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RETROSPECTIVE ETHNOGRAPHIES

Twisting moments of researching commemorative practices among volunteers after the refugee arrivals to Europe 2015

Marie Sandberg

Introduction

The *Museum without a Home – an Exhibition of Hospitality* was a travelling exhibition curated by Oxfam and Amnesty International Greece in 2016. It exhibited everyday items donated by Greek citizens to refugees arriving during the so-called “long summer of welcome” in 2015. On display, for example, were a jacket donated by Spyros and a backpack donated by Mara. As the accompanying exhibition text explained, Spyros lived near the Greek–Albanian border where many refugees were temporarily hosted in 2015 and while helping out as a volunteer he became acquainted with one of the Syrian refugees, to whom he decided to give his jacket. Further, it is described how Mara, living in Athens, would pass by Victoria Square on a daily basis back in 2015 in order to provide refugee children with pencils, paper and other school supplies; the backpack was among her donations.

Since November 2016, the *Museum without a Home* exhibition has travelled the world. As can be seen from Oxfam’s webpage, the exhibition is “dedicated to humanity”, the overall mission being to display, “the new historical contribution of hospitality, humanity and solidarity towards migrants and refugees” (Oxfam org. 2018). The concluding statement attached to each exhibition text reads: “A small act of solidarity that deserves a big THANK you”. The text confirms the aim of *Museum without a Home* as a celebration of hospitality in which the focus is on the citizen helpers rather than the refugee arrivals (Poehls forthcoming). The exhibition thus configures a clear distinction between the “generous helper” on the one hand and the “needy receiver” on the other.

It goes without saying that the exhibition could have benefitted from including the narratives of incoming refugees. However, in this chapter I would like to zoom in on the volunteers and their “good deeds”, in particular on how those deeds were recollected among volunteers seeking to provide relief for refugees arriving to

Europe, once the sense of urgency had been diffused or deflected after the brokering of the EU–Turkey deal in 2016.¹

Scholars of humanitarianism argue that humanitarian acts of “doing good” implies a range of hierarchies and power relations that are not always visible (Fassin 2012). Being able to provide help and assistance assumes a privileged position, which can ultimately victimize the ones in need (Ticktin 2016). In the anthropology of humanitarianism, there is a growing interest in the everyday forms of humanitarianism, such as the loosely organized, informal networks in focus here (Brković 2016). Less attention has so far been devoted to the role of ethnographer (s) in examining what “good deeds” or the doing of “the right thing” entailed for citizens who volunteered in the long summer of welcome in 2015. In order to capture volunteers’ motives and self-reflections, further emic exploration is thus still much needed (Cabot 2018; Rozakou 2016). A point of departure for this article, therefore, is that, if volunteer practices are to be understood as actions that do more than offer hospitality or donations – as they are presented in the *Museum without a Home* – careful ethnographic attention needs to be directed towards the ways volunteers themselves reflect on and commemorate events and their involvement in volunteer refugee reception work. This attention requires additional methodological reflection on the role of ethnographers in researching on “doing the right thing” among volunteers.

The chapter² will present fieldwork insights from an interdisciplinary research network, *The Helping Hands Research Network*, which explored various ways of doing informal volunteer work in support of refugees coming to Europe, with special emphasis on arrivals to northern European countries in 2015.³ Between May 2017 and October 2018, the network visited more than 20 initiatives for refugee support in five European cities, Copenhagen, Nijmegen, Glasgow, Hamburg and Flensburg. Those visits were organized through so-called “field-workshops”, in which network members opened up their ongoing field sites for their colleagues’ short-term visits. Since the fieldwork was conducted after the summer of welcome in 2015, many of the volunteers we have had the opportunity to talk with were looking back at their volunteer practices and motives. Taking a lead from Ferreira and Vespeira De Almeida (2017), I apply the term “retrospective ethnography” in order to bring the issue of temporality centre stage when undertaking ethnographic research on specific past events (Ferreira and Vespeira De Almeida 2017, 208). The commemorative practices of the volunteers will, therefore, be at the centre of my interest here. Whereas commemoration usually designates an official marking of a past event on a collective level (cf. Nora 1998), the commemorative practices in focus here are rather the everyday recollection of the 2015 events by the volunteers.

