Being There While Not Being There
Reflections on Multi-sited Ethnography and Field Access in the Context of Forced Migration

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ABSTRACT

Multi-sited research has become a quality criterion for ethnographic research. This applies especially to studies on forced migration. Here, a site is often equated with a state, where researchers are usually required to be physically present. In this article, however, we ask: Must multi-sited research necessarily be multi-national? Do researchers have to be physically present at all sites? By discussing ethnographic material collected with forced migrants in Malta, we demonstrate that multi-sitedness is viewed in too narrow terms when site is equated with the nation-state. Adopting this approach also obscures refugees' lived realities, their patterns of movement and their often truncated mobility. Instead, we carve out an understanding of multi-sited ethnography within one locality, introducing the concept of un-participated sites to include sites researchers are not able to physically visit. While the inaccessibility of sites is often inherent to ethnographic studies, it is all the more relevant for migration research.

Introduction: An Anecdote on Multi-Sited Ethnography

'Finally, now you have also advanced to a stage where you have conducted multi-sited research'. This comment, directed at Sarah Nimführ at a research colloquium at which she presented ethnographic research on forced migration, was prompted by her decision to follow her research partners' movement from Malta to Italy (Nimführ 2020: 78). The comment highlights a tendency that has become ever more pronounced in migration studies: multi-sited research occurs when one crosses borders of nation-states. Along these lines, it was further suggested to both of us that we had finally 'complemented

our single-sited and stationary research in Malta', that 'the binaries between here and there had been overcome' and that 'the complexity of migration is now better understood'. Both our physical presence and our own trans*national* movements were evidently decisive for our research to be labelled as 'multi-sited'.

But is this – crossing national borders – really what constitutes multi-sited research in the context of forced migration and beyond? After all, transnational phenomena are always simultaneously local, national, *and* global. How, then, do researchers cope with these phenomena, such as in forced migration, when research partners are immobilised and (at times) unable to cross borders, or when a physical 'being there' is not always possible for researchers (Feldman 2011)? How do we grasp the concept of 'site' if researchers do not cross-national borders during their research, even though their research partners do?

Multi-sited research (Marcus 1995; 1998) is viewed in too narrow terms when 'site' is merely equated with the nation-state. Contemporary ethnographic fieldwork for which researchers cross national borders is often labelled as 'multi-sited', which leads to the impression that a 'real' ethnography on migration needs to be multinational. Yet migration does not merely take place on the one or the other side of national borders but between them too. Adopting this approach obscures refugees' lived realities, their patterns of movement and their, at times, truncated mobility. What complicates matters even more is that anthropologists have always also included material that has been reported to them, but where they have not been present. We discuss this phenomenon as an 'un-participated site', highlighting its relevance for ethnographic research on forced migration. Consequently, we have two aims: First, we propose not conceiving of multi-sitedness as necessarily entailing different nation-states in one's research. Second, we contribute to debates on field access and are concerned with the question of who can collect ethnographic material at which times and in which places. Is it always researchers, or do research participants also receive 'ethnographic authority'? Here we understand forced migration as a lens through which to examine the norm and form of ethnography. All too often migrant movements challenge methods and methodological assumptions that – while not universal – are commonplace to much ethnographic research in the field. Therefore, we propose the term 'un-participated site' – which we developed against the backdrop of our empirical material – to foster context-sensitive methodological approaches.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: First, we highlight different conceptions of multi-sited research. Second, we offer insights into our empirical material collected in Malta, and, in a third step, we discuss this material against the backdrop of the different understandings of multi-sitedness. In our conclusion, we offer an outlook on the practice of multi-sited research in forced migration studies and beyond.

