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# Rethinking Social Resistance Through the Consolidating Politics of Humanitarian Populism in Mytilene, Greece

OTHON ALEXANDRAKIS\*

## ABSTRACT

During the spring of 2015, thousands of migrants began to arrive daily on the shores of Lesbos, Greece, from nearby Turkey. As the Greek government and the European Union (EU) monitored the unfolding situation, diverse ad hoc humanitarian projects flourished on the island. These projects enacted a field of action grounded in intersecting, concerning effects and values of care. This essay considers the challenges these projects posed to the local, national, and transnational humanitarian apparatus that eventually moved in and attempted to regulate these players. Drawing on recent work in anthropology on sense and critical agency, I discuss these challenges as a mode of social resistance that evokes a populist expression of the political. Two specific examples are discussed drawing on my recent ethnographic fieldwork in Mytilene, the capital city of Lesbos.

## INTRODUCTION

Much scholarly attention has recently focused on the use of domestic and global humanitarian actions as state apparatuses of power and, more broadly, as modes of governmentality.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I wish to

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1. See generally HUMANITARIANISM IN QUESTION: POLITICS, POWER, ETHICS (Michael Barnett & Thomas G. Weiss eds., 2008); MIRIAM TICKTIN, CASUALTIES OF CARE: IMMIGRATION AND THE POLITICS OF HUMANITARIANISM IN FRANCE (2011); THE POLITICS OF HUMANITARIANISM: POWER, IDEOLOGY AND AID (Antonio De Lauri ed., 2016); DIDIER FASSIN, HUMANITARIAN REASON: A MORAL HISTORY OF THE PRESENT TIMES (2012);

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contribute another perspective on the politics of humanitarianism from the critical responsiveness point of view that can coalesce into collective action where official and otherwise sanctioned actions end (or in the places where they are absent altogether). The responses I consider in this article do not focus only on addressing failures or shortfalls in sanctioned humanitarian responses<sup>2</sup> but also challenge sanctioned organizations and their national and transnational backers by various means. In other words, I focus on actions that focus on humanitarian work deemed to be beyond the practical and legal scope of sanctioned agencies while also resisting those forms of state-backed interventions that would direct or limit them. I argue that, taken together, the humanitarian work and regular resistance arising at sites of conflict—both in the context of formal legal proceedings and in the field—express a nonessentialist critique<sup>3</sup> of state-backed humanitarianism. On Lesbos, this critique serves as the basis for a reflexive actualization of relationality among *ad hoc* responders that has become fertile terrain for consolidating ethics and politics of critical humanitarianism that echo populist expressions of everyday justice in the rest of Greece. Through a careful consideration of this case, I aim to contribute fresh understanding to the sources of populism— an inclusive, justice-seeking form of populism that slips such familiar political categories as “right-wing” or “socialist.” I also aim to shed new light on the ways in which the “refugee crisis” on Lesbos became ungovernable by law by noting, particularly, the special role of local courts in activating and encouraging social resistance.

In the following pages, I recount the organization of a small group of activists on the island of Lesbos at the onset of the refugee crisis<sup>4</sup> in 2015 and their encounters with the various national, regional, and global forces and agencies that moved in eventually to address the

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CONTEMPORARY STATES OF EMERGENCY: THE POLITICS OF MILITARY AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS (Didier Fassin & Mariella Pandolfi eds., 2010).

2. See generally Katerina Rozakou, *The Biopolitics of Hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the Management of Refugees*, 39 J. AM. ETHNOLOGICAL SOC'Y, no. 3, at 562 (2012) (illustrating an example of informal response to address shortfalls in sanctioned humanitarian response).

3. By this I mean critique that reflects the contingency, heterogeneousness, and social situatedness of the *ad hoc* response.

4. I put this term in quotes to draw attention to the political and other uses of both “refugee” and “crisis” that have come about in response to the 2015 inflows of individuals involved in migratory movements to and through Greece. See e.g., Didier Fassin, *La Economía Moral del Asilo. Reflexiones Críticas Sobre la “Crisis De Los Refugiados” de 2015 en Europa* [*The Moral Economy of Asylum. Critical Reflections on the 2015 “Refugee Crisis” in Europe*], 70 REVISTA DE DIALECTOLOGÍA Y TRADICIONES POPULARES, no. 2 (2016). On the political uses of the term ‘crisis’ see, JANET L. ROITMAN, *ANTI-CRISIS* (2014).

situation.<sup>5</sup> I focus specifically on two sites of heightened tension between *ad hoc* responders and sanctioned aid organizations. The first occurred during the initial months of these groups becoming active on the island when they were subjected to an increasingly aggressive regime of police regulation and legal processes; the second occurred roughly a year later when the inflow of migrants abated, but tensions between *ad hoc* responders and sanctioned organizations flared as conditions in migrant camps deteriorated<sup>6</sup> and migrant futures became more uncertain. Through these ethnographic accounts, I trace a developing understanding among my interlocutors that sanctioned agencies were playing by a troubling set of rules and priorities produced and regulated through intersecting powers of government, capital, gendering, and racialization. As state attempts to regulate their actions intensified, they began to see themselves as differentially positioned to these intersecting global/national forces—forces my local interlocutors believed were structuring migration to Europe in the familiar injurious terms of a neoliberal biopolitics of human disposability.<sup>7</sup> A year later, when tensions shifted from courtrooms to the field, I consider the widening of this differential positionality as my interlocutors undertook efforts that were more critically engaged with sanctioned agencies and the spaces and processes they operated and followed—efforts they described in the terms of a co-produced depoliticizing language of ethical humanitarianism.

I conducted ethnographic field research for this project on and off between 2015 and 2017 on the island of Lesbos primarily among *ad hoc*

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5. To be clear, Greece has been a pathway of human movement to Europe for much of recorded history. The term “refugee crisis” refers specifically to a dramatic uptick in human migratory flow to and through Greece from Turkey starting in the summer of 2015. For more on the early days of the migration boom through Lesbos, see Evthymios Papataxiarchis, *Being ‘There’: At the Front Line of the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ - Part 1*, 32 ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, no. 2, at 5 (2016); Evthymios Papataxiarchis, *Being ‘There’: At the Front Line of the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ - Part 2*, 32 ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, no. 3, at 3 (2016).

6. This deterioration was also noted by sanctioned aid organizations. See generally MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES, A DRAMATIC DETERIORATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS ON LESBOS (2017), [https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/msf\\_lesbos\\_vulnerability\\_report\\_1.pdf](https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/msf_lesbos_vulnerability_report_1.pdf).

7. Here, I refer to neoliberal practices of governing that expose subjects to the risk of abandonment not only by the state and corporate power but also socially. See Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). On neoliberalism, abandonment and human disposability see also, Athena Athanasiou and Othon Alexandrakis, “Conclusion: On an Emergent Politics and Ethics of Resistance,” in *Impulse to Act: A New Anthropology of Resistance and Social Justice*, ed. Othon Alexandrakis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

responders and migrants living at the Moria refugee camp but also with workers and volunteers at several aid organizations. At their request, I have taken steps to protect the identities of my interlocutors using pseudonyms by relaying their experiences both literally and figuratively through those of my primary interlocutor and by omitting information that would allow the reader to identify specific *ad hoc* organizations. I have taken particular care to protect the identity of “Mary,” whose narratives I use to weave together the account of social resistance I develop in this article. Mary, as with my other interlocutors involved in the *ad hoc* response, was proud of her humanitarian efforts but feared participation in this study might result in her being barred from entering the refugee camp or worse.

