

CHAPTER FOUR

**Desiring Walls**

The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion.  
—Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

Israel is a villa in the jungle.  
—Ehud Barak

I think the fence is least effective. But I'll build the goddamned  
fence if they want it.  
—Senator John McCain

You show me a 50-foot fence and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder at  
the border.  
—U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano

Why do late modern subjects desire nation-state walls, and what do walls promise to secure, protect, rehabilitate, contain, or keep at bay? To what extent does the spectacle of a wall gratify a wish for sovereignty restored to the subject, as well as to the state? This chapter considers the effects of waning state sovereignty on the psychic-political desires, anxieties, and needs of late modern subjects. It theorizes the contemporary frenzy of nation-state wall building, especially in Western democracies, from the vantage point of a subject made vulnerable by the loss of horizons, order, and identity attending the decline of state sovereignty. It asks what psychic reassurances or palliatives walls provide amid these losses. It asks as well what fantasies of innocence,

protection, homogeneity, and self-sufficiency walls secure.

These queries in turn open two avenues of analytic possibility. On the one hand, the subject may *identify* with the attenuated potency of the state occasioned by declining sovereignty and seek measures that restore this potency. Here, the nation-state's vulnerability and unboundedness, permeability and violation, are felt as the subject's own. Such identification, with its gendered and sexual connotations, would seem to be at the heart of the aggrieved masculinism of the Minutemen's walling campaign. (Recall from Chapter 3 the Minutemen's desire to "put steel into the ground" to recover control of sovereign territory and indeed, sovereignty itself.) Such identification between the subject and the state is no doubt an element of all forms of militarized nationalism.

On the other hand, the effect of eroding political sovereignty on the power of the state to provide protection and security for its subjects may threaten the sovereignty of subjects more directly. The specter of transnational terrorism, for example, translates state vulnerability directly into the vulnerability of subjects. But terrorism does not exhaust the matter. Recall the circuitry, identified in Chapter 2, that the social contract establishes between political and individual sovereignty. This circuitry both premises the contract (individuals are sovereign in the state of nature, but insecurely so) and is also transformed by the contract (sovereign individuality is what the social contract promises to establish and secure). From Hobbes to Locke, Rousseau to Rawls, political sovereignty is generated by the prepolitical sovereignty of the subject in the state of nature and legitimated by the postcontractual sovereignty of the subject in society. The sovereign state brings into being and secures the sovereign social subject, even as it appropriates that subject's political sovereignty for the making of its own.

These two different dimensions of the state-subject relation, identification and production, are both important in generating the desire for walls in late modern liberal societies, where the

social contract remains ideologically and discursively constitutive. Undoubtedly these two dimensions of the state-subject relation are pertinent to nonliberal societies, as well, and hence to walling in such societies. However, these relations would necessarily have different contours and contents from those produced by liberal social contractarianism, a difference left unexplored in this chapter.

One additional prefatory note is in order: This chapter argues that nation-state walling responds in part to psychic fantasies, anxieties, and wishes and does so by generating visual effects and a national imaginary apart from what walls purport to “do.” Walls may be effective in producing this psychic containment even as they fail to block or repel the transnational and clandestine flows of people, goods, and terror both that signal and contribute to the undermining of political sovereignty. Walling responds in this regard to subject desires that are themselves the effect of declining sovereignty, desires that states can neither gratify nor ignore. The fact that walls do not and cannot actually stop or even effectively mitigate these transnational flows is an important part of this argument. Thus, prior to examining the desire for walls, we first need to return to the failure of walls to achieve their putative aims.

### *The Inefficacy of Walls*

Walls have many substantive effects on the political identity and subjectivity of those they separate, on the lives and lands of those in or near their path, and on the prospects for integration or peace settlements in conflicts that they consecrate. However, walls do little to halt the illegal migration, drug smuggling, or terrorism most frequently and overtly animating and legitimating them, and the reason for this is simple: immigrants, smugglers, and terrorists are not entering nations because land borders are lax and are thus not deterred by border fortifications, though their activities may be rerouted and otherwise transformed by them. Walls may augment the technologies, cost, social organization,

experiences, and meaning of what they purport to lock out, but they are relatively ineffective as interdiction. As one U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent summed up the matter, "It's like squeezing a balloon. The air has got to go somewhere."<sup>1</sup>

But don't some walls attain their publicly declared aims? Hasn't Israel built such a wall? True, the Israeli wall, in combination with multiplied and fortified checkpoints and a complex network of roads, bridges, tunnels, and train systems aimed at surgically separating Palestinians from Israelis in an intricately intimate geography, may have reduced suicide bombing in Tel Aviv . . . although many argue that Hamas was committing itself to alternative paramilitary strategy and tactics even as the Wall was being conceived. What is certain is that the Wall has not reduced Palestinian violence and hostility toward Israel, improved prospects of a political settlement, or generated greater international sympathy and hence political capital for Israel. Clearly, the Wall *has* produced new political subjectivities on both sides and is part of a larger architecture of occupation separating Palestinians from Israelis and discursively inverting the sources and circuitries of violence, projecting the cause of the wall onto imagined originary Palestinian aggression toward Israel.<sup>2</sup> One could say that these effects of the Wall, along with its redrawing of the Israel-Palestine map to include a number of West Bank Israeli settlements within Israeli territory, are all part of the policy aims of walling. But precisely insofar as the Wall is legitimated, indeed, often lamented, entirely on the grounds of making Israel secure from Palestinian hostilities, its inefficacy in this regard is striking. Building a wall has not stopped Palestinian violence or hostility, only altered Palestinian tactics and technologies, even as it has exacerbated frustration and rage at Israeli domination.

