



Volume 1, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2018)

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Keywords: *Refugee crisis, Lesvos, Displacement, Activism, Graffiti, Public Interventions, Liminality*

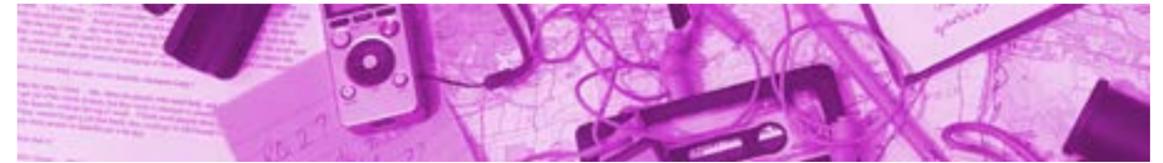
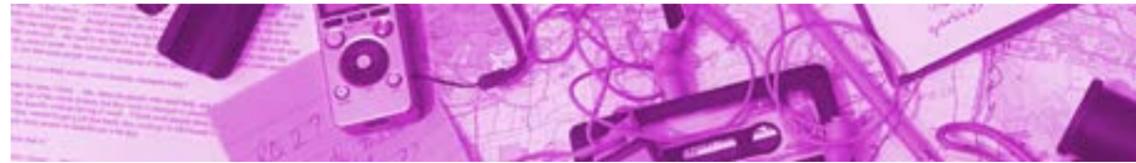
Recommended Citation:

Karathanasis, P., and Kapsali, K. (2018). 'Displacement and the creation of emplaced activism: Public interventions on the walls of a European border city', *entanglements*, 1(2):52-61.



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Displacement and the creation of emplaced activism: public interventions on the walls of a European border city

Pafsanias Karathanasis and Konstantina Kapsali

Abstract

Displacement is a process that affects the places of departure as well as the places of arrival. One such place of arrival has been the island of Lesbos in the northeast Aegean Sea. Lesbos has been a place through which hundreds of thousands of displaced people passed, on their way to Europe, during the period of the “Refugee Crisis” (2015-2016). The urgency, however, of this massive influx, led to the arrival of several humanitarian actors, as well as activists, and volunteers, who played a vital role in the reception of the displaced, forming official and unofficial support networks. Today, despite the proclaimed ending of the ‘crisis’, more than 7.000 people still reside in camps and other facilities within and around the capital of Mytilene. The ‘hotspots’ policy of the European and Greek authorities, including the EU-Turkey statement and the ‘geographical restriction’ of the asylum seekers on the islands, keeps asylum seekers in a liminal and in-between position; in-between asylum and deportation or in-between the lives they left behind and those they can only imagine. In an attempt to approach the liminal condition in which the asylum seekers are being placed, our video-presentation focuses on the slogans and other public interventions on the walls of Mytilene, which are related to the self-organized refugee support networks. These interventions, created by local and international activists, as well as by people on the move, can be seen as the results of a renewed emplaced activism that reacts to the ‘hotspot’ technologies of humanitarian governance as well as to the deportation regime in place in Lesbos and the other Aegean islands.

[See HTML version for accompanying video content](#)

Why video?

Slogans, stencils and other unauthorized interventions in public space are the results of a spatial but also a visual practice, which is common in activist cultures, especially in urban settings. Such interventions express, on the one hand, the activist presence on the island and, on the other, they are representative of the sociopolitical and spatial context in which they are produced, and in which they are viewed and experienced by the public.

Using video to approach the activist public interventions on the walls of Mytilene gives us the opportunity to produce a rich audio-visual account of those ephemeral add-ons on the public walls, but also, an account of the landscapes in which they appear. By producing a record of those ephemeral interventions, some of which might already be whitewashed, we contribute to a documentation of the activity on the walls and other surfaces of the city that relates to the so called ‘refugee and migration crisis’, as well as of the resistance to the ‘hotspot’ technologies of the humanitarian governance. Moreover, video offers a way to record and present those interventions in relation with the landscapes in which they appear. We argue that every writing, slogan or stencil is always in-place, or, in other words, that each of these interventions acquire their meaning always in relation with their urban environment.

