

Laughable borders: Making the case for the humorous in migration studies

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Abstract

Humor is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of the human experience, that has also played a vital role in the way marginalized groups comment on and mock power. Yet, in migration research the methodological and analytical value of humor has been largely overlooked. Rather, migration studies has commonly centered its analysis around suffering and tragedy and, in the process, depicted migrant trajectories as endeavors largely devoid of laughter, humor, irony and play. This article suggests that such humorless representations of the migration process – and indeed of the migrant subject itself – has broader implications for the types of knowledge that we (re)produce around migrants' experiences, subjectivities and struggles. In fact, it argues that migration studies' failure to recognize migrants as humorous individuals risks feeding into processes of exceptionalization and de-humanization through setting "the migrant" up as an obscure figure that lacks "essentially human" qualities. In order to make the case for the humorous in migration research, the article illustrates how refugees arriving to the Greek island of Lesbos in the early summer of 2015 laughed at their own predicament as well as the technologies put in place to control their freedom of movement and how their laughter, humor and comic displays did important political work in refusing subjugation, in speaking truth to power and in capturing the absurdity of the violence that they faced.



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Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Approaching humor and laughter	4
3. Love must go on	6
4. Refusing subjugation	7
5. To say without saying	9
6. The limits of serious reason	10
7. The end and the beginning	10
References	12

1. Introduction

Humor is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of the human experience (Apte 1983; Berger 1997; Freud 1905/1991), that has historically also played an important role in the way marginalized groups comment on and mock power (Bakhtin 1984). Yet, in migration research, the methodological and analytical value of the humorous has been more or less entirely overlooked (but see Hernann 2016; van Ramshorst 2019). In fact, and rather to the contrary, migration scholarship has not only been exclusively dedicated to serious reason, but has also overwhelmingly centered its analysis around *suffering* and *tragedy* (Coutin and Vogel 2016). In the process, migrant trajectories have become depicted as endeavors largely devoid of laughter, humor, irony and play (de León 2015, 93) in which “the migrant” appears as an almost entirely humorless subject. While the “forensic power” of highlighting migrant suffering, as evidence of violence that may otherwise remain unseen, should of course not be underestimated (Cabot 2016, 658), we also need to ask ourselves what the almost single dedication to suffering and hardship in migration research does for the types of knowledge that we (re)produce around migrants’ experiences, subjectivities and struggles. If we, for example, assume the proposition that laughter is something essentially human, then what are the implications of our failure to recognize migrants as individuals that laugh and are able find things funny (Sigurdson 2021)? In epistemic communities that celebrate “being funny” as one of the most attractive and relatable traits in a human being, and where being “humorless” is seen as lacking “a vital human quality” (Billig 2005, 11), then how does our humorless representation of migrants feed into processes of de-humanization, and the “exceptionalization” of migrants’ experiences (Schapendonk et al. 2021)?

While this article will not attempt to answer these questions in full, it does seek to open the window into conversations around the methodological and analytical value of the humorous for migration research. In the following pages, I therefore set out do several interrelated things. First, I want illustrate the somewhat banal (yet, it seems, quite necessary) point, that migrants *do laugh* at their life circumstances as well as the technologies put in place to control their lives and circumscribe their freedom of movement (see also van Ramshorst 2019). To recognize this is neither to downplay the violence and injustice that migrants face, nor to exaggerate or romanticize their resilience in handling it (Fluri 2019). Rather, it is to acknowledge that for migrants – much like for everyone else on

the planet – humor is part of everyday life, an integral aspect of how we interact with each other and the outside world. However, and this is my second point, migrants’ humor does not merely warrant our explicit attention because it is *there* but because it *does* political work for the way migrants narrate and navigate their circumstances. Thus, while writings on migration do feature the odd mention of laughter or jokes (typically in the form of the added [ha ha ha] following quotes or through mentions of people smiling, laughing or giggling), I here seek to promote a move beyond the anecdotal treatment of humor towards a recognition of how it can help us capture the broader complexities of migrants’ experiences, expose “the cracks in the system” as well as the more masked and subtle ways that power gets challenged (Goldstein 2013, 5).

In making these arguments I offer an ethnographic account from fieldwork that I conducted together with a group of researchers from my university in the Greek island of Lesbos over the summer of 2015. From the outset, this research neither intended to explicitly examine humor nor to focus on Lesbos because of its inscription in history as a great “disaster site” (Papataxiarchis 2016, 9). Rather, the original intention was to empirically investigate how migrants and refugees navigate increasingly securitized border regimes in/from a place that has a longstanding history as site of arrival, transit and departure for a variety of migratory movements (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012; Tsoni and Franck 2019). However, as tens and thousands of refugees, primarily fleeing war, conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq were arriving to Lesbos over the spring and early summer of 2015 (UNHCR 2015), the focus and character of this work necessarily had to change. First, and although the terminology here is clearly very tricky, rather than focusing on different types of migratory movements, attention was turned towards *refugees*, and primarily towards Syrian refugees. This was not only due to the fact that Syrian nationals were the largest group arriving to the island at this time but also because many of them spoke English, which meant that we could engage more informally and directly with each other. The majority of the Syrian nationals arriving to Lesbos at this time were further *male*, and while we of course engaged also with women (in both a serious and humorous fashion) most of the people that we were able to follow more closely were men. Second, due to the chaotic and fast emerging situation in the island, which was exacerbated by the ongoing Greek financial crisis and the slow emergency response from the EU and international organizations, approaching refugees for formal and more structured interviews was practically as well as ethically problematic. The research therefore largely came to rely on a form of “serial hanging out” in key sites across the island (Sandhu et al. 2007). This implied recurrent observations in these different sites, making ourselves recognizable to the people inhabiting them, enabling those interested to approach us more on their own terms. We also tried to “move with” the refugees throughout the island. By that I mean that we would follow in the tracks of those who wanted to collaborate with us, sometimes in person or through them sending us photos, text or voice messages via WhatsApp as a means of documenting their experiences.

