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### THE WALL AS MARKER OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER\*

<b>Abstract:</b>	<i>In an article from 2018, Iver B. Neumann analyzes the role of monuments in the construction and representation of the Other. Neumann observes that from the Bronze Age and up to the Second World War, monuments would display the Other either as absent, (literally) dead, or subjugated. While constructions celebrating the conquerors may be passé, one type of monument that doubles as an identity marker not only persists but thrives. The wall is alive and well. In America, the U.S.-Mexico border wall – either in practice or in discourse – represents a veritable battleground where identity is cast in supremacist terms and the alterities search for legitimacy. What sets walls apart from other classes of monuments is found in their utilitarian function, that creates normative conditions whereby the evolution or devolution of the Selves' relation to the Other is codified at the policy level to serve exclusionary designs. The present article analyzes how the construction of a walling in / out enterprise generates identities and assigns them value based on their proximity to the border, using as a case-study the wall at the border between the United States and Mexico. For this purpose, the article examines the practices of monumentalization outlined by Neumann and applies them to the U.S. border. In this sense, the article provides a historical overview of the border in order to illustrate that current developments, however paroxysmic, are not isolated only to the Trump Administration's policy on immigration but are part of a long-standing policy approach adopted by both Republican and Democratic administrations that, inadvertently, contributed to the present crisis.</i>
<b>Keywords:</b>	<b>Alterity; identity; Nogales; practices of monumentalization; Trump administration; U.S. immigration policy; U.S.-Mexico border wall</b>
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*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
[...]  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me*  
Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus* (1883)

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## Introduction

In the lead up to Donald Trump's first ascent to public office, the world was premised on a global polity of open borders and diminished barriers, presenting itself as a space where sovereignty had become fragmented and fluid, in which states ceded sovereignty freely and without (too many) reservations. A world without borders was beginning to take shape in the early '90s and the promise of further freedoms seemed close to fruition, however the mirage of a globalized world devoid of barriers did not last long. Freedom of circulation is not universal after all, but conditional, it comes with restrictions that clash with the frameworks of exile that exist in parallel, as a byproduct of wars, climate change, or poor governance. As such, the clash is equally physical as it is symbolic, counterposing the familiar Self with the uncanny Other, which is represented by the figure of the migrant. While the Selves embrace cosmopolitan worldviews – which profess that every person belongs to a universal community – these are not matched by cosmopolitan policies. This is why the Others' attempt to partake in the Selves's projected prosperity, triggers reactions of rejection, both rhetorically and on the ground<sup>1</sup>.

Walls, barriers, and other fences have been encroaching upon the borderlands at an accelerated pace in the last thirty years. Currently, there are over seventy such constructions in place with more being constructed worldwide<sup>2</sup>. David B. Carter and Paul Poast have noted “that over 50 percent of border walls built in the last two centuries were built in the post-Cold War era”<sup>3</sup>. In this context, the wall seemingly re-emerges as a memento from a bygone era which focused on symbols of power and separation. This is indicative of the fact that the current walling practices are neither new developments, nor outliers, but part of a long-standing practice that accompanies identity constructions. While one can find the rationales and contingencies behind each construction, the size and reach of these walling events are evocative of a narrative fueled by the reawakened specters of nationalism and intolerance, that is as much about security, as it is about identity and the separation of Self from the Other.

Using as a case-study the border wall between the United States and Mexico, this article argues that the contemporary narrative on walls as physical barriers is not designed to respond only to security imperatives, but is linked to a process of identity construction that transcends the present moment. The case-study illustrates how this process did not begin with the Trump administration, but how instead it was built over decades, in the policies pursued by multiple US administrations, that seamlessly cross the ideological divide between the Republican and the Democratic Parties. The wall, therefore, is reified as a persistent and reiterative ideological monument, long after it has stopped fulfilling its intended security purpose. At its center, the research approach is based on Iver B. Neumann's article *Halting Time: Monuments to Alterity*, published in “Millennium: Journal of International Studies”, in 2018<sup>4</sup>. By reviewing a variety of monuments, Neumann wanted to determine how monuments construct and perform Otherness: “We have in monuments what seems to be a paradigmatic case of the ways in which a political Self gains its identity by marking a difference to Others, for the basic boundary markers are walls, fences, portals”<sup>5</sup>. Drawing from border studies, the analysis adopts a monumentalization framework to examine how identities are formed and reformed on the borderland, as a space where the wall enacts policies of separation and regimes of segregation in both its material and immaterial dimension, as a physical wall, as well as a symbolic / virtual wall. The monumentalization of the wall refers, therefore, to the process whereby the object is imbued with symbolic meaning for the purpose of memorializing a particular homogeneous polity, real or imagined. This is echoed in President Trump's words when he refers to the imperative of building a wall that is “impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Billeaud, *Volunteer Arrested After Border Agents Seen Dumping Water*, “Associated Press”, 23 January 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/ee090a053cb74c18be78303de370c9f> (20.02.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Kim Hjelmggaard, *from 7 to 77: There's Been an Explosion in Building Border Walls Since World War II*, “USA Today”, 24 May 2018, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/05/24/border-walls-berlin-wall-donald-trump-wall/553250002/> (20.02.2025)

<sup>3</sup> David B. Carter, Paul Poast, *Why Do States Build Walls? Political Economy, Security, and Border Stability*, “Journal of Conflict Resolution”, Vol. 61, No. 2, February 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715596776> (20.01.2025), p. 263

<sup>4</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Halting Time: Monuments to Alterity*, “Millennium: Journal of International Studies”, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818771339> (20.02.2025), pp. 331-351

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 336

<sup>6</sup> Nolan D. McCaskill, *Trump promises wall and massive deportation program*, “Politico”, 31 August 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-arizona-227612> (21.02.2025)

The article is also informed by the concept of a “border memoryscape”. Paul Basu describes the “memoryscape” as “a multiplicity of different forms of remembering”<sup>1</sup> and what is the border if not a space to remember, “a memory whose survival is guaranteed by individual and collective memories”<sup>2</sup>, where competing forces are intersecting in a said moment<sup>3</sup>. In combining the two approaches – the wall as a memorialization device of an eminently statist order and the border as a memory cape, the article suggests that the wall should be seen as a monumentalizing dispositif<sup>4</sup> which, in effect, does very little to mitigate the border issues, compounding them instead. Where it thrives though is in generating a regime of control over the border premised on the delegitimization of the Other through exclusionary practices.

### Literature Review

Walls have generally been designed with the intention to separate, to keep apart, to insulate. Rarer are the instances where walls are built to keep people in, like in the case of the Berlin Wall whose fall was at that time tantamount with the end of history. How well do these walls fulfill this function is a matter of debate since walls have always been associated with a certain performative imagery: they must be durable, steep, unascendable – indomitable monuments. Their imposing presence prescribes an interdiction, yet, they can always be circumvented, subverted, disrupted. They are not a deterrent in and of themselves<sup>5</sup>. In developing a monumentalization framework, the analysis ascertains that the wall stops being just a security installation – a structure fulfilling a perfunctory purpose – and becomes something more. At what point does it metamorphosize from a physical wall into a symbolic monument? Or does it bear the semblance of one from the very first boundary marker? Of the US-Mexico border wall, Ronald Rael remarks that: “The wall itself is a monumental construct. Long after the optimistic possibility of its removal, evidence of the wall’s presence will remain in the environmental, genetic, cultural, topographical, geological, and ecological transformation it has created”<sup>6</sup>. Past decades’ wall-building spree on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere – from President Trump’s renewed efforts to (re)build the wall to the EU Member States’ thousands of kilometers of border walls and fences that resulted from the botched attempt at mitigating the mid-2010s refugee crisis – has attracted various types of research endeavors on this topic.