### I. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES AND THE COMING COLLECTIVE

The island of Lesbos is the first European location along a well-established route of migration from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, to the European Union through Turkey. During the summer of 2015, Syrians fleeing war in their homeland, along with others from the Middle East and various parts of Africa, began to move along this route in massive numbers.<sup>8</sup> Thousands arrived on the shores of Lesbos daily, catching local and national governments and the European Union unprepared, and in many ways, unable to respond. Islanders were also surprised. When I arrived on the island at the onset of the migration in 2015, my local interlocutors used the language of a “human tsunami” to describe the migration—a situation that would not abate for over ten months. When I returned in October 2016, many pointed to lifejackets and punctured dinghies still present along the beaches (Figure 1) while others talked about piles of discarded personal items along migrant footpaths worn into farmers’ fields. To my interlocutors, the lingering presence of these discarded objects and the marks left on the landscape evidenced both the magnitude of what happened and the scale of response it demanded.<sup>9</sup> In the following pages, I will consider how the different responses and tensions that emerged between *ad hoc* and state responses during this early period of the migration enabled a mode of

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8. In 2015, the UNHCR recorded 856,723 arrivals to Greece by sea. Lesbos received over 54,000 migrants between January and July 2015. During July the island received over 8,925 individuals. That number grew to 32,858 individuals in August, and continued to increase for months. UNHCR, “Lesbos Island Snapshot,” *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency* 2015.

9. On migrant materiality, see Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

collectivization that came to define an unexpected and politically significant idiom of humanitarian action.



*Figure 1: Punctured dinghy on the beach near Mitylene. Migrants would puncture their dinghies as they approached the beach fearing that they might be pushed back from land. Photo by the author, October 2016.*

Prior to the migration boom in 2015, the Greek state was focused on the “sovereign debt crisis” and the ongoing implementation of neoliberal austerity measures that had been imposed by the country’s international lenders<sup>10</sup> since 2010. These measures, among other things, drastically reduced the size of government, slashed social services, and, through reduction of wages and cutting of pensions, precipitated the mass impoverishment and heightened precarity of low-and-middle-class Greeks across the country. Some observers noted that austerity measures caused a small-scale humanitarian crisis that prompted the Médecins du Monde (MDM) and other international aid organizations to set up services in major city centers and beyond.<sup>11</sup> Although the

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10. In 2010, the so-called *troika* consisting of the European Union, International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank, provided Greece with three “bailout loans” in exchange for austerity measures.

11. On humanitarian response and the sovereign debt crisis, see generally JENNA LEIGH COUTINHO, *NAVIGATING HEALTH IN ‘CRISIS’: THE MINIMAL BIOPOLITICS OF HUMANITARIAN AID IN GREECE* (2016). The language of humanitarian crisis was also used in the media, Dionysis Marinou, *Η Ελλάδα Βιώνει Ανθρωπιστική Κρίση - Εννέα*

situation had stabilized, when migrants began to arrive on Lesbos in large numbers, they came to a place that had been governed through crisis management for nearly fifteen years, where the injuries of poverty and demoralization were becoming normalized for much of the population and the dream of a better life to come was still quite remote.

As the numbers of arriving migrants continued to grow, key EU and Greek state priorities shifted from economic reform by way of austerity to managing and monitoring the massive numbers of arrivals. Since the state was unable to fund a national response, the Greek effort was initially led by local governments at various arrival points. With migrant inflows showing no signs of abating, however, Greece soon appealed to the EU for aid—a request supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) European Director Vincent Cochetel who noted local efforts were “totally inadequate” and that the Greek islands of first arrival were in “total chaos.”<sup>12</sup> The EU subsequently deployed its own front-line solution consisting mainly of migrant “hotspots” supported by the UNHCR and a number of professional international aid organizations,<sup>13</sup> which were situated at key points of entry, including Lesbos.<sup>14</sup> At first, locals expected these hotspots to function primarily as monitoring and aid centers, much like the open reception/transit camps that were already active on the island. Many were surprised when these hotspots began to limit migrant movements so agents could classify those held as either “true refugees,” eligible for facilitated relocation within the European Union, or “economic migrants” to be deported. As the European Union’s relocation strategy generated friction among member states—many of which

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Αποκαλυπτικά Γραφήματα [Bbc: Greece Is Experiencing a Humanitarian Crisis - Nine Revealing Charts], *iefimerida* (2015); Ioanna Tsiganou, Η Ελλάδα Και Η Ανθρωπιστική Κρίση: Μεταξύ Κοινωνικής Πραγματικότητας Και Πολιτικού Πλεονασμού [Greece and the Humanitarian Crisis: Between Social Reality and Political Redundancy], *ΝΑΥΤΕΜΠΟΡΙΚΗ* (Mar. 26, 2015).

12. *Migrant ‘Chaos’ on Greek Islands – UN Refugee Agency*, BBC NEWS (Aug. 7, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33818193>.

13. Other organizations involved included Save the Children, International IRC, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

14. The European Union provided financial and administrative support for hotspots were placed under the authority of governments concerned. See *The Hotspot Approach to Managing Exceptional Migratory Flows*, EUROPEAN COMMISSION [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/multimedia/publications/the-hotspot-approach-to-managing-exceptional-migratory-flows\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/multimedia/publications/the-hotspot-approach-to-managing-exceptional-migratory-flows_en) (last updated Nov. 3, 2018).

Fassin explains that, despite initial intentions to use hotspots to manage migration, they quickly became sites of “summary human triage” and deportation without due process or the possibility of appeal. See Didier Fassin, *Hot Spots: What they Mean*, *CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* (June 29, 2016), <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/897-hotspots-what-they-mean>.

refused to accept any refugees at all<sup>15</sup>—and a new, controversial resettlement deal was struck with Turkey,<sup>16</sup> my interlocutors noted one final surprise in relation to the hotspots on their island. These camps appeared to no longer manage migration to the European Union but rather to facilitate mass migrant expulsions that were intended to discourage migration altogether.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the aim of the EU/state response to the migration appeared to shift from monitoring, to managing, to prevention, *ad hoc* efforts remained largely consistent. As migrants arrived on beaches, dead bodies were retrieved from the Mediterranean Ocean, large groups were rebuffed at unfriendly border crossings,<sup>18</sup> and exasperation over what was generally perceived to be the grave mishandling of the latest crisis to hit Greece became palpable on the island. Many locals did not wait for the state-backed professional aid agencies and sanctioned NGOs to “get it right” but began taking initiatives to address the migrants’ physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual needs. Some individuals provided arriving migrants with basic provisions like water and dry clothing on the beach. Others provided migrants with information on local means of transportation and ferry routes. Others opened their homes to the injured and to those wanting to rest or pray. Others attended to the dead. Many individuals and existing groups that

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15. The European Union proposed to manage the migrant inflow in part by redistributing refugees across Europe according to a quota system. This system was rejected by Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. See Katerina Linos et al., *Hungary and Slovakia Challenged Europe’s Refugee Scheme. They Just Lost Badly*, WASHINGTON POST (Sept. 8, 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/08/hungary-and-slovenia-challenged-europes-refugee-scheme-they-just-lost-badly/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.c760095966ed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/08/hungary-and-slovenia-challenged-europes-refugee-scheme-they-just-lost-badly/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c760095966ed).

