



## INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *RIAS* focuses on walls. It is motivated by Donald J. Trump's campaign promise and presidential rhetoric insisting on building a tall, strong, beautiful and effective wall between Mexico and the United States so as to keep undocumented Mexican (and Central American) people out of the United States. Of course, walls are also things used in building houses and other buildings, creating rooms within those houses and buildings, and demarcating the edges of property in both urban and rural areas. They may be tall or short, made of a multitude of materials (including wood, adobe, brick, mud, glass, and concrete), and painted or left unadorned. And they may be used to hang art or political posters. Walls have been used for thousands of years of human history, and it is often ruins of stone walls that we find in archaeological settings since they tend to survive better than roofs, wooden furniture, and textiles. But they are not the kind of walls that motivated me or the contributors of this issue of *RIAS*.

Clearly then, walls are not in themselves problematic. The issue is how we use them, how people and often their governments use them, and how people affected by their presence use them. In the case at hand, it is obviously the exclusionary nature of Trump's Wall that concerns me and this issue's contributors. Trump's campaign rhetoric was anti-immigration, but it specifically focused on the southern border of the United States, not its northern border with Canada, which is, of course, much longer. Trump has never proposed building a wall along the US-Canadian border,

Virginia R. Dominguez  
University of Illinois  
at Urbana-Champaign  
USA

although Canadian critics have in response proposed building a botanical fence all along that border. The end result, however, was that Trump's proposed wall came across as a wall to keep Mexicans and Central Americans out of the US and it has been perceived as deeply racist. With Trump's campaign and presidential rhetoric against allegedly untrustworthy Muslim refugees coming into the US, the proposed wall along the Rio Grande (known in Mexico as the Rio Bravo) has become a symbol of protectionism of only a part of the US population. "Make America Great Again" is and was a catchy slogan, but in practice it came across as assuming that "Americans" were neither Muslim nor Mexican or Central American in origin. Scholars and policymakers will debate whether Trump actually meant to exclude those people from the "America" he wanted to make great again, but the wall he wants to build along the southern border of the US has become symbolic of an exclusionary and particular notion of the US that many academics and US liberals decry (see the December 2017 issue of *Comparative American Studies*).

But Trump is not alone and that is of greater concern to me. US Trump supporters have been inspired by his rhetoric. Pew Research Center Surveys showed that "nearly 8 in 10 Trump supporters" in August 2016 favored "building a wall along the Mexican border." And "in an interview shortly after his [November 2016] election, he [Trump] again promised to build a wall on the southern border [of the US] and said his administration would seek to deport up to 3 million unauthorized immigrants with criminal records, leaving open the possibility of deporting others in the future" (Gramlich). While much talk during his first 100 days in office seemed to have focused on other things, his administration did issue a call in early February 2017 for proposals for such a wall and got a number of proposed designs in early March 2017. The official expected cost of building such a wall is \$21 billion US dollars.

We can approach this matter from many perspectives, and we should, including why Trump and his supporters concentrate on the US-Mexico border and not the far longer international border the US has with Canada. But my own interest here—and in putting together this special issue of *RIAS* (and the double panel we had at the 2017 IASA 8<sup>th</sup> World Congress held in Laredo, Texas)

is the power 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.

Interestingly this idea that building a wall will solve an important problem has a long history, as Darcy Eveleigh wrote in the *New York Times* in May 2016 (prior to Donald J. Trump's election in November 2016 as President of the United States, even if he did not win the popular vote and even if there remains some doubt that he ever won at all because of Russia's interference). Her piece, "What History Teaches Us about Walls," is still available online, and I highly recommend it. Her subtitle read, "Donald Trump may want to take note: World history is full of examples of engineering thwarted by goal-oriented rank amateurs" (May 27, 2016). Her article contains textual and visual references to most of the examples I had originally contemplated in putting together the July 2017 double-panel in Laredo and in putting together this special issue of *RIAS*, though it also mentions more "walls" than I had originally imagined. These include the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, Hadrian's Wall, the Israeli Wall, the fence between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla, the walls of the Kremlin, Pope Leo IV's wall around the Vatican, the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, the 2011 wall built by a mayor in Romania around a neighborhood full of Roma (Gypsies), the fence dividing North Korea from South Korea, the wall long dividing the Greek and Turkish parts of Cyprus, the fence erected by the Indian Security Services to keep Bangladeshis from crossing illegally into India, the walls/fences built in 1969 to separate Roman Catholic and Protestant areas of Belfast (in Northern Ireland), and the wall built by Morocco in the early 1980s to "keep out the Polisario Front guerillas, who sought to make the western Sahara an independent nation."

