



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH DISASTER:  
LIVING AND WORKING IN REFUGEE SPACES

by  
MARWA BAKABAS

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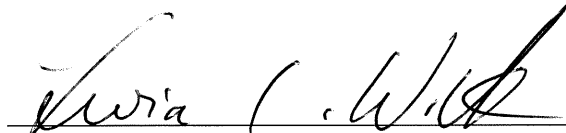
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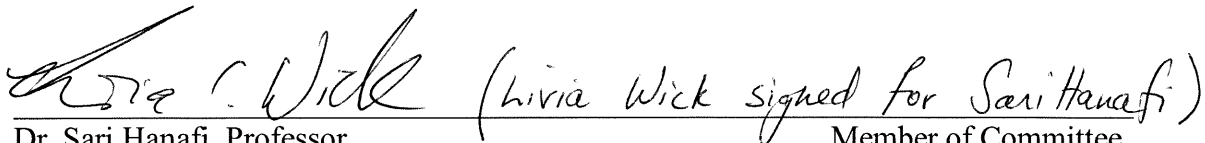
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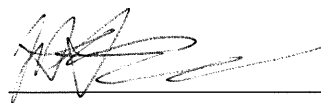
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Marwa Bakabas for Master of Arts  
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This thesis is an ethnography of refugee spaces in Greece and Lebanon. It explores the ways in which disaster transforms people. It is a sustained reflection on my own experience as a volunteer aid worker and on the experience of refugees that I worked and lived with. This study uses the concept of enunciatory communities to study the ways people live in a double bind as refugees, aid workers, victims of war/trauma and humans who demand dignity. The fieldwork has permitted me to observe the ways in which disaster brings different kinds of experts to the same site, the ways the boundaries between aid worker, volunteer and refugee are fluid. Furthermore, the thesis shows the way disaster brought issues of aid and law to the everyday lives of refugees and the ways in which care for their communities- through aid assistance, teaching and singing- has become essential to refugee identities and lives.

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## CHAPTER I

### PREFACE

I began the writing of this thesis when my professor requested that I practice fieldwork writing. First in *Translated Woman* (1993), then in *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), Ruth Behar makes an appeal for the personal in fieldwork. She argues that the anthropologist should not have to pretend to the absence of one's own body in one's story or have to erase one's personality and trajectory and she goes against the drive of the anthropology that "abandons...narrativity for the... rigors of empirical and statistical research." (164) Her work inspired me to write about the ways in which my own trajectory is part of my fieldwork and the ways in which my fieldwork has transformed me.

He is gone...what do I do now? What purpose do I serve now?

When I was born, I was brought home to this little brick house that my family immigrated to, which now stands empty. My grandparents were actively involved in my upbringing. I could never imagine the idea that they may no longer exist in my life. The thought of their death was incomprehensible for me. I knew it would happen one day, but the idea seemed impossible and too excruciating to even consider. Anytime they fell ill I knew it was possible that they could pass which had me cry in fear. Then my grandmother fell severely ill with a disease that rapidly took over her body. She finally took her last breath as I held her hand. I felt her body temperature drop. The person who called me daily, whose voicemails remained on my phone so that I could

keep her memory alive. When I lost my phone, I lost the essence of her voice; there was the feeling of a gauging hole in my life. My grandfather was old, alone, and falling more ill.

Early 2015, I became a caretaker, supporting my aunt and mother in taking care of my grandfather for about 7 months. As the women in the family, it was our duty to do so. He requested that I come take care of him and this was a person who had never requested anything from me. In fact, all of his previous hospital visits were secrets in order to avoid my worrying or attempting to drop everything and go to him. This time, his mind and body knew his time on this Earth was nearing to an end. I didn't only owe this to him, but I owed it to myself and to my grandmother. When my grandmother passed away a couple of years' prior, I carried this painful weight of guilt for not spending enough time with her before her ability to speak deteriorated. Even though I was able to say goodbye precious moments were missed. I would have vivid dreams of unfinished conversations with my grandmother – her voice and presence felt surreal. Once I started taking care of my grandfather, my nightmares reduced and eventually fad away. Finally, my dreams of conversations with my late grandmother reached an end.

I began taking care of him in our little home where much of my childhood memories reside. The home that was comfortable and warm, filled with stuffed animals, toys and home décor from the Arab region, turned into medical equipment, oxygen tanks and a hospital bed. The place where I was fed a bottle was where I was now feeding him. The place where my diaper was changed was now where I walked him to the bedside commode. The living room that was reserved especially for guests was now where we spent our days since he physically couldn't go downstairs. I was forced to sleep with a constant loud buzzing sound of oxygen forcing air into his lungs so he wouldn't stop breathing and sleep close enough to hear the bell in case he was uncomfortable, hungry, needed the washroom or to take his medication. I was not resentful, I

was happy to do this, but I was saddened by the reversed roles. Eventually, the caretaking moved to a hospital. He became dependent on me. I basically lived in the hospital with him; in order to translate, feed, force him to do physical therapy, argue, comfort, face his increasing dementia - anything that entailed physical and emotional support. He did not trust anyone and to be frank, nor did I... He would wake up during the night to make sure I was still around, sleeping on the chair-like couch next to him. I basically lived in the hospital with him. I also needed to be around for my mother and aunt to rest during Ramadan as they were fasting. My entire day's schedule revolved around being with him morning through night. I knew his time was nearing – but I had no choice but to lie to him. I had to lie to myself in order to act as though everything was okay in front of him. But was I lying to myself or was I convinced? When he passed away, I didn't even feel his disappearance - I was in mere shock. The 5th floor of that hospital became a home. Those nurses, therapists, lobby coffee person, night and day shifts became my friends. But it was time to say goodbye and close this chapter of my life.

The Arab-American community in Dearborn and my distant cousins were supportive. I recognized how people were always around us, paying their respects, bringing us food and helping in whatever way they could. I observed this communal support; however, I knew it was temporary. Around this time, I began to recognize who was really there or wasn't there for me and my family. I began to understand the emotional presence of surrounding loved ones whether they were family, friends or community members. The pain and struggle surfaced and allowed me to reflect on the human condition of empathy, the social obligations humans felt they owed one another and the communities that gathered in support. It had me think about humans who lacked empathy, who carried minimal value in other peoples' lives. It made me wonder if humans were made to be in denial of reality or if individuals chose to be aloof. The reality of life

was something I no longer wanted to escape. I decided that I did not want to shun my eyes to the reality of pain, death, or the reality of what was occurring outside of my comfort zone.

He's gone, so what do I do now?

## CHAPTER II

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS

A few months later, as I was contemplating my next move, I decided to go to Greece with a friend. We figured we should go to Greece and volunteer during the refugee crisis since there was a call for volunteers. The plan was initially to meet in Istanbul then fly to Izmir, which was one of the Turkish coast's smuggling hubs for refugees. Then we planned to backpack our way towards Lesbos Island and make our way up the Balkan route through Serbia and Macedonia. We imagined the plan to follow the refugee route and volunteer as we trek. Once we arrived in Izmir, we trekked our way to Çeşme. We walked through small Turkish towns, enjoying the food and scenery. We drank fresh pomegranate juice off the streets and ate olives and cheese as we enjoyed the surrounding cats. We took numerous coffee and tea breaks as we were carrying our oversized hiking backpacks filled with our belongings for our journey. As we came closer and closer to the sea, I noticed lifejackets being sold on the streets and in the street markets. As I watched them hanging in shops located inside tight alleyways, I began to feel the presence of those who were crossing the sea. We've arrived.

Once we arrived to Çeşme, we took a large ship to Cios, another Greek Island where refugees were landing. Between me falling asleep and enjoying this luxurious ship, which was the most comfortable that I have felt in days of traveling, I kept looking out to the sea. I would look to see if I could spot any signs of refugees crossing. I took a little walk on this large ship and found myself in the gift shop. The woman behind the register and I became locked into a discussion and she mentioned her opposition to the influx of refugees. That would be my first interaction during the trip where someone was vocal about her negative feelings. Admittedly, I

wasn't sure how to respond during that interaction. I began realizing that people will vocalize their opinion regardless of how inhumane a situation was.

When we arrived to Chios, we came across a large tent, we peeked around to see if there was anyone inside. Later we discovered it served as either a medical station or transit tent. I noticed refugees walking around with sacks of their belongings and tea kettles. They were speaking Farsi, meaning they must be from either Afghanistan or Iran. All I did was have more questions and thoughts, which I kept to myself - When did they arrive? They look so exhausted. Where are they going? Out of all their possessions, they decided to preserve the tea kettle?!

Upon our arrival to Cesme, we came across volunteers who were coming from Europe and traveling towards a Greek Island. We learned that they have been volunteering at various sites through the region since during this time the refugees were still on a route into Europe. I remember myself thinking (since I kept thinking to myself a lot) how incredible it was that so many people from different countries had come together for the same cause. People from Catalonia, the United Kingdom, others that are second generation from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran who translated, patrolled; responded as emergency medics, surgeons, pediatricians, firefighters. This place attracted individuals whose heritage is derived from some of these countries and others who specialize in emergency responding. People of all backgrounds and ages would sit together sharing this experience. I often found myself in a situation wondering: if we would have ever been friends had we met in another casual setting. Would we know we care about the same causes? Would we guess to even talk to each other or have anything in common? And how were we to respond to the suffering that was unfolding before our eyes.

I recovered from my diary the following scene:

Winter – Lesbos Island, Greece, December 2015

She arrived to the island drenched by sea water, purple lips, a missing shoe, all of her valuables placed in a backpack which was also soaked with water. Volunteers were trying to wrap her in an emergency blanket. Those that were on the same boat surrounded her crying, vomiting, hugging each other or in physical shock. She was guided to an area set up with makeshift tents and volunteers wearing yellow vests. A volunteer hands her a small plastic cup of hot tea and 2 biscuits. She thanked her immensely. She went into a tent to change into dry clothing. The tent had buckets that were filled with donated clothing, shoes, socks, and scarves. It was a tent of pure chaos, women not liking certain designs even though it was not the time to be stylish or selective. Hopefully there was a dry pair of shoes that would fit her. If not, then she would be provided with socks and plastic to use as a barrier between the dry socks and the wet shoes so that she can continue her cold route up through the Balkans.

On that day, I knew that I was at the scene of a disaster. I started to think about disaster and the way it brings different people together and the ways in which it produces new kinds of voices.

In the field sites series of *Cultural Anthropology* (Fortun 2013), Kim Fortun defines disaster as a site “when there is no prescribed way to respond, when the world outruns our capacity to make sense of it, when we are in a desperately reactive mode. In these terms, disaster can be chronic as well as acute. Asthmatic, or delivered by a toxic cloud that kills on contact. And most always multiple, involving entwined systems—social, ecological, technological, cultural, economic—charged by context...” I thought of the site I was working in first as a relief worker and then as an ethnographer as a site of disaster, where “established structures—

political, technological, cultural, and economic—aren't adequate to the realities at hand. New modes of thought, articulation and sociality are needed; basic infrastructure needs to be reconceived and rebuilt.” And in the following section, I will explore the ways in which I observed and experienced my fieldwork amongst refugees and aid workers in Greece and Lebanon and the ways it challenged me to reconceptualize some of my understandings of political and cultural concepts such as humanitarian work and refugee needs. And I trace the ways disaster transformed the narratives my interlocutors used to talk about themselves and those I used to talk about myself. Over the years, my journey taught me to be a care-taker for my grandfather, an aid worker and then a student of anthropology. And my interlocutors narrated both shifts and a certain continuity in the ways they thought of themselves: revolutionaries in the Syrian uprising and organized caretakers of displaced communities within Syria to caretakers for their refugee community in Lebanon.



## CHAPTER III

### INTRODUCTION

In the beginnings of this thesis topic and in my thesis proposal, I planned to follow the concept of needs through different sites in refugee camps of the Beqaa valley. With my experience in Greece and preliminary experience in the Beqaa, I became interested in looking deeper at how NGOs respond to emergency and calculate forthcoming needs and how refugees negotiate the definition of needs.

