Outsourcing hotspot governance within the EU
Cultural mediators as humanitarian–border workers in Greece

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Abstract: Responding to the self-declared "Mediterranean migration crisis" in 2015, the European Commission launched a Hotspot Approach to speed up the handling of incoming migrants in the "frontline states" of Greece and Italy. A key element in this operation is the identification of those eligible for asylum, which requires effective communication across cultural and linguistic difference between the asylum system and the migrants, facilitated by officially designated "cultural mediators." We assess the hotspot governance as a form of outsourcing border control within the EU territory. Beyond sorting out and separating migrants into the categories of deservingness and undeservingness, we propose that the hotspot mechanism represents "governing by communication," with cultural mediators as key players in this humanitarian–bordering strategy. A focus on how cultural mediators provide the precarious human labor for this governance, offers, we argue, a productive inroad into the ways in which the hotspot economies of deterrence, containment, and care sustain inequalities embedded in race, socioeconomic status, and citizenship.

Standing in the port of Piraeus in Athens at the beginning of April 2016, Raymon, an Arabic-speaking interpreter and volunteer, pointed out a man who attentively observed the crowd of refugees gathered at the E2 gate. He explained that a week earlier, this man had approached him on the upper deck of a ferry connecting the islands of Lesvos, Chios, and Samos to Athens, and made him a proposition:

> This man understood that I was working for a humanitarian organization, and after a few moments of talking about what exactly I do, he told me not to speak to and trust every refugee on this ferry; that there are many dodgy subjects among them, acting as the refugee. Then, he admitted to me that he was a police-secret service agent appointed on the ferry to identify potential smugglers among the refugee multitude. Before leaving he advised me not to miss my chances; that the refugees were here to stay in Greece, that this is Europe's plan to dump them all here. "We will need people like you. Who speak good Greek but also their language; you speak their language and you are dark, you can easily pass as a refugee and make them talk. (Personal Conversation with Raymon, April 2016)

In this odd encounter, Raymon was being offered work in the "hotspot-Greece." We rely on his experience as a starting point to critically investigate how people with precarious, undecided, or temporary status in Greece may become implicated in the emerging economy of what, in policymaking and media, has been framed as the "European refugee crisis." In this context, Raymon's position is illuminative: a person born in Greece as the son of parents who had migrated from Sudan in the 1980s, but due to *jus sanguinis* not recognized by the state as a Greek citizen.[1]

The declaration of the "crisis" in 2015 brought with it a new phase of militarized migration management whereby the five border islands of Greece—Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros, and Kos—were quickly instituted as the sites of "registration and

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[1] In Greece, children acquire Greek citizenship if at least one of the parents is a Greek national. However, in 1997, 2001, and 2005, the Greek government launched regularization procedures for undocumented migrants, who would receive a temporary residence permit (white card) while their application for a more permanent status (green card, for one, two, or five years) was being examined. Further, in 2015, the citizenship code was amended to enable a pathway to citizenship through education in Greek primary, secondary, and/or post-secondary institutions, rendering 'Greek' anyone who 'participates in Greek culture' (Hellenic Parliament 2015). Citizenship can also be gained transitively by an unmarried non-adult child of a migrant and a nonnational parent to a non-adult Greek national can apply for a residency permit (which must be renewed annually). Two hundred thousand 'second generation' migrants—children, teenagers, and young adults—stood to gain Greek citizenship through the EU-required amendment to the citizenship code (Generation 2.0 2015)" (see Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020, 1080).

identification centers," termed "hotspots" (European Commission 2015), to manage what the European Commission (2019) terms "mixed migration flows." The measures have raised much critique among humanitarian actors, critical scholars, and in civil society. Scholarly literature has already shown that hotspots accomplish a process of differentiation involving variable attributions of agency, choice, freedom, or the lack thereof, all of which silence the actual subjects and transform them into objects of migration management (Franck 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018; Vradis et al. 2018; Lisle and Johnson 2019; Perkowski and Squire 2019; Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2020, 1). Pallister-Wilkins (2018, 12) argues that humanitarian NGOs are gradually enfolded into the "spatially disaggregated network of the Hotspot Approach," so that the work of spatial segregation is increasingly distributed to nonstate actors. From the migrants' point of view, an emerging scholarship approaches hotspots through their desperate forms and practices of resistance: migrants' efforts to leave the island for the mainland, their struggles against deportation, their claims for right to asylum, as well as their agency within the confinement of the hotspot (Dimitriadi 2017; Tazzioli 2017; Pinkerton 2019; Ozguc 2020; Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020).

Building on this critique, we focus specifically on cultural mediation as a technology of governance, a practice explicitly advanced by the EU in the hotspot context.[2] As Rethimiotaki (2019, 81) notes: "The new European Agenda on Migration in May 2015 set among its five priorities the support provision to member states under pressure in order to obtain adequate reception capacity including the use of cultural expertise in handling the situation." Cultural mediators are instrumental for this capacity because of their ability to accelerate processes of communication between asylum seekers and the refugee regime: they literally translate across differences, both linguistic and cultural. The *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, launched September 23, 2020, further emphasizes the need for such labor throughout Europe as it aims at more efficient and swift practices of preliminary sorting at the gates of Europe (European Commission 2020).

In Greece, as well as in Italy, people like Raymon have been invited to staff the hotspot infrastructure, the NGOs, and even the military, in the role of cultural mediators whose linguistic and cultural capital is highly needed yet poorly valued in EU governance, preoccupied as it is by border control as much as humanitarian provision. Humanitarian organizations are increasingly using cultural mediators in their work, as part of the turn toward promoting multiculturalism and tackling racism and xenophobia (Theodosiou, Aspioti, Papagiannopoulou, and Panagiotopoulou). Besides purely humanitarian spaces, such as community centers where some refugees act as aid-workers (Malkin 2015), cultural mediation is employed in strict policing where border guards and other officials encounter migrants (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; DeBono 2019). In the hotspot regime, the role of cultural mediators is bolstered as they are involved in both humanitarian work *and* bordering. Following the call by the European Commission (2016) for increased reception capacity in Greece, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) provided emergency funding in 2016 for hiring more cultural mediators and interpreters in Greece, followed by support for the same purpose in 2018 (EASO 2016, 2018). Over the past four years, cultural mediation has grown into an integral part of hotspot governance in Greece.

