WHEN SPACES OF CARE BECOME SPACES OF OBSCURED VIOLENCE AT THE BORDERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the production of "care spaces" designed for and with migrants in the border zones of Europe. More specifically, I examine the relations between care derived by humanitarian aid and solidarian movements, and how design transforms this care to obscure border violence. Drawing upon critical border theories related to materialities of borders and upon the critical voices towards humanitarian design, I re-examine the concepts of humanitarian design and care spaces for children in the context of the island of Lesvos. This paper seeks to raise a debate around the thin red line between care, violence and new forms of colonialities derived by humanitarian design.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have noticed a proliferation of care spaces for people crossing the borders. I am interested in the production of care spaces for children and more particular to playspaces at the wide area of the Greek borders. We have experienced that even when such spaces are intended to be designed with and for caring for these children, they rarely end up doing so. I argue that this is due to their ontological nature of being located within the border and the humanitarian regimes (Walters, 2011). I also argue that these spaces in most cases are not managing to exceed what is known as the "innocent victims" discourse (Malkki, 2015) towards displaced children. Instead they impose, re-affirm and re-produce the violence of the borders.

I will argue this by first briefly explaining the context of the Greek *borderscapes* (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007), and how they have formed the last three years in relation to the extensive externalization of the European border zones by EU. Secondly, I will discuss the humanitarian design approach and the critical questions that a small part of the design community raises concerning this and I will analyze how a specifically designed playspace fails to produce a real space of care based on a solidarian, humanistic and child-oriented ways of being.

THE NEW BORDERSCAPES OF EUROPE. LESVOS THE EAST FRONTIER

European Union's external borders is a complex political and economic regime, as many critical migration scholars have pointed out (Andersson 2016a; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2013; Andersson 2016b; De Genova 2016a; Verstraete 2003), where its investigation goes beyond the limits of this paper. Yet, it is important to give a brief account of how this regime works, in order to understand the genealogy of the humanitarian spaces in the Greek islands these last years. More specifically, I analyze the production of such spaces in relation to the EU´s "hotspot" approach, implemented since March 2016 (Neocleous & Kastrinou, 2016; Vradis, 2018).

Since the winter of 2014-2015 European citizens "suddenly" became consumers and observers of the "spectacle" of the borders (De Genova, 2013). The putative "refugee crisis" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015) has resulted in the proliferation of legal, political, economic and social operations and measures crucial for the states in the borderlines, the people of border zones and the border-crossers. Some of the EU´s tangible emergency measures implemented this period were and are stricter border controls, partial closing of the borders between various Schengen areas, bilateral agreements with

neighbor countries, such the one between EU and Turkey (European Commission, 2016a)and foremost the "hotspot" policy (European Commission, 2016b). The "hotspot" approach as described by the EU is a novel administrative, legal and physical process of identification, registration and fingerprinting of the incoming migrants in the South borders of EU. This approach gives to different organizations and agencies of EU, such as the European Juridical Cooperation Unit (Eurojust), European Asylum Support Office (EASO), European Police (Europol) and FRONTEX the possibility to work on the ground with the authorities of frontline EU Member States in order to manage, secure, control and surveil the cross-borders movements (Painter et al., 2016; Vradis et al., 2018).

In this context, the island of Lesvos has been in the epicenter as it hosts the first "hotspot" center, the odious Moria. The close geographical position of the island to Turkey, made it a main cross-over point for many years prior to 2014-2016. These years, the local authorities and local people were managing a cross-bordering movement "unseen" from the public, that already then reconfigured the island´s geo-political-cultural spaces (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). The concept of *borderscape*, coined by Suvendrini Perera (ibid), is useful in order to understand the production of the spaces in relation to the multiple dynamics of the border zone, their longevity and also their performative role in the lives of the migrants. A borderscape by definition is a contested space where multiple actors confront each other, expand control over space and territory, and political challenge each other (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). If we accept these dynamics of making and un-making the borders (Keshavarz, 2018b) we can then understand both the formation of *multiple temporalities and spaces* of reception, care, and detention as a dynamic and an ongoing process in relation to contemporary politics. This specific borderscape also produced "new relations, practices, possibilities and forms of connections" among the island people and the people on the move, as Perera defines precisely (ibid; p.p. 205). The borderscape of Lesvos thus, I argue produced not only spatial configurations but also a "history of care", contradictory to the idea of the Westernized humanitarian care, which appeared to the island after 2015 (Rozakou, 2017).