Although humor was not part of the original research agenda, it was constantly present in our interactions with people in Lesbos. Laughter kept erupting during conversations or more brief encounters, jokes around various themes were abundant, and in narrating their experiences many also relied on the comic as a mode of representation. As will be discussed further on, such humorous modes of communication performed a range of different functions. Sometimes it was occasioned by insecurity and fear. At other times it was a deliberate move to translate “tragedy into comedy” (Macpherson 2008, 1085) – using gallows humor as a means to describe and comment on their “collective precarity” (van Ramshorst 2019, 907) or the (mis)management of refugee reception in the island or the EU at large. On many occasions it was, of course, also a matter of sheer enjoyment, the simple pleasure of having a laugh with (newly found) friends and acquaintances. The fact that humor was not the focus of our research was most likely a good thing, as it would probably have hampered the organic use of humor if people would have known that we were taking note of whether they were being “funny” or not. That being said, the way that laughter and humor penetrated so many of our encounters in Lesbos also meant that I started taking note of it, thinking about its function during conversations and what it enabled in terms of knowledge-sharing. This article is essentially the result of these ponderings and it will, following a presentation of my conceptual understanding of humor and laughter, present an ethnographic account of how both the serious and the humorous were present in our meeting with a group of Syrian refugee men in the island. This ethnographic account will be followed by three analytical sections that focus on humor

as *refusal*, the way that humor operates as a form of *ironic truth-telling* and as a vehicle for *exposing the absurdity of violence*.

2. Approaching humor and laughter

Anyone seeking to write about humor instantly runs into several problems, the first of which is how to *define* it in a meaningful way. Although humor is universal in the sense that it is found in every society and present in most human interaction (Apte 1983; Berger 1997), there are significant differences with regards to *what we find funny*. As such, humor is both historically and spatially specific – and the kinds of humor we appreciate, the jokes we tell and our freedom to engage with “the funny” therefore differs not only between places and but also intersects social hierarchies such as gender, class, age, positionality etc.ⁱ Humor further involves several different components that can be described as social, intellectual, emotional as well as embodied. The “paradox of humor” is further that it is neither “good” nor “bad” (Meyer 2000). Instead, humor can function as much as an “invite to come closer” (Coser 1959, 172) as a tool for exclusion (Billig 2005, 176). Many of us have likely experienced both the joys of sharing humor as well as the obliterating feeling of being laughed at. The above complexities are visible in the many different ways that humor has been conceptualized throughout history and across academic disciplines but, in essence, the main theories of humor are often summarized as: *superiority theory* (originating out of philosophy, associating humor with sense of victory or triumph); *relief theory* (common in psychological approaches, focusing on humor as the release of tensions); and *incongruity theory* (perhaps the most common in social sciences, emphasizing *disruption* as a key element of how humor operates in human interaction).ⁱⁱ Most contemporary humor scholars, however, recognize that there are elements in all three theories that needs our consideration if we are to understand the complexities of humor, and they are therefore often approached as complementary rather than exclusive (Raskin 1985). For my purposes here, I borrow a working definition of humor from the sociologist Giseline Kuipers (2015) who describes humor as an inevitably social phenomenon: “a form of communication that is embedded in social relationships” and that involves “the successful exchange of joking and laughter” (p. 7). While humor may certainly be unintentional, I am here primarily interested in the “conscious” use of humor (ibid). That is, when jokes, humorous remarks or comic displays are intentionally funny.

The second problem, that occurs very soon after the first one, is how to disentangle the relationship between humor and laughter. While I am here principally interested in laughter that results from humor, it should be noted that the two are not necessarily connected. We may for example laugh for a variety of more or less conscious reasons – and we may, as Sigmund Freud has pointed out, not even know why we are laughing at all (1905/1991). In that sense, laughter can also be viewed a “muscular” phenomenon that we are not always in control of (Macpherson 2008). An interesting example of this is how laughter can be “contagious”, which also speaks to the way that it can work to disarm “seemingly predictable patterns of thinking and feeling” (ibid). Following Macpherson’s work, where humor is seen as related to various cognitive processes whereas laughter is seen an “embodied act” that may or may not be the result of humor, Dittmer (2013, 499) proposes that we can “crudely map humor onto the world of the discursive and laughter onto the world of the affective.” While this is useful for disentangling their difference, I am also drawn towards Michael Billig’s (2005, 177) reading of laughter as *rhetorical*. Much like other forms of rhetorical communication (such as language), laughter “has to be learnt and taught” (ibid). We are thus socialized into “the rules” around where, when and how to laugh. The advantage of this approach is that it locates laughter very clearly within the social order, which also helps us highlight its potentiality when it comes to disrupting that very order (ibid 180). This, as Billig reminds us, “means more than decoding jokes in terms of their social impact or in terms of their potentiality for disrupting solemn occasions” (ibid). Rather, it requires a much closer reading of the relationship between “the individual and the social” and how the dynamics of laughter and humor are “situated within, as well as reacting against, these complex relations” (ibid).