We consider the practice of cultural mediation as illuminative of hotspot governance in two ways. First, it shows how the operation of humanitarian–bordering in the hotspots depends on effective communication facilitated by cultural mediators. Second, it sheds light on the ways in which illegalization and precarity intersect

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[2]Discussion on cultural mediation in Europe dates back to the 1980s, whereas in Greece reference to cultural mediation has coincided with the implementation of relevant EU-funded projects in Greece in the 1990s and 2000s. These projects tackled racism and xenophobia and promoted the practice of multiculturalism (see Theodosiou et al. 2015, 6).

with the local labor market, and how labor ties into the overlapping European "crises" of migration and economy (on "crises," see Tazzioli, Garelli, and De Genova 2018; Perkowski and Squire 2019). Cultural mediators are typically migrants or children of migrants from "global south" countries, who, after living in Greece without citizenship for years, or all of their life, suddenly discover themselves in the role of "accepted economic migrants" supplying for the demand of a specific form of humanitarian–bordering labor. This requires from them a mingling of a "politics of alienation with a politics of care, and a tactic of abjection and one of reception" (Walters 2011, 145), which entails performing a multifaceted migrant role to various audiences — including their employers and colleagues, the asylum seekers and refugees with whom they work, the local migrant communities, and personal life circles. Focusing on this boundary figure — working at once within and without the system — helps not only in critically unpacking and denaturalizing the binary of refugee versus economic migrant, but also in revealing a particular technology of governance currently at play in Europe: the outsourcing of border control within the EU.

A growing literature discusses the European migration regime as connected to the off-sourcing and out-sourcing of the borders of Europe, and how the European Union carries out its "border-work" far beyond the current physical EU borders (Dünnwald 2011; Bialasiewicz 2012; Andersson 2014). In this island governance scholarship (also Mountz 2011; Billings 2013; Vogl 2015; Dimitriadi 2017), less attention has been paid to how the regime operates by outsourcing the "dirty work" to people residing *within* EU member states but perceived as "non-European." Events unfolding in Greece are revealing of this development in three respects. First, the country has been given the role of managing what has been identified as "Europe's worst refugee crisis" since World War II (Carastathis 2018). Second, in 2015, the Greek government proclaimed a "refugee humanitarian crisis" to attract humanitarian capital toward the country and to outsource social services and the employment of relevant staff effectively to NGOs (Avgeri 2016). Third, people with a recent migrant background have been employed in increasing numbers to work as cultural mediators between humanitarian actors, state officials, and asylum seekers. In this paper, we add a new layer to the island governance framework, by discussing how migration management in Greece involves what we refer to as "governing by communication" within the premises of the hotspots but, also, in the practices of transporting asylum seekers from the island to the mainland and from one island to another. And as we will explain further down, the boundary figure of the cultural mediator forms an essential "tool" of communication within these wider networks across space and time.

In what follows, we will first contextualize our paper in recent discussions on the Hotspot as one manifestation of island governance, the precarization of migrant labor, and the role of communication. In the next sections, we outline our analytical and methodological approaches. After that, we move to the analysis of hotspot outsourcing through the boundary figure of the cultural mediator, focusing on how mediators are being used as "communicative tools" of the migration regime and how they experience the dilemmas and struggles of this specific employment. The paper ends with concluding thoughts on the present system of humanitarian governance and bordering in Europe.

Hotspots as Spaces of Cultural Mediation

The declaration of a "refugee crisis" in Europe—defined explicitly by authorities as a problem of categorizing mixed migratory flows crossing the EU's external borders—led to the reactive restructuring of migration management termed the *European Agenda on Migration* (Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2020). As part of this larger policy push, in May 2015, the European Commission launched

the EU's Hotspot Approach that mandates the European Border Agency Frontex and the EASO to collaborate "on the ground with the authorities of the frontline Member State to … swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants," dividing those eligible to apply for asylum from those ineligible and slated for deportation (European Commission 2015, 1). Further, Europol and Eurojust are to assist the Member States in the dismantling of "smuggling and trafficking networks." While EU officials have greeted the Hotspot Approach as a move toward more coordinated migration policy on the European level, many scholars have argued that the self-proclaimed "migration and refugee crisis" has "exposed shortcomings both in EU policy and its implementation" (Kasparek 2016). It has exposed the EU itself as in crisis, which the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* seeks to resolve with dehumanizing measures.

There is by now an extensive academic literature on the hotspot system, which considers its inhumane consequences, how it has offloaded responsibilities onto Greece and Italy while generating economies of deterrence, containment and care (Andersson and Keen 2019), and how refugees seek to protest and escape its unlivable circumstances (Kalir and Rozakou 2016; Kasparek 2016; Dimitriadi 2017; Sciurba 2017; Franck 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018; Andersson and Keen 2019; Lisle and Johnson 2019; Pinkerton 2019; Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020). Building on this growing literature, our aim is to move beyond the idea of the hotspot as a static, fixed, closed, and geographically isolated site (all of which it also is), by discussing how this regime of governing accomplishes its main goal: the categorical separation of the mixed flows, through a network of connectiveness and communication that functions upon the precarious human labor of cultural mediators.

