

Translation and Irregular Immigration at the Border of Europe

Richard C. Ledes



On Lesbos looking towards Turkey, from where the boats arrive.

My interest in making NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL (2018) from the start had to do with translation. This feature documentary film is about the people arriving on boats on the shores of Lesbos (AKA Mytilene), the volunteers who assist them, and the inhabitants of the island. In 2016 over a million people passed through Lesbos--an island with a population of 80,000--coming through Turkey into Greece and hence into the European Union. Before I made the decision to organize the production, looking on social media at the video clips of people arriving on overcrowded boats, one of the characteristics of the clips that stood out for me was that these people's speech most often was not translated. Lesbos is a short distance from Turkey and there has always

been at least some irregular migration back and forth between the mainland and the island. The amount of immigration from Turkey onto the island surged in the 1920s when a rise in nationalism in Turkey was accompanied by massacres of the minority populations, including the Greeks. At the time, my grandparents were Greeks living in Istanbul who migrated as refugees to the United States aboard a Russian ship stopping in Turkey. Legend in my family is that my paternal grandfather, who spoke Russian as well as Greek and English, at Ellis Island was enlisted on the spot by the authorities into translating for the other passengers and thereby expedited their own passage into their new country. A great number of the Greeks living on the island of Lesbos today, arguably the majority, are descended from this same wave of irregular migration of the 1920s that marks the history of the island, of Greece, and of my own family. The etymology of “translation” from Latin is roughly a “carrying across,” and I could “hear” another sense of “carrying across” in these images of people crossing from Turkey—really, of what was *not* being carried across, an impasse that remained on the level of language: this impasse was what was carried across from these images to me and was an important part of what motivated me, as a filmmaker of primarily fiction films, to go with a small crew to the island to make my first feature documentary film. On the island there are a small number of volunteers who speak one or more of the languages of the people arriving, Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish among them. In our film we interview a



Shamshaid Jutt from Pakistan standing in the soon-to-be-dismantled autonomous camp outside Camp Moria. He speaks Punjabi, Urdu and English.

number of the translators and they are very aware of the importance of their work.

In 1943 an essay by Hannah Arendt entitled “We Refugees” was

published in the journal *Menorah*. While the specific history is not the same, the characteristics of the loss experienced by refugees that she describes remains unchanged:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world.

We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.

It is up to the small number of translators among the volunteers, the inhabitants of the island and among the irregular immigrants who speak English, Greek or one of the



Inside the front gate of Camp Moria irregular immigrants are seen protesting. One sign reads, “If U deport, we will die.”

other languages of Europe initially to facilitate this dimension of the “carrying across.” We too, myself, our small crew, those who supported the film and those who watch it become part of this passage. We arrived in April 2017, just after the European Union had reversed its prior policy and had begun intensive efforts to halt the arrival of irregular immigrants and to concentrate those who still managed to arrive into camps surrounded by barbed wire, police and the military. On Lesbos the largest and most infamous of these camps is Camp Moria, known internationally for its substandard living conditions and overcrowding unrivaled anywhere else in Europe. The “carrying across” of translation now takes on a different temporal relation to immigration. It needs to precede rather than follow other forms of migration and also happen independently and in spite of the effort to impede the other forms of passage. Most of the irregular migrants



The title of our film comes from graffiti on the wall of Camp Moria. Shortly after we filmed, this graffiti was whitewashed over for the Pope's arrival a few days later.

whom we interviewed were hoping to be able to continue into Europe and in the meantime authorized us as a means of transmitting to a largely Western audience the portion of their experiences that could be translated and shared even if this act of translation would always fall short and need to be made again. 1

1 Anyone who thinks translation is not an issue at the southern border of the United States should see Chantal Akerman's film that she made at this border DE L'AUTRE COTÉ.

To watch Richard Ledes' doc:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= A_9e3-FCnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_9e3-FCnU)