NGOs are part of a set of state and non-state institutions that make up humanitarian aid. In recent years, humanitarian aid, the material and logistical assistance to people in need with the purpose of alleviating suffering, saving lives and respecting human dignity, has sparked much public debate. Much of the debates focus on the types of aid that governments and non-governmental organizations should be administering to recipients of aid, who are usually people who have endured crisis situations such as wars and natural disasters, in many cases lumped under the category of refugees. One of the more famous public debates is between disaster relief organizations such as Medecins Sans Frontieres and international organizations such as the WHO. The former argues that humanitarian aid should focus on quick short-term alleviation of suffering in times of crises while the latter focusing on the fact that disasters are usually protracted insists on working with governments to build long-term structures that may improve lives in the long-run.

In anthropology, the literature on humanitarianism has focused on its relationship to broader governing structures, mainly sovereign states, international laws, global discourses (Feldman 2007, Redfield 2005, 2006; Ticktin 2005) and their work in practice as they govern,

manage and service the populations they seek to aid (Feldman 2008; Malkki 2007; Pandolfi 2003) In addition, the literature on refugees has focused on day to day living of refugees to provide for themselves as anthropologist Diana Allan did in Shatila Camp. This work builds on and contributes to the literature on Syrians refugees, some of which is based on previous refugee literature on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This literature explores the experience of Syrian refugees displaced by war. This literature focuses on studies of refugees especially in Europe and is focused on integration and racism in European societies (Andrikopoulos 2017; Karacizmeli 2015; Vandevordt 2017); as well as borders and their fluidity in Europe (Depraetere, Oosterlynck, 2017; Kallius, Monterescu, Rajaram, 2016); Other works have focused on issues around war and trauma (El-Khani, Ulph, Peters, Calam; 2017, Boswali, Al Akash, 2015); and narratives of victimization (Al Kash, Boswali, 2015; Alhayek, 2014; 2015; Reale, 2015).

However, scholars in these fields have not yet adequately addressed the basic question of the meanings of a ubiquitous concept such as “needs” of people. My research proposal focused on the concept of needs and the ways in which it is connected to forms of negotiation and power relations between non-governmental organizations, volunteers and recipients of aid. The concept of needs is essential to our contemporary understanding of survival and indeed what it is to be human. The notion of needs really brings up the struggles and debates of what is necessary for a human to live, who has the authority to define that.

However, my interviews and fieldwork in the Beqaa showed that the questions about the meaning of human needs posed questions about the construction of communities and groups (of refugees, of volunteers, of managers) and were interconnected with questions about what disasters do to people’s lives and how people think of themselves and narrate their lives after a disaster. The narratives and social worlds I was encountering in my fieldwork were more

complex than a negotiation about what needs are in the refugee camp that I had delineated as my research question in my proposal. Reflecting on my fieldwork and my experience as a volunteer in Greece and my reading of literature pushed me to reconsider my work on needs in terms of questions about the reconstitution of groups and subjectivity with disaster. Anthropologists of disaster explore different topics: toxic contamination, oil spills, and nuclear meltdowns; environmental contamination (Masco 2006; Fortun 2001, Petryna 2002); tsunamis and floods (Gamburd 2013); epidemics (Briggs 2004, Mitchell 2003); earthquakes and climate change (Ingold 2000; Masco 2009); forced migration, political violence and displacement (Das 1991; James 2010; Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007).

Ethnographic studies of disasters push us to think about how we understand the spatial and temporal dimensions of disasters. States, and humanitarian organizations mobilize scientists to study when a disaster begins and ends, what the spatial distribution of its catastrophic effects is. Furthermore, states, humanitarian organizations, scientists and activists start a process of deciding who is a legitimate claimant of aid is (Fortun 2001). Rather than being self-evident qualities of a disaster, this process is about specific people's technoscientific and legal practices. In fact, those affected by disasters often challenge the socially produced spacetimes of disaster and create new "enunciatory communities" (Fortun 2001) that include activists, academics, and sympathetic scientists in an effort to influence the determination of where and when a disaster begins and ends and who is worth what.

In *Advocacy after Bhopal* (2001), Kim Fortun writes about the problem of how to demarcate the site of research that is a disaster such as the 1984 Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal, India. In making sense of advocacy work, Fortun uses Bateson's term "enunciatory communities" instead of the policy term "stakeholders". For Fortun, stakeholders are static. It assumes consensus,

agreement and prior existence. Enunciatory communities shows shifting articulations, contradictions within groups. The shift to enunciatory communities allows her to see new subject formation and the ways in which they shift and change. At the same time, it allows for an accounting of different and contradictory discourses and forms of advocacy.

I find Fortun's use of the concepts of disaster and enunciatory communities helpful to understand the work of volunteers and aid workers as well as the work of refugees in my ethnographic work. The physical and linguistic encounter with displacement brings a set of questions into everyday lives: legal issues and legal language (questions about residencies, work, migration to Europe, refugee status), and new survival questions about what the physical and psychological needs of people are, and questions about re-imagining and narrating lives after displacement and relocation. Furthermore, the concept of enunciatory community permits me to think about the ways in which the practices and discourses of volunteers and aid workers as well as those of refugees were not stable and were shifting.

During fieldwork, I spoke to two different groups of people: volunteers and aid workers. My own experience of becoming a volunteer informed the ways I thought of the work of volunteering and formed some of the material I present to think through the work of volunteering. Furthermore, I did participant observation in the events of an NGO that works in the field of education. Moreover, I lived in a house for three months in the Beqaa with several volunteers working in this organization. I spoke with them about their work, Syria and displacement, family, romance and everyday life. I quickly realized that there were overlaps between my initial categories of aid worker and refugees. All the volunteers working with me were Syrian refugees. Furthermore, their narratives emphasized that the disaster of their displacement had not only radically changed their everyday lives but had shifted the ways in

which they thought of themselves. The told a story of a shift from being a participant in the Syrian uprising to be a volunteer and care taker of their refugee community. One interlocutor called that transformation “becoming ibn al-mukhayyam, the son of the camp” part of which was about becoming poor, facing xenophobic and discriminatory treatment from Lebanese citizens, longing for the hometown in Syria and a story about becoming a community care-taker. I thought the concept of enunciatory community which permitted me to see the ways in which my interlocutors’ encounter with disaster brought issues of aid and law to their everyday lives and the ways in which care taking became essential to their identities. It permitted me to see both the ways in which they wove continuity in their lives but also felt there were contradictions, and challenges and gaps.

My first real exposure with refugee aid response was on the northern shores of Lesbos Island, in November 2015? The shores overlooked the Aegean Sea, which served as a dangerous route meant to serve as ‘safe passage.’ Here we, volunteers needed to provide immediate care when the fragile boats arrived from Turkey. It was where new people arrived on this small Greek fishing village called Skala Sykaminas. Each time a boat arrived, I was able to build a stronger understanding of inconsistent access to care that can put lives at risk. An arrival that was assumed to finally be ‘safe passage’ would turn into a year of immobility in an ‘in between’ country, leaving stateless individuals remorseful for having left their homes and going to an alternative anguishing space. I began to question what is the most appropriate way to proceed in providing sufficient aid or care for people subject to this disaster? This is where I started to reflect about the concepts of need, care, assistance, humanitarianism and volunteerism. This is where I became critical of myself and of others around me, curious about the aid workers around me and what their motives, trauma, self-fulfillment to bring them to the island. I had just faced

the death of my grandfather, which gave me thick skin and made me feel desensitized. Later, I learned that others had their own stories that motivated their choice to volunteer. For instance, those who went through a divorce, breakup, victim of abuse, even rape. Or those who had the resources and wanted to use their money for good and flaunt it.

Several non-governmental institutions labeled the year 2014 as the worst year of the Syrian conflict, blaming the international community's non-response to disaster and lacking aid assistance inside of Syria (Holmes 2015). In 2015, half of all refugees crossing the Mediterranean came from Syria, by 2017, that number reduced to only 10 percent (UNHCR 2018), By the end of 2016, nearly 5.2 million refugees and migrants reached European shores. They had journeyed from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries torn apart by war and persecution. Thousands lost their lives, often drowning during this journey. This was talked about as the largest global migration movement in history.

The reasons for the global refugee crisis and why people have felt driven out of their home are attributed to political persecution, fleeing war or economic suffering. Many would argue that fleeing your home for the cause of economic poverty and persecution due to politics and war is interchangeable. However, international law treats each of these reasons as its own category, which created stricter borders since May 2016. Technically, the 1951 UN Convention on refugee status by the European Union indicates that someone is a refugee if they are displaced "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Dragostinova 2016). This doesn't align with current practices.

It was September 2015, black rubber dinghies that were meant to seat 20 to 25 individuals were tightly packed with 50 to 55 individuals who voyaged across from Turkey to the Greek

Islands of Lesbos, Chios, and Samos. This caused an influx of humans, who took their chances in a dangerous sea crossing and trekking. Meanwhile, social media circulated drone images of thousands walking on what seemed like an endless ground route. Images of children washing up on the shores of Turkey or Greece began to spiral across Facebook and Twitter creating a buzz of awareness. Human dignity and tragedy struck thousands of people all over the world to respond to this disaster. The movement that started from Syria had escalated into a phenomenon for not only Syrians but for Iraqis, Afghanis, Iranians, North Africans and Africans escaping war, oppression and the lack of opportunity. This quickly moved from being called the Arab Spring to the Syrian refugee crisis to a global refugee crisis.

The first responders to this influx were the local residents of small populated fishing villages. I remember a restaurant owner whose restaurant was right at the port who showed me images on his mobile phone. He explained to me how when the refugees landed, they would let them into the restaurant to stay sheltered. The tables that were meant to serve meals turned into hospital beds where people were treated and hooked to IV's. Since the structure was not built for a hospital setting there was no place to hang the IV's, so people had to stand and hold the medicated serum bags. I remember looking at the photos and seeing how quickly a nice Greek restaurant could be altered to a mock hospital within minutes. He then expressed to me how they will eventually be left by the organizations and responsible to respond to emergencies with no assistance. It was clear he was fearful of the abandonment.

Then came the aid workers - in 2015 the Turkey-Greek sea border crossing had detected 246,000 individuals crossing it (ESI 2014). In March 2016, the European Union closed the borders. Balkan countries shut their borders, meaning those en-route from Greece crossing Macedonia were trapped in Greece. What was thought to be a days-long affair turned into

months of living in Idomeni in tents at the border. Rapid response for what was hoped to be very temporary turned into months of living in a field of camping tents. I left Greece about a week before the borders closed and organizations mobilized to respond to the chaos in Idomeni. I was glued to my phone and social media to stay up-to-date with the changes and felt helpless and angry all at once. We all waited for this to end and for the borders to open. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months. Eventually the borders did not reopen and the refugees that thought to be en-route were distributed throughout Greece into semi-permanent camps. Now it has been years.

The needs in Greece went from providing them with dry clothes, food, and water to medical care and buses in response to the long trekking. As their stay lengthens unexpectedly, the needs expand. The situation at hand continues to remain fluid as it evolves, but how can we be prepared and respond appropriately and with dignity for anything that happens next? Now there are difficulties to be faced; employment, adequate housing, health services, access to education and risk of heinous exploitation in addition to basic day-to-day sustainability needs.

As a volunteer with a small emergency response organization (which was yet to be an official NGO) that started on the north shores of a Greek Island, I observed the way refugees survived and the way NGOs responded to new situations. I often fell into a tunnel vision, not being able to hear or see beyond the peripheral of what was happening in front of me. My line of vision was a circumference which included refugees who needed all kinds of support and volunteers from everywhere would swarm attempting to help. Everything else in the background was simply blurred out. Sometimes I wondered if the volunteers even knew who they were helping. Babies were separated from family members because they were being handed down one volunteer to another, photographs were being taken, people tried to forcefully help people who were just fine,



volunteers and refugees both stood in shock, constant crying, lack of medical assistance and non-clinicians needing to play the role of doctors. It was pure chaos and sometimes it felt unbearable. It was there when I became interested in the question of who and how does one decide what human needs are. This experience opened my eyes to the notion of needs and questioning what it means. With my experience in Greece, I became interested in looking deeper at how NGOs respond to emergency and calculate forthcoming needs in longer lasting dwellings.

