



# Reciting the future

## Border relocations and everyday speculations in two Greek border regions

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Using ethnographic research from two different historical periods and border regions of Greece—the Greek–Albanian border in Epirus in the northwestern mainland during the 1990s, and the Greek–Turkish border in the north Aegean in the 2000s—this article explores how talk about what might happen next contributes toward the continual process of relocating borders. A comparison between them demonstrates that the specific historical moment and the different iconic significance of the two border regions mattered considerably in people’s speculations about what might happen next. As such, the stories form part of the historically contingent process of giving borders certain qualities. This article focuses on the way these accounts combine stereotypical with personal stories about the past, bringing widely known, and often ideologically inflected, commentaries that are recited almost by rote together with more personal stories about people’s experiences. The article suggests that such recitations both perform and reiterate stereotypical and ideological positions, which locate people politically, socially, and in relation to the border—and which also define the qualities of border. The more personal stories act as a contrast, or complement, to these recitations, locating people in their own relations, and highlighting the way borders are multiply qualified places.

Keywords: borders, location, Epirus, Albania, Aegean, Greece, recitation

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### Epirus in the 1990s

Epirus, a region located in northwestern mainland Greece, experienced a major change in its political landscape in the last two decades of the twentieth century: its border with Albania was reopened, after almost fifty years of closure. Albania under communist rule had the most tightly controlled borders in any part of Europe during that period (De Waal 2005: 5–7), not only preventing most movement of people or goods across the border, but also preventing almost any information about the country from getting out: Albania’s neighbours knew little if anything about what had been going on there. Equally, the Greek government persisted in refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the border after the cessation of hostilities in 1949, so that in formal terms, Greece remained at war with Albania until the 1970s (Clogg 1986: 194). As the communist regime in Albania began to change in the mid-1980s after Enver Hoxha, the country’s leader since the Second

World War, became ill and then died, followed by less hostile relations between the Greek and Albanian governments from 1987 onwards, restrictions around the border began to loosen. The crossing points were more formally opened in May 1990; restrictions were further relaxed during 1991, and the final ending of communist rule in Albania in 1992 ushered in a period of mass movement of people from Albania across its borders into Greece.

Unsurprisingly, that was a period of somewhat disorganized shifts in official policies and regulations, both on the Greek and the Albanian sides. Little of the necessary infrastructure to support the newly opened border had been put into place as yet: the roads were too narrow; there was not a sufficiently large border control point at Kakavia (the main official crossing point in Epirus); and there was insufficient funding to police the border properly. During these years, both the Albanian and Greek governments responded to problems as they arose, neither side being quite sure what would happen next. One could say the border was undergoing a process of official relocation during this period. It was in these circumstances that I spent a considerable amount of time in Epirus with the people of Pogoni, a region that shares its western border with Albania (Green 2005).

In these early years, accounts in Greece about what this relatively sudden reappearance of Albania and Albanians might mean were inevitably based on very sparse knowledge. Many drew upon popular accounts of what communist states were like in general and patched that together with the few facts they knew about Enver Hoxha (e.g., that he was an admirer of Stalin); this was combined with historical stereotypes about what Albanians were like (e.g., that they worked hard, but were also highly patriarchal and had a tendency toward blood feud). Media accounts reflecting relatively conservative views combined these stereotypes with a widespread belief that because Albania had been communist, what had probably happened during the fifty years while the border was closed was precisely nothing—or rather, many believed that nothing had happened that could be called “progress.” Instead, many suggested that the country had been kept in a state of general “backwardness,” usually meaning insufficient modernization in every sense of the term, both material and moral. Those with more socialist views avoided speculating about what had happened, with the result that the more conservative and populist perspectives dominated accounts that appeared in public in Epirus at the time.

An equally important topic of conversation concerned the Greek-speaking peoples who had remained on the Albanian side when the border had been closed. This was unsurprising, as it was on the basis of the existence of these people—called Northern Epirots in Greece—that successive Greek governments had remained at war with Albania for decades, arguing that Northern Epirus was Greek. In line with the logic of this claim, there was a constantly repeated commentary at the beginning of the 1990s on the Greek side, that Northern Epirots had been particularly badly affected by the closure of the border because of their separation from Greece. The Orthodox cleric who represented the border area, Metropolitan Sevastianos, played an important part in promoting this view locally, including the publication of a book in 1989 entitled *Northern Epirus crucified* (Sevastianos 1989). The claim of Greek rights to Northern Epirus (Southern Albania) continued to be made in various forms after the border was reopened in the late 1980s, though in somewhat muted form (Dalakoglou 2010: 137–8). In the media, that account was occasionally accompanied by the expressed hope that the

reopening of the border would reunite this lost population with their brethren on the Greek side, and that this would mark some kind of return to normality, as if the half century of communism in Albania had been a historical accident that was now being corrected.<sup>1</sup> This account was often accompanied by a hope for the return of the close-knit communities that apparently had been lost in recent decades.

Nobody I met in Pogoni thought this kind of talk was anything other than idealistic rhetoric. They were entirely familiar with the style of this talk, which they saw as being among the most common forms of slightly saccharine nostalgia expressed in the region and in Greece more widely. They were recognized as a version of the stories about how people used to live in some rural idyll in the past: working together to bring in the harvest and take care of the animals; having regular gatherings in the village square to celebrate saints' days, or just to sing in the unique polyphonic musical tradition of the Pogoni area; taking care of each other and keeping to the traditional values of close-knit community life.<sup>2</sup> Each performance of this kind of talk was a recognizable repetition of a previous performance, each part was known almost word for word, or rather by *heart*, by everyone: the sentiments expressed were the most important aspect, the element that everyone recognized instantly. The main point of the performance was a longing for something lost, particularly something that had to do with mutual social regard, relations, and connection.

