



## EPILOGUE: TURNING TO THE WALL

### Concepts across Space and Time

This special issue of the *Review of International American Studies* has grappled with the power of walls as idea, rhetoric, policy, and embodied experience. Moving beyond the question of whether walls ‘work,’ our authors have probed what walls *do*, and what *people do with walls* in history, politics, culture, and everyday life.

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#### THE WALL AS RHETORIC AND POLICY

In her incisive introduction to this issue, Virginia Dominguez probes the power of the wall—a seemingly illogical idea, a solution proven ineffective by plenty of historical cases, yet enjoying support across party lines in the United States. She is fascinated with the potency “of this atavistic idea in an era of alleged globalization, when so much rhetorical energy focuses on cyberspace, the globalization of manufacturing and service jobs, and the technological advances that allow people to work from home, hold meetings for free with people in many different countries, and stay closely connected with family and friends regardless of location” (Dominguez, this issue). Yet, I venture to ask, how much of candidate and President Trump’s idea of building a Mexican border wall has to do not with logic and binaries, but with offering a tangible, *producerist* entity to the American people? When globalization and cybersecurity are abstract worlds, a wall is solid, created, put in place, mended and maintained—something to produce, erect

and hold on to, a concrete and specific expression of anxiety, identity, and border.

Dominguez recognizes that “the wall has rhetorical power and galvanizing power—racist power and xenophobic power,” but boldly predicts that President Trump’s wall will not be built. She may prove to be right precisely because an actual wall would be tested against the president’s claims, and Trump’s rhetoric relies on intangible, extra-factual images and assertions. Yet I believe that this prediction may prove to be wrong. If there will be any tangible legacy left behind by a president who does not care about facts or logic or conditions on the ground, it will be a big and beautiful wall. Donald Trump is a businessman of real estate and building: he deals in constructing and profiting from hotels, casinos, and golf courses. What he may leave behind may be a wall—not a legacy of any coherent policy—but a wall (and later, a “tremendous,” “beautiful” presidential library). Only posterity will get to appreciate the bizarre irony of this—we in the here and now are too busy struggling over President Trump’s politics and policies.

#### THE WALL AS A STATE OF MIND

Several articles in this issue grapple with the complexities of what walls ‘give’ the populations they are supposed to protect. As Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Steffan Igor Ayora-Díaz (this issue) explain, the historical dynamic of peninsular smuggling, Mexican blockades, isolation and secessionism powerfully shaped Yucatecan identity and lifeways. Their description of the role of these relations in the Yucatan peninsula’s connections to Anglo-North America and the Caribbean echoed my own impression of the history of Scotland: Scottish reassertions of independence developed that nation’s connections with continental Europe as against the ‘colonizing’ efforts of the English. These are instances when actual and more general walls and passages shape the identity, or at least foreign relations, of a country or region. Yet it is not necessarily inevitable that the influence of globalization will erode the traditional ‘walls’ of Yucatecan identity. Like the Scots, young Yucatecans may also update their traditions to a global world and upgrade it, in a sense ‘glocalizing’ their identity walls, roads, and tunnels.

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In her turn, Éva Szabó (this issue) deconstructs the Western European (liberal) historical analogy that the recent Hungarian and other Eastern and Southern European border fence, erected at the height of the migrant crisis, is nothing but a new Iron Curtain. Szabó historicizes and contextualizes European attitudes towards walls by recovering the original function of the Iron Curtain as a wall built by Communist governments against emigration from within their own Eastern Bloc—of keeping people in, not out. According to Szabó, Western Europe's historical experience with migration developed a welcoming attitude precisely partly because of the Iron Curtain: in general, the resulting migrants and refugees were similar to them (Europeans or colonial subjects), willing to integrate, often highly skilled, and during the Cold War came in controlled bursts. The wall eventually came down in what was regarded as a triumph for democracy, and this has been taken as a lesson against wall-building that Western Europeans and liberals falsely apply to the defensive border fence built by governments in Eastern Europe during the migrant crisis of the 2010s. Thus, the very societies who were once protected by the Iron Curtain now do not understand why those historically on the other side have decided to build their own defensive wall.

