Notes in regards to the PhD Course in Ethnographic Method:

What follows is an edited version of the PhD project proposal I submitted to Tallinn University earlier this year. It explores, broadly, some of the conceptual and emotional tensions present in Estonia’s political response to the refugee crisis. Nationalism, as it is experienced and expressed by both Estonians and asylum-seekers in the country, is one of the core concepts I plan to utilise. However, nationalism is more than just a perspective or a discourse – it is, to borrow Thrift’s (2004, 71) phrasing, a “microbiopolitics of the subliminal”, a sense and a feeling that inevitably colours interactions in often subtle ways. This affective aspect of the topic is something I want to address more clearly in my theoretical and methodological approach. There is also the role of expert knowledge: my fieldwork will involve participant-observation and discussion with several government ministries, NGOs, and legal experts in the field of migration. In doing this, I must also engage with questions of how expert knowledge is produced and valued in the very volatile context of EU refugee policy.

Displacing Nations: Identities and Narratives of Asylum-seekers in Vao, Estonia

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Purpose & Research Questions

At present, the many (and varied) voices of asylum-seekers and refugees are rarely consulted within European political debates. Within policy discourse and legal decision-making, they are subject to a type of “narrative inequality” where “institutionally sanctioned” speech, text, and documentation can be at odds with personal expressions and expectations (Blommaert 2001, 416). In many government presentations and media reports, they are moreover objectified as a composite group that can be simultaneously threatening, vulnerable, victimized, and enigmatic. My goal with this project is to take a different stance, considering refugees and asylum-seekers as agents that interpret, reframe, and
transform European identities. In Estonia’s case, this process begins in Vao, a village at the edge of Lääne-Viru county, where the Vao Center is located. It is the only accommodation center for asylum-seekers within the country, currently housing approximately 90 people.

My preliminary PhD plan is to write an ethnography based on time spent living among asylum-seekers in Vao, exploring their stories, needs, and expectations in a way that treats them as agents of a new ‘nation-making’ process within Estonia. I contend that rich and useful knowledge can be uncovered by considering how asylum-seekers refract and alter identity politics within the country. Their narratives can present an alternative to more homogenizing and stigmatizing discourses surrounding migration, opening up new pathways for analysing the changing shape of Estonian nationalism.

Tentatively, this project aims to address the following questions:

1. How do asylum-seekers in Vao navigate and articulate their own identities in relation to local (Vao), national (Estonia), and ‘home’ (place of origin) spaces?
2. How can the narratives of asylum-seekers in Vao speak back to the dominant political portrayals of refugees within Estonian national(ist) space?
3. How do the experiences of asylum-seekers in Vao intersect with the tasks of relevant political actors, public officials, and policy experts? What types of dialogue and interaction take place?
4. What can the experiences of asylum-seekers in Vao reveal about wider discourses regarding European identities? In what ways have they altered the socio-political landscape?

Context & Previous Research

As in the rest of Europe, the ‘refugee crisis’ has become a flashpoint political issue in Estonia, bolstering public support for the ethnonationalist Conservative People’s Party. In September 2015, an arson attack
on the Vao Center made headlines within the country and further sensationalized discussions. Despite the comparatively minute number of asylum-seekers that Estonia receives within the EU, political debate on the topic mines a deep, historically-rooted seam of anxiety regarding the vulnerability of the Estonian nation. This anxiety is something I explored, albeit from a different angle, in my undergraduate analysis of Russian-Estonian border security and State reification in Narva (Anderson 2013). I hope to expand on my previous work, considering the complexities of Estonian nationality and identity from a dramatically different vantage point.

National borders do not just demarcate a place, but embody various and contested languages, histories, cultural traits, rituals, and anxieties. As Paasi (2015, 1) articulates, the imagined nation is both “hot” and “banal”, linking traumatic or tumultuous events (such as wars) with everyday expressions and interactions. In Europe’s ‘post-Soviet’ spaces, these nationalisms have been explored by a number of scholars (notably Katherine Verdery, 1996 and Dovilė Budrytė, 2011), many of whom have drawn links between citizenship policy, language politics, and national identity. Some recent scholarship on nationalisms in Estonia (see, for example, Peiker 2015 and Petsinis 2016) has also applied a postcolonial lens to the State’s protectionist approach to ethnicity and migration. However, the present refugee crisis has now warped and intensified identity politics in eastern European states. The asylum centre in Vao represents an uneasy, invasive body (*a la* Agamben 1998) in the rural heart of the Estonian nation. The presence of asylum-seekers and refugees challenges the Estonian-Russian linguistic/historical divisions that have dominated Estonian politics since 1991.