My analysis will take its cue from anthropologist Sharon MacDonald’s notion of *past presencing* (2013, 80–82), which enables an interrogation into the various modes whereby the past may be enfolded to the present, not only at institutionalized levels but also in everyday practices like the commemorations of the volunteers. I will focus on different modes of *memory work* enacted by the volunteers in their

reflections on the past events. In order to refine our understanding of volunteer practices and to go beyond seeing volunteerism as offering relief through hospitality or material help, the analysis presents three modes of memory work enacted through volunteers' commemorative practices: the *melancholy of volunteering*; *acting for the future* and *volunteering as heritage-making*. By looking closely at the different modes of memory work among volunteers, I argue that the retrospective ethnographies not only represented the field of study, namely the volunteers' commemorations, but also enabled a collaborative knowledge production, in which divisions of roles between ethnographers and interlocutors became contorted. As I will argue, the ethnographic interventions played a central role in those recollections, altering divisions in ethnographic research between observer and observed, subject and object, recollector and recollected.

According to Noortje Marres et al. (2018), ethnographic research is not only an intervening but also an *inventing* enterprise in the sense that it creates new objects of and sites for research. Taking this point further, building on Gassan Hage (2005), the fieldwork process co-constructed volunteering as a research object that can be studied across Europe's borders (in this case The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark), not in the shape of a multi-sited research endeavour, but as a "single site with its own specificity" (ibid., 466). As I will intend to show, the field-workshops developed a collaborative knowledge production jointly produced between volunteers as well as the hosting and visiting researchers respectively. Ultimately I argue that in order to nurture such inventive knowledge production, retrospective ethnography should therefor include a sensitivity towards the twisting moments, which enhance ethnographically informed knowledge production as a collaborative endeavour.

Researching welcome initiatives and "good deeds"

In 2015, more than 1.3 million refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Europe (Fladmoe et al. 2016). Western and Northern European countries suddenly experienced an overburdening of their national asylum systems. By contrast, this situation was not new to the Mediterranean countries, which in previous years had been asking for support from their Northern/Western European colleagues to handle the flows of refugees arriving in Europe every year. It was the 2015 influx of refugee arrivals to Europe, however, that later acquired the name "the summer of Welcome" (Karakayali and Kleist 2015). This name came about as a result of the peak in mobilisation of civil engagement, now also among Western and Northern European countries (Della Porta et al. 2018). "Venligboerne/Friendly neighbours" in DK, "A Drop in the Ocean" in Norway along with a range of "Refugees Welcome" initiatives in several European cities are only a few of the many local initiatives that mushroomed at the time. A common trait of many of these welcome initiatives was that they were started outside established aid organisations like the UNHCR, UNICEF and Red Cross, and that social media played a central role in recruiting volunteers (Fladmoe et al. 2016, 33).

In the still burgeoning research field of the anthropology of humanitarianism, a lively discussion about help, helpers and receivers of help has evolved over the past years, a main focus being on established aid organisations. As mentioned, offering assistance initiates a relation of power that places those capable of giving aid above those receiving it. What gives people this role? How clear-cut is it? And when or how does – or *can* – the receiver give something in return? Such questions problematize the concept of reciprocity and exchange as intrinsic elements of gift-giving known from Marcel Mauss’ anthropology of relations (1990). The social anthropologist Didier Fassin describes humanitarianism as a prevalent moral economy of Western societies, and one that bears an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, humanitarianism, as seen by the West, involves an ideal of universal equality embracing all of humanity; on the other hand, on the battlefield, humanitarianism accords unequal value to and makes a clear selection between lives worth saving, lives worth risking, lives that have to be sacrificed, and lives that can expect only limited protection (2007, 519). Humanitarianism thus establishes and reflects a hierarchy of humanity.

Research initiatives aiming to study more informal initiatives that welcome refugees like the ones that proliferated in 2015 have likewise been growing recently (Della Porta et al. 2018; Sutter 2017). Yet, these are still very much in their exploratory phase. Little, for instance, is known about the dynamics behind the various kinds of refugee initiatives or about the reasoning, aspirations and justification offered by volunteers. Moreover, there is a particular lack of ethnographically informed studies of informal volunteer initiatives in a European perspective that include the volunteers’ retrospective self-reflections. This type of investigation requires careful attention being paid to the role of the ethnographers in the collaborative production of knowledge.