One key move of my shift from volunteer to anthropology student, was to turn the practice of volunteering into an empirical focus in my research. This was particularly challenging for me. My own process of learning and becoming a volunteer would become an object of analysis alongside the volunteering of others. In addition, my purpose was also to take my fieldwork with the approach of an applied anthropologist since I am working directly with the refugees who are finding ways to survive in their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, throughout my time in Greece and in Lebanon, advocacy directed my practice and outlook. During fieldwork, on many occasions, I campaigned to raise funds for ill people who did not have access to adequate medical care or could afford it. For example, to have a child receive surgery in the roof of her mouth or the man who needed an aesthetic eye. During Ramadan, the NGO ran a daily “community kitchen” where I would assist in cooking meals. When I accompanied the doctor on mobile clinics my role was to help her... I was not simply a participant observer. Advocacy and practice guided my research. As Barbara Johnson (1978) would say, it is both a problem and remedy focused research. Johnson argues that participatory and collaborative research can offer a means to implement change both on a national and international level. While I acknowledge it is a challenge, my work thus blurs an assumption in the social sciences that reinforces a distinction and ranking between what is politically relevant, which demands practical involvement and

engagement, and what is theoretically interesting, which requires reflection and detachment. An additional way in which my work blurs this distinction between theoretical concerns and applied concerns is motivated by the work of George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) who argued that the challenge for anthropologists was to find ways to embed rich descriptions of local social worlds in larger, impersonal systems of political economy. And they argued that the purpose of anthropology—in some of its experimental modes- is “cultural critique”, a continually comparative work that used understanding of different experiences to disrupt and renew our struggles towards a more humane society. Ethnography thus is part of an imagination of social alternatives that disrupts conventional stories that have become naturalized, desensitized and immune to change. Blurring this distinction as I carry out my research, I try to think of the ways it can have components of advocacy in hope that it can shape and encourage implementation on humanitarian policy.

## CHAPTER IV *BAHR AL MAWT* (SEA OF DEATH):

and how I learned that aid worker, volunteer, refugee and smuggler are ambiguous categories



1. *Image Source:* United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and MapAction, “Greece: Key Locations on Lesbos,” January 14, 2016.

*He had just landed to the island on that cold November day. We continued speaking as we walked out to the shore. We stood on the rocks that had scattered belongings from their landing looking out at the Aegean Sea. As we stood there and our voices silenced, he took a deep breath and said “wallah bahr al mawt” which translates to: I swear this is a sea of death. This*

*deception of the sea has shifted from its picturesque appearance and became a death trap for those escaping threat. It was a death trap that defined their destiny.*

I walked into the site of emergency response thinking I had an idea of what to expect and thinking I was prepared for the worst having just accompanied my grandfather from life to death. I found myself learning and improvising since that is what you had to do working in emergency response. I learned a lot from the experience and walked away viewing the situation in a different way than the way I entered. This just had me recognize how complex the story of the migration crisis was. The sea is the first environment that volunteers learn about and learn to maneuver. I started thinking about the role of the sea and what it served during the migration crisis. That year in 2015 there had been more than 1 million Mediterranean Sea arrivals, half a million from Syria (UNHCR 2016). The sea – a body of water was both a passageway to Europe and safety and a graveyard. UNHCR estimated that 3,730 reported missing and drowned (UNHCR 2015).

As I was on the ferry going from Chios to Lesbos, I felt relaxed as I stared at the beautiful water reflecting off of the sun with the backdrop of the Greek Islands. A couple of hours later I found myself pondering out at the Aegean Sea. As I stared at the mesmerizing water ripples, all I could think about was how this was the crossing that refugees voyaged. Then I began to realize that this body of water we were traveling on is a sea of corpses consisting of children, husbands and mothers. This sea is a graveyard of decomposing bodies. This sea was symbolic to what inspired our choice in volunteering, and it represented more than a mode of transportation. Refugees were crossing the same body of water and the only difference was that they were cramped into rubber dinghies for a significant cost of money because they are fleeing conflict. I began to deconstruct what the sea symbolized and how its beauty transformed from a space of

passage to a space of death. As we reached closer to the island, the experience began to feel surreal.

During the past few days, the winds had been causing the water to shift in the opposite direction, which was delaying the arrival of refugees. This had left Chios and Lesbos in stillness over the days. During harsh weather smugglers would either prevent refugees from crossing the sea and the “bad” smugglers would make the cost cheaper to cross the riskier water. Volunteers were sitting, waiting, looking out into the sea. This raised concern for NGOs and volunteers who began to wonder if they should leave the island due to the lack of arrivals from the sea. They were bored. For an aid worker, excitement and action is essential to the work.

Upon arrival to Lesbos Island, all I could think about was the beauty of the island. It was bursting with mountain views complimented by old rustic Greek homes that were covered by rigid rooftops, which were the color of rusted red and orange. My friend and I walked along the boardwalk of Mytilene a Mediterranean-style town on the southern part of the island. The boardwalk of Mytilene was filled with cafes and shops. We sat at a café to share two Spanakopita pastries; one filled with spinach and the other filled with cheese. My inexperienced self was wondering; *where are the refugees? How are people just walking around nonchalantly?* That anticipation, looking for refugees or for the most vulnerable is a feeling that aid workers experience when they reach a site of disaster. Aid workers quickly learn to wait, identify refugees and sort them to the proper aid site or camp. I later learned how to navigate this feeling.

When I reflect on the aid work on Lesbos, the stories seem endless. After some time, I began to pay attention at how quickly people responded to the boat arrivals. I would stand from a distance while a boat would land to the rocky shore. I would observe the number of volunteers who ran to the boat and out-number the refugees actually on the boat. It was as though they

wanted a piece of the heroic action meanwhile the camps would sit empty even though they would need to be prepared to provide the refugees with immediate dry clothes, food, and water. This overcrowding of the boats seemed to have caused more chaos and confusion and was not necessarily in the best interest since it became counterproductive. I noticed that the panic from the aid workers triggered refugees to panic even more as a reaction to their response. I also remember the occasions of being wrapped in an emergency blanket myself because volunteers thought I was just landing as a refugee. Or the time I was sitting with a family outside of a tent, helping a child, and someone kneeled down to my level speaking in slow English and in a loud voice.

Coordination among NGOs across the island were attempted through various communication efforts. We all took overnight shifts at the lighthouse which was a high peak of the island where we overlooked the sea with military binoculars. This was necessary since some nights were difficult to visually identify boats. If a boat was spotted, they would inform members from the north and south of the island to which direction it was landing. We all communicated via WhatsApp groups and walkie-talkies to make sure nobody was missed since it was common for boats to land someplace completely isolated and even dangerous. The lighthouse nightshift played an important role for precautions but also because this was a place where boats managed to get directed by the wind currents and it was an extremely dangerous landing. The landing was very rocky with brutal waves and boats were prone to capsize. EMT's, medics, and swimmers needed to be posted at the lighthouse as a precaution. The coordination efforts were taken very seriously with the various and inconsistent landings during the refugee boat crossing between Turkey and Greece.

My friend and I coordinated to meet with a woman through Facebook who was going to volunteer as a medical physician and gave us a ride to a camp where we would stay for the night. Facebook at this time was used as a major platform to connect volunteers for advice, arranging meetings, support, and to provide live updates on the ground situation. This transit camp in Lesvos that we were headed to was called a 'stage 1' site once refugees landed from Turkey. These were reception sites where refugees and aid workers responded to immediate needs. There were four sites on the island: in Moria, Kara Tepe, Molyvos/Oxy and Skala Sykaminas. Lesvos was the most common passage way to Europe for refugees, separated from Turkey by a 10 km channel. 279,000 refugees arrived through Lesvos in 2015 (UNHCR 2015). That is at an average of about 3,300 per day. The population of the small Greek Island is 88,000 inhabitants (UNHCR 2015).

As we began taking a tour to get familiar with the transit site, which had been empty for about 72 hours, a rush of wet young men entered the site. It seemed that a boat filled with Afghan refugees had finally arrived on the island. I was standing on a staircase connected to a medical caravan looking at the rush of them entering. They passed waving and grinning ear to ear saying "hello" and "salaam." At that point, their joy made my heart feel heavy. They were cold, wet, yet so happy. That moment we leaped right into work and the excitement and improvisation started.

My time on Lesvos taught me how to improvise in emergency and low resourced settings, a staple of emergency response. My designated role as an inexperienced volunteer was to serve our arriving guests hot tea, which was served in a white plastic cup with a biscuit. I was initially bothered about serving extremely hot tea in a plastic cup because the cup would toxically melt, but I had to accept it. Their hands would shiver as they accepted the cup of tea

and biscuit. They were so appreciative from this tiny cup of tea and plain biscuit making one really feel the minimalism. Their only complaint would be that the tea wasn't sweet - coming from a family who drank a lot of sugar in the tea I was sympathetic. When we ran out of tea, I carried an oversized pot filled with hot tea to refill the empty pot. As I wobbled, one of the men offered to help me carry it. At that moment, I remembered thinking that they have been through so much and he's trying to help me!? I was supposed to help him! In retrospect, it was the first glimpse I had of the fluidity and complexity of categories of refugees and aid workers. Even in a context where refugees were vulnerable, on their first day of arrival in Greece, some refugees were seeking to help out in the work of organizing and helping out. This is when I began to understand the categories of victimhood.

The arrivals continued through the night and the hours passed quickly but our adrenaline kept us awake. During the long hours of chaos, a group of teenage boys came up and talked to a group of us volunteers. They were full of delight and were garrulous. Even though there was a language barrier, our body language and a minimal exchange of words allowed us to connect. One of the boys handed me his journal and asked me to write today's date, our location (often times, some of the arrivals did not know exactly where they were and just followed the others with the goal of landing in Germany or another EU country), and to write something meaningful. I stood perplexed as he flipped through the pages of this nice journal, which he was able to somehow keep dry on the boat. The journal carried a collection of memories, quotes and poetry. Though I am a person who loves quotes and the significances attached to them, for some reason my brain blanked, and I had no idea what to write! I remember wondering where my phone was so that I can see all the photos of quotes I had saved. I wanted to be sure to write something



meaningful and supportive to positively symbolize the journey he had just endured. Finally, I wrote;

*“November 23, 2015 – Lesbos Island, If God brings you to it, he will bring you through it.”*

I found that this quote was timely and appropriate for what they had been through and will continue to endure during their forthcoming journey as they assimilate to a new and foreign society. Again, for me this was a strange moment of fluidity. I was writing my diary and so was he.

Another young gentleman and I had a conversation about his experience which led to him fleeing home. He spoke about how he was unable to find employment opportunities in Iran due to his political activism. The inability to have a job prevented him from being suitable for marriage. He expressed that Iranian families would not accept him to marry their daughters if he did not have an income to provide for her and to start a family. They would also be deterred by his political principles and activism for the sake of her safety. Finally, he decided that the best option for him was to go off the radar if he wanted a sustainable and happy future. He blamed the Arabs for his fate. He said to me; “I hate Arabs.” At some point in the conversation he asked me where I was from. I reluctantly looked at him in the eyes and said; “I’m actually Arab.” In that moment, I didn’t know if I should have revealed that or not, but I did not feel the need to hide my identity. After I told him he repeatedly apologized as I assured him, I was not upset by this. I had heard that there was a historically present Iranian and Afghan anti-Arab discourse and that this was reinforced by the European Union decisions to take more Syrian and Iraqi refugees. I felt like this was a moment when both he and I were testing out the acceptable social and political discourses of that new space.

Later that night a few of us sat on a bench facing the Aegean as the stars and moon reflected off of the sea. It was around 02:00 and I was planning to head to sleep. Then a car pulled up from another nearby camp looking for an Arabic speaker. Since the volunteers couldn't find the girl who they confused me for, they decided I would suffice to translate for an emergency. During that time my Arabic was not strong and so I was quite nervous. They took me in front of their camp that was treated like a squat, which was occupied by Greek anarchists who also set up a transit site to provide water, food and dry clothes. The two transit sites supported one another, which was useful when there was a rush of boat arrivals. They took me to a father and his four teenage sons who came from Iraq four days earlier. They did not want to sleep in the transit site. The old man insisted he wanted to wait for his wife. So, he and his sons walked back down to the shoreline to wait. We offered him blankets and to come in the site and sleep and he requested that we just let him sit near the sea and wait until the morning. I'm sure you are wondering how does he know that she will arrive in the morning? Someone had informed him over WhatsApp that his wife was on hold at the Turkish border due to the delay of the crossings. During that night, I checked a few times to see if they had gone back to the camp, but he and his sons who were comforting him, were sitting staring at the sea, waiting all night long.

