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The Pontic Greeks, from Pontus to the Caucasus, Greece and the diaspora

“iconography” and mobile frontiers

Michel Bruneau

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 The Pontic Greeks, from the shores of the Black Sea, have, over time, become a frontier people, first of multi-ethnic empires (Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian) then of Nation-States (Greece, Turkey). They are also a people of the mountains, the Pontic Alps, with a marginal location in a distinctive region of Anatolia, and former guardians of the eastern border of the Byzantine empire in the area of contact with the Turkoman emirates. When the Russian tsarist empire extended its territory to the South, particularly into the Caucasus, it pushed back the Muslim populations and attracted Christian populations to resettle these lands. The settlement of the Pontic Greeks was encouraged in the valleys of the Caucasus to the south of Tbilissi and in the steppe region of Kars-Ardahan, on the Armenian plateau of the Anti-Caucasus, a region annexed by Russia from 1878 to 1918. Following the exchange of populations provided for in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the Greeks of the Pontus were then transplanted in Greece along with a large number of those from the Caucasus region of Kars that was returned to Turkey. These refugees were strongly encouraged by the Greek State to settle in the mountainous border areas of northern Greece, in Macedonia and Thrace, as new “akritique”¹, close to the frontiers. From the Pontus to the Caucasus, and then to the mountains of Macedonia and Thrace, it would seem then that the Pontic Greeks regularly sought to settle in mountainous border regions, regions similar to their place of origin, the Pontic Alps. Participation in three of the pilgrimage trips (2003, 2006,

2010) that associations of Pontic Greeks organise each summer in Turkey enabled us to better understand the links between their villages of origin in Turkey and their places of settlement in Greece. A further source of information was provided by the texts written by refugees or their descendants about their villages of origin and the places they settled in Greece. Surveys were conducted in 2010-2011 in the department of Kilikis in the border region with Greece and the Macedonian Republic (villages of Iliolousto, Akritas and Drosato), and in the region of Kars-Ardahan (Turkey), where the inhabitants of these villages were originally from.

- 2 Following numerous migratory movements, the Pontic Greeks very quickly became dispersed in a diaspora around the Black Sea and in the Caucasus. They therefore recreated symbolic frontiers, an idea that can be understood by referring to the “iconography” concept of Jean Gottmann (Bruneau, 2000). Among all the Greek refugees of 1923, the Pontic Greeks were the most attached to preserving and transmitting their ethnic identity from one generation to the next, by establishing places of remembrance. In the diaspora, they created, within their numerous associations, a particularly rich iconography by referring to the places and territories from which they originated (Pontus and Caucasus). In the host areas where they settled, they built sanctuaries and monuments where periodically they held and still hold commemorative ceremonies and cultural manifestations (Bruneau, 2008). They therefore created mobile, non-territorialized frontiers that helped them preserve and reproduce their diasporic identity by distinguishing themselves from other Greeks. By mobile frontiers, we mean everything that separates a given population, the Pontic Greeks in this case, from other populations living in the same area. The constitution of an “iconography”, made up of symbols, cultural practices and memories, enables them to preserve a distinct identity wherever they go, one that is transmitted from one generation to the next within the networks of their associations.

The temporal and spatial itinerary of the Pontic Greeks: from the Pontic Alps to the Caucasus, the Anti-Caucasus and then the Balkans

- 3 At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Pontic Greeks lived in an area inherited from the end of the Byzantine period that had become a distinct entity between 1204 (taking of Constantinople by the Crusaders) and 1461 (fall of Trabzon and its attachment to the Ottoman Empire). This territory, which they called *Romania*, the same name as the Byzantine Empire, was governed by an imperial dynasty, the Komnenos, directly descended from the imperial dynasty of the same name in Constantinople before the fourth crusade.
- 4 The territory was characterised in Asia Minor by the originality of its environment in the form of an imposing mountain range, the Pontic Alps, stretching along the southern shores of the Black Sea in an east-west direction. These mountains, rising to almost 4000 metres in places, have deep parallel valleys running in a N-S direction, each providing a layering of vegetation, with deciduous forest giving way to conifers and then mountain pastures above 2000 metres. The nomadic Oghuz Turks were not able to penetrate these areas with their herds as easily as in Anatolia, so that

Islamisation and Turkification took place far more slowly and in a less comprehensive manner.