Collective field-workshops

Even though ethnography would traditionally comprise “some kind of in-depth and fairly small-scale study, often over a lengthy time period” (McDonald 2013, 8), today we see many fieldwork projects conducted over shorter time periods and involving several locales or field sites, as with the fieldwork insights presented here. The aim of conducting fieldwork at several European locales was to explore the possible similarities or convergences in the volunteering practices across European borders. However, as Ghassan Hage argues, lumping together several sites into one field of research does not automatically make the research multi-sited (Hage 2005, 466). So rather than making a point about the many sites we have included in our research, I suggest with Hage that the volunteer practices can be treated as one field site (the volunteer phenomenon) with its own specificity. This requires reflexivity on the selections made and on the motives for highlighting some actors and networks rather than others, and these I will briefly outline in the following.

The research network’s focus on Northern European reception was chosen in an attempt to fill a knowledge gap, since much research on volunteerism in light of

the 2015 refugee influx to Europe has been conducted in a Mediterranean context. Our field-workshops were not designed to carry out fully-fledged comparisons but rather to bring together experiences from the various volunteer initiatives in order to gain a better understanding of the processes of volunteer mobilisation in a European perspective. We have, therefore, also chosen to emphasize the volunteer work of the less formalized organisations rather than those of the more established humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross.

During the field-workshops we pursued a combination of methodological strategies, including group-based in-depth interviews, walking tours, group discussions and museum visits (see Sandberg and Andersen, forthcoming). In the following section, I will present three examples from The Netherlands (Nijmegen), Denmark (Copenhagen) and Germany (Flensburg) respectively, each representing different ways of recalling events in the aftermath of the 2015 arrival of refugees to Europe, which can be found in our ethnographic material. Crucially, as I would like to show, our presence as ethnographers played a central role in the re-enactments, which highlights memory work not only as an individual endeavour, but a result of collaborative achievement in which ethnographers can take an active part.

Volunteers' commemorative practices

It was in the wooded outskirts of Nijmegen, close to the border to Germany, at a place called Heumensoord, that one of the larger tented camps in the northern part of Europe was erected in 2015, housing 2900 refugees. In the Netherlands, the intake of refugees rose from 30,000 to nearly 60,000 in 2015.⁴ The Heumensoord camp was run by the Central Organisation for Asylum seekers (COA),⁵ with its headquarters in The Hague. As far as the Dutch authorities were concerned, the Heumensoord camp was only meant to be for a couple of weeks, however the camp continued to operate from September 2015 until June 2016, a period of 10 months that included the winter season (Aparna et al. forthcoming). This huge clearing in the woods was available for the refugee camp because the place was the temporary home of people affiliated with the military who were participating in the *Vierdaagse* (International Four Days March), which is the world's largest multi-day marching event taking place with Nijmegen as final destination every year (Vierdaagse 2019).

Despite its significant size, the camp made little impact on the daily lives of the 170,000 Nijmegen inhabitants, placed as it was at a (safe) distance from the centre of town. Nevertheless, the thought of having a camp in the woods haunted several locals, such as the volunteer "collective" JustPeople. This initiative was formed in October 2015 as an "independent and informal collective of volunteers who organize and coordinate direct support and activities for and with people who come as refugees to Nijmegen" (JustPeople 2017). As the initiatives' name indicates, the group promotes an ethos of egalitarianism, stating that all are equal as human beings – we are *JustPeople*. JustPeople started going out to the tent camp in the woods with a coffee urn on a cargo bike, offering coffee and a chat. This

venture resulted in several friendships over time and it also initiated further activities such as the establishment of a bicycle workshop in order for the refugees to be able to be more mobile and gain easier access to the town centre.

In December 2017, our Dutch colleagues in the research network organized a workshop in which JustPeople (and the initiative Asylum University, see Aparna 2018) met with us in order to share knowledge. One of the participants was Mahmoud, a Syrian refugee in his 20s. He had lived in the Heumensoord tent camp back in 2015 and then became an activist joining the initiative. When I later spoke with Mahmoud, he told me how he immediately became curious when he saw JustPeople's cargo bike with coffee outside of the Heumensoord camp, especially because the people surrounding it were young people. Mahmoud had a degree in Business Management, yet he deserted from the army in Syria and came to Germany before deciding to apply for asylum in the Netherlands. So he arrived at IND (the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service) in Eindhoven, where every asylum-seeker has to report, and was then transferred to the camp at Heumensoord. When the tent camp was shut down in June 2016, just before the *Vierdaagse*, he managed to get asylum and to rent an apartment in Nijmegen, rather than be transferred elsewhere.

