

Chapter 6

Polyphonic Lesvos. Inside and beyond the prison-island

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Abstract

Back in 2015, Lesvos (Greece) started making headlines. First, for the disproportionate number of landings of refugees; later, for the inhumane conditions in the Moria camp, until it burned down in September 2020. Over the last ten years, thousands of international volunteers and researchers arrived on the island, partially transforming its social and economic landscape and binding Lesvos' image with the European «reception crisis». But Lesvos is not just that. Along its history, different flows of people, driven by diverse narratives, crossed and inhabited it. In this article, we present different perceptions of the island, exploring what kind of encounters arise – or do not – from these premises.

Keywords: Lesvos; Migration; Tourism; Volunteering, Borderland.

Riassunto

Nel 2015, Lesbo (Grecia) ha iniziato a fare notizia. Inizialmente, per lo sproporzionato numero di sbarchi di rifugiati; poi, per le condizioni disumane nel campo di Moria, fino all'incendio che lo ha distrutto nel settembre 2020. Negli ultimi dieci anni, migliaia di volontari e ricercatori internazionali sono arrivati sull'isola, trasformando in parte il panorama sociale ed economico e legando la sua immagine alla «crisi dell'accoglienza» europea. Ma Lesbo non è solo questo. Nel corso della sua storia, diversi flussi di persone, spinti da immaginari differenti, l'hanno attraversata e abitata. In questo articolo, presentiamo diverse percezioni dell'isola, esplorando quali incontri sono possibili – o meno – a partire da queste premesse.

Parole chiave: Lesbo; Migrazioni; Turismo; Volontariato; Confine.

1. Introduction

The elaboration process for this paper started when one of us received a message on Instagram in the summer of 2024.

Hello, Simona here – we don't know each other but my roommate told me you've been to Lesbos. I'm going there on holidays this summer and I've heard that the island is involved in some migration issues, but I don't know much. I'm just going for holidays, but if you feel like sharing some info it would be great – I'd like to be a conscious tourist.

The initial reaction was one of disappointment: was it possible that, just nine years after the long «summer of migration» (Kasperek and Speer, 2015), the Greek island of Lesbos had already been removed from the collective memory? That only four years after the Moria fire, the island had disappeared from the headlines to such an extent that it was possible to have never heard of its role in the so-called «refugee crisis» (New Keywords Collective, 2016)?

At this point, before proceeding with any further questioning and reasoning, we deem it necessary to position ourselves, in accordance with feminist critics (Anzaldúa, 2012; Borghi, 2020; Haraway, 2021).

We are four Italians who met on Lesbos in the spring of 2022. Davide is a filmmaker who has been traveling back and forth to the island since 2015, accumulating hundreds of hours of video footage to document what has been happening from different perspectives. Alice and Arianna arrived on the island in early 2022 as Erasmus students at the University of the Aegean and later returned in 2023 to conduct ethnographic research for their master's theses in Anthropology. Luca came to Lesbos for his PhD research on migration, as the first stage of a multi-sited ethnography along one of the many migration routes crossing the European space. All of us, during our stay, chose to volunteer in some NGO or to join self-organised groups supporting the refugee¹ population. Indeed, we were fully

¹ In this paper, the term 'refugee' is used in an extensive way. Indeed, 'refugee' is how most people who arrive on the island seeking protection self-define themselves, regardless of their specific legal status. The choice of the term aims therefore to privilege the possibility of self-representation by the subjects.

embedded in the humanitarian bubble that inhabits Lesvos' capital Mytilini (Di Matteo and Daminelli, 2024). All of us decided to visit the island precisely because of the refugee crisis. Given these premises, and perhaps with a degree of presumptuousness, it seemed almost inconceivable to us that someone might have never heard of the «reception crisis» (Lendaro *et al.*, 2019) that shaped the island's recent history.

Then, dismissing our preconceptions, a few questions arose in our minds. What do people know about Lesvos besides the 'refugee crisis'? What motivates them to visit the island nowadays? Where do they go? These questions led us to interview Simona after her holiday, as well as other people who have travelled to the island for tourism in recent years. Moreover, the elaboration process has also prompted us to question ourselves: what did we know about Lesvos before visiting the island that was not related to refugees? What did we know about its culture, its traditions, and history? To be honest, very little. More questions arose: what was Lesvos before the 'refugee crisis'? Why did people visit it before 2015? And what is Lesvos nowadays, besides the place where thousands of asylum seekers are confined while waiting for their claim to be processed (Daminelli and Cometti, 2024)? Lastly, what did we discover about Lesvos while living there?