The significance of this kind of nostalgia in Greece has often been noted. Herzfeld explored it in particular in terms of how Greeks relate to Greece as a nation (Herzfeld 1986, 1997). In *Cultural intimacy*, he focuses on "structural nostalgia," and suggests that a key feature of this kind of nostalgia is the expression of rhetorical longing for "damaged reciprocity . . . a mutuality that has been . . . ruptured by the self-interest of modern times" (Herzfeld 1997: 111). He also argues that this form of rhetoric is marked by a sense of timelessness (*ibid.*: 112–13). Gourgouris, in his discussion of the popularity of nostalgia in Greece, notes that it is a distinctly modern discourse (Gourgouris 1996: 222) and that a great deal of it involves longing for a vanished world that never existed: "the spatial coordinates of Greece are constantly revolving, predicated as they are on a permanent condition of return to a place that does not exist" (*ibid.*: 223); and he goes on to note that this nostalgia expresses as much a utopian hope for the future as it is a reminiscence on a lost past (*ibid.*).

The connection between repetitive, rhythmic storytelling and the kind of nostalgic sense of loss noted by Herzfeld and Gourgouris is also powerfully evoked in Kathleen Stewart's study of the peoples of the Appalachian coal-mining region of West Virginia (Stewart 1996). Her ethnography focuses particularly on the way stories were told there, stories that densely, and in a jumble of fragments, describe and perform a multiple sense of longing, loss, and hope. In Stewart's words:

These hills—at once occupied, encompassed, exploited, betrayed, and deserted—become a place where the effects of capitalism and modernization pile up on the landscape as the detritus of history, and

1 This echoes a very similar sentiment that Katherine Verdery heard expressed in other parts of postsocialist Europe (Verdery 1999).

2 A verbatim example of such accounts can be found in Green 2005: 216–18.

where the story of “America” grows dense and unforgettable in remembered ruins and pieced-together fragments. (Ibid.: 4)

Stewart notes that the stories she gathered had a certain poetics about them, that they needed to be listened to differently, in a way that would absorb their sense beyond the words and the gaps that they left: “Missing pieces and unknown meanings taught me to listen not just more intently, but differently—a listening in order to retell. Over time, as I came to recognize patterns in modes of telling, it was easier to follow along with stories and to remember them *verbatim*” (ibid.: 8; emphasis added). In order to grasp the sense of these stories, Stewart learned to recognize patterns in the *way* the stories were told (their rhythm, their style, their sentiments), and she learned them by heart. They evoked a sense of loss, a sense of longing for a return to something—something that perhaps never actually existed, but was missed just the same: “Ways and ideals and fundamental attachments emerge from out of the ruins as a space of desire resonant with nostalgias, heroics, and dreams of reversal” (ibid.: 48). The more stereotypical nostalgic talk in Epirus seemed to have similar qualities, echoing a sense of wholesale, national loss; these were popular and public stories that could be heard in virtually any part of Greece, and they evoked the entirety of the Greek people. Indeed, as Herzfeld has studied at length, these stories played an important part in defining and performing a particular version of contemporary Greekness, the more official nationalist version (Herzfeld 1986: 53–4).

On the face of it, the reopening of the Greek–Albanian border and the reconnection with Northern Epirots seem like ideal material for this kind of nostalgic account. And indeed, such accounts did appear in newspapers and they were occasionally expressed by elected officials; however, they were almost never told by people who actually lived near the border. While it was possible for some people in Pogoni to be nostalgic about the way life had been in the past *in general*, the events surrounding the closure and subsequent reopening of the Greek–Albanian border did not seem suitable for this kind of talk. The closure had not simply been about the separation of Greeks from each other by an external power; it had also been about the deep divisions between communist and capitalist political ideals, and which had separated Greeks from each other *internally*. These political differences had caused a civil war in Greece after the Second World War, a fight that had been particularly painfully experienced in Epirus (Close 1993; Shrader 1999).<sup>3</sup> By 1950, Albania had gone down the communist route, and Greece, following the defeat of the communist side of the civil war, had gone in the other direction. And while some Greek-speaking peoples had remained on the Albanian side when the border was closed, a significant proportion of the defeated Greek communists had remained on the Greek side. Many of those people were

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3 A particularly poignant example of this battle can be seen through the work of Nicholas Gage on the one hand, whose book *Eleni* rapidly became a famous account of what Gage believed were the atrocities perpetrated by the communist side of the war; and, on the other hand, the response by Anastases Takas, who strongly attacked Gage’s account of the war in almost every respect (Gage 1983; Takas 1986). Many people in Epirus during the 1990s, whichever side they or their parents had supported during the civil war, were so upset by the whole debate over *Eleni* that they did not wish to even discuss it.

imprisoned, and, if not, they were prevented from gaining decent employment, or they were deprived of passports, or they were generally harassed in other ways by the authorities; their lives were made difficult more or less until the mid-1970s, about the same time that the formal state of war between Greece and Albania ceased. In short, the Greek–Albanian border did not mark a timeless difference between one side and the other, nor a straightforward iconic injustice done to the Greeks who were left on the Albanian side; rather, it was the location of unfinished business and ambivalent attitudes about the political economies of capitalism and communism (and to some degree, also about the role of the Church in defining and defending certain nationalist sentiments). This ambivalence persisted over the decades, not only because it was part of the unfinished business of the border, but also because it was strongly associated with the conflicting ideologies driving the Cold War, so it could hardly be ignored. Seen in that context, the stories that described the border location, and its closure, as having been only about an injustice against the Greek nation—while recited by some people in Greek Epirus, particularly members of the Orthodox clergy and some of the more nationalist politicians in the region—were not repeated by those who lived around the border; a few even vocally challenged such assertions, particularly those who had borne the brunt of discrimination against them after the end of the civil war. Most simply ignored these accounts, silently; even if they agreed with the idea that Northern Epirus ought to be part of Greece rather than Albania, the awareness of the ambivalence over what this border represented in civil war terms made it difficult to tell those accounts without evoking a memory of that unfinished business.