Yet why evoke walls when there is ample historical evidence that the great majority of past walls were ineffective at keeping people from moving? Tunnels, climbing, bribing, and many other strategies of containment are well-known, and, of course, history shows us that all empires have fallen and that they do so less

by invasion from outside than policies and actions taken within the empire. As Eveleigh puts it,

It is lost to history whether Hadrian, Qin Shi Huang or Nikita Khrushchev ever uttered, 'I will build a wall.' But build they did, and what happened? The history of walls—to keep people out or in—is also the history of people managing to get around, over and under them. Some come tumbling down. The classic example is the Great Wall of China. Imposing and remarkably durable, yes, yet it didn't block various nomadic tribes from the north.

Here is where the contributors to this issue of *RIAS* may be most useful. I asked colleagues who work on walls and other forms of physical separation to put all this in perspective. I also asked colleagues who work on the US but live in places with a history of walls of various kinds to reflect on them, even if it meant stepping outside of their comfort zones. So here they are. Giorgio Mariani, who tends to work on 19<sup>th</sup> century US literature, became fascinated by the many walls in and around Rome where he teaches American Studies—walls Roman emperors built to keep out alleged outsiders, though in this article for *RIAS* he goes back and forth quite a bit as he thinks about walls and separation. Alejandro Lugo, who headed the School of Transborder Studies at Arizona State University in the Phoenix, Arizona (US) metropolitan area, but is a wonderful photographer as well, here offers his own photoessay on the US-Mexican wall. It is interesting to me that he chose to include this photoessay in this *RIAS* volume, a special contribution to the theme of this issue, although he has also become fascinated by Roman emperors and the ways Trump reminds him of Roman emperors. Amalia Sa'ar, who normally writes about neoliberalism and its effects on both Jews and Palestinians in Israel, reflects here (jointly with her Israeli colleagues) on Trump's proposed wall and lessons we might learn by looking at 'normalization' in Israel. Then there is Sangjun Jeong, who normally lives in Seoul, South Korea, where he teaches American Studies at Seoul National University, and who had never before written about the separation of North and South Korea, the ironically-called DMZ (demilitarized zone) that is heavily militarized and is just miles from his home in Seoul, nor the effect on so many Koreans of that physical separation that continues to exist between North

*Walls,  
Material and Rhetorical:  
Past, Present,  
and Future*

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER Nº 1/2018

and South Korea. Sangjun wanted to write about that separation in large part because of Trump's rhetoric and plans.

And there are Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Steffan Igor Ayora-Díaz, coauthors of a paper they presented in Laredo, now much expanded here, who were trained as (social/cultural) anthropologists in Canada but live in Merida, Mexico, where they teach at the Autonomous University of the Yucatan, and who surprised people in Laredo (and probably again here) by not focusing on Trump's wall. They instead focus on physical, historical, and social barriers between the Yucatan and the rest of Mexico and, in so doing, they call into question many Americans' notions of Mexico, including Trump's and his supporters' idea of Mexico. And there is Éva Eszter Szabó, who normally lives in Budapest, Hungary, where she teaches American history at Eötvös Loránd University and has special interest in the Latino population of the US and in US' relationship with Latin America. This article of hers here, like her original and much shorter presentation in Laredo, Texas, actually focuses on the Iron Curtain not just as an ideological or political barrier but also as a physical barrier between the Soviet-controlled world and Western Europe. She tackles its history but also the history of its effect on Eastern Europe, and in so doing she reminds us of the effects of walls and enforced separation of the sort Trump and his supporters endorse.

Laura McAtackney was unable to join us in Laredo, Texas, in July 2017, but I am delighted that she was able to contribute to this special issue of *RIAS*. Laura, an archaeologist who is much concerned with the past and present physical barriers built in Belfast between Catholics and Protestants, raises issues of materiality, violence, social class, and hope here. And in so doing, she makes all of us think about hope, determination, and other border conflicts over time, and the violence that walls (material or rhetorical) represent.

In a photoessay on the use of walls in Israel/Palestine for a variety of reasons, Jasmin Habib raises similar issues, many of them about hope and determination. This works well with Laura McAtackney's explorations of walls in Belfast and Sangjun Jeong's concern about the DMZ and the state of war that continues to exist between North Korea and South Korea, as well as the many decades

*Virginia R. Dominguez*  
University of Illinois  
at Urbana-Champaign  
USA

of the Iron Curtain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its effects detailed by Éva Eszter Szabó.