Beyond its astute historical argument, Szabó's piece can also challenge us to think about what walls do to people they are supposed to protect—how such communities are shaped by their barriers, and what they lose by living on the 'safe' side of the wall. In what ways do the walls of Fortress Britain, Fortress Europe, Fortress Israel, or Fortress America lock their own people in, while—or instead of—keeping them safe? Is there a 'wall mentality' among border populations, in a good or a bad sense?

As Sangjun Jeong's article (this issue) argues, the people of South Korea cultivate—in Robert Frost's words, 'mend'—their own mental walls even as many of them want to reunite their country with the North. According to Jeong, starting as a casually drawn line on a *National Geographic* map, the Demilitarized Zone not only became one of the world's most heavily armed buffer zones, but it has been the symbol of at least two competing histories within South Korean society. One of these is patriotic, anti-North and pro-US; the other is fervently pro-democratic, leftist, anti-US,

and for re-unification. As Jeong shows, South Koreans, the very people whom the 'wall' of the DMZ is supposed to protect, are still politically and culturally waging the Korean War amongst themselves—over six decades after that conflict putatively ended.

THE WALL AS SOCIO-POLITICAL METAPHOR: A FORTRESS UNDER SIEGE

What if we thought about what walls are a part of—the larger thing? My own Hungarian conceptual heritage tells me that walls are part of a fortress. A central image of Hungarian historical memory is the early modern fort, defended by a small garrison of Magyars against the invaders, usually the Ottoman Turks. In our public school canon is Géza Gárdonyi's fin-de-siècle romantic historical novel set during the 1552 siege of Eger (Gárdonyi). In elementary school we were required to memorize the oath that the Hungarian commander made the whole garrison take to defend the fort at all costs.<sup>1</sup> This scenario posited that the fort was the only thing standing between the ruthless Turkish invaders and the rest of Hungary, which was defenseless against this kind of an army. This was an apocalyptic scene.

I dwell on this because if we understand walls as metonymy—the part standing for the whole—we may see the rest of the concept that they invoke: a fort under siege. A siege is not only a discrete event—it is also a mindset. Think of the slogan “No surrender” used in a variety of cultural contexts and regional geographies. The scarf worn and the song sung at the Glasgow Rangers football (soccer) games bearing the words “No Surrender” refer not only to the specific game or even necessarily to the team's sports values, but to the historic siege of cities in the Ulster province of Northern Ireland by ‘Catholic’ forces, and defended by the Ulster Scots—all in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In the Glasgow football subculture

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1. Administered to the defenders by Captain István Dobó, the oath read, “I swear to the one living God that I consecrate my life to the defense of the fortress of Eger, for king and homeland. Neither force nor trickery will intimidate me. Neither money nor promises will make me falter. I will neither talk nor listen to talk about giving up the fort. I will not surrender to the enemy alive inside or outside this fortress. From beginning to end of the defense, I will obey the orders of my superiors. May God so help me.” Translation from Hungarian by Tóth. (Gárdonyi, *Egri Csillagok* 304).

2. For more on Scottish football's sectarian songs, see Taylor.

of Celtics versus Rangers, this historical memory evokes sectarian and ethnic (Protestant vs. Catholic, Scots vs. Irish) hatred. Along with the seasonal marches of the members of Glasgow's Orange Lodges in some parts of the city, these rituals are more symbolic and subcultural<sup>3</sup> than the dangerous and explosive annual marching season in Northern Ireland.

The siege as socio-political metaphor (which, I posit, may be the logical extension of the wall) functions not only in Northern Ireland, but in other epochs and geographies. The ideological and physical walls of that region discussed in this issue by Laura McAtackney date back to the time when the Crown encouraged Scots to populate what became the Ulster province of (Northern) Ireland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These people were often Protestant, and those later migrating to colonial America became known as the Scots Irish. However, in Northern Ireland they knew themselves as "The Plantation."<sup>4</sup> Their enclaves supported by the metropole and its regional elite, but surrounded by a sea of Irish Catholic communities, some of the very identity of the Plantation Scots came to be rooted in their experiences of the sieges and other confrontations between these ethnicities and denominations under recurring royal power plays. But if I as a historian can take the liberty to be ahistorical, how much is this conceptually different from the historical memory of the Anglo-Texan US population? What London/Derry city was for the Scots-Irish in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and has been since, the Alamo was for Anglo-Texans in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and has been since.<sup>5</sup>

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3. For more on sectarianism in Scotland, see "Scottish Football 'a Cause of Sectarianism'" and Bruce.