How did the "hotspot" then affect the expansion and the contraction of the spaces of care in this borderscape? One aspect that has become substantially different after the implementation of the "hotspot" policy and the renaming of the First Reception Center of Moria to "hotspot", has been the geographical restriction of the migrants. By that juridical term, people who had or were crossing the Greek borders after March 2016 were to be encamped on the islands of Greece under a special judicial status until they were identified, registered and sorted by the hotspot administration. Lesvos and the other islands were then pressured to manage a *stranded* population of thousands of people (Tazzioli, 2017) who were and are still eligible for basic provision of care such as nutrition, settlement, sanitation, immunization and education. Under these conditions, and as the "hotspot" infrastructure of Moria was inadequate for all these people, new spaces emerged as sites of supportive care provision – by state, humanitarian sector and solidarians - transforming Lesvos to a permanent temporal borderscape. One should here imagine this bordescape as a nexus of spaces and services, which are interrelated and communicating in multiple ways, with the "hotspot" of Moria being the administrative, legal and spatial center. As an example, a space for educational and recreational activities, in the center of Mytilene, which is initiated and run by political local activists and volunteers, is connected closely to the demographics and needs of the people captivated in Moria.

THE OBSCURE VIOLENCE OF DESIGNING "CARE"

Humanitarian interventions are not neutral. As many critical scholars have been pointing out (Ticktin, 2011; Agier, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Alexiou, 2015; Malkki, 2015; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016), the aid and care provided in emergencies are easily blurring with control and border practices. Framed by the notion of emergency, humanitarian aid responds immediate, squinting towards the border policies and practices that exclude, sort out, dehumanize and in many cases kill specific bodies. The humanitarian design, is then the rearguard of the humanitarian aid providing services, technologies, solutions, and spatial configurations, that not only affirms the border policies, but also extends the violence of the borders into every aspect of migrants' lives.

In recent years, a handful of design scholars have critically approached the humanitarian design and tried to expose the several ways it imposes exclusion and violence towards the border-crossers (Johnson, 2011; Weizman, 2012; B. F. Nielsen, 2014; Heller & Pezzani, 2014; Kalantidou & Fry, 2014; Feldman, 2015; Hattam, 2016; Keshavarz, 2018a; Suchman, 2018). They identify, through different approaches and projects, common elements of how designers and their designs neutralize and obscure the political power of design. The basic idea of humanitarian design is to be a temporal solution to a specific crisis. As research (Petti, 2013; Petti et al., 2013; Feldman, 2015) has taught us, the emergency sites, like refugee and disaster relief camps, very often become permanent dwelling sites, extending the suffering and the precariousness for the displaced people.

Humanitarian design in these cases involves specific processes and materialities, like fast, easy, light and cheap structures and materials, that correspond to temporal way of life, disregarding simultaneous local environments, societies, cultures, histories, economies,

politics and time. This constructed overlooking from designers in combination with the emergency operations that these practices emerge from, clearly unpack what Bruce Nussbaum has described as “new imperialism” (Nussbaum, 2010) or Peter Redfield as “gadget capitalism with a human face” (Redfield, 2016). sAs Johnson (2011) and Keshavarz (2018a) further argue, the humanitarian design usually approaches problems to the Global South markets with imperial and colonial attitudes, even though these problems in first hand have been created by the neoliberal modes of the Global North. Design research in many cases has tried to understand these colonial attitudes with terms of “empathy” or terms such as “empathetic design” (Mattelmäki et al., 2013; Nielsen, 2014), which in my view risks to enter moral and neo-colonial discourses that humanitarian scholars have addressed already (Malkki, 2015; Ticktin, 2014; Ticktin, 2006; Agier, 2011; Fassin, 2012).

