Assembling Bits and Pieces

From Patchwork to Ethnography

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> I think I ought to say something in Favour of Patch-Work, the better to recommend it to my Female Readers, as well in their Discourse, as their Needle-Work.
> *Barker 1723: iv*

When musing about the many sides of the ethnographer in the field, all of which inspired this Festschrift to celebrate Martin Sökefeld, a thread began to spin. I found myself thinking about my relatively new-found interest in patchwork and quilting. I see it as intimately connected to the genesis of my research, and, at the same time, I consider it an outcome of the particular research and living conditions I encountered when starting my fieldwork in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. So, how did I get from patchwork to ethnography, or, rather, into patchwork while doing ethnography – as the two crafts might be even more related to one another than one would expect at first sight? Following the 'multi-sided' researcher thread, I would like to trace how, in the context of my fieldwork with so-called 'refugee women'[1] in Germany (2020–22), patch-

1 In the following, I use the description 'women addressed as refugees'. This denomination is the result of an ongoing struggle of 'appropriately' addressing and representing my research partners. In the course of many conversations

work became not only a private interest and creative activity, but also a methodological point of reference and, subsequently, a research lens – thus rather casually transcending the boundaries between the realms of 'private' and 'professional' life.

Patchwork as a metaphor for women writers

For a long time (especially in the North American contexts but also in some European countries[2]), patchwork and quilting[3] were perceived and represented as 'good' activities for women and connected to the domestic

with interlocutors sharing the experience of being addressed as refugees, even years after their arrival in Germany, it became clear that they themselves do not (anymore) use 'refugee' as a self-description and sometimes also severely criticise the usage of this description by others. Furthermore, the terms 'refugee' and 'refugee women' are often used (also within interdisciplinary and anthropological research literature) without specifying if one is referring to a legal category (e.g., according to The Geneva Convention) or a social status. Therefore, following Liisa Malkki, who reminds us to take 'refugee' not as a given category for anthropological research (cf. Malkki 1995: 496), I use the term 'women/people addressed as refugees'. This may not be a perfect solution, but at least it is an attempt to highlight the controversial character of the 'refugee (woman)' category.

2 There exists a wide range of quilting traditions in various parts of the world (e.g., *ralli* quilts in Pakistan or the *sashiko* method in Japanese quilting).

3 'Patchwork' and 'quilting', though often used interchangeably in academic literature as well as in everyday language, refer to related but different textile handicraft techniques. Patchwork usually describes the practice and, simultaneously, the end product of piecing together small pieces of fabric (mainly cotton). As these are often remnants from other sewing projects, like a dress or a shirt, patchwork is primarily used as a way of recycling. It carries the connotation of both accepted imperfection and creative creation. Quilting, in contrast, involves sewing patterns on a so-called 'sandwich' consisting of background fabric, filling and cover fabric (often a patchwork) to hold the three layers together and also add decoration. In some cases, quilting is used deliberately to break up the pattern of patched fabrics, e.g., by using contrasting colours of yarn (see also Stalp 2007: 14 for a more detailed definition).

sphere. However, an interesting twist was added to the association between all sorts of textile handicraft (especially needle-work) and female labour when a connection was made between the patchwork method and women's literary output.

In 1723, Victorian writer Jane Barker argued in favour of patchwork as a replacement for more detailed, exhausting and time-consuming methods of embroidery as an occupation for women (cf. Barker 1723: viii). [4] As Audrey Bilger shows in her article on patchwork and women novelists, in this context stitching and sewing, especially involving complicated embroidery, were often required from women (of certain class backgrounds) to keep them busy at home as well as to prepare their hands and minds for their later obligations as mothers and housewives (cf. Bilger 1994: 19 f.). According to Barker's argument in her introductory section addressing the reader, patchwork is a much quicker and less exhausting way of putting together a larger work:

> I am glad to find the Ladies of This Age, wiser than Those of the Former; when the working of Point[5] and curious Embroidery, was so troublesome, that they cou'd not take Snuff in Repose, for fear of foiling

