



To the future guests of Lesvos: Hospitality and history among Syrian refugees in Greece

Maria Kastrinou & Hannah Knoerk

To cite this article: Maria Kastrinou & Hannah Knoerk (06 May 2024): To the future guests of Lesvos: Hospitality and history among Syrian refugees in Greece, History and Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/02757206.2024.2346910](https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2024.2346910)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2024.2346910>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 06 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 75



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

To the future guests of Lesvos: Hospitality and history among Syrian refugees in Greece

Maria Kastrinou^a and Hannah Knoerk^b

^aAnthropology, Social and Political Sciences Department, Brunel University, London, UK; ^bIndependent Researcher

ABSTRACT

Syrian refugees in 2015 in Greece found themselves suspended between a tragedy they had just escaped, and the hope of safety in Europe. While their clothes were still wet from the sea, they were looking forward and planning ahead. In fleeting gatherings at the port or the registration centre, Syrian travellers exchanged advice, debated routes and destinations, and offered tea, fruit and food. In transit, they often became hosts and guests. These roles were interchangeable, yet, through the percolations of advice given and information shared, a Syrian sense of hospitality as collective recognition emerged. Connecting advice, sociality and solidarity, we argue that a different Syrian hospitality than what is usually assumed was at play. The articulation of this hospitality was different to the formulaic, hierarchical or legal prescriptions of honour and status and conflict mediation in which the duplicity of hospitality is encountered. Although at many junctures in their journeys Syrians were made reliant on regimes of 'protection' and 'care', Syrian travellers actively tried to bypass these by using the sense of hospitality as a 'Syrian virtue', as the heuristic of social intimacy and recognition. Through the multi-temporal uses of hospitality, a sense of history and future erupted at a time of danger and anticipation for the journey to follow, forcing Syrians to reconfigure their pasts and futures. In the form of advice given to other Syrian travellers, but also to the anthropologist, this *future* use of hospitality became a conduit of communication and collective belonging.

KEYWORDS

Syria; hospitality; history; advice; solidarity; belonging

'The sea took them!'

'Where are you from?' I asked Miriam, who was sitting next to her sleeping son at the Kara Tepe registration centre¹ in Lesvos. 'From Midan', she replied in Arabic. 'Oh, you have the best sweets in all Damascus!' I said. Miriam, who was sceptical of me and had declined being interviewed on dictaphone, suddenly lit up: 'Yes, how do you know?' So, I told her, in Arabic, that I lived and worked in Damascus as an anthropologist before the war, and that Midani sweets are famously delicious, and that I had sampled truly

CONTACT Maria Kastrinou  maria.kastrinou@brunel.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

marvellous delights in her neighbourhood. Sharing a memory of a past common to both, I sat and talked with Miriam for hours, moving occasionally with the shadow of a eucalyptus tree we were sitting under, to avoid the unforgiving sun. This was September 2015 – the year of the so-called refugee crisis where Europe received an estimated one million refugees, most of whom had passed through the sea border between Greece and Turkey. Lesbos was the Greek island where the majority arrived, most of whom were Syrian nationals fleeing the protracted and devastating war. Hesitantly, Miriam shared her family story of how both her and her husband were established journalists but were persecuted and narrowly escaped arrest. She then showed me photos of her sisters, mother, nephews, – they were dispersed in Lebanon, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. I was then taken aback by a single, seemingly inconsequential, sentence that Miriam uttered:

You know, Maria, I brought some sweets with us from Midan. But the sea took them!

That statement struck me as incomprehensible, so much so that I quickly changed the subject. Only that night I thought to myself: why would anyone who is leaving behind their home, their life as they knew it, fleeing war, choose to take with them something so useless and perishable as sweets? Perhaps, I could have understood if the family were eating them on the journey – sugar is a source of sustenance. But that did not seem to be the case. The sweets had something ceremonial, almost ritual, about them. Why would she take them on the dinghy? The sea has taken the lives of thousands of people, why did it matter that it took the sweets? The metaphor struck me as unbearably naive and painfully futile: it is almost as if she left her home for a temporary visit, and as a guest, she was even taking sweets for her new host.

That is the Syrian way: you never go empty-handed on a first visit. During my fieldwork in Greece that year, I would soon discover that hospitality, *karam* in Arabic, continued to play a hugely important role to Syrians seeking refuge. As it did in Syria before the war.

Having escaped a brutal war, the dangerous journey in the Aegean Sea, and facing an uncertain future in Europe, Syrian refugees in 2015 in Greece found themselves suspended between a tragedy they had just escaped, and the hope of safety in Europe. Upon arrival, they endured police detentions, antiterrorism interrogations, and were made to rely on the kindness of strangers for the fulfilment of their most basic human rights. And, although their clothes were still wet from the sea, these Syrian travellers were looking forward and planning ahead, towards their onward journey, from mainland Greece, into the Balkan route, and toward Germany or other northern European destinations. A dangerous challenge, a turning point, but not the end of the journey. Roads had to be crossed and hopes to be materialized further ahead. A year later, however, travellers would not be allowed to proceed, and the registration centre became a closed asylum-processing centre, a prison but in name, called the Moria Hotspot.