THE INNOCENT PLAYSPACE

I argue that many spaces of care, especially spaces for children, in the borderscape of Lesvos unfortunately falls into that previous humanitarian critique. I analyze a specific playspace, that due to the ongoing research is unidentified.

Summer 2018. The playspace in the stake is located approx. 8km from Moria and 1 km from Kara Tepe. The playspace is a part of a community center building, run by a Swiss NGO, which functions as an umbrella organization for smaller NGOs. The operation fields of the center extent from education and secondary recreational activities to legal and healthcare assistance. In a sense, it is a cooperative space between international NGO´s who are on the island. Foreign volunteers and migrants themselves run the everyday activities. On our one-time site visit, we get a generous tour and explanation of the space and its activities. There is a genuine optimism in the air. We enter the main building where I am directed to a hidden corner, where the safe space for preschool children is. It is a space approximately 20m^2 designed and run by an American NGO, for preschool children between 1-1,40 m, as the wall measure indicates. Entering the room, I am struck by the selection and the quality of toys and play materials. Natural materials like wood and fabrics, a variety of colorful objects and blocks, useless objects like tubes and sticks sorted out carefully and combined with a plethora of well-known toys as railroads and all diversity dolls.

Figure 1: Diversity dolls

For an experienced eye, these materials point to specific critical progressive play educational curriculums, where the materiality focuses on empowering children through skills and abilities. The NGO describes the inspiration of the space as a mix of Montessori´s and Regio Emilia´s pedagogies combined with Swedish models of children´s democratic participation in the processes and of knowledge share platforms and material support for the teachers-caretakers. I am lucky enough to be given access to their teacher´s guide and the perspectives of play the volunteers/teachers incorporate in their daily activities. I leave the space with a sense of admiration as I have never seen such a “well designed” space for play care for children in such contexts.

Figure 2: A plethora of natural and colourful educational-play materials

Nevertheless, when I place the playspace in relation to the nexus of the borderscape of Lesvos, unforeseen elements of the humanitarian care and design surface. One of the first aspects I find crucial, is the multiple temporalities that are facilitated in the playspace. The pedagogical curriculums that inform the space demand a repetitive and long-term engagement both from the volunteer-caretaker and the children. Unfortunately, the run of the playspace is based to two-week volunteer programs, something that does not give the actual time to be committed to the space and the demands of it. Simultaneous, children due to the lack of an official program of play activities are coming in and out without schedule, resulting in a fragmented relation to the play and to play activities.

In that point is important to mention the fact that these kids are not following any official education program on the island, due to the judicial status of the “hotspot” residency. Thus, it is even more important for these humanitarian and volunteer activities to have a continuity and a long-term engagement. In addition, an unstable relation to such a space creates ambiguities when it comes to verbal and emotional communication between the volunteers and children. One could notice that the use of English as a primarily language in the playspace, determines the power relations shifting them towards a more oppressive experiences for the children who do not speak English.

The colonial attitude of this humanitarian playspace becomes apparent while I reflect on the guidelines for the volunteers/caretakers. Due to many recorded incidents of lost toys and materials, the official guideline supports body-searches from head to toe for every child leaving the space. In a European and Greek context, the body-search of minors or any other citizen has to be order juridical and to be performed by a police officer. Any action that diverge from that line is illegal. I argue that the NGO´s statement derives from the nature of the border, where uncontrolled violent operations can pass under the official radars and also from the design and the selection of toys the materials. Placing *exclusive* play and educational materials in any children space, will only encourage the already natural “sneaking” behavior of this age children. If one place intentional in the name of care such equipment within a

contested nexus, then it becomes intentional an action of control and violence then.

Figure 3: An ambiguous statement in otherwise a typical NGO´s guidelines.

CONCLUSION

Considering that humanitarian design has been well established as a part of the border regimes and at the same time that it is hard and risky to be critical towards "good intentions" design solutions as one could be blamed for arguing for solutions that are "good enough for them", I expect to explore further ideas of unseen violence in the everyday life of the kids entrapped to a political situation named "hotspot". As this research is ongoing further analysis and investigations of different playspaces in the border zones is needed.

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