

Walls, after they are built, do not last forever. They exist until circumstances act against them—the passing of time, the terror of a bulldozer, or perhaps devastation by a shell. Before losing their firmness, walls interact frequently with human bodies, which are enclosed within or rest against them. Experience, as a result, accumulates on the surface of walls.

In a photograph by the Ethiopian photographer Michael Tsegaye, from the series “Future Memories” (2006–ongoing), a young woman holds her face in her hands. What emotion her face expresses is occluded. Yet, her body foregrounds a wall and its rubble—juts of crushed brick, perhaps the inner wall of a house once inhabited. Her gesture, connoting shame or grief, or, at best, shyness, is framed by an unsightly wall—an unsightliness emphasized by her gestures toward anonymity. One possibility is that the photograph depicts the young woman in shock at what is left of the house. In Addis Ababa, as in several African cities, walls of little houses are decimated to make room for skyscrapers. The net result is often displacement, a significant population of unsheltered people. The woman in the photograph, who obscures her identity, turning away from the wall of an uninhabitable house, appears as a tentative monument to the bulldozed wall.

Another photograph by Tsegaye: the portrait of a little boy with his back against a wall (Fig. 1). Diagonal shadows halve the boy. The photograph mainly depicts the wall, but there is sufficient indication of the ground. The boy’s left foot rests on a stone, his right against the wall. The photograph is remarkable for two reasons: the boy’s eyes, so dark they form little holes, as though his stare is dimmed by resignation; black grime on the surface of the wall, reaching as far up as the edge of the frame, like a broad laceration extending across an entire arm.

These lacerations, so-called, are present in most walls that are past their time. Consider



Fig. 1

Michael Tsegaye, *Future Memories #13*, from "Future Memories." Digital print on Canson Platin Fiber. 2011. Courtesy the artist and Addis Fine Art.



Fig. 2

Edson Chagas, "Found Not Taken, Luanda." Chromogenic print. 2013. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg.



Fig. 3

Jo Ractliffe, *Mural portraits depicting Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev, painted on the wall of a house in Viriambundo, Angola, circa 1975*, from "As Terras do Fim do Mundo." Platinum prints. 2009. Courtesy the artist, Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg, and The Walther Collection.

a photograph by Edson Chagas in his series "Found Not Taken" (2008–ongoing). A wall painted bright blue, long without its sheen, covered in marks of washed-out or missing paint (Fig. 2). Despite showing signs of imminent crumble, it remarkably foretells its coming ruin, perhaps clarified by the photographs of Francois-Xavier Gbré, which often depict not one wall but several. Here is the misfortune of going to ruin without the prospects of reconstruction.

Time, considered through these walls, has reached its limits. The promise of tomorrow is hollowed out, particularly, in cases such as these, where the walls are pictured in post-colonial African cities.

In Tsegaye's Addis Ababa, and in Mame-Diarra Niang's Dakar and Johannesburg, the old is replaced by the new. If it were possible, for some urban planners, the skyline of African cities would consist only of new towering buildings. Since this would not only be impossible, but also outrageously expensive to achieve, those who decide the fate of cities take a different approach: they hopscotch around the city, constructing new walls and new buildings alongside the crumbling vestiges of old structures, making neighborhoods unrecognizable in the process. The shiny façades in Niang's photographs are also premonitory—each surface tells of its future, when the lines are no longer straight or precise.

The destiny of a wall might be rubble. But photographs serve as interlocutors, bridging its fate with its depiction in the present. In 2009, Jo Ractliffe took photographs of a wall in Viriambundo, Angola (Fig. 3). On its surface were portraits of Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto, and Leonid Brezhnev, painted around 1975. Ractliffe's photographs of larger-than-life murals portray the three dead men as omnipresent—gods who watch the living from painted heights. The implication of this triptych is two-fold: the images of the heroic men have outlived them, and the photograph has outlived the demolition of the wall.

What we now know from looking at photographs of walls is this: What's human, or human-made, always reckons with passing time. History is reflective. It reaches into the past from the present, by weaving speculations into narrative. The walls suggest not merely time, but its span. Gifted with the right supernatural abilities, an onlooker could see all the life that has unfolded, and will unfold, in front, and on the surface of a wall.

