Counter-Cartographies of Exile

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From Afghanistan to France

The map presented here (see map at the end of the article) sketches a trail of exile from Afghanistan to France. It was created by H.S.[1], who was seeking asylum in France when we met. H.S. attended the cartographic workshops titled Crossing Maps that artists and researchers in geography organized with other asylum seekers and refugees in Grenoble in May and June 2013.

The map's zenithal view makes it possible to understand the places and the distances involved at a glance, but it is not the only perspective that is presented. The map is also drawn from ground level, using the path pursued, and from inside the trailer behind a truck. In the frontal view, the mountains around Afghanistan and Iran break with the zenithal perspective, and so do cars, trucks, boats and an individual on the road. Returning to ground level, one perceives the space as a landscape of displacement for H.S., who represents himself in his work. This map blurs the dichotomy between the map as a grid and as a route.

The former is the result of the a priori imposition of codes that seek to depict a point of reference that is considered stable and measureable; the latter "provides a representation of the territory on which [it] is not considered independently from the practices that are deployed [...] on the contrary, it is defined within its structure by the practical engagements of those who record their wanderings there." (Besse, 2010: 7).

The map From Afghanistan to France (see map at the end of the article) presents the journey of the traveller-cartographer, using the conventions of established geography and geopolitics (the names of the countries and of the cities crossed before reaching France) but also representing the experience of the road (the material and political obstacles that have to be overcome, the hardship of being confined inside a truck, the encounters with the police...).

This map of exile is not the creation of a totalizing eye; it is also seen from below, from the walking point of view and the multiple practices and tactics used to cross geopolitical borders. In this sense, From Afghanistan to France subverts the conventional and normative maps of migrations and nation states. Embracing a point of view from the ground, this map is questioning the "commensurability of Euclidean space, [...] the scientization and regularization, [...], disciplinization of space" (Crampton & Krygier, 2006: 18).

In addition, From Afghanistan to France is not only a cognitive or mental mapping. In order to read the map, it is necessary to read the map legend (see map at the end of the article). Here the different symbols do not represent rivers or settlements; instead, they symbolise the fear, danger, police, injustice, friendship, love... encountered en route.

Counter-Cartographic Workshops

H.S., who created this map, is one of the Grenoble residents who were invited to take part in the counter-cartographic workshops (Mekdjian et al., 2014; Mekdjian, 2016) that took place over two months, in May and June 2013, in Grenoble on the premises of the association Accueil Demandeurs d'Asile (ada-grenoble.org). This local association helps individuals seeking asylum in Grenoble to deal with the administrative procedures that affect them.

The cartographic workshops, initiated by Sarah Mekdjian, geographer, brought together twelve Grenoble residents who were seeking asylum as well as three artists, Marie Moreau, Lauriane Houbey, Fabien Fischer, and a geographer, Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary. The participants came from Sudan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Eritrea, Azerbaijan, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others. Some were staying in emergency shelters and hotel rooms, while others were living on the street or in squats.

## A Few Intentions
of the Counter-Cartographic Workshops

The first intention was to collectively produce maps that would breach some norms of migratory representation, which generally uses arrows to indicate displacement. Maps are often the result of a territorial, static and quantitative conception of migration.

Representing movement in its qualitative, sensitive dimensions is particularly challenging. It implies to enquire the points of view of those who are displaced. In their analysis of trans-Saharan migrations, geographers Armelle Choplin and Olivier Pliez (2011) explain that many cartographic representations, mostly in the media, lead "to a vision of a smooth migratory space – in other words: where the continuous line drawings of some migration routes overshadow the political, police and pecuniary dimensions of spatial and temporal 'roughness' that mark the routes taken by migrants". It seems that the hardships, and all the experiences involved, encountered by the individuals on the trail of exile are more difficult to represent than is the measuring of the flows of individuals crossing borders.