A note on methods and collaboration

Hospitality is not only a cultural trope, it is also the distinct possibility of anthropology, which is almost entirely dependent on the generosity of our informant-hosts. Indeed, in ethnographic practice, it is the very 'impossibility' of hospitality (Derrida 2000) that makes anthropology possible (Candea and Da Col 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Pitt-Rivers

1968). This paper is based on fieldwork in Lesvos and in Athens in the summer and autumn of 2015, and ongoing anthropological returns since. Having conducted long-term fieldwork in Syria prior to the war and the 'refugee crisis', Kastrinou was in the unique position of being recognized by Syrians as, not exactly 'one of our own', but as 'our own stranger' and 'our own guest': someone who could speak 'their' language, had visited their country and knew its norms and traditions (*adat wa taqalid*), and also as someone who, on account of this shared past, could recognize Syrian hospitality. The anthropological positionality was further complicated as Kastrinou is a Greek citizen, and as such a potential 'host', one who perhaps ought to reciprocate the Syrian hospitality she had received. The debt of this Syrian hospitality weighed heavily during these interactions, as did the brutality of the ongoing war.

Much affected by the literal burning down of the 'field', and the inability to go back, I (Maria Kastrinou) felt unable to write anything satisfying about Syria in the aftermath of the war and the so-called refugee crisis. When I conducted fieldwork in Greece (2015 – 2016), I was still coming to grips with what had happened to Syria. I felt unable to follow the expected anthropologist-guest relationships, or to be a researcher-host, or activist-host. Angry and powerless vis-a-vis the Greek and EU treatment of Syrians, I did not want to be associated with either the Greek state, nor the EU policy, nor could I feel connected to the activists on the island that were able to express solidarity, but who were also able, I felt, to finish their day's work and sleep at night. The fleeting relationships and stories exchanged in a borderland, further challenged my preconception of anthropological fieldwork as long-term. Haunted by the gravity of the situation, of Syria lost, of lives lost, and of my loss for words, I was not ready to process the material collected until years after – a strange temporal percolation.

It was not until the summer of 2022 that Hannah Knoerk took on the task of reading through the ethnographic material – which had laid dormant since being collected: Field notes, interviews in English and in Arabic, most of which were half-transcribed and roughly translated in English, none of which were systematically organized. Hannah, who had been Maria's student at Brunel University, worked initially as research assistant, and later as co-author and collaborator. Maria's and Hannah's collaboration helped to revitalize the ethnographic puzzle in many directions (including in producing a theatrical performance, Kastrinou, Knoerk, and Birringer 2024). Hannah's editorial work and data analysis skills were fundamental in bringing to light the narratives, but also in allowing us to see the many ways that the interviews spoke to us *and* to each other. This co-authored paper is a result of this collaboration. However, to preserve the flow of the ethnographic vignettes and to retain the presence of the anthropologist in these, we have decided to maintain the pronoun 'I' throughout the paper to refer to Kastrinou, and to retain the ethnographic context in which these vignettes took place.

Exceptional hospitality in 2015 Lesvos

As 2015 witnessed Europe's so-called refugee crisis, the island of Lesvos came to embody the crossing of the European border. Since the early 2000s, an increasing number of immigrants and refugees used both Lesvos, and Greece more widely, as a transit route (Cabot 2014; Green 2012). Moreover, although the idyllic island of 86,000 residents has its own history of displacement, population exchanges and migration (Papataxiarchis 1988;

2016a; 2016b), in 2015 it experienced an unprecedented scale of visitors, not only in the number of refugees it welcomed, but also in the resulting entourage of state, intra-state, and humanitarian workers, volunteers, academics, journalists and curious tourists. Post-2015, Lesbos stopped being the main entrance point to Europe due to the EU-Turkey Agreement, in effect since March 2016, becoming instead the first and largest EU 'Hotspot' in the Aegean.

The year of 2015 was exceptional for another reason: like a 'space of exception' where normal law was suspended, so too were the European Union's 'normal' border security controls. Specifically, the Schengen Agreement and Dublin Regulation, which administer EU immigration and asylum procedures, were temporarily suspended in order to allow refugees to transit through the Balkan route to the countries of central and northern Europe. However, at the same time, securitization and border regimes continued and proliferated by other means. The EU's border control agency, FRONTEX, played the main role in border patrol, registration and identification of refugees; while the more refined security response to immigration was taking shape as the New European Agenda on Migration and the 'Hotspot Approach' which institutionalized securitization, incarceration and policing as the main policy response to migration (Fernando and Giordano 2016; Neocleous and Kastrinou 2016).

Along with the securitization of the refugee 'crisis' came the humanitarians: beyond individual and collective – but local – expressions of solidarity to refugees, national and international humanitarian organizations, agencies, NGOs, charities and volunteers flooded the island. Although many operated on different registers and sometimes with competing ethics and practices (see Papataxiarchis 2016a and 2016b), 2015 was a significant and exceptional time precisely because non-state institutions of 'care' ushered in a humanitarian government and morality (also see Rozakou 2012). To understand part of the processes on the ground in Lesbos, Fassin's concept of 'humanitarian reason' is relevant because it describes both humanitarian government and a new moral economy: a politics of compassion founded upon inequality made 'somewhat bearable' through enlisting 'the secular imaginary of communion and redemption' (2011: xii). In this way, the lives of the helpless and the destitute, of the refugees and the poor, become precarious: 'lives that are not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer, [...] defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in relation to those who have power over them' (Fassin 2011, 4). Incumbent upon the bureaucratic hospitality on offer by state and humanitarian institutions (the reception centres, the charities, the national and international NGOs), refugees in Lesbos found themselves enmeshed in unequal relations that structurally positioned them as powerless. An expression of this structural classification of powerlessness, was the inability to reciprocate, to counter-gift, which constituted them as helpless and voiceless objects of sympathy (Ticktin 2011). Not only was the hospitality on offer in Lesbos unequal, but it was also 'ambivalent' (Fassin 2011, 133): like previously in Sangatte, France, humanitarian agencies co-existed with the security apparatus (such as FRONTEX, Greek army and police, among others). Hospitality was 'ambivalent' in another way: it granted not political asylum to refugees, it conferred none of the rights and protections of the 1951 Refugee Convention, only a temporary 6-month registration paper which offered protection from deportation on humanitarian grounds in order for the refugees to continue their precarious journey. As Fassin explains, 'more consensual, the logic of compassion now prevailed over the right to protection' (2011, 145).

