



WALLS THAT BRIDGE

Or, What We Can Learn from the Roman Walls

THE AURELIAN WALLS AS “ANCHORAGE”

If you google the words “Aurelian walls,” right after the customary Wikipedia entries in both Italian and English, and a third reference to the *A View on Cities* website, you will find a fourth listing titled “Aurelian Walls Taxi Question” with a link to a *TripAdvisor* page.¹ There you can read the following:

Hi everyone,

I am trying to find out which territory is considered to be within the Aurelian wall. According to the airports' website adr.it/web/aeroporti-di-roma-en-/pax-fco-taxi and Comune di Roma www.comune.roma.it/wps/portal/pcr... if you take a taxi from the airports (Fiumicino and Ciampino) to any address within the Aurelian walls the fee is fixed. So, I am trying to understand which parts of Rome are currently within the walls.

This may seem a trivial question, but in fact it discloses an interesting truth. Even though in their everyday life contemporary Romans are unlikely to devote much of their thinking to the majesty of a more-than-seventeen-centuries-old wall, two thirds of which are still intact, the Aurelian walls continue in many ways to be central to the identity of the Eternal City. In a fascinating study of what she describes as three nodes of the “Network of Global Cities”—*Città e Limes: Roma–Beijing–New York*—Italian architect Anna Irene Del Monaco argues that:

1. I wish to thank S. Masturah Alatas for her careful reading of a previous draft of this essay.

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the historical borders [*limes*] of cities are among the founding physical elements of all subsequent urban transformations. And therefore, urban walls, whether natural or artificial, having defined in the past the physical and symbolical shape of the city, and having sustained their identity, are the place of modern transformations that reverberate in any subsequent decision (“Introduzione,” my translation).

Del Monaco is referring primarily to the way the urban development of what she describes as “anchored” cities (as opposed to the unanchored megalopolis of a more recent history) has been influenced by the shape designed by their original *limes*, but she also helps us make sense of such a “subsequent decision” as that of setting a fixed fee for taxis running between the airport and any location within the Aurelian walls. Regardless of the actual distance from the airport, if the address you are trying to reach is within the perimeter of the walls—within the old *centro storico* of Rome, that is—you will pay a set fee (at the time of this writing, 40 euros). The Aurelian walls may no longer defend Romans—if they ever did—from the barbarians’ invasions, but they now defend both locals and tourists from being overcharged when they take a taxi from the airport to the city.²

Before I say something more on the continuing importance of the Aurelian walls to Rome’s identity, let me offer some basic information about the history of the city’s perimetral fortifications. The Roman walls that still stand today began to be built under Emperor Aurelian in 271 A.D., as he was concerned with the threat posed by Germanic tribes pushing along the borders of the Empire. For centuries, the military might of Rome had been such that no one felt the need for a protective wall. Imperial Rome had long outgrown the older, fourth century B.C. Republican Wall, also known as *Mura Serviane*, after the king Servio Tullio, the one who, according to tradition, erected the walls to replace the much older *Mura Romulee*, a quadrangular structure covering 285 hectares, named after Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, in 753 B.C. As you can see from the map in fig. 1, though covering a much larger area, the Aurelian walls—the ones marked in black—are

2. Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410, by the Vandals in 455, and by the Goths in 472. Then was again invaded by the Normans under Robert Guiscard in 1084 and by the mutinous troops of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1527. (“Sack of Rome”).

anchored (in del Monaco's terminology) to the older Servian walls (marked in red), and move the *limes* of the old Republican city a bit further, by and large following the physical features of the terrain, as for example, with the river Tiber, on the left of the map.