David Morley argues that as the world is *destabilized* and *detrterritorialized*, a tension manifests physically stemming from the “spaces of belonging (and identity)” [...] being encroached by the transnational<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, an effect of “reterritorialization” occurs “whereby borders and boundaries of various sorts are becoming more, rather than less, strongly marked”<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the wall will act as a manifestation of the contemporary global environment. Elisabeth Vallet’s edited volume on *Borders, Fences and Walls. State of Insecurity* (2016) examines “the reterritorialization effected by border walls”, how they create new security regimes where “legal and political

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Basu, “Memoryscapes and Multi-Sited Methods”, in Emily Keightley, Michael Pickering (Eds.), *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2013, p. 116

<sup>2</sup> Mireille Rosello, Stephen F. Wolfe, “Introduction”, in Johan Schimanski, Stephen F. Wolfe, *Border Aesthetics. Concepts and Intersections*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2019, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Kendall R. Phillips, G. Mitchell Reyes, “Introduction: Surveying Global Memoryscapes: The Shifting Terrain of Public Memory”, in Kendall R. Phillips, G. Mitchell Reyes (Eds.), *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2011, p. 13

<sup>4</sup> The dispositif should be understood in the Foucauldian sense, as an “ensemble of discursive and non-discursive elements” (Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh”, in Colin Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings (1972–1977)*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p. 194

<sup>5</sup> As Janet Napolitano, former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security under President Obama, observed: “Show me a 50-foot wall, and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder”. Kevin Schaul, Samuel Granados, *5 Challenges Trump May Face Building a Border Wall*, “The Washington Post”, 25 January 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/challenges-building-border-wall/> (21.02.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Rael, “Recuerdos / Souvernirs: A Nuevo Grand Tour”, in Ronald Rael (Ed.), *Borderwall as Architecture. A Manifesto for the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2017, p. 150

<sup>7</sup> David Morley, *Belongings. Place, space and identity in a mediated world*, “European Journal of Cultural Studies”, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2001, p. 425, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940100400>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 427

instruments are being mustered to support ever stricter control over borders”<sup>1</sup>. For Claudio Minca and Alexandra Rijke, the European states’ knee-jerk reflex to set up walls is framed along the lines “of an immunity-seeking machine, that may not be directly related to its actual *effectiveness* and may, instead, be connected to a social imaginary”<sup>2</sup>. Slesinger examines “the neat dichotomy between one’s own identity and a foreign and dangerous ‘Other’”, by looking at the border between Israel and Lebanon where he regards “the borderland as a heterotopic space, rather than perceiving the border as a fixed line, and by examining the everyday “micro-political” operations and materialities that inhabitants of the border region perform and experience”<sup>3</sup>.

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010), Wendy Brown argues that “what we have come to call a globalized world harbors fundamental tension between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription”<sup>4</sup>. The form through which these tensions manifest themselves is defined both as a tendency towards “increasingly liberalized borders” between Selves and Others, and as a Sisyphean effort devoted to “border fortification”<sup>5</sup>. Brown describes how rampant the phenomenon of wall-building is by providing a small census of the walls and fences existing in the present: from post-apartheid South Africa to Saudi Arabia and its attempt to wall in the entire country; India walling out Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Burma while also walling in Kashmir, to Uzbekistan building a fence with Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001, while at the same time also being fenced out by Turkmenistan; to the “concrete and steel border wall” built in a cooperative effort between Thailand and Malaysia; to the wall between Egypt and Gaza to the walling out of Pakistan by Iran<sup>6</sup>. All these instances are representative of the wall as a tool of separation and a symbol of division.

The proliferation of walls has multiple causes, with security and economy<sup>7</sup> remaining the two most dominant ones. During the 2015 refugee crisis, this phenomenon was witnessed in multiple European countries – by both Members and non-Members of the European Union (EU)<sup>8</sup>. Miles upon miles of border fences were erected to prevent people from entering and they remained in place even when there were no more people attempting to cross the border. In some cases, like in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, the government decided to build a wall after the refugees / migrants had already stopped using that route<sup>9</sup>. This shows us that the walls are not built solely to perform their security purpose, they are not purely functional, but also symbolic, fulfilling their monumentalization potential, that creates identity domains, separating the Self from Other. The proliferation does not necessarily breed effectiveness, as Nick Buxton explains: “You can build more and more walls until you’re a completely walled society, but all you’re doing is making it more and more dangerous. People will find ways to cross walls”<sup>10</sup>.

A similar sentiment is shared by Minca and Rijke who note that while: “these new walls consist[...] of intricate combinations of visible techniques – such as bricks, chain link fences, barbed wire – and less visible ones – such as infrared camera and underground sensors – in practice they often remain porous and relatively unsuccessful in fully controlling the movement of such real-and-imagined-enemy-others”<sup>11</sup>. Minca and Rijke explain that while the walls seal off the native population from foreign contaminants, they “at the same time keep[...] that very

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Vallet, “Introduction”, in Elisabeth Vallet (Ed.), *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?*, Ashgate, Surrey, 2014, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Claudio Minca, Alexandra Rijke, “Walls! Walls! Walls!”, *Society & Space*, April 2017, <https://societyandspace.org/2017/04/18/walls-walls-walls/> (20.02.2025); Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Mattias Kärrholm, “Introduction: the life of walls – in urban, spatial and political theory”, in Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Mattias Kärrholm (Eds.), *Urban Walls. Political and Cultural Meanings of Vertical Structures and Surfaces*, Routledge, New York, 2019, p. 10

<sup>3</sup> Ian Slesinger, *Alterity, Security and Everyday Geopolitics at Israel’s Border with Lebanon*, “Journal of Borderland Studies”, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2016, p. 123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2015.1124246> (21.02.2025)

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Zone Books, New York, 2010, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 7-8

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8, p. 19

<sup>7</sup> David B. Carter, Paul Poast, *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Rareș-Alexandru Văscan, *The European Discourse on Migration: Between Securitization and Desecuritization (2019-2021)*, “Studia Securitatis Journal”, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2024, pp. 74-85, <https://magazines.ulbsibiu.ro/studiasecuritatis/wp-content/uploads/STUDIA-SECURITATIS-No.-1-2024-74-85-1.pdf> (21.02.2025)

<sup>9</sup> Laura Markham, *If These Walls Could Talk. The strange history of our futile border fortifications*, “Harper’s Magazine”, March 2018, <https://harpers.org/archive/2018/03/if-these-walls-could-talk/> (21.02.2025)

<sup>10</sup> Palko Karasz, *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Claudio Minca, Alexandra Rijke, *Op. cit.*

possibility open so that more migrants will try to go through and... more walls will have to be built and managed by increasing human and non-human surveillance assemblages”<sup>1</sup>. This ever-expanding wall becomes an ideological instrument serving the process of identity construction, creating a clear demarcation between the Self and Other, where the Other is framed as a subaltern or subordinate, and, always, in a subservient position. On this backdrop, the present article uses the lens of monumentalization to develop a framework illustrating how the walls shape the clash between identities and alterities, as well as the way in which they act as conduits for erasure and forgetting.

