Geoforum xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Shifting itineraries of asylum hospitality: Towards a process geographical approach of guest-host relations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Hospitality
Process geography
Asylumscapes
Shifting itineraries

ABSTRACT

Hospitality as a notion has emerged as a critical philosophical category in human geography for addressing various issues around asylum migration and citizenship. In this paper, we identify two major limitations of empirical studies focusing on hospitality in this context. First, empirical studies tend to investigate relations between pre-known guests ("migrants") and pre-defined hosts (states, local organisations, activist movements, churches), thereby overlooking shifting dynamics of social relations. Second, although critical geographers have emphasised a relational sense of place in their empirical discussions on hospitality (in the context of asylum migration), observations are mostly place-based and focus on how different cities or organisations provide hospitality (or not). To re-think hospitality, we instead start from negotiating our own practices as researchers in relation with actors in the field of refugee support, actively forging and navigating shifts in these relations, thereby creating action research processes under the title of 'Asylum University'. In so doing, we re-position Derrida's concept of 'cities of refuge' in the in-between spaces of shifting roles, (un)certain (im)mobilities, border-crossings and tensed emotional geometries that intertwine in an entangled web of hospitality, in ways that are yet-to-be-known. In other words, we challenge researchers that investigate hospitality in the context of asylum migration to apply a process geographical approach that actively follows guest-host relations (including the ones they become entangled with) instead of freezing them in time and space. This allows for an approach that is more self-critical and sensitive to what we call "asylumscapes" - the dynamic processes of refugee hospitality.

1. Introduction

It is another Wednesday. I enter the cafe in the city-centre used by a local migrant-support organization. It is not a usual day. All the furniture has been moved aside to create a classroom setting. People still crowd around the bar. A volunteer steps onto a higher pedestal, cups his palms around his mouth and calls out, "Today we will have a lesson on trauma! So can all of you move to the chairs and take seats? We will begin the lesson soon. Does everyone understand me? If not, just ask someone because I don't speak Arabic or Amharic etc.*" (in Dutch).*

A few of us reluctantly move and sit down on the chairs, while others continue to stand around and chat. Two well-meaning volunteers stand around a white-board and begin a presentation on the different kinds of traumas that refugees face. They have invited a fellow 'client' (a word used to refer to those receiving support from the organization) to share his story of how going to the gymnasium brought him out of depression, but his audience seems disinterested. The volunteers then speedily go through ways of coping with stress. Soon one of the volunteers stops the other and says, "Maybe they are not following us. We should open it up for a discussion in English."Volunteer 1: "Sure. So what are the traumas that you people face?" (in English).M from the audience: "You know it's life. It's not always trauma. For me, you cannot sit and talk about these things. You have to keep moving."Volunteer 2: "Sure, but you are an exception, we think. Let's ask others. What do you do every day to overcome trauma?"K, sitting next to me: "Eat and sleep…Eat and sleep."

After this, the so-called lesson on trauma abruptly ends because of a heated debate between the volunteers. I continue sitting there, being confronted with pre-determined relations between the 'hosts' and their 'guests' who needed their help. It had appeared too forced while being actively and passively rejected by the 'guests' for whom it was intended. [March 18, 2015, fieldwork diary of author 1]

The above experiences confronted the authors with the contested nature of refugee-support. It illustrates how pre-determined host/guest relations produce their own politics of victimhood, dependency and rigid performativities despite shifting in power relations in terms of guests becoming hosts of hosts (Derrida, 2000a: 124–125) in how they

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.03.024
Received 24 May 2017; Received in revised form 22 January 2018; Accepted 24 March 2018
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accept or reject hospitality. On one hand, the 'coming-togetherness' of the people in the cafe can be seen as part of active social-support networks outside/beyond the state. This can be attributed to the fact that the organization supports people rejected by the state, and that some people who had arrived newly to the cafe that day were not yet officially 'documented' by EU states in their cross-border travels from various outer-European locations to the Netherlands, but having arrived there through their own social networks. At the same time, we were also 'thrown-together'[1] in the cafe because of the border regimes of EU states that require one to invite himself/herself into the legal system of (asylum) citizenship (a language that is itself alien to the 'new arrival', as Derrida notes, (2000a: 15)) in order to access basic rights.

There is no doubt that the role of local migrant support organizations such as the above one play a crucial role in hospitality networks of asylum in Europe challenging state practices of hostilities towards undocumented inhabitants of the city. In this context many critical geographers (e.g. Gill et al., 2014), and most notably Darling (2009; 2010; 2011), highlight the relationality of refugee support initiatives. However, remaining fixed to local initiatives might run the risk of losing sight of the dynamic processes of guest-host relations. That is to say that guest-host relations in the context of asylum migration are part of an entangled web of hospitality in which diverse actors, practices and discourses inter-act, and power relations, despite being unequal, are constantly being challenged, imposed and negotiated producing their own space-times (Dikeç et al., 2009).