4 It should be noted that quilting in Europe is intimately interconnected with European colonialism: the most famous example is provided by early quilting in England, which was highly dependent on and profited from forced cheap fabric imported from the Indian subcontinent (cf. Bilger 1994: 18). This is mirrored by the production chains that support today's European or North American quilting industry: many textiles and sewing accessories are produced in countries (e.g., China or Bangladesh) with a low average income for the workers involved, while being sold relatively cheap to the consumers elsewhere. Furthermore, many of the workers employed in the textile industry are women (e.g., in Bangladesh, over 80% are women, cf. Kabeer/Mahmud 2003: 95). This stands in harsh contrast to the often claimed 'sustainability' of patchwork as a way of recycling – which is also contradicted by the fact that many quilters buy and use special fabrics that are made only for the purpose of quilting/patchwork.

5 Here, the author refers to the time-consuming technique of needlepoint stitching usually used to decorate cushions, handkerchiefs, napkins, etc.

> their Work: But in Patch-Work there is no Harm done ; a smear'd Finger does but add a Spot to a Patch, or a Shade to a Light Colour. (Barker 1723: viii)

While proving to be less exhausting than embroidery and stitching – which she considered "pernicious to the Eyes" (Barker 1723: viii) – patchwork as a creative method also offered (mainly bourgeois and/or wealthy) women the possibility to spend more time on other activities, e.g., writing. Barker tried to reconcile the allegedly opposing crafts of sewing and writing, and she also advocated novels as an acceptable genre for women writers in particular (cf. Bilger 1994: 24). Within her own novel, which follows the introductory address to the reader cited above, Barker's heroine Galesia struggles as a writing woman at a time when – and in a societal context in which – women were bound to the domestic sphere. In the end, however, she finds a way of presenting her writing as part of the novel's eponymous 'Patch-Work Screen' – literally sewing together her written stories and poems as a patchwork. Here, Barker presents, (probably) for the first time, patchwork as a metaphor for women's literary production (probably) (cf. ibid: 32). This resonates within today's feminist literature studies, wherein patchwork has once again provided a well-established metaphor for women's writing since the 1980s (cf. Torsney/Elsley 1994: 3). In this regard, for example, Elaine Showalter argues for the US-American context that "a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing" (Showalter 1986: 227).

Patchwork as a methodological point of reference

However, not only with regard to women's literary production, but also within social anthropology, patchwork has been used as a metaphor to refer to modes of researching and writing. For example, in her monograph *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), anthropologist

Anna Tsing highlights her way of investigating 'friction' in global connections as "patchwork ethnographic fieldwork" (ibid: x). With regard to her research interest in global connections, she was dealing with such a wide range of social groups that she could not work with all of them in depth. Thus, she decided to move back and forth between different 'chains', zoom in on particular "zones of awkward engagement" (ibid: xi) and finally 'patch' them all together:

> On the one hand, I was unwilling to give up the ethnographic method, with its focus on the ethnographer's surprises rather than a pre-formulated research plan. On the other hand, it is impossible to gain a full ethnographic appreciation of every social group that forms a connection in the global chain. (ibid: x)

Another kind of 'patchwork ethnography' gained popularity in the context of anthropologists' struggle to do fieldwork and defend their changed methodological approaches, especially during the coronavirus pandemic (see e.g., Günel et al. 2020; Fratini et al. 2022). In 2020, Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe issued a *Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography* (Günel et al. 2020[6]) wherein they argue that the ideal of conducting long-term fieldwork at a designated place has long been questioned (cf. ibid: paragraph 1; see also Gupta/Ferguson 1997). While referring to multiple anthropological strategies to follow up on the needs of research partners, e.g., by following their movements in the course of multi-sited or transnational ethnographies, Günel et al. stress that the needs of the ethnographer are rarely taken into consideration (cf. Günel 2020: paragraph 2). Here, gender enters the stage in a different way: in reference to feminist critiques of artificial separations between 'the private' and 'the professional', the authors refer to the importance of care obligations that concern many (not only) women anthropologists but which are usually not taken into consideration in research designs.