We realised that our disappointment was of someone who reduces the island to the image of the open-air-prison (Bousiou, 2020), ignoring its much broader history and its multifaceted identity. After all, we ourselves fell in love with the island and we are fully aware that there are many possible reasons to visit it and to settle there.

Acknowledging that any discourse on social reality is shaped by positionality, we aim here to present different perceptions of the island collected from various actors – locals, refugees, humanitarians, and tourists. The main goal of the paper is to understand if and how these different partial views intersect, overlap and conflict, and what kinds of encounters emerge – or fail to emerge – from these dynamics.

This article is structured into three sections. Firstly, we aim to make explicit how we position ourselves in the field and present the methodology behind this collective work. Then, we briefly illustrate the situation on the island between 2015 and 2020, when Lesvos, and especially Moria camp, were the symbols of the 'reception crisis' in Europe. Subsequently, we

broaden our perspective by examining various present and past narratives connected to Lesbos. Finally, in the conclusions, we dissect the main thesis of this work: only a polyphonic description of Lesbos is possible.

2. A collaborative, messy work

Simona's message triggered a process of collective elaboration that drove us back to the archive of our interviews with a different approach, looking for something that we didn't – or only partially – research before in our informants' words.

Diverse reasons drove us to Lesbos: Alice researched about frictions (Tsing, 2004) and intersections within the humanitarian network; Luca's research focused on temporal borders imposed on the asylum seekers (Tazzioli, 2018); Arianna's research explored uncertainty and spaces of resistance on Lesbos; Davide's documentary project aims to chronicle the recent migration history of the island through a plurality of perspectives.

Now, we have decided to re-analyse the interviews we conducted, looking for something different: references to the island's culture and history, to its nature and artistic heritage, to the places where people hang out, to the different types of travellers who land on Lesbos and their motivations, to the possible encounters and clashes among various groups.

We strongly believe that knowledge is always the product of the common, that no one can research alone, and that it is only through sharing and discussion that hypotheses can be elaborated. For this reason, from the beginning, part of the materials was collected and processed collectively – in some cases by two of us, and at other times by all of us together. In our experience, even the simple fact of placing ourselves in such a saturated research field, like Lesbos, constituted a profoundly generative element. The awareness of inevitably treading in the footsteps of so many researchers (Andersson, 2014; Cabot, 2019) triggered in us different processes of reflection, as well as questions about the legitimacy of being there, making us doubt the very appropriateness of doing research in such a place. We chose to address this saturation through collaborative research and by taking the time to be in the field, in order to build trusting relationships with people whom – only after a few months of getting to

know each other – we felt comfortable asking to be interviewed.

After all, doing ethnography requires time. Yet, in the contemporary context of the neo-liberal university, the time spent on the field is becoming increasingly short and fleeting; researchers are bound by obligations – primarily publishing (or perishing) – that do not allow for extended periods of research (Cabot, 2019; Gris *et al.*, 2022; Di Matteo and Daminelli, 2024). As Bandak and Janeja (2018: 23) write: «the transformation of ethnographic boredom into productive engagement – have been increasingly put under pressure in a neoliberal era where people are not being allowed to wait». Taking the time for ethnography, therefore, is not simply an ethical and methodological issue, but also a political one: ethnography as a way to resist and slow down the hectic pace of our commodified lives. In this perspective, doing ethnography means taking the time to be available to encounter, to listen and observe, to confront and debate, to share and cooperate (Bacchini and Daminelli, 2024), to put ourselves in a vulnerable position (Behar, 2022). We all, for different reasons – primarily being white Europeans – had the privilege to do it for extended amounts of time.

Plows (2019) defines ethnographic research as a *messy* process; in our case, the fact that four people living in four different places were working on the same article made it even messier. Nevertheless, the collective brainstorming sessions allowed us to give our work a common shape and a direction.

We drew from our fieldnotes and an archive of about sixty interviews, although not all of them contained useful information for the purpose of this article. We tried to make the most of the richness of these sources, leaving ample room for quotations from interviews, in order to render a polyphonic narrative of the island. In addition, thanks to Simona's mediation, we delivered ten surveys to people who spent their summer holidays on Lesbos in 2024.

3. Inside the prison-island

At the end of the summer of 2015, the world's attention turned to the fate of people on the move, mainly Syrians, crossing from Turkey to Greece,

headed to Central and Northern Europe. On September 2nd, the lifeless body of the two-year-old Alan Kurdi washed ashore on a beach near Bodrum. Only a couple of days earlier, Angela Merkel had pronounced the famous «*wir schaffen das*» (we can handle this) slogan during a visit to a reception camp in Dresden. Migration made headlines and media coverage got out of control. By then, Lesbos had already received more than 200 thousand people, who had crossed over from Turkey and had quickly made their way to mainland Europe. By the end of that year, more than half a million people transited through Lesbos (UNHCR, 2015).