The next day, fellow aid workers placed me in front of Greek authorities, members of the camp, and a family who had just arrived, hoping I would be able to translate. The families explained that they had a missing family member (at this point families were mainly separated at the Turkish border). This would reoccur with me almost every day. In one case, the missing person was supposed to be in a boat right behind theirs, but it wasn't or perhaps they lost sight. It was hard to keep track of the boats if they drifted off towards another direction since there was

little control of these dinghies. The volunteers and the authorities wanted to know where the boat was. I struggled not only because of the situation but admittedly I didn't know what the Arabic translation for *boat* was. I was embarrassed but I don't think I ever used the word *boat* in Arabic. I was desperate and needed to improvise under the pressure of everyone waiting around us. I stuttered in hopes that one of the refugees would complete my sentence midway, which they did not, so in this anticipated silence I said; "the car that drives over the sea, I honestly have no idea what it is called in Arabic." They all laughed and said "balam!" The stress and anxiety became a moment of heavy laughter and slight mortification. I often was placed as translator and because of my weak language skills the situation made everyone laugh. The members of the NGOs and authorities were confused because they did not understand what was funny. I realized that as a volunteer I am part of a community that is neither a paid humanitarian aid worker nor a refugee aid receiver, that my situation as a translator made me waiver between joking with refugees and sharing diary entries which sometimes made aid workers uncomfortable and sometimes I was part of humanitarian aid worker group, discussing the issues of the day and planning with them for the next.

At some point of this endless night, I was sitting in the local café that all aid workers and volunteers spent time in called Gogi Café. Suddenly someone from MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) dragged me to a room attached to the café and served as their clinic. I entered in the room where a woman with dark hair and breathing heavily was lying in a medical bed. She had severe asthma perhaps early stages of COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). The reason I suggested she was suffering from COPD was because of the familiar symptoms of my late grandfather. Her wheezing and deep breaths brought me flashbacks. I thought to myself, this is too soon for me to be put in this situation and I didn't know if I could handle it. It felt like it

was a sick prank the universe was playing on me. I went to speak to her to find out that she didn't even speak the same language as I did. I turned to the MSF staff and said: this is not Arabic; she's speaking Farsi. At this point, I rolled my eyes thinking to myself that aid workers don't even know how to differentiate the languages. But I tried communicating anyways. I spoke very slowly in Arabic and English and trying to relate some of the words and context that I knew were similar or at least sounded similar. I attempted to contact a Farsi-speaking friend in America. I also relied a lot on Google translate. She would look at me with her big eyes while attempting to answer me between gasps and exhaustion from the lack of oxygen going to her brain. It seemed that when she was taken away during her asthma attack, her husband and 2 children were separated from her. I could only imagine what the additional anxiety of their separation was contributing to the exacerbation of her asthma attack. There was only one option, which was to find the remainder of her family on this island. A gentleman and I then went on a manhunt searching the island for her children and husband while the medics transferred her to a fully equipped hospital.

We went to a UNHCR camp which was considered a 'phase 2' transit site before arriving to Moria (see UNHCR map on page XX), which was a holding and registration site on the island. Phase 2 (the second site during the trek was where overnight accommodation and transportation were provided) was the place where refugees often times trekked in long lines. There used to be available buses to provide transportation but when border restrictions became implemented it was considered human trafficking even though it was only helping them reach a short distance.

At that hour, everyone was asleep and if there was a man with children, we had to go into the tents to wake them up and ask them for their names. I remember thinking to myself; there is no way we are going to find them in the middle of the night while sleeping and they can be at

any camp or anywhere wandering around this island. I am not even confident that I recorded the names correctly. It was a miracle that we found them sleeping in the second transit site. We took them in the car to meet their mother at a hospital that she was transferred. When we went in the car the father put his daughter on my lap as she continued to sleep but I could tell she was really uncomfortable from something wrapped around her chest. As she fidgeted, she unzipped her sweater and adjust a sack of hidden valuables. I don't know what exactly was in the sack, but it was clear she was holding it for safe-keeping.

After we reunified the family, we spent time with them to make sure everything goes smoothly. The children suddenly woke up in excitement to see their mother. There was still no translator, which made us dependent on using the phone translator. As we sat on the hallway chairs, it felt like the hospital was empty. We sat with the children and their father who was a tall, thin, soft-spoken man. The kids sat there eating large chocolate filled pre-packaged croissants as they peaked at their mother through the door of the hospital room. As we sat and attempted to chat, we learned from the father that there was a part of their journey where they had to swim in the sea. Their boat had capsized, which led to them needing to swim. The father had to swim with his children on his back. Alas, she stayed at the hospital until she was stabilized and was then transported to camp south of the island, which accommodated orphans and vulnerable populations. They informed us that she could not possibly continue the journey. They emphasized that if she continued the journey in the state she was in, she would die. She was instructed to focus on her breathing treatments to strengthen her lungs, which would enable her and her family to continue to Europe.

Weeks later, I visited this family one last time.

I learned a lot about the site of emergency response through the diverse stories from my own observations as well as the stories that were shared. I learned about how the sea serves as both a passageway and space of death. I also gained knowledge about what it means to be in emergency response which I became immersed in. The narratives I write about are just a few that occurred during my very first week arriving to Greece which was my first time working with refugees. The exposure was beyond what I had expected or prepared for. The practice of emergency response can be both organized and professionalized with a system of tracking information and triaging in different transit sites. Or at least it was attempted. On the other hand, it can be informal, haphazard, and in fact quite fluid. I remember when I began training volunteers that arrived, I would always mention that the situation of the crisis was so fluid which made the work as an emergency responder very fluid. This meant there might be days of no boat arrivals and then a sudden strike of arrivals. This meant that weather or the abrupt political climate would impact routes and times of expeditions.

But in retrospect, I learned that there was another kind of fluidity and that was in the categories of aid worker, volunteer and refugees. Volunteers were comfortable in both the social space of aid workers and in that of refugees and worked as the go-between. But that sharing of social space was always temporary as refugees usually continued their journeys or had to move to another place in little time and the marked hierarchy with paid aid workers always made volunteers feel like they did not belong in either space.

Moria – Greece’s largest refugee camp was considered as ‘phase 3’ was where refugees went to process paperwork and wait for the ships that would take them to Athens. It was located at the center of the island and today houses refugees as the mobility is prohibited. Moria used to

run as a prison and continues to feel as though it is one with its upheld prison infrastructure surrounded by barbed wire, and police presence. It was simply grim. People would spend hours or days waiting to process their paperwork. I remember visiting Moria, it was stricter than the other sites as it was more formalized and became more and more overlooked by the Greek authorities. In Fall of 2015, Moria was so congested that tents were surrounding the outskirts of the prison. Organizations set up to provide blankets, food, medical assistance as well as camping tents. Single women were provided headlamps for their safety walking in the dark and encouraged to wear them during their bathroom visits given the spike of harrassment. Fights would break out and the tension was high as people tried to enter to move quickly on the list to leave the island and continue their route. It was miserable and the security presence felt tough.

One evening I went to assist with an overnight shift to support with distribution and recording of those who entered. I always found it interesting to visit Moria, because people didn't know if I was a refugee or even Greek. When I would enter, I wouldn't understand their Greek language so then I had to show my passport. My appearance and name sounded like a 'potential refugee,' which caused a takeback when checking me versus my identification card. I remember a guard said to me, "*but your name is Marwa.*" I responded, "*yes, but I am still a volunteer and from America.*" That same night I was about to enter a tent for a briefing before distribution would begin. A woman abruptly leaped in front of me and spoke in slow and loud English while blocking me. "*YOU CANNOT ENTER YET, IT'S NOT TIME!*" I calmly and annoyingly looked at her and pointed inside the tent and said, "*I'm here with them and working a shift here tonight and I need to enter for that meeting.*" She profusely apologized and I just stared at her. All I felt was anger that this volunteer from some NGO thought it was okay to block someone who she assumed to be a refugee and felt it was appropriate to speak in that tone as

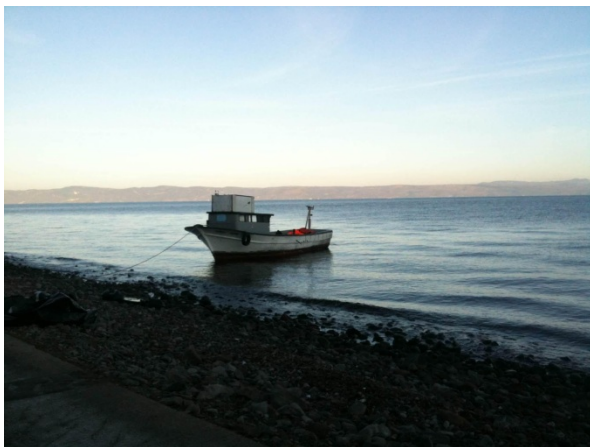
though I could have been an assertive savage. I remember thinking; *who does she think she is?* The fact she worked with the refugee community concerned me. I was also angry with myself for not telling her that her behavior was unacceptable when I had the chance. This was one of the many earlier experiences that had me question volunteers and NGO's. I understand that there must have been forceful people during distribution, but the manner in how she handled me walking casually caused a level of discomfort that made me feel bitter. It made me question how humanitarians are trained to handle situations in an emergency context.

Rather than sticking to our plan of going up the Balkan route, my friend and I decided to stay in Skala Sykaminas. As our two-week volunteer mission was coming to an end, I couldn't imagine going back home to the United States. I was getting more interested in the situation, the gaps, and I felt that I became addicted to the work. I also felt that I didn't finish what I had come to do.

In December 2015, as I was taking a stroll along the water, I saw that there were Greek authorities, refugees, and a large wooden boat. A type of boat we don't frequently see. As I arrived closer there was a young man standing on the boat being searched head to toe. The authorities were thoroughly patting him down. Everyone seemed frustrated about whatever was going on. What contributed to the frustration was the Greek – Arabic language barrier. The young man who spoke Arabic was questioning why he was the only person on the boat who was being searched like a criminal and the men in uniform were suspicious. While they were unable to communicate; the fear, anger, confusion caused tension to rise. They wanted to ask questions, but they couldn't. In the midst of this, life jackets were thrown, photos were being taken and everyone passing by was asking questions about the situation. I was pointed at by someone who yelled saying that I spoke Arabic. I walked closer to the shore to get some clarification. I was



expected to mediate, but the authorities would not allow the young man officially on land. So, I was instructed to go to the boat. Might I add, it was December and freezing cold. A volunteer offered to put me on his shoulders, and he would walk into the water. I glanced at him and decided to walk into the below freezing water myself. I walked in my jeans and working boots as the water reached my hips. As I shivered standing in the water, I looked up at the two men. The young man asked me in Arabic; “*why am I the only one being patted down?*” The Greek authority member then asked someone to translate to me; “*why was he the one steering the boat?*” They thought he was a smuggler, a person involved in the illegal entry of persons to another country in return for benefits. When I explained to the young man that they thought he was a smuggler, he said that he was not, that he was just steering the boat because the smuggler had left the boat during their journey and returned back to Turkey and someone had to guide the boat, so he did. This was a common story about smugglers. But I came to learn from refugees that the category of smuggler was fluid too. For the authorities and Aid workers, smugglers were illegal traffickers. And some refugees had terrible stories about the smugglers abandoning them and taking the engine of the boat back. But most were grateful that someone had taken them across the sea and given them a chance to get out.



2.Photo of the same wooden boat from the event.

It was a cold day during mid-late December, a day which I will never forget. The day I felt the *death of the sea*. The waves were fierce accompanying the brisk cold air. It was common that boats would capsize and sometimes rescue boats would need to go out and collect everyone. It is worth mentioning that the lifejackets sold to migrants were often times fake. They were not made for long withstanding in the sea. When a boat capsizes and people need to respond quickly, a rescue boat isn't enough and jet skis would go collect people and drop them to the shore. I remember this cold winter day and seeing news reporters and people drenched in water, shivering. Emergency blankets worn, everyone panicking. Suddenly a stretcher was carrying a body that was clearly in hypothermic shock. Her eyes were wide open and looked straight at me. I was hoping I was only thinking the worst when I was assured, she was dead. Unfortunately, I was right, they were unable to revive her. Shortly after, when we thought things had calmed down, I saw someone carrying a child. The child had dark, glossy hair that flowed with the footsteps of the carrier. But the face was covered, and the small body seemed weighed down as he was carried. The child too had died. When I came to volunteer, I knew I would witness death, but this was not something I was fully prepared for – death caused by disaster.