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6 For more information on the research project and associated activities and collaborations with other researchers, see their website https://www.patchworkethnography.com/

As a consequence, people/women with care obligations experience more difficulties in conducting ethnographic research – not exclusively, but certainly under pandemic research circumstances. To counteract some of these problems, the authors suggest a 'new' form of researching – 'patchwork ethnography' – which they define as follows:

> Patchwork ethnography begins from the acknowledgement that recombinations of 'home' and 'field' have now become necessities—more so in the face of the current pandemic. By *patchwork ethnography*, we refer to ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork. (ibid: paragraph 4, original emphasis)

However, in contrast to the recent appropriation of patchwork ethnography, especially by scholars trying to make sense of how they struggled with their research during the pandemic (e.g., Fratini et al. 2022), it might be argued that it provides a useful perspective, not only with regard to ethnography in/of the pandemic, but also beyond, as the authors touch upon (once again) urgent issues of how to design and conduct anthropological fieldwork. It might even be argued that patchwork might provide a useful metaphor for ethnographic research on a broader level, as I elaborate in the following.

Patchwork and ethnography – two related trades?

According to Maura Flannery (2001), many similarities can be found between quilting and science in general. In the following quote, she attempts to highlight these comparisons to strengthen her argument that quilting should be considered a useful metaphor for scientific inquiry:

> In the case of the metaphor of science as quilting, quilting can be seen as a way to create order out of a multiplicity of pieces, just as science is discovering the order that underlies the multiplicity of phenomena that confront us daily. A research project often involves ideas and information that have been around for years but that may be used in a new context in the present work. Such a project is a patchwork of techniques and pieces of information that may have been gathered at very different times and in very different contexts but that happen to fit into the solution of the problem at hand. Scientists and quilters both spend their time trying to fit pieces together to make a pleasing whole, and often, this involves playing with the pieces, rearranging them to make them fit and to allow them to be used most effectively. (Flannery 2001: 633)

Flannery also repeatedly makes the point that establishing patchwork as a metaphor for scientific inquiry would be preferable to male-connotated metaphors such as "wresting [sic!] knowledge from nature" (ibid: 631), which in turn may also help to attract more women "to do science" (ibid: 630). This, however, is a somewhat problematic argument, because while presenting patchwork as a classically female occupation drawing on tacit knowledge and creativity, it presupposes that women do science in a different way, e.g., with more emotional empathy than men. Here, Flannery risks reproducing homogenising stereotypes of women as care-givers and emotion-driven while trying to argue in favour of a decidedly feminist scientific inquiry. Moreover, she ignores the contemporary (and by now well-established) critique of mainstream feminism's appropriation of the category 'women' as neglecting the different contexts and varieties of female experiences (and struggling) (see e.g., Mohanty 1988).

Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile reconsidering her description of the similarities between quilting/patchwork and scientific inquiry – which heavily draws on her own background in biology – in relation to ethnographic research. It might even be argued that the metaphor works better with regard to the trade of ethnography than it does in reference to more deductive research approaches. Some representatives

of the natural sciences (but also some parts of sociology, see critically e.g., Smith 1987) claim to be doing 'objective' science. Ethnography, in contrast, aims to discover inductively 'the unexpected' in the field (in its broadest sense). While incorporating irritations and mistakes into its epistemology, the ethnographic researcher relies on rigorous data documentation and comparison – and last but not least, questions her/his impartiality at any time during the process (see Haraway 1988). Similar to their relevance for patchwork as a material practice, accepted imperfection and creative creation can be considered as guiding themes of ethnographic research and writing. In fact, a larger pattern or a central thread that connects the bits and pieces might become recognisable only in the process of *doing* both patchwork and ethnography.