Routes and flows are often instinctively depicted by arrows, feeding Europe's invasion anxiety: "The long strokes that depict the migration from Africa in the direction of Europe convey the image of an invasion carried out via multiple routes (the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as through Libya) that are, however, rarely used all at once by thousands of migrants. Such maps make one forget that these flows are marginal with respect to African migrations and even trans-Saharan migrations. They also lead to a blurring of the terms 'routes' and 'flows'." (Choplin & Pliez, 2011).

The second main intention of this project was to open a creative space of hospitality in which one could suspend the administrative standards of the "real" and the "fake" refugee. The administrations responsible for granting the right of asylum (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons – OFPRA – in the first instance, and the National Court of Asylum – CNDA – in the second instance) seek to define what constitutes a "true story" and a "real refugee", terms that generate strong symbolic violence (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). The act of seeking asylum in the signatory States of the Geneva Convention means having to undergo tests of narrative credibility that are carried out by the administrations. Every individual is asked to recount the reasons and the circumstances of the journeys they undertook. The asylum seekers have to provide a "verifiable" account that corresponds to the statutory definition of a refugee as it is defined by the Geneva Convention of 1951[2]. The recording of proofs is one of the conditions required for the application to be successful. While the administrations demand life stories/accounts that are "verifiable"
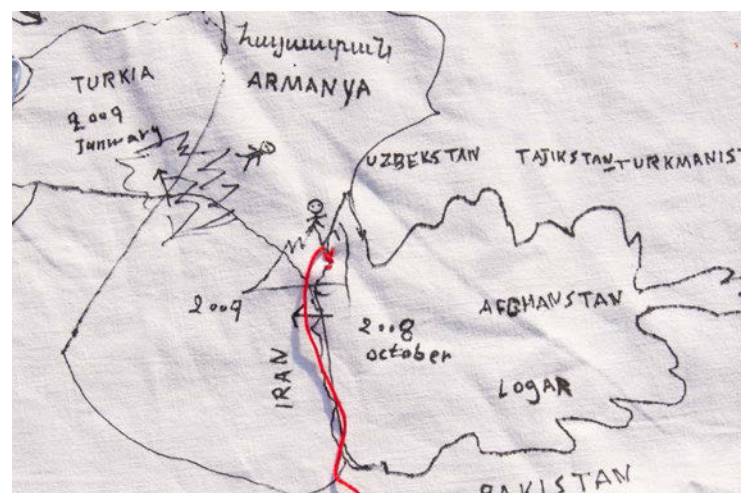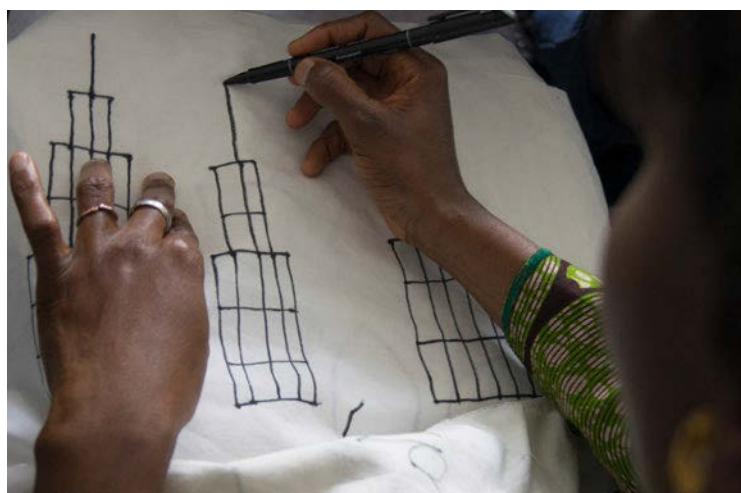
in order to approve or reject the asylum application, we seek to question the idea of "narrative truth". "Narrative truth" is itself inconsistent with the principle of narrative enunciation. According to the theories of enunciation, the act of enunciating is analysed as a set of heterogeneous linguistic and non-linguistic elements, constituted by affective, ethical and political forces. In the case of asylum procedures, telling "the true story of what happened" cannot be understood outside the political conditions of enunciation between the judges and the applicants. The politics of testimony developed by the judges and the Geneva Convention determines in great part what can be said and not said, heard and not heard. The notion of "narrative truth" also clashes with the complex process of memory production and with the subconscious, particularly in a trauma context (Pestre, 2012; Signorini, 2015). In a text dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the politics of humanitarian protection, Didier Fassin deconstructs the very idea of "true" testimonies or narratives: "The point is [...] not to determine whether the Palestinian youth is a combatant or a neurotic, but to acknowledge that he is presented, and even presents himself, alternately as one and the other. We then seek no longer to know what his true experience of violence is, but rather, what the various ordeals of truth to which he is submitted by political authorities or humanitarian organizations, by religious officials or psychiatrists, correspond to." (Fassin, 2008: 533).