One night a boat landed and the Frontex<sup>1</sup> border control made all the refugees stand in the cold near a café. They refused to let them go unless they confessed which one of them the smuggler was. They were certain that the smuggler was among them. Everyone was wet and cold, some were crying. They decided to take them all to jail unless they confessed. As we waited for the bus to take them to prison, we tried to negotiate with them to allow us to take them to change out of their wet clothes. They refused. Finally, we started going back and forth to the camp to bring clothing, shoes and socks for the women and children who were wet. One of the

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<sup>1</sup> Frontex is the European border patrol agency which takes place in the Mediterranean, mainly where the perilous crossing to Europe from Turkey or North Africa. The

Greek restaurant owners came down and asked one of the guards to let them go into his restaurant to, at the very least, stay warm. There was a common culture and language between the Frontex men and the restaurant owner, which mediated the situation though they had different overarching beliefs. The restaurant owner opened the space and lit the fire where everyone surrounded to keep warm. We provided tea and biscuits as we helped them warm up and change out of their wet clothes. There was one man who didn't speak Arabic like the rest. A woman with her 2 children insisted he was her husband. He looked confused and didn't speak even if we spoke directly to him. She spoke for him as he looked away. I suspected he didn't actually speak Arabic. After they were all taken away for questioning, I was told that often times smugglers will hold a family member, such as a husband, on the other side while the smuggler comes through. I started speculating if the silent man was the smuggler since everyone was convinced that he was among the refugees from this particular landing. Though there were suspicions, we still were not completely sure.

I became overwhelmed by everything that I was seeing occur. All I could see were refugees who needed support and volunteers swarming trying to help but somehow causing more chaos. Babies were being separated from their family members, handed down one volunteer to another, photographs taken, an attempt to help people who were just fine. Sometimes I wondered if they even knew who they were helping. Volunteers and refugees were both in shock and crying. There was a lack in medical aid and non-clinicians needing to play the role of doctors. The chaos became unbearable.

What started off as a happy arrival and relief of escaping war and danger, shifted into meeting need provisions such as food, clothing, and safety? All the mixed emotions became swelled by anticipation and fatigue. The already existing struggles of separation and violence

traveled along with the refugees as they continued their journey. They rendered even when they reached their final destination of resettlement. The struggle of mobility and temporality generated enemies and tension among different nationalities even though they shared the experience of exile. Enemies spread between the smugglers, local authorities, refugees, as well as NGO's. These all complicated my observations of what was going on during the 'refugee crisis.'

The governance of the ocean or sea faces many obstacles. The zoning is essentially based on governance of the body of water and what institution the body of water is governed by. In this case, it is the European side versus the Turkish side. Once a boat of refugees crosses the invisible line, which is patrolled by the EU, then political complications begin.

There have been refugees crossing onto European shores for decades, however an influx in the Fall of 2016 was when it overwhelmed the EU. Due to the influx of refugees crossing into Europe since 2015, there were complaints about the Dublin Agreement, which impacted Italy and Greece. The influx raised concerns of national security, welfare and social risks in Europe. I knew Frontex was known for border and sea patrolling from the talk and experience on the island. They are also known for repatriation of illegal immigrants. If they are not repatriated, they are detained as my examples above. They can't turn back and go home, and they are prevented from going forward. Smuggling, exploitation and even more dangerous routes were the only loopholes to reach a destination because refugees would continue to try and cross the border to escape the stateless being, they have become.

Disposed lifejackets were collected from along the the shores as well as the more abandoned areas. The lifejackets left behind became symbolic of the refugee sea crossing and the narratives attached. There was the infamous Lifejacket Graveyard which was setup similarly to a

garbage dump. It piles in Molyvos, a town on Lesbos. This part of the island was filled well over 10 acres of orange, black, and gray lifejackets. Surrounding them stood wooden boats that occasionally landed on the island. Each and every one of those life jackets was worn by a refugee from Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, and surely more. Each lifejacket was representative of someone fleeing a form of injustice. This lifejacket graveyard became a tourist attraction – a landfill museum of migration and stories of suffering leading to a life-risked sea crossing that formed into symbolically representing the politics of the sea and the number of lives that transformed into a graveyard.

I did not realize the magnitude of how militarized and politicized the sea was. My time spent on Lesbos allowed me to see and feel the impact of border patrolling. Though I was aware of border issues, the actual presence of borders did not even occur to me as an aid worker – until I arrived on Lesbos. This is where I found myself more interested in advocating against border control. After witnessing how deadly this journey could be, it's easy to begin to have stronger views and to advocate against them. During my time on Lesbos, I realized that Frontex was central to policing the sea. This resulted in threatening stories of how guns would be held to heads, arrests, interrogation, torment in the cold and wet winters.

Towards the end of my stay on the island, I realized how central politics and the military are to aid development and policy. This particular anthropological work has exemplified that objects and subjects of power have shaped how humans construct their societies, even if temporary. If I've learned anything, it is that anthropology can be a new way for policy change in the context of refugee mobility. Development and policy can be morally complex, which can fit under the umbrella of public anthropology aimed towards institutional accountability to address political and social matters. The reason I was drawn to anthropological work was to

understand the situation socially and politically. Anthropology has expanded on the definition and has evolved into ways of resistance and identifying power structures which impact social beings whom are clustered into human categories.

The site of emergency response and the stories attached to the site(s) demonstrated how the sea could serve as a passage way while simultaneously serve as a space of death. This had me question what it takes to be an emergency responder and question the frame of mind that a responder should be in. There is this morally driven moment of how people practice empathy and care. This transnational humanitarianism has been shaped as moral or political projects that are practiced through these individuals or non-governmental organizations.

In this chapter, I presented stories from my work as a volunteer on Lesbos Island in 2015 - 2016. I narrate how I quickly learned the work of volunteers, sometimes waiting and sometimes managing arrivals and trying to find missing people. In addition, to the routines of work, I came to see the categories of paid aid worker, volunteer, refugee and smuggler as fluid and complex. On the one hand, it is obvious from dress, demeanor, and activity which category one belongs to, on the other the roles were often reversed, and the communities wavered in terms of who was part and who was not. I also wanted to reveal the ambiguous figure of the smuggler and how he is fluid and not clearly bad.

## CHAPTER V

### MY MOVE

After my work in Greece, I moved to Lebanon to seek volunteer opportunities while conducting research about these inquiries of needs, survival, and care among refugees in the Beqaa Valley. I selected Anthropology as my discipline of interest because I felt that it could help me make sense of such complex chaotic situations. In fact, I applied to the American University of Beirut because I knew that Lebanon was the only place I could simultaneously further my education accompanied by more field experience in the refugee spaces.

My motivation was driven by my curiosity based on my experience, so I decided I wanted to move somewhere where I could gain more knowledge while also having access to refugee camps. Once I arrived in Lebanon, I did not waste any time. I sought different opportunities through different organizations in various parts of Lebanon. I visited Shatila, Saida, and the Beqaa Valley. I was not particularly seeking to work with any particular group of refugees but rather the experience which is why I explored various spaces. Through that exploration I found parallels and dichotomies in these different spaces then I eventually narrowed down where I wanted to conduct my research.

During this process, I ran into the situation in which my research critiques. For example, I volunteered with organizations where I was told walking alone in the camp to purchase a bottle of water was too dangerous for me. I personally found this unacceptable and frustrating that a volunteer would carry that much fear or that an organization would instill this fright. I even helped organizations where I face-painted for an Eid celebration in exchange for a certificate and a tent as a thank you gift. Yes, a tent – the irony. I found it difficult to find an organization I

could commit to where I believed had dignified values. After some time, I decided to volunteer independently since I built my own contacts. I even accompanied others who were doing video projects or interventions in these camps which was mutually beneficial. Though I was collecting a decent amount field experiences and notes, I was worried I would never find an organization I would value enough and that I would need to find a way to continue this sporadically on my own.

A year later, by chance, I found an organization called WARD that was supportive of my research interests and of my skeptical views. This was the introduction to a new journey filled with stories, interlocutors/friends, and knowledge which put great meaning in my research. My time started off communicating with some of the management and members in order to launch a health project. We agreed that I would be a volunteer for the organization and that at the same time, I would conduct research.

I found myself spending more and more time in the Beqaa and in the camps. I lived there for three to four months where I conducted a significant amount of participant observation. Over that course of time I made friends who became very dear to me and shared momentous memories. My time certainly turned out very different from what I had expected. Every night was spent on the porch smoking argileh <sup>2</sup>and engaged in long controversial conversations. The topics varied from family, love, memories, citizenship, human rights, education, current events, life... anything and everything. I mean, I can't think about what we haven't discussed. Every topic that would come to our mind, we would either discuss or postpone into their future referring to "bookra" which means tomorrow. But tomorrow didn't mean literally tomorrow, but rather in the near future. This is how close they felt to the light at the end of the tunnel...or at least they

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<sup>2</sup> Argileh is a water pipe for smoking flavored tobacco commonly in the Middle Eastern countries. It is also known as hookah, shisha, narghile or water pipe.



hoped. I often wondered if this was a coping mechanism to move forward or if they genuinely believed in a better “tomorrow.” Every night at midnight the electricity would go out leaving the entire town dark and quiet. It was something to look forward to and an opportunity to flip over our glowing phones for those 60 seconds and look up at the stars.

For the months I spent in Beqaa, I stayed in a house in a small town not far from the scattered refugee camps. It was mainly me and four Syrian young men who consistently were there while volunteers and other Syrians would occasionally stay with us. Across from the house we stayed was a fruit stand where the owner knew everything we said and did. He was the face we saw when we left the house in the morning and when we returned in the evening. He was actively involved which meant he embarrassingly and unknowingly heard all of our discussions and disputes. I knew this because one day when I went to purchase fruit and he told me; “by the way I agreed with your argument with one of the boys the other day.” I was puzzled and wondered what else he had heard. That summer was filled with so much realization and bonding. I would just sit and listen to them talk and reminisce about Syria. The stories sometimes were about going to school and beautiful memories to dark war stories that filled them with distress. I remember one of the boys referred to me as being too shy when I first met them and how I changed to being more social with them. The more time I spent with them the more open I became, the more comfortable I felt asking questions, and the more comfortable I felt speaking my own views.

The day started early. We would all wake up, get ready and head off to work our daily routines in the camps. The boys worked in different centers; agriculture, psychosocial support, and education. I would go around to all of the 22 camps getting a grasp of the situation and helping launch the health campaign. I conducted various interviews and assessments to

understand the needs and health concerns. My days were spent in the scorching heat drinking countless cups of tea and coffee. Each day the sun would go down and we would reconvene on the porch for our daily ritual – argileh, fruit, coffee, and talks. It was something I always looked forward to.

Once the weather got colder the nights were filled with my house-mates playing cards on the floor of the living room which was filled with a cloud of cigarette smoke. It made me nostalgic because I reminisced growing up when we cooked eggs, vegetables, cheese, some dips, or whatever we had laying around the kitchen, and pita bread while we sat on the floor dipping the pita bread and eating the variations.

## CHAPTER VI

### WHAT DOES A HUMAN NEED TO SURVIVE?

#### Winter – Beqaa Valley, Lebanon

I was riding up towards Beqaa in a taxi and got dropped off in Bar Elias. There was heavy water melting off of the mountains and flowing streams along the sides which seemed to be man-made tunnels. The sound of the water was loud and flowing rapidly as though there was a rain storm. I was only imagining what the camps were like at that moment.