16. On March 20, 2016, the European Union entered a controversial migrant exchange deal with Turkey that saw “irregular migrants” apprehended in the European Union returned to Turkey for asylum processing in exchange for already-processed Syrian migrants. This deal came with eased visa restrictions for Turkish citizens and roughly six billion euros. Hotspots became hubs of mass deportation. See *Migrant Crisis: EU-Turkey Deal Comes into Effect*, BBC NEWS (Mar. 20, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35854413>.

17. See Ruben Andersson, *Rescued and Caught: The Humanitarian-Security Nexus at Europe’s Frontiers*, in *THE BORDERS OF “EUROPE”: AUTONOMY OF MIGRATION, TACTICS OF BORDERING* 64, 65 (Nicholas De Genova ed., 2017) (explaining how the hotspots came to exemplify the seemingly paradoxical “humanitarian and securitarian” character of Europe’s borders, where liberal advances in relation to migration are typically cut short by new draconian measures aimed at deterrence).

18. On unfriendly borders in Greece, see Maurice Stierl, *Excessive Migration, Excessive Governance: Border Entanglements in Greek Eu-Rope*, in *THE BORDERS OF “EUROPE”: AUTONOMY OF MIGRATION, TACTICS OF BORDERING*, 210, 215-21 (Nicholas De Genova ed., 2017).



had been involved in local social support efforts prior to 2015<sup>19</sup>—efforts aimed mostly at supporting islanders struggling to make ends meet as austerity measures diminished livelihoods and eroded social services—became focused on the massive number of migrants’ needs.

By mid-summer of 2015, locals were working alongside growing numbers of international volunteers—again, many individuals (mostly short-term visitors), some loosely organized groups, and a few well-established, aid-oriented collectives from abroad—to address the situation in an *ad hoc* manner. Of note, to suggest that local and international actors and groups all worked together in some organized or otherwise coordinated way would be to mischaracterize what was happening in those early days of the migration. These responders worked alongside each other. At times, they cooperated. Some talented individuals developed a website to crowdsource information about the island and the still-unfolding situation and to facilitate communication among responders. Despite their efforts, however, face-to-face interactions, albeit increasingly frequent, were not regular or planned, and while the website became popular, it was not used by everyone. In fact, the website was criticized by some locals, who thought it was geared more toward international volunteer tourists (so-called voluntourists)<sup>20</sup> than supporting what they considered to be more sustained local efforts.

Beyond encounters in the field, responders came together when there were disagreements and friction unrelated to the actions of sanctioned agencies and their backers. These difficult moments were often resolved in assemblies and town hall meetings usually also involving local residents—deliberate spaces of democratic agonism where “what should be done” was worked out by those involved,

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19. Social support efforts, more commonly referred to as social solidarity efforts, proliferated across the country as austerity measures depleted livelihoods. See, e.g., Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, *Philanthropy or Solidarity? Ethical Dilemmas About Humanitarianism in Crisis-Afflicted Greece*, 24 SOC. ANTHROPOLOGY 167 (2016); Katerina Rozakou, *Socialities of Solidarity: Revisiting the Gift Taboo in Times of Crises*, 24 SOC. ANTHROPOLOGY 185 (2016); Evthymios Papataxiarchis, *Unwrapping Solidarity? Society Reborn in Austerity*, 24 SOC. ANTHROPOLOGY 205 (2016); Theodoros Rakopoulos, *Resonance of Solidarity: Meanings of a Local Concept in Anti-Austerity Greece*, 32 J. MOD. GREEK STUD. 313 (2014).

20. The term “voluntourists” describes tourists who undertake holidays that involve aiding some groups in society, restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment. See Catherine Liston-Heyes & Carol Daley, *Voluntourism, Sensemaking and the Leisure-Volunteer Duality*, 17 TOURIST STUD. 283, 284 (2016). Voluntourism is also associated with the re-evaluation of personal values, and personal searches for the “authentic.” See *id.* The present case also invites us to consider voluntourism’s connection to religious identity specifically, as many international volunteers on the island claimed to be there as and for “fellow Muslims.”

affected, and interested in the problem or situation.<sup>21</sup> Both field-based and the more deliberate spaces of interaction—spaces that came into formation around migrant landings and pathways—became important sites of collective becoming.

There is a growing body of poststructuralist political theory that examines the emergence of social mobilizations not determined or anticipated by particular political histories, projects, or commitments of various kinds but which came into formation around local critical events.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, I have contributed to this literature an account of collectivization resulting from irregular and uncoordinated but repeated interactions that leave traces activating the political potential of heterogeneous assemblages of individuals and groups.<sup>23</sup> Here, I would like to further this account of collectivization by attending to the resilience of the collective form that emerged from interactions among *ad hoc* responders as they came and went and as the critical events to which they were responding evolved.

On Lesbos, during the early days of the migration, repeated encounters—mostly positive, but also some more tense—left traces in the form of a growing sense of involvement with others in addressing a humanitarian crisis. This sense territorialized the social space of humanitarian action and gave it form, content, and direction that became understood by those involved as the unique effect of its constituent elements: the independent and intersecting actions and relations of those involved and invested. In other words, with time, individuals and groups pursuing a variety of projects, motivated by a variety of different interests and commitments, began to see themselves as interlaced with some collective effort that had become meaningful in ways that exceeded any specific undertaking. The collective effort consisted of smaller contributions on the beaches, along pathways, and in supply warehouses; it was made up of opening doors and prayers said over improvised graves. What the collective effort *meant*, however,

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21. See Julien Cossette, *Critical Encounters on the Road: Walking Migrants on an "Island Full of Busses"* 32-37 (2016) (unpublished Major Research Paper, York University).

22. See, e.g. ERNESTO LACLAU & CHANTAL MOUFFE, *HEGEMONY AND SOCIALIST STRATEGY: TOWARDS A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICS* (2d ed. 2001) (taking up the question of how broader transformative struggles emerge from local resistance movements, suggesting that the construction and nurturing of moments of interdependence or the construction of commonalities were critical to such mobilizations) ERNESTO LACLAU, *NEW REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION OF OUR TIME* (1990); see generally JUDITH BUTLER & ATHENA ATHANASIOU, *DISPOSSESSION: THE PERFORMATIVE IN THE POLITICAL* (2013) (contributing a more current critical account of non-sovereign agency in their exploration of new modalities of social mobilization).

