

# MEN OF HARD DAYS

*AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF ASYLUM SEEKING,  
TEMPORALITY AND CARCERALITY WITHIN THE TERRAIN OF  
ENCAMPMENT IN DENMARK*



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PhD thesis



Centre for Advanced Migration Studies (AMIS)

PhD School in the Humanities

University of Copenhagen

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PhD thesis

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## **Cover images**

The cover images are taken by photographer Farzad Soleimani. Both images were taken in Autumn 2020 in Camp Thyregod as it was being emptied out and closed as regular accommodation for people seeking asylum. The images were originally shown as part of a bigger exhibition *SEVENTY-SIX ROOMS* at the 2022 Nordic Migration Research Conference at University of Copenhagen. Soleimani has captured traces large and small of the lives lived there by former occupants, right at the threshold between presence and absence.

For Mo

with the big smile and the heavy heart  
may you rest peacefully, finally



They wait in places where they live while they wait, wait to live while they wait. Live to live.  
While they wait. Live to live. While they live. While they wait. While they live. Wait. Live.

(Inger Christensen (1969) *It*)

## Acknowledgements

*I have dedicated this thesis to Mo, an interlocutor who died by suicide after enduring the hardship of asylum seeking for a couple of years. He came to Denmark with hope and enthusiasm but also with trauma. Otherwise, he might never have come. He was a funny, loud, caring, emotional man. He was a hopeless romantic. He was also a lot of other things, very annoying at times because of his electric energy for example. He expected a lot from people because he always gave a lot, and because of that he was often disappointed in his peers - both in the camp, among the people he met and befriended in Denmark, the Danish authorities, his religious community. However, he was an optimist, and he never gave up hope that everyone could and would do better, not until at the end of his life at least. He should have been taken care of better, and I am saddened and angered by his death. Knowing and losing Mo will stay with me.*

An immense gratitude first and foremost to the men who lived in the camp in Thyregod. I am forever moved by your kindness and willingness to share both profound and everyday experiences with me. Your patience with me and my questions was impressive, and I am so pleased that I am still able to speak to and know some of you. Your way in the world is not for the weak-hearted, after all you are men of hard days.

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A special thanks to Farzad Soleimani, the photographer behind the beautiful and haunting images on the front cover of this thesis and throughout.

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Lasse, my comfort zone and my safety net to arrive home to. You've helped with everything I asked for, and it feels very special to have someone who will do that. Tak min skat.

And finally, Olga the dog - my forever best friend who brought a lot of love, long walks and fresh air into my life at some point in this process. You were exactly what I needed!

## Summary

This PhD thesis is overall and most importantly about asylum seeking and camp living. It explores how a group of men seeking asylum in Denmark experienced and navigated everyday life in the camp, and how the carceral, temporal, and affective conditions of that camp shaped their ways of being in the world. The main empirical foundation is twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019 at an accommodation camp in the village of Thyregod in rural Denmark, supplemented by field visits to Bosnia Herzegovina and Greece, as well as continued engagement with interlocutors across digital and physical spaces. The thesis is also informed by nearly a decade of involvement and interest in the field of asylum seeking in Denmark.

The analytical work is carried out through three journal articles, each addressing the overarching question from a different angle. In the first article (“Little Prisons”) it is shown how the experience of carcerality in the camp cannot be understood through spatial conditions alone. By expanding *the trajectory approach* to include the revisiting of past journeys from within the carceral present, it reveals how the camp becomes a “little prison” contrasting past mobility with the experience of an immobile present. Furthermore, it shows how revisiting trajectories also is an insistence on selfhood. Article 2, (“Churn”) co-authored with Zachary Whyte, draws on a combined 25 years of fieldwork and a historical synthesis of ethnographic literature on Danish asylum camps. It argues that the Danish asylum system is characterised by churn. Churn should be understood as the ongoing institutional production of change whose cumulative effect is paradoxically more static than transformative. It is the constancy of change itself that produces and reproduces experiences of isolation, passivity, and uncertainty. In the third article (“Wary Compassion”) turns inward to the atmosphere of the camp and the kind of social space it facilitates. Through an extended ethnographic description of an improvised memorial ceremony, it proposes the concept of wary compassion to capture the affective dynamics between residents. Wary compassion is a characteristic of the camp atmosphere and holds an inherent tension of care at an arm’s length.

Taken together, the three articles offer complementary perspectives by looking outward along trajectories, by zooming out and focusing on historical and institutional perspectives, and by turning the gaze inward to the social and affective textures of camp life. What connects them is the insistence that the camp cannot be understood in isolation and that the everyday life taking place there reaches well beyond it. The thesis contributes to camp and migrations studies by advancing a conception of the camp as multiple and relational. The men I worked with in Thyregod were, as an interlocutor put it, men of hard days. There was always more to their lives than the camp could contain, even as the camp shaped those lives profoundly. This thesis has been an attempt to understand their perspectives on an experiences with asylum seeking and camp living.

## Resumé

Denne ph.d.-afhandling handler overordnet set om asylsøgning og livet i en (asyl)lejr. I afhandlingen undersøges det, hvordan en gruppe asylsøgende mænd, oplever og navigerer hverdagslivet i lejren, samt hvordan 'carceral', tidlige og affektive omstændigheder i lejren former disse mænds måder at være i verden på. Afhandling baserer sig primært på 12 måneders etnografisk feltarbejde fra 2018-2019 på et helt almindeligt asylcenter i landsbyen Thyregod i den sydlige del af Jylland, kortere feltbesøg til steder i Bosnien og Grækenland samt et fortsat engagement med informanter både i den digitale sfære, men også via opfølgende fysiske møder gennem årene. Derudover er denne afhandling også informeret af et årtis interesse og engagement i asylområdet i Danmark. Det primære analytiske arbejde ligger i de tre tidsskriftsartikler, som hver især adresserer det overordnede forskningsspørgsmål, men fra forskellige vinkler. Den første artikel ("Little Prisons") viser, hvordan oplevelsen af 'carcerality' i lejren ikke kun skal forstås ud fra de rummelige rammer, som omgiver beboerne. Ved at udbrede begrebet 'trajectory approach' til også at inkludere det at genbesøge tidligere rejser gennem samtaler og minder, bliver det tydeligt, at noget af det, der forvandler lejren til et 'lille fængsel', er kontrasten mellem tidligere mobilitet og oplevelsen af det modsatte i nutiden. I artikel 2 ('Churn'), som er skrevet sammen med Zachary Whyte, trækkes der på et samlet etnografisk feltarbejde på tværs af 25 år, samt en betydelig gennemgang af etnografiske analyser produceret siden 1980'erne. Det argumenteres i artiklen, at det danske asylsystem er karakteriseret af, hvad vi kalder 'churn'. 'Churn' skal forstås som den konstante produktion af forandringer, hvis akkumulerende effekt paradoksalt nok er mere statisk end foranderlig. Hermed foreslås det, at det er den konstante forandring i sig selv, der producerer og reproducerer oplevelser af isolation, passivitet og usikkerhed for mennesker, der søger asyl i Danmark. Den sidste af de tre artikler ('Wary compassion') kigger indad i lejren og forholder sig til det sociale rum og lejrens atmosfære. Gennem en specifik etnografisk case, der beskriver et improviseret begravelsesritual, foreslås begrebet 'wary compassion', som en måde at fange de affektive dynamikker, der er på spil i lejren. 'Wary compassion' skabes som en måde at være i forhold til hinanden i den specifikke 'lejr atmosfære'. Begrebets dynamik består i dets indlejret spænding mellem omsorg og afstand. Samlet set, så komplimenterer de tre artiklers perspektiver hinanden. Der bliver kigget ud af lejren langs ruter og 'trajectories', der bliver zoomet ud til et institutionelt og historisk perspektiv, og der bliver kigget indad mod de sociale og affektive teksturer i lejren. Afhandlingen samles af en grundlæggende insisteren på, at lejren ikke kan forstås i isolation, og at hverdagslivet i lejren strækker sig langt ud over dens fysiske rammer. Afhandlingen bidrager overordnet således til 'camp and migration studies' med at udvikle på en begrebsliggørelse af lejren som multiple og relationel. De mænd, som har deltaget i ph.d.-projektet, var, som en af dem sagde, 'men of hard days'. Der var altid mere til dem og deres liv end det vi så i lejren, også selvom lejren havde en stor indflydelse på netop deres liv. Denne afhandling er et forsøg på at forstå deres perspektiver på og erfaringer med asylsøgning og livet i lejren.

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# Chapter one

## Introduction

*“I am a man of hard days, Cecilie. You don’t know me yet.”*

Daniel<sup>1</sup> had told me this before. That he is a man of hard days. He had also made it obvious that he would not tell me his whole story, and that shielding part of his story was not just for his own sake, but for mine too. Every time I spoke with Daniel I would get a tiny bit more. Although he was Afghan, he did not know his country, he told me. He had grown up in Pakistan and Iran and had lived a difficult and marginalised life already before he arrived in Denmark. His experiences with the European terrain of encampment were brutal but also commonly shared amongst many camp residents; walking through several countries, living in countless cramped camps, doing his best to avoid formal registration. He once told me, with great hesitation, about a place in Hungary where he had stayed for a bit. The place was cold, overcrowded, they stayed in tents outside, and there were no kitchens. *“You didn’t feel like human there. I am sorry to tell you“*, he said, as he sat in his room in Thyregod holding a pillow. He explained that food was handed out once a day, a piece of bread, a can of tuna and a little juice box. He stared into space before he corrected himself. They do not hand out the food, *“they throw it...“*, and he looked disturbed when he said it, pressing the pillow hard against his chest: *“the throw it like when you are feeding animals”*. Daniel was always polite, very insistently present and formal at the same time. He liked company but he did not like speaking that much. Whenever we were driving anywhere in my car, he would always quietly sing songs of impossible love in Dari, Hindi or Urdu, and he had a beautiful and meditative voice. Daniel did not have any family, or at least not any that he was in contact with. A very soft-spoken, introspective and calm man. He weighed every word he shared with me, and I only experienced him emotionally dishevelled once, when he received his final rejection for his asylum case at the Refugee Appeals Board. Not long thereafter he decided to leave Denmark on his own

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<sup>1</sup> All names, bar the location of the camps, are anonymised. Interlocutors’ pseudonyms are either chosen by me or be themselves. Some people have chosen names from celebrities they admire, some chose names of people they missed, and others simply just liked a specific name, and some left it to me to choose a name.

accord. Deportation was not an option for him. Daniel had always found his own way in this world, as he told me often, and so he did again after his case was rejected in Denmark. I went to visit him in a camp in Germany just over a year after I met him the first time, at a time where I felt that I was quite close with him. We had been in close contact both before and after he left Denmark, and I was very updated on his life. He showed me around the camp and the nearby areas, and we spoke both as researcher-interlocutor but also as friends, catching up on things. As I left, we continued our conversation over WhatsApp and this is when Daniel wrote that message: *I am a man of hard days, Cecilie. You don't know me yet.* This gave me something to think about, because I had imagined that being close with him was somewhat synonymous with knowing him. But he was right, I did not know him yet. Throughout this PhD project I have followed a group of men, men of hard days, as Daniel said, and the more immersed in the field I found myself, the more it opened up, and I realised that what Daniel ended up telling me, that I do not know him yet, was indeed true. Knowing these men in the context of the camp, is not the same as knowing them, simply because the camp context is so specific and encompassing. Who you can be in the camp may feel far from who you feel you are. By the same token, the camp is also a very specific place to get to know people. My position there meant that I got to know these men in particular ways that did not always fit their own understandings. And that is what this PhD thesis is about.

It is not an attempt to know these men. It is an attempt to understand the situation they are in, to understand and learn from them about asylum seeking and camp living, I therefore categorise this as a PhD thesis on exactly that: asylum seeking and camp living. The empirical outset is the Danish campscape, but I want to emphasise that I consider this a part of the European terrain of encampment. This is what the men central to this thesis have navigated in many different ways. They have moved geographically, emotionally, existentially - some of them also religiously - through Europe. Their trajectories are not linear or direct, nor will they be as they leave the camp in Denmark. This understanding, at the core of critical migration studies, is also the necessary starting point for my own inquiry.

My engagement with the Danish asylum field stretches back. In March 2013 I moved to Jelling for the first time. I was there to do about six months of ethnographic fieldwork as part of my master's programme in Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen. This was my first

meeting with this field that has shaped my work life and interests for the past decade. Since then, I have worked with and in it through many forms of engagement. Since the ethnographic work I did for my master's, I have been engaged in informal civil society networks, not necessarily as what I would call an activist, but using my detailed knowledge of asylum seeking in Denmark to facilitate informal networks and contacts for students, researcher, migrants and activists. I have also worked more formally with documentation on the Danish deportation camps for Amnesty International Denmark. This PhD thesis, though it draws directly from the empirical data of my doctoral fieldwork, is also informed by these previous engagements in the field, and knowledge of and about people seeking asylum. Right before this thesis was submitted - on the 26th of February 2026 - the camp in Jelling closed after more than 30 years. It is the final Red Cross-managed camp in that part of Southern mainland Denmark. With the closing of Jelling, as the final Red Cross-managed camp in that area to close down, it is the end of a geographical field site that I have returned to since 2013. Yet, as I will show in the second chapter of this thesis, the fact that this field is also digital means that I will continue my engagement. And this perhaps also speaks to the potential meaning of the word "yet" in Daniel's message. Despite the circumstances imposed by the camps and the hard days, it is still possible to get to know each other.

### ***Research statement and questions***

When I applied to undertake this PhD project as part of the Carceral Mobilities Project (CAMP) (AMIS, 2018) my project looked slightly different although the sentiment of being primarily interested in asylum seeking and camp living was also present. My initial research question was focused on *how refugees navigate the terrains of encampment they face on their way to, through and in Denmark, and specifically focusing on connecting the temporal aspects of this journey with the spatial conditions encountered.*

Some of this ambition remains. This PhD thesis explores how the terrain of encampment, primarily in Denmark, and its carceral conditions are navigated, experienced and most importantly lived with and in by a group of men seeking asylum. It lays out methodological and ethical reflections on working in this field, of having a field that is characterised by its hybridity, and gender, and all of this is framed within the conceptual and empirical frame of

the camp. Yet it has also expanded in scope to include both reflections on the wider political field of asylum-seeking in Denmark as well as the atmospheres of the camps and the possibilities for sociality there. Through three different articles overarching themes of carcerality, temporality and affect are addressed through analytical perspectives on trajectories, churn, atmospheres and sociality. The overarching research question from which this thesis takes its starting point is:

*How is everyday life experienced and navigated by men seeking asylum in a Danish asylum camp, and how do the carceral, temporal, and affective conditions of the camp shape their ways of being in the world?*

### **Thesis structure**

This thesis is article-based. The main analytical contribution is found in the three journal articles. Each of these articles follow their own complete structure with theoretical frameworks, methodological reflections, unique, empirically founded analysis and a conclusion. Besides this the so-called “cape” frames and contextualises the overall PhD project.

This thesis therefore unfolds as follows: after this brief introduction of the Phd project, motivating its relevance and outline its overarching research question, I will dive into the context in chapter two. Here I will present the geographical field site and introduce the reader to the camp. I will also briefly outline some of the bureaucratic, political and legal structures that frame everyday lives for people seeking asylum and living in camps in Denmark. In chapter three, I will discuss the methods and ethical considerations that guided this this project. This chapter is closely connected to the description of the camp context as methodological movement and considerations were organically and ethically shaped by their specific context. In chapter three, I therefore, chose to emphasise specific discussion of my fieldwork based on relevance and transparency. In the fourth chapter I will unfold the state of research and theoretical framework for this thesis. Here I have focused on overarching categories of camps and carcerality, camps and temporality and camps and uncertainty. These themes resonate across the three articles and a firm rooting in their theoretical tradition is the point of view that their individual analytical trajectories start from. Chapter five is a brief description of each article, summarising their contribution and stating their publication status. In the final chapter

I draw an overall conclusion highlighting the contributions of this PhD thesis. Hereafter you will find the bibliography for the thesis framework as each individual article will have their own bibliography. The collection of articles follows hereafter, while formal documents can be found in the appendix.



# Chapter two

## Context of the field

I will, in the following, present the field context – both spatial, political and legal. I begin this contextualization from the place that this thesis is about, the camp in Thyregod<sup>2</sup>, and its surrounding areas. Please note that this will be an introduction to the camp in Thyregod, and that much more will be unfolded in the chapter on Methodology and Ethics as well as in the three articles of this thesis. After introducing Thyregod, I will describe the Danish asylum system with an emphasis on how it is experienced by those seeking asylum. Finally, I will give a brief overview of the political and legal framework that structures the everyday life of people seeking asylum in Denmark. I want to note, that as part of the fieldwork for this thesis, I also visited Bihac in northwestern Bosnia Hercegovina as well as some locations on mainland Greece. These field visits played a part in contextualising interlocutors experiences, and the methodological impact of using these trips is unfolded in the first article “‘Little prisons’: Revisiting trajectories and carcerality in a Danish asylum camp”. I do not consider these places as separate fields, but as part of experience of asylum seeking in Denmark (see Chapter three on methods for more).

## Thyregod – camps and surroundings

The camp was an unassuming place. It was on the side of a road - Thyregodvej - that ran right along the eastern part of the village and its outskirts. There was a neighbour on one side, a small farm with a big barn facing towards the camp where there seemed to be some kind of auto mechanic or machine shop. Often, I would hear revving engines from behind the small tree

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<sup>2</sup> I have not anonymised the names of camps and areas in Denmark. This is a conscious choice. First, the camp in Thyregod is no longer open. The interlocutors I worked with were all gone from there by the end of 2020. The ones still in the camp when it was closed were dispersed to other camps. Second, the number of camps in Denmark was and is relatively low (in 2019 14 locations in total, in 2020 12 locations, and in 2026 it is 15 locations though not the same (Ritzau, 2020; Udlændingestyrelsen, 2020, 2026)) and it would be very easy to figure out the places central in this thesis. My concern is with protecting the identity of the participating residents of the camps and none of them have any connection to these camps anymore.

line separating the two plots of land. In front of the camp ran the road as a little ditch between the camp and the village and on the two other sides was agricultural land, fields.

The village of Thyregod is a small place with around 1300 inhabitants, located in the Southern part of Jutland on the mainland of Denmark. Thyregod has a railway station, and it is on a train line with regular trains towards Herning and Struer and in the other direction Jelling and Vejle. Thyregod itself has a small supermarket but not much else. It is a little famous for having homed two different important voices within Danish nationalism. N.F.S. Grundtvig, who was the famous founding father of the Danish folk high school movement and apparently lived in Thyregod as a child and young teenager. And Kristian Thuelsen Dahl who was the former chair of the nationalist Danish People Party and long-term Thyregod resident. Thyregod also has a small industrial district but mostly it is surrounded by farmland. It is located somewhere in between Herning and Vejle, two larger towns that the camp inhabitants would visit, when possible, via the train. It seemed like people in the camp had a favourite destination between the two and half of them went to Herning and half went to Vejle for errands, hanging out, whatever they might get up to. In Vejle there are good train and bus connections towards Copenhagen and Sweden, towards Aarhus and towards Kolding and Germany. Both Vejle and Herning also had a wider range of shops including Asian and African groceries and cheaper supermarkets.

Thyregod looks and *feels* like any other rural Danish village. A little bit sleepy. There are some football fields where the men from the camp had football practice at times but it faded out while I was there as the volunteer trainer withdrew. There is also an indoor swimming pool and the local volunteer, Elisabeth would sometimes secure entry tickets to hand out amongst the camp residents. A real Thyregod resident would probably present lot more things to do there, however this is the Thyregod I got to know from the men in the camp, the Thyregod that they experienced as available to them and the Thyregod that was part of their camp lives.



Screen shot from Google Maps Satellite view of the camp buildings. (accessed May 8th 2025)

Thyregod, the camp, is easy to miss when you drive along Thyregodvej. It consists of seven modular buildings, all in grey colours and does not stand out in anyway. I would mostly enter the buildings from the parking lot through the corner of the L-shaped building (it was really two of the building modules connected by a doorway). To the left there was a few smaller rooms which were technically common areas and had, with previous resident groups, been actively used by then volunteers and residents. Now they were most often closed. One of the rooms was supposed to be for gaming, but it was rarely used and rarely had any gaming equipment. And then there was a room that was supposed to be for other crafts and hobbies. This camp, before housing the group of men who lived there now, had also housed other groups of people seeking asylum: children and young people, families, people with special care needs. At some point this space for hobbies and crafts was probably used and facilitated on a weekly or daily basis but the extracurricular activities offered to the current group of asylum-seeking men were quite sparse.

To the right through this entrance was the door into the Red Cross office of the camp. Just as the rest of the camp, it was an insignificant room, it looked easy to dismantle. There was a wall of windows through which the Red Cross employee working the office could look out at the main courtyard of the camp where the flagpole with weathered Red Cross flag was placed in

the middle. Likewise, the residents of the camp could walk up to the office window and see who, if anyone, was inside. They used this method to check whether or not the office was open as you could never be sure, but they also checked to see if other residents were inside. In the window the staff would also hang the daily 'post list'. This was a printout with the ID number of any resident who had mail to pick up, and checking the 'post list' was a key everyday ritual for everyone. The Danish Immigration Service would only communicate news of people's asylum cases like this. So, while residents might also receive other kinds of mail (for example from the Red Cross jobcentre, the school, the health clinic) it was the mail from 'immigration' that people waited for. It was also in the office window that I hung an introduction of myself and my project, and where any relevant and irrelevant information was posted (visits by the Danish Refugee Council, volunteer activities, etc). Inside the office there was a large table intended for meetings but often used informally by people waiting to speak to the staff member, waiting to leave for the train station, waiting for the daily post list to be printed, or simply just a little bit bored and waiting for the time to pass in proximity to some kind of company. There was not much on the walls apart from a map of Denmark, which we sometimes looked at and discussed in relation to camps people had lived in previously, areas where they knew someone, municipalities they were moving to in cases of positive asylum applications or camps they hoped to never see the inside of, such as the deportation camps like Kærshovedgård.



From the Danish Red Cross office, picture by the author.

The same building housing the office also had a room that was always open to camp residents, the 'billiard room'. Equally unassuming, this room had a pool table, a very worn-out sofa and a ping-pong table. The pool table was the most used by the residents. Maybe they preferred pool, or maybe it was because the ping-pong table often lacked ping-pong balls. It was not uncommon for one of the members of staff to play either pool (or 'billiard' as people called it) or ping-pong with residents. Connecting to the 'billiard room' was the staff kitchen. This room was generally locked (as was the office when no staff was in there as well as other non-common areas), but I had a key, and I slowly, over the first couple of months, made this space into my domain. Here I could brew batches of coffee and tea for the camp residents (and the staff), and people knew where to look for me. It felt like a neutral space to occupy as it had not really had a prior role in the lives of the residents, as it has mostly been closed off, and mostly used by staff. The kitchen, however, was also used in relation to volunteer activities. These were very sparse in the camp, just as the Red Cross manager of all the camps in the area had told me: not much was going on out there. However, a little was happening, mostly pioneered by Elisabeth, a local woman, who tirelessly insisted on trying to make everyday life in a camp like Thyregod just a tiny bit better. She had volunteered there for several years and with different resident groups (Thyregod had previously housed people with special care needs, families, unaccompanied minors), and while it was more difficult to recruit volunteers to activities for the current group of 'single male asylum seekers', as the current residents were categorised, Elisabeth did not waver in her engagement. When I arrived Elisabeth and two other volunteers hosted a little café in the kitchen twice a month, that I participated in too. It was a space to hang out, play a board game, work on some crafts (they had a key for the crafts room) and whatever people wanted to do. It was not overly popular, however the people that did show up were very loyal to the event. Within the first six months of my fieldwork, we fused the café into a communal dinner every other week, paid for by the Red Cross activities budget, and cooked by me, with the help of Elisabeth and Wasim. Wasim, a young Palestinian man who grew up in Syria really liked cooking, company, and to be helpful. He was generally a very restless man, always looking for something to do, so over the year he became my permanent cooking buddy.

In the end of these two buildings making the L-shaped corner of the camp, there was also a small more or less functional gym (on the other side of the kitchen), mostly used by Behruz who was a former body builder, and in a much smaller building next to it: a laundry room and the janitor's office. The rest of the main modular buildings, five out of the seven, housed the camp residents. These buildings were all build by the same recipe: rooms and shared bathrooms at each end of them with a communal kitchen in the middle. As the number of residents in Thyregod fluctuated so did the room distribution. Some people were lucky to have their own room while others shared 2-3 people. It was not by pure luck; some people had circumstances making a private room a necessity. This could be due to sexual orientation (see Schröder, 2025), mental health issues, and also just being difficult. Residents who acted out in any ways which led to complaints by roommates often ended up in their own space. These buildings are familiar in the sense that they are used and re-used in other camps spaces (Whyte and Ulfstjerne, 2020). They are meant to be moved (ibid.) and are thereafter in construction. Residents said that the walls were thin, so it really did not take much to be bothered by a neighbour or feel exposed.

Everyday life in the camp is really subdued. People only get up in the morning if they have to go to school or 'praktik'. Both of these offers are part of the activation programme and while both elements works to structure the day kind of, for most people they do not contribute meaningfulness and are therefore approached with less and less enthusiasm as time passes (Kohl, 2020). Otherwise, people tend to sleep late into the day, as most of them struggle to sleep at night. Awad once described it as having a tv turning on whenever he laid down. It was there, right in front of him, no matter which side he laid on. A lot of people talked about nightly ruminations and troubles sleeping. Some even tried to go to the health clinic for some assistance, but everyone was told more or less the same: it is stress. Whenever people got up, they went to check the post list. Some had a list of ID numbers to look out for, as some of the residents who had friends, family, partners outside the camp, stayed with them and only showed when they had mail or 'pocket money' to pick up. Everyday life was really quite uneventful. I explore this much further in the third articles on *wary compassion*.

The camp was staffed by two men (and sometimes a third person would join from the bigger camp in Jelling. One of the men was the office worker and the other one was responsible for

janitorial tasks, facilities, gardening and beyond. Both men were quite well-liked by residents and were also always kind and trying to lighten the mood, sometimes more successfully than others. The staff were around Monday through Friday but only during office hours, and the rest of the time residents were on their own.



From the courtyard in the camp in Thyregod. Picture by author.

I drove there every day from Jelling, a bigger village or even small town, approximately 25 km away. I stayed in Jelling, where I had rented a room with a wonderful middle-aged woman who incidentally worked at the 'asylum school' when I moved in. Jelling is famous for being home to the first monarchs of Denmark at some point in the Viking Age as well as being the place from which the Danes were Christianised in the 10th century. All of this is manifested by the

Jelling stones (runic stones) and two burial mounds. All of this is a UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO, n.d.).

Locally, Jelling is also famous for a big music festival, a school for teacher education and an asylum camp that opened in 1993<sup>3</sup>. Quite contrary to the placement of most camps in Denmark, the one in Jelling is right in the middle of the village and very integrated into both the routes through parts of the area as well as into the local social welfare institutions like nursery, kindergarten, youth club and a public school (UNESCO n.d.). The camp in Jelling is an accommodation camp for families and couples and run by the Danish Red Cross and the manager here oversees the other two Red Cross-managed accommodation camps in the area: in nearby Sandvad (couples and families) and in Thyregod (men only). It was also the head of Camp Jelling who suggested I do my fieldwork in Thyregod, 'as nothing much was going out there anyway', which turned out to be very true.

Jelling has a lot more general activity than Thyregod; around 4000 inhabitants, three supermarkets, a couple of cafés, a library, and then it is a cultural location so also a fair number of tourists.

The men from Thyregod go to Jelling for several things; for the asylum school, as it is called, for meetings with the camp job centre, some of them do their 'praktik' here, some of them have friends there, if they need to see staff at the health clinic, some of them shop there, some of them join activities organised by staff or volunteers in connection to the camp in Jelling. All the men in Thyregod who have agreed to the offer (and then duty) to attend the asylum school, have a free transportation pass for the train between Jelling and Thyregod. For any other locations they would have to pay or risk the fine (which many did for lack of funding). I often gave people rides when driving between Jelling and Thyregod.

