

A Piece of the Wall

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## Artist Statement

Mercedes Rajme is a Mexican American artist working between Portland, OR and their hometown of El Paso, TX. Their work focuses on the subject of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, exploring the concepts of American-ness and subsequent “other,” and contextualizing U.S. domestic security policy as well as military interventions globally in the history of western colonialism and U.S. imperialism. This work primarily takes the form of video, publication, and digital installation through website; Rajme additionally works in sound, performance and various print medias.

## Thesis Proposal

Fall 2018

The colonization of the Americas by the Europeans that began in 1492 resulted in a lasting legacy of violence and displacement that still ripples today. Over the past few years, I have been reflecting on these outcomes in my work and in my personal life. I question my own place in these ripples as the daughter of Mexican immigrants, as a generally white presenting, middle-class, U.S. born citizen and as someone who lived in a border community until moving to Portland, OR in 2015. In my most recent work, I have found myself interested in how colonialism and the ideas brought forth in the Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny and post-9/11 politics (i.e. the PATRIOT Act) have informed American ideals in relation to national security, foreign policy, U.S. expansionism and the American Dream in our current day. In this project, I will create an anti-imperial, satirical publication and installation entitled Build the Fence, that subverts modern symbols of structures rooted in colonialism that now oppress the descendants of those who have been subjected to violence and displacement for generation after generation.

I began exploring the subject of the U.S.-Mexico border in my art practice when rhetoric about “building the wall” became increasingly popular during Trump’s presidential campaign and presidency. The idea of a “wall” was not one I was unfamiliar with since an 18 foot tall border fence was constructed in my hometown of El Paso, Texas in 2008, but I now see the fence as a symbol to point to the absurdity and hypocrisy of the proposal for a new, even more secure wall. The irony of calling for a bigger and taller border wall while the U.S. directly contributes to the violence, economic turmoil and ecological strife displacing those who the wall is meant to keep out is obvious and

undeniable. Additionally, border walls do not prevent crossings, but instead shift migration routes to more remote and often more dangerous locations. The construction of border walls also correlates with an increase in the number of migrant deaths. A wall would not be effective in the event of a military attack on our border nor is it necessary for delineating territory. Much like a picket fence, a border wall is for show; a symbol of action against a perceived threat of outsiders that is ultimately useless.

Since April of this year, a caravan made up primarily of Honduran migrants as well as some from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua fleeing violence, terror and poverty in their home countries, is slowly making its way to the U.S. through Mexico. As the migrants have crossed into Mexico, Trump has referred to the caravan as “an invasion” infiltrated by “gang members” and “unknown Middle Easterners;” he has ordered over 5,000 troops to the Southwestern U.S. border and announced that anyone crossing without doing so through an official port would be ineligible for asylum by barring them from entering the U.S. This reaction is not only excessive, but cruelly ironic considering role that U.S.-backed military coups, corporate pillaging, trade imbalances and weakening of domestic industries in Central and Latin America that began in 1904 with the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, has played in the “poverty, instability, and violence that now drives people from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras toward Mexico and the United States”.

As the humanitarian crises on the border grows, the work of artists and activists becomes increasingly relevant to the development of my work, especially that of Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco (*Two Undiscovered Amerindians visit the West* and *The Year of the White Bear*, 1992-93), Leslie Mac and Marissa Jenae Johnson, (*Safety Pin Box*, 2017), Fulana (Amnezac, 2005 and *#SomosElMuro*, 2018) and Group

Material (Timeline, 1984). Additionally, I have drawn influence for Build the Fence from my own past works especially Frontera (2017), a video installation, and Fence Patrol (2017), a video and performance work, in which the border fence and the white picket fence are key symbols.

Through my work and research, I have found that the fence is not only a very real and tangible barrier meant to keep certain people out and others locked in, but it is also a symbol for the American Dream, U.S. nationalism and expansionism, and other manifestations of colonialism. To directly confront the current migration crisis, I will create a subscription kit to “build the fence”. A Build the Fence kit will be sent through the mail periodically and will include a scannable link to a short video tutorial on varying subjects (how to build a fence, how to maintain your lawn, how to keep out pests, etc.), a small amount of “building materials” (concrete powder, baggy of screws, patch of fake grass, etc.), an envelope to pay for the subscription, a sheet of a fence pattern, a small catalog of fences and other small ephemera. The video tutorials however, will not provide any pertinent information to their supposed intention, rather will be satirical critiques pointing to the absurdity and ineffectiveness of the border wall. Similarly, the building materials distributed through the kit will be insufficient or otherwise entirely unusable for building a fence. The fence pattern sheet can be photocopied to make a larger and customizable temporary fence, but this fence of course is merely paper and can only be used as a visual stand-in for an actual barrier.