Multi-sited Ethnography, its Various Interpretations, and Forced Migration Research

The 1990s were a changing decade for ethnography: both as a specific form of text and as the actual practice of collecting material through fieldwork alike. The *Writing Culture Debate* (Abu Lughod 1991; Clifford and Marcus 1986) addressed questions of representation with several scholars criticising the equation of space and culture, and many arguing against viewing culture holistically. Yet the world and its societies faced rapid changes due to 'hyperglobalisation' (Rodrik 2011): migration has increasingly taken on new forms, trade has become more integrated, travel has become cheaper and faster, technologies have developed rapidly. And ethnographers have had a great interest in grasping these phenomena. It is therefore hardly surprising that new concepts of mobile research were proposed during this period: Gisela Welz's (1998) 'moving targets', Ulf Hannerz's (1996) 'transnational connections', and – of course – George E. Marcus' concept of 'multi-sited ethnography', which he introduced in 1995. It is fair to say that Marcus' concept has prevailed and is still the talk of the town, yet some scholars already denote it as a 'buzzword', as being used in an 'inflationary' fashion and as suffering from 'oversimplification' (on a critical note: Hage 2005; Hannerz 2003; Herzfeld 2004: 216).[1]

The hype about multi-sited ethnography was accompanied by the devaluation of so-called single or mono-sited ethnographies, which were now understood as outdated. Whoever is called a single-sited ethnographer is easily suspected of reproducing holism and the equation of space and culture. Yet some scholars argue that ethnographic research is by nature mobile, as Bronislaw Malinowski and others were everything but immobile (Schmidt-Lauber 2009). Hannerz (2003: 202–203) claims that cultural phenomena were always studied 'along the way', and the understanding of single-sited ethnography seems to be a retrospective ascription (Hage 2005; Haller 2005: 159–161;

Marcus and Okely 2007: 357; Schmidt-Lauber 2009: 248). Ruben Andersson (2017: 95) goes even further and argues that the distinction between single- vs. multi-sited ethnography is 'an artificial concern'.

Regardless of whether one understands multi-sited ethnography as an innovation or as a continuum of ethnographic research, it can be said that with the increasing prominence of the concept, very different interpretations, applications, and adaptations emerged. In the following paragraphs we discuss several of these and point out confusions around multi-sited ethnography that are particularly prevalent in methodological debates in Europe.

Questions of What a Site is and Where it Can be Found

The first confusion that is immanent to the debates on multi-sited ethnography is the question of what actually constitutes a site. Different researchers have very different answers to this question: Andrea Lauser (2005) denotes both her research field and her perspective as sites; Zsuzsa Gille (2001) argues along a similar line and equates site and perspective; Welz (2009) postulates that sites are places where global phenomena are locally negotiated and argues that the researcher's presence at these places is important; here, 'sighting' and 'siting' matter. Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber (2009: 245) and Eckert et al. (2020: 51–52) understand multi-sitedness as a method for studying processes of globalisation and distance themselves from approaches that simply incorporate different research localities; Sabine Hess and Maria Schwertl (2013) posit that a field only emerges through the combination of different sites, which they denote as assemblages;[2] and Ghassan Hage (2005: 466) contrarily equates site and field, thus arguing that multi-sited research is generally not viable. Mark-Anthony Falzon (2009) understands the function of sites as contrasting and comparing. Joanna Cook, James Laidlaw and Jonathan Mair (2009: 69) suggest the 'un-sited field' to discern the field from existing geographical places. Raymond Madden (2010) joins the debate, declaring that neither multi- nor un-sitedness challenge the idea of a singular field, thus refusing to question the quasi-natural existence of the latter.

Regardless of these different understandings of sites, it is fair to say that multi-sited ethnography has become the gold standard in contemporary ethnography. Almost all recently published ethnographies make use of Marcus' concept, and researchers tend to design their studies as multi-sited. While Hage (2005: 464) already warned

that 'flying between two or three locations' does not fulfil the criteria of multi-sitedness, researchers, even if they are highly mobile and follow their research partners as Marcus suggests, tend not to call their studies multi-sited when they do not cover different states (e.g. Kratzmann 2007). Anna Eckert, Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber and Georg Wolfmayr (2020: 51–52) criticise that the researcher's role then seems to be reduced to simply visiting different places in different countries. If multi-sitedness is equated with flying between states, then this makes research sound bigger, better and more generalisable – a feature funders usually like to hear. Used in this way, the discourse on multi-sitedness tends to obscure that ethnographic research needs time and that a 'one-and-done' attitude does not generate deep anthropological knowledge.