### Conceptual Framework

The present analysis examines how walls construct and perform Otherness by applying a framework proposed by Iver B. Neumann, in the article *Halting Time: Monuments to Alterity*. Neumann suggests that, historically, until the end of the Second World War, there had been three main monumentalizing practices in which the Self has been constructed<sup>2</sup>. The three prototypes in which the Other was halted in time are: “as visual absence, as dead and as subjugated”<sup>3</sup>. Neumann remarks: “The first, which had already emerged during the Neolithic, was the megalith monument, which celebrates the Self and excludes the Other by visual absence only. During the Bronze Age, it was joined by two others: The Eurasian Steppe practice of piling skulls in pyramids to represent the Other as dead, and the Egyptian and later Roman practice of depicting the Other as subjugated”<sup>4</sup>. Post-World War Two, a fourth way that immortalizes and *damns* the Other emerges where the Other stands for “a previous incarnation of the Self”<sup>5</sup>.

Where walls are concerned, Neumann explains that they depict otherness “as a visual absence” and “given that the Other is always there, the Other’s visual absence amounts to a negation of the Other’s very being”<sup>6</sup>. They are removed from our sight and kept at a distance. Walls, Neumann argues: “are definitely boundary-drawing structures that put an easily visible mark on a landscape”, in doing so, they enact a polity given that “the territory is constitutive of states”<sup>7</sup>. Or in the words of President Trump: “[F]or the people that say no wall, if you didn’t have walls over here, you wouldn’t even have a country”<sup>8</sup>.

In his analysis, Neumann employs the notion of *longue durée temporality* to assess “the longest possible history and a maximum number of heterogeneous polities”<sup>9</sup>. The region from which he retrieves this taxonomical framework of Otherness is Western Eurasia. Neumann argues that while the triumphal monumentalizing practices have been a constant throughout history, the Second World War broke with this binary cycle of immortalizing victors and losers and brought to the forefront “the futility of freezing a specific constellation between Self and Other”<sup>10</sup>. Monuments represent a break from temporality: they isolate one particular poignant moment in time and encase it in a distinctive medium for preservation purposes. As such “monuments are constitutive of a polity’s identity by commemorating the Self in a specific constellation with its constitutive Others”, where the Self has the resources to institutionalize hierarchy<sup>11</sup>. Consequently, a monument is a structure that captures the moment that constituted the polity<sup>12</sup> and in building the wall, we try to reconfirm this formative state.

Triumphal monumentalization practices became obsolete because there has been a reconsidering on the part of the Selves with regards to “the futility of celebrating the Other’s permanent subordination”<sup>13</sup>. In developing this argument, Neumann draws on the theorization of historical sociologist, Norbert Elias who argues that in so far as

<sup>1</sup> *Idem*. On this topic: Claudio Minca, Alexandra Rijke, “Walls, Walling and the Immunitarian Imperative”, in Andrea Mubi Brighenti, Mattias Kärholm (Eds.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 79-93

<sup>2</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 331

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 348

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 331

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 341

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 348

<sup>8</sup> Elisha Brown, *Trump in California Says ‘You Wouldn’t Even Have a Country’ Without Border Wall*, “The Daily Beast”, 13 March 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-in-california-says-you-wouldnt-even-have-a-country-without-border-wall> (22.02.2025)

<sup>9</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 333

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 334

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 350

civilizations evolve, there comes a moment defined by the “advance in the frontier of shame and the threshold of repugnance”<sup>1</sup>. However, in the post-Second World War period, the Cold War’s externalized theaters of the bipolar confrontation reflected an environment where the goal was one of annihilation and erasure. If the goal is to erase, a monument, then, defeats this purpose. According to Neumann, “the key may lie in the word celebration: what has changed a little may not be practices as such, but the way in which these practices are made a spectacle of”<sup>2</sup>, thus highlighting, once again, the symbolic function of the wall.

This conception is predicated on the idea that such displays of restraint in the Selves’ depictions of the Other would also influence foreign policy: “refraining from boosting the identity of the Self by monumentalizing a vanquished or dead Other, should make it somewhat harder to mobilize violence against a certain Other”<sup>3</sup>. In practice, this prescription seldom materializes given that practices crossing into the realm of taboos, do not disappear, instead, they find other outlets of expression. This, in turn, becomes institutionalized if no fundamental changes are brought to the framework that enabled the practice in the first place. In paraphrasing from Foucault’s seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*, Neumann warns that “the ending of one kind of violence simply opens the field for another to emerge”<sup>4</sup>. The wall exhibits such a form of violence given that it acts as an instrument to demarcate between Self and Other, whereby to function as a deterrent and keep the Other away, it has to punish the trespassers, as will be shown in the subsequent sections.

While the practices of depicting a subjugated Other in stone or other mediums are outdated, the instinct has not been fully repressed. Instead, these practices repurpose the walls to operate outside their utilitarian purpose, as symbolic markers of power and identity. The walls of today attempt to provide a break with temporality, but in safeguarding a certain space in the present moment, they call back to a more homogeneous past. Or if homogeneity was never there to begin with, they try to construct it and put it in the service of an existent, dominant community. The wall then does not celebrate a *status quo*, but attempts to preserve a crumbling one, by stitching it together with mortar and barb wire. In this symbolic act of imposing a different temporality, irrespective of how vulnerable or infallible it is, the wall acts as a *damnatio memoriae* dispositif, seeking to erase the Other and memorialize the Self.

The walls remove or obscure the Others from the Selves’ line of sight, but as rhetorical devices, they also conceal the Selves’ share of responsibility. It is far easier to conjure an image that delegitimizes the Other than to acknowledge that the policies pursued by the Selves create the very conditions of delegitimization. But if the responsibility is obfuscated, then the otherizing projections – economic (*the Others want to take the Selves’ jobs, benefits*) social (*the Others seek to disrupt the Selves’ routines*), or security-based (*the Others pose a security risk*) – can be more easily rationalized and will resonate with various segments of the public<sup>5</sup>, conditioned to see themselves as “contemporary manifestations of exceptionalism” and the Other as something harmful, to be wary of<sup>6</sup>. The Other’s erasure contributes to the amorphous nature of the contemporary threats, rooted in a rhetorical mechanism in which they are presumed to be illegitimate. The wall, therefore, stands as a confirmation and a limitation. The loop is now closed: the wall is a temporary stopgap that tries (and fails) to conceal one side from the other, but at the same time, it is a constant reminder that there is some fluid, non-conventional, asymmetrical, anonymous, stateless, *borderless* entity, out there on the borderland, that wants in. Even if this entity does not actively try to cause the Selves harm, it is still perceived as being detrimental to the Selves well-being.