If nostalgic longing was not a popular way to discuss the reopening of the border in Epirus, much more common were hard-hitting, factual-event forms of storytelling. These stories were much darker and more fearful about the future, and they had a completely different temporal rhythm and style: not a hoped-for return to a timeless past of peace and harmony, but of the potential dangers of reopening the border. In the early 1990s, there was a clear set of themes, mostly related to various kinds of crime and moral transgression; all of them expressed a fear about the crossing or transgressing of boundaries, fears about the consequences of mixing together the two sides of the border after its reopening. These accounts represented the border as having become suddenly leaky, allowing potentially toxic and dangerous elements to cross into Greece.<sup>4</sup>

These stories told of the countless houses that were broken into after the border was opened; the Orthodox chapels that had their icons stolen or, worse, defaced; they told of rapes committed by illegal migrants, or of the Albanian women who were sold into sex slavery by their male relatives; they told of the ingratitude of the people whom the Epirots on the Greek side had tried to help, in an initial act of humanity and friendship. That latter story was particularly popular in Pogoni, and it was repeated again and again. The story went like this: when the people from Albania first crossed into Epirus, residents in Pogoni did their best to

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4 This is of course a very common sentiment about the reopening of borders; another example can be seen in Gingrich's description of the rise of racism in the southern Bergenlands of Austria (Gingrich 2004). Haraway suggests such visceral fears of transgression are related to deeply entrenched Euro-American concerns about the possibly monstrous effects of mixing categories together (Haraway 1997).

help them and give them food, clothing, and shoes (almost everyone mentioned the shoes; they have particular importance in Greece as a marker of social status, and a sign of intimacy when given as a gift). The story goes on: these people from Albania, sometimes described as Northern Epirots and sometimes not, turned out to be ungrateful and behaved very badly, often stealing from those who helped them. So the people from Pogoni became disillusioned about them.<sup>5</sup> This was a story of initial trust that was betrayed, and that justified an attitude of suspicion and hostility towards Albanians.<sup>6</sup>

Stories that challenged these accounts of betrayal and disillusionment developed quite soon afterwards. These alternative stories represented the border as a mere political device, an accident of history, which did not mark any major difference between peoples. Rather than marking a barrier that kept separate entities that should not be mixed together, the border was represented as a line in the sand that political and military authorities had put there; it could have been put somewhere else, or it might not have existed at all; either way, it was a political border, not a social or ethnic one.

A popular account of this type was that the Northern Epirots, having dreamed of a return to Greece one day (a form of that main nostalgic story of the “lost” Greeks in Albania), had crossed the border and found themselves being treated as backward people simply because they came from Albania. The disillusionment of many Northern Epirots recalls Gourgouris’ point that the location of Greece, the Greece in people’s imaginations, always seems to be somewhere else (Gourgouris 1996: 223). Other accounts suggested that Albanians had been treated as the source of extremely cheap and highly exploitable labor with no legal rights, justified through an assertion of Albanian “backwardness.”<sup>7</sup> This approach suggested that it was the Albanians, not the Greeks, who had been exploited and betrayed.

This was a deeply politically inflected debate that drew upon both contemporary and historical political affiliations; and, again, the trace of the Greek civil war, and the affiliations expressed during that time, were clearly present in these debates. That trace, often an indirect hint of something everyone was expected to know about, was also a form of recitation in a sense, but often made present through deliberate indirect references, an act of mutual knowing; it was an indirect reference to something that also perhaps never occurred exactly as it was imagined or represented now, but which was being relied upon in order to make sense of the present and possible future.<sup>8</sup> The Cold War might not have ended,

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5 Again, an account of this type can be found in *Notes from the Balkans* (Green 2005: 58).

6 Betrayal is an important concept in contemporary Greek historiography, as Herzfeld has noted (1985, 1992). It is important to note that by the late 2000s, both the stories and the attitudes they justified had almost completely disappeared in Epirus; but in the early 1990s, the story of Albanians showing ingratitude and betraying the trust initially shown to them was repeated almost daily.

7 For more details of the kinds of experiences Albanian migrants had in Greece in the early years, see Lawrence’s ethnography, *Blood and oranges* (2007).

8 I have explored this notion of trace in more detail in a working paper entitled “Lines, Traces and Tidemarks: reflections on forms of borderli-ness” that can be found at [http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/). The key point is that not only

not really, not in terms of the sentiments and ideals involved; what might happen next could be a continuation of those old debates, those old enmities, a recasting of the ideological battle lines to suit contemporary conditions.

