Exploring borderlands between civic engagement and academia

An ethnographic encounter of volunteering among refugees at the Austro-Bavarian border

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In 2015, more than one million refugees made their way through Europe. For many, the remote area of the Austrian-Bavarian border became a compulsory stop of initial registration, where they were requested to stay in camps. This region of Germany, located between Austria and the Czech Republic, is deeply shaped by its own local history of migration, refuge and national population engineering. Based on its geographical location, residents have developed their own ways of interacting with 'their' borders. These behaviours were disrupted by the re-introduction of border controls in 2015. The example of my native town, Landau, shows how a local community changed with the arrival of thousands of refugees, a right-wing shift of national and local politics and a changing assessment of the region's own past. These different dynamics took place simultaneously and were shaped by and in reaction to each other. The interplay of local, national and international politics, supporters and opponents, and activists and volunteers shaped the 'summer of refuge' not only for the refugees, but also for the local community in my hometown. In this article, I will discuss the implications of these transformations.

Keywords: refugees, native anthropology, Bavaria

Coming home as an anthropologist

In early September 2015 I received a voice message from a friend from Aleppo, who had fled Syria for Turkey in early 2011.[1] He asked myself and one of my friends in Munich to help on behalf of his 'cousins' as they made their journey from Aleppo to Germany. I did not refuse the favour, and immediately mobilized my own networks of friends and activists along the Balkans. After about ten days, I finally had dinner with my friend's 'cousins' in Vienna, Austria, where I was living at the time. During

1 In 2011, during fieldwork for my master's thesis, I spent some time in Aleppo and Damascus.

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dinner, we prepared the last steps of their journey across the border into Germany, and further discussed their desired destination of Hamburg, which they would reach the day after – or so we thought. I was not aware on this evening that my new friends would not reach Hamburg so easily, but would instead be held back at the border, ironically in exactly the same region of Germany I was born. I also did not understand at that point that this was just the first of many phone calls and messages from different countries between Syria and Germany that I would receive in the coming months, and which I continue to receive as I write this article. Austria – and in these late summer days especially Vienna – had become a transit zone for thousands of refugees and migrants on their way north.[2]

During this particular summer, I started volunteering in the evenings at a train station in Vienna, where I translated travel documents into Arabic, and I also did relief work with children. In the same period, perhaps predictably, the border town in the remote area of Lower Bavaria that I had left some years ago became a threshold for the thousands of people who had crossed the border into Southern Germany. Registration camps were opened at the border there, and soon additional reception camps were opened in smaller neighbouring towns. In my hometown of Landau an der Isar, around 700 refugees were accommodated and soon a civil initiative called *Helferkreis* (circle of helpers) was established, and my family began participating in it. I soon started to spend my weekends in my home town at the border assisting my family with their volunteer work, translating between German and Arabic in the local camp and mediating between the temporary camp residents and the 'permanent' community. Travelling with refugees on a train from Vienna across the German border allowed me first-hand experience of the powers of border regimes. However, my account is quite different from those of travellers with precarious legal status, such as Sharam Koshravi describes in *Illegal Traveller* (2010). When crossing the border, nothing much changed regarding my status as a passenger, not only because of my racial profile, but also (though I was never asked to show it) due to my German passport. However, my co-passengers completely changed their position from (almost) regular train travellers to being suspected of illegal border-crossing, due to the border police's speculations that they were refugees or illegal passengers and that their journey should be inhibited immediately.

As a native of the town, I was intrinsically enmeshed in the town's kinship networks, history and social dynamics. Although I had been living abroad, I was still perceived first and foremost as the offspring of a certain family, and was expected

2 Although I am well aware that many of the people arriving to Germany and asking for asylum would not fall into the legal category of 'refugees', I focus here on the experience of 'refugeeness' rather than the legal definition of refugees. For simplification, I will continue to use this term to refer to all groups of people arriving at the refugee camps during this period.

to act according to my allotted social role. But it was not only I that was enmeshed in such relations, my family were even more so, and this defined the framework in which I could act. Without expecting it, my multiple roles as a family member, resident, volunteer and maybe even as an activist helped me to rediscover and reposition my role as an anthropologist, and forced me to question where I should stand in what was later called 'the European refugee crises'.

Evthymios Papataxiarchis describes his position as an anthropologist researching a small village in Northern Lesbos, and the ramifications that the incoming refugees and related developments had for its residents (Papataxiarchis 2016:5). Like him, I need to admit that my account is biased. Instead of claiming to deliver a 'proper ethnography', I want to bring my own limitations into light from the beginning. These devolve especially from my multiple biases as a child of the town, being a descendent of a refugee (or expelled) family background, my position as a local volunteer, and my strong disagreement with the politics of my native town.

