

**White Saviorism or Sisterhood? –  
Volunteering with Female African Refugees in Germany**

by

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## Abstract

In the past decade the so-called ‘voluntourism’ industry has registered an increase in predominantly young, white volunteers from the global North travelling to countries in the global South with the intention of helping or saving. At least since Teju Cole coined the term ‘white savior industrial complex,’ the harmful effects of this dynamic have become known to a wider audience. Activists and scholars have criticized the ‘white saviors’ and their uncritical perpetuation of white privilege and white supremacy in the name of humanitarianism and benevolence. Often missing from the conversation are accounts of voluntary work carried out in the European context which would add a valuable perspective as they can demonstrate that the problem with white saviorism is not limited to the Global South. Implementing scholarship from the disciplines of sociology, literary history, ethnography, educational studies, pedagogy, and political science, this thesis explains the key terms benevolence, humanitarianism, white saviorism (including the delimitation of the term white ally), white supremacy, white privilege, whiteness, solidarity (including the distinction of political solidarity), empathy and friendship including their historical background. After introducing the short story *Etenesh*, an account of voluntary work between German, Ethiopian, and Nigeria women in Regensburg, Germany, the key terms are related to the short story and accounts of voluntary work in general.

The purpose of this work is to explore the question: How could voluntary work be channeled into a tool that helps dismantle white supremacy instead of reinforcing it? The short story thereby serves as a resource to draw upon in order to answer this question. This thesis argues that good intentions and genuine empathy do not absolve us of the harm we cause as white volunteers but also that voluntary work and activism do not have to be mutually exclusive but that working towards the dismantling of white supremacy within voluntary work is not only possible but necessary.

## **Lay Summary**

The key goal of this thesis is to present a comprehensible and easily accessible account of voluntary work carried out by white German and Black Ethiopian and Nigerian women in Germany in the form of a short story in order to relate it to academic discussions around volunteering, to identify how white privilege and white supremacy but also anti-racist work and solidarity are reinforced within this volunteering project in Germany, and to explore the possibilities of combining volunteering with social justice activism.

This research project can furthermore contribute to the future development of organizations offering voluntary work projects such as Campus Asyl, the initiative who had offered the project presented in the short story and possibly encourage discussion around volunteering with local initiatives instead of boosting the controversial ‘voluntourism’ industry.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Xenia Wittmann.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank everyone who has supported me on this journey, first and foremost my parents without whom this would not have been possible.

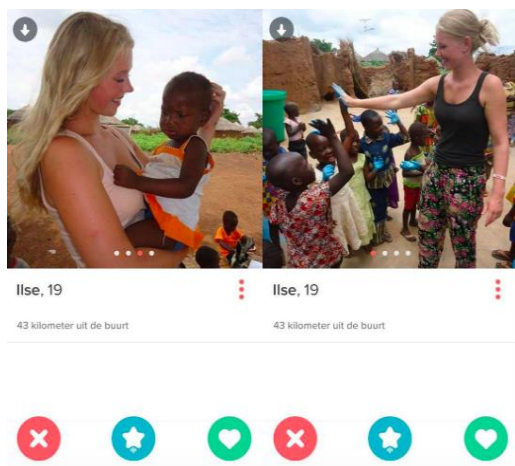


For Ando and our baby.

## 1. Chapter One: Introduction – The Problem with Volunteering

In the past decade, volunteering abroad has become increasingly popular (Toomey 152). The so-called voluntourism industry, one of the world's fastest emerging tourism sectors, records an annual revenue of 2.6 billion dollars and observes 1.6 million people per year travelling for the purpose of 'doing good,' most of them being young, white volunteers from the global North (Toomey 152-153). The travelers often act with good intentions in mind and the genuine willingness to help (Toomey 166) and the industry's self-representations as effective, helpful, and 'civilizing' appeal to their desire to do good (Toomey 153). Yet, an increasing number of scholars and activists are criticizing the harm the voluntourism industry causes, specifically by representing "[...] Africa and Africans as corrupt, impoverished, uneducated, victimized, and requiring rescue (Schwarz and Richey 1929)." Academic scholars and activists alike argue that upholding the idea that Blackness and 'Otherness' are in need of what is commonly – usually ironically – referred to as 'white saviors' perpetuates white supremacy (Toomey 153). In an era of what Amal Awad refers to as "show-and-tell, or it didn't happen" in his article *When the savior becomes the story*, social media seems to aggravate this problem ("Awad"): Schwarz and Richey note that "when individuals upload content online 'it instantly becomes part of the infrastructure of the *digital superpublic*,' and as such, the permanency of digital traces requires some deliberation (1930)." In the case of voluntourism this often means "[...] reproducing 'poverty pornography,' reinforcing the 'white savior complex,' and oversimplifying the solutions to deeply entrenched structural inequities (Schwarz and Richey 1934)" – especially when the international volunteers "[...] are more concerned with self-image than social justice (Schwarz and Richey 1934)." Various activists have responded to this perpetuation of injustices by mocking the self-acclaimed humanitarians online through 'networked laughter' and counter-narratives that challenge accounts of white

saviorism (Schwarz and Richey 1929). One example is the website *Humanitarians of Tinder* that exposes users of the dating app Tinder which “[...] appeal to potential suitors by choosing images of themselves engaged in benevolent acts; most notably white men and women holding and standing near racialized children in unnamed locations recognized as the ‘Third World’



**Figure 1** Tinder user Ilse, 19, portrays herself amidst Black children (via Humanitarians of Tinder)

(Schwarz and Richey 1934).” *Humanitarians of Tinder* aims at calling out the so-called ‘Tindertarians’ “[...] on exploiting their humanitarian do-gooding to boost their own desirability, [...] displaying their ‘exotic’ companions instead of helping them, and [...] enjoying poverty instead of weeping with its victims (Schwarz and Richey 1934).” Schwarz and Richey explain that “[...] *Humanitarians of*

*Tinder* circulates these images as they are, without further comment from the website curator. The original performance, it seems, is deemed so obviously problematic that it requires no further explanation (1934-1935).”

Another example for a resource that aims at calling out and challenging white saviorism through humor is the Instagram account *Barbie Savior*, which publishes stereotypical white saviorist photos with the famous doll as the main character with the goal of “[...] shin[ing] a light on the people who fetishize and over-sentimentalize the experience of visiting Africa [...] (Schwarz and Richey 1936).”



**Figure 2** A post on the Instagram page *Barbie Savior* captioned “BRB saving Africa...” (via @barbiesavior on Instagram).

*Humanitarians of Tinder* and *Barbie Savior* are just two of multiple activists' attempts to call out on white volunteers who disregard their own privileges for the sake of portraying themselves as saviors and who ignorantly perpetuate colonialist narratives and white supremacy. These examples suggest that voluntary work conducted by white people that involves Black people and POC is an overall bad idea. One might even come to the conclusion that it is less problematic to not try and help than to risk causing more harm than good and being categorized as a white savior.

However, I argue that one should take into consideration that both narratives, those the white saviors tell in order to be regarded as heroes, as well as the humorous counternarratives which condemn voluntourism and white benevolence, are oftentimes circulated in a very generalizing way, portraying volunteering as either entirely positive or entirely negative. This is problematic as it leaves little room for critical reflections or improvement. The following thesis therefore gives attention to alternative ways of telling stories about volunteering and explores the idea of reframing volunteering as a kind of activism. I argue that benevolence and humanitarianism do not have to be either a universal solution nor the culprit but that they could be utilized as a tool to counteract white supremacy when accompanied by an awareness of the larger social, cultural, and political framework, the questioning of one's own privileges and contribution to perpetuating white supremacy, and, ideally, anti-racism training.

I will begin by introducing the volunteering program I was personally involved in and by outlining my personal background and motivation for doing research on voluntary work. In chapter *1.2 Approaching the Master's Thesis as a Creative Project* I will then state my reasons for embedding a short story in my thesis. I argue that circulating short stories can raise awareness of the hardships refugees face in Europe while at the same time conveying the beauty and joy that can lie in intercultural encounters and friendships..

The second chapter will cover the theoretical foundations of the thesis. I will outline the key concepts as well as their historical backgrounds in order to be able to situate the short story

within its larger historical, social, and political framework. In doing so I will also present a review of the relevant literature I am working with. Furthermore the central research question and the relevance of this research project will be introduced.

Finally I will outline the methodology I plan on implementing. In doing so postcolonial theory, critical whiteness theory, feminist standpoint theory, and critical discourse analysis will be introduced before being related to accounts of volunteering in general and the short story specifically. The short story, which I gave the name *Etenesh*, constitutes the third chapter. It will be followed by a critical analysis during which it will be embedded within larger socio-political, cultural, and historical frameworks before the strengths and limitations this research project offers will be pointed out. Finally, I will come to a conclusion and provide insights into scope for further research.

## **1.1 Background and Personal Motivation**

I was involved in a volunteering program from December 2018 until September 2019. It was organized by a student-founded initiative based in Regensburg, Germany called Campus Asyl. The project I worked in was a weekly group-meeting of female, German volunteers and female refugees from Ethiopia and Nigeria who had applied to be granted asylum seeker status in Germany. It took place in a trailer which was located on the premise of the asylum seekers' home. The project was called *Women's Tea Time* and included not only the regular meetings every Wednesday evening during which we would chat, drink tea, craft, and learn some basic German, but also outings such as visits to local festivals.

I had come to know about the project through a university newsletter which was addressed to all students studying 'German as a foreign language,' an additional training course certificate which trains students from all faculties to become German teachers for foreigners living in Germany or abroad. My motivation for completing this training course certificate was

first and foremost to be able to find a job anywhere in the world as my main interest at the time was travelling. At the time I did not fully question the privilege my German passport afforded me and the power dynamics at play when travelling around the world as a white woman teaching a European language. I was, however, aware of the fact that Germany was in the midst of what was commonly referred to as the ‘refugee crisis’ and realized that many of the people coming to Germany would want to or need to learn German as well. Having the formal training to be a German as a foreign language teacher I felt an obligation to put what I had learned to use. I thought about teaching German to refugees for a long time, being intimidated by the idea but also feeling increasingly selfish for not using my free time and training course certificate in a way that would benefit those fleeing war, poverty, or religious prosecution. I saw the lurid headlines the media created, fueling whatever narrative served them best, oftentimes portraying refugees as potential danger. And finally came to the conclusion that I wanted to form my own opinion and to take a stand against the right-wing, anti-Muslim propaganda that was being pushed by those who believed that too much diversity endangered German culture.

When I uttered my wish to volunteer with refugees to friends and family most of them seemed quite surprised, although they knew I had a great interest in meeting people from different cultural backgrounds, learning about different cultures, and engaging in intercultural friendships. What was different this time was that I did not want to go abroad, but stay at home. I am assuming that while travelling is seen as a privilege and an adventure for Europeans, engaging with multiculturalism in Germany is regarded as difficult, uncomfortable, and not at all as glamorous as a trip to a different continent.

Reflecting on the decision I made back then, I now also see that my motivations went beyond ‘wanting to do good’ and getting to know different cultures, but that they were influenced by my family history which was shaped by war and displacement. I had come in touch with this part of my ancestors’ history only shortly before when my grandparents had invited my mother, my sister and me on a trip to Poland.

My maternal grandmother was born in a province called Silesia which used to be part of Germany. She was the youngest of four children of a family of shepherders who lived in a very rural area. Her father died during the Second World War leaving her mother alone with four small children. As Germany lost the province of Silesia to Poland, Polish soldiers took over the small villages, committing acts of violence against their inhabitants, finally forcing them to flee to other parts of Germany. My great-grandmother embarked on a dangerous journey with her four children, leaving behind everything they had. After almost losing her eldest son who had run back to the house to grab a bottle of syrup and had to sneak through a field as the soldiers had already taken over their farm, the family caught a train westwards. My grandmother was a baby at the time and as they spent the entire night in the rain outside a train station, getting soaking wet, someone told her mother: “You can just leave the little one behind, she is going to die anyways.”

Hearing these stories from my grandmother and her older sister, seeing the tears in their eyes, and visiting the now overgrown and ragged land where their farmhouse used to stand in Silesia had a profound impact on me. My younger sister and I were eager to learn more about our roots in Silesia but gathering information turned out to be a tedious and difficult effort. While completing my undergrad degree in comparative European ethnology I therefore often found myself choosing seminars with a focus on Eastern Europe as well as on migration and displacement. Looking back now, I do see how my family’s history shaped my interest in these themes and in refugees’ stories and finally prompted me to make these fields of interest a focal point of my research.

The first time I thought about writing down my experiences with the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria was while I was still involved in the project. I had the idea to conduct interviews with them and to publish them in order to make their stories known to a wider audience and to offer German people an account of the circumstances under which young female refugees live in Germany unrelated to the narratives the media pushed. Although I am

sure the young women would have agreed to being interviewed, I never actually suggested it, partly because I was busy writing my Bachelor's thesis at the time and had already chosen another topic for it, and partly because I did not want to bring them in a situation where they would feel obliged to participate in a project that might not even directly benefit them.