Many Syrians, in masses. And as the days and weeks went by and the boats were multiplying in number, in July and August it started to get out of control. There were 50, 70, 80 boats a day coming out of the sea. That's a lot, we're talking about 60 people on average per boat, that's 3,000 people a day, 4,000 people. They were arriving nonstop (Thanassis, local resident, 2022).

Thanassis Marmarinos is one of the fishermen of Skala Sykamineas, a small village on the northern shore of Lesbos, who started rescuing thousands of people arriving by sea. For their efforts, they were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 (Schoenbauer, 2016).

I left all my work aside [...] Five months we went on without a paycheck while helping people. [...] I had to do this; it was the right thing to do. I don't care about what I lost. [...] So what? Did I die? No, but I did save lives, and right now I feel complete (Thanassis, local resident, 2022).

2015 was a pivotal year in the history of migration to Europe, as well as for Lesbos: the island became the main migration hub in the area and soon international media were publishing article after article about the 'island of refugees' (Niarchos, 2015). Lesbos, the third-largest island in Greece, but still often unknown to those outside of Greece, made its appearance on the map of Europe².

However, soon enough the local population started resenting such a

² It is interesting to note that a Google Scholar search on the word 'Lesbos' finds 8.320 articles published before 2015 and 14.600 from 2015 onwards, confirming that also the interest of researchers for the island increased significantly after the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis'.



Fig. 1 – Remains of a rubber boat landed in the southern shore of Lesbos (Marchesi, D., 2016).

label. The delayed institutional response, both governmental and non-governmental, caused people on Lesbos to feel left alone in managing a situation far too large for them to handle. They found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being glorified as heroes on international media, while living through a contraction of the local tourist economy (Tsartas *et al.*, 2020). All of this happened within the already dire financial framework of the post-2011 economic crisis in Greece.

From 2016 onwards, it's been a matter of survival for many families, because we're talking about purely family-owned businesses [...]. So, from the moment this started, it created internal migration. Many adults, especially young people and not only, were forced to leave the island to find work. [...] Many businesses had to shut down and, unfortunately, many people have been damaged financially with tragic consequences. Broken families. Too much debt. Many psychological issues because, when financial problems emerge within a family, it affects it in a tragic way (Maria, local resident, 2022).

After March 2016, the situation in Greece and all over Europe and the Balkans changed completely with the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement (European Council, 2016). European borders tightened and closed, migration hotspots were created on Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Kos and Leros and thousands of people found themselves stuck in overpopulated, understaffed and ill-equipped refugee camps like the infamous one in Moria, on Lesbos.

After a while, you get used to it all and forget all the good things about life. The way you are treated makes you forget that you are a human being. There was not a single moment when you could feel safe. Every minute there was a possibility of a fire, of an attack, of rape (Nazanin, refugee, 2022).

Over the following years, on national and international media, Lesbos started to be identified with Moria, and the horrendous living conditions in the camp became well known all over Europe. This «permanent emergency» (Pitzalis, 2022) made the previous spontaneous solidarity initiatives insufficient, marking the beginning of the arrival of large international NGOs that could, through their economic capacity and stability, provide more structured support, even if non-exhaustive.

There was a lot of money spent on very temporary resources, a lot of money, activities and human capital going into very temporary fixes, because all the main problems were systemic. There was no answer for the problem of the toilet, there was no answer for the problem of housing [...]. Tons of activities, energy, stress, money, working hours going into these very flimsy bandages over systemic problems. [...] Nothing would really solve the worst issues of Moria. [...] Five years of working with toothpicks, and it is still the hygiene, it is still the long wait, it is still the assault, it is still the rape, it is still the murdered, it is still the drug use, the awful food... The suicide attempts (Jack, former volunteer, 2022).

Along with the decline in traditional forms of tourism, the island's economy has been affected by the start of a new type of tourism, that of volunteers (Di Matteo, 2023). A complex coexistence emerged, involving locals, migrants and a multifaceted humanitarian galaxy made of activists, NGOs' workers, volunteers, and researchers. The strong presence of internationals – usually with higher economic capacities – seemed to



Fig. 2 – Moria camp (Marchesi, D., 2019).

exacerbate Greece's «sense of otherness» from the rest of Europe (Herzfeld, 1995, 2005), which was often identified with efficiency, rationality and economic resources.