Urban landscapes, however, are not simply ‘clean’ surfaces where those interventions appear. Landscapes interact and shape the ways in which those writings act on the everydayness of the city and affect the sociopolitical relations formed within the city. Thus, through a video-presentation we do not only approach the spatial and visual practice of activist public intervention by presenting some of its results on the walls of the city, but we also turn to the mutual interrelation between those writings and the complex sensorial and sociopolitical cityscape of Mytilene.



Image 1: Half erased writing at the center of Mytilene that reads “Fuck Frontex”. The ‘cleaning’ of the results of the activist presence on the capital of Lesbos is a practice that the authorities use in order to promote the idea that the ‘Refugee Crisis’ is over and the city is back to the pre-crisis normality.

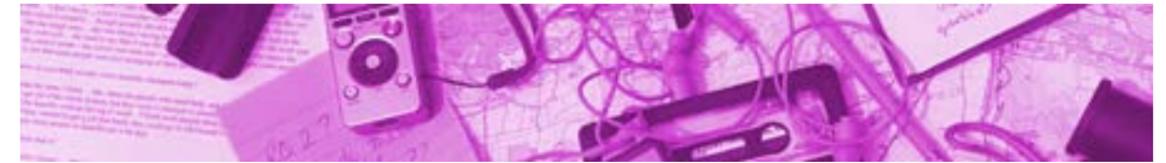
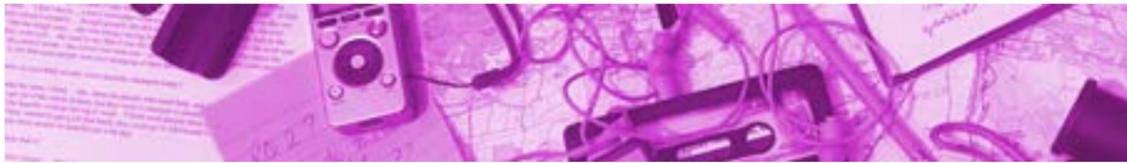


Image 2: The same half erased writing, as above. Here we present a view of the writing in-place; a view that includes the landscape in which the writing appears: at a wall of a central park, located next to the Municipal Theater at the sea-front of Mytilene, an area where the writing is viewed by hundreds of people every day.

Displacement and the “Refugee and Migration Crisis” in Lesvos

Displacement is a process that affects the places of departure as well as the places of arrival. One such place of arrival has been the island of Lesvos in the northeast Aegean Sea. During the recent “Refugee Crisis” the eastern Aegean Sea, as a border of the E.U., confronted massive flows of displaced people. From summer 2015 to spring 2016, hundreds of thousands of displaced people crossed the Aegean on their way to central Europe, causing an emergency situation that Europe had not seen since the Second World War. Lesvos was placed at the center of this influx, and thus at the center of the emergency.

The urgency caused by the massive influx to Lesvos, led to the arrival of different actors: State agencies and European authorities, like Frontex – the E.U. border control agency, inter-governmental organizations, like UNHCR and International Organization for Migration, several international and local NGOs as well as, activists, and volunteers. All these actors played a vital role in the reception of the displaced, forming, on the one hand, official and unofficial support networks and, on the other, new technologies of border security and humanitarian governance.

During the last three years, the island of Lesvos has become a field where the ‘hot-spot’ technologies of migration management have been tested out and a new deportation regime has been set up. This, however, had as a result the consequent

rise of a resistance and support movement, based mainly in the capital of Mytilene. Focusing on the slogans and the other unauthorized public interventions on the walls of the area within and around Mytilene, we address the transformations in the sensorial everydayness of the small city and the creation of a landscape of resistance and support.

Landscapes of resistance and support



Image 3: “Stop Deportation”, writing on the wall of a small Orthodox church located close to the Moria Refugee Camp, at the outskirts of the city of Mytilene, which since 2015 has been used by Christian African asylum seekers that reside at the camp.

Landscapes, as Barbara Bender argues:

“are created out of people’s understanding and engagement with the world around them ‘the world out there’” (...) “They are not a record but a recording, and this recording is much more than a reflection of human agency and action; it is creative of them” (Bender, 2002:103).