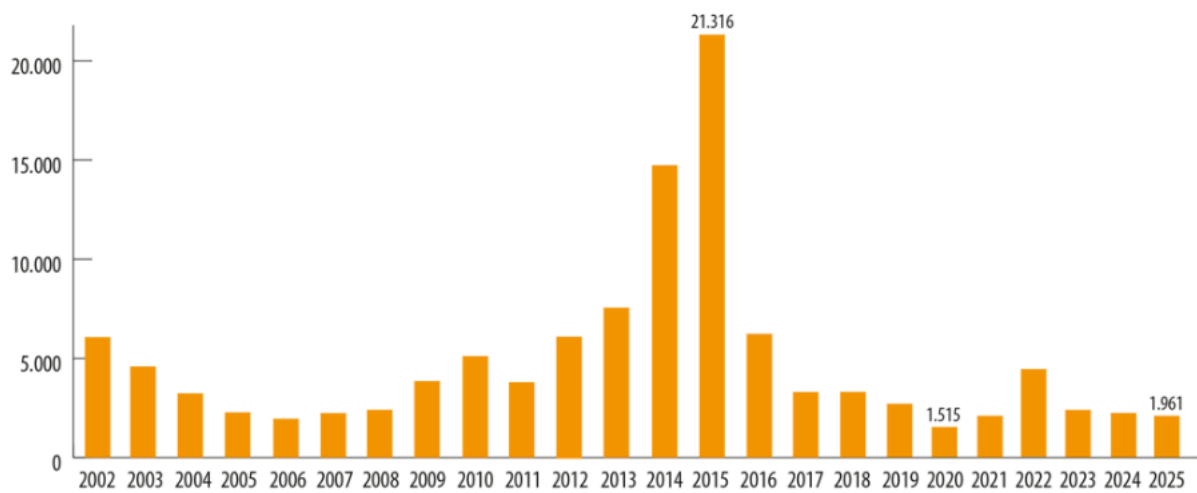
The terrain of encampment in Denmark is fairly volatile. The opening and closing of camps are dependent on the number of people seeking asylum which is dynamic and reflective of general migration movements and policies. This below graph is created by the NGO Refugees

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally it was just decided in 2025 by the Danish Immigration Service to close down Camp Jelling, reason given is financial, and so on Feb 26th 2026, the day before this thesis is submitted, they will lower the Red Cross flag for the last time.

Welcome based on numbers from the Danish Immigration Service. However, as Refugees Welcome note these statistics based on gross numbers are slightly misleading as they includes people who will not have their case even opened in Denmark (due to being manifestly unfounded or belonging under the Dublin procedure) (Refugees Welcome, n.d.). It should also be noted that people arriving from Ukraine receiving a temporary permit to remain are granted that under a special act and not considered ‘asylum seekers’ but ‘displaced’. The number of arriving Ukrainians is much higher and in 2025, 13705 Ukrainians were granted a permit (under the special act). (ibid.:2026).

**NUMBER OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN DENMARK 2002-2025 (gross numbers)**



Source: Danish Immigration Service  
Graph: refugeeswelcome.dk

The countries people arrive from are mostly Asian, European and African, however I also met a few people from the Americas during my fieldwork. Many people arrive clandestinely as it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get visas to countries in the EU from especially Asian and African destinations (Refugees Welcome, n.d.).

## The Danish Asylum System

In Denmark the asylum system is split into three phases, and they are generally presented as more straightforward and linear than they are experienced. The below model (Refugees Welcome, n.d.) shows the three phases in much more detail.

### THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE IN DENMARK

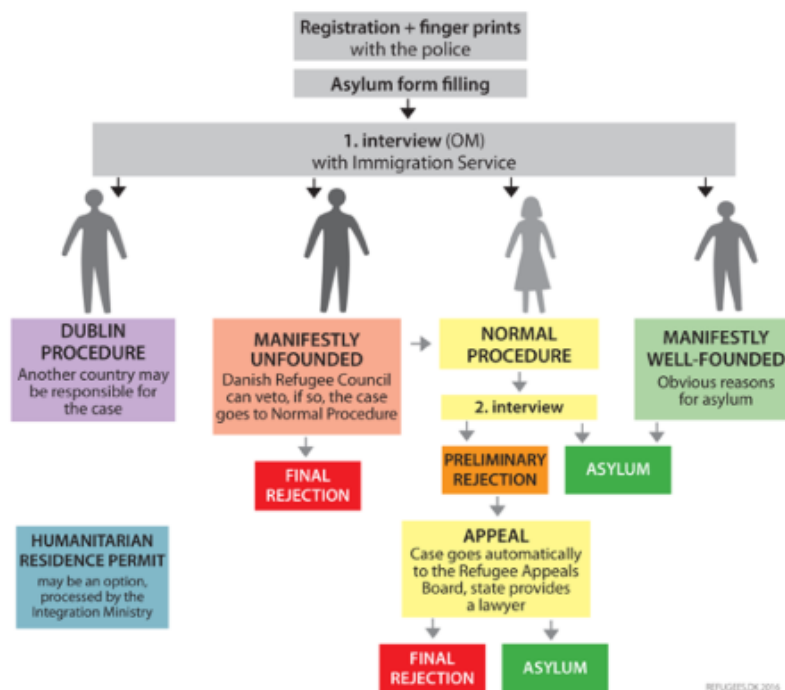


Figure by Refugees Welcome, visualising the different phases of the Danish Asylum System.

In the first phase, the person seeking asylum is registered as an ‘asylum seeker’. It is on the basis of information gathered in this phase that it is determined what kind of procedure the person will follow through the system. If the person applying for asylum is determined to be under the Dublin II Regulation, they will remain in the first phase while the Dublin procedure is applied. In this first phase all types of identification are established as well as the asylum motive. The person seeking asylum has their first interview with the Danish Immigration Service. During

this phase they will remain in a reception accommodation camp like Sandholm where they will eat in the cafeteria. If they are not considered to be a case under the Dublin procedure, their case is processed in Denmark.

Phase two is the period in which the asylum application is processed. Most people are processed under the normal procedure (Refugees Welcome, n.d.) but cases could also be considered as either ‘manifestly unfounded’ or ‘manifestly well-founded’<sup>4</sup>. In phase two (under the normal procedure) the person seeking asylum is moved to an accommodation camp, like the one in Thyregod, where they receive a cash allowance, often referred to as ‘pocket money’ in the camp by both residents and staff. This is supposed to cover expenses for groceries, public transport, cigarettes, clothes, phone bills, and other necessities. As part of the activation programme people in phase two are offered to enter into a contract with the ‘job centre’ of the camp (for the people in Thyregod this is placed in Jelling) agreeing to take language classes and do an internship (‘praktik’), which can be self-chosen and outside of the camp but most often is within the camp and consists of janitorial or cleaning duties (Kohl, 2015, 2020). The ‘pocket money’ that people receive (in cash) every two weeks is slightly boosted if they agree to the activation contract, however that also meant that they had to show up for school and ‘praktik’ and provide a legitimate reason for any absence. Within phase two people are called for their second interview with the Danish Immigration Service and will, after that, receive the decision from them (first instance). All people who receive a rejection in the first instance is offered an interview with the Danish Return Agency, which they are not obliged to participate in. In this interview they will be told “(...) *how many people from the country of origin that are rejected and ask if [they] want to cancel [their] complaint.*” (DRC Danish Refugee Council, n.d.). This conversation is purely based on statistics as the agency does not know the individual applicant’s case. If they do not withdraw their case, it is automatically appealed to the Refugee Appeals

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<sup>4</sup> Manifestly unfounded cases are determined to be so by the Danish Immigration Service based on what they consider unfounded grounds (e.g. people from other European countries), however the case will be referred to the The Danish Refugee Council before final refusal, and they will interview the applicant before making their recommendation. They have veto rights in this procedure. However, if the applicant is refused asylum here, there is no appeal right to the Refugee Appeals Board. Manifestly well-founded cases are cases considered obvious for asylum and therefore are determined a lot faster than the ones under normal procedure (DRC Danish Refugee Council, n.d.; Refugees Welcome, n.d.).

Board (second instance), a “*quasi-legal, independent administrative body*” (ibid.)<sup>5</sup>. In the Danish asylum system, there is no appeal option into the general court system. At the Refugee Appeals Board the person seeking asylum is represented by an appointed lawyer and they will have an interpreter available. Matilde Skov Danstrøm and Zachary Whyte have written on the centrality of asylum narratives in determination processes and in relation to this emphasising the importance of credibility and authorship (2019). In the camp I have gone through a lot of interview transcripts (from interviews on asylum motive carried out by the Danish Immigration Service) as well as grounds for rejections, and often interlocutors voiced experiences of discrepancy between their explanation and how it was noted down. Likewise, a lot of rejections of applications are based on the applicant deemed not credible due to diverging narratives. As Danstrøm and Whyte observe it is also a specific kind of ‘re-presenting’ of this narrative that is preferred in front of authorities like at the Refugee Appeals Board (2019).

Any kind of communication regarding one’s asylum case comes as mail which is why checking the daily printed ‘post list’ is a key everyday ritual for everyone in the camp. During my master’s fieldwork a Somali family father, Amiin, told me about his and his wife’s, Hani, daily ritual, When the office opened, he would go and check the list, while she waited anxiously in their room for any news. Every time he returned empty-handed, Hani would look at him, exhale and state: “*Ok. Live.*”

If the person seeking asylum gets ‘positive’ they are moved to a municipality in Denmark. The decision of where sometimes accommodates specific requests (based on established network, family and other preferences) but it is also dependent on an annual allocation quota determining how many refugees the different Danish municipalities should receive. The receiving municipality is responsible for temporary accommodation, which, for a lot of refugees, turns into places they live a lot longer than they expect to. Up until 2019 and the so-called ‘paradigm shift’, people had a right to permanent housing when they moved into their new municipality (Refugees Welcome, n.d.). As this is no longer the case, interlocutors who

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<sup>5</sup> The board consists of three members: an appointed judge (the chair), a member appointed by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, and a member appointed by the Council of the Danish Bar and Law Society. Approximately 20% of the rulings from the first instance (Danish Immigration Service) is reversed (Refugees Welcome, n.d.).

struggled to find this on their own complained that their new homes in the municipality, the temporary housing, was exactly like living in the camp. I have visited people in a few of these temporary housings, and it does indeed resemble camp living. One interlocutor had a room (but shared kitchen and bathrooms) in an old school in which the other residents were also refugees, while another moved into a room in a row of barracks that resembled the camp of Thyregod a lot. Together with colleagues we have written an op-ed on the reach of the camp into the post-asylum phase (Kohl et al., 2019).

People move into the third phase if they are rejected for asylum in both instances. In the third phase they are confronted with the Danish Return Agency with whom they are encouraged to collaborate on their own return through a contract. What this ‘collaboration’ entailed could be very difficult for people to figure out, for example it sometimes seemed that difficulties in deporting people due to resistance from their country of origin could be viewed as a lack of collaboration. Katrine Sypli Kohl has written on the specific kind of ‘motivational interviews’ that were held with people to convince them to return voluntarily (Kohl, 2022). In phase three people are moved to what they most often call deportation camps. In this phase they do not receive financial aid and do not have the option to cook themselves but will eat in the camp’s cafeteria<sup>6</sup>. These camps are highly contested by the people who live there, their relatives, activists etc. and for good reasons (see Suárez-Krabbe, Lindberg, and Arce 2018 for insights). People have specific control duties to adhere by, such as a duty to report (to the Danish Return Agency that are present in the camps) and reside meaning that they cannot spend their days with family or friends. They have to apply for permission every time they want to spend a night away. This is just one aspect of the different technologies of control and power that are at play in these camps. While the camps are technically open they are difficult to leave as part of everyday life. Kærshovedgård for example is located eight kilometres from the nearest public transport, and either way people do not receive financial aid in phase three to pay for bus or train tickets. In phase three you also risk detention in Ellebæk and forced deportation.

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<sup>6</sup> After most controversy in public and political discourse (Leth and Jørgensen, 2020), families in phase three, who are housed in Avnstrup got the right to cook their meals back, though under controlled conditions to avoid giving people cash money to shop for. Generally, food has been associate with resistance and use of power in the Danish asylum system (Whyte and Kohl, 2023).

In theory, all the people I met during fieldwork in Thyregod were in the second phase, but I came across quite a few people for whom the presented linearity of the process was not a reality. An older man in the camp had been in Denmark for over 20 years; a lot of that time spent in and out of the camps. His case was of course uncommon, but what was not uncommon was this story of being in and out of the system. This happened for many reasons; two interlocutors had previously had residency in Denmark and left only to have returned now. Others had had residency through student visas or green card type of visas and had either lost their residency right or had been unable to return to their country of origin for different reasons. While flowchart overviews of the asylum system commonly highlight bureaucratic junctions, where decisions are made, and links them with arrows, people seeking asylum spend most of their time in the arrows, so to speak. They spend their time waiting in the camp for the final outcome. Even though the second instance of the Refugee Appeals Board is an extra step in the bureaucratic processing this for example fades into the overall process of ‘phase 2’. Nothing really changes in the applicant’s everyday life in the camp, other than they will have to stay there longer.

## **The political and legal context**

In the following final part, I will briefly go over the political and legal context that structures and frames the everyday life of people seeking asylum. This thesis centres the experience of *asylum seeking* and *camp living* and I therefore attempt to focus on how these structures are experienced and what it means for people seeking asylum rather than the innerworkings and logics of the structures themselves. Please therefore note that the following overview is non-exhaustive and hardly compares to a legal and policy-orientated analysis as such (see instead Mortensen, 2025; Petersen et al., 2025; Scott Ford, 2025 for recent overviews of changing policies in Denmark; Vedsted-Hansen, 2022, 2023).

As Zachary Whyte and I establish in the second article of this thesis on the consistent flow of changes in and on the Danish asylum system, the field of migration has been central in Danish political discourse for many years. This means that policy and therefore legislation has seen a very high number of changes since the turn of the century (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Lokjær Jørgensen, 2014; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Whyte, 2011). Change is a characteristic of Danish

asylum policy, not an exception. Even more noteworthy is the fact that the vast majority of these changes are considered restrictions and have had the aim of worsening conditions for both people seeking asylum but also those who do so successfully and receive refugee status. This trend is not only specific for Denmark; the restrictive approach to refugee protection has been widespread across European countries since 2015 (Schultz and Vedsted-Hansen, 2025). The turn towards a temporary refugee protection (ibid.; Sandberg, Schultz, and Syppli Kohl 2025) will impact futures of for example the interlocutors of this project but the present everyday life in the camp is already highly temporalised and its undefined and uncertain temporariness seeps through every aspect of their present. Legislative changes aimed at the post-asylum phase, although not a major concern in the camp, does also not go unnoticed. I will, in the following section, briefly go through some aspects of the so-called ‘paradigm shift’ as it was rolled out politically during my fieldwork but focusing on what interlocutors noticed. It is worth noting that these Danish policy developments have been increasingly presented as models to follow elsewhere in Europe (see for example ‘Tidöavtalet’ in Sweden).

### ***The ‘paradigm shift’***

The ‘paradigm shift’ was officially introduced publicly in 2019 when Bill 140 [Lov 140] was approved on February 21<sup>st</sup> 2019 (Ingvorsen, 2019; Vedsted-Hansen, 2022). However, as legal scholar Jens Vedsted-Hansen puts forward, this was a continuation of the temporariness in Danish refugee protection that was already introduced in legislation in 2015 (2022:13). In 2015 a new category of protection was added to §7 of the Danish Alien’s Act, namely §7(3) aimed specifically at people fleeing a generalised violence. This third tier was added in addition to convention status §7(1), the strongest form of refugee protection in Denmark, and the subsidiary protection §7(2), that was most commonly used for Syrians fleeing the civil way before the introduction of the new temporary protection status §7(3). §7(3) became the weakest foundation for continuous protection, and the easiest temporary protection status to revoke (Vedsted-Hansen, 2022). Then came the political roll out in 2019, launched by the then government as a serious ‘paradigm shift’ in Danish migration policy. This shift indeed manifested the wish to make refugee protection temporary. It has been debated how much of a shift this really was (Rytter et al., 2023) but it is fair to say that it probably created its intended spectacle (De Genova, 2013). The main and overall shift was from an explicit focus on

integration to an explicit focus on repatriation. This included that for example all residence permits were made temporary and short-time, and that the intention of temporariness would be stated on the actual permit itself. This was commented on by a couple I had met in one of the other camps when they received their residence permit. Their conditions in country of origin makes it very difficult for them to imagine being able to return, but this stamp of temporariness also makes it difficult to imagine the future in Denmark (see also Shapiro et al., 2025) New refugees would no longer receive ‘integration benefits’ as financial aid when they moved into a municipality but rather a ‘return- and self-sufficiency benefit’. Rytter and colleagues frames this a political attempt to mobilise uncertainty and indeed temporality as part of wider deterrence politics (Rytter et al., 2023).

These legislative changes did not go unnoticed by the people living in Thyregod. Shortly after the changes were announced, I ran into a furious Murad at the school. All the people in the camp had been given a note by the Red Cross on what would change with the so-called paradigm shift in Danish refugee protection. *“I am very tired!”* he said angrily, *“I am very tired now... What can I do?”* He was really riled up but he was also scared to say something bad about Denmark (he was still a bit suspicious about me for example), so he calmed himself down. Murad had children that he was hoping to reunite with in Denmark as soon as possible, actually that was the only thing he was working towards. With this ‘paradigm shift’ things had just gotten complicated. Awad was similarly worried about the hindrances to reunite with family, not that he had any of his own, but he was very concerned on the behalf of peers. Like Murad, he had also gotten a note in the school about the coming changes and seemed mostly affected by the increased restrictions on family reunifications - *“that is no good”* as he said, *“people need their family.”* As with the asylum process more broadly, people seeking asylum did not always have a full understanding of the details of the new legislation. But they understood that it was aimed at making their lives more difficult, and this sense folded into their experience of the camp.



By Farzad Soleimani, for the exhibition SEVENTY-SIX ROOMS

# Chapter three

## Methodology and ethics

In this chapter I will lay out the methodological and ethical considerations taken and negotiated before, during and after I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. I carried out the bulk of this ethnographic fieldwork across 2018 and 2019, but as I will unfold in this chapter, the course of the fieldwork was also rooted in prior knowledge and experience from the field as well as continuous contact well beyond 2019 with interlocutors too.

This chapter on methodology and ethics will emphasise some of the main critical reflections that has come out of this fieldwork. In the following I will briefly present how I ended up in Thyregod before moving on to share a precarious interaction from my first month in the camp. I will use this interaction as a stepping stone to a discussion on gender and positionality. In the second half of this chapter I will discuss specific methods used for navigating and positioning myself in the camp as well as the impact of working in hybrid fields. I will reflect on ethical concerns and considerations throughout this whole chapter. I want to emphasise that all of these elements are influenced by each other: the methods I used were also connected to my positionality and the context of the camp itself (see also Weima and Brankamp, 2022).

### *Arriving at Thyregod*

In 2013 I did ethnographic fieldwork for my master thesis in anthropology in two interconnected Red Cross camps in Jutland (Jelling and Sandvad). This fieldwork focused on aspects of waiting amongst people seeking asylum in Denmark. I still had a semi-active contact with an employee working there and through him I was kept updated on the Red Cross structure of the place. When I began my PhD research as part of the “Carceral Mobilities project”, I approached the question of access through both a central project manager within the Red Cross as well as the daily leader of the camps in Jutland (three camps within a 25 km radius). A couple of months before I intended to begin my fieldwork, I arranged a meeting with the regional manager for. Before meeting her, I had assumed I would return to my former field site in Jelling, but instead she suggested Thyregod as a field site. I knew of the place but had only been there once during my master’s fieldwork. To me, it seemed like her suggesting

Thyregod might have been down to the fact that not much was happening in that specific camp. Following that line of thought, my research project could add a little something to do for the people in the camp.

This is how I arrived at the camp of Thyregod. The camp was 25 minute's drive from Jelling, and a small place with a capacity of just under 100 persons. At that time, it was a camp for 'single male asylum seekers'. I try and refrain from using the different categorisations used to describe different groups of people seeking asylum for several reasons, but more than anything this specific category is quite unprecise. A lot of the men in the camp were not 'single' and had partners and children elsewhere that they hoped to reunite with in Denmark. Some of them had not even arrived in Denmark on their own. Nima had arrived with his partner who he was not married to. They had initially been housed together but she received her residency before him and tragically passed away shortly after. I have already stated previously in this thesis, I try to take seriously the point of view of interlocutor who rarely adopt the same vocabulary as authorities and Red Cross. They call the places they live for 'camp' rather than 'asylum centre' and they also rarely call themselves 'asylum seekers'. As stated previously I try to position this thesis from a logic that reflects the point of view of interlocutors rather than authorities, and while Danish Red Cross obviously is not an authority of the Danish asylum system, they do become adjacent to it from the perspective of people seeking asylum due to their role in managing aspects of the asylum system (see also Whyte, 2009). The distinction between the two, and other organisations such as the Danish Refugee Council, was generally difficult for camp residents to make out. This blurriness could often become a site of contestation between staff and residents in the camp as Red Cross, in day-to-day interactions, often shifted the responsibility for stuff like room changes, new roommates, moving camps etc, things that residents objected to. I have heard the camp staff refer all sorts of things back to the Danish Immigration Service when explaining, or defending, different changes to residents. This is not necessarily untrue but for residents in does not always make sense. One thing that I have heard repeated a lot is that 'all the camps have the same rules' in cases where residents experience that things in Thyregod are different than the camp they were in before. The argument from staff is always that they follow the rules that Danish immigration Service has put forward, and so do the other camps, and by this logic all rules everywhere is the same. However, this is just

not the reality. Staff is different, management is different and this means that while the overarching framework of how to run the camps might be stipulated by the Danish Immigration Service, residents are right to experience different processes and rules.

### ***Framing the field***

Doing fieldwork in camps is fraught. Questions of positionality cut across the fieldwork, razor-sharpened by the highly unequal circumstances I and my interlocutors faced. If the daily leader of the camp saw my project as a welcome distraction for the men residing there, fundamental issues of vulnerability, trauma, and gender quickly came to the fore. The question on ‘how to navigate this space where I have been placed’ is actually also the conditions of the field for the actual residents – this is a characteristic and a trait. One example of this is the overflow of suspicion that is also part of everyday life in the camp. Most people seeking asylum experience authorities as suspicious towards them at some point in their case processing, a well-established feature of ‘the system’ (Whyte, 201b). And when I arrived in the camp there were also some rumours that I could be a spy working on behalf of the Danish Integration Service. I was Danish, I knew a lot about the Danish asylum system, I was kind of imposing in the camp, I was friendly with the staff and knew the local campscape really well, and I asked questions. Some people were suspicious of me throughout and some people were never. Interlocutors like Murad would often test out the rumour on me, presented like a joke, and while we worked together a lot, I think he remained unsure. However, it is important to note, that this is very much also in the nature of the camp. The suspicion aimed at me did not stand out; people were also highly suspicious other camp residents too as well as some of the staff members. The camp is just a space that generates uncertain and mistrust (Whyte, 2009), arguably feeding of the feeling of the whole system all together.

### ***Simon’s story***

Not long after I arrived at the camp, I met Simon. He was immediately friendly, talkative and very forthcoming. I later learned that Simon had and continued to participate in different projects ranging from aspiring documentary students filming aspects of his everyday life in the camp to giving interviews to the local newspaper. While he was indeed very forthcoming and helpful, he was also trying to strategically position himself better for his asylum case, and he

hoped that exposure of his story would help that. So naturally, when he heard about my project, he wanted to arrange an interview<sup>7</sup> immediately. Having just arrived in the field and eager to dive in, I agreed, even though I had prepared myself to simply spend time getting familiarised with people and building relationships in the first weeks. However, Simon wanted to be interviewed and so we set it up. I realised after having started the conversation that he was in a 'documentation-state of mind' as he was very concerned to proving a lot of things to me about his extremely violent and traumatic personal story. He laid out everything chronologically and in much detail. I have decided to not detail this story here as it first of all serves no direct purpose for the conversation I want to diverge into and secondly would compromise his anonymity. Simon is no longer in Denmark, I might note. As he faced deportation, he ended up leaving the country on his own accord and now lives elsewhere in Europe. Simon's personal story is harrowing and brutal and ripped with trauma, and he served up every single violent detail within the first couple of days of my fieldwork, and honestly, I was completely overwhelmed. This speaks to the lack of preparation on the emotional impact of fieldwork in which researchers are faced with the difficult realities of interlocutors (Sørensen, 2022) or might underestimated different motives of desires or at least gendered attention (Cabot, 2018), as I will return to in the next section.

Simon and I connected on social media where we later had a brief conversation in which he thanked me for listening and I thanked him for sharing. As a follow up after our second interview just two days after, he ended up sending me very intimate images and videos of his groin. He had asked beforehand if he could show me some of the physical damage that had been done to him, and I had said yes not understanding nor knowing the explicit nature of the images I would be receiving. It felt first and foremost as a transgression of my own boundaries but certainly also of his. Even writing this up again long after it happened made me feel uncomfortable, knot in my stomach, heightened senses, tension of the whole body, and a kind of nausea. The images themselves were too intimate, but it was also the gesture shocked me. I had just entered the field officially few days prior to this experience and I had not even been in

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<sup>7</sup> As I will return to later, I rarely used the word 'interview'. People seeking asylum are *interviewed* by authorities and often get a bit apprehensive when it is brought up. Likewise, I experienced that many of them also preferred to not be recorded.

the camp for a full week yet. I was completely overwhelmed. However, I also had this panicking feeling of guilt. As a researcher, I hold a responsibility to not overexpose interlocutors, to help draw and uphold these boundaries, and I had not stopped him. In these messages, following the images and video he send to me, he also wrote very bluntly on how it had impacted his sex life. I never looked at the images, besides that little preview that you cannot avoid seeing, and I have never watched the video. At the time I communicated that I did not have anatomical knowledge and therefore was not the right person to assess this, I further wrote “*Maybe it is easier for me to understand the facts, if you explain the consequences...*” in an attempt to gently discourage him from sharing visual material like this again. At the time I was apprehensive of what to think in terms of the motive behind it; whether he had felt that he needed to share documentation of his situation, or if it was more of a personal advance or what it was.

### ***Gendered trouble, gendered positionality***

In that situation I experienced Simon’s actions as a personal transgression. I addressed this situation with Simon in a session with a therapist supervising researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork. I generally used these sessions to address the balance and boundaries between personal and professional ethical questions as these first couple of months in the field blurred that for me. Through these conversations we discussed containment and the inability to do so as a trauma response (Heitzler, 2013), and while I do not wish to push diagnosis onto interlocutors, I do consider the lack of boundaries on behalf of Simon a reflection of his very traumatic life experiences.

In the following months, I had other experiences of men living in the camp who likewise did things<sup>8</sup> that challenged the positionality as a researcher that I worked to establish. This could be comments on my appearance: “*I like when you have your hair down, it looks good*” or touching my face to see if I had make-up on or questions about my personal life such as whether I had a partner or children. Simon also asked me later in our Messenger conversation about my sexual orientation. All these little things accumulated to have a significant impact on me. And I struggled, and still do retrospectively, to decipher the gendered disposition. I position it in an

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<sup>8</sup> Though not to the same extend bar one person who, at a much later stage in the fieldwork did send an explicit image.

ethical discussion for which I keep changing my mind about, namely the position we put our interlocutors in by our presence in the field. Deciding to do fieldwork as a, at the time, younger, white, Danish, single woman in this context and then being emotionally and personally impacted by being seen as such made me feel naïve. Not just in retrospect writing up this chapter, but also in the context. I had anticipated some playful flirting, also drawing here on my previous fieldwork experience where I also had a group of younger men as interlocutors, but nonetheless I was overwhelmed by it. Furthermore, while I had expected some gendered interest from especially younger camp residents perhaps it was a little more unexpected to also be approached by to members of staff.

After the initial couple of months, we more or less settled together in the field, and our gendered disposition also opened up a different space between me and interlocutors. At least I sensed that the fact I was not a man allowed some interlocutors to share more emotional aspects of their lives. Mo cried uninhibited in my car as I gave him a ride to Zealand while he talked about things he had experienced previously and feelings in relation to this. And I used the position as a *woman* researcher and a *woman* in the field actively by showing care and concern through emotional and relational availability, also when I was not in the camp physically, and by ‘hosting’ the men in the staff kitchen of the camp – both aspects I will return to later. I furthermore also offered up help with translating letters from authorities, making calls to places like DRC Danish Refugee Council with legal questions and other things that positioned me as someone knowledgeable about the Danish asylum system.

Discussing questions of gender in this specific context is a difficult conversation to raise as I do not want to participate in the stereotyping of migrantised men. It is well-established that men in migration are viewed as less vulnerable and by that default also considered ‘dangerous’ (Griffiths, 2015; eg. Jobarteh, 2025; Wyss, 2022). Anna Wyss observes that this ‘gendered tension’ (2022:23) does not just say something about the gendered aspect of a researcher-interlocutor relationship, but also speaks to the gendered impact there is on border regimes and illegalisation. Marriage is a legitimate way of gaining residency, and so by becoming part of interlocutors’ social spheres my positionality changed. And this was joked about often both by the office staff and the camp residents; how I could marry one of them for ‘positive’ by which they meant a positive outcome of their case. Furthermore, Wyss correctly point out the “(...)