I will try to recollect these eventful times and disentangle the strands of their dynamics within their historical relations from my memories, diary entries and messages to and from people involved. Grounded in ethical considerations of consent, this contribution will amount to a reflexive autoethnographic account (see Ellis and Bochner 2000). This narrative situates the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997:9), and therefore 'the distinction between the ethnographer and the Other is not clear' (Khosravi 2007:322). Through this approach, I will address the knowledge systems that overlap at the borders and create different realities, evaluations of humans and claims of property, for all those involved.

This article aims to explain the particularities of one German town in the context of Germany's policy of decentralized refugee camps, by focusing on its locatedness near the border and the implications that arise from this dynamic for the people living, crossing and 'protecting' the place. With this account, I also want to reflect on the role of 'anthropology at home' in the midst of Europe, in times when the notion of 'home' is (again) under scrutiny – while thousands lose what they might describe as 'home' due to forced migration, wars and enduring uncertainty, others try to find and build new 'homes', while for others 'home' is what they seek to 'protect' from strangers. In this sense, I apply the concept of 'border regimes' outlined by Sarah Green (2015) in order to shed light on the overlapping knowledge systems that calibrate the relative value of humans to places and hence how national border regimes and local border practices interact. I conclude by claiming that anthropology at home, despite its challenges, can make a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the ways communities have changed in the wake of 'the refugee crises'. Furthermore, the intense reflection this anthropology requires, illustrated here by my own case, only lays bare the vulnerabilities and unique advantages of all anthropological research.

Border location matters

If we believe Eurostat, 1.2 million refugees made their way through Europe in 2015 (Eurostat 2016), most via Austria to Germany or even further northwards. At a certain point in summer and early autumn 2015, the Austrian railway company *ÖBB* organized special trains and busses to transport refugees from the Hungarian border to the two main train stations of Vienna: Wien Hauptbahnhof and Wien Westbahnhof. Here, organizations, such as the Red Cross or Caritas, and independent private initiatives, such as Kids Corner (with whom I volunteered), as well as individual helpers, were already waiting with water, food, clothes, medical equipment and toys for the announced masses of refugees. My account of Vienna is hence only one of many. The two train stations evolved as the prime centres of action, where refugees, volunteers, journalists, security forces and spectators met in a rather chaotic, but festive atmosphere of humanitarianism for some and relief for many others. However, most of those labelled by the collective and individual helpers as 'refugees' told me that they were not in Vienna to stay. They were here only to rest and to organize the last bit of their journey into the big cities of Germany, like Munich, Dortmund, Essen or Berlin. Vienna became thus a nexus for their journey onward. Here people were full of hopes and expectations about their new homes (even if only temporary) and often felt seemingly very close to their final destination, or so they hoped back in Vienna.

However, the reality was different. Refugees were already being detained at the Austro-German border: trains, buses and smugglers were stopped in the Bavarian hinterlands by a large contingent of the German national border police. There, people had to register and were then forced onto buses ready to transport them to refugee camps, where they had to wait for the next weeks and sometimes even months. Their journey ended there, at least until their legal status was decided.

Throughout the summer, I travelled to Passau at the Austro-Bavarian border alongside hundreds of people whom I had received as a volunteer at the station in Vienna. We started our journeys as passengers with seemingly equal status; for the first three hours our right to be on the train was defined only by a ticket. However, the border regimes drastically changed our relative positions. On command of armed border police, the refugees had to leave the train and were forced in long queues to register as asylum seekers (disregarding the tickets bought to Northern Germany), while I left the train to stay with my family. Thus, Khosravi's description of a 'world of apartheid' determined by how and whether individuals can cross borders materialized in front of my eyes. 'To me, the border was a surplus of rights', while for my co-travellers it was a 'color bar' (Balibar 2002:82– 83). According to Khosravi, 'The freedom of mobility for some is only possible through the organized exclusion of others.' (Khosravi 2007:331). Drawing on earlier works of Fredrik Barth (1969) as well as John Cole and Eric Wolf (1974), Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (1999:40) argue that 'borders are always metaphors, since they are arbitrary constructions

based on cultural convention'. While for me the only indication I had crossed the border was that the train personnel changed and that often, though surely not always, my mobile-phone signal altered, the transition was far more than just metaphoric for my co-passengers, whose entire legal status and rights to mobility changed in an instant.

When I later visited my former co-passengers in the camp, I was a free inhabitant of the town, while they had to stay in the camp as asylum seekers with limited possibilities for mobility. Within moments of encountering border control, the locating regime of the border had materialized and changed our relative statuses with regard to the place and to each other (Green 2016), and had rendered our experience of crossing into Germany completely different. Yet, my own positioning also changed in the new context. While I was one among hundreds of Arabic-speaking volunteers in Vienna who helped in translation and relief work (and was certainly not among the most fluent), I became the only Arabic-speaking town inhabitant visiting the almost volunteer-free camps, while trying to make sense of what was happening around the refugees, the residents and myself. My intentions were thus manifold, as I wanted to support both the town people who faced new challenges, which included my family, friends and acquaintances, and those who came as refugees to the town, whether I knew them or not.