During the workshops, the researchers and artists collectively decided to suspend the categories of "truth" and "untruth". They invited the participants to draw maps dealing with exile and displacement, without the researchers or artists asking any questions about what "really" or "personally" happened.

Within this frame, Sarah Mekdjian and the participants started to work on creating a collective and common map legend, reproduced here (see following spread) and used by H.S. We collectively discussed the most significant words that could express migratory experiences. Each participants proposed several words. We translated them into different languages as the discussions progressed and eventually retained the most important ones for the collective. We then symbolised them by using coloured stickers in various shapes. The participants chose the system of symbols that they found most pertinent.

The following step of the work involved incorporating the collective map legend in the individual maps. In his map titled From Afghanistan to France, H.S. used the collective map legend to describe some experiences of exile.

Following the work initiated by Sarah Mekdjian, the three artists proposed other creative protocols in order to produce different forms of enunciation. The purpose was to explore how different protocols would lead to heterogeneous and polyphonic maps and discourses. Marie Moreau invited the participants to draw exilic experiences in black marker on large white sheets of fabric, which were then subsequently partly embroidered (see photographs above). Lauriane Houbey suggested to remember the voyages by means of soundscapes (audio document proposed and produced by the artist), while Fabien Fischer produced another audio document with the participants on the urban life in Grenoble. Nasruddin Farouk Gladeema created a three-dimensional map in clay entitled The World is Stopping Us (see photograph on previous spread and photograph to the right). Cartographies Traverses/Crossing Maps is the name of the visual and sound device composed of all these creative cartographic works.

Cartographies Traverses/Crossing Maps seeks to critically engage views of migrations: in the rubbing out, the silences, the gaps, the changes in perspective from the sky to the ground, the forks and the hesitations one catches a glimpse of the movement of memory that these maps convey. The maps are neither true, nor false. Cartographies Traverses/Crossing Maps figures trajectories of memory; it extends an invitation to read maps and accept the possibility of losing one's bearings in them.

Translation by André Crous

Endnotes

1. The use of the initials has been decided by the person itself.
2. Article 1 - Definition of the term "refugee". For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who […] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (Geneva Convention, 1951).

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Illustrations

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Photographs by Mabeye Deme

Tukey

Grace

ship

walk

Car

140 person

Austria – Hangari – Romania – Bularia

??

