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### **Walls, Fences, and Barriers: Anthropology on the Border**

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#### **The Editors' Note: Walls, Fences, and Barriers: Anthropology on the Border**

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*This is my home*

*this thin edge of*

*barbwire*

*But the skin of the earth is seamless*

*The sea cannot be fenced,*

*el mar does not stop at borders.*

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

The official demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1990, following months of popular demonstration, had been heralded as the start of a new chapter of human history in which walls, fences, and borders were no longer needed or wanted.

We are writing a different story now. Border barriers are going up, not coming down.

In fact, almost 30 years after the end of the Cold War, there has been a boom in the building of walls and the fortification of borders around the world. While there were seven such structures at the end of World War II, [USA Today reported in May 2018](#) there are at least seventy-seven such barriers today, many of them erected in the aftermath of 9/11. They include a wall raised by Turkey on its border with Syria, fences installed by Greece and Bulgaria on their borders with Turkey, and barriers that Israel built on its border with Egypt and that Egypt built on its border along the Gaza Strip.

The situation is one that the American Anthropological Association has been prompted to investigate, establishing a committee on [Anthropology and the Proliferation of Border and Security](#).

This issue of *Open Anthropology* brings together the work of anthropologists examining some of these walls, fences, and barriers and their effects and consequences for the people whom they are intended to keep out (or keep in)—and the actions that people themselves take to scale and navigate them. As a publication of the American Anthropological Association, we are opening material from AAA journals, but we would also like to highlight the special 2018 issue on “[Walls, Material and Rhetorical: Past, Present, and Future](#)” in the *Review of International American Studies*. This special *RIAS* issue in many ways intersects with the articles in OA, and we would encourage readers to pursue these interconnected works.

While attributed to the need to secure national boundaries in the face of terrorist threats, political geographer [Elisabeth Vallet](#), in her 2014 edited book, *Borders, Fences, and Walls: State of Insecurity?*, writes that “the speed with which walls sprang up suggests the existence of a latent tendency that predated 9/11, at least at the ideational level. The apparent security-seeking reflex actually sprang from the pull of identity, which explains why democracies also set about fortifying their boundaries in order to demonstrate their ability to regain control of their borders” (2-3). These new barriers—like the one that U.S. President Donald Trump insists will be built on the border with Mexico—are intended to block and deter the migration of unwanted people.

[Hilary Parsons Dick](#) considers the political spectacle of the border wall in “[‘Build the Wall!’: Post-Truth on the US–Mexico Border](#),” her 2019 essay, just published in *American Anthropologist*. As Dick observes, Trump’s ascendancy is based significantly on his career in real estate development and the visibility of his name branded towers, which lend credence to what he claims as his singular ability to build a presumably winning wall. With Mexican migration into the U.S. at a net zero and blatantly false and racist claims about the criminality of Central American migrants, the facts fail to support the contention that there is a “national emergency” at the U.S. border requiring the immediate raising of a wall. (Indeed, [Trump himself acknowledged as much](#).) Yet, in the rallying cries to “build the wall,” a metaphorical line become drawn and social border built between Trump’s supporters and the Others who oppose it.

Though often discussed as a monolithic structure, “the wall” is more accurately described as “the walls.” The almost 2,000-mile-long border between the U.S. and Mexico is lined with stretches of walls, fences, and barriers, much of it constructed in only the last 30 years. Glimpses of the vast terrain are captured in USA Today Network’s [2017 series examining “The Wall”](#), which combines text, audio, video, and immersive technologies and won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism. The modern border was not established until the late 1850s, and according to historian [Rachel St. John](#), author of *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*, there was neither a wall nor a fence built here until 1909, when a barrier was constructed to prevent the movement of cattle, not people. The 20th century included periods of relative openness, but the movement has been toward the tightening of the border in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In 1994, amid political discourses on “illegal” (undocumented) immigration and drug smuggling, U.S. President Bill Clinton authorized the construction of a 14-mile-long barrier between San Diego and Tijuana as part of Operation Gatekeeper. In 2006, then-President George W. Bush signed the [Secure Fence Act](#) to build 700 miles of fencing.