Israel is the hard case for my argument. Much easier are the walls formally aimed at interdicting migrant labor, illegal drugs, and other contraband. As the previous chapter suggested, by most scholarly accounts, the U.S.-Mexico wall, which has now been authorized, though not fully funded, to be built across the entire

two-thousand-mile border, is a political theater piece, albeit an exceptionally expensive one in a number of respects. Labor from south of the border has been vital to the North American economy since the building of the railroads in the West two centuries ago. In the last two decades, globalization has dramatically increased both the quantity of this migration and the value of keeping it illegal.<sup>3</sup> Northern capital today requires labor that is maximally cheap and exploitable—hirable at subminimum wage, without benefits or regard for regulations on overtime, health, environment, or safety, and easily dispatched when not needed. In the face of growing global competition, such labor has become increasingly important to the construction and manufacturing industries and to the retail and fast-food sectors, not only to the domestic and agricultural work with which it has long been associated.

The building of a wall pretending to halt the immigration of labor required by capital produces an abundance of ironies. There is the story of the Golden State Fence Company, a firm that built a significant portion of the border wall in Southern California, which was charged three times over a decade with having hundreds of undocumented workers on its payroll.<sup>4</sup> There are the repeated immigration raids on McDonald's franchises across the United States for hiring undocumented workers to flip its all-American burgers. These ironies have their cousins in Israel, not only in the form of Palestinians employed to build the Wall, but in the remarkable story of a protest against the proposed route of the Wall by women of an illegal Israeli settlement because the route blocked access to their homes by maids from a neighboring Palestinian village.<sup>5</sup>

The story is similar with drugs: As Europeans recognize to a greater degree than North Americans, drug smuggling does not drive drug use. Rather, the demand for drugs pulls the supply. Several studies, including one by the RAND Corporation, have shown that to reduce drug demand in the North, substance-abuse treatment yields far more bang for the buck than border

reinforcements, the main effect of which is to increase drug prices.<sup>6</sup> But what sells politically are walls and elaborate sting operations, not drug-rehabilitation facilities, let alone policies that address the social conditions generating drug markets in North America.

More than simply failing, however, walls often compound the problems they putatively address. First, because walling and other border-intensification measures make migration more difficult and expensive, they tend to increase one-directional migration, thus enlarging the numbers of illegal migrants living permanently in the United States or Europe. Second, walls armed at drugs and immigration produce an ever more sophisticated and Mafia-like smuggling economy, one that increasingly merges drug and migrant smuggling. Drugs are buried deep in difficult-to-inspect shipping cargo or conveyed through elaborate systems of tunnels under the wall. Approximately forty tunnels have been discovered at the U.S.-Mexico border since 2001, and twice that many have been found since the authorities began keeping records on them in 1990. Some include lights, drainage, ventilation systems, pulley operations for moving cargo, and connect warehouses on one side of the border to warehouses on the other.<sup>7</sup> In addition to tunnels, boats may be used in place of land routes, and smugglers have also been known to cut holes in less monitored parts of fences, which they often then gate and vigilantly police against use by other smugglers.<sup>8</sup> Third, and related, border intensifications and responses to them render the border zone itself an increasingly violent space. In the U.S. case, migrants are sometimes left by their smugglers to die of thirst and exposure in the desert or abandoned to suffocate in car trunks, vans, or trucks. Smugglers themselves are more often armed and violent: In 2007 alone, in California, there were 340 documented assaults on Border Patrol agents, who were attacked with weapons ranging from nail-studded planks to Molotov cocktails.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, border towns, once relatively peaceful, if impoverished and unhappy places, have become garrisons, complete with lookout towers

for smugglers built on top of houses. The Border Patrol responds in turn with elaborate all-night floodlight systems, giving these towns the look of detention camps, and has also resorted to firing pepper spray and tear gas into the towns to rout smugglers.<sup>10</sup> In short, what prior to border fortifications was a more laconic and less dangerous cat-and-mouse game between the Border Patrol and illegals increasingly now resembles a scene of permanent guerilla warfare and counterinsurgency.

Border fortifications also multiply other outlaw elements. As Chapter 3 detailed, well-organized vigilante groups frustrated with state laxity or inefficacy undertake to police borders or assert jurisdictional sovereignty on their own. In the U.S. case, in addition to hunting down illegal crossers and thwarting the efforts of those who would abet them, this now includes armed invasions of the homes of alleged illegal immigrants: In May 2009, a man and his ten-year-old daughter were shot dead in their home by members of the Minutemen American Defense group. The group was seeking money and contraband to finance their vigilante activities.<sup>11</sup>

The state, too, is implicated in heightened lawlessness related to border space and activity. As Chapter 1 recounted, the Real ID Act of 2005 allowed the Department of Homeland Security to “waive any and all laws necessary to ensure expeditious construction of the barriers and roads,” permitting the set-aside of laws ranging from environmental protocols to Native American protections.<sup>12</sup> The Secure Fence Act of 2006 permitted the direct violation of private-property rights to build the border barrier. While standing for law and order against violence and illegality, the wall not only generates violence and nonstate rogue actors, but licenses rogue state activity.