23. See generally Alexandrakis, *supra* note 7.

emerged through a growing awareness of the assemblage of responders as encouraged by repeated encounters with each other; what it meant was an echo of collectivization.

Again, this is not to say that the work of responding to the migration produced a traditional social movement or allied effort. With time, and as interactions of various kinds became more frequent, those involved began to understand that their specific undertakings help address a humanitarian crisis that was generated elsewhere but unfolded locally at what was becoming a migration bottleneck—a state of affairs in which state-generated problems are unmet by state-backed solutions. Talk of doing the essential work became a common refrain evoked when expressions of willingness to cooperate and collaborate were called repeatedly.

Importantly, this talk coded an implicit moral critique: *the people* did what needed to be done for those harmed by some politics elsewhere while *the state*, playing its own politics, remained unresponsive. This talk of common participation within the collective effort, and the moral critique this effort communicated, underscored a dichotomous relation between the people of the collective and the state—a dichotomy that appeared to become starker as the humanitarian situation deteriorated and the work on the ground intensified. So, while individuals often talked about the meaning of the collective action in terms that reflected their subject positions, the overarching idea that their efforts contributed to a collective ethical response that addressed a humanitarian need (as much as a state failing) became increasingly unambiguous and common. International volunteers came and went, as did Greeks from other parts of the country. Local responders scaled up and down, participated and then did not, but the collective humanitarian work continued, despite state (in)actions, because it had to.

## II. FAMILIAR HUMANITARIANISM AND THE IMPULSE TO RESPOND

I met my interlocutor, Mary, through a mutual friend in August 2015.<sup>24</sup> Mary worked with what she called a “civic friendship group” that had been active on Lesbos for some time. Their focus before 2015 was on improving relations between those living on the island and their close neighbors in Turkey. She insisted that this was not a nationalist

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24. Given the nature of Mary’s identity, this interview will not have the standard citations generally requested by the Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies and the Bluebook.

project; instead, she explained, the group was interested in normalizing relations where recent events and politics promoted tensions.<sup>25</sup> She explained that the people of Lesbos had positive connections with the people of Turkey's nearby shore since "before Greece became Greece and Turkey became Turkey." Mary and her group were working to return to these positive relations.

Mary explained that the friendship group became involved with relief efforts as soon as large numbers of migrants began to arrive at the beaches. This happened quickly, she explained: Mary had friends who knew several individuals providing medical aid to newcomers and arranged for the friendship group to join the effort. In the weeks that followed, they met migrants at the beaches, provided essentials like dry clothes and water, and helped migrants to reach ferry boats bound for Athens. The group worked daily and witnessed scenes of joy, scenes of despair, and, as Mary put it, "everything in between." Mary further said the members of the friendship group would gather each night to debrief. As they talked about the day, they often noted similarities between their prior "friendship" efforts and their current efforts helping groups of migrants arriving from Turkey on their own. The ocean, tense politics, and unexpected interactions were all points of similarity. The current work, however, felt very different. It was certainly more intense and rawer, but Mary critically explained that it also felt as though the group's activities were "off script."

I found this idea of acting "off script" very compelling. She explained that there was no official word on how to handle what was happening, so the group drew on what social, cultural, material, and other resources they had to improvise. Mary eventually came to see this improvisation as a source of trouble for the state and local government. Indeed, the group had shifted from their friendship activities, which, perhaps unintentionally, reproduced political borders through programs that re-inscribed national frontiers, to activities that troubled borders on multiple fronts. This troubling stemmed, in part, from the group's commitment to responding to the unfolding humanitarian crisis no matter what. The commitment, in this case, advanced an impolitical or unregulated expression of common humanity—a humanity not qualified or negated by movement that performed an expression of the political

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25. The relations between Greece and Turkey have alternated between hostility and reconciliation since Greece became independent from the Ottoman Empire in 1832. Mary pointed to the periods of reconciliation as times of returning to an imagined "normal state of affairs." Interview with Mary in Mytilene, Greece, October 21, 2016.

without sovereignty.<sup>26</sup>

This sense that their actions were off script became visible as a broadly shared sentiment when the local government finally did mount a response. As the inflow of migrants grew—up to 6,000 a day at one point—and showed no signs of abating and prior to the inception of the hotspot strategy, pressure from the national government and the European Union mounted on the local authorities to begin monitoring and regulating migrant movements more closely. Local responders explained that lawmakers on the island passed a deeply problematic law making it illegal to transport unregistered migrants by any means, be it in private cars, taxis, or public transportation.<sup>27</sup> Large international humanitarian organizations active on the island, such as the UNHCR, MSF, and IRC, appeared to support the law by encouraging migrant transportation by authorized transfer to transit/reception camps only—an under-resourced solution that resulted in thousands walking across the sun-parched island.

Responders like Mary, who were involved in transporting migrants in their cars or who provided tickets for them to ride on the public bus network, were suddenly targeted by police—an operation that made the sense of acting off script very real for many individuals and groups. Yet, like many others, Mary refused to stop transporting migrants. She explained that the law was in line with the familiar neoliberal biopolitics of human disposability to which islanders had been exposed since 2010. They refused to play by the rules of administrators who treated humanitarianism as a mere technical undertaking in which migrants were economized as little more than objects of management. She explained that “governments might think this way, but people know a different way.” Mary explained her refusal in terms of acting on an impulse cultivated over time—an impulse she would not suppress.

She traced the history of this impulse to the 1920s when the people of Lesvos helped fleeing Greeks at the end of the Greko-Turkish War.<sup>28</sup>

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26. See Brett Neilson and Angela Mitropoulos, *Exceptional Times, Nongovernmental Spacings, and Impolitical Movements*, in *NONGOVERNMENTAL POLITICS* 469, 469 (Michael Feher et al. eds., 2007).

27. Nicolas Niarchos, *An Island of Refugees*, *THE NEW YORKER* (Sept. 16, 2015), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/an-island-of-refugees>; Zia Weise, *Greek Islanders Are Breaking the Law to Help Thousands of Desperate Migrants*, *PUB. RADIO INT'L* (June 18, 2015, 3:15 PM), <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-06-18/greek-islanders-are-breaking-law-help-thousands-desperate-migrants>.

28. In the final days of the Greko-Turkish War in 1922, over one hundred thousand Greeks fled as the Turkish army retook Smyrna and other areas that had been held by Greek forces since 1919. Lesvos received roughly fifty thousand refugees from the until-then Greek-controlled town of Aivali on the northwest Aegean coast of Turkey. This

For Mary, this history of caring for fleeing migrants reverberated into the present. To be sure, the memory of Greek refugees arriving to the island to find open doors and expressions of care had been recorded and retold in manifold ways. This narrative was still very present on the island. Indeed, opening doors to refugees from Smyrna was a backdrop for the friendship group's activities—activities that stretched the local response to the happenings of the 1920s into the present and in their periodic reworking provided space for reflection on the politics of response. The local response to Smyrna also sketched an ethics of care that sat in the near background of efforts to ease the harm caused by neoliberal austerity. This is all to say, the coming of Greek refugees from Smyrna was more than just a story that locals “tell themselves about themselves”<sup>29</sup>; it grounded an ethics and politics of response that made compliance with the regional government's prohibition on transporting migrants unlikely for Mary.