My explicit interest here in the way that laughter and humor relate to the social order leads to a third problem, namely how to answer the enduring question of whether humor can actually accomplish anything to disrupt this order. Can humor, as Majken Jul Sørensen (2008, 169) for example

suggests, “play an important role in resistance to oppression”? Or is its impact, like Benton (1988, 54) has argued, “as fleeting as the laughter it produces”? While there is certainly a lot of food for thought in such debates,ⁱⁱⁱ Achille Mbembe’s (2001, 108) reading of humor in the *Postcolony* suggests that the question of whether humor can/should be read as “resistance” or not is actually of secondary importance: “For the most part, those who laugh” are, after all, “only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandment* [the holder of power]” (ibid). What is important about humor in the context of colonial oppression is thus not whether it attempts to do (or does) any real damage to the “material base” of the ruling system (ibid 111), which Mbembe largely contends that it doesn’t, but rather how it exposes, if only by accident and momentarily, the vulgarity of power that the official order “tries hard to hide” (ibid 109). Mbembe’s work differs from Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal argument (1984) in that he does not locate the grotesque or obscene within “non-official” or “popular” culture, but rather points towards how these elements are “intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed” (102). Mbembe’s view of the political potentiality of humor in the context of the postcolony is, however, rather “pessimistic”, which has to do with his view of postcoloniality as a relationship that is not best characterized as “resistance” or “collaboration” but is rather one of “conviviality” (Fontein 2009, 388; Mbembe 2001, 110).

Taking a somewhat different stance, Lisa Bhungalia (2020), who draws on the work of Audra Simpson (2007; 2014; 2016) and perhaps above all Frantz Fanon (1963; 1952/1997), suggests that in the context of oppression, violence and occupation humor can be read as a form of *refusal*. A focus on humor as refusal implies thinking about how it operates beyond “the specificities of particular power geometries” and rather focuses on its workings in relation to the “underlying orders on which these geometries rely” (see Newhouse 2021, 178 on refusal). This, as Bhungalia (2020, 390) proposes, means that we can approach humor as “a politics of disavowal” – a politics that is not necessarily *confrontational* in the sense that it overtly opposes power, but that is *disruptive* in the sense that it refuses to recognize and normalize the conditions of subjugation that this regime so heavily relies on. As per both Friedrich Hegel (1807/2008) and Fanon (1963), this suggests that the political potentiality of humor in the context of oppression lies precisely with the way that it deprives power (the master/colonizer) of the necessary recognition from the subjugated (the slave/colonized). In Bhungalia’s (2020, 389) words: “to laugh in the face of power is not to say: ‘I oppose you’—rather it is to say: ‘your power has no authority over me.’” Key here is thus the work that humor does as/in acts of “turning away” from power (Simpson, 2014). My proposition is therefore that when migrants laugh at borders, they deny – intentionally or not – “authority presumed” and in doing so, they also momentarily reconfigure “the relationship between dominated and subjugated itself” (Bhungalia 2020, 389). In that sense, refusal is also generative of new possibilities (Simpson 2014) and thus of envisioning a different way of existing in the world. Reading humor as refusal does not suggest that humor is *always* about turning away from power nor that those moments when we do refuse through humor are forever lasting. Instead, key to the notion of refusal is that it is both “a stance” and a “theory of the political” that is being repeatedly pronounced by subjugated populations (Simpson 2016, 328).

The final difficulty that I would like to mention relates to the particular sets of problems that come with writing about humor in an *academic paper*. This is not only due to the fact that academics are not a particularly funny bunch (oh come on, you know it’s true – snarky tweets don’t count!) but also, as Macpherson (2008, 1083) points out, because what strikes us as funny in a particular moment is both “historically and culturally relative”. Beyond the problem of the reader not understanding “inside jokes” (Kuipers 2015) we are therefore also faced with the “you had to be there” type problems. In addition to that, much of the funny that goes on in a conversation is not so much about *what* is being said but rather *how* it is said. It is thus as much about intonation, facial expressions and timing as it about the actual content of the statement. These aspects of the humorous are not so easily captured in academic writing – perhaps especially for those of us who are not writing in our first language. What this means here is that the reader may not perceive what is being said, or the references to it being humorous, as particularly funny at all. While this is in many ways as natural as not being frightened by a paper on fear or saddened by a paper on depression (Oring 2003), there is often an (even if unspoken) expectation that a paper on humor has to be funny. I have, for example, presented work on humor in several academic seminars where I have received the comment: “I don’t think this is funny” (again: academics...). While this might certainly be due to my own short-

comings as a writer, I do feel the need to underline that my purpose here is not to use the comic as a mode of representation (although I agree with Phil Emmerson (2016) that the comic holds value also in academic writing), but rather to highlight the presence and analyze the workings of humor in the way migrants narrate and navigate their circumstances. Now, with the above caveats in place, we can proceed to an account of our first week of fieldwork in Lesvos.