Made by local and international activists, but also by people on the move, often under the cover of the night, public unauthorized interventions express messages of support and they are public declarations of radical political agency and action. Transforming the landscape into a recording of displacement and resistance reflects the ways in which displaced people and radical activists understand and engage with the “world out there”. A world of militarized border control, refugee identification, reception and detention centers, and deportation regimes.

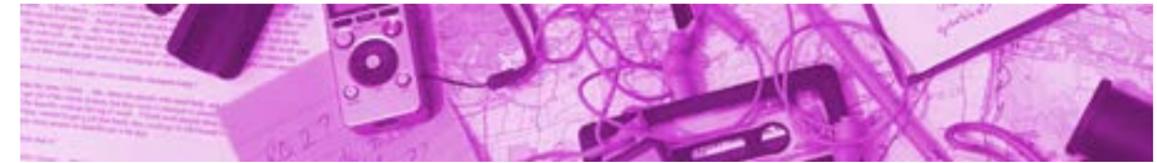
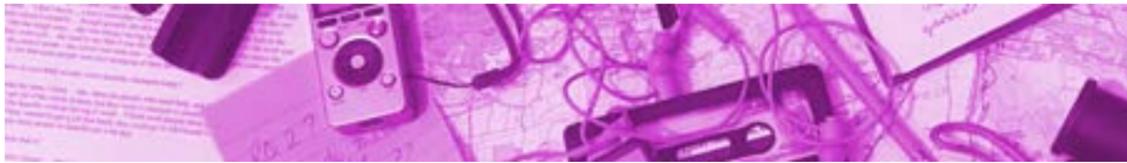


Image 4: 'Frontex, what will you tell your children?', writing next to the highway leading out of the city that comments on the 'dirty job' of managing migration flows of the European border control agency (i.e. FRONTEX).



Image 5: 'Stop Deportation', scratched the barbed wire fence on the surface of one of the outside walls of the Moria Reception and Identification Center (i.e. 'hotspot').

Emplaced activism and its traces on the walls

Unauthorized interventions on the landscape of Lesbos are the results of what we call emplaced activism. An activism born on this island out of the urgency of the current 'crisis', but also, emplaced here as a result of the interaction and collaboration between local and international activists, and those refugees and migrants who as 'life seekers' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018:2) resist the 'bare lives' (Agamben, 1998) of the refugee camps and the hotspots. Writings on the walls, as traces of this activism, indicate different

radicalized practices, such as hunger strikes, public protests and demonstrations in support of those to be imprisoned or deported, and occupations, both of buildings, to house people outside the hotspot, and of central public squares, to demonstrate the inhuman conditions of the Moria hotspot.

Following the geography of those unauthorized interventions, we move from the walls of the city center to the outskirts of the capital and finally around the area of the Moria refugee camp. Thus, on the walls of the lively city center, slogans and aestheticized stencils, made by international and local activists, communicate in Greek and English, political messages and demands to the locals and visitors who frequent the streets, the cafes and the market.



Image 6: Stencil in Greek that reads: "The state murders migrants". Located next to the central Sappho square of Mytilene, a place where most of the demonstrations take place in the city.