*intersectionality of power relations.*” (2022:23) in this field, because the vulnerability I experienced in these first months as a woman in the field was very much entangled with my position as non-marginalised in relation to interlocutors (ibid.). So, the gendered dispositions did facilitate a set of tensions that, on the one hand, lead to deeply uncomfortable situations (for both me and interlocutors) but on the other also show that there was dynamism in the field - things changed.

### ***Navigating spheres***

From the beginning of my fieldwork, I viewed the camp as consisting of different spheres for me, that I had to navigate accordingly. These spheres were acted out spatially, relationally, digitally and ethically, and they appeared different to me than staff and residents who navigated the camp spheres from their point of view. They were a key part of the methods I employed to collect the empirical foundation of this thesis.

As I have described in the previous chapter the camp consisted of several modular buildings, some of which housed common areas and Red Cross-areas, and some were dedicated residential spaces. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I felt unsure on where and how to ‘place’ myself in the camp. I was feeling a slight discomfort simply for being new in the field and having not established my position there yet. Moreover, I was trying to not spend too much time with the Red Cross staff working in the camp to avoid being associated too closely with being an employee. I wanted to ensure that the residents knew that I was not an employee and thereby part of the Danish asylum system. Just like Red Cross became ‘authority-adjacent’, I was also a little ‘staff-adjacent’ (or ‘least staff’ Ringer, 2013). At the beginning of my stay, I had received a key to all the staff areas for which I was happy as it gave me an access to a bathroom without having to ask residents to use theirs or the Red Cross staff to open the doors whenever I needed it. I also appreciated the opportunity to go to a space where not everyone had access if I needed a little break. But this relief was not guilt-free; my need and possibility for privacy was in stark contrast to what was possible for the men living in the camp and this point did not elude me. Camp residents had very little access to privacy; often, as was the case here in Thyregod, many rooms were shared, as were the bathrooms and kitchen. Eventually I decided to create a space for myself in the staff kitchen. The kitchen felt like a

good place to be, I could make myself useful, keeping the kitchen open and the thermos of coffee filled, and I would also be easy to find. Setting myself up in the kitchen gave me the possibility to welcome people into the space and extend hospitality towards the residents. By remaining in my 'sphere' by the kitchen, I hoped to have provided enough space away from me, however, it is impossible to simultaneously be there and not be there as an ethnographer. This became apparent one day as I was sitting outside with a couple of the men, just chatting away as I always did. I was asking about specific themes relating to experiences of asylum seeking and camp life, when a young man, who spoke Danish fluently and had lived in Denmark for many years, ended up getting really angry with me for being around and asking these kinds of questions. I was not asking him, he just walked past. Even when I tried to inhabit only the common-ish areas of the camp, I was still there, physically present in the camp: sitting outside and chatting to people, or making coffee in the kitchen – my company or coffee or help or hello was always to a certain extent transactional as I was there to do research. So, this instance where I was told off (only very briefly, as the young man was intent on being very polite and therefore quickly composed himself), I was also infringing on just being – he detected that me making conversation in that situation was not purely innocent for which he was completely right.

This moment highlights how the ethnographer's presence in highly conflictual spaces such as asylum camps can be problematic. After all, the camp in itself is experienced as a transgression, and the unnatural exceptionalisation of the people who lived there was only accentuated by my presence. In recent years, there have been calls by research such as Weima and Brankamp to study up and focus on bureaucrats, legal structures and other facilitating aspects of asylum seeking (2022), rather than focusing on migrants. While I agree with this, I have noted, as well as others (Whyte, 2009), that how people seeking asylum experience the workings of 'the state' and borders (Balibar, 2002; Khosravi, 2008) offers up valuable knowledge and so excluding that perspective all together would also be unethical.

### ***A note on interviewing***

People seeking asylum in Denmark and elsewhere are often cautious about the interview format (e.g. Wajsberg, 2025: 57–58). In Denmark, the authorities use the word 'interview' to describe their interactions with asylum applicants: you can be interviewed by the police upon

arrival, and you have an interview with the Danish Immigration Service about your asylum motive. These interactions differ a lot from how ethnographers conceive of a semi-structured interview and are often more interrogation-like in nature. I learned during my first fieldwork as a master's student in the Danish asylum camps to try and avoid 'interviewing' in the classical sense. I rather opted for an approach that I call a semi-structured informal conversation. I had prepared certain topics that I would like to discuss but I never expected to talk about them for long, to scrutinize and record these conversations, as people are, for obvious reasons, also wary of being recorded. With this being said, I have ended up having some more traditional interviews with interlocutors I knew well, also a few recordings. I made it a habit to carry my notebook with me to ensure that people continued to be reminded that I was in fact there as a researcher. As part of securing continued consent, I would also state out loud when I wrote down things they said, or rather, made sure it was okay to do so. I have also had completely confidential conversations where interlocutors asked that part of their explanations or certain details were not written down.

More than 20 interlocutors appear by pseudonym throughout this thesis, however many more informed the data foundation. While I may not have conducted very many formal and recorded interviews, I have written hundreds of pages of fieldnotes both on my laptop, by hand in the field and typed on my phone. I have also utilised message exchanges through WhatsApp and Messenger as data because we had many of our conversations in this digital space. In the article *Little Prisons* (Jakobsen 2022) I also unfold both methodologically and analytically how the digital space was utilised when I travelled abroad, as part of my fieldwork, to places where interlocutors had previously passed through or lived. This I will also unfold in the following section.

### ***The digital sphere – on methods, choices, intimacy and use***

Society is both digital and not. For everyone. This is not unique for the people in the camp. But what does characterise the camp is that the digital sphere became a precondition for existing in the physical space, as well as a way of existing in an unwanted present. The digital sphere that people (all of us) inhabit allows for moments of escapism. It can be intimate, like facilitating contact with friends, family, romantic partners; it can open up for ways of

expression, faith, hobbies etc. This was the same in the camp. Camp life is very much experienced as a place of inactivity, and 'nothing' was such a common descriptor of what you had been up to that it almost became a joke amongst camp residents. So, when you 'do nothing' you often find yourself scrolling, and as everyone else in the modern world the men in the camp also had lives online, and perhaps more prevalent than for the surrounding society as they were far from familiarity and relations.

The digital sphere extended relation-building beyond the face-to-face meetings in or near the camp or camp-related spaces (like the school and bigger camp in the other town). This specific space also increased the general availability of both me and interlocutors; they could and would reach me when I was away from the camp, and likewise, I could contact them on days where I did not see them, meaning that none of us really had the option of being left alone simply by choosing to not physically see each other. This new(ish) position of the digital sphere in everyday lives also means that I have been able to continue to keep in contact and be part of at least some aspects of interlocutors' ongoing travels, whether they moved on to places they came from or had already been or to new locations within or beyond the geographical borders of Denmark. It also made the field and therefore the fieldwork more unbound than I have experienced previously. I have noted in some text I wrote soon after finishing my official fieldwork that I had not for once considered that part of my methodology was digital. It seemed so natural to connect with people through my phone, as I did that in all other aspects of my life. However, this connection also changed the 'rules' of the fieldwork somewhat. Back in 2013 when I did fieldwork for my master's thesis, social media was still less of a natural part of daily life than in 2018 when I began my doctoral fieldwork. However, I do remember taking some active choices in 2013; for example, I chose not to create a Facebook account for the purpose of fieldwork which other peers did for various reasons often related to privacy. I wanted to extend a part of my personal life (even though I still controlled access to it) as part of relational work that I see as imperative for ethnographic fieldwork in this context. Social media representation is very much an exaggeration of who you are, as you showcase specific elements, but so is your fieldwork persona. In the field I emphasised certain aspects of who I am, but I never pretended or was untruthful.

The digital space into which the fieldwork expanded and therefore also the relationships between interlocutors and me was an ambivalent one (Ma and Cai, 2023). It is a very specific space due to its informal, nonchalant and intimate nature, a space that can be disarming but also where words can be misunderstood as it does not allow for an in-person reading of each other. I experienced being connected through social media and messaging apps as hugely important for the relation-work, a personal preference and a transgression. As I describe earlier in this chapter, I received inappropriate images on Messenger from an interlocutor. Also, messages that definitely transgressed the personal but professional relationship I tried to establish, like from a young man who confessed his love and got increasingly aggressive and manipulative over messages as I turned him down. For example, he had a friend message me to tell me that he had been admitted to hospital because he had gotten too drunk, trying to drown his sorrows that I did not want him (which turned out to be true, that he had gone to hospital). Another man in the camp literally send me 'dick pics'.

Other transgressions were less clear; like having people reach out to me as when I was spending my weekend with my family or friends. Here it was never the nature of the messages but simply the inescapability of the field. While I was only at the camp for certain hours in the day, I was, potentially, constantly reachable via social media. For example, I was not at the camps on the weekends. As the camp was also not staffed full-time and the office was usually closed from Friday afternoon until Monday morning. All other activities that residents usually engaged in, such as school or their 'praktik' were also not taking place on the weekend. Residents who had someone to visit in Denmark therefore often spend the weekends away from camp. Occasionally there was the opportunity to participate in a volunteer-arranged activity away from the camp but mostly I just heard the weekend described as eerily quiet, as the absolute space of 'nothing'. So, connecting to me over the weekend made sense – someone to talk to that was not your neighbour but it still in the know of why your weekends were not full of activities. I am empathized with the desire to talk to a 'friend', someone who knew the camp. And I tried to offer space for people to reach out and have conversations online.

Contact over social media and messaging platforms, while it can pierce any other social or intimate engagement as long as you have your phone with you, also is a less confrontational and more informal form of contact (Kraemer, 2016; Wajsberg, 2025). It is informal in the way

that the format is often brief; the majority of messages I got was very much along the line of “how are you?” and sometimes a simple “fine” or “good” and “how about you”- interaction was enough. Like if we were waving and exchanging a nod across the courtyard at the camp. This space was also nonchalant to a certain extent; you can easily reach everyone, and even though they could respond instantly (because most of us carry our phone with us) it is rarely an expectation. I often received messages late at night for example<sup>9</sup> and would respond in the morning, where, on the other hand, I knew most people in the camp would be asleep (if they did not have school). And then I would also categorise this form of contact as intimate for all of the above reasons as well; you are reachable in your most private sphere, at home, in your bedroom, around friends and family and at all hours. One thing is the messaging platforms but connecting on social media such as Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat also offer a view into a virtual space that you might have curated in a certain way and where friends and family members also interact. This also goes for men I met in the camp who also use and curate their social media presence in different ways. Some of the younger people had several Facebook profiles; for friends, for people and friends they met in Europe, for family members etc.

The virtual space extends relation-building beyond the face-to-face meetings in the camp or outside of it (Ma and Cai, 2023). As well as increasing the general availability of both. This means that I have been able to continue on, partly, on aspects of people’s ongoing travels, back to their home country or elsewhere in Europe. It also makes the field and field work more unbound than I have experienced previously. Connections feel a lot friendlier and more serious, like we are intertwined in each other’s lives, or at least parts of it. As I present in the article “Little Prisons” (Jakobsen, 2022) I have used this digital connection actively to be guided by interlocutors. For example, in Athens, Murad took me to a specific street and hotel where he had sought advice for his ongoing travels, and when I send Wassim a picture of the train station in Androupolis, he remembered a specifically kind café worker thereon. I also used my phone actively in everyday conversations in the camp; google translate (for obvious reasons) and I installed an Arabic keyboard to make it easier, google maps we used a lot, images searches to visuals things and people, YouTube for music (a lot of regional pop music; East African, Arabic,

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<sup>9</sup> As I elaborate in in the third article in wary compassion, most people turn their circadian rhythm upside down in the camp, and therefore sleeps very little at night, however, often also experience it as an especially lonely time.

Somali, Iranian, and really anything from 80s Modern Talking to Greek pianist Yanni to Luis Fonsi's hit song Despacito) or to play the Islamic call to prayer *azan* to show me the favorite sounds of 'home' after I showed a few people a video of this from my trip to Bosnia. Phones were a natural part of everyday life for people in the camp just as outside of it. Some of the men with families at home did parenting from afar via videocalls (Kędra, 2021) or simply kept in contact with friends and family; voice messages and phone calls, reading news, dating apps, all kinds of social media etc. Or as I refer to in the third article on wary compassion where I helped film a memorial ceremony for a passed away brother as evidence to family back home that he was being properly mourned here as well. The digital space offer another aspect to the relationship building and relationship maintaining in fieldwork and it allows for extended engagement with the field. But it also blur lines between personal and professional self when the work ends, allowing also potential for transgression both ways – of interlocutor and researcher.

### ***Field site(s) – thoughts on multisitedness, immersions and the problems of “leaving” the field***

My field unfolded across many different geographical (in the camp, other camps, the local area around the camp, Copenhagen, Bosnia, Greece) and temporal locations (recalling previous events in county of origin or somewhere on the move (Jakobsen, 2022)), I was present and immersed online through WhatsApp messages, Messenger, Snapchat, Facebook pages, and I still am. I receive email updates from the Danish Ministry for Immigration and Integration and participate in the quarterly information meeting by the Danish Immigration Service as well as a network for relevant scholars, activists and organisations working with the field of asylum seeking.

Reflections on the character of the field and fieldwork are therefore also multiple; what characterises this field however is specifically that it is *not* multi-sited even though it crosses geographical borders and locations and dips in and out of digital and non-digital spheres. All these different types of spaces are very much connected to each other. Jordan Kraemer, in a blog post on 'situated immersion', observes that: “[b]uilding on the view that my interlocutors are themselves situated in overlapping worlds and ties, I contend that remoteness is not about

*geographic distance, but a different kind of relation.*” (Kraemer, 2021). This position resonated with the kind of ethnography that I engaged in during my fieldwork. While Kraemer wrote during an ongoing pandemic and motivated by the constraints of doing ‘physically there’ fieldwork, the interlocutors I encountered already lived in a ‘here but also there’ world stretching across geographical borders and continents, future hopes, past actions, and present networks. My interlocutors travelled not only through countries but also traversed the digital sphere looking for advice, friends, networks, opportunities, support and comfort. I therefore characterise this field as a hybrid field of asylum seeking and encampment more than a field that is linked to a geographical location. In doing so, I acknowledge that all the different spaces, in which I have met the field or have been met by it, are a spectrum of intensities and immersion. I realise that this is not an uncommon experience for an ethnographer, however I want to emphasise that, as an ethnographer, the challenge of working in a hybrid field, which is composed of different physical and digital sites, is determining the boundaries of that field. So even when Thyregod eventually closed as a camp in 2020, the field continued to live on in other spaces complicating how to determine the end of my fieldwork. I am still, occasionally, in the field.

# Chapter four

## Camps – carceral, temporal, uncertain

This thesis is grounded within migration studies, and in this presentation of the state of the research I will centre myself more specifically within camp studies. Narrowing in on camps is considered a subfield within migration studies (Minca, 2015; Weima and Brankamp, 2022). I engage with scholarly conversations within this subfield on carcerality, temporality and uncertainty. These themes have obvious overlaps, and I separate them here primarily for reasons of presentation. In the rest of the thesis, they will also be explored more organically. I will, however, in the following, unfold these themes framed in relation to the concept of *the camp* as it has been conceived as a place of multiple complexities and forms of both mobilisation and confinement (Turner and Whyte, 2022).

Each of the three articles in this thesis explores elements of everyday life in the camp, the experience with and impact of carcerality and temporality and living with uncertainty both as an existential and structural condition. Of course, each of the articles follows its own analytical trajectory, however they have all grown out of these themes and I will therefore, in this section, provide an overview of the state of the research within these subjects (camps and carcerality, camps and temporality, camps and uncertainty) to build the academic foundation of my study and show the interwoven subfields of migration and camp studies that I situate my research within.

### ***On camps***

Within migration studies a significant literature has emerged on 'camps', as mentioned above, referring to the various, distinct institutional and informal spaces, where migrants remain or are kept for varying periods of time (Martin et al., 2019). Claudio Minca calls this literature *camp studies* (Minca, 2015). In this section, I will first present some of the ways camps have been conceptualized more broadly, before considering the camp studies literature in relation to carcerality, temporality, and uncertainty, which are all key and recurring analytical themes in my articles. I want to note, that this thesis focuses on camps in Europe. It is a study of everyday life in a camp in Denmark and a study of the everyday lived experience of asylum

seeking. This entails a number of distinct modalities, as I will detail below, and I acknowledge that my discussion here is not necessarily fully transferable to camps everywhere in the world. While I ground myself in broader conceptions of the camp, at the same time I orient myself towards European terrains of encampment, not simply as unreflective Eurocentrism but as an attempt to bring my analytical framework as close as possible to my field.

Liisa Malkki has famously argued that the national order of things is generally considered the natural order of things, and that refugees, within that logic, are ‘matters out of place’ (cf. Douglas, 1966; Malkki, 1995). The history of camps is therefore grounded in a state-determined need to control a group of people deemed uncontrollable or undesirable (Agier, 2011; Turner, 2015). It has been argued that the origin of camps is indeed strongly associated with colonialism and the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade (Opi, 2024). Historical studies of camps tend to locate their modern origin around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, drawing on a range of mostly colonial projects (See Martin et al., 2019; McConnachie, 2016 for an overview) As Martin et al. conclude, “*the camp, as a modern institution, has been used since its inception as a technology of population protection and care, but also as a military strategy and an instrument of population control and racial purification*” (Martin et al., 2019: 749).

The majority of camp literature builds on the basic Foucauldian point that the motivation behind especially institutionalised camps today is also one of control; they are places for people who are irregularised, migrantised and to certain extents illegalised, and they are biopolitical and segregative (McConnachie, 2016). A key point here is that they are not just places to contain these populations, but that they actively produce them. This is not merely a cultural understanding of ‘matter out of place’, camps also serve a political functions as an extension of the border and a spectacle in itself (De Genova 2013; Whyte, Campbell, and Overgaard 2020 using tent camps as an example of this). Simon Turner has argued that the pretence to make the camp space de-political in turn produces its hyper-politicised nature (Turner, 2015). Camps are now often associated with humanitarian necessity (Malkki, 1995; Turner, 2015); as a temporary housing for people displaced due to war and conflict, natural disasters and other catastrophes, but the reality of camp living tend to be much more complex and the strategic motivations are not always so humanitarian, as for example in Israel-

Palestine (Katz, 2022). Further, the literature also shows that camps are spaces that involve many other dimensions. Camps are multiple: formalised and makeshift (Hagan, 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Minca, 2015, 2022), more or less permanent (Feldman, 2015; Oesch, 2017; Ramadan, 2013), spaces of literal detainment (Canning, 2014; Lindberg, 2022), places of voluntary immobility too (Wyss, 2019), of temporal suspension (Boccagni, 2025) of hope (Kallio et al., 2021), and resistance (Gatter, 2026; Olivius, 2017).

### ***Beyond Agamben***

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has been a major contributor to thinking on the nature of camps (Martin et al., 2019). He builds on the unavoidable contribution by Hannah Arendt (1951) on totalitarianism, the production of stateless (and thereby superfluous) people and the role of the camp within the totalitarian regime. This research has, together with Foucault's biopolitics (Foucault, 1978), laid the groundwork for Agamben's seminal work on the (concentration) camp. For Agamben the camp is constructed as a space of exception in which 'bare life' (zoë – stripped of political, social, legal rights) is enabled and contrasted to a qualified life (bios – living with political, social, legal rights)(1998). As scholars like Minca have noted, his theorisation of the camp as an exceptionalised space became highly influential post-9/11 with the USA-initiated 'war on terror' and the "(...) *global archipelago of camps and spaces of exception(...)*" (2015:78) that grew out of it (see also Agamben, 2005).

Martin, Minca and Katz refers to the last decade of camp research as post-Agambian (Martin et al., 2019: 744), often characterised by a critical approach to Agambian's camp theories for not being able to capture the complexities of the terrain of encampment now (Martin et al., 2019). In Sigona's article on 'campzanship' (2015:1) it is argued that Agamben's conceptualisation of the camp as an exceptionalised space limits the analytical possibilities for grasping the complexities of the camp: the social relations within, the relation to the city and the everyday strategies for claiming rights of inhabitants. Generally, the common critique of Agamben tends to be rooted in empirically grounded studies and focused on a camp reality showing much more complex socialities, hybrid sovereignty and migrant agency (see for example Dunn and Cons 2014; Ramadan 2013; Rygiel 2011; Singh 2020; Tuastad 2017). There is

a sense that an Agambian approach tends to strip out the actual lives lived in spaces of encampment. While this critique of Agamben is indeed valid, I prefer to consider it more as nuances of the theory he posits. As Turner and Whyte note, Agamben's concern is with the *nomos* of our time – the camp – and does not necessarily have to be seen in opposition to an empirical reality in which refugees, of course, display agency within the camp (similar point also made in Turner, 2015; Turner and Whyte, 2022: 3). What Agamben helps us see is the wider systems of sovereignty and power that structure not just camps, but society at large. While Agamben might still be good to think with, scholars have also moved beyond a strictly Agambian analysis of sovereignty and legal structure of the camp. I position myself similarly, rejecting the extreme and passive vision of “bare life”, to instead consider a spectrum of agency, which is also what is shown in the three articles of this thesis. I have drawn heavily on Dunn and Cons' notion of *burdened agency* as it is exactly this combination of opportunity and constraint (Dunn and Cons, 2014: 99) that I see negotiated in everyday life of the camp.

### ***The camp multiple and terrains of encampment***

Recent literature on camps calls for a broadening of the focus on camps from the institutionalised format to also include more informal settlements and makeshift structures. This widening of perspective to a wider *campscape* (see for example Collins and Minca, 2024; Hagan, 2022; Martin, 2015; Martin et al., 2019) is what I generally refer to as the terrain of encampment. Dorte Jagetic Andersen and Marie Sandberg have argued for the *border multiple* with reference to Annemarie Mol's definition of multiplicity (Mol, 2002), they “(...)conceptualize borders as performed or enacted effects of the multiple practices through which they are made.” (Andersen and Sandberg, 2016: 7). I want to encourage a similar understanding of the *camp multiple*. In my understanding, this works on both an analytical level (camps are indeed usefully conceived by the “multiple practices through which they are made”) but also an empirical one (my interlocutors traversed a varied and multiple terrain of encampment, as I show in my article, “Little prisons”).

This perspective is motivated by the empirical reality I experienced during the fieldwork; that camps followed people (Kohl et al., 2019), the variety in nature of camps as shown above, the transformative nature of camps – that they impacted and changed people but were likewise

changed by them<sup>10</sup>. This idea of a terrain of encampment is similar to the call from Olga Lafazani to move beyond analysing the camp and the camp space in and of itself but to view it as part of “*broader assemblages of power and resistance that unfold across multiple and interlocking temporal and sociospatial scales.*” (Lafazani, 2026: 8). Working from the conceptual limits of the notion of the “migration journey”, Schapendonk et al. (2021) come to a similar argument: that we need to understand migration – and therefore also camps – in a manner that is “sensitive to both the power of mobility regimes as well as the multiple ways people transgress the logics of these regimes” (Schapendonk et al., 2021: 3256). The trajectory approach they propose (see also Schapendonk, 2018, 2021) starts from a rejection of the binary distinction between “migrants” and “non-migrants” to instead interrogate the ways in which people are “migrantised”. A similar logic applies to my approach to understanding the different ways people are encamped in different places and times. So, while the main geographical field site is Thyregod, I also show through the articles its outward interlinkages, and in so doing try to take my interlocutors’ navigation and trajectories serious.

All camps are not the same, but they are all spaces of exception, places whose inhabitants are migrantised, and places often experienced as a space of somewhat temporal suspension. This may not entail actual physical confinement, but as McConnachie notes, refugee camps may operate as spaces of containment even when they are not spaces of confinement through e.g. “border security, visa controls, and immigration detention” (2016:398). This leads me to consider the carceral dimensions of camps.

### ***Camps and Carcerality***

Carceral geography is a subfield from which this thesis and its theoretical framework have drawn a lot of inspiration. It comes out of a ‘punitive turn’ that has pivoted attention to carceral spaces other than prisons and defines ‘the carceral’ as not just a physical place of confinement, but includes its spatial, temporal, mobile, embodied, and affective dimensions (Moran, 2015). The current period has been described as a ‘carceral age’ characterised by “(...)

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<sup>10</sup> One of the structures I visited in Bihac, the camp now called Borici, was initially an informal settlement turned formal camp through the IOM. Neil, an interlocutor, had lived here when it was more like a squat, and he was surprised to see the pictures I took of it as a place with windows and toilets and running water (see Jakobsen, 2022).

*unprecedented fluidity between forms of confinement, be they state-sanctioned, quasi-legal, ad-hoc, illicit, spatially fixed, mobile, embodied or imagined, and in which the scale of deployment of carceral techniques and infrastructures demands critical attention.”* (Moran et al., 2018: 668).

In the context of asylum-seeking in Europe we have also seen a punitive turn identified by an experience of increased criminalisation, sometimes under the guise of ‘security’ and illegalisation of migrants . Recent examples also count the so-called temporary turn in asylum politics which is widely experienced as a punitive by migrants. The temporary turn in asylum is a reference to the re-focusing of deterrence efforts from pre- to post-entry (Sandberg et al., 2025). Restrictions of rights, lengths of residency permits and legislation enabling easier revocation are all part of this (ibid.). In general, all of the policies that further restrict rights and possibilities for refugees and people seeking asylum are experienced as punitive and punitive for no real reason.

Carceral geography builds from a theoretical “trinity” of Foucault’s work on punishment, disciplining of bodies and surveillance, Goffmann’s ‘total institution’ and Agamben’s focus on spaces of exception (Moran, 2015). However, it expands on this theoretical foundation through the notion of a carceral landscape (Moran 2015), continuum (Hamlin and Speer, 2018) or circuitry (Gill et al., 2016) that expands the sphere of carcerality beyond the physical walls of confinement.

As part of the overall research project that this thesis comes out of, the Carceral Mobilities Project (CAMP) (AMIS, 2018). Simon Turner and Zachary Whyte have written on the conceptualisation of the camp as a ‘carceral junction’: places of both “pressure and possibility” (2022: 4). These junctions are not isolated but very much connected across national border geographies through different spheres from the digital to the affective. However, these junctions also have carceral qualities: geographical isolation, punitive experience, temporal and structural suspension. The key point here is that the tension between the pressure and the possibility is not resolvable, and indeed that each inflects the other: the carceral aspects of the camps always include some possibility, while the possibilities that people seeking asylum may find are never unfettered by carceral dimensions (Turner and Whyte, 2022: 4).

## ***Camps and Temporality***

Temporality has been an influential analytical and empirical object when looking at camps, probably driven by the camp itself as a notably temporary structure. However, as we know from the subfield of camp studies, camps often become not-so-temporary places albeit with a huge variety. The temporary nature of both camps and refugeehood is challenged perhaps most famously by the Palestinian situation (Oesch, 2017; Ramadan, 2013). The Danish terrain of encampment is characterised by accommodation camps opening and closing as the numbers of arrivals go up and down, and refugeehood is also explicitly temporary (Sandberg et al., 2025).

Traditionally, migration has been viewed as a 'spatial phenomena' (Griffiths, 2026), but for the past couple of decades time and temporality in relation to migration has been of great research interest in what has been called the "temporal turn". In 2001 Cwerner published a now famous article on the times of migration in which he presents a conceptual framework for analysing temporal aspects of migration taking time in relation to migration seriously as a research subject (Cwerner, 2001). A decade after his call for a temporal focus in migration studies, a group of Oxford scholars published a very thorough working paper presenting a comprehensive review of the state of research at the time (Griffiths et al., 2013). This focus on time has expanded rapidly to the extent that Griffiths, in a very recent publication, has referred to the temporal turn in migration studies as a regular 'time epidemic', entailing risks that "(...) *the temporal interest might become disproportionate, tokenistic, and potentially unhelpful.*" (Griffiths, 2026: 4). It is therefore important to balance the interest in time and temporality with other perspectives in conceiving what I called the camp multiple above.

The asylum systems in places like Northern and Western Europe lend themselves well to a temporal focus, as they are often designed in a way that has an automatic waiting period which is obviously uncertain as applicants do not know if they will receive a positive or negative outcome to their asylum application. In this sense, the experience of asylum seeking is inherently temporal: a lot of time is spent waiting in and for the system. This has consequences for the disruption of life courses, but most importantly people like the

interlocutors of this project generally used temporal terms to talk about their experience, like complaining about wasting time.