3. Love must go on

On a warm Greek summer evening in June of 2015, we walk through the central parts of Lesvos' main town of Mytilene. Families, students and tourists are dining and drinking in the many brightly lit restaurants and bars along the scenic waterfront. A few blocks further down, along the fence to the Port Authority, newly arrived refugee families have set up camp for the night, resting atop cardboard boxes gleaned from a nearby alleyway. As we make our way through the port area this evening, we come into conversation with a group of Syrian men seated in a doorway. One of them presents himself as Qasim, a medical doctor from Aleppo.^{iv} After chatting for a moment, Qasim invites us to join the group for dinner. They have ordered food from one of the nearby restaurants and as they serve up some delicious fried fish on the back of brown paper bags, they crack jokes about the conditions under which they are now entertaining guests. Under normal circumstances, they chuckle, invited guests are not eating from paper bags.

For all of us seated in the doorway this evening, this is the first night in Lesvos. But while the group of researchers that I belong to have arrived on the afternoon flight from Athens, Qasim and his companions came ashore last night in an overcrowded rubber dinghy to one of the island's northern beaches. Due to Greek anti-trafficking laws, which at the time prohibited anyone from aiding and transporting irregular border crossers, the men had to undertake the roughly 70-kilometer-long journey towards Mytilini, across the mountains, on foot. While very little information or assistance was provided along the walk, they had encountered "an American lady" that was handing out water and bananas from the trunk of her car somewhere outside the village of Mantamados. "We like this lady", one of the men say with a big smile. "I mean, we of course have the money to buy our own bananas, but we didn't want to disappoint her. She *really* wanted to help refugees." His remark is followed by giggles in the group, making it clear how they found being on the receiving end of her charity work quite comical.

As our evening in the doorway proceeds, the conversation flows between a range of topics – from the increasingly adverse situation in Syria and for refugees in Turkey to the journey across the Aegean Sea. Just a few weeks prior to our encounter, the European Commission had sought the support of the UN to use military force in handling the smuggling networks that aid refugees on their route to Europe.^v This proposal is met by quiet mumbles and headshakes in the group. Not entirely sure of what our stance on this matter is, one of the men lean forward, smiles and says in an exaggeratedly innocent voice: "Forgive me, but your policies are a little stupid, don't you think?" He continues to smile while observing our reaction: "I mean, how can you fight smugglers through bombing small rubber dinghies full of refugees?" We all laugh and shake our heads in response. Because, obviously, you cannot.

An hour or so later, while discussing the situation unfolding around us in Lesvos, one of the men seated at the back of the group, and that has thus far only observed the conversation, asks Qasim to translate for him. While Qasim looks like he has trouble holding back his laughter, he obeys the man's request. In a somewhat strained voice, he translates: "Excuse me, but is either one of you a dentist?" The whole group erupts in laughter, urging the man to open his mouth to show us the missing tooth in his upper jaw. We stare at him – and the others – puzzled by this reaction from the group. Qasim laughingly explains: "When we stepped ashore on the island, he was so happy he waved his hands in the air and knocked out his own tooth!" The man missing a tooth shrugs his shoulder and soon joins in the laughter. I remember thinking that "oh man, they will mock you forever on this one".

Over the coming week we follow Qasim and his travel companions in their endeavors to get registered with the authorities and receive permission to leave the island. Together, we try to make sense of the many levels of authority that such procedures include and the chaotic and constantly changing technologies used to register arriving refugees in various sites throughout the island (see for example Bousiou 2020; Papada et al. 2020; Rozakou 2017). The end game of this procedure, we soon learn, is an administrative deportation order, which *de jure* expels refugees from Greek territory but *de facto* sets them free to make arrangements for “voluntary departure” elsewhere (Lauth Bacas 2010). In fact, obtaining this administrative deportation order is at this point in time the only way that refugees can (legally) leave the island, and the deportation order is therefore largely conceived of as a “travel” rather than “expulsion” document (Franck 2017; Trubeta 2015). For Qasim and his travel companions, the journey towards receiving this document begins with initial registration in the port of Mytilene, upon which they are taken to the temporary holding camp of Kara Tepe to await transfer to Moria First Reception Center, where the formal registration and fingerprinting for the Eurodac database is supposed to take place.

As we visit the group in Kara Tepe the next day, the camp is filling up with people. While the municipality has organized some larger military tents, most people are sleeping in regular camping tents that they have themselves purchased in sports shops in Mytilene or under canvas sheets hung between the olive trees that surround the camp area. At this point in time, the camp has a shortage of more or less everything that constitutes basic humanitarian provisions. There is not enough food or sanitation and the smell in the camp is therefore not particularly pleasant. As we sit down with Qasim and the twenty other people that he shares a tent with, one of the men suddenly gets off the floor and starts excessively spraying perfume in the air. The scene is comical and intended to make us laugh, but perfectly captures the undignified conditions that people are forced to endure in the camp.

