



Individual and group psyche against the wall: psychic skin and the politics of borders

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Abstract

This article examines the global proliferation of contemporary border walls as a psycho-political phenomenon. Despite limited practical efficacy in regulating migration or security, walls continue to multiply across the world. The article argues that their persistence cannot be fully understood within geopolitical or policy frameworks alone, but must also be approached through the unconscious dynamics of individual and collective psychic life. Drawing on Jung's concepts of participation mystique and regression, and on psychoanalytic theories of the psychic skin and group envelope (Bick, Anzieu), the paper develops a framework linking early sensory boundary formation with the dynamics of large-group identity. It proposes that in periods of social and political instability the wall can function as a substitute group psychic skin: a material surface that reactivates archaic experiences of containment, belonging, and separation. Through this process, political discourse mobilises sensory and imaginal forms of identification that tighten collective boundaries while intensifying mechanisms of splitting and exclusion. By theorising the reciprocal relation between individual psychic envelopes and large-group identity, the article reconceptualises contemporary wall-building as a reconfiguration of the psychic architecture of collective life.

Keywords Border walls · Psychic skin · Group envelope · *Participation mystique* · Regression · Large-group identity · Psycho-political dynamics · Border art

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My therapeutic work with refugees has prompted deep reflection on the complex dynamics of global conflict, migration, asylum, and human rights, as well as on the intricate interplay between individual and collective experience. One theme that has persistently captured my attention concerns the presence of barriers, walls and fortified borders, both between and within nations, and across contested regions (Luci, 2022, 2024).

The so-called “*walls of the world*” can be understood as enigmatic, multi-layered and compelling structures. They disclose something essential about the psychic life of individuals and groups, and about the modes through which that psychic life is articulated, defended and transformed.

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of barriers commonly referred to as “*walls*” not only as material and political formations, but also as psychological and symbolic objects that actively engage our individual and collective minds. It advances a perspective that links the wall as a physical edifice with the wall as a psycho-political object: an instrument through which political leaders seek to reshape the geography of the group’s psyche and to reconfigure the complex relations we sustain with ourselves (intrapsychically), with others (interpersonally), and with the social and political groups to which we belong.

While psychoanalytic theory has developed the concepts of the individual psychic skin (Bick, 1968) and the group skin-ego (Anzieu, 1999), the reciprocal dynamics between individual and large-group envelopes remain under-theorised in relation to contemporary geopolitical transformations. This article therefore advances a psycho-political model of contemporary wall-building that connects three levels of analysis: the developmental formation of the individual psychic envelope, the emergence of large-group identity through shared symbolic and sensory boundaries, and the political mobilisation of these dynamics in times of collective instability. By conceptualising the border wall as a *substitute group psychic skin*, the paper shows how material barriers can reactivate archaic processes of containment, regression and identification that operate simultaneously at individual and collective levels. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to psychoanalytic approaches to politics by illuminating the unconscious boundary dynamics that render walls such powerful objects within contemporary political imagination.

The proliferation of walls

Over the past twenty years, there has been a surge in the construction of walls worldwide, serving various functions such as ideological barriers, contentious obstacles, anti-terrorism measures, and segregationist fences. Vallet (2021, pp. 9–10) observes that since the end of the Second World War, the development of border walls has adapted in response to shifting geopolitical and global dynamics. Countries across the globe are strengthening their international borders at unprecedented speeds. While only seven countries had fortified their borders with walls or fences by the conclusion of the Second World War, when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, that number had gradually risen to fifteen. By 2018, the number had grown to more than 75. Most of these



fortification projects began in the wake of 9/11, with a substantial fraction occurring after the so-called global refugee crisis of 2015 (Linebarger & Braithwaite, 2020).

In the mid-twentieth century, walls typically emerged from frozen conflict zones, transforming front lines into *de facto* borders. Examples include the divisions between North and South Korea, India and Pakistan, the walls in Belfast in Northern Ireland, and the partitioned island of Cyprus. These conflict-driven walls still represent approximately 21% of existing border barriers.

However, the twenty-first century has witnessed a shift in the rationale for wall construction. Today, most walls are designed to regulate transnational flows rather than demarcate conflict zones. Approximately 32% are aimed at preventing unwanted immigration, such as that on the US–Mexico border, between India and Bangladesh, and around Hungary. Another 24% are constructed primarily to curb smuggling, while 23% serve counterterrorism purposes, as seen in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Ferghana Valley region of Central Asia (Vallet, 2022).

These motivations, which are also fluid and shifting, reflect broader global trends and anxieties associated with the challenges of globalisation, including mass migration, illicit trade of substances, weapons, human beings, and real or perceived threats to state sovereignty. Walls have thus become tangible expressions of state authority, offering political leaders a symbolic means to demonstrate control in an increasingly populated, interconnected and unstable world.

