

the spill, the fold, the spiral (undercartographies against the border)

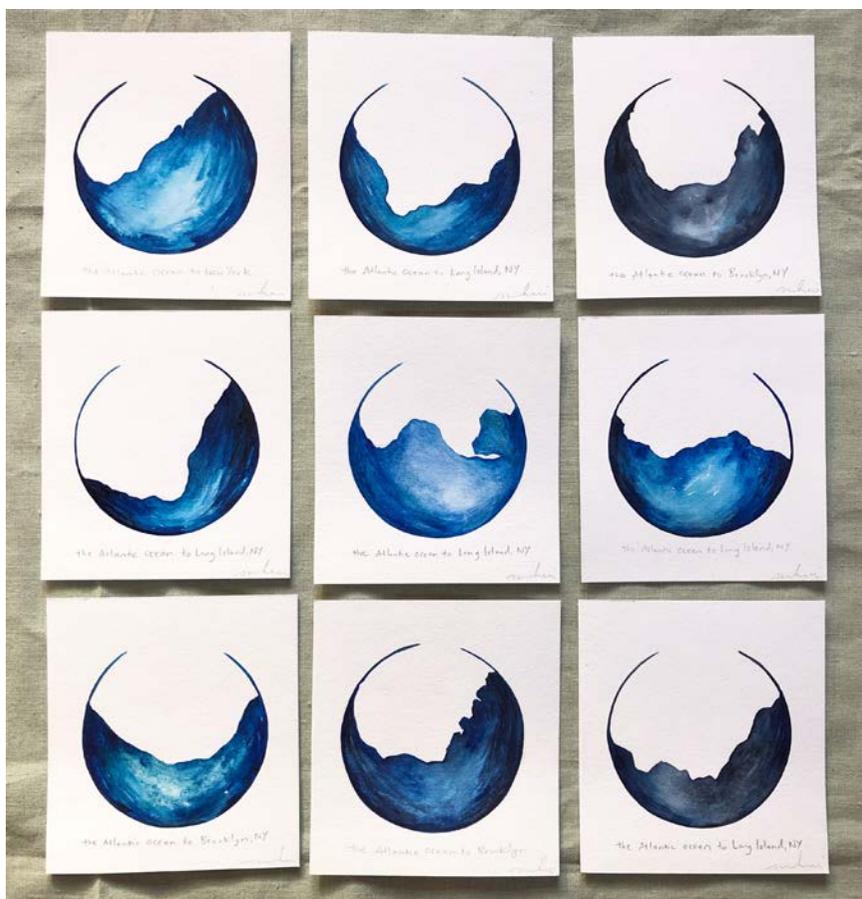
by kareem alkabbani & tom western

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
Maintained by constant policing, violence
Always threatening a new map.

Wendy Trevino

In Athens borders follow people around. The colonial map weighs heavy, pressing down on people forced to move or unable to move or both. But the city gathers spatial imaginations, made of errantry and history and multiplicity, and the city becomes mobile. Here we write shapes and strategies that turn the city into a sea and the sea into a city. We write Mediterranean futures. We write the spill, the fold, the spiral.

All are ways of thinking against the imperial transparencies of maps, ways of evading control and capture. These are undercartographies: maps that can't be seen but can be felt and heard. Maps that are invisible to border enforcement. The below is a gathering of imaginations, rhythms, entanglements, and spatial inventions. Practices that write against Euro-colonial cartographic cruelty. Athens and the Mediterranean are always caught up. A testing ground and a dumping ground.



elaine su-hui
atlantic oceans to new york
collections of watercolor drawings on paper
4.5 x 5 inches each

We follow the counterstrategies detailed by Edward Said when writing of reinscribing a Palestinian presence on the map – counterstrategies which always have to come from on the ground, from below. “Geography,” he wrote, is “the art of war but can also be the art of resistance if there is a counter-map and a counter-strategy.”¹ In Athens, and in the seas that it opens onto, these become undercartographies – geographies invented and inscribed at street level, that write spaces into existence and support free movement.

The Spill

We imagine cities running into each other. Or seeing their reflections across a watery expanse. Athens is Damascus, is Beirut, is Amman, is al-Quds, is Alexandria. The colonial map turns the sea into a border, turns continents against one another. But the Mediterranean itself is a city, with all its geographies spilling over.

The old Greek word $\lambda\alpha\delta\epsilon$ – or seawards² – makes conversations. Cities speak circling histories. We know Damascus through the Greeks and Phoenicians, the Kurds and the Palestinians. We know Athens the same way. Cities spill over the map. Diversity is the first part of every sentence.

In an essay on the Aegean sea as a “far-flung city,” historian Spyros Asdrahas narrates the Greek archipelago as a dispersed urban complex, with islands grouped together and understanding themselves in relation – “a microcosm weaving a net of communications from one end to the other of the centreless sea-city.”³ Communities are migrations, from all around the Mediterranean and between the Aegean islands themselves.

“In 1673, 15% of the population of Patmos bore names of local origin, and so on.”⁴ The border is a fiction. The sea-city is spatial continuity, gathering up all the edges.

To spill is to flow over, to pour out, to move quickly, to be liquid, to disclose truths.⁵

Athens today does this work, holding and supporting other cities and movements. Places depend on each other. Cities layer over one another. Not as palimpsest (“palimpsest is too archaeological”, writes Doreen Massey, and stays too closely to the imagination of surfaces⁶), but as counterpoint, written together as a fugue.⁷

The contrapuntal city is a sea and a method. We don’t see the fish speaking Greek or speaking Arabic. The spill smudges the lines – the linear histories and geographies of empire.