4. For more on the Ulster Plantation and its legacy, see Montgomery.

5. The historical memory of the conflict between the Anglo settlers and the Mexican government in the territory of Texas in 1835–36 has been enshrined by and for the dominant Euro-American population of the United States as a war of independence for Texas. One episode of this conflict was the defense of the Alamo mission building by Anglo-Texans against Mexican government troops in 1836, where all of the defenders were killed. The immediate understanding of the siege as martyrdom by patriotic Texans for their cause helped them win their war against Mexico later that year. The Alamo continues to be a place of pilgrimage for Texans and other US Americans. For the differences between the historical memory of the past of Texas between US Americans of different ethnicities and Mexicans, see Kozák.

“No Surrender” may also apply to the siege mentality of the Russians in Kaliningrad<sup>6</sup>—and of the Russian ethnics in other parts of the Baltics,<sup>7</sup> or to Mother Russia’s historical memory of World War Two.<sup>8</sup>

The insidious thing about the siege as mental image is that it securitizes thinking, erases or suppresses diversity and internal dissent, and mobilizes people in a logic to ‘hold the wall.’ This is what makes it so appealing: it gives one something to do, while it simplifies one’s thinking. ‘Man’ the wall, mount a defense, make a stand—this is its message. When we struggle to understand, much less to combat the impersonal forces of globalization, deindustrialization, and the random horrendous strikes of terrorism, the wall offers us, in the words of *West Wing* writer Aaron Sorkin, “an enemy I can kill.”<sup>9</sup>

Other authors have discussed the entities beyond the wall in the minds of those who think of themselves as defenders of the fortress. Tom Englehardt’s 1995 book *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* is only one such example (Englehardt). Even without knowing his cultural history of ‘the last stand’ scene in US culture, we can imagine that on the other side of the wall are the faceless multitudes, hordes of barbarians attacking Rome, bloodthirsty savage Indians trying to overrun the emigrant train or Custer’s beleaguered troopers, criminal evildoers (candidate Trump’s “bad hombres”) (Jacobco), the terrorists hiding among Syrian and Afghan refugees (as for the Hungarian government), or like in the 2016

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6. Kaliningrad has been a non-contiguous part of the Russian Federation and its predecessors since 1945, surrounded by populations of Lithuanians, Polish, and Germans.

7. Russian-speaking ethnics comprise ca. 6% of the population in Lithuania, 27% in Latvia, and 25% in Estonia. “Baltic States Concerned About Large Russian Minority.”

8. Russian historical memory of World War Two frames the conflict as “The Great Patriotic War / in Defense of the Homeland,” and in its post-war version drew lessons from it that call for greater security, a stronger military—measures to prevent another similar in-depth invasion of Russia by a foreign power. For more on the historical memory of the Second World War in Russia, see Bernstein.

9. Admiral Fitzwallace to Leo McGarry in “We Killed Yamamoto.” *The West Wing*.

movie *The Great Wall*, which depicts Matt Damon as a European mercenary patrolling the Great Wall of China not the Huns or other nomadic tribes, but multitudes of computer-generated monsters unleashed from some seventh hell of Hollywood's ancient world. Our supreme challenge as critical thinkers is to make of those on the other side of the wall anything other than infernal, sub-human creatures to be kept out at all costs.