Certainly, nowadays, building a wall appeals to both authoritarian and democratic regimes. However, research indicates that border walls seldom achieve their stated objectives. Rather than halting unauthorised crossings, they tend to slow them down or redirect flows to more remote or dangerous routes, increasing the risks for migrants and the profits for smugglers (Di Cintio, 2013; Linebarger & Braithwaite, 2020). Empirical studies, particularly those focused on the US–Mexico border and the Israeli West Bank barrier, reveal that walls often exacerbate the very issues they purport to address, including human trafficking, organised crime and terrorism (Jones, 2012). In turn, these dynamics contribute to the entrenchment of illicit networks and heighten security concerns (Mutz & Simmons, 2022).

Moreover, border walls produce a range of negative externalities. Environmentally, they disrupt ecosystems, deplete natural resources, and endanger protected areas, as seen in the Białowieża Forest in Poland and Quitobaquito Springs in Arizona (Sennett & Chambers, 2025). Socially and economically, they fragment communities, hinder cross-border cooperation, and impair local economies by obstructing legal trade and movement. The creation of enclaves and the severing of access to essential resources further marginalise already vulnerable populations. Vallet (2022) effectively summarises this:

Walls end up producing more instability without solving the problems they were intended to address. They do not allow for a lasting halt to the flows of people and goods that they are supposed to stop. Instead, border walls get circumvented and breached. Yet each time they are, it is, to their supporters, a demonstration of their necessity. In a way, border walls' inability to completely halt irregular movement is key to their political longevity. They constitute a territorialised remedy to challenges that do not originate at the border where



they are erected, but far outside of the national territory and sometimes on the other side of the globe, where foreign policy might be a more effective tool. It could be that they are simply not designed for that purpose in the first place and are merely *symbolic*. It is precisely this symbolic weight that could guarantee not only their perennial nature but also their multiplication in years to come. (paras. 23–24)

These reflections point to the need to explore the function of the wall as a symbol and a psycho-political object that serves broader ideological and emotional purposes.

The merger of psyche with the environment in primitive mental states

The psychological role of walls can be better understood by examining the relation between the psyche, the spaces we inhabit, and the human and non-human objects with which we interact. At a fundamental level of psychological functioning, the sense of self emerges through engagement with the environment. This stabilising process is simultaneously individual, intersubjective, and groupal. Although psychoanalysis and analytical psychology have often focused on intrapsychic dynamics, with only a few exceptions they have tended to overlook the role of the environment in psychic life. Yet the processes of merger and separation between the self and its human and non-human surroundings are central to the formation of both personal identity and collective belonging.

Jung explicitly addressed this relation in his lecture “The Dependence of the Psyche on the Earth”, later published as “*Mind and Earth*” (1931/1970). There he described the psyche not as an isolated entity but as “a system of adaptation determined by the conditions of an earthly environment” (Jung, 1931/1970, para. 49, p. 29). In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962/1989), Jung illustrates this idea through the account of the tower he built at Bollingen. The tower functioned for him as a symbolic extension of the self, representing what he called a “confession of faith in stone” (Jung, 1962/1989, p. 250). Its construction unfolded alongside decisive moments of mourning and psychic transformation in his life: he began building the first structure shortly after his mother’s death in 1923 and continued expanding it until 1955, a year after his wife’s death (Jung, 1962/1989, pp. 251–252). Jung described the tower as a material expression of his inner life and as a place that allowed him to become “what I was, what I am and will be” (1962/1989, p. 252). His reflections evoke a mimetic experience of identification with both the environment and the building itself:

At times, I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing in the Tower that has not grown into its own form over the decades, nothing with which I am not linked. Here everything has its history, and mine; here is



space for the spaceless kingdom of the world's and the psyche's hinterland.
(Jung, 1963, p. 252)

Lucy Huskinson (2018) similarly emphasises that the formation and transformation of the self involves not only human relationships but also the wider environment composed of objects, spaces and atmospheres. The subject emerges through an ongoing interplay between internal psychic processes and external material contexts. Architectural theory has long recognised that space is not merely a neutral backdrop but an active participant in psychic life. Reflecting on the analytic setting, Danze (2005) describes the analytic room as an “envelope and backdrop” (p. 112), a spatial container that shapes experience through light, thresholds, hierarchy and material boundaries. The arrangement of space – who sees whom, how bodies are positioned, how light enters, and how thresholds are crossed – structures perception before interpretation. Such configurations organise intimacy and distance, exposure and refuge, thereby subtly regulating psychic experience.