The Fold

Poet and painter Etel Adnan wrote that “folded maps push countries aside.”⁸

She made maps on leporellos – books that fold outwards like a concertina – the folds making geographies that multiply and recombine, that are infinite and pleating,⁹ that knock borders out of joint so the lines don’t align and the placenames become multilingual. So the sliproads open and the territories collapse. The folds open escape routes, ways of losing those who shout race and nation.

Pinch two points and bring your hands together. We enact what history already knows but that maps deny: that geographies are already embedded within one another.

The first articulation of Greek citizenship came not from the Greek state or from the European “protecting powers.” It came from Haiti. In 1821, inspired by the Haitian revolution some decades prior, Greeks fighting for independence from the Ottoman Empire sent a letter to Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer, to which Boyer replied sending news and support, writing “Citizens! Convey to your co-patriots the warm wishes that the people of Haiti send on behalf of your liberation.” Signed: “in the 15th of January 1822 and the 19th year of Independence, BOYER.”¹⁰

This is the Aegean-Caribbean – that which Derek Walcott called “reversible seas”¹¹ – a co-mapping that has been written through literatures and that enfolds and unfolds.¹² Folded maps bring places closer together, making geographies that blow so far past the border it becomes both a footnote and a stupor.

The Spiral

The border is a fiction. The work of unimagined geographies of the nation, of Frontex, the border agency (why do we give the border agency?). These unimagination are small and recent and we have histories and futures on our side.

The artist Meriem Bennani makes a future where teleportation has become the main form of transport and border militarisation involves dematerialising people on the move. There's a scene in one of her videos where a group of crocodiles are taking the now-old-fashioned route of crossing the sea on a small boat. The boat has a synthesiser and a sound system and they sing in autotuned voices of persecution and the danger of the journey.

Soon an enormous weaponised border tanker cuts across and intercepts them. The song stops, and the small boat appears as a target in the crosshairs. The scene depicts a pushback. Yet the crocodiles start a new beat, and their rhythm whips the sea into splashes and dances and starts to generate a spiral, becomes frenetic and irresistible. A message flashes on the border guards' binocular lenses reading "target lost" and the spiral opens a portal in the sea through which the boat descends and escapes. The scene ends and the video's narrator tells us that there are countless stories like this, all with different starts and ends, but that the border guards "never win."¹³

Adnan writes that "nations are sitting and crying in front of screens larger than their borders. Their brains are starting to fall apart."¹⁴ Massey calls it "falling through the map:" a means of getting away from the surface and transparency and the codifications of cartography.¹⁵ We call it the undercartography, with rhythms to outrun the border and the citizenship regime.

They call it a pushback, but you can't push back centuries that render the border untenable. Music sends movements spiralling off the map, spinning away from capture. In our Mediterranean, music moves, picks up and feeds back, resonating from its anticolonial and anti-border histories into anticolonial and anti-border futures.

At the other end of the reversible sea, another spiral. In the 1960s, Haitian writers began to reimagine the whole world as a spiral – something that obeys no predetermined order, and that puts all beings into relation.¹⁶ The spiral is ex-centric, making cartographies that write away from so-called centers and their systems of validation. "A formal testament to the possibility of the infinite."¹⁷ An undercartography. A nonlinear unmapping of geography and history.

¹ Edward Said, 1994. *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969-1994*. London: Chatto and Windus, p.416.

² Phoebe Giannisi, 2017. "Seaward: The Sound of Eros and an Athenian Avenue to the Aegean," trans. Konstantinos Matsoukas. *Montreal Architectural Review*, 4: 21-39.

³ Spyros Asdrahas, 1985. "The Greek Archipelago – A Far-Flung City," in *Maps and Map-Makers of the Aegean*, ed. V. Sphyroeras, A. Avramea, and S. Asdrahas. Athens: Olkos, p.246.

⁴ Asdrahas, 1985: 243.

⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 2016. *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

⁶ Doreen Massey, 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage, p.110.

⁷ A fugue is a form of musical composition where multiple melodic lines are happening at the same time, woven together through counterpoint, and all gathered around the same theme.

⁸ Etel Adnan, 1997. *There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other*. Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, p.41.

⁹ Jennifer Scappettone, 2022. "The Infinite Cartography of Etel Adnan." *Poetry Foundation*, 21 November – <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2022/11/the-infinite-cartography-of-etel-adnan>; Mahwash Shoaib, 2003. "Surpassing Borders and 'Folded Maps': Etel Adnan's location in There." *Studies in the Humanities*, 30(1-2): 21-28.

¹⁰ E.G. Sideris and A.A. Konsta, 2005. "A Letter from Jean-Pierre Boyer to Greek Revolutionaries." *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, 11(1): 167-171.

¹¹ Derek Walcott, 1997. *The Bounty*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p.62.

¹² Emily Greenwood, 2009. *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Merriam Bennani, 2021. "Guided Tour of a Spill (CAPS Interlude)" – <http://meriembennani.com/>.

¹⁴ Etel Adnan, 2008. *Seasons*. Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, pp.3-4.

¹⁵ Massey, 2005: 106-111.

¹⁶ Kaiama Glover, 2010. *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

¹⁷ Glover, 2010: viii.