

## Walls: Arbitrary Impediments/Green Lines

*Rhonda Harder Epp*

*The cover artwork on this special issue of The Conrad Grebel Review is by Rhonda Harder Epp, whose artist's statement appears below. Panel 5 of her Green Line paintings appears on the front cover, and panels 1-5 appear on the back cover. – Editors*

Walls became an obsession when I went to Berlin in 2010. I followed the path marking where the wall had been. I saw the few remaining sections of it. I heard about a couple from East Berlin who walked away from their apartment in 1961 with a picnic basket, hedging their bets that life would be better on the other side. After the wall came down in 1989, they were able to return to see their apartment. Nothing had changed. Their neighbors had moved in, but the furniture and even the pictures on the walls were the same. The Berlin Wall created a divide in aspiration, potential, security, prosperity, perspective, and culture—a divide that was not there before and that more than two decades has not completely erased.

There are several geo-political borders like the former Berlin Wall that are as impenetrable as people can make them: in Western Sahara, Ceuta, and Melilla; between India and Bangladesh, the US and Mexico, and Israel and the West bank; across Cyprus; and in Belfast, dissected with “defensive architecture.” These are arbitrary lines. They are drawn by the more powerful side.

Walls, albeit not in material form, figure in our imaginations and speech. When we struggle to succeed, we can feel like we are “hitting our heads against a wall”; when someone or something bothers us, we say we are being “driven up a wall”; when we are excited, we are “bouncing off the walls”; when something is pervasive, it is “wall-to-wall”; when we will try everything possible, we will “go to the wall”; long-distance runners, energy flagging, can “hit a wall”.

There is also every kind of emotional wall. The materials of these walls are hurt, fear, depression, depletion, inability to trust, insecurity, self-esteem, injury, misunderstanding. We build those walls one experience at a time.

*Global Mennonite Peacebuilding: Exploring Theology, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul C. Heidebrecht, and Reina C. Neufeldt, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 238-239.

The paintings in my Walls series are meditations on the idea of separation, arbitrariness, and emotional distress—our experience of being separated from our people, our land, or our deepest desires. I found that I tended to think in terms of release or escape: over, under, through, and around, as well as ladders, flight, windows, and doors. I worked at getting the feel of arbitrary separation. I thought about the things that stall our lives in frustration and unrequited dreams, preventing us from any progress at all as surely as a concrete wall. I wondered about the difficulties we encounter as individuals, as communities, and even as societies as we approach others with good but misaligned intentions. I painted and I made books. I ruminated and imagined. And maybe with the final panel of “Green Lines,” the barbed wire unravelling, I came to a wishful resolution.

### **Green Lines**

The 1949 armistice boundary between Israel and the West Bank was drawn on a map in green ink. Cyril Radcliffe, a British official, thus created the first “green line,” which also became the internationally accepted border. The second green line cuts across Cyprus, cleaving its major city in half. In that case, another British official, another green line. That time the line was drawn with a green pencil, but it has been no less difficult to erase than ink. What is neat and clean on a map is messy and heart-rending for families and communities.

The panels of the *Green Line* paintings focus on the arbitrariness of these political divisions. Nothing about arbitrary action sits well with people, especially if they have been harmed and there is no redress. Panel 1 is a close-up of a green line, so close it is pixelated. What is within a line? Is it, in and of itself, something? Panel 2 applies a green line to divide my neighborhood; it divides my house from half my neighbors and cuts me off from the local grocery store. Panel 3 presents the worst situation I can think of: my home is separated by a no-man’s land green line from my children’s homes. Panel 4 looks for some redemption—ladders help overcome a fence. Panel 5 sees the barbed wire unravelling. Unrealistic, perhaps, but better worth working towards.

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