This insight resonates with broader philosophical reflections on the role of place and dwelling in human existence. Across philosophy, sociology and cultural studies, the idea of home has been understood as a fundamental site where subjectivity takes shape through an “intimate rendez-vous” between self and environment. Malpas (1999, p. 177), for example, argues that human beings are “that sort of thinking, remembering, experiencing creatures we are only in virtue of our active engagement in place”. In this sense, the possibility of mental life itself is inseparable from our situatedness in the world. Heidegger (1971, p. 147) similarly conceptualises dwelling as the fundamental mode of “being on earth”, emphasising that relationships between people and places constitute meaningful and emotionally grounded bonds. These perspectives converge in suggesting that the environment in which we live is not merely external to the self but participates in its formation.

The intimacy of this relation is reflected in the claim that “after the body itself, the home is seen as the most powerful extension of the psyche” (Després, 1991, p. 100). Papadopoulos (2021) draws on multiple disciplinary traditions to show that experiences of identity and belonging are deeply rooted in the symbolic and affective dimensions of home. In this sense, place functions not only as a physical location but also as a psychic container through which individuals situate themselves in the world.

The destabilising consequences of losing such containers are evident in the experience of forced migration. Those who work with refugees frequently observe how displacement disrupts psychic continuity. As Grinberg and Grinberg (1989, p. 26) note, migration often entails the “wholesale loss of one’s most meaningful and valued objects: people, things, places, language, culture, customs, climate”. Such losses threaten not only external attachments but also parts of the self invested in those objects. Displacement therefore entails not simply a geographical relocation but a profound disturbance of psychic structure (Luci, 2020).

Psychoanalytic theory provides further insight into these dynamics through the notion of mimetic identification with objects and environments. Bollas (1987) argues that when individuals project aspects of themselves into objects, they may in turn incorporate qualities of the object’s form or function that resonate with unconscious needs. He describes such encounters as moments of “uncanny fusion”, an “intimate



rendez-vous” and a “deep subjective rapport” (Bollas, 1987, pp. 16, 31). In these experiences, the subject simultaneously loses aspects of the self through projection and acquires new elements through identification with the object. The result is a sense of recognition that Bollas characterises as “being reminded of something never quite cognitively apprehended but existentially known” (1987, p. 16).

Jung (1921/1971) described comparable dynamics with the concept of *participation mystique*, referring to situations in which subject and object cannot be clearly differentiated but are linked through a relationship of partial identity. One well-known illustration of this idea appears in Jung’s account of a dream about his house whose successive floors, he thought, represented different layers of psychic history (Jung, 1962/1989, pp. 182–183). Such imagery suggests that psychic life often organises itself spatially and architecturally, with buildings and environments functioning as symbolic representations of the self.

This perspective suggests that the environment may perform a containing and stabilising role for the self. The spaces we inhabit can function as extensions of psychic structure, supporting experiences of belonging, continuity and identity. Conversely, disruptions to these environments can reverberate within the psyche.

At the origin of individual differentiation: the psychic skin

The capacity to identify with the non-human environment has developmental origins. As noted in the previous section, early psychic life unfolds in a condition in which the boundaries between self and environment are not yet clearly differentiated. According to Winnicott (1971), in the earliest stages of life emotions are not experienced as purely internal states but rather as elements of the surrounding world. The infant initially experiences physiological states, desires and affects as if they were properties of external reality, lacking a clear distinction between internal and external stimuli.

Winnicott was also the first theorist to describe the mother as the infant’s “environment” (1960). In his account, the mother functions as a *holding environment* that encompasses both physical care – holding, feeding, protecting – and the psychological capacity to keep the infant in mind. Through this relational matrix the infant gradually moves from an unintegrated state toward psychic integration. Sensitive caregiving allows the infant to develop a sense of personalisation: the experience of having an inside and an outside, and of inhabiting a body that becomes integrated with psychic life. Winnicott described this process as the “indwelling of the psyche in the soma” (1954/2016).

This developmental perspective underscores that the emergence of the self is inseparable from spatial and relational contexts. Winnicott’s theory of the transitional object further illustrates how material objects can become imbued with subjective significance. Transitional objects and spaces allow the infant to negotiate the boundary between inner and outer reality, creating what Winnicott (1953, 1971) famously called a “transitional space”, an intermediate area of experience that is neither wholly internal nor wholly external. Importantly, these dynamics do not disappear after infancy but remain operative throughout life as fundamental structures of psychic experience.



At the origin of the self lies therefore the quality of the interpersonal vessel formed within the caregiving relationship between mother and child. This relationship, mediated through bodily contact and interactional care, is essential to the emergence of the child's mind. The connection between skin-to-skin contact and the development of the self has consequently become a central theme in psychoanalytic thought.

