

BORDERS, MIGRATIONS, ASYLUM AND REFUGE

# Migratory Activisms in the Eastern Mediterranean

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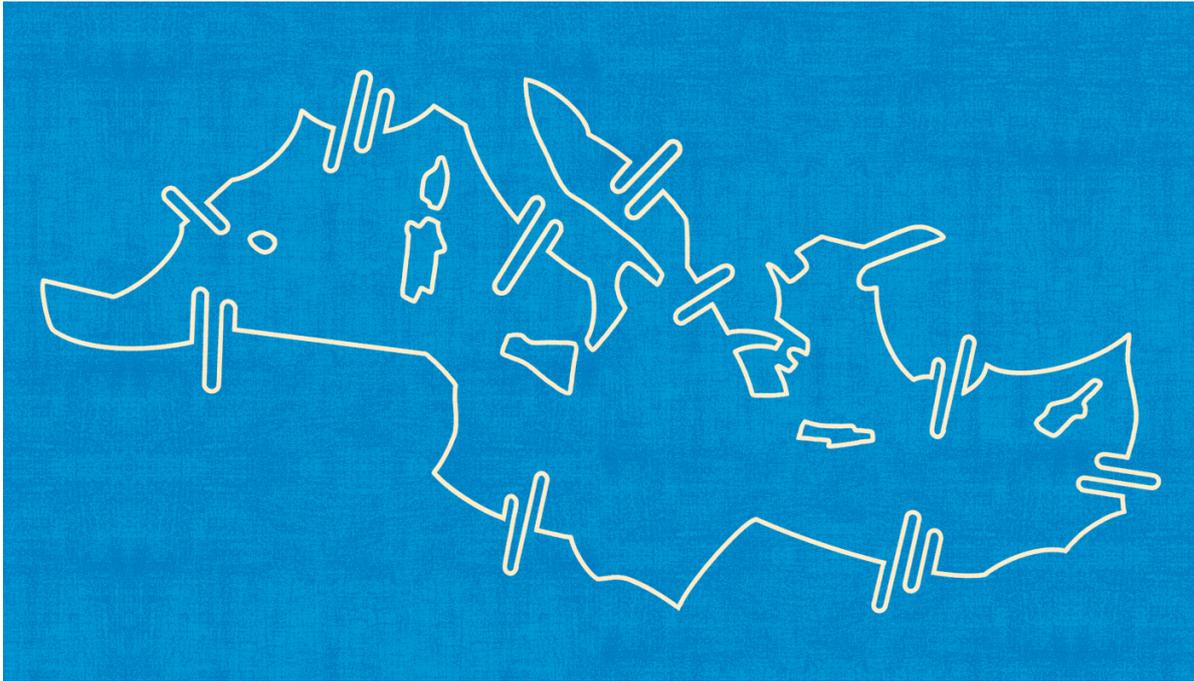


Illustration by [Carole Hénaff](#)

*On every side the idea is being relayed. When you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form.*

Édouard Glissant [1]

‘And believe me, this is from every single Syrian who is in Greece, we promise to protect Greece from any concern, and to stand together with any Greek person or citizen’. A hundred kids applaud loudly. We are at a school in a neighbourhood near the port of Piraeus—a school with a history of diversity and welcome, but in an area where more recently the neofascist political party Golden Dawn made gains. Our organisation—the Syrian and Greek Youth Forum (SGYF)—got an invitation from the Athens Minister of Education to speak and play music at the school, and the two co-founders, both from Damascus, are on a stage set up in the gym hall, addressing the pupils and their teachers through a sound system that bounces their voices around the room like a bathtub.

This event is one of many in and around Athens where our team has been invited to talk and participate—the culmination of a couple of years spent on the slow and steady work of social and political inclusion. We find ourselves as citizens, Athenians. Not in terms of legal

status and voting rights; not for now, at least. But as a validation of the team's struggle for rights, a recognition of contributions to the city, an unmaking of borders between refugees and hosts. This, in turn, fits into expanded activist geographies. My colleagues have given a decade to activism: first in the Syrian revolution, then in the struggle for refugee rights in Greece. Freedom, in both cases. And this finds easy commonalities with social movements and political struggles in Greece, and with solidarities from elsewhere.

*On every side the idea is being relayed.* This essay sketches a theory of migratory activisms. It takes its jumping off point from Édouard Glissant's line on shared struggle at the top. Glissant wrote of circles and circulations, and built a language that sounds out the rhythms and relations of struggle. Although he focused more on geographies of the Caribbean than the Aegean, he described the Mediterranean as a 'sea that concentrates' [2] —a space that gathers and echoes ideas. Building on Glissant's thought, this piece understands the sea as not only a space of circulation, but also a space of mobilisation, as political movements resonate and travel, and people make transnational spaces of resistance. A feedback loop exists around the Mediterranean. These migratory activisms create sites of shared struggle. And these commonalities are rooted in the rhythms of the street, the city, and everyday life.