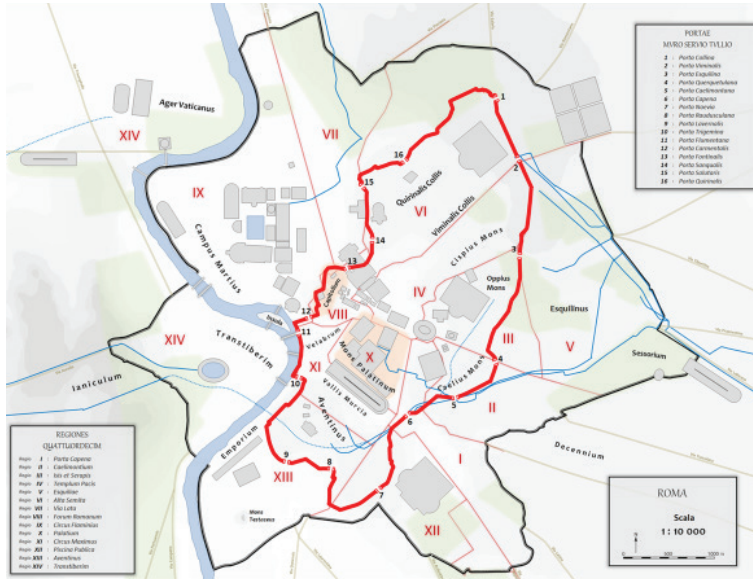


Figure 1: The Aurelian walls

As attested by Plutarch's description of the mythical founding of Rome by Romulus, the tracing of the city's *limes*—the borders that preceded the erection of walls or palisades—was a liturgical act. Here is a relevant passage from Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*:

the founder, having shod a plough with a brazen ploughshare, and having yoked to it a bull and a cow, himself drove a deep furrow round the boundary lines, while those who followed after him had to turn the clods, which the plough threw up, inwards towards the city, and suffer no clod to lie turned outwards. With this line they mark out the course of the wall, and it is called, by contraction, "pomerium," that is, "post murum," *behind or next the wall*. And where they purposed to put in a gate, there they took the share out of the ground, lifted the plough over, and left a vacant space. And this is the reason why they regard all the wall as sacred except the gates; but if they held the gates sacred, it would not be possible, without religious scruples, to bring into and send out of the city things which are necessary, and yet unclean.

The *walls* marked a sacred line that could not be crossed, as opposed to the *gates*, those openings where things both clean and "unclean"

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could go through without bringing disgrace to the city. It was forbidden to climb over the walls. The penalty for such an act, according to the jurist Pomponius, was capital punishment. Indeed, some sources suggest that Rhemus was killed precisely because he had dared *murum transcendere*: he had crossed the border traced by his brother Romulus (Rosada 366–68).

However, while the Republican walls initially drew “a boundary that separates different territories and designates the city as a completely distinct physical place, different from, or even inimical to, the space outside,” later, “under the empire, the whole concept of separation began to lose its meaning with the massive expansion along the consular roads with their imperial and senatorial country estates” (Del Monaco, Abstract, English in the original). Even when the Aurelian walls were built and Rome had perhaps two million inhabitants,

only a part lived within the circuit of the Aurelian walls; afterwards the city began to shrink until in the darkest days of the middle ages, the population numbered little more than fifteen thousand, clustered near the Tiber, at some distance from the imperial city walls, from which they were separated by ancient abandoned ruins, orchards and meadows (Del Monaco, Abstract, English in the original).

Though they could not always keep invaders at bay, the walls retained their primary defensive and military purpose until the Unification of Italy and the annexation of Rome, in 1870, to the newly founded Kingdom of Italy. Thus, over a brief period, the walls went

from being a still-functional military structure to being romantically isolated from the modern context of the city, and very often desecrated as obstacles to the spread of the infrastructure of the modern city. Despite this, however, the role performed by the Roman city walls in the formation of the modern city has been significant and clearly visible In fact, during the urban development of Rome, the new road systems, such as the Great Outer Ring Road, the railways, the city bypasses, all re-echo the circuit of the original Aurelian walls; even when increasingly distant, their layout and routes follow the radiocentric pattern and geography of the territory of Rome. (Del Monaco, Abstract, English in the original)

Simply put, as Del Monaco insists, the city’s *limites* are a place of both continuity and change. The identity of the city depends

on them, but it also grows *out* of them, moving further on, just as the Roman consular roads, originating from the *Milliarium aureum*, a “monument, probably of marble or gilded bronze, erected by the Emperor Caesar Augustus near the Temple of Saturn in the central Forum of Ancient Rome” (“Milliarium”; see fig. 2), reached out to the provinces, thereby redefining the character of Roman civilization.