All these debates, whatever political perspective they represented, became familiar performances: people knew them, came to expect them, came to judge each other and know each other by them. I wrote many of them down, and rereading these notes years later felt like reading endless streams of repetitions. I was not the only one to notice the repetitive character of these accounts, and nor was I alone in noting the oblique references to traces of the past, and the use of stereotypical assertions about people and betrayal. Seremetakis, for example, noted it:

Traveling down to the nearby Greek towns myself, I heard about Albanians killing Greeks, Albanians being killed or being fed and sheltered by Greeks, and Albanians being betrayed by Greeks or other Albanians. Endless narrations, an ongoing oral daily newspaper. Albanians and their tales were everywhere, yet every time I tried to locate one of those narrated Albanians, he or she was always absent. Albanians, myth and reality. (1996: 489)

Here, Seremetakis echoes the same sense of recitation as I experienced at the time, and the same sense that people were speaking in a way that evoked a set of wider, abstract conditions. The constant repetition, the constant recitation, was beginning to fill an enormous gap of what was still unknown at the time; the gap was being filled with traces, with stereotypes, with repetitions built upon particular, recognizable, and competing political perspectives and sensibilities.

While these stories were being recited, there were also other kinds of talk in Pogoni that were much less monumental, much more mundane. This talk was about people's particular lives: what had happened to Dimitri's son near the border the other day when he was out hunting and got into trouble with the border guards; the old man in the village who had gone to Albania to look for a young bride and had come back empty-handed, feeling dejected; how the building works to upgrade the road to the border were disrupting people's lives and livelihoods, yet the government clearly did not care; how someone met his cousin after almost half a century of separation, and the two could not find much to say to each other anymore, and began to wonder whether they ever did have much to say to each other; how there was talk of a road being built that would provide a high-speed link between Ioannina and Thessaloniki, and how that would change *everything*;<sup>9</sup> how the Albanians who had moved into some villages were keeping the schools from closing because their children increased the numbers enough to justify the schoolteacher's salary; how there might be an opportunity to make a killing on the property market in Albania if people bought now, before the foreigners realized what nice beaches there are on the coast there. Endless talk about everyday things,

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events, but also concepts and ideas, leave traces, even if what they leave as traces is not predictable by the events or concepts themselves.

9 This is a reference to the Egnatia Odos motorway project. It has now been built and has reduced travel times between Ioannina and Thessaloniki to a fraction of what they were in the 1990s.

talk that made it entirely unclear, actually, what the border meant or what might happen next in relation to it.

Little of this talk was rhythmically repetitious, and while some of it might have been sentimental, it did not take on a coherent sentimentality; it was people narrating their lives, telling of things that had happened to them and their immediate kin, friends, and acquaintances. Some of this talk was hopeful; some fearful; some just descriptive. Occasionally, people would drop into a recitational style in these personal narratives, drawing on it to give an event a particular meaning, and to make it more of a performance; but, mostly, people were telling stories about *particular* events, unconnected to the familiar patterns, stereotypes, or ideals of the recitations. These were stories about people they knew, rather than traces; and, collectively, these accounts did not usually add up to something coherent, but instead generated a sense of the border as being multiple, messy, and unpredictable. Sometimes, accounts of similar experiences were told often enough by a wide enough range of people that others began to recognize a pattern in them; people would begin to expect that the next story about that topic would be the same—not because it was following some particular rhetorical style or political perspective; but because a lot of people had told about having the same experience. For example, in the early years, many people reported being fined in Albania for a variety of apparently very minor, or even nonexistent, traffic violations. After numerous reports of this experience, people began to warn each other about it—not in the more recitational style, as evidence to support a particular image of Albania and/or Albanians, but rather in the form of practical advice: if you drive in your own car in Albania, be prepared to pay fines.

This kind of repetition results in an expectation about what might happen next that is different from the kind built up from the reciting of stereotypical rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> In the case of recitation, speculation about what might happen next is built upon a preexisting model, a set of beliefs or assertions, about how things are, and, more importantly, a main point of telling the story is to demonstrate the truth of the general principle: the assertion that Northern Epirus belongs to Greece; or that Albanians are bad people; or that the past was idyllic compared to today. The more mundane everyday kind of speculation about what might happen next was based on people telling stories about themselves and develops with the telling of the stories, and without there being, at least initially, a predetermined script, a predetermined pattern into which the repetition must be fitted. There is no effort to squeeze what happened into an existing explanation for it. The focus in this talk is on what happened, on the event, and not so much what it represents.

Both forms of storytelling coexisted in Epirus, and of course they often blended into one another; I do not intend to make a hard distinction, but instead simply to note that there *is* a distinction. Furthermore, the stories told were not random: the recitation style was expressed in the terms of what had made the Greek-Albanian border distinctive for people—the history of the Cold War and the particular

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10 Deleuze refers to the recognition of a pattern from this kind of repetition as “passive synthesis”: if a person sees the letter B follow the letter A often enough (AB AB AB AB AB A . . .), when they next see the letter A, they will come to expect the letter B to come next—not because of the characteristics of the letters A or B, but because of their constant appearance together (Deleuze 1994: 70–1).



relationship that the people of Epirus had with that history, rather than the familiar nostalgic longing for a return to a lost golden era; and the everyday stories people told of what happened in their lives were both conscious and unconscious contrasts to the logic of recitation, to the stories that could account for everything through traces, as if they are representations of an underlying truth, rather than accounts of the mess of everyday life. The result was a sense that what would happen next would be both predictable—a repetition of what had come before, the playing out of a theory that we already know—and yet lively and contingent, open to the possibility of being surprised.

### **The Aegean in the 2000s**

The argument I have made so far suggests that particular, specifically located histories, and particular, personal stories in relation to borders (in this case, relating to the Cold War and its aftermath in the border area), combined with stereotypical rhetoric that is rather less spatially and temporally particular (in this case, Greek nationalist rhetoric), are equally important to the process of redefining and relocating borders. To explore the implications of this a little further, I will take a somewhat briefer look at the kinds of stories circulating more than a decade later about changes going on around another border region: the Greek-Turkish border in the Aegean, during the late 2000s.