A rich literature has emerged over the past decades on waiting, often building on Bourdieu's insight that "[t]he all-powerful is he who does not wait but makes others wait" (Bourdieu, 2000: 228). Waiting is thus an existentially experienced but politically structured activity. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage's important work on 'stuckedness' (2009) addresses this tension, conceiving it as a form of existential immobility, underlining that to live what he calls a 'viable life' this feeling of moving forward is crucial (Hage, 2009). Building on this, Rotter (2015) shows ethnographically how asylum seekers in the UK experience waiting as an enforced and deeply destabilizing condition, marked by uncertainty, enforced idleness, and a pervasive sense of life being suspended. Griffiths (2014) further nuances the temporality of asylum by distinguishing between different modes of temporal experience: e.g. "sticky" time that drags interminably and "frenzied" time produced by sudden, unpredictable decisions. Critically, she shows how the asylum system generates contradictory temporal pressures that compound vulnerability. In Boccagni's recent ethnography of Italian camps, he engages this experience of 'doing nothing' not as an empirical fact but as the result of a legal and existential liminality in which people seeking asylum struggle to produce a sense of relevance, meaning and direction (Boccagni, 2025).

### ***Camps and Uncertainty***

Uncertainty as a concept speaks to many elements of asylum seeking and camp living. It obviously includes the outcome of an asylum process, but also people's sense of the process itself as well as the everyday life in the camp. While it certainly has an existential quality, I use uncertainty here as an analytical angle more oriented towards the social and, to some extent also legal, dimensions. Most research focusing on people seeking asylum are highly attuned to their relationship to and understanding of 'the state' as they meet it through policy, legislation, asylum processes, bureaucracy, camps and their staff, and authorities (Gill, 2010). This context and condition are also highly present in my study as it is such a dominant part of life in formal camps. However, I have also attempted to be more attuned to how these people experience everyday life and each other – what kind of social space exist in the camp. In what

follows, I consider uncertainty as a technology of power as well as a key element of social space in the camp.

A substantial body of literature has identified uncertainty as central to the functioning of asylum and border regimes, rather than a mere byproduct of bureaucratic complexity. Whyte (2009) has shown how a "productive mistrust" operates as a key mechanism in bureaucratic decision-making in asylum cases, enabling negative decisions by structuring doubt into the process itself. In his article on the myopticon, he further posits that "(...) *the uncertainty generated in the asylum system is not so much an unfortunate byproduct of determination procedures, as fundamental to the system's functioning as a technology of power.*" (Whyte, 2011b: 21). Danstrøm and Whyte (2019) extend this analysis to the production of (un)credible narratives in Danish asylum cases, demonstrating how the institutional construction of doubt operates on the very stories asylum seekers tell about themselves. Similar dynamics of institutionally produced distrust have been identified in tribunal settings, where Gill et al. (2021) show how the 'atmospheres' of tribunal hearings generate a further layer of uncertainty that compounds applicants' disorientation. At the level of everyday camp life in Denmark, Kohl (2020) has located activation programmes as ambiguous technologies of power that, among other things, produce uncertainty through their contradictory demands. Stel (2021) provides a broader comparative frame by naming these dynamics as 'strategic institutional ambiguity', arguing for a 'universality of uncertainty in refugee governance' that works both temporally and spatially to marginalise people seeking asylum and render them controllable, exploitable, and deportable. Technologies of power thus feature both strategic and less direct uses of uncertainty in relation to migrant populations.

If uncertainty shapes the relations of people seeking asylum with the state, it also shapes their relations with each other. In one of the articles, I conceptualise what I call 'camp atmospheres' as a space where uncertainty is felt, shared, and spatially present. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen (2015) have argued that atmospheres occupy a space 'in-between' subjects and their material environments. They are neither purely objective features of a place nor wholly subjective projections, but emerge from the relations between bodies, materials, and affects in a given setting. This is useful for thinking about how uncertainty shapes camp atmospheres in a context where it already

permeates their institutional situation. Bille and Schwabe (2023) develop this further in their ethnographic work on urban spaces, showing how atmospheres are characterised by a fundamental porosity: they are not fixed but shift with the people, practices, and phenomena that constitute them. This porosity is analytically productive for thinking about camps, where the material environment, institutional practices, and residents' affective states are in constant and unstable interplay. Within carceral studies, Turner, Moran and Jewkes (2022) have explored how atmospheres of incarceration are simultaneously designed and emergent, shaped by architectural intentions but also by the precarity and changeability of affect in confined settings. It seems to be simply "in the air." Similarly, Gill et al. (2021) show how uncertainty both infuses and is produced by tribunal atmospheres in asylum appeals hearings. Taken together, these contributions suggest that uncertainty in asylum camps might be understood not only as a product of policy, temporality, or bureaucratic design, but as an atmosphere shaping social relations at the camp in what I call "wary compassion."

### ***Overall***

In this state of the art, I have outlined the scholarly conversations on camps, carcerality, temporality, and uncertainty that form the academic foundation of this thesis. As I have shown, these are deeply interwoven themes: carceral conditions shape temporal experiences, temporal suspension produces uncertainty, and uncertainty in turn generates particular social relations and atmospheres in the camp. It is from within these conversations that each of the three articles develops its own analytical contribution. While the articles each follow their own analytical path, they share the ethnographic foundation of everyday life in the camp and are all, in different ways, attempts to grapple with the complexities that the literature reviewed here has identified. Together, they seek to contribute to the ongoing conversations in camp studies by bringing the lived, relational, and affective dimensions of asylum seeking into closer dialogue with the structural and institutional analyses that have dominated the field.

## Chapter five

### Overview of articles

#### **Article 1 - ‘Little prisons’: Revisiting trajectories and carcerality in a Danish asylum camp**

Published in *Incarceration* in 2022 as part of a special issue.

Author: Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen

This article draws on the overall ethnographic fieldwork of the camp but also unfolds the methodological and analytical use of the especially a field trip to Bosnia. The article draws attention trajectories as an integral part of how carcerality amongst men seeking asylum in Denmark is experienced and navigated emphasising the contrast between prior mobility and present feelings of stuckedness. The article expands on the ‘trajectory approach’ to also explore how trajectories can be ‘revisited’, understood here as a ‘return to’, through conversation and memory mostly. This is unfolded through an example of an interlocutor, Neil, and his stories of a specific town in Bosnia. Neil revisited this place from the camp in Denmark both in memory but also through messages exchange with the author while she was in Bosnia. It is argued, through this example, that the contrast between ‘being in the camp’ and the trajectory leading to the camp, offers up new insights on how everyday life in the camp is experienced and talked about as carceral.

#### **Article 2 - Churn: change and continuity in the Danish asylum system**

Ready to submit. Aimed at *Journal of Nordic Migration Research*.

Authors: Zachary Whyte & Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen

This article views the camp from an institutional framework. It takes its outset in the hundreds of modifications that Danish asylum law and policies have seen since the Aliens Acts birth in 1983. This many changes stands in sharp contrast to the fact that ethnographic accounts over the past three decades describe remarkably similar everyday experiences of imprisonment, boredom, and uncertainty. The article draws on both authors' long-term engagement in the field and their collected ethnographic fieldwork in Danish asylum centres (2000–2023) as well as historical synthesis of the ethnographic literature on asylum in Denmark (1993–2023). This article uses a conceptualisation of 'churn' to describe the ongoing institutional production of change whose cumulative effect is paradoxically more static than transformative. Churn is developed as an analytical concept in its own right as separate from theory of chronic crisis as well as the general uncertainty that characterises the asylum process. Rather it is argued that churn refers to a specific mode of governance in which continuous political, legal, and infrastructural change produces and reproduces a stable pattern of experiential effects for people seeking asylum.

### **Article 3 – Wary compassion in the camp: an ethnographic exploration of carceral sociality**

Ready to submit. Aimed at *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Author: Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen

This article turns its focus inwards into the social space of the camp. Again, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out from 2018-2019 in the camp of Thyregod, this article looks at the affective dynamics of sociality and compassion. It uses literature on atmospheres to draw out what kind of social space and modes of being with each other exists in place characterised by great uncertainty, experiences of carcerality and temporal suspension. The article uses an extended ethnographic case of an improvised ceremony that two young men put together to commemorate a loss of a brother. This specific ritual was uncommon practice in the camp but worked to illuminate affect in the camp, and it is through this ritual, that the article unfolds the concept of 'wary compassion'.

**Collectively**, the three articles present a layered, ethnographic depths of everyday life in camps as a part of asylum seeking in Denmark. They each follow their own analytical trajectory but read as a collection they also paint a broader picture by engaging with the camp through methodological exploration of the carceral, institutional perspective on governance and the production of camp experiences as well as an analytically engagement with the atmosphere and sociality of the camp.

# Chapter six

## Concluding remarks

This thesis explores the experiences of people seeking asylum in Denmark and the terrains of encampment they navigated, not just actively while on the move but also while awaiting asylum cases in camps. The overall research question framing this thesis is as follows:

*How is everyday life experienced and navigated by men seeking asylum in a Danish asylum camp, and how do the carceral, temporal, and affective conditions of the camp shape their ways of being in the world?*

I have drawn on empirical data from 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in camp of Thyregod in Denmark as well as field visits to Bosnia Hercegovina and Greece. Furthermore, I have also been informed by nearly a decade of active involvement in the field of asylum-seeking in Denmark and continued engagement with interlocutors across digital and physical spaces. The three articles are the analytical backbone of this thesis, each addressing the overall research question from a different perspective. In the following section, I briefly recap the three articles before turning to the contributions and wider implications of the thesis.

Article 1, ("Little Prisons" (Jakobsen 2022)) shows how the experience of carcerality in a Danish camp cannot be understood through spatial conditions alone. By drawing on the trajectory approach (Schapendonk et al., 2020) and expanding it to include the *revisiting* of trajectories, both in memory and conversation, the article explored how people experienced the camp as carceral in part through the contrast with past experiences of movement, agency, and possibility. Through the extended example of Neil, who guided me around the town of Bihac in Bosnia via WhatsApp messages while I was physically present in the places he had passed through. This article reveals the tension between trajectories and carcerality and how revisiting past journeys plays a part in present navigation. Revisiting past journeys was both a way of making sense of the present and an insistence on personal freedom and agency. The camp emerged not simply as a single space of confinement but as a part of a broader landscape of carcerality, experienced as punitive precisely because of the disconnect between prior mobility and present stuntedness.

In Article 2 (“Churn”), co-authored with Zachary Whyte, we drew on a combined longitudinal ethnographic engagement with camps in Denmark spanning approximately 25 years and a historical synthesis of the ethnographic literature on Danish asylum camps from 1993 to 2023. This article argues that the Danish asylum system is characterized by what we call *churn*: the ongoing institutional production of change, whose cumulative effect is paradoxically more static than transformative. We traced how churn operates across three interconnected domains (political spectacle, legal volatility, and infrastructural instability) and showed how this continuous motion produces and reproduces a remarkably stable pattern of experiential effects: isolation, enforced passivity, punitiveness, boredom, anger, exhaustion, and uncertainty.

And in Article 3 (“Wary compassion”) the gaze is turned inward towards the camp as a social space. This article draws on an extended ethnographic description of an improvised ritual that two young men put together to commemorate the death of a brother. By attuning to the atmosphere of the camp, this article proposes the concept of *wary compassion* to capture the affective dynamics between camp residents: a form of care and co-suffering grounded in shared experience, held simultaneously with emotional distance and apprehension shaped by the precarious and transient conditions of camp life. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's distinction between compassion and pity and recent literature on carceral atmospheres, this article conceptualizes the *camp atmosphere* — the heavy, tense, yet porous affective quality of everyday life — as constituted by material conditions, legal-political structures, and the sociality of its residents. This article showed that even in a setting seemingly inhospitable to compassion, forms of mutual recognition and care emerged, though always at arm's length.

### ***Contributions to camp studies***

Taken together, the three articles offer complementary perspectives on the everyday experience of asylum seeking in Denmark. Article 1 looks outward and backward along trajectories; Article 2 looks at the historical and systemic; Article 3 looks inward to the social and affective textures of camp life. What connects them is the insistence that the camp cannot be understood in isolation and that the everyday life that takes place there connects well beyond its walls.

This thesis contributes to the growing post-Agambian literature on camps in several ways. First, it advances a conception of the camp as multiple and relational ('the camp multiple') rather than as a bounded space of exception. The empirical reality across the three articles, where carcerality is produced through contrast with prior mobility, where the camp is continuously remade by systemic churn, and where residents forge complex forms of sociality within its constraints, speaks to a more nuanced framework than bare life and the space of exception alone can offer. By drawing on the idea of the terrain of encampment and demonstrating how camps connect to broader carceral landscapes, migration infrastructures, and the life trajectories of their inhabitants, this thesis contributes to what Martin, Minca, and Katz (2019) have called for: an understanding of camps as part of wider assemblages of power, mobility, and containment.

Second, this thesis makes a specific contribution to understanding how trajectories and carcerality relate in the camp. The trajectory approach (Schapendonk et al. 2020) has been an important corrective to static and linear conceptions of migration, but it has primarily been used to trace ongoing physical and legal movements. This thesis extends the approach by theorising the *revisiting* of trajectories: the ways people return to their routes and experiences, in conversation, in memory, through digital tools, from within the carceral conditions of the camp. As the article on "Little Prisons" shows, revisiting is not simply recall but a situated practice shaped by the present. When Neil narrated his time in Bosnia from the camp in Thyregod, what he chose to share—the freedom of hiking through green landscapes, the espresso by the river—was inflected by the contrast with his current immobility. And when I was physically in Bihać and relayed what I encountered there, he began sharing the darker dimensions that had not surfaced in the camp context. This shows that revisiting is a dynamic and relational process: what is recalled, emphasized, and silenced shifts with the conditions from which one revisits. This contribution is twofold: it demonstrates that the experience of carcerality is co-produced by the trajectories that precede it, and it shows that trajectories do not stop at the camp gate but continue to be active as resources for navigating the present.

Third, this thesis contributes to the understanding of the social life of camps. While much camp literature has focused on the relationship between camp inhabitants and the state or on the structural and spatial qualities of camps, this thesis closely examines how people live with

each other within the camp. The concept of wary compassion addresses a gap in the literature on inter-resident relations, where compassion has been more commonly studied in the context of humanitarian actors or volunteers interacting with migrants. By showing how co-suffering coexists with emotional distance and how this dynamic is shaped by the camp atmosphere, this thesis offers a vocabulary for the everyday affective labor of cohabitation under conditions of uncertainty and precarity.

Fourth, this thesis contributes to the engagement between camp studies and carceral geography by drawing on and developing the concept of *carceral junctions* (Turner and Whyte 2022). It shows how the camp in Thyregod is a junction of many things: not just mobility, but also affect, uncertainty, temporality, and sociality.

### ***Contributions to migration studies***

Beyond camp studies, this thesis contributes to broader debates in migration studies. It contributes to the temporal turn through the analytical framework of churn, which is approached as a form of assembled governance. Churn is distinct from, though related to, established notions of waiting, stuckedness, and sticky time. While these concepts illuminate the experiential quality of temporal suspension for individuals, churn describes how continuous institutional change produces and sustains the conditions (like uncertainty, isolation, passivity) that appear as temporal experiences at the individual level. This reframes the relationship between policy change and lived experience, arguing that the pattern of change, not just any particular change, matters profoundly.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes methodologically. The trajectory approach, as expanded here, to include revisiting as both a physical and conversational return, offers a way of working ethnographically that takes seriously the non-linear, ongoing nature of migration trajectories without requiring multi-sited fieldwork in the traditional sense. In the churn article, the combination of longitudinal fieldwork with a historical synthesis of ethnographic literature offers a model for addressing what De Genova (2002) has called methodological presentism: the tendency to treat the present configuration of asylum systems as paradigmatic rather than as one moment in a longer process. The unusual density of ethnographic attention to Danish asylum camps over three decades made this possible and demonstrates how reading across

fieldwork conducted decades apart can reveal patterns that are invisible within any single study.

This thesis also contributes to more sensory attuned approaches to migration. Inspired by Willen's (2007) call for a critical phenomenology of illegality, this thesis extends this framework to the specific context of asylum seeking and camp living. The concept of wary compassion, the description of the camp atmosphere, and the attention to how trajectories are revisited from within carceral conditions are attempts to capture what it means to be in the world as a person seeking asylum in Denmark: a mode of being shaped simultaneously by legal precarity, institutional unpredictability, spatial confinement, affective restraint, and the stubborn persistence of agency, hope, and care.

### **Concluding reflection**

This thesis has been driven by a conviction that understanding the everyday life of asylum seeking requires attending to what is often invisible: the accumulation of experiences along trajectories that do not end at the camp; the systemic production of continuity through constant change; and the quiet, restrained, wary forms of care that people offer one another in difficult spaces designed to keep them waiting. The men I worked with in Thyregod were, as Daniel put it, men of hard days. And as he reminded me, *you don't know me yet*. There was always more to their lives than the camp could contain, even as the camp squeezed those lives so profoundly.

The concept of the terrain of encampment, which runs through this thesis, insists that the camp is never just an isolating place. It is a junction in a carceral landscape, a product of ongoing institutional churn, and a social space whose atmosphere is co-produced by the people who inhabit it, the structures that constrain them, and the histories and hopes they carry. If we are to take seriously the lives of people seeking asylum, we must attend to all of these dimensions, not in isolation, but in their entanglement. This thesis attempts to do so from the ground up



By Farzad Soleimani, for the exhibition SEVENTY-SIX ROOMS



By Farzad Soleimani, for the exhibition SEVENTY-SIX ROOMS

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## **Collection of articles**



# ‘Little prisons’: Revisiting trajectories and carcerality in a Danish asylum camp

Incarceration

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## Abstract

This article, closely grounded in empirical examples from an ethnographic fieldwork, draws attention to trajectories as an integral part of how carcerality amongst men seeking asylum in Denmark is experienced and navigated. By expanding on ‘trajectory approach’ to also explore how trajectories can be ‘revisited’, understood here as a ‘return to’ in person but most importantly in conversation, the author dives into an example of an interlocutor’s stories of Bosnia, revisited from a camp in Denmark. It is argued, through this example, that the contrast between ‘being in the camp’ and the trajectory leading to the camp, offers up new insights on how everyday life in the camp is experienced and talked about as carceral.

## Keywords

Asylum, carcerality, camps, trajectories, Denmark, Bosnia

## Introduction

‘Welcome back to jail!’ was Farzad’s<sup>1</sup> standard greeting whenever I had been away for a short while, always accompanied by a sarcastic grin and a hand gesture, waving his arm dismissively towards the buildings around us. Here, at the outskirts of the small Danish village of Thyregod, seven rectangular, low barracks painted in different shades of grey framed the everyday life of between 70 and 90 adult men awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications.

The number fluctuated as the men were processed through the Danish immigration system and as new people arrived. For many, Denmark was not the country they had planned to apply for asylum in, it was a stop on the way of a scattered, developing trajectory. Nor was Denmark necessarily a

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place they would or could stay. Many of the men found themselves unsuccessful with their asylum claims,<sup>2</sup> and in the end moved on their own or were placed in removal centres by the Danish Immigration Service (IS) and, in some instances, were deported (cf. Lindberg and Khosravi, 2021 for further insights into the deportation business). People regularly left these removal centres of their own accord, either to live without documents in Denmark or to try to find their way in other countries.

The camp's modular buildings themselves can be conceived as transit points, as they have seen thousands of refugees<sup>3</sup> pass through over the last 20-odd years since they were originally built to house people fleeing Bosnia in the early 1990s (Whyte and Ulfstjerne, 2020). The buildings were even familiar to some of those arriving, like Zaman, an Afghan man in his 20s who, for the second time within the past decade, was living there.

This specific asylum centre<sup>4</sup> has housed many different resident groups or 'statuses', as it is referred to within the asylum system: it has been a camp for *unaccompanied minors* seeking asylum, for *asylum seekers with special care needs*, and recently (since the summer of 2018) *single male asylum seekers* (a group also housed there previously). Residents have changed and so has the interior of the buildings but the exterior has not, bar a few layers of paint. Even today, when Thyregod is no longer open<sup>5</sup> and working as a camp, it looks the same from the road, and the lack of people on its premises these days does not in any way hint at its abandonment as it was always an eerily quiet place to look at from the outside.

On the face of it Farzad's description did not seem to fit. The camp in Thyregod never looked like a prison; there were no fences and no locked gates keeping people in and outsiders out, unlike the detention camps in Denmark. No – the camp simply looked dull, and back in 2018, when I visited Thyregod for the first time and saw the Red Cross flag flying from the flagpole in the courtyard, the pool table with its ripped green cloth in the common room and the post list in the office window displaying the ID numbers of those who got mail, it merely resembled any other Danish asylum centre. Nevertheless, the 'jail' description was common among the men there.

Tawfiq was a young man who I sometimes would not see for weeks and when we then crossed paths again I often asked him where he had been. He would look at me with an indifferent shrug and simply say that he had been in his 'prison', referring to his room. A Somali man, Awad, who regularly called the camp '*little prison*', told me that for someone without papers, all of Europe in fact was '*like a prison*'. He referred to the abruptness of opportunities such as working, getting married, and generally pursuing '*normal life*', which from his and many others in the camp's perspective was part of the reason why this experience was 'prison-like'. I asked Daniel, a soft-spoken man whose smiles were always only brief flights from his introverted and serious expression, what about the camp was prison-like. 'It is not LIKE a prison, Cecilie, it IS a prison' was his matter-of-fact reply.

In this article, I want to take these descriptions and comparisons seriously. Thinking through this sense of imprisonment, I place it in the context of the men's ongoing trajectories. In making this argument, I draw on Schapendonk's 'trajectory approach' to think through questions of the carceral (Schapendonk et al., 2020). However, I also want to highlight that these trajectories are not simply one-way affairs, moving them from point A to point B, as the men I talked to would revisit their travels, reconsidering and perhaps remaking them as they recounted them to me. Indeed, a central part of this article will be a description of my revisiting of a particular site in Bosnia with one interlocutor, and the ways in which he made sense of it in the context of being in the Danish camp. I use the term 'revisit' advisedly since it can mean not only a physical return to a place but also – more broadly – can refer to reconsidering an issue from a different perspective. In other words, I am interested in how the men at the Danish camp thought about their travels in

the carceral context of the Danish asylum system, highlighting through this their sense of agency and onward movement, which contrasted sharply with the experience of waiting and immobility in the camp. One thing to bear in mind here is that Farzad's greeting also marks the discrepancy between our positions and in particular our mobility possibilities: I was the one returning to the place where he was stuck. This must also be borne in mind when thinking about what 'revisiting' means in particular contexts.

The article will proceed as follows. In the next section, I will give some background to the Danish asylum system, briefly describing the camp and the structure of the administrative system. I will then present my methodological approach and ethical reflections on my fieldwork both at the camp and during my foray to Bosnia in particular, and I will describe the process of revisiting a particular trajectory with a particular interlocutor. I will also unfold how I am inspired by and make use of the 'trajectory approach'. I then present some thoughts, first on the carcerality of the camps as experienced by my interlocutors, and then on how revisiting trajectories also could become ways of navigating current conditions for the men in the camp.

During the ethnographic fieldwork conversations among me and the men travelled beyond the camp in Denmark and, through their careful guidance, I have also travelled in an effort to retrace and rediscover specific places and people that had made an impact on interlocutors. Curiously, many of these narratives centred around adventurous aspects of their journey as refugees, recalling beautiful scenery and kind people, which stands in sharp contrast to the frustrating and seemingly complete standstill of the camp in Denmark. I will argue that this threshold between mobility and stuckedness comes to be experienced as punitive and carceral at times. Furthermore, I also want to shed light on the precarious, unpredictable and uncertain nature of the spaces and places encountered along the way, rendering the carceral qualities of the European landscape potential and omnipresent.

## Asylum-seeking in Denmark

In Denmark all persons seeking asylum generally have to live in specified 'asylum centres', as they are called by authorities, while their cases are being processed; first by the Danish Immigration Services and second, if initially rejected, appealed at a court-like body, called the Refugee Appeals Board.

The centres they live in tend to be located in rural or provincial areas. There are specific places dedicated to failed or rejected asylum seekers that are detention-like in nature (see Lindberg, 2022; Kohl, 2022). However, the place described in this article is what would be characterised as a 'normal residential centre'. The administration of the residential asylum centres is subcontracted to either local municipalities or to the Danish Red Cross (the latter was the case in Thyregod) (Figure 1).

The camp described in this article housed '*single male asylum seekers*' and had a maximum capacity of up to 99 residents.<sup>6</sup> On a daily basis, the camp was staffed by two men from the Red Cross. The people who lived there, as in other residential camps in Denmark, were technically free to come and go as they wished – although there are certain rules relating to how long they can be gone at a time. However, the financial aid distributed to people seeking asylum in Denmark is relatively little and most of the residents did not have a lot of money to use on buying train and bus tickets. This is obviously not the only reason why people did not leave this space: social stigma, small or no networks of friends or family and many other aspects were also contributing factors. People therefore spent a lot of time in the camp. Days were mostly filled with what the men living there would refer



**Figure 1.** Three pictures of the asylum centre in Thyregod, all taken by the author between October 2018 and October 2019.

to as ‘nothing’. Some of them attended Danish lessons at the Red Cross school and some also did chores a few times a week, such as helping out with janitorial tasks or cleaning. Both ‘activities’ were also a way of upping the financial aid which they received twice a month.

In his article on the myopic qualities of the Danish asylum system (and camps), Zachary Whyte unfolds how uncertainty becomes a technology of power that focuses on the removability of individuals rather than their disciplining (2011: 21). People who are seeking asylum are not viewed and

treated as potential citizens through this system but quite the opposite. Through an unpredictable asylum process, unpredictable not only in terms of length and outcome but also in terms of its judgement of 'truth' and credibility (see also Danstrøm and Whyte, 2019), the whole process and its inconsistencies breed the mistrust with which it not only meets the people seeking asylum but also, in turn, shapes how they understand and meet the system.

Besides potentially going to school or doing practical tasks around the camp, the main structure of the day was to go and check the daily 'post list' to see if their immigration number showed up – receiving mail could mean news about their case with the Danish authorities. Waiting time in these camps varies – I have known some people who got their residency after 8–10 months and others who have been in and out of the Danish asylum system for well over a decade. A common denominator is that no one knows how long they will be waiting for, increasing the pressure of every passing day.

## Methodological considerations

The empirical foundation of this article stems from a year-long doctoral fieldwork carried out between Autumn 2018 and Autumn 2019, mostly at the asylum camp in Thyregod described above. I also met up with people in two other Red Cross-managed camps in the same area as well as walking past the Red Cross school regularly, as I lived close by. Furthermore, as I will return to shortly, I conducted two field visits lasting a couple of weeks each to mainland Greece and to the north-western part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each visit focused on retracing interlocutors' trajectories through Europe, following up on people and places they encountered en route – as well as visits with interlocutors who had moved on to other places in Denmark or Europe.

It should be noted that there is a gendered angle to the research conducted since I have, during this specific fieldwork, worked almost exclusively with men. It was significant not only for the men's experience of living in the camp and being en route, but also for the relationships formed between me and them. As I will return to a little later, life in a camp devoid of children and family dynamics allows for a very different social space that, in this specific camp, was characterised by most people keeping to themselves, citing wariness of getting involved in any (potentially violent) conflicts in particular as the main reason.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the relational work carried out between me and interlocutors was also delimited and formed by gendered dynamics. Boundaries had to be negotiated continuously for both parties, and especially my role as a researcher (and what kind of researcher) was a challenge to establish in the beginning. However, since this is not the focal point of the article it will not be dealt with at length analytically here.

The ethnographic fieldwork in the camp consisted quite classically of participant observation, evolving into 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1998) as I found myself increasingly immersed and welcomed. It was during this time together that informal but semi-structured conversations were carried out. These conversations were rarely recorded, as this would often make interlocutors uncomfortable; instead I used handwritten notes. This also functioned as a way of continuously reminding people of my purpose there as a researcher. Having previously carried out six months of fieldwork in another Danish camp in 2013 for my MA thesis, I had a useful experience of the field to draw on, not only in terms of communication and emic expressions but also in terms of being aware of words and situations that could cause discomfort. An example of such was a formal interview set-up; with the reason for this perhaps being that the IS and Danish authorities generally use the term

'interview' for their interactions or meetings with people seeking asylum, and these situations are often experienced as uncomfortable and are very interrogation-like in nature.