Three years later I now get the chance to share my account of this impactful time in the form of a short story as part of my Master's thesis. Besides sharing my personal experiences I have incorporated quotes from Fatma Aydemir's and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah's anthology *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare] into the short story as its essays are representations of the stereotypes and discrimination migrants and people of color (POC hereafter) living in Germany are confronted with in their day-to-day lives. As I am fully aware of the fact that my short story can only convey a very limited perspective – that of a white, German woman – it only seemed ethical to try and weave the voices of migrants and POC into it. They do, however, in no way serve as a justification to make claims to objectivity. Rather, they are to be understood as additions to the perspective the story conveys. Furthermore I have included quotes by two Black feminist scholars I came in contact with during the course of my Master's degree into the short story. A quote from bell hook's *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women Author(s)* was incorporated into the short story as hooks' perspective on solidarity and the connections she establishes between sexism and racism are very relevant for the short story. Her work and relevance for this research project will be further discussed in the literature review. Secondly, Denise Ferreira da Silva's *The Racial Limits of Social Justice* was woven into the short story as da Silva's explanations of raciality and subaltern subjects, which I was introduced to me during one of her classes, have had a great impact on my understanding of social justice. Da Silva's work furthermore helped me to establish a connection between my personal experiences and structural inequalities.



## 1.2 Approaching the Master's Thesis as a Creative Project

In the following I will state my reasons for approaching the Master's Thesis as a creative project. I will begin by outlining the general advantages storytelling has in an academic context and then move on to the effects and benefits of sharing refugees' stories.

First of all, short stories are much more easily accessible than what is typically considered academic writing. In her article *Story as World Making* Kathy G. Short illustrates that "stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives that it's easy to overlook their significance in framing how we think about ourselves and the world. [...] We live storied lives (9)." This quote demonstrates the significance stories have for our lives. Yet, according to Short, "despite the significant ways in which stories frame our world views and identities, their role in making sense of life is often not recognized or valued (9)." This is especially true for the academy where "[...] writing that attempts to articulate general truths and to support these truths with evidence that can be shared (Mlynarczyk 8)" and the idea "[...] that knowledge is generated through logical reasoning or empirical studies of phenomena that can be directly observed and measured rather than apprehended through intuition or introspection (8)" are privileged. One argument for this preference for non-narrative writing given on a website named *Key Shifts in English Language Class* is that storytelling "[...] will not prepare students for the demands of college, career, and life (Mlynarczyk 10)." However, Mlynarczyk argues that "this increased emphasis on argumentation and 'evidence-based writing' seems ironic in today's world where personal experience and personal stories are constantly celebrated in social media and on reality TV (10)." However, the idea that personal accounts and experiences have political and societal value is not new: Black feminists such as The Combahee River Collective have argued that "[...] the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity (The Combahee River Collective)." And Mary Patrice Erdmans explains in her article *The Personal Is Political, but Is it Academic?* that narrative methods

such as life stories and autoethnographies “[...] are used by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, in feminist and cultural studies, ethnic and minority histories, and postmodern histories [because] they represent a critique of traditional scientific methods that posit a duality between the subject and the object, that ignore power relations between the researched and the researcher, and that privilege the academic voice over the everyday voice (Erdmans 7).” I will refer to the idea of narrative methods as a critique of traditional research methods at a later point in this chapter.

Mlynarczyk also introduces a quote by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, who clarify: “The divorce between the language of the family and the language of school only serves to reinforce the feeling that the education system belongs to another world, and that what teachers have to say has nothing to do with daily life because spoken in a language which makes it unreal (10).” Their emphasis on academic language seemingly being disconnected from daily life also proves that a short story written in every-day language such as *Etenesh* is much better able to convey the fact that it is based on actual events and occurrences.

This exclusion of every-day language and storytelling from classrooms and academia furthermore results in students getting “[...] a very clear and discouraging message: Your language is not valued here, and your stories don't belong (Mlynarczyk 10).” According to Mlynarczyk this is especially true for students who have learnt or are learning English as a second language and who speak a language other than English at home (10-11). In other words: the use of complex vocabulary in academic English can seem intimidating to students like me who are learning or have learnt English mostly through non-academic texts, as well as tv shows, films, or social media. I have personally struggled a lot with imposter syndrome during my graduate studies due to the fact that English is my second language which is why I find this argument especially relatable.

Besides being more easily accessible and inclusive, especially to people whose first language is not English, short stories can also foster cultural awareness. Short mentions that

“[...] stories provide a way for us to move between local and global cultures and to explore the ways in which people live and think in cultures that differ from our own. [...] they provide access to shared and unique experiences and beliefs. We need more than facts to understand the storied lives of people in diverse global cultures (9).” It is especially the last sentence that is of interest when thinking about storytelling in an academic context as it suggests that stories are better suited for fostering cultural understanding than theory. Since “stories can also be a vehicle [...] for building intercultural understandings and global perspectives (Short 11)” employing storytelling when introducing an account of intercultural encounters therefore seems like an obvious choice.

Finally, I would like to bring up a point Lina Sunseri makes in her article *Indigenous Voice Matters: Claiming our Space through Decolonising Research*. Sunseri sees mainstream research approaches as “[...] inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism (93)” and asks: “How can my work be part of a broader decolonizing movement (93)?” When talking about her own research within an Indigenous community Sunseri mentions that, “[...] a more mainstream research approach would perceive the attachment that I have with the community as a source of bias that could potentially ‘contaminate’ my research, in contrast, an Indigenous research methodology sees this subjectivity as a strength in a more holistic and genuine research process, one that shapes a truly collaborative relationship (103).” Similarly, the accounts of friendship and emotions shared in *Etenesh* would be seen as weaknesses and source of bias in a traditional research project, but as a strength in a short story as well as in non-traditional research methods such as feminist standpoint theory which I will refer to again in chapter 2.3 *Methodology and Positionality*.

When describing the methodology she implements while doing research in an Indigenous community Sunseri mentions: “Indigenous epistemology and methodology demand that the relationship between the researcher and the participants be built on sincere and heartfelt dialogue, so that good and right relations can be nurtured (100).” This point is particularly

interesting as I did not conduct formal interviews or research involving the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria. Instead, connections and friendships formed naturally and the decision to implement the experience into my research was made much later on. Similarly, Sunseri explains: “I participated in many social, cultural and traditional ceremonies and political activities in my community, some of which became direct sources of knowledge for my research (100).” One possible interpretation of Sunseri’s words might be that it makes a difference whether a researcher enters the field with the goal to gain an academic benefit from conducting their research or whether they participate in the social and cultural life of a community with genuine interest and later on implement their experiences into their research. Summarizing Sunseri’s points it can be said that moving away from traditional, Western ways of researching towards alternative methods, one of which might be storytelling, can be seen as a break with imperialist and colonial narratives and an effort towards decolonizing research.

In the following I will expand on the benefits and effects of sharing refugees’ stories. First of all, I believe that Kerri Woods’ is right in stating in her article *Refugees’ Stories: Empathy, Agency, Solidarity*: “[i]f we are to solve the [refugee] crisis, i.e., if we are to respond adequately to the human need that is urgently manifest, we need not just political institutions and agreements about burden-sharing, but also more solidarity (1),” and that “[o]ne answer is to tell stories, or better, to facilitate the means and the space for refugees to tell their own stories, and to amplify their voices (1).” This means that ideally, the story I am telling should be told from the perspective of the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria. Unfortunately this is not possible at this point as I have no means of contacting them. I therefore want to make it clear that *Etenesh* only conveys my perspective and that I do not intend to speak for the young women on whom the characters in the short story are based. By pointing out specific challenges and experiences the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria faced it might still prompt its readers to reflect on the circumstances female asylum seekers life in in Germany and inspire them to seek out refugees’ stories.

Summarizing the points I have made in this chapter it can be said that short stories are not only more accessible to a broader range of people and therefore also more inclusive, especially to those whose first language is not English, but that they can also foster cultural awareness and contribute to the decolonisation of research methods when implemented in an academic setting. Short stories can emphasize a connection to daily life when based on true stories, they can cultivate solidarity and empathy amongst their readers, and they are best suited for conveying what usually remains unsaid in purely theoretical approaches: accounts of friendship and interhuman connections, emotions and insecurities that arise when volunteering with people from a cultural background one does not know much about, as well as reflections on one's own home country and culture that arise as a result of these encounters. I believe that it is precisely because short stories such as *Etenesh* are very personal and individual that they can raise awareness for the fact that they do not represent isolated cases but just one of many stories.

## **2. Chapter Two: Theoretical Foundation**

The following chapter features the thesis' theoretical foundations. It begins with an introduction of the key concepts *Etenesh* addresses: benevolence, humanitarianism, white saviorism (including the delimitation of the term white ally), white supremacy, white privilege, whiteness, as well as solidarity (including the distinction of political solidarity), as well as empathy and friendship. They will be presented alongside their definitions and historical background and a review of the literature they were extracted from. Chapter 2.2 presents the central research questions and reasons for why conducting such a research project is relevant. Finally, chapter 2.3 presents the methodology I am employing in an attempt to answer the central research questions, specifically postcolonial theory, critical whiteness theory, feminist standpoint theory, and critical discourse analysis.

### **2.1 Key Concepts and Literature Review**

The concept of benevolence and its historical background in the American context are presented in Susan M. Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*. Ryan explains how mid-nineteenth-century rhetorics of benevolence helped shape America's ideas of race and nation (1) and how the vision of white benevolence arose from a collective racial guilt (2). According to Ryan, the intentions underlying acts of benevolence were oftentimes pernicious and self-serving (3) – an interesting observation that many critics of the voluntourism industry, which was introduced during chapter one, would still deem valid today. The fact that benevolence was and is a matter of interpretation is also backed up by the following quotes: “Antislavery activism was figured as a means of doing good unto the ‘unfortunate’ African race, but in the rhetoric of the other side, so was ongoing enslavement (Ryan 3)” and: “Through benevolence, [Anglo-Americans] could claim a caretaking quality

that might counterbalance the aggressiveness and expansionism for which they were becoming known (Ryan 5).” Ryan also illustrates how the meaning of the word has changed over time and provides insights into its gendered connotations: “Benevolence offered [native-born white women] a means of participating in civic life without challenging the era’s strictures against their more overt involvement in the political sphere (by voting, holding office, or speaking in public to mixed audiences). For these women, benevolent activism was the very substance of their citizenship (7).” This argument demonstrates benevolence’s performative nature and proves that it rarely included a challenging of the existing social or political order, in other words: acts of benevolence could be regarded as “[...] efforts [...] to alleviate suffering on a small scale, without altering broader social structures (Ryan 8-9).” It comes as no surprise that one important feature of antebellum benevolence was an hierarchical structure (Ryan 19). Ryan explains: “The simultaneous erasure and persistence of difference facilitates both the sentimental bond that creates the desire to give and the maintenance of hierarchy that suggests that such giving is safe, that it does not threaten the identity or the status of the giver, that it does not, ultimately, make helper and helped the same (19),” which demonstrates that benevolence at its root was never meant to create equality. In the twentieth century the term went through a reinterpretation: benevolence was now “[...] associated with inauthenticity, manipulateness, and laziness; [...] (Ryan 18).” Amongst those criticizing white benevolence were many African Americans who, on the one hand, were grateful for the aid they received but also stated that “[...] justice would better serve [B]lack people’s interests than charity,” and that “[...] benevolence without justice is hypocrisy (Ryan 164).” The idea of combining benevolence and social justice will be revisited and discussed in chapter four. Ryan comes to the conclusion that “at first glance, benevolence now seems to be out of style,” as “apart from [...] narrow usages, *benevolence* has come to signify for many a misguided and coercive approach to social activism, one that reifies hierarchies and forestalls fundamental change (Ryan 187).” *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of*

*Benevolence* by Susan M. Ryan is an interdisciplinary work, focusing on literary history, sociology, ethnography, and social justice. It provides very detailed insights into antebellum America's culture of benevolence and is therefore a good starting point when trying to understand the concept of benevolence. However, Ryan's work refers to the American context only, excluding accounts of benevolence in other parts of the world. Considering Europe's unique historical, geographical, and political circumstances when it comes to immigration matters including refugee movements and voluntary work related to them one therefore has to keep in mind that the account of benevolence Ryan provides does not necessarily reflect the development of benevolence in the context this thesis refers to. Fatima El-Tayeb states that "debates about the state of Europe emphasize that essential to the success of the continental union [...] is a sense of a transnational European identity, based on common values, rooted in a common past, distinguishing the continent from the rest of the world and connecting nations with vastly different cultures," and that "[...] the attempt to invest this European identity with meaning heavily relies on the trope of the Other, the non-European, in order to foster internal bonds (El-Tayeb 2)." This narrative of 'the Other' and the idea of an endangered homeland related to it will be referred to again in the short story.