Patchwork as a creative activity in challenging (research) times

In the course of my research, patchwork became important to me, not only as a methodological point of reference owed to the particular temporal setting of my research, but also as a haptic creative activity which in turn shaped and determined my research interests as well as the ways in which I engaged with my data – well beyond any pandemic conditions. Looking back, patchwork entered the scene at a very early stage. At the beginning of 2020, I was set and ready to start my PhD fieldwork in the context of refugee camps and the activities of social workers designated to host and support people addressed as 'refugees'.[7] Driven by the desire to learn more about the subjectivities and societal treatment of young women sharing the experience of being addressed that way, I planned to dive into my field and conduct interviews and extensive participant observation. Unfortunately, the plan did not quite work. In March 2020,

7 The PhD is part of a project on the 'Processes of Subjectivation and Self-Formation of Young Women Addressed as Refugees in Germany' based at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, LMU Munich, funded by the DFG (2020–23).

the coronavirus hit many parts of the world, including Munich and upper Bavaria, where I lived and had planned to conduct my research; a struggle with lockdowns and contact restrictions followed. Due to these rapidly changing research conditions, I had to adapt and reconsider my original research plan. For example, as face-to-face meetings were almost impossible, at least at the beginning of my fieldwork, I shifted to online tools to keep in touch with my research partners and also to reach potential interlocutors. Furthermore, we made long telephone calls, kept in contact via messaging and tried to meet up in our homes and flats or outdoors as often as possible. In the long run, these recurring and extended informal conversations and interviews with individual women became much more central to my methodological approach than I had originally expected.

While the pandemic forced me to restructure my fieldwork and made contacting and meeting my interlocutors very difficult, it simultaneously became mandatory to find some kind of occupation to fill "Those long, dark, lonely evenings" of the lockdown(s) – as one of my research partners once called it. However, although I was interested in all kinds of handicrafts before, and had worked with several different materials and techniques, I only started sewing when I caught Covid myself. While the following three months were a personally challenging time, sewing and patchwork helped me get through and kept me occupied.

In the aftermath, however, I continued my autodidactic journey into the world of patchwork: this included watching YouTube tutorials on how to cut and prepare the fabric, assemble and sew certain patterns, adjust a quilt 'sandwich' and successfully finish a quilt with an appropriate 'binding'. Simultaneously, I started reading up on the history of particular patchwork and quilting patterns, such as 'the lone star' or 'the carpenter's wheel', as well as different quilting traditions and also took lessons from the mother of a friend who had been practicing the craft for decades. While she showed me her newest piece, which she was slowly quilting by hand in a special wooden frame, I was also introduced to the schism between advocates of hand-made vs machine-supported quilting – and the connected struggles to combine notions of 'authen-

ticity' or 'real' quilting with the temporal demands and restrictions of (mostly women) quilters' everyday life.

At the same time, I started talking about my growing fascination for this craft with friends and with some of my research partners. When chatting on the phone or face to face on a walk, we covered many subjects – not only 'official' research topics and questions, but also our daily struggles of getting through the day and managing work and private obligations as well as how to occupy and distract oneself in the face of social distancing.[8] Furthermore, also some of my interlocutors were either themselves engaged in particular forms of handicraft or knew people who did. Thus, the simple exchange on how to spend their newly acquired timeslots sometimes resulted in lengthy conversations on this or that particular kind of stitching or type of patchwork which they knew themselves or which was practiced by acquaintances all over the world. Furthermore, we had intense discussions on the problem of recycling and the unjust conditions of textile production as well as the elitist character of 'creative' and leisure time activities such as sewing (e.g., who can or cannot afford the time, money and space to spend on such a 'hobby' vs sewing as an economic necessity). While I initially thought that these topics were not directly related to my research questions, the opposite

8 Between March 2020 and summer 2021, public life in Bavaria, as in many other parts of the world, was restricted repeatedly due to the quickly developing pandemic. However, my interlocutors and I were affected by the Corona regulations in different ways, very much influenced by our social positions intersecting with our legal situations as well as economic possibilities – and connected to such different factors as age, country of birth, etc. While most of my interlocutors addressed as refugee women were living with their families or in student apartments, and others still lived in camps, I could afford (and enjoyed the legal right to) live in a private flat – as many of my interlocutors from a Social Work background also managed to do. Especially in the context of camps, the situation was very difficult, in that the ever-changing official Corona restrictions were accompanied by rules differentiating from camp to camp. In some cases, the whole camp went into quarantine when one case appeared; in others, only floors were closed down. As many people fell ill one after another in her camp, one interlocutor told me she had been living in quarantine for months with virtually no interruption.

turned out to be true. While I became more and more aware of the increasing presence of sewing and other textile activities in the field, our conversations prompted me to question how these practices are embedded and interwoven with gendered, class-related and racialised dimensions of the everyday life of both researchers and research partners.