This paper brings together the sounds of war and the hopes for safety that my interlocutors bore with them during that exceptional time, from the summer of 2015 until March 2016, when Syrian travellers that arrived in Lesvos were permitted to travel onto Europe. In fleeting gatherings at the port or the registration queue, Syrian travellers exchanged advice: about the road ahead, the journey before. They spoke of these stages and they often insisted on offering some tea or fruit to each other and to the anthropologist. In transit, they often played hosts and guests in multiple ways and in different scales. These roles were swiftly interchangeable, yet, through the percolations of advice given and information shared, a Syrian sense of hospitality as collective recognition seemed to emerge. We, thus, connect hospitality to advice, sociality and solidarity and argue for a different Syrian hospitality than what is usually assumed: a sense, an affect, an atmosphere of hospitality. The sense of ease, comfort, and safety that endured, that travels *beyond* the importance of the formulaic, hierarchical or legal prescriptions of honour and status and conflict mediation in which the duplicity of hospitality is encountered and studied (Alkan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023; Anderson 2023; Herzfeld 1987; Khalaf 1990; Shryock 2004). Although at many junctures in their journeys Syrians were made reliant on regimes of ‘protection’ and ‘care’, this paper focuses on how Syrian travellers actively tried to bypass these by using the sense of hospitality as a ‘Syrian virtue’, building and extending on Andrea Rugh’s (1997) familial concept of Syrian intimacy as ‘within the circle’, as the heuristic of social intimacy and recognition. Through the multi-temporal uses of hospitality, we argue that a sense of history and future erupted at a time of danger and anticipation for the journey to follow, forcing Syrians to reconfigure their pasts and futures. In the form of advice given to other Syrian travellers, but also to the anthropologist herself, this *future* use of hospitality became a conduit of communication and collective belonging.

The future: on history erupting

In order to explore the multi-temporality of hospitality, we turn to the question of time and the formation of history (Bandak 2024 Hirsch and Stewart 2005); we can never isolate the past, the past is recalled in the interstices of the present. Yet, to trace the future we must attend to the question of history. To do this, we turn to Reinhard Koselleck’s understanding of history as a plurality of times, and to Walter Benjamin’s history as redemption. Both Koselleck and Benjamin bring forth a forceful non-linear sense of time, a ‘paradoxical form of temporality’ (Osborne 1992, 66), imbued by the present-ness of revolution and catastrophe, single and pivotal events that erupt through the sediments of time.

On the Concept of History (1940 [2005]: XIV), Benjamin locates history as ‘the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [*Jetztzeit*]’. History is something that is active, disruptive, that ‘erupts’ and ‘explodes’, always being in here-and-now, indeed the historian is one who does not ‘give themselves to the whore called “Once upon a time” in the bordello of historicism’. Concerned with the emancipation of the oppressed classes, Benjamin sees history not as the archaeological enterprise of recovering artefacts from stable strata, but as events and relationships in revolutionary motion.

With a shared concern as to how history is defined and by whom, Koselleck probes the revolving conditions of possible histories. His term *Zeitschichten*, or ‘sediments of time’

captures his theory of the plurality of historical times that are present in the same moment, pressed together layer upon layer. Like strata, each temporal level represents the process of memory formation, in terms of flow and solidification that accrue or sediment at different speeds. These layers of time can be hardened and volatile, and therefore have the potential to erupt at any moment (2018, 240–1). Whilst people write about experiences of violence and provide explanations for the course of events, histories in the moment of their unfolding are not rational. Eruptions *in actu* emerge as senseless absurdity, making it difficult for survivors to transform their individual experiences into a ‘history’ or a ‘collective memory’, as they are never given the space to process negative memory, unlike those who write about them from a distance.

For Koselleck, time and memory remain essentially individual, subjective and impossible to share, a survivor’s vertigo and formative burden. For Benjamin, collective redemption is the at once destructive and productive winds of the future, a storm that ‘drives him [the angel of history] irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high’ (Benjamin 1940 [2005]: IX). With his mouth open, his wings overstretched, attempting to piece together the violently destroyed past, Benjamin’s *Angel of History* is thrust forward. Mark Neocleous in *The Monstrous and the Dead* (2005) demonstrates that contrary to theological messianic readings of Benjamin’s Angel of History,

the angel stands for the ‘true’ historian, that is, the historical materialist, who sees those lying prostrate, the horror which has produced the cultural treasures, the sky-high wreckage and pile of debris, and senses that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy (2005, 66)

Benjamin’s notion of the historical consciousness of the oppressed for Neocleous has the potential to actualize redemption:

anamnesic solidarity figures in Benjamin as redemptive solidarity, centred on the now-time and to be realized in the future. [...] In political terms, then, such an act can take on the sense of ‘to make good on the debts of the past’, or even ‘to rescue the past by means of the future’. (2005, 69–70)

‘Anamnesis’ means recollection or evisceration, and what ‘anamnesic solidarity’ refers to is the forging of identity not on pre-existing and essentialist characteristics. Redemption comes via the future actualisation of this revolution, made possible partly because its agents were capable of grasping time as it erupts at a moment of danger, forging forward not as individual potentiality but as collective power. For Benjamin and Neocleous, redemption is a collective future forged out of collective struggle, as it flashes at a moment of danger. We argue that Syrians, hunted away from their country, many by their own regime and some by so-called revolutionaries, found themselves in the borderland of Europe. Precarious, liminal, uncertain. By exchanging guidance, hospitality otherwise, were already engaging in the politics of a collective future. This future emerged at the cracks of danger and death, it was intense, traumatic, sometimes banal, but mostly embedded within a Syrian framework of the give-and-take of good advice.