Although there certainly are parallels between the European and American societies, concerning for example the predominantly white population, the existence of white supremacy, and consequently racism, assuming that Ryan's descriptions could be applied to the European context would be a mistake. For example, as stated above, America's culture of benevolence was interrelated with its history of slavery and abolitionism, which did not exist in the same form in Europe.

Nikolitsa Grigoropoulou's *The 'Malevolent' Benevolence: What Happens to Perceived Immigrant Threat when Value Priorities collide?*, for example, differentiates between benevolence as "[...] value priority or the well-being of the members of the in-group [which] is tied to more readily available 'us' vs. 'them' boundaries, ethnocentrism, and outgroup



prejudice, whilst universalism points toward the notion of a ‘human identity’ that trumps intergroup distinctions and bias (132).” According to this definition, benevolence “[...] tends to increase perceptions of immigrant threat (139).” Despite the fact that Grigoropoulou’s article does not provide a thorough historic perspective on benevolence in the European context as Ryan does for the American context, her work is of relevance for this research project. It not only constitutes an interdisciplinary approach towards benevolence from a sociological and inequality and social policy point of view, but also focuses on the European context and recent developments concerning immigration into European countries.

Chris Chapman’s and A.J. Withers’s *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working* adds another vital layer to the explanation of what benevolence is. Chapman and Withers distinguish “[...] between social work as any act of help or care in the social realm and organized professional social work by which [they] mean paid work done by people who have obtained degrees in social work (13).” While the first one of the two is seen as mostly harmless, so-called professional social work is described as a “vehicle of oppression (Chapman and Withers 14)” that perpetuates colonialism, racism, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchalization (Chapman and Withers 12). They come to the conclusion that “[...] wherever professional social work has gained prominence, it has been at the expense of local strategies of caring, sharing, and otherwise social working (Chapman and Withers 243),” an interesting observation that I will refer to again in chapter four. They finally state: “[...] we distinguished between the everyday ubiquity of interventions into the social world, generally animated by some version of a recognition of shared humanity, as contrasted with a very specific ethic for relating and intervening, which we’ve characterized as animated by the ethic of the healing power of domination and imagined moral superiority (Chapman and Withers 244).” Chapman and Withers place a strong focus on the contemporary situation and the perpetuation of white supremacy and violence within social work today. The

discussion of this systemic aspect renders *A Violent History of Benevolence* a highly relevant source for this research project.

I have exemplified by means of these explanations that defining the term ‘benevolence’ is rather complex as it involves multiple historical, social and gendered layers, it is often associated with performativity and therefore dishonesty, and distinctions between local acts of help and organized, professional social work need to be taken into consideration. The term is very ethically charged, especially in a context where acts of benevolence are carried out by white people who claim or claimed to provide aid to Black people. It is often described as opposed to concepts that are deemed less problematic and more effective, such as ‘justice,’ ‘activism,’ or ‘universalism.’ Ryan notes that “[...] current usage replaces *benevolence* with terms now deemed more congenial – humanitarianism, compassion, social responsibility (188).”

About humanitarianism, a term closely related to benevolence, Ryan writes that it developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of an “[...] emerging culture of sensibility (15).” In *Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy* Polly Palister-Wilkins argues that, just like benevolence, humanitarianism “[...] fails to address underlying structures (98),” which makes it equally performative and ineffective when it comes to challenging the existing social order. Pallister-Wilkins argues that “[...] humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy, defined as ‘a logic of social organisation that produces regimented, institutionalised, and militarised conceptions of hierarchised ‘human’ difference,” and that “[...] [it] plays a historical and contemporary role in the creation and consolidation of what W.E.B. Du Bois ([1920] 1999) termed ‘whiteness’ (98).” She comes to the conclusion that “[...] humanitarianism as it has developed over time allows white supremacy to go unchallenged *but* also to thrive (Pallister-Wilkins 98).” Her article is highly relevant for this research project as it is critical not only of humanitarianism itself but also of postcolonial critiques of humanitarianism.

Similarly, Nisha Toomey, whose article *Humanitarians of Tinder – Constructing Whiteness and Consuming the Other* deals with displays of humanitarian acts on dating apps, points out:

“Information and deeper analysis seem commonly absent from the conversation; accountability is not necessarily a prerequisite for participation in these projects. The ambiguity of a common understanding of what voluntourism is, and the way that ambiguity works through a framework of purported white innocence, signals that voluntourism as a phenomenon simultaneously upholds and is upheld by global white supremacy (155).”

Shenila Khoja-Moolji writes in her article *Death by benevolence: third world girls and the contemporary politics of humanitarianism* that “[...] humanitarianism re-inscribes the privileges and power of Whiteness through references to universality and normativity (69).” She continues by explaining that “[...] one of the reasons that it has been hard to name and pin down the racial logics of humanitarianism is its careful elision of ‘race’ from its official discourse (Khoja-Moolji 69).” Furthermore she argues that “[...] as humanitarianism extends care towards particular bodies it also advances a specific, often essentialised, articulation of those bodies as victims (69).” Her article, which was published in *Feminist Theory*, highlights not only the racial component of humanitarianism but also closely examines the effects it has on non-white girls and third world girls, arguing that “it is widely believed that girls in the global South are unable to partake in modernity’s offerings, which include not only consumption products (such as sanitary pads and tampons), but also enlightened ideas and values (which, in the quote above, are linked to views about women’s menstruation and sexuality). This discursive construction of an ‘Other out there’ who is ‘not like us’ traffics in

assumptions about the third world being in misstep with modernity,” and that “in anchoring the colonial gaze on the conditions of these girls, the Western subject can view herself as fully modern and enlightened (Khoja-Moolji 71).” This feminist perspective is often missing in literature on humanitarianism, voluntary work, and their relation to white supremacy, making *Death by benevolence: third world girls and the contemporary politics of humanitarianism* a critical resource for this thesis. Furthermore Khoja-Moolji makes obvious why humanitarianism is closely tied to white saviorism: by re-enforcing the narrative of certain bodies as victims, humanitarianism invites others to position themselves as saviors.

The term ‘white saviorism’ was coined by Teju Cole in tweets included in his article *The White Savior Industrial Complex* which was published in *The Atlantic*. Cole provided a simple yet very impactful definition of the so called ‘white savior industrial complex.’ He explains that “[t]he White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” The article was quoted many times and citations such as “This world exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs, of white people and Oprah” or “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening (“Cole”)” have sparked conversations and controversy about volunteering and whiteness in North America and globally. According to Cole one significant problem is what he calls policed or neutered language which includes avoiding to call people out as misogynist, homophobic, or – in this case – racist in order to not offend anyone. Cole explains: “One cumulative effect of this policed language is that when someone dares to point out something as obvious as white privilege, it is seen as unduly provocative.” And indeed, Cole’s tweets seemed to have offended a large number of people, who, as a result, resorted to calling him racist. Furthermore Cole assigns a reason for the popularity of Africa amongst the so called ‘white saviors’: “[Africa] is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: A nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs

satisfied.” Teju Cole’s *The White Savior Industrial Complex* can be regarded as a main catalyst concerning the conversation around white saviorism.

Chunhua Yu, who wrote the article *Rising Scholar: An Examination of the Institutionally Oppressive White Savior Complex in Uganda Through Western Documentaries* defines the white savior industrial complex as “[...] an institutional social relation that entails self-serving, condescending, and often institutionalized actions by ‘privileged’ people that aim to provide help to the underprivileged, including those from less powerful nations and people of color in developing nations (1).” He adds that “at an individual level, the white savior complex is a mentality that encourages individuals to act as saviors of those incapable of self-autonomy (Yu 1),” and that “instead of promoting friendly horizontal connections based on human equality, the white savior complex perpetuates oppression because of its implications of inequality and a one-sided dominance (Yu 9).” Yu’s article was published in the *International Social Science Review* and centers the example of American documentaries about Uganda (25). Yu’s perspective is of relevance for this research project as he takes the white savior complex’s institutional and oppressive nature into consideration. Furthermore Yu makes proposals for changing the narrative and counteracting oppression, by “[...] promoting friendly horizontal connections based on human equality (9)” or through “[...] the acknowledgment of privilege, awareness-raising, and humility [...] (22).”

Julio Cammarota establishes a distinction between white saviors and white allies in his article *Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education*. He argues that “the existence of white saviors may help some people of color but it will not result in long-term systematic change. White allies can contribute to systematic change by abdicating both privileges and superior status while cultivating leadership within communities of color and relations of mutuality and respect (245).” Cammarota states that “the focus on ‘saving’ instead of ‘transforming’ fails to address oppressive structures and thus the privileges that maintain white supremacy (244).” Cammarota approaches the white savior complex from

an intersectional point of view, combining educational studies and pedagogy with cultural studies. His article adds an important perspective to Cole's and Yu's works by contrasting the term 'white savior' with 'white ally.' Just like Yu, Cammarota provides suggestions for reframing the white savior narrative into a more productive form of activism that may lead to systemic change. Cammarota's observations furthermore point to a strong link between white saviorism and white supremacy and suggest that the two presuppose each other.

In *Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white benevolence* Polly Pallister-Wilkins quotes Rodriguez' *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino* (2009) who explains that "[...] humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy, defined as 'a logic of social organisation that produces regimented, institutionalised, and militarised conceptions of hierarchised 'human' difference' (98)."

The definition of white supremacy used in this thesis stems from David Gillborn's article *Rethinking White Supremacy – Who counts in 'WhiteWorld.'* According to Gillborn "[...] white supremacy is conceived as a comprehensive condition whereby the interests and perceptions of white subjects are continually placed centre stage and assumed as 'normal' (318)." Gillborn is quoted by Mary E. Earick in her article *We are not social justice equals: the need for white scholars to understand their whiteness*, which critically engages with whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy. About white allyship Earick says: "Whites who strive to be allies often make the mistake of being a theoretical ally reaffirming [w]hite supremacy as they reduce race and racism to an exercise in discourse (807)," an observation that adds to Julio Cammarota's above mentioned article. When picking up on the concept of white allyship, Earick also brings the term 'traitor' into play: "An antiracist [w]hite activist is engaging in interrogating the reality of their race, facing the impact of power and privilege on society and ultimately working to expose that reality in and through their daily actions. As a traitor is one who betrays society and an ally works to merge a society, an antiracist [w]hite activist is an antiracist [w]hite ally not traitor (816)," providing further examples for productive activism

white people might engage in. Earick's article is a valuable secondary source for this research project as she employs a critical whiteness theory approach which will be further discussed in chapter 2.3 *Methodology and Positionality*.

Additionally, bell hooks' *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women Author(s)* provides another interesting and – with regards to the short story – very relevant standpoint on white supremacy. Hooks argues that “when white women attack white supremacy they are simultaneously participating in the struggle to end sexist oppression (hooks 132).” This quote alludes to an intersection of racism or white supremacy and sexism or patriarchal structures. Since the short story also addresses both of these forms of oppression hook's perspective will be incorporated into the analysis in chapter four.

White supremacy, the belief that whiteness and white subjects are to be seen as the default, enables another closely related condition called white privilege. Mary E. Earick points out that white privilege is to be understood as made possible by the condition of white supremacy instead of being an “individual passive experience (802-803).”

Paul R. Carr explains the conditions that enable and perpetuate white privilege in his article *Whiteness and White Privilege: Problematizing Race and Racism in a 'Color-blind' World and in Education* as follows: “In sum, [w]hiteness involves power; looking beyond simplistic manifestations of racism to further understand the holistic and systemic nature of lived experience. It is not purely focused on [w]hite people, but, rather, on the society, which condones, facilitates and administers formulations of [w]hite racial superiority, power and privilege (875).” He comes to the conclusion that “the key to discussions of [w]hiteness and [w]hite privilege is acknowledging discomfort, and, importantly, not allowing it to deter from the importance and necessity of engaging in such work. Difficult questions require difficult and critical discussions, and this process is fundamental to facilitating change and social justice (885).” Carr approaches whiteness and white privilege from a critical social justice standpoint and takes into consideration a global framework, including migration to Europe. *Whiteness and*

*White Privilege: Problematizing Race and Racism in a 'Color-blind' World and in Education* is therefore a very relevant and useful secondary source for this research project. Carr's globally oriented approach will be further discussed in the analysis in chapter four.