The story of Ambos Nogales, which translates as Both Nogales, can be told as a tale of two cities that meet on the border of the U.S. state of Arizona and the Mexican state of Sonora—and of one city cut into two, as [Randall H. McGuire](#) describes in his 2013 *American Anthropologist* piece, “[Steel Walls and Picket Fences: Rematerializing the U.S.–Mexican Border in Ambos Nogales](#).” He begins his account with memories of the easy passage between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Mexico during the early 1970s, when the border was marked by a chain-link fence that children were observed climbing and crawling under, then crossing back at the end of the day. Today, local residents nostalgically remember that border fence as a “picket fence between neighbors.” In 1996, the fence had been replaced by a green steel barrier, which in turn became replaced with a fortified steel wall in 2011. McGuire, an archaeologist, calls our attention to what he describes as the materialization and rematerialization of the border and the walls, fences and barriers as an assemblage of things that “both reflects and affects agency, meanings, and social relations” (468). In particular: “The United States and Mexico try to simplify relations along the border and to materialize as a hard line that defines homogenous national spaces. Whereas this physicality checks the ability of the people to move freely, it also provokes willful responses that generate agency just as the material border constrains it” (468). Indeed, McGuire describes the rematerialization of the green walls as blackboards for graffiti and canvases for art installations—at least on the Sonora side, as the U.S. Customs and Border and Patrol (CBP) prohibited displays on its wall. The new bollard-style wall, composed of vertical posts, is “taller, more imposing, and crueler” (475). McGuire notes that the wall is designed so that climbing and falling from it are especially injurious to bodies, and that CBP can enforce their prohibition on graffiti and art because officers literally can reach their hands between the steel slats. Yet, people themselves also exchange greetings and share time and even picnics with each other through those slats.

[Jason De Leon](#), in his 2015 book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, criticizes the U.S. policy of “Prevention through Deterrence” that sends migrants on routes through the harshest terrain of the borderlands in their attempts to cross and has resulted in a sharp rise in death rates. In “[Toward Estimating Geographic Origin of Migrant Remains Along the United States–Mexico Border](#),” published in 2014 in the *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, [M. Katherine Spradley](#) describes the difficulties in identifying the remains of individuals—likely migrants—found in the frontier. A starting point in forensic anthropology is to make an estimation of geographic origin based on cranial morphology. “In most areas of the United States, the ancestry designation Hispanic can be useful in narrowing down a list of potential matches from missing persons databases. However, human remains found along the U.S.-Mexico border, in known migrant corridors, present a different perspective on anthropological criteria and local vernacular commonly used in ancestry estimation” (102).

Spradley’s study is based on the analyses of the remains of unidentified migrants found in Texas and in Arizona as compared with identified individuals known to be of either Mexican or Guatemalan origins. The study found strong similarities between the unknown Arizona migrants and known Mexican individuals, suggesting shared geographic origins; however, the unknown Texas migrants differed significantly from the other groups (and from each other), suggesting geographic origins from countries other than Mexico or Guatemala. Readers ought to take note of the situation in which this study is conducted, with localities like Brooks County

“overwhelmed” with the number of migrant deaths and forced to bury the “unknown” before identification can be made.

Taking into account the responses of the border communities themselves is the focus of [“Engaging with the Immigrant Human Rights Movement in a Besieged Border Region: What Do Applied Social Scientists Bring to the Policy Process.”](#) In this 2009 article in *NAPA Bulletin* (now *Annals of Anthropological Practice*), [Josiah McC. Heyman](#), [Maria Cristina Morales](#), and [Guillermina Gina Núñez](#) discuss the important and necessary role that social scientists, including anthropologists and sociologists, can play in directing and redirecting immigration and border policy. The authors, who are colleagues in a joint department of anthropology and sociology at University of Texas at El Paso, had been participants in community-based coalition groups concerned with the effects of post-9/11 changes in immigration law policing, which intertwined and conflated the two separate issues of immigration on the one hand and terrorism on the other hand. As they point out: Borders are envisioned as the privileged site for the protection of national interiors; whether this is strategically and tactically sound appears not to matter. At the same time, borders are important transit points in the integrated global economy. Borders are also places people live, largely because of this transit function, directly or indirectly. This means that the effort to use policing (in the guise of homeland security) to shore up a flawed migration policy has been imposed, largely from the national interior, on a region in which people must weave complicated lives, with diverse immigration and nationality statuses and varying engagements in two countries. (15)