- 5 Between the seats of government and influence of a enduring state authority, roles played by Constantinople and Ikonion from the 12th to the 15th centuries, the frontiers separating these two principal state structures and the Turcoman emirates were particularly mobile between unstable states (Danishmendid...). They were largely governed by the capacity of their armies to attack and resist.
- 6 The frontier between the Russian Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire fluctuated in function of the power relationship between the armies of these two empires. The Pontic Greeks always welcomed the Russian troops as liberators and often went off with them into the Caucasus to avoid reprisals from the Ottoman troops, when the Russian troops had to retreat and return to their homeland. The Caucasus thus became an area of retreat and then settlement for Pontic Greeks, particularly those of the mining interior (Chaldia or the Argyroupoli and Ardasa region), which experienced an economic decline from the beginning of the 19th century. The Russians therefore encouraged immigration of the Greeks into the Caucasus and the coastal area of the Black Sea in a similar manner to the immigration of the Armenians, Christian populations who were brought in to replace the Muslim populations (Circassians, Abkhazians, Chechens...) who, not wishing to submit, were pushed back towards the Ottoman territory. A first wave of migrants from the Pontus settled in the mountain valleys of Tsalka and Tetri-Tskaro to the south of Tbilissi following the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-29. A second wave arrived after the Crimean war (1853-1856).
- 7 This immigration was particularly well organised between 1878 and 1918, when 70 000 Greeks established 74 villages in the governorate of Kars-Ardahan in the Anti-Caucasus. They had a literacy rate of 80% and brought with them their priests and teachers. In the regions of Kars, Sourangel, Soganlouk, Olti, and Kagisman, the Greeks were first of all farmers, then stock rearers, while in the regions of Ardachan and Kiolas, they were above all stock rearers. Grazing was on communal land and transhumance took place in summer to the mountain pastures (*parcharia*) at higher altitudes. Religious feelings were very strong. The Greek villages often had their schools in private buildings, with teaching that was both national and religious. Lessons were taught in Russian, with one hour of Greek per week.
- 8 At the end of the First World War, following the Russian revolution, the Greeks of Kars-Ardahan were forced to flee by the advancing Ottoman troops and took refuge around Tbilissi and in the north of the Caucasus, then in Batoum where ships sent by the Greek government came to pick them up in 1920-1921 (Kaztaridis, 1996). After a long period of quarantine in Kalamaria (near Thessalonica) until the end of 1921, the refugees from Kars finally settled in northern Greece, in Macedonia and Thrace, and more especially in the prefectures of Thessalonica, Pella, Kilkis, Florina, Drama, Imathia, and Serres. These regions were sparsely populated and the Turkish villages were abandoned following the Exchange of populations under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Most refugees settled in farming areas, with relatively few going to Thessalonica. This settlement took place once again in a mostly mountainous region in northern Greece, in a Balkan region on the border with the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia. These Pontic Greeks, referred to as Caucasians (*Kavkasioi*) by the others, once again found themselves in the situation of “akritai”, acting as pioneers, defenders of the

frontiers, and replacing the Slavic-speaking populations who had left for Bulgaria at the end of the Balkan wars and during the First World War.