Transporting migrants was a necessary action and the right thing to do—this was something Mary said she felt “in her bones.” Others, whether or not they complied with the law, described a similar impulse to respond in ways that were becoming increasingly understood as off script. Of course, these impulses did not have a common history; rather, the assemblage of impulses expressed by responding individuals on the island represented a coming together of multiple cultivations and of diverse histories and commitments, both of local and international origins. Thus, these impulses held and expressed many worlds and lives-lived together in the present situation—a situation in which the actions motivated and informed by these impulses were set against the actions and motives of the authorities and their agents.

In other words, the impulses behind the diversity of unsanctioned responses to the humanitarian crisis on the island encouraged the possibility of collectivization not grounded or reducible to some ideological or historical commonality but rather on some point of convergence. In the case of migrant transportation, a point of convergence—this impulse to respond off script—was activated by antagonistic state action as a shared condition in the present. Every state attempt to regulate, interfere, or direct the humanitarian effort already underway on Lesbos produced disruptions in established humanitarian activities. Thus, attempted state intervention amplified an already shared sense of collective at the points of interaction where the collective was evoked and where traces of this evocation lingered

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caused a humanitarian problem on the island that was addressed, in large part, through individual and community acts of hospitality and care.

29. Cf. CLIFFORD GEERTZ, *THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES: SELECTED ESSAYS* 448 (1973).

with individuals and groups.

Mary came to see diverse responders come together to act as a collective several times and in different ways. This occurred in the field as individuals and groups responded to migrant needs. This also happened in other spaces, however, where migrants were absent. Mary recounted one example that occurred in the summer of 2015. She was on her way back to Mytilene from working at one of the beaches when she saw a mother and child at the side of the road. It was a wickedly hot day, and the two were clearly struggling. Mary stopped, got out of her car, and offered them water. They told Mary that they wanted to go register with the authorities but did not know where to go. Mary knew that to get to the registration center, these two individuals had hours of walking ahead of them. They would never make it by nightfall, so she decided to give them a ride in her car. According to Mary: "I knew I was breaking the law, but it was the right thing to do. They were withering. They'd never make it. Besides, I wasn't driving them to the port . . . I was taking them directly to Moria." They arrived at the Moria registration/transit camp in good time and the two passengers exited Mary's car. They went directly to the gate and entered a long line. Mary put her car in gear and began to pull away when a police officer stepped out in front of her vehicle from behind a parked truck. He motioned for her to get out—Mary was arrested for human trafficking.

News of the arrest spread quickly. Members of the friendship group reached out to a lawyer and to their contacts in the field. Mary met with the lawyer a few times to talk about her defense in court. On the day of the trial, Mary said she appeared with several hundred local and international responders and the press. Mary's lawyer was prepared to argue that the charges should be thrown out. The aid workers who filled the courtroom, the hallways, and sidewalk were buzzing about the law being ill-conceived, harmful, ineffective, and perhaps even illegal. The trial ended as quickly as it started—all charges were dismissed. Mary continued to transport migrants she encountered on the road. She attended trials of other responders charged with trafficking. Mary also participated in responder-organized convoys that drove women, children, and the elderly to transit centers. Eventually, the local police stopped enforcing the law.<sup>30</sup> Mary likened the collective action to various examples of popular resistance undertaken by what she referred to as masses of "disobedient citizens" across Greece—cases where uncoordinated but synergistic and persistent action resulted in aborted

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30. Mary was unsure if the law had been modified or rescinded. In fact, not one of my interlocutors could say with certainty if the law, or some version of the law, was not still on the books. Regardless, and more to the point, everyone regarded the transportation ban as "over."

legal processes and laws being abandoned or rendered less or completely ineffective. She cited various examples of this kind of action, including that of tenants refusing to vacate foreclosed homes, thousands of commuters refusing to pay increased road tolls and transit fares, and a boom in the illegal distribution and sale of locally grown tobacco. Mary described blocked courtrooms in the case of tenants, abandoned legal actions in the case of commuters, and the undoing of various “austerity laws”<sup>31</sup> as in the case of tobacco sales.

Like these other cases Mary noted, she, along with the other members of the friendship group and their contacts, considered this generally uncoordinated collective action that coalesced around points of trouble a complete success. On Lesbos, they beat a judicial process that threatened to both limit their actions and consolidate authority over the humanitarian response with the state and its agents. Everyone was acting off script: some of those actions happened to be in-sync with authorized responses while others were not. Where they were not, the resulting friction produced defensive activations informed by a shared impulse to respond. The coalescence of these actions reinforced the collective as such. They were differentially positioned to forces of authority that applied a neoliberal humanitarian regime that exposed migrants to new uncertainties and danger in the pursuit of administrative efficiency and so-called “regional security.”

### III. CRITICAL HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND PRESERVING A RELATION TO MOVEMENT

In the spring of 2014, well before the migrant boom, Greek and EU funding was used to convert Moria from a military base to a migrant reception center.<sup>32</sup> The site was enclosed by razor-wire fencing and equipped with dormitory-style shelters in eleven prefabricated structures. The center was operated by the Greek police, and the interior structures were maintained by Greek authorities. In the summer of 2015, professional humanitarian groups including the IRC, MDM, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), PRAKSIS, and the UNHCR moved in to provide services in the camp while Frontex carried out

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31. Here, by “austerity laws,” Mary was referring specifically to troika-mandated tax reforms that raised the cost of everyday items; although she and my other interlocutors also used the term to describe changes in labour, property and other laws they thought impoverished Greeks. By her estimation, social action that “undid” austerity laws rendered them unenforceable or otherwise circumvented their intended effects.

32. Again, due to its proximity to Turkey, Lesbos has received a steady flow of migrants for decades. Prior to the establishment of the reception center, migrants were expected to report to police stations.



screening and Greek Interior Ministry officials managed registration. The camp was designed to hold a maximum of seven hundred occupants, which was later upped to one thousand with the addition of portable housing units as the migration intensified. This fell far short, however, of the total need on the island, which was seeing daily arrivals between three thousand and six thousand people. Working with the European Commission, the national government of Greece selected Moria for the hotspot program in October 2015, but despite the infusion of monetary resources and personnel that came with this designation, the camp still struggled to register incoming migrants, let alone provide aid. This resulted in the opening of an overflow site as well as many informal camps around the island.

By April 2016, as the Western Balkan route to the European Union closed at Greece's northern border and it entered its migrant exchange deal with Turkey that triggered mass deportations, the numbers of migrants arriving at Greek shores declined dramatically—down 90 percent compared to the previous month. At this time, the friendship group felt they were no longer needed on the beaches and along pathways. They turned their attention to Moria and specifically to helping unaccompanied youth living at the site since conditions at the camp appeared to be worsening and assessment and relocation times continued to grow.