Starting from the Derridean notion that hospitality can never be fully *known,* but emerges in practices and experiences in constant negotiation (1997; 2000), this paper outlines two main limitations of the existing empirical studies on refugee support, hospitality and migration. First, these studies tend to focus their ethnographic work mainly on the 'usual suspects' of hospitality, such as humanitarian/migrant-support organizations (Johnson, 2015; Darling, 2014), church communities (Itçaina and Burchianti, 2011; Snyder, 2011; Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014, Nagel and Ehrkamp, 2016), and activist groups (Millner, 2011; Gill et al., 2014) as bounded entities offering hospitality. While these studies provide rich ethnographic insights into the lives of migrants and also around how researchers perceive 'them' to experience hospitality in the US or Europe, such an approach at the same time has the risk of further reproducing the divisive imaginaries of hospitality as unidirectionally experienced by and offered to 'the migrant Other'. What may also be ignored in one's gaze solely on 'the migrant' is the relations, situations, processes and deviations that reproduce and dissolve such identities in the first place. In a worst case scenario, empirical research may uncritically reproduce the paternalistic and predetermined visions of hospitality that are state-centric and/or sometimes observed within local initiatives for migrant support, as illustrated by the opening vignette. Here we follow the critique raised by the autonomy of migration literature that stand against such paternalistic approaches by humanitarian as well as fear-based securitised discourses on migration (e.g. Papadopoulos et al., 2008).

Second, although most studies acknowledge that hospitality relations are embedded in networked practices that transcend bounded notions of place, the actual empirical observations do actually take place in single sites. Thus, with a theoretically outward perspective, hospitality practices are analysed in, among others, Sheffield (Darling, 2010), Toronto (Young, 2011) and Calais (Millner, 2011). These studies then reveal that specific sites/localities such as a café, parks, neighbourhoods etc., rather than 'the city' as a whole, offer refuge. While focusing on hospitality 'here' and 'now', these studies are less sensitive to the transient spatio-temporalities of hospitality that are constantly making and re-(de)making places also related to past relations 'there' and 'then'. We argue that while place-making is crucial to *where* hospitality relations are forged, it is important to not bound it to a scalar notion of city and state as dualistic and hierarchical political bodies (Isin, 2007). In fact, everyday hospitality relations, despite being structured by border regimes of states, show autonomy and agency in mobility (not only across places but also in relations that are carried and forged). In so doing, we follow the main arguments of mobilities studies that has shifted our scholarly attention to movements and journeys of all sorts (e.g. Sheller and Urry, 2006; Ernste et al., 2012; Faulconbridge and Hui, 2016), in which place is fundamentally understood to be constituted by movement rather than fixed in relations and singular belongings.

With these two limitations in mind, the aim of this paper is to introduce a process geographical approach (inspired by Appadurai (2000; 2001), see also Schapendonk et al. in the Introduction to this themed issue) to hospitality. In other words, a Derridean conceptualisation of hospitality challenges the researcher to actively build and move with hospitality relations in order to be sensitive to the ways how hospitality practices cross borders, how past and current feelings of being un/welcome relate to each other, and how specific guest-host roles change over time. Based on this argument, we have used an action research approach to build our own informal hospitality initiative under the name Asylum University. This forms the foundation of our empirical illustrations regarding the ways hospitality emerges in the in-between spaces of shifting power relations and the interplay between the coming-togetherness and thrown-togetherness of actors and practices.

In what follows, we discuss further the limitations of empirical studies investigating refugee support, come into critical dialogue with Derrida's theorizations on hospitality and 'cities of refuge' to underline the need to move away from fixed places and relations of hospitality. We use our empirical vignettes to illustrate how the hospitality dynamics outlined create "*asylumscapes*" that challenge the boundedness of formal institutions of refugee hospitality and conventional research relations in Europe today. Drawing very much inspiration from Appadurai's notion of scapes (1990) as well as scholars theorising on borderscapes (e.g. Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007), asylumscapes point to the webs of entanglements in which asylum escapes the confined co-ordinates of state hospitality but emerges in multiple locations and fields, produced in everyday practices, processes and actions emerging *in-between* the formal and informal (gestures and procedures), here and there (in the then, now and towards), researcher and researched.

2. Encountering the limitations on hospitality thinking

Questions of hospitality are often tied to borders of nation-states understood in relation to immigration and especially asylum-seekers (Rosello, 2001; Dillon, 1999). This is so because of the underlying assumptions of 'hosts' and 'guests', 'insiders' and 'outsiders' attached to spatial imaginaries of nation-states as 'territorial containers' and bounded notions of membership of national citizenship. The 'asylum-seeker' as the known 'Other'[2], is a figure understood to challenge some of the foundational myths and limits of nation-states. Not only do "their" continuing presence, struggles, and resistance at the heart of national space and everyday life are seen to challenge the limits of liberal democratic citizenship, but also to expose the permeability of state borders and the transnational dimension of citizenship (Balibar, 1997), which Balibar even claims is something 'we' (European citizens) owe the *sans papiers* for. The asylum-seeker and the *sans papiers* rather than a real person emerges as a symbolic figure who confronts, and unsettles routines and taken-for-grantedness of privileges and self-perceptions within state-centric frames, while also, being the object and

[1] 'Thrown-togetherness' is also used by Doreen Massey to stress the relationality of places (Massey, 2005).

[2] As Derrida (2000a, p.21) underlines, the subtle difference between a 'stranger' and the 'Other' is that with a 'stranger' one knows him/her as the 'Other' whereas, the 'Other' in general is someone one is not even aware/is not known to one as the 'Other'.

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