Helge, a German social worker and writer, told me that after 2016, over time, the situation became more complex; the locals began to perceive an invasion; not that of the refugees arriving by sea, but that of the international NGOs and the thousands of volunteers. They arrived with money and their codes of conduct, without caring about what already existed on the island and without wanting to understand the habits and rhythms of the locals (Fieldnotes, March 2022).

In the following years, the consolidation of the European hotspot approach turned Lesbos into an open-air prison, where asylum-seekers had to endure years of waiting due to the slow bureaucracy of an asylum system that was completely – if not deliberately – underprepared and understaffed (Daminelli and Cometti, 2024).

On Lesbos, the worsening of the situation in Moria and the normalisation of the emergency contributed to the fragmentation and

radicalisation among the local population. In April 2018, the Afghan refugee community from Moria organised a peaceful sit-in in Sappho square, in the very city centre of Mytilini. It was just one of the frequent non-violent protests started by asylum seekers in those years. This time, however, the sit-in was violently targeted by a group of far-right extremists; the delayed intervention of the local authority allowed the situation to escalate into an urban guerrilla scenario for a few hours (Antireport Lesvos, 2022).

I just remember a large number of women and children sitting in the square, protected by men, in a circle around them, with blankets covering them. But that was really the only shield they had. Just blankets. People were throwing water bottles and rocks and, at a certain point, also Molotov cocktails. It got quite violent. From what I remember there were police there, but they weren't stopping the attacks. Not until at least much later in the evening. It went on really for quite some time. That night the square was cleared, and the people were moved along (Rachael, NGO worker, 2022).

The Sappho square attack proved to be a turning point in the recent history of the island. It was the first time that openly violent behaviours towards refugees were not only perpetrated, but also somehow tolerated by the authorities. On Lesvos, some felt that such actions could now be performed with impunity.

In the summer of 2019, *Nea Demokratia*, headed by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, won the national election marking a swift harshening of anti-migration policies in Greece. From early 2020, illegal refoulement of asylum-seekers – commonly known as pushbacks – started to be reported on Greek-Turkish borders, including near Lesvos (Forensic Architecture, 2024).

From a political point of view, it was very weird. For me, a very strong switch was the victory of *Nea Demokratia*. [...] The behaviour of the police from one day totally shifted. The media completely flipped as well, and suddenly it was all hate... And the acceleration of the hate speech was unbelievable, it really took one election and the next month this was it, a very crazy thing to see especially in a place like Lesvos (Quentin, former NGO worker, 2023).

A climate of terror and fear took over the asylum-seeker population on the island, as well as the NGOs. In addition to the exhaustion of the local population and the political changes described above, the announcement of the construction of a Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) in Vastria (Krösschell and Kempf, 2024), a remote site on the island, sparked anger and protests.

Back then, we had attacks every day. You had attacks against persons working for medical NGOs. Their cars were attacked because they had the logo on them. You had a lot of checkpoints in various places on the island where there would be groups of people, sort of vigilante groups, armed with whatever they could find (Elli, lawyer, 2022).

Then, suddenly, COVID-19 restrictions put an end to all hostilities and, almost overnight, Lesvos went back to a new kind of quiet, which lasted only a few months. On the night of September 8th, an unprecedented fire broke out in Moria, with blazes originating from different areas of the camp, eventually engulfing the whole facility.

In the matter of just a couple of nights, Moria camp was destroyed and all its residents found themselves homeless, roaming the country roads around the area without food, water, or access to toilets. It was mayhem. For two weeks, more than 12 thousand people struggled to survive with almost no resources available.

Mavrovouni, the currently operating CCAC on Lesvos, was then set up on a former military training ground and shooting range, directly by the sea (Refugee Support Aegean, 2023). Asylum-seekers, wretched at the prospect of having to enter yet another camp, were forced to move into a facility which was obviously not ready nor suitable for long-term accommodation. That was the beginning of the new normal for Lesvos. In the past couple of years, the ongoing construction of the new CCAC has been slowed down by bureaucratic issues and environmental concerns (Andersen and Geiger, 2022). Mavrovouni is still acting as the main accommodation facility for asylum-seekers on the island and, as of early 2025, there seems to be no sign of its imminent dismissal.



Fig. 3 – View of Mavrovouni camp (Marchesi, D., 2021).

After the Moria fire, Lesbos gradually disappeared again from the map: over the years, media attention diminished and consequently it became harder for NGOs to find funding to run projects on the island.