Figure 2: Milliarium Aureum

These roads were of course instrumental to the building of the empire, and made possible the erection of further walls, from Northern Italy all the way to Hadrian’s Wall, to which I would like to come back at the end, as its history seems to support the idea that walls—viewed in a historical perspective—are about separating territories and peoples as much as they are about connecting them. This may not be so surprising if we think that the Latin word *limes* had a double meaning. On the one hand, it meant “border,” “limit,” “dividing line.” On the other, it was a synonym for “road” or “way,” as was the case with the Germanic-Augustan *limes* running along the Lippe river, instrumental to the creation of the new province of the Empire. The argument I wish to develop here, therefore, is that the lesson the *Mura Romane* can teach us

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is a simple but very important one, especially today, when so many governments around the world wish to build or reinforce existing geopolitical borders. “Walls”—by which I mean both man-made structures and physical or even conceptual borders—can be seen as integral to the effort of constructing both individual and collective identities of various sorts, but this does not mean their function is simply exclusionary or protective. Walls and borders may be necessary to put some order in what William James famously described as the “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (462) of the world, not so much because they are meant to keep out “others” but because they set the preconditions for setting up meaningful relations with them. Dividing lines between what we now call Mexico and the US, or Europe and Africa, have always existed (the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo and the Mediterranean Sea) but their role was not so much to exclude as to connect, which is also why all attempts to turn such borders into trenches (Trump’s wall or Fortress Europe) are doomed to fail.

WALLS VERSUS BRIDGES

References to walls in current political discourse tend to emphasize only one meaning—that of walls as barriers erected to separate people. Even before the US election, Pope Francis stated that, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the gospel” (Bever). Francis has repeated this concept several times, thus echoing a metaphor that was a favorite with another illustrious Catholic, Giorgio La Pira, for many years the mayor of Florence and very active in promoting world peace during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. “Unify the world. That is the—sole—problem of today; to unify it building bridges everywhere and bringing down walls everywhere” (La Pira). Francis’ words have been interpreted as a not-so-indirect critique of Trump’s projected wall along the US-Mexico border, but they were also meant to call attention to that other water “wall” between Northern Africa and Southern Europe, where thousands have died and continue to die every day by trying to cross it. *Ponti. Non muri—Bridges. Not walls* has become the slogan of both religious and left-leaning organizations active

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

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER N^o 1/2018

in bringing assistance to political and economic refugees fleeing from war, hunger, and misery to Europe.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, many of the same voices that a few decades ago celebrated the fall of the Berlin wall, today are clamoring for the need to protect Europe from being invaded by Africans, Arabs, Asians, and so forth. As the controversial young Italian philosopher Diego Fusaro has observed, however, one should be careful not to reify bridges as being always about connecting peoples in a good way. He refers in particular to Xerxes' famous pontoon bridges—mentioned by both Herodotus and Aeschylus—whose purpose was to lead the Persian army to the conquest of Greece, an act no one would describe as friendly. Though Fusaro can be criticized on many counts, I think it would be hard to deny that he is right when he writes that “bridges and walls are not inherently good or evil. There are historical periods and contexts in which walls may be necessary and others in which it is good to go over them” (Fusaro, my translation).³

A similar, though better articulated impatience with the conceptual and political simplifications of an otherwise worthy slogan have been expressed in an article by the Benedictine monk Giulio Meiattini. Walls, Meiattini writes, are too often used to discriminate and separate, but walls are also what our own homes are made of. Walls are about identity in both a conceptual and a very material sense. The image of the bridge to help people cross over is suggestive, no doubt, but once people have reached their destination, they too need homes, they too need to be protected from cold and heat, they too need a circumscribed space where they can lead their daily lives. Meiattini believes the *door* to be a more suggestive and flexible image for the kind of open, though always discerning connection between inside and outside, between “me” and “you,” or “us” and “them.”