Like good advice, for Keshavarz and Khosravi smuggling is a way of following Benjamin’s ‘opening history up ... by disclosing the contradictions within the nation-state system that are concealed by the official narratives ... to include narratives of the illegalised, the outcast, the undocumented, the bandit, and the smuggler’ (Keshavarz and

Khosravi 2022, 4). In their attempt to socially embed the process of migration and smuggling, they describe borders as *magic*: powerful, performative spaces where the state-coloniality-capitalism hide themselves from view. The smuggler appears in their analysis as the anti-hero who upends the magic, making it visible through countering it. They provocatively ask: why is this form of ‘negotiable protection’ bad (Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022, 9)? Looking from the border up, as in the work, travellers engaged in reciprocal bonds with people they know, and not refugees whose victimhood requires a sovereign state’s protection. Pointing toward alternative, from below, histories, the analysis serves not to reclaim the term ‘smuggler’ as an absolute good –Khosravi’s own depictions of different of different, certainly not romanticized characters (2008). Rather than romanticizing the smuggler, the Benjaminian opening-up allows us to read the *potentiality* for subversion, emancipation and resistance. That is how the image of the ‘illegal’ traveller bares similarity to that of the insurgent citizen and freedom fighter. As in the example of the Kurdish freedom fighter-turned-smuggler who explicitly sees his work as part of the resistance of the oppressed: ‘As long as there are plunderers the plundered ones will want to come and see where their wealth has ended up. And I help them’ (Khosravi 2010, cited in Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022, 6). The next section introduces the people who helped Syrian travellers, and the anthropologist, in different ways in Lesvos.

A new old friendship

In the classic ethnography of urban Damascus, *A New Old Damascus* (2004: 60–64), Christa Salamandra describes the friendships that she experiences with other women as ‘elusive’, antagonistic, ranging from mean to almost bullying. Unlike other ethnographic descriptions of the harem or the ‘daughter’, her material, Salamandra argues, fits closer to ethnographies of agonistic relationships described in ethnographies of Greece. This section sketches the start of a Syrian-Greek friendship that was not agonistic. Sami and his wife Amal arrived in the early summer of 2015 in Lesvos, and contrary to his brother who travelled with him, decided to stay in Greece. Tasos is a local taxi driver from Lesvos. And myself, the Greek anthropologist who had lived in Syria. Our friendship travelled forth in the years, losing touch and finding each other again, but was also a relationship through which the anthropologist encountered the ‘field.’ Sami and Amal spoke about their lives and journey, Sami connected me to other Syrian travellers and NGOs in the field, and Tasos often drove me to field visits and meetings, as well as to excursions with his family where he would unravel the history of the island in the landscape.

Amal’s and Sami’s house was a wooden cabin at the ‘Village of All Together’² and it was special: it was beautiful. Passionate gardeners, they had planted flowers in a pair of old blue jeans, which stood up and as if ready to walk away – an apt embodiment of freedom against borders. The area surrounding their cabin was clean and tidy, a strange sense of permanence surrounding temporary houses. No, not so much permanence as a sense of beauty: fragile and not essential but somehow not superfluous. Like the sweets from Midan. In front of their one-bedroom home was a small garden space, an open-air *madafa* (Arabic for guestroom) for the reception of guests and friends: a small side table and old plastic chairs. It brought to mind the spatial arrangements of hospitality within houses that I had frequently experienced and studied in Syria (Kastrinou 2014). The side table was covered by shiny aluminium foil, shining and

covering its dilapidated state, keeping it clean and beautiful, an attention to the details of life.

Tasos struggles to make ends meet: he barely works less than 12 h shifts in the taxi, his wife and daughter relocate every summer to a nearby island to work in the tourist industry. Life is hard and money is tight, but he makes amazing woodwork, like the bookshelves he has reclaimed out of traditional wooden window shutters that he has salvaged from dilapidated ruins in the surrounding mountain villages where he lives.

I cannot remember how I met Sami and Tasos, or who I met first. But I remember us sitting around that little table by the cabin and having the feeling, the sense of being back in Syria. It was not that Amal would make delightful cups of tea, coffee, or maté, nor that there was a constant rotation of simple and inexpensive foods on the table (when Sami and Amal moved into a house, later that autumn, Amal would bake for us). It was the sense of hospitality and intimacy, as we described above, the sense of openness, sharing, comfort and ease (*mourtah*).

Sami and Tasos had a strong bond, they understood each other. They were similar: two working men from rural areas (Sami from Kalamoun, Tasos from Lesvos), with young families, a special sense of justice, loyalty and honour which imbued their politics, and with an amazing sense of humour and aptitude at telling stories and jokes. It might have been handiwork, in making objects and in taking the extra mile in human relations, that is the opposite of transactional exactness, that goes beyond what is survivable or necessary.

Back to our first meeting, I explained to Amal, Sami and Tasos my research with Syrians, and how hard I was finding it. Sami suggested that I visit him at his work the following day. Tasos offered to take me there. The next day, Tasos took me in his taxi to Kata Tepe registration centre, where I met Sami who was working for a large international NGO at the registration centre. One of his tasks was to provide water bottles to the people who were waiting in the scorching sun to be 'processed'. Seeing what people had to go through, I was visibly emotional. Perceptively, Sami took me aside and said '*Yalla, Maria, you do not help anyone like this ... you know us [before] people do not need more misery ... and you can help*'. He then went back to giving out water bottles to the people in the registration centre, joking with them, and impersonating being a foreigner by talking to them in English! Sami's funny performance helped me to notice the matter-of-fact, the things that needed to happen: to help people in their journey with practical stuff (like finding a pharmacy, going to the hospital, translation), not to burden them with additional sorrow, and to listen if they wanted to speak. But, I think, he pulled me into the realm of the future.