For Qasim’s group the stay in Kara Tepe will last for six days, upon which they receive the unexpected news that they, due to overcrowding in the Moria camp, are to be transferred directly to mainland Greece. Having received a WhatsApp message about their departure, we make our way to the ferry terminal in the Port of Mytilene to see the group off. As we pass the parking lot outside the Port Authority a man in a larger group of Syrian men shouts towards us: “Are you journalists or activists?” When we respond that we are neither, but rather researchers from Sweden, his face lights up and he throws his hands in the air: “Oh, Sweden! It’s the Syrian dream! You know the American dream? Well, Sweden is the Syrian dream!” The group walks away laughing, and the man is patted on the back, congratulated for his successful joke.

When we finally manage to locate Qasim and the others in the huge crowd of people waiting to board the ferry, one of the men in their group says that they have a favor to ask us: “Once we are up on deck and the ferry sails out, could you please sing ‘My heart will go on’? You know? The Titanic song with Celine Dion?” Our puzzled answer went something along the lines of: “Eh, what? Why? No! Wait, dude, it’s not a good idea! The Titanic sinks!” But the men persist: “It doesn’t matter! I want to be Rose,” one of the men laughingly exclaims, holding his arms out in the air in the classical “Rose pose”. Following some debating amongst ourselves we finally cave. As the ferry departs, we see Qasim and the others by the railing on the upper outdoor deck, several of them posing as Jack and Rose. Below, on the pavement we wave our scarfs and laughingly sing:

*Near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the heart does go on.
Once more you open the door, and you’re here in my heart, and my heart will go on and on.^{vi}*

4. Refusing subjugation

It is of course hard to know precisely what prompted Qasim and his companions to mimic this famous movie scene during their departure from Lesbos. But the resulting laughter – as we were standing there waving at each other and in the WhatsApp messages that followed – no doubt provided a moment’s relief from the bizarre, unpredictable and intense situation unfolding around us.^{vii} In the context of adversity, such moments should not be underestimated. To the contrary, they can

function as tools for temporarily reclaiming time and space, in ways that install a sense of “normality” (Trnka 2011, 322) and “provisional safety” (Fluri 2019, 126; see also Mayo 2010). Thus, while laughingly posing as Jack and Rose on the upper deck of this ferry clearly does not do much in terms of providing any physical safety during a perilous refugee journey, it can nonetheless install a momentary feeling of “mastery” over a situation that is clearly beyond one’s control (Trnka 2011:340). In that particular moment, when standing on the deck of that ferry, these men were thus the “authors” of their situation, authoring “an emotional sensibility” that could momentarily replace their stress, anxiety and fear (ibid). What is important about this is thus that while the use of humor in stressful moments can certainly be read through a more individual(istic) lens of coping or relief (the more common approach in psychology, see Billig 2005), it is also inevitably “a product of agency and struggle” (Bernal 2013: 301). And, as such, it is also political (Brassett et al 2021, 4).

Dismissing this Titanic moment as a mere “funny anecdote”, as a bunch of dudes goofing around,^{viii} is therefore to miss a potentially insightful moment of learning. We can, for example, consider what their comic stunt *did* to recast the politics of that moment (Butler 1999) – and thus ask what posing as Jack and Rose did for what it meant “to be” a refugee in relation to the dominant order (De Genova 2005, 169). Most of us are likely familiar with the singular modes of knowledge that have developed around who constitutes “a refugee” – and the way that these have tended to “deny the very particulars that make people something other than anonymous bodies” (Malkki 1996, 389; see also Malkki 1995; Johnson 2011). Whether constructed in relation to racialized masculine threat or feminine victimhood (Gray and Franck 2019), it is central to such modes of knowledge that the refugee body itself is marked as “wounded” in order for it to be legible as a *real* refugee body. In fact, it still seems to be quite puzzling when refugees “don’t *look* like refugees” (Malkki 1996: 384, emphasis in original). A striking example of this in the context refugees arriving to the Aegean Islands since 2015, was the confusion, anger and outright hatred leveled at refugees that took celebratory selfies upon their arrival to European shores.^{ix} In social media, photographs of smiling and laughing refugees taking selfies were turned into memes whose very purpose it was to question the validity of their protection needs. A photograph of a Syrian woman smilingly taking a selfie upon her arrival to Kos was for example circulated with the caption: “Nothing says traumatised refugee like a grinning selfie took [sic] on the latest Samsung mobile phone” (Madörin 2021, 2). Along similar lines, a photograph featuring a group of male Syrian refugees that were laughingly taking a group selfie on another beach in Kos, was retweeted by the Swedish far-right parliamentarian Kent Ekeröth with the words: “Starving, vulnerable Syrian refugees arrive to the Island of Kos and take out their selfie-stick to immortalize their relief” (August 14th, 2015, my translation). While the fact that refugees were in possession of smart phones, and that they used them to take selfies (with or without selfie-sticks), seemed to be very troubling in itself, the fact they also had the audacity to smile, laugh and celebrate while doing it was taken as additional evidence that they were clearly not *real* refugees.

