

Jenna M. Loyd

[Figures 1–5, pp 69–70]

Spanish and Farsi graffiti crisscrossed the walls of the single-platform train station in a small Greek border town. No one else was here on this December morning, and the fog made it impossible to see across the Evros river valley into Turkey, so I turned my attention to the large and small letters that marked people’s movements. “Ecuador” was emblazoned along one wall, “Salvador” on another; the words suggested welcome to future migrants whose presence I would not have expected there. These walls carried on a conversation, as bold swastika strikes bluntly replied to messages in faint Perso-Arabic script.

At the time I was in the Evros river valley in December 2011, the region had become a significant place of entry for migrants to the European Union. Border patrols in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas had temporarily reduced boat entries, forcing migrants to attempt overland crossings from Turkey into Greece and Bulgaria. Entry by sea was highly dangerous, as governments were known to sink migrant boats in a practice called “push-back.”⁻¹ Migrants had also died trying to cross from Turkey into Greece, where patrols by the E.U.’s external border agency Frontex, the fast-flowing river, cold winter temperatures, and landmines from World War II and subsequent conflicts created dangerous conditions.

I had made my way there to do research on shifting patterns of offshore border policing and onshore immigration detention. Greece’s detention and asylum system was widely known to be “disastrously dysfunctional.”⁻² Common European asylum policy proclaimed “burden sharing,” or equitable distribution of asylum seekers among E.U. states, but the 2003 Dublin II Regulation stipulated that asylum claims would be made in the first country of entry. This policy created conditions for concentrating migration crises in nations forming the E.U.’s external boundary.⁻³

These proximate and longstanding geopolitical conflicts

1
Pro Asyl, “The Truth May Be Bitter, but It Must Be Told’: The Situation of Refugees in the Aegean and the Practices of the Greek Coast Guard,” 2007, www.proasyl.de/fileadmin/proasyl/fm_redakteure/Broschueren_pdf/GriechenlandDoku_dt_klein.pdf.

2
Ian Traynor, “EU Border Police ‘Turning Blind Eye’ to Abuse of Migrants in Greece,” [The Guardian](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/21/eu-border-police-blind-eye-migrant-abuse), September 21, 2011, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/21/eu-border-police-blind-eye-migrant-abuse.

3
Alison Mountz and Jenna M. Loyd, “Constructing the Mediterranean Region: Obscuring Violence in the Bordering of Europe’s Migration ‘Crises,’” [ACME](http://www.acme-journal.org) 13 no. 2 (2014): 173–195.

Irina Contreras, "Descado en Los Angeles: Cycles of Invisible Resistance," in Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis, ed. Jenna M. Loyd, Matt Mitchelson and Andrew Burridge (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 325–336.

Jennifer Hyndman, Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

Ian Baucom, Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Duke University Press, 2005).

Ibid.

are profoundly consequential for migrants and their advocates. But as an American citizen, I was struck to find myself in the “ricochets” of American empire.^{–4} Refugees from Afghanistan had become the largest population seeking asylums in Europe (28,000 claims in 2011) since the U.S. commenced its war in 2001. In line with the trend since the 1990s to keep refugees within their region of origin,^{–5} this number pales in comparison to the over three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran in 2011. Many others were fleeing Iraq and Pakistan, other places where the U.S. was conducting military operations and drone strikes. While Greece (among other states) had become a border guard for Europe, it also was engaged in an implicit project of containing the effects of U.S. imperial violence. In short, the fact that the United States resettled 410 Afghan refugees in 2011 is related to the precarity faced by tens of thousands of asylum seekers in Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere.