Meiattini is by no means condoning the language of those xenophobes and right-wingers who argue that we are being “invaded” by refugees who wish to impose upon us “their” customs and lifestyles, and perhaps also their backward religious mores. He is,

3. Though Fusaro claims to be a Marxist and has written extensively on Marx and communism, he is also on record for endorsing or at the very least justifying various forms of right-wing “anti-capitalism.”

however, reminding us that if “walls” stand for “borders,” much as we would want to live in a borderless world with no passports and no checkpoints, we would not want to live in an *undifferentiated*, flat world emptied of local identities and histories.⁴ His reasoning runs parallel to Del Monaco’s emphasis on the significance of the Aurelian walls: even though the latter are no longer a defensive structure and they have been by and large merged into the landscape of Rome or reverberated, as she writes, onto other urban developments such as the Great Outer Ring Road or the railway circling the greater city of Rome, those borders continue to define the identity of the city.⁵ The Aurelian walls

4. In his controversial *Against the Double Black Mail*, writing about the refugee crisis, Slavoj Žižek argues that while it is impossible for Europeans to “pull up the drawbridge and let Africans and Arabs solve their own problems,” it is also impossible for Europe “to ‘open its door widely.’ I believe that while Žižek is by and large correct when he argues that an indiscriminate open-door policy “would trigger an instant populist revolt in Europe,” he is in more than one way wrong to maintain that “The greatest hypocrites are those who advocate open borders.... They play the Beautiful Soul, which feels superior to the corrupted world while secretly participating it.” Who are Žižek’s “Beautiful Souls”? Certainly not the moderate or liberal parties he seems to have in mind when he castigates the “left,” as these parties by no means “advocate open borders.” To the contrary, “left” or “liberal” parties like the Italian Partito Democratico have very often taken a line that is only minimally different from that of openly right-wing formations. See, for example, the agreement that at the time of this writing (September 2017), the Italian government has signed with Libya—an agreement that even the U.N. has denounced as *de facto* permitting Libyan authorities to lock up migrants in detention centers where human rights violations are the norm (see “EU ‘turning blind eye’”). This is not to say that Žižek is wrong in posing the problem of how to reconcile a public opinion whose xenophobic feelings can be easily whipped up by the media, with the pressing need to save lives (in the terms of this essay, how to reconcile bridges with walls). I agree with him that no lasting solution can be found under the current global geo-political and economic conditions, and that the only way to address the refugee and migration crisis is by rebuilding from the foundations up a more just world order, but the people who are drowning every single day in the Mediterranean must be saved *now*.

5. Another way in which the walls of Rome have become part of the city’s biography is through the significance of some of their gates (*porte*), which besides being often architecturally and aesthetically interesting, are also markers of important historical events. One need only think of *Porta Pia*, where the Italian army clashed on September 20, 1870, with the Pope’s soldiers,

have long lost any significance as protective barriers, but they continue to provide a pattern around which the city's evolving identity can "anchor" itself. This is one of the reasons why I think that one of the most interesting recent filmic representations of the Eternal City is not so much Paolo Sorrentino's internationally acclaimed and Oscar-winning *Grande Bellezza*, but Gianfranco Rosi's *Sacro Gra*, the winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2013, a documentary that shows the lives of people living in the peripheries flanking the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* (Rome's main ring road)—that is, along what could very well be described as the new "walls" of Rome, where the lives of so many people living literally on the margins of the city unfold, far away from the postcard scenes punctuating Sorrentino's otherwise interesting film.

WALLS, BOUNDARIES, IDENTITIES

Before I proceed, however, I need to remind readers that my field of expertise is not Roman history but American literature, and it is perhaps mostly to my Americanist self that Meiattini's words of caution regarding the unconditional praise of bridges versus walls make a good deal of sense. As my colleague Alessandro Portelli wrote in a seminal essay published in the inaugural issue of *Ácoma* (the Italian journal of American studies I have been coediting for many years now), US culture and its literature are very much about the desire to overcome borders and confines of any kind, be they physical or conceptual. Portelli's essay uses as its first epigraph an exemplary quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Circles": "Limitation is the only sin." This American enthusiasm for never-ending expansion, which may be traced from the early explorers to *Star Trek* ("Space, the final frontier," are the memorable lines that preceded all episodes chronicling the exploits of the spaceship *Enterprise*), is both admirable and troublesome. It is a source of inspiration for the bohemian