Italia

France

shot on car
person dead

IRAN

Iran

mountain

car

car
walk

Afghanistan
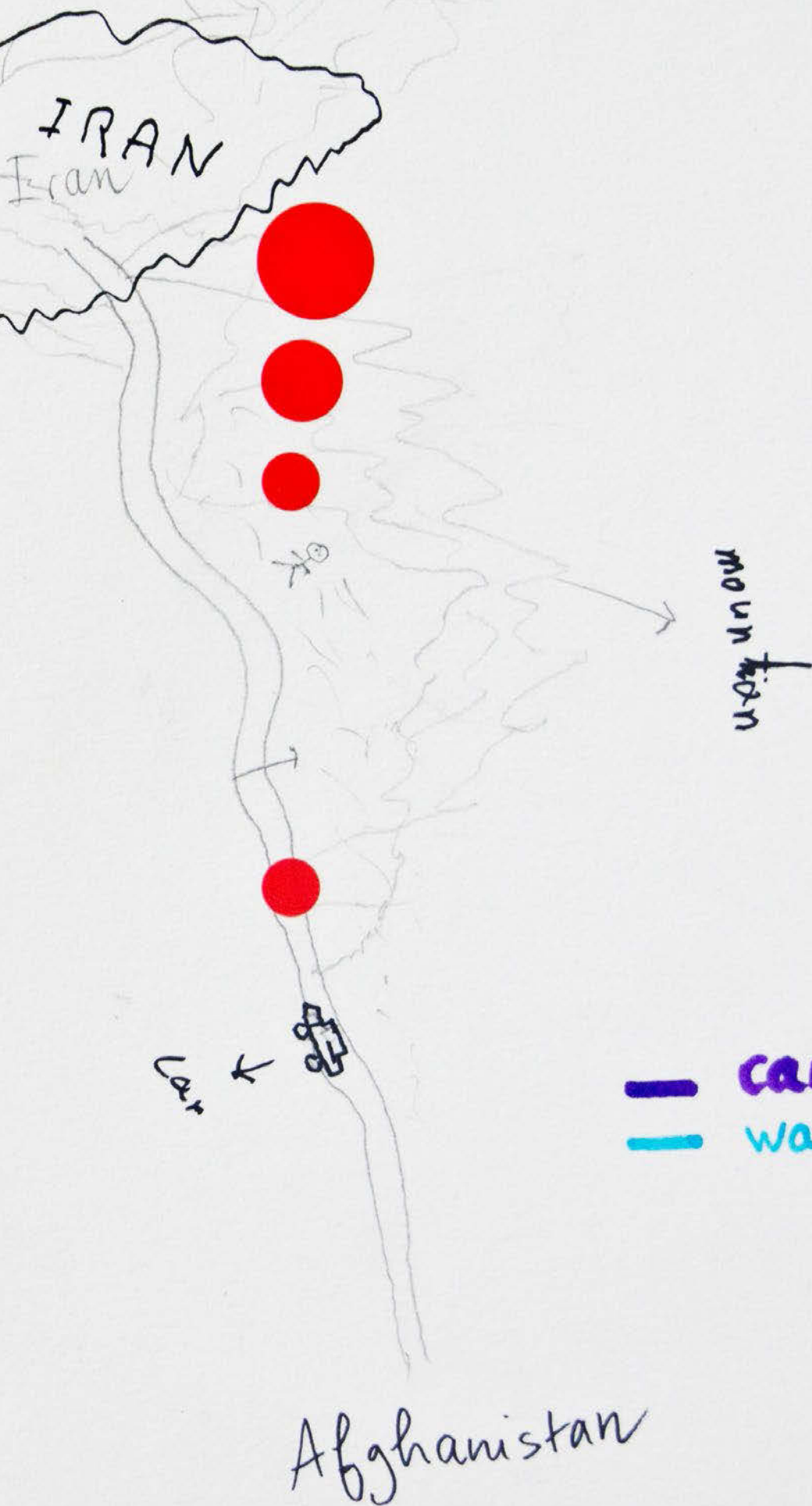
Les Légendes du voyage

● ● ● ● ● Danger

✚ Soins Médicaux/
Medical care

▲ ▲ ▲ Stress
Faim .Fatigue/
Hunger .Tiredness

? Où ? Comment ?/ Where?
Pourquoi?/ How ?
why !

▲ ▲ ▼ ● ● ● Mort/
Death

● ● ● ● Tranquille/
Easy

● ● ● Rencontre, amitié, amour/
Friendship, love

● ● ● Police

● ● ● ● Chance

● ● ● ● Avoir chaud /to be hot

● ● ● ● Avoir froid / to be cold

[yellow box] Injustice

● ● ● Peur / Fear

Ateliers de cartographie
Grenoble, 2013