I first went to Moria on my own in November 2016 following loose directions Mary had provided. She told me the name of a nearby village and said the camp was located at the top of a hill. As I approached the village, I saw two large water tankers and decided to follow them. There was a point near the top of the hill where Greece's national telecom, Cosmote, cut out and my cell phone automatically switched to Turk Tel—a coincidence, perhaps, but one that left me surprised and thinking about unexpected discontinuities and markers of place.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, as I approached the top and my phone switched back to Cosmote, I suddenly found myself driving alongside a seemingly endless row of parked cars lining empty, overgrown farmland scattered with garbage and makeshift tents—another unexpected and certainly unusual experience. Then, before I had a chance to wonder who was living in these shelters,<sup>34</sup> I found myself coming alongside a large cement wall topped

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33. Cf. Yael Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* 40 (2012) (describing how the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot land parcels were divided and the difficulties the maps department faced).

34. I later discovered that these tents were part of Moria's "exterior" camp, set up by various volunteer organizations for migrants who could not be accommodated in Moria itself. This exterior camp featured a clinic, a child-friendly area, enclosed restrooms, a mosque, kitchens, and a tea distribution center. The tents migrants lived in, however,

with barbed wire and loud speakers (Figure 2). An armored riot police bus was parked in the shade just up ahead. I found a spot to park where someone had pulled away along the row of vehicles. I opened the door and stood to get my bearings; I could hear conversations just over the wall in what sounded like Arabic and Bengali, the ruffling sound of loose tarp in the wind, and a generator humming. A security camera mounted on top of a tall post rotated slowly.



*Figure 2: Moria refugee camp. Photo by the author, October 2016.*

My arrival at the camp was abrupt and a little disorienting. I could not imagine how children would process this place, especially if they knew that they would be living there for the foreseeable future. Mary explained that unaccompanied young people were on almost every migrant boat from Turkey. When groups of migrants arrived at the camp, unaccompanied youth were immediately separated for quick registration and sorting. Children under twelve, youth with babies of

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offered little protection against the elements, and safety was a constant concern. Although the interior and exterior camp were situated next to one another, they operated completely independently of each other. The *ad hoc* responders who helped establish and operate this camp described ongoing tensions between their group and the Moria administration.

their own, and girls in general were moved on immediately from Moria to registration centers in Athens and to other safer camps. Children over twelve and boys in general were assigned to a separate area away from Moria's general population. These children were considered old enough to take care of themselves in the refugee camp.

While I was on the island, there were about ninety children at Moria between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Another ninety or so were out in the community in housing organized by various aid agencies. Mary was concerned for the children at Moria. They were living in a large group setting under the loose supervision of a rotating roster of aid workers. They did not attend school; whatever programming was available to them was occasional and, as she put it, "less than nourishing." Many children would not leave the sleeping area. Fights were not uncommon. Mary, and a few others from various *ad hoc* organizations, approached the administrators of Moria with a proposal to provide these children with some positive distraction. They offered to take up to forty children and their minders on daily excursions—short trips where the children could have fun, learn something about an occupation, have lunch out, and then return. The administrators initially refused, but the group eventually persuaded them that removing roughly half the youth population daily would likely ease tensions. Indeed, with time the fighting became less frequent. The police at Moria's gates still treated the group with suspicion and randomly denied them access to the camp—but things went smoothly overall. As Mary put it, "they like to remind everyone that they're in charge . . . organizations like ours are always on the outside."

On one excursion I participated in, the children were taken to a closed amusement park in Mytilene and allowed to ride the bumper cars. They were then loaded back on the bus and taken up the nearby mountain to a pottery workshop. After a brief tour of the facility and demonstration, the group was taken to a café and lookout point. Most children took selfies with the Turkish coastline in the distance. Those with whom I spoke expressed deference and gratitude to Mary's group and to the staff who accompanied them. They described leaving Moria, even if only for a few hours, as a relief. One boy told me that, for him, his bed was the only safe spot at the camp: he felt nervous and afraid everywhere else. Outings like the one we were on allowed him to see "something good," as he put it, and to relax and think. His friend echoed this sentiment and added he never expected to be on Lesbos for as long as he had—the outings helped him to remember that his journey was not over. He was stuck but hoped to be on his way again soon. I shared with Mary what these boys had told me.

She explained that, not long ago, the land on which Moria was built used to be a campground for children. She, in fact, had spent time there as a young girl. For Mary, the plight of the boys represented a stark inversion of her experiences on the same land. What was an open campground that encouraged friendship and wellbeing had become a military site turned migrant camp that promoted isolation and stillness. She went on to lament what she described as the mismanagement of Moria: the infrequent garbage collection that led to growing piles of reeking refuse; the constant power outages that plunged the camp into darkness at night; and the lack of facilities to provide education and other programming for children. However, my interlocutor pointed to the seemingly endless administrative processing times that resulted in older male children languishing for months as Moria's most egregious failing. She attributed this situation to poor staff training and constant politically driven, poorly communicated, changes to the relocation program itself. According to Mary, "They're not treated well because they're migrants. They're an administrative problem because they're older minors. They're not worthy of care or special attention because they're boys." When they first began to interact with Moria, Mary and her group understood that keeping *ad hoc* responders out was a strategy of state humanitarianism as administrative undertaking intended to produce a controlled, warehouse-able population by structuring conditions of becoming still. As they became aware of the plight of the unaccompanied boys, however, they began to see that, beyond control, stillness could further be understood as a gendered form of abandonment.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Moria fit the established narrative of official humanitarian response as shaped by a deeply morally fraught, neoliberal, transnational biopolitics of human disposability.<sup>36</sup>

Mary's group pushed against the stillness to which unaccompanied boys were subjected by offering programming that sustained them, in part, by helping them preserve some relation to movement. Other *ad hoc* responders intervened in other ways: some offered off-site medical services to migrants with day passes; others provided legal support

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35. See ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI, *ECONOMIES OF ABANDONMENT: SOCIAL BELONGING AND ENDURANCE IN LATE LIBERALISM* 107 (2011) (describing how the view of gender identity can affect political operations).

36. By 2018, the population of Moria had expanded and conditions were deteriorating further. Various news outlets were reporting child suicides, rampant rape, and near constant brawls at the site. The average wait time to be transferred out of Moria—whether back to Turkey, onward to other parts of Greece, or to other EU countries—had grown to two years. See Lorenzo Tondo, "We Have Found Hell": Trauma Runs Deep for Children at Dire Lesvos Camp," *THE GUARDIAN*, October 3, 2018.

delivered to those living in the camp by various means;<sup>37</sup> still others pushed against the administration's closed-gate policy by continually requesting access to the camp. Again, this was not a coordinated effort or a traditional social movement *per se*.<sup>38</sup> These were actions that, while taken independently of each other, evoked an unfixed, inessential collective front—a broader effort consistent with the ethics and politics of action dichotomous to official response seeded during the early days of the migration. Insofar as this collective effort expressed a critique and posed a challenge to the normative frameworks of state-backed humanitarian work, their efforts generated a trajectory that in turn created political possibility. Again, this possibility was not the result of some coordinated coming together but an effect of interlaced allied undertakings coming into critical relationality as pressure from their antagonistic others—the sanctioned humanitarian apparatus—persisted.