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thus wresting Rome from the Vatican's control and making of it the capital of the new state. Another landmark event in recent history is the heroic resistance that the Italian military and civil volunteers put up at *Porta San Paolo* on September 10, 1943, as they tried to prevent the German army from occupying Rome.

lives on the road of Jack London, Woody Guthrie, and Jack Kerouac, but it also finds expression in the imperial expansion over the continent of the historical United States, in its limitless desire to impose its will (claiming it was for their own good, of course) on other peoples and other lands.

According to Portelli, this endless expansion of America has the paradoxical effect of loosening the borders of the country to such a point that the latter is at least imaginatively “invaded” by other expanding or resisting subjects. From the Puritans’ witches to McCarthy’s communists, from the fear of slave revolts or Indian uprisings to the anxiety generated by organizations such as the Black Panthers Party and the American Indian Movement, American history and culture is haunted by the fear of being assaulted by an internal enemy, by those who would erect “walls” to the unlimited extension of its imperial design. That is one of the reasons why, while for the most part I am all for bridges and very much against walls, when it comes to, say, American Indian reservations, I think some “walls” may be necessary to keep non-Indian intruders out. Visitors may be welcome, but they should enter through doors, not by smashing walls (as they often do, in the guise of corporations, real estate developers, oil companies, and so forth).

What I am trying to suggest may be further clarified by referring to two moments in American literature that Portelli does not mention but which, I think, could very well be assimilated into his argument. In his famous “quarterdeck speech” in Chapter 36 of *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab, after stating that “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks,” goes on to add that “in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ‘tis enough” (159). One may describe Ahab’s desire to smash the White-Whale-as-wall as a textbook illustration of the *Pequod* captain’s imperialist desire to accept no limits to the expansion of his thirst for domination over the world of men and nature.

But if Ahab may be considered, in Melville's own words, as "a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans" (130), his refusal of limitations has at times appeared—for example to Jorge Luis Borges—as heroic as Dante's Ulysses' daring flight in search of *virtute e canoscenza* (virtue and knowledge). Melville himself, in "Bartleby, a story of *Wall Street*" (my emphasis), described the confinement behind walls as deadly and claustrophobic. Walls, in that story, threaten those who, like Bartleby, are forced to live *behind* them. Smashing them, in this case, does not so much suggest imperialist appropriation as an act of liberation. If, as in my example of American Indian reservations, or in Portelli's analogous reference to the idea that "Good is knowing when to stop" (words uttered by Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which he uses as the article's second epigraph), "walls" are needed to sustain the sense of who we are—to shore up the "homes" of our own individual and collective selves—they can also turn our homes into prisons. Once again, the significance of walls both as reality and as symbol can only be assessed dialectically.

That this should be the case is effectively illustrated by the second example I wish to call attention to: the often quoted poem by Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," a text that critically interrogates the notion that "good fences make good neighbors," though it simultaneously sustains the cultural, psychological, and perhaps sociological value of "mending" walls rather than doing altogether away with them. As Richard Poirier has argued in his magisterial analysis of the poem,

Though the speaker may or may not think that good neighbors are made by good fences, it is abundantly clear that he likes the yearly ritual "outdoor game" by which fences are made. Because if fences do not "make good neighbors" the "making" of fences can. More is "made" in this "outdoor game" than fences. The two men also "make" talk, or at least that is what the speaker tries to do as against the reiterated assertions of his companion, which are as heavily limited as the wall itself. (105)