In anthropology, there are basically two established approaches to understanding borders. The first treats them as locations, and the second as elements of identity, and as such important to questions of hybridity, subjectivity or displacement. In both cases, borders are areas marking difference, thus evoking the understanding of borders as lines. Thus, borders that mark differences in terms of nationalities require those who cross them to do paperwork that would identify them individually as belonging to a specific nationality and hence territory.

Within the pioneering studies of the US-Mexican border in the 1970s and 80s, people were by definition turned into migrants, and migration and border crossing were mostly seen through legal definitions (see, for example, Anzaldúa 1987; Fernandez 1977; Herzog 1990). Without the existence of migration law, people would have simply remained 'foreigners'. To that end, the focus was on the people who crossed borders and not on the borders they crossed. Hence there was a fierce understanding of the borders' 'linearity'. However, contradicting the idea of borders as lines were the multiple links already existing across many borders. For instance, those living at the borders were often part of 'mixed' or transgressive cultures that spanned them. Robert A. Alvarez (1995) describes borders as hybrid, as well as contested and fluid, and focuses on the connectivity that the border situation creates within networks across them. Yet, he maintains the stress on identities.

In opposition to the identity approach, in *Routes* (1997), James Clifford focuses on people as moving subjects, going beyond the position within anthropology generally at this point. He poses the question of the relation between 'routes' and

'roots' (1997:3f). Given the assumption that the norm was not to move, crossing borders would then lead to displacement. Michael Rösler and Tobias Wendl shifted attention away from people to places, focusing on *Frontiers and Borderlands* (1999). They distinguished between frontiers as zones of transition, where different regimes meet or where something is forged, and borders as more politically defined places.

Further, in *From War to Peace on the Mozambique-Malawi Borderland* (2002), Harri Englund defines borders in relation to social communities of people, but as enmeshed in networks and relationships. According to him, people engage in all kinds of actions around borders, involving residents in various activities, practices and relations across them, regardless, so far as possible, of national border policies. Sarah Green, too, considers the idea of borders as lines as insufficient for understanding them and their meanings for everyday living (Green 2009:10). She argues that borders locate people, but not necessarily places. However, unlike Rösler and Wendl (1999), she avoids the terms 'borderlands' or 'frontier', and instead suggests the metaphor of 'tidemarks' to include the notions of space and time in the understanding of borders (Green 2009:18). Hence, they are not just 'there', but are tied to economic, political and social entities, and to expectations and imaginations of people about their past and future (Green 2012:125). Green therefore reminds us that borders often actually generate the differences that they were supposed to mark, instead of simply being mirrors of them (2010:261).

To summarize the contributions above, borders are knowledge systems informed by national policies and historical changes, rather than straight lines of differences. The relationships between people, borders and movements can radically differ between these knowledge systems.

The border region I will focus on is itself located between two borders embedded in different knowledge systems. Lower Bavaria is located between the Czech and the Austrian borders, each of which has historically been very differently enmeshed into the daily life of the local residents (as discussed later in this article). While in the past, the Lower Bavarian residents' relationship to the Czech-Bavarian border was a more critical one, the focus of events in 2015 shifted to the Austro-Bavarian border and the effects of border politics for the different groups that were concerned with it: those with nationalist views of 'border protection', residents, refugees, commuters and finally national border police. Consequently, the ways they made a difference in people's everyday lives and their 'meaning, purpose and qualities' – characteristics that Green describes as their 'border-ness' (2010:261) – were not just different, but changed over time, as the borders were linked to bigger national and ideological imaginaries and political processes.

I grew up in a small village of 300 inhabitants in the municipality of Landau an der Isar. Most of the officially 13,000 registered inhabitants of Landau are distributed through the thirty-one villages around town, like the one in which my family lives. Despite some smaller industries, the area is mostly rural and surrounded by

agricultural land. With the Bavarian capital Munich a mere 100 km away, many leave Landau during the week only to return on the weekends or on holidays. Many actually live, study or work elsewhere, but remain registered in Landau, as I did, making the actual number of permanent residents much fewer than the official numbers.

The borders to the two neighbouring countries, Austria and the Czech Republic, are important for local social belonging. First, both foreign borders are only sixty km away, which allows inhabitants to cross them on a regular basis. The Austrian border is especially important. Much land there is equally rural, and the lifestyle and spoken dialects are considered more similar to those spoken in Landau than are those in the city of Munich or urban Germany in general. Crossing into the Czech Republic, however, has only been possible since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Velvet Revolution in 1991, and has eased significantly since the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union in 2004. Since that time, many EU-funded projects, such as EUREGIO or ETZ 2014–2020 for regional European development, have helped to develop the connections between the two countries, which were once aggressively separated by a lifeless (and deadly) and empty border, with all ties across it violently suppressed.