Many NGOs are moving elsewhere, e.g. Athens and Thessaloniki, because the numbers of refugees no longer justify their presence here, they are not even comparable to the more than twenty thousand people who lived in Moria before the fire. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in recent weeks risks further accelerating this process. Europe Cares' decision to take over the management of the Community Centre, now called Paréa³, is precisely to ensure that a network is created between the NGOs still operating in Mytilini, in order to stop this

³ Paréa Lesbos is a community centre run by the German NGO Europe Cares, where different NGOs cooperate providing psychological and legal support, language courses, a safe space for women, a cycle workshop, gardening courses, sports activities, a circus school, and clothes and hygiene products distribution. It is in proximity to the Mavrovouni camp, and it is visited daily by hundreds of camp residents. Until 2021, the space was run by the Greek NGO 'One Happy Family', which later moved its activities to Athens. See: <<https://www.europecares.org/parea>>.

progressive disinvestment and prevent organisations from leaving one after the other. (Fieldnotes, March 2022).

One could say that the fire that destroyed Moria turned the media spotlight on the island back on for a few weeks, then as the ashes of the camp cooled down, the media spotlight also turned off. Nevertheless, the island continues to be very much present in the humanitarian universe and a destination for volunteer tourism. We must not forget that we ourselves met in Mytilini after the pandemic, a year and a half after Moria's destruction.

I saw the fire in Moria, I knew there were a lot of people here. I needed to do something with my life, it was the time of Covid, I needed to do something with a meaning. I had always seen it from the outside, I needed to try to understand how the political system works, but I was not really involved in political issues at the time. [...] I didn't expect much, I had a friend here who told me something about the situation and had a house here, he suggested that I come. It took me months to start to understand (Eleni, NGO worker, 2022).

Today, the humanitarian world is primarily focused on the city of Mytilini and the areas surrounding the Mavrovouni camp, where NGOs and self-organised collectives operate, attracting many Europeans. While in 2015 Skala Sykamineas served as the focal point of what Papataxiarchis (2016: 7) described as «a kind of gravity [that] attracts them [humanitarians/activists] to the front line where they meet in large concentrations to form knots», the same role is nowadays played by Mytilini, often referred to as the 'humanitarian city' (Papataxiarchis, 2017).

4. Beyond the prison-island

Our assumption is that Lesvos metaphorically appeared on the map of Europe in 2015, with peaks of exposure in international news dictated by frequent tragedies in the Aegean or the conditions and events of Moria camp, to then gradually disappear from it after the fire in 2020. It is now time to ask ourselves what Lesvos was like in the international and local portrayals before 2015 and what Lesvos is like nowadays.

Firstly, it is important to mention that even though everyone was taken

aback by the scale of the 2015 landings, most people on Lesbos were not surprised that their island found itself at the centre of such a great movement of people. As by Thanassis (local resident, 2022) «Before the Syrians started coming out, we had the problem with the Iraqis. Five years ago, six, seven years ago, Iraqis were coming out. We knew. Refugees from Iraq, but not as many as from Syria».

Because of its geographical position, the whole region has historically been a crossroads, with different political, social, and economic influences overlapping with each other. The Roman aqueduct in Moria, the Panhellenic sanctuary of Messon, the Byzantine-Genoese castle in Molyvos, or the Yeni Ottoman mosque in Mytilini are, among many others, traces of the different people and conquerors who had inhabited Lesbos⁴.

The island has many second – or even third – generation immigrants, whose parents and grandparents crossed under the same circumstances [as in 2015] (Babis, local resident, 2015).

Let's not forget that all the islands, especially in the Aegean, are migratory islands. Half the population has come from somewhere else. My grandfather came from Smyrna (Maria, 2022).

Babis and Maria refer to the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey, an agreed mutual expulsion formalised at the end of the Greco-Turkish War, what Greeks call the *Μικρασιατική Καταστροφή* (the catastrophe of Asia Minor) (Exertzoglou, 2016). During the war, and especially after the fire of Smyrna (now Izmir) in 1922, thousands of Greeks started fleeing Anatolia, where they had been living for generations. At the end of the population exchange, more than one million Asia Minor refugees had returned to Greece, whose total population amounted to less than six million. These events had a major social and political impact on Greece and especially on Aegean islands, due to their proximity to Turkey.

In Greek culture, especially in Rebetiko music, in the following decades this inflow created a vivid imagery of nostalgia, a collective opus of stories of departure and displacement, from an ancient, paradise-like homeland now lost forever (Tragaki, 2009).

⁴ For a brief overlook on Lesbos' history see Di Matteo, 2021.



Fig. 4 – Asia Minor Refugees on Lesvos in 1923 (courtesy of the Skala Loutra Asia Minor Refugees Museum, Lesvos).