Walls in this poem take on a completely different meaning from that assigned to them by contemporary political discourse. Rather than barriers for separating people, they are spaces where people meet and enter dialogue. Frost's wall is an impermanent construction requiring constant repair because "something there

is that doesn't love a wall" (Frost 33). Whatever that "something" might be—hunters, the forces of nature and time—it is an incentive to rethink the wall, and wonder what one is "walling in or walling out." Thus, for Poirier (and I agree with him), the "real significance" of "Mending Wall" "is that it suggests how much for Frost freedom is contingent upon some degree of restriction. More specifically, it can be said that restrictions, or forms, are a precondition for expression. Without them, even nature ceases to offer itself up for a reading" (104). That is why, perhaps, Ahab needs to conceptualize the White Whale as a wall, while Ishmael is overwhelmed with terror at the idea of the "indefiniteness" of whiteness, whose "dumb blankness" brings to his mind "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (Melville 184)

I realize that at this point one may begin to suspect that my argument so far may provide conceptual ammunition to those who warn us that while projects such as Trump's wall with Mexico may be both politically and ethically wrong, and doomed to fail as all other great or small walls have throughout history, doing away with borders is not a real option and some sort of "walls" must continue to exist. I want to state unambiguously that I strongly believe that borders should be open to welcome every single individual fleeing from human and natural catastrophes, or simply seeking a better life, and that I understand that migrations have been one of the defining features of the species *homo sapiens* since time immemorial. At the same time, however, individual and collective identities depend on boundaries that can and should be flexible, but cannot be done altogether away with. As Jacques Derrida (101–140) taught us a long time ago, even *naming* someone is to trace a boundary around an individual, but while, as Derrida insists, naming is a potentially violent act—a primary instance of the violence of the letter—it would be hard to imagine living in a world of nameless people. Moreover, as we move from individual to collective boundaries, we would do well to keep in mind that in our globalized world the destruction of collective identities is all too often the prelude to the triumph of the only logic that nowadays remains unchallenged: the logic of the market and of capitalist accumulation. Ignoring how globalization, wars, and mass migrations are often inextricably intertwined can only

facilitate the rise of nationalistic, extremely xenophobic right-wing formations such as the French Front National or the Italian Northern League on the one hand, and the strengthening of Islamic and other fundamentalisms on the other.

Considering these concerns, I find Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito's work on the relationship between what he calls *communitas* versus *immunitas*, especially useful. In his exploration of "the origin and destiny of community," Esposito has called into question the belief that what holds a community together is "a property," or a "territory" that a specific people would guard and protect from the intrusions of outsiders. By calling attention to the etymology of the word *munus*—gift or debt—Esposito argues that what holds a *communitas* (*cum-munus*) together is the reciprocal indebtedness of individuals to each other.

[T]he common is not characterized by what is proper but by what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding [*svuotamento*], be it partial or whole, of property into its negative.... In the community, subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure within which they can establish transparent communication or even a content to be communicated. They don't find anything else except that void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves (*Communitas* 8).

While the term *communitas* has therefore a positive meaning, as it calls for gift-giving and mutual caring, immunity "implies the exemption from or the derogation of such a condition of gift-giving. He is immune who is safe from obligations or dangers that concern everyone else" (Interview 50).

In his work Esposito traces not only how this "immunitary paradigm" has traveled through disciplines as diverse as anthropology, theology, medicine, and legal studies, but has been extended also from the individual to larger collective bodies. "All societies, as well as all individuals, have been concerned with assuring their own survival with respect to the risk of environmental or inter-human contamination." In the language of the present essay, one could say that all societies have erected walls to "immunize" themselves from the threat of the outside but, as Esposito insists, "such a protection, when pushed beyond a certain limit, forces life into a sort of prison or armoring in which what we lose is not

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only freedom, but also the real sense of individual and collective existence” (Interview 51). Paradoxically, what is meant to safeguard a community turns into the poison that risks infecting its water wells. If on the one hand some “walling in” is required to hold both individuals and societies together, we should beware that our “walling out” does not turn medicine into venom. If one thinks of how the EU has responded to the ongoing refugee crisis of the last few years, one is offered a virtual textbook illustration of the dangers Esposito mentions. Failure to respond effectively to what is perceived as a threat to the “health” of Europe has fueled desires of immunization whose net result is the coming apart of the European project of an open space of tolerance and integration. As Esposito himself has noted elsewhere, “a community that wishes to immunize itself in regard to its original openness, ends up closing in on itself, thus risking implosion” (Esposito and Bauman, November 11, 2014 letter).