The Epilogue we include here (carefully and thoughtfully crafted by György Tóth of the University of Stirling in Scotland) brings up important issues about rhetoric, power, intent, similarity and difference, and empires. Whether this mix of contributions sheds useful light on Trump's proposed wall and his focus on the southern border of the US will be up to readers to decide. But we do hope that it at least raises useful questions, including those not already anticipated by others.

In Laredo, at IASA's 8<sup>th</sup> World Congress, I stated something that many then present probably found surprising and that György Tóth bravely disagreed with. Because of that and because it is important to provoke discussion and not necessarily come across as all sharing one view, I want to end this introduction with mention of it and an argument for it. In Laredo, in July 2017, I said that I did not think that Trump would ever build the wall he frequently talks about but that he would continue to talk about it during his term as president of the United States. So far I have been proven correct, but who knows? Many readers and certainly probably most of this issue's contributors will disagree with me. I suspect that most people hearing Trump's speeches and rhetoric do assume that he will indeed build a wall between Mexico and the United States during his first term in office, and they are for the most part fiercely opposed to it.

But I wonder. The US-Mexico border is already heavily officiated and militarized, even if it is not all that effective. I remember telling IASA Congress participants who very much wanted to see Nuevo Laredo (the city in Mexico on the other side of the US-Mexico border at the Laredo, Texas, site) that they would be able to cross into Mexico quite easily but that crossing back into the US from Mexico would not be so easy, even if they had visas into the US. Many of them heeded my warning but not all, and those who did—had trouble with US passport and customs officials. I crossed into the US myself from Mexico in 1969 and remember the long lines. My parents and I were all US citizens by then, and we were neither Mexican nor Central American, but we still had to wait for a long time to cross into the US. This was before NAFTA

and the Laredo and Nuevo Laredo mayors and officials we met at the IASA Congress who told us of the economic boon NAFTA has been for this border area. And yet the border patrol in 2017 in this border area remained highly unequal. Crossing into the US from Mexico is not at all like crossing into Mexico from the United States.

I was even reminded of this in an unexpected way as I was leaving the Laredo, Texas, airport on July 22, 2017, en route to Dallas-Forth Worth and eventually home to Champaign, Illinois. Just before going through the metal detectors and the security machines (but after already getting my boarding pass) I was asked by two men in military uniform standing next to the TSA (airport security) if I was a US citizen. I have never been asked that before at any airport in the US and I told them so. They did not ask for any proof of my US citizenship after I replied “absolutely,” but the mere fact that they asked the question left me baffled. When I told them that I had never been asked that question before at any US airport, one of them said that the question is asked at any US airport that is less than 100 miles from the US-Mexico border.

So, the US already tries to keep people out along its southern border. Why would a wall itself keep people out? Let me reiterate what Eveleigh said in May 2016. “The history of walls—to keep people out or in—is also the history of people managing to get around, over and under them” (Eveleigh 2016).

My point in Laredo—and one I reiterate here—is that it is Trump’s rhetoric that matters much more than Trump actually building a wall along the southern border of the US. The fact is that many Americans, and not just Trump’s diehard supporters, want to keep Mexicans and Central Americans out of the United States. Do I have proof of this? Perhaps.

Many people—journalists and scholars alike—seem to focus on Trump’s supporters voicing approval of Trump’s idea of building a wall separating the United States from Mexico, with the hope that it would be effective in seriously reducing (if not totally eliminating) the entry into the US of undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans. But the fact remains that many supporters of Hillary Clinton also voiced approval when Pew Research Center asked them as well in 2016. Whereas “nearly 8 in 10 Trump supporters”

in August 2016 favored “building a wall along the Mexican border,” 38% of Hillary Clinton’s supporters said the same thing. That is not 3% or 2% or even 5%. That is a large percentage. It is over a third of Clinton’s supporters, and not all that far from half of her supporters. What is that about?

Clearly many non-Latino, non-Mexican, non-Central American Americans think a wall between the US and Mexico is a good idea. Is this racist? Probably, as I said before, because it is not applied to the US-Canada border. But is this just a Trump view? I don’t think so. Many Clinton supporters apparently support Trump’s proposed wall, and clearly not all Trump supporters endorse his proposed wall.

There may then be much support among US citizens not of Mexican, Central American, or Latino background for Trump’s proposed wall, but who indeed would pay for it at a current estimated cost of \$21 billion US dollars? Trump has publicly said that Mexico would pay for the wall, but I don’t think that many people on either side of the border believe him, so my point (no doubt a controversial point) is that the rhetoric is what is important, not the actual building of the wall he keeps talking about.