When I decided to go to Lesvos it was also for music [...]. People who had been there for migration related reasons told me «no, there is no music on Lesvos» and then I discovered a world! And through Greek people I found out that there is a specific type of *Paradosiako* (traditional music) and also a specific type of *Lesvian Rebetiko*. There is quite a circle of jazz and traditional musicians, who experiment mixing genres. In Mytilini there are at least one or two concerts every week. Other musicians live near Plomari; one day they took me to this tavern run by a famous *rebetiko* singer, who lived there, far away from everything, she didn't want to have many people around, unless they were friends and musicians to spend long days playing together (Francesca, Erasmus student, 2025).

Rebetiko first appeared in the urban cities of Asia Minor at the beginning of the 20th century and was introduced to Greece by the refugees of the 'catastrophe'. *Rebetiko* songs were considered marginal or subcultural (Gerasopoulos, 2021), since they were associated with the low-class Greek refugees, as Babis and Maria's grandparents were.

After the *καταστροφή*, my father and his two siblings came from Asia Minor,

accompanied by their mother. [...] They left everything, [...] [they] came as refugees to Mytilini. [...] Unfortunately, the locals [...] treated them as slaves and took advantage of them. However, they managed to save money and, with efforts, to put together a good fortune, to have children and to raise a family. This is their story, more or less, from the side of my refugee father, who came at the age of 5 from Rodesto, Callipolis (Babis, local resident, 2015).

On a clear day, from the northern and western shorelines of the island, it is easy to see buildings, roads and wind turbines dotting the Turkish coast on the other side of the Aegean. It is so close, in fact, that it is hard to imagine that just a few kilometres of water divide two different continents.

As soon as we see the Saturday morning ferry going eastward, Yaqub tells me: ‘when I look at the ferry going to Turkey, I wonder why we didn’t have the chance to take it, sometimes this thought haunts my head, it is constant and exhausting (Fieldnotes, April 2023).



Fig. 5 – Eritrean and Ethiopian asylum-seekers living in Moria protest in front of the Mytilini port (Marchesi, D., 2016).

Because of such proximity, Lesvos has historically acted as a crossroads of passages and constellations, a place characterised – both from a naturalistic and a symbolic perspective – by frictions (Tsing, 2004) and fractures, filled by diverse subjectivities at different times. Nevertheless, the island has also preserved and still cherishes a strong Greek identity: some of the island's main towns like Mithymna, Eressos, Antissa, as well as Lesvos itself inherited their names from lesser-known Greek mythological figures (Peck, 1896). The work of poets such as Alcaeus and especially Sappho has contributed to the popularity of the island from ancient Greece to the present day, leaving a legacy that goes beyond her poetry.

The first time I heard about Lesvos was through Sappho of Mytilini, the poetess of Eressos considered to be the tenth muse by the great writers of her time. [...] A big, beautiful place, full of culture, that's what I imagined (Inés, tourist, 2025).

I first heard of Lesvos during my student years, and I connected it with historical figures like the philosophers Sappho and Theophrastus and even some geopolitical historical facts like marine battles (Adriana, tourist, 2025).

I can't remember when I heard for the first time about Lesvos, but probably at school [...]. It reminds me about Sappho, her sexual orientation and also her poems. I had a very close friend who decided to move to the island to work with refugees and it was because of her that I decided to travel to the island. The first time I travelled there was on my way back from Turkey, when I visited her (Theodora, tourist, 2025).

It is thanks to Sappho that the term 'lesbian' is believed to have been coined (Kantsa, 2010). She was from Lesvos and expressed her love for women in her works; this connection to her homeland and her poetry is the reason why she is often credited with its creation. For this reason, since the end of the 1970s, an ever-growing number of lesbian women started visiting Lesvos. A separatist community settled in Skala Eressos, the birthplace of Sappho, which at that time was still a fairly isolated place. The northern end of the beach was turned into a non-mixed village made of cane huts, where a community of women «ate, talked, and flirted» (Kantsa, 2002: 40). In Preciado's words (2020: 179): «[t]he first image of the beach at Eressos has stayed intact in my memory like a hymn to utopia,

like a summons to revolution. It was the impossible become reality: a kilometer of sand and sea occupied by 500 naked lesbians».

In the late 1970's, tensions between the locals and the lesbian community began to emerge, and it grew more serious and hostile in the middle of the 1980's, partly because the locals wanted to attract another type of tourism, more economically advantageous and modest, leading to the beach village dismantling (Kantsa, 2002). Despite this, over the years, the presence of the lesbian community has been consolidated and normalised: nowadays, many accommodation and business activities are run by women who have settled in the village, and Skala Eressos has become a destination for LGBTQI+ tourism, fully integrated into the circuits of the international tourism industry.

