



Cartographies of a Non-Place. The Mediterranean as a Space of Passage

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The great migration crisis of recent times has reasserted the sea as a synonym of promise, passage and uncertainty, a non-place established as the home of uprooting and future. This article will explore visions of real or imaginary crossings through the Mediterranean, as well as the perception of this sea as a place of passage and a non-place in the imaginary (and imagination) of this region. With this in mind, we will review current artistic production in and around the MENA region and its diaspora.

The Sea between Lands

The sea is “constant narrative”

Etel Adnan

“The Mediterranean does not exist,” argued Najat El Hachmi. What exists is rather a yearned-for image of the Mediterranean spirit that “forms part of our imagination, of an imaginary made of highly quotidian intangibles” that perhaps reveal that “the Mediterranean character is detected in small things, in those apparently secondary elements that greatly determine our lifestyle.”¹

The Mediterranean, a sea between lands, is defined as an empty space formed by its own

shores; a “being between lands” that reflects its condition as an interior (and following El Hachmi’s reflections, we could say interiorised) sea and its binding and limiting nature with respect to the areas that form its basin.

Today, at a time when it seemed that globalisation had diluted the borders, this sea shows that such frontiers have merely taken on new forms.² Precisely because of the forced mass displacements in the Mediterranean, its bordering character has now become fiercely tangible. This is how Abdul Rahman Katanani represented it in “The Wave”, a sculpture in which the water that separates the sailor from a new life rises up as a wave transformed into threatening barbed wire.

1. Najat El Hachmi, “The Mediterranean, Frontier or Intersection”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, No. 24, 2017, p. 221.
2. Javier de Lucas, *Mediterráneo: el naufragio de Europa*, Valencia, Tirant Humanidades, 2016, p. 53.



Frontier and Threshold

However, it is actually its bordering and interstitial condition that, paradoxically, also signifies the Mediterranean as a threshold, as a half-open gate to other regions, as an area for the real and imaginary crossing. The “sea between lands” becomes a space of promise, uncertainty and drift, a liquid frontier crossed by routes that transform and define it. This quality of frontier-threshold has led many to dream of a new life on the other side of the horizon. “She no longer looked at the ships in the same way. She saw them set sail, slip upon the quiet waters, like big bottles in which she placed her dreams,” wrote Tahar Ben Jelloun on Malika’s permanent dream-like state in *Partir*, a novel about the longing to leave Tangier to start afresh on the other side of the Mediterranean.

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The overwhelming effect of the sea as frontier-border in the Strait of Gibraltar is indeed one of the latent elements in Yto Barrada’s photographic series “A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project”, initiated in 1998. The lengthy project revolves around the day to day of a Tangier leaning over the sea, in which the wait to leave has become, as Barrada describes

it, yet another urban dimension. Thus, Yto sets the idyllic image of the touristic Tangier against the drowsy existence of many of her compatriots, nurtured in the desire to reach the other shore. This has resulted in a latent state of drift, of being on both sides of the same fissure while trapped nowhere.⁵ As she explained, “Tangier has become an area of passage, a vast waiting room, where everybody waits to go to the afterlife, in its secular version.”⁴

Suspended time, dream and waiting also occupy centre stage in the series “Rochers Carrés” by Kader Attia, taken on the Algerian beach of Bab El Oued, where the artist used to spend the summer and saw how the boys, the main subjects of the project, looked hypnotised from the dock at the ships that went in and out heading to Europe. The breakwater, artificially built by Houari Boumediène, looks like the cold concrete constructions on the outskirts of the big French cities where many Algerian migrants end up.

Exploring the notion of limit, Attia photographs the pier as a premonition of the shipwreck of an oft-dreamt crossing when, on the other side, the migrant finds these massive prison-like buildings, which dress the frontier in new garb and label them as foreigners in their new home.⁵ Thus, Laurent Gaudé argued in *ElDorado*, “No frontier will let you pass unhurt. They all wound,” as if the boundary itself had crossed the traveller instead of the opposite. In fact, in some of areas of North Africa, as Ben Jelloun explains in *Partir*, the migrant is called *hrraga*; that is, “the one who burns” [the frontier]. *Hrrag* refers to the action of reducing the identification documents of

3. José Miguel García Cortés, “Between Myth and Fright. The Mediterranean as Conflict”, *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, No. 24, 2017, p. 182.

4. Claire Guillot, “Yto Barrada photographie Tanger”, *Le Monde*, 3 April 2006. http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2006/04/03/exposition-yto-barrada-photographie-tanger_757339_3246.html#g5EtDgSb4cSWHKoO.99 (last access: 1 February 2017).