In short, where demand pulls the supply of labor or contraband and where state expansion and/or occupation is at stake, walls produce borders as permanent zones of violent conflict and lawlessness, incite sophisticated and dangerous underground industries, expand the size and expense of the problems they

would solve, and aggravate hostilities on both sides. Most of the examples offered here have dwelt on the U.S.-Mexico wall, but it is easy enough to extend the analysis to other efforts at walling out the Third World, or to efforts, such as those in certain regions of Africa and South Asia, at walling out more poor from less poor parts of the world, or to walls staking claims where land jurisdiction is contested.

Why, then, build walls? What generates fierce popular passions for walling alongside state investments in these icons to and of failure—the failure of nation-state sovereignty, followed by the literal failure of the walls that would prop this faltering sovereignty? If one quasi-psychoanalytic answer suggests the “I know—but still...” structure of the fetish, that is, “I know they don’t really work, but still, they satisfy,” this poses the question of what desire the fetish is harboring. In a context of declining protective capacities of the state, diluted nationhood, and the increasing vulnerability of subjects everywhere to global economic vicissitudes and transnational violence, we need to understand the political wishes for potency, protection, containment, and even innocence that may be projected onto walls. We need to grasp what the new walls psychically address or assuage, even when they cannot deliver on their material promises.

### *Fantasies of Walled Democracy*

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “imagined” as bounded, sovereign, and communal.<sup>13</sup> If boundary, sovereignty, and national community are precisely what globalization erodes, how might walls fictively restore these elements of a national imaginary? What kind of threatened or compromised identity, of subject or nation, is generating the desire for walling? In the context of an increasingly interdependent, unhorizoned, as well as openly inegalitarian global order, what do walls help to ward off psychically or repress, or what kind of psychic political defenses might walls emblemize? How might walls serve as a set of national psychic defenses, as prophylactics



against confrontation with our own ills or as projections onto others and onto an elsewhere of a nation's own needs, dependencies, and hungers? To this end, what political-economic logics do nation-state walls help to invert rhetorically or reverse such that the poor, the colonized, or the exploited can be figured as aggressors? And, as they resurrect myths of sovereign containment and protection, what fantasies of national purity and national innocence do they gratify?<sup>14</sup>

This chapter proceeds by first speculatively engaging these questions through consideration of four historically specific national fantasies. It then turns to psychoanalytic thought in an effort to deepen and ground these speculations.

*The Fantasy of the Dangerous Alien  
in an Increasingly Borderless World*

Associations of political outsiders with difference and danger are as old as human community itself. Demonizing constructions of tribal or political outsiders are widely recorded by anthropologists and political historians and appear as well in the etymologies of words such as “barbarian” and “alien,” both of which were coined to name a particular other, but then became names for generic pejorative and threatening figures of otherness. Moreover, as Mary Douglas argues, border violations themselves are almost universally associated with pollution and danger.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as sovereignty weakens and borders are more routinely trespassed and as the nation itself loses clear definition, it is hardly surprising that the alien is drawn as an especially powerful and dangerous figure, even in the epoch of the global village. Perhaps more striking are the diverse elements that make up this composite portrait of danger.

In the U.S. post-Cold War context, the border has been discursively constructed as a point of entry for a variety of heterogeneous threats to the nation, threats increasingly merged into a single figure of alien danger. Tom Ridge, the first head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security established in 2001, declared

the border “a conduit for terrorists, weapons of mass destruction, illegal migrants, contraband, and other unlawful commodities.” But it is a statement by Steven A. Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies, an anti-immigration think tank, that exemplifies their conjoining: “We can’t protect ourselves from terrorism,” he proclaimed, “without dealing with illegal immigration.”<sup>16</sup> Post-9/11 popular discourse, especially that arguing for completion of the border wall, also merges these threats: Campaigns on behalf of border fortifications in general and of walling in particular routinely identify unchecked illegal immigration with the danger of terrorism, despite little evidence of the connection.

The political, security, and economic effects of globalization, however, do not exhaust the elements animating contemporary First World constructions of a figure of alien enmity. There are also the challenges to hegemonic culture, language, and race posed by large numbers of immigrant Latinos in North America, Arabs in Europe, South Asians in Australia, and of course, Palestinians in Israel. For those of the hegemon, these challenges may be to both individual and national identity, the psychic and social “I” and “we” that the nation has long secured. Hence the repeated European uproars over Muslim dress codes and other cultural practices or the repeated bids for “English-only” voting materials and school curriculums in the United States. At the academic level, this threat to identity is formulated as a challenge to Western values by “immigrants from other civilizations [*sic*] who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, customs and cultures of their home societies.”<sup>17</sup> When this rejection of Western values is affirmed and strengthened through the more general promulgation of multiculturalism in Western societies, Samuel Huntington adds, this “means effectively the end of Western civilization” and of the countries upholding it. “A country not belonging to any civilization [lacks] a cultural core. History shows that no country so constituted can long endure as a coherent society.”<sup>18</sup> Western civilization and Western nations

are not merely being culturally diluted or economically drained by immigrants, but sacked.

The figure of alien danger is thus literally overdetermined today, comprising economic, political, security, and cultural effects of globalization. These disparate elements are fused into one, producing “the alien” as a many-headed dragon. Of course this construction disavows the Northern demand for cheap, unprotected labor and the fact that most terrorist events in Europe and the United States have been homegrown. (In the United States, this includes the Weathermen, the Unabomber, Timothy McVeigh, who blew up the Oklahoma City Federal Building, and Bruce Ivins, the army microbiologist thought to be responsible for the September 2001 anthrax attacks, as well as a host of school and workplace shooters and bombers.) It occludes studies revealing that new immigrant neighborhoods have generally lower crime rates than other parts of Western nations.<sup>19</sup> And it occludes the mutable nature of culture and identity, that is, the extent to which cultures are not timeless and unchanging, but live in history and persist through transformation and the incorporation of new elements.