It would not be the first time that rhetoric mattered more than the materiality of a wall or even its social effects and tragic costs. We are all likely to remember how in 1989 the Berlin Wall came down, but I wonder how many of us know why it was erected in the first place. As the May 2016 *NYT* piece put it, in a caption under a black and white photo,

Increasing the height on a section of the Berlin Wall on Oct. 9, 1961. The Communist East Germans built it to stem mass migrations into West Berlin. The wall accomplished that goal, but it also became an *enduring symbol* of the Cold War as people risked their lives to flee over and under it. Germans tore it down in 1989.

And I know that several other walls were built for similar reasons by empires and their heads, whether or not they were called emperors, but many of these have since become primarily tourist attractions. Consider the Great Wall of China, Hadrian’s Wall in southern Scotland, the walls around the Vatican, and even many of the walls in Belfast. When their value becomes symbolic

*Walls,  
Material and Rhetorical:  
Past, Present,  
and Future*

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER N<sup>o</sup> 1/2018

of past but failed efforts, what should any contemporary politician or policy-maker think? Perhaps the point is always rhetorical and symbolic, never a material one.

And yet the rhetoric is there and, unlike others in the US who oppose Trump and his planned wall, I remain interested in the fact that a decent number of Clinton supporters (over a third) said before the November 2016 US presidential election that they support the building of a wall along the entire US-Mexico border. And I also remain interested in the fact that not all supporters of Trump said in the same Pew survey that they supported such a wall. In fact, Pew reported that only 79% of Trump's supporters supported that part of Trump's plan. Clearly there are conflicting positions in the US with respect to immigration, but I wonder what to make of this rather widespread support for building a wall along the US-Mexican border.

The simple comment is that many non-Mexican origin US citizens are racist toward people in Mexico and do not worry about Canadians at all. That may well be true but is that all we can say about it? I don't think so, and I don't think the contributors to this issue of *RIAS* think so, and I don't think we should think so. Ironically the same Pew Research Center surveys showed much more complexity in responses to immigration—among both Clinton and Trump supporters in the US—highlighting for me Trump's emphasis on a likely-to-fail wall and what it might say about many people in the US, and not just Trump's right-wing base. For example, while 88% of Clinton supporters reported thinking that “undocumented immigrants are as honest and hard-working as American citizens,” 57% of Trump supporters reported the same thing. And the same survey showed that 84% of Clinton's supporters reported thinking that “undocumented immigrants are no more likely than American citizens to commit serious crimes” which many of us might expect, but the same survey showed that nearly half (43%) of Trump supporters also agreed with that statement. And a later poll (October 20–25, 2016), much closer to the actual election day in 2016, showed that these August results were not unusual. Ninety-five (95) percent of Clinton supporters said that undocumented immigrants in the US who meet certain requirements should be allowed to stay, but so did

over half (60%) of Trump supporters. So, what is the proposed wall all about? It certainly does not look like just some people in the US want that wall, but it also does not look like building the wall is seen by most people in the US as the solution to the question of immigration to the US, not even as the solution to the issue of Mexican and Central American immigration to the United States.

So should we not ask why anyone should persist in talking about building a tall, strong, beautiful, and effective wall along the US-Mexican border when it does not take extensive research to learn that most societies that have built walls to keep people in or out have failed in their goals, and they were not even living in a world with the Internet and as extensive trading across international borders as we have now? My answer is that the wall has rhetorical power and galvanizing power—racist power and xenophobic power—but pretty much no other kind of power. That is why I suspect that Trump will keep talking about it but will never really get that wall built.

Readers and contributors may not be convinced, and Trump may indeed surprise me but, as I read and think about the contributions to this special issue of *RIAS*, I contemplate some of these other walls, barriers, fences, and their rationales, as well as what they have become.

Consider what we know of these walls. The *Great Wall of China* today functions primarily as a tourist attraction. It is “a series of fortifications made of stone, brick, tamped earth, wood, and other materials, generally built along an east-to-west line across the historical northern borders of China to protect the Chinese states and empires against the raids and invasions of the various nomadic groups of the Eurasian Steppe.”

Several of these walls were built as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Others came later, joining the earlier ones together and making them bigger and presumably stronger. As Wikipedia puts it, “Especially famous is the wall built 220–206 BCE by Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China.” Yet even Wikipedia says that “little of that wall remains” and that “since then, the Great Wall has on and off been rebuilt, maintained, and enhanced; the majority of the existing wall is from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).”

Watch towers, troop barracks, garrison stations, and signaling facilities were eventually added, but over the years other functions took hold—from the imposition of import duties along the “Silk Road” to the regulation or encouragement of trade, immigration, or emigration, the use of the wall(s) for transportation, and more recently money-making for the tourist industry.