We also met Max, a Dutch student of psychology. In a later conversation during the field-workshop, Max told me about his parents, who would do what he classified as "charity work" through Christian organisations, in which they supported various humanitarian projects in Uganda. In Max' view, this kind of volunteering makes him uncomfortable since in his view it is merely colonial and based on missionary ideologies. So clearly, for Max, engaging in JustPeople is a way of moving away from patronising forms of charity towards more egalitarian relationships between human beings.

Memory work I – the melancholia of volunteering

During our field visit in 2017, we took a walk of two kilometres together with six members of JustPeople, including Mahmoud and Max, from the Radboud University in Nijmegen centre through the forest to the premises of the former camp, which now stands as a large empty clearing surrounded by old oak trees.

The members of the JustPeople initiative had not been to the place since the camp was closed back in the spring of 2016, so they told us how strange it was "to be back there". Upon arrival, we formed a circle, and the JustPeople members and the Helping Hands scholars involved in this initiative (and hosting the workshop), began to share their stories. The rest of us, the visiting field researchers, formed part of the circle too and took notes, and also asked questions during the process when JustPeople members told us how it had all begun.

Engaging in this circle as a visiting ethnographer was at first a bit of a twisting moment in which our roles as visitors contorted into eyewitnesses of past events recollected. The circle enacted a process of commemoration, an act of memory work, in which past events were recollected by the volunteers and presented to

the rest of us. Also, the present state of volunteer activities was evaluated. Since the success of the work of JustPeople, they had difficulty in recruiting new members and keeping their team spirit after 2016 (fieldnotes, December 2017). Mahmoud, who had experience from living inside the tent area, recollected how there was always a sense of movement inside the camp. It was only after 22:00, when the lights were turned off, that the noise of activity decreased. Often the heating system broke down, and this turned the humid interior of the tents freezing cold. Whereas it was clear that no one in the group would wish for any tent camps to be re-erected, a certain atmosphere was created in this circle. Through the sharing of commemorative narratives, the Heumensoord tent camp was re-enacted as an unofficial “locus of memory”. However, whereas Pierre Nora (1998) coined this term with particular reference to official commemoration sites or events, this small ceremonial circle evoked an everyday act of memory work shared by volunteers, activist researchers and witnessed by the guest researchers. The memory work involved enacted an interesting composite what was both a *looking* back and also a kind of *longing* back. There was a sense of *Sehnsucht*, or melancholia in the air, which was highlighted when Max explained how he missed the atmosphere of collectivity when looking back at the events in 2015 (fieldnotes, December 2017). This kind of memory work exemplifies a longing for a past fellowship, a community arising from an activity that is no longer there.

Participating in the memory circle at Heumensoord released a kind of memory work which speaks, then, of the *melancholia* of volunteering – a paradoxical longing towards the time when things were exceptional (Sandberg and Andersen, forthcoming). It can be seen as a paradoxical longing because clearly none of the volunteers would wish for the crisis and the erection of tent camps to start all over again.

This particular mix of euphoria or pleasure and melancholy is comparable to MacDonald’s point that emotions, “may contribute to processes of remembering and forgetting, of feeling compelled or unable to speak about the past” (2013, 79). This sense of melancholia is not to be conceived of as an individual or inner state of mind, but rather a performative practice (Butler 1997). This first mode of memory work, highlights how volunteering not only has a certain rhythm of being on/off the mission, but also has an aftermath of ambiguity attached to itself, in which volunteers, including those with refugee background like Mahmoud, are coming to terms with – often traumatic – experiences and the joy of making a difference and of being in the right place at the right time.

Since the memories of the events of 2015 were obviously not shared by the visiting ethnographers, it was not a collective but rather a collaborative memory process, enabled through the volunteers’ recollections and our follow-up questions. The role of ethnographers in the process of studying retrospective accounts of doing good were thus a kind of midwifery of memory in which recollections of the time when events were taking place were compelled to be spoken about.

