



**MAINTAINING REFUGE:
ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS IN
UNCERTAIN TIMES**

**Edited by:
David Haines
Jayne Howell
Fethi Keles**

**A Publication of the
Committee on Refugees and Immigrants**

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LESVOS:

TRACING THE SPACE OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Raluca Bejan

The Mediterranean, therefore, is the center of world history. Greece lies here, the focal point of history. In [what is nominally] Syria there is Jerusalem, the center of Judaism and of Christianity. To the southeast are Mecca and Medina, the source of Islam. To the west are Delphi and Athens; and farther west there is Rome, with Alexandria and Carthage on the south side of the sea. Thus the Mediterranean is the heart of the Old World, that which conditions it and gives it its life. Without it we could not imagine world history—any more that we could think of Rome or Athens without the forum where all things converged. (Hegel 1988)

Hegel's quote takes on new dimensions today, as Europe was confronted, in the last years, with a massive influx of irregular migrants. The Eurocentric ideal is particularly significant in defining the "refugee crisis." Millions of refugees were already stranded in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey for years, and yet the refugee crisis only became a "crisis" when people started to flock into Europe and were seen to contaminate the symbolism of what Europe constitutes. The actuality of the refugee "problem" is subsequently connected to how we name and choose to understand the idea(s) of Euro-centrism, of Europe, and its cultural supremacy on the world map. Starting in 2015, thousands of people coming from the Middle East and Africa disembarked on the shores of Italy and Greece in search of refuge. This essay traces the emotion conveyed by the island of Lesvos, as the space containing the refugee crisis, while it critically interrogates the current representational imagery of the crisis. The discrepancy between the everyday island life and the surreal problem of the "refugees," is metaphorically extrapolated here through a narrative account describing the space of the island.

TRAVELLING TO LESVOS

Στον Πειραιά, παρακαλώ (“To Piraeus, please”) we asked the cab driver in broken Greek, as we turned left from Loustinianou and Kallidromiou in Exarchia, walked down on Emmanouil Mpenaki, and waved the cab from across Café 67. Passing a traffic jam around Syntagma, within ten minutes we were on the highway, and in about half an hour we reached the port. “Which gate?” the driver asked. “E2” we responded. He pulled out a pen and an old receipt from a pile of papers stacked on the seat next to him. We wrote the gate number and passed the paper back. “Ah, epsilon dio!” he exclaimed. In a few minutes we were at the gate. The boat was the same one we took a year ago, in July 2016, when we first saw Lesvos. Operated by Hellenic Seaways, Ariadne is one of the two ferries that regularly sails the Piraeus-Mytilini (Lesvos’s port) route. Staff members were wearing red t-shirts. Ariadne’s uniform would be red, of course, as in Greek mythology the thread passed to Theseus to find his way out of the Cretan labyrinth was most likely red.



Ariadne has two decks. From the higher one up, the sea was difficult to see. From the one below, the view was much clearer. Two rescue coils were diametrically located at the opposite corners. On the left side corridor, a square white box hung above the water, with the words “In case of Emergency” written in red. Nine evacuation techniques (Operating Procedures of the Marine Chute Evacuation System) were presented in photos and accompanied by detailed text: how to turn the handle and the stopper at the seaside door at 90 degrees; how to disconnect the safety lever from the receiver; how to lower down the lever.

Lesvos currently hosts about 3,000 migrants, scattered among the camps of Pikpa, Moria, and Kara Tepe, the lowest number since the start of the refugee crisis in 2015 (Makris 2017). Following the deal between the European Union (E.U.) and Turkey, signed in March 2016, which allows Greece to “return” (i.e., as in to deport) irregular arrivals back to Turkey in exchange for E.U. resettlement assistance for the Syrian refugees located on Turkey’s soil, a visa removal promise for Turkish nationals, and a payment of six billion euros, the numbers of refugees on the Greek islands significantly decreased. Yet the absence of the refugees’ former presence continues to be felt.

LESVOS. APRIL 25, 2017.

Early morning. Eighteen degrees.

8:33. Distance to Moria Refugee Camp - seven kilometers. Estimated walking time: one hour and twenty-eight minutes.

8:33. Distance to Kara Tepe Refugee Camp - three kilometers. Estimated walking time: thirty-eight minutes.

8:37. Distance to Pikpa Lesvos Solidarity Camp - six kilometers. Estimated walking time: one hour and seventeen minutes.

9:56. Fourteen ships anchored in the Mytilini port:

Border patrol. Anchored with four strings. Yellow and black braided.



White ship. Dilapidated. Number 470 written in black paint. Anchored with two blue strings and a white thread.

White boat in better shape. Twice the size as the former one. Anchored with four dirty-white strings.



Two boats side by side:

Blue boat. An old man was cleaning it. Resembled a small tourist cruise. Anchored with white thread. Tied with one of the strings from the third white boat.

White, modern boat. Interior made out of wood. A table was visible inside, along with a small bar and a sink.

Oceanis 321. Anchored with black string in two spots. Small and white. A black bucket was out on the deck.

White boat. Small. Anchored with two white and blue dotted braided strings.

Jeanneau coRRente is written on the left. *Sun Odyssey 33.1* on the right.

Sarakina Mytilini 965. White and orange. Anchored with chains in two spots. Small.

Bavarian Yachts 350. White and blue. Two chains. One black. One white.

Nelli NM 1202. Grey strings.

N.M.1093. White.

Boat chained in two spots. Cherry color.

Border Patrol. “Please do not take photos of the ship. It is a *war scene*. It is forbidden.”