5. Kader Attia, “Rochers Carrés. Kader Attia. 2008”, available at <http://kaderattia.de/rochers-carres-2/> (last accessed: 1 June 2017).



A Performance Desperately in Need of an Audience, by The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation (Mahmoud Hourani).

illegal travellers to ashes so that they cannot be deported.

The *hrraga* burns the water frontier and, in this kind of rite, is renamed with provisional anonymity. Upon embarking, he somehow subverts the past-present-future time sequence: the crossing so often dreamt of in the past becomes real and present in a ship sailing towards the imagined future. It is perhaps for this reason that Foucault spoke of the ship as the heretopia par excellence, as a counterplace for the materialisation of the utopia, as the greatest reserve of imagination.⁶

“I hope my ship brings me to you,” wrote Ali to his uncle Sadik Kwaish Alfraji in a letter delivered on the first visit of the artist to his

land, Iraq, after almost twenty years of exile. Along with his desire, Ali painted a boat with eyes and oars that, on paper, would indeed cross the sea in the artist’s suitcase. A couple of years later and inspired by this letter, Sadik produced the video “Driven by Storms (Ali’s Boat)”. In the short film, through oneiric and symbolic language, Sadik narrates with his own drawings a trip back to his yearned-for land, a tribute to his own exile, to the thousand times reinvented crossings to meet halfway with Ali and his ink boat, full of dreams and ready to set sail, an echo of his own departure two decades earlier. The screen shows the sketches of a fantastic journey, in which the boat becomes a bird; the road, a labyrinth; and the tears, a river to sail

6. Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres”, *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, No. 5, October 1984, pp. 46-49.

upon. The different scenes transform the face that, from the bottom of the screen, observes the stages of the journey and thus etches on his skin the narrative of the displacement and frontier.

Zineb Sedira also explores the condition of the sea as a space of passage in “MiddleSea”, whose title again characterises the Mediterranean as that eternal fissure that forms part of being an Intermediate Central Sea, “the sea between”. The video installation comprises fragmentary shots of an anonymous man plying the sea on board an empty boat from Algeria. As in the short film “Departure” by Taysir Batniji, in which an anonymous crowd moves away from the shore on board a big ship, the lack of time references and the slowness of the shots dilute the past-present-future sequence in the journey. This journey therefore seems to be made of an ambiguous superimposition of the so often imagined crossing by sea and the real crossing, again revealing the ship as the heterotopia enunciated by Foucault.

New Cartographies

The recent intensification of the passage and migration has led to reconsideration of traditional geographical concepts to the benefit of new forms of belonging and territorial construction that have emerged from displacement.⁷ Among these concepts we find the one coined by the French ethnologist Marc Augé at the end of 20th century: non-place. This notion would define spaces of passage, anonymity and temporality developed in the era of overmodernity.⁸

In her rereading of the non-places, “Genealogía mínima del no-lugar” for the magazine

JotDown, Concepción García wrote: “Non-place emerges as a concept that encompasses this new subjectivity and appears as what we do not know how to name (...). A lyrical poetry of the suburbs that has sneaked almost stealthily into our imagery as a liquid concept that attempts to define the place of uncertainty.” This reflection, supported by its bordering and interstitial condition, its space of passage and uncertainty, and in the passage, time and identity fracture, has acted as a starting point for thinking about the Mediterranean as a non-place.

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However, in contrast to Augé’s non-place, the Mediterranean is a geographically signed space; it is in itself a place shaped by the interaction of the individual with it. In this interaction, the migrant’s passage alters it subjectively and temporarily, turning it into a region for provisional belonging and rooting, anchored in the present, but holding the narratives of the past and future. The Mediterranean, here an uncertain hiatus made of promise and deterritorialisation, becomes a kind of place that, in the displacement, is defined by the migrant as an ephemeral non-place. Thus, these two conditions of the “sea between lands” – being a place and, fleetingly, non-place – interweave intermittently and constantly, revealing its complex and versatile nature.

As a place, it is also “mappable”. However, this geography of the displacement requires new cartographic practices that, faced with

7. María Cristina Nin and Stella Maris Shmite, “El Mediterráneo como frontera: desequilibrios territoriales y políticas migratorias”, *Perspectiva Geográfica*, 20(2), 2015, p. 339.

8. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, London / New York, 1995.

the rigidity of traditional maps, capture the transformations created in the space by drift and personal experience; that is, what Palacios Ortiz called “cartobiographies”.⁹ Thus, we have understood the artworks displayed here as intimate, experimental, subjective and alternative cartographies that, from the passage, limit or dream, approach a Mediterranean marked today by its nature as a threshold frontier and the real or imaginary journeys that cross it. Far from trivialising the serious current migration crisis, these artistic cartographies make visible the experience of the migrant in the Mediterranean and, in the era of overinformation, seek to bring it closer to the rest of the world through art.