At the time this piece was written, the plans to build large segments of a U.S.-Mexico border wall in El Paso were being put into place. In addition, U.S. Border patrol added more than 4,000 officers between 2005 and 2008—in part, as the authors note, by relaxing the training requirements—and expected to add another 4,000 officers in 2009. However, the piece describes significant steps that the community groups were taking together, noting that local religious organizations, academic institutions, civil liberties groups, and law enforcement agencies were represented in the collaborations.

It is perhaps a sign of the bounded inadequacies of text to capture and convey what needs to be understood about the experience of walls and borders—and the importance and necessity of engaging publics and audiences beyond readers of scholarly monographs and journal articles—that anthropologists have turned to other forms of engagement. The work of contemporary archaeologists (including McGuire, discussed above) and ethnographers (including Margaret E. Dorsey and Miguel Diaz-Barriga, discussed below) are featured in the two gallery exhibitions and one film reviewed by [Amahl Bishara](#) and [Naomi Schiller](#) in [“Making Violence Visible at the US/Mexico Border: Review of the Exhibitions \*Fencing In Democracy\* and \*State of Exception/Estado de Excepción\*, and the Film \*El Mar La Mar\*,”](#) published in 2017 in *Visual Anthropology Review*.

At times, the exhibits and the film eschew argument altogether in favor of evoking experiences and exploring emotion. In other moments, they combine analysis with the mobilization of sensory affect. We see dismembered and decomposing bodies; we glimpse the disorienting

darkness of the Sonoran Desert; we smell the dust of abandoned backpacks. We read calls for justice in the face of this suffering. (195)

Although *Fencing In Democracy* closed in 2017, a PDF of the exhibition brochure and a page of images from installation are [archived at the gallery's Web site](#). The web site for *State of Exception/Estado de Excepcion* can be accessed [here](#). Information about the film, "El Mar La Mar," can be found [here](#).

Border walls and fences are intended to be seen. Yet, when [Margaret E. Dorsey](#) and [Miguel Diaz-Barriga](#) initially undertook their 2008 ethnographic research project on the building of the walls in southwest Texas, they were frequently deterred and blocked from photographing the construction, as they recount in their 2010 *Visual Anthropology Review* article, "[Beyond Surveillance and Moonscapes: An Alternative Imaginary of the U.S.–Mexico Border Wall](#)." In addition, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga observe that only particular views of the border wall tend to be promulgated. Pointing to images published in *Time* and *National Geographic* of the border as desert or deserted landscape, they write: "Media attention on the U.S.-Mexico border wall primarily focuses on the border as a desolate site of federal surveillance and often neglects the ways that border residents conceptualize and lives its meanings and possibilities" (130). Other images focus upon the militarization of the border, depicting armed Border Patrol agents apprehending unidentified individuals attempting to cross into the U.S. "These photographs contextualize the border as inhabiting a deserted and faraway place where the construction of a border wall represents yet another unnaturally naturalized otherworldly intrusion. In other words, readers do not view the border wall—or the border for that matter—in neighborhoods or in green spaces that replicate the common trope of U.S. suburbs" (132). In contrast, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's photo essay includes images of the border wall being built, the greenery of backyards in Texas, and families enjoying the federal parklands that account for about 70 percent of the territory along the border—and which will become inaccessible with the construction of barriers. Indeed, the ecological impacts of walls, fences, and barriers have been a less frequently discussed, but no less significant concern for the communities along the border.