Everyday life in a Danish asylum centre is far from eventful, so we, the men who lived in the camp and I, did not do much there simply because there is not much to do. Spending time together consisted mostly of sitting around, playing a bit of pool, drinking coffee and tea, and smoking cigarettes outside the office building. I also engaged myself with the very small volunteer community connected to the camp arranging small excursions and cooking big dinners together. I tried to help with practical things such as translating letters from Danish to English, sharing information about organisations and networks in Denmark that might be helpful to people, giving car rides and other simple tasks like that. It seemed that relational and emotional labour was the most valuable action to undertake in this field – for interlocutors and for myself – and I, therefore, as part of the research, chose to be available for people to vent to, to chat with, or to ask questions over social media such as Messenger and WhatsApp whenever I was not physically around. I officially finished my fieldwork by the end of 2019 but continue to keep in contact with some of the people I met while conducting fieldwork who I also consider to be friends; a testament to the emotional closeness that can often develop during long-term fieldwork.

### *Across the field – a trajectory approach*

The field was not a single geographical location but was sprawled across different places in the local vicinity of the region of southern Denmark where the camp was located, as well as across borders, drives in my car and the digital sphere. To further contextualise some of what might frame the experience of being in a camp for the men I know from there, I attempted to back-trace a couple of trajectories to specific places and/or people that interlocutors described to me. Despite the multiple locations, the ethnographic fieldwork should not be categorised as multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) per se; or at least it is not its multi-sited qualities that are pertinent. The ambition was never to explore the visited locations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Greece as sites in and of themselves. The specific geographical rootedness is obviously not disregarded but to some extent, it is secondary as it was and *is* the individual trajectories and experiences that have guided my research.

This approach was initially inspired by Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* (2015) in which, he writes of the migration trajectory of a Somali man named Asad spanning over two decades and drawing on extensive and lengthy interviews. In the book Steinberg nuances and expands Asad's narrative by following up on places and people Asad mentions and returning to him with his findings to create a more in-depth and nuanced tale of displacement.

Methodologically though, the term 'trajectory approach' as coined by geographer Joris Schapendonk (Schapendonk et al., 2020), approximates the strategy employed in the fieldwork drawn on here, where I also hope to answer previous calls for a more focused engagement with the migrant or refugee journey in itself as a way of understanding the complexities inherent in being on the move (cf. BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). The 'trajectory approach' is further expanded and applied by Inga Schwarz (Schwarz, 2020) who offers several examples of the complexity of migrant trajectories, making it clear how this type of movement is not merely physical but might also relate to 'struggles over legal statuses' (Schwarz, 2020: 220) that complicate the possibilities for movement, arrival and settlement for people.

Overall the trajectory approach conceptualises the term 're-routing' in two ways: as a re-orientation towards processes of im/mobility as well as re-routing as an understanding of the constant adjustments undertaken by migrants (Schapendonk et al., 2020: 2). To this, I want to add a

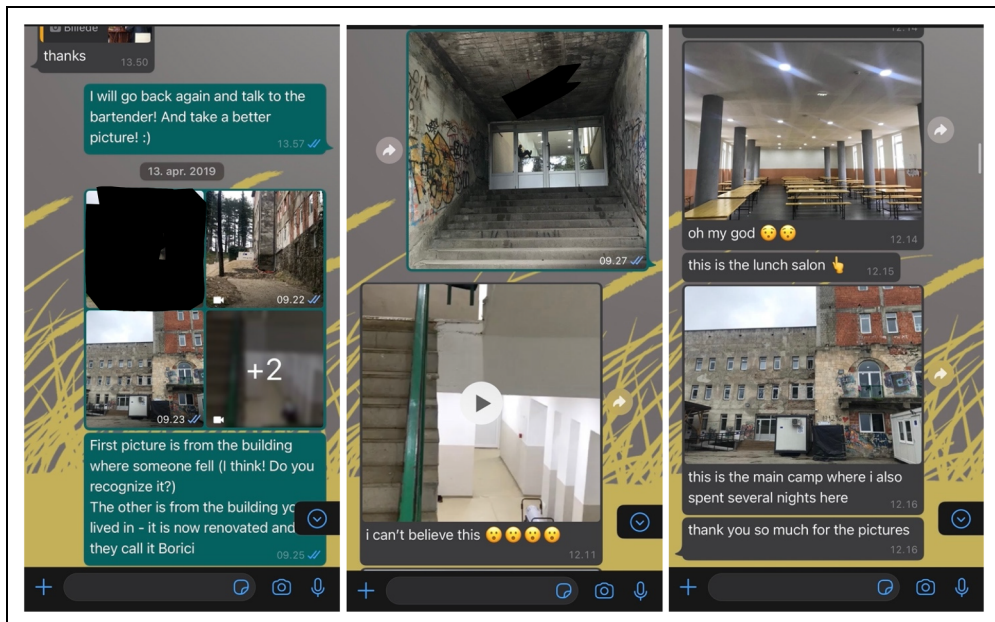
third way in which to re-route research attention: the revisiting, in memory, of routes taken. Hereby, I aim to shed a light on how previously undertaken journeys are also revisited from the sedentary position of waiting in the camp, and how these previous experiences are affected by life in camp in not only how they are recalled and retold, but also how they in turn impact on how everyday life in the camp is experienced and dealt with. In my own endeavour, the hope is to broaden how we view the experience of living in a camp as a person seeking asylum by including, if not full courses of action, then at least debris of those trajectories that people like those I have worked with are on. This is not to say that the path is given; I want to highlight here, just as Schapendonk et al. (2020) do, that people mostly have to find their way as they go as a response to the geographical, economical, social, structural and political conditions, changes and developments. My attention to the relationship between carcerality and trajectories has been driven by a curiosity that came out of the field when interlocutors reviewed their geographical journeys and reminisced over specific places and people they had come across, some of which and whom I sought out during shorter field visits. These short field visits have then also been a way to explore trajectories as more than merely a geographical and linear movement, while also strengthening relations between researcher and interlocutor as a core element of feminist ethical values in conducting research amongst refugees (Lokot, 2019).

The trajectory approach is a lens through which we are able to expand on the lifeworld of migrants and challenge the more rigid and linear views on migration that have conventionally been adopted. This is also noted by anthropologist Shahram Khosravi (2020). With reference to Sarah Willen's work on critical phenomenology (Willen, 2007), Khosravi pleads for an understanding of migration as not only a question of legal statuses but also a way of being in the world (Khosravi, 2020: 292) and argues that the broader perspective of the 'trajectory approach' might facilitate this understanding better. Khosravi furthermore offers some valuable points of critique in relation to the emphasis on qualitative methods and mostly interview-based foundation of the 'trajectory approach', as well as a seemingly random selection process in terms of places and people participating with their insights (2020: 294). Equally acute are his comments on ethics, focused largely on the discrepancy between researchers and interlocutors in access to something like (legal) movement. The study I have undertaken is solely qualitative too, however, as explained previously, it is ethnographic and draws on inputs other than interviews. There is no doubt that the inequality between my interlocutors and myself is apparent in so many aspects (financially, access to information, not being subjected to racism, etc.) but most importantly here, my ability to cross borders with ease, as a white person and an European Union (EU) citizen, and to travel legally in and out of the EU as well as the camp in Denmark. This privilege was not lost upon the people who have participated in and contributed to my research and often came up in conversation. Neil, who will be more thoroughly introduced shortly, therefore really encouraged me to visit a specific place in Europe that he had enjoyed travelling through and, as I elaborate on later, agreed to continue our conversation whilst I was exploring places, he wanted me to see.

My idea to visit such sites and Neil's encouragement to revisit routes took me to the town of Bihac in the north-western part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, very close to the Croatian border. Neil, a gentle and generous Iranian, was a man with whom I had many lengthy conversations from the beginning of my time in the camp. Neil enjoyed reminiscing fondly of his time in this specific region of Bosnia, which he had travelled through. While I was visiting the town in Bosnia (around six months after I met Neil), we were in constant contact over WhatsApp through which he directed me to specific geolocations that he had logged on Google Maps; taking me through daily errands, to everyday stops and significant spots in the town, from when he was there. I

went past the coffee shop where he had sat and planned his onward route, and he also guided me to the mosque where he first sought out advice on where to sleep and used their washing facilities. Neil seemed to enjoy this process, remembering and sharing more details as I sent him current pictures (that he explicitly asked for) and descriptions of the places where he had been. Neil also guided me to a phone repair shop whose owner was in the business of selling power banks and SIM cards to people on the move and repairing phones destroyed by Croatian border guards and police. One of the abandoned buildings that Neil had stayed in together with others on the move had, in the meantime (more or less a year had passed between our visits), been turned into an organised camp managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020). They had installed windows and doors as well as running water and other amenities, images of which I shared with him as I visited the place. Figure 2 is one example of the many WhatsApp conversations we had while I was in Bihac.

Furthermore, Neil also sent me many voice messages via WhatsApp explaining things about the area, things he was reminded of as I was there; little stories of people he met, like a local man in one of the surrounding villages who had housed him for a while, or his attempts to cross the border to Croatia, as well as a tragic tale of a man who fell down an elevator shaft from the top floor of an abandoned building by the river (I heard this story a few times while being there – from locals too). He had also equipped me with the contact details of a staff member from IOM he had helped with some translations while he was in town; all of which I tried to follow up on under his careful guidance.



**Figure 2.** Screenshots of WhatsApp conversation with Neil (Bihac, April 2019). Author's messages are shown on the right side (green) and Neil's messages are shown on the left side (grey). Images are taken by the author and consent to share the conversation has been given. In the example above the author is sending pictures of how places and buildings known to Neil looked during my visit (a year after he stayed in the town). One image has been removed for reasons of anonymity.

Mainland Greece was another location for a field visit as many of the people I know have been to Greece at some point. Here I followed up on not only fragments of trajectories (relational and physical) in Athens but also all the way up through Macedonia (Thessaloniki) to the most eastern parts of Thrace (Alexandroupoli and Orestiada) close to the Turkish border. In Athens, I was advised and assisted by Farzad and Murad who had each been there at different times and under different circumstances. Common to both was that neither had wished to be ‘caught’, as they put it, while in Greece, which they both had considered a temporary stop necessary in facilitating their onwards journeys. In order to attract as little attention as possible, they had mostly spent time in areas where there were a lot of tourists, as they felt it was easier to blend in with the masses there rather than hang out and walk around in the neighbourhoods where they lived, which are known publicly and to authorities for housing migrants and therefore are perceived as places of higher risk of getting arrested. Farzad generously connected me to a couple he had spent a lot of time with while he was in Athens. They had encouraged a religious journey for him – one he is still on – something which points to yet another type of movement that might grow out of a geographical trajectory. Murad showed me different streets that had impacted his stay (or that he knew were significant to others) on video calls as I walked around, and he inspired me to head towards the Turkish border in the Evros region of Thrace.

While the majority of the fieldwork was conducted more or less in a single geographical location, the narratives and experiences upon which it draws span outwards, backwards and ahead in so many different directions, illuminating the social, relational and multi-dimensional shape of migrants’ trajectories and experiences. Glancing into and towards these multiple directions seems appropriate and important if not also necessary, as it is my conviction that the contrast between the waiting period, that most people in Thyregod find themselves in, and past movement and future potentialities, could point to some of the carceral characteristics experienced in the camp. Tension, boredom and frustration in Thyregod are often quite tangible – like a heavy fog enveloping everything and everyone – and yet, since no one can really afford to be completely sucked in, hope is also very much a part of everyday life.

In the following sections on carcerality and on trajectories, I will draw out my two overall points linked to these. First I show how risk is omnipresent for people on the move and lay out and establish an understanding of carcerality which is not only tied to spatial conditions. Then I go on to show how the experience of carcerality and trajectories is inflected by the current situation and state of mind people are in. The experience of the carceral is affected by the trajectory of the individual. Likewise, navigation of trajectories is affected by carcerality (living with it, avoiding it, despite it or because of it).

## **Carcerality – camps, landscapes and junctions**

We live in an increasingly ‘carceral age’ (Moran et al., 2018: 668) and in the asylum context researchers from various social science disciplines have identified a ‘punitive turn’ in recent years (see, for example, Banks, 2008; Bosworth, 2017; De Genova, 2013; Whyte, 2011). This development is also evident in my own work in the Danish asylum system. In 2013, I conducted fieldwork in another Red Cross camp in the same area of Denmark and even though the description of the camp as ‘prison’ or ‘jail’ was less common among people living in that camp, the experience of the camp and especially of waiting in the camp was still explained as unbearable and hurtful – like a punishment. Phrases like ‘this is what kills me...when they say wait’ or ‘I feel like my future has become a postponed thing’ was something I heard daily in various formulations back in 2013.<sup>8</sup>

The camp I did fieldwork in in 2013 was different, as it was family-based. Furthermore, life after the camp, should people have their asylum claim recognised, was also different, as I will return to shortly. My later, most recent fieldwork was mostly carried out in a camp that housed men only, thereby creating an extremely gendered space with an absence of the little everyday distractions that having kids playing around might add, or just a more buzzing social life as people go in and out of houses and kitchens in order to tend to their families. No such distractions were available in Thyregod making space for different kinds of tension that might have contributed further to the restrained experience of being there.

In any case, it does seem clear that life as an ‘asylum seeker’ in Denmark is increasingly difficult. Conditions *have* changed; people spend longer waiting for their cases to be processed, and the long waiting time is also linked to a higher risk of getting a psychiatric diagnosis, even after being granted asylum (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2020). Furthermore, asylum recognition rates are down, residence permits are temporary only and of shorter duration now, and quite a few interlocutors have described a further ‘campification’ of life after receiving the official refugee status (Kohl et al., 2019). The ‘temporary’ housing offered to recognised refugees is often far from temporary and on top of that resembles the living conditions people encountered in the camps (in some Danish municipalities this is literally so, as the same buildings used for asylum centres have been repurposed as temporary housing for refugees). Many of these changes were instated after 2015 when the numbers of people seeking asylum rose considerably for a few years, and there was a momentum to shift procedures. These new and worsened conditions further threaten the possibilities for living a so-called ‘normal life’, a life that is often described by the people I have met in the camps throughout the years as containing opportunities for education, work, housing security, residence rights, a partner – all recognisable components of how people live their lives in general.

While the carceral characteristics that people encounter also have structural and spatial qualities (border control, prison, detention and other forms of governance to name a few), here I focus mostly on the experience of carcerality and the accumulation of feelings not only from the camp but also from the journey there. I aim to nuance how camps and camp-like spaces become so frustratingly dire by also engaging the places’ ability to produce mobility and thereby (potential) futures, drawing on the overall idea of ‘carceral junctions’ as presented in the introduction (Turner and Whyte, 2022). In this article, I treat the geographical space that people move through in Europe as a ‘carceral space’; a carceral landscape of junctions that effectively slow people down, yet also direct them on to somewhere else (Turner and Whyte, 2022; Kohl, 2022). These junctions become turning points that might represent some form of relief (Wyss, 2019) as well as of risk, for example of stuckedness, actual imprisonment, deportation and violence (sexual, physical and mental). Considerable contrasts (of experiences, places, spaces, people and authorities encountered) are being accumulated along the way, and the clear stagnation that people experience in the Danish asylum system produces intense and excruciating feelings of being detained and punished for no reason. Anthropologists Ghassan Hage and Melanie Griffiths among others have referred to similar types of (existential) standstill as ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2009) and of the period passed within the asylum system as ‘sticky time’ (Griffiths, 2014), both concepts encompassing more than simply the passing of time.

Unlike prisons, Danish camps do not make for obvious carceral spaces and, as mentioned earlier, this was especially the case with Thyregod, as it was a residential asylum camp and therefore less restrictive than deportation and detention camps. However, as also noted previously, the emic use of the word ‘camp’ was often alternated interchangeably with ‘prison’ by the people living there. The idea of the camp being carceral, in the sense of it being confining and punitive, was brought up

repeatedly by the people who lived there, and the conflation of camp and prison in conversation was an almost daily occurrence during the fieldwork. The camp was not just compared to a prison, it was also described as 'dead' or 'empty' by interlocutors, both then and during my earlier fieldwork, referring not only in relation to the feelings it instils in its residents but also in relation to the actual activity in and around these low, grey, modular barracks. Volunteer or staff-based activities were few, socialising amongst the residents of the camp scarce too, and as the place was only staffed (by two persons) during normal working hours, things were quiet most of the time. People living there grew sick of the place, of each other, and most of all, of the situation that they were in. Tension was expressed and felt in so many ways from just a certain feeling of everyone being in a bad mood, to the staff being impatient, damage to the physical structure of the camp, substance abuse, verbal fights and also a few serious incidents of physical fighting.

Everyday life in the camp was, at a subjective level, further defined by what has been referred to as 'burdened agency' (Dunn and Cons, 2014). 'Burdened agency' is a dependent combination of opportunity and constraint (2014: 99), and Dunn and Cons present the concept as the form of agency available to people living in refuge in for example camps or borderlands. They explain, with reference to Meyers (2011) that choice is not free but falls within a spectrum where most of the available options for people living precariously are relatively bad (2014: 99). For individuals undergoing the asylum process in Denmark, this is no less true; the available options to act on one's own behalf are extremely limited as long as people await the outcome of their asylum application. Despite the punitive nature of the undefined waiting time and the spatial conditions in which it is passed, they are most likely to stay put as any alternatives appear too risky or not really an option at all. Several interlocutors also referred to the Dublin regulation system in Europe as another confining element; they feel it robs them of their identity and opportunity for pursuing a life in safety, as the registered fingerprints will return them to, for example, Denmark should they decide to move on.

So, the people seeking asylum who live there do not just feel confined, they feel imprisoned. While not serving prison sentences, it has been an explicit political choice to make people feel unfree and unsure of their futures as a part of a deterrence strategy.<sup>9</sup> This, in turn, is often experienced as direct punishment by the persons subjected to it (see Kohl 2020 for more on policy concerns in the past few decades; and Whyte 2011 on the deployment of uncertainty in the Danish asylum system). Governance and control are conditions of the terrain of encampment migrants encounter upon entering Europe, and this is also at the core of the carceral (Armstrong and Jefferson, 2017: 243 referring also to Moran, 2015). Within the EU this is made obvious through, for example, the Dublin system currently in place and the resources spent on controlling spontaneous migration, but similar measures are also present in the bordering countries (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina) for the exact same reasons as dictated by the EU.

In the camp, 'prison' can be your room, or the camp itself, or all of Europe. It is much more a testament to what the conditions framing asylum-seeking do to you than an actual spatial reflection of being locked up. It is a way of expressing a basic sense of being confined and punished and perhaps even held against one's will. It is also an expression that exists in relation to what you cannot do, and my coming and going as a researcher emphasised exactly that; they had to stay, and I got to come and go.

Hamlin and Speer (2018: 800) propose the adoption of Foucault's *carceral continuum* as a means to explore how carcerality works at different intensities and across different sites, still keeping the prison at the centre of how we understand what is carceral. Loic Wacquant has famously also addressed this continuum, drawing connections between the ghetto and the prison

(Wacquant, 2001). Likewise, anthropologist Anja Kublitz has also shown how a continuum can be stretched between other categories of seemingly different spatiality; in her example the ghetto and ‘the camp’ (*mukhayyam*, originally referring to camps housing Palestinian refugees in, for example, Jordan) (Kublitz, 2019). The fact that specific spaces that are not the same can come to feel and be experienced as similar or alike hints towards an underlying argument here: that it is not spatial conditions in and of themselves that make for an experience of carcerality. This becomes clear when Farzad welcomes me back to a jail that is not locked down or fenced in at all. Rather, I would argue that the way in which people think about carcerality is shaped not only by space but also by time and past experiences as well as the potential for future ones.

The carceral (not solely geographical) landscape is punctuated with risk and uncertainty that produces an omnipresent carceral continuum. Authorities move around and the border moves with them, extending well beyond the actual, physical crossings for people on the move (Khosravi, 2008). This in turn means that the risk of apprehension and/or incarceration encompasses more geographical ground and, furthermore, that this risk preoccupies and worries people on the move for longer than simply at the border crossings. Recalling Awad from earlier, who described all of Europe as a prison for people without papers, I would argue that this perception is a good example of the experience of risk and feelings of fear and uncertainty that this type of carcerality instils in people. Awad also imagines a landscape where possibilities are limited but risk is extremely high and, most importantly, it is unpredictable. Places such as border crossings are obvious high-risk spaces, and they are treated as such: with caution. Neil showed me how he studied satellite images of crossings on Google Maps and used their ‘streetview’ function to choose places that looked remote and far from main roads. Alas, as mentioned, this is not necessarily enough as some people on the move encounter the border way beyond its geographical demarcation. Illegal pushbacks within the EU are increasingly well documented (ECRE, 2020), and in Bihac I spoke to an IOM camp staff member who recounted how he had seen individuals being violently pushed back to the camp he worked in from as far away as Slovenia by authorities or someone who identified themselves as police to the unfortunate persons who were returned. These types of arrests (unofficial as they must be due to their illegal nature), detainment and returns had not occurred on an actual border crossing, and this reveals the unpredictable reach and power of the border and therefore of the carceral landscape for people on the move.

The contrast between being ‘on the way’, moving between holding points, and the junctions (one of which the camp in Denmark also represents) and then waiting in or at these intersections, also has a severe impact on the feeling of being locked down. During the former, between places, it is all choices, decisions and attempts that are stepping-stones to moving forward. Although time passes in the same way, it is somewhat accelerated – rushed – you do not dwell for no reason. And then, suddenly, people find themselves at a standstill; like in Denmark where the bureaucratic processing of an asylum application dictates to a large extent when and how you are moving again (unless the application is abandoned). Or, like Farzad’s time in Athens where he ended up waited on his ‘smugglers’, as he called them, for months to get their affairs in order and send him on his way. Terrified of being caught in Greece as he needed to make it further north in Europe, he stayed in a cramped and dirty apartment that the ‘smugglers’ had put him up in – a space and a precarity shared with many others in the same situation – or he spent his days walking around the city’s tourist destinations as a way of claiming an anonymous identity just like any other visitor.

## Revisiting trajectories

Building on these perspectives of carcerality, I now turn to the concept of trajectories and use Neil's story of his trajectory to argue that experiences of carcerality in Danish asylum camps are bound up with peoples' trajectories. To clarify the situational character of memory with the help of Neil, I will highlight how shifting memories and associations with places are recollected and retold differently, depending on context. Next, I will return to the 'trajectory approach' (Schapendonk et al., 2020) as it is a methodological and analytical approach useful in challenging linear or stereotypical perceptions of migrant trajectories, and, as we are reminded by Khosravi (2020) it should also be able to incorporate a critical phenomenological perspective of 'migrancy' as a specific way of being in the world. I have never set out to document routes, not at least due to grave ethical concerns; rather my focal point is how people live in 'the camp' and what happens to them during the time spent there. I have been consistently interested in how accumulated experiences of being on the move in (and to) Europe affect how people stay in and experience camps like the one in Denmark. The tense comparisons to 'prison' spurred this interest and in this project my focus on 're-routing' (Schapendonk et al., 2020: 2) has been on *revisiting* the trajectories undertaken by interlocutors. As stated earlier, this was first and foremost done through conversations at the camp in Denmark. These conversations also became an opportunity for interlocutors to revisit their trajectories exactly as they wished.

Neil, who I got to know quite soon after I arrived at the camp in Denmark, had many fond memories of Bosnia and being on the road in general. When he presented his journey as an exciting bit of travelling, I was a little surprised initially. I, like so many others, had been fed migrant trajectories as almost exclusively problematic and fraught with struggle (and they certainly are for some), and I was embarrassed, especially in my role as researcher, to presuppose that same narrative from Neil. But what Neil shared with me was first and foremost a longing for the feeling of freedom he had experienced as he was trekking through parts of the Balkans. He recalled this feeling of freedom while describing the nature of the Balkans, and how beautiful it was to be there and pass through. He showed me his route on Google Maps, as he had flagged it along the way, and he explained how he planned it using the 'streetview' feature to check out paths and smaller roads so he knew what they looked like and what he would encounter, as he had to walk parts of the route during night-time when it was dark. All of this he shared with an enthusiasm and level of detail that to me sounded as if it had been an exciting task to take on. This was further emphasised by small videos of himself describing his surroundings along the way that he showed me to exemplify the stunning landscape. When he had first arrived at what is now an IOM-managed camp, he thought it resembled a haunted house (and he loved scary movies, he told me) and a video on his phone explicitly conveyed the excitement Neil felt at the time staying there.

These examples were not necessarily complete representations of Neil's journey. When I went to Bihac myself and began relaying to Neil some of the things I heard about and encountered in Bihac such as the grave violence at the border to Croatia or local racist attacks on people moving through the area – things that Neil had never mentioned during our conversations in Denmark – he also had several such stories to share, displaying another side to his adventures, one of the very negative and problematic experiences too. The key point is that the parts of his journey that he shared with me shifted over time and depending on the context in which we talked. I mention them not so much to get at 'what really happened' as to think about how there might be a temporal and spatial reality as well as an accumulation of feelings and experiences affecting how we all recall different events and experiences. Furthermore, what I learned in conversations with Neil was also how revisiting offered up a temporary escape from the camp.

Neil expressed an immense sense of freedom and relief at having managed to leave his country of origin from where he had to flee in a hurry and, as he generally enjoys travelling and hiking, all these elements combined made Bihac and parts of the notorious Balkan route into an adventure. Revisiting trajectories through conversation allows first and foremost for a space that is controlled by interlocutors. Neil got to show me an exciting and beautiful place that stood in sharp contrast to his current conditions in the camp in Denmark. He also got to tell me something about himself that did not only have to do with him being a refugee (that he liked hiking and horror movies, that he was able to map out and plan difficult routes via satellite images etc.). Revisiting cherished parts of trajectories was not only a feature in conversations with Neil. I heard such lovely stories from another man, Nima, who had travelled with his partner. Devastatingly, she had passed away since then, and when he revisited his trajectory, he not only returned to a route, but also returned to a relationship. The level of detail was all in the little anecdotes about his partner. Nima was barely able to keep from laughing out loud, as he was telling me about how they had accidentally rented a room for the night in Greece at a hotel mostly used by sex workers and their clients, and he described their surprise when they entered the dimly lit space where a TV facing the bed was turned on and showing porn. 'But the view was so beautiful', Nima noted to me with a dreamy look on his face. They had laughed so much. Such warmth and fondness stood in sharp contrast to the camp. Especially for Nima, who had just lost his partner on top of facing the seemingly destitute everyday life of asylum-seeking in Denmark. Everything he had experienced before arriving in the camp, on his trajectory, contributed to his feelings of imprisonment now that he was here.

Likewise, Neil told me almost solely about the green and lush forests of Bosnia and the view of the mountains. And the little coffee shop close to the river where he had small espressos while using the free Wi-Fi to plan his route. It was not until I was in Bosnia myself, that he also shared how the bartender in the café was quite racist, how he had failed to cross the border to Croatia several times, and how he had stayed in an abandoned building at the same time as one of its other residents fell down an elevator shaft and was horribly injured. The point here is that people share different things at different times. And the carceral experience of the camp in Denmark easily stood in sharp contrast to what had happened before, just as it might contrast with what people hoped would happen next. In that sense, the happier stories Neil shared with me can be thought of as a way of managing his current situation by insisting on his own agency, adventurousness, and his ability to map out and traverse difficult terrain.

The revisiting of past experiences such as these kinds of trajectories is not simply about how things are remembered or recalled (perhaps not even at all). His choice on what to share and when is beyond my concern, just as the reverse situation would be, if I were sharing certain experiences with him. The tension between the rosy image and the not so rosy image that I was presented with in relation to Bosnia, that Neil remembers his experience both ways at different times and triggered by different things and input from both myself and his current situation, shows how the context of the Danish camp contributes to an understanding of how the journey is revisited (as, for example exciting, in the case of Neil), and the journey there contributes in turn to how the camp becomes so carceral, not at least due to the sheer contrast of the experience of confinement and lack of room to manoeuvre that is so pervasive in Thyregod for all its residents.

## Concluding remarks

People's lives are obviously not confined to the camp even though they themselves might be, which is why I propose that we need to look at the experience of being in the camp, in this case, an intense

experience of carcerality, in relation to trajectories too. The tension between trajectories and carcerality becomes tangible when revisiting trajectories, as I have done with Neil. He offers us new insights by showing how revisiting one's journey also plays a part in navigating and existing in the carceral conditions that he and others are in. His emphasis on the enjoyable elements of his trajectory enabled him, as I understand from his stories, to navigate the ubiquitous risk associated with being on the move as a refugee travelling through a carceral landscape. Furthermore, there is an insistence on personal freedom and agency in the way he revisited this trajectory in our conversations, elements that are mostly experienced as missing in the everyday life in the camp, which in turn is also why a room in the camp can be as much of a prison as an actual prison cell. As noted right at the outset of this article, there is not anything particularly new in drawing comparisons between camps and prisons. However, in order to situate the camp within studies of the carceral, it is pivotal to review other qualities of carcerality besides its spatiality, as I have done here.

