

# Book review of Bissonnette, A. and Vallet, É. (eds.) 2021. *Borders and border walls: In- security, symbolism, vulnerabilities*. London: Routledge. 228 pp



## BOOK REVIEW

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In late March 2021, as concerns about a ‘crisis’ enveloped political discourse in the United States of America, the Biden Administration scrambled to present an image of being tough on unauthorized border crossers (McCarthy 2021). Invariably, this image involved the material ephemera of walls, fences and surveillance equipment. In a tweet posted on March 20<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced that he had ‘traveled to El Paso [to see] the extraordinary efforts of Customs and Border Protection firsthand’ (Mayorkas 2021). Alongside this message, Mayorkas posted stern-looking photos of himself standing solemnly alongside immigration officials, backed by the fences and walls and surveillance cameras.

Mayorkas’ interview suggests how border walls and fences have come to play an increasingly important role in the political theatre of border discourse. Yet, despite an outpouring of research in the field of critical border studies, there has been relatively little research conducted on border walls (for exceptions see Jones 2012; Saddiki 2017). This absence is the subject of the volume titled *Borders and border walls: In-security, symbolism, vulnerabilities* edited by Andréanne Bissonnette and Élisabeth Vallet.

The overarching question asked by the volume is ‘why do we care about walls?’ (p. 1). Border walls and fences are a critical subject of study, the editors argue, because the number of such fortifications seems to have increased exponentially. By Vallet’s (p. 9) count, the total number of global border walls and fences has increased more than sevenfold since 1990. More broadly, the editors (p. 1) suggest that border walls are an important subject for three reasons: First, border walls require interdisciplinary approaches. As both physical and virtual manifestations of state power and ideology, the editors argue that border walls invite scholars to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. Second, border walls are uniquely inter-national phenomena, creating distinct bi-national relationships involving a complex array of material practices and ideological discourse. Last, border

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walls are inter-identity: Vallet and Bissonnette (p. 1) contend that border walls define individual and collective identities at both the micro and macro levels in ways that allow for more nuanced studies of individual movements, identity politics, gendered analysis and discourse.

The collection is divided into two sections. In the first section, six contributions examine the function and practice of borders and border walls, drawing from an interesting array of case studies in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In the first contribution, Vallet provides a thorough overview of border walls on a global scale, and situates the volume's focus on walls in the broader context of existing research on borders and bordering practices. Tracing the European Union's shift towards harder, externalized borders over the period from 2007 to 2021, Jussi Laine highlights how the tendency towards security, and efforts to restrict migration sustain and reinforce further processes of fencing and walling. Laine (p. 83) argues compellingly that intensifying migration control practices nominally intended to protect core European values are in fact hollowing these values out. In the sixth chapter Said Saddiki examines the intensification of migration controls along the Morocco–Algeria border. Saddiki argues compellingly that unilateral border fortifications and territorial disputes have emerged for both states as a means of maintaining the regional balance of power in the absence of greater regional integration under the framework of the Arab Maghreb Union (p. 107). Shifting the focus from walls to the interior 'border regime,' James Scott's contribution argues that border politics have deeper social implications than simply securitizing or controlling the mobility of certain people. Rather, Scott argues, they are part of a deeper "'politics of life" aimed at norming the public sphere and everyday life according to specific political and ideological aims' (p. 117).

In the second section, a further five contributions examine how both material and abstract practices of walling shape the lived of experiences of people close to and far from the physical border line. Matthew Longo's (p. 137) contribution engages, and aims to upend, our 'ways of seeing' at the border. By shifting our frame of analysis to focus on how the border sees us, Longo (pp. 146–148) argues that we can see how new practices of border surveillance involve a normalization of risk-based control practices that may undermine the value of citizenship. In the ninth chapter Bissonnette (p. 151) examines how the 'paper wall' of immigration law affects access to reproductive healthcare in border states, arguing compellingly that access is differentiated based on geographic location, immigration status and socioeconomic class. Raphaela Kormoll's contribution focuses on the Indian government's response to border (in)security through the construction of a fence along the Punjab region's border with Pakistan, highlighting how the walling process has disproportionately affected farmers in marginal areas close to the border line. Margath Walker's (p. 195) chapter traces how evolving 'security modalities' driven by the border industrial complex have in fact intensified insecurity at Mexico's northern and southern borders.

Throughout the volume, the contributions highlight the often-contradictory relationship between border walls and (in)security: border walls are framed rhetorically as solutions to the threat of smuggling, terrorism and unauthorized migration, but in practice they tend to exacerbate insecurity and make vulnerable people more vulnerable. Both Laine and Walker's chapters highlight how border control makes migrants vulnerable along the borders of the EU and the USA, respectively. Beyond people on the move, Kormoll's analysis demonstrates how local farmers on the Indian side of the India–Pakistan border in the Punjab region have suffered dramatically from

successive efforts to secure and control the border line. This work broadens a growing body of research that has traced how the intensification of migration and border controls in the USA (De Leon 2015; Sanchez 2015) and Europe (Andersson 2014) have increased insecurity in myriad ways.

The contributions in the volume also raise interesting conceptual questions about the meaning of the term border wall. Bissonnette and Vallet (p. 2) offer both a narrow definition of the border wall as a physical barrier with masonry foundations, and a broader definition in which the ‘wall’ can be understood as a ‘political divider that comprises complex technologies, control methods, legislative provisions and “securing the border” discourse’ (Vallet & David 2012 as cited in p. 2). In the latter sense, border walls are ‘much more than a physical artefact along a border line’ and encompass ‘technological boundaries that stretch far beyond a state’s geographical boundaries’ (p. 5). This expansive concept of the border wall helps us to see how practices of control and exclusion expand and collapse beyond the physical and geographical zones of territorial borders. Many of the contributions expand this line of analysis in useful ways: Scott’s discussion of the internalization of the border regime in Hungary, Bissonnette’s analysis of the bordered nature of reproductive healthcare in the US–Mexico borderlands, and Longo’s analysis of new modes of digital border surveillance encourage a reconsideration of what and where the border is.

Aside from a reference in Vallet’s introduction, there is little discussion of the disjuncture between the rhetorical and practical efficacy of walls or fences as implements of border control. As Vallet acknowledges, walls are ‘(un)efficient’ tools that project the ‘fantasy of impermeability’ (Brown 2013 as cited in p. 12) while in fact doing little to control or prevent the unauthorized flow of goods and people. Scholarship on border walls that focuses on securitization without acknowledging that impermeability is a fantasy may inadvertently reinforce this perceived impermeability.


More broadly, the inefficiency of walls raises a tantalizing question: why do states continue to build walls if they do not work? Shirk’s analysis of how electoral political dynamics have produced ever-greater investment in walling at the US–Mexico border offers one potential answer. Similarly, by suggesting that securitization is ‘fundamentally about capital rather than people’ Walker’s (p. 186) discussion of the ‘border industrial complex’ implies that wall building is part of a broader, lucrative border industry. Yet aside from a passing reference to the Department of Homeland Security’s use of outsourced contractors, there is no specific discussion of how practices of border control produce economic accumulation. The contributions in this volume highlight the need for more empirical work on the subject.

Overall, this volume is a great contribution to a growing body of literature within critical border studies that will be invaluable to scholars interested in how border walls, both material and abstract, shape our society, economy and politics.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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