A salient theme of the kit is that all the elements included within it are ultimately useless or ineffective for their principal purpose, much like the border wall itself. I will also create a social media platform and website for people to subscribe to, post documentation of and further promote the kit. The money collected from the subscription

will be given to organizations assisting migrants and refugees as well as to pay for the legal defense of undocumented folks in an attempt to directly support the community targeted by racist, xenophobic, nationalist and imperialist propaganda and laws as well as to subvert the language and symbols of these laws and propaganda as a form of resistance. Build the Fence will also take the form of an installation using the materials distributed in the kit, the various tutorials playing on a monitor, a wall papered with copies of fence pattern, a picket fence timeline of U.S. interventions globally and resources on concrete ways to provide aid and support to migrants and asylum seekers.

My work is based on long contemplations on what led to my being here, in a private art institution, studying theory on how to dismantle oppressive systems in a building that used to be a detention facility for immigrants. I think hard about my father and mother and the fact they undoubtedly lived the American Dream, and how inaccessible that dream is to others. What would it mean to right the wrongs of this country that exists only through the genocide and enslavement of Black and Indigenous people and how we can begin to end the state-sponsored violence that continues today, both domestically and globally? I wonder, how tall does our wall have to be to block out all the ugliness we have created? Let's build a fence together and find out.

## Abstract

For my thesis, I have created a publication and accompanying website through which the publication can be purchased. The website utilizes prevalent nationalistic right wing language and visual cues to promote the publication, entitled “a piece of the wall”. The publication is advertised as a commemorative piece of the U.S./Mexico border wall, but in addition the publication includes information on the effects of the wall as well as brief summaries of relevant historical events. The proceeds collected from the sale of this publication will be given to organizations assisting migrants and refugees.

Through research of the histories of U.S. border security policies, as well as, U.S. economic and military interventions in Latin America, it is evident that the border wall is not only key to creating and securing the u.s. national mythos and identity and consequently, an alien “other”, it is ultimately the continuation of colonial imperialism and the genocide of indigenous and other colonized peoples. The major goal of my work is to confront the hypocrisy of building a wall to keep out the very people who are being pushed out of their home countries by the destabilization and poverty that past and ongoing U.S. interventions are greatly contributing to if not outright fueling.



## Oral Defense

Hello, thank you all for being here. My name is Mercedes Rajme and I would like to begin my defense with a word I feel summarizes much of the context of the work I am presenting. You may have heard it, you may have been called it. There are many stories surrounding the etymology of this word, but one version is that the word came about in response to the invasion and occupation of American troops in Latin America and is derived from the phrase “Green - go home!” Though the word “gringo” can be traced back to Spain in the mid 18th century, this word is now commonly used in Latin America to describe a western foreigner. To me, the myth surrounding this word represents the long standing legacy of western colonialism and imperialism in Latin America and the resistance against it.

For my thesis I have created a publication and accompanying website through which the publication can be purchased. The website utilizes prevalent nationalistic right wing language and visual cues to promote the publication, entitled “A Piece of the Wall”. The publication is advertised as a commemorative piece of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, but in addition it includes information on the effects of the wall as well as brief summaries of relevant historical events. The proceeds collected from the sale of this publication will be given to organizations assisting migrants and refugees. Through research of the histories of U.S. border security policies, as well as, U.S. economic and military interventions in Latin America, it is evident that the border wall is not only key to creating and securing the U.S. national mythos and identity and consequently, an alien “other”; it is ultimately

the continuation of colonial imperialism and the genocide of indigenous and other colonized peoples. The major goal of my work is to confront the hypocrisy of building a wall to keep out the very people who are being pushed out of their home countries by the destabilization and poverty that past and ongoing U.S. interventions are greatly contributing to if not outright fueling.

The border wall we know today came about in the early 1990s when President George H.W. Bush approved the first federally funded construction of a fourteen mile section of border fence along the San Diego-Tijuana border. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of Border Patrol agents in urban crossing points, like El Paso and San Diego. In 1994, Border Patrol released its first national strategic plan called Prevention through Deterrence, a strategy built on the notion that with a border lined with agents and walls, potential migrants would be convinced that crossing successfully would be nearly impossible or result in capture or even death and ultimately, prevent them from even attempting to cross. In 1996, despite there being no evidence to show that the wall and its patrolling were a deterrent to migrants, and furthermore that border crossings had simply been rerouted to more remote and dangerous locations, the Illegal Immigration and Reform Act was passed. The act provided resources for Border Patrol to hire an additional 1,000 agents and 300 support personnel each year from 1997 to 2001. As the plan of Prevention through Deterrence continued to be carried out, there was no mention of the fact that in order to deter migrants from crossing, many people would have to die first, news of their suffering and deaths would have to reach their communities and families, death would have to become synonymous with crossing the border. An increased number of migrant deaths while crossing therefore had to be an