Recent scholarship has started to highlight the role of effective communication in crises management, such as the 2015 refugee crisis in Greece (Carlson, Jakli, and Linos 2018), and how systems of communication practices address the double requirement of security and care at the EU's borders. In their analysis of the humanitarian–security border on Chios, during the peak of the refugee crisis, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017, 160) draw upon the concept of "hospitability," the communicative architecture of humanitarian securitization, "a techno-discursive capacity which is performed at and by the border as a double moral requirement: to uphold the humanitarian imperative to care for vulnerable others and, simultaneously, to protect European citizens from potential threats by those same others." Regarding the actual work of cultural mediators in the management of migration, Rudvin and Pesare (2015) shed light on the important role of language mediators in the detention centers for undocumented migrants in Italy. While they show how this intermediary figure goes beyond the range of functions usually attributed to an interpreter/translator, and the detrimental psychological effects that this has on them, less attention has been given to the racialized aspects of their precarious labor and, thus, to the colonial legacies of this particular profession.

The labor economy of humanitarian migration is also receiving increasing critical attention. Pascucci (2019) has shown how the humanitarian business thrives on hierarchies between locally recruited labor and international NGO officers. Others have drawn attention to the labor being asked of asylum seekers and refugees in humanitarian contexts such as camps. Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) coin the term "resiliency humanitarianism" to show how refugees in camps are being asked to participate in their own governmentality, within the context of reforms undertaken by the United Nations, which brings about a particular rationale of care, camp coordination, and management. Tazzioli (2020) speaks about the value extraction stemming from financial support programs for refugees in Greece, leading to "extractive humanitarianism"; the multiple forms of unpaid labor that asylum seekers are requested to do while waiting and stranded in camps (Tazzioli 2020). Our analysis contributes to these discussions from the specific perspective of cultural mediation labor.

The Hotspot Approach developed in "the Greek migration laboratory" (Tazzioli 2019, 405) has gradually enfolded humanitarian nongovernmental organizations into the emerging economies of care and control (Franck 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2018; DeBono 2019). With a focus on cultural mediators, we seek to expose the role of effective communication as part of the humanitarian–bordering in hotspots. To grasp how mediation achieves efficient communication in practice, and why it is burdensome for those performing its precarious labor, we pay attention to its dependence on the mediators' skilled capacity to understand the point of view of those on the move who are being defined as culturally "other." To this end, we turn to the concept of *empathy* that denotes this generic human capacity (distinct from sympathy that refers to positive emotions for the other) (Walsh 2014; Cuff et al. 2016). In institutional encounters, such as those within the migration regime, empathy often works "as a technology of access, providing an 'insider perspective' on 'the truth'" (Pedwell 2012, 172), and in the case of hotspots we see how reliant the regime is on the boundary figure of the mediator.

A focus on empathy as a technology of communication provides, we argue, an illuminative analytical lens to inquire into the hotspot economies of deterrence, containment, and care. As the director of an NGO working inside Moria hotspot on Lesvos put it, "it is all about communication, communicating the information and the message clearly to the arriving population in order for the system to work. When there is no communication, the right communication, there is chaos" (Interview by author 1, February 2017, Moria, Lesvos). Through the idea of "governing by communication," we explore how humanitarian sorting between deserving asylum seekers and undeserving economic migrants increasingly involves nonstate actors that exploit the empathetic skills and embodied labor of cultural mediators—often "non-white" second-generation migrants themselves. Moreover, we look into how this places the mediators into a tensioned field of relations with the state, the humanitarian actors operating hotspot practices, and the asylum seekers. Within this force field cultural mediators become laborers of empathy: boundary figures pivotal to the effective functioning of the hotspot regime.

We understand empathy as a technology of governing and communication that depends on the copresence of the mediators and migrants, shaping their subjectivities and relationalities. Embodiment is indispensable here because access to the other's subjectivity depends on the possibility to validate assumptions about the other's experiences in a situation of copresence (Zahavi 2010). As the asylum interviewers in Jensen's (2018, 2622–23) study remarked, "physical presence [is] crucial to an interview's success … to establish that personal connection." In this sense, empathy marks a two-way path between the embodied subjects involved, one that does not unite but links them situationally, in this case at the service of humanitarian–bordering regime.

Moreover, while access to the other's knowledge is a key element in governing by communication, we consider the latter also an aspect of an "island-mainland dialectic" unfolding through the redistribution and transportation of migrants to the mainland, the criminalization of the economic migrant, and the multiplication of informal hotspots on the Greek territory (Garelli and Tazzioli 2016). The multiple spatial reshaping of the migration regime through infrastructural, political, and legal measures contributes to the enforcement of "cramped spaces" where migrants have restricted leeway both for moving and for staying (Walters and Lüthi 2016). In the hotspots, such conditions are purposely produced in order to both deter potential "newcomers" (migrants arriving since the summer of 2015) and lead those already contained within the hotspots to "voluntary" return (for a further discussion, see Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2020). In working to determine migrants' mobility to the mainland, while often being from there themselves, cultural mediators partake in shaping the "island-mainland dialectic." Their precarious work highlights the role that communication plays in pushing the static and fixed geographies of the use of islands in migration governance beyond the actual "hotspot islands."

Island Governance as Outsourcing of Humanitarian–Bordering

Hotspot islands are not unique places in European migration management (Dimitriadi 2017, 81). The use of the islands' topography to trap and contain people on the move is an established transnational technology of coercion. In Greece, "unruly" political exiles were sent to remote islands during the junta. The Canary Islands for Spain and Lampedusa for Italy have been sites of detention, screening, and "buffer zones" since the early 1990s (Andersson 2014; Cuttitta 2014; Sciurba 2017 in Dimitriadi 2017), and a specific detention policy has been implemented by Malta since 1970 (Mainwaring and Silverman 2017 in Dimitriadi 2017, 80). The Hotspot Approach is also inspired by Australia's "Pacific Solution" to "unmanageable flows," where asylum seekers arriving by boat have been exported to the offshore prisons of Nauru, Manus, and Christmas Island (Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020).