I was not the only one who Sami gave advice to.

'My brothers!': Sami's travel guide for future Syrian travellers

The audio recording begins with some informal remarks. There are some background noises: the sound of clanking of spoons, phone ringing, heavy breathing, a child crying and babbling. I interviewed Sami, a few days after I had met him and Tasos, with the hope to find out more about his opinions of the camp, of belonging, of the future of Syria, of his personal journey. Instead, he provided almost an hour-long explanation and practical advice of all things connected to the migration route, from smugglers in

Turkey, to registry services in Greece, even the parts of the journey that he himself had not experienced such as alternative travel itineraries, the asylum process in Germany and in other northern European countries. The following is a short selection from Sami's guide to Syrian travellers in Europe. The extracts have been organized thematically in the form of a guide to future travellers:

Preparation: Let's talk with reason and logic, you must be fully equipped ... The trip is difficult, involving a lot of fatigue and exhaustion. But we must prepare for all these things. Of course, my words are directed towards families in particular. Please, please, anyone who wants to immigrate to Europe has to be aware of all the problems, to know where Greece, Macedonia and Serbia are located, people, this is not difficult. There is no necessary map, the Internet has everything. It lets us know where Macedonia is, where Serbia is, Hungary, what countries you will pass through. Write it on paper, for example we know 'Greece' as 'Alyunan', no, it is not true. Once you enter 'Greece' [Alyunan] its name is 'Greece' [...] Because once you enter Europe, people here want to help you but unfortunately, they do not know how they can help, how to communicate with you.

Foreign currency: The second mistake that people make when they come to Europe, is that they come with their dollars. When you go to Europe, you do not need the dollar, what are you going to do with it? Unfortunately, here the dollar spends and changes with the price of the euro, so if you have 100 dollars, they will exchange it for about 60 euros, so you will lose a quarter of the value. This alone is a crime, so you must hold onto your money.

Smugglers, the sea, what to take with you: Dinghys are not necessarily as dangerous as we hear about them, the real danger is that we have not been in one before. When we get on the boat, any vibration is a problem for us. And if a little water enters the boat, it is a problem for us, any engine failure is a problem for us, fuel shortage or gasoline is a problem, a baby crying is also a problem. These are all problems that are normal, you just have to be ready to face them. Do not take a lot of things, just your personal stuff in a small bag containing something to eat, such as a Snickers, Mars, Twix, or anything. A bottle of water, a life jacket. You cannot take more than this. Finally, equip yourself with knowledge. This is your weapon, knowing the way, knowing the movement of the waves, the wind, the area, where you are going. Knowing where you are heading, the point of arrival is very important. Especially those arriving in Rhodes, Chios, Mytilene, please, you have to know where the police station is, where you should be received by the police. The people arriving in Mytilene arrive in an area called Molyvos, about 65 kilometres from the delivery centre. The delivery centre is also a quite important topic. You have to walk for about 65 kilometres, you have to know where you are going. Once you have left the dinghy, you are out of the control of the trafficker. The choice is up to you now, you have a point and its coordinates and you have to go there. When you are in the dinghy, your aim is not to reach land, just access the minnow so it is safe and it works. Go to a point where there are activists.

Registration and the asylum process in Europe: Greece does not take the passport away, on the contrary, the passport proves your identity, your name. The people here do not speak Arabic, so when they bring a Syrian identification document, it is a big problem for the people here. They do not know how to read the name correctly; they do not know how to translate the papers. If they do translate it, they are likely to do it wrong. And this error will be a problem for you in the future, because the country that follows Greece relies on the papers issued in Greece. ... At least try to bring a copy of your Syrian passport and carry your passport with you. We make a big mistake if we leave it in Turkey. The Syrian passport will make a lot of things easier for you, and not one will take it from you, that is nonsense.

The importance of sharing information is pivotal in making decisions in the context of 'illegality' and precarity, as Shahram Khosravi demonstrates through his autobiographical account in 'the "illegal" traveller' (2007, 329). Similarly, Sami's guidance is about how to make the journey easier. On unknown territory, the host guides the guest through a new situation. Good information and advice are highly sought and incessantly discussed, making the right decision about where and when to go could mean a positive or a negative result in the asylum application. For this reason, reliability, care, and reputation played significant roles, and in this regard Sami was positioned as a reliable conduit of information, being a Syrian refugee himself, as well as an NGO worker.

Travellers sought good advice as much as they gave it, as in the following examples. A group of Syrians from Aleppo were discussing their chances of going to Sweden, while they were waiting for the ferry that would take them to Athens. I had joined them asking about where they come from and how their journey had been, but the conversation soon returned to issues of where their final destination should be and why: *they make it so hard because Sweden took in a lot of Somalians, Iraqis, Syrians, there are millions,*

thousands every day who enter into Sweden. Hence, they argued, maybe Germany is a better choice. Syrian travellers were constantly probing the information they received and advice given. Connected to these concerns, many feared Syrian ‘fakes’ and imposters, as this Kurdish man who travelled from northern Syrian:

If one day Syrians went to Europe and Europe does not receive them because there are too many, it is because the Iraqis and Egyptians who went as Syrians got residence.