## We have been developing methods of creative activism: using culture as a tool of political participation

This idea comes equally through my work with SGYF, and the activist lessons I have learnt from my colleagues. I was invited to join the team at the start of 2019, having worked in Athens for a couple of years before that, building friendships, falling into social circles and solidarity networks. Since then we have been developing methods of creative activism: using culture as a tool of political participation, of finding connections and shared histories, of belonging and becoming the city. These creative citizenship practices remake the logics of the urban landscape through the production of common spaces. Movement across borders is always a social movement and a political movement.

Migratory activisms, then, work to disrupt representations of migration that focus on linear journeys and privilege European space. They serve to decentre refugee and host binaries, and allow narratives to emerge that are usually drowned out by border panics and crisis reportage. I begin by developing ideas of migratory activisms through collective histories and relational geographies. I then turn to the kinds of street-level citizenship work that connects these movements, and which run ahead of state-led programmes to 'integrate' people. I close with some thoughts on shared struggles.

## Migratory Activisms

What if we think in terms of trajectories rather than territories? Homi Bhabha outlines a 'new geographical consciousness', built out of 'multicentred circuits' and 'ex-centric itineraries.' [3] Historians, too, have drawn the Mediterranean through its linkages of

people and places. Where ‘travel and migration, trade routes, the distribution of labour and capital, military conquest, and cultural exchange have produced the Mediterranean as a single but also multiple geographical spaces’. [4] Where Medieval mariners crisscrossed the waters with ease. [5] Where Mediterranean identities emerge that are at once connected across the sea and set in particular places. [6]

These relational geographies help us understand events and movements of the last decade. Too often, scholarly accounts of Mediterranean migrations focus on the journey, the crossing, with little concern for what came before and what comes afterwards. And almost always, these accounts follow arrows drawn on maps pointing from south to north, reproducing logics of ‘refugee crisis’. Better, instead, to work with what Diana Sorensen calls ‘alternative vectors of movement’ —trajectories that contain ‘transit, transmission, and exchange, often detecting conversations that have gone unnoticed’. [7] These directionalities, Sorensen continues, are ‘not regulated by the conventionally established paths of hegemony’, but instead through ‘circulating along maritime pathways or settling in the borders’. [8] Ideas, cultures, people, and things move in more than one direction, and the task is to ‘discern linkages, many of which may be unexpected’. [9]

In the case of migratory activisms, this becomes a question of how movements *move* —how activisms travel, circulate, migrate; how citizenship struggles shuttle from place to place; how resistances resonate across exploded trajectories. What other writers have called ‘migrant resistance’ and ‘immigrant protest’, [10] isn’t something that begins and ends in Europe. Maurice Stierl describes ‘transborder solidarity’ as something ‘fleeting and momentary’, [11] and that people ‘begin to challenge their marginalisation and exclusion’ once they enter Europe and are subjected to EU border governance and violence. [12] But focus on this kind of activism means paying less attention to people’s struggles and resistance before reaching the European continent, and the feedback loops that connect these movements.

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Migratory activisms instead exist across expanded and decentred geographies. They connect disconnected histories and challenge Eurocentrism. [13] Some examples. Sara Salem brilliantly traces the importance of Marxist thought and practice to Middle Eastern politics through the 20th century, writing of how the work of Gramsci and Fanon fed into revolutionary struggle in Egypt. [14] Malu Halasa and Assaad Alachi detail the influence of the Serbian Otpor! movement on the Syrian revolution, unfolding through a series of civil disobedience workshops looped from Serbia to Sweden to Syria. [15] Recent conversations between Syrian and Palestinian activists with those involved in the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States sketch commonalities, solidarities, and shared strategies. [16]

In the words of my colleague at SGYF, Kareem al Kabbani, who has taught me much about the movement of movements, and how our activisms in Athens are connected to others elsewhere: ‘You can hear these voices everywhere —in America, in UK— and this voice it turned to break statues, it turned also to looking more in the history. The sound everywhere, it’s travelling from place to place’. [17] What emerges through these migratory activisms is a set of commonalities, very often rooted in acts of citizenship. As Hassan Abbas puts it, the Syrian revolution was ‘an exceptional act of citizenship... the first steps in the process of reclaiming the bonds of citizenship’. [18] In different contexts, but in related ways, these citizenship practices are now playing out in Athenian streets.

## Citizenship Work

Active citizenship is the organising principle of our team. ‘We watch the city and ask what we can do as citizens’. [19] On one level, this means building a platform to be included in Greek society and political decision making, working in solidarity and collaboration with other Athenian organisations and communities. On another level, it is about unmaking and remaking the meanings of citizenship. Crucially, this is about decoupling ideas of citizenship from national identities, from the nation-state itself.