The symbolic and political importance of the Greek-Turkish border, and particularly the Aegean part of it, for dominant accounts of contemporary Greek history is so well known it hardly requires comment. The failed attempt by the Greek military to secure parts of Asia Minor for Greece in the early twentieth century became a key moment in both the history of modern Greece and of the relationship between Greece and Turkey. The conflicts resulted in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which not only agreed the territories of the two countries, but also arranged for a compulsory exchange of populations between them, overseen by the League of Nations: with few exceptions, Greek Orthodox peoples living in Turkey were to be sent to Greece, and Muslims living in Greece were to be sent to Turkey (Hirschon 2003; Ladas 1932).

This was a starkly different situation from that at the Greek-Albanian border, where the separation between the two countries was nowhere near as symbolically important to the development of the Greek nation, and there was nothing like the kind of separation of populations between Greece and Albania as had been officially imposed by the Treaty of Lausanne in separating Greece and Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Of course, as implied in the discussion earlier about the importance of the Orthodox Church in asserting certain kinds of nationalist sentiment about Northern Epirus, the issues that separated Greece from Turkey did have their echoes in the separation between Greece and Albania (indeed, Muslims in general, whether Albanian or Turkish, were often referred to as “Turks” in Epirus).

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11 The exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey did of course affect Epirus; my point is that the Greek-Albanian border was not symbolic of the separation between Greece and Turkey in the way that the Aegean region was. There is also the issue of what happened to the Cams or Tsamides in terms of the battles between Greece and Albania (Hart 1999; Mikalopoulou 1993), but again, that did not involve the iconic difference between Turk and Greek that was being evoked by the separation imposed in the Aegean.

Nevertheless, my main concern here is the difference in the sense, or quality, of border that people mostly expressed during fieldwork,<sup>12</sup> and in Epirus the overwhelming sense was that the Greek–Albanian border marked an ideological division between communism (and its aftermath) and capitalism, and the histories associated with it that made both the relations and separations of that border somewhat ambiguous. The Greek–Turkish border, on the other hand, and particularly in the Aegean, marked the division between Greeks as Orthodox Christians and Greece on one side and Turks as Muslims and Turkey on the other, and both of the contemporary Greek and Turkish states were formed in large part out of the conflict and subsequent formal disambiguation between them. There was no additional complexity of the Cold War intervening in that narrative in the Aegean, nor anything within living memory that strongly challenged it, either. The Greek–Albanian border felt to most like a border that was about socialism and postsocialism (for peoples on both sides of the border), and although there were elements of religious-based nationalism present, that was not the main focus of attention during my period of fieldwork.

In the Aegean, the political geography itself seems structured as a binary opposition: the western and northern coasts are part of contemporary Greece, while the eastern coast is part of the contemporary Turkish mainland.<sup>13</sup> There are a scatter of islands within the Aegean, the vast majority of which are part of Greece, an arrangement also established by the Treaty of Lausanne. The two countries' territories thus face each other across this water. That generates an overall duality—on the western side, Greece, on the eastern side, Turkey. However, the Aegean being a sea, and this sea being filled with (mostly Greek) islands, means that the borders between Greece and Turkey are repeated, again and again: islands such as Rhodes, Lemnos, Ikaria, Chios, or Samos, and their surrounding water and air space, are Greek; but at some point toward the east, as the mainland of western Turkey is approached, the water, and the air, become Turkish. Exactly where the sea and air borders in the Aegean are located is still a matter of dispute (Acer 2003; Bacas 2005). So while the differences that these borders mark are unambiguous, their physical location, at least in the sea and the air, is still debated. That makes these borders different from the Greek–Albanian border in Epirus, which is, for the most part, a land border, and there is little contemporary dispute about its location; the uncertainty there is more about what it is that the border locates and differentiates.

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12 I explore the idea of qualities of border, or “borderness” at more length elsewhere (Green 2010, 2012).

13 Of course, it would be easy to suggest that while the Greek–Albanian border marked the difference between East and West in terms of political economy, communist versus capitalist, the Greek–Turkish border marked the difference between East and West in terms of Occident and Orient. However, as my comments about the ambivalence toward that distinction in Epirus have indicated, and as a great deal of research on concepts of the constitution of Greek identity has demonstrated, there is also deep ambivalence about the way Greece relates to such Occident/Orient distinctions: see Faubion 1993; Fleming 1999; Frazee 1969; Gourgouris 1996; Green 2005; Herzfeld 1986, 1987; Hirschon 1989; Karakasidou 1997.

My ethnographic research in the Aegean is focused on the shifting relations between two towns: Mytilene, the capital of the Greek island of Lesbos, located in the north Aegean, and Ayvalik, a small town on the coast of western mainland Turkey, also often referred to as western Anatolia. They are separated by 17 miles of sea, and, nowadays, a ferry regularly takes goods and passengers between them. Both towns still bear the marks of the enforced exchange of populations in the 1920s. In Mytilene, there are many abandoned and broken-down houses, as well as an abandoned port, in the previously Muslim area in the south of the town; and in Ayvalik, there are also many old abandoned houses in the previously Orthodox areas of town. I am focusing here on Mytilene, but it is worth noting that both towns are marked by these abandoned places, some of which are slowly being restored, on both sides. For now, people still walk by them and cannot help but be affected, whether consciously or not, somewhat in the manner described by Navaro-Yashin about walking past rusting old trucks and walls with bullet holes in them in Cyprus (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 14). Abandoned places are particularly effective as traces, material manifestations of relations and places that continue to be lively through their ruins, again also noted by Stewart in her study of the Appalachian Mountains (Stewart 1996: 90–6). In Stewart’s words, “Objects that have decayed into fragments and traces draw together a transient past with the very desire to *remember*” (ibid.: 92–3; emphasis original). The abandoned places in Mytilene recalled many years of social and trading relations between the Aegean islands and the western Anatolian coast—times when, some said, life was relatively good, though of course others said the opposite. Then the troubles began that resulted in the exchange of populations, and Mytilene found itself without its nearby mainland and market, and Ayvalik found itself without the expertise of olive oil production that had disappeared along with the Greeks (Hirschon 2003; Koufopoulou 2003). That story is so coherent that it is barely recognized as recitation or a performance; it is much more often regarded as a simple description of what happened.