The broader literature on island geopolitics discusses how the governing of migration through outsourcing creates topological spaces of governance that intertwine the "inside" and "outside" of topographical state spaces (Mountz 2011; Billings 2013; Vogl 2015 in Dimitriadi 2017, 81). Andersson (2014) insightfully shows how Spain successfully externalized its migration management through partnerships with countries of origin and transit, and simultaneously developed extensive border patrols using surveillance systems and fences (in Dimitriadi 2017, 83). As in Greece, the only difference is that these islands are within the national/EU territory, not separate island nation-states or under other countries (Dimitriadi 2017). Similar policies have been in place in Italy, the other officially designated "frontline country" operating the Hotspot Approach (Sciurba 2017).

Mountz (2011) has pointed out the need to study islands not as isolated exceptional spaces but as part of the territorial strategies of migration management. In what she describes as an "enforcement archipelago" for the detention of asylum seekers on islands across the world, she has aptly shown that seeking asylum has become synonymous with immediate (and sometimes indefinite) detention (Mountz 2011; Mountz and Loyd 2014). Australia, with the excision of territory and Pacific Solution I and II, is a classic example of islands being transformed into border zones that function as detention spaces (Vogl 2015; Billings 2013 in Dimitriadi 2017, 82). As Dimitriadi (2017, 82) highlights, "the contrast between deterrence and humanitarianism makes the islands function as a tool of governance of irregular mobility: they are both gates and guardians at the gates." While the Hotspot Approach pushes the national border outward, separating the islands from the mainland and creating a liminal zone of questionable legal status, it concurrently multiplies the border through so-called mobile hotspots, which follow people who have circumvented the security regime (Spathopoulou 2016, 406; Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi 2017).

Under its humanitarian guise, the hotspot model is, therefore, first and foremost set to facilitate the EU's segregation and deportation regime as a European version of outsourcing in the governing of migration (Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2020). In combination with bilateral agreements exporting asylum, detention, and deportation functions "off-shore" from Europe (most prominently the EU–Turkey Deal), the Hotspot Approach has worked to reify a refugee crisis through constructions of national space and national time that regulate rights of belonging in "Europe" (Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2020). The detention center of Moria in Lesvos, burned down in the summer of 2020, has become the visual emblem for the "European refugee crisis" and has earned monikers such as the "Guantánamo Bay of Europe" and the "worst refugee camp on earth" in international press reports.

On the Ferry: Mobile Ethnography with Cultural Mediators

As much as a space of separation, the hotspot functions as a space of encounter. Its infrastructure reproduces a specific *regime of mobility* based on ferries and other transportation devices that transfer migrants between islands and the mainland and from one island to another, and a *system of connectivity* that, as we shall show, operates upon cultural mediators' precarious embodied human labor by means of empathy.[3] This governing by communication sustains the distracted spatial coordinates of the hotspot regime as a traveling control device, a mechanism revealed by our mobile ethnography approach.

The paper draws upon Aila Spathopoulou's research with cultural mediators in Greece: at the Moria hotspot on Lesvos, the Vathi hotspot on Samos, in Athens (with Doctors of the World and three local humanitarian organizations), and, importantly, on the ferry between the islands and the mainland where a mobile unit of Doctors of the World functioned between June 2015 and April 2016, with cultural mediators involved.[4] She established ongoing conversations and observations with fifteen cultural mediators altogether and also formed long-term research relations. They were established migrants who, with the advent of the "European refugee crisis," had been invited to staff the hotspot infrastructure due to their ascribed migrant background. Aila was interested in understanding the kind of bordering work involved in mediation and translation, and how this work shapes the subjectivities of those involved.[5]

The study was informed by "mobile ethnography" (Knowles 2014). Spathopoulou's methodological choice was based on the trajectories of both the people channeled through hotspots and transported to the mainland by ferry and those who moved between the islands and the mainland by ferry as cultural mediators. Her initial ethnographic encounter with Raymon—in March 2016, a month after the fieldwork began—was particularly meaningful in this regard. His route as a cultural mediator on the ferry, from the islands to Athens and back, affected the way she came to understand the hotspot to systematically analyze its declared and undeclared functions through mobile ethnography.

"As hotspots were then instituted on islands at the maritime border region of Greece, the relationship of the islands to the mainland and the geographical restriction of mobility for people arriving there had become a tool of control" (Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020, 1068). The ferries that asylum seekers were allowed or disallowed to board to travel onward—to the mainland, to the capital, or to the border with North Macedonia, through the Balkan Route to central Europe— had grown into a vital vehicle. As Budz (2009, 18) argues, "given the persistent significance of states in the determination of legal identities of people on the move, a consideration of the construction of people as legal (or illegal) migrants, refugees, or asylum-seekers must also recognise that these determinations take place in conjunction with the simultaneous processes through which spaces such as sovereign states or ships carrying asylum-seekers are constructed." Instantiated by the centrality of the ferry, the analysis in this paper is

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[3]The mobility regime may also turn against itself when migrants succeed in establishing connections with people and things circulating within the hotspot. This is an aspect we cannot cover in detail in this paper but have discussed elsewhere (Spathopoulou 2016, also Dimitriadi 2017; Tazzioli 2017; Pinkerton 2019; Ozguc 2020).

[4]This research forms part of the first author's long-term ethnographic research conducted on the five hotspot islands and in Athens from 2015 to 2018, which formed the basis of her PhD dissertation.

[5]Pseudonyms have been used to preserve interlocutors' anonymity. Spathopoulou has received all interlocutors' consent to use material from their conversations and interviews for the purpose of this article. Particularly with Raymon, they went over together the parts that represent his insights and that he chose to be included in the discussion of this article.

based on encounters with cultural mediators engaged in humanitarian–bordering work that very often took place on the ferry. In the spirit of mobile ethnography, the ferry forms an important site of arrival/entry into the "field" and departure/exit out from it, itself becoming a site that breaks down the very boundaries between the "outside" and the "inside." Further, the movement of the ferry, beyond and across as well as within a bounded territory, serves to reproduce the territory being bounded (Steinberg 2009). By focusing on ethnographic encounters on the islands, in Athens and on the ferry, our analysis problematizes the inside/outside dichotomy that the notion of "research access" often takes for granted (see, also, Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020).