In this context, the wall represents a limitation because the policies that enact it tend to disregard the chain of

<sup>1</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, p. 114

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

<sup>3</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 350

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 351; Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 1979

<sup>5</sup> For example, the case of the civilian volunteer-based Minuteman Civil Defense Corps patrolling the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent illegal crossings. Douzet has analyzed how, in turn, a group like the Minutemen has been instrumental in fermenting animosities and “building up popular pressure for immigration reform [...] in a context of heightened fear about national security”. Frédéric Douzet, *The Minutemen and Anti-immigration Attitudes in California*, “European Journal of American Studies”, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2009, article 2, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.7655> (22.02.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty, *States of Exception on the Mexico-U.S. Border: Security, “Decisions,” and Civilian Border Patrols*, “International Political Sociology”, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2007, p. 113, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2007.00008.x> (22.02.2025)

causality that produces it in the first place. Any remedial measures to normalize relations between the Selves and the Others will be palliative and vulnerable to executive decisions. For example, in the case of President Trump, he acted to remove such measures altogether (like those concerning the asylum and immigration policies that bypassed congressional approval and were taken at the level of government agencies or through executive orders)<sup>1</sup>. The wall, then, is both powerful and powerless. For those who use it as a shorthand for discriminatory rhetoric, we can see how the image of the wall retains some of the triumphal reflexes of the monumentalization that Neumann invokes and President Trump evoked in his speeches “a great wall on our southern border”; “a wall with a very big, very beautiful door”<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the wall reveals an underlying vulnerability and instability, or, as Rodney remarks, “[a] theatrical expression of insecurity”<sup>3</sup>. There is an interplay between the Self and Other and their relation to power, with the former casting itself as both powerful and powerless and the latter holding power over the Self, by physically or symbolically projecting themselves over the other side of the border.

### The Wall at the US-Mexico Border: Brief Overview of the Bipartisan Approach to Border Politics

In the United States, wall politics may ebb and flow depending on the political climate<sup>4</sup>, but the depreciated condition of the Other remains a constant, their status depending on political whims rather than on inviolable institutional mechanisms. A report of the Physicians for Human Rights from 2019 found that over the course of the last three decades, both Republican and Democratic administrations implemented “border enforcement strategies that have led to the deaths or injuries of a growing number of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border”<sup>5</sup>. The institutions and agencies mandated to ensure border security or to deport undocumented migrants have resorted to physical abuse against the immigrant Other, both on the borderland where the exceptional status of the frontier facilitates and expedites rights violations and on the mainland itself. Judith Ann Warner notes that these are patterns of “human rights abuses under international law and violations of the U.S. Constitution”<sup>6</sup>. The unlawful treatment of immigrants ranges from: “illegal search of people and property” to “verbal, psychological, and physical violence”<sup>7</sup>. Other instances of abuse include: denying access to food and water, medical care, and torture. On the low end of this spectrum of violence, we find “verbal abuse and threats”, humiliation, and intimidation, while, on the opposing end, instances of “assault, battery, and [even] murder” have also been recorded<sup>8</sup>. This difference in treatment is indicative of the fact that the separation between the Self and Other relies on the dehumanization of the Other to enact exclusionary policies.

In the case of US border politics, the undocumented immigrant is framed as an illegitimate body who becomes further delegitimized depending on their proximity to the border. In this sense, we can recall Victor Konrad distinction between *citizen* and *subject*: “certain citizens” are privileged while “those deemed less worthy of full rights” are othered<sup>9</sup>. These frameworks of otherization refer to “a process of constructing and representing the

<sup>1</sup> Amanda Holpuch, How Trump’s ‘Invisible Wall’ Policies Have Already Curbed Immigration, “The Guardian”, 15 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jan/15/invisible-wall-trump-policies-have-curbed-immigration>, (22.02.2025); Sarah Pierce, Jessica Bolter, Andrej Selee, *U.S. Immigration Policy Under Trump. Deep Changes and Lasting Impacts*, “Transatlantic Council on Migration”, Washington, D.C., July 2018, pp. 7-9, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/us-immigration-policy-trump-deep-changes-impacts> (22.02.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Ron Nixon, Linda Qiu, *Trump’s Evolving Words on the Wall*, “The New York Times”, 18 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/us/politics/trump-border-wall-immigration.html> (23.02.2025)

<sup>3</sup> Lee Rodney, *Looking Beyond Borderlines. North America’s Frontier Imagination*, Routledge, New York, 2017, p. 83

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Hampton, *Zero Protection: How U.S. Border Enforcement Harms Migrant Safety and Health*, “Physicians for Human Rights”, 10 January 2019, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/zero-protection-how-u-s-border-enforcement-harms-migrant-safety-and-health/> (27.02.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Judith Ann Warner, *U.S. Border Security. A Reference Handbook*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2010, p. 88

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*

<sup>9</sup> Victor Konrad, “Borders, Bordered Lands and Borderlands: Geographical States of Insecurity between Canada and the United States and the Impacts of Security Primacy”, in Elisabeth Vallet (Ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 96

“other” in negative or inferior terms to justify discrimination, exclusion, or even hostility toward them”<sup>1</sup>. Through these frameworks, one creates conditions of exception that, over time, become entrenched in US politics. In an Agambian understanding (“no-man’s land between public law and political fact, [...] between juridical order and life”<sup>2</sup>), the security apparatus asserts “the power to arrange the fate of any persons not fitting an ideal type”<sup>3</sup>, dispensing punitive measures haphazardly, with little regard for the human toll.

Previous administrations from Nixon onwards have all invoked the need to secure the border and though there are many strategies that go into realizing this objective, some form of visible fortification always comes into play. This was true for all three of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. In Texas (El Paso), Arizona (Nogales), and California (San Diego), Bill Clinton’s Operation Hold the Line (1993), Operation Safeguard, and Operation Gatekeeper (1994) were three initiatives that, according to Tony Payan, represented “a definite turn in the war against undocumented migration on the border and gave it its distinctive look today”<sup>4</sup> – what President Clinton described as the “get-tough policy”<sup>5</sup>. The three operations authorized the construction of fences and Operation Gatekeeper was the origin point of the *fence* as it is known today. At that time, a 23 km / 14-mile-long wall was built which stretched all the way to the Pacific Ocean. According to Joanna Griffin, Operation Gatekeeper “expanded existing structures to keep out illegal immigrants” and introduced “multi-tiered fencing”<sup>6</sup>. Armando Navarro describes that this operation spearheaded the “prevention through deterrence” strategy and involved “the construction of a Berlin-type iron curtain”<sup>7</sup>. These policies draw from a memoryscape where the Self is a monopolizing force at the border, erecting monuments dedicated to physical and symbolic separation from the Other.

In October 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Secure Fence Act which allotted 1.2 billion dollars to the construction of a security barrier on the border, approximately 1 000 km long (the equivalent of 650 – 700 miles)<sup>8</sup>. By January 2009, departing Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff stated that at the end of President Bush’ second term, the fencing constructions covered “580 miles of the 2,000-mile border, short of the planned 661 miles”<sup>9</sup>. The Bush administration also had designs for a *virtual wall*, advanced under the Secure Border Initiative Network, that involved the use of surveillance technologies. The *smart wall* was intended to compliment the physical barrier however it proved to be cost ineffective, and the Obama administration put an end to it. In the intersection between virtual and material, we can see an interplay between the utilitarian and performative dimensions of the wall: no matter how far it stretches, it will always be incomplete, hence the need to constantly reinforce it and upgrade it.