Why is it important to analyse information and pass down good advice? In such precarious situation, knowledge, and trustworthy networks, can make all the difference between success and failure. By giving their advice, Sami and other travellers become hosts to the future Syrian guests who will come after them. Another example of this heuristic of hospitality and trust is relying on and following one’s people, as Umm Samir responded, when asked if she knows where she is going next:

I do not know anything. We walk depending on God, we see the people going and we go with them. Where we see the people walking, we walk with them.

David Graeber closes his book *Debt* by asking: ‘What is debt, anyway? A debt is just the perversion of a promise. It is a promise corrupted by both math and violence’ (2014, 391). The violence rests in the exactness of debt that makes it at once moral and transferable, that turns a social relation into a business deal the escape of which calls upon the violence of Gods and Capitalists alike. But, here hospitality is not employed as a framework for exchange, it is not a business deal: Sami is not providing precise information in exchange for something equally exacting. This is a hospitality that attempts to recognize through practical advice and intimacy a past-future collectivity. It is a sense, an atmosphere of hospitality that erupts out of danger.

The sense of hospitality: danger, past, future

We were drinking tea in a cafe near the port in Lesvos with Hiba and Salam. They are a mother and daughter who had settled in Sahnaya, Damascus, as refugees in 2006, after the US invasion of Iraq, and they were relating how they felt safe and at ease in Syria.

Salam (daughter): Before the war, the situation was so good. Iraqis were treated in a very sweet manner. It was heaven for us.

Hiba (mother): The Syrian people are very good people.

Salam: [Speaking about going to school and university] They did not make us feel that we are from a different country. I felt as though we were all from the same country completely.

The conversation eventually changes into a comparison between Jordan and Syria:

Salam: They do not want anybody.[...]

Hiba: They do not give each other advice.

Salam: If you ask someone for directions they will say, ‘I don’t know’, even if they know.

Hiba: Even amongst themselves, their relations are like this, they do not help each other. The humanity between them is missing, the opposite as with Syrians.

Twice refugees, they talk of their life in Syria as ‘sweet’; Salam is conveying the sense of belonging, of feeling at ease at school and university, while they both emphasize the importance of help and advice. Advice, for Salam, is being sociable, it is ‘humanity’.

Salam's and Hiba's description of how they felt is not a reflection of how all Iraqi refugees felt, nor of the factuality of a past; it is a description of their recollection and their reality from the perspective of their current position.

Like Benjamin's Angel, this looking back and recollecting from the perspective of the Syrian travellers was a recurrent theme in the interviews I collected. Ruba, for example, is a young Syrian woman married to a Palestinian man. She gave me a harrowing account of danger and death at Tadamon and at Yarmouk camp, in Damascus. Having escaped both war and sea, Ruba spoke of hospitality and safety, not as the formulaic hierarchy of articulating social capital, but as a feeling of safety, a knowledge attained once lost: '... it is enough that this is a safe place', Ruba said, while awaiting reunification with her young daughter and husband.

When the old people told us about the Grace of Safety, we were not aware of what these words mean. Safety is a grace. Like being able to walk at 6:00 pm without fear, or that someone will grab your hand and take you, or a car will stop next to you and kidnap you. It is really hard, safety is a grace, and in the end, how long will it last?

Ruba's sentence underpins the temporal basis of safety. Yet Ruba's narrative is descriptive and helps to document a tragedy, but it also goes beyond description; following Benjamin, the point is not to call 'what really was' but to take control of a dangerous situation by transmitting the experience of the past. We could say here that this is the moment of Heideggerian break up of equipment, the start of the uncanny (Bryant 2016; Bryant and Knight 2019), but Benjamin's understanding of history as a collective result of struggle is closer to the instances of the narratives above, as they express a clear collective battle (Benjamin 1940 [2005]; Neocleous 2005). These memories are the result of a common path, a dangerous exodus whose insistence on remembering is both collective and productive of a new collective: a new yet different *al-Taghreba al-Falastenyia*. The past and the present emerge together: here is the exodus of Moses, the Nakba, the Exodus from Syria.

The darkness of the present contrasts to a past that becomes light, as Hiba explains:

When we went to Syria, Syria was not like it is now. It was shining before, but now it is so dark. When we went there, we felt like when the life comes back to you. We love Syria, we love it. In the beginning Syria was so sweet.

The Syrian dialect uses the word sweet (*helu*) casually and often: beyond sweets that are eaten and drunk, life can be sweet, the response to a nice story can be 'sweet'.

In this light, the sweets from Midan at the start of the paper may not have been a gift at all. Instead of a gift in exchange of hospitality, Miriam was bringing a piece of Midan in the past, the sweetness, a materiality of taste past, forcefully or hopefully thrust into a future in which this will be made possible, and will make sense, in which the death, displacement and danger will be redeemed. History is constituted at the nexus of past-present-future, not from the linear progression of events but through the danger of the present, of the war and of the sea, the common but also collective fight to survive the bombs and the waves.

Not a guest, or, how to make sense of matter-of-factness

Can you imagine that I haven't tasted anything and haven't eaten any food yet so I don't go to the bathroom because I can't. I threw up this morning, vomited a lot. I don't want to

change my clothes until we travel so they do not get dirty because if I change them now, they will get dirty. My clothes were wet, and I did not change them. Salt water got on them and my face, too. And I just went to shower with soap, but the situation here is so bad, you can't eat anything or bathe, or change clothes because they will get dirty. At night I slept in a chair, I cannot sleep on the floor because the tent is so dirty, you can't sleep in it . . . We booked a trip to Athens, on the ship we can go to the bathroom.

This section pivots around the registration centre of Kara Tepe with Umm Mohammed, a middle-age, middle-class woman who travelled with her husband and youngest son from Hama to Greece, and who hoped to reunite with her eldest in Finland. Her story is stark in that, despite the dangers that she and her family have faced along their journey, they do not act as guests in a foreign country, they lack any form of expectation in regard to 'Greek hospitality'. It is this 'matter of factness' in combination with an induced liminality that the section goes on to trace in the form of advice, guidance, and forewarning.