Hadrian’s Wall supposedly protected the Roman Empire from foreign invaders up north some 2000 years ago but, as Eveleigh put it, “invaders were never a real threat” and it stands now as a curiosity well worth visiting. Why Emperor Hadrian started it in 122 AD and why successors continued to build it probably said more about perceived weakness of the Roman Empire at the time than real strength, a point Trump and his avid supporters ought to contemplate and, if I am right, do at some level. Now regarded as a British cultural icon, not an Italian one, it was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. Clearly a large portion of it still stands, allegedly the largest Roman artifact anywhere in the world, built with a stone base and turrets in between. Physically, it might (or might not) have mattered that it included a fort about every 5 miles, and it might (or might not) have mattered that there were ditches, fighting garrisons only at the forts, and that its gates may well have functions as customs sites.

The walls around the Vatican are much like the walls around many an ancient city, now of special interest to tourists and now also typically enclosing no one—with urban dwellers frequently living beyond those walls. And then there are the far more recent walls built to separate Catholics from Protestants in a particularly violent era of life in Belfast. Beneath a photo credited to Peter Kemp of the Associated Press, Eveleigh wrote:

The[se] *fences* were built in 1969 in an effort to maintain peace. It didn’t work. Today, with violence abated, parts of the city have become a thriving tourist hub, with trendy shops and restaurants. The walls remain, but open each day under the watchful eyes of the police.

Laura McAtackney agrees but only to a point. She says that the walls continue to be built today with very few coming down. Eight years ago, she says, people estimated that there were 18 in 1990 and 80 in 2010. They are now almost exclusively dividing

working class communities and very few, contra Kemp and Eveleigh, are in “tourist areas.” Yes, there are tours but there are also lots of walls that are not visited by tourists. One wonders why and what they have to do with peace-making in Belfast.

In any case, failure and weakness and symbolic power all come to mind when thinking about walls—that and not interconnectedness, globalization, or actually efficacy, although readers of Giorgio Mariani’s article here might think twice, and even readers of Sangjun Jeong’s essay here might ponder the North/South Korea division, too. But I encourage all readers to wonder what Trump is doing when *he* talks about strengthening, raising, and beautifying the walls along this Mexican-US border. Surely, all this talk is and has been rhetorical, but it would be a mistake to undermine the importance of rhetoric itself. It is just ironic and paradoxical that this material thing intended to keep people out actually (or, in the case of the Iron Curtain, to keep people from getting out) evokes weakness and not strength, fear and not chutzpah (or hubris), failure and not success.

These problems may be well worth contemplating as you readers read the many wonderful contributions to this special issue of *RIAS*. Is Trump’s proposed wall going to work when its predecessors have all eventually failed? Are readers fearful because they might at some level be exceptionalizing the US? Is there a normalization at work here, akin to the normalization that Amalia Sa’ar and her colleagues describe for Israel or arguably Sangjun Jeong describes for South Korea? Does it go further, as Gaby Vargas-Cetina and Steffan “Igor” Ayora-Díaz imply when thinking about the Yucatan, Mexico, and the US? Why is there support for Trump’s idea of a wall along the US-Mexico border, or among whom is there support? Are we as scholars ignoring some evidence of dissent and hope, of the sort Jasmin Habib noted in her contribution to our double panel in Laredo, Texas, in July 2017 and does so here as well, or of fracture of the sort Vargas-Cetina and Ayora-Díaz note? Is rhetoric more important than actually building the wall Trump proposes, as I suggest? And is rhetoric more worrisome than a material wall Trump might in the end build and that, if György Tóth is correct, we will largely come to think of as Trump’s Wall?

*Virginia R. Dominguez*  
*Guest Editor*

*Walls,  
Material and Rhetorical:  
Past, Present,  
and Future*

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER Nº 1/2018

WORKS CITED

*Comparative American Studies*, Vol. 15, Nos. 1-2, 2017.

Eveleigh, Darcy, "What History Teaches Us about Walls," *New York Times* online, May 2016. [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/upshot/what-history-teaches-us-about-walls.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/upshot/what-history-teaches-us-about-walls.html?_r=0)

Gramlich, John. "Trump Voters Want to Build the Wall, but Are More Divided on Other Immigration Questions." Pew Research Center, 29 Nov., 2016, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/trump-voters-want-to-build-the-wall-but-are-more-divided-on-other-immigration-questions/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/29/trump-voters-want-to-build-the-wall-but-are-more-divided-on-other-immigration-questions/).