In the previous paragraph, one problem – a crucial concern of this article – has already surfaced: the fact that site and nation-state have increasingly been equated in the debates surrounding multi-sited ethnography. This is particularly interesting because in recent years ethnographic research has also increasingly been conducted digitally, for example on social media platforms or in internet forums (Wittel 2000). While the understanding of the 'placeness' (Haverinen 2015) of field and questions about the where of ethnography have become more dynamic as a result, the role of the nation-state has, in some cases, taken on a secondary role. Nevertheless, the equation of site and the state is repeatedly reactivated in multi-sited research designs – especially in (forced) migration research. Accordingly, research is often considered multi-sited if it takes into account different nation-states, and if the researcher has been present in these states (e.g. Amelina 2010; Hendry 2003; Kratzmann 2007; Lauser 2005; Mazzucato 2008). This is an important finding, especially in light of the fact that multi-sited ethnography is intended to critique methodological nationalism (Beck and Grande 2004; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), and it shows that much research makes use of Marcus' idea but deviates from it at its core.

Re-reading Marcus' original works reveals that he does not argue that a multi-sited approach implies that researchers must necessarily (physically) cross national borders. Marcus' initial argument seems to have been lost during the process of its inflationary adoption: he argues that ethnographic fieldwork no longer explicitly aims to study cultures holistically, nor to enshrine culture into a specific place (Abu Lughod [1991] and Clifford and Marcus [1986] engage this idea in the *Writing Culture Debate*), but rather to develop a system view, allowing

the localisation and understanding of the studied (cultural) phenomena within a broader context (Marcus 1995: 96). Marcus (ibid.) writes that research cannot focus on the intense examination of one site any longer: 'It [multi-sited ethnography] develops instead a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macro theoretical concepts and narratives of the world system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture framing a set of subjects'. Regina Römhild (2006: 181), referring to Marcus' ideas, reminded us in 2006, that 'stationary' and 'mobile' are not mutually exclusive; ethnography is always a practice of (stationary) localisation. She claims that the challenge of doing multi-sited ethnography is 'die Erweiterung des Feldes auf die verschiedenen sozialen, kulturellen, diskursiven, ökonomischen und politischen Schauplätze [. . .] ein "mehrortiges" Feld, das ebenso gut auf einen geographischen Raum beschränkt sein kann, wenn sich diese Schauplätze oder Sites dort lokalisieren lassen [the extension of the field to various social, cultural, discursive, economic and political sites . . . – a "multi-sited" field may as well be limited to one geographic location, if these sites can be located there; own translation]' (Römhild 2006: 181). This underlines that a multi-sited study does not have to be conducted across international borders.

Nevertheless: Why have these interpretations hardly been implemented in recently published ethnographies on forced migration in particular? When reading various interpretations of multi-sitedness one quickly gets the impression that instead of methodological nationalism, we now face methodological *trans*nationalism. This is owed to the fact that studies have increasingly sought comparisons; often, the ideal-typical options for comparison lie in categories created by nation-states (Weiß 2010). The danger here is to perpetuate a naturalisation of the nation-state (Bogusz 2018; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) – why multi-sited ethnography research on forced migration is particularly susceptible to this methodological *trans*nationalism is explored in the next section.