Bar Elias is an area in the Beqaa which is highly concentrated with refugees and camp set-ups. My route when I enter Bar Elias, is usually walking past a Botox center which is not occupied but seems to be an abandoned miniature building with a lingering botox advertisement, a large \$1-dollar store on the right side and small mini markets selling trinkets covered in dust. As I continue to follow along a polluted canal, a camp is on the left side, a small unofficial school on the right which sits in between a saj stand and a vegetable market, and then two camps right across. Typically, children would run around with joy, playing and yelling “MISS!” at me. There would be worker trucks that would drive around which stopped to talk to everyone. The space was generally a very social space. There is a chunk of land spacing out two of the camps. Usually there would be cattle or sheep that gather by their farmer and young boys who played football with a deflated soccer ball. It is merely a plot of land spacing out the two camps, acting as a backyard for the community. One day, it became a mini lake due to the harsh winter. A heavily polluted lake. This mini lake had nowhere to drain which resulted to leaking into some of the tents. I’ve been warned by others that this area fills up with water during the winter. “Wait until the winter, this entire land fills up with deep water like a lake!” Though I was alerted,

months later I would see it was of course most shocking. Imagine having your little tarped home which already is not proper housing made of bricks or panels of hardware. Imagine it being flooded through the cracks of your tent. Imagine the polluted ground of trash and soil from animals making a soup with the rain water then entering your tarp-made tent.

My curiosity grew as I wondered how these torturous winters were always expected but difficult to prepare for. Relief teams regularly were prepared to respond at any hour of the day as the snow melted off the mountains. This duty was not only for NGO's but an expected onus from the men and boys of the community. But I often wondered; what is the need here? Is it simple drainage? Proper insulation? Proper installation? If it is known that this is a larger issue during the winter time, then why has there been no sustainable solution. Though I knew the answer of why there was no sustainable solution since there were no rights for the refugees dwelling, I couldn't help but question it. The winters in the Beqaa Valley are known to be below freezing temperature and rainy. My bones would shiver unless I was in an enclosed room.

Fires are a common concern in the camps during every winter since every year tents would flame up resulting to an increase in deaths. Email blasts would circulate across NGOs to notify aid workers and agencies of the fire hazards and the death toll. So, what are the options here? To stay warm in a fire hazard structure, enduring freezing temperatures, or perhaps letting the winter water seep into your dwelling called *home*.

This practice of dwelling has become near impossible. I remember walking the winters in the camps walking on slush and being brittle cold. Women worked in the centers and I don't know how they even moved their fingers. How was the laundry hung? I remember I went to Saad Nayel one day and a teenage boy was wearing a t-shirt and barely flinching from the cold. Sure, he shivered and was cold, but not as we were while we were bundled up. Some would say that he

is immune to the temperatures and can endure it given the context he has been living in. Is this true? Or is it a way to accept meagre living conditions?

But how was I going to tell a story about needing and surviving in these conditions that I thought were barely livable? And how was I going to research a practice I was directly involved in? As Pierre Minn (2007) states, “Much of the literature that directly addresses humanitarianism has been written by individuals in the movement itself”.

Instead of exploring the perspectives, narratives and aspirations of refugees, Liisa Malkki (2015) emphasizes the importance of studying the aid workers. By studying aid workers, she permits her readers to consider motivations and transformations of those providing aid. She allows us to question this embedded desire to be involved in the act of helping and of doing good. Her ethnography *The Need to Help* (2015) considers local and international humanitarian aid workers by questioning needs, how they are met, and by whom. She questions “who” is helping and their incentive and inspiration may be – is it to fulfill their own needs, an escape, to be involved in disaster, or simply to help provide aid. In the field it is easy to question whose needs are being met – the aid recipient or the aid provider? While looking at the notion of the ‘self,’ she surfaces this question of self by looking at how their own needs has driven them to providing needs. What constructs these individuals in being defined as selfless and how has the meaning of being selfless transformed into providing aid or relief during conflict?

Malkki’s work inspired me to think about the transformations of *self* that I was hearing about and observing during fieldwork. Not only was I discovering how the categories we were used to taking for granted were fluid in the anecdotes from the field but also in a much more sustained way. Most of the volunteers for WARD were refugees themselves. And they started

pointing out to me how their subjectivity changed in times of disaster. In the next chapter, I explore the ways volunteers/refugees spoke of the ways they were transformed by disaster.

## CHAPTER VII

### HOW SULTAN BECAME IBN ALMUKHAYAM – SON OF THE CAMP

Sultan was a volunteer for WARD when I met him. He worked in a Syrian refugee school which provides informal education for children waiting to be enrolled in a formalized education system. He left Homs, Syria in 2013. It was no longer safe for him and his family when the bombs began to drop. They had to flee for their safety which had an impact on their livelihood and education. Sultan's brother attempted delaying his departure from Syria to continue his education and at least complete grade 12, but this became impossible. Soon after Sultan had made it across the border, his brother followed.

Sultan himself was a family man who cared about working and advancing his own education. Sultan and I would challenge one another in in-depth discussions about a variety of topics. I always appreciated his honesty, wisdom, and inflexible views. Now he lives with his brother, mother, sisters, wife and two children. He was the breadwinner, supporter, and the rock for them all. His brother was also working, studied English and always seeking opportunities that would enhance his education. During my knowing him, he was able to enroll his younger sisters into a private school which made him ecstatic.

I grew quite close to him and his brother who both continue to strive for their future and the well-being of their family. Their good nature made me feel comfortable and always humbled. They had dreams and devoted faith that everything will follow along God's path. Behind their hopeful words, I saw sadness in their eyes from the moment I met them. I thought I perceived a type of sadness that was buried under persistence and conviction. Though I spent a lot of time

with them and felt close to them and I knew they had escaped their homes and lives in Homs, I felt like there were aspects of their sadness I could not see or hear.

Sultan's life in the camp and the way he talked about it was full of stressful events and daily hardships. For example, Sultan told me the story about how his brother was arrested from the camp. I didn't fully understand the details of what happened, but it sounded that authorities arrested people without adequate paperwork, and it was during the peak of scanning the camps. When his brother was arrested, Sultan could not bear to eat or sleep. He fell ill because he was worried about his brother being held captive. He even called the police and suggested for himself to be arrested in exchange of his brother. A few days later, they released him. Later I realized that this was probably exacerbated and impacted by their father's arrest and disappearance.

I first heard about Sultan's arrival in Lebanon from his younger brother. I was helping Sultan's brother on a university application for Africans, Syrians and Palestinian refugees. In a section of the application, we were meant to write about why the applicant's case is unique. The application needed information which would measure their level of vulnerability which would indicate their needs. I started in assisting him by writing a brief narrative about their lives in the camp that I thought showed what the university wanted. At this point Sultan's younger brother took me aside to another room and tells me the story of their father's disappearance. Sultan, his mother and siblings were the first to arrive in Lebanon. A few weeks later, his father and uncle were en route to reunite with the others in Lebanon. They were stopped at a Syrian army checkpoint where his father was taken by the army. To this day, Sultan and his family are unaware of his father's whereabouts, whether he is alive and imprisoned or whether he was killed. "I believe he is alive", said Sultan's brother smiling as we went back to write up the disappearance as part of their hardship case.



It is after this story that I realized that I knew so little of the sadness and pain I was feeling in them. Over the year and a half that I knew them, they rarely talked about their father's disappearance. It came up in discussion only twice, once as we were putting together the scholarship application and once as we were listening to an interview transcript with Sultan I was going to use for my work. Later I read a short story that Sultan's brother shared with me which also revealed more about the pain he's witnessed and how he attached it to their father.

Sultan had a strong sense of the changes that the war had instilled in him. He talked about the new life, new family and new person he had developed since leaving Homs as becoming "ibn al mukhayyam" (son of the camp). He said he would always be a son of the camp no matter where life took him to. This was not about him living in a refugee camp, or about his conditions of life he said but was a moral and political belonging. Upon his arrival in Lebanon he said he naturally submerged himself in this new community to learn how to survive and gradually became a different person with different priorities, politics and ambitions.

In one of our interviews, he talked about his shift from a being someone with "big dreams" to becoming a son of the camp:

"When I was living in Syria I was living very well. I had a house, I was obtaining my education, I had dreams. What was most important were my dreams. I had big dreams, for example I wanted to become an aerospace engineer. I had plans to travel and work towards my dreams. All of us (Syrians) were like this. Then the war broke out. I had to leave. I thought; if I arrive to Lebanon, I can continue my life and dreams as I had planned. That's what I thought. I arrived and was astonished. My house became a tent and I had no employment opportunities." Part of becoming son of the camp was him realizing that his dreams were blocked.

When he and his family arrived in Lebanon, they came with nothing and needed everything. Sultan's displacement from Homs and his father's disappearance made him and his brother breadwinners for a family of seven which grew into a family of ten. During one of our discussions he repeated that "we, refugees, are also humans, and we needed everything, food, shelter, absolutely everything, but most importantly we needed safety and dignity to survive." To Sultan, these two elements of dignity and safety come before needing shelter. They arrived with no work, no papers, no food and they did not know what to expect when they arrived. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was not active and present in Lebanon when they arrived but other smaller NGOs provided distributions as emergency response. I asked him to give me examples of the NGOs and the kinds of things they distributed but instead he took my field notebook and started writing in my place.

"What are refugee needs: I know how to work with refugees residing in my camp as I am a son of the camp."

Upon his arrival, Sultan worked random jobs here and there which accumulated to 3 – 4 months out of the year. However, he was never paid in full and could not report it as he was a Syrian refugee, getting paid on the black market. He had no official rights that could protect him.

Once, when he was talking about everyday hardships, I asked him if he knew or expected what it was like living in a camp when he was still in Syria or on his way. I thought maybe since refugees communicated a lot with people still internally displaced and all over the world, that maybe he had heard about life in the camps. He paused and looked at me; اقسام بالله ('I swear by God' – a very strong promise) if I knew my life was going to turn out like this I would have stayed and died in Syria." This is a common response from the refugee community. "If my father

was here” he continued; “I would have returned to Syria but I’m the eldest male in my family so I am obliged to stay.”

Through conversations with Sultan over the year, I learned that part of becoming a son of the camp was holding a tenacious grip on memories, communities and lives that were in the past and at the same time navigating the relationship between managers of humanitarian organizations, volunteers and refugees in the present and also feeling a strong responsibility towards the people of the camp. This was particularly clear to me in the first recorded interview I conducted with him.

One day during Ramadan of 2018, we finally sat down behind the Ramadan Kitchen where refugees from the Beqaa and volunteers spent the day preparing thousands of meals for distribution in the camps. At this point I knew Sultan and his brother very well, but I had not conducted an official interview with him. Before we started, I asked him to choose a pseudonym for himself and said he could think about it. Without hesitation or a moment to contemplate, he smiled and said; “I’ve always loved the name Sultan.” So, I kept the name he requested. Later that day when I joked about him loving his new name, he told me that his father had wanted that name for him.

I started the interview, and it focused on the ways in which employees of NGOs felt superior to refugees. At that moment, I remembered an incident when he had become agitated a year prior. We were both volunteers conducting a two-day scabies and lice intervention in one of the more vulnerable camps in Delhimiyeh. Majority of the camp residents were affected by lice or scabies or both. During that day, I was in the backseat of a car and Sultan was sitting in the front seat. I watched him agitated and telling our friend driving, “this is why it is important that we are present on the ground helping our own people, so others don’t treat them this way.” The

Lebanese aid workers working with us had had visible and hearable exclamations of disgust making comments about how poor and dirty these refugees were. In fact, earlier that day the shawish<sup>3</sup> of the camp had come up to one of the aid workers and asked her “why do you get disgusted? Don’t think I can’t see your reactions and face expressions, if you are disgusted by us then don’t help us. We don’t need to feel like we are dirty.” I was there when this conversation happened. I felt protective over the refugee population, embarrassed for the aid worker and proud that the shawish stood up for his community and vocalized how he felt. Many feared to stand up for themselves in this context as they are receiving assistance and do not want to risk any chance of losing their provisions.

Continuing with the interview, Sultan mentioned that there are some people that merely work in NGOs to be a part of working with refugees and fundraising money in their name for the attention rather than for the actual cause. Sultan found it problematic that people in the humanitarian profession usually have a self-interest. He even alluded to the intentions of some people we knew and worked with. He asked; “do you really think he is any different Marwa?” He said that some aid workers have openly said that they do this work to boost their resume or purely for the paycheck.