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This is how The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation conceived its production *A Performance Desperately in Need of an Audience*, under a title that skilfully plays with reality and fiction, criticising the society of spectacle and the anaesthesia faced with the humanitarian problem. Previously called with pointed irony *A Thousand and One Titanics*, it tells the story of Ahmed, an anonymous and universal migrant, who decides to cross the sea in search of a better life.¹⁰ Without dialogue, its humble cartography is reduced to little more than a city of cardboard and a sea of plastic plied by paper boats. These materials, which represent

the fragility of human existence and the uncertainty of the journey of the person escaping, are easy to find in the refugee camps, where the foundation holds several workshops in which the stage, like the sea, temporarily becomes a place of belonging to think about the status of the traveller and the refugee.

The Spanish playwright Marco Magoa, who for a long time lived in different countries of the MENA region, also took to the stage the bold journey of the fleeing migrant in the trilogy *Mare Nostrum. Finis Somnia Vestra*. Each stage of the journey was performed for the first time in a different country (Jordan, Egypt and Denmark), reproducing and mapping through fiction the real crossing of the refugees. In this travelling conception, the play became a journey and the stage a living map of the migration experience. To take the play between fiction and reality further, Marco wrote part of the script based on real testimonies of refugees, and included in the set design video shots of a shipwreck in the Mediterranean or of walks through Zaatari, a Jordaiann refugee camp. In the third part, he even included the unexpected performance of some migrants who were among the audience and took part in the play, thus going beyond that slender frontier that in theatre separates reality from fiction.¹¹

However, perhaps “The Mapping Journey Project” by Bouchra Khalili is the most appropriate example to illustrate the emergence of what we have called cartobiography. Here, the artist proposed an alternative mapping of the Mediterranean region that would take into account the narratives of displacement. Produced between 2008 and 2011, the project comprises eight videos with images of real maps of different sizes. On each screen, the

9. Antonio Jesús Palacios Ortiz, “Carto[bio]grafías. Invenciones cartográficas para representaciones experienciales”, *URBS. Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2014, pp. 269-276.

10. Interview with Mahmoud Hourani, director of The Arab Puppet Theatre Foundation, 30 March 2017.

11. Interview with Marco Magoa, 12 July 2017.

hand of an anonymous migrant manipulates the map, outlining the path of his own journey accompanied by the voice-over narration. The map is once again subverted and thus, by superimposing the established and personal geography, the displacement becomes a form of resistance against the rigid territorial imposition.¹²

Mahi Binebine in La Patera said: “The elders of my village had told us about the sea many times, and in a thousand different ways.” Because, as Fernand Braudel argued, the Mediterranean is no other than a succession of seas, an amalgam of found narratives

In the second part of the project “Constellations”, the artist transfers these routes drawn by the migrants to eight silk-screen printed star charts in which the frontiers disappear against the opaque blue of the background. Traditionally used by seafarers to guide themselves, Khalili’s celestial charts record the crossings of the migrants, as if they were guides for future travellers by night.

Conclusion: Re-Imagining the Mediterraneans

The condition of frontier-threshold, as well as its “being a space of passage”, is an aspect of the Mediterranean that has always been present. Today, because of the circumstances of some regions in its basin, they are particularly relevant. However, these are not the only qualities of the “sea between lands” currently explored both inside and outside the artistic field.

Mahi Binebine in *La Patera* said: “The elders of my village had told us about the sea many times, and in a thousand different ways.” Because, as Fernand Braudel argued, the Mediterranean is no other than a succession of seas, an amalgam of found narratives. A good example of this is the recent holding of the Qalandiya International Biennale 2016, *This Sea is Mine*, which brought together a wide range of artistic reflections around the same sea, reinvented, interiorised and appropriated in each particular definition.¹³ It is perhaps for this reason that María Elena Morató in “Art... What For? A Reaction to Failure”, demanded a plural name for it, Mediterraneans, a denomination that embraces the different voices that name it from each shore, and avoids enclosing a constantly re-imagined sea into a limiting and unique place name.

Picture References

This article was originally accompanied by a series of pictures that illustrated the works mentioned in the text. However, due to the format of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, we have had to limit the use of pictures and it has not been possible to illustrate all the artistic creations mentioned here. As it is an essay based on the works cited, we have considered it necessary to include a series of links that enable the reader to complement this article with the pictures and videos of the works.

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12. “Absorbing Displacement. Bouchra Khalili in Conversation with Dorothea Schoene”, *Ibraaz*, 003, September 2012, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/40> (last accessed: 3 June 2017).

13. <http://www.qalandiyainternational.org/> (last accessed: 4 June 2017).

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