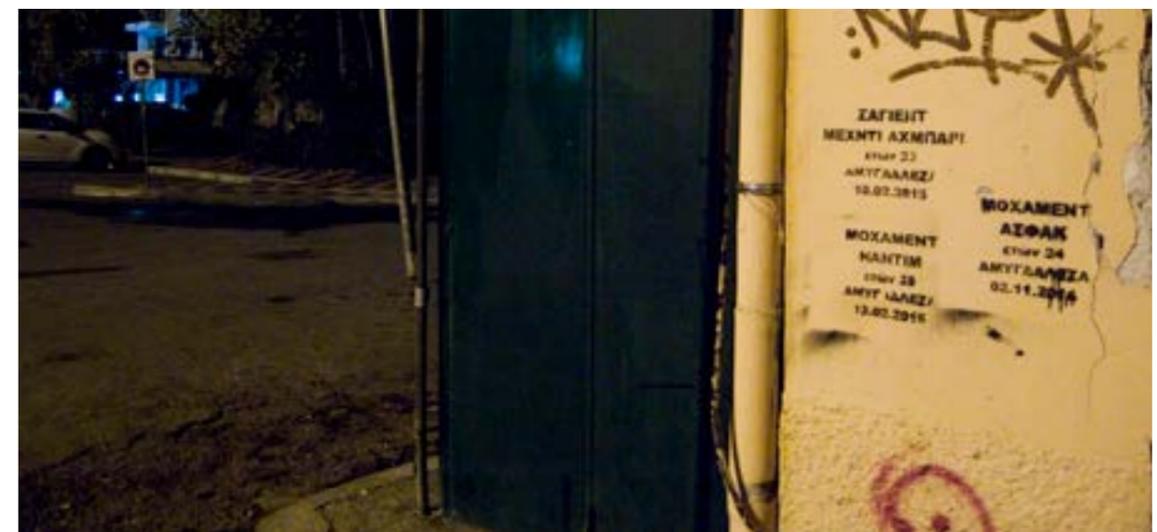
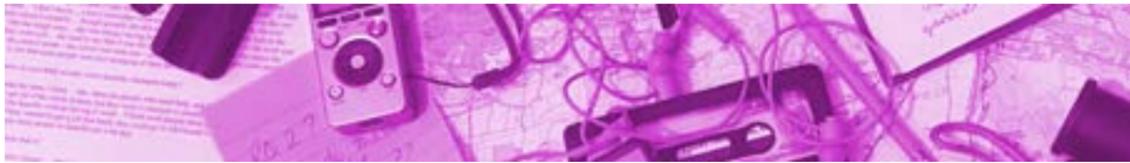


Image 7: Stencils with messages commemorating the deaths of migrants detained in Amygdaleza Detention Center in Athens during 2014-2015. The commemoration of those migrants who have lost their lives in detention acts as a reminder of the history of violent migration management in Greece, as well as of the history of the support movement.



However, more than bearers of the messages themselves, those interventions are indexes of the presence of a radical movement. A movement against acts of racism and human rights violations, that uses its rough and aggressive aesthetics to transform the sensorial everydayness of a city in which the authorities seem to care only for returning to a before-crisis normality or to express xenophobic reflexes.

Once outside the city, on the way to the two official refugee camps, we observe writings on the walls of two abandoned industrial buildings, which were occupied by activists and asylum seekers between 2016 and 2017.



Image 8: “Alpha Bank - Big Malaka”. Writing on a wall of a former occupied building at the industrial north outskirts of Mytilene. This is a writing, which uses the colloquial Greek word ‘Malaka’ (i.e. asshole) to express the frustration of the occupiers against ‘Alpha Bank’, the owner of the building who, together with the police evicted the occupation.

Half erased slogans on the walls of the now evicted occupations, act as a recording and a reminder of the collective, self-organized attempts for the creation of alternative residential and social spaces as well as spaces of resistance; resistance to the European fortress policy, to the ‘hotspot’ technologies of the humanitarian governance, to the NGO philanthropism, and to the private and public actors, who evict them from their property¹.

In contrast to the more aestheticized political interventions within the city, those on the outskirts seem as written declarations of the asylum seekers’ frustration towards all those actors.

Approaching the refugee camp in Moria, we encounter a welcoming note, which is revealing of the living conditions inside the largest Reception and Identification Center of Greece.

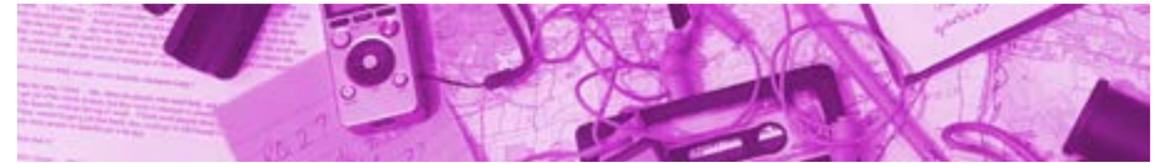
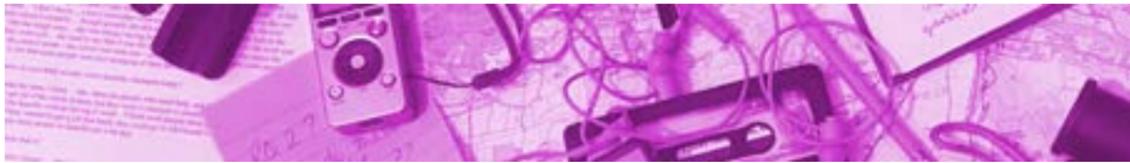


Image 9: “Welcome to prison Moria”, writing on one of the outside walls of the Moria Reception and Identification Center. Many of the asylum seekers call Moria Refugee camp a prison to stress the inhuman living conditions in the overcrowded camp. Its official capacity is approximately 3,500 people, but often the people who are there are more than 7,000.