Regarding ethical concerns, we agree with Katerina Rozakou on the ethical and epistemological implications of researching the "refugee crisis" and the hotspots. Reflecting on her role as an ethnographer and how she became part of the hotspot structure, Rozakou (2019, 72) states that, "this assemblage poses restrictions on research access or, as I argue, enables specific forms of access. Paradoxically, the Moria camp is both an inaccessible and an over-researched site that has nurtured particular representations of the 'migration crisis'." She is not alone in her call for attention to the ethical implications of such over-researched sites (e.g., Pascucci 2017; Lisle and Johnson 2019). We share these reflections and recognize that issues of access into the hotspots pertain even to the most critical scholarship. These considerations affect, also, the research relations established with people who partake in this humanitarian–bordering as cultural mediators. We would like to clarify from the outset that our aim is not to assess how the hotspot system is performing, nor to admonish those who work as cultural mediators. As researchers, we are rather positioned against the hotspot policy and the ways in which it produces spaces of administrative torture, first not only for people trapped within its spatial confinements, but also for those involved in highly exploitative jobs, such as cultural mediators.

Cultural Mediation in Hotspot Governance: Carrying the Burden of Humanitarian–Bordering through Empathy

> It is about understanding and speaking, not only the same language as the refugees, but also sharing the same culture as them — something that we are not able to do. They can relate to the other. Understand when they are making a joke, when they are serious, when they mean something and not. When they get upset with us about something or think we are lying, the mediators explain to them and calm them down. (Spathopoulou, interview with local NGO employee, March 2017, Athens)

This interview excerpt from an employee of a Greek NGO, provides a general idea of the role proposed to cultural mediators in hotspot governance. In their task of fostering communication and understanding, it is *empathy* in particular that helps them in mediating "relations between so-called different individuals and members of dominant social groups" (Meyers 1994, 37). Because the idea is to bridge the distance to the other, successful enactment of empathy depends on interpersonal encounters and proximity, even intimacy (Pedwell 2012). Yet, these embodied encounters occur under structural relations of power that determine what the work of cultural mediation is about. As Tariq, a cultural mediator working for an NGO in Lesvos formulated, "it is not a translation issue, I mean, it is not about misunderstanding, but knowing exactly what the agent means but the refugee does not want to accept." Thus, the compound of "humanitarian–bordering," bundling politics of alienation with a politics of care, characterizes this work aptly.

From the mediator perspective, the task is demanding and exhausting, sometimes generating harmful mental effects. Many participants in our study declared as their greatest challenge the request that the empathic relations they are obliged to generate and enact with asylum seekers must never turn to sympathetic ones. In the words of an International

Organization for Migration (IOM) employee on Samos: "It should never become personal. Mediators must not become friends with the refugees. This is why we, also, forbid them to share their personal names with the beneficiaries. The mediators are identified with their number, never by their name." (Spathopoulou, Personal Conversation with an IOM employee, April 2016, Samos). Pointing to the risks of getting too personal with refugees, a police officer at Piraeus port spelled out to Raymon—the cultural mediator introduced in the beginning—why he should not continue to work with the asylum seekers once they arrived in Athens. As Raymon recalls it, the officer stated:

> I see you work for an organization. That you are a mediator. Like me, you are also obeying orders. However, you are not the law. I am the law. And if you help these people you can get into trouble. You know I can arrest you for facilitating illegal mobility. This is my job. I have been told I am here to enact order. I have been told to arrest two or three people that get off the ferry as smugglers. I can arrest you as a smuggler if I see you helping these people. Your job is to translate for them on the ferry. You work for an organization. Your job is not to help at the port. (Spathopoulou, Personal Conversation with Raymon, April, 2016, Athens)

This situation underlines the constricted position of cultural mediators in the hotspot regime. Working on the ferry with Doctors of the World before the EU– Turkey deal, Raymon's job was to "take care of these people but, also, to make sure the people working for our organization are kept safe … these people arrive with so many problems and traumas, in many cases they don't know how to behave on the ferry, and with all these different languages and needs, conflicts often break out. That is why we were needed on the ferry" (Raymon, April 2016). Hence, facilitated by the work of cultural mediators, the ferry operated as a communicative facet of the external border, beginning from the island hotspots and ending at the mainland port where other agencies, such as the police, encountered the asylum seekers and escorted their next steps. A fraction of the wide-ranging system of violence through connectivity is thus revealed.

During one journey from Samos to Athens in December 2015, Raymon told Aila how he was startled at what he saw when making his way to the upper deck of the ferry. As soon as they boarded the ferry, some refugees headed directly toward the ship's orange life rings and tried to put them on. According to Raymon, "they know that this ship is safe, but, still, some things in your life you can never forget and overcome. It was my job to stop them and explain." However, what disturbed Raymon the most was that the social worker on the ferry assumed that he and the other mediators could recognize the refugees' trauma due to a shared experience of dangerous crossing of the Aegean Sea to arrive in Greece. "They presume that I arrived illegally in Greece by boat. They don't believe that my mother and I came to Greece by plane, legally, to join my father who was already living and working in Greece in the early seventies." Raymon's experience illuminates how cultural mediation in the Greek hotspots invites certain (groups of) people to perform and mobilize specific humanitarian–bordering subject positions—those considered not-fully-European to be included in the "Schengenland," yet European-enough to guard the external borders of the EU.

Critical race theory helps us to see how the figure of the cultural mediator is racialized, to the extent that it is made to bear racial connotations. Discussing "migrants' lives as black lives," Nicholas De Genova (2018, 1768) points out that "it is particularly crucial that we do the critical work of reconfirming the precisely racial specificity of what is so commonly and casually euphemized across Europe as 'migrant' or 'of migrant background'." In line with De Genova, we argue that the migration regime capitalizes upon established migrants' "migrant background" in order to manage and control the arriving migrant population. In his analysis of the racialization of the figure of the climate change migrant, Baldwin (2013, 1474) argues that "intrinsic to the figure's racialization is its occupancy of an ambiguous

time between present and future, and an ambiguous space between order and disorder." Such ambiguity can be identified also from the case analyzed here, through the liminal threshold figure situated at the limits of the economic and the refugee crises. As such a boundary figure, the cultural mediator is called to address a set of "white" anxieties to do with an impending loss of control and disorder — what Baldwin (2013, 1474) calls the "dissolution of boundaries" between locals and refugees.