WALL BLUES

Of late, in response to both Trump’s projected wall and fantasies of a fortified Europe, numerous historians have called attention to the failure of dividing walls throughout history. In an article in the *Washington Post*, for example, Cornell University archaeologist Adam T. Smith has noted that attempts to block peoples’ movements through the erection of walls, starting with the fortifications of the city of Ur at the end of the third millennium B.C. all the way to the Berlin wall, are records of spectacular practical failures, not to mention their often-enormous moral, economic, and political costs. According to Smith, what makes the case of a Roman wall especially interesting, I have not yet mentioned, is precisely the fact that “it was never intended to cease the everyday flow of people across the border.” Hadrian’s Wall,

initiated by the Roman emperor Hadrian in A.D. 122 across the northern boundary of the province of Britannia [...] became an important entrepôt for trade and a funnel for population movement. The strategic objectives of Hadrian’s 73-mile wall were to provide the military infrastructure for parrying violent attacks from the north and to define the symbolic limits of the Roman world.

As another scholar has also noted, “Hadrian’s Wall was not a defensive structure. The Roman army at the time did not fight behind fixed defences [...] the wall, like other great Roman frontier monuments was as much a propaganda statement as a functional facility” (Faulkner). Of course, propaganda is neither innocent nor necessarily harmless, but it is worth considering that the term derives from the Latin *propagare*, where *pro* is forward and *pagare* has its roots in *pagere* or *pangere*, which means *to fix, to consolidate*. The root of the verb is *pag*, deriving in turn from the Sanskrit *pac*, meaning *to tie, to bind*, as in *pact* or the Latin *pax* (peace). The peace we are speaking of may well be the Augustan Pax Romana—the peace imposed by the mighty—but whatever its limitations, it evokes a scenario where dialogue is possible and the human voice may be stronger than the iron of the centurions’ swords and spears. If we are to believe what Smith writes, Hadrian’s wall was meant to regulate and direct, but not to arrest the movements of peoples. It was a *limes* where, as the Roman world ended another one began blurring the lines between the Empire and its others.

Hadrian’s wall has proven to be the occasion for what is probably the best-known poetic statements on a Roman wall in the English language, W. H. Auden’s poem-song “Roman Wall Blues.” Originally the text was part of a radio play commissioned in 1937 by the BBC, whose aim was to instruct listeners on the history of Roman Britain in general and of Hadrian’s Wall, specifically. The transcript of the play, its only surviving trace, included, along with the narrator’s, also the voices of modern-day tourists as well as those of actors impersonating Scottish rebels and Roman soldiers contemporaneous with the Wall’s construction. What is nowadays mostly remembered as a poem, is the only part of the original screenplay that Auden chose to preserve and publish, but was originally a song, with a musical score by Benjamin Britten, which, long believed to be lost, has only recently been rediscovered.⁶ Auden’s text is briefly but incisively analyzed in an essay by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, but before I refer to her reading, the poem must be quoted in full:

6. The first minute of a modern recording by singer Mary Carewe and pianist Huw Watkins can now be listened to for free on the NMC Recordings website (<https://www.nmcrc.co.uk/recording/britten-america>).

Over the heather the wet wind blows,
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.

The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.

Aulus goes hanging around her place,
I don't like his manners, I don't like his face.

Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish;
There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.

She gave me a ring but I diced it away;
I want my girl and I want my pay.

When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky. (Auden 94)

In her interpretation, Gottlieb perceptively underlines the way in which Auden undermines certain traditional distinctions (between inside and outside, friend and enemy) by focusing on other, to the poet more interesting ones, such as the division between the soldier's "eros-filled life and the absence of erotic pleasure in the life of his Christian acquaintance," as well as "the temporal difference between the period of enforced service ... and the period of freedom" (Gottlieb 157). By shifting his attention from what the wall supposedly separates (civilization from savagery) to the right and left sides of the soldier's face, Gottlieb suggests, Auden calls into question which side of the wall stands for vision and which would represent blindness. The poem's "anti-wall" stance is effectively summed up in the final lines, pointing to "the ultimate object of the Wall soldier's desire: the sky, not as a place of heavenly rest but as a space without boundaries, especially those imposed by walls" (Gottlieb 157).

