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Three walls

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Abstract

A year into the COVID 19 pandemic, I reflect upon walls and the fact that the lockdown has exacerbated humanity's experience of walls in themselves and, guided by an act of pictorial rebelliousness, push for a feminist way of re-enchanting them both materially and symbolically.

KEYWORDS

lockdown, muralism, painting, re-enchantment, walls, writing

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Painting a wall is always a revolutionary act. My 4-year-old daughter already knew it without me or anybody explaining it to her: she was staring at me in defiance while splashing the paint-soaked brush across the wall.

At least it was one of the walls of our balcony, not the living room, was my first thought. Oh well... there was no point in interrupting her rebellious creativity now that it was too late already anyway. Instead of leaving the wall half-finished, just like the graffiti tag on the corner across the street was left incomplete because of the suddenness of the first lockdown in March 2020, I decided to join her and we spent the rest of the afternoon decorating our balcony together. The condominium administrators and the neighbors will probably complain at some point when they realize the “damage” we made to the building's uniform appearance, and we shall probably have to erase or cover-up our family artwork with boring gray paint.

But in the meantime, my daughter and I accomplished a political act, as much as an artistic exercise. We transformed that wall into a place of our locked-down existential affirmation. Like prisoners carving “I was here” on the walls of their cells, or students engraving their names, emotions, dreams, or drawing on their desks during class when their teachers turned their backs to them to write something on the board (at least, in the good old days when students still attended class in the flesh instead of on online platforms). Behind such acts of what many would label “vandalism,” we are phenomenologically present to our gesture, we dedicate our intentional attention to our every move and literally (or colorfully) mark ourselves into existence (Pérezts, 2021). We do not do them in order to necessarily write, carve or paint *something*—the content is as relevant (if not less so) than the gesture itself. We do them to fix our being onto a material surface beyond ourselves, to write or paint ourselves through them, to mark

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our territory. The same existential and political reason that drove our ancestors to leave hand prints, drawings or inscriptions on the walls of caves.

Having grown up in Mexico, I've always been fascinated by mural paintings and frescoes. I have now been living in Lyon, France for some years, and its painted walls¹—le mur des Lyonnais, le mur des Canuts, la Bibliothèque de la Cité, and, more discrete, a homage fresco to Diego Rivera just a mere 5-min walk from our apartment reproducing some of his iconic works— are certainly part of why I feel kind of like “at home” in Lyon. It is the frescoes of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, but also the less internationally known David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo, or José Clemente Orozco, that trace the memory of my people and prefigure our mestizo identity on the very object that is erected to delineate space. Such frescoes transform the gray urban landscape into an open-sky gallery. More than a gallery, into a *program*. Political and artistic. Just like the East Side Gallery in Berlin, murals take an enhanced structuring or *edifying* dimension precisely *because they are painted on walls*.

And while half the population is a year into, at varying degrees but for the same reason, being locked away at home to contain contagion—“between four walls,” as the common saying goes—it is these walls that precisely have captured my attention. They are everywhere I look. I feel them closing in on me, on each of us. Like a larger-than-life escape game that never seems to end. And this crowned virus, unable to reach us through these cement walls that protect us against its potential human carriers, is determined not only to reorganize our entire lives and societies, but to invade us on the “walls” of our social media profiles as well, where it has, quite literally, become “viral,” and the only thing that anybody seems to talk or care about nowadays, while business-(and tragedy)as-usual keep unfolding.

Sitting on the floor with my back against the wall, I am ruminating this saying “being between four walls” almost as if it were a sort of prayer or mantra of our times. In the meantime, my eyes err across the imperfections on the surface of the walls that surround me, following the more or less straight angles, scouting the fingerprints my daughter left here and there, the posters and mirrors, the projected shadows as the Sun goes down and shines through our West-facing window, the dust that has accumulated on the floor plinths that we don't have time to clean, and all the scars left by daily life within these walls that a future coat of paint will cover-up sometime. Too often have I ignored these walls. Now they have been shouting their overwhelming presence at me for too long and keep doing so every waking moment, reverberating the sound of my children's noise while I try to write, echoing our unavoidable togetherness. These walls have become oppressive and oppressors, and yet they don't seem to be thick enough to allow for some piece of quiet and privacy from the other four people, however loved, that I share them with.