In 2010, President Obama put the construction of the wall on the Southern border on hold due to a funding shortage<sup>10</sup>, in parallel, however, he further enabled and enacted strict border and immigration measures<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Raquel Recuero, Felipe Soares, ““How Does the Other Half Tweet?”: Analyzing the Construction of “Otherness” During the 2022 Brazilian Presidential Campaign”, in Alexandre Novais, Rogério Christofolletti (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook on Right-Wing Populism and Otherness in Global Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2025, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Casey, Mary Watkins, *Up Against the Wall. Re-Imagining the U.S.-Mexico Border*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2014, p. 52

<sup>4</sup> Tony Payan, *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars. Drugs, Immigration, and Homeland Security (Second Edition)*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2016., p. 113

<sup>5</sup> Clinton, William J., “Remarks on the Immigration Policy Initiative and an Exchange with Reporters (February 7, 1995)”, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States – William J. Clinton – 1995 (In Two Books) – Book I – January 1 to June 30, 1995*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1996, p. 167

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Griffin, “Operation Gatekeeper”, in Lee Stacy (project editor), *Mexico and the United States. Volume I*, Marshall Cavendish, New York, 2003, p. 607

<sup>7</sup> Armando Navarro, *The Immigration Crisis. Nativism, Armed Vigilantism, and the Rise of a Countervailing Movement*, AltaMira Press, Lanham, 2009, p. 129

<sup>8</sup> Said Saddiki, “Border Fences as an Anti-Immigration Device: A Comparative View of American and Spanish Policies”, in Elisabeth Vallet (Ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 183

<sup>9</sup> Randal C. Archibold, *U.S. Plans Border ‘Surge’ Against Any Drug Wars*, “The New York Times”, 7 January 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/08/us/08chertoff.html> (28.02.2025)

<sup>10</sup> William A. Callahan, *Op. cit.*, p. 472



Meanwhile, his policy decisions attracted the ire of the conservatives<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, President Obama declared that: “We have strengthened border security beyond what many believed was possible. [...] we now have more boots on the ground on the Southwest border than at any time in our history. The Border Patrol has 20,000 agents – more than twice as many as there were in 2004, a buildup that began under President Bush and that we have continued. They wanted a fence. Well, that fence is now basically complete. And we’ve gone further”<sup>2</sup>. At that time, the Department of Homeland Security declared that the fencing project was 99.5% complete. On the ground, that percentage was reflected in 1044,46 km / 649 miles out of the 1049,29 km / 652 miles originally estimated<sup>3</sup>. The issue now stemmed from the fact that the original text of the Secure Fence Act had been amended in the years since it was adopted. Originally, it stipulated that the fence would need to be double layered (the type that allows cars to drive between the layers), but the provision was changed in 2007 at the request of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)<sup>4</sup>. DHS stressed that the heterogeneity of the terrain made the construction of a double-layer fence from one border to the other, unfeasible<sup>5</sup>. Once again, the wall needed to be retrofitted.

Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo argue that the Obama administration’s decision to further (hyper-)militarize the border, arguably played a key part in (re)legitimizing the dyadic reflexes of the previous administration: “the hyper-militarization [...] contributed to the merger of images of undocumented immigrants and terrorists in the public imagination”<sup>6</sup>. If these practices were adopted during a liberal presidency, it follows that a Republican administration would advance an even stricter policy. Arguably, these attempts on the part of the Democratic Party to placate the Republican opposition did not broker a compromise, as a similar scenario would be replayed during the Biden administration. Leti Volpp recounts how the Republican establishment and conservative media had repeatedly tried to delegitimize the policies pursued by President Obama, noting that the president was “rhetorically [...] thrust outside the territorial space of the United States as the “first foreign president”, and as the “first immigrant president”, as an “anti-American racist,” and as a “disloyal terrorist sympathizer”<sup>7</sup>. According to Volpp, when such dynamics are instituted against a perceived Other, even the president can be subjected to a process of otherization and can be placed “outside the law”, not unlike the undocumented immigrants that the Obama Administration deported in mass<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> José D. Villalobos, *Promises and Human Rights: The Obama Administration on Immigrant Detention Policy Reform*, “Race, Gender & Class”, Vol. 18, No. 1-2, 2011, pp. 151-170, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23884873> (28.02.2025); Lauren Gambino, *Orphaned by Deportation: the Crisis of American Children Left Behind*, “The Guardian”, 15 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/oct/15/immigration-boy-reform-obama-deportations-families-separated> (27.02.2025); Dora Schriro, *Weeping in the Playtime of Others: The Obama’s Administration’s Failed Reform of ICE Family Detention Practices*, “Journal of Migration and Human Security”, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2018, pp. 452-480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241700500212> (28.02.2025); Benjamin Hart, *Trump’s Draconian Immigration Policies Highlight Obama’s Missteps*, “New York Magazine”, 20 June 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/06/trumps-immigration-policies-highlight-obamas-missteps.html> (27.02.2025)

<sup>1</sup> Leti Volpp, *Immigrants Outside the Law: President Obama, Discretionary Executive Power, and Regime Change*, “Critical Analysis of Law”, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2016, pp. 385-404, <https://doi.org/10.33137/cal.v3i2.27264> (28.02.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, *Feminism after 9/11. Women’s Bodies as Cultural and Political Threat*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2017, p. 75

<sup>3</sup> Robert Farley, *Obama Says the Border Fence Is ‘Now Basically Complete’*, “Politifact”, 16 May 2011, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2011/may/16/barack-obama/obama-says-border-fence-now-basically-complete/> (28.02.2025)

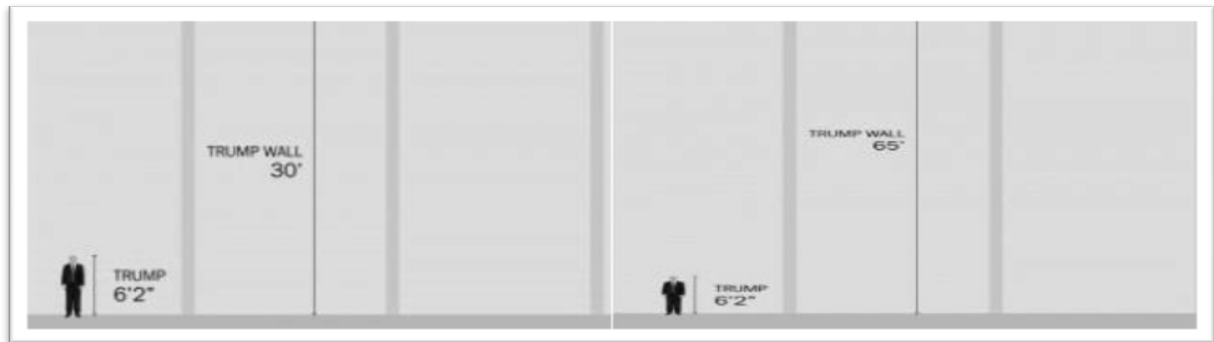
<sup>4</sup> *Idem*

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Halverstadt, *The Phantom Triple Fence: Fact Check*, “Voice of San Diego”, 15 May 2013, <https://voiceofsandiego.org/2013/05/15/the-phantom-triple-fence-fact-check/> (28.02.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, *Op. cit.*, p. 75

<sup>7</sup> Leti Volpp, *Op. cit.*, p. 404

<sup>8</sup> The Obama Administration also sought to create legal pathways through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA)



**Figure 1. Various sizes of the proposed wall on the Southern border<sup>1</sup>**

During Donald Trump's first term, his vision for the wall had only timidly begun to materialize<sup>2</sup> (its height ranged anywhere from 9 meters / 30 feet on the low end to 20 meters / 65 feet on the high end) (Figure 1) and the president would repeatedly revise his assessment on the length of the wall ("We have 2,000 miles of which we only need 1,000 miles, because you have a lot of natural barriers, [...], that are extremely tough to get across. We have 1,000 miles"<sup>3</sup>). Not for the first time, the rhetorical wall superseded the pre-existent fortified border constructions laid by the previous administrations. The wall then is not only about the physical separation of Self and Other, but also a symbol of power, with each administration putting their stamp on the matter, to further emphasize the Other's unwelcome status and imprint their own vision on the issue in order to ensure the Other's continued exclusion.