Importantly, the discourse of walling and the fantasy it holds out of being able to seal the nation off from the outside themselves facilitate these disavowals and occlusions. Walls are a scrim on which can be projected an anthropomorphized other as the cause of national woes ranging from dilutions of ethnicized national identity to drug use, crime, and declining real wages. The nation is under assault and needs to bunker itself against a “Third World invasion.” In short, the bid for walls both emerges from and abets a discourse in which foreign labor, multiculturalism, and terrorism are merged and relocated from consequence to cause of the loosened enclosing folds of the nation and the growing limits on state protective capacities.

### *Fantasies of Containment*

The projection of danger onto the alien both draws on and fuels a fantasy of containment for which walls are the ultimate icon.

The protective walls of the home are now extended to the nation, taking to a parodic height Hannah Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* that the overtaking of the political by the social in modernity converts the nation into a giant household.<sup>20</sup>

In the face of an increasingly unbounded and uncontrolled global order, walls figure containment that exceeds mere protection against dangerous invaders and that pertains instead to the psychic unmanageability of living in such a world. The need for containment, at times depicted as the need for horizons, is a theme sounded frequently by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thinkers, albeit oddly, less often today. For Nietzsche, "a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon," and for psychoanalysis, loss of containment is a road to psychosis.<sup>21</sup> In his critique of the impulse to develop a "world picture," Heidegger writes, "shelter is provided by the horizon's ability to turn the threatening world of the 'outside' into a reassuring picture."<sup>22</sup> Walling phantasmatically produces such shelter when the actual boundaries of the nation cease to be containing, and it is noteworthy that merely "virtual fences," consisting of sensors and screening devices, are not up to the task. That is, walls—solid, visible walls—are demanded when the constitutive political horizon for the "we" and the "I" is receding.

If in a Westphalian order the state is the container for the nation and political sovereignty contributes the hard metal of this container, then it is unsurprising that contemporary nationalisms issue demands for rearticulated state sovereignty through visible signs of its containing powers.<sup>23</sup> Settled and intact state sovereignty does not require such signs. It produces bounded national composition and order without hyperbolic border militarization and barricading—it orders through its structuring and ubiquitous presence, through the charisma of sovereignty, and above all, through the fusion of nation, state, and sovereign. Waning state sovereignty loses these capacities to contain the nation and the subject. Thus does Achille Mbembe formulate the detachment of

sovereignty from the state as an emasculation of the state, one that parallels the demasculinization of the male civil population in the decimation of familial patriarchalism. In the case of the postcolony, he adds, this demasculinization is compensated by phallic militarism, a literal fetishization of guns.<sup>24</sup> Walls appear to be a related fetish, one that similarly reaches from state to subject in promising restored potency.

Seen from a slightly different angle, the call for strong state iteration of national boundaries would be a crucial element in what Saskia Sassen terms the “renationalizing” of political discourse corresponding to denationalized economic space. Boundary iteration and defense stages the righteousness and the possibility of such renationalization against its contemporary undoing.<sup>25</sup> Thus do declining state sovereignty and the disappearing viability of a homogeneous national imaginary redress each other at the site of walls. Visible walls respond to the need for containment and boundaries in too global a world, too unhorizoned a universe. They produce a spatially demarcated “us,” national identity, and national political scale when these can no longer be fashioned from conceits of national political or economic autonomy, demographic homogeneity, or shared history, culture, and values.

### *Fantasies of Impermeability*

Containment within an increasingly boundaryless world is one kind of psychic longing animating the desire for walls; the fantasy of impermeability — perhaps even impenetrability — complements it. Sovereign power carries the fantasy of an absolute and enforceable distinction between inside and outside. This distinction in turn depends upon sovereignty’s defiance of spatial or boundary porousness and of temporal interruption or multivalence. Political sovereignty, like that of God, entails absolute jurisdictional control and endurance over time. The sovereign can be attacked, but not penetrated without being undone, challenged, but not interrupted without being toppled. In this respect, sovereignty appears as a supremely masculine political fantasy (or fallacy)

of mastery: Penetration, pluralization, or interruption are its literal undoing.

It is significant, in this regard, that most discourses of walling in the United States, Europe, and Israel produce the entity at stake as simultaneously vulnerable, victimized, righteous, and powerful. The nation is in danger, under siege; the state is appealed to as capable of defending against this siege and eminently right to do so. Here it may be useful to remember that walls of premodern European cities were mainly built against sieges for plunder, not as fortresses against political-military conquest.<sup>26</sup> The siege was a routine economic phenomenon in the Middle Ages, and an entity “under siege” for economic plunder by a neighboring entity is in a different situation from one engaged in a political-territorial war, even as the siege may constitute an element in war tactics. The blending of military and economic elements in the siege facilitates an appreciation of how defenses against migrating peoples today so easily acquire a security aspect in contemporary walling discourse. Sieges work by penetrating defenses, swarming a defended area, and plundering its resources—exactly how “invading immigrant hordes” are frequently depicted in the Euro-Atlantic world today. Thus, a nation “under siege” justifies defenses and blockades even amid NAFTA-type agreements, on the one hand, and military (or terrorist) technologies that make walls irrelevant, on the other. Indeed, Palestinians flooding Egypt last year through the breached Gaza wall in order to purchase food, fuel, and other domestic necessities might be framed as a kind of siege in reverse, or perhaps as a specifically late capitalist siege in which a desperate need for access to cheap commodities, and not only to capital itself, is what “batters down Chinese walls.”<sup>27</sup> Even terror, though not economically driven, may be more appropriately framed as siege, rather than as warfare—it aims at plunder, not sovereign conquest. Yet the siege, presumed to have passed from history with the emergence of the modern nation-state, is a relatively nontheorized phenomenon within liberalism. This is one reason why walls and their putative aims lack

a lexicon or grammar in liberal theory, including in theories of international conflict.