Memory work II – acting for the future

The second mode of memory work I would like to highlight among the volunteers' commemorative practices leads us to another site in the European landscape of informal refugee reception: to the Copenhagen Main Central Station. Fatima is a 23-year-old student in Copenhagen, and one of the coordinators of Hovedbanegårdens frivillige (Volunteers of Copenhagen Central Station), initiated in 2015.⁶ Even though the initiative is no longer active, Fatima still works as a volunteer and has also been active in the previously mentioned Danish initiative known as Venligboerne (Friendly Neighbours). In the late summer of 2015 Fatima heard through a friend about what was going on at Copenhagen Central Station, and they decided to drop by. Fatima ended up being at the Central Station every day for eight months. Fatima's grandparents are from Morocco, but both her parents were born in Denmark. To her parents' regret, Fatima stayed away from lectures at the university throughout this time.

Most of the volunteers at Copenhagen Central Station were either students or pensioners, and the group included people aged between 15 and 65. The ranks of volunteers also included people who were themselves asylum-seekers, some working as interpreters for the refugee arrivals. Many refugees got stuck at Copenhagen Central Station when, on 12 November 2015, Sweden introduced temporary passport controls for those crossing the border from Denmark. They could either return to Flensburg in Germany, from where they had arrived at Copenhagen, or try to apply for asylum in Denmark, yet for most of the incoming refugees the country of destination was Sweden (see Sandberg 2018).

Fatima describes how chaotic her first time at Copenhagen Central Station was. Refugees and volunteers were all over the place, surrounded by huge donations of clothes and food. There was a lot of frustration among all present, including the staff from the Danish Railway Company (DSB), who seemed to disapprove of the presence of the volunteers. The volunteers managed to organise the chaos into daily routines and structures surprisingly quickly. Refugees were arriving from Syria, via Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and on from there via Flensburg in Germany to Copenhagen. Every half hour, a new train would arrive from Flensburg with approximately 50 refugees on board. In the first few months, this amounted, according to Fatima's estimate, to 1,500–2,000 people reaching Copenhagen Central Station a day. As we walked through Copenhagen Central Station together, Fatima recalled the events of 2015:

We had our shifts, and our tasks were mostly to help the refugees arriving to get some rest, perhaps a shower. Later on, we created the "Safety Zone" in collaboration with DSB [The Danish Railway Company]. Often we took care of the children so the parents could relax and get some sleep. (Interview, 9 February 2018)

Creating zones of safety where refugees could withdraw and re-group, as it were, also reconfigured the station from barrier to temporary shelter. To get a shower

and a nap (while someone looks after your children) is both a very mundane and pragmatic way of humanizing oneself and a symbolic stepping out of categorical notions of migrants as being part of a (threatening) “migration flow”.

When Fatima gave us a tour around Central station now completely void of refugees, it becomes clear that she shares a similar state of melancholia as members of JustPeople in the aftermath of the reception challenge. However, there is a further dimension I wish to highlight here, namely a historical awareness directed towards the future:

Yes, I miss it. I have had bad experiences and good experiences. So, I won't let it go, because I feel that I have developed as a person through experiencing this. And one day, this refugee crisis will become part of the history books, and when that time comes, I'd like to be able to sit and say, “Gosh, I was part of this”. (Interview, 9 February 2018)

In Fatima's recollection of events, she is clearly aware of the aftermath – her actions were made in order to prove that Danish citizens were not all xenophobic and that someone did act as a counterweight to anxiety and to antipathy towards refugees. This memory work is, therefore, clearly oriented towards the future and the way her actions will become part of a new collective memory. Yet, it was only in Fatima's concluding reflections, when we were about to say farewell to each other, I realized that we, the ethnographers accompanying Fatima around the premises of the Central Station, were in fact regarded as “history books”. Ultimately this wish was the reason why Fatima wanted to share her story with us. It was in this twisting moment, I got a glimpse of the future life of my own work as fieldworker doing retrospective ethnography, leaving me not only dizzy because the spotlight was suddenly directed towards me and my efforts, but also with a sense of obligation of returning Fatima's wish into reality.