If the head of state can be othered to the point that his very political legitimacy was put into question<sup>4</sup>, then those that by their very status are illegitimate find themselves in double jeopardy. Moderate policies will seek to pacify the immigration hardliners which, in turn, leads to hypermilitarization and to a state of "low-intensity warfare against (im)migrants"<sup>5</sup>. The rise of Donald Trump shows that this policy of appeasement did little to quell the discriminatory and racist reflexes involved in the construction of a White nativist identity. In this sense, Philip Kretsedemas and David C. Brotherton point out how Trump's election put the presidential office in contact with "far right identity politics – defined by inherited culture, race, nativity, and religion" and predicated on the idea that "undesirables" must be purged "as an end in itself"<sup>6</sup>. During President Trump's second term, this ethos was accelerated and to a degree, automated<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Image Source: Philip Bump, *Donald Trump's Mexico Border Wall Will Be as High as 55 feet, according to Donald Trump*, "The Washington Post", 26 February 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/26/so-how-high-will-donald-trumps-wall-be-an-investigation/> (05.03.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Martinez, *Mexico Border 'Bollard Wall' Construction Begins in Santa Teresa*, "El Paso Times", 10 April 2018, <https://eu.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2018/04/09/mexico-border-bollard-wall-construction-santa-teresa/498773002/> (28.02.2025)

<sup>3</sup> Speech from 30 December 2015 quoted in Byron York, *7 Times Trump Said Wall Not Needed on All 2,000 Miles of Border*, "Washington Examiner", 18 January 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/byron-york-7-times-trump-said-wall-not-needed-on-all-2-000-miles-of-border> (28.02.2025)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 402

<sup>5</sup> On this issue: Martha D. Escobar, *Captivity Beyond Prisons. Criminalization Experiences of Latina (Im)migrants*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2016, p. 55; Jose Palafox, *Opening Up Borderland Studies: A Review of US-Mexico Border Militarization Doctrine*, "Social Justice", Vol. 27, No. 3, 2000, pp. 56-72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29767231> (28.02.2025); Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border (1978-1992). Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*, CMAS Books, Austin, 1996, pp. 19-33

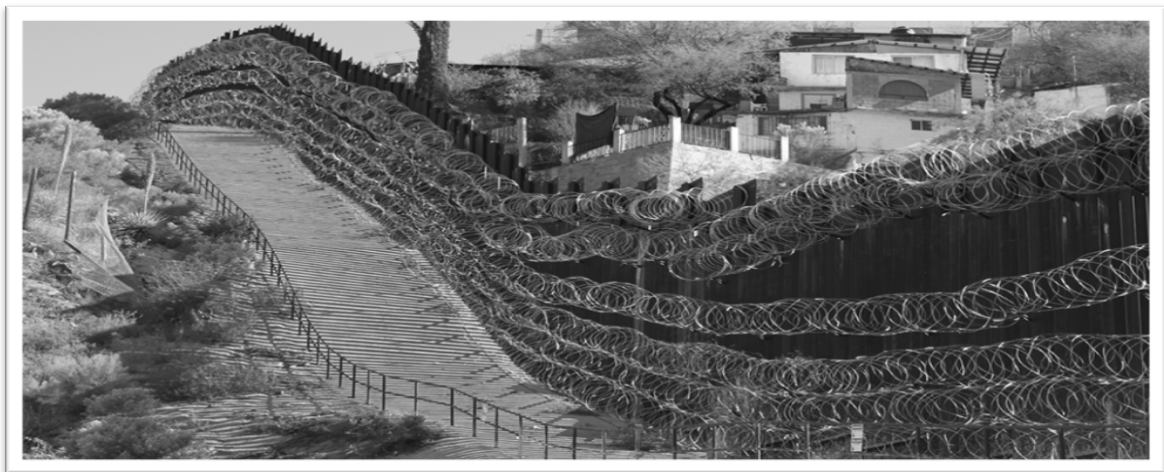
<sup>6</sup> Philip Kretsedemas, David C. Brotherton, "Introduction: Immigration Policy in an Age of Punishment", in Philip Kretsedemas, David C. Brotherton (Eds.), *Immigration Policy in the Age of Punishment. Detention, Deportation, and Border Control*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2017, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Rodrigo Nieto-Gomez, "Walls, Sensors and Drones Technology and Surveillance on the US-Mexico Border", in Elisabeth Vallet (Ed.), *Op. cit.*, pp. 191-290; Mitxy Mabel Meneses Gutierrez, *Researching the Mexico-US border: a tale of dataveillance*, "Journal of Global Ethics", Vol. 19, No. 3, 2023, pp. 347-358, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2023.2271005> (17.05.2025); Josiah McC. Heyman, "Constructing a virtual wall. Race and

### The Nogales Section at the US-Mexico Border as an Exercise of Monumentalization

Though walls in and of themselves are insufficient in exerting exhaustive control over the borderland, the manifestation of tangibility conceals the Selves. President Trump's envisioned wall provided cover for the proliferation of walling structures and embellishments. In the city of Nogales – the largest port of entry in the state of Arizona, which borders its Mexican namesake in the state of Sonora – one such addition was a drape of razor wire over-imposed on the wall (Figure 2). The Nogales wall evolved over time: prior to the walling efforts that began in the '90s, the border was divided by a cattle fence, even a river fence (Figure 3); afterwards, it even comprised of metal landing mats from Vietnam welded together<sup>1</sup> (Figure 4). The Mayor Arturo Garino described how: "later on, we had a little section made out of concrete, which was more like a designer wall in the DeConcini Port of Entry to make it look nice"... "It had big squares with mesh through which you could actually see into Nogales, Sonora"<sup>2</sup> (Figure 5). The mayor continues: "after that is when we got this metal bollard fence, (made of) this big, thick steel about 4 to 6 inches (cca 1-2 meters) wide, and in some places from 18 to 20 feet (cca 5.5-6 meters) high"<sup>3</sup> (Figure 6).

Unlike the old metal mats, the bollard pillars were considered more efficient, they required less maintenance, the transgressors could be more easily identified and intercepted and, according to the U.S. Custom and Border Patrol officials, they were also more aesthetically pleasing. Randall H. McGuire remarks that "[t]he new wall is taller, more imposing, and crueler than the old landing-mat fence. It visually dominates the border landscape even more than the old wall did". These bars crisscross the landscape akin to those of a prison. The new barbed additions solidify this image. Only this time, the prison is mirrored inside. In Mayor Garino's view, "all this razor wire curled along the border [...] looks like we're trying to keep Americans in, not like we're trying to keep Mexicans out". There is a power dynamic exerted on the border that disciplines not only the Other, but the Self itself, because now, the wall stands as a memento, it does not conceal, but, in fact, reveals the penalties that the body illegitimate is subjected to.