Elaborating on Freud's idea of the ego as "first and foremost a bodily ego", a projection of the body's surface (Freud, 1923/1961), Esther Bick explored the skin's role in containing the infant's sensations and mitigating the "catastrophic anxieties" associated with an unintegrated state of mind (1968). In her formulation, the infant initially experiences the skin as the structure that holds together parts of the personality not yet differentiated from the body. The infant therefore oscillates between two states: coherence, associated with integration and the feeling of being held when the caregiver is present, and incoherence, linked to anxiety and psychic disintegration when the caregiver is absent.

Object relations theorists subsequently expanded this focus on surfaces and boundaries as constitutive elements of psychic life. Winnicott (1953, 1971), for example, placed the border between "inside" and "outside" at the centre of his developmental theory, arguing that maternal holding and handling establish a basic "continuity of being". When the environment fails to provide adequate support, the infant's fragile integration is threatened, leading to the emergence of what Winnicott (1960) described as the "false self", a defensive structure that protects the vulnerable true self.

Bion (1962, 1970) reformulated these processes in terms of the maternal containing function. Infants experience unassimilated *beta elements* – raw, unprocessed sensory and emotional experiences – that must be metabolised through the caregiver's *alpha function*. Through maternal *rêverie* these elements are transformed into *alpha elements*, making it possible for the infant to dream fears and gradually construct an inner world. When this process fails, the infant is left with unprocessed experiences that manifest as what Bion termed "nameless dread".

Didier Anzieu further developed these ideas through the concept of the *skin ego* (*moi-peau*) (1974, 1985/1989). According to Anzieu, the ego initially develops in response to sensory experiences affecting the skin's surface. Through these experiences the infant forms a mental representation of the self as a container. The skin ego thus becomes the foundation of the thinking ego, persisting into adult psychic life. For Anzieu (1974, 1985/1989), the skin functions simultaneously as a boundary and as a surface for meaning-making: it filters stimuli, facilitates contact, and holds psychic contents together. Importantly, the psychic skin is not limited to tactile experience but involves multiple sensory modalities – auditory, olfactory, gustatory and visual – forming an interwoven sensory envelope.

Anzieu proposed a dual-layer model of the skin ego. The inner layer serves primarily as a protective barrier that resists damage but retains little symbolic inscription, while the outer layer remains more malleable and capable of being marked by experience. Disturbances affecting these layers produce different psychopathological configurations, reflecting failures in the development of adequate psychic containment.

Clinical observations have further illustrated the importance of these sensory envelopes. Working with autistic children, Frances Tustin (1990) observed that when



early containment is absent, the skin may be experienced as detached or insufficiently connected. In such cases, children may cling to hard, sensation-giving objects in an attempt to recreate a sense of containment.

Daniel Stern (1995) described early subjective life in terms of “pre-narrative envelopes” – schemas of “being-with-another” – that organise sensorimotor, perceptual and conceptual experience. Through processes of “refiguration”, these early relational patterns gradually transform into autobiographical memory and narrative identity (Stern, 1997, p. 132).

Along related lines, Thomas Ogden (1989) extended Kleinian theory by proposing the *autistic-contiguous position*, a developmental phase in which the infant initially experiences the world primarily through sensations rather than through a clear distinction between self and other. In this position, sensory experiences generate impressions of surfaces that gradually give rise to boundaries between self and other. Even non-tactile sensations – vision, sound, or smell – contribute to the formation of these early experiential surfaces. Ogden suggests that this sensory organisation forms the “floor” of personality, anchoring the earliest experience of selfhood.

Although Jung did not develop a systematic theory of early self-development, his well-known dream of the house offers a striking symbolic parallel to these psychoanalytic formulations. The successive floors of the house revealed progressively older architectural layers, which Jung interpreted as representing different strata of the psyche (1962/1989, pp. 182–183). Equally significant is the dream’s emphasis on the house’s *surfaces*: floors, walls, stairways, vaults, doorways and subterranean chambers, which function as architectural analogues of the skin. The psyche is presented not simply as a sequence of contents but as a structured inhabitable space, articulated through boundaries, thresholds, and enclosing forms. The dream-house thus appears as a spatial metaphor for psychic organisation, in which movement across levels and through architectural divisions evokes both the differentiation and the sensory containment of psychic experience.

Jung later described the process of building his tower at Bollingen as a form of personal rebirth, “a maternal womb ... in which I could become what I was” (1962/1989, p. 252). Such imagery resonates strongly with the notion of psychic envelopes, containment and the formative role of enclosing structures.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that the self is organised from the outset through envelopes, surfaces and containing structures that mediate the relationship between the infant, the caring other, and the surrounding environment. At this early stage, the containing function of the other (and of the sensory surfaces through which contact occurs) is indispensable for the integration of experience and the gradual differentiation between inside and outside. Sensory containment is therefore not merely supportive but constitutive of psychic organisation.