SKALA SIKAMINEAS

Located about forty-seven kilometers from Mytilini, Skala Sikamineas is easily reachable by bus. In April (still the winter season in Greece), scheduled trips were departing Mytilini at 1:00 p.m. and returning from Skala the next day at 6:45 a.m. On the way to Kaloni, close to Agia Paraskevi, reminders of a former refugee camp lay untouched. Mantamados camp was located within an empty terrain closed off by a wire fence. A jacket was hanging on the entrance door.



After the Byzantine Monastery of Archangel Michael in Mantamados, the serpentine road continued to Skala. Turkey was visible to the right. “Turkia,” the driver said. “Ten euros from Mytilini by boat. And migrants pay four thousand.” He told us stories of refugees on the road offering to pay as much as five hundred euros for a taxi ride to the port. People, however, were afraid to help. “Police will arrest,” the driver said. “For helping, yes.”

After talking with somebody from the Lesvos Legal Centre, we learned that oftentimes in Turkey smugglers assure migrants that a person will accompany them to operate the boat, yet they send people on their own; regularly, these passengers have no other choice but to (learn to) navigate. Landing on the Greek shores, the person sailing the boat, himself a migrant, is often arrested for smuggling people.

A camp seemed to have been located three kilometers away from Skala Sikamineas. It was enclosed by wire fence, and most of the white tents had the UNCHR emblem. A covered open-air sink stood outside the fenced perimeter. A table covered with a white tablecloth was propped between two barracks. Several pairs of shoes were placed on top of it. A sign with text in Greek, English, Arabic, and Farsi was fastened on the fence. “Welcome to the Greek island Lesbos,” it read. “You must first register with the authorities at the port of Mytilini. By bus it takes about ninety minutes. Walking takes two days.”



At Skala Sikamineas the water was clear, reflecting the rays of sun as they hit the rocky shores. The town looked small, quiet, and serene. Next to a dozen fisherman boats, there were two rescue ships from Proactiva Open Arms, an organization based in Barcelona, Spain. The few empty restaurants and coffee shops stood in marked contrast to the reality that hundreds of thousands of migrants have passed through Skala Sikamineas, with as many as eighty-eight boats per day reaching its shores (Owens 2016).

Evidence of this movement was visible at the Goji Café. One stone wall was covered by t-shirts, including a yellow lifeguard shirt from the ProActive Open Arms Rescue team, a red Hellas Lifeguard top, a white t-shirt from Médecins Sans Frontières, and another from Medics Bergen. Additionally there were photos of island residents and refugees together: Vasillis, Lotte, Marry, Joe, Ben, Max, Daisy, Pete, Ali, Naya, and Kristina were some of the names.



MYTHIMA AT EFTALOU

“Drive from Skala towards Molivos,” read our friend’s directions. “And just before Eftalou you can visit the life-jacket graveyard.” We turned east near Mythima, and followed the dirt road, now curved towards what looked like a junkyard. A few municipal workers were gathering items and burning them in the open, somewhat flat space between the hills. Several abandoned boats that formerly carried migrants were stored within a wire-fenced perimeter. The earth was dried up by the sun, though small trees had their shapes contoured on the horizon. The fence enclosing the boats had hundreds of clothing items, garbage bags, and orange vests stuck to it. In the middle of the hills, thousands of life-jackets were piled on the ground. Forming an ad hoc graveyard, the jackets had been brought to this space as debris cleaned up from beaches. Those that had been there for a long time had been discolored by the sun. Others looked fairly new. Despite the E.U.-Turkey deal, the piles will only grow bigger with time. A young woman was playing what sounded like a funeral song on the saxophone.

LESVOS. APRIL 26, 2017.

Early afternoon. Twenty-one degrees.

13:35. At Skala Sikamineas, a fisherman was cleaning his boat. Two lifeguards were having a coffee.

14:42. At Eftalou, a man wearing a black swimming suit was beating an octopus on the rocks.

14:50. At [Mythimna], thousands of orange life-vests were lying on the ground.

15:31. At Pikpa, someone was placing a green fruit box with oranges on a white bench. A woman wearing a blue headscarf was coming out of a tent to empty a pot full of cooking water.

17:09. Back in the Mytileni port, a small girl with a flower crown made of pink plastic flowers was pinching her father's right ear.

Lesvos. The space of everyday.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This photo-essay aimed to symbolically create a topography of the refugee crisis, as seen through the space containing the crisis. Public accounts on the European refugee predicament covered the issue by placing a particular individualizing gaze on the refugee subject (although the problem is structural in nature). The refugee in suffering, an experience witnessed by us all, as a spectacle, from a distance: images of crowded tents, boats carrying overflowing numbers of people, children dying on Mediterranean shores. This essay turned the gaze outwards, aiming to scrutinize the “spaces” of the crisis in which people seek refuge and to convey the emotions contained by these places.

On the one hand, there is the everyday of the “space.” The ordinary island life, with not much to do in the early hours of the day, some people anchoring their fishing boats, some going for a swim, some going for a stroll. A serene, pictorial, postcard-like place, which makes it difficult to imagine that thousands of people were arriving

daily, not that long ago, on the island's shores. The "presence" of the refugees, however, is no longer a *sine qua non* presence. The space of the island has symbolically changed, from hosting refugees' presence to hosting their absence. Ultimately, the physical markers of living on the island remain metaphorically the very same markers discursively used to talk about the refugees: the port, the stationed border patrols, the island's roads, the swimming vests.

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This volume reflects the breadth of the anthropological vision of refuge, and the application of that breadth to understanding the many barriers that are created against refuge—whether for people meeting the formal legal standards of being refugees or for those many others for whom only durable refuge can bring a viable and meaningful human future.

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