Also worthy of discussion is the gendered nature of the wall—the fortress, and the siege—as concepts. Gárdonyi's novel features a strong Hungarian female character, Éva Cecey, whose agency is expressed in transgressing her gender role by entering the besieged fort with assistance, cooking and feeding the fort's defenders, donning a soldier's armor, and fighting against the Turks during their final assault (Gárdonyi, Part Five). An iconic 19<sup>th</sup> century painting about the same siege depicts women in similar roles in this last scene—'manning' the wall (Székely). In other words, the women in the fort can transgress their gender role, but only temporarily, and only in the defense of the fort—as part of the war effort. As Susan Faludi's 2007 book *The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed About America* documented, such a national/community emergency constricts and regresses not only democratic exchange but also gender roles, suppressing dissent and free expression by women, and forcing them into socio-political roles prescribed by conservative social and historical memory: the damsel in distress, the grieving widow/mother/sister/daughter, the supportive female family member, or the maiden looking for safety and security in marriage.

"GATED COMMUNITIES" BUILT BY WALLS, INC.

But if in our mental structures, historical memory, and political rhetoric walls are built and guarded by nation states or empires, are they so in reality? In their investigation of how Israel's Separation Wall is perceived by Palestinians on one side and Jews on the other, Amalia Sa'ar, Sarai B. Aharoni, and Alisa Lewin (this issue) discuss Jewish "gated communities" nestled along the wall. This case of privately developed real estate being in a symbiotic relationship with the nation state's security structure challenges us to probe our concepts of the *private*—not only as in private vs. public, but also in national security. In the state's

public projects versus the private, for-profit security and building contractors work on government contracts—in Israel, as in the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as on the US-Mexico border. Are government and national security bleeding into privatized security and infrastructure? Whose national security is protecting whose gated communities—and against/from whom? More, are such transfers of power and control from national to private a characteristic feature of our globalized world, where borders are (sub)contracted by the state to Walls, Inc.?

#### OPENING WHAT IS CLOSED DOWN: THE WALL AS GATEWAY

As of this writing (January 2018), President of the United States Donald J. Trump is again turning to the wall in his policy. The president is in discussions with Congressional leaders about the United States budget, which for him revolves around his plan to build the border wall with Mexico (“President Meets with Congressional Leaders”). Yet not only, as it has been pointed out, do walls not fully ‘work’ as they are supposed to—they do not always fulfil the purposes or functions they were originally built for. Walls condition the region around them, but they do not fully, or exclusively, seal off communication and circulation. Discussing the ancient walls of Rome, Giorgio Mariani reminds us that “the Latin word *limes* had a double meaning. On the one hand, it meant ‘border,’ ‘limit,’ ‘dividing line.’ On the other, it was a synonym for ‘road’ or ‘way,’ as was the case with the Germanic-Augustan *limes* running along the Lippe river, instrumental to the creation of the new province of the Empire’ (Mariani, this issue). If we expand our concepts from the specificity of walls to the bigger category of *limes* that includes other natural and human-made landscapes, such as mountain ridges and rivers, this concept opens us up to more diverse interpretations. In this sense of walls and wall-ness as border-ness, *limes* is also *liminality*, which could also mean in-between-ness, but has the potential to straddle borders, to transcend them, struggle with them, go above, under, and beyond them. In this sense, trans-wall can be trans-border, and even trans-national. This leads us back to the recovery and re-examination of trans-border economies, societies, and flows, along with their continuities and interruptions by the walls in their midst.

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Once we start seeing walls as tools of connection (such as traffic on or along the wall as much as across it), then we can also understand some functions of border rivers. Thus, these constructions or contour features may serve to facilitate communication, commerce, and transfers of culture, goods, ideas, as well as bodies. Whether as a wall's original functions, its evolved functions over time, or the active subversion of its original functions, these are all there at least potentially, 'built into' the wall.

If some artists claim that they only 'liberate' a statue's figure from the surrounding stone, clay or wood, Jasmin Habib may have captured a similar creative practice in her essay (this issue) about art and culture along the walls of the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood of Haifa, Israel. Habib shows how through humor and art, the residents and activists have 'opened' walls up to messages that are only obliquely political, and reflect on their struggles to coexist in a landscape riven by nationalist and sectarian structures. The art that recognizes and sublimates histories of displacement and Israeli and Palestinian identities includes a humorous panel commentary regarding the street's paved asphalt, olive tree imagery 'growing out' of a wall, figures of an Israeli and a Palestinian child 'opening' a window on the side of a building, and a dove taking flight on yet another wall surface. Out of what is regarded as one of the most intractable conflicts of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, this wall art reimagines the dividing lines as a 'soft/ening' border, or a springboard for future peace.