Patchwork as a research lens

Thus, while getting into patchwork as a form of "serious leisure" (Stalp 2007: 9), I started reading up on the topic and discovered that both quilts as material products and patchwork as a textile practice have long been a subject of anthropological inquiry (separately from its aforementioned usage as both a methodological approach and a metaphor). Anthropologists studying patchwork and quilting focus on a variety of different issues, including the significance of quilts in 'Native American' mourning rituals (Cariocci 2010), the importance of everyday quilting as a practice of self-care and self-fulfillment for middle-aged American women (Stalp 2007) and investigations of quilting conventions from the perspective of an 'acafan' (an academic who is also a fan) (Barrus 2021).

While Marybeth Stalp (2007) highlights the importance of the recent 'quilt revival' in the US-American context, in Germany quilting and patchwork are also becoming quite common leisure activities. Within most bigger cities, as well as some rather remote towns, there exist specialised shops and active patchwork communities consisting of numerous individual practitioners as well as regional groups and so-called patchwork or quilting guilds[9] that also organise recurring exhibitions and conventions. However, up to now, not much (if any) anthropological research seems to have been done on this topic in the German-speaking context.

Among the many different anthropological approaches to investigating patchwork as a practice, Nancy Scheper-Hughes's article on the Gees'

9 See, for example, 'The German Patchwork Guild' webpage (https://www.patchworkgilde.de/).

Bend Freedom Quilting Bee stands out, as it transcends the often-supposed boundaries between activism and research. Retrospectively, she describes her feeling indebted to a group of African American quilters that once took her in and supported her in an early research project. She describes her engagement and struggle to get these women's quilts accepted as art in the context of the North American art scene of the late 1960s (cf. Scheper-Hughes 2003). Here, Scheper-Hughes gives a very personal testimony of the changing representation of African American quilters within (North) American quilt history, as she experienced it as both a researcher and a friend of quilters from the Gees' Bend Quilting Bee. For a long time, this history was shaped by omitting African American quilters from official narratives, e.g., in dedicated quilt histories published since the early 20th century (cf. Klassen 2009: 298), as well as from the multi-million dollar quilting industry[10] (cf. Stalp 2007: 8). Only recently has African American quilting been acknowledged as a part of this record (cf. Klassen 2009: 299 ff.), and it has even found its way into inter-/national art museums.

However, the construction of 'African American quilting' or 'Native American quilting' as distinctively different to '(mainstream) American quilting' can be criticised. First, quilters addressed by either of these labels respond to 'trends' in mainstream quilting in their own patchwork and quilting practices (ibid: 298). Second, patterns claimed to have originated in this or that particular quilting tradition[11] are constantly exchanged (ibid: 298), rearranged and altered, thereby making any patch-

10 The selling of countless books on patchwork and quilting, fabric collections for different occasions and patterns for a variety of patchwork techniques is by now quite a lucrative sector of the arts and crafts' economy, not only in North America, but also in other parts of the world.

11 One example of this kind of sometimes very ambivalent appropriation might be provided by the ubiquitous log cabin pattern, which – consisting usually of three rows of angular logs in light and dark colours arranged around the sides of a red square that symbolises a fire – is claimed as both an invention of 'settler-colonists' on their march to the American West as well as a symbol of the underground railroad helping people escaping slavery to find their way to the safe North, where slavery had already been abolished (cf. Stalp 2007: 7).

work quilt both a citation of pre-existing patterns or historical quilts *and* a product of individual manual labour and creativity.