- 9 In the three villages of the department of Kilikis considered here (Iliolousto, Akritas, Drosato (Terzenidis, 2009)), as in that of the department of Florina Neos Kavkasos (Kritharidis, 2006), the great majority of refugee families were originally from the villages of the border governorate of Kars-Ardahan: Fakrel, Hanach, Kongk, Siaraf, and Pelikpas. The Pontic Greek populations, which founded the villages and lived there for some forty years, were themselves originally from the towns and villages situated in the mountainous border zone of the South of the Pontic territory, the Chaldia (Sevasteia, Hapes, Argyropoli, Erzigkiang, Kertzani, Santa) and Tsalka-Tetri-Tskaro in the Caucasus, whose own population, as we saw earlier, also came from this same mountainous Pontic area.
- 10 In this area, we thus find populations originating from the mountainous border zones of the Pontus and/or Caucasus, whose settlement had been deliberately encouraged by the Greek State on its northern Balkanic border with Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. It was indeed a systematic policy to resettle a Balkan border zone that had been largely emptied of its Slavic-speaking Muslim and Christian populations (Pelagidis, 1994, p. 136-138)².
- 11 The same phenomenon occurred, but on a smaller scale and in a different historical context, sixty-six years later in 1990, when the families of new Russian-speaking Pontic Greek refugees, following the collapse of the URSS, came to settle in these villages in the hope that they might find distant relatives or compatriots originating from the same Pontic regions. Their numbers vary, depending on the villages, but the average is around ten.
- 12 After the Second World War, during the 1950s and especially the 1960s, the population of these Macedonian villages was the subject of massive migration to the major Greek urban centres, Athens and Thessalonika, and to Western Europe (Germany, Belgium, Sweden), Australia, Canada and the USA. Unlike earlier migrations, these were not forced migrations but for economic reasons. Today, these villages have fewer and fewer farms, but have increasing numbers of retired people and second homes for the descendants of the refugees now settled in Athens, Thessalonika, Kilikis or abroad.

From the villages of Macedonia to the Greek diaspora of Sweden and Australia

- 13 We will now take a closer look at the Pontic Greeks of Sweden and Australia, who are particularly representative of the Pontic diaspora of Western Europe and the New World that developed after the Second World War, a diaspora that includes many migrants who came from the villages of Northern Greece.
- 14 In Sweden, the Greeks have settled in the Stockholm area and other towns in the South (Uppsala, Malmo, Goteborg) and number no more than twenty thousand spread over some forty communities, not counting the numerous cultural associations. Despite their relatively limited numbers, they are very active. Several tens of former inhabitants of Drosato emigrated to Sweden after 1964, and in Stockholm, in the 1980s, founded their own association. Others took responsibilities in the Greek community of Rinkeby to the North of Stockholm as well as in the Swedish federation of Greek

communities (Terznidis, 2010, p. 58). The Pontic Greeks make up a relatively important proportion of the Greek community and have grouped together in the association *Evxinos Pontos*, also situated in Stockholm³.

- 15 Another migration took place between 1952 and 1970, this time to Australia from Macedonia. Some 55,000 migrants of Pontic origin settled in Australia during this period, mostly in the major cities and federal capitals: 35,000 in Melbourne, 8500 in Sidney, 6000 in Adelaide, 5500 in the other capitals, including 40 in Hobart (Tasmania), and 80 in Perth (Western Australia) (Kasapidis, 2007).
- 16 The main centre of this Pontic diaspora is Australia's second city, and the most industrial, Melbourne, with some 35,000 Pontic Greeks out of a total Greek population of 200,000. Four or five associations were set up there at the end of the 1970s and a coordination committee for these was established in 1998 to organise ceremonies to commemorate the genocide (May 19). These ceremonies proved to be a success among the Greek and Pontic community and even drew interest from Australian civil society in 2006 (Kasapidis M. L., 2007).
- 17 The Pontic Greeks in Australia, like those in North America and Germany, continue to refer to their mountainous homeland and places of origin in the Pontus through their associations and churches. They do not claim any territory, as was the case in 1918-19 ("Pontus Republic" project), but merely recognition by the Turkish state of a genocide perpetrated against their ancestors (duty to remember). Cultural and religious exchanges take place through the national and transnational network of these associative and ecclesiastical institutions. They thus operate in a transnational reticular space that links the communities of the diaspora and those of Greece. The effectiveness of this associative life and of the affirmation of a Pontic ethnic identity has been accompanied by the creation of a very coherent "iconography". To better understand the preservation and transmission of this identity between generations, as well as the mobile frontier that delimits this transnational diasporic network of Pontic Greek communities, it is useful to refer to the concept of iconography as defined by Jean Gottmann.