The defense that walls establish against siege works the fantasy of impermeability into a psychic politics in which the enemy is figured as raiding, invading, coming to take or plunder what is rightfully the nation's own—its safety, security, peaceful or prosperous way of life, its jobs, its wealth, its First World privilege, its civilized existence or liberal democratic values. As I will suggest next, this enemy also tears at First World subjects' psychic political insulation from the hierarchies and violence in the global webs of dependency sustaining them. Walls are a visual means of restoring this psychic insulation. They help to restore images of national self-sufficiency, and they help to screen out suffering or destitution.

*Fantasies of Purity, Innocence, and Goodness*

"Saving Lives—Israel's Anti-Terrorist Fence: Answers to Questions" is an Israeli government public-relations document written in English—clearly for American and European consumption—that gently rebukes criticisms of the Wall and calmly explains its rationale. The document depicts the barrier as a fence, rather than a wall ("97% of the fence is not concrete," it notes repeatedly), as apolitical and unrelated to the question of negotiating a settlement or boundaries, as temporary and moveable in accord with negotiations and an end to Palestinian violence, and as built entirely on the humanitarian grounds of preserving and nurturing life. It presents both the policy architects and the contractors building the wall as deeply concerned with human life and livelihoods on both sides of the barrier. All involved, the document reports, have been careful to treat Palestinians, their lands, and their villages with respect and care. The rationale for the Wall itself is similarly framed: Israel is a tiny, humane, democratic nation victimized by barbaric neighbors who must be walled out unless or until they change their terrible ways.<sup>28</sup> The wall, in short, is depicted as preserving innocence and civilization against its opposite and as standing in every way for humane

and life-preserving values against barbaric and murderous ones.

The many Web sites devoted to justifying and promoting the U.S.-Mexico wall are similar, if generally less sophisticated and less defensive.<sup>29</sup> Porous borders, the story goes, permit the flow of drugs, crime, and terror into a civilized nation whose only crime is to have been too prosperous, generous, tolerant, open, and free. In both the U.S. and Israeli cases, walling expresses and gratifies this desire for a national imago of goodness, one that wholly externalizes the nation's ills and disavows its unlovely effects on others, its aggressions, needs, and dependencies. In this regard, the desire for walling responds to a historical moment in which structural inequalities and dependencies (between Global North and Global South, rich and poor, settler and native, white and colored) have been both spatially desegregated and challenged as natural or legitimate, but are not thereby undone. That is, at the same time that racialized discourses justifying colonialism, natural hierarchies, and global inequalities have lost their easy hegemony, global movements of people and capital have eroded the separate spheres inhabited by the populations these stratifications produce. Today, rich and poor, colonizer and native, First and Third World live virtually and actually in ever greater proximity. The result is a world of extreme and intimate inequality deprived of strong legitimating discourses—apart from neo-liberalism's giant “whatever” shrug.

For the predicament this condition produces for those wanting to understand themselves as justice-minded and good, or at least innocent, walling offers several discursive exits. Mobilized to depict discursively what it blocks as lawless invaders, walling literally screens out a confrontation with global inequality or local colonial domination. It facilitates denial of the dependency of the privileged on the exploited and of the agency of the dominant in producing the resistance of the oppressed. Two Israeli anti-Wall activists develop this point, arguing that the Wall's “ugliness” is essential, rather than incidental, functioning as a theater of ugliness projected onto the other:



The wall allows Israel not to see itself as aggressive, violent, cruel, possessive, a violator of human rights, by projecting all these traits on the Palestinians beyond the wall. The wall is not perceived by [Zionists] as an aggressive act; it is perceived as a protective act, an act of self-defense. . . . It takes a complex psychological mechanism to facilitate such a reversal. . . . The wall achieves its goal: protecting Israel from seeing its own aggression and thus preserving its basic assumption that it is the “good” “just” victim.<sup>30</sup>

Figuring what is outside as invading, but also literally blocking from view the often impoverished conditions that they block out, late modern walls facilitate a conversion of subordination and exploitation into a dangerous threat neither produced by nor connected to the needs of the dominant. Rewriting dependency as autonomy, walling in this context displaces appreciation of webs of social relations with the fiction of autarky. Optically and psychically, at the moment that global demographics and economics undermine ontologized political and economic identities, walling resurrects ontological ascriptions of (victimized) goodness to the dominant and (agentic) hostility, violence, knavery or greed to the subordinate.

### *The Psychoanalysis of Defense*

In order to provide something of an analytic firmament for these speculations about desires for walling, we turn now to two strands of psychoanalytic theory. The first is the theory of defense offered in early papers by Sigmund Freud and extended by Anna Freud in *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense*. The second is Sigmund Freud's account of the origin and persistence of religion in *The Future of an Illusion*.