#### IV. FORMULATING HUMANITARIAN POPULISM

The night I arrived at Mytilene, I heard what sounded like a large crowd assembling down the road from my accommodation. By the time I arrived to see what was happening, the crowd was on the move (Figure 3). Participants were carrying signs and chanting anti-fascist slogans. I saw adults with their children, elderly grandparents pushing strollers, individuals wearing scrubs, and others in high visibility vests. The march was loud and boisterous but not uninviting. Mary was among them. The scene looked very much like demonstrations I had witnessed in Athens, especially the more recent anti-austerity actions that drew together diverse groups. I spoke with a few individuals. They explained that this was not the first anti-fascist rally in Mytilene. They were marching that night, like on previous nights, because they rejected the Far Right and its politics of hate and intimidation. They also came to

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37. See e.g., *About Us*, LEGAL CENT. LESBOS, <http://www.legalcentrelesbos.org> (last visited Oct. 4, 2018) (describing the Legal Centre as one of the most well-known legal aid organizations on the island).

38. By this I mean not recognizable as a “new social movement” as per the actions since the 1960s. See Laclau & Mouffe, *supra* note 22; ALBERTO MELUCCI, *NOMADS OF THE PRESENT: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY* (John Keane & Paul Mier eds., 1989). Nor is it recognizable as a so-called third-wave activist intervention. See Jeffrey S. Juris, *Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space and Emerging Logics of Aggregation*, 39 AM. ETHNOLOGIST 259 (2012); *INSURGENT ENCOUNTERS: TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE POLITICAL* (Jeffrey S. Juris & Alex Khasnabish eds., 2013); Maple Razsa & Andrej Kurnik, *The Occupy Movement in Žižek's Hometown: Direct Democracy and a Politics of Becoming*, 39 AM. ETHNOLOGIST 238 (2012).

support speakers who would be addressing the crowd after the march—a mix of well-known local responders and activists. According to one protester: “This is Mytilene. We are all anti-fascists here! This is a place of refuge. We all work for this and they can’t stop us!”



*Figure 3: Anti-fascist protest in Mytilene. Photo by the author, October 2016.*

At the time, I did not fully appreciate what he meant when he said, “we all work for this” and “they can’t stop us.” Mary explained that local efforts to support migrants had been singled out by Greece’s neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, as a threat to the job security and personal safety of “ethnic Greeks.” Moreover, the local government and its various partners had also begun to use a similar security language to justify the regulation of ad hoc responders and the discouraging of migrant flows. Indeed, by 2016, Lesbos was being cited by politicians and administrators across Greece and Europe, again and again, as a threat when discussing European political unity, local social stabilities, and the possibility of terrorist violence.<sup>39</sup> Demonstrators rejected the racist totalitarian pronouncements at the heart of Golden Dawn’s politics. They also rejected the racialization and implicit economization of migrants at the heart of “regulation for stability and security” language employed by politicians and others associated with the state and its partners. They countered all this on the streets that night by drawing attention to the similarities between fascist discourses and state action

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39. Anna Triandafyllidou, *A “Refugee Crisis” Unfolding: “Real” Events and Their Interpretation in Media and Political Debates*, 16 *J. IMMIGR. & REFUGEE STUD.* 198 (2017).

and by demanding more support for efforts that improved the lives of migrants.

The protesters echoed a moral sentiment<sup>40</sup> I would repeatedly hear in the field from nearly every ad hoc responder I spoke with: to care for people fleeing war, devastation, and poverty is right; subjecting these people to the violence of detention and summary deportation is wrong. To be sure, the sentiment behind this language, and the language itself, was not new on Lesbos; indeed, the line in the sand between responders and the authorities had been drawn over a year back, and the moral critique of the authorized response had been voiced ever since. As the migration situation changed and the terrain of humanitarian action shifted from the beaches and the fields to migrant camps, the ad hoc responders' message had persisted, essentially unchanged. Its deployment in a political offensive (the protest) rather than a defensive context (in response to litigation or stonewalling in the field), however, appeared to me to be new, as was the fact that non-responders were also using this language. It appears the message of ad hoc responders resonated with them and became a resource in a broader struggle.

We might trace the coming political relevance of ad hoc humanitarian work to the emergence of caring as a mode of critical agency cultivated among responders since the onset of the mass migration. Their acts of care troubled and thereby politicized the account of migration on which the authorized humanitarian response was based<sup>41</sup> and according to which the authorities sought to regulate other humanitarian actors. Their acts of care produced tensions that positioned ad hoc responders as defenders of human life opposite a neoliberal biopolitics of population management.<sup>42</sup> Care became a site where differentially embedded individuals could contest and politically mobilize with others the injuries the state was willing to inflict.<sup>43</sup> In this, the care ad hoc responders performed and expressed for migrants resonated with acts of care that pushed against state-backed injury in other spaces—especially the care-work performed by “social solidararians” across Greece.<sup>44</sup>

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40. See DIDIER FASSIN, *HUMANITARIAN REASON: A MORAL HISTORY OF THE PRESENT* 1 (2012).

41. See MIRIAM IRIS TICKTIN, *CASUALTIES OF CARE: IMMIGRATION AND THE POLITICS OF HUMANITARIANISM IN FRANCE* 3 (2011).

42. FASSIN, *supra* note 40, at 226-27.

43. Athena Athanasiou & Othon Alexandrakis, *Conclusion: On an Emergent Politics and Ethics of Resistance*, in *IMPULSE TO ACT: A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY OF RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE* 250 (Othon Alexandrakis ed., 2016).

44. See generally Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, *Philanthropy or Solidarity? Ethical Dilemmas About Humanitarianism in Crisis-Afflicted Greece*, 24 *SOC. ANTHROPOLOGY* 167 (2016); Katerina Rozakou, *Socialities of Solidarity: Revisiting the Gift Taboo in Times of*

Mary considered the unification of migrant and Greek issues to be a positive development—one that benefitted everyone. She noted, however, that this change had sparked opposition. Ultrationalists and neoconservative critics often pointed to cases of hostility against migrants on the islands to suggest migration was harmful to struggling Greeks. On these islands—especially Kos<sup>45</sup>—the response to migration was unambiguously hostile, with some prefectures declaring they were anti-migrant and going so far as to raise black flags if challenged. Actors in these places talked about migration as an existential threat—a refrain allied critics repeated when disparaging protest actions like the one on Lesbos. On the other hand, some critics questioned the conflation of migrant and local issues based on the implied “equivalence of suffering,” as it were, between the two populations in question. Employing a rather crude economics of compassion, these critics suggested that migrants were worthier of sympathy as their suffering was perceived to be greater than that of local Greeks. My interlocutors associated this criticism with agents of the state who had a stake in maintaining multiple distinctions between the “citizen,” “other,” and individuals associated with sanctioned aid organizations who rationalized their efforts in terms of addressing misfortune.