For him, the fact that there was a salary distinction between Lebanese and Syrian volunteers even though they were all working for the same cause was a sign of the problems with this work. Sultan said that his current wage is about \$420 per month. Someone who has the right to work in Lebanon would make at least twice as much. He continued; “these aid workers need to enter a camp with respect, not come in as though they are above us and looking down at the refugees.”

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<sup>3</sup> The shawish is the community leader or decision maker of that specific tented settlement. The shawish carries the role of the camp supervisor and can even have control of the roles of children in working, marriage, debt, giving orders, as well as take care of their community. The shawish can be appointed by the community or given the role based on their leadership skills. Shawish are commonly men, but during my research there have been encounters with female shawish’s.

There was a back story for this reaction. When he was a new arrival to the camp, he said he refused to let any aid worker or volunteer enter his family's tent for quite a long time. Or in fact, he let one aid worker in early on. He said; "when I arrived, I lived in a tent. A volunteer entered to ask questions for an assessment. The volunteer did not remove his shoes nor did he accept the tea I offered. He made me feel that my tent and my home was of no value." From that moment on, he refused to let volunteers and aid workers in his family tent. Until one day, a volunteer from WARD came asking for a glass of water. He let him in, gave him water and started a conversation with this volunteer and it was the beginning of his relationship to this NGO. Soon, he wanted to be involved with them himself.

Sultan spoke with bitterness about the ways in which Lebanese young people were employed in humanitarian work. They usually don't have education or credentials in the field and use "wasta" (connections) to get a position in large international NGOs. He raised a question of why or how they work on the ground if they don't even show that they want to help refugees. In addition, he said it is not possible to help or work in this field unless a person takes the time to understand what refugees lived before, how they arrived and how they live now, the time to get to the "truth of the experience".

I asked Sultan if he ever felt 'in between' being himself a refugee and at the same time a volunteer for an NGO. He said he feels deep alam (pain) because of that. "When I first enter a camp, I joke with the elder, I put my hand on the child's head, I drink water in their homes while we sit sharing our problems. I feel their pain." There was often ambiguity as to whether the pain was about being "in-between" or whether it was about "feeling their pain" or perhaps both.

I asked him what he thinks are the most important needs in the camps. He responded that the most important is health and respect. Health because there is a need for access to affordable

medical care. It is important to point that some refugees came from Syria who were already suffering from health ailments. Then living in these tents, in these camps and conditions, make them more prone to disease. The sun beams and heat make people sick from dehydration leading to more health distress as well as the inadequate protection. Then there are the harsh winters where there is no proper insulation or heating.

On the one hand, Sultan often talked to me about how useless all the assessments were. “NGOs come for occasional field visits and then leave with an assessment.” They came filled them out and left, nothing more from it. He shared how he has seen surveyors erase data because they would assume what the refugees were saying are lies. On the other hand, Sultan’s work with WARD as a teacher in the informal education center was important to his sense of self and sense of worth. He talked about how gratifying his job is. “When one of my children (students in his class) succeeds at the end of the school year, I feel proud, that for me is an accomplishment”.

During the Ramadan Kitchen interview, I asked him if his work was difficult or if it was a difficult job to work with refugees. He responded that no, that he was part of the same narrative. When his student does well he feels he is doing well. He feels their pain, their suffering, their frustration which makes the work easy in one way but difficult in another.

While depicting the complicated nature of his work, he also constructed binaries between being a refugee and being a Lebanese citizen and between refugees, volunteers and aid workers. “Lebanese don’t understand us (Syrian refugees)” he would say sometimes. “And refugees will never understand Lebanese citizens.”

A couple of months after the Ramadan kitchen interview, Sultan told me that he has never opened up to the extent that he did with me over the year. Sultan was known not to trust anyone and to be hesitant and critical especially with NGOs. He said that he trusted me with this

information, that I would convey it responsibly. I felt honored but I also felt a sense of responsibility about how I would tell his story with its complexity and ambiguity. Sultan had told me a number of times that he wanted his story known. That he wanted readers of my work to know what he went through and the respect or recognition he was looking for in the world.

By the time I interviewed Sultan, he and his family eventually moved out of their tent and of the camp and lived in an apartment thanks to the small cash for work he and his brother earned from the organization. This is representative of Bateson's (1956) double-bind theory which is a self-confrontation of a distressing dilemma receiving conflicting messages. This "in-between" role that Sultan has picked up, naturally became a double bind, in that he was able to provide for his family but didn't feel it was dignified enough even though it seemed so in the context he was situated in.

Looking at how refugees are treated and viewed, whether it is fragile or intruders, will always be difficult for the refugee. It is also difficult to try to build a life where it is prevented and, in a place, where you are unwanted or in this case accepted with limitations. Where is the space of refuge if it's this unimaginable? Seeking refuge and being a refugee is kind of ironic if there is no sanctuary. Sometimes I hear the young Syrian men jokingly say, "but aren't I just as human as that person with another passport?" Behind that jokes, lies a painful yet truthful uncertainty.

Months later, friends of Sultan informed me with the news that he had returned to Syria and was drafted into the Syrian Army. He had told me he was planning to go back to Syria and made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone until he was gone. He was depressed with the living conditions in Lebanon and tired of waiting for change. His unhappiness carried him to the decision of taking his wife and children and returning to Syria to continue his life and provide a

future for him and his family. I was sad because he didn't say goodbye and I thought he had paid to opt out of the army. I messaged him on social media and on the phone, but he did not respond. I asked his brother if he tried to stop him. He responded, "no he informed us the day before he left so that nobody could stop him." I had no words when he told me this.

Months later I received a notification on my phone from Sultan, I finally heard back from him. I was thrilled and relieved to hear from him. Though he was drafted into the army and hadn't seen his wife and children since returning to Syria, there was a sound of contentment in his voice. I thought I heard a sound of relief since he had a form of control over his future by making a decision that provided him some stability, even though it was a compulsory system. He talked about hope to "live in freedom" once he had finished his military service.

Sultan's decision to go serve in the army that had destroyed his city and disappeared his father was looked down upon by his friends and community, most of who had participated in one way or the other in the revolution. But he said to me when he told me he was planning a return that he was so weary of living indefinitely without rights in Lebanon that he could not take it. It was clear that there was no space of refuge for him. I wonder if he found refuge in his newest life.



## CHAPTER VIII

### REFUGEE CARE WORKERS

The second person I would like to introduce in this research is Mohib. Mohib is young man who also became a dear friend. We met on several occasions during the summer of 2017 where we barely spoke to one another but eventually began to debate and get into deep and personal discussions about life as we know it. Mohib is a single father in his late 20's who came to Lebanon from the outskirts of Damascus. The village of Syriani descent which later converted to Islam. He and his family still hold on to the language of Syriac complementing their Arabic. He is divorced. His ex-wife lives in another part of Lebanon with her new husband. He has full custody of his daughter. He shows constant and unconditional love to his daughter. Their bond seems inseparable and unbreakable, especially with everything they have been through. They often dance and sing together, and he talks about how he would do anything for his daughter. Mohib is known to have a "heart of gold"; people say he is pious, romantic, loving, forgiving and simply pure. I wanted to get to know him because of his gentle way of looking and modest way of speaking.

Mohib loves to sing and often when I would spend time with him, I would listen to his romantic and sad songs. Much of the community knows him for his clear and passionate voice. He sings about love and places he yearns for. In addition to singing, Mohib tells stories in a poetic and metaphorical way. During my fieldwork, almost every night I used to sit and listen to him and Sultan and the other young men, as they discussed their experiences in Syria. I would hear their struggles, the horrors they witnessed, and how they were subjected to and perpetrated. These are all young men who were in one way or another part of the uprising against the Assad

regime and tried to help their people in any way they could. They each experienced what I would consider a traumatic event which led them to flee and migrate to Lebanon. Their pain was at times palpable in their stories. Mohib was the person among them who expressed his pain the most eloquently through singing and story-telling.

On a hot summer day during August 2018, we met up in a caravan which serves as part of an education center in Bar Elias. The center let us sit in the caravan since it was scorching hot outside. It was right before his shift at a harmonics program where he taught music to children. We sat down to discuss what we have always discussed but this time in the structure of an interview. I asked Mohib; “What do you find to be the most important thing in life?” He responded; “Let us begin with the force of life. The most important thing in my opinion is safety. If the person isn’t feeling safe with life or himself how are they supposed to be assured, then they cannot deal with any situation that they are in.” Indeed, Mohib had told me before that the reason he and his friends were in Lebanon and could stay in Lebanon was only because they were safe to a certain extent. They constantly faced brick walls in terms of figuring out a future for themselves, but they had safety.

I then asked him what his opinion was on how NGO’s should be handling humanitarian work. He responded to me; “Now, I will tell you about Syria and what we saw on the ground there.” During the interview, whenever I would ask questions about NGO’s and human needs, he would connect that to what he experienced in Syria. He talked about the work he did in his village providing help to people during wartime assaults. Various organizations provided shelter and he and other young men coordinated with them.

Again, I would try to shift the conversation to focus on his life in Lebanon, NGOs and needs and he persisted in bringing the conversation back to providing help and assistance to

rebels and families in his area in Syria. He remembered the community work in response to bombing and siege in Syria fondly. People were moving from governorate to governorate, escaping bombing and he and other people in his community would provide shelter, food and simple medical care. The first time his village provided shelter and food was when they received refugees from Homs as the city was being destroyed by the regime. “They came with nothing, not towels or clothing. Many only came with the clothes they were wearing that day.” Mohib and his friends began a volunteer initiative to provide a roof, in their homes and in tents in people’s yards. Little by little every single person in the village got involved to help the displaced. “If someone made food that day they would offer it to a family, everyone gave away some of their clothing. People gave baskets of food and baby milk.” His village was giving but actually he insisted it was also receiving and gaining. For the first time, people felt they were part of a community, unified and had a purpose.

A month after the first wave of displaced arrived in his village, all the clinics or hospitals were either bombed or deserted. So, Mohib and his friends set up field hospitals to help the families in his area. These were set up underground and in secret locations to avoid targeting by the air force. NGO’s and wealthy Syrians from the diaspora started to send them medications and simple hospital furniture. He and his friends did first aid training and learned practices and procedures from any medical personnel working in the field hospital. They then decided to train one person per household in first aid and how to deal with war injuries. This was a time period when the air force would drop bombs at any time. “Everyone became a first aid responder, willingly or not. It was necessary.”

By that time, images of the Syrian war had already started to circulate, images of the dying and dead. Mohib despised the activists who took photos and circulated them: “why would

we take pictures. They are already down, why would we break them even more?" He repeated that what people needed at that time was shelter, food, a place to hide - not pictures of dead bodies that denies dignity and respect to the dead and their families.

Mohib continued that work with his friends for two years. It was clearly an important part of the story of who he was. He said it made him feel complete. He continued: "When people arrived to our town, the schools were shut down so we used the schools to house them. We all loved doing this work. We felt it was an important accomplishment to do this. If I can help with the smallest thing to assist a family, at the end of the day we felt we were all the same, we were all family. At the end of the day, they are family, our people, we are exactly the same."

In my usual fashion, I tried to revert back to Lebanon I asked him; "But what about when you came here? Was there a difference between Lebanon and Syria of how people would help others? He responded to me; "Listen, no matter what, the beginnings are always going to be different than after an extended period of time. When the revolution and war started, people and organizations used to help more than they do now." This was a common comment in the refugee community: "They stopped distributions", "they don't provide us with covers anymore" I would often hear. But what became clear to me as I was listening to the transcript is that "the beginnings" he was talking about was about beginnings in his own person, and that he thought of beginnings not only as the first demonstrations, revolutionary songs and signs of war but also as being about beginnings inside him. And those changes he saw within him were about him and his friends providing care to others.

In the interview, I unconsciously once again, revisited to aid work in Lebanon. Mohib said that he continued the work of care and assistance after he had been displaced. He was part of the team that provided assistance with the first 60 families that arrived to the North of Lebanon

through Tripoli. It was natural for them to support one another. “However, after seven years, I’m tired. I’m exhausted” He stuttered as he tried to express what he was feeling and concluded by saying that he doesn’t know how to explain what he is feeling but it is certainly different than how he felt three years ago when he arrived to Lebanon. There was a way in which care work for him as a refugee was an essential part of his personhood. It was his narrative about himself but it was also what exhausted him in his daily life which weighed him down emotionally.