inherent goal of this strategy, and this goal was accomplished. An ACLU report on the past, present and future impacts of the U.S.-Mexico border wall cites scholar Wayne Cornelius, whose 2001 report showed that confirmed deaths border-wide rose from 87 in 1996 to 499 in 2000, a 474% increase. Cornelius identified the main correlation between these numbers was the shift from urban to remote crossing locations, a conclusion similar to the that of the 2006 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, neither of which resulted in any change or questioning of the strategy of Prevention through Deterrence.

In 2006, President George W. Bush signed the the Secure Fence Act which called for the completion of approximately 700 miles of border wall and increased surveillance in order to “achieve and maintain operational control over the entire international land and maritime borders of the United States.” The bill defined operational control as “the prevention of all unlawful entries into the United States.” Since the erection of the walls, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has neither had nor developed a valid metric system for assessing the impact of border walls on preventing crossings. Subsequently their effectiveness has been measured by the number of apprehensions and narcotics seizures despite the fact these figures alone cannot be used to assess the efficacy of the wall without also knowing the total number of crossings or narcotics smugglings. These figures nevertheless are regularly cited in reports and testimonies given to Congress by border enforcement agencies. The U.S. Border Patrol has recorded 7,216 migrant deaths along the border between fiscal year 1998 and fiscal year 2017, though Border Angel’s estimates are around 10,000.

In 2018, a migrant caravan originating in Honduras reached the U.S.-Mexico border. President Donald Trump and U.S. media referred to this caravan as an invasion. To be able to understand the complexities of poverty, violence, and scarcity of resources that people are fleeing, one needs to know the history of U.S. interventions, and the extent of U.S. colonial imperialism that creates these unsustainable and violent environments. In 2009, the U.S. backed a rightwing coup in Honduras which caused extreme destabilization in the country to the point that from 2010 to 2014, Honduras was the most violent country in the world outside of an official war zone. In 2017, the U.S. recognized the re-election of Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernandez despite widespread allegations of fraud, massive protests, and calls from the Organization of American States to hold a new vote. Hernandez is seen as a reliable U.S. ally in Central America because of his support for the U.S. military staging of “humanitarian and counter-narcotics operations from an Honduran air base.” Additionally, Honduras has, like the U.S., officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Contextualizing the migrant caravan within the history of U.S. interventions of Latin America was one of the first major tasks of creating this work. The website, [pieceofthewall.com](http://pieceofthewall.com), is modeled after the website of a group called We Build the Wall. We Build the Wall was founded by Brian Kolfage, a veteran who started a viral GoFundMe that raised 22 million dollars to build more segments of border wall on private property. This group is responsible for the half mile segment of border wall built in El Paso and Sunland Park, New Mexico. Though I did not find the page until after I had decided on selling pieces of the wall, I found that We Build the Wall was also, very unironically selling pieces of the border wall that they have constructed in my home town of El Paso.

Borrowing from both the aesthetic and language of this website, I created my own website through which A Piece of the Wall could be purchased. I included about us, feedback, and news pages in addition to a shop and home page in order to give the site legitimacy. Images of the border wall being constructed, red white and blue, as well as appeals to patriotic duty and nationalist ideologies are central motifs of the website. The feedback page is populated with images gathered from “Build the Wall” Facebook groups and the news page plays videos praising the border wall. The goal of this website is to be convincing enough to entice border wall supporters to purchase the publication for themselves or a loved one. There are three different tiers of the publication available. Included within every tier is a small baggy of gravel and bits of corroded steel bollard collected from the San Diego-Tijuana border, a link to a 15 second video clip of the border wall unique to each piece, and a booklet with the faces, names, ages, countries of origin and causes of death of the seven children who, in the past two years have died either while in or briefly after being released from ICE custody. To directly accompany this booklet is a brief history of U.S. interventions in Guatemala, the country of origin of six of the seven children who have died in order to point to the connection between migratory push factors and U.S. military involvement in Guatemala.