Multi-Sited Ethnography and Research on Forced Migration

Migration studies often fall under the realm of the so-called 'mobility turn' (Sheller and Urry 2006). With forced migration being a genuine transnational phenomenon, multi-sited ethnography has become very popular and a helpful research strategy (Römhild 2006: 181). That being said, 'mobility has become the category that is to be

observed' (Schmidt-Lauber 2012: 571), which also impacts the actual research practice: forced migration scholars have increasingly 'traced and tracked' (Marcus 1995) their research partners and 'followed' them across national borders. And indeed, the national framework highly impacts how migration is viewed (McAdam and Otto 2020), how migrants are treated and whether migrants wish to stay or continue their journeys. No surprise then that falling back into a form of methodological nationalism can occur easily; Bridget Anderson (2019) even argues that 'the problem of methodological nationalism is particularly acute in migration studies', especially because migrants are often understood as a problem for the nation-state order.

Moreover, the practice of migration itself relates places to each other, it connects people in different countries, it (re)relates places and people to each other. In addition, forced migration is usually not linear; refugees' movements typically do not follow a direct path, but are often circular. A spontaneous following of the refugees by researchers is therefore valuable to make the messy forms of migration more understandable. For these reasons, multi-sited ethnography and the idea of the mobile researcher have found great acceptance in migration studies as it deals with the global phenomenon of 'zigzag migration' (Hage 2005: 465).

Now that we have shown that different understandings of site exist, have illustrated some adaptations of multi-sited ethnography, and have carved out the relationship between multi-sited ethnography and migration research, the anecdote referred to in the introduction of this article can be comprehended much more easily: our peers certainly wanted to support us and wanted to encourage us to check off boxes of contemporary understandings of ethnography in migration studies. Moreover, the anecdote shows that the understanding of multi-sited ethnography as a multi-country research design is apparently widespread. And while we are not at all opposed to doing multi-country research, we argue, much like Römhild and Marcus, (1) that a multi-sited study need not entail a multi-country research and (2) that the researcher cannot and must not be physically present at all sites to take them into account. The inaccessibility of sites – whether offline or online – is inherent to ethnographic studies, but it is all the more pronounced in migration research. Literature has heretofore insufficiently addressed the issue of what happens when the researchers' (physical) presence cannot be guaranteed in multi-sited ethnography. We explore Bubak's and Blaze's stories to learn more about multi-sited ethnography in migration studies.

Same Country of Arrival, Different Migratory Mobilities: Empirical Insights into Research with Refugees in Malta

As stated in the introduction of this article, we have both conducted research with refugees in Malta (Nimführ 2020; Otto 2020). The island-state served as the geographical starting point of our research, and Malta thus became the place where we first met our research partners. We were interested in how they navigate the island-state, wished to learn more about their everyday lives, and studied the impact of the European Union's border regime on their patterns of mobility. We were both inspired by Marcus' ideas of 'tracing and tracking' (1995: 105–106); when our research partners left Malta, we also tried to keep in touch, we 'followed' them, we met them in countries other than Malta, but we also realised that their migratory paths had been negotiated at sites they had visited long before we met and which, of course, we had not visited. Yet we also followed them within the borders of the island-state: we accompanied them to appointments at the asylum seekers' registration office, we were invited to their homes, we visited them in the camps in which they were housed, we accompanied them to NGOs, and we dined together at restaurants.

Against this background of our practices of 'following' our research partners within Malta, we began to question both the equation of multi-sitedness with multi-state research and the necessity of researchers' (physical) presence at sites.

Bubak's Story: From Somalia via Ethiopia, Sudan, to Malta – A Place of Transit

Bubak was born in Somalia as his parents' oldest child. The family lived close to the vibrant market of Mogadishu, Somalia's capital. One day in 2010, when he was about fifteen years old, his parents' house was reduced to rubble when a bomb exploded nearby. After his initial shock, Bubak went to the local hospital to look for family members, but was told that none of his parents or siblings were hospitalised there. He realised that he could not continue to live in Somalia and began looking for ways to leave. Bubak made it to Ethiopia, where he worked as a dayworker. Once he had earned enough money, he continued his journey to Libya, where he was detained by rebels before managing to escape. He paid for a seat on a boat, which brought him to Malta in Europe. Following an age assessment that classified him

as an 'unaccompanied minor', he was housed in a state-run care facility. There he met Laura McAdam-Otto and became one of her most important research partners.[3] He took her to places that were important to him, such as Somali restaurants, gave her a tour through an open centre where the Maltese government housed refugees, and he shared many stories – of how he managed to organise his migration, referring frequently to places in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Libya.