Like many others, Umm Mohammed and her family arrived in Lesvos in the darkness of the night. They did not know where to go, walking for hours with soaked suitcases.

We got lost from the group because we had suitcases with us, and the bags weighed a lot because they were wet with water. So, we wanted to ride with someone and pay them a sum of money. We asked someone in a normal car, not a Taxi, here in Greece. He told us yes, and we paid twice. The second time we paid him we were in a fight and he threatened to kill us, here in Greece.

In this succession of suffering – a near death experience on the boat, the fear of the journey, walking with the weight of the sea, threatened by the driver and tactical starvation – what is striking is the matter-of-factness that comes after danger. This is perfectly obvious when she said,

We met people that helped us, and people that did not help us. And for us, we have had luck since we got to the island. There are good people and bad people everywhere, but also the economic situation in Greece is bad. We walked 35 kilometres yesterday, and we did not get a good image of Greeks, taking advantage of people. We do not have enough money because we are fleeing from war. Turkey is the same, they take advantage of people.

With a sense of rationality and distance in her words, she showed understanding and even compassion for the perhaps desperate driver.

The contrast between intense experiences of suffering with 'matter-of-factness' is precisely the tension that Koselleck describes

The costs with which "History" burdens us with its impositions of meaning are too high for us today if we intend to act. Let us therefore dispatch them back to their origins: to the realm of – difficult to bear – absurdity. [...] History is neither a tribunal nor an alibi. (Koselleck 2018, 195–196)

The story of Umm Mohammed does not offer explanation, it brings out the contradiction between the starkness of the burden of the sea with the matter-of-factness in regard to the Greek 'host'. By connecting different temporalities of danger and exactness, the Syrian sense of hospitality was not to bring the gift of sweets in order to perform as 'good guests' to Greece or elsewhere. Rather, Umm Mohammed does not want to be a guest at all. Part of the logic of matter-of-factness is to continue maintaining the form of independence and of dignity, and not being a guest.

Conclusion: the mirror of time

In the case of war between Greece and Turkey, an always present scenario, Tasos has a plan: they have discussed it with his friends from the village. 'The women and kids will take the ship to Athens. The men will stay back. We know the mountains well and can fight'. He is very serious when he tells me this, in 2022. I cannot tell how much his friendship with Sami played a role, he definitely saw himself in Sami. But his preparedness for a future war speaks to the fact that Tasos was able to see, as if in the mirror of time, not only an individual resemblance, but also the temporal interchangeability between peace and war, hosts, guests and hostages. The friendship here becomes redemption on the condition of recognition of the common struggle – and anamnestic solidarity, contravening Koselleck's position that 'there is no common reality that can be perceived in the same way by the different participants involved' (2018, 184).

This paper explored ways Syrian travellers employed a multi-temporal form of hospitality that readily turned into recognition, intimacy and collectivity: hospitality, as an affective sense that merged multitemporal nexuses of past and future. The guidance and advice, the strategies and critique of their current condition, were not there to set the reciprocal parameters between them as guests of states. Often, Syrians actively resisted being a guest of the state. Tracing the connections between Syrian travellers as they passed through borders, this analysis has more in common with Mahmoud Keshavarz and Shahram Koshravi's analysis of 'borders from below' (2022), whereby the 'sociality of borderlands' is explored, and exposed, through the methodological standpoint of the 'smuggler'. Reclaiming the 'smuggler' then, is important methodologically as an antidote to the state-centric analytical gaze. Instead of smugglers, in the shores of Lesvos we find traveller-guides.

Syrian travellers used the framework of hospitality to speak across temporalities, across *time*: as the hosts to the future Syrian guests in Lesvos and Europe. In doing so, the temporality of their position was projected onward in the form of advice and guidance. Hospitality, born out at this very moment of danger and anticipation, hence, became the portal to a collective future. In this way, this paper is located at the nexus of past-present-future by contributing an ethnography of possible and collective Syrian futures that forge solidarity beyond the state, sectarian or neo-colonial imaginaries – thus hospitality became a form of Syrian identity in exile.

What these stories bring out is that the future is born out of common struggle, at the moment of danger. In Lesvos, hospitality and the future became linked with sharing advice and in a collective struggle and that bears the possibility of a collective future. The sense of hospitality was tactile, embodied, material in its intended affect: a recognition of taste in the sweets of Midan and in the sweetness of life, in the reconstruction of safety through care in providing the advice, in precision of sharing parts of the way, materialized in trusting to 'walk with the people'. The precision and advice were not given on the expectation of balanced reciprocity. But these shared in creating a hospitality otherwise: of fragile comfort, and the potential for recognition and intimacy. This heuristic use of hospitality made the Syrian travellers whose stories and words animate these pages, both guests and hosts of and to other Syrians, and through these formative exchanges, the 'future' erupted from the threshold of danger, on the shores of Lesvos. There, an opportunity beyond the exclusive imagination of the nation-state, a redemptive

anamnestic solidarity was forged through imagined host-guests and friendships that hold, consciously or not, the mirror of time. For the multi-temporality of hospitality does not tell us only that futures, too, emerge collectively, but that someone else's danger, death, tragedy may soon become our own. In Lesvos as elsewhere, past and future and danger mixed, projecting a refraction of redemption on the mirror of time.