Importantly, these sensory forms of containment do not disappear once differentiation has been achieved. The experience of surfaces, boundaries and enveloping structures continues to operate throughout adult psychic life as a largely implicit condition of cohesion, safety and self-experience. In moments of uncertainty or threat, these archaic modes of boundary formation may be reactivated.

The differentiation between inside and outside established at the level of the body also provides a template for later experiences of belonging and exclusion. As individ-



uals enter social life, these early boundary schemas become symbolically extended through collective formations such as home, territory and nation, which function as shared containers of identity. In this sense, the psychic logic through which the infant establishes a bodily envelope may be reproduced at the level of groups, where spatial and territorial boundaries sustain the phantasy of a collective inside protected from an outside.

If psychic life is grounded in such envelope-forming processes, it follows that similar dynamics may also operate beyond the level of the individual. Collective life unfolds not only through symbolic identifications but also through shared environments, spatial arrangements and material boundaries that may acquire containing functions. The concept of a *group psychic skin* seeks to capture this extension of envelope dynamics into the domain of collective experience.

The group psychic skin

Groups are bound together through shared culture, religion, practices, rituals and values that orient everyday life within a complex web of families, subgroups and generations (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Geertz, 1973; Anderson, 1983). Yet collective existence does not unfold solely within symbolic systems. It also takes shape within the relational field between group members and within the material environments that hosts and structure their interactions (Bion, 1961; Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Ingold, 2000). The relationship between groups and their environments, I argue, constitutes a crucial but still under-theorised dimension of collective life.

Didier Anzieu (1999), extending his theory of the *skin ego*, proposed that groups develop a comparable psychic envelope: a *group skin ego*. This concept symbolically represents the group as if it were a collective body, whose boundaries perform functions analogous to those of the individual skin. The group psychic skin provides containment, coherence and differentiation, enabling the group to experience itself as a bounded entity. For Anzieu, the image of the body and its skin function as one of society's fundamental organisers, supporting processes of maintenance, containment, signification, consensus, individuation and cohesion.

The concept of a group psychic skin builds upon the developmental logic of psychic containment described earlier. Subjectivity emerges through a gradual differentiation from an initial state in which the boundaries between self and environment remain fluid. Through this process, individuals establish a sense of personal identity while simultaneously entering relational and collective fields of belonging. The environments inhabited by groups – shared spaces, territories and material arrangements – may therefore function as containers that sustain the phantasy of a collective body.

At the experiential level, belonging to a group involves not only symbolic identification but also the internalisation of shared atmospheres, rhythms and practices grounded in sensory life. Emotional tones, rituals and everyday interactions gradually become embodied patterns through which individuals recognise themselves as part of a collective envelope (Anzieu, 1985/1989, 1975/2015; Lafrance, 2013; Stern, 1995). These processes suggest that the mechanisms through which the infant estab-



lishes psychic containment may also underpin the formation of collective envelopes through which groups experience themselves as coherent entities.

The group skin may therefore be understood as a secondary container that fuses individual psychic envelopes through shared identifications, bodily rituals and collective emotional experiences into a sense of “us”. National ceremonies, protest marches and collective mourning illustrate such dynamics particularly clearly. In these moments of intense sensory and emotional synchronisation, individual boundaries may temporarily blur and participants experience a phantasy of fusion, as if the group constituted a single enclosed body (Bion, 1961; Kristeva, 1980/1982). These affective intensities help produce what may be described as a “phantasised group skin”: a transient yet powerful form of collective containment.

A particularly illuminating metaphor for this phenomenon is offered by Volkan’s (2004, 2006) description of large-group identity as living under the same *canvas tent*. Individuals, he suggests, live with two layers of identity, comparable to wearing two garments: an individual identity and a shared large-group identity. In ordinary circumstances, the outer garment of group identity remains largely unnoticed. However, when the tent’s canvas is shaken or torn – when the group experiences threat or instability – attention shifts dramatically. Under such conditions, individuals may become preoccupied with protecting and repairing the shared tent that shelters them.

In Volkan’s metaphor, the tent pole represents the leader, while the canvas itself is inscribed with two types of collective narratives that he calls *chosen traumas* and *chosen glories* (2006). A *chosen trauma* refers to a historically transmitted image of catastrophic loss that becomes central to group identity. Such memories are not merely recollections of past events but emotionally charged narratives transmitted across generations. Conversely, *chosen glories* refer to collective memories of triumph or expansion that reinforce group self-esteem. Both operate as symbolic inscriptions on the canvas of group identity, binding members through shared emotional meanings.