**Figure 2. Nogales – The U.S.-Mexico Border Wall with the Concertina Wire Additions<sup>4</sup>**

citizenship in U.S.-Mexico Border Policing", in Julie A. Dowling, Jonathan Xavier Inda (Eds.), *Governing Immigration Through Crime. A Reader*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2013, pp. 99-114

<sup>1</sup> Mary Harris, This Border Town Mayor Wanted More Roads. What He Got Was Razor Wire, "Slate", 12 January 2019, <https://slate.com/podcasts/what-next/2019/02/trump-border-wall-nogales-arizona-razor-wire> (28.02.2025); on this issue: Victoria Hattam, *Imperial Designs: Remembering Vietnam at the US-Mexico Border Wall*, "Memory Studies", Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015, pp. 27-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015613971> (28.02.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Mary Harris, This Border Town Mayor Wanted More Roads. What He Got Was Razor Wire, "Slate", 12 January 2019, <https://slate.com/podcasts/what-next/2019/02/trump-border-wall-nogales-arizona-razor-wire> (28.02.2025)

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*

<sup>4</sup> Image Source: Photo ID 171407938 © Rebekah Zemansky, <https://www.dreamstime.com/border-wall-eastward-nogales-arizona-us-december-looking-east-along-bollard-style-hung-barbed-wire-mexico-image171407938> (22.05.2025)



**Figure 3 River Border Fence in Nogales, Arizona<sup>1</sup>**

If the wall is a marker of identity, then what does it say about the state of the Selves' identity if one way in which it can be confirmed is through the severed body parts of the Other<sup>2</sup>. In 1978, early in the Carter administration, George Norris, a manager from a company contracted to build a section of the border wall, boasted that the projected wall would be *razor-sharp*, its purpose would be to draw blood, and that it would be equipped with "punched-out metal [that] would leave edges sharp enough to cut off the toes of barefoot climbers"<sup>3</sup>. President Trump's dehumanizing rhetoric was indeed a break of decorum, but his policies did not constitute a radical break with the past, as he preserved the binary dynamic of US versus Them in adversarial terms. The implementation was cruder, but the ethos behind the wall-building enterprise had been echoed before.



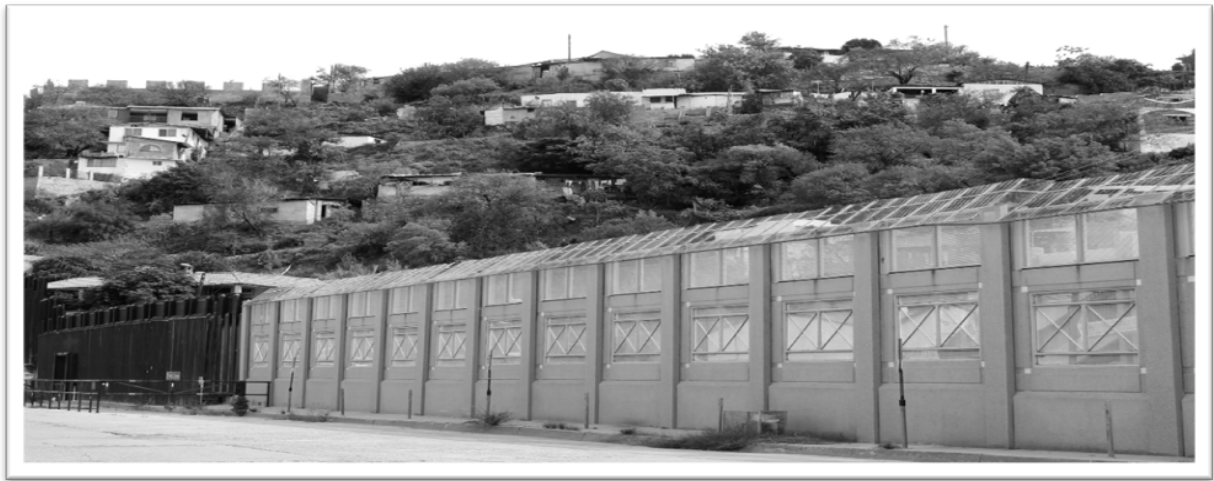
**Figure 4. Section Built from a Steel Landing Mat. The Crosses Commemorate Those Who Died Attempting to Cross the Border<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Image Source: Photo ID 133642444 © Linda Johnsonbaugh, <https://www.dreamstime.com/river-border-fence-separating-us-mexico-nogales-arizona-dry-river-bed-river-border-fence-road-near-image133642444> (22.05.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves. Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2015, pp. 25-26

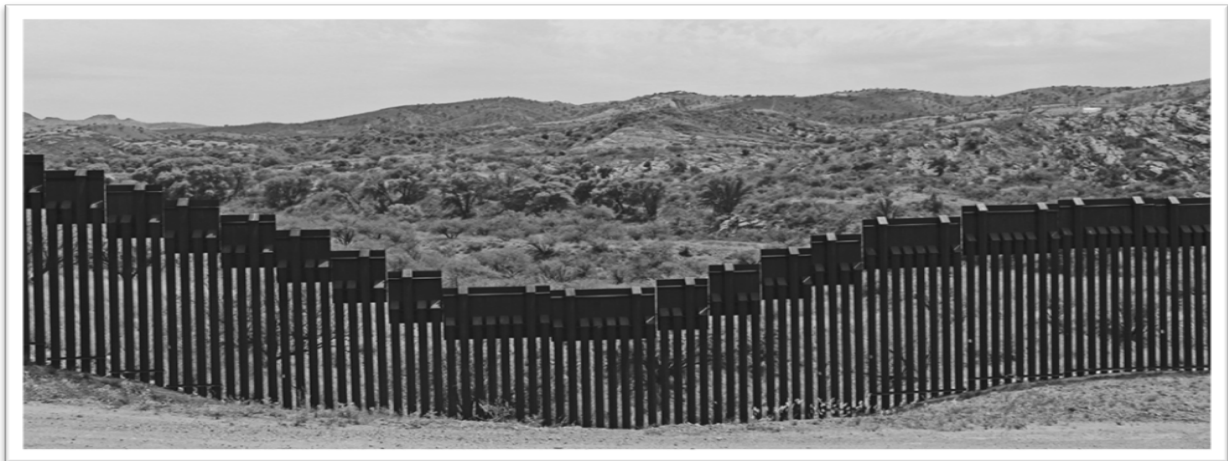
<sup>3</sup> Greg Grandin, *How the U.S. Weaponized the Border Wall*, "The Intercept", 10 February 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/10/us-mexico-border-fence-history/> (05.03.2025)

<sup>4</sup> Image Source: Photo by Jonathan McIntosh / Flickr, in Greg Grandin, *The Militarization of the Southern Border Is a Long-Standing American Tradition. NACLA Report on the Americas*, "NACLA", 17 January 2019, <https://nacla.org/blog/2019/01/17/militarization-southern-border-long-standing-american-tradition> (05.03.2025)



**Figure 5. Section Of the Wall in Nogales, Arizona. Materials: Concrete And Mesh<sup>1</sup>**

The Nogales wall frequently harms the bodies of trespassers: it fractures bones, it shreds through skin, it severs limbs<sup>2</sup>. The added concertina wire covering the inside of the wall is even more perilous. For one, it cannot be seen very well from the Mexican side, as Mayor Garino observes: “If somebody climbs it and they don’t know anything, and it’s pitch-black, that’s when something’s going to happen”<sup>3</sup>. To a certain degree these walls restore Neumann’s instantiation of the Other as dead: “The building of a monument that consists exclusively of the Other’s severed [body parts] to celebrate the Self’s victory [...] The Self celebrates itself by putting the dead Other on display”<sup>4</sup>. In this, the wall is both a material and ideological construct since no security imperative can justify the cruelty, but cruelty can be sublimated into something acceptable by a Self inured to these expressions of dehumanization and willing to do anything to separate Themselves from the Other.