Notes

1. Kara Tepe is Turkish for 'black hill'. Located just outside the port town of Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos island, Kara Tepe served as the temporary registration centre where arriving asylum-seekers were initially registered with Frontex and the Greek police during the 2015 so-called refugee crisis, before continuing towards their onward journeys. A more permanent settlement, initially with a focus on families and as the 'overflow' site from the Moria Hotspot, developed in it after 2016. When the Hotspot in Moria was burned and closed down in 2020, Kara Tepe refugee camp became the main refugee site where asylum-seekers waited, usually for months, to receive the result in their applications.
2. The 'Village of all together' is a local solidarity network founded in Lesvos in 2012. During the time of fieldwork they were using the PIKPA camp to host the most vulnerable of refugees, especially families with children. This was an open refugee camp that was run by local solidarity activists, it was evicted in 2020.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants to the seminars in Brunel University and Aegean University for their insightful engagement and support; our colleagues Effie Plexousaki, Akis Papataxiarchis, Charlotte Al-Khalili, Dawn Chatty, Mark Neocleous and Steve Emery for comments on earlier drafts; and Andreas Bandak and the *History and Anthropology* anonymous reviews for their incisive and original suggestions. We are grateful to Brunel University's BRIEF award (2015-2016) and Athena SWAN award (2021-2022), that funded this project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Brunel University London.

References

- Al-Khalili, Charlotte. 2023. "Rescaling Hospitality: Everyday Displacement at the Syrian-Turkish Border." *American Ethnologist* 50 (2): 309–320. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13144>
- Alkan, H. 2021. "The Gift of Hospitality and the (un) Welcoming of Syrian Migrants in Turkey." *American Ethnologist* 48 (2): 180–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13012>
- Anderson, P. 2023. *Exchange Ideologies: Commerce, Language, and Patriarchy in Preconflict Aleppo*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Bandak, A. in press. "Syrian Futures. Percolation, Temporality, and Historical Experience in the Plural." *History and Anthropology*.
- Benjamin, W. (2005) 1940. "On the Concept of History." Translated by D. Redmond. Accessed July 10, 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

- Bryant, R. 2016. "On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present." *History and Anthropology* 27 (1): 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2015.1114481>
- Bryant, R., and D. M. Knight. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Cabot, H. 2014. *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Candea, M., and G. Da Col. 2012. "The Return to Hospitality." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (s1): S1–S19.
- Derrida, J. 2000. *Of Hospitality* (Trans. R. Bowlby). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Fassin, D. 2011. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. London: University of California Press.
- Fernando, M., and C. Giordano. 2016. "Introduction: Refugees and the Crisis of Europe." *Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology website*, June 28, 2016. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/900-introduction-refugees-and-the-crisis-of-europe>.
- Graeber, D. 2014. *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn: Melville House.
- Green, S. 2012. "Absent Details: The Transnational Lives of Undocumented Dead Bodies in the Aegean." In *The Refugee and Migrant Issue: Readings and Studies of Borders*, edited by S. Troubeta, 133–158. Athens: Papazisi.
- Herzfeld, M. 1987. "'As in Your Own House': Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society." In *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, edited by David D. Gilmore, 75–89. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Hirsch, E., and C. Stewart. 2005. "Introduction: Ethnographies of Historicity." *History and Anthropology* 16 (3): 261–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200500219289>
- Kastrinou, A. M. A. 2014. "Sect and House in Syria: History, Architecture, and Bayt Amongst the Druze in Jaramana." *History and Anthropology* 25 (3): 313–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2013.878713>
- Kastrinou, Maria, Hannah Knoerk, and Johannes Birringer. *forthcoming*. "The Price of Water: Some Reflections on an Anthropological Play." *Critical stages / Scenes Critiques*.
- Keshavarz, M., and S. Khosravi. 2022. *Seeing Like a Smuggler: Borders from Below*. London: Pluto Press.
- Khalaf, S. 1990. "Settlement of Violence in Bedouin Society." *Ethnology* 29 (3): 225–242. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773568>
- Khosravi, S. 2007. "The 'Illegal' Traveller: an Auto-Ethnography of Borders." *Social anthropology/ Anthropologie sociale* 15 (3): 321–334.
- Koselleck, R. 2018. *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*. Translated by S. Franzel and S. L. Hoffmann. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Neocleous, M. 2005. *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Neocleous, M., and M. Kastrinou. 2016. "The EU Hotspot: Police war Against the Migrant." *Radical Philosophy* 200:3–9.
- Osborne, P. 1992. "Modernity is a Qualitative, not a Chronological, Category." *New Left Review* 192 (1): 65–84.
- Papataxiarchis, E. 1988. "Kinship, Friendship and Gender Relations in two East Aegean Village Communities (Lesbos, Greece)." Doctoral dissertation. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
- Papataxiarchis, E. 2016a. "Being 'There': At the Front Line of the 'European Refugee Crisis'– Part 1." *Anthropology Today* 32 (2): 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12252>
- Papataxiarchis, E. 2016b. "Being 'There': At the Front Line of the 'European Refugee Crisis'– Part 2." *Anthropology Today* 32 (3): 5–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12237>
- Pitt-Rivers, J. A. 1968. "The Stranger, the Guest and the Hostile Host: Introduction to the Study of the Laws of Hospitality." In *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology: Mediterranean Rural Communities and Social Change*, edited by J.-G. Peristiany, 13–30. Paris: Mouton.
- Rozakou, K. 2012. "The Biopolitics of Hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the Management of Refugees." *American Ethnologist* 39 (3): 563–578. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01381.x>

- Rugh, A. B. 1997. *Within the Circle: Parents and Children in an Arab Village*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Salamandra, Christa. 2004. *A new old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria*. London: Indiana University Press.
- Shryock, A. 2004. "The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (1): 35–62.
- Ticktin, M. I. 2011. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. London: University of California Press.