Everything started when I joined a reading group in January 2024 at the collective FAC in Athens (Feminist Autonomous Center for research⁵) where we were reading the book «After Sappho» (2023) by Selby Schwartz [...]. People from the reading group have been frequently traveling [...] to Eressos due to the feminist and queer festivals and the involvement with EL*C (Eurocentralasian Lesbian* Community)⁶ that has funded some projects [...] including renting a small house in Skala for the whole summer. The idea was that whoever wanted was free to organize their vacations there. So we did. I cannot forget [...] the stories from older lesbians about the socio-political situation in Eressos in the 80's and 90's and [...] the documentary «Lesvia» by Tzeli Hadjidimitriou⁷ (Adriana, tourist, 2025).

Every year, in September, Sappho Women – a non-profit organisation – organises the International Women's Festival to celebrate «diversity and inclusivity, [...] [providing] a unique opportunity for women from around the globe to come together in friendship, connection, learning, and empowerment»⁸. They describe Skala Eressos as a «small fishing village» where:

⁵ <<https://feministresearch.org/>>.

⁶ <<https://europeanlesbianconference.org/>>.

⁷ <<https://lesviafilm.com/>>.

⁸ <<https://www.womensfestival.eu/>>.

lesbian, gay or solo woman traveller [...] [can find] the opportunity truly to relax and to be themselves. [...] The freedom of expression in the village is not characteristic of the rest of the island, but in Skala Eressos it is welcomed! This unique, unspoiled beach village offers a chilled-out and grown-up alternative to some of the better-known, overpriced party resorts, and allows you to have just the kind of holiday you want while being exactly who you want to⁹.

Skala Eressos and other places in the North of the island are indeed destinations not only for LGBTQI+ tourism, but more generally for young Greeks looking for an «easy and cheap island» to spend their holidays, as stated by Raphael who visited Lesbos in summer 2024. «I ended up in Lesbos just because I wanted to go on vacation with this Greek friend of mine, and she suggested joining her group there. I didn't even know where it was on the map», Simona told us. She talked about the beach in Chrusos where she camped for weeks joining a nudist community, somehow recalling Preciado's image of Skala Eressos of yesteryear, placing Lesbos among other popular destinations where «looking not for consumerist vacations, but for nature and exploration». In her words, the times when Skala Eressos was a lesbian utopia are definitely gone, and Sappho's legacy has now been commodified.

On the island, there are many places involved in non-consumerist tourism; we ourselves enjoyed free camping, relaxing or partying in Skala Eressos or other places such as Sigri, Xrisi 'Ammos, Thermi, being part of that extended community composed of Greek and Erasmus students, refugees, volunteers and humanitarian workers, living on Lesbos for diverse reasons and with varying degrees of connection and mutuality.

Before the call for Erasmus applications, I didn't even know there was a university on Lesbos; in my case, my application was driven by my interest in the issue of refugee camps and humanitarianism. [...] The city of Mytilini is in the middle, with the camp and the community centre on one side and the university hill on the other. What I've discovered is a community of students, not only in social sciences, but also in environmental studies and marine biology. Many of them have chosen to come here because these departments are among the best in Greece. For me, before coming, Lesbos was just a borderland; I couldn't imagine

⁹ *Ibid.*

any other reason to come. [...] Erasmus students come and go, similarly to NGO volunteers, while those who stay are refugees, locals and also this stable community of Greek students who spend three or five years here and then, in some cases, never leave (Alice, Erasmus student, 2022).

Daily life on the island is marked by constant encounters between those who have the privilege to hold the *right passport*, which allows them to explore different countries for weeks, months or years, with the reassuring possibility of traveling back home at any time; and those who have the *wrong one* – or no passport at all – and are forced to stay on Lesbos for undefined amounts of time waiting for their asylum claim to be processed (Knott, 2018; Daminelli and Cometti, 2024). These encounters can be empowering and foster deep relationships; but they can also be a source of suffering for those stuck on the island.

You know, we are all here for solidarity, so it's easy to make connections and get close to each other, to feel the same. But it was also painful to see people leaving... Last year, for months, we were at the port to say goodbye to someone. We cried every day... (Zaman, refugee, 2022).

It is so hard. I mean, [...] then you meet someone, and you think “OK, this is my type, I need to be friends with him” and then they just move. I saw thousands of people coming and going. But still I have contacts with friends who were here... It is a good thing that they don't forget after they leave (Mohsen, refugee, 2022).

Encounters like these shape people; through living – and sometimes struggling – together, their subjectivities evolve, becoming something new.

