Drawing parallels between a border wall and a dam, Michael Davis makes the following observation in his foreword to Joseph Nevins’ book *Operation Gate Keeper: The Rise of “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (2002: x):

The border is often compared to a dam: defending the fat suburbs of the American dream from a deluge of Third World misery. This, of course, misunderstands the role of a dam, which is not to prevent the flow of water but to control and ration its supply.

Even a cursory historical observation of all the walls, barriers and fortifications built in and around imperial territories will support the above observation made about contemporary barriers, particularly concerning the movements of populations. Within the context of preceding discussions, of the nature of empires and imperial formations and the interdependence of the postmodern Empire and the globalization process I will make the following observations that serve as conceptual guidelines for my case studies in this book:

1. Imperial walls and barriers that are constructed and maintained are seldom located on the frontiers. For one thing, frontiers are zones or regions that move and change in space in different time periods (Hall, 2009: 27). The world-systems analysis informs us that all world-systems, and by definition all imperial territories tend to pulsate through periods of expansion and contraction (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997). Conceptually, frontiers are also “shaped by processes of interactions among societies,” meaning that frontier lines do not move in a unidirectional fashion only (Hall, 2009: 26). Using a biological metaphor Slatta (1997) likens a frontier to a membrane—it has a thickness, is permeable depending on the intensity and direction of population movement, is flexible and most important of all, it moves forward or backward in response to socio-political and economic pressures. Thus for all practical purposes (cost of labor, capital, raw materials, etc.), and regardless
of historical time periods frontiers are not suitable locations to construct and maintain barriers, walls and fortifications.\(^1\)

2. Borders are demarcation lines between two socio-political entities, and up to the point that their economies function independently (in relative terms) there is no need for an intensive border fortification and control. This was the case for the U.S.-Mexico border that up until the mid-1990s was loosely secured whereby unauthorized border crossings prior to the implementation of NAFTA in 1994 were common occurrences even in bright daylight; the Green Line that separated Israel from the occupied territories up until the late 1990s; and the political boundaries between East and West Berlin from 1949–1961. Related to the U.S.-Mexico border, according to Nevins (2002) the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) budget for the southwestern portion of the U.S.-Mexico border security enforcement increased from $400 million in 1993 to $800 million in 1997; and Cunningham (2004) reports that the number of border agents more than doubled between 1994 (the year NAFTA was implemented) and 2001 (cf. Wonders, 2006: 79). In this light, border walls and barriers are erected when the two political economic entities have passed beyond a point in their ability to survive independently; and similar to a dam they are always semi-permeable allowing a controlled flow and movement of population under the empire’s administrative control. This also signals that the two political economies are integrated and the wall/barrier is a tool for imperial intentions.

3. Contrary to the conventional perception the imperial walls and barriers are not erected at the ‘edges’ of empire, but right in the midst of contested territories (Beck’s notion of globalization from within). Furthermore, they are not friendly ‘fences between neighbors’ (see Williams, 2003) since they are never erected and maintained by mutual consent.\(^2\)

Within the above context it is possible to identify at least four types of imperial walls:

*Offensive Wall.* The imperial-colonial power erects the wall to control the flow of population from subjugated peripheral territories to the mainland

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\(^1\) My focus here is not on frontier studies. But for a list of literature on comparative frontiers see Hall (2009: 27, f.n. 2).

\(^2\) All the walls examined in this book are pertinent examples.