The investment of group psyche in a wall as a *real* group psychic skin

Anzieu (1985/1989) distinguishes three modalities of group psychic skin: a *real skin*, which defines the group’s spatial and temporal boundaries and sustains its holding function; an *imaginary skin*, composed of fantasies and illusions of containment; and a *symbolic skin*, expressed through rituals, institutions and signs of belonging. This tripartite structure resonates with Ogden’s (1989) modes of psychic organisation – autistic-contiguous, paranoid-schizoid and historical – suggesting that group psychic envelopes operate simultaneously at sensory, imaginal and symbolic levels.

The most fundamental of these levels is the sensory ground of group identity: the embodied experience through which individuals feel anchored to places, objects and territories. At this level, group belonging is not merely represented symbolically but experienced through bodily and sensory experiences. One may therefore hypothesise that, analogous to the infant’s relation to the maternal environment, the group’s relation to its surroundings forms a primary basis for the collective psychic organisation. When collective stability is threatened, psychic energy – or libido in Jung’s sense – may regress toward this more archaic sensory ground, activating the need for tangible



forms of containment, merging with the environment and its objects that provide support and structure.

Here the role of material objects becomes particularly significant. Bick (1968) suggested that non-human objects can sometimes function as forms of psychic holding. Tustin's (1970) observations of autistic children similarly show how reliance on hard, sensation-giving objects may compensate for the absence of adequate containment. Jung (1962/1989) himself recalled comparable experiences from childhood, describing moments in which he played with a large stone and at times identified with it.

Within collective life, walls may assume a comparable function. The presence of a wall can operate as a concrete sensory container at the level of the group, echoing the psychic envelopes that structure early development. Like the maternal skin, it provides a surface that promises unity, separation and protection. Such experiences of containment need not remain attached to particular objects. They may be extended symbolically to larger spatial entities, including homes, communities, territories, and landscapes. From this perspective, the widespread representation of the Earth through maternal imagery becomes more intelligible. As Jung observed, collective representations such as "Mother Germany", *la douce France*, "Mother Church" and "Mother Earth" reflect a persistent association between territory, containment and the maternal image (Jung, 1931/1970, para. 64, p. 35).

If group psychic skins operate simultaneously at real, imaginary and symbolic levels (Anzieu, 1985/1989), the wall may function as an operator across these registers. It is not only a physical barrier but also an imaginal and sensory figure that activates the experiential strata through which collective envelopes are constituted. The wall may stimulate fantasies of fusion with similar others and separation from different others, consolidating the boundaries through which a group recognises itself. Through its material qualities – surface, hardness, enclosure – it produces boundary effects that resonate with deeply rooted sensory experiences of containment.

What is politically significant is that the wall engages the group not only through symbolic identification but also through the stimulation of the sensory ground of belonging. As Ogden (1989) suggests, experience is initially organised through surfaces before it is organised through interpretation. Walls therefore mobilise modes of perception and affect that precede explicit political discourse.

Recent neuroscientific research provides further insight into this sensory dimension. Vittorio Gallese's work on embodied simulation suggests that perceiving or imagining objects involves the activation of multisensory neural systems (Gallese, 2018; Gallese & Ebisch, 2013). The perception of surfaces and barriers engages not only visual processing but also somatosensory networks associated with touch and bodily orientation. As Gallese notes, contemporary cognitive science increasingly recognises that imagining an action or a spatial relation activates neural mechanisms closely related to those involved in performing it (Gattara, 2017, p. 80).

From this perspective, the evocation of a wall or walled border may stimulate tactile and bodily sensations that shape how individuals perceive themselves and others. The imagined barrier may reinforce the perception of similarity among those on one side of the wall while accentuating difference from those on the other. In this way, the sensory experience of surfaces and boundaries – rooted in the earliest forms of



bodily containment – can contribute to the reorganisation of collective identity. The wall thus operates at a very deep unconscious level of our psyche, despite acting on its surface.

The walls in contemporary world: regression, boundary anxiety and political instrumentalisation

Contemporary political life is increasingly marked by profound destabilisation. Processes of globalisation, rapid technological acceleration, economic restructuring, ecological threats, armed conflicts, and shifts in geopolitical equilibrium have unsettled previously more stable political coordinates. Bauman (2006) describes late modern societies as permeated by *liquid fear*, a diffuse sense of insecurity that erodes institutional confidence and intensifies demands for protection and enclosure. Similarly, Szakolczai (2017) interprets modernity as trapped in a condition of *permanent liminality*, a prolonged crisis in which stable structures dissolve and societies become more susceptible to archaic forms of identity and belonging. Under such conditions, the mechanisms described in Girard's work (1977) may re-emerge, whereby anxieties and tensions that threaten the cohesion of the group are projected onto external others. Through this process, collective boundaries are reinforced and a threatened sense of order is temporarily restored. Scholars in political geography have likewise noted that the global proliferation of border walls must be understood within this broader climate of insecurity (Brown, 2010; Vallet, 2014). Taken together, these analyses suggest that contemporary wall-building expresses deeper dynamics through which societies confronted with uncertainty attempt to stabilise themselves by reasserting tangible boundaries capable of sustaining the phantasy of collective containment.