Bavaria's southern border, adjoining Austria, is marked by a historical awareness of similarity and a shared history and thus is not experienced as a separating one. Once both sides of the border were one territory, and today they remain connected by a common dialect and an often expressed shared animosity towards northern Germany. Unofficially for generations, and officially since 1950, people have been allowed to live and work on either side of the border, a practice established long before the Schengen zone or even the European Union. Over the past 68 years, and especially since border controls were abolished, many binational friendships, families and working relations have resulted, and many residents crossed the border regularly to go shopping, refuel their tanks, spend their free time, or meet family and friends. Many Bavarians from the border regions have therefore commuted between Austria and Bavaria on a very regular basis, as I do, without paying any attention to the fact that there was actually a border to cross. Hence, the border between Austria and Bavaria has to be understood as a political construct of nation-states, rather than as a lived practice of local inhabitants. National borders are only one of many knowledge systems in the region trying to link personhood and belonging to a nationality rather than to a place. But inhabitants of border regions often feel closer to people who share the same location than to the rest of the nation-state further away.

A second implication of the border's location is demonstrated by the role it has played in Germany's population-engineering policies over several decades. In August 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the country would accept refugees from Syria without them having to claim asylum in the EU country

in which they had arrived (see Holmes and Castañeda 2016:14), and many refugees entered Lower Bavaria via Austria. Once in Bavaria, they were stopped and sent to camps. This process was due to the German government's policy of non-central accommodation, aimed at keeping the refugees away from congested areas in larger cities, which resulted in an average of 200,000 newcomers being relocated within the area within this single summer. Like the human influx into Bavaria in 2015, Germany's population-engineering policy in the region was also not new. Lower Bavaria already had a history as a threshold and resettlement zone since the aftermath of the Second World War. This then remote area was part of the American zone of occupation, and enormous camps for displaced persons were established within it. Of the six million people that the war displaced, most found their temporary homes inside the American zone. Lower Bavaria, towards the eastern borders of the zone, took the highest numbers of people (Seipp 2013:53). Among them were a huge number of expelled members of the former German minorities from Czechoslovakia. This population-engineering decision was based on the region's ability to supply the expelled and displaced persons with food and affordable living space (Bundesministerium der Justiz 1950:4).

New social actors in town

In the years after the Second World War, the region's population grew 28 per cent thanks to these ethnic German refugees. As a result, today 25 per cent of all residents in the region are descendants of expelled families (Ziegler 2011), including the paternal side of my own family. This, in turn, became a reference point for two divergent dynamics when the high numbers of refugees and migrants reached the area in 2015. First, for many residents, experience of 'refugeeness' served as a common denominator between residents and newcomers. Many elderly people, especially, themselves having arrived as refugees, were very sympathetic to the plight of the new arrivals. Recalling their own past, they donated food, clothes and other goods to local charity organizations. Moreover, for the first time, the previously taboo topic of the expelled war-driven ethnic Germans was seen in a different light, and was brought up in local political speech and popular culture, which also touched upon the sensitivities of many younger people, who were now recalling their refugee roots. In particular, 'folk pop' (which alludes to folk music sung in Bavarian dialect, and is popular within younger generations) drew comparisons between grandparents arriving in Germany as refugees (or expelled Germans) and the new refugees, in order to help mobilize support and remind opponents of the refugee movements of the German past (see, for example, Neurosenheimer and Eisenreich 2015). As a second resulting dynamic, some within this group often compared the war-driven refugees from eastern Europe of their grandparent's generation with the middle-class Syrians arriving in 2015 negatively, and circulated pictures through a local Facebook group to show what 'real' refugees looked like. Soon the comments of these posts were

flooded with contestation about the plight of the new refugees. These opponents, on the other hand, were mainly young people who had not left the area for further education and were dependent on local businesses or social benefits offered by the state in order to make a living. A growing resistance movement against the new 'others' developed among those who saw the economic differences between the two refugee inflows as an indication of an unjustifiable presence of the newcomers.

Politically, Bavaria has for decades been one of the most conservative regions in Germany. The Christian Social Union (CSU), a centre-right party only existing in Bavaria and allied to the Christian Democrats in the rest of the country, has ruled the Lower Bavarian State Parliament since 1957. The head of the party, Horst Seehofer, gained fame and popularity within conservative circles during the refugee debate of 2015, when he notoriously criticized Angela Merkel for not protecting the borders (especially of Bavaria) and bringing threats and insurmountable challenges to the country in the form of refugees. No other party has a real say in the politics of Lower Bavaria. However, the contemporary dynamics created novel internal cleavages and facilitated new social actors on the political scene, as I will demonstrate.