In this article, the aim has been to show the ambivalent complexity of this by emphasising how previous experiences influence present ones and in turn how present life might also influence the memories of past experience (revisiting, as Neil did, the exciting parts). The idea has been, through a reading firmly grounded in empirical examples, to show how carcerality is produced by the institutional, spatial and temporal aspects and, most importantly, also in interaction with what has come before. Not all people I have met had the same positive perspective of their trajectories but a common denominator was stories of greater possibility for action than what is experienced as an 'asylum seeker' in Denmark. While choices are available during the process of asylum-seeking, the type of agency that can be drawn upon is opaquer and more restricted, what Dunn and Cons have described as 'burdened agency' (2014). One consequence of the approach taken here – the trajectory approach – is that the carcerality of landscapes, which people describe, is inflected by and entangled with the carcerality of the camps they are in when they describe them. The context of the Danish asylum camp contributes to the understanding of how the journey leading there is recalled and revisited, and this trajectory in turn contributes to the understanding of how the camp becomes carceral.

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## Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used for all participating persons. I am not, however, anonymising the location and name of the camp for two main reasons: all participating persons here have been scattered across Denmark, Europe and beyond at the time of writing and are no longer associated with the camp. Also, there are so few residential centres left in Denmark that anonymisation in terms of name and location is unrealistic.
2. Based on verbal information from a Danish Red Cross staff member (Autumn 2019) I was informed that 57% of asylum claims between 1 January and 31 October 2019 had been acknowledged by the IS. This statistic did not seem to me to be reflected amongst the people in Thyregod; a point of view shared by the men who lived there, as well as the staff. Statistics on recognition rates from specific camps are not available. It should be noted that I rarely got to spend any considerable time with people whose applications were processed very fast (within 1–3 months as seen with some Syrian nationals) meaning that my interlocutor group is mostly made up of men who wait for considerably longer periods of time.
3. The legal term would be ‘*asylum seeker*’ as the people living in these centres are awaiting their asylum hearings. However, people there refer more commonly to themselves as refugees rather than asylum seekers. In this article, I will mostly use refugee or people/person/men seeking asylum.
4. In this article, I use ‘centre’ interchangeably with the word ‘camp’. Both terms are emic but are used by different groups of people intersecting with the asylum system. The latter – camp – is the word most commonly used by the people who live there and refers not only to this type of camp but also to the majority of living structures encountered on the move (and for some also the places they lived in before coming to Europe). The undertaken research focuses on the perspective and experiences of this group, and for that reason I favour the terminology used by interlocutors.
5. Thyregod re-opened in mid-August 2021 in order to house Afghan families that had been hastily evacuated in the days after Taliban regained control of the country as Western military forces withdrew after a 20-year presence in Afghanistan.
6. The camp in Thyregod is no longer an active asylum centre, officially since the end of the year 2020, although it was mostly emptied of residents a few months before then. The men who lived there were sent to other camps in Denmark, the majority of which (four of them) are run by local municipalities.
7. During the year I spent there not many violent conflicts occurred (although some did) but it was often brought up as a perceived risk by residents of the camp and often explained by the fact that it was only men living there.
8. The comparison between camp and prison was not completely absent though and phrases referring to the camp as ‘*a prison without walls*’ are also mentioned by Zachary Whyte (2011: 19) from fieldwork in a Danish camp.
9. Former Minister for Migration, Integration & Housing Inger Støjberg (Liberal Party) was explicit about introducing policies that would make Denmark less attractive as a destination for refugees (Ritzau, 2018), a position that has been continued by the current Social Democratic government.

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# Churn: Change and continuity in the Danish asylum system

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## ***Abstract***

The Danish asylum system changes constantly. Since the 1980s, its laws, policies, and infrastructure have been modified hundreds of times. Yet ethnographic accounts across three decades describe remarkably similar everyday experiences of imprisonment, boredom, and uncertainty. Drawing on longitudinal fieldwork in Danish asylum centres (2000–2023) and a historical synthesis of the ethnographic literature on asylum in Denmark (1993–2023), this article argues that the system is characterised by what we call *churn*: the ongoing institutional production of change whose cumulative effect is paradoxically more static than transformative. Developing *churn* as an analytical concept, we distinguish it from accounts of chronic crisis and the uncertainty of the asylum process, arguing that it names a specific mode of governance in which continuous political, legal, and infrastructural change produces and reproduces a stable pattern of experiential effects for people seeking asylum. We trace how *churn* operates across three domains — political spectacle, legal volatility, and infrastructural instability — and show how it generates persistent experiences of isolation, enforced passivity, and compounded uncertainty in Danish asylum centres. The article contributes to debates on temporality, deterrence, and crisis in migration studies by shifting analytical attention from the content of specific policy changes to the condition of constant change itself.

## ***Introduction***

“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

Giuseppe Tommasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

Change is a constant in the Danish asylum system. Over the past few decades, Danish asylum politics have seen a mainstreaming of an extremely restrictionist position, Danish asylum law has seen hundreds of changes, and the Danish asylum center system has been continually reshaped. And yet, reading ethnographic descriptions of the Danish asylum system across the same period, you could be forgiven for thinking not much had changed at all. For people seeking asylum, it seems, experiences of imprisonment, boredom, and uncertainty run through the literature. This paradox is the starting point for this article. Thinking through how continuity and change figure in the Danish asylum system, we argue that what we call churn - the institutional production of constant change - is a defining feature of the system and that it produces continuing effects.

We relate this central change to the literature on camps and carcerality, arguing for the importance of historical perspectives in a field that has been rightly described as shaped by “crisis talk” (Dines et al. 2018, Aoussar 2025) and “methodological presentism” (de Genova 2002: 428). To move beyond the tendency towards defining specific moments (e.g. “the long summer of migration” in 2015) as paradigmatic, we draw on a longer and more continuous engagement with the Danish asylum system from ourselves and others. Our argument is that the churn of constant change both results from and sustains this talk, and that it in turn helps produce a range of continuing effects for people seeking asylum in Denmark.

Drawing on our own fieldwork with the Danish asylum field, spanning some 25 years in total, and an engagement with ethnographic literature on asylum in Denmark, we argue that churn shapes the experiences of the asylum-seeking process and specifically of living in asylum camps for people seeking asylum. In other words, the very volatility across domains of politics, law, and infrastructure produces continuing effects that are often overlooked through a focus on the specifics of individual changes at particular

junctures. Constant change is a through line in the Danish asylum system, not an exception. We argue that acknowledging this helps in engaging critically with the Danish asylum system.

While Denmark is not a unique case for this argument, it is particularly illustrative of our argument about churn for at least two reasons. First, the volatility of the Danish asylum system is very high, especially across the last few decades. As we will show, the sheer scale of change across political, legal, and structural domains is intense by any account. Second, the Danish system of asylum camps places people seeking asylum in particularly dependent positions without realistic access to work or education and often living in relatively remote areas. This brings the effects of churn very close to their daily lives.

To think about this, we consciously adopt a more historical approach. We do so in part to address the “presentist” bias in much migration literature, which we argue in fact relates to how the field itself works. It has been well-established that the very notion of a refugee crisis often involves exceptionalization and dehistoricization (Jansen & Lässig 2020). By presenting refugee movements as unprecedented in size and scope, media and policy actors contribute to and reproduce a policy environment conducive to ever more restrictive migration policies (Krzyzanowski et al. 2018). Following, Cantat et al. (2023) we are less interested in migration crises than we are in “migration as crisis”, which is to say the ways in which certain kinds of migration and migrants are framed in terms of crisis, and how for states “representing migration as crisis both draws upon and justifies certain ways of governing it” (Cantat et al. 2023: 3). Our interest in “crisis”, however, focuses on the ways in which the production of asylum centres as spaces of crisis, entailing a continuous policy churn, shapes a more continuous experience for the people living there.

It is important to note that the changes that have affected Danish asylum centres do not all derive from “crisis talk” (Dines et al. 2018). Yet our argument is that churn as a mode of governance makes the basis for critique unstable, because each change invites engagement on its own terms (e.g. a human rights-based condemnation of this or that specific policy change) rather than with the pattern. Our aim with the concept of churn is thus to take a longer view and focus on the wider cumulative effects of all this changeability.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 describes our methodological approach. We then turn to churn as a concept in section 3, defining it and comparing it to related concepts like crisis and deportability. Section 4 describes the institutional volatility of the Danish asylum system in terms of political, legal, and infrastructural churn. Section 5 then turns to the effects of churn, the experiential continuities across time that persist despite the constant change. We end with a discussion and conclusion.

## ***Methods and empirical basis***

This article draws on a qualitative research design that combines longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork with a historical synthesis of ethnographic studies of Danish asylum centres. The purpose of this combined approach is to analyse the relationship between extensive institutional change in the Danish asylum system and the striking continuity of lived experience documented across three decades of ethnographic research.

The analysis is grounded in the authors' own ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Danish asylum centres between 2000 and 2023. This includes extended periods of participant observation and informal interviewing during long-term stays in residential asylum centres in 2000–2001, 2013, and 2018–2019, as well as shorter follow-up visits across the intervening years. In addition, more recent field visits in 2023 were carried out in Danish return and departure centres. Taken together, this material spans different political moments, legal regimes, and organisational configurations of the Danish asylum system.

The two authors conducted fieldwork independently in different asylum camps and at different points in time. We used comparable ethnographic methods but from distinct positionalities.

Indeed, the premise for this article came from our ongoing discussions about the juxtaposition between the ongoing legal, political, and infrastructural changes in the Danish asylum system and the profound similarities in our ethnographic observations about everyday experiences in the camps.

In order to assess whether these similarities were artefacts of our own crossed research trajectories, we conducted a systematic review of ethnographic literature on Danish asylum centres. Rather than treating this literature as contextual background, we approach published ethnographies as secondary qualitative data: empirically grounded, historically situated accounts of everyday life in the Danish asylum system. The literature corpus consists of peer-reviewed articles, doctoral and master's theses, and monographs based on sustained ethnographic fieldwork in Danish asylum centres conducted between the early 1990s and the early 2020s. Texts were identified through a combination of bibliographic snowballing, database searches (including Google Scholar), and long-standing familiarity with the field. Inclusion criteria were: (1) ethnographic engagement with Danish asylum centres or closely related institutions; (2) a focus on everyday life, temporality, social relations, or institutional practices; and (3) ethnographic fieldwork-based empirical material rather than policy analysis alone. The resulting corpus spans multiple generations of researchers, theoretical orientations, institutional affiliations, and guiding thematic interests. Importantly, these studies were produced independently, often with different analytical agendas and at moments when the Danish asylum system was configured in markedly different ways.

Our analytical strategy is comparative and historical. We read across our own field materials and the ethnographic literature with the aim of identifying recurring experiential patterns, such as waiting, uncertainty, isolation, passivity, and perceptions of punitiveness, while remaining attentive to differences in context, emphasis, and interpretation. We are inspired by Candea's notion of "thick comparison" (2018), and his proposal that "we commit to spooling out the potential of the initial contrast or analogy which caught our eye, and then, having done so, struggle against these thick comparisons, sharpen them back down to a point to reach our aims" (2018: 349-350). In other words, while we use comparison as a method to flesh out and "thicken" our empirical material, our aim is not simply descriptive but to advance our conceptual understanding of "churn". The central finding of ethnographic continuity is therefore not assumed in advance, but emerges from the repeated appearance of similar experiential motifs across ethnographies conducted decades apart and under different institutional conditions.

## ***Churn as a concept***

The sharp contrast between the constant changes in the asylum system and the more persistent experiences of people seeking asylum in Denmark is striking. Yet, we argue that this contrast speaks not so much to fracture as to connection, and we frame this connection through the concept of churn. The key point here is that it is the process of change itself, not the content of any particular change, that does the work.

We use the term churn – in the dictionary sense of “move or cause to move about vigorously” or to “have an unpleasant disturbed feeling” – to help understand a situation of ongoing motion or change that has a constant, experiential effect. Like churning seas or a churning stomach, it describes motion without progression, where the unsettling effects of the motion are key to understanding the process. As a policy process this distinguishes churn from both reform (change directed towards a goal) and entropy (gradual undirected decline into disorder). It is not so much a policy goal in itself as the effect of a constantly shifting goal of restrictive asylum policies. We note that the concept “churn” these days is much used in business studies to denote e.g. the continuous changes in a customer base, or churn rate (Reichheld & Sasser 1990, Bhattacharyya & Dash 2022), or the frequent turnover of investments in finance to generate commissions. Our purpose here is fundamentally different, yet even this understanding captures the basic idea that change in itself has effects and can be grasped through zooming out from the detail of any single shift. Russel et al. have coined the term “carceral churn”, drawing on the productive sense of the verb – to “churn out” – to describe “the production of carceral subjects via the disciplined movement of people through the carceral circuits involved in the bail and remand process“ (2022: 152). Though we are also interested in the productive effects of systems, our focus here is somewhat different, as we are interested in the ways the system itself changes or churns as well as what it “churns out”.

Our argument here is that the Danish asylum system is fundamentally shaped through churn. This is not to discount the massive changes that the area has seen over the past decades, but to take seriously the qualitative effect of the constancy of these changes. Like concrete mixers that keep their contents in a fluid state through constant agitation, certain conditions of life in camps are maintained by continuous churning. This

provides a different perspective to work emphasizing the stasis of the asylum period, by foregrounding the activity that takes place to produce the widespread sense of stillness or “nothingness” in asylum camps.

It is worth pointing out that it is of course not only the asylum system which is under constant change: people seeking asylum change, they grow, their health, ambitions, horizons may change, as may their friends and family, as may circumstances in their homeland. This is not an argument that change is somehow contained in the asylum system. But it is an attempt to take seriously the effects of this changeability in the specific context of the Danish asylum system.

Conceptually, we build on literatures on crisis, temporality, and deportability from migration studies and beyond. Nearly twenty years ago, Vigh brought attention to the ways in which “crisis” is not always a temporary deviation from normality, but for many people constitutes the basis, the context for their lives (2008). Crisis in his understanding needs to be seen not as a rupture in the order of things, but as a chronic condition, which lashes together the social and the personal. This perspective is particularly useful for our understanding of the Danish asylum system, for its reframing of crisis as “a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration” (2008: 8). In a more recent revisiting of his original work, Vigh has described situations of “slow crisis” as “critical conditions where deterioration is incessant and where the end to the negative developments in question is not necessarily in sight” (2022: 526). These are situations where “harm and decline linger and persist and the critical is more than a rapid move towards a cataclysmic event but rather constitutes ‘slow harm upon lifeworlds, livelihoods, and environments’ [Rydstrom, 2019a: 2].” (Ibid.). This resonates with the experiences of many people seeking asylum in Denmark, for whom camps are often lived as spaces of slow crisis, where the “slow harm” inflicted on the people living there serves to undergird a politics of deterrence (Whyte et al. 2020).

Yet we distinguish churn from this thinking about crisis in at least three ways. First, the churn of the Danish asylum system has a much clearer origin than the often emergent ones of crisis. For us, churn is more of a mode of governance than an environment: it is at least in part a product of policy. Second, if chronic crisis is often experienced as totalising, offering no outside, churn is experienced by people seeking asylum in ways that are profoundly shaped by the bounded institutional spaces - the camps - in which

they are enclosed. In a sense, this is about the narrowing of the contexts of crisis to fit in the camps, though as we will note the conditions of churn are increasingly reaching into the post-asylum phase for people with refugee status in Denmark. Finally, we draw on Susan Reynolds Whyte's early warning that chronic crisis as a concept "introduces a danger of atemporality" (2008: 99), by implying a permanent present that does not properly attend to the past and the future of the people navigating it. This is particularly important in understanding the Danish asylum system, as each individual asylum seeker, though caught in its systemic churn, does so on the understanding that it is a temporary situation, one way or the other. Clearly, it can lead to worse risks and crises, but in any case, it is not permanent.

This leads us to the temporal dimensions of churn. As Susan Reynolds Whyte continues in the section we quoted above, "When there is no sense of progress and lineal movement towards a foreseeable future, then time seems to be on hold. For our interlocutors, it may seem, there is just surviving — one day after another. Of course there is the short-term discrimination involved in navigation of present obstacles and opportunities, but what of the longer perspective? What of the past and the future?" (2008: 99) On the one hand, this aptly summarizes the experiences of many people seeking asylum: the feeling of a lack of progress, time seeming to be on hold, just surviving. On the other, the point about the longer perspective remains. Our argument is that the experience of churn precisely involves this temporal tension between a seemingly perpetual present and the history, hopes and desires that point beyond it. In making this argument, we draw on Griffiths call to employ time as "method" and so "offer 'fresh eyes' for understanding the macro or everyday operation of systems of power; and help contextualise legal systems and their functioning as disciplinary discourses" (2026: 1080). This approach builds on the extensive and critical engagement in migration studies with waiting (Jacobsen et al. 2021, Janeja & Bandak 2018, Rotter 2015) and temporariness (Bhatia & Canning 2021, Sandberg et al. 2025) across a range of asylum contexts, as well as the kinds of state power and violence that are enacted in this way.

Finally, we draw on the notion of deportability (De Genova 2002, De Genova & Peutz 2010) to sharpen our understanding of churn. As Vigneswaran and Bourbeau summarize it, deportability "represents the attempt to theorize the 'condition'

of being subject to the potential of deportation” (2023: 519). In other words, it is not about the specifics of any particular deportation, but about the effects of potentiality resulting from the ever-present possibility of deportation. This perspective helps to shift our analytical gaze. Repurposing Vigneswaran and Bourbeau’s phrasing, we may say that churn contests the idea that (a) people seeking asylum are a problem that (b) camps are designed to solve to instead ”problematize governing practices and their implications for the security of those who are affected by them” (2023: 519).

A key aspect of churn for us is thus the effect of the uncertainty of future change on the present. As Weima and Minca argue in relation to camp closures, “the possibility of closure is a constitutive element of the camp, and therefore a fundamental component of camp-making and governance, but also of the life and sociality of camps.” (Weima & Minca 2021: 3). In other words, the possibility of change itself has an effect beyond the actuality of any given change. The fact that a camp might suddenly close or indeed that another might open adds to the feeling of instability that characterizes churn in the Danish asylum system.

Our understanding of churn thus thinks across a range of different sources of change to understand the ways in which it helps produce relatively continuous experiences of seeking asylum across time. Paradoxically, the very use of crisis, understood as periods of critical change, to frame the asylum process in fact undergirds these continuities.

### ***The Danish asylum system: Continuous change***

The Danish asylum system has been through massive changes since it first started finding its feet in the 1980s. In this section, we detail some of these changes across political, legal, and infrastructural domains. Together these domains form an environment where rules, expectations, and material conditions are continuously in motion. We should of course not take these three domains to be distinct. Rather, they all continuously interact in a variety of ways, and are indeed primarily analytical categories to help illuminate certain patterns in the asylum churn we are positing.

We are therefore also not arguing that all these changes amount to a coherent plan - and certainly not that there is some Macchiavellian strategy in place on

the part of the state. Rather we see the changeability of the system as the result of a desire to appear restrictive on the part of successive governments, combined with the shifting circumstances of the arrival of refugees to Denmark, and wider changes in the Danish camp landscape. Our purpose here is not so much to document the detail of the many changes as to give a sense of the kind and reach of the changeability that characterizes the field.

Finally, we should of course acknowledge the obvious point that some of the volatility of the asylum field is simply to do with external factors: wars, patterns of migration, the changing circumstances in the wider European “terrain of encampment” (Jakobsen 2022). This is clearly all consequential for the changes in the Danish asylum field. Yet it is also not sufficient to explain either the changes or the consequences of the continuous changeability. For this, we need to engage more directly with the three dimensions, we turn to below.

### **Political churn**

Refugee policies have become increasingly central to wider Danish political debates. Since the 2000s, when the Danish Liberal Party (*Venstre*) won a string of elections on a platform that depended on the anti-immigrant Danish People’s Party for parliamentary support, it has become a truism in Danish politics that the only way to win power is through embracing restrictive asylum and integration policies (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). With this centrality has come a necessary volatility. In practice this has meant the development of a range of measures meant to signal the restrictive nature of Danish asylum policy, and the ways in which this was signalled was through constant calls for ever-tightening policies. Restrictiveness in migration policy is not a point but a direction of travel. Put baldly, the desire to appear restrictive necessarily entails continuous change, or churn. Indeed, we argue that churn in some sense constitutes the restrictionism of policy. While these policy changes have certainly been substantive, as we will argue they have also relied on communicative effects of spectacle.

Drawing on push-pull models of migration, Danish governments have explicitly aimed to reduce “pull” factors that might draw would-be migrants to the country, as well as actively communicating restrictive policies and plans in what Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen has called “negative nation branding” (2017). This has

meant a continuous erosion of rights and material support for both people seeking asylum and recognized refugees.

It has also entailed a regular focus on spectacular politics, meant not least to cause controversy and so communicate the restrictive nature of Danish refugee policy to refugees but perhaps not least to the Danish electorate. (Indeed, Gammeltoft-Hansen's "branding" is probably best understood as directed at this audience.) Examples include the Danish jewelry law (L 102) from 2016, which mandated the impounding of valuables from people seeking asylum to cover the expenses of housing them, the use of tent camps to house people seeking asylum (Whyte et al. 2020), and most recently plans to externalize the entire Danish asylum process to Rwanda (Lemberg-Pedersen et al. 2021). These policies were either extremely limited in use, short-lived or failed. In other words, they had larger symbolic and communicative effects than direct practical consequences. This is by no means to say that they were inconsequential. Indeed, it is arguable that their primary effects came through their controversy, their spectacularity, which shifted the ground of policy-making itself even if the individual policies were of limited effect. The political willingness and even eagerness to break with established limits on restrictive migration policies is perhaps best illustrated by the current focus on implementing law that directly challenges current European Court of Human Rights legal principles (Jacobsen & Jeppesen 2026). Taken together the politics this produces is one of widening political possibility when it comes to migration policy, and so of greater potential for churn.

At the same time, churn itself may be a political goal. This is perhaps best illustrated by the counter, which the former Danish Minister for Integration, Inger Støjberg, added to the Ministry homepage, enumerating the number of restrictive changes the government had put in place since 2015. In 2017, she celebrated the 50th restriction with cake, generating massive media attention (Whyte & Kohl 2023). By late 2018, the government claimed to have reached the 100th restriction. What is striking here, for our purposes, is that churn clearly serves political purposes, in part through the sheer enumeration of the restrictive changes enacted but also through the ways in which it generates protest and therefore algorithmic attention.

In Denmark, this churn is increasingly reaching into the post-asylum phase, especially since the paradigm shift (Poulsen 2023). Indeed, the entire paradigm shift is arguably

about instrumentalizing temporariness and uncertainty among people with refugee status to encourage them to leave the country, increase the deterrence effects among prospective migrants, and signal a restrictive line to the Danish electorate (Rytter et al. 2023). In this sense it is also about instituting churn as simultaneously a mode of deterrence and spectacle.

### **Legal Churn**

The Danish Aliens Act has been subjected to a host of changes since it was implemented in 1983. The basic structure of the Danish asylum system involves an initial interview with the Danish Immigration Service, a judgement from them, and then a possible appeal to the Refugee Appeals Board, a “quasi-judicial” (*domstolslignende*) body, which provides a final verdict. Unlike other countries, no further appeal into national courts is possible in Denmark. The process therefore includes both legal and administrative elements.

While this basic framework has largely prevailed, major legal and administrative changes have also taken place. Some of these have related to Denmark’s harmonization with shifting EU legislation, but the majority has come from the Danish parliament. These include the expansion of manifestly unfounded and well-founded procedures that can render immediate judgements on cases, the regular reconstitution of the Refugee Appeals Board members (it has varied in size between 3 and 7 members from various organizations), and the categorization of various “de facto” protection statuses. It has also entailed the establishment of the Danish Return Agency as well as specialized removal camps.

The pace of change has been intense, reflecting the increasing political salience of the area, as we have described above with hundreds of changes in law documented since 1983. As Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Lucienne Lokjær Jørgensen wrote in an op-ed marking the 100th change of the Danish Aliens Act in 2014, “overall, from 2000 onwards, a picture begins to emerge of unclear and messy legislation based on countless amendments with many different sub-elements” (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Jørgensen 2014; our translation). They argue that the speed of these changes has effects not only on the complexity of the legislation, as illustrated by the sheer volume of legal text and number of sub-sections, but also creates a system where even

legal experts – and indeed the ministerial staff in charge of administering it – are unsure as to the precise legal situation. This churn also was pointed to as a reason why camp staff refused to give any advice to people seeking asylum about their cases (Whyte 2009). The speed of change meant that they were afraid they might give inaccurate advice. The key point here is that the tempo of the legislative changes in itself creates particular effects that can impact people seeking asylum both directly and indirectly.

It is important to note that not all of these changes have been restrictive. Further, some of them simply undid previous changes, such as the decision to establish a removal camp on the island of Lindholm in a former biological research facility in 2018, which was rolled back by the following government in 2019. While this in concrete terms reestablishes the status quo ante, the changes and the media attention it garnered certainly added to the sense of churn.

If Danish law has seen a quantitative increase, it has also seen a qualitative change. In particular in the last ten years, the so-called “paradigm shift” has enshrined temporariness as a central part of Danish asylum law (Rytter et al. 2023, Sandberg et al. 2025). The shift was politically introduced in 2019 but legally implemented already in 2015 when a new category of protection was added to Section 7 of the Danish Aliens Act. While the Act already distinguished convention status (§7(1)) and protection status (§7(2)), it now introduced the category temporary protection status (§7(3)) as a third tier type of protection given to people fleeing a situation of, for example, generalised violence. This form of protection is the weakest of the three and the easiest to revoke (Vedsted-Hansen 2022). It is more often given to women and the elderly. This is clearly indicated in the legal requirement that all residence permits now must explicitly include the language that they are granted “For the purpose of temporary stay” [*Med henblik på midlertidigt ophold*].

Finally it is worth noting that the political aim of producing quantitative increases in restrictive asylum legislation also impacts its content. Many laws thus involve a ratcheting of various requirements - the number of years of paid work required to apply for permanent residence, the amount of money paid out in various forms of benefits for people seeking asylum or refugees, and so on.

## **Infrastructural Churn**

In this section, we detail the ways in which the Danish asylum estate has changed and evolved in the past 35 years or so.

In 1993, in response to the relatively large numbers of Bosnian refugees arriving in Denmark, the Danish Immigration Service contracted for the building of a total of 52 “flexible asylum centres” (Whyte & Ulfstjerne 2025). This was the beginning of the modern Danish asylum estate, which remade the geographical distribution of asylum centres in Denmark. From a relatively small number of centres, primarily based in the capital region (Kohl 2015), asylum centres were rolled out all over the country to be operated by the Danish Red Cross. These were mainly placed in out of the way areas, outside smaller towns, and built on site from pre-fabricated units assembled and connected to utilities. However, with the passing of the special law, giving Bosnians access to residence permits, these units were quickly emptied. While many were re-used for other purposes or moved once more (Whyte & Ulfstjerne 2025), a significant number were retained as asylum centres. Indeed, both of us did fieldwork in camps composed of these housing modules across the last 25 years, which were still operated by the Danish Red Cross.

By the early 2000s, however, a number of rural, Danish municipalities started taking on the role of asylum centre operator for the Danish Immigration Service. Various factors shaped this development, including an increasing centralization of the welfare state, which meant that rural municipalities both had available housing stock and were looking for ways to bring back jobs (Whyte et al. 2019). In practice, this meant a change in the buildings being employed as asylum centres. From the “flexible asylum centres” in pre-fabricated units, asylum centres were now placed in closed down welfare buildings like schools, retirement homes, hospitals, and even town halls. This in turn meant that people seeking asylum were now housed in smaller, rural towns rather than in enclaves. (It should be noted that some centres were placed in former military barracks, which also tended to be placed outside of towns.) Municipal operators also tended to include asylum seeking children in their local school systems, not least to keep class sizes up so as to avoid further school closures, rather than to run dedicated schools for people seeking asylum, like the Red Cross.

A further development, most pronounced in the last decade is the buildout of the Danish deportation estate. The first dedicated “return centre”, mostly referred to as ‘deportation camp’ or ‘closed camp’ by the people who end up there, was opened in 2016, and this has been a continuous focus for successive Danish governments. These are run by the Danish Prison Service and one of them (Kærshovedgård) is in fact a converted prison.