With regard to my research, another aspect of textile handicraft became of interest, namely the importance of women's (manual) work for humanitarian activities. For example, in her monograph *The Need to Help* (2015), Liisa Malkki considers the engagement of mostly Western women in the production of material objects of aid, such as hats, shawls and knitted cuddly toys (e.g., 'aid bunnies' or 'trauma teddies') for the victims of war or natural disasters *elsewhere* (cf. Malkki 2015).

In her investigation, Malkki convincingly shows how these handmade objects become emotionalised and considered essentials of any humanitarian aid – especially, but not only, with regard to humanitarian activities in other countries. For example, Malkki refers to the carrying and distributing of 'trauma teddies' by the Red Cross in the context of numerous catastrophes such as the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, tsunamis following an earthquake in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and the Russian bombing of an airplane in Ukrainian airspace in 2014 (cf. Malkki 2015: 108). As products of a decidedly voluntary humanitarian engagement, these objects of aid are meant to soothe the pain and fear of children affected by disaster. Here, children represent both the pure victim and the "exemplary human" (ibid: 9), and thus they ennoble the voluntary production and giving of bunnies, hats, teddies and the like as morally 'good' and benevolent practices. At the same time, these activities can be considered highly gendered, as mainly women do (and are called upon to) produce these objects of aid (ibid: 106).

Similar enterprises became also quite common following the arrival of more than a million people fleeing war and disaster in 2015/16. Rapidly, women – especially those in their fifties and sixties (among them also some of my relatives and acquaintances) across Germany –started to engage in all kinds of textile handicrafts, e.g., knitting, sewing and so forth, to produce objects of aid 'for the poor refugees'. These activities included the production of countless hats and shawls as well as pullovers, with sometimes hundreds of pieces pro-

duced per person.[12] This type of occupation was further encouraged by fundraising campaigns; the by now annually repeated campaign "Shawl for Life" (in German: "Schal für das Leben") in favour of 'Syrian refugee children' can be considered one of the most prominent examples of this kind of campaigning at the intersection of individual and corporate humanitarian commitment. The campaign was originally initiated by the well-established German women's magazine *Brigitte* and the NGO Save the Children e.V. in cooperation with Lana Grossa, a wholesale trader specialising in the distribution of all sorts of wool and yarn, and it is still running today (Spring 2023).[13]

However, in subsequent years, and again in the context of the pandemic, comparable connections of gender and handicraft kept reappearing. For example, while at the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020 nobody had any masks, people started to sew them themselves from small pieces of cotton, and also offered them to others as one of very few known preventive measures against COVID. In the beginning, inhabitants of refugee camps were targeted as beneficiaries of this kind of aid. However, after a short while, increasingly more social organisations started to offer sewing opportunities, especially to refugee women, to learn how to make these masks and make them accessible to the public, often advertised under the label 'they want to give something back'[14]. Thereby, these organisations were participating in the subjectification (cf. Butler 2015) of particularly women addressed as refugees in an ambivalent way – both as aid recipients and at the same time 'good' and 'grateful' (future) members of German society.

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12 See for example "Bunte Mützen, damit Flüchtlinge nicht frieren," 18.02.2016 (https://www.shz.de/lokales/eckernfoerde/artikel/bunte-muetzen-damit-fluechtlinge-nicht-frieren-41555818).

13 For more information on the campaign, see e.g., "Alles zur BRIGITTE-Aktion 'Schal fürs Leben'", February 02, 2023 (https://www.brigitte.de/leben/wohnen/selbermachen/stricken/schal-fuers-leben/).

14 See, for example, "Flüchtlingsfrauen nähen Masken", April 29, 2020 (https://www.berliner-woche.de/charlottenburg/c-soziales/malteser-verbinden-integration-und-corona-hilfe_a263650).

Fittingly, many of the organisations I worked with over the course of my fieldwork developed special activities for refugee women that both drew on and reproduced the long-established imagination of (manual) care work in the domestic sphere as women's domain. At the same time, however, they complemented this presupposition with the assumption that refugee women are eligible (and willing!) to work in these areas. For example, in many cases, creative activities such as sewing and other forms of needlework were connected to the aim of empowerment. By offering courses on machine sewing and fashion design under the empowerment label, and opening up these avenues only to women, occupations such as tailoring were presented as desirable areas of work for women addressed as refugees.