My quest to understand detention and boundary enforcement in the Greece-Turkey borderlands as elements of American empire is indebted to Walter Benjamin, whose materialist approach to history brings the asynchronous past and present into a constellation, “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”^{–6} As Ian Baucom writes, taking responsibility for this “relational constellation of now-being with what-has-been” engages Benjamin’s understanding that the “‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule.”^{–7} Édouard Glissant built on Benjamin’s writings, insisting that:

We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments. The poetics of duration [...] reappears to take up the relay from the poetics of the moment. Lightning flashes are the shivers of one who desires or dreams of a totality that is impossible or yet to come; duration urges on those who attempt to live this totality, when dawn shows through the linked histories of peoples.^{–8}

For me, taking responsibility for this history means showing how these ricochets and relays have accumulated in dispersed

constellations of bordering and carceral practices.

Political theorist Wendy Brown takes up the question of the apparent paradox of the worldwide trend toward border walling at a moment of heightened transnational economic integration. For Brown, these efforts represent attempts to shore up state sovereignty. The “seemingly physical, obdurate” architecture of border walls “would seem to embody precisely the power of the ‘no,’ physically proclaiming and enforcing what is *interdit*.”⁹ The border creates a sense of national space even as border regulation is shifted offshore through patrols in international waters, passport and visa checks, and bilateral agreements (such as that between Italy and Libya) for less powerful nations to carry out border-control measures on behalf of their wealthier neighbours. Moreover, Brown continues:

[T]he new walls would seem to signal a problem usually identified with sovereignty’s external face—enmity, rather than order—and run it through the whole of society, producing pockets and islands of walled-in “friends” amid walled-out “enemies.” The fantasy of an “us here/them there” cannot be sustained amid the barricaded and checkpointed landscape of postapartheid South Africa, the wall-carved cities of Baghdad and Jerusalem, or the interior checkpoints and gated white communities north of the U.S. border with Mexico.¹⁰

While Brown correctly draws attention to the blurring of citizens, military, and the police within domestic territory, her analysis too easily attributes this blurring of interior and exterior spaces to the neoliberal crises of sovereignty embodied in the “new walls.” Focusing our critical attention on border walling is necessary, but treating this political moment as exceptional does not help us to understand the accumulation of geopolitical entanglements relaying between Afghan asylum seekers and me in the Greece-Turkey borderlands. Moreover, Brown’s emphasis on newness suggests that the historical production of settler colonial sovereignty through enclosure and territorial containment has also not been one of continuous crisis.

If we begin instead from historical efforts to territorialize

American empire, we see the simultaneous roll-out of white-supremacist prison walls and military fortifications. This analytical starting point is suggested by Dylan Rodríguez, who writes: "The U.S. prison is a global statecraft, an arrangement and mobilization of violence that is, from its very inception, already unhinged from the delimiting 'domestic' (or 'national') sites to which it is presumptively tethered."¹¹ That is, Rodríguez continues, "the arrangement of juridically coded bodily violence that is coordinated and institutionalized by the U.S. prison regime generates a logic of (anti)social formation that fundamentally exceeds the national geography within which it is nominally situated."¹²

One of the first places that I came to understand the mutual construction of colonial enclosure and the prison was at the site of a minor Civil War battleground in the Rio Grande Valley south of Albuquerque in what is now the U.S. state of New Mexico.¹³ Fort Craig was a United States territorial fort and prison, which served as the base for executing the Indian Wars, including the pursuit of the Chiricahua Apache resistance leader Geronimo (born Goyathlay). After Geronimo's 1886 surrender in Skeleton Canyon, just north of the U.S.-Mexico boundary between Arizona and New Mexico, the United States transported him and his band to a military prison at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. They were subsequently held as prisoners of war at Fort Sill, another military post established to prosecute the Indian Wars, in the Oklahoma Territory. During World War II, Fort Sill was used as an enemy alien internment camp for Japanese Americans. As I wrote this essay in 2014, it was being used to confine children from Central America who have been captured in the Rio Grande Valley attempting to cross into Texas from Mexico.