Before 1994, Santu Mofokeng might have asked, "Who owns the land?" After the dismantling of apartheid, he chose to ask, "Who owns the landscape?"¹ The question shifts from merely one of possession to one of memory, from the material to the immaterial. He says, "Landscape is not geography, certainly not in the romantic sense. It is about your view, where you live, where you die, that is your landscape."² It is about the span of your view, what comes to you as an encompassing presence.

Mofokeng's black-and-white photographs stretch the metaphor of landscape to its furthest human limits: death. Landscape is where you die. Whereas in Gbré's photographs of ruin, we can sense leftover life—green grass growing from cracks between concrete—in Mofokeng's images, the ominous is pervasive. Perhaps this might simply be a question of photographs rendered in monochrome or color. Or it could affirm subtle distinctions between decay and death.

Walls, then, contextualized as part of landscape, take on the significance of scale. The impulse, put simply, for photographers documenting the lay of the land is to record the expansive—to counterbalance human-made structures with those of the nonhuman. Niang's high-rising walls, seemingly out of the hand's reach, are superimposed against clear sky. Walls in Tsegaye's photographs contain details as myriad as the multitudes of people who have rubbed their hands against them, banged their heads against them, kicked them

in despair, placed their backs against them, or glanced at them in passing.

A metaphorical line of thinking, connecting walls to something other than their physicality—as Mofokeng says, “Landscape is not geography”³—expands how we might consider photographs of walls. Niang is remarkably adept at using these metaphors. In a conversation with Bettina Malcomess, she says, “I make references to mythology and etymology, it becomes a way to name my territories, my body, to map and name relations between images.”⁴ In her telling, glancing at walls, even in passing (most of the photographs in “At The Wall” (2014) were taken from a taxi), is a way to interrogate your self. If walls were part of a landscape, it would be the landscape of an inquiring mind. “How you see the landscape is how you see yourself,” Niang says. “It’s your form, your representation of yourself, like a mirror.”⁵

Consider lines from two poems, the first entitled “Scaffolding.”

So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be
Old bridges between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall
Confident that we have built our wall.⁶

The second, “The Kitchen-Dweller Testifies.”

He described a wall reaching far into
our past and once I saw it,
I couldn’t climb it. I looked for a crack
to wail into
but there was none, so I wailed the way
the least heartbroken woman at a funeral
wails.⁷

In the first poem, by Seamus Heaney, walls enclose and promise safety; in the second, by Ladan Osman, they lengthen and impede. One protagonist thinks about walls in the concep-

tual sense of their solidity, the guarantees they make. Another protagonist, less optimistic, the partner in a relationship gone sour, describes a wall equally solid (there was no “crack to wail into”), but which must be escaped. Later in the poem, the Kitchen-Dweller packs (puts “every good sweater [...] in a duffel bag”) and leaves.⁸

We can note, then, the contrast in the way walls are conceptualized. Whereas they promise safety, they also suggest impediment. To note this contrast is to note the urgency of thinking about walls.

Why urgent? To put it simply, human habitation today is almost unthinkable without the framing walls provide. And, the frontiers and barricades we erect almost inevitably take their shape. Once walls are built to serve as barricades, there is a subtle shift in register, especially in a geopolitical sense. Other words, such as “fence” or “border,” are then used as synonyms, to expand the function of a wall. With its function expanded, there is a further shift. “Protect” becomes interchangeable with “police.”

The image of a wall, for millions of people on the run, is an image of despair. Life for them must be insisted on, despite the possibility of death. Once they begin to scale a fence, their bodies move with an instantaneousness matched only in severity with the urgency of fighting for their lives. The fence-wall is thus a place of emergency.

The Amsterdam-based group UNITED for Intercultural Action has collated a list of documented deaths of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, who died “due to the restrictive policies of Fortress Europe.”⁹ Between January 1993 and June 2015, the listed names of the dead totaled 22,394. Of this number, I present nine entries from the list, detailing 21 deaths that occurred on, or around, border fences:

— On August 30, 2014: Roumian Tisse, a man from Cameroon: died, when trying to climb the fence from Morocco to Spain.



Fig. 4

Mame-Diarra Niang, *Le peuple du mur #6*, from “At the Wall.” Inkjet pigment print on 300g cotton paper. 2014. Courtesy the artist, Stevenson, Cape Town & Johannesburg, and The Walther Collection.