Cultural mediators are thus continuously engaging with our "colonial present" through their precarious labor. That the asylum seekers are divided into more and less deserving categories by nationality in the hotspot system further complicates their work. The relocation programs eligible only to Syrians and Iraqis mean that "organizations are discriminating among different nationalities, even an organization such as Doctors of the World" (Raymon 2018, Athens). Pakistani asylum seekers, for example, are typically not identified as refugees in any circumstances.[6] "I guess it is because I have darker skin, that the policeman checked me," a young man who was indeed from Pakistan commented to Aila on a ferry from Lesvos to Samos in March 2016. Police officers had checked his papers because, in their words, he "does not look like a refugee but more like a Pakistani." Due to his assumed Pakistani nationality, he was readily perceived as an "economic migrant." Moreover, there were no Urdu-speaking mediators on these ferries, despite the large number of Pakistani migrants on board, which shows how the Hotspot Approach is, ultimately, tied less to the humanitarian ethics of vulnerability than to specific principles of bordering (e.g., race, ethnicity, and nationality (Doty 2011; Provine and Doty 2011). As cultural mediators often share the position of "undeserving economic migrants," the categorical differentiation methods have deteriorating effects on their sense of self (for a similar discussion see Methmann 2014, on the climate migrant/refugee as a racialized figure, a passive and helpless victim of global warming). Ultimately, the incident with the Pakistani migrant shows how immigration policies seek to curtail immigrants' presence once in the country and how confines or internal borders such as those on the ferry play a decisive role in the construction and preservation of a cheap, flexible labor force (cf. Garcés-Mascareñas 2015, on the case of Malaysia).

The ferries' role in operating the hotspots reveals their dependency on a regime of mobility that distracts their spatial coordinates. During journeys between February and April 2016, Aila noticed how the mediators contribute to the ferry's functioning as a sorting and channeling mechanism, regulating migrants' mobility not only from the islands to the mainland but, also, on the actual ferry. For instance, those asylum seekers with enough resources to book a cabin were allowed to move freely throughout the whole space of the ship. The rest were monitored by mediators under the order of the police, who made sure that they stayed put within the bounds of the lower deck, a space reserved only for them, where they could sleep only on chairs and on the floor.

"In addition to serving as vehicles of transportation of asylum seekers, ferries are also being used as contained spaces for registering and processing, separating and categorizing, asylum applicants. In the summer of 2015, a large cruise ship in the harbor of Kos was used as a first reception and identification center for migrants. For about two weeks,

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[6]An established and well-organized Pakistani community exists in Greece since at least the 1970s, when migrants who first arrived as so-called guest workers during the time of the junta (1967–1974) came to work in construction projects that were flourishing during this period (Broesma and Lazarescu 2009). It is important to mention that "Pakistani" functions as a derogatory synonym for "illegal immigrant" and is used widely to refer to all undocumented migrants in Greece. Since the introduction of the hotspot system, Pakistanis became constructed as "economic migrants," a disposable (and deportable) labor force for the agricultural sector in Greece" (Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020, 1079).

migrants could apply for asylum on board, with cultural mediators performing the double role of care and control, humanitarian and bordering. Reflecting this new reality, in October 2017 the Greek Minister for Immigration Policy, Yiannis Mouzalas, was advocating what he referred to as 'floating hotspots', as a measure to alleviate the hotspots' overcrowded conditions: that is, ferries parked at the port to function as registration and identification centers (Nikolaou 2017). The struggle for the 'right to the ferry' was thereby recast as a paralyzing experience of being stuck on the ferry, anchored in the port" (from Spathopoulou and Carastathis 2020, 1075).

While mediators were responsible for attending to asylum seekers only while on the ferry, this did not mean that the migrants would not need help once off the ferry at Piraeus port. This, in itself, is a distressing aspect of the mediating work. Having worked with asylum seekers on the ferry for twelve hours or so, Raymon felt that he was abandoning them once their journey from the islands ended. However, when working on the mainland only, after the EU–Turkey deal came into force, he found the work on the ferry empathically less demanding than in the new situation where the same people would keep coming back to him: "At least back then we were assisting people to see them leave. They were not stuck here, and we were not stuck with them. They moved on and so could we with our lives" (Raymon, April 2016).

After March 2016, Raymon started to work as a mediator in a relocation program run by the Doctors of the World in Athens, where he found his position between the regime and the asylum seekers ever more controversial:

> We, as mediators, become part of this selection process, this relocation contest, by testifying who really deserves relocation, who is innocent and who is lying, who seems suspicious and a threat for Europe and who not. And as a result, the refugees end up blaming us if they are denied relocation, they claim that we translated something wrong on purpose because we don't want them to leave Greece, we envy their luck, and, therefore, want them stuck in Greece. How to make them understand that it is Europe that doesn't want them. (September 2016, Athens)

Many cultural mediators feel trapped in this regime of distrust he was mediating for. While placing their empathy at the service of an organization that faced asylum seekers with suspicion, the asylum seekers, too, did not trust him precisely due to their shared (even if legally different) migratory position. His experiences resonate strongly with those of Nina, the director of an NGO responsible for housing asylum applicants on Lesvos. Nina had a job interview scheduled for the following day with a French-speaking applicant from the Ivory Coast for the position of cultural mediator:

> We want to hire migrants, people with migrant backgrounds and cultural expertise. Tomorrow I am interviewing someone from Africa, from the Ivory Coast. But to be honest with you, I am not sure if this is a good strategy or not. The asylum applicants from Africa can be dangerous sometimes because they really have nothing to lose. They are running away from extreme poverty and starvation back in Africa. Having a mediator from the same place as them might be helpful, but on the other hand we are putting him in a really vulnerable position, we are exposing them and forcing them to confront their own people, while they themselves have escaped that very same country and people. I feel quite ambivalent about this and I don't know if it is fair to hire them. Not to mention when the mediator belongs to another ethnic group than that of the beneficiary. I mean, that he has to attend to who he might consider back home as his enemy. (Spathopoulou, Interview with a local Greek NGO director, January 2017, Lesvos)

It is evident, then, that at least some of those involved in operating hotspots recognize the exploitative position in which the outsourcing of humanitarian–bordering work places cultural mediators who, in their precarious positions, end up carrying a disproportionally heavy burden as laborers of empathy. Sofia, a Farsi-speaking interpreter working at the asylum

service at Moria hotspot, said that she was even translating in her sleep. Nadia, a French-Arabic-speaking mediator working at Caritas Hellas (an NGO that, since 2015, has become very active in refugee crisis management), complained about the emotional pressure she felt at work that although she sympathizes with the asylum seekers, it was becoming too much for her, that the things she was hearing every day from them, their stories, were so horrific that she preferred to think they were not true, and that they were lying. "We mediators need to put limits to what we are listening to. This is why we wear a double face," she said, capturing a significant element in the technology of governing by communication (Spathopoulou 1 Personal Conversation with Nadia, Athens, October 2019). As part of the system, cultural mediators gradually come to embody the Janus-faced humanitarian–border that consists of contradictory elements (Häkli and Kallio 2020). Their empathic bodies become an intermediary space for the coexistence of humanitarian needs and bordering objectives, the contradiction of which is experienced as pain and anxiety (on embodiment and empathy in refugee governance, see Häkli and Kallio 2020).

Yet the mediators do not typically receive psychological support for the emotional labor work they are asked to enact. In some cases, when it was being provided, Aila came across a few mediators who had opted out because the sessions were focused on how mediators were being affected by dire events, such as a bomb in Afghanistan or the war in Syria, occurring in their ascribed countries of origin. And these were situations that they preferred not to remember or discuss. Moreover, echoing several other mediators, Nadia told how the situation had started to affect her experiences and agency:

> I have become apathetic to everything we listen to. Moreover, when I encounter a beneficiary on the road after work, I avoid saying hello to him because I know he will ask me a question, a favor, something, anything, but I cannot handle this anymore. I need my own life, work is work and after work is something else. I cannot feel bad anymore when going out with friends to enjoy. (September 2016, Athens)

Here it becomes visible how the hotspot regime gradually impacts on the subjectivities of both established migrants *and* "newcomers." To carry out the empathic labor requested from cultural mediators, serving the ends of the hotspot system yet receiving the frustration and pain of asylum seekers on a personal level, requires "mental resilience and the ability to distance oneself consciously from the emotional part of the work" (Dahlvik 2018, 56). The principles presented in the beginning of this section by the NGO employee and the police officer hence become somewhat internalized over time, which can be seen as a hotspot policy achievement: the external boundary has been established between two precarious groups of migrants, instead of EU citizens and asylum seekers who need not encounter each other as the cultural mediators do the "dirty work."

A further challenge in the cultural mediators' work relates to their circulation from one location to another, coupled with having only short-term work contracts running from two to six months. For example, when Aila met Shad in December 2018, he was employed by the Greek Asylum Service in Athens. Prior to this, he had been working at Samos and Lesvos's hotspot and in two months' time he did not know whether he would be sent to another island or to north-Greece. This uncertainty and feelings of temporariness in relation to his work, made it impossible for Shad to settle down: "The moment I begin to get used to the place, my work environment, and start to get to know my colleagues better, I have to leave." Hence, it is hard for Shad and other mediators like him to establish connections with his colleagues any more than with the asylum seekers, a condition that the hotspot system thrives upon. This shows how the system of connectivity and circulation serves particular ends; in weaving together the regime of governing, it separates and distantiates its precarious laborers and precaritized groups.

Another distressing facet of cultural mediating was expressed by Nikos, working for a local Greek NGO through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) funding in collaboration with Doctors of the World. He had realized what loyalty to the humanitarian–bordering system of hotspots meant:

> I cannot reveal to the refugees that everyone is lying to them; I cannot translate to the aid workers and doctors their real problems because they will never understand. I understand them just like I understand my parents. But I cannot help these people, the refugees… What they really want is to find a way to move on, but how to translate this to the Doctor and how to tell them in turn that they have come to the wrong place for help. (Spathopoulou, Personal Conversation with Nikos, May 2018, Athens)

The contradictions in the work of empathy are clearly visible here. Through indepth understanding of the situation from multiple directions, and especially the personal encounters with numerous asylum seekers, Nikos found himself inept if not detrimental in his mediator position. Yet, like several other participants, as a cultural mediator he had become a boundary figure — a person living in Greece without citizenship but suddenly discovered as a laborer amid the "refugee crisis" and thus an "accepted economic migrant." As a mediator puts it, "an interpreter can save a life just by translating, even though we are not paid for this." In the name of translating, the cultural mediator performs the role of psychologist, social worker, crisis manager, and policeman, yet without being officially acknowledged and financially rewarded for such expertise. Aila even met mediators who play the role of the security guard, by being placed in front of humanitarian organizations' doors, to put order to the "migrant mob" waiting outside and eager to enter. As Shad said, "we are placed at the front-line, we need to protect the social workers inside by sometimes endangering our own lives." In this sense, the mediators are asked to play the double role of the bridge and the wall between the humanitarians and the refugees, following the island governance logic that bizarrely bundles up the gates and their guardians (Dimitriadi 2017). Yet, while asked to perform all the above roles, contrary to their "Greek" colleagues, the mediators do not have access to important documents and databases because, according to the director of a humanitarian organization, "the UNHCR allows access only to Greek and European citizens working in the organization." This further discloses the governing strategy of "outsourcing within."