I am told that there is no need to forget identities. It is easily possible to be both Syrian and Greek; possible to empower multiple communities simultaneously. A lot of this thinking is based on history, and the connections between Greece and Syria that stretch back for centuries. Diversity is what holds a place together. My colleagues speak of Damascus in this way. Whoever goes to Damascus becomes Damascus, and diversity becomes the identity of the place. We apply the same logics to Athens, and are all now Athenians as a result.

So although our work has centred on remaking the Syrian and Greek experience, it seeks to discard the ‘ethnic lens’ of methodological nationalism —that which views migrants as culturally and socially discrete from ‘national societies’, and assumes that people can only have one country and one identity. [20] More than this, it seeks to distort ideas that index place to ethnicity and vice versa. The ethnic lens is melted down, remade with commonalities not just between Syria and Greece, but across bigger geographies of creative activism. The team performs traditional arts and popular culture and teaches them to others; cooks and distributes free food at social centres around the city; runs workshops on employment and labour rights. ‘Syrian’ becomes a vector of inclusion: subverting logics of who is a host and who is hosted, a space where all are welcome.

And this connects with ideas of border thinking. Take, for example, the work of Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III with Latinx youth in the USA and Spain, who develop this idea to illuminate ‘practices of belonging and activist strategies that reject national identity categories in both home and host nations’, and which are ‘animated by transnational cultures of resistance’. [21] Collective and collectivist ways of organising are carried, remembered, and remade in new migratory contexts. These transnational and migratory activisms are full of creativity. But the street-level theories of citizenship being generated by people crossing borders are often invisible to the agents of the state

responsible for ‘integrating’ them. [22]

Street-level citizenship work runs way ahead of state-managed integration programmes: people create, instead, a space of self-organisation, border thinking and activist practice

The same is true in Athens. Street-level citizenship work runs way ahead of state-managed integration programmes. People create, instead, a space of self-organisation, border thinking and activist practice; a workshop of subject positions worth inhabiting; an escape route from the representation traps of state work (and scholarship) which allow people only to be refugees and to speak only as victims, to be positioned as a problem in need of fixing, or to become ‘useful’ through narrow vocational opportunities. [23] Such spaces open new forms of identity and belonging that no longer map onto the nation-state. As Kareem Al Kabbani puts it, ‘I don’t want to come back [to Syria] as a Syrian or as Greek, or as any nationality. I’m an active citizen, and I am really welcoming any person that believes in this method to come and to live this experience’. [24]

So migratory activisms generate transnational citizenships. Culture and knowledge exist in circulation. Cities and citizenships are never fixed or finished, but are constantly being crafted, claimed, and voiced at street level. Narratives of displacement accumulate and unsettle in the city, the city which has long been a site of contested identities, which in turn generate constant creativities. Inclusion is not just a two-way street but a whole metro system of mutualities, gathering unlikely publics and materialising in unexpected vistas, redrawing maps of urban space.

## Shared Struggles

I close with a call to amplify this citizenship work, and to do so by recognising how they are part of shared struggles. In this I follow Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller, who argue that the displaced are urban precariats—who join broader urban struggles to reclaim resources within processes of emplacement and claims for social citizenship. [25] And what Asef Bayat calls ‘street politics’, wherein the street is where people ‘forge identities, enlarge solidarities, and extend their protest beyond their immediate circles to the unknown, the strangers’. [26] What Bayat calls the ‘Arab Street’ finds its echo in the *plateias* of Athens, as activisms and protests are increasingly based on things shared and held in common.

Again, much of this comes from history. Memories of anticolonial resistance carry and combine – through Ottoman pasts, but also through European colonisation and ongoing colonialities that straddle and saddle both sides of the Mediterranean. The SGYF team performs *arada*—the traditional performance art from Damascus, resounding with messages of revolt against empires— in Athens, filling public spaces with anticolonial

echoes. Again, activist practices and strategies in one place are informed by cultures of resistance and collective action in another. [27]

So while Greece is a country crushed by enforced austerity packages and EU border regimes, [28] it is also lucky —my colleagues tell me— to have so many people arriving and staying, so many ideas and so much energy. All of which is missing from accounts of migration that focus only on the deathscapes of the Mediterranean and crisis at the borders. And all of which risks being written out of the archive of the city and the nation, as has been the case with other kinds of citizenships deemed ‘dangerous’ to the polis and the Greek state. [29] We set up an [Active Citizens Sound Archive](#) for these reasons —to document our citizenship work, but also to reorient the idea of an archive away from the nation and towards the relational, the migratory, the activist, the communal. Maybe such a resource could be useful more broadly. Maybe it could contribute towards a recognition that those in charge of policy decisions could learn a lot from those remaking citizenships from the ground up.

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