This reading of the poem is sustained by the fact that Auden's "Roman Wall Blues" often appears in lists of anti-war songs and poems. Still, one may want to observe that the metaphor of the sky as a wall-free space also implies that such a space would be one where humans may dwell only in the imagination. We can be completely free only in the sky, the very place, alas, where our earthly bodies cannot make their home. This is not to say that we should stop desiring to make, in the language of the poem, our

earth resemble the sky as much as we possibly can. We may not be able to inhabit the sky, but looking at it the Wall soldier is able to express his uneasiness at the canonical divisions of the culture he belongs to. The poem's Wall is therefore a space where identities, rather than being mechanically restated, are interrogated and renegotiated—a “contact zone,”” to use Mary Louise Pratt's influential concept, where human relations should not be treated “in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices” (8). Also in Auden's poem—as in Frost's—we are encouraged to wonder what we “are walling in or walling out,” and *why*. Far from being simply a dividing or exclusionary line, the Wall provides the occasion for rethinking our identities: for asking ourselves what is the meaning of what we believe and do. We may erect walls or trace borders in order to cut ourselves away from others, but as we do so we also acknowledge our intimate connection to what or whom we wish to leave out.

There is a scene in the last episode of Nanni Moretti's film *Caro Diario*, which in my view provides a wonderfully compact allegory of what I am trying to get at, and I would like to conclude by turning to it also because the scene takes place along the Aurelian walls with which I began. Indeed, I believe that the scene is especially meaningful precisely because it is filmed in front of those Roman walls that should have ideally protected the cradle of civilization from the barbarians pressing at the gates. The film director and protagonist is riding gingerly on his blue Vespa when suddenly he sees actress Jennifer Beals and film director Alexander Rockwell taking a stroll along the Aurelian walls. He stops to ask the woman whether she is indeed Jennifer Beals of *Flashdance* fame, but he is no regular fan hunting for an autograph. As soon as he sees that Beals understands Italian, Moretti starts to pour out his regret for not having ever learned to dance, and then asks her whether the shoes she wears are as comfortable as they look. His behavior is so strange that Beals tells Rockwell that maybe the guy is “a feet maniac” but that in any case they should just stay calm as the fellow is not dangerous—he is just “off.” In a surreal conversation where English and Italian are constantly mixed, Moretti asks whether by “off” they mean *pazzo*—crazy. Beals

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reassures him that they don't think he is crazy—he's just "off," and at that point she enters a discussion with Rockwell about what "off" really means in English and how it might be best translated into a language of which she does not have a complete command.

The conversation diffuses what is initially perceived as a potential confrontation between people not only speaking different languages but also on completely different wavelengths (and by the way, here the potential aggressor is the local, the Roman, not the outsiders). Filmed against the background of the majestic walls, the scene seems to evoke the notion of separateness only to show that "walls" are places where people from diverse linguistic, emotional, and cultural backgrounds can gather to "translate" themselves by interrogating not only the other's language, but also their own. Paradoxically, while in the intention of those who construct them, walls are usually meant to separate, they can end up providing the occasion for bringing people together—if people, of course, are able to grasp the provisional nature of their individual and collective identities and are therefore willing to work against what Pratt identifies as the "radically asymmetrical relations of power" that have historically characterized the colonial "contact zones" (6-7).⁷ It is only if those power relations are seriously and fundamentally challenged that walls and bridges may turn out to be not the opposite of each other, but two moments of a dialectical restructuring of the world we live in.

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

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER N^o 1/2018

7 I suppose that another way of putting this would be to say that, so revised, Pratt's contact zone would begin to look more like Richard White's "middle ground": a terrain where "a process of mutual and creative misunderstandings" unfolds in a situation marked by "an inability of one side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to do what it desired" (xii).

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

RIAS VOL. 11, SPRING-SUMMER N° 1/2018