

## EPILOGUE

# On the Topic of Location

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### Abstract

What does it mean to ‘locate’ the study of location in the Mediterranean? Would studying location somewhere other than the Mediterranean make location itself look different? Conversely – this is the same question, inside out – is there something distinctively Mediterranean about the topic of location? This afterword considers the way in which the volume contributes to rethinking not just Mediterranean anthropology but also the broader assumption that anthropology is about studying general topics in particular places.

### Commonplaces

Anthropologists, as Eriksen (2018) notes, typically study some-*thing*, some-*where*. This recurrent anthropological form is evidenced in the distinctive and recognisable aesthetic of titles and abstracts (dance in rural Greece, neo-liberalism in Puerto Rican street markets, infrastructural politics in Kinshasa, etc.). But this ‘topic–location’<sup>1</sup> pairing is more than a verbal tic, a writerly trope. It is a profound structuring device of anthropological knowledge production. Pairing a topic with

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a location forces each to cut across the other in ways anthropologists typically value. Locations<sup>2</sup> specify theme and concepts, tie them to empirical experiential realities. Conversely, making particular locations speak to themes, topics, and concepts that are shared beyond a 'regionalist' audience opens up conversations with anthropologists working elsewhere (cf. Howe and Boyer 2015). This is why, despite the recurrent ways in which anthropologists rail against the topic–location binary, try to challenge it, destroy it, or radically reimagine it,<sup>3</sup> they keep coming back to it in the immanent practice of the discipline. Supervisors continue to instruct students, and reviewers to invite authors, to find that 'topic–location' sweet spot. In this enduring anthropological aesthetic, a something without a somewhere feels 'ungrounded', a somewhere without a something feels 'uninteresting', a 'mere case study'.

Having got the topic–location device in clear view, we can see in what ways this volume's call to study location in the Mediterranean is both classic and new. The form is familiar: these chapters consider an enduring anthropological topic ('location'), in a recognisable albeit problematic location ('the Mediterranean'). Yet the fact that the topic here is precisely location brings an exciting recursivity and also a hint of paradox to the exercise. What does it mean to 'locate' the study of location? Would studying location somewhere other than the Mediterranean make location look different? Conversely – this is the same question, inside out – is there something distinctively Mediterranean about the topic of location?

## Returns

As the [Introduction](#) (Chapter 1) to this volume reminds us, the topic of Mediterranean distinctiveness (or, conversely, the coherence of the Mediterranean as a location) has had a problematic life in anthropology. Andrew Shryock has noted in a perceptive recent comment that anthropologists seem to be forever 'returning' to the Mediterranean (2020). Collections such as the present one are critically aware that they are returning to a location that was once the scene of a thriving regionalist anthropology, dissolved by critical fiat in the 1980s. Such returns frame their efforts as much against as within that older history. Yet, as Shryock notes, Julian Pitt-Rivers himself in one of the foundational texts of the 'old' Mediterraneanist anthropology, already saw

his discipline as returning, after a hiatus, to ‘the Mediterranean that figured so large in the writings of the founders of anthropology’ (Pitt-Rivers 1963, 10; quoted in Shryock 2020, 151). Shryock’s explanation of this phenomenon turns on the distinctive and problematic way in which topics cling to locations.

On the one hand, with each return, the problematics of Mediterranean anthropology seem to change drastically. The present collection clearly bears out Shryock’s observation that ‘The old problem of Mediterranean anthropology was comparison. As a way of articulating the region and defining its distinctive qualities, it failed. The new problems of Mediterranean anthropology are connection, movement, protection, and border-crossing’ (Shryock 2020, 153). Indeed, the chapters in this volume do not, in the main, gravitate to the classic topics – honour and propriety, tradition and modernity, patronage and egalitarianism – through which an older Mediterranean anthropology tried to frame the region as a comparative unit.<sup>4</sup> The themes most in evidence in these pages are along the ‘new’ lines to which Shryock points: migration, materiality, and postcolonial legacies loom large here. As if to drive the point home, the present volume’s Introduction persistently casts itself as being against ‘comparison’. If there is one thing this volume is setting out *not* to do, it is identifying (stereo)typical features of Mediterranean distinctiveness.

On the other hand, there is a deep continuity beneath these changes. The old problem of comparison and the new problems of connection (and disconnection) are both refractions of an anthropological ambivalence about the Mediterranean as a location. What has remained constant throughout the troubled history of the anthropological Mediterranean is the challenging yet productive way in which holding the Mediterranean together as a focus of analysis disturbs anthropological practice. In particular, the Mediterranean recurrently disturbs the operation of that key anthropological device, frontal comparison – comparison between ‘us and them’ (Candea 2019b).