— On November 5, 2013: an unnamed person fell from border fence, trying to cross from Morocco to Spanish enclave city Melilla.
— On March 6, 2009: an unnamed man was tangled in razor wire trying to jump a border fence from Morocco to Ceuta.
— On December 3, 2006: an unnamed person was shot by a Moroccan border guard while trying to cross the border fence in Melilla.
— On July 3, 2006: 3 unnamed persons died climbing the border fence in Melilla, one reportedly shot by border guards.
— In October 2005: 11 people shot by Spanish and Moroccan police whilst trying to cross fences to Ceuta.
— On February 22, 2004: an unnamed person from Morocco was shot by border police while climbing the fence between Morocco and Ceuta.
— In May 2003: an unnamed person, a child, suffocated, trapped on the border-fence in Melilla.
— On May 26, 2002: a Moroccan boy died in an attempt to enter Melilla; he got trapped in frontier fence and suffocated.¹⁰

It must give the inhabitants of a place like Spain a sense of pride to know that their walls are strong enough to keep away the unwanted. If so, they perversely acknowledge the dead, whose deaths while attempting to cross over is proof that safety is assured. Seen from afar, fences of the sort in Melilla appear serene, even beautiful.

There is a similar dangerous serenity in Niang’s “Le peuple du mur #6” (2014). In her brilliantly composed photograph, a multi-colored wall is background for a pedestrian walkway, where two men walk with their heads bent (Fig. 4). They are visibly existential in their poise, singular in their respective thoughtfulness. Niang says in her conversation with Malcomess, “It seems that these figures are always framed on the wall, or rest on something—for me it’s like the grave. They are



Fig. 5

Dawit L. Petros, *Untitled (Prologue III)*, from “The Stranger’s Notebook.” Archival color pigment print. 2016. Courtesy the artist and Tiwani Contemporary.

recumbent statues, effigies [...] trapped and resting on the wall."¹¹ On the other side of the wall in "Le peuple du mur #6" there's nothing visible but colorless sky. The revealed is distinguished from what is shrouded in mystery, the known from the speculative.

In his short essay "How Goodly Are Your Tents, Jacob," Vilém Flusser speculates on the future of walls. "Roofs supported by solid walls don't have much of a future," he writes.¹² "Once solid walls have fallen, we will be more likely to think 'canvas' when we think of roof and wall. Within this expanded sense of the word, there is no room for homelessness. This expanded sense, however, will require that architects transform their ways of thinking. They will have to think more in terms of tents than houses."¹³

Flusser's prophetic stance, admittedly, is one that reaches back, rather than forward. How could post-nomadic societies, after an epoch dominated by concrete walls, conceive of living within walls made of canvas? This is the challenge he poses to architects. Implicit is the notion that walls, as they are conceived and built today, have exhausted their promise. He challenges a rethinking of the guarantees demanded from these structures.

What seems central to Flusser's radical imagination—and the possible locus for ours, in response—is a daring possibility: homelessness as we know it could be a thing of the past. The tools for building this future are mainly non-material. The architecture is one of the mind; the model is a tent billowing in the wind. And the initial task is to elevate the homeless—the expelled, migrant, refugee, displaced, vagrant, exiled—into the pantheon of our aspirations. We must think of them daily.

As we contemplate the idea of an immaterial wall, one image to keep in mind is the photograph of a man with his back to us, facing a limitless horizon, balancing a mirror on his shoulder (Fig. 5). This photograph, by Dawit L. Petros, from "The Stranger's Notebook"

(2016), accomplishes with great beauty what Niang has proposed: to look at walls the way we look at mirrors. The wall that is a mirror is the wall that reflects, inviting the onlooker.

1. Santu Mofokeng quoted in Corinne Diserens, ed., *Appropriated Landscapes: Contemporary African Photography from The Walther Collection* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011), 126.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. "Contemplari: a conversation. Mame-Diarra Niang with Bettina Malcomess," last modified 2012, <https://www.mamediarraniang.com/a-conversation>.

5. Ibid.

6. See Seamus Heaney, "Scaffolding," in *Death of a Naturalist: Poems* (Dublin: RTÉ, 2009).

7. See Ladan Osman, "The Kitchen-Dweller Testifies," in *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

8. Ibid.

9. United for Intercultural Action. "Working with the List of Death," accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/campaigns/refugee-campaign/working-with-the-list-of-deaths/>.

10. Ibid.

11. "Contemplari," 2012.

12. Vilém Flusser, *The Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 59.

13. Ibid.