#### *Sigmund Freud's Early Theory of Defense*

At first blush, Freud's theory of defense in two papers, “Neuro-Psychoses of Defense” and “Further Thoughts on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defense,” would not seem to have an immediate bearing on the desire for walling. This is both because Freud

is primarily concerned with defenses against unbidden sexual desires and because he conceives defenses as ways of rerouting or avoiding conscious confrontation with such desires, rather than as simple psychic barriers or fortresses. Yet if Freud's arguments are deliteralized, detached from exclusive concern with sexuality, and considered closely, we may discover something quite useful here.

In his two papers on defense, Freud says defenses arise in response to anxiety about something distressing. (He calls this distressing something an "idea," although the idea constitutes the ideational version, even compression, of a desire or experience.) Freud posits a dialectical relation between defense and repression: On the one hand, defense entails repression of the distressing material, while on the other, repression itself is a form of defense. This is important because the defense is not aimed only at the idea, but also at its energy—defense is the means by which the source, content, *and* energy of the anxiety are repressed. That is, the ego defends itself not just against content, but against the energy or affect of the unwanted content. This is how repression is both a psychic act and a psychic effect.<sup>31</sup>

Let us rehearse the logic here: "Defense hysteria," Freud says, is unique. It differs from what he calls "hypnoid" and "retention" hysteria because it involves attempting to *deny or repel* a distressing experience/idea/desire that produces a contradiction or shock for the ego.<sup>32</sup> The task that the ego sets is to make the incompatible idea "*non arrivée*"—not to have come at all. The task is first carried out by turning the powerful idea into a weak one, which is accomplished through "conversion" of the idea into an obsession of some sort "which lodges in consciousness like a parasite." But if a fresh impression like the original "breaks through the barrier erected by the will," the weakened idea is furnished with fresh affect, so a further conversion is needed, which ultimately takes hold as a defense. Even when successful, however, this resolution is unstable, giving rise to episodic hysterical attacks. And if conversion is not possible, then the idea is fended off only by separating it from its affect, and obsessions or

phobias “unrelated to reality” will result. The obsession or phobia, Freud says, is a substitute or surrogate for the incompatible idea and takes its place in consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

So Freud identifies two possibilities for the ego’s response to unacceptable desire. There is either complete conversion to another idea (defense), which, while producing periodic hysterical outbursts, wholly suppresses the original anxiety, or there is conversion of the unacceptable desire’s energy into an obsession or phobia. Both possibilities, he insists, are modalities of protecting the ego against ideas that conflict with its notion of itself.

The unacceptable ideas producing the desire for walling and generating hysteria about permeability, immigrants, or even terror may not be limited to immediate desires from within the entity doing the walling. Instead they may pertain to one or more of the following difficult-to-accept and even frightening features of contemporary existence: the limited capacity for (economic, cultural, and even legal) containment exercised by the nation-state today; the weakening of sovereign protective capacities; the declining power and supremacy of the Euro-Atlantic world and the attendant loss of status for the working and middle classes; the erosion of national identity based on a shared language and culture; the reliance of Euro-Atlantic prosperity on the production of an impoverished outside; perhaps above all, a Euro-Atlantic existence full of crime, drugs, violence, ennui, depression and drained of its secure economic might, social stability, political power, and cultural supremacy. The hysterical obsession is *The Alien*, fashioned as a single imaginary creature from the material of immigrants, drug traffickers, and terrorists and representing the pollution of violated borders and the demasculinization of permeable national and individual subjecthood. The phobia is xenophobia. Thus do walls conceived to block danger discursively produce it. At the same time, walls facilitate a psychic defense against recognition of a set of internal or systemic failures that are relocated to the outside and against recognition of a set of unacceptable facts of dependency, unprotected vulnerability, or

even responsibility for colonial violence in the context of declining sovereign power. Walling makes recognition of these failures and facts “*non arrivée*,” just as it literally aims to make migrants and terrorists *non arrivée*. Moreover, building the walls themselves becomes obsessional, as the Minutemen’s tracking of illegal entrants is obsessional. The convergence of unprotected vulnerability resulting from sovereign decline amid global markets and global terror produces a national egoic response that seeks literal defenses to prop up psychic ones or that spurs the construction of literal defenses in the production of psychic ones.

*Anna Freud’s Elaboration of the Theory of Defense*

In *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense*, Freud’s daughter, Anna, sought to systematize and scientize her father’s theory of defense. While the elder Freud is often thought to have replaced the notion of defense with the notion of repression, Anna Freud claims that repression actually “ends up being only a special mechanism of defense,” one that protects the ego against instinctual demands, while defense has a significantly broader range.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Anna Freud argues, there are ten distinct mechanisms of defense: regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self/subject, reversal, and sublimation.<sup>35</sup> These may operate separately or in clusters; different mechanisms are triggered by different kinds of anxieties and according to other elements in the personality.

For our purposes, Anna Freud’s most important hypotheses are these: First, the defense of repression is most valuable for combating sexual wishes, while other defense mechanisms better serve other instinctual forces, especially aggressive impulses.<sup>36</sup> Second, anxiety is always what sets the defensive process into motion. This anxiety can be a superegoic response to the id’s desires, a response to objectively frightening or disturbing things in the world, or an egoic response to the sheer strength of instincts.<sup>37</sup> Third, defenses are always built against the impulse and the affect of the anxiety; they are never merely against certain

ideas.<sup>38</sup> Finally, defenses are designed to secure the ego and save it from experiencing pain—again, a pain that may arise from within or come from the outside world.<sup>39</sup>

With the first and second points, Anna Freud opens out the operation of defense beyond sexual anxiety. She stresses the importance of building defenses against anxieties whose source ranges from intolerable internal psychic aggression to a frightening aspect of the external world. With the third point, she argues that defenses address and redirect affect, not just ideas. Consequently, the whole personality can be transformed by defense, and it is this transformation that allows us to speak of “character defense” in a particular person. With the fourth point, Anna Freud underscores the two primary purposes of defense: stabilizing the ego and securing it from internal and external sources of suffering. All of these points are also reminders that while defenses can arise episodically and in response to contingent impulses or experiences, they are most significant as enduring aspects of subject formation and, as such, produce their own train of additional effects on the subject.