For the old Mediterraneanist anthropology, a key challenge and promise of the area lay in its sitting astride two figures of contemporary anthropological imagination: ‘traditional Africa’, classic stomping ground of anthropology, and ‘modern Europe’, anthropological *terra incognita*.<sup>5</sup> Critics of this first wave of Mediterranean studies returned to the troubling in-betweenness of the Mediterranean, re-reading it as a figure of anthropological imagination, not as a feature of the world

itself (Herzfeld 1987). Even as Mediterraneanist anthropology was being dissolved, the Mediterranean – now an imaginary location – was being put to work to reveal the internal workings of anthropological epistemology and European power/knowledge. Now, studies of Mediterranean region formation (e.g. Ben-Yehoyada 2017; Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot, and Silverstein 2020; Ben-Yehoyada and Silverstein 2020) are returning to that frontal contrast once again, worrying away at it in two distinct registers. One register is epistemological: the study of ‘practical Mediterraneanism’ (Herzfeld 2005) poses the question of what ‘we’, anthropologists, are to do with the fact that ‘they’, people living around the Mediterranean, are still after all characterising themselves in the very terms ‘we’ have abandoned (cousinage, gendered performance, honour and propriety, North/South, Christian/Muslim, tradition and modernity, patronage and egalitarianism). The other register is political: as almost every chapter in this collection attests, locating one’s study in the Mediterranean forces an attention to the sheer complexity of the afterlives of European colonialism and imperialism in non-European locations – the Mediterranean seems to relentlessly call up that dualism in order to complicate it.

In picking the Mediterranean as a location in which to experiment with location, this volume is therefore building on a long tradition. True, the current resistance to identifying Mediterranean distinctiveness through comparison is the diametrical opposite of the pointedly comparative aspirations of an earlier anthropology that sought to draw it together. Yet both attitudes point to the same distinctive ways in which the Mediterranean keeps interrogating anthropological uses of location. One might be tempted to ask whether this tells us more about the Mediterranean itself (its geographic, ecological, sociological, or cultural realities), or about the intellectual history and conceptual devices of anthropology (its changing uses of geography, its enduring concern with frontal comparison), but I will not. I will follow the Introduction’s lead, in which we are enjoined to stop trying to split the real Mediterranean from its imagined counterpart. Trying to disentangle anthropological knowledge practices from the locations in relation to which they have been crafted is a similarly hopeless endeavour. Such hopeless endeavours can sometimes be productive, but that is for another day. Suffice it to say for now that the persistent way in which the Mediterranean interrogates anthropology’s techniques of location speaks to a relationship that pre-exists its terms.

## Dislocations

The present volume moves this relationship along in a number of ways, key among which is the sustained attention these chapters give to issues of disconnection, immobility, and arbitrariness. If, as Shryock writes, the old problem was comparison, and the new problems are connection and border-crossing, the editors rightly show that both of these problems share an additive aesthetic: they are about bringing the Mediterranean together. By contrast, this volume makes a point of reminding us that such achieved unities in the Mediterranean are only ever partial, and showcase ‘practices that intentionally work to dissolve region, to foster separation, and to generate remoteness’ (Rommel and Viscomi). These practices include the borders and walls that make their presence felt in Melilla (Soto Bermant) or Lampedusa (Elbek), and the multiple historical repartitionings of ‘public’ space in Beirut (Lähteenaho). More subtly, they include the menus and pricing of the various ‘Mediterranean’ restaurants along one road in Marseille (Bullen), which shape as much as they reflect classed and racialised divides, or the distinctive ways in which touristic over-exposure leeches out meaning and identity from Istanbul’s Old City (Su). The partitionings and divisions of an old imperial order run like a backbeat through these chapters, as does the theme of selective memorialising and historical forgetfulness – from the fraught re-enactments of religious conflict around the Nafpaktos ‘bridge to nowhere’ (Douzina-Bakalaki), via the historic replay of siege mentalities in Melilla, all the way to the well-meaning but somewhat arbitrary reboot of the Virgin Mary of Trapani as a patron saint of migrants (Russo), which one cannot help feeling is also an unintentional act of historical erasure of the figure’s rich and layered earlier lives. Nowhere is the value of paying attention to disconnection more clearly visible than in Green’s exploration of the ways ecosystemic and national political visions of the Mediterranean cut across each other. At times these collude to make certain animal border-crossings into a ‘problem’. At other times each vision’s own determinisms works to render the other’s utterly irrelevant. And of course, one might add that these practices of disconnection are as much those of anthropologists as they are those of the people whose lives are described in these pages: the dogged resistance against ‘comparison of cultural traits and separate cases’ is an intentional device

for ensuring, as much as acknowledging, the incomplete unity of the Mediterranean.