By turning their departure from Lesvos into a moment of laughter and play, Qasim and his companions, much like the refugees taking celebratory selfies, clearly failed their obligation to visibly perform suffering and subjugation. Instead, they used this moment to poke some fun, enjoy themselves and laugh – and in the process they also reclaimed their expressiveness, subjectivity and humanity (Bhungalia 2020, 400). But rather than seeking to identify Qasim and his companions as “resistors” of the European border regime (Abu-Lughod 1990, 41), I suggest that we read the Titanic moment as a much more fundamental “unmasking” of that regime, its very premise and underlying logic. Their comic stunt should then not be read as (overtly or covertly, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally) resisting power, but is rather about momentarily “turning away” from power altogether (Simpson 2014) – and in that sense it represents “a disinvestment with the order that is” (Bhungalia 2020: 400). As Simpson (2014, 107) points out, such disinvestment also involves pleasure. There is, in other words, *enjoyment* in those moments when we refuse to be told who we were, who we are and what rights we have. Such moments of refusal, she proposes, involve several layers of consciousness and play that can go something along these lines: “I am me, I am what you think I am, and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am, and you are all full of shit, and then maybe I will tell you to your face’ and ‘Let me tell you who you are” (ibid). Or, in the case of the Titanic moment, perhaps something like this: “I don’t really care who you are, who you think I am. I am Jack and my friend here is Rose and we are boarding the Titanic on route to Athens.”

5. To say without saying

Beyond the Titanic moment, there is likely not much that is unique about the way that laughter and humor kept resurfacing in our encounter with Qasim and his companions. To the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere (Franck 2021), whether we pay explicit attention to it or not, humor often forms an integral feature of ethnographic fieldwork. It is present in the form of laughter, wit or jokes – and as researchers we often intuitively use the humorous as a means to break the ice when meeting new people, to diffuse tense situations, to mitigate our privileges or to show solidarity. The problem is, however, that we rarely reflect more precisely on what the humorous *does* in the research encounter (but see Hernann 2016; van Ramshorts 2019)– and what the shapes of knowledge “might look like” (Simpson 2007, 68) if the laughter and humor of migrants was accounted for in our analysis. Here, I would therefore like us to think about the more precise workings of the humorous as a vehicle for commenting on issues that are difficult, contentious or even taboo to speak about (see also Goldstein 2013). One example of this in our work in Lesvos was how humor was used to mitigate statements that could be perceived as more politically charged. Consider for instance how Qasim’s companion would rely on smiles and an innocent voice when calling EU policies “a little bit stupid” or how the group giggled while mocking the American lady’s deep desire to “help refugees”. Not entirely certain of our position on these matters (maybe we agreed with the EU’s suggestion to bomb smuggling boats or shared the need to hand out bananas to refugees), the “safest” option was to lean on the humorous as a “rhetoric of politeness, smoothing over conversational difficulties that otherwise would arise” (Billig 2005, 191). This more intuitive usage of humor when commenting on sensitive issues speaks not only to the social competence (or “politeness”, in Billig’s terminology) of the person making the statement but also to a political awareness around which issues are contentious or not, i.e., which issues require a humorous framing in order to not offend or complicate a relationship. As such, the smiles, giggles and jokes must be understood as speaking from and to the social order.

Studies of humor in the context of adversity and violence have further suggested that humor often operates as form of ironic “truth telling” (Goldstein 2003; Trnka 2011). A less regulated form of speech (Foucault 1990) that holds the potential to both expose and subvert dominant narratives (Hernann 2016, 68). One reason for this, if we are to believe the sociologists, is that the inherent incongruity of humor allows it to perform “breaks” in human interaction, which is also why the humorous is generally believed to hold a potential for transgressing social norms (Kuipers 2009, 221). Consider for example how comedians are often pushing the envelope of what we are “allowed” to talk or joke about, or how offensive and outright racist opinions are made more “acceptable” through humorous framings (Billig 2001). Michael Mulkay (1988) suggests that humorous modes of communication, as a difference to more serious ones, do not hold the same demand for coherence, reason or even truth. In the humorous mode we are therefore much freer to play with misunderstandings, irrationality and contrast. This also means that even as we make jokes about very serious or contentious issues, humor tends to be associated with a degree of “innocence” (Jul Sørensen 2008, 171).^x In this capacity, it can also work as a protective shield in the sense that we can mitigate – or even entirely reverse – statements through claiming that we were “only joking”.

This ability to use humor as a means to “say without saying” is clearly important in empirical work on migration (see also Hernann 2016), given that the people we talk to often find themselves in a socially, politically and legally precarious position. It may therefore be precisely in moments of laughter, joking or mockery that we can gain insights into how people comprehend their circumstances, comment on their social and political surroundings (ibid) and, as discussed above, insist on their humanity and refuse subjugation (Bhungalia 2020). This, of course, requires that we first accept the premise that refugees are humorous individuals, and that they, much like the rest of us, encounter the world and their circumstances using a whole array of emotions, expressions and positions *including* laughter, gallows humor, comedy, wit, irony, mockery and play. Once we have accepted that premise, and thus tried to move (if ever so slightly) beyond the “stickiness” (Ahmed 2004) of their suffering and victimhood, we can also begin to ask what humor captures “that other languages do not” (Bhungalia 2020, 394).