In all, the Greek Hotspot Approach functions to separate the asylum seekers from established migrants and citizens, yet situating them on a "shared precarity continuum" exacerbated by the economic crisis in Greece. This is how the "economic crisis" and the "refugee crisis" link to an emerging crisis of European citizenship, "and the radical precaritization of rights for both citizens and non-citizens on Europe's Mediterranean margins" (Cabot 2019, 3, 7). As a policy reaction to this entanglement of crises, the hotspot has emerged as a site that encapsulates and intensifies the relation between the stratified labor market on the one hand, and the predicament of our "colonial present" on the other. Migrants who had suffered years of unemployment due to the financial crisis of 2011 welcomed the work of migration management, even if it provided only temporary alleviation. Their employment is dependent upon emergency EU funds to various international organizations and the state (ECHO funding) that terminate when the so-called crisis is "solved," thus the contracts are very short term, usually between two to three months, six at the most.

Adding to these, during the publication process of this article, the coronavirus pandemic has further exacerbated the previous crises' negative effects. The border control restrictions put in place on February 27, 2020, and the subsequent lockdown measures of March 22, turned camps on the hotspot islands and the mainland practically into detention centers and the asylum seekers into prisoners — a situation still continuing, in stark contrast with that of citizens who have been relatively free to move since May 4. While a chronically underfunded medical system subject

to austerity cuts is collapsing, the warehousing of asylum seekers has primed the conditions for the rapid and deadly transmission of the virus (Carastathis, Spathopoulou, and Tsilimpounidi 2020). The governing of the people in the camps is achieved, once again, also, through the labor of cultural mediators, who are requested to communicate clearly and effectively to the refugees the rules that must be followed: hygiene regulations, social distancing. and, above all, compliance with the controls and the lockdowns.

Conclusion

European responses to the so-called refugee crisis have been characterized by reactive political measures that include the multiplication of securitized border zones across Europe, the creation of migrant hostile environments through a politics of containment in the Mediterranean, and the implementation of the Hotspot Approach in Greece and in Italy. In this paper, we have addressed how the latter has produced forced congestion and restrictions for migrants' mobility to and from the Greek islands. While these spaces also open up spaces of livability for migrants, thus not producing a situation of total confinement and blockage (except recently), our analysis reveals that the hotspots operate forceful technologies of governing that depend on effective communication by means of cultural mediation.

The outsourcing of hotspot governance within the EU to cultural mediators has created ambivalences and tensions that link their exploitative working conditions and racialized positioning to the suffering enacted upon asylum seekers, who appear as "newcomers" in the local migration scene. We have addressed empathy as a key dynamic in the embodied encounters through which the humanitarian bordering regime meets the asylum seekers, facilitated by cultural mediators who typically have a "migrant background." In their work, empathy functions, we argue, as a technology of access to "the truth" about their personal history, migration trajectories, and goals. Operating upon cultural mediators' precarious human labor that involves extensive embodied exposure to empathetic relations with the migrants, the hotspots form a multidimensional system of connectivity that largely serves the ends of EU border control.

Due to their ascribed migrant background, the mediators are considered as experts capable of entering into the migrants' lives by enacting empathy. By analyzing their precarious labor, we have shown how the humanitarian–bordering regime capitalizes upon the cultural mediators' "migrant background" in order to manage and control the arriving migrant population. This exploitative form of governing by communication is enabled by the insecure positions of the laborers who have been on the margin precisely due to their migration status and prolonged unemployment during the financial crisis in Greece. Hence, finding work in the emerging economy of migration management has come as a relief. Yet, their sociopolitical existence remains completely marginalized. Many of the cultural mediators are not recognized as Greek or EU citizens but, instead, are offered the role of embodying the humanitarian border in the EU. Our analysis demonstrates that they gradually adopt this role, even if reluctantly, to cope mentally and to be able lead their own lives. Moreover, while the hotspot system relies on their precarious labor in order to effectively and swiftly process the asylum claims of the newcomers, their own asylum claims or stay applications have been on hold for years, constantly being postponed or, in the best case, resolved through the legal status of "second generation" that acknowledges them as "economic migrants" but nothing more.

Vradis et al. (2018, 105) argue that "precarity was and, indeed, still is the mode of production apt for a culture of instantaneous consumption: it matches the instantness, as the worker is replaceable as swiftly as the time it takes to consume the product they produced. Similar in its fleetingness, the hotspot logic (and soon enough we will have

a name for this too) is the mode of migration governance fit for the age of precarity." Inquiring into the humanitarian–bordering work involved in cultural mediation provides new insights into the ways in which the hotspots encapsulate and intensify the relation between the stratified labor market on the one hand, and the predicament of our "colonial present" on the other, as well as the temporal and spatial dimensions of bordering and race in Greece. With the appearance of a soft policy designed to provide support for the asylum seekers seeking refuge, the hotspots are an efficient mechanism for outsourcing border governance within the EU. Furthermore, it seems that the significance of cultural mediation will only increase in the future; its role seems emphasized in the *New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, the latest policy initiative currently under debate (European Commission 2020).

The lead idea of the New Pact is that of distinguishing between those who are and are not eligible to seek asylum, under the ideal of an efficient "sorting machine" that miraculously divides the border-crossers into two queues at the external EU border: one for those to be deported and the other for the potential refugees. Then, the EU countries—bound by (forced) "solidarity"—can allegedly process the queues in an orderly manner. This trimmed sorting system is likely to depend on the empathic "double-faced" cultural mediators who will carry the burden of the dirty work that no one really wants: of finding out about the humanitarian needs of migrants and transmitting the knowledge to the EU institutions that interpret the information according to its prevailing humanitarian–bordering criteria. In most cases, this will lead to deportation, which the cultural mediators are silently aware of. The contradictory knowledge that invests in their embodied existence is the magical element that the New Pact is built on. This is the politics of governing by communication in the current European Union.

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