Escaping “prison Moria”, claiming “freedom of movement”, and resisting deportations have been major demands of the emplaced activism on the island; demands expressed in demonstrations or in, often, violent contestations and recorded as slogans on the public walls.



Image 10: A simple but very powerful writing on a wall at the center of Mytilene, that express the liminal and vulnerable condition in which the asylum seekers find themselves because of the ‘geographical restriction’ to the islands. This restriction is imposed by the Greek authorities (as a result of the EU-Turkey statement), to every asylum seeker on the Greek islands until the decision on their asylum application. During waiting for the decision, these people are technically within EU, but actually they are restricted in the 5 islands with Reception and Identification centers.



According to Greek and European authorities, the 2016 E.U-Turkey statement, and the consequent drop in the number of arrivals, signaled the end of the 'Refugee Crisis'. However, Lesvos and the other Aegean islands with 'Reception and Identification Centers' –widely known as 'hotspots'– became liminal territories for the people who reach their shores. According to the 'geographical restriction'² that was imposed as a result of the statement, the asylum seekers cannot leave the islands until they have an answer from the authorities on their applications – a process that can take more than a year. In this way, Lesvos became a liminal area where people, while technically within the E.U., were not yet able to reach their desired destination; their desired new life. Stuck in-between the lives they left behind and those they can only imagine.

"Crisis" is not only defined by the number of arrivals or by the overcrowding of the camps. Whether it is called a 'Refugee Crisis' or a 'Reception Crisis'³, this is a view from-the-above; a dehumanizing view of the humanitarian governance technologies.

Antonio Gramsci, in his "Prison Notebooks" ([1930] 2011:32-33), argues:

*"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that **the old is dying and the new cannot be born**; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."*

Even if Gramsci refers to another crisis, that of the interwar period of the 20th century, his argument seems true for today as well. Europe seems to be in a prolonged crisis, in which the old is dying and the new has yet to be born. If **displacement** is among the results of this crisis, then **border control technologies, surveillance, 'hotspots', detention centers and deportation regimes**, surely are this crisis' morbid symptoms.

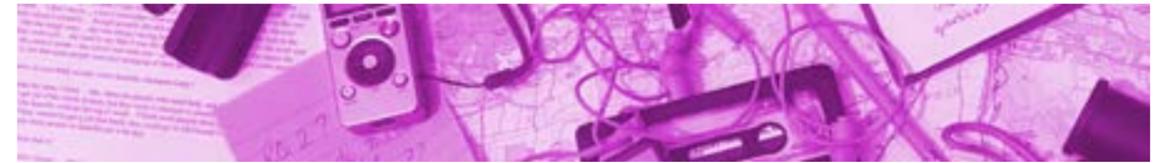
We chose to present the visual traces of the resistance to these symptoms, arguing that they are not just words and images on walls, but they can potentially be signs of a collective political imaginary towards a world of solidarity.

Notes

[1] Post by 'No Border Kitchen Lesvos' (a grassroots activist initiative) on the eviction of the 'old squat' in an abandoned industrial building which is owned by Alpha Bank: <https://noborderkitchenlesvos.noblogs.org/post/2017/04/29/no-yoga-in-the-police-station- eviction-of-old-squat-april-28th-2017/>

[2] See more on the "geographical restriction" to the islands here: <http://eumigration-lawblog.eu/implementation-of-the-eu-turkey-statement-eu-hotspots-and-restriction-of-asylum-seekers-freedom-of-movement/>.

[3] Many argue that after the "Refugee Crisis" Greece has been in a "Reception Crisis", because of the challenges that the Greek authorities face in many of the camps in Greece. See for example the August 2018 report by the organization Refugee Support Aegean on the situation at the camps in the Greek mainland: <http://rsaegaeon.org/reception-crisis-in-greece/>.



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