Years before Muslim refugees from Syria or Afghanistan entered Bavaria, right-wing discourse and Islamophobia already existed in the region. But these feelings intensified in 2015.[3] The head of the district authority, for example, himself a member of the CSU, claimed on his first visit to the refugee camp that 'headscarves don't fit into our landscape'.[4] His statement is embedded within a broader rightward shift within the CSU during the 'refugee crisis'. In addition, 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD), the Euro-sceptic populist right-wing party founded in 2013, became more apparent in Bavaria. This party has its origins in the east of the country, the former GDR, a region symbolically distant to many Bavarians. AfD was originally founded in reaction to the Eurozone crisis of 2010 (Niedermayer 2014:177). It was only in 2015, however, that it became best known for its anti-refugee politics, when members suggested, for example, 'shoot the refugees at the borders' (see e.g. *Zeit Online* 2016). AfD became influential in Bavaria, and the head of the party was invited to give a talk in Landau, attracting scores of listeners. To my surprise, this was the first time that Landau had hosted a head of a party, beyond the CSU, in its town hall.

Also for the first time, Russian migrants became visible in the local political sphere. They had been in the region since the end of the Soviet Union, when 4.5 million people moved to Germany (BAMF 2013), among them a huge number of ethnic German background. Landau and its surroundings were attractive to investors. The taxation system was favourable, the region was well connected via road infrastructure, and cheap land was available. These conditions attracted

3 The presence of Muslim minorities in the region was nothing new, as there has been immigration from Turkey since the 1960s and from former Yugoslavia since the 1990s.

4 Personal interaction at the refugee reception camp in September 2015

business such as BMW, which in turn attracted migrants searching for work. Russian-speaking communities settled around the factory, remaining politically invisible despite their numbers. In early 2016, however, news headlines presented the story of Lisa, a teenager born into a Russian immigrant family living in Berlin, who had allegedly been raped by a refugee. Even though the story was proved false within days of the newsflash (the story was invented, and originated in Putin's propaganda machine) (Bota 2016), the Russian community mobilized. The so-called 'Lisa affair' brought thousands of people with Russian or Russo-German senses of belonging onto the streets. Landau was no exception, and for the first time in local history, the community became politically active as a single entity, waving posters in German and Russian stating that 'my home stays German'. Possibly the sentiment, though couched in nationalist terms, was an expression of a local desire for things not to change from the way they were imagined to be. Not only did both actors, the Russian-speaking community as well as the new right-wing movement in Landau, create the refugee as a body out of place, but they also defined a place as exclusive for its residents and their kin, although it was in practice deeply shaped by immigration and mobility.

These new actors were quite visible and loud in the public arena, though they were mostly not in contact with the refugees themselves. Who, then, was in contact with the refugees? The camp was located outside the residential area of Landau, in the industrial zone, and only a small number of non-refugees were able to enter.[5] Hence, refugees were invisible to the general public. Those who were granted access to the camp, which was secured with gates and guards, were the local Red Cross for medical services (their main task previously had been provision of first-aid classes in schools); camp-administration personnel; local authorities, including a single male Arabic translator for all the Arabic-speaking asylum seekers within the 200,000 refugees in the Lower Bavarian district; a network of teachers for German classes; a woman responsible for clothing donations; and me, as a translator of Arabic, mostly for women, and for non-legal matters. Unlike in Vienna, where organizations, NGOs and private volunteers were fighting for places and visibility, volunteers were almost completely absent in Landau, leaving the refugees in the hands of local authorities and a few local inhabitants; there was no national or international support, nor any fashionable 'volountourism' from civil society.[6]

Concomitantly, however, like me, not all locals supported the CSU and AfD political perspectives. For us few refugee supporters, it became increasingly more difficult the clearer it became that refugees were no longer on the move, and that

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5 The inhabitants were allowed to leave the camp if they wished. However, as there was only one small supermarket, and some residential houses and factories, most never left the camp.

6 This had been the case, however, only after a warm initial reception, when many inhabitants donated clothes or old household appliances or brought food and blankets.

rather than being of 'international concern' they were a 'local issue'. We were, on the one hand, now alone in defending the presence of the refugees and our own position against growing critics, and, on the other hand, were ourselves frequently engaging critically with the refugees. Often, refugees did not fulfil the volunteers' expectations of 'thankfulness' and 'humbleness' towards their 'helpers', but instead turned out to be humans with flaws and strengths, and this caused internal ruptures and disagreements. The situation created subjects to offer help to, but not humans to interact with. The moral economy of gratitude (Rivkin-Fish 2011) was hence more complex and contradicting than during the initial period of '*Willkommenskultur*' ('welcoming culture'), and did not necessarily match the expectations of many of the volunteers.