He then reopened a discussion which he had already shared with me during one of our late-night chats. “When I arrived in Lebanon, I was like shell shocked. Every day I received a phone call with the news of the death of a family member, friend or someone dear to me. My world disappeared.” For three months, he remained in solitude, and never exited the door of his room. His daughter told him she did not recognize him. His description of his state reminded me of severe depression and shock.

The first time he told me this story was several months earlier when I first visited him and his family in their small apartment. We sat in the main area where there laid Moroccan seating. On the wall, there was a prayer scripted in golden print which hung on a gold intricately carved frame. This was the exact same framed prayer that hung in my late grandparents’ home back in America. I just could not believe that I was seeing the same piece of art with the same frame hanging in a small apartment in the Beqaa Valley and in a house in Detroit. His mother brought us a delicious lunch served on a large round silver platter with smaller dishes of traditional dips and bites which we ate using our hands and pita bread in. As we sat on the floor eating this humble lunch, he continued to share stories. He pointed at the door and said: “See this door? For three months, I did not step out of it.” He saw a building collapse on the heads of neighbors and in front of his eyes and his legs went numb. He lost sense of time and reality. The

sound of bombs made his legs shake but he could not even feel them. Gradually he stopped recognizing the sound of the bombs and buildings falling. It was all lost in a loud sound of the gust of wind. This was when he and his family fled to Lebanon. I never heard the story of how they made it to Lebanon. That part was omitted from the story of seeking refuge. When he arrived to Lebanon, he stayed in his small apartment for three months and when he came out, he returned to helping provide shelter and food to refugees arriving from the North, and continued to sing for his friends and family. Then he started making a living by teaching music and organizing events for NGO's in the community.

Whenever Mohib shared stories or sang them through his lyrics, I wondered if this was a coping mechanism. I felt and saw the trauma in his bright green eyes and heard the pain in his voice when singing from his heart. The voice that provided a soothing, psychological function, that gave him and his friends a sense of togetherness and victimhood, like the times he described as the beginnings when they cared for refugees together.

On most nights, Mohib would sing with his friends, neighbors, daughter and mother. I started to record his songs so that I could later translate them. His songs were melancholic and yearned for a place and person that no longer was with him. I transcribed the words of one of the songs I recorded several months after our interview:

*The flowers of the house, I missed you, the tears of the eyes yearned for you*

*Even the grains of dirt, with my poetry, sang for you*

*Your absence from me has destroyed me*

*I am here – you are there*

*I cry and shout all night long*

*Where are you, where?*

*Where are you, where?*

*I miss you, my soul*

*You, who is torturing my consciousness,*

*You, who heals my injuries*

*[You] My heart, [You] the most valuable human  
and why?*

*Did you go to someone else?*

*Stay away and forget my tenderness?*

*It is too soon for you [my eyes] to start crying*

*May your eyelids not shake (may you not cry)*

*May your eyelids not shake (may you not cry)*

*I used to see you as my days*

*You were heaven for me*

*After you, my hopes have died*

*You have grown in my soul*

*I started... lamenting my love,*

*Which I enjoyed with you*

*And where are the memories of my old days?*

*Where are the flowers of your days? (Where have the youthful days gone?)*

*Where are the flowers of your days? (Where have the youthful days gone?)*

*The flowers of the house I missed you, the tears of the eyes yearned for you*

*Even the grains of dirt, with my poetry, sang for you*

*Your absence from me has destroyed me*

*I am here – you are there*

*I cry and shout all night long*

*Where are you, where?*

*Where are you, where?*

*I imagine your silhouette in my imagination,*

*In my night and throughout my long day*

*You don't check on my situation*

*You don't know my news*

*And after you, what happened to me*

*You lit my heart my fire*

*And I call out all night,*

*Where are you, where?*

*Where are you, where?*

These songs were about pain. And at the same time, I felt they were healing and bringing people together through the experience of pain. I wondered about the history of the songs. Where they came from, who sang them before and what they meant to people before their displacement.



Mohib often talked about how he is grateful that he could still help people and was eager to keep caring for his community until it is no longer necessary. It is what kept him going. This is what kept him alive even though it is based on the suffering of people and of himself and exhausts him.

The first time he sang in his refugee camp after his three months of enclosure in his house was for a Mother's Day celebration in the street of his camp. He wanted to sing for everyone but he was reluctant because he kept on thinking about where he was and who they were, refugees. He wondered whether his community would be upset that he is turning a tragic condition into something joyful or even a mockery. He wondered: 'what if her husband is dead?' Being a widow is a common status among the families around him. But, he decided to start singing despite his hesitancy. He said they spent two and half hours singing and dancing, like in a debke trance. That was the moment in which he felt he could survive again, that he could serve as a care-giver for his community and himself through singing.

I asked Mohib why he did this type of work. He said that after not being able to leave his house for three months, he needed to get out and he needed to make money for his family in particular his daughter or they would die. Singing was not only a way of bringing his community together, but it also became his means of living, being paid for various kinds of gigs by NGOs. But I could tell that singing was more than merely permitting him to get bread on their table every day. Singing was the way he could provide care which had become a central part of who he felt he was. He said about the people he cared for, "they are our people and I know them from back home in Syria. But besides that, it is the humanly right thing to do. If I wasn't Syrian, even if we were not in an Arab country, I would and must help. At the end of the day, I'm a human

and that other person is also a human.” Indeed, for Mohib, caring was the definition of what it means to be human.

Towards the end of our interview, I tried to bring us back to NGO workers and the needs of refugees. “Do you feel that NGO’s that come from abroad understand refugee needs?” He responded; “yes, of course. They know there is a war and they are doing this work for a reason. When they come on the ground, they are able to see the situation and respond appropriately. They see the cases and they are specialized in something which is helpful in the end.” And then as usual, he referred back to Syria explaining that in the two years he worked in medical assistance there were no ambulances because they were too dangerous so they learned how to transport the injured in cars, motorbikes or on foot. So, then I asked him if he felt that NGO’s alleviate much of the needs in the camps, over here, in the Beqaa. He said they did, that the problem was not with the NGO’s but rather with the numbers of people in need and the depth of their needs. NGOs could not cover those. When I asked others this question, sometimes I would get answers such as: “they don’t care,” “nobody helps with medicine,” etc. But Mohib pointed to sheer inability of NGO’s to fulfil everyone’s need in a meaningful way.

In my obstinate way, I continued asking him about NGO work. “What about volunteers from the West, do you think they understand your needs?” He thought they did. But he recognized that it may take a while to understand the conditions of life, that it may take time and work on the ground to understand them.

After a while, he carried the thought further. “We are people. Nobody in Syria was living in a tent, we were employed, had a home and made money. We came here forcefully, once we were broken, once they had broken us. And we came wherever we could. This is not just here in Lebanon but in Jordan, Turkey, everywhere. We were harmed a lot. All we want is to live a

decent life (hayat karimeh). Some live in tents, some live in tiny apartments, there is no work. We work and then our children are taken from their education in order to work. The child needs to work any form of labor whether it is selling napkins or flower to bring home 5,000 lbp (3.33 USD) or 10,000 lbp (6.67 USD) otherwise there is no food for tomorrow. Some families have reached this level of misery. Now we need to think about our pockets, not our education – but then if we want a future, we need to keep our children in schools.”

Mohib, Sultan and their friends saw their work as work in caring for their communities and also as work in education which always signified a way for the future. All of their activities had educational agendas too. I felt that Mohib, in his sad, nostalgic way, was more optimistic than Sultan. Mohib constantly wanted to learn from his community and from aid workers and wanted to share his songs and stories here in the camp. Sultan was fed up and without telling his friends, returned to Syrian and was conscripted in the army.

Working with Mohib, Sultan and the other friends, I learned that nationality, documents, rights and access to capital define who is a refugee and who is not, who is an aid worker and who is a volunteer and who is a receiver of aid. But I also learned that the desire to care for people and work together to assist people was one that was deeply engrained in the refugee communities I was working with and was a central way in which refugees thought of themselves.

The literature on humanitarianism identifies humanitarian organizations and aid work as central to creating a new kind of subjectivity among refugees. The system of humanitarian assistance co-constructs refugees as victims and in need of assistance. Furthermore, some have highlighted the ways sites of humanitarian assistance become places where being a humanitarian assistant becomes an important way for recipients of aid to think of themselves too (James 2010). But in my fieldwork caring for communities as defining the way lower middle-class young men

and women thought of themselves seemed to have a longer history. While the disaster of war and displacement disrupted or shattered everything in their lives (their homes, their friendships, their families, their lives), what they felt was continuous and what gave meaning to their new lives was their work as caregivers to their communities.

## CHAPTER IX

### BEST OF FRIENDS

Mohib and Sultan were my colleagues, my friends and my interlocutors. They talked about being best of friends. Both had a profound effect on their communities through their teaching and music. Both talked about having this role in Syria too. Both were part of anti-regime communities and participated in the uprising. Hence, they were prevented from return. Typically, young men either have to serve in the military or pay a fine to avoid serving. Sultan had said he paid the fine. But later, to my surprise I discovered that he had returned to Syria and was serving in the army.

A while after these interviews a bunch of us attended a citizenship training which was to promote an understanding of a nation's rights to for citizens and non-citizens. After it ended the three of us; me, Sultan, and Mohib, sat hours talking. I actually compared my notes about them since they were interested in what I was going to write about them with their interviews. I told them that I had wanted to write about refugee needs but that a lot of my fieldnotes and interviews were about how disaster changes people. We walked to the kitchen and Mohib made coffee as I gathered some muffins. We sat and drank coffee as they spoke to me of how disaster had changed their lives. Mohib sang on and off.

Sultan turned to Mohib and asked; "where did you see yourself seven years ago before knowing the revolution would happen?" Before Mohib could answer, Sultan turned to me and said that I would also have to answer that question. They talked about how their persons changed. Sultan was single, and had no children, Mohib was married. Sultan said that he doesn't feel as much; he doesn't get excited or sad but rather in an emotional state of neutrality or

numbness. He may feel happiness or sadness, sure, but there is no excitement or devastation. He expressed this by saying he saw so much blood that he doesn't have the same feelings anymore. Mohib said that he used to be so gullible seven years ago. If anyone said anything to him, he would believe it. He now knew reality and what that was. I too said that seven years ago I would cry about absolutely anything and now the worst things of life seem normal to me. I haven't experienced the devastation of war but I felt I knew the emotional process they were describing, I know that the death of my grandfather and that fear had been fading away my emotions.

If I were only listening to their stories with socio-economic and political data, probably I would have told the story of a shift from lower middle class, educated revolutionaries in their home country fighting the regime to refugee aid workers or relief experts in their refugee communities. But what I observed and heard was more the story of people trying to heal themselves and their communities by weaving continuity yet facing contradictions between their lives before their exile and after it through song, through providing shelter to new refugees, through teaching, through telling stories about caring for their communities first in Syria and then in their refugee camps.

## CHAPTER X CONCLUSION

I feel writing this thesis had a set of challenges.

I had the challenge of shifting my approach to language and observation from one of a volunteer and practice oriented person to one of an anthropologist, observing, describing and analyzing in particular ways.

Then, I set out to do work about needs and no one really wanted to answer my questions. They answered with obvious answers like: food, drink, shelter, health care and dignity. Or sometimes they refused to talk about needs and wanted to talk about the disruption of their lives and their memories. I stopped wanting to talk to people about needs even though I continued volunteering and writing up field notes. I gather this is part of the process of fieldwork, but it was particularly challenging since it naturally transitioned the focus.

And then, I set out to write the thesis. Having read hundreds of pages of my interview transcripts, scattered field notes, and personal stories, my professor gave me Kim Fortun's ethnography to read and requested I use it to frame my interpretation of my own work. I thought the concept of enunciatory communities worked to describe the stories of interlocutors and the ways they described the systemic nature of the conditions of their lives. But writing in a clear and consistent manner was challenging too. And my professor requested I cut any story, paragraph or sentence that did not fit in the larger narrative of this thesis. Naturally, I was upset but followed the advice and ended up with this thesis. It has been challenging to accept that I will not be able to include all the other stories, events, books I have read and people I worked with in this thesis. However, I hope to include them in other future works.

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