The guardhouse at Fort Craig also served as the territorial prison. An 1870 Surgeon General Report on Barracks and Hospitals with Descriptions of Military Posts tells us, "the underground cells at Fort Craig are probably the most discreditable example of prison construction found in the Army."¹⁴ It continues:

The prison-rooms are poorly lighted and ventilated, the last mentioned having only a few small holes near the roof and chinks around the door for the admission of fresh air. The guard room

and room occupied by white prisoners are warmed by open fireplaces; but there is neither fireplace nor stove in the room occupied by colored prisoners. The prison-rooms had, during a period of three years, an average of sixteen men confined in them—the greatest number reached was thirty-two.

In one corner of the guard-room is a trap-door opening upon a stairway which leads down to the cells where prisoners are kept in solitary confinement. The cells are six in number, three on each side of the passage way. Each cell is 5 feet 7 inches long, 2 feet 10 inches wide, and 4 feet 10 inches high, giving a cubic space of 76 feet; width of passage way 3 feet 7 inches. [...] The whole amount of air and light, admitted into the dungeons passes through an opening beneath the guard-room steps, not to exceed in area one square foot. This is the only opening, except the trap door, which is always closed at night. [...]

The men, with seldom more than a single blanket, sleep upon the earthen floor, which, from being frequently sprinkled to lay the dust, contains much moisture. Colds and rheumatism are frequent among the inmates, and, if not removed at once to the hospital for treatment, are very difficult to treat.—¹⁵

It is unclear from the report who was confined in these dungeons. What is clear is that this guardroom prison built the codes of post-bellum white supremacy into the ground where the U.S. was seeking to establish its sovereignty. Rodríguez's observation that the U.S. prison regime exceeds its national geography is evident in the confinement of the Chiricahua on a military base in Florida (on what had been a fort established by the Spanish and later held by the English) that was also used to dispossess Native peoples, and in colonial territory in what would subsequently become the state of Oklahoma. Moreover, the imprisonment of Japanese American citizens relayed the legal history of racial ineligibility for citizenship to this

site, an operation that would again interiorize the globally expansive geographic imagination of U.S. white supremacy.⁻¹⁶

The ricochets of American empire that I felt through the cold fog in Greece were not only in the layers of violence accumulated at the border, in detention facilities, and through xenophobic attacks in the streets of Athens. They were also in the practice of interception as a means of preventing asylum claims. In 1981, following the arrivals on the Florida coast of 125,000 Cuban and 25,000 Haitian asylum seekers over a six-month period, the United States established a two-pronged strategy to deter future "immigration crises": imprisonment (legally, and euphemistically, called "administrative detention") and territorial denial through policing at sea. The U.S. practice of interception, according to international law professor Guy Goodwin-Gill, would become "the model, perhaps, for all that has followed."⁻¹⁷ Goodwin-Gill recounted this history to a European audience in 2011 soon after Italy announced it wanted to send soldiers to Tunisia (where people had overthrown the government, setting off what came to be known as the Arab Spring) to prevent a mass exodus by sea.⁻¹⁸ As in the early 1980s, governments vocally upheld their commitments to asylum and humanitarian protection, but simultaneously established restrictive asylum procedures and offshore policing practices that would make these commitments hollow.

My mapping of the ricochets of American empire from the Greek border to U.S. military forts in contested colonial territories, to Coast Guard interdiction in the Caribbean Sea illustrates the blurring of military, civilian, prisoner-of-war, and refugee operations, categories that defy any sense of a securely domestic space. The intertwining of prison and military spaces in the territorialization of the United States does not support a simple operation of sovereign enclosure. Rather, the repeated use of these dual-purpose spaces to forcibly relocate and confine "internal" enemies points to the exteriorization of these subjects through the exercise of military power. In this way, we might better understand contemporary bordering projects as also being tightly tied to projects of expulsion, and not simply exclusion. Given that the history and architecture of bordering is one of imprisonment and militarization, challenging these violent practices will mean retying genealogies of abolition and anti-

colonialism to contemporary political idioms of abolition, freedom of movement, and anti-imperialism.

Acknowledgements

Portions of this research were supported by the National Science Foundation under Award #0847133 (Principal Investigator: Alison Mountz). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.