The concept of iconography according to J. Gottmann

- 18 For Jean Gottmann (1952, p. 67-68) "the psychological factor is essential for understanding the compartmentalisation of the world, partitions being far more in the mind than in nature (translation)". "Iconography is the sum of beliefs, symbols, images, ideas, etc. inherited by a community and to which its members are attached. This link between people and "icons" constitutes the cement of the group and leads to the definition of a territory from which the members of other communities, attached to other iconographies, are excluded (translation)" (1955, II, p. 200). Gottmann sees, in this iconography, "the Gordian knot of the national community (translation)" (1952, p. 220), in our case the identity of the Pontic Greek people. It ensures relative political stability for this community. This "set of symbols, abstract and concrete, that summarise the beliefs and common interests of a community, constitute the cement giving its cohesion and political personality to this community (translation)" (1966, p. 63). It is "a barrier of resistance to change", a "solid cement" linking the members of the same community. Gottmann spoke of "systems of resistance to movement" that are "more abstract than material and consist of a number of symbols (translation)" (1952,

p. 214). It concerns “a system of varied symbols in which the population of the region under consideration has faith (translation)” (Gottmann, 1966, p. 136). Iconography is “a factor of political stabilisation” (1952, 221) as opposed to circulation, the “principle of movement”, which is a factor of change.

- 19 The symbols making up an iconography concern three essential aspects: religion, the political past (memory), and social organisation. “Religion, great historical moments, the flag, social taboos, vested and well established interests, are all part of what we call the iconography (translation)” (Gottmann, 1966, p. 136). “These three categories of symbols constitute an iconography that is often complex, but always effective. There are scarcely two sets of people who can have the same (translation)”. These symbols are the object of a real belief that singles out a population in relation to its neighbours, who are attached to other symbols: “tenacious attachments to symbols that are sometimes very abstract, but which together form what we call the iconography (translation)” (1952, p. 157). On either side of a border that has existed for a certain length of time, different iconographies may be observed, that is “different systems of symbols in which the population has belief. These symbols are very different: flags, religious beliefs, great historical moments, social taboos, customary techniques, etc. Thus regionalisms are formed and sometimes the beginnings of new nations (translation)” (Gottmann, 1952, p. 137-138). One might also add ethnic or ethno-regional minorities.
- 20 We put forward the hypothesis that the concept of iconography as defined by J. Gottmann was conceived in a culture that was descended directly from the Byzantine civilisation (Bruneau, 2000). At least, it complies with its spirit, as illustrated in the following text: “Most often, human communities distinguish themselves from one another by the differences in these networks of symbols, these complex sets, for which we have proposed the term of iconography elsewhere in this text. Each community has its own iconography in this sense. In Russia at the time of the Tsars, when a village in conflict with another was on the verge of fighting or signing an agreement, a meeting took place in the presence of the icons of these two communities (translation)” (Gottmann, 1966, p. 136). He refers to the highly symbolic character of the Byzantine icons extended to a much larger area: “the entire system of symbols in which the population of the region under consideration has faith (translation)”.

The Pontic Greek iconography

- 21 The Pontic Greeks who took refuge in Greece and the diaspora increased their identity and cultural symbols by creating a very rich iconography. The icon of the Virgin of Soumela, through a history that is as exceptional as it is symbolic, became the focal point of Pontic iconography and the symbol of their unity. It is around the icon of the Virgin that the Pontic Greeks in diaspora built up their iconography. For these direct heirs of the Byzantines, State, Nation and Orthodoxy are closely linked. The Monastery of Panagia Soumela symbolises all this at one and the same time. This iconography can only exist and fully express itself by being rooted in a shrine, the sanctuary and monastery of the Virgin of Soumela, which is the focal point of a great annual gathering in the form of a pilgrimage (Bruneau, 2008). Its main function is to ensure the reproduction of Pontic Greek identity in exile and its transmission from one generation to the next. Hence the need to make it possible wherever there is a significant part of

the diaspora: in Macedonia (Kastania), the US (West-Milford, New-Jersey), or Australia (Melbourne)⁴