Chunhua Yu offers a solution to counteracting white privilege by raising awareness and exerting humility and respect:

“While silence and denial of privilege as well as a superiority complex lead to the reinforcement of oppression, the acknowledgment of privilege, awareness-raising, and humility minimize the psychological harms. While imposed stereotypes and misunderstanding force innocent victims into a place of oppression, respect and the restoration of the dignity of a social group can minimize bias and encourage empathy across different social groups (22).“

He exemplifies the connection between white privilege, the white savior complex, and whiteness as follows: “[...] ‘whiteness’ is not an accusation of all white people who offer help to nonwhites, and nonwhites from developed nations can also partake in the white savior complex. The use of ‘white’ in the naming and discussion of the white savior complex alludes to white privilege, an important aspect of the white savior complex (2).” Yu’s example points to the systemic aspect of whiteness and how it upholds white supremacy and white privilege and therefore enables white saviorism to go unchallenged.

Polly Pallister-Wilkins finally establishes a connection between humanitarianism and whiteness: “[...] through seeking to relieve the worst excesses of racist violence, humanitarianism did not challenge whiteness but secured it using a range of controls that worked through logics of care helping to soothe the troubled souls of white folk concerned with



both the well-being of Black and Indigenous populations and their own security at the top of racial hierarchies (101).”

These explanations exemplify that the key terms benevolence, humanitarianism, white saviorism, white supremacy, white privilege, and whiteness function in dependence on one another. They should therefore not be regarded in isolation but rather as parts of a complex system of historical and social circumstances that are interdependent and enable one another. While all of them are usually very negatively connotated, volunteering is also associated with positive concepts such as solidarity, empathy, care, and friendship.

The definition of solidarity used in this thesis stems from Kerri Woods’ *Refugee’s Stories: Empathy, Agency, Solidarity*. Woods asserts that “[...] solidarity is related to empathy, and stands in opposition to xenophobia and fear,” and that it is “[...] a relation between members of a community of some kind (2).” In other words: “To be in solidarity with another person or group of persons is not simply to provide what is due to them, it is to care about what happens to them to at least some minimal degree, or to care about shared goals (Woods 3).” Woods introduces various kinds of solidarity of which political solidarity is the most relevant when talking about solidarity with refugees. According to Woods “political solidarity involves the efforts and sacrifices of individuals who commit to a cause with those who suffer,” whereby “[...] the aim is not simply to alleviate need and suffering [...], nor to secure collective benefits (as in trade unions), but to ‘challenge the social structure’ causing injustice to specific others (3).” Woods’ article was published in the *Journal of Social Philosophy*. It takes into consideration European countries as receiving states of people who seek refuge.

As stated above, solidarity is related to empathy, to be more precise: empathy can function as a motivating experience that will eventually result in solidarity (Woods 5). In *‘Not in my name’: Empathy and intimacy in volunteer refugee hosting* Yasmin Gunaratnam defines empathy “[...] as a thoroughly social relation [...]" and states that it “[...] often appears as the desire to feel the pain of the other, as becoming of what one is not (709).” The concept of

empathy is of particular interest in conversations around voluntary work as “[it] has been identified as a central motivating emotion for those volunteering in migrant solidarity activism [...] (Gunaratnam 709).” However, she then points out that empathy can possibly also have quite the opposite effect: “[...] empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome (Gunaratnam 709).” Yasmin Gunaratnam engages with hospitality and empathy in voluntary work with refugees in the United Kingdom from a sociological and feminist perspective and furthermore relates them to the concept of ‘intimate citizenship.’ According to Gunaratnam intimate citizenship “[...] identifies and investigates discursive and moral relays between the personal and the public [...],” which means that “[...] personal practices and moral dilemmas – such as how to live with difference, how to understand and respect others – have become public concerns (708).”

In order to explain how the idea of friendships relates to these concepts and to volunteering with refugees Joachim C. Häberlen’s *Making Friends: Refugees and Volunteers in Germany* will be consulted. He argues that “by building friendships with refugees, activists are engaged in something that is deeply political (Häberlen 56).” According to Häberlen, friendships between volunteers and refugees go beyond personal relations, as “by choosing to depict relationships with refugees as friendships, many volunteers quite consciously refuse to regard themselves as ‘helpers’ and others as refugees in need of help (60),” thus disrupting common white saviorist narratives. Nevertheless, Häberlen also recognizes that not everyone might agree with this definition of ‘friendship,’ as it lacks “[...] a certain level of intimacy and equality that does not exist given the structurally unequal situation Germans and refugees face (Häberlen 60).” He still comes to the conclusion that “[...] even if relations between German ‘volunteers’ and refugees are not exactly typical friendships, calling refugees ‘friends’ is a powerful statement (60-61).” *Making Friends: Refugees and Volunteers in Germany* was published in *German Politics and Society* and incorporates the historical, political, and social circumstances of what is commonly referred to as the ‘refugee crisis’ in Germany. Being one

of the few accounts of white German people volunteering with refugees in Germany, Häberlen's work represents a significant secondary source for the analysis of the kind of voluntary work described in the short story as his work is not based on research in the traditional Western sense but on a form of participation observation which naturally evolved while Häberlen was involved in voluntary work with refugees (57).

Summarizing the literature reviews incorporated in this chapter it can be said that the secondary sources which constitute the theoretical framework of this thesis are informed by a wide range of disciplines and employ a variety of methodological approaches. Most of them feature links to social justice or sociology, including, amongst others, social philosophy. Furthermore sources from the fields of literary history, ethnography, and educational studies, pedagogy, and political science found their way into this thesis, constituting an intersectional base which covers a wide range of academic disciplines. Applying such an intersectional approach is vital for this research project as the short story featured in this thesis broaches a variety of social and political themes such as displacement, volunteering, whiteness, racism in Europe, and sexism. Some of the methodological approaches employed in these resources are critical whiteness theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory. They will be further discussed in chapter 2.3 *Methodology and Positionality*.

## **2.2 Central Research Question and Relevance**

The central research question is: How does voluntary work conducted by white Germans and African refugees in Germany, reinforce or challenge concepts such as benevolence, white saviorism, but also empathy and solidarity? And how could benevolence and humanitarianism – both of which are rather negatively connotated in conversations around volunteering – be channeled into tools that could help dismantle white supremacy? These

research questions build on the key concepts and secondary literature introduced in the previous chapter.

The first question is related to Chapman's and Withers' *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working*, which illustrates how organized, professional social work is a vehicle of colonialism, racism, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchilization (12), while "[...] local strategies of caring, sharing, and otherwise social working [...] (243)" are seen as mostly harmless and as "[...] some version of a recognition of shared humanity (244)." These statements will be related to the short story in chapter four. Additionally, the first question refers to the fact that "[...] what's in our hearts and minds doesn't absolve us of responsibility for the impact of what we do (Chapman and Withers 241)," which exemplifies that even with the best intentions in mind white volunteers risk falling into the white saviorism trap and thus end up perpetuating white supremacy without meaning to do so. Lastly, the first question is also related to Kerri Woods' aforementioned definition of solidarity in a political context: "political solidarity involves the efforts and sacrifices of individuals who commit to a cause with those who suffer," whereby "[...] the aim is not simply to alleviate need and suffering [...], nor to secure collective benefits (as in trade unions), but to 'challenge the social structure' causing injustice to specific others (3)," and to Joachim Häberlen's statement: "by choosing to depict relationships with refugees as friendships, many volunteers quite consciously refuse to regard themselves as 'helpers' and others as refugees in need of help (60)."

The second question is partly informed by Susan M. Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*. When talking about African Americans who opposed white benevolence in Antebellum America, who stated that "[...] justice would better serve [B]lack people's interests than charity," and that "[...] benevolence without justice is hypocrisy (164)," Ryan introduces the example of fugitive slave, activist, and author William Wells Brown. In the 1850s, Wells apparently "[...] lost faith in benevolence

and invested instead in violent resistance,” which raises the question: Why do benevolence and violent resistance constitute two separate entities? And: could they be combined into a new form of activism that is not afraid of calling out hypocrisy and racism disguised as charity? Ryan continues by explaining that “[...] some of [Wells’] writings allow for the joining of benevolence and violence, against the neat distinction drawn above (165),” which suggests that the merging of benevolence and violent resistance is possible. And indeed, Ryan comes to the conclusion that “[...] benevolence as we know it might profit from a reform which will eventually allow us to utilize it in a way that can help dismantle white supremacy (171).” The second question is furthermore inspired by Polly Pallister-Wilkins’ *Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy*, in which she poses two fundamental questions when talking about the potential of reframing humanitarianism: “[...] does humanitarianism need or deserve to be saved?” and: “[...] what opportunities are there for an international practice of care that does not rely on or reproduce racial hierarchies [...] (103)?” While the answer to Pallister-Wilkins’ first question might be very individual as it depends on one’s definition of humanitarianism and personal experience with volunteering, the second question alludes to a scope of improvement within the voluntary work sector and suggests that humanitarianism and social justice activism do not have to be mutually exclusive.

In the following I will elaborate on why this research project is relevant. First of all, Campus Asyl, the association I volunteered with, merits a closer look. In a recent interview on the show *Heim süß Heim* [translation: home sweet home] which was broadcast on the radio station ‘ghost town radio’ one of Campus Asyl’s chairpersons Dennis Forster pointed out some of the initiative’s main virtues and goals. In the past years, Campus Asyl, despite not receiving any structural state funding, has become an important – if not the most important – point of contact concerning integration matters in Regensburg (“Heim süß Heim”). Their main goals are: continuous development, participation of migrants in their projects and as chairpersons, being self-critical concerning the perpetuation of white privilege, and promoting emancipatory

projects such as language classes specifically for women and the two projects *women together* and *mother schools* (“Heim süß Heim”). What is particularly interesting about Campus Asyl is their focus not only on integration and anti-racism but also on feminism and the intersection of different forms of discrimination. Furthermore, Forster pointed out that Campus Asyl refrains from calling only the white, German people ‘volunteers’ but that all members of their projects including refugees are seen as volunteers (“Heim süß Heim”), which takes up Häberlen’s idea of volunteers choosing to form friendships with refugees and deliberately referring to refugees as friends, which according to Häberlen is “[...] deeply political (56).” To my knowledge, no scientific research from a social justice standpoint has been conducted on Campus Asyl to date. My hope is that his research project will not only shed a light on the potential such associations offer but also directly benefit Campus Asyl and their future development.

Secondly, as I am mentioning in the story, not many German people have the opportunity to visit an asylum seekers’ home as these spaces are shielded from the public. Consent to enter this space is only given for just causes, one of which is voluntary work. Since I had the chance to have had access to such a space I want to use this opportunity to give insights into it, which I believe is most effective in the form of a story. Woods mentions that “[...] by attending to the stories of others, people can be moved to think more deeply about these experiences. By reflecting on specific stories of one refugee, people may be moved to think more generally about the situation of others in need of asylum. Empathy with particular stories can motivate a generalisable moral reflection (5).” Although my account can not replace stories told by refugees, which was never the intention behind the short story, I believe that it can still raise awareness and prompt people to think about the situation of asylum seekers in Germany.

Additionally, I believe that the German media’s representation of refugees is too one-sided and rarely mentions individuals, which gives the impression that refugees are a homogenous group instead of individual people with very different stories, coming from a variety of different countries, having different cultural and religious backgrounds, and a

multitude of reasons for coming to Germany. Woods states that “[w]hile refugees at least share a defined legal status, and may share some of the same experiences, refugees and asylum seekers have diverse cultural, religious and political affinities; there is no reason to assume homogeneity within refugee populations (2).“ Consequently, my hope is that *Etenesh* can raise awareness of the fact that it is just one of many stories to be told and that it can therefore contribute to larger discussions around volunteering, whiteness, white privilege, racism, friendship, solidarity, and the way refugees are regarded in European societies.

### **2.3 Methodology and Positionality**

In an attempt to answer these research questions they will be addressed from a decolonial and feminist perspective. I will employ postcolonial theory, critical whiteness theory, a feminist standpoint theory approach, and critical discourse analysis. Ranjan Banyopadhyay’s and Vrushali Patil’s article *‘The white woman’s burden’ – the racialized, gendered politics of volunteer tourism* describes postcolonialism as:

“[...] a powerful critique of the legacies of formal colonialism and the development project and an increasingly important challenge to dominant ways of apprehending North–South relations. Within this broader arena, postcolonial feminism in particular highlights the gender and sexual dimensions of post/colonial processes and the racialized, neo-colonial dimensions of Northern-based gender identities (647).”

Postcolonialism critiques dominant discourses which perpetuate simplistic world views by reproducing stereotypes and simplistic, racist narratives. Bandyopadhyay and Patil state that “Postcolonial critiques challenge the experiences of speaking and writing by which

dominant discourses come into being. For example, terms such as ‘underdeveloped,’ ‘developing,’ and ‘the Third World’ homogenize peoples and countries and other them in relation to the ‘developed’ world (646).” This research projects therefore aims at avoiding such generalizations and instead features designations that promote equality. Bandyopadhyay and Patil add that “Robert Young (2003) puts it succinctly, ‘postcolonial theory disturbs the order of the world. It threatens privilege and power, [and it] refuses to acknowledge the superiority of the Western cultures.’ (646).” They advocate for a holistic approach to analysing voluntary work by explaining: “[...] the meanings, practices, and policies of volunteer tourism development must be understood within broader histories of colonial thought (654).”