Bubak was quite dissatisfied with his life in Malta. He could not attend school, it was difficult for him to find work, the pocket money was very little, and he encountered racism on a daily basis. With his Subsidiary Protection status,[4] and being a minor, he was not allowed to travel within the Schengen zone. A few months after Laura McAdam-Otto and Bubak had met, he left Malta and wanted to go to Germany. On his way, he often called her via Skype and told her about his ongoing journey. She gained insights about his path to Germany, she even talked to people in Italian refugee camps where he found shelter; she was informed about police controls along the Austrian–German border. And finally, Bubak made it to Germany, where he still lives and recently completed his educational training – and where they met again.

Blaze's Story: From Nigeria via Libya to Malta – The Final Destination

Yet not all refugees succeed in leaving Malta, as Blaze's story illustrates. Blaze and his wife, Jessica, left Nigeria in 2002 to work in Libya. Under the rule of Colonel Gaddafi, he reported, they made a good living in Libya and never intended to come to Europe. Despite difficulties, they nevertheless returned to Nigeria several times between 2002 and 2011, but repeatedly left their home country and went back to Libya. After the nationwide uprisings in February 2011, however, access to regular and steady work in Libya became increasingly difficult, especially for people from sub-Saharan Africa. The thirty-two-year-old Nigerian told Sarah Nimführ that he lived in constant fear of being attacked by militia on the streets. Sub-Saharan Africans were in danger of being mistaken for mercenaries of the Gaddafi regime by Libyan rebels. Since a permanent return to Nigeria was not an option, Blaze and Jessica, against their initial intentions, decided to leave for Europe. They used their savings to cross the Mediterranean Sea and reached Malta in March 2011, where they applied for asylum.

However, the couple received an asylum rejection notice and faced a situation of non-deportability, as the Maltese government does not deport refugees to Nigeria due to bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of bilateral agreements. They had to remain in Malta, where they met Sarah Nimführ in 2015 in one of the open centres in which the government housed asylum seekers. Yet the couple was not allowed to settle there permanently; instead, they had to move several times. At times, they were able to rent a flat, sometimes they lived in a shared flat, and they ultimately moved to an open centre located at the heart of the island, run by an NGO under church sponsorship. The couple is no longer able to afford a flat because Blaze lost his job.

Without a formal legal status, they were unable to establish a stable life in Malta, even after several years. Religious practices provided a hope-giving support in this uncertain situation. Sarah Nimführ accompanied the family to a prayer session at an evangelical church to gain insights into their support network. There she also talked to the pastor, a founder of a humanitarian organisation, and other parishioners and learned more about the situation for refugees who were not granted a status of protection.

Blaze and Jessica had two children after arriving in Malta, but they are still worried about their future. Still, they are hopeful to provide a better future for their children and themselves in another EU country. Blaze had heard that in other European countries people were less racist, and that it would be easier to receive a protection status in Italy. The family asked Sarah Nimführ several times about possibilities to leave Malta; this resulted in her accompanying the family to a legal advice office. However, a regulated departure from Malta, according to the human rights lawyer, was impossible due to missing documents and the pending deportation order. Leaving the Mediterranean island-state in an unregulated manner was not an option for the family because of difficulties in organising and financing such a journey, and thus they were compelled to stay in Malta.