6. The limits of serious reason

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) writing on the history of laughter, highlights how humor has not always held a marginal place in knowledge production. Whereas the knowledge ideals brought about by "Enlightenment" (with its dedication to "reason" and "empiricism", see also Watson 2015) paved the way for a view of the humorous as more or less irrelevant in serious analysis of the world, the Renaissance period rather saw laughter as holding a deep philosophical meaning: a "peculiar point of view" from which "the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from a serious standpoint" (Bahktin 1984, 66). Rather than dismissing humor as irresponsible, irrational or even hostile (Morreall 1989),^{xi} this historical view of humor thus acknowledges that there are certain aspects of the world that are "accessible only to laughter" (Bahktin 1984, 66). While contemporary social science research has largely neglected – or even rejected – this proposition (Watson 2015), empirical studies on the workings of humor in more precarious and violent settings have made the point that humor is particularly helpful for "identifying the absurdity of violence and the ambiguity and insecurity it fosters" (Fluri 2019, 127; see also Goldstein 2013; Trnka 2011). Such studies hold that in the context of poverty, protracted precarity, racism and injustice, laughter becomes "a means of giving voice to situations that strikes one as radically irregular" (Trnka 2011, 338). In other words, and as Nicholas de Genova (2005, 168f) points out, when the surreal is an integral "facet of everyday life itself" humor emerges as an important "tactic" of survival. Precisely these dynamics, I would argue, were also at play also in Lesvos, which was visible in the abundance of jokes and witty remarks that ranged a variety themes, such as: how one could find out how to get registered, how long this procedure would possibly take, why one person in the group had to remain "forever in Lesvos" while his travel companions were leaving the next day, how to obtain a ferry ticket, what line to wait in and which identity to emphasize if you were a *Palestinian* Syrian and not just a *Syrian* or which borders were open further along the route on that particular day if you were *not* Syrian at all, what the document with your name misspelt actually meant, where all the "blond people" came from that suddenly appeared to offer assistance on beaches, in camps and other sites, and where Europe's "famous human rights" had gone to.

While joking here certainly provided a fun, if fleeting, escape from the seriousness of their circumstances, the humor of refugees in Lesvos also carried knowledge about the situation unfolding in the island and in Europe at large. In fact, jokes and comic displays were often acutely precise in exposing the absurdity of their current predicament. Just consider, for example, how effectively the simple comic stunt of spraying perfume around the tent in Kara Tepe, or how the jokes around invited guests having to eat on brown paper bags, identified the indecency and indignity of refugee reception in the island. But such humorous framings, I argue, also disavowed these conditions – in the sense that they represented a refusal to "normalize" them (Bhungalia 2020, 389) and "be drawn into" the very politics that enabled them in the first place (Wright 2018, 130; see also Simpson 2014). Laughing at the European border regime, and the conditions of refugee reception that it produces, thus shifted the focus – and set this regime up as ridiculous rather than almightily powerful, consistent or rational. While such discursive shifts may not cause much damage to the actual material reality of border enforcement or refugee reception, I would argue that it does help us challenge "the mythologies of power" (Mbembe 2001) that are, in fact, essential for upholding and justifying the cruel and unjust treatment of migrants along and beyond our borders.

7. The end and the beginning

This article has been long in the making. It has been written and re-written more times than I can count. Having finished it now (if an article is indeed ever finished...), my hope is that it will be read by migration scholars as a provocation, but also an invitation to conversations around the presence, utility, meaning and politics of humor in our joint endeavors to understand the complexities of migration. Scholars much more seasoned and articulate than I have already pushed migration studies towards a recognition of migrant agency. Through their work they have complicated simplistic and colonial notions of victimization and/or threat and stressed the ethics and politics involved in representing migrants' experiences and struggles. It is my conviction that such debates would benefit greatly from taking humor seriously. Not the least because it allows us to recognize that people,

even when put under the most extraordinary pressure, are going to be *people* – and it is part of that experience to laugh, to giggle, to turn tragedy into comedy, to mock each other and our oppressors and to play as a simple means of enjoying ourselves. While people certainly have different possibilities and propensities to turn to humor in our everyday lives and in times of hardship, I would still argue that it is problematic, or even dangerous, to categorically deprive people whom are labelled “migrants” a sense of humor. Because it places “the migrant” in the category of people with whom it is very difficult to identify and signals that “migrants” are people that lack something essentially human. Or even worse, that they are, along the lines of Amos Oz’s reading of the humorless “fanatic”: dangerous (see Sigurdson, forthcoming).^{xii} My appeal here is therefore that we recognize how the laughter of migrants and, of course, of refugees, is as much about “turning away from power” as it is about a “humanity denied” (Bhungalia 2020, 398).