The visual representation of the border wall and its visibility or invisibility are central concerns, too, for the four Israeli and Palestinian photographers who [Nayrouz Abu Hatoum](#) considers in her 2017 article in *Visual Anthropology Review*, "[Framing Visual Politics: Photography of the Wall in Palestine](#)." Israel began construction on its separation barrier in 2003. Portions of it deviate not only from the recognized Israeli border, but also from the Green Line marking occupied territory and into the West Bank, which the International Court of Justice has ruled a violation of international law. In this piece, Hatoum reads photographic images of the wall as the expressions of both Israeli and Palestinian anxieties. Following the work of literary critic [Gil Hochberg](#), Hatoum notes that the wall both renders Israel as visually dominant to Palestinians and erases Palestine invisible to Israelis. Indeed, the wall obstructs and restricts the movements of Palestinians, who live with the barrier literally in their midst. Meanwhile, Israelis rarely encounter the wall, which is built away from their cities and communities. Thus, Israeli photographers like Miki Kratsman see their photographs of the wall as statements revealing "closure, apartheid, evil, and occupation" (23) to the viewer. In contrast, Palestinian photographers like Mohamed Badarne refuse to take or display images of the wall, instead

focusing their (and their audience's) gaze to the people whose lives have become organized around it. "We should focus on one issue, one detail about the Wall and go deep with it," Mohamed tells Hatoum. "Like the story of that woman whose laundry never dries because the Wall is blocking the sun" (21).

Though not strictly about the border or security walls of the West Bank, "[The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada](#)" considers the significance of graffiti on the walls within the occupied territories during what is now known as the first Palestinian intifada or uprising of the 1980s and 1990s. As [Julie Peteet](#) writes in her 1996 *Cultural Anthropology* article:

Popularly dubbed a "war of stones," stone-throwing images dominated the intifada's public presentation. Indeed it was a war of stones, but stones were more than weapons of defense: they were print weapons as well. With its preponderance of stones and stone walls, the landscape provided ready made, easily accessible weapons of communication, assault, and defense. (139) Peteet's concern is not only with the content of the messages of resistance (like "No taxes without representation") and their reception among both Palestinian audiences and Israeli authorities, but also with the production of the graffiti. "Private property in the form of walls—which demarcated residences or businesses—was mobilized. Aside from declaring the popular communal nature of the uprising, taking over privately owned walls for inscription was also an act of internal politicization and mobilization" (143). It is striking also to consider that the graffiti and other wall paintings themselves were fleeting, as they were put up at night then blacked out in day. However, they also attracted an unanticipated and unintended audience of academics and other observers, including Peteet herself, who documented the walls with their photography and writing.

The Israeli separation barrier is built on ground that was cleared of tens of thousands of olive trees, [Irus Braverman](#) explains in "[Uprooting Identities: The Regulation of Olive Trees in the Occupied West Bank](#)." Published in *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* in 2009, the piece describes the material and symbolic importance of the olive tree for the Palestinian people. Israel's restrictions on the movements of residents in the West Bank have hindered their ability to work, prompting their reliance on the olive industry, which was largely situated in the Palestinian territories. Moreover, olive trees require only occasional pruning, so that farmers who can access their land and trees only infrequently still have the ability to cultivate and harvest their crops. The hardiness and resilience of the trees have come to stand for Palestinians themselves. In contrast, the pine tree is the symbol of the Israeli people, with more than 240 million pine trees planted by the Jewish National Fund since 1901 on land the organization purchased for Jewish settlement. Braverman notes that the uprooting of olive trees as a punishment against Palestinian farmers dates back to the Ottoman rulers. "However, Israel's central rationale for uprooting olive trees in the occupied territories has not been framed as punitive, or at least not explicitly so. Israel explains these uprootings, rather, as essential for its national security" (247). In addition to the trees removed from the route of the barrier, they also were uprooted "to secure roads, increase visibility, and make way for watchtowers, checkpoints, additional roads, and security fences around Jewish settlements" (247). The promises of the Israeli government to replant the olive trees—not always met—have not assuaged Palestinians or Israelis opposed to their removal.