Some scholars describe the present conjuncture as a “crisis of hope and trust” (Mahler et al., 2022; Lammers, 2023; Elçi, 2022). Under such conditions, large groups may reinforce their identity through shared fantasies promising a return to safety, power and plenitude. Leaders may then be selected less for their governmental competence than for their ability to embody and perform omnipotent promises on behalf of the group. Feelings assume the status of guiding truth, while reflective thinking, precisely because it is tied to reality-testing, may be dismissed (Luci, 2024). When loss is denied, reality itself becomes deniable, obstructing processes of creative adaptation.

At such moments the sensory foundations of belonging acquire particular importance. Material environments, familiar others, and culturally significant objects may function as sensory supports for cross-identifications of “sameness”: being within the same envelope, under the same protective covering, and therefore “the same”. When anxiety intensifies, groups may regress toward this sensory ground of cohesion, and it is precisely here that boundary phenomena acquire their affective force. Anzieu's formulation is instructive: “There is no group without a common skin, a containing envelope, which makes it possible for its members to experience the existence of a group self” (1986/1990, p. 97). Groups thus experience themselves metaphorically as bodies whose “skin” provides cohesion and containment (Anzieu, 1975/2015). Belonging is achieved when anxieties about fragmentation are overcome, often



through the projection of threatening elements onto external others. Such processes follow the scapegoating logics powerfully illustrated by Girard (1977), through which the group secures the fantasy that its body remains intact and purified from the *abjected* (and expelled) other (Kristeva, 1980/1982).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, these dynamics can be understood as manifestations of regression. Jung (1934/1959), following Janet, described regression as *abaissement du niveau mental*: a lowering of the level of psychic energy that ordinarily sustains the cohesion of consciousness. This lowering narrows the personality and permits the emergence of unconscious contents as relatively autonomous forces. Its effects include impaired logical thought, diminished reality-testing, and the intrusion of unconscious material into conscious life. When such processes unfold at the level of groups – particularly under conditions of trauma, disorganisation or rapid environmental change – they generate dissociative dynamics affecting both individuals and collective formations.

Within such contexts, dissociation may consolidate fragments of psychic life into what I have elsewhere termed *monolithic self-states and societal states* (Luci, 2017). The term “monolithic”, derived from its ordinary meaning of massive, immovable stone structures (Collins, 1987), evokes rigidity, homogeneity and the silencing of internal multiplicity. Monolithic states are characterised by intolerance of complexity, reliance on splitting, and vertical relations of authority. Psychic life presents itself as a solid unity, sacrificing flexibility and adaptability, while multiplicity is denied in favour of “adhesive” relationality in which individuals stick to each other in dyads, groups or larger social organisms with no in-between space among them available for reflective thinking. Such configurations suppress creative potential and intensify paranoid-schizoid functioning, so that difference can be processed only through dynamics of submission to authority.

At this point, political instrumentalisation becomes possible through the manipulation of reality, language and trust. Arendt (1967) observed that when adherence to a party line is demanded regardless of truth, the conditions for independent thinking collapse. When distinctions between truth and falsehood erode, dependency on the leader intensifies. Formerly trusted institutions and mediating figures may be disqualified as corrupt or hostile, while the leader is positioned as the sole guarantor of reality. Under these conditions the leader increasingly functions as an internal object that is simultaneously protective and persecutory: protection is promised on the condition of adhesion, while dissent risks expulsion from the shared envelope. An epistemic vacuum emerges in which the leader’s voice replaces institutional mediation, while the rhetoric of walls offers a sensation of continuity and protection. Under such conditions, consistency between the leader’s proclaimed truths, observable reality, and actual conduct ceases to be necessary.

In this context, global uncertainty may produce a regressive longing for monolithic identities, emotional certitude and psychic fusion. Political strategies that mobilise such desires abandon complexity and nuance in favour of the imagined safety of a clearly demarcated in-group. It is precisely here that *participation mystique* (Jung, 1921/1971) with the wall acquires political salience. The barrier – whether materially constructed or repeatedly invoked – becomes a privileged object through which the



group is invited to merge imaginally with the leader and a protective surface while locating danger outside it.