Let us now return one stop, so to speak, to another train station, namely Flensburg Central Station, in Northern Germany. Several of the refugees who came to Copenhagen Central Station came directly from Flensburg. This example serves to illustrate a final and third mode of memory work enacted in volunteer commemorative practices.

Memory work III – volunteering as heritage-making

In Germany, the 2015 refugee arrivals to Europe was tackled in a very different manner than in Denmark and the Netherlands (Sutter 2017). Chancellor Angela Merkel's dictum “Wir schaffen das” [We can do it], meaning that Germany would be capable of handling the refugee influx, is reflected in this quote from one of the initiators of Refugee Welcome Flensburg, Karin:

The homepage of Refugee Welcome Flensburg] had already 5,000 likes, because there was a sense that, now it was the time to show the openness of this city, and in general there was this positive atmosphere of “yes, wir schaffen das!” (Interview, 19 January, 2018)

Refugee Welcome Flensburg was established during the late summer of 2015, when around 60,000 people passed through this station, Flensburger Bahnhof. We met Karin in January 2018. She worked 20 hours a week at the Bahnhof, aside from her full-time employment. She recalled the atmosphere almost as a kind of euphoria, and in fact she compares the first days of the refugees arriving with the days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as we shall see in the next quote:

When we came down there, there were hundreds of people and donations, piled up in front of the Bahnhof (...) so the message – not only from our side – had gone viral all over Flensburg, and one had the feeling of ... comparable to the fall of the GDR wall, because there was this “Yeeess”! And, in fact, it was a bit overwhelming for the people arriving, as they were loaded with presents and clothes, and they just stood there with so many bags of food (laughs). It was kind of crazy! (Interview, 19 January, 2018)

As at Copenhagen Central Station, the chaos was quickly organised into daily routines. Yet, as Karin explains, no one had overall control, “it was all individuals who gathered at the Bahnhof, and everyone would know someone (to contact for further help)”. Around 80 volunteers (200 in the beginning) came on a regular basis, which included interpreters speaking Farsi and Arab. In time, the activities became even more organised, the Fire Department ensured safe exits in case of fire, and some localities were offered to Refugee Welcome from Deutsche Bahn.

According to MacDonald (2013), heritagization is a social process in which the past is presented and interpreted. Focus therefore needs to be put on the ways in which these interpretations can travel and make the past keep being present. Memory work as a kind of heritage-making became especially apparent when we visited the premises of the former Refugee Welcome sites at the Bahnhof. It was in a sense like entering a small museum. All the central props and furniture were there from the days when “it was all going on”, Karin explains, as we pass through the premises (Interview, 20 January, 2018). Stored in this room are several photo collages put together by the volunteers which captured cheerful moments of smiling people and hugs from “the long summer of welcome”. On the wall hangs a framed notice announcing that Refugee Welcome Flensburg were elected People of the Year 2015 by the *Flensburger Tagesblatt* readership. This mode of memory work turns the volunteers’ deeds into cultural heritage, which enters a recursive process that continues to make the events of 2015 become present, again and again. And the process continues in this present article.

Visiting Refugee Welcome Flensburg at the Flensburger Bahnhof was like entering a museum, yet of another kind than the Oxfam/Amnesty *Museum without a Home* in which the celebration of hospitality was unidirectional, focusing solely on the giver, and merely glorified the acts of solidarity. As MacDonald argues, different cultural objects have different “memorizing capacities” (2013, 82), which means that they can help establishing links to the past. The memory circle in the woods on the outskirts of Nijmegen, the small tour Fatima gave us at the

Copenhagen Central Station, the photo memory wall at Flensburger Bahnhof all have such capacities of enabling links to a past sociality, which is after all not possible to re-establish.

Exemplified by these three different volunteer initiatives and traceable in several of the other 20 initiatives we have been visiting are the three modes of memory work presented here: memory work as melancholia, as oriented towards the future and as co-creating cultural heritage. Together, they show that the neat distinctions between the “generous helper” on the one hand and the “needy receiver” on the other, which are exposed by the *Museum without a Home* exhibition, turn out to be much more complex when scrutinized in detail. In many senses, the commemorative practices of the volunteers show that they were also needy receivers – as participants of a sociality that was no longer there.