The so-called peace lines of Belfast are a material reminder of The Troubles that tore at Northern Ireland during the late twentieth century. The walls were intended to separate Loyalists or Unionists, most of them Protestants, who wished for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, from Republicans or Nationalists, most of them Catholics, who wished to become part of a unified Republic of Ireland. In [Matthew McCoy's "I Will Not Die on This Street": Thinking Things Over in Conflicted Belfast](#)," the walls loom in the background of everyday life in east Belfast. Published in *Ethos* in 2018, the article traces a day in the life of one resident of what is known as an interface community—a neighborhood where Protestants and Catholics both live, but segregated from each other by walls. Even since the negotiation of a peace agreement in 1998, “the Irish Catholic district of the Short Strand has seen its ‘peace walls’ raised higher several times. Currently standing around 30 feet tall, these walls provoke residents to call their district both a ‘fortress’ and a ‘prison.’ After participating in the everyday lives of residents from each side of the wall, I came to understand the ways in which these massive structures and the legacy of conflict continues to shape possibilities for self making” (422). Poignantly, even as Protestants and Catholics live separated by walls, a shortage of plots in the Catholic cemeteries in east Belfast has led to these families burying their dead in the traditionally Protestant municipal cemetery. The government of Northern Ireland has announced its intention to demolish the walls by 2023, but there appears to be [a divide](#) between the younger generation who wants to see the walls come down and the older generation who maintains their necessity to keep the peace.

The making and remaking of self, community, and nation have been a focus of the scholarship on Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In “[The Ethnography of Contradiction: Studying Post-Unification Germany](#),” published in 2000 in *American Anthropologist*, [Roberta Fiske-Rusciano](#) reviews two books: [Hans Baer's \*Crumbling Walls and Tarnished Ideals: An Ethnography of East Germany before and After Unification\*](#) and [Daphne Berdahl's \*Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland\*](#). Baer considers the changes that he observes between his time teaching on a Fulbright fellowship in East Berlin in 1988 and then his return to reunified Germany in 1991. He discusses the attempts to legislatively reconcile the different sets of rights that were recognized in the two German republics. One example is the compromise on abortion rights, which women of the former East experience as more restrictive and women of the former West regard as more expansive. An increase in antagonism and racism directed at African and southeast Asian emigres is one change that Fiske-Rusciano contends the author might have addressed further.

The focus of the review is on Berdahl's account of post-unification changes in Kella, a village of about 600 people located directly on what had been the border of East and West Germany. “There were stories about villagers who escaped over over the border, and those who tried but failed. In spite of this, the State explained the presence of the barbed wire as a necessary measure to keep the enemy imperialists out. Yet, the citizens noted, the barbed wire was pointed at them” (359). Almost overnight, the political division is undone, and villagers “were happy to change their leaders and their economy and looked forward to all the attendant benefits, especially the ability to travel. What they were not prepared for was a complete devaluation of their culture” (359). This includes architecture and material objects associated with the German Democratic

Republic, which become slated for demolition and destruction in an attempt to remake historical memory. Thus, the disassembling of the wall in Kella—and its meaning—becomes debated among the residents.

A worthy complement to the articles in this collection and a valuable resource for teaching on border crossings is [Steffen Köhn](#)'s 2016 book, *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration*, which is considered in this 2018 *Visual Anthropology Review* [book review](#) by [Christiane Brosius](#). In the book, Köhn discusses a number of documentary, ethnographic, and feature films focused on migrations in the Mediterranean region and made between 1955 and 2015. "Migration as a multiscalar and multisited distributed field of discourse, Köhn proposes, can be captured particularly well by visual and media anthropology. In all this, mobility and motility are central to consider the porousness and boundaries, the 'jumping' of scales and the relational connectivity of people, ideas, and places" (167).