The number of asylum centres naturally varies with the number of people seeking asylum. In 2015, Denmark thus had more than 100 asylum centres. As of February 2026, there are 15, 3 of which are so-called return centres. While the camps themselves regularly open and close, it is also the case that people seeking asylum are regularly moved between camps. The reasons for this are not always clear to them and can entail ripping out the tentative connections they have managed to make, either to other people seeking asylum, local schools, volunteers, or sports clubs.

### **Churn across domains**

As will be evident from the above, different domains of churn create change in different ways and with different consequences. Political churn has involved a felt need on the part of successive governments and opposition parties to demonstrate restrictive political positions through a constant political spectacle of crisis. Legislative churn has involved a steady accretion of legal acts and changes, in some cases amounting to a sort of legislative involution (cf. Xiang and Lindquist 2014), causing migration legislation to become both more cumbersome and opaque. Infrastructural churn has of course related to the previous two domains, but also to wider societal changes, including the centralization of the welfare state and concomitant emptying of built infrastructure in rural municipalities, which could be made available as camps. The combination of these domains of churn produce effects that are not determined by any one of them, and it is to these that we now turn.

## ***Analysis: What churn produces***

If the Danish asylum estate has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, the experience of those staying in them shows a remarkable continuity over time. In this section, we turn to the experienced effects of the churn we have just described. We relate the constant political, legal, and infrastructural change to recurring themes of carcerality, affect, and uncertainty.

### **Carcerality**

One key recurring theme in the ethnographic record is an ongoing sense of carcerality: the camps were considered “little prisons” (Jakobsen 2022) or “prisons without walls” (Whyte 2009). This sense of being imprisoned in camps that did not have barbed wire, prison guards or locked cells derived from at least three intertwined themes, relating to experiences of isolation, passivity, and punitiveness in and through the camp.

A returning theme was the sense that the camps were remote and disconnected from local communities. The isolated positioning of early asylum centres was part of the rollout of the Bosnian “refugee villages” (Whyte & Ulfstjerne 2025; Engholm 2000), and was still experienced in that way decades later. Alexandridis reports an interlocutor saying about his camp in Zealand “There is nothing here. The closest village is 45 minutes by train. When you are in a place like this you need to have friends, you must try to have a good time” (Alexandridis 2012: 25). The expense and in some cases lack of public transport tended to mean they had limited opportunity to leave the camps. At the same time, the lack of funds also meant that there were few spaces (with libraries as notable exceptions) where they could spend their time outside the camps. Thus, even when camps were increasingly opened in smaller villages from the 2000s onwards, many local spaces were still not accessible to the people living in the camps.

The physical isolation of the camps was often related to a sense of social isolation. As Khaled explained to Whyte, he often talked to other people seeking asylum about what local people did all day, since they never saw them around. “Sometimes we think that there is no one living here, that this is a town of ghosts. We think that we are the only living people here” (Whyte 2009: 233). While some people seeking asylum made

friends and romantic connections, for most local Danish communities were distant and largely unwelcoming entities.

As we have argued, the experience of isolation in many asylum camps related to their disconnection from local communities and institutions. As mentioned, this was in part a policy aim. Arguably, keeping people seeking asylum in relative isolation also made it easier to deport them. But this disconnection also related to the high turnover among the inhabitants (another kind of churn), which meant that many social relations between people seeking asylum and local communities were almost always temporary (Whyte et al. 2019).

While Verdasco (2020) reports that young, unaccompanied people seeking asylum developed communities of belonging with each other, this was less pronounced in camps for adults. Further, even in the camps Verdasco worked in, she found a relative isolation from the surrounding community. As one of her interlocutors put it to her, “The Danes, I don’t trust them, but my own people know how to take care of me, they know my language, they help me when I need something. If I need money, I don’t have to ask the staff or wait for a week– it’s right there.” (2020: 565).

The feeling of enforced passivity at the camps added to the feelings of carcerality of the people living there, but the sense that their possibilities for activity were subject to constant change compounded this feeling. People seeking asylum in Denmark are generally not allowed to work or educate themselves. This sense of an enforced passivity is a continuing theme in the ethnography on Danish asylum centers. As Hajro put it to Grünenberg in the 1990s, “I am only a number here, that’s all... I am here today, tomorrow I might be somewhere else. They can send me wherever they want to, when they want to.” (Grünenberg 2006: 73). Almost a decade later, Whyte found a similar sense of enforced passivity, As Mustapha said, “What can I do? Nothing. I will just sit and talk and smoke cigarettes.” (Whyte 2009: 233).

While the policies on paid work for people seeking asylum have shifted, it has always been the case that the access to employment has been structured in a way that effectively limited its appeal. For example there have been requirements that they sign contracts promising to cooperate with their deportation in case of a negative decision. Education was largely limited to language courses on offer at the camp, and enthusiasm for these courses tended to drain quickly in part because of the constant fracturing of

progression as people seeking asylum continuously joined and left them. The lack of funds and relative isolation meant that there was little opportunity for other activities. On the one hand, then, the feeling of passivity derived from a structural lack of opportunities. On the other hand, it also related to the ways that activities could be drained of meaning. This led to both a sense of exhaustion and bursts of anger.

This is well illustrated in the paradoxical policy of “activation” that was brought into Danish asylum centres in 2003 (Kohl 2015, 2020). As Kohl describes it, the policy derived both from a neoliberal rollout and as a response to the established detrimental effects of camp living on people seeking asylum. It involved the withholding of a portion of the so-called “pocket money” paid out to people seeking asylum on a biweekly basis and making it dependent on the performance of agreed upon tasks. Many of these tasks were defined as “internships” though they almost all took place at the camp itself and involved things like cleaning and helping out in the cafeteria. For people seeking asylum, this system involved “a plethora of mortifying encounters and situations” (Kohl 2020: 202), regular experiences of humiliation and dependence, where they were not just required to clean toilets, for example, but told that it was for their own good. While the policy originally involved an educational component, these were diluted over time, and Danish lessons were replaced with English lessons ostensibly so as not to create “false hopes” of being able to stay in Denmark (Kohl 2020: 184). While the activation system thus was meant to address the harmful effects of enforced passivity among people seeking asylum, it also through its structure and not least its shifting implementation, also drained many of these activities of meaning.

In 2018, Jakobsen met Mo, a very active and enthusiastic man, who had trained and worked as a school teacher before arriving in Denmark. He was desperately looking for some kind of teaching internship: “I feel dead when I stay in the room” [from inactivity]”, he explained. He also pointed out how the camp itself affected him, not least through the other stories of the other people living there. “The brain freezes from all of that (...) I cannot even study” [for Danish classes in the asylum school].

Finally, the camps were understood as prisons in part because there was a felt sense of undeserved punitiveness to life there. As Daniel put it to Jakobsen, “It is not LIKE a prison, Cecilie, it IS a prison” (Jakobsen 2022: 2). This understanding entwined with their experiences of isolation and passivity, while ascribing intent to the system: it

seemed meant to make life difficult for them. Yet they felt that they had done nothing to deserve this. The camps seemed to interpellate them as wrongdoers. In a sense, the difficult circumstances of camp life were felt as an accusation, which seemed incompatible with the people seeking asylum' own senses of their dignity and innocence. People seeking asylum talked about being treated like criminals (Whyte 2009: 81) and protested that they had done nothing wrong. In his fieldwork at Centre Sandholm in 2011, Antonis Alexandridis spoke to a Syrian asylum seeker, who made a similar point. "We are imprisoned but even murderers are not imprisoned without knowing for how long" (Alexandridis 2012: 58).

Clearly, the sense of punitiveness related to the kinds of accommodation centres and people's experiences in the asylum system. Unaccompanied minors experienced a much more supportive camp system than people in regular accommodation centres, let alone those in removal centres. Indeed, it was often a shock for people who "aged out" of the centres for minors and were placed in the adult system (Verdasco 2018). At the other end of the scale, the removal camps were literally run by the Danish Prison Service, which made the sense of punitiveness all the more palpable. As the director of the Ellebæk closed detention camp put it to Lindberg, "If you put prison officers from a prison in charge of running the place, what you get is a prison" (Lindberg 2023: 48).

For some people seeking asylum, this sense of punitiveness related to a broader sense of being unwelcome in Denmark that ranged from a vague sense that they were unwanted guests to outright experiences of xenophobia and racism (Lindberg 2023, Suarez-Krabbe et al. 2018). Often this sense changed over time. Newly arrived people seeking asylum were often careful not to appear ungrateful, while people who had spent more time in the churn of the Danish asylum system – and especially those who had had their cases rejected – tended to read their treatment as intentional and hostile. As Kadir put it to Jakobsen during her fieldwork in 2019, "Everybody come here, have no problem. Stay in camp and then 'Fuck Denmark!'"

### **Affect: Boredom, anger, fatigue, hope**

The ethnographic record shows a good deal of continuity in the affective effects of the Danish asylum system on the people living in camps. Similar and related feelings of boredom, anger, and fatigue are expressed across the literature.

A fundamental sense of boredom pervades much of the ethnographic record on people living in Danish asylum camps. While this relates closely to the isolation and passivity mentioned above, it has been widely portrayed in a particular affective and temporal register. In the 1990s, Larsen reports talking to a man in his forties, who said,

There's nothing to tell about life here in Denmark. All days are the same. You eat, you sleep, watch some television, go for a walk, or do some shopping. Then you eat some more and sleep some more - and the next day it is the same. You wake up and find out that everything is the same as yesterday, so you say to yourself that you may as well stay in bed. In the end you sleep during the day, and are awake during the night, because you are so bored and have nothing to do. You just sit here and worry and wait for something to happen. I don't like this life; it's like a bad and boring movie which never ends. (Larsen 1998: 53)

Talking to two young men at Camp Jelling in 2013, Jakobsen records them discussing what to do on that day. One of them wanted to go to the gym, but the other said "Not on the weekend", to which the first replied "But every day is the weekend for us." This marked out a sense of the emptiness of their week, transforming free or leisure time from a valued commodity to boring monotony. Similarly, Sadiq, a teenager staying with his family at Center Sandholm in 2009, described his time there to Vitus. "It gets so boring, there is nothing to do, like last Sunday, nothing was arranged in the club and there were almost no children, so I went home after only a few hours. That was a very bad day . . . I got in such a bad mood." (Vitus, 2010: 36)

Across the ethnographic record we see how this boredom could flare into anger. Whyte writes, "First they put us in this prison," he [Abu Minna] waved his hand around the camp kitchen. "Wait wait wait, every day. Every day, nothing. Then they treat us like liars. I get so angry!" (Whyte 2009: 163). Similarly, frustration could boil over, as Jakobsen reports in 2013.

Tawfig walks up to the closed office door. He knocks on it. Then he pulls the handle. He looks at me and yells "where is she?". I tell him that I do not know. He walks over to me and stands so close that I really notice how much taller than me he is. Normally he walks

around silent and hunched with his arms hanging down by his sides and an empty look in his eyes. Now he is tall, tense and with a furious look in his eyes. He mumbles something about no one caring about him. Then he throws his hands up in the air, fists clinched, turns around and walks away while mumbling angrily in Dari, punching the doors open and slamming them behind him.” (Jakobsen 2013: 47)

Similarly, we see how time at the camps produced fatigue or even exhaustion. “Often I am tired after I eat, and so I take a nap. You know it is difficult to sleep here, especially in the night. My brain is full of many thoughts like ‘What will I do if I get negative?’ ‘What if they won’t let me move to Copenhagen?’, so it is hard. I usually wake up six or seven times in the night.” (Khaled in Whyte 2009: 56).

A striking through line in much of the ethnographic literature from Danish camps is a recurring concern with “a normal life” that people longed for and felt structurally obstructed from accessing. The churn of the asylum system at once made this normal life seem attainable or at least possible while denying access to it. And this ongoing process was exhausting. Writing about Bosnians in the 1990s, Grünenberg describes people longing for a “a normal life” - as distinct from the camp life they were leading as a “longing for a spatial and temporal sense of recognizable order” (2006: 95). A key part of this was a certain sense of autonomy that could derive from housing outside the camps and employment, as was the case in Whyte’s fieldwork from 2000-2001 (2009). However, this possibility was foreclosed within a few years, and in her fieldwork from 2013, Jakobsen describes people who were “not in a position to ‘play real life’” at the camps (2014: 25), but instead projected their hopes for a normal life into the future. What constituted this “normal life” was, of course, variable, but in all cases the camp itself was naturally enough understood as extra-ordinary.

As Stanley Edwards, a former resident of Sjølsmark removal centre, observed, hope provided both a way of enduring the harsh circumstances of the camp, while urging “you to endure the misery that you are in. Reality tells you differently, but hope keeps you believing that there is a chance that things will change” (Lindberg and Edwards 2021: 97). In other words, the hope that continuous change might also provide an opening for a different life, showed the ways in which it is also drawn into the churn.

## Uncertainty

Clearly, uncertainty is a central experiential part of any asylum system. The fundamental uncertainty about whether or not your claim will be recognized, especially when coupled with extended periods of waiting, has real consequences for those awaiting decisions. Some of these shapes repeat beyond the Danish asylum system (e.g. Boccagni 2025, Stel 2018). However, our argument relates not only to the basic uncertainty of the asylum system as a bureaucratic process but suggests that the continual changes in the Danish asylum system in themselves have effects. In other words, people seeking asylum are not simply asking themselves whether their status as refugees will be recognized by the authorities, but whether the rules governing the process will change, whether they will still be in the same camp, whether further political changes will mean lower benefits or fewer rights, whether the camp office will be open, and so on. Critically, these uncertainties are experienced together, reinforcing their felt interconnection.

While we appreciate, as Schiltz et al. (2019) argue, that uncertainty cannot be placed a priori as a defining and universal component of refugee experience, it is clear from the ethnography that it has played a formative role in Danish asylum centres for at least three decades. At the asylum centre where Whyte did his fieldwork in 2000-2001, a recurring refrain was “Everything here is by chance” (2009: 42). And themes of uncertainty run through all the ethnographic material we have seen from Denmark.

In part this may relate to the Danish asylum process itself. As people waited for more or less opaque bureaucratic processes to play out, which will determine their future trajectories, their experience was very much one of uncertainty between two possible outcomes, two possible futures: getting “positive” and starting a life in Denmark or getting “negative” and staying in the asylum system or being forced to move on. The tension of holding these two radically different futures in mind at once and over extended periods of time took its toll on people and drenched the daily check for mail in potential and risk, as Amiin and Hani explained.

Amiin, a Somali family father in his late twenties would, as all other people seeking asylum and living in the camp, make a daily trip to the Red Cross office to check whether his or his wife Hani’s immigration number showed up on the list of those who had received mail that day. Hani would wait with bated breath in their small apartment,

looking to her husband for news upon his return. There is really only one letter that people in the camp wait for; a reply from the Immigration Service regarding their asylum application. Amiin returned empty-handed every day of the 5 months I spent in the camp. Every day when he confirmed that also today there was no mail for them, Hani exhaled and replied with a firm nod of her head: “*Ok, live!*”. (Jakobsen 2014: 66-67)

At the same time, though, uncertainty was also very much a defining theme of people seeking asylum’ everyday lives. Will I be moved to another camp? Is the office open and can they help me? Will I be allowed a “praktik” that makes sense to me? What was experienced as shifting and random responses to these sorts of questions from camp staff was also shaped by the various forms of churn, mentioned above. Tawfiq’s frustration with uncommunicative staff, described above, was one way this was felt in the camps.

### **Living with churn**

It is important to note that the churn of course did not affect all people seeking asylum in the same way. Verdasco has suggested the concept of “anchoring points” (2018) to think about the ways people seeking asylum seek out social bonds and places of belonging to navigate the choppy seas of the asylum context. “They allow people in otherwise uncertain and fluid situations to be stable, at least for the time being, through a community of meaningful social relations and to make sense of themselves as individual human beings” (Verdasco 2018: 5). For us, though, the key point is that the choppiness of the asylum seas are a product of constant agitation, and that the experiences this produces as well as the ways in which people seeking asylum try to navigate them are fundamentally shaped by this churn.

As Darko put it to Kristina Grünenberg in the 1990s: “Imagine if you were in this situation. You are unwanted, you live with three others who all have their own problems, every day is the same...boring.... There is nothing you can do in order to build future ‘cause you don’t know where you’ll be tomorrow. Everyday you think about the same problems and about those who stayed behind. Is it strange that people go crazy?” (Grünenberg 2006: 76).

## ***Conclusion***

In this article, we have argued that the Danish asylum system is characterised by churn: the ongoing institutional production of change whose cumulative effect is not transformation but the reproduction of a stable pattern of experiential effects. Drawing on our own longitudinal fieldwork and a historical synthesis of ethnographic literature spanning three decades, we have shown that the constant motion across political, legal, and infrastructural domains has not produced correspondingly new experiences for the people living in the system. On the contrary, the ethnographic record reveals a striking continuity of isolation, passivity, punitiveness, boredom, anger, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Our argument is that this continuity is not despite the constant changes but at least in part because of them. Churn, in other words, is not a side-effect of Danish asylum governance but a defining condition of it.

It is worth underlining that churn has consequences that extend beyond questions of policy. Research on people seeking asylum' health in Denmark and elsewhere has consistently documented elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress among people living in asylum centres, and crucially, these worsen with the duration of stay rather than simply reflecting pre-migration trauma (Hvidtfeldt et al. 2020, von Werthern et al. 2018). Here the churn of the asylum process literally grinds people down, impacting their physical and mental health.

Our argument also has implications for how we understand deterrence. Danish asylum policy has been marked by a steady stream of spectacular measures — the jewelry law, the tent camps, the Lindholm island plan, the Rwanda externalisation scheme — that were either extremely limited in practice, short-lived, or failed outright. Each new policy change invites engagement on its own terms, drawing attention to the specifics of this or that measure, rather than to the broader pattern. Churn, we might say, fragments attention in the same way it fragments experience. At the same time, the desire to project a restrictive political stance on the part of successive governments and oppositions has meant a constant churn of policies and legislation.

Methodologically, the concept of churn is itself an argument against what de Genova (2002) has called "methodological presentism" in migration studies. The pattern we have described only becomes legible through the kind of historical ethnographic

comparison we have pursued here, reading across fieldwork conducted decades apart and under markedly different institutional conditions. The unusual density of ethnographic attention to Danish asylum centres over the past thirty years makes this possible.

Finally, while we have focused on the Danish case, we do not consider churn to be uniquely Danish. Denmark is an unusually well-documented and in many respects extreme case of asylum policy volatility, which is what makes the dynamics we describe so visible here. But there is reason to think that similar patterns of institutional churning characterise other European asylum systems, where political incentives for continuous restriction, legal complexity, and infrastructural instability are also present. The concept of churn offers a framework for asking, in any given context, what continuous change produces and for whom.

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# **Wary compassion in the camp: an ethnographic exploration of carceral sociality**

Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen

## ***Abstract***

This article investigates the affective dynamics of compassion between residents in a camp for people seeking asylum in rural Denmark. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018–2019, this article explores how men awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications relate to one another in a setting that is characterised by uncertainty, temporal suspension, and carceral conditions. It takes its point of departure in a funeral ritual that two young men arrange at the camp to honour and mourn the loss of a brother ‘back home’ in Afghanistan. Through this improvised memorial ceremony this article unfolds the concept of *wary compassion*. I conceptualise *wary compassion* as a specific form of compassion that is grounded in a mutual recognition of each other's suffering, while maintaining a wariness shaped by the precarious and transient conditions of camp life. I draw on recent literature on atmospheres, particularly in carceral settings, to conceptualise what I call the ‘camp atmosphere’: the heavy, tense, and yet porous affective quality of everyday life in the camp, constituted by its material environment, legal-political structures, and the sociality of its residents.

## ***Keywords***

**Compassion, carcerality, asylum, camp, atmospheres**

## ***Introduction***

*On Monday his brother died. The bad news spread fast. Everyone knew, in this camp and the camps nearby. Beltoon<sup>1</sup> is not someone you know well but he was always friendly to everyone. Since his brother died, however, we all learned much more about him; that his father also passed away recently, and another brother was lost somewhere on the way to Europe. He only had younger siblings left back home, and he, himself, was not even 20 yet.*

The tragic and violent event occurred while this young Afghan man was awaiting the resolution of his asylum application in an accommodation<sup>2</sup> camp for people seeking asylum in Denmark. Beltoon lost his brother to an explosion in Afghanistan, and he was left to grieve his and his family's loss in this camp far from home.

This camp housed a fluctuating number between 70-90 men, all awaiting their asylum applications in Denmark, which was probably the main common denominator: they were all seeking asylum on their own in Denmark. Besides that, these men came from a multitude of different countries, were of different ages and educational backgrounds, some were married and had children, some of them were almost children themselves, some of them had big networks, also in Denmark, while some seemed to be really on their own, some of them knew Denmark well having lived here before or for long, while others had just arrived. But all the men shared this specific experience of asylum seeking and camp living in the village of Thyregod, Denmark. When Beltoon's brother died, it was obvious that it affected many people in this and adjacent camps, and when Beltoon arranged an improvised commemoration for his brother, a kind of funeral ritual, several people showed up.

In this article, I propose the concept of *wary compassion* to capture the affective social dynamic at play in the camp, where people show acts of care (like attending the memorial ceremony or

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> In a previous article I referred to this as a 'residential camp' (Jakobsen 2022), but I will use 'accommodation camp' here to describe the same place.

feeling happy on behalf of someone getting ‘positive’ and moving out) while actively not getting close to one another. Building on recent literature on atmospheres broadly (Anderson, 2009; Bille and Schwabe, 2023) and in carceral settings (Gill et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2022), I propose that these wary practices of care are central to what I describe as the *camp atmosphere*. I do so through an extended ethnographic description of the ‘funeral’ ritual that Beltoon organized for his deceased brother back in Afghanistan. The description of this ritual, while out of the ordinary routines of everyday life in the camp, serves as a magnifying lens through which the affective dynamics that unfold between residents of the camp become visible and highlights how they oscillate between compassion and care, on the one hand, and wariness and apprehension, on the other.

This empirical and analytical focus on *wary compassion* and *camp atmosphere* is very much informed by a larger framework of critical phenomenology inspired by Sarah Willen (2007). Critical phenomenology, in this conceptualisation, focus on connecting migrants’ experiences to legal and systemic structures that shape the position of migrants and how they get to exist in the world (Willen, 2007: 13). While not actively contributing theoretically to critical phenomenology in this article, I draw in a sensory-attuned approach to edge closer to a description on how the camp feels and the kind of wariness that shape the social interactions and approaches amongst the men living in the camp. For the interlocutors of this study, life in the camp is characterised by uncertainty and an inability to plan for the future while they await a decision on their asylum claim. Thus, the potential of rejection and thereby deportability (De Genova, 2002; De Genova and Peutz, 2010) loom large. This particular atmosphere of uncertainty and frustration would appear to be a poor space for compassion. Yet, this article shows that compassion is indeed present between the residents, not least in the ad hoc funerary ritual Beltoon and his co-residents performed.

Before presenting the vignette, I will first give some background to the context of seeking asylum and living in camps in Denmark as well as outline the methodological and ethical considerations that guided my research. Then we will look at the ritual before discussing the

camp atmosphere, the camp as a social space and the *wary compassion* that grows out of these circumstances.

### ***Asylum and camps in Denmark***

I use the word camp to describe the accommodation space, though authorities and the Danish Red Cross prefer 'asylum centre'. But the people who lived there most commonly referred to these places as 'camps', which is why I do that too. In Denmark, people seeking asylum go through up to three phases, each entailing specific accommodation; Phase 1 (arrival) in which the applicant will live in a reception camp (Sandholm); Phase 2 (case processing) in which the applicant will live in an accommodation camp; Phase 3 (if their application is finally rejected) in which the failed applicant will be moved to what is officially referred to as 'return centres'<sup>3</sup>, (Refugees Welcome, n.d.). The people living in the camp in Thyregod were all currently in the second phase in which they had their asylum case processed. Time spent in the second phase, and therefore time spent in the camp, varied a lot. According to authorities the current average processing time is eight months (Udlændingestyrelsen, 2025), which was similar at the time of my fieldwork, but many interlocutors waited considerably longer – commonly 1-2 years but for some even longer.

The camp is located at the outskirts of the village of Thyregod in rural, mainland Denmark. Thyregod has a population of about 1300 and scarce retail options. It is in the southern part of Denmark. It has a railway station from which train lines connects it to bigger towns (e.g. Herning and Vejle). As is common in the Danish countryside, villages like Thyregod come across a little sleepy and quiet. This is also how the men in the camp experienced it. Not only did 'nothing' happen in the camp, but interlocutors also reported the same being the case in the village. Some of the men would occasionally go fishing in a nearby lake, and some of them also said that they valued the quietness of being surround by nature and agriculture. But often I heard people complaining about the lack of possibilities (for shopping, meeting people, maybe going out or at least hanging out, etc) in the area and the high cost of public transport,

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<sup>3</sup> I normally refer to them as 'deportation camp' or 'closed camp' as this is what residents called them.

if they wanted to go somewhere else (which many of them did). As I have addressed elsewhere, there was a shared experience of the camp as being a carceral space even though it was open to people entering and leaving (Jakobsen, 2022). In this article the sociality of this carceral experience is central. I will therefore now briefly explain what everyday life is like in an accommodation camp as Thyregod. The camp itself consisted of seven low, single-story, modular buildings, five of which all had a communal kitchen on the middle, and shared bathrooms and toilets as well as rooms to each side of the kitchen. Thyregod was not a busy camp, and while many people shared their room with someone else, some also had their own space. People are offered 'activation' via the camp job centre, which most often consists of basic language classes and some work practice or internship (*praktik*) (see Kohl, 2020). The 'praktik' often amounts to maintenance work or cleaning in the camp. Every fortnight all residents received a very basic cash allowance that had to tie them over with food and other amenities they might need. They all were responsible for cooking all their own meals. This financial aid left little money to spend on for example public transport, so most of the residents did not have many places to go besides the camp and the school hence the experience of isolation. While nearby camps also managed by the Danish Red Cross housed more diverse groups of residents, Thyregod's status was that of a camp for 'single male asylum seekers' and a wide spread of different nationalities from European, Asian, African and Latin-American countries. Age varied a lot in the camp, but it is fair to say that there were more younger men than older.

## **Methods & Data**

For this article, I have drawn mostly on empirical data from my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork in asylum camps in Denmark<sup>4</sup>. Most of this fieldwork was carried out between 2018-2019, however I have, in the following years revisited interlocutors both in these camps and other places (physical and digital) to follow up. The main field site was the camp in rural mainland Denmark, in the village Thyregod<sup>5</sup>, that is the spatial setting of this article. This camp was

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<sup>4</sup> I have previously carried out six months of fieldwork in 2013 in the same area, and so my foundational knowledge and experience is also informed by that.

<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to not anonymise the location and name of the camp since the people living there at the time of research are long gone and scattered all over: some in Denmark, some have travelled on, one tragically has passed.

managed by Danish Red Cross such as several camps were at the time<sup>6</sup>. A lot of people passed through this camp as they changed phases in their asylum process and either saw themselves getting ‘negative or positive’ which is how people commonly referred to rejections and acceptances of their asylum claims, so the number of residents fluctuated.

Only men were housed in this camp at the time. This was a purposeful way of accommodating people seeking asylum determined by the Danish Immigration Service. Thyregod therefore housed ‘single male asylum seekers’, while the other two camps in the area housed families and people with special needs (care needs, ‘vulnerable women’), and couples and families respectively<sup>7</sup>. All residents across the three camps attended the same school in nearby Jelling, where one of the camps were located, and therefore knew (of) each other through that. During my fieldwork, I also lived in Jelling and therefore saw both members of staff and residents there. As I was driving back and forth, I often had the opportunity to offer rides to the men from Thyregod. Riding in the car side by side made for a comfortable space in which to speak, also about the more difficult things. In general, fieldwork in the camp, which is a processual ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998), was all about finding these little pockets in which we could speak sincerely but informally, to take pressure off the conversation. People seeking asylum are formally *interviewed* by authorities and so many are wary of the format. This is why I focused on informal semi-structured conversations either over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, while they were playing pool and I was watching, or as I was cooking in the staff kitchen. Or, as mentioned, in the car. I also offered my attention and emotional availability through digital spheres and communicated with interlocutors on message apps when I was not physically present in the

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Secondly, there are so few locations of this type of accommodation camp, and it would therefore be easy to figure out which camp it was.

<sup>6</sup> In that specific area there was three Red Cross-managed camps in 2018-2019. The last of the three closed in February 2026. Danish Red Cross are still managing camps and camp services elsewhere in Denmark at the time of writing.