Changing border perspectives and social dynamics

The changing border perspectives and the ruptures caused by the new actors described in the two previous sections led to a spiral of changes. Among these, was the politicization of the refugee topic. Major fault lines appeared within the town community. Social clubs stopped functioning, friendships broke and families fought in public about supporting the refugees, or not; pro-refugee individuals were ridiculed as naïve '*Gutmenschen*' ('good humans') and those not in favour of refugees were reviled as 'Nazis'. There was no in-between position. This conflict was quite visible in the media, in readers' comments in the local newspapers and in local Facebook groups, where each side called the other out for being blinded by the '*Lügenpresse*' ('press of lies'), whether naïve or radical. The spiral of changes led to violence. Some, calling themselves '*besorgte Bürger*' ('worried citizens'), founded vigilante groups, mostly of men, to 'protect' the 'local women' from the foreign threat by attacking everyone who in their opinion looked like a refugee. They organized themselves via Facebook groups under the eyes of the disempowered local police, at times even attacking refugee-supporters' houses. As Jack Crone (2015) notes, narratives of refugees as posing a threat to the country's integrity and security have been circulating in Germany and were instrumentalized in tabloids to oppose the working classes against middle classes, and similar dynamics have been present in many other European countries.

Other ruptures were less normative and more pragmatic. The lives of people crossing the borders regularly, as previously described, were disrupted by the re-established presence of border controls. Now, due to the intervention of national police, commuters like myself had to wait at the border for hours, disconnected from workplaces, families and friends. The situation was similar to that Papataxiarchis (2016) describes for a village in Lesbos: the community was torn apart, and expressed a sense of a loss of sovereignty over their own 'homeland' that was connected to a fear of losing a 'local subjectivity'. It was the presence of national politics that disrupted community life. Such disruptions were directed by people from the same nationality,

but not from the same region; they had no understanding of how 'our' border had been lived for decades. They claimed to act in the 'national interest' – a concept rather alien to separatist Bavarians. The decision made by the national government about how the border had to be protected, and by whom, as well as the question of who would be allowed to cross the border into Bavaria, and who would not, was witnessed by many of us as a dictatorial and as a violation of our – at least imagined – 'sovereignty' over 'our' territory.

Against this background, I navigated through my weekday volunteering routine in Vienna with refugee children without being criticized, and through the translations and intermediations in Landau on the weekends without support. I travelled between both settings, often spending many hours at the border, only a few kilometres from where my family was awaiting my arrival. The intrinsically different and shifting assemblages of volunteers, activists and local authorities, in combination with national policies, shaped the of the Summer of Refuge for the refugees as much as it did for activists and volunteers. Moreover, the local changes in the political landscape and alignments in Landau, with the enlarging of social capital via positioning for or against the refugees, expressed the effect of locating regimes along the border, and the creation of different hierarchies based on different knowledge systems. While this shows, on the one hand, the effects of these implications, it shows, on the other hand, how their existence led people to develop different kinds of actions and responses. All these different dynamics were taking place simultaneously in the same geographical place, and were shaped by, and reaction to, each other.

Rethinking the summer of 2015

Since the *Writing Culture* debate[7] and the postmodern turn in anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s, awareness has increasingly been raised regarding the complexities involved in knowledge production. Notably, the position of the anthropologist has come under scrutiny, and the former omniscient observer has been repositioned to an acknowledged participant, offering only partial and situational accounts (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). With the growing awareness that the researcher does not enter the field as a *tabula rasa*, but with assumptions, former experiences, the impact of education and an interpretative system (Kanaaneh 1997:7), reflexivity became a crucial element of the years following the *Writing Culture* debate. Accounts written in the following years usually included a section giving a meta-analysis of the research and its coming-into-being. Almost a quarter century later, many, including myself, have embodied this practice.

7 The debate evolved in the 1970s and reached its peak with the eponymous edited volume by Clifford and Marcus in 1986. Together with authors of other momentous works, such as Asad 1973 and Said 1978, they engaged critically in questions of representation and authenticity and heralded an era of self-criticism within the discipline.

The problematic implications of being a researcher, an activist, a volunteer and a local at the same time, restricted and challenged the way I became involved, reported, thought and represented the events and the actors I encountered during that late summer. Every account creates only a partial truth and therefore 'systems, or economies, of truth' (Clifford 1986:7). As Clifford's approach suggests, the different situations I found myself in due to my multiple roles generated different kinds of truth. These truths vary across time and space and made the summer of 2015 very different in Vienna and Bavaria. Accordingly, feminist epistemology has proposed the concept of 'situated knowledge' (see, for example, Harding 1991; Collins 1997). Collins suggests that there is no single truth, but instead a variety of ways of knowing that depend on context. This approach even denies the existence of single truths and rather suggests that there are just different knowledges.