In a broader sense, the present refugee crisis also highlights a profound tension within the European Union as an institution: the conflicting ideologies of ethnonationalism and economic liberalism. While this tension has certainly been explored within political philosophy (such as in the work of Brian Barry, 1996),
there is less writing that directly analyses the empirical manifestations of this conflict in Europe.

Integration, as a state and EU-level practice, is frequently represented as a bundle of labour market and education policies- but this hardly satisfies more complex and imaginative criteria for national belonging, which itself has serious consequences for employment, health, and mobility. How this issue is navigated in the coming years will be critical for the political and social stability of the European Union. I hope to provide insight on this topic, potentially using Estonia’s situation as a case study for the relationships between asylum-seekers/refugees, nationalism, and European socioeconomic integration.

Although the situation is rapidly evolving, Estonia at present takes a conservative and deeply restrictive approach to both immigration and refugee management. The rejection rate for asylum applications within the past 15 years is approximately 80%, and the country receives the fewest asylum applications of any state in the EU (Eurostat 2015). The majority of asylum applicants come from Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Syria, Sudan, and Afghanistan (Eurostat 2015). Asylum policies are still in a state of flux within Estonia, giving me an opportunity to document these changes and give ‘snapshots’ of the situation throughout the next few years.

**Project Description: Analytical Approach & Methodology**

To answer my research questions, I want to position myself in a niche that allows me to articulate the experiences of my subjects and informants. The scholars that I have found most inspiring throughout my time as a student and as a researcher do this by giving primacy to the ‘human subject’ as a unit of study and emphasizing the narratives lived out within their research. Within Philippe Bourgois’ *In Search of Respect*, for example, an extensive ethnography on a deeply marginalized and little-studied group of crack cocaine dealers in Harlem provided the grounds for a potent and profound analysis of US social policy. This is the approach from which I wish to depart- human experience, including my own, understood as
both narrative craft and scientific piece. These experiences and narratives, while valuable on their own terms, can illuminate processes from the bottom-up and provide the basis for powerful post-structuralist critique.

However, literature in cultural anthropology and critical geography can sometimes boil down to conceptual wrangling, assessing social and political phenomena in a lexicon that is far removed from lived experience. Drawing inspiration from the methods of Bourgois and Wacquant, I hope to subvert this trend, using the voices and everyday lived experiences of informants to build an inductive narrative analysis that reflects critically on Estonian identity, political space, and nationalism. Within this analysis, I want to utilize the works of Paasi, Verdery, Eastmond, and other critical geographers and anthropologists by reframing them in the context of Estonian asylum policy and ethnographic data. Drawing from these various scholars, I hope to place asylum-seekers in Estonia as their own “space-forming forces”, demarcating new domains within Estonian national history and political identity (Borén 2005, 2). Through the lenses provided by these authors, asylum-seekers can be studied as historically disruptive agents taking part in a struggle to access and find meaning in an Estonian social landscape, embedded simultaneously within local, national, and ‘home’ spaces. This type of analytical approach is what I hope I can contribute to a growing body of literature on refugee and asylum-seeker discourses within cultural anthropology.

Methodologically, my objective is to produce an ethnography that incorporates long-term participant observation and extensive unstructured and semi-structured interviews with asylum-seekers in Vao. Burawoy’s (1998, 1) writing on the “extended case method” is an important anchoring point here- I aim for my research to embody a “reflexive model” that emphasizes the “intersubjectivity of scientist and subject of study”. To make this fieldwork possible, I will draw on the support and personal contacts that I have made in Estonia since 2011. These include staff members of the Estonian Academy of Security
Sciences (Sisekaitseakadeemia), the Social Anthropology department at Tallinn University, the Estonian Refugee Council, the Estonian Human Rights Centre, and Jekaterina Maadla, an interpreter currently working in Vao who aided me during my undergraduate fieldwork in Narva. Through these contacts, I should be able to live (or at least spend full days) at the Vao centre, where I can talk with asylum-seekers and volunteer for tasks at the facility. As a supplement to my ethnographic data, I hope to also conduct interviews with public officials in both Vao and Tallinn, which will provide legal and political context for my work.
References