<sup>7</sup> Camps in Denmark are subjected to a high volatility and can therefore not only open and close but also be subjected to a change in the status of the group the house. Throughout the years the camp in Thyregod has also housed unaccompanied minors, people with special care needs, and families up until it was formally closed as an accommodation centre in the end of 2020 (Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2020). It was briefly reopened in 2021 to house some of the Afghan nationals that was evacuated in August of that year, but as of writing, the Immigration Service has terminated the contract renting the land, and the camp no longer exists.

camp. This form of being together was also part of my ethical consideration, realising that I had very little to offer but my company and doing small favours such as giving rides, translating documents etc.

The fact that I spend a lot of time in the camp, also on my own, as will become apparent later in the article, positioned me well to *feel* and experience the camp atmosphere too. There is an obvious gendered angle, as the camp housed only men and the permanent staff were men too. As a woman doing research there, I had to navigate this, and so did my interlocutors. One thing I made sure of from the beginning was refraining from going to the buildings where the residents had their rooms unless specifically invited and even then, I was hesitant. I did this to respect the very limited privacy people had in the camp and wider asylum system and to not initiate any rumours in the camp also for the people who I was talking to (not because I did not trust people). I therefore tried to keep conversations, also longer sit-downs, in areas where I normally roamed, such as the common areas, the staff office (when staff was not around) and the staff kitchen. Other ethical concerns centred around mobility; the fact that I (and staff) could come and go and had homes outside the camp. Of course, camp residents are well aware of this discrepancy, we even spoke about it (and they often joked about it), and bar the obvious power imbalances, I think it more than anything, made the unnatural exceptionalisation of the residents stand out. The people living in the camp knew that this way of being in the world was not right.

### ***Ritual (ethnographic vignette)***

The following ethnographic vignette is written based on what happened an early summer's day in 2019. As we heard at the outset of this article, Beltoon's older brother had been killed by an explosion in Afghanistan. On this day he, alongside some other young men, arranged a memorial ceremony for the dead brother to mourn him correctly and collectively but also to document the mourning to his relatives in Afghanistan.

*Kadir and Beltoon come back from the shop with heavy plastic bags and get to work in the kitchen. "Azza," Wasim says knowingly while gesturing towards the two young men. He tries to explain to me that they are preparing a wake. I pop my head into the kitchen to see what it is they are doing, and if they need any help. In the dining area they have moved the tables around so that there is only one left pushed up against the wall. On the table there is a picture of Beltoon's brother from his wedding day and one of him in full military uniform including the bullet proof vest that was no match for the explosive device that took his life. Next to the pictures there is a flower bouquet and Beltoon is trying to arrange some candles. He and Kadir have bought juice, soft drinks and an array of prefabricated cakes and biscuits. They are preparing a memorial for Beltoon's brother, just as Wasim told me (azza).*

*Beltoon constantly looks to Kadir for answers; on how to place the chairs or the speakers or the candles. Which candlesticks to use. I am not puzzled by the two of them organising something like this together. They often hang out, and Kadir, who rarely shows care and concern for the others, at least not around me, has been very busy making sure Beltoon was not alone this past week. Beltoon's presence is always calm and polite, maybe even a little discreet, whereas Kadir tends to be louder, ruder, and more forceful. Kadir is actually a bit of a bully, always carrying his attitude like a shield. But today he does not snap or yell at Beltoon. He looks concentrated while carefully laying out cakes and biscuits on plates and answers all of Beltoon's questions decisively. I have not seen either of them so seriously engaged in a task before – everything must be just so, there is no room for mistakes here. Also, there is no room for me. Preparing and setting this room for the ritual to come – even in the most practical aspects – is clearly an intimate and private act.*

*So, I'm back on the bench with Wasim. "Ash-shams", he sighs with a nod up towards the sun. Abu Saed has moved out of the camp today, he got positive. He is an older man Wasim liked a lot; he was always calling his name and hanging out near him. Abu Saed gave Wasim his keychain as a parting gift and Wasim seems a little sad and a little restless. Losses occur constantly in the camp and everyday life here offers few distractions to deal with them so here we are, mostly silent, on the bench smoking cigarettes, while on the other side of the wall a memorial ceremony for a late brother is being arranged.*

*“Ceci, coffee??” Kadir pops his head out of the kitchen door to call me in to put the coffee on. While the coffee is brewing, slowly a few people appear. Wasim wanders in and out in his usual restless manner. But Masood is there and Sayeed. So is Musa and a young man from one of the adjacent camps that I have seen Beltoon hang out with before, whose name I do not know, from one of the adjacent camps that I have seen Beltoon hang out with before. Milad walks in and straight up to Beltoon. He says a few words, hugs him and kisses his head before he leaves. And now Anbassa and Aleeki arrive as well as Arash and Hussein. The melodic voice vibrating from the speakers under the table-turned-altar draws them in. It has the same rhythm to an outsider’s ear as the azan – call to prayer. Masood knows the words of the prayer and softly joins in the recitation.*

*Beltoon and the young man from the other camp are already seated right in front of the images of his late brother. Most of the others take their seat towards the edges of the room. Kadir is filming everyone. Everyone settles in – even Anbassa and Wasim who always seem very conflicted when it comes to religious gestures. There is a solemn and respectful atmosphere in the room. The way in which the prayer is performed gives it a mechanical and meditative quality, it is beautiful and hypnotizing. Besides the melodic voice, silence fills the room, only briefly interrupted by Beltoon getting up to press ‘skip’ on the ad break on the YouTube channel from which he plays the prayer. The emotional impact of the soundscape and community in the room is nearly tangible – I am moved too.*

*As I fill the last thermos with coffee, I prepare to leave discreetly so the men can perform their ritual in private, but as I make my way towards the door, Kadir grabs me by the arm and passes me his phone to film the ceremony. Kadir joins the others to get absorbed in the movement of the prayer. Someone else besides Masood is silently reciting too - I think it is Aleeki. He is the only other person in the room right now who would know Arabic (Wasim has left again) and the voice is deep like his.*

*After 15 minutes, the prayer stops. Beltoon’s acquaintance from the other camp turns his chair around, so he is facing everyone next to the little ‘altar’. He lifts his hands out in front of him, palms open and facing upwards. He leads a prayer and they all join in. Everyone finishes the prayer by wiping their hands against their faces. Kadir jumps up and starts retrieving cakes and*

*drinks from the kitchen tables while everyone else hugs Beltoon and shakes his hand. I try to pass the phone back to Kadir, but he wants me to carry on. I continue to film while they set the table. Wasim is asked to come back inside and so is Aleeki who tried to walk off. Musa sees me still filming and says in Danish: "I think it is enough now, you can turn it off", quickly overruling Kadir as I repeat his orders. Kadir takes his phone back. I later learn that this video was important testament for Beltoon's mother back home in Afghanistan to prove that they were mourning the loss correctly also here in Denmark. I grab my bag, determined to leave. Beltoon sees me heading for the door and asks me to join – Kadir too. I am surprised and unsure if it would be more polite to deny the invitation or join in. But eventually I sit. Kadir serves me a cup of coffee.*

*We are all quiet. Musa talks directly to Beltoon in a low voice for a long while before Masood says "Alhamdulillah". He does not like silence and he does not understand Pashto. Musa translates to the rest of us. He is very affected by the situation and Beltoon's family's story ("it is painful") and to yet again feel let down by his country, he explains to us. He says that it does not make a difference whether we cry or not, but we should all pray for Beltoon's brother. Everyone agrees. Musa then talks about Afghanistan and the violence taking many lives. Masood interrupts, attempting to make the example bigger, to include places like Syria and Iraq prompting Musa to make his words more personal. He tells us about Beltoon's remaining family and the loss is tangible to all of us in that moment. Beltoon is completely silent. Musa cries a little. They all agree around the table that the brother is in a better place ("inshallah"). And that the remaining family needs praying for.*

*"I don't understand these extremists" Aleeki exclaims, as it was most likely a bomb placed by the Taliban that killed the brother. They dive into a debate on the type of Islam practiced by 'extremists' – "they are sick in their heads" – and the mood in the room is intense in a different way than before. Beltoon's friend from the other camp breaks the tension with a prayer and everyone turn their palms upwards. At the end of the prayer, they all wipe their hands in downward motion on their faces again and get up, we are done and the day continues as usual.*

## ***Atmospheres and compassion***

In the following I will briefly introduce the conceptual approach to atmospheres that I draw on in this article. Referring to or describing an atmosphere is part of everyday vocabulary. Often we refer to a ‘mood’ or a ‘vibe’ or a ‘feeling’ and often we use those words interchangeably with ‘atmosphere’ (see also Anderson, 2009; and Turner et al., 2022). Atmospheres are famously dynamic, intangible and non-static, rather they are described as not ordered, not structured, not defined (Anderson, 2009: 78) . Bille and Schwabe have characterised atmospheres as porous, meaning that they are not solid, that they have a structure that is passable, like a little rock full of minute holes that air or water might run through. They explain that atmospheres are “(...) *seeping in and out of people and places*” (Bille and Schwabe, 2023: 7), an understanding that resonates with this experience of *sensing* something but that this *something* can also be fleeting. There is an airy quality to atmospheres, yet atmospheres are not ‘air’ but made up of several elements: material structures and space is part of what facilitate and contain an atmosphere but likewise are people’s presence in that space, their relationality, affect, sociality.

The camp as a space and place has carceral qualities in the eyes of its residents, something I have written on elsewhere (Jakobsen 2022). This experience of carcerality is influenced by feelings of social isolation, temporal suspension, uncertain outcomes of asylum cases, contrasts to previous experiences of being on the move and a feeling of powerlessness. Experiencing and in turn reacting to the camp as punitive and confining adds to its carceral atmosphere (Turner et al., 2022). Additionally, the everyday life of asylum seeking in Denmark is hugely influenced by the legal status of being an ‘asylum seeker’ as well as the sociopolitical structures that this entails, both of which adds to the carceral experience. People are placed in the camp because of the asylum process, a process that often comes across as unpredictable, painfully opaque and difficult to navigate (see also Whyte, 2011). Gill et al. (2021) have put forward ‘tribunal atmospheres’ as a concept containing the experiences and impression of appellants in First Tier Immigration and Asylum Tribunal hearings in the UK. According to Gill et al. tribunal atmospheres produce disorientation, distrust, and disrespect for migrants. These feelings resonate very much with the experiences people in Denmark speak off as part of an everyday

life that is indeed shaped by political and legal structures. So while the camp is not a tribunal hearing, it is, amongst other things, also a legal and political space. For camp residents the camp is inseparable from the bureaucratic process of being an asylum seeker, and so, the experiences of disorientation, distrust and disrespect, that people might have in relation to authorities, are transferred to life in the camp and the way in which people engage with each other and staff. This, as well as the carceral characteristics of the camp create an affective atmosphere that amounts to a wary and apprehensive sociality. In this article, I use the notion *camp atmosphere* to capture the tension of this space, the time spent there, the specific sociality and the affect it creates. All of this in effort to conceptualise what I have called *wary compassion*, an affective way of being with each other in the camp, as you have just seen in the funeral ritual.

This kind of affect is what I characterise as compassion. Anthropologist Didier Fassin observes compassion as a humanitarian response to suffering and thereby a moral logic that shifts focus away from the political rights of an individual (Fassin, 2005). The concept of compassion has come to be closely associated with a humanitarian framework (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). This might also go some way towards explaining the relations and power dynamics that have been most explored when it comes to compassion and migration, namely the role of compassion in the treatment of migrants by e.g. volunteers (Maestri and Monforte, 2020) and bureaucrats (Kalir, 2019; Kohl, 2022). By contrast compassionate relations between migrants are less commonly explored (for some exceptions, see for example Sirriyeh, 2018; Verdasco, 2019). The understanding of compassion that I draw on in relation to *wary compassion* takes its outset from the distinction between compassion and pity that Hannah Arendt puts forward in her book *On Revolution*. Here Arendt says:

“For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, are not only the same, they may not even be related. Compassion, by its very nature, cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people, or, least of all, mankind as a whole. It cannot reach out farther than what is suffered by one

person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering. Its strength hinges on the strength of passion itself, which, in contrast to reason, can comprehend only the particular, but has no notion of the general and no capacity for generalization.” (Arendt, 1965: 85)

For Arendt a key distinction is that compassion is not political, and it is singular. So, while Arendt aligns with the root meaning of compassion, namely 'to suffer with', she would still insist it is an individual experience. I agree that it remains individual in the camp, and that while people might share grounds for solidarity that is not a community they foster. People keep their cards close and remaining unknowable (friendly, yes, but not open) and private was the most common way of being amongst residents in all social relations. This is very much another feature of the camp atmosphere. Compassion in the camp does not turn to pity for one another but rather reflections in which they see themselves in each other. Building on Arendt, Ticktin (2011) argues that compassion requires a certain shared understanding. She argues that “*for imagination to play its role in the coordination of emotional commitments, people must make a case for it, nourishing their imagination from the same referents; their claims must be shaped by the same ideas of what suffering is and where the threshold of the bearable is drawn [Boltanski 1999:50]*” (Ticktin 2011: 113). *Wary compassion* then, becomes a threshold, between taking care of oneself, as in, being careful or on guard (wariness), and taking care of others, as in showing affect because of true understanding (compassion). I see the specific qualities of the concept of *wary compassion* as ambivalent and in constant tension; it is an extension of empathy and care at an arm's length. It is heartfelt concern for each other with some wariness of who the other is, who he was before arriving in the camp and who he will be after, while sharing an experience that outsiders cannot grasp.

Having laid the theoretical foundation for our ongoing discussion, I will return to the camp and its residents.

## **Camp atmosphere**

*I have never experienced 'quiet' as I did in the first couple of months in the camp. Mornings are dead silent. The air is heavy, literally heavy with water, as this area often is covered in fog around sunrise and sunset. In the winter, when the days are short, the fog envelopes you, and it can feel claustrophobic and numbing at the same time. All the buildings are grey. The gravel in the courtyard is grey. The flagpole is grey. The blinds in the windows of the rooms are always pulled down – and grey. And when the fog rolls in, the whole world out there, at the outskirts of the small countryside village, is grey. (ethnographic excerpt 2019)*

Arriving in Thyregod always brought a specific mood with it. Something that I struggled getting a grasp on; it was a *feeling* of something heavy and tense. The quietness of the camp was striking and because of that often commented on by both residents and staff. Residents joked about this quietness, referring to the silence and lack of everyday life hustle and bustle. This was also a reference to the geographical location of the camp in this sleepy little village. In my initial meeting with the manager responsible for all three camps in the area, I got the strong impression that they suggested Thyregod for my fieldwork because it was also convenient to them. They knew that not much happened there, so my presence might be a welcome distraction would: an activity of some sort. The camp was not prioritised in terms of Red Cross-arranged activities, and while there were a few volunteers connected to the camp, one of whom was indeed very engaged and active, there was just not a whole lot for residents to do. Martin, a member of staff, would often talk about how quiet it was, and it was clear that he did not only refer to the (lack of) sound; it was a feeling of stillness too. As described above the place came across as quite anonymous with its grey and identical buildings throughout. You would sit in the office and look out at all of this, and then the courtyard flagpole in the middle of it all, with an old, slightly torn and worn-out Red Cross flag flying in the, like a clichéd metaphor. In this first part of the analysis, I explore the atmosphere of the camp, and how it speaks to its social and carceral characteristics. I am drawing on the idea of atmospheres to assist in unfolding

what it *felt like* to be in the camp. The components making up the camp atmosphere are material, geographical, legal, political, social, relational and affective.

A lot of camp residents had turned their circadian rhythm upside down. People often slept in late if they did not have any chores to do. It was commonly known and talked about how people in the camp struggled to sleep during the night; Wassim would sometimes catch a train to a nearby town and walk around all night only to return with the early morning train and go to sleep as the darkness made way for daylight. Another interlocutor complained that his roommate prayed all night (“*he must have troubles with his God*”) and kept him from sleeping. Another one became really anxious when it turned dark and had his lights on all night to avoid being alone in the dark. And one man complained that it was like a TV turned on every time he lay down to sleep, referring to his mind spinning. The twisted day/night rhythm became a striking contrast to the world outside the camp where most people got up in the morning and went to bed in the evening. It also explains why arriving to the camp in the morning felt eerie, and why the heaviness seemed so uninterrupted. The anxiousness and restlessness causing the insomnia was also *felt*, just as it seemed to be contagious as also new arrivals in the camp quickly became nocturnal.

So there was something enveloping the camp, pressing upon people ‘from all sides’ (Anderson, 2009: 78). And this is not to say that you never heard laughter around the camp. People joked with each other, with the staff and with me. Yet, even in the jokes there was a sarcastic distance to everyday life, like Wassim who would always respond with “*inshallah*” and a little laugh when I said, “*see you tomorrow*”.

### ***Camp atmospheres and social space***

As I have introduced this article with, the camp atmosphere facilitates and is being facilitated by a specific social space in which its residents affectively share compassion but less so friendship. One might be tempted to compare this to an Aristotelian friendship of utility or a

survival unit of some sort (Elias, 1978), but I view it as a much more dynamic and yes, atmospheric, affective condition. Relationships are certainly also utilised; Kadir and Beltoon's 'friendship' appeared more physical than emotional generally: they hung out a lot and cooked for each other, but their interactions still came across as necessary more than wilful. They appeared similar in the sense that they shared a language and cultural background and were around the same age but as individuals they were day and night. While Beltoon's presence was always discreet and polite, Kadir rarely showed kindness in public settings but would hang around the office being moody and sometimes teasing the other residents, the staff or me for long periods at a time as some sort of statement. Beltoon always excused himself and quickly disappeared either out of the camp or down to his room. Whenever I caught one of them on his own and asked about the other, their individual response was always a little bewildered, why would I think they knew what the other person was up to. In these situations, they always seemed to have no real sympathy for the other, and still, when Beltoon's brother died, Kadir did not leave his side for several weeks.

Another aspect of the camp that brought about the hesitant social space was that it housed only this group of men. The absence of demographic diversity had an impact on both the rhythm and the dynamics of the camp. In the other camps in the area, there was a completely different atmosphere simply from the sounds of children playing or crying, and the activities of people minding their families; cooking, talking, arguing, singing, etc. Of course, people cooked and talked in Thyregod (they also minded their families) too, but there were not the same busyness of sounds and smells and bodies. While I do not explore gender as the central theme in this article, it is important to note, that gendered positions did of course contribute to the different atmospheres in the camps. Other scholars have observed the role of gender in relation to asylum (Griffiths, 2015; Hyndman and Giles, 2011), and the general realities of asylum seeking are that people are made to wait. This temporal suspension was often voiced, by the interlocutors here, as a waste of time (like serving a prison sentence), and the fact that they could not work, or get educated, and for the younger men, find a partner, were of great concern and worry. However, I argue that this disposition is not a 'male issue', as the conditions of waiting was shared across most people seeking asylum. With that being said, I do share

interlocutors' impression of being at a disadvantage in certain ways, probably mostly because they are not considered a vulnerable group (compared to women and children on the move). This positioning of men on the move as more dangerous than vulnerable, and more likely to be viewed as 'bogus' is well-established (De Genova, 2013; Griffiths, 2026; Hyndman and Giles, 2011). In Thyregod the perceived resilience of residents amounted to fewer formal activities arranged by the Red Cross than when the camp had housed other groups. This led to the men feeling a little put aside or forgotten about. Whether or not this impression was accurate, the experience was *real* and therefore it impacted both emotions and reactions of people and also added to the atmosphere. A lot of the wariness in the camp came from assumptions the men held about each other, as well as an understanding of how camp conditions might influence you, and while these assumptions might be untrue, the impact of them was real. I have, from the first day I arrived in the camp, always felt that there was some kind of dormant tension, a feeling that something could always happen, even though nothing ever really did happen. Carceral geographers Turner, Moran and Jewkes quote a prison officer who talks about how, some days, he get this feeling that something is "in the air" (2022: 2) without being able to put a finger on it. This feeling of 'something' or a "bubbling", as the prison officer also calls it (Turner et al. 2022: 2) was also characteristic of the camp atmosphere, maybe in an anticipation that something had to happen because the 'quiet' was too weird? The argument is not that this is *because* of the gendered aspect but that is more *obvious* because of it. Uncertainty and the somatic and existential tension that comes from this is prevalent in all camps, but so apparent in this camp of Thyregod because nothing distracted you from it.

Murad, once told me how he made an effort to not get into any discussions or conflict with the people he lived next to. He was often angry at how others in the camp cleaned up after themselves or the noise they made, maybe listening to really loud music late at night, but he wanted to mind his own business. He wanted to be friendly and to not have any conflict with anyone in the camp, even if it meant biting his tongue. Murad was not the only one who told me about this wary strategy of being friendly, non-confrontational and of keeping to yourself. When asking people about friendships in the camps, I mostly got a very adamant "I am not friends with anyone"-answer, even from people who seemed to hang out quite a lot, like Kadir

and Beltoon. Most of the camp residents made real efforts to not rub each other the wrong way. They all know that it is a difficult situation to be in; they know that it is tense; they know that people can be on edge; that they might not sleep well etc. This wariness towards each other contributes to the camp atmosphere. It is also crucial to the affective aspect of its atmosphere. I generally interpret it as a way of respecting each other and the way in which your neighbours deal with their struggles because you yourself understand the hardship. This wariness based on a shared understanding existed at the same time as a wariness based on a lack of understanding of each other.

Crudely put, there was three ways of being in relation to each other in this camp shaping the social space (and thereby the atmosphere): explicitly antisocial, neutrally friendly, and withdrawn. Some people were explicitly antisocial in the way that they were inconsiderately loud, perhaps loudly or openly under the influence, breaking some of the few things everyone could use (like the pool table), very messy or unhygienic in the shared spaces (bathrooms and kitchens) or explicitly looking for conflict. One might also consider this kind of behaviour as more self-destructive than destructive, at least this reflects very well the people I knew who acted like this on occasion. Most of the time most people were quite neutral in relation to each other. Friendly and polite but also emotionally distant to each other. Of course, people bonded and formed connections but generally the focus was on staying out of trouble with each other as Murad often would mention. And finally some people became completely withdrawn, physically, socially and emotionally . It is important to note that I consider this carceral sociality as a kind of spectrum and that people do not stay in the same emotional place.

The intention of this article is to focus inward the dynamics inside the camp and what kind of social space is created there rather than how the people who live in the camp are met by those outside of it, however I will briefly touch on how connections outside of the camp influence its atmosphere.

## ***Camp atmosphere and outside connections***

Social life in the camp is also impacted by the relations and connections that people have outside of it. This can be very active relationships that interlocutors tried to maintain (for example with children, spouses, siblings etc), avoid (people who have fled from social stigma like religion or sexual orientation) or simply a absence of relations (a few people expressed having no one in their life). During my first ethnographic fieldwork in a camp in 2013, I spoke to a young man who had decided to 'give up', as he said, and take the financial aid that came with repatriation and return to Iraq. He spent a lot of that money buying presents for family back home as he could not, he explained, show up empty-handed. People did not know or did not understand his circumstances in the Danish and European terrain of encampment – they just knew he had been gone for several years and were now returning home. Before the death of Beltoon's brother I remember having a similar conversation with him; he was looking for some informal work opportunities because he needed to send home remittances. When his brother passed, he repeated this again and again, as he was now, in his own words, considered the breadwinner, as he was the oldest man left. Liza Schuster et al. explore experiences of coping for the 'left behind, often women, in Afghanistan (2021). They observe the struggle of maintaining understanding of each other's positions, that incidentally the enforced temporal control of European asylum policies (Tazzioli, 2018) causes a similar suspension for the 'left behind' who might be somewhat dependent on their migrating family members (Schuster et al., 2021). Murad, a father of two, was often walking around the buildings in the camp on a video call with his wife. He missed his children a lot and tried to stay present by seeing them during daily calls, and taking on parenting roles from afar, like scolding them if they did not listen to their mother. Maintaining these relationships to the outside, or shielding yourself from them, is an individual task that orientates people towards themselves rather than each other in the camp. Most people struggled with this. Murad often argued with his wife because she was disappointed that he had not progressed further in the asylum process here in Denmark. She was scared that he was lying to her about wanting her and the children to join him. Navigating these relationships that stretch, not just beyond the camp but also across borders and continents, was difficult. This struggle is also part of the affective dynamics of the camp

atmosphere as these individual battles are fought side by side. As I mentioned earlier, Beltoon struggled to convince especially his mother, that he was even grieving his brother here in Denmark. He told me, before the funeral ritual, that she accused him of not caring about the dead brother at all. I learned, after filming the ritual, that this video was an important testimony that he was sending to his family in Afghanistan to show that he was grieving with them. Beltoon's family could then feel seen in their grief and accept his grief, which is an affective aspect that differed from the affect shown on this day from the other men; they shared the grief of having to grieve in the camp.

### ***Wary compassion as concluding remarks***

Participating in the 'ritual' that Beltoon and Kadir improvised was not just showing compassion but also an act of respect and 'taking care'. 'Taking care', the double meaning of which entails both a concern for oneself and for others, by showing up to the ritual probably does not reveal intentions. We know, from the participants, that it also did not require a deep relationship with Beltoon. It therefore could also be read as a version of what Murad described to me; of keeping social life peaceful, friendly and non-confrontational. Sociality in the camp is built from a shared experience of hardship and through that an understanding of each other's dispositions at this time in the world and life course. Loss is a part of everyday life in the camp. The day that Beltoon held the ritual, Wassim lost Abu Saed who he had grown very connected to, but who moved out of the camp after finally receiving a positive answer to his asylum claim. Everyday people lose hope after having their asylum application rejected or they experience losing out on life. Ultimately people also lose their actual life as part of life on the move. Showing Beltoon compassion by showing up, also shows an understanding of his specific condition that I for example could not share in. And while this ritual was a very extraordinary event, it has helped shine a light on an affective dynamic that always exists in the camp but is rarely as visible.

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# **Appendix**

## **Appendix 1**

### ***Co-author statement***



## Co-author statement

PhD student Cecilie Frederikke Odgaard Jakobsen

Date of birth 27<sup>th</sup> April 1988

Faculty (Department) Humanities, Saxo, Centre for Advanced Migration Studies

“Attribution of authorship should in general be based on criteria a-d adopted from the Vancouver guidelines , and all individuals who meet these criteria should be recognized as authors:

- A. Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work, and
- B. drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, and
- C. final approval of the version to be published, and
- D. agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.”

Article/paper/chapter/manuscript

This co-authorship declaration applies to the following:

\*Title Churn: change and continuity in the Danish asylum system

\*Author(s) Zachary Whyte & Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen

Journal Journal of Nordic Migration Research (ready to submit)

Volume (no) N/A

Start page N/A

End page N/A

### Contributions to the paper/manuscript made by the PhD student

What was the role of the PhD student in designing the study?

Cecilie conceived the fundamental idea of the article, which draws on her doctoral fieldwork in conversation with my previous work.

# Co-author statement

PhD student Cecilie Frederikke Odgaard Jakobsen

Date of birth 27<sup>th</sup> April 1988

How did the PhD student participate in data collection and/or development of theory?

Cecilie provided significant amounts of the ethnographic data we draw on, and we developed the theoretical framework together.

Which part of the manuscript did the PhD student write or contribute to?

We wrote together in a Google Docs and edited the entire text continuously together.

Did the PhD student read and comment on the final manuscript?

Yes

## Signatures

If an article/ paper/chapter/manuscript is written in collaboration with three or less researchers (including the PhD student), all researchers must sign the statement. However, if an article has more than three authors the statement may be signed by a representative sample, cf. article 12, section 4 and 5 of the Ministerial Order No. 1039, 27 August 2013. A representative sample consists of minimum three authors, which is comprised of the first author, the corresponding author, the senior author, and 1-2 authors (preferably international/non-supervisor authors).

By their signature, the authors agree that the article/paper/chapter/manuscript will be included as a part of the PhD thesis made by the PhD student mentioned above.

Date 27.2.2026 Name Zachary Whyte Signature 

Date 27/2/2026 Name Cecilie Odgaard Jakobsen Signature 

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2**

### ***AI declaration***

# Declaration of use of AI

I have used generative AI as a tool as part of the drafting of this PhD thesis.

The used AI tools have not been used to generate text or references for the thesis.

Tools used: Google's NotebookLM and Claude

Use:

- I have used NotebookLM to organise, structure and search in chosen and uploaded sources of literature.
- I have used Claude for feedback on the structure of portions of my text.
- Zachary Whyte and I have used Claude to identify inconsistencies and flag copy editing errors in the co-authored article. We have also used it to verify bibliographic references and identify missing citations.