- 22 The development of associations with a cultural and identity orientations, which could be observed among the Pontic Greeks both in Greece and abroad, especially from the 1970s, helped enrich their iconography with non-religious elements, be they cultural, political or national. The figure of the resistance fighter armed to the teeth with daggers and pistols, frequently displayed in photos and the subject of stylized representations in their commemorative monuments, is the most political of the iconographic elements. This figure becomes particularly prominent in references made to the “genocide” (1919-1923). The photographs of massacres and deportations are increasingly present in the associations and even on the walls of Pontic taverns. They are now part of the iconography. This is also enriched by two other elements. First, the eagle with its head turned toward Constantinople, which appeared on the coins of the old city of Sinope (IV century BC), is most prominent in the press and in Pontic periodicals, the most important of which is the *Archeion Pontou*. The slogan on the *Romania*, an extract of a popular song, is another prominent characteristic of many publications: “Even if *Romania* belongs to the past, it will flower again and bear new fruit (translation)”. The term *Romania*, which also designates the Byzantine Empire and that of Trabzon, has in fact been appropriated by the Pontic Greeks. Images or photographs of the main churches of Trabzon (Agios Eugenios, Agia Sophia) or the high school (the *Frontistirio*), where the greater part of the Pontic Greek elite were educated, often appear on the walls of meeting rooms of associations or in Pontic publications. This iconography helps maintain and transmit Pontic Greek identity from one generation to the next, an identity linked to a territory corresponding to that of the Byzantine Empire of Trabzon (1204-1461), taken from the map of the “Republic of Pontus” as claimed at the Peace Conference (1919) following the First World War. The attachment of the Pontic Greeks to their mountain origins (the Pontic Alps) is such that it has given rise to commemorative gatherings in their host territory in Macedonia where, even if the mountains are not as high, Pontic Greek communities like to remember life in the mountain pastures of the land from whence they came. An association of former inhabitants of Matsouka was founded in Thessalonica in 1984 in close cooperation with Kozani where a large number of them now live. Each year, at Whitsun, people relive the customs of mountain life in the alpine pastures (*parcharia*) with their herds of cattle and sheep, their temporary dwellings, and the famous *parcharomana* who presided over bucolic life, making products derived from the milk of their cows⁵.

Conclusion: from territorial frontiers to the mobile and invisible frontiers of the diaspora

- 23 Before becoming a world-wide diaspora, the Pontic Greeks were a frontier people living in the mountainous margins of great multi-ethnic empires (Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Russian empires) and then of the Greek Nation State bordering on the Balkans. The Pontic Greeks were a frontier people in both senses of the term (a border between states and a pioneer area) and gradually built, stage by stage, a complex transnational space, a diaspora, linking different communities of refugees and migrants. Their extremely rich “iconography” enabled them to build an imaginary territory with

references to the land from which they had come, thanks to the development of places of memory that provided focal points for reproducing and preserving their distinct ethnic identity within their host territory, but that at the same time were closely linked to Hellenism and the Greek Nation State. Their situation as border wardens (“acritique”), at the limits of imperial or national territories, has continued, either spontaneously or under coercion, throughout their history: Byzantine eastern border, Russian Caucasus, northern border of Greece. The mountainous environment of their origins has long imposed on them a way of life based on mobility and migrations in search of means to supplement their income. This migratory movement between Pontus, the Caucasus, Russia and the shores of the Black Sea resulted in the constitution of a transnational diaspora. Their attachment to their Pontic territory of origin, and even to their lands, is passed on through their Christian orthodox religion, inherited from their Byzantine past (churches, monasteries, icons) which differentiates them from the Ottoman Muslim majority. This long-standing confrontation with another dominant religion, Islam, and with another dominant language, Turkish, which they have sometimes adopted, has undoubtedly strengthened their desire to affirm their identity.

- 24 Of all the Greeks of Asia Minor and eastern Thrace uprooted from their homeland in 1923, it is the Pontic Greeks who are the most attached to their lost lands and their identity, linked to a special history and mountainous environment. Places and territories of the memory, both tangible and intangible, are a substitute for the territory and places of origin that have been lost, but proclaimed as “unforgettable”. They are the markers of an identity that is very much alive among those who never knew their homeland. These places and the rich iconography that is found in them have created invisible frontiers, not associated with any territory, which allow the Pontic Greeks to preserve their own identity within Hellenism. Their lost territory has been transformed into a territory of the memory with frontiers that are imagined or dreamed of (the “Republic of the Pontus” and the Empire of Trebizond), related to a mythical story, constantly reproduced in their commemorative ceremonies and their abundant publications whatever form these may take (paper or electronic).
- 25 The Pontic Greeks, from the first to the fourth and fifth generations, have long since ceased claiming the territory of a “Republic of Pontus” (1918-20) in order to concentrate on demanding international recognition and an acknowledgement by the Turkish State of the “genocide” committed against their people. In the diaspora, they have strongly engaged in cultural and remembrance activities, thus perpetuating the affirmation of their identity. Their frontiers are no longer territorial but socio-cultural and identity-based. They are mobile, and have adapted to the diaspora and its places of memory.