The roof of the old main mosque in Mytilene fell in a few years ago, turning it into a ruin. Recently, a project has been implemented to protect the mosque from further decay and to help to partially restore it, with funding from the European Union. Every so often, art installations are placed in the grounds in front of the old mosque. Those kinds of changes, both deliberate efforts to preserve the trace and to make something else, also affect people as they walk by. Still, they can only walk by, they cannot walk in: the gates are locked because, the authorities say, the building is in a perilous state, and so it is too dangerous for people to enter.

On the same street as the old main mosque in Mytilene, many of the once abandoned houses increasingly are being restored and new businesses are beginning. For many years, at least twenty-five, there have been some small businesses in that district around the old main mosque—artists and ceramics specialists mostly, plus an all-night place to eat, and a wine wholesaler. Nowadays, there is a more concerted effort to change things, to make that section of the street, which forms the southern part of the main market street of the whole town, into *somewhere* again.

Residents of Mytilene would often tell me whether their family was brought to Mytilene as one of the refugees in the 1920s, or had already been living there when the exchange happened. A few said they could tell the difference just by looking at a person, or hearing them speak for a short time; others said this was nonsense. In

any case, and again, there was remarkably little talk of loss, separation, or longing; there was a marked absence of any dream of return. One 94-year-old man now living in Mytilene, and one of the few I met who was personally transported across from Ayvalik to Mytilene in the 1920s as a child, occasionally goes to see the Turkish lady who now inhabits the house in which he was born in Ayvalik. When asked by a friend whether he would claim the house back from her, he responded: “Why should I? She’s a nice woman, and what use do I have for that house now?” He did have children, so he could have wanted to leave it to them, as an inheritance of his past. But the exchange of populations had cut something for him, had severed a relationship—not between himself and Ayvalik, as that was clearly still very important to him; but it had severed his children’s relationship with the place. They saw no familiarity in it in a literal, social sense: no kinship.

Similarly, a doctor from Athens whose family had been moved from Smyrna (Izmir) said that she travels over to Turkey occasionally just to keep in touch with the place that her parents spoke about so fondly, but that she herself did not remember. She added that it is never possible to return: the place had changed and her family had changed, so she was going to see the remainders, like ruins; a place that reminded her of where her family had been, which no longer existed.

Some people on the ferry traveling between Mytilene and Ayvalik who said they were going to Turkey in order to visit old Greek places discussed this as an act of tourism rather than a personal journey: a visit to a place that had a lot of *history*, a place where many things happened that were important to Greece and the Greeks. Most people did not even say that; instead, they said they were going over to visit the weekly bazaar in Ayvalik. The most regular passengers were traders of various types—a man who specializes in buying horse saddles from Turkey and selling them on in Greece; another who collects antique furniture and has shops both in Mytilene and in Athens. Some big businesses have grown as well: one company specializes in selling Turkish-made automated olive presses to Greek customers. And in addition to the passengers traveling from the Greek side to Turkey, the ferries also carried a range of cargo in the other direction, from Turkey to the Greek side. There was a wide range of goods, notably fresh fish in ice-packed Styrofoam boxes; a range of different kinds of tile and stone for house building; and, interestingly, aniseed, the key ingredient that gives ouzo its flavor—Lesvos is famous for its ouzo.

Initially, I noted this steady flow of trade only in passing, being more interested in the social relations between the two sides and how these might be changing now that it is much easier than it had been to travel from Greece to Turkey.<sup>14</sup> However, once I began to listen to people’s talk, I understood that the trade was in fact key to most people’s *personal* accounts of this border, as opposed to the more widely recited, highly familiar, nationalist rhetoric about the Greek and Turkish nations. The nationalist rhetoric on the Greek side emphasized the tragedy of the 1920s, the huge loss, both to the Greek people and their nation, and the way that this loss can never be made good (note the contrast here with the nationalist rhetoric in Epirus ten years earlier after the Greek–Albanian border reopened). The implication is that the separation between the Greek and Turkish sides of the

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14 The other way around, traveling from Turkey to Greece, is still quite bureaucratic and expensive; but that is a topic for another article.

Aegean is irreversible, and any attempt to bring them together again is an act of betrayal. People's discussions about trade were quite different in emphasis, focusing on connection and relation rather than separation. It was the trade that had linked all the Aegean islands with the western Anatolian coast in the past; it was the trade that had suffered most when the relations were cut in the 1920s, and both Mytilene and Ayvalik were launched into deep economic difficulties as a result; trade was also the first form of interaction between the two sides to be revived whenever relations became less hostile between Greece and Turkey; and trade is, today, the major focus of both the fears and hopes of what might happen next for the people of Mytilene. If Cold War politics was the key focus informing personal talk on the Greek–Albanian border in the early 1990s, then *trade* turned out to be the key focus informing talk on the Greek–Turkish border of the Aegean in the late 2000s. Even the rhetorical nationalist talk was often expressed through the issue of trade: when it became possible for goods to cross from Turkey to the Greek side again, the local papers were instantly filled with stories about attempts to undermine local businesses by flooding the market with cheap imports from Turkey. If there were accusations of betrayal now, it was most often against those who shopped Turkish.