Ceuta, a Spanish city on the North African coast, is surrounded by a six-meter-high steel fence topped with razor wire. Spanish police mind one side of it and Moroccan soldiers the other. In addition, the Spanish Coast Guard and military aircraft patrol the waters, and other electronic surveillance technologies are employed to maintain control over the border. This is the setting for a 2014 *American Anthropologist* article, "[Time and the Migrant Other: European Border Controls and the Temporal Economics of Illegality](#)." In it, [Ruben Andersson](#) describes how, "Through such initiatives, Europe's external borders increasingly seem to be everywhere yet nowhere: a dense web of controls that displaces the border both inward and outward, throughout European space and into the borderlands beyond it" (798). Yet, the technology that is Andersson's focus here is time itself, as migrants caught in the web are sent to detention centers. Here, they are forced to wait and have their time disciplined by strict mealtimes and curfews and wasted by workshops and language classes in which little became learned. Still, waiting is also to their advantage, with migrants actively seeking ways to stall their deportations.

We close with [Faedah M. Totah](#)'s short essay, "[The Wall and the Chicken](#)," which was featured in *Anthropology News* in 2017. Contemplating the ancient city wall of Damascus, Totah writes: Before the uprising in Syria there was revived interest in the wall as a cultural artifact in the booming heritage industry. Today, the main industry in Syria is war and that has led to more walls, both physical and mental, being constructed throughout the country. Yet, the idea of walls is spreading beyond the region leading one to reflect on the meaning of barriers, enclosures, and dividers when in today's world being walled off has never been so impossible.

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**Volume 7, Number 1**  
**March 2019**

“Build the Wall!”: Post-Truth on the US–Mexico Border

Hilary Parsons Dick – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 121, Issue 1: 179-185 (2019)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Steel Walls and Picket Fences: Rematerializing the U.S.–Mexican Border in Ambos Nogales

Randall H. McGuire – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 115, Issue 4: 1466-1480 (2013)

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Toward Estimating Geographic Origin Of Migrant Remains Along The United States–Mexico Border

M. Katherine Spradley – *Annals of Anthropological Practice*. Vol 38, Issue 1: 101-110 (2014)

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Engaging with the Immigrant Human Rights Movement in a Besieged Border Region: What Do Applied Social Scientists Bring to the Policy Process

Josiah McC. Heyman, Maria Cristina Morales, and Guillermina Gina Núñez – *NAPA Bulletin*. Vol 31: 13-29 (2009)

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Making Violence Visible at the US/Mexico Border: Review of the Exhibitions Fencing In Democracy and State of Exception/Estado de Excepción, and the Film El Mar La Mar

Amahl Bishara and Naomi Schiller – *Visual Anthropology Review*. Vol 33, Issue 2: 195-200 (2017)

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Beyond Surveillance and Moonscapes: An Alternative Imaginary of the U.S.–Mexico Border Wall

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Framing Visual Politics: Photography of the Wall in Palestine

Nayrouz Abu Hatoum – *Visual Anthropology Review*. Vol 3, Issue 1: 18-27 (2017)

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The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada

Julie Peteet – *Cultural Anthropology*. Vol 11, Issue 2: 135-159 (1996)

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Uprooting Identities: The Regulation of Olive Trees in the Occupied West Bank

Irus Braverman – *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*. Vol 32, Issue 2: 237-264 (2009)

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“I Will Not Die on This Street’: Thinking Things Over in Conflicted Belfast

Matthew McCoy – *Ethos*. Vol 46, Issue 4: 421-439 (2018)

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Book Review Essay: The Ethnography of Contradiction: Studying Post-Unification Germany

Roberta Fiske-Rusciano – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 102, Issue 2: 358-360 (2000)

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Book review of Steffen Kohn’s *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration*

Christiane Brosius – *Visual Anthropology Review*. Vol 34, Issue 2: 166-168 (2018)

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Time and the Migrant Other: European Border Controls and the Temporal Economics of Illegality

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The Wall and the Chicken

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