After a few months in the camp, I could not stand it anymore. Luckily, I found out about the No Border squat, set up in an abandoned building nearby their little volunteer camp located on the beach on the way into town. [...] The building was kind of wrecked, but it was okay. I moved in with some friends, and we started a life there, together with the volunteers. It was much better than Moria. We had rooms, we had a kitchen. [...] About fifty people of different nationalities moved from Moria to the squat and after a few months a sort of community was born. We had some sort of parties, we danced, musicians would show up, sometimes we'd play football and volleyball. We all sat there together, side by side and that's where I found humanity. I just felt free. It was a complete wreckage of a building,



Fig. 6 – View of Mytilini’s Statue of Liberty (Daminelli, L., 2022).

but we were happy inside that building. It was important for us. [...] Every one of us, as refugees here, has been an important part of a movement. [...] Our journey has turned us all into political activists (Javad, refugee, 2017).

Just like the people landing on Lesvos, the island itself can also be considered *on the move*, a space «that is fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses practices, and relationships that highlight endless definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial and other symbolic boundaries» (Brambilla, 2015: 19). A place that requires us to revise conventional images of islands as isolated, immobile and impervious to external influences and connections (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll, 2014) in order to think of them as relational spaces forged by the subjectivities that flow through them. In Vannini and Taggart’s words (2012: 237): «Like any other place, [...] [an] island is something that is always going on. An island’s features – from its tides and currents to the coming and going of its ferries and its dwellers – never cease to move.

These movements and the encounters they generate constantly generate [...] [the] island's sense of place».

5. Conclusions: a polyphony

The ethnographic material presented in the previous pages shows that the island has an historical and social identity evolving and changing over time, which therefore cannot be defined once and for all.

Tsing states that the «landscape is social» (2004: XI), referring to a never-ending overlapping of narratives, communities, and perspectives. Lesvos is a great example of this continuous overlap, being a place that can be described only through a *polyphony* or a collage of different contrasting images. It is a place where one starts talking about tourism and ends up talking about border violence:

Lesvos has never been a tourist island. There were tourists, but very few, some Germans, Dutch, Belgians, I don't know. English people were there, even and especially in that area in the north near Molyvos, which suffered a lot from this situation, because they lost a lot of the tourist audience they had before. Because, you can understand, it's not easy to have a holiday and have pushbacks in front of you. I experienced it this summer, I saw pushbacks before my eyes. I was in Molyvos and it was not a very pleasant thing, OK? Hearing people scream, that's a bad thing (Evriviadis, Lesvian tourist guide, 2023).

Where varieties of olives and olive trees connect to ancient poets:

I was born here, I grew up here, [...] it is one of the most green islands in the Aegean, it has a great olive grove with about eleven million olive trees, it has a very nice huge forest with pine trees, and there is also the western part where the island is dry with the stone forest [...]. I try to give my best and each of us does, in order to make the island as it used to be before, and to give value to the olive grove and the quality oil it produces, to make it known and to enter the markets. [...] I realized that these olives come from generation to generation [...]. Here in Lesvos, we have three varieties; the dominating one is the Kolovi variety in a percentage over 80-85%, especially in the area of Geras. This variety is an ancient one, dating back to the years of Sappho and Alcaeus (Kostas, local resident, 2018).



Fig. 7 – «All the weird things in the city of angels», graffiti in Mytilini (Marchesi, D., 2016).

It is a place where, going to the Ottoman hotsprings of Efthalou to escape the humanitarian context of Mytilini for a few hours, one can find themselves sharing the small pool of thermal water with three Lithuanian Frontex agents on their day off – as it actually happened to one of us.

It is both the place where some «learnt how hell looks like» (Muhaied, refugee, 2023), but where others decided to settle: «You know, when I arrived here six years ago, I had this problem, I couldn't see anything around me: like nature, houses, how beautiful this island is. Now I can see it and enjoy it... Swimming... Everything!» (Musa, refugee, 2022).

Sappho Square, in the heart of Mytilini, just past the harbour, is a privileged viewpoint on the different flows that cross and inhabit the island. On either side of the road, two bus stops face each other and connect, in opposite directions, the city centre to the University and the Mavrovouni camp. Separated by two lanes of sometimes intense traffic, large groups of students meet the gaze of refugees and volunteers waiting on the other side. From the tables of the many bars populating the square, eyes can wander between the Hellenic Coast Guard boats moored in the harbour and the streams of tourists disembarking from the ferries from Athens,

Thessaloniki, or Ayvalik.

Lesvos is an in-between island: a borderland in-between cultures, peoples and continents, in-between history. Because of this position, it cannot escape this multifaceted overlapping of perceptions and perspectives. As Anzaldúa wrote, «ambivalence resides in the borderlands» (2012); Lesvos is a place where differences meet, mix and conflict, producing something that is inherently *beyond* borders.

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