Before drawing these elements of psychoanalytic defense theory toward the desire for walling, I want to highlight one rhetorical aspect of this theory as it is elaborated by both father and daughter, namely, its heavy reliance on spatial and especially military metaphors. We already glimpsed this reliance in Sigmund Freud’s early papers where he discussed barriers, separations, and the interdiction of would-be arrivals. Now consider the way that Anna Freud sets up the whole problem of defenses:

On their way to gratification, the id-impulses must pass through the territory of the ego and here they are in an alien atmosphere. . . . [The id’s] instinctual impulses continue to pursue their aims with their own peculiar tenacity and energy, and they make hostile incursions into the ego, and in the hope of overthrowing it by a surprise attack. The ego on its side becomes suspicious; it proceeds to counter-attack and to invade the territory of the id. Its purpose is to

put the instincts permanently out of action by means of appropriate defensive measures, designed to secure its own boundaries. . . . No longer do we see an undistorted id-impulse but an id-impulse modified by some defensive measure on the part of the ego.<sup>40</sup>

Anna Freud formulates the id-ego relation as a protracted struggle over territorial domain and boundaries, complete with incursions, attacks, counterattacks, defenses, and border fortifications. She also constructs this theater of struggle as that through which self and other, identity and alien, are performatively brought into being and negotiated. Her basic account of the psyche recalls Carl Schmitt's insistence in *Nomos of the Earth* that in the beginning (of all law and hence peoplehood) was land appropriation.<sup>41</sup> Yet she also postulates inevitable boundary breaches—the impulses of the id, she says, must pass through the territory of the ego—which produce the necessity of defense and transform both the transgressor and the transgressed. The landscape she describes is one of permanent hostilities, territorially motivated attacks and counterattacks, the production of defensive measures against threats to identity through which identity is also produced and hardened. This territorial struggle all takes place within the subject—it is an intrapsychic battle for the identity of the subject.

What does the ego, the conscious “*moi*,” become consequent to these battles? “The defended ego,” Anna Freud says, “takes the form of bodily attitudes such as stiffness and rigidity, a fixed smile, contempt, irony, and/(or) arrogance.”<sup>42</sup> Defense paradoxically produces a fragility and brittleness, what, borrowing from Wilhelm Reich, Anna Freud identifies as the “armor plating of character,” which, again, more than merely attaching to the ego, transforms it. Hegel's shadow is discernible here as defenses come to reduce the resilience, adeptness, and flexibility—the powers—of the entity they are built to secure. (Consider this paradoxical effect in the state of Israel today.) Moreover, the ego thus constructed will inevitably block not only untoward impulses or experiences, but *analysis itself*, where analysis stands not simply

for formal psychoanalytic work, but for all forms of self-reflexivity. The ego comes to be defined by these defenses, and not merely protected by them. Consequently, it fiercely resists submitting them to critical undoing.<sup>43</sup>

Now let us see what the two Freuds' accounts of defense might contribute to theorizing the late modern desire for walls. If psychic defenses are always attempts to shield the subject from pain issuing either from external sources or from its own unacceptable energies, the new nation-state walls may be seen to function in precisely this way. Defenses, the Freuds argue, spare the ego from any encounter that disturbs the ego's conceit of itself. This includes blocking encounters with the id's own aggression or hostility, a blocking that allows the ego to split off from the id to construct an identity of virtue and goodness. Translated into the desire for walling, national identity is restored not only to potency, but to virtue through walls. It is cleansed of both its identification and its imbrication with what it is walling out, whether extreme global inequalities, capital's demand for cheap illegal labor, or anticolonial rage. Thus do walls help to defend the identity, virtue, and strength of the nation against a variety of challenges.

Rhetorically, the spectacle of the wall reverses and displaces a range of disturbances to national identity, from disavowed predicates of its existence to the "strength of its own instincts," that is, its own aggressions toward what it is walling out.<sup>44</sup> As "efforts by the ego to repudiate part of its own id," walls help to protect (and hence to produce) a national ego/identity—fortifying its boundaries and suppressing its predicates. These include, in the U.S. case, various effects of neoliberal globalization that together degrade the boundaries and ethnic-cultural homogeneity of the nation and that also affront its conceits of equality, universality, and fairness. Mobilizing the defenses that Anna Freud names "reversal" and "displacement," walls against immigration construe it as an invasion, rather than a global production, especially insofar as they rearticulate in spatial terms an outmoded sense of nation and belonging.<sup>45</sup>

The Israeli wall does something similar, albeit with the colonial native, rather than the laborer, figured as persecutor or invader. Emanating from and contributing to a discourse of Israel's singular civility in a barbarous environment—"a villa in a jungle,"<sup>46</sup> as Ehud Barak has called it—the Wall abets discursive reversal of the fount of aggression generating the enmity it would repel. Producing as well an ever more militarized and check-pointed order of existence for all (Palestinian-Israeli MP Azmi Bishara refers to Israel as "the state of the checkpoints" and Palestine as "the land of the checkpoints"), the Wall itself hardens Israel's defensive, besieged, and defended condition into identity and character inside and out.<sup>47</sup>