Genine Hook defines Critical whiteness theory (CWS hereafter) in *Towards a Decolonising Pedagogy: Understanding Australian Indigenous Studies through Critical Whiteness Theory and Film Pedagogy* as follows: “Critical whiteness theory provides a framework to explore three themes, the invisibility of whiteness, the reachability of whiteness and the cultural interface. Critical whiteness theory identifies the way in which non-Indigenous people centralise and normalise whiteness within colonised societies, and particularly considers how white privilege is maintained (110).” Even though this explanation refers to a different geographical context than this research project, namely settler colonies, the three themes Hook identifies as well as the centralization and normalization of whiteness can as well be found in the European context, making this definition of CWT relevant for this thesis. Furthermore, Cheryl E. Matias’ and Janiece Mackey’s *Breakin’ Down Whiteness in Antiracist Teaching: Introducing Critical Whiteness Pedagogy* will be consulted. Matias and Mackey explain that “[...] critical whiteness studies uses a transdisciplinary approach to investigate the phenomenon of whiteness, how it is manifested, exerted, defined, recycled, transmitted, and maintained, and how it ultimately impacts the state of race relations (34).” In short: “Critical whiteness theory provides a framework to deconstruct how whites accumulate racial privilege (Matias and Mackey 34).” Finally, I will, again, draw on Mary E. Earick’s *We are not social justice equals:*



*the need for white scholars to understand their whiteness.* Earick quotes Leonardo (2004) stating that “Critical White Studies (CWS) acknowledges the need to study [w]hite privilege but not as an individual passive experience but one made possible by the ‘condition of [w]hite supremacy’ benefiting all who are identified as [w]hite in the U.S. and globally (802-803).” This statement, once again, reflects the interdependence of the critical key concepts I have explained earlier.

My approach to feminist standpoint theory is based on Jill McCorkel’s and Kristen Myers’ *What Difference Does Difference Make? Position and Privilege in the Field*. McCorkel and Myers state: “Feminist standpoint theorists contend that the researcher’s positionality affects all aspects of the research process—from the articulation of a research question to the analysis and presentation of the data,” (199) and that it is crucial for researchers to “[...] explicat[e] how their data, analyses, and conclusions were shaped by their positionality“ (200). They furthermore claim that “standpoint epistemology requires that the researcher put her taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes on the table for dissection“ and that “it requires the researcher to consider how she reproduces her own privilege through the analyses she produces (McCorkel and Myers 205).” I will refer to these demands specifically when taking into consideration my own positionality as a white researcher.

Donna Haraway’s *The Persistence of Vision* provides another perspective on situated knowledges with reference to feminist standpoint theory. Haraway argues that “there is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions (291)” and adds that

“situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and

transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions— of views from somewhere (292).“

Finally, I will refer to Thomas N. Huckin’s *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Huckin defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as “a highly context-sensitive, democratic approach which takes an ethical stance on social issues with the aim of improving society (87).” Hence, a central criterion of CDA is the acknowledgement “[...] that authentic texts are produced and read (or heard) not in isolation but in some real-world context with all of its complexity,” which means taking into consideration “[...] the most relevant textual and contextual factors, including historical ones, that contribute to the production and interpretation of a given text (Huckin 87).“ Huckin explains that CDA “[...] tries to unite at least three different levels of analysis: the text; the discursive practices (that is, the processes of writing/speaking and reading/hearing) that create and interpret that text; and the larger social context that bears upon it” and demonstrates “[...] how these levels are all interrelated (87).“ This standpoint perfectly reflects my interdisciplinary approach and the interconnectedness of the concepts I plan on analyzing. Since it is particularly important to situate the short story within a larger social and cultural context, CDA is best suited for this research project as it includes “[...] not only the immediate environment in which a text is produced and interpreted but also the larger societal context including its relevant cultural, political, social, and other facets (Huckin 87).”

As a white, German woman I am conducting this research from both, a perspective of an insider, considering that I was directly involved in the volunteering program, and an outsider, considering the facts that I am white and I do not have a migration background myself, which I have to stay aware of throughout the entire research and writing process. To ensure this awareness I will refer to Lina Sunseri’s spiral method which “rather than following a neat,

conventional linear progressive direction in the research, [reflects] a spiral process. A spiral method is characterised by its continuously revisiting, re-examining, and refining of ideas and theoretical assumption, [...]” (103). Implementing this method into my research will serve as a reminder to constantly question my own positionality as well as my approach to analysing the concepts I have discussed earlier.

### 3. Chapter Three: *Etenesh*

Every day on my way to and from work I pass by the former military casern which has been repurposed into a refugee camp. It is a large greyish building with lots of windows. Shoes and groceries are spread out on the windowsills, thick curtains protect the little privacy its inhabitants have. Behind the casern there is an open court with multiple trailers. Whenever the weather is good – which it is not very often in Germany – I see children playing outside. They race around on their little bikes or chase each other, they laugh, they look happy. Women hang laundry on the clotheslines and young men play football while guards patrol the premises that are surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. I try to remind myself that these safety measures serve to protect the people who live here, yet it is impossible to overlook the resemblance to a prison. Every time I drive by the refugee camp I remember the times I spent there, not as an inhabitant but as a visitor. Not many people know about my history with this place. I never talked much about it.

It began in November 2018, when I received a mail through a university newsletter which said that multiple projects by Campus Asyl, an initiative founded by students of the University of Regensburg that seeks to support asylum seekers in Regensburg, were looking for volunteers. One of these projects was called *women's tea time*. Its objective was to offer women who had applied to be granted asylum seeker status in Germany a safe space to meet other women, ask questions, and receive advice on life in Germany. I was intrigued by this particular project for two reasons: I had just started studying Gender Studies and a project tailored specifically towards the needs of female refugees seemed like the perfect fit. And secondly, I knew the image the German media landscape paints of refugees who arrive here, namely as one big, homogenous group of young men who have carelessly left behind their families and potentially pose a threat to German women, was very flawed and far from accurate

and I wanted to get an idea of the reality of the people living in the asylum seekers' home in my neighborhood, hidden behind barbed wired fences and thick curtains.

According to Nadia Shehadeh's essay *Gefährlich* [translation: Dangerous], the image the German media convey of refugees was significantly influenced by the 2015/2016 New Year's evening's sexual assaults. That night, about 1000 young men, who reportedly all looked North African or Arab, assaulted, robbed, and raped young women near the central station in Cologne. This incident added fuel to the fire of anti-refugee propaganda. Shehadeh states that it resulted in the perpetration of the idea of sexualised violence being ethnicised instead of being treated as an integral problem of society as a whole, which renounces patriarchal structures and toxic masculinity.<sup>1</sup> And still, nobody ever seemed to mention female refugees, who were – and still are – suffering under the same patriarchal structures und male violence.

Since I had the privilege of not depending on a side job while being a student, I made the decision to dedicate some of my free time to this project. I sent a mail to a lady named Maria Morales who was listed as the supervisor of the *women's tea time*, telling her a bit about myself and asking whether I could join.

A few days later, on a cold, dark December evening, I found myself standing in front of a large gate with a turnstile made out of heavy iron bars. The asylum seekers' home was just a five-minute walk from my apartment and I had walked quickly because it was so cold. Even though it was already dark I could still see my breath under the street light's dull orange light. I had arrived too early and the security guards eyed me suspiciously as I waited for Maria to arrive. I did not dare to ask them whether I was allowed to enter. When Maria saw me standing in front of the gate from afar she waved and started walking faster towards me. She looked younger than I had expected. She turned out to be very kind and said she was happy I was joining the project. Maria was Mexican, she had been living in Germany for three years. She

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<sup>1</sup> Shehadeh, Nadia. "Gefährlich." [translation: Dangerous]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 122-129.

told me that she had completed her master's degree here, that she had married a German, and that she operated a small art gallery in the same village I grew up in. I immediately like her, her bright smile, and her accent.

She handed me a small laminated card which read "Campus Asyl – women's tea time – Xenia Wittmann" and explained to me that I had to show it to the security guards every time I arrive and told me to ask for the key to the blue trailer. After passing the turnstile and being greeted by the guards, who turned out to be really friendly, we proceeded to walk past a large grey trailer and finally arrived at the blue trailer which was located at the back of the premises. I unlocked and opened its heavy door. It contained a big round table with many chairs positioned around it, a sofa, children's toys, books, crafting supplies, and, of course, a kettle and tea cups. As I turned on the radiator I noticed a variety of brochures about contraception and sexualized violence spread out on a smaller table. I was not sure what to make of it. Before I could reflect on those brochures further Maria explained that we had to go and pick up the women now. I followed her back to the grey trailer whose front door read 'women only.' My heart was pounding. We knocked on the window beside the door and were let in immediately. Inside, it smelled like sautéed onions, tomatoes, fish, and something else I was not able to make out. Children's toys and buggies were spread out in the corridor and a little boy was racing around on his bike. He smiled when he saw us. Maria told me to knock on the doors which led to the women's rooms and to ask everyone whether they wanted to join us for a cup of tea and some German learning. At first, I felt inhibited as I did not want to invade anyone's privacy but the young women who opened their doors did not seem to feel annoyed by our presence in their temporary home. Some excused themselves saying they could not join us today because their children were sleeping, others grabbed their German books, put on jackets, and followed us.

Back inside the blue trailer Maria and I started cooking tea for everyone. I had bought vegan cookies, as Maria had asked me to do. When I arranged them on small plates she asked me for the receipts so that she could request the money from Campus Asyl and give it back to

me. “Oh, I did not keep the receipt,” I replied and quickly added: “But that’s alright, they weren’t expensive.” “No,” Maria responded. “I do not want you to spend any money on this project. It is already very generous of you to invest your time here.” I had not thought about it in that way and I did not really agree with her. Investing my time was the least I could do, but I did not object and told her I would keep the receipts from now on.

I had been a bit nervous about meeting the women as I had been unsure of what to expect. As they gathered around the large table I noticed that they were giggling and teasing each other. Since all I had known about them was that they were refugees I had somehow expected them to be more serious, maybe even sad, to be marked by the journey and everything they had had to endure on the way – although I did of course not know what exactly that was. Now that I got to meet them I was surprised about the joy and vitality they emanated. I felt a sense of relief.

When Maria introduced me to everyone I noticed Etenesh for the first time. She was tall and wore a thick, black down jacket that evening. Her face was full of freckles. Bracelets and chokers in green, red, and yellow covered her wrists and neck. I realized much later that those are the Ethiopian flag’s colors. When our eyes met she smiled at me in such a kind and affectionate way that I immediately sensed a connection between us. Etenesh was one of the few women who did not have children. She had come to Germany by herself via Italy and she was probably the most motivated to learn German. Her language skills improved rapidly over the next few weeks but every time I complimented her on her progress she downplayed it.

My first time at the *women’s tea time* passed by very quickly. After Maria had introduced me to everyone and had asked how they were doing today, we did some simple German exercises. Most of the women who had joined the *women’s tea time* that day were from Ethiopia and their first language was Amharic. Almost all of them already had German exercise books in their mother tongue and Maria offered books to those who were joining for the first time. I had never heard of Amharic before and seeing the letters that I did not understand at all

made me feel uneducated. Having some teaching experience, I knew the best way of teaching German would be to explain it in the learners' first language and I felt bad because I was not able to do that.

I was not even sure whether teaching the women German was the right thing to do. In her essay *Privilegien* [translation: privileges] Olga Grjasnowa talks about integration and how it is a form of injustice to believe that someone must integrate into German society as it sends the message that only European societal norms have a right to exist.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Maria and I knew – one of us from first-hand experience – that the obstacles the young women faced would become smaller if they understood and spoke some basic German. That supermarkets, doctor's offices, and legal help during the process of awaiting to be granted asylum seeker status would become much more accessible to them. Sometimes theory and reality diverge so widely.

The young women were all fluent in English which allowed us to communicate effortlessly. We discussed and repeated the numbers from one to twenty in German and then played some games. Some of them had brought their babies who were sleeping peacefully while we conversed and drank tea.

The sense of peace I felt when I came home that evening was something I had never experienced before. For the first time in my life I actually felt like I was doing something with a purpose. I was not sure whether what I was doing would actually made a difference but I had a feeling that this was the beginning of deep interhuman connections that would bring all of us joy and relief from our daily lives. I sat on my sofa and all I could do was smile and think about how grateful I was to have found this community.

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<sup>2</sup> Grjasnow, Olga. "Privilegien." [translation: Privileges]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 130-139.