Now, the critical reader (here’s looking at you Reviewer two) may now feel the need to point out that there are also risks in overstating the presence or meaning of humor in migrants’ experiences. This reader may be right. But my proposition here is not that we turn “the migrant” into “the clown” (although even that would perhaps be better than the eternal “victim” representation). Rather, my suggestion is that migration scholarship needs to move beyond the occasional anecdotal reference to laughter and humor in migrant narratives (the: “she says with a smile” or the [ha ha ha]) and actually analyze what it means. Without having to spend a decade reading humor theory (trust me, it still wouldn’t be enough), we need to, at a minimum, ask what kinds of knowledges, experiences and preferences the humorous can capture, which the serious has a more difficult time doing. What does a humorous framing mean for what for is actually being said? What does laughter in the face of hardship and oppression tell us about how different groups of people understand, comment on and refuse their subjugation? Along with Cate Watson (2015, 408-409), I would argue that failing to recognize the presence and function of humor in human interaction – *including* “in the human activity that we call ‘research’” – is not only to exist in “a state of denial” but it also risks undermining the research that we conduct. It places us “like one of Kafka’s heroes, in the absurd position of someone ‘seeking to unravel the mystery of the irrational by rational means’ (Reiss, 1949 in Watson 2015, 409)”. Rather than clinging to suffering as if it was the only means of understanding migrant experiences, we can thus learn a great deal from recognizing migrants’ laughter *and* from analyzing what it tells about the contours of power that are so central to critical readings of contemporary border regimes. In fact, and only somewhat accurately paraphrasing Judith Butler (1999, xxvii),^{xiii} I propose that migrants’ laughter is indispensable for exposing how *laughable* borders are.

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Endnotes

ⁱ In her book *Good humor, Bad Taste*, Giselinde Kuipers (2015: 43-56) for example discusses how historical stereotypes that associate joke-telling with men and the working class have impacted how humor is viewed as an im/proper activity for women to engage in. Such stereotypes are of course spatially specific and may also change over time (see for example Kothhoff 2006).

ⁱⁱ For a more elaborate account of these main theories, see for example: Watson 2015, 409-413.

iii See for example: Kuipers (2008, 368-373) for an overview of these debates within sociology; Goldstein's (2013, 5-13) anthropological intervention and; Jul Sørensen's (2016,17-26) discussion on political humor and/as resistance.

iv I have previously written about Qasim and his companions in a paper where I focus on how they navigated the registration procedure. Some of what is described here, is also part of that article, see: Franck 2017.

v See for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/07/world/europe/un-wants-to-let-europe-use-military-force-to-stop-migrant-smuggling-boats.html>.

vi *My heart will go on*, composed by James Horner and Will Jennings, recorded by Celine Dion, released 1997.

vii While this was the last time we saw Qasim and his companions in person, we remained in contact as they made their way towards – and succeeded to reach – Germany, where Qasim and several of the others also settled.

viii While I will not expand further on the issue of gender here it needs to be noted, and as already mentioned in the theory section above, that humor is of course – much like migration itself – a gendered phenomenon. Women and men may therefore have differentiated access to it in the sense that constructions of masculinity and femininity impact who, how and where we are allowed to tell jokes, mock other people, laugh out loud, perform comic stunts etc. (see for example Kuipers 2015). As such, it should also be noted that the ability of Qasim and companions (all of whom were male) to “goof around” in this moment, was most likely also impacted by their positionality as young and able-bodied men.

ix For an interesting discussion around how these publicized images were in fact not “refugee selfies” but “images of refugees taking selfies”, see: Risam 2018.

x In her interesting work on humor as non-violent resistance, Jul Sørensen (2008), who builds her analysis partially on Micheal Mulkey's (1988) conceptualization of the serious and the humorous modes, points precisely towards how it is this “contrast between innocence and seriousness” that makes humor so effective in the context of oppression. The “reformulation” of serious oppression into the humorous mode shows that “something has changed”, which can engender the expectation of even further changes.

xi The philosopher John Morreall (1989) has identified three objections to a focus on humor in what he terms “Western thought”. The first is the *Hostility Objection* and can be traced back to superiority theory, and thus the idea that if amusement arises when we feel superior to other people this also raises ethical objections around humor as hostile, antisocial or even cruel (243f). While incongruity theory rather emphasizes how amusement is linked to the inherent ambiguity of humor – and thus the way that it turns things upside down and “clashes with our conceptual system” (ibid), it links humor to the absurd and therefore gives rise to the *Irrationality Objection*. Finally, the nonseriousness of humor has given rise to the *Irresponsibility Objection*. This objection captures the idea that if we are amused by something we are not feeling a “practical concern” about it. That is, if we perceive humor as involving a degree of distances ourselves from the problem, it also makes us disengaged and less responsible (255f).

xii In his book “How to Cure a Fanatic”, Amos Oz argues that he has never seen a fanatic with a sense of humor or someone with a sense of humor become a fanatic. For a very interesting reading of Oz' thesis in relation to humor as an emancipatory or reconciliatory force, see: Sigurdson Unpublished manuscript.

xiii In the 1990 Introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Butler speaks of laughter as a key feminist strategy to trouble gender categories – exposing the laughable nature of serious terms.