Walls. We bump into them. They have a material dimension, empirical, phenomenal. We can build them, demolish them, climb them, paint them. But they also have a symbolic, metaphorical, or even epistemological dimension. Now that being predominantly constrained by four walls has become our shared human condition, one of the greatest common denominators of humanity (Pérezts & Deslandes, 2020), these walls invite us to collectively reflect upon them as rarely before.

Being “trapped” between walls has often had the effect of freeing our tongues, or rather our pens or whatever tool we can get our hands on to scrape a piece of paper, or, if there isn't any, their very surfaces. Different places of incarceration in the world have witnessed the birth of tales of epic proportions (Thomas Malory, Miguel de Cervantès, Fiodor Dostoïevski), of poetry (Paul Verlaine, Guillaume Apollinaire), of morally provocative texts (the Marquis de Sade, John Cleland), of travel diaries (Marco Polo), history books (Fernand Braudel), philosophic essays (Machiavelli, Thoreau, Russell, Althusser, Gandhi), political manifestos (Vladimir Lenine, Adolf Hitler, Ho Chi Minh, Antonio Gramsci, Martin Luther King Jr., wa Thiong'o, Nelson Mandela, Leonard Peltier) as well as a proliferation of epistolary writings (Saint Paul, Oscar Wilde, Vaclav Havel) and more. To the point that being locked down—particularly in spartan material conditions, or in the akin form of exile—is even a condition that is purposively sought in order to favor inspiration. Philosophers like Wittgenstein can testify to this, when he spent a lengthy retreat in a cabin he built with his own hands in Norway. So can the monks of any religion across the world. According to popular legend, it is said that the lyrics of the Mexican national anthem were only written because the fiancée of their author, Francisco Gonzalez Bocanegra, locked him up in a tiny room with just bread and water until he finished... Conversely, incarceration is also a recurrent leitmotif of fiction since the classics (*The Count of Monte Cristo*, by Dumas (1981); *The Last day of a*

Condemned man (1829/2009) and *Les Misérables* by Hugo (1862/2018); *No Exit* [1947/2000, also known as *Behind closed doors*] by Sartre (1947/2000); *Chess story* by Zweig (1943/2005), among many others). Today, this theme is recolored by contemporary television series such as *Orange is the new black* (Kohan, 2013).

But let us leave the specificities of the carceral environment, or that of monastic or philosophical retreat, because what we are living through today is actually another kind of “prison”: the domestic environment. The prison remains a world of violence and of the masculine (including prisons for women) that have the noble (albeit contestable and often tragic) objective of justice. However, the lockdown in our homes is too close to the animality (we feel “like caged lions” in a zoo) and to the feminine. Being confined to the home, has ultimately been, and largely remains in many parts of the world, the feminine experience *par définition*, either by tradition, modesty, or gendered division of labor. In light of this, we find it all the more dreadful. An unbearable situation, in our misogynist and patriarchal societies. Staying at home has long been disdained, seen at best as uninteresting, and at worst as degrading, as the reign of the subjection to the everyday, anchored in the banality of the daily routines and chores, and whose objective is the protection and the *care* (almost a bad word) of an anonymous “all of us,” by attempting to limit the spread of the virus.

Some of the (women and feminist) readers of this text will have not failed to notice that, except for screenwriter Jenji Kohan, not one of the above-mentioned authors is a woman... So, if this lockdown is unleashing so much the pens or rather the tweets, it is also because a fair share of the world's population was subjected overnight to discover this symbolically feminine experience that both shes and hes have sought to flee, for different reasons (the escalating domestic violence being among the prices of this crisis already being paid behind closed doors, unsurprisingly by the most vulnerable).

So, in a way, and against all odds, it is on a quest to reconquer these four walls that humanity must embark, to reappropriate them, to give them new meaning. In this regard, (re)reading Frank's (1947/2007) *Diary of hiding away* in an attic for two years in Amsterdam during the German occupation and Jewish persecution seems just as a good idea in the present circumstances as (re)reading Camus' (1947) *The Plague*, whose sales have soared in the past year, or Netflix's miniseries on *Pandemic: how to prevent an outbreak* (Adaskova & Sorre, 2020), whose first airing in early 2020 couldn't have chosen a more perfect timing.