Mary rejected both critiques. She explained that inclusion of both migrant and local issues in the protest space brought a broader social justice issue into focus. This issue, she continued, was relevant to everyone. For her, these protests afforded an opportunity to rethink “the people” beyond the usual identity politics. It also clarified that although the struggles people faced were not all the same struggles and the futures these people imagined were not necessarily the same futures—in this specific context—they could voice a demand for justice, together, in the same direction.<sup>46</sup> This effectively opened the limits and potential of demos<sup>47</sup> beyond the constraints of the sovereign nation, just as it evoked a national/global figure of authority. As interference in the ad

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*Crises*, 24 SOC. ANTHROPOLOGY 185 (2016); Daniel M. Knight, *Wit and Greece's Economic Crisis: Ironic Slogans, Food, and Antiausterity Sentiments*, 42 AM. ETHNOLOGIST 230 (2015); Theodoros Rakopoulos, *Resonance of Solidarity: Meanings of a Local Concept in Anti-Austerity Greece*, 32 J. MOD. GREEK STUD. 313 (2014); Othon Alexandrakis, *Incidental Activism: Graffiti and Political Possibility in Athens, Greece*, 31 CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY 272 (2016).

45. Mark Mackinnon, *Welcome Turns Increasingly Hostile in Kos as Migrant Numbers Grow*, THE GLOBE AND MAIL (last updated May 15, 2018), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/welcome-turns-increasingly-hostile-in-kos-as-migrant-numbers-grow/article26241534/>.

46. Cf. SARA AHMED, THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EMOTION 189 (2004) (describing how feminists could gain power through the solidarity of supporting other movements).

47. The people, or political subjects, of a state.



hoc response sparked a non-essential becoming of the political (thus structuring the possibility of a resonant critical assemblage performing acts of social resistance from within the very texture of humanitarianism itself), the resonances this politics produced with local protest spaces made possible a radicalization of the social imagination.

Now, I am not suggesting that these responders be considered political agents of some coherent post-national leftist populism. To be clear, the formulation of humanitarian populism I seek to develop here is not intended as a descriptive category but rather as an analytical approach that appreciates the political significance of humanitarian responses symbolically constituted as popular, or of “the people,” through relations of antagonism with perceived agents of the status quo.<sup>48</sup> Antagonism is thus a mode of identification in which the relation between the form of humanitarian populism and its content is given by the very process of establishing who the opponents of the responders are.<sup>49</sup> In the present case, the opponents or agents of the status quo are an agglomeration of local and global players that impede, oppress, and exploit ad hoc responders and their allies to advance their own agendas.

This is a dynamic that was broadly legible even to those uninvolved in the relief effort as symptomatic of the present political moment in Greece. Thus, the humanitarian effort on the island found allies in many anti-austerity activists both locally and across the country. To these allies, the struggle of ad hoc responders presented, unambiguously, the moral face of a broader effort to survive neoliberal authoritarianism and the biopolitics of human disposability on which it hinges. Moreover, these responders distilled the situation into very compelling, straightforward, and relatable terms: those who care about the vulnerable masses versus state actors and their global partners serving their own strategic interests. In this, the ad hoc humanitarian response on Lesbos resonated with the broader realm and scale of an established political sentiment that posited the Greek precariat as victims of some cruel global economics channeled through complicit local political actors.

I would like to suggest the possibility that this resonance did more than just broaden established resistance efforts; it also contributed to its resilience. Again, beyond Lesbos, ad hoc responders were relatable as political subjects pursuing a modality of everyday justice not unlike anti-austerity support efforts elsewhere in the country. Responders supporting migrants at various reception centers and along pathways

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48. Cf. Víctor Giménez Aliaga, *Whose Populism? Which Democracy?*, 58 ANTHROPOLOGY NEWS 79 (2017).

49. See generally POPULISM AND THE MIRROR OF DEMOCRACY (Francisco Panizza ed. 2005).

across Greece provided a heightened sense of nonlinear interconnectedness<sup>50</sup> with a new struggle in open conflict with the state to the polyvalent, albeit situated, politics of relationality that constituted the Greek precariat as collective. This expanded relationality has the potential to introduce a radical charge of non-sovereign ethics—ethics uncircumscribed by nationalist presuppositions—to local efforts, and slow domestication or normalization of anti-austerity humanitarian resistance action, or social solidarity, in other parts of Greece.<sup>51</sup> Put more directly, as Mary suggested:

Taking unaccompanied minors to an amusement park is not unlike neighbors coming together to fix a rotting playground in some village on the mainland. We're both fighting forces that produce stillness in children. Our efforts push against this, not because the children are Greeks or Syrians or whatever, but because the children are children.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the preceding pages, I argued that the humanitarian care work that sparked conflict between *ad hoc* responders and authorized humanitarian actors on Lesbos can be understood to express a nonessentialist critique of state-backed humanitarianism which, in turn, became the basis for a reflexive actualization of relationality and collectivization among *ad hoc* responders. I showed that the collective form that emerged became fertile terrain for consolidating ethics and politics of critical humanitarianism that echoed, in form and content, populist expressions of everyday justice current in the rest of Greece. In this, the efforts of *ad hoc* responders on the island can be located within a broader ecology of resistance action that opposes neoliberal authoritarianism, contests crisis governmentality,<sup>52</sup> and gestures to alternatives, new social imaginaries, and the hope for a better life to

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50. By “nonlinear interconnectedness,” I mean a sense of connection evoking assemblage rather than direct intersectionality. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

51. Cf. ANDREA MUEHLEBACH, *THE MORAL NEOLIBERAL: WELFARE AND CITIZENSHIP IN ITALY* 41 (2012) (describing the view of ethical citizenship that linked all of the members of a single nation).

52. By this I mean the contestation of governing through crisis management and—as we have seen in Greece—the production of dispensable and disposable populations as a result.

come.

It is worth noting the special role courts played in the above account. Courts, and specifically the times that led up to court appearances and the bringing together of people at hearing locations, activated relationalities among my interlocutors and concentrated the figure of authority. Indeed, court actions encouraged a process of popular identification by communicating, very plainly and very publicly, that their care work located *ad hoc* responders as subjects of regulation rather than partners in action. Moreover, the figure of authority that came into formation around court process—a figure that drew to it professional humanitarian organizations unwilling to challenge the court—persisted as a counter to the collective of *ad hoc* responders thereafter providing open space for the mapping of new accounts and other content as frictions persisted.

Finally, this work also invites us to attend to the synergies or resonances that might emerge when local populisms intersect. These resonances in the present case did not lead to the emergence of one heterogeneous movement *per se*.<sup>53</sup> Instead, they provided each with cultural resources in the form of narratives, histories, and symbols that sustained and invigorated each expression without necessarily subsuming either. This resonance also held the potential to widen and deepen the field of opponents to a given populism. Again, in the case of *ad hoc* responders on Lesvos, this resonance allowed my interlocutors to see common strategies the state employed in structuring conditions of becoming “precarious” for local islanders and “migrant” for those individuals who entered processes of registration and assessment. With this broadened understanding, my interlocutors began to see Moria as a “little Greece,” where migrants were subjected to a particularly egregious version of the same inefficiencies, diminished services, and poor planning by the local population.

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53. *Cf.* ERNESTO LACLAU, ON POPULIST REASON 152 (2005) (describing how a heterogeneous movement creates complexities in the populist camp).