Viewed as a form of national psychic defense, walls can be seen as an ideological disavowal of a set of unmanageable appetites, needs, and powers. They facilitate a set of metalepses in which the specter of invasion replaces internal need or desire and the specter of violent hostility replaces reckoning with colonial displacements and occupation. Through their ostentatious signification of sovereign power and definition of the nation, they also deflect anxieties about the disintegration of national identity and about the decline of state sovereignty.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, they spectacularize a hyperidentity of the nation in response to anxiety about the detachment of sovereignty from the nation-state and globalization's dilution of homogeneous national cultures. In the language of Guy Debord, the spectacle is "a *Weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material real—a world view transformed into an objective force."<sup>49</sup>

One important omission from the Freuds' account of defense, of course, is the gendered dimensions of the anxieties these defenses are managing. There is a notably gendered inflection to walling as a defense against anxieties about need, vulnerability, and penetrability and to the desire for sovereign containment and protection against such vulnerability. Vulnerability and penetrability are almost universally coded as feminine; sovereign supremacy and powers of containment and protection are coded



masculine. The desire for walling may emanate in part from a wish to be relieved of a feminized national subject condition and emasculated state power and also from an identification with sovereign political power, an identification facilitated by the circuitry between sovereign subject and sovereign state in liberalism discussed in Chapter 2. More generally, in a late modern context, walling appears to defend against a sovereign failure to protect a penetrable (penetrated) nation (always referred to with a feminine pronoun), a failure and penetration that also threatens to expose national dependencies and needfulness. The heterosexual coupling of the feminized nation and the masculinized sovereign state is no minor matter here. Absent the protection of a sovereign state, the nation stands vulnerable, violable, and desperate. Walling restores an imago of the sovereign and his protective capacities.

### *Illusions of a Future*

By way of conclusion, we turn from Freud's thinking about defense to Freud's reflections on the human need for religion. This strand of Freud's thinking contributes to an appreciation of the theological dimension of sovereignty articulated most famously by Schmitt. Insisting that all political concepts descend from theology, Schmitt formulates political sovereignty as imitating God's power—supreme and temporally infinite. Chapters 2 and 3 argued that the theological face of state sovereignty reappears strongly at the moment of its waning. This is the argument I want to press through Freud's reflections on the origin and persistence of religion.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud follows other nineteenth-century German critics of religion (most notably Feuerbach, but also Nietzsche, Marx, and Weber) in arguing that religion arises from an unbearable experience of human vulnerability and dependency in both the natural and social world. Freud's distinctive contribution to this critique formulates this vulnerability as taking the psychic form of "infantile helplessness." Religious ideation, Freud argues, is a reaction not merely to ubiquitous human

vulnerability, but to the particular resonance this vulnerability has with the experience of infancy. Man's terrible vulnerability to fate, suffering, and the forces of nature resonates psychically with the infant's absolute inability to care for itself and its radical dependency on others who may hurt or terrify it, as well as protect it. According to Freud, religious ideation will recapitulate this experience, meaning that God will be cast in the image of all-powerful parents.<sup>50</sup> The human artifact of religion thus produces a God who is at once frightening and loving: God replicates the unique dual character of parents as sources of absolute fear and absolute protection. Religion acknowledges our helplessness, Freud says, even as it is a strategy to overcome the humiliation of that helplessness with an anthropomorphized figure of protection.

Armed with this understanding of religion's psychic origin and function, Freud believes he can explain a fundamental conundrum of a scientific age, namely, why religion persists even after reason and science should have discredited and displaced it. Religion does not collapse so easily for a very specific reason. It is not merely an error, but an illusion, Freud argues—the important distinction being that errors are mistakes, while an illusion is powered by a wish.<sup>51</sup> The wish for sovereign protection that generates and sustains religion is so powerful and emerges from such a primal psychic experience that it cannot be addressed by any other force or allayed by science or reason. Hence, religion will not die upon being disproved.<sup>52</sup>

How does Freud's argument bear on the contemporary phenomenon of walling? To the extent that walls optically gratify the wish for intact sovereign power and protection, to the extent that they produce an imago of such power and protection and an effect of sovereign awe, the desire for walling appears as a religiously inflected one. It is a desire that recalls the theological dimension of political sovereignty. So, too, does the notion of sealing ourselves off from a dangerous outside appear animated by a yearning to resolve the vulnerability and helplessness produced

by myriad global forces and flows coursing through nations today. The fantasy that the state can and will provide this resolution thus reconvenes a strong religious version of state sovereignty. The desire for national walling carries this theological wish, and walls themselves may visually gratify it.

Ancient temples housed gods within an unhorizoned and overwhelming landscape. Nation-state walls are modern-day temples housing the ghost of political sovereignty. They organize deflection from crises of national cultural identity, from colonial domination in a postcolonial age, and from the discomfort of privilege obtained through superexploitation in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global political economy. They confer magical protection against powers incomprehensibly large, corrosive, and humanly uncontrolled, against reckoning with the effects of a nation's own exploits and aggressions, and against dilution of the nation by globalization. These theological and psychological features of the clamor for walls help explain why their often enormous costs and limited efficacy are irrelevant to the desire for them. They produce not the future of an illusion, but the illusion of a future aligned with an idealized past. Sigmund Freud will have the last words here: "We call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is prominent in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification. . . . Having recognized religious doctrines as illusions, we are at once faced by a further question. . . . Must not the assumptions that determine our political regulations be called illusions as well?"<sup>53</sup>