Learnings from Bubak's and Blaze's (Im)mobilities for Multi-Sited Research

Bubak and Blaze have contrasting stories about migration, mobility, and immobility. Bubak's account demonstrates that his journey to Europe was characterised by passing through different countries and that researchers cannot be present at every place where forced

migration towards the EU is negotiated (see also Craith and Hill 2015: 42), such as in the Sahara Desert or in prisons in Libya, for example. Yet these places must be taken into account to properly understand his story. Blaze's account reveals that he could not continue to move transnationally after he arrived in Europe and thus had to remain in Malta; yet migration was nevertheless negotiated at different places *within* Malta, such as the open centre, the refugees' flats or legal advice offices, and through his immobility we can also learn more about refugees' mobility in the EU's border regime.

Their stories and mobilities are exemplary of what we heard and experienced repeatedly during our research. They served as starting points for our discussions about multi-sitedness and the different interpretations of the approach. As we reflected on our methods and research practice, the following question arose: Did we not already conduct research in a multi-sited fashion when we went to different *locales* in Malta and followed Blaze's and Bubak's connections? Do the NGOs, lawyers, the ministries and offices, the parish, the refugees' flats or camps not count as *sites* where forced migration was negotiated? Do refugee camps farther north, for example in Italy in Bubak's case, also belong to our *sites*? And was following the refugees to other nations-states not exactly the same as employing Marcus' strategies of following on Malta, as in Blaze and Jessica's case of a multi-locale life in 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009)?

In Marcus' early work (1986, 1989), he suggests identifying and visiting different *locales,* which can be located in either one *or* several nation-states. Travelling to different countries to conduct research was not his primary suggestion. In his line of argument, he refers to Paul Willis, whose ethnography *Learning to Labor* (1981) is, according to Marcus, full of references between *locales* in which the research participants interact. Marcus mentions several examples, such as flats, a school, a shop, as well as a club, where the researcher and the research partner mix and mingle.

Furthermore, it was Marcus' intention to move beyond the equation of space with culture, as well as to overcome holistic approaches. He strongly argued for carefully contextualising one's field research and its respective outcomes. These premises can be met whether we conduct research in one or more states. Certainly, the contextualisation is different and other questions can be answered when researchers operate transnationally, but research within one locality, such as Malta in our case, does not contradict the idea of multi-sited research in the way Marcus conceptualised this approach. In both cases we

took into account 'social, cultural, discursive, economic and political sites' (Römhild 2006) and they became part of our field construction. The fact that multi-sited research, especially in forced migration research, has repeatedly been equated with the presence of researchers in several countries has consequences: the quality criterion of multi-sitedness was withheld from researchers who did not travel across national borders. The main problem, however, is that an overemphasis on border-crossing ethnographies tends to obscure lived realities of refugees, such as Blaze's, which are not necessarily transnational. In this article, we argue that 'following' their paths of everyday life – to the lawyer, to the parish and to their homes – not only fulfils the criteria of multi-sitedness, but also adds empirical richness to the field of forced migration studies.

However, what is decisive in Marcus' works as well, is the researchers' physical presence at *sites*. Yet both stories, Blaze's and Bubak's, reveal that mobility was also negotiated at sites to which we did not or cannot have access. Taking these sites, which are of great importance to the research partners, into account, however, is relevant for a better understanding of their lived realities and different forms of mobility.

These dynamics allow one to argue that, first, it is important not to equate sites and nation-states and, second, against the backdrop of the dynamics in forced migration research, that it is crucial also to consider *sites* that researchers could not visit. In short: taking the migration paths of Bubak and Blaze seriously, we can learn two things about multi-sitedness in forced migration studies: (1) Multi-sited research can be conducted within one locality and does not (necessarily) require the researcher to cross national borders; (2) the integration of *un-participated sites,* that is, sites that researchers cannot (physically) access, helps to better understand the complexities of refugees' lived realities and multiple negotiations of (im)mobility. It is important to conceptualise this non-access in order to be able to discuss and integrate these dynamics into knowledge production processes.