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NOTES

1. In Greek, *Akritai* (from *akra*, a frontier outpost or region) refers to soldier farmers established by the Romans, and then by the Byzantines, to defend the eastern border of the empire. A large number of popular songs celebrate their heroic exploits (Ahrweiler, 1974). The epic poem, *Digenis Akritas*, a manuscript of which, dating from the 16th or 17th century, was found in the monastery of Panagia Soumela in the Trabzon region and published by Satha and Émile Legrand in 1875, was written in the same vein.
2. During the Second World War and the German occupation, and until the end of the civil war (1941-1949), this region was the theatre of repeated armed conflicts.
3. On 11 March 2010, the Pontic Greeks of Sweden obtained recognition by the Swedish parliament of the genocide of Pontic Greeks by the Ottaman and Kemalist Turks (1916-1923) as well as that of the Armenians and the Assyro-Chaldeans. This is the first time that the parliament of a Nation-State, outside of Greece itself, has recognised this genocide (*Evxinos Pontos*, April 2010, 24). This recognition, so important for Pontic associations worldwide, was the fruit of action taken by a member of the Social Democrat party of Pontic origin, Nikos Papadopoulos, but also that of Swedish members belonging to different parties of the left and right who were convinced by the arguments of the Armenian, Assyro-Chaldean and Greek associations.
4. The exceptional geographical characteristics of this shrine, the Mont Mela, also play an important role: the monastery perched on an abrupt cliff, surrounded by a dense, rich mixed

deciduous and coniferous forest, occupying a dominant position with an impressive view between earth and sky. A search was made in the sanctuaries of the diaspora to find comparable sites, particularly on Mount Vermion, chosen for the beauty of the surrounding landscape and a dominant viewpoint. However, it was not possible to find any real equivalent, since the exuberance of the subtropical natural environment and the depth of the steep-sided valleys of the Pontic Alps have no equivalent in Greece (Bruneau, 2008).

5. The three villages of Ayios Dimitrios, Tetralophos and Komninon, at the foot of the western slopes of Mount Vermion have, since 1928, sought to recreate this pastoral life on the highest parts of the mountain. Today, there is an annual festival (in June) on the *parcharia* (mountain pastures) of Ayios Dimitrios, near the monastery of Agios Johannis Vazelon, when traditional dishes associated with this pastoral life are prepared and enjoyed and the music and dances of Matsouka are relived in celebration, in particular, of the women, the *parcharomanes*, the heroines of this transhumant farming society.

ABSTRACTS

From the Byzantine period until the beginning of the 20th century, the Pontic Greeks, from the shores of the Black Sea, lived in the mountain areas of the Pontic Alps, where they were able to preserve their language and/or their orthodox religion on the eastern borders of first the Byzantine and then the Ottoman Empire. Like many mountain people, the Pontic Greeks moved a lot, in their case in the direction of the Caucasus and Russia. The exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece in 1923 resulted in their settling as refugees on the northern Balkan borders of their new homeland. Later, after the Second World War, the population of Pontic Greeks became dispersed in a world diaspora. In response to these developments, they created a very rich “iconography” (in the sense used by Jean Gottmann), which enabled them to transmit their identity from one generation to the next by establishing places of remembrance in the areas in which they settled. The construction of a transnational network, within which they regularly created mobile and symbolic frontiers with the help of this iconography and the places of remembrance it adorned, enabled them to reproduce their ethnic identity. This helped them resist assimilation by the host societies, be they Greek or foreign. Constant reference to the territory and mountain places of their origins has forged links with the border zones where they now live and with their iconography that underpins the mobile frontiers, which in a diaspora distinguishes them from other Greeks and the citizens of their host country.

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Keywords: frontier, iconography, places of remembrance, mobility, transnationalism, territory

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