Obviously then, just as people in Epirus drew on wider stereotypes about Albanians, people in Mytilene also regularly drew upon grand narratives that both constituted and justified deep oppositional differences between Greeks and Turks. There was a continual stream of reciting-style talk, both in coffee shops and in the newspapers, about the ongoing threats posed by Turkey. Moreover, talk about Turks and Turkey easily slipped into the well-worn and highly familiar recitations about almost 400 years of Ottoman control over Greeks on which Herzfeld has written in considerable detail (Herzfeld 1986, 1987). But as also noted in several of the contributions to *When Greeks think about Turks* (Theodossopoulos 2007), there was considerable variation in how this discussion was phrased, revealing a diversity in the way Turkish people were discussed. In Mytilene, many suggested that following the assistance the Greek government offered Turkey after a major earthquake devastated parts of the Turkish mainland in 1999, which was reciprocated when Greece experienced its own major earthquake a month later, relations between the two countries had fundamentally changed. One example:

It was *definitely* after the earthquake in 1999; after that, things changed. It wasn't a change in the rules or regulations, I don't think; it was people's attitudes. That's what changed.<sup>15</sup>

The comment that people did not particularly remember the regulations changing after the 1999 earthquake is important. In fact, the major regulatory changes occurred four years earlier, in 1995; and these were brokered by the European Union and concerned *all* the Mediterranean countries, only two of which were Greece and Turkey. The changes were initiated by a program called the Barcelona

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<sup>15</sup> People also often spoke about the huge popularity of a Turkish soap opera, called *Yabancı Damat* (Foreign groom) in Turkish, and *Τα Σύνορα της Αγάπης* (The borders of love) in Greek, as an indication of changing relations between the two countries. The soap opera is about a Turkish woman and a Greek man who fall in love, and the resistance against this by their two respective families. Lenio Myrivili has also carried out an intriguing study of this issue (Myrivili 2007).

Process, aimed at encouraging both economic liberalization in the whole region and a variety of other political initiatives.<sup>16</sup> The revised version of this agreement, made in Paris in July 2008, reiterates a commitment to completing a “deep Free Trade Area in the EUROMED region by 2010.”<sup>17</sup>

The significance of this is that most people’s personal accounts of their experiences with this border are related to issues of trade, and the vast majority of the rhetoric was also related to that during fieldwork (2007–8). The border might have iconic significance in terms of the making of the Greek nation, but for people living in the region, this area was also, and fundamentally, a trading route that had been badly disrupted by the events of the 1920s. Most accounts people gave me of their families’ experiences of relations with the Turkish side had to do with this: the western Anatolian coast formed a key part of the markets and trading routes for the Aegean islands, and that coast provided easy access to two key cities—Smyrna/Izmir, and Constantinople/Istanbul. And when crossing between the two sides became much easier, it was not contact between the peoples of the two sides that was the focus of discussion, but the threat to local markets in Mytilene posed by the much larger and much better organized markets in towns like Ayvalik and Dikeli, another town just across the way from Lesbos on the Turkish coast.

The Barcelona Process is effectively redefining a range of borders established by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. The Treaty cut the links between islands and the eastern mainland in the Aegean, so that people in Lesbos developed a sense that their island was located in the middle of nowhere, far away from any cosmopolitan center. After 1923, the nearest accessible cosmopolitan center was Athens. The Barcelona Process, which was unconnected with the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey, set in train a redefinition of those borders. In the process, the Aegean was becoming a part of something much bigger: no longer a border predominantly marking the difference between Greece and Turkey, but instead governed, for the most part, by a much larger entity—the European Union (EU). And the EU, in spite of having no territory itself as such (Abélès 2000), is becoming key in redefining the Aegean as being part of a pan-Mediterranean network of economic, environmental, and political cooperation.

The perspective of one quite substantial Mytilene trader who had been key in developing new trade between Lesbos and the Turkish mainland in recent years is worth discussing here. His way of speaking about the experience combines recognizable political recitations with a personal account of his experience as someone who did regular trade in Turkey. In one fell swoop, he stereotyped and classified Turkish people, constituted the Aegean as a single entity, and suggested that, actually, everyone is much the same, and how things turn out is historical

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16 [http://www.ceas.europa.eu/euromed/index\\_en.htm](http://www.ceas.europa.eu/euromed/index_en.htm). The key objectives in 1995 were: Political Dialogue, Economic Cooperation and Free Trade, and Human, Social, and Cultural Dialogue. Recently, in 2008, the whole process was renamed “EUROMED” and its aims and objectives have been changed, particularly to include issues relating to terrorism and the quest for peace.