Ethnographic in(ter)ventions

Yet, another dimension of the volunteers’ commemorative practices needs to be addressed: As I have already indicated our presence as researchers studying the ‘volunteer phenomenon’ at those particular moments had further temporal implications and ultimately released a set of twisting moments in which our role as ethnographers became contorted. An example was when our presence in the memory circle compelled a longing back to the events of 2015. The twisting moments of our ethnographic encounters occurred during the field-workshops at the very moment when remembrance became part of not only an individualized but a collaborative process. This is the moment, Ferriera and Almeida describe as the,

terrain par excellence of the ethnographer who maps the past, where observation is not merely present, but becomes participant because it arouses, incites and assimilates the process, making it possible to access information that could not be obtained through daily social interactions. (Ferriera and Almeida 2017, 208)

As co-present and participating ethnographers, we contributed to the volunteers’ reflections upon their actions and memories, for example when we were guided around Copenhagen and Flensburg Central station by our volunteer interlocutors. But the process also contorted the divisions between observer and observed since the recalling of events and more overall the aim of communicating those recollections to us temporarily changed the spotlight directing it onto our research aims and efforts. The process of retrospective ethnography meant that, in those recollections, relations and roles were contorted, so that as ethnographic researchers we became:

1. *Midwifery of memory*: The memory work of the volunteers was stimulated by our presence and questions (as in the memory circle at Heumensoord).
2. *Documentarists*: Our recording, notes and transcription of the volunteers’ experiences of past events would make the volunteers’ actions travel – into conference

halls, journal articles, class rooms – and eventually make them “part of history books” (as Fatima was hoping for at the Copenhagen Central Station).

3. *Visitors*: as researchers, we were only short-term visitors, which adds a temporality of ephemerality to our ethnographic understanding. We entered new research terrains, only for a short visit, and this raised the question whether we were pursuing some kind of academic tourism? However, as a museum needs not only curators but also visitors in order to be a museum, I would argue that we were not tourists but *visitors*, in our colleagues’ research fields as well as at the ‘Museum of Volunteering’ at Flensburger Bahnhof.

Returning to Marres et al. (2018), our ethnographic study not only represented but also invented our field of study. By virtue of our ethnographic participation, through our questioning, our taking pictures, our drinking coffee, we enacted volunteering as an object (the volunteer phenomenon) that can be studied across borders, in Nijmegen, Flensburg, Copenhagen.

I have argued that, as ethnographers, we can allow for more complexity than is admitted by Oxfam and Amnesty International at *Museum without a Home*, which encapsulated a specific commemoration celebrating volunteers as hospitable helpers. Unpacking the complexities of refugee volunteering by exploring the volunteers’ different modes of memory work can make us more knowledgeable about the volunteer phenomenon in different settings across European borders. Retrospective ethnography, therefore, includes sensitivity towards those twisting moments, when ethnographically informed knowledge production becomes a collaborative intervention.

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Notes

- 1 The EU-Turkey statement refers to the agreement made in March 2016 in which Turkey “agreed to accept the rapid return of all migrants not in need of international protection crossing from Turkey into Greece and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters” in this way closing down the Balkan route for arriving migrants (source: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/, accessed 19 August 2019).
- 2 The chapter is based on a keynote lecture held at the “Ethnography with a twist” conference Jyväskylä February 12–14 2019, organized by EUROHERIT — *Legitimation of European cultural heritage and the dynamics of identity politics in the EU*.
- 3 The network gathered 12 researchers (ethnologists, anthropologists, human geographers, borders and migration scholars, and political scientists), from six different countries, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland. It was funded by the Danish Research Council for Independent Research 2017–2019 (DFF/

- 6107–00111), with Marie Sandberg as the PI. http://saxoinstitute.ku.dk/research/research_projects_and_networks/helping-hands-research-network-on-the-everyday-border-workk-of-european-citizens/
- 4 Of which half of the 60,000 refugees came from Syria. <https://refugeesnetherlands.weebly.com/statistics.html#> (accessed 28 January 2019).
 - 5 COA is responsible for the reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands.
 - 6 Fieldwork on *Refugee Welcome Flensburg* was conducted with Dorte J. Andersen and with research assistant, ethnologist, Line Bygballe Jensen. Fieldwork on *Hovedbanegårdens Frivillige* was conducted in collaboration with research assistant, ethnologist, Line Bygballe Jensen.

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