While, as our literature review above has demonstrated, questions of what constitutes multi-sited research have been debated in various ways, literature has heretofore insufficiently addressed the issue of whether or not the researcher must be physically present at these specific sites (Schmidt-Lauber 2012: 563). Regardless of whether researchers equate sites with nation-states or argue that multi-sited ethnography replaces the 'outdated' single-sited ethnography, these approaches indeed seem to require the researchers' physical presence. Yet ethnographic research, and the field of forced migration

in particular, are characterised by a high degree of inaccessibility, which is why we propose the term *un-participated site*. While participant observation is certainly of importance and became the central method of ethnography for concrete reasons, we nevertheless support the notion of differentiating between participated and un-participated sites. Our inability to visit relevant locales – such as police hearings or age assessment procedures – should not be understood as a lack of willingness to participate; rather, we were either denied access to some locales, and/or sites of interest no longer existed when we carried out our research. Consequently, we understand denied or impossible access as a symptom of the field. We complement the ethnographic material generated about these inaccessible locales and/or sites, like hearings or age assessment appointments, with interviews and talks with governing and non-governing research partners to gather multiple perspectives on these un-participated sites. Research partners' interpretations are thus inherent to un-participated sites. If we had been present at these sites, it may have led to the generation of other material and interpretations (see e.g. Schmidt-Lauber 2007: 229). Our development of the concept of the un-participated site yet offers a 'context-sensitive methodological approach(es) to concrete empirical cases' (Nieswand 2009: 20) and joins a trend that increasingly conceptualises ethnography as 'patchy' (Günel et al. 2020).

In short, recognising locales that we have not personally been to as sites is not only in line with the constructivist understanding of the field (Hess and Schwertl 2013), but also relinquishes ethnographic authority to the research partners. This further breaks down the image of the anthropologist as hero (Sontag 1966) and also allows us to experiment with new forms of knowledge production. This approach also allows for a better understanding of the complexity of the realities of refugees' lives, not just representing them as figures whose existence begins once reached Europe. Indeed, they are not a 'geschichtslose *tabula rasa* [historyless *tabula rasa*; own translation]' (Braun 2016: 210; italics in original). They reach Malta with their experiences, motivations and imaginations, which were shaped in many places and which continue to influence their lives and migratory paths in Europe. By opening up the concept of multi-sitedness towards the inclusion of un-participated sites, one can better grasp the multiple simultaneities of places and time, as well as legal and social contexts (Braun 2016: 210–211; Nimführ 2020: 168). In this vein, multi-sitedness that includes un-participated sites contributes to questions of representation discussed since the *Writing Culture Debate*.

At the same time, of course, ethnographic self-reflection is missing, and being present and participating in situ is not possible.

To this end, however, we critically reflected on current understandings of 'multi-sitedness' and took the actual migration movements of refugees in Malta as an opportunity to think about multi-sitedness in a new and different way. Here, critically, we argue against distributing labels among researchers and, instead, plead for studying the concrete paths of people who have fled – because stories like those of Blaze and Bubak characterise current migratory dynamics in Europe. To do justice to their stories, we hope to have created an openness for un-participated sites and multi-sitedness within one locality.

Concluding Remarks and Outlook

Since its initial publication nearly thirty years ago, Marcus' concept of multi-sited ethnography has been interpreted, applied and further developed in various ways, both in migration research and in other fields. In the course of this process, the concept has found different applications related to the hype of doing justice to both globalisation tendencies and researchers' demands to be mobile. Last but not least, a multi-sited research design ticks various boxes for research funders: it promises more generalisability by including different countries, and makes research sound bigger and better.[5]

However, this leads to the fact that important aspects of our research partners' lived realities remain overlooked. Yet these aspects interest us and we try to encounter them with our concepts and research strategies. We distanced ourselves from a debate that assumes that the methodological change in ethnography primarily relates to transitioning from single-sited to multi-sited research (e.g. Andersson 2017: 95).