<sup>1</sup> Image Source: Photo ID 53326087 © Pkorchagina, <https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-photo-wall-mexico-usa-nogales-image53326087> (22.05.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Randall H. McGuire, *Steel Walls and Picket Fences: Rematerializing the U.S.–Mexican Border in Ambos Nogales*, “American Anthropologist”, Vol. 115, No. 3, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12029>, pp. 466-480

<sup>3</sup> Mary Harris, This Border Town Mayor Wanted More Roads. What He Got Was Razor Wire, “Slate”, 12 January 2019, <https://slate.com/podcasts/what-next/2019/02/trump-border-wall-nogales-arizona-razor-wire> (28.02.2025)

<sup>4</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 342

### Figure 6. Section of the Metal Bollard Fence Near Nogales, Arizona<sup>1</sup>

While the present walls are both celebratory and perfunctory in nature, they are washed in the blood of Others. The Mayor from Nogales somberly worried that if an individual attempts to go over the wall, they might get trapped in the razor-wire contraption and the emergency services might not even be able to adequately provide first aid<sup>2</sup>. Neumann explains that the dead Other is often *primary subject matter*, “occur[ing] in a sublimated form, where death is intrinsic”<sup>3</sup>. The walls are therefore macabre omens: the Other can die by wall, by man, or by nature. They may die when attempting to jump over, they may die if the Border Patrol assesses them to pose a threat<sup>4</sup>, they may die of exposure when attempting to circumvent the wall.

According to Neumann, monuments are characterized by *slow temporality* which enables them to reawaken *old stimuli* like those of nationalism, but the walls as can be seen in the case of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, exhibit an inhibited temporality<sup>5</sup>. As borders are renegotiated, walls fall, change designation, or arise where they were previously absent. In the case analyzed, the wall tries to preserve – like a fly in amber – a hegemonic order that has been demographically dislocated, but which still retains enough control to impose its own will, irrespective of costs. Instead of halting the Other in time, the wall is halting the very Self. That the Self goes to such extremes to achieve this outcome reflects an inside / outside outlook meant to preserve the Self’s claim over the homestead. The homestead embodies the Self’s home, land, and polity – projecting a memoryscape conveniently devoid of native and naturalized Others or Others that ended on the other side of the border as a result of conquest and expansion. The wall, therefore, overlooks this internal dissonance while its architects are content to devise more and more instruments that perpetuate the Self’s division from the Other.

### Conclusions

Former Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Democrat Nancy Pelosi described President Trump’s wall as “an immorality between countries. [...] an old way of thinking [...] [that] isn’t cost effective”<sup>6</sup>. The Speaker talked about building a “positive, shall we say, almost technological wall”<sup>7</sup>. The article has shown that the border wall existed long before Donald Trump came to power. Should we infer that the pre-Trump bollard fences also constituted an immorality? The wall’s existence continues to endure irrespective of who occupies the White House because it is rooted in a policy of border absolutism, which single outs the border as a place to be insulated from foreign contaminants to reclaim the nation for the homogeneous Selves, with the wall as their protector.

A technological wall may be more sophisticated than the crude Nogales barbed wire, more delicate and less of an eye-sore, but it would still operate on the existent parameters of otherization outlined above. Such a *wall* works as an amplifier, further exacerbating the barriers of separation. According to Tanvi Misra, “biometric surveillance technology such as iris sensors are already being piloted at the border”<sup>8</sup>. On the risks posed by the virtual wall, Misra contends that “Computerized risk-assessment programs at or near the border [...] may lead to racial profiling. Expansions in drone and marine surveillance may capture the faces of anyone who lives or works in the vicinity, not

<sup>1</sup> Image Source: Photo ID 133642362©Linda Johnsonbaugh, <https://www.dreamstime.com/border-fence-road-nogales-arizona-separating-united-states-mexico-border-fence-separating-us-image133642362> (22.05.2025)

<sup>2</sup> Mary Harris, This Border Town Mayor Wanted More Roads. What He Got Was Razor Wire, “Slate”, 12 January 2019, <https://slate.com/podcasts/what-next/2019/02/trump-border-wall-nogales-arizona-razor-wire> (28.02.2025)

<sup>3</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 343

<sup>4</sup> Sabrina Siddiqui, *Family of Mexican Teen Shot Dead by US Border Patrol Agent Can Sue, Court Rules*, “The Guardian”, 7 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/07/mexican-teen-us-border-patrol-agent-lonnie-swartz-court>, (03.03.2025); Southern Border Communities Coalition, *Fatal Encounters with CBP Since 2010*, updated 1 April 2025, [https://www.southernborder.org/deaths\\_by\\_border\\_patrol](https://www.southernborder.org/deaths_by_border_patrol) (01.04.2025)

<sup>5</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Op. cit.*, p. 346

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hirsh, *Will Pelosi Be the First to Out-Bully Trump?*, “Foreign Policy”, 4 January 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/04/will-pelosi-be-the-first-to-out-bully-trump/> (05.03.2025)

<sup>7</sup> Ian Sherr, *How Trump’s Border Wall Could Embrace Drones, Camera and AI*, “CNET”, 1 February 2019, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/drones-cameras-and-ai-could-be-border-wall-alternatives/> (05.03.2025)

<sup>8</sup> Tanvi Misra, *The Problem with a ‘Smart’ Border Wall*, “Bloomberg”, 12 February 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-12/the-problem-with-a-smart-border-wall> (05.03.2025)

just undocumented migrants, and license-plate readers would track their movements over time”<sup>1</sup>. The virtual wall reaffirms its utilitarian bona fides while retaining its monumentalization potential: it operates from the same logic of exclusion, rendering the Other invisible and subject to abuse, but with an added element of gamification – turning attempted crossings of the wall into a game – through which the Self asserts dominion over the Other.

We can conclude that the walls and their accoutrements reflect the existing tensions between universalist discourses designed to enable intercultural coexistence and the practices of security designed to safeguard the allegedly inviolable domain of identity that nativism thrives on. At times, the wall is the expression of a course correction, at others, a manifestation of tribalism. In either case, the Other is to be kept at a distance, surveilled, and deported if it manages to cross the border. Neumann’s exploration of Otherness ends with a normative appeal: the Selves should refrain from “monumentalis[ing] Others in humiliating ways, for humiliation breeds contempt and contempt may breed unnecessary conflict”<sup>2</sup>. Yet, degradation has become, maybe more than ever before, a core element of the zero-tolerance / deterrence-based policy towards irregular immigration instituted by the Trump administration. Arguably, the spectacle of gratuitous brutality serves a baser memorialization instinct. This article examined how identity is formed and reformed in liminal spaces to discuss what are the implications for universal human rights considering the established hierarchies of separation that discipline and punish the body rendered illegitimate. The process of otherization analyzed is a cautionary tale for the Self, whose status must be supported using symbolic and physical violence. The excesses of border politics risk crossing over and being turned not just against the domestic Others, but against the very Self, if it arbitrarily fails to meet the set criteria for belonging. As the liberal / cosmopolitan polity disintegrates at an accelerated pace and sovereignty reverts to a hard state, the wall (re)surfaces as an accessible solution to keep the Other out, but in so doing, we disregard the global political, economic, or environmental processes that make separation impossible and the fusion between the Self and Other inevitable on the long term. Resisting the pull of otherization is imperative if we are to avoid cruel scenarios as those envisaged above, and a first step in this direction would be to dismantle the monuments dedicated to Self.

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