Wednesday quickly became my favourite day of the week. There was nothing I looked forward to as much as to our *women's tea time* and I never missed a meeting. Maria complimented me for taking the project so seriously and regularly complained about other German volunteers who were unreliable or quickly lost interest. Sometimes she also commented on the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers, saying they were never on time and always took too long to arrive at the blue trailer. I knew that she often felt exhausted after our meetings, particularly when many women had brought their children. After they left she would exhale sharply and say: "Today was super exhausting, wasn't it?" and I would stand there, rather awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

I had previously worked as a German teacher in India where I had taught classes with up to sixty students. I was therefore used to large groups of children and I did not at all mind the few children who accompanied their mothers to the *women's tea time*. But I did not want to brag and so I remained silent when Maria lamented the noises the kids made. I secretly always hoped the women would bring their children as I loved playing and crafting with them or holding them while they ate cookies. I had never considered myself to be someone who was good with kids but I had discovered my affection for them while working at a school in India.

Over the course of the following months the *women's tea time* became a source of stability in my life. I was in the process of writing my bachelor's thesis at the time and spent many hours alone in the library, reading through countless books about gender depictions in the media, drinking maté, and staring at the other students who somehow all seemed to be much more concentrated than me. It was one of the most peaceful times of my life. I am not sure whether that was because I enjoyed the tranquility and solitude of the library, because I was so passionate about the topic I had chosen for my thesis, or because our weekly tea time meetings gave me a sense of purpose unrelated to my academic performance. It was probably the combination of all three, the fact that my life felt well-balanced and the satisfaction and peace that came with it.

It did not take long until Etenesh asked for my number and suggested that we could hang out outside of our regular meetings. I hesitated, not because I did not want to, but because I wondered: How much contact is too much? What would the others think if I met her outside of our meetings? And most importantly: Will I hurt Etenesh by forming a close friendship with her knowing that she might not get to stay in this country? I found myself in a moral dilemma. Mila, a close friend of mine, who had recently joined the *women's tea time* after I had told her about it, did not see a problem with hanging out with Etenesh. One evening, when Mila, a friend of ours, and I went to a bar, she suggested asking Etenesh whether she wanted to join us. I hesitated but knowing that she would be very happy to hang out with us I finally sent her a text. We all ended up having a good time.

That night I walked Etenesh home, as the asylum seekers' home was close to where I lived and I wanted to make sure she got home safe. On the way she told me that she had left her family when she was seventeen to go to Italy by herself. She had spent a while there before moving to Malta for two years where she worked as a chef and eventually came back to Italy. Finally, she said: "But I had to leave Italy, because, you know, I am in trouble with the mafia." I held my breath. Out of all the things she could have said this seemed to be the most unexpected. Etenesh was calm and humble, a gentle soul with a beautiful smile. I could not possibly wrap my head around the idea of her getting in trouble with the mafia. I did not dare to ask what kind of trouble that was but a multitude of horrible scenarios flashed before my inner eye. When we arrived at the old casern Etenesh took my hand: "Thank you so much for everything you do, I really appreciate it," she said. I was glad she felt supported and safe to tell me this part her story. In the end, I did not even need to know her whole story in order to make her feel a little less alone by simply being her friend.

Etenesh was always eager to join our weekly *women's tea time* meetings and to hang out as much as possible. When Maria announced that Campus Asyl was organizing an anti-racism event in the city centre and asked who would be willing to help and attend the event,

Etenesh and I were the first to accept. A few days later, on a cold, grey evening in March we met at the evangelical youth centre, whose facilities had been provided to Campus Asyl. It was located in a historic building in the old town but its kitchen was modern and spacious. Our plan was to bake cookies, decorate them as colorful as possible, and attach a little label which read “Regensburg stays colorful” to them. So that during the anti-racism event, which would take place the next day, members of Campus Asyl could hand them out to strangers. I liked the idea and I was happy I would get to meet some of the members of Campus Asyl’s other projects for the very first time.

When I walked into the kitchen I was taken aback for a second because I had not expected so many men to be there. Being a member of the *women’s tea time* had made me unaware of the fact that most of the other projects were male dominated. Even though everyone I met that evening seemed very kind, welcoming, and open-minded and we all had a good time baking and decorating the cookies together I thought to myself that I was happy and proud to be part of a project which exclusively focussed on women. That we had our little safe space of female solidarity which had enabled us to form such meaningful bonds. In *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* Author(s) bell hooks writes:

“Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> hooks, bell. *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* Author(s). *Feminist Review*, no. 23, Sage Publications Ltd., 1986, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394725>, pp. 125–38.

I think this quote captures what I felt that evening, especially for the women I had met through the *women's tea time*. There was a sense of solidarity despite our different backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, religions. We were working on a project together because we had a common goal, to take a stand against racism.

A day later we met again, this time at Neupfarrplatz, the busiest square in the old town. Various stalls and a stage had already been set up and a crowd of people had gathered around the venue. Some were waving banners and flags with slogans advocating for an end of racist discrimination, others seemed to be curious passerby. I was content to see everyone again but the atmosphere was much more gloomy than the evening before. I felt very emotional and I wondered whether the others felt the same way. As I stood in the crowd next to Etenesh I tried not to let it show but on the inside I felt like bursting into tears. I had never felt this way before, at least not without knowing why. We listened to the choir sing songs in German and Arabic and to Malik, a young man who had fled Syria a few years earlier and who was now one of the chairpersons of Campus Asyl. We cheered on the speakers who advocated for a shift in society's perception of migrants. Someone suggested that a racist street name in our city should be changed into 'May-Ayim Street.'

May Ayim was a Black German poet, educator, and activist who had received her diploma in pedagogy from the University of Regensburg. Her diploma thesis was published in Audre Lorde's well-known anthology *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*. Ayim was quoted stating: "I will still be African, even if you would like me to be German. And I will still be German, even if you do not like my Blackness."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, an elderly white man stepped on the stage. He wore a plaid shirt and beige trousers with large pockets, as if he had just come back from a hike. He took the microphone

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<sup>4</sup> Kelly, Natasha A. "May Ayim." *Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv* [translation: Digital German Women Archive], 2018, <https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/akteurinnen/may-ayim> . Accessed 05 April 2022.

and spoke out about an issue I had been thinking about a lot in the past months: “The sanitary situation in the asylum seekers’ homes is terrible!” he exclaimed and went on saying: “The people who live there neither have any privacy nor enough space! This is why we demand that the living conditions in the asylum seeker’s homes must be improved! This is inhumane!” The crowd cheered him on. When Etenesh gave me a questioning look I quickly translated his words to her. Her eyes widened and she stared at me with a sense of bewilderment: “Really?” she then asked. “But the asylum seeker’s home is ok for us, we are even grateful we get to live there!” she added and sounded very certain. I half-heartedly tried to convince her that the circumstances under which she and the others lived should actually be improved but gave up when she insisted that she appreciated it. I found the whole situation quite ironic. I wondered if Etenesh actually found the conditions in the asylum seekers’ home ok or if she simply did not want to seem ungrateful by complaining. And I wondered if the elderly white man had asked inhabitants of such a place about their evaluation of their temporary home or if he had just assumed that since he would not want to live in a place like this everyone else must be feeling the same way about it. Clearly, his intentions were good but maybe his reality and that of people demanding asylum in Germany just diverged widely.

After the rally Maria asked us if we wanted to hang out for a bit before going home. We decided on a nearby donut shop which had just opened a few weeks earlier and enjoyed the rest of the afternoon drinking hot chocolate, eating donuts, and talking. The atmosphere was much less emotionally laden now, or maybe it was just me who felt that way.

I was not sure what to think about this whole anti-racism day. It confused me. On the one hand, I was happy and grateful that people in my city put so much thought and effort into organizing this event. It moved me to know that there were people in my city who cared and who were not afraid to speak up against social injustices. And I was glad to be a part of it. Yet, on the other hand, I felt ridiculous. What difference was it really going to make whether I was

there or not? What difference was this whole event going to make in the long run? I did not have an answer. Maybe it was worth trying anyway.

In her essay *Zusammen* [translation: Together] Simone Dede Ayivi, a Black German author, activist, and ethnologist, explains that she often feels overwhelmed with the amount of activist work there is to be done and fears that she might not be doing enough. She describes her endeavors to save the world as megalomaniacal but also illustrates that they are her reason for getting up every morning, despite being scared and despite what she calls ‘Germany depression,’ a reaction to the cold, discrimination and racial profiling she faces. Ayivi illustrates that her activism and specifically demonstrations are a source of strength and empowerment for her as she gets to meet like-minded people and that seeing others who are motivated to solve problems motivates her as well. She suggests attributing less importance to the question of what the result of a specific demonstration might be and instead focusing on being able to see that there are others who fight for the same cause and who stand on the same side. Ayivi recommends that besides talking about the hate people who fight social injustices face, we should also talk about their successes and about love and solidarity. She comes to the conclusion that there is always something that should be done but also always someone to do it with.<sup>5</sup> Somehow this explanation comforts me.

As it got warmer outside the other German volunteers and I began talking about doing small excursions in lieu of the meetings in the blue trailer. Maria explained to us that the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers could not leave the city and had to return to the premise within a few hours, unless we got written permission for them to go on longer trips. Organising small outings would not be a problem though, as long as we kept all the receipts for our expenses so that Campus Asyl could cover the cost. We got excited about the idea of being able to leave the asylum seeker’s home as we knew the young women and their children would love

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<sup>5</sup>Ayivi, Simone Dede. “Zusammen” [translation: Together]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 182-194.

it. During our next meeting we proposed the idea of taking a bus to the city centre to eat ice cream together to them and they immediately agreed. Buying bus tickets for everyone, lifting all the strollers into the bus, and having everyone get off at the same bus stop was a challenge. When one of the babies started screaming on the bus I got scared one of the elderly white men might comment on it and possibly say something racist. Luckily all they did was roll their eyes.

In her essay *Sichtbar* [translation: visible] the Jewish-German author Sasha Marianna Salzmann talks about her experience of living in Germany and explains that she will never know what it feels like to be invisible and carefree.<sup>6</sup>

Simone Dede Ayivi discloses that in situations where she witnesses someone making a racist remark in public she usually feels a mixture of anger, stress, and shame when she does not speak up. But whenever someone stands up against this discrimination a sense of relief and confidence take over as she realizes that someone is on her side. She concludes that every-day racism is best combatted with every-day solidarity.<sup>7</sup> The way I was on alert during that bus ride because I knew that someone might say something racist but wanting to spare my friends the experience helped me understand what Salzmann and Ayivi meant in describing situations from their day-to-day life in Germany and gave me a glimpse of what being part of a minority might feel like in this country.

We were lucky this time and were able to enjoy a wonderful afternoon together. The memories we made were well worth the effort. We had chosen an ice cream parlour with plenty of vegan options and everyone got to choose as many flavours as they wanted. We then sat down by the river, enjoyed our ice cream and the sunshine, and took photos together. Hearing the children squeak with joy when they got to eat ice cream and seeing their mothers smile because their little ones were happy made me smile too.

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<sup>6</sup> Salzmann, Sasha Marianna. "Sichtbar." [translation: Visible]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 13-26.

<sup>7</sup> Ayivi, Simone Dede. "Zusammen" [translation: Together].

Since our little trip to the city centre to eat ice cream had been such a success we decided to keep this option in mind as an alternative for hot summer days, when the scorching heat made it impossible to stay in the metal container in the court. Since the gray trailer, in which most of the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers lived with their children, did not have air conditioning and was far from any source of shade, they were relieved whenever we suggested hanging out somewhere else than the asylum seekers' home.

For our second ice cream date we chose a different ice cream parlour than the first time. It was located near a big square with multiple fountains in front of the city theatre. In the summer hordes of tourists, students, and theatregoers hang out there to enjoy an ice cream or a cold beer and the old town's Mediterranean charm. It did not take long after we had sat down on the rim of one of the fountains that the children discovered the water and wanted to play with it. And so, without further ado, we took off our shoes, stepped into the fountain and played with the kids who could not stop laughing as they splashed around in the water. Within a few minutes they were soaking wet but luckily their clothes dried quickly in the summer heat. This free and easy kind of joy, the taste of raspberry ice cream, the sensation of stepping into the cold water on this hot day, made me feel alive and brought back memories from my own childhood.

A few weeks later an African festival took place in Regensburg and Maria suggested that we should all meet there. It was a beautiful, warm summer day and the sun was shining. Various artists were performing live concerts, small stalls sold handmade jewellery and decorations, and it smelled divine, a mixture of spices and fried food. I ate a big plate of yams, jollof rice, plantains, and spicy peanut sauce and bought a small, colorfully embroidered change purse that was made in Madagascar. I had decided to bring my mother and sister to the festival as I wanted them to finally meet all the amazing young women I had been spending so much time with over the course of the last months. When I introduced them to each other Etenesh put her arm around my shoulder, looked my mother in the eyes and said: "You raised your daughter



so well, we're so lucky to have her." I stood there awkwardly, not knowing whom to look at as she said that. I glanced at my mother who looked bewildered but nevertheless smiled and I wondered what was going through her mind. I was sure nobody had ever said anything like that to her before. Then I looked at Etenesh. She squeezed my hand and I had no idea what she meant to tell me in doing that.