And yet this focus on disconnection and arbitrariness, on processes that 'although always beginning somewhere, often finish nowhere in particular' (Chapter 1) raises its own paradox. For, as soon as it is identified explicitly and brought to mind, every disconnection is also perform a connection. Or, to put it otherwise, an arbitrary location (Candea 2007) turns into a relative location (Green 2005), as soon as you make explicit what it was arbitrary *in relation to*. Thus, the remoteness of Melilla speaks to the marginality of Lampedusa; in both cases, 'locals' relate to outsiders (powerful people in the metropolitan centre, struggling migrants breaching the border) precisely as they mark their separation from them. Historical re-enactments at Lepanto call up reflections on contemporary inter-faith encounters. It is because the eateries along one street in Marseille are so neatly lined up as instances of the same thing (Mediterranean food outlets) that one can pick out how they differ and how they differentiate their *clientèle*.

More broadly, despite the self-conscious rejection of comparison in the Introduction, the chapters in this book cannot help but line up – like those eateries – as 'separate cases' of the same problematic: location in the Mediterranean. The stubbornly comparative form of 'the edited volume' trumps the self-conscious rejection of comparison. For, after all, we have here a set of texts, each set in or around the Mediterranean Sea, each exploring the question of location, and these texts are collected under a common title and framed by an introduction that elucidates how they hang together and where they diverge. Comparison is like a boomerang: the harder you throw it away, the harder it comes back.<sup>6</sup>

## Remappings

The problem brings to mind Umberto Eco's meditations on mnemotechnics and the impossibility of an 'art of forgetting' (1988). The classical arts of memory, Eco reminds us, operated by associating ideas to locations: an orator would visualise a familiar location (a house, street, or townscape) and 'place' the topics of their speech around that location in the form of vivid images. They could then mentally travel that space in order to remember the sequence of their speech. If this connecting of places to topics is the art of remembering, Eco asks, how

then might we imagine an art of forgetting? The difficulty is that you cannot unmake a connection any more than you can unring a bell. Connections may fade on their own in time, but to intentionally ‘disconnect’ a topic from a location is to connect them once more – rather like in the famous injunction ‘don’t think of a pink elephant’. If there is a way of intentionally forgetting, Eco argues, it is not through the removal of connections but on the contrary through their accumulation. The more cross-cutting connections anything has to anything else, the more faintly each of these connections registers. The art of forgetting is the art of overwriting, the art of the palimpsest.

Eco’s meditation helps us get the novelty of the present collection into sharper focus. Yes, focusing explicitly on disconnection means, inescapably, making more connections. But the question each time is what is being remembered and what is being forgotten, what is being written anew and what is being overwritten. The ‘new Mediterraneanist’ focus on cross-cutting connections, border-crossings and region formation is calculated to overwrite the recurrent binaries (north/south, modern/traditional, real/imagined) that had haunted both the old Mediterraneanism and its 1980s critique. The present volume partakes of that sensibility, and in that respect belongs squarely to this new wave of Mediterraneanist studies. But its abiding concern with remoteness, arbitrariness, and the trailing edges of processes that finish nowhere in particular writes over this emergent picture of Mediterranean region formation in a distinctive way. This is not an erasure but rather a delicate shading in, adding darker touches of absence and interruption that allow unexpected patterns to come into view. This makes a subtle yet important difference to that topical location – the Mediterranean. The topic of location, too, emerges refreshed.

## Notes

- 1 Elsewhere I called this the ‘place–concept binary’ (Candea 2019a). On reflection, though, this is too specific and too general at the same time. ‘Topic–location’ fits the bill better, if only because of the pleasing etymological reminder that these two terms are ultimately interchangeable. There is an arbitrariness and reversibility to the way anthropological themes operate upon anthropological locations. Both are also, literally and metaphorically, ‘commonplaces’.
- 2 Not necessarily geographic, of course. The classic ‘among the’ is another recurrent way of ‘locating’ a topic.
- 3 See Candea (2019a) for a roll call of some of these attempts and concerns.

- 4 These topics do loom large, however, in the collection that Shryock is commenting on (Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot, and Silverstein 2020), and that is precisely his point. Despite the critical exorcisms of the 1980s, the topics of the 'old' Mediterranean anthropology are returning to haunt contemporary ethnographers, if only because they are the topics that, for better or worse, still matter to people living around that sea. The new anthropology of Mediterranean 'region formation' represents a creative and sophisticated engagement with this dilemma. But it still very much bears out Shryock's point about shifts in perspective. What is at stake in revisiting these topics is not the task of building up a 'culture area' but rather an attentiveness to how concepts, stereotypes, and expectations move around the Mediterranean, connecting people across borders.
- 5 Evans-Pritchard's rather defensive foreword to Pitt-Rivers's *People of the Sierra* (1954) gives a measure of the discomfort this in-betweenness caused. Inside the book itself, Pitt-Rivers's model of the way the nation state articulates to the local community through bonds of patronage and models of honour was one of the more sophisticated early products of this perceived in-betweenness.
- 6 For sure, this is not comparison as a mere 'sifting out' of similarities that unite a region. But then, arguably, neither was the comparatism of the old Mediterranean anthropology, although it is beyond the scope of this epilogue to make good on that assertion.

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