The crux in this epistemological approach was the question of objectivity and to what degree the researcher had to be disinterested and invisible (Harding 1991:109). The resulting argument held that fierce objectivity also requires 'strong reflexivity' (1991:136). I had not been invisible and never intended to be; neither had I ever tried to be objective or neutral. Instead, I positioned myself as an activist and a volunteer – which already discredited my status for some in town as a 'professional' anthropologist who came to support the community. To Kirin Narayan, every knowledge is 'situated in the relation to people we study' (1993:678); therefore, I did not try to hide my supportive relation to refugees in Lower Bavaria or to the *Helferkreis*, or my critical stance vis-à-vis local and national border policy. What my situated knowledge production allows is a critical analysis of the power relations at stake and the politics involved from a point of view of an anthropologist native to the place. This is 'a confessional tale' (Van Maanen 1988:74) mainly informed by my own autoethnographic example. Ellis and Bochner describe autoethnography as 'autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation' (2002:742). Although the danger of 'navel-gazing' and solipsism was often brought against this approach, I underline its importance, as certain research settings do not comport with other approaches. For years,anthropologists have been writing various autoethnographical accounts reflexively (Kim 2002; Okely and Callaway 1992; Powdermaker 1966; Rabinow 1977; Wax 1971). On the whole, though, they do not tell us much about doing reflexive autoethnography 'at home'. In this sense, Numazaki poses an interesting question: 'Does being an anthropologist affect the way in which he or she lives "at home?"' (Numazaki 2014:1). In my case, it affected greatly the way I witnessed the Summer of Refuge in my hometown, how I positioned myself, and how I narrate what happened to the place and its people.

Although it was never my intention, I ended up doing autoethnography as a native anthropologist in a crosscutting web of social, cultural and political fields.

Nigel Rapport describes this approach quite fittingly as 'an anthropological study of one's own, one's home and one's self' which inquires into 'that murky ground, at once physical, phenomenological, psychological, social and personal, which "an anthropology at home" gives onto' (Rapport 2014:25). Hence, the kind of account I provide is intimately tied to my personal life as well as the family history and the family relations into which I was born. Narayan, however, opposes Rapport by posing the question of '[h]ow native is a native anthropologist?' In her essay (1993) she challenges the assumption that any native anthropologist is an insider, simply due to formal group identity, regardless of their personal background and the interplay of other intersecting categories, such as education, gender, class or other factors, such as the relations the anthropologist develops with other group members (Narayan 1993:672).

Similarly, the notion of 'home' is not just a changing variable, it is politically exhausted by new conservative groups. For anthropologists and others, who spend much time in field sites, this idea is also a constant process in the making. Therefore, being born in a particular place did not necessarily make me an insider in a specific community; in fact, that I was not living there anymore was sometimes used against me. In this sense, while anthropologists who engage the field from outside might sometimes have difficulties having access, the problem of endo-anthropologists is rather 'how to get out in order to enable them to have an ethnographic gaze at familiar social environments' (Van Ginkel 1998:258). In this account, this new gaze at my otherwise so familiar everyday life implied a cognitive effort that I had not been exposed to before. 'Anthropology at home' is a more complicated concept than just stepping away from a colonial ethnography of folkloristic endeavours, and this approach has developed significantly beyond its initial application in the 1980s (see, for example, Greenhouse 1985; Jackson 1987; Messerschmidt 1981). Underlying both Rapport's autoanthropology and Narayan's discussion of how native a native anthropology is, is once again the question of boundaries, now including those between civic engagement and academia.

Exploring border zones between civic engagement and academia

During the Summer of Refuge, my own involvement turned any possibility of research other than autoethnography into a questionable, if not unethical, endeavour. First, I was constantly acting under time pressure. I had to act pragmatically and research was not a priority. This often hindered me from asking questions, writing down notes, or even formulating thoughts and analyses. Second, I did not want to make the information I had gathered public. I often used legal grey zones and pushed their limits. More than once, I had to mistranslate in order to circumvent mechanisms that would turn people, who had asked me for help, into deportable objects; yet I also feared patronizing them. To write about these activities at all, especially while still ongoing, could have harmed my interlocutors and others, and would have come with

a psychological dissociation that I was not willing to admit. Moreover, as a local, I did not want to expose my own hometown or the disagreements within the *Helferkreis*, rendering them even more vulnerable, especially as they included my nuclear family.

My engagement within this network made it difficult to address the hierarchies, conflicting agendas, and power struggles it was embedded in. For analysis it would be critical to address the activities themselves; however they happened within a social setting of different actors, including volunteers and their respective agendas. Refugees were often romanticized as helpless suffering subjects, a representation which was often criticized as the 'teddybearization' of refugees by more critical voices (Frank 2015), leading by extension to a romanticized image of the summer of 2015. However, Syria's well-established middle class hardly fit into the social imaginary of refugees as people escaping hunger or generations-long war zones. Many Syrian refugees who made their way to Germany did not match this image, including those who seemed to be wealthier than some of the volunteers, and who refused charity. Had I revealed these insights then and in that context, right-wing populists could have misused them.