To further contextualize said ‘involvement’ in Guatemala, I will go back to 1954, when U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower funded a military coup against popular president Jacobo Árbenz, ending ten years of democratic rule in the country, known as the “Ten Years of Spring.” Under Árbenz, Guatemalan congress had passed Decree 900, which expropriated a quarter of a million acres of uncultivated United Fruit land and redistributed it to 500,000 landless, largely indigenous peasants, although the company

was offered compensation based on tax records. The United Fruit Company, the largest employer and landowner in the country, lobbied the U.S. government for intervention. Central Intelligence Agency trained insurgents led by Guatemalan army officer Carlos Castillo took power in Guatemala and proceeded to return the land expropriated by Árbenz, abolish the tax on interest and dividends to foreign investors, ban labor unions, eliminate the secret ballot for elections and jail thousands of political critics. Both U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother CIA Director Allen Dulles were investors in the United Fruit Company, now known as Chiquita Brands International. This military coup ultimately lead to the Guatemalan civil war that ended in 1996.

In the following tier up in the publication, entitled the “Block tier”, the publication also includes a brief history of U.S. border security policies and enforcement. With the highest tier, the “Proud American tier”, the publication includes a link to a 30 second video clip of the border wall and the first page in a series of letter-pressed lists of the names and causes of death of adults who have died in ICE detention which the recipient of the publication will continue to receive as each subsequent page is completed, whether they want to or not. This part of the publication feels especially important to me. I don’t want those names to be forgotten, I don’t want them to be ignored. That for me really solidified the necessity of memorializing these names through letterpress and continuing to mail them out; not letting them just become numbers, because they aren’t, they’re people and their lives and deaths had rippling effects and trauma and that’s something that needs to be acknowledged in some manner.

The envelopes in which the publication will be mailed are screen-printed with patterns of various types of fences I observe in my daily life. The Brick tier is printed with

a picket fence pattern, the Block tier with chainlink fence and the Proud American tier with iron bars and barbed wire. The price increase in each tier is paralleled by the perceived increased “security” of each type of fence. As of now, the publication is completed and ready to be shipped and I have created Instagram and Twitter accounts in order to find and promote the publication and website to my targeted audience of border wall supporters.

The work of Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco influenced me deeply, especially their performance works, in my early explorations on the topic of the border. Though I’m not sure if that influence has really carried over into this particular work, they have been a part of my larger growth as an artist. The major artistic influences for this work have been Carlos Motta and his timelines, especially as I attempted to distill many separate histories and present them as one in order to contextualize our present situation, as well as the satirical video and campaign Somos El Muro created in 2017. This was a collaborative project made by artists and activists from Mexico, Central America and the United States in order to address the xenophobia and discrimination by Central American migrants and refugees in Mexico. the group posed as pro-Trump-wall Mexicans who said they would not pay for the wall, but instead would themselves be the wall. This work played a very important part in developing the language for my website and conceptualizing this concept of how we all participate in the perpetuation of these systems that dehumanize and abuse migrants and refugees, staying silent is an action and we are all a piece of the wall everyday that we carry on with business as usual.

Although there have been many changes from my proposed work to the work I have completed, the original purpose of my project has remained the same; to appeal to the prejudices and biases of border wall supporters and entice them to purchase my publication and regardless of what the person learns or does not from the publication, their money will be given to organizations providing free legal aid and representation to migrants and refugees as well as shelter, safety and support for those in transit. The organizations I plan to give the proceeds of this publication to are Al Otro Lado, Raices and Pueblo Sin Fronteras. I think there's something very specific that I'm getting at in seeking out this particular group of people to purchase my publication. I know those who already sympathize with and support migrants may already be giving money to these organizations for migrants, so my goal is more so to get people who would otherwise feel no desire to donate to these organizations to inadvertently do so.

When I initially proposed my thesis, I had originally planned on making a series of instructional videos and accompanying kits for border wall supporters to build their own wall at home. This work relied largely on humor and satire to convey its message; since then my ideas around how to approach conveying my message has shifted and humor no longer felt like the right vehicle for this work. Straightforward language, cold and simplistic aesthetic to match the harshness of a system that reduces human beings to "numbers apprehended" felt more appropriate. In doing the research required for this project, I often felt as if I was reading a book to which I already knew the ending, I began with a vague understanding that colonialism and capitalism and their systems of expansion have caused major destabilizations all throughout the global south and that we currently are faced with simultaneous increase in anti-immigrant sentiment as migrants are arriving at our border in huge numbers. What this work filled in was the



United States's involvement in nearly every Latin American government, directly linked the to exportation of natural resources, poverty, dictatorships and death squads, and the murder of thousands, largely indigenous people living within these countries. This violence fueled and funded by the U.S. ideology of spreading democracy initiated in the Monroe Doctrine is directly linked to the migration of thousands of people from Central America to the United States in search of work or asylum. And they continue to die and suffer at the hands of U.S. border policy, while waiting in detention or attempting to cross, while trying to survive the consequences of decades of U.S. economic and military interventions.

Thank you.

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