The psycho-symbolic efficacy of the wall can be further illuminated through architectural theory, particularly through Deamer's (2005) analysis of how Stokes drew on Kleinian psychoanalysis. She argues that Stokes viewed architecture as an expression of unconscious fantasy, manifested through form, texture, and surface. For Stokes (1951), architectural form is significant not primarily for the space it encloses but for the surface through which relations between inner and outer are staged. The façade objectifies processes of projection and introjection, rendering psychic exchange visible in stone. Architecture thus operates as a structured surface that gathers and stabilises phantasy in material form. The border wall flattens complex social realities into a visible contour onto which anxieties may be projected and from which fantasies of protection may be introjected.

Empirical studies suggest that leaders facing uncertain electoral prospects are particularly inclined to employ wall rhetoric or policy (Linebarger & Braithwaite, 2022), indicating that the appeal of walls lies as much in their psychological resonance as in their practical function. Trump's electoral campaigns in 2016 and 2024, Netanyahu's political messaging in the early 2000s, and the rhetoric of leaders such as Orbán since 2016 illustrate how walls operate as powerful tropes promising security against the spectre of otherness, whether shaped in the form of migrants, criminals, terrorists or other projected threats.

Contemporary walls can therefore be approached as psycho-political operators that reorganise the relationship between individual and large-group identity under conditions of regression. They promise repair of threatened envelopes by tightening the sensory boundaries of belonging, yet this repair may come at the cost of dissociation, rigidity and submission to vertical authority. The wall thus operates at a deep, largely unconscious level of groups' psychic life, even though its action unfolds at the visible surface of the political and geographical world.

Conclusion: walls as thresholds of political imagination

This article has sought to make explicit the largely unformulated unconscious dynamics that render walls such potent psycho-political objects. It has been argued that the contemporary proliferation of walls cannot be adequately explained within geopolitical or security frameworks alone. Their persistence, even where their practical efficacy is limited, indicates that they mobilise more archaic strata of psychic life. Walls succeed because they resonate with foundational processes through which subjectivity and group formation are constituted.

At stake are the most primitive bounding operations of psychic development: the establishment of surface, limit and envelope through which inside and outside first become differentiated. In this sense, walls operate at the level of primal containing structures that underwrite both individual self-experience and large-group identity. They offer an immediately apprehensible, sensorially charged boundary that re-establishes distinctions threatened by social and symbolic destabilisation. What is experienced as political protection is simultaneously a reconstitution of psychic contour.



Seen from this perspective, walls are not merely material barriers but condensations of affective and identity-related processes. They enable cohesion through demarcation and solidity through separation. Their force derives less from what they physically obstruct than from what they psychically organise: the differentiation of self and other, the consolidation of sameness, the localisation of threat, and the reanimation of fantasies of protective enclosure. In functioning as an incorporable surface, one with which the group may identify and merge, they reactivate generative dynamics at the origin of both ego formation and collective belonging.

The appeal of walls, therefore, lies in their capacity to translate complex and often unmentalised unconscious processes into spatially legible form. They render the anxieties of permeability, fragmentation and loss of envelope into visible geometry. By materialising boundary, they reorganise psychic space and, in doing so, reorient political affect, identification and attitudes toward alterity. The wall's efficacy operates where psychic life and political life intersect at their most foundational level: the psychic skin that gives birth to the subject.

Because walls act upon imagination and perception, they do not fix meaning once and for all. A wall can function as a hardened boundary, but it can also become a surface of inscription, a place where narratives can be contested and reworked. The same imaginal power that consolidates exclusion can be mobilised to reopen relations. This is why artistic interventions at borders are not peripheral to the argument but illuminate it. When artists paint, perform, braid, photograph, or gather across walls, they are not merely decorating (Murphy, 2020; Anderson, 2021; JR, 2017), they are altering the experiential field in which the wall is lived. They transform a structure designed to enforce separation into a site of encounter, witness to vulnerability, and shared humanity (Leahy, 2024). They do not deny division; rather, they reconfigure how it is perceived and inhabited. Such practices do not dissolve political conflict. Nor do they neutralise the structural violence embedded in many border regimes. What they can do, however, is interrupt the monopolisation of the wall's meaning, reintroducing ambiguity where rigidity threatens to prevail (Giudice & Giubilaro, 2014). They create temporary apertures in what appears impenetrable. Rational critique alone cannot counteract the affective charge of enclosure. What is required are political practices of imagination that work through image, symbol and embodied presence, practices capable of loosening fixed identifications and reopening the possibility of relation without denying difference. Artists' work at borders is not the solution but an invitation to reverse the direction of regression, to use it at the service of a leap forward. The task is therefore not simply to oppose walls, but to engage the unconscious economies that sustain them and to cultivate forms capable of transforming fear, regression, splitting and scapegoating without denying these psychic realities.

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