I was often overwhelmed by emotions, especially by the unaccomplishable expectations refugees brought from Austria, and the unfulfillable hopes they raised when they arrived in Germany, when confronted with what was really happening at the border. This resulted in sometimes schizophrenic situations, where I helped to acquire expensive tickets into the north of Germany at the station in Vienna, even though I knew that the train would be stopped in Passau before reaching the intended destination. I refused to accept the facts, given the optimism of the people I helped, and as a result felt torn between different knowledge systems. More than once I tried to write down my experiences, but did not know how to shape them into a coherent narrative, and I doubted they were even tangible. They amounted to a bricolage of memories in my diary that I needed some time and distance from in order to digest and understand them. My personal attachments, kinship and friendship ties created a biased approach to the field, one that rendered all the others mute. This was due to the impossibility of sympathizing with some actors, when to do so would have challenged my loyalty to my own family relations. Since childhood, I have developed personal relationships with most people involved in this ethnographic account, including, primarily, my own kin. I found it almost impossible to engage in participant observation with, or even to interview, people so close to me during such an exceptional time. My only possible account was therefore autoethnograpic, with all the challenges and possibilities that it entails.

Positioning oneself as an anthropologist is different from positioning oneself as a volunteer or an NGO worker. While all these roles are positioned within power structures, anthropology is unique in that, almost by definition, it gives a privileged space to other perspectives, which must shape the anthropologist's own account. As a volunteer, action is often guided by adrenalin and the constant justification of

practical intervention against all odds. Anthropologists who have been active in the 'service' sector of the migration and refugee economy have had similar experiences, and face structural difficulties in shifting positions back and forth between activism and research. Finally, due to my personal involvement with Syria, and my lack of knowledge of languages besides Arabic among the refugees, I inevitably hierarchized refugees, over-representing Syrians. For all these reasons, looking back, I feared losing intimacy if I distanced myself and asked critical questions.

The ethics of doing anthropology 'at home'

Anthropologists have the duty to bear witness and to question. We are positioned and act within power structures, but we can use these constructions to give voice to subjects and situations. It may seem obvious that refugees need to have their voices heard, but refugees are not the only voices silenced in this case.

Although much has been written about (forced) migration in cities, I could find no anthropological work on the Lower Bavarian countryside, or on the interplay of incoming transitory and permanent groups. Anthropology at home in Germany often coincides with research on large cities and urban anthropology (Kilianova 2015:115). Studies of (forced) migration in Germany often focus on subgroups, like diaspora communities (see, for example, Çağlar 2002; Schiffauer 1999; Sökefeld 2008), but less often on receiving communities, and even more rarely on rural ones.

Hence, anthropology in the EU along national-border communities gives an especially interesting view on migration and border crossing in a zone where, theoretically, mobility is no longer regulated by national borders. Ironically Marta Kempny stated the following in 2012: 'The formation of border-free zone [*sic*] within the EU has created a new arena for ethnographic studies.' (Kempny 2012:40). Witnessing the current societal changes in the region is necessary in order to address this context's shifting assemblages and internally diverse dynamics in combination with regional and national politics and European migration policies. This is especially so given that these processes shape not only the experiences of residents, volunteers, activists, politicians and police forces, but also those of human traffickers, and even refugees' experiences of flight itself. Yet, to use the impressions and notes I collected, as well as the life stories and experiences I witnessed, to write an ethnography without my interlocutors' consent would be questionable. Despite anthropologists' ethical duty to make invisible injustices visible, how can we do so without casting our interlocutors in the role of suffering victims? Violence against women and minorities, racism, aggression, class hierarchies, and a mismatch of expectations and their ability to be realized marked the refugee camps I knew. How can we address hierarchies and injustices within them without exposing the refugees? How can we address the shifting dynamics within towns and cities, without feeding the rhetoric of right-wing populists? Having these ethical considerations in mind, the only possible way of displaying how the summer was experienced was hence through my own case.

From the outset, I knew that it would take me a long time to understand clearly what had happened that summer, including why and how, all of a sudden, my private life had merged with my professional expertise. Like other colleagues, I do not yet fully grasp how this experience affected the refugees, my hometown, my work as a researcher, and my own life. I never intended to be a native anthropologist, but my biography and my personal life became part of my field site, and hence forced me to reassess my position as an anthropologist.

Holmes and Castañeda (2016:13) remind us of the 'important links between human experience and macro-political economic structures' that anthropologists create through taking into consideration historical perspectives and by challenging established perceptions. This reminder is an important key to understanding the different experiences of flight for both refugees and Landau's locals. To avoid oversimplifying, macro-analysis needs to be audited by first-hand accounts. I have attempted to show how the different contexts along the route, the ruptures at borders and dynamics in the respective local communities shaped the experience of flight. Moreover, these dynamics do not just respond to the arriving refugees, but are themselves embedded in their own socio-historical knowledge systems, as I have shown in the case of my native town. Hence, I have aimed to show how these knowledge systems simultaneously overlap and calibrate the value of humans to the respective places, alongside negotiating national border regimes and local border practices. My multiple positionings offer insights into the Summer of Refuge that I hope can speak truth to power and contribute to more nuanced perspectives on an extreme situation. Through this account, I have rendered visible the ways a local community changed when caught in the midst of the so-called 'refugee crisis'.

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