Telling the stories of what is happening within our walls and marking it on walls (both material and digital) is an existential need as much as an act of resistance (Li & Prasad, 2018). Making sense of this globalized *expérience féminine* par excellence. This seems to be confirmed by the variety of “lockdown stories” flooding the Internet and social media, where domestic anecdotes of the everyday are given center-stage, and whose power resides in that they resonate globally. As many others, I bang my head against the wall in trying to cope with working from home, home-schooling my daughter, taking care of my newborn son, grappling with my marriage, and struggling to keep an ounce of private inner life in the midst of it all. Every night at 8 o'clock during the first period of lockdown,² I joined my neighbors by going out on our (now colorful) balcony to clap in support of the medical teams and frontline workers, as one of the only social gestures I could do besides staying at home. I clapped, all the while dreading that once this whole crisis is over, those that once clapped—and particularly the reigning class—will wall themselves in an indifferent silence tomorrow. The weight of inertia will probably make us rush back to the same mistakes that led us collectively to “run into a brick wall” in terms of economic, social, environmental, racial, and political issues, worldwide. There is but a small step between sanitary lockdown measures and necrocapitalistic closure, as materialized by the wall project that has long haunted us for the Mexican-USA border.

However, and no matter how desperate, boring, tired, or exhilarating things get, I find myself thinking that the four walls around me are never actually four, according to the common saying. This popular expression is in fact misleading in that it makes us overlook an opportunity to give them a meaning different from that of undergoing domestic imprisonment. If we pause to consider it, there are only three walls, and this is what new feminine and feminist hermeneutics of these walls must pursue. The fourth one is *not* a wall, or not entirely. It is always also a door or a window of some kind. It is a wailing wall, a revolutionary fresco, a fantastic imaginarium. It is a blank page, a virgin canvas, an invitation to the voyage, a prison's glass parlor, a movie screen, a curtain between the audience

and the stage—that can and will be lifted by the stroke of an artists' brush. It is this fourth one that we open each night at 8 o'clock to clap and discover the faces of our until-now much ignored neighbors. In a word, it is an opening, always. A *non-wall*.

Whether in a dungeon, a prison cell, or a monastery, a student dorm room, a refugee camp, a hotel room, an apartment or country house, no matter how big or small... all these figures of closed spaces that have become the locus of our global—yet always experienced as singular - lockdown, only ever have *three* walls. As long as we strive to not forget it. As long as we inhabit them as poets, or as painters instead of as slaves (Mandalaki & Daou, 2021). In order not to let these walls that today lock-us in turn into walls of silence and indifference. In order to appropriate them and put our embodied selves onto their surfaces. As long as we make them speak, to make them *edifying*, we make them the locus of a feminist political and artistic re-enchantment. Whether with a pinch of humor or of despair, of heroism or banality, of the exceptional or of the commonplace, of the literary or the pictorial, our three walls are the stage where our lives are being played out, and where the potential of our feminine creation can also be asserted (Biehl-Missal, 2015).

More than that, they are becoming one of its main characters, as important as the beings who breathe in it, just like Isabel Allende's (1982/2010) *The House of Spirits*, and it falls upon us to assert their magical realism, to re-enchant their existence.

This is why we paint the wall of our balcony.

We must.

A feminist reinterpretation of muralism.

(Childhood is decidedly an age of wisdom).

And following my daughter's example, in an act to conjure silence, I transcribe on the part of wall on our balcony still left virgin, these words by Eluard (1945, p. 8), who in 1942, amidst a World War, wrote what resonates today so vividly in my veins and in the linings of my free spirit:

(...)	(...)
Sur mes refuges détruits	On my refuge that crumbles
Sur mes phares écroulés	My beacon-tower that falls
Sur les murs de mon ennui	On ennui's walls
J'écris ton nom	I write your name
Sur l'absence sans désir	On absence on nude
Sur la solitude nue	Solitude on each tread
Sur les marches de la mort	Of the stair of the dead
J'écris ton nom	I write your name
Sur la santé revenue	And on health rekindling
Sur le risque disparu	On danger dwindling
Sur l'espoir sans souvenir	On hope without remembrance
J'écris ton nom	I write your name
Et par le pouvoir d'un mot	And by the power of a word
Je recommence ma vie	My life returns to me

Je suis né pour te connaître	I am born again to know you
Pour te nommer	And to name you
Liberté	Liberty

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ A brief description and some pictures of these painted walls in Lyon can be found here: <https://en.lyon-france.com/Discover-Lyon/week-end-activity-ideas/frescos-and-murals-a-must-see-in-lyon> (accessed January 21, 2021).
- ² In France, between March 16 and end of May 2020.

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