As this beautiful and carefree summer slowly came to an end, another festival approached. It was a traditional Bavarian festival, similar to Oktoberfest in Munich but smaller and less touristic and overpriced. When my friend Mila first suggested visiting it as part of the *women's tea time* I was not exactly enthusiastic. Although I loved our small outings I was unsure whether introducing the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers to this particular aspect of our culture would be a good idea. I assumed they had not much experience with hordes of drunk teenagers chanting along to German Schlager music and feared we might be setting them up for a cultural shock. Mila interrupted my flow of overthinking by arguing that we could go in the early afternoon, before the crowds of party goers would take over the beer tents. To my surprise Maria agreed to the plan and left the organization of that afternoon to Mila and me. Since she was not going to join us she told us to keep the receipts of the rides we would be taking and the food we would eat and promised that Campus Asyl would reimburse all of it. Knowing how expensive it would be to visit and eat at this festival with multiple people I was taken aback and very grateful.

As the day approached I got more and more excited and curious about whether the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria would enjoy the Bavarian festival. On said day we took a bus to the city centre and then walked to the festival, which was located on an island in the river Danube. The walk took around fifteen minutes and as we got closer to the festival we saw more and more people wearing traditional Bavarian dresses and lederhosen, we heard the music, the beeping of the fun rides, and the carnival barkers from afar, and finally, when crossing the bridge, saw the Ferris wheel. We were all very excited. In between the booths selling lottery

tickets, toys, and sugary smelling candy, the haunted house, and the rollercoasters, we let the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers try cotton candy, chocolate coated fruits, pretzels, and roasted almonds. To Mila's and my surprise they were so enthusiastic that they wanted to ride almost all of the fun rides. I stood in awe in front of the wildest out of all of them – a gigantic swing pendulum with a disk with seats at its end that flipped over in a dizzy height – as Hanna, Desta, and Etenesh fearlessly climbed onto it. I had been considering myself way too old for these sorts of things for years and could not believe what I was witnessing. Meanwhile, the women seemed to be having the time of their lives, they laughed throughout the entire ride, and upon descending from it already discussed what they wanted to ride next. I was genuinely happy for and with them. Although I was used to them being in a good mood, this was certainly the happiest I had ever seen them. At the end of this beautiful afternoon we all rode the Ferris wheel together, admiring our beautiful city from above, and spinning the gondolas around. Before going home we asked someone to take a photo of us all together. It shows us standing in front of the Ferris wheel, smiling and hugging each other.

On one of the last hot days of that summer – I had not seen Etenesh in a while – I went into the grey trailer to ask who wanted to join us for some ice cream in the city center. Etenesh opened the door to her small room that she shared with another lady and her baby. She said that she would not be able to join as she had a cold but that she wanted to give me something as she would be deported the next day. My heart sank when she uttered those words. I did not know what to say. “Really?” I asked sheepishly, not wanting to accept what she had just told me. She nodded, looking down, then handed me a white envelope and smiled. “Thank you so much,” Etenesh said and I looked at her, unable to comprehend that I would probably never see her again. I wanted to hug her but she told me not to get too close as she did not want me to catch her cold.

When I got home that evening I carefully opened the envelope. It contained a beautiful white card with the letters “DANKE” [translation: thank you] written out of small pink flowers

and golden droplets. It must have been expensive. I unfolded it and found a message from Etenesh inside: “Thank you very very much and I wish you all the best sis! We had a great time, love you sis.” Tears started rolling down my face. The fact that Etenesh called me sis and told me she loved me overwhelmed me. I had never known she liked me this much. Suddenly I felt the urge to tell her so many things but I knew it was too late. I really wanted to trust that one day we would meet again but it did seem very hopeless that evening.

As the summer came to an end, Maria suggested going on one last afternoon trip before it got too cold to hang out outside. She asked us how we liked the idea of doing a boat trip to a temple that is located a few kilometres outside of the city and to have a picnic there. We all loved the idea and Gabriela organized the tickets while the other German volunteers and I took charge of the snacks. We bought a watermelon and grapes, biscuits, pretzels, and apple juice, and baked a cake. The weather was not ideal on that day, the sky was overcast and gloomy but it somehow fit my mood. I knew my time at the *women’s tea time* was coming to an end. When we all had sat down on the deck of the boat I broke to the others the news that I had just gotten the opportunity to do an internship in Madagascar and that I would be leaving in a few weeks. “Wow, Madagascar! You’re always going to such cool places!” the other German volunteers said while the volunteers from Ethiopia and Nigeria looked slightly bewildered. “It’s so sad that you’re leaving, we will miss you so much,” they added. I tried to enjoy our last little trip as much as I could. After all, the temple we were headed to was my favorite spot near my city. It is not a religious site but rather a hall of fame whose style is based on ancient Greek architecture. It is located on a hill covered in lush green forest and overlooks the river Danube and the city of Regensburg. In the summer crowds of people hang out on its countless stairs to have picnics, drink beer, or smoke hookah, and newlyweds take their wedding photos in between the temple’s massive pillars. On this cloudy afternoon not many other people were there. We climbed the many steep stairs leading up to the temple – which took a while since so many small children had come with us – and then spread out our blankets to have a picnic at

the top. We listened to music, talked, took photos, and ate the snacks we had brought. Although I enjoyed this afternoon I simply could not shake the feeling of missing Etenesh. Our meetings had not felt the same ever since she was gone. I was wondering where she was right now, what she was doing, whether she thought of me too. The others must have been missing her too.

A few weeks later, on a Wednesday evening in early September 2018, I immediately sensed that something was off the moment I arrived at the blue trailer. Only Desta and Hanna were waiting for our meeting to start and I asked them where all the others were. “They were taken away.” Desta replied. It took me a moment to process this information. “Taken away? Where were they taken?” I asked, helplessly looking at the two young women whose facial expressions were empty and tired. “We don’t know. It happens every day now. The police come into our trailer at five in the morning and take someone away. They don’t even knock, they just walk in.” I felt anger rising up in me. “You know, there are some Muslim women in our trailer and they are not wearing a hijab inside because they feel safe there because men are not allowed to enter but the police just walk in and take someone away without a warning.” I could hardly believe my own ears. How could anyone be so cruel and disrespectful to violate the ‘women only’ rule of the grey trailer? I could not possibly imagine the trauma these young women were experiencing, how dehumanizing it must have felt to see their sisters being deported like this, stripped off of any sense of humanity. I did not know what to tell them, how to comfort them, nothing I could have said seemed appropriate. I knew they were afraid they would be next.

In *The Racial Limits of Social Justice* Denise Ferreira da Silva explains that “[...] raciality delimits the modern notion of justice, by producing affectable (racial subaltern) subjects to whom dear modern universal principles (liberty and equality) do not apply because they are governed by necessity—that is, by violence.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ferreira da Silva, Denise. “The Racial Limits of Social Justice: The Ruse of Equality of Opportunity and the Global Affirmative Action Mandate.” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0184>, pp. 184–209.

Later that evening I called Mila, who had not been able to make it to our meeting. I told her about what had happened and we both cried on the phone. Coming to terms with the fact that we would never get to see the women we had spent so much time with again and without having had the chance to say goodbye was one thing. But learning how forcefully they had been taken away, how they had been mistreated, and how their human rights had been spurned, added a whole new level of grief and anger to it. It was knowing that there was absolutely nothing that we could do to in order to prevent this from happening again that made me feel the most helpless I had ever felt.

In her essay *Zuhause* [translation: At Home], Mithu Sanyal, a Polish-Indian-German ethnologist, explains that Western democracies such as Germany define themselves on the basis of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and inviolable human dignity. Germany is an immigration country and its constitution states that migrants and people without a migration history are equal before the law, yet reality looks very different. Sanyal argues that German politics has created a discourse of an ‘endangered homeland’ in order to justify the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. She clarifies that this narrative works so well since home or homeland is so closely tied to shared, collective identity. Sanyal comes to the conclusion that identity does not determine what we do but what others do to us.<sup>9</sup>

On my very last evening before flying to Madagascar we met at the evangelical youth centre to cook Ethiopian food together. The idea had come up because whenever we, the German volunteers, had walked into the grey trailer it always smelled delicious and we had gotten curious about trying Ethiopian food. When we expressed our interest in their traditional food to the volunteers from Ethiopia they immediately offered to cook for us and were thrilled that we wanted to learn more about their culture. Since their trailer’s kitchen was too small for all of us Maria had made sure the evangelical youth centre’s kitchen would be made available

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<sup>9</sup> Sanyal, Mithu. “Zuhause.” [translation: At Home]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 101-121.

to us. After arriving we immediately began chopping vegetables and preparing the dishes the Ethiopian women had chosen. Not knowing the recipes I felt rather useless in the kitchen and offered to take care of the children who were getting impatient and twitchy. Their mothers welcomed this idea with open arms and so I spent the time until dinner chasing a couple of toddlers around the youth centre and making sure no one escaped, which was surprisingly a lot of fun. When dinner was ready we all gathered around the large table in the community area and shared the food the Ethiopian women had prepared. We ate Injera, a traditional flatbread which reminded me of a fluffy, savoury pancake, with different sorts of vegetables and seasoned scrambled eggs with onions and bell peppers. It was delicious and I once again felt deeply grateful for this beautiful community I had found.

Vina Yun, a second generation Korean migrant who lives in Austria, wrote an essay titled *Essen* [translation: Food] about her relationship with the Korean cuisine and its significance to her life in Austria. Yun mentions that her Austrian friends could never understand the sense of security and belonging, community and strength the food that seemed so foreign and strange to them instilled in her. She states that it is one of the few means for her to feel Korean.<sup>10</sup> Maybe the young women from Ethiopia felt the same way about the food they so passionately prepared for us. I could not imagine what it must have felt like to leave everything they knew behind in the hopes of finding happiness in a place as foreign and cold as Germany. I hoped they found some comfort in cooking their traditional meals; that it reminded them of home maybe.

After dinner we got to participate in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony and tasted a sweet, spongy, yellowish cake that the Ethiopian volunteers had prepared. Desta even showed us a traditional dress that she had brought from Ethiopia and now tried on for us. When she pulled the thin white robe over her body I noticed for the first time that she was pregnant.

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<sup>10</sup> Yun, Vina. "Essen." [translation: Food]. *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare], edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, Ullstein, 2019, pp. 140-149.

Before the moment of the indefinite and inevitable goodbye came, Maria told me that they had a farewell present for me. She pulled a calendar with quotes by famous feminists, a foldable shopping bag which read “Follow your dreams,” and a card with an adorable hummingbird that she had drawn, out of her bag. The card had been signed by everyone, the African and German volunteers. I was touched by this thoughtful gesture and promised that I would take the gifts to Madagascar with me.

Over a year later, in the middle of the Covid pandemic, I had a stopover at the airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital. After multiple lockdowns and months of almost complete isolation I felt overwhelmed with the amount of people who were rushing through one of Africa’s busiest airports. While trying to find my way through the crowds I could not stop thinking: I wish Etenesh knew I was here, in her country, in her city even. Maybe we were only a few kilometers away from each other at that moment but I had no means of contacting her. I looked for her in the crowds, knowing she was not there.

#### **4. Chapter Four: *Etenesh* – A Critical Reflection**

This last chapter contains a short analysis during which will contextualize the social, cultural, and historic circumstances under which voluntary work takes place within the framework of relevant secondary literature. Furthermore, this research projects' limitations and strengths will be analyzed whereby accounts of voluntary work by white, Western people will be problematized. Finally, a short summary of the findings will be presented which will contain a conclusion that picks up the central research questions and possible answers. Furthermore, scopes for further research on voluntary work projects, specifically in Germany, will be pointed out.