According to Mariani, the Benedictine monk Giulio Meattini "believes the door to be a more suggestive and flexible image for the kind of open, though always discerning connection between inside and outside, between 'us' and 'them'" (Mariani, this issue). Vargas-Cetina and Ayora-Díaz likewise pointed out that "Walls have to have doors, and also may be overcome by going above them, by air or by bridges, or going under them, by tunnels" (this issue). They discussed various concepts that connect instead of only separating sides: roads, bridges, and tunnels. Indeed, the concept that literally splits the wall and breaks through it conceptually is not the bastion of the fortress; it is the gate. While each gate may be guarded and closed, what begins as deterrence and checkpoint may end up becoming an opening in the wall—such as Checkpoint

Charlie did in the Berlin section of the Iron Curtain. One of the reasons that the wall came down in Berlin was that in November 1989 the border guards had no clear instructions on how to respond to people's attempts to transcend the Cold War border that had been inscribed in stone, steel, barbed wire, and lead. This new vacuum of political power was exposed in a matter of hours, and the system of the wall subsequently collapsed.

The national/istic building of walls in the United States may be more vulnerable to criticism than elsewhere because of that nation state's myths of origin. Alejandro Lugo's photo-essay pays particular attention to US national iconography and mythology as encoded around and reinterpreted by the existing parts of the US-Mexican border fence. For him, the nondescript figures standing by the wall and looking out into the distance stretching from the US flag waving above them are "In Search of the American Dream/Buscando del Sueño Americano"; the couple in ethnic Latino festival clothing walking towards a relief monument depicting a 19<sup>th</sup> century settler family are "Twenty-First Century Pioneers in Arizona/Pioneros del Siglo Veinte-y-Uno en Arizona"; and he makes a point of capturing what seems to the viewer the accusatory gaze of a mural of an "American Eagle at the Calexico-Mexicali Wall." Extrapolating from the US defensive border fence, Lugo's photographs assert that the "Fenced White House Welcomes Latino Immigrants (2006-2016) / La Casa Blanca Encerrada da Bienvenida a Inmigrantes Latinos (2006-2016)," and even more pointedly, that the "Statue of Liberty Turns Its Back on Mexican Immigrants/ La Estatua de la Libertad le da la Espalda a Inmigrantes Mexicanos" (Lugo, this issue).

This last shot of Lugo's explicitly criticizes the border fence for contradicting one of the United States' foundational tenets: that it is 'a nation of immigrants.' In this, Lugo invokes a tradition of art for social reform. Emma Lazarus' poem about the Statue of Liberty which was originally gifted to the US by the French in the 1880s, depicted the statue as the latter-day incarnation of the giant figure that had formed a gate to the port of ancient Rhodes. Lazarus' "modern colossus" now marked one major European entry point into the United States. "Holding a flame at the golden door" ever

since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>10</sup> Lady Liberty has been actively inviting and greeting the world's immigrants and exiles—even as US immigration regulations have tried to restrict them by ethnicity, country, and ideology.

There is much that is powerful in the wall as an idea and mental image in rhetoric, policy, landscape, and embodied experience. Fences and walls divide, sort out and categorize complexity into two sides whose meeting they control. They also homogenize diversity by forcing human beings, their ideas, cultures and practices to conform to those of either this or that side. This is most often what they are built to do. Walls may not always or fully 'work' for the purposes they are designed; yet they work in other, sometimes oblique, but powerful, insidious, sad, or delightful ways. The real struggle over their meaning lies in their interaction with their human environment; and this may change over time. Even when our politics and societies are 'turning to the wall,' our walls may retain some openness to meaning and exchange. Unlocking these may help change both the understanding and the enactment of the walls of our world.

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10. For one interpretation of Lazarus' poem in the context of post-9/11 US civil liberties and immigration policy, see Cavitch.

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