17 Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, p. 12. Available at [http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/import/07/0713\\_declaration\\_de\\_paris/Joint\\_declaration\\_of\\_the\\_Paris\\_summit\\_for\\_the\\_Mediterranean-EN.pdf](http://www.ue2008.fr/webdav/site/PFUE/shared/import/07/0713_declaration_de_paris/Joint_declaration_of_the_Paris_summit_for_the_Mediterranean-EN.pdf)

accident. I had introduced myself as being interested in his views and experiences on the shifting relations between Greece and Turkey:

“The first thing I have to say is Turks are Turks. They don’t change mind-set; their mentality is from the 1950s. The Greeks now experience their own past through their relations with the Turks. The Turks will have to change that before they can join the EU. . . . The Greeks used to have that same mentality, you know, but they were forced to catch up a bit . . . though Greeks too still have a long way to go—we still wasted all the subsidies the EU paid to us, rather than building proper infrastructure. . . . The Turks *could* catch up; they just haven’t. One of the things that makes them different is their unreliability; if you make a deal, you should keep it, and they don’t. . . . In any case, the people of the Aegean have kept in touch with each other over the years, despite all the changes, and they understand each other—not like in the mainland [of Greece], where people know nothing of Turks; here, they’re close by, and we know. So we’re not opening new roads in Turkey, we’re reopening old roads, and we’re modernizing. We’re not doing something different.”<sup>18</sup>

This commentary was made in front of a Turkish friend, Ayşe, one of the few Turks who today lives permanently on the Greek side. I asked her later whether she agreed with this man’s views. Ayşe responded that he had been prominent in the local center-right party on the island for some years, and added, “That’s why he talks like that.” In other words, his rhetoric about Turks simply identified his political leanings; to Ayşe, it did not say anything about his relations with Turks in practice.

This border was one that appeared to many to be in the process of transforming, both in returning to some old paths once well worn, and of multiplying its relations. More specifically, it was no longer only a border that was located *here*, and that formed some kind of interface among the places and peoples of the Aegean; it was also a border that was a part of somewhere else, part of a place that Marc Abélès calls “virtual Europe” (Abélès 2000), a place with no sovereign territory, but plenty of regions and states. In a sense though, the border had always been multiply related, simultaneously historically, politically, economically, personally, and in diverse imagined/virtual ways. That multiplicity did not prevent a sense of singularity about the place, just as combining past and future with the present does not prevent a sense of singularity of the moment; rather, it added density to the experience, like the ruins of past lives and the diversity of talk. The addition of the EU’s rhetoric and border regulations could be considered to be one more element of that, a partial repetition even, and it is a matter I have discussed elsewhere (Green 2010); here, I have been trying to draw

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18 The reference to the opening of old roads was something also mentioned in Epirus, but it was meant more literally: once border controls relaxed in the late 1980s, some well-worn paths used in the past by both travelers and pastoralists in the Epirus region were reopened by locals and regularly used to cross between Albania and Greece without going through the formal border crossing point. That practice carried on until the late 1990s, after which time border security on both sides became much tighter again. The idea of doing again what has been done before was regularly mentioned in both field sites.

out the way people combined a range of familiar, ideologically inflected assertions about the meaning of the place with their stories about their own, or their families', personal experiences, which were recounted in much less recitational style, and with much less certainty about what those stories added up to. In combination, these stereotypical repetitions and personal accounts made speculations about what might happen next seem, while to some degree apparently predictable and repetitive, nevertheless contingent, perhaps even negotiable, in a small way. The unpredictability of the small things—the mundane, quotidian, personal matters that people have to attend to as they go about their lives—*that* seemed to be where the contingency lay. The big moments—the way the Cold War played out in Epirus, and the way the leftovers of the wars between Greece and Turkey and the Lausanne Treaty that followed it played out in the Aegean—marked all the stories, in one way or another, and that made “border” mean different things in the two places and times I have been discussing. When combined with people’s accounts of their own lives and relations, it was at that point that speculation about what might happen next took on a less overdetermined or epic feel, and became more a kind of contemplation about whether there is anything that can or should be done.

### Afterword

Finally, the fieldwork for the Aegean part of this article was carried out in 2007 and 2008, before the current fiscal crisis in Greece. At the time of writing in May 2012, things appear worse in economic terms than anyone ever predicted during my fieldwork; and yet in another sense, it was not entirely unpredicted: time and again people said that there was no money, that everything was being kept afloat with the constant recirculation of debts and credits, and through a range of informal methods that always resulted in the government receiving less tax revenue than they should. That was excused by people suggesting that they could not make ends meet in any other way, and, anyhow, the government would just waste the money (another regular recitation, repeated endlessly). Many people in 2008 did not believe the situation could continue as it was, but they carried on, using their creativity to get by, as there seemed few other options. There are even fewer options now; but while it makes many people furious—furious with their successive governments, with the EU, with banks and large corporations (“Why should we pay for this when it was they who created the problem?”)—it is not altogether a surprise. This too had its trace, and people had recited it.

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### Réciter le futur. Relocalisations frontalières et spéculations quotidiennes dans deux régions frontalières grecques

Résumé : À partir de recherches ethnographiques portant sur deux périodes historiques et régions frontalières différentes de la Grèce (la frontière gréco-albanaise d'Épire, dans la partie continentale nord-ouest, au cours des années 1990, et la frontière gréco-turque de l'Égée-Septentrionale dans les années 2000) cet article explore la façon dont les discours sur ce qui pourrait survenir contribuent à un processus continu de relocalisation des frontières. Leur comparaison montre que le moment historique particulier et la signification emblématique des deux régions frontalières importent considérablement dans les spéculations des gens sur ce qui pourrait arriver. En tant que telles, les histoires font partie du processus historiquement contingent d'attribution de certaines qualités aux frontières. Cet article se concentre sur la façon dont ces récits associent certains stéréotypes à des histoires personnelles sur le passé, mêlant ainsi aux commentaires éculés et souvent idéologiquement infléchis qui sont comme récités, des histoires personnelles d'expériences vécues. L'article suggère que ces récitations réalisent et réitèrent à la fois les positions stéréotypées et idéologiques qui localisent les personnes politiquement et socialement par rapport à la frontière, et qui définissent également les qualités de la frontière. Les histoires plus personnelles contrastent, ou complètent, ces récitations, et localisent les personnes dans leurs propres relations, en soulignant la façon dont les frontières sont des lieux multi-qualifiés.

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