##### **4.1 Analysis**

The following analysis contains reflections on voluntary work in the European context against the backdrop of the social, cultural, and historic circumstances that enable voluntary work or what I have referred to as white benevolence and humanitarianism in chapter two. This is where critical whiteness theory, which provides a framework for analyzing how white people accumulate and maintain racial privilege (Matias and Mackey 34), comes into play. Postcolonial theory holds “[...] the legacies of formal colonialism and the development project (Bandyopadhyay and Patil 647)” responsible for this accumulation and perpetuation of white privilege. As pointed out in the literature review, these historic circumstances laid the foundation for acts of humanitarianism and benevolence which allowed white people to establish a racial hierarchy and exercise power over POC who were portrayed as helpless, incapable of improving their own life situation, and therefore in need of white aid. Following this train of thought, one would certainly answer Pallister-Wilkins’ question “[...] does humanitarianism need or deserve to be saved (103)?” with a ‘no,’ when working towards the



dismantling of white supremacy. Yet, as I have discussed in the second chapter, there is no universal definition of humanitarianism and different manifestations of it should be taken into consideration. While many accounts who engage very critically with benevolence might be talking about organized, professional social work, local strategies of sharing and caring should not be disregarded. Although the voluntary work described in *Etenesh* is organized (for example through the newsletter), one might argue that it falls under the second category as it is a local strategy of caring involving local, unpaid students and being concentrated only on its city of origin rather than being a so called ‘voluntourism’ program which sends volunteers from predominately white countries in the global North to overexploited countries in the global South. This local component manifests not only in the project’s geographic location but also in introducing the women from Ethiopia and Nigeria to German (or to be more precise: Bavarian) culture by taking them to a local festival, introducing them to traditional food, and showing them various places in and around the town of Regensburg. On the other hand, one might argue that the Ethiopian and Nigerian women’s migration to Europe disrupts this idea of the project being a local strategy and that, instead, the roles of who is travelling have just been interchanged: while the classic ‘volontourism’ programs introduced in the introductory chapter send white volunteers to Africa, in the case of voluntary work projects with refugees in Europe it is the African people who travel. The power dynamics underlying these two forms of travel, however, diverge widely: while the white volunteers travelling to Africa can easily obtain visas for their stays abroad, coming to Europe as a refugee does in no way guarantee that a visa or residence permit will be granted and furthermore often involves perilous voyages and months or even years of awaiting the decision whether one’s application for asylum seeker status will be approved. The answer to the question of whether voluntary work projects with refugees in Europe are local strategies of sharing and caring is therefore a matter of interpretation.

Apart from that categorizing voluntary work projects into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ according to their location and professionalization would be too simple. According to Chapman and Withers

the intentions behind engaging in benevolent work matter as well: they claim that everyday acts of benevolence are motivated by “[...] some version of a recognition of shared humanity [...],” while professional interventions into the lives of those in need are “animated by the ethic of the healing power of domination and imagined moral superiority (244).” I argue, however, that categorizing social work according to this standard is problematic for multiple reasons: first of all, intentions are not obvious most of the time, secondly, good intentions do not absolve us of the harm we do, or as Ryan puts it: “The road to hell, it is often said, is paved with good intentions (4),” and finally, such a debate distracts from the question whether a specific project is actually helpful or not.

In the case of the voluntary work project presented in the short story, determining whether it was helpful or not seems to be a matter of interpretation. The project was certainly successful in creating a space of female solidarity, which becomes evident in scenes such as the situation on the bus in which the author would have stood up for the women from Ethiopia and Nigeria in case anyone had complained about their children being too loud or made racist remarks. Solidarity also manifested in sharing food and taking care of the Ethiopian and Nigerian women’s children, acts of mutual care and reciprocity that all volunteers irrespective of their origin took part in and regarded as a matter of course. Political solidarity, on the other hand, manifested primarily in the taking part in the anti-racism day rally, an event that the author questioned afterwards as it seemed performative despite the feelings of solidarity it had evoked among the participants. The project furthermore succeeded in fostering intercultural exchanges through cooking and eating Ethiopian dishes together, through engaging with each other’s languages, and through introducing each other to cultural practices such as the Ethiopian tea ceremony or visiting a Bavarian festival together.

Finally, the project was certainly also successful in fostering friendship such as the friendship between Etenesh and the author. However, I want to point out that the term ‘friendship’ is often used inflationary, a phenomenon which also manifests in Häberlen’s article

in which he promotes the idea of referring to refugees as ‘friends.’ In the short story the author is careful and reserved during the first meeting with the Ethiopian and Nigerian refugees. And even later, when Etenesh asks for the author’s number, which can be interpreted as the beginning of their friendship, she still has inhibitions about whether actually forming a close friendship is the right thing to do in the circumstances they are in and hesitates. The author finally decides to engage in the friendship but begins referring to Etenesh as a friend only much later. The development of their friendship mostly becomes evident in small, loving gestures such as squeezing the other’s hand, hugging, and finally the farewell letter.

The fact that the project evoked feelings of empathy becomes clear mainly through the scenes in which the German volunteers learn that the Ethiopian and Nigerian volunteers have been or will be deported, in their emotional reactions, and the acts of solidarity discussed above.

With regards to the second research question: “How could benevolence and humanitarianism – both of which are rather negatively connotated in conversations around volunteering – be channeled into tools that could help dismantle white supremacy?” the question whether the project contributed to the dismantling of white supremacy comes up. Attempts to do so can be seen in Campus Asyl’s principles (for example in referring to all participants of a project as ‘volunteers’) and in the featuring of anti-racist activism (such as the anti-racism day presented in the short story). These commitments hint at an “[...] acknowledgment of privilege, awareness-raising, and humility (Yu 22),” which, according to Yu, counteracts oppression. However, white supremacy manifested in the teaching of German which can be interpreted as imposing societal norms on the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria. Furthermore, Campus Asyl’s commitment to equality and anti-racism does not cancel out the fact that the whole project was launched because of the the racist German immigration system which fails to provide adequate facilities and support to asylum seekers, Therefore the project, despite its anti-racist efforts, is a manifestation of a system rooted in white supremacy.

Pallister-Wilkins comes to the conclusion that

“[...] it is necessary, for scholars and practitioners alike, to acknowledge that humanitarianism, with its universalist claims, acts as a salve for sustained racial discrimination and violence, working if not to entirely invisibilize racial hierarchies within suffering, then to make the racial underpinnings of such suffering acceptable through supposedly universal practices of care (102).”

This remark is striking as it explains how voluntary work projects can sometimes render the effects of a white supremacist system more bearable without actually changing the larger social structure it is rooted in. In the end, the project described in *Etenesh* did not contribute to an elimination of white supremacy but helped those affected by Germany’s racist immigration policies to endure white supremacy.

## **4.2 Limitations and Strengths**

When thinking about the limitations and flaws of this work, Linda Alcoff’s *The Problem of Speaking for Others* comes to mind. Alcoff states that “[...] certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for (7).” I am aware that despite my intentions to not speak for the young women from Ethiopia and Nigeria this work could be interpreted as ‘speaking for others’ as it does not feature their perspectives. As I have pointed out in chapter 1.2 *Background and Personal Motivation* and 1.3 *Approaching the Master’s Thesis as a Creative Project*, this work only contains the (very limited) perspective of a white, German

woman who has been involved in a voluntary work project with refugees from Ethiopia and Nigeria and it can therefore in no way make claims to objectivity. At this point I would like to refer to Donna Haraway's *The Persistence of Vision* once again, in which she talks about "[...] objectivity as positioned rationality (292)" and points out that it is about "the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions — of views from somewhere (292)." Haraway's approach allows for partial, subjective views but demands for a multitude of such perspectives in order to obtain a scientific result. In the case of this thesis this could mean comparing or merging *Etenesh* with multiple other accounts of voluntary work conducted with female African refugees in order to arrive at an objective conclusion. An attempt to include more voices in the conversation was made in incorporating quotes from Fatma Aydemir's and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah's anthology *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* [translation: Your Homeland is Our Nightmare] into the short story. Since accounts that specifically deal with female-only voluntary work in Germany are scarce, it follows that this work will remain a subjective account.

The strength of this research lies primarily in its creative and critical approach. As explained in chapter 1.2 *Approaching the Master's Thesis as a Creative Project* short stories offer many advantages compared to exclusively theoretical approaches. Short stories are more accessible and more inclusive to a broader audience as they are more easily comprehensible for people whose first language is not English, which, I believe, should be a priority especially in the field of social justice which aims at offering equal opportunities and decolonizing research. Furthermore, short stories foster cultural awareness, which I, as someone who holds a degree in cultural studies, find particularly important. They also constitute an alternative research method which can contribute to the decolonising of research in an academic setting. Finally, *Etenesh*'s strength lies in it being a piece of creative fiction that is based on a true story. This can help raise awareness for the fact that the short story contains events abstracted from daily

life which, in turn, can foster empathy and solidarity, possibly invite others to either critically reflect on the voluntary projects they are currently involved in or to join voluntary work organizations with a commitment to anti-racism.

Summarizing the points made in this chapter it can be said that the fact that *Etenesh* is a personal account and can be seen as both, a limitation and a strength. On the one hand it could be regarded as one-sided, especially because it was written by a white, German woman. On the other hand, one could argue that the intent behind a short story can never be to include all perspectives on a specific topic. Instead, this form of storytelling, specifically when it is concerned with a global issue such as displacement, can raise awareness for the multitude of stories that could be told.

#### **4.3 Conclusion and Scope for Further Research**

This research project examined the ways voluntary work with female African refugees can look like in a European context, a perspective that is often missing from conversations around voluntary work, the voluntourism industry, and humanitarianism in general. In the future, more research projects on voluntary work with refugees in Germany or other European countries would therefore be appropriate. A wide range of accounts of voluntary work with refugees in Europe – ideally written by refugees and asylum seekers themselves – would be especially important when working from a feminist standpoint since Haraways calls for a “[...] joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere (292).“

One account of a volunteering project involving both white, European and Black, African volunteers which took place in Germany was introduced by means of the short story *Etenesh*. As explained in the analysis, it features a voluntary project which was created with

the intention of founding a safe space for women and facilitating the waiting time until the Ethiopian and Nigerian women's applications for asylum were approved. It shows how multilayered intentions in engaging in voluntary work can be and that categorizing voluntary work into 'good' and 'bad' according to the volunteer's or organization's intentions is not only impossible but also inutile. The analysis showed that the project was successful in fostering personal as well as political solidarity, empathy, and intercultural exchanges and the example of the friendship between the author and one of the Ethiopian women alludes to the possibility of forming genuine friendships within such a setting.

Furthermore, I have argued that instead of examining the the volunteer's or organization's intentions in carrying out voluntary work, the focus should be on the question: How could benevolence and humanitarianism be channeled into tools that could help dismantle white supremacy? Or in other words: How could voluntary work do better?

Many activists and scholar have proposed solutions for changing the narrative and counteracting oppression, such as Yu who suggests "[...] promoting friendly horizontal connections based on human equality (9)" or through "[...] the acknowledgment of privilege, awareness-raising, and humility [...] (22)." Tim Engles, on the other hand, quotes Christian Landner who points out: "An interesting fact about white people is that they firmly believe that all of the world's problems can be solved through 'awareness.' Meaning the process of making other people aware of problems, and then magically someone else like the government will fix it (102)," suggesting that being aware of structural inequalities alone is not enough. Others, such as Earick, suggest focusing on the historic circumstances that have enabled white saviorism:

"White Scholars hold potential to be antiracist allies, if cognizant and vigilant in ongoing interrogation and rejection of both hegemony [privilege and power] and Supremacy [domination and oppression]

leading to an antiracist ally archetype and culture of equity. This interrogation not only demands a focus on current conditions but historic conditions as well. An antiracist White ally must first be a student of historiography, to unlearn a White history that has molded their being and is consistently reproducing White supremacy masked as alternative ‘facts’ and White-washed interpretations of primary documents (816).”

And Jennifer Erickson points out in *Volunteering with Refugees: Neoliberalism, Hegemony, and (Senior) Citizenship* that “[...] a reliance on the goodwill of volunteers with few accountability standards and almost no training does little to challenge deeply ingrained attitudes about race, class, gender, culture, and the state (174),” suggesting that people who work with refugees and potentially share their stories should receive some kind of training before doing so.

In response to the first research question: “How does voluntary work conducted by white Germans and African refugees in Germany, reinforce or challenge concepts such as benevolence, white saviorism, but also empathy and solidarity?” it can be said that these voluntary work projects, despite what would probably pass as ‘good intentions’ and a commitment to anti-racism, are often still rooted in a white supremacist immigration system and a societal norm that prescribes that migration into Germany must be linked to integration in the form of learning the German language. It can therefore be noted that negatively connotated features of voluntary work, such as the perpetuation of white supremacy, often coexist with good intentions and genuine empathy, solidarity, and friendship. Nevertheless, Campus Asyl’s latest statements which were made during an interview in May 2022 suggest that the initiative has increased its anti-racist and emancipatory efforts and is continually working towards dismantling white supremacy – within the bounds of possibility, proving once



more that the potential to do better within voluntary work and to combine it with activism exists. Instead of advocating for the continuation or discontinuation of voluntary work I therefore want to suggest that humanitarianism could and should do better and that it does not have to be an antidote to activism. Many scholars have already provided examples of how white people can do better, the next step is putting these ideas into practice in order to not “[...] make the mistake of being a theoretical ally reaffirming White supremacy as they reduce race and racism to an exercise in discourse (Earick 807).”

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