Ethnography as a method is closely linked to the (physical) being-there of researchers: be it physically in offline settings, or personally in online research designs. Participating and being there promises insights via moments of irritation and self-reflection. Participant observation has become the gold standard with other approaches having been declared 'imperfect alternatives' (Fine and Abramson 2020). Ethnographic research is thus 'embodied'. On a meta-level, however, this article has asked what actually counts as ethnographic material and where it can be collected and through whom. Current debates in the discipline focus on understanding 'access' – and also its denial or impossibility – to the field as productive encounters and relevant

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for knowledge production (Andersson 2016; Straube 2020). This article, consequently, must also be read against the background of the global COVID-19 pandemic; currently, it is hardly possible to conduct research in physical co-presence. It is still uncertain for how long face-to-face observations will be interrupted, affected or impacted. Alternative approaches, such as including research partners as collaborators or assistants, digitally collecting material through online interviews or other modes of interaction, or the analysis of narratives, are currently no longer merely an option, but in many cases a must if one wishes to continue with research. This allows for reflection and methodological innovation leading to new inspiring forms of ethnography that have often only been used as second-best solutions to date. While online research situations entail different atmospheres, they might also provide us new insights and access to interviewees and places that were not accessible before – the un-participated site is therefore a concept that is not only applicable to forced migration studies.

Against the backdrop of our research on migration in Malta, we have reflected on the terminologies surrounding the much-cited and applied concept of multi-sited ethnography and provided clarification and reinterpretations of certain terms. First, we have shown that research within one locality is not incompatible with the approach of multi-sitedness as proposed by Marcus. Moreover, we argued that anthropologists have always included third party material and narratives in their research. The fact that researchers do not have access to specific sites applies strongly to forced migration research, but is currently becoming effective on a large scale against the backdrop of the pandemic. To better describe these sites – which are inaccessible but central to the research – we have introduced the concept of the un-participated site. We are convinced that a compelling multi-sited ethnographic study, irrespective of whether it takes place in one locality or several, needs to do justice to the everyday worlds of our research partners – including both participated and un-participated sites.

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Notes

1. Terms such as 'locality', 'locale', 'site' and 'field', which are not always used in the same fashion (Marcus 2012: 16; Scheffer and Meyer 2011), go hand in hand with multi-sited ethnography. To avoid confusion, we outline here our understandings of these terms. *Locality* is the geographical framing of a study, selected against the backdrop of the research subject (Mukadam and Mawani 2006: 106). A locality must not be a nation-state. In our understanding, several *locales* constitute a locality. A locale is a concrete place of interaction (Willis 1981; van Duijn 2020). Locales are then denoted as sites if they display relevance for research. What we coin as *field* is the sum of all sites considered in research. A field, thus, is constructed and cannot simply be found (Hess and Schwertl 2013; Kristmundsdottir 2006: 169).

2. George E. Marcus and Erkan Saka consider the assemblage concept suitable for describing the heterogeneous and the fluid while retaining structure and systematisation. According to Marcus, the assemblage is a helpful tool to highlight connections (see Ein E-Mail-Interview zwischen Sabine Hess, Maria Schwertl und Marcus 2013: 314–315). We follow this adaptation, which refers to Aiwha Ong's and Stephen Collier's (2004) idea: 'An assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic … As a composite concept … assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated [inherent tensions]' (Ong and Collier quoted in Marcus and Saka (2006: 104)).

3. We refer to people with whom we conducted research as research partners. This intentionally avoids designating them as passive interviewees; instead, it

emphasises that knowledge production is a situational interaction process. In this process, individual subjects of our research were actively involved in knowledge production, albeit to a different extent than researchers (see also Otto and Nimführ 2019).

4. Beneficiaries of Subsidiary Protection (SP), an international form of protection, obtain a three-month EU visa for travel within the Schengen area. SP holders receive personal documents and a renewable residence permit for one year. In contrast to refugees as recognised by the Geneva Convention, they are not entitled to family reunification or citizenship (Aditus and UNHCR 2013).

5. We are grateful for the comments the reviewers made with respect to this issue.

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