In this way, Social Work contributes to gendered ways of integrating refugee women into the German labour market against the backdrop of the activating welfare state[15] (see e.g., Kessl 2019). Here, Social Work actors take over the mission to prepare women addressed as refugees to become 'good' working members of society – but only in areas of occupation that are deemed adequate for them as both women and refugees.

Conclusion

As we have seen, patchwork and quilting provide well-established metaphors for women's novel-writing, (feminist) scientific inquiry and social anthropology. In the latter context, patchwork especially is used to designate research approaches that 'jump' either between different research areas and sites while investigating global phenomena or with respect to changed research conditions under the impression of the

15 The 'activating' welfare state model, as established in Germany through the introduction of the 'Hartz4' laws in the early 2000s, is oriented towards the improvement of the single citizen; as Kessl argues, the activating welfare state model is very much related to neoliberal thinking (Kessl 2019: 118). Furthermore, Social Work in Germany can be considered to play an essential part in the implementation of the state's hope 'to activate' all members of society, and especially those that seem not 'active' enough (cf. Kessl 2019).

corona pandemic and/or care obligations. These are not necessarily compatible with the current trend of publication cycles becoming faster and faster (cf. Günel et al. 2020). Therefore, some authors call for a new form of ethnographic research – especially questioning the ideal of the classic one year of fieldwork or village study in the Malinowskian tradition – under the buzzword "patchwork ethnography" (ibid).

While these works provide fascinating insights, in the context of my research, patchwork became significant as a methodological point of reference in a broader sense, due to the many limitations and restrictions heaped upon both research and private life in the wake of the corona pandemic. Additionally, though, the boundaries between these two spheres became increasingly blurred, as in the course of my fieldwork patchwork also became a creative occupation and offered the possibility to engage with others on a personal level in times of spatial distance and social distancing. Therefore, my 'private' interest in patchwork and sewing as creative techniques led to a new focus of attention: while engaging with patchwork and quilting as subjects of anthropological inquiry and through conversations with my interlocutors, I became more attentive to any kind of handicraft activities in the field and its embedding into gendered, class-related and racialised dimensions of the everyday life of researchers and research partners. These included not only the differing and unjustly distributed opportunities to learn and pursue such a 'hobby', but also the (questionable) significance of voluntarily producing material aid objects in the wake of disaster.

Furthermore, it made me aware of the recurring connection between manual care work and notions of what can be considered an appropriate occupation for women – as a general category but (with slightly different implications) especially for women addressed as refugees against the background of the activating German welfare state. Finally, this new research lens made obvious not only our differences and commonalities as researchers and research partners, e.g., our shared difficulties in dealing with new living circumstances in the pandemic, but also our (different but related) struggles of living as women in a society profoundly shaped by patriarchy and racialisation. Once more, this might be taken as a reminder that researchers and research partners are not trapped in differ-

ent times and spaces but should rather be considered as "actors within the same political and societal surrounding, although they occupy different positions" (Sökefeld 2002: 89, my translation).

Against this backdrop, it has to be acknowledged that I was not the only researcher (or ethnographic patchworker) in this context, as my interlocutors were also highly involved in the joint discussions on first ideas and interpretation, as well as constructive critiques regarding the whole research process. Therefore, I owe them a lot of gratitude for teaching me how to "weave" (cf. Ingold 2000) together the various patches that come together to make up this research.

Finally, patchwork and ethnography might be regarded as two related trades, as they both rely not only on a rigorous methodological procedure, but also on the element of surprise. Furthermore, as ethnographers *and* quilters, we often need to make various attempts to rearrange 'the material' until we can recognise any overarching themes and patterns that might help us make sense of all those bits and pieces we have collected over time. However, we have to acknowledge that any resulting insights are never just on our own merit but depend on the patterns designed by those that came before us and the knowledge of those that kindly take the time to talk and explain to us how it all fits together.

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