

“The system is wicked in this Babylon-Europe!”

**Exploring asylum seekers’ moral reasoning at the urban margins
of Europe**

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Abstract

This thesis presents an ethnographic exploration of asylum seekers' moral agency in two distinct local contexts in the English North and the Italian South. Both areas have played a central role in the reception of asylum seekers, amid long-standing socio-economic and political marginalisation within each country. Building on Didier Fassin's influential work on the morally laden discursive construction of asylum migration in Europe, i.e. 'the moral economy of asylum', I propose a framework based on the 'moral economies of asylum from below'. By doing so, I shift attention from the public framing of asylum migration that Fassin studies to the fragmented moral labour done by asylum seekers to assess and respond to the socio-legal position they are ascribed to in two distinct local contexts. My research is grounded in the ethnographic observation of asylum seekers' everyday life in Newcastle upon Tyne (North East England) and Catania (Sicily, Italy) between August 2018 and August 2019. It investigates how differently situated people seeking international protection morally engage with the challenging institutional and socio-economic conditions imposed on them, while developing contextual understandings of what is 'good' and 'just'.

I argue that asylum seekers' moral reasoning – i.e. their lay normative thoughts and feelings (Sayer, 2005) – offers a window into the multiple ways in which asylum seekers variably challenge, circumvent, re-signify or legitimise the structural constraints they face in their efforts to carve morally meaningful lives. Attending to asylum seekers' moral reasoning is imperative to understand how different subjects seek to affirm their moral worth and make claims to justice, while their legal legitimacy is suspended, tied as it is to their precarious immigration status. By juxtaposing two distinct socio-economic, cultural and institutional contexts, the ethnographic data I present illustrates how different (local) moral frameworks affect asylum seekers' livelihoods, forms of recognition and social ties. Asylum seekers act upon the contexts they inhabit in interaction with others and by engaging with local understandings of deservingness, legitimacy and moral worth.

The thesis is conceptually anchored in my re-articulation of Didier Fassin's 'moral economy of asylum,' including his focus on the interplay between 'the moral' and 'the political' in the management and public framing of asylum migration. In dialogue with sociological and anthropological literatures on everyday moralities and informality, the 'moral economies of asylum from below' that I propose centre asylum seekers' situated moral agency as they navigate the UK and Italian asylum regime at the local level, within and across

its legal boundaries. More specifically, I foreground asylum seekers' multiple, often conflicting lines of moral reasoning as it unfolds in three key domains of their in/formal reception: institutional housing, destitution and work life.

Moving beyond policy-driven analyses of asylum reception and centring asylum seekers' standpoint as situated moral and political agents, my research lies at the intersection between migration studies, the anthropology of the state and the sociology and anthropology of everyday morality. In particular, this thesis contributes to the field of ethnography of asylum migration in Europe by foregrounding asylum seekers' moral reasoning in two distinct institutional, socio-economic and cultural reception settings.

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Chapter 1. Seeking legitimacy in peripheral Europe: exploring asylum seekers' situated moral agency in the interstices of the asylum system

'There's nobody who can say "this is right this wrong": De-coupling legality and legitimacy in the asylum regime

March 2019, Newcastle upon Tyne, North East England.

It is a sunny morning and I am comfortably sitting in Henry¹'s large pastel living room over a cup of tea. Despite having lived most of his life in Newcastle, Henry tells me he can still pass as a 'London foreigner' in the North East, where he is at the head of a successful company. He is telling me about his three-year long friendship with Ali who ended up in Newcastle after fleeing from Iraq. Two middle-aged men who share a rather dark sense of humour, they have met through a befriending scheme set up by a local charity supporting people who, like Ali, are going through the asylum legal system to request international protection in the UK. Henry tells me of how they have carefully negotiated the moral boundaries of reciprocity in their friendship, in the face of the stark unbalance between their respective socio-economic positions. Due to his immigration status, Ali has no right to work nor access to public funds (i.e. any form of welfare support) and lives in a shared accommodation provided by the Home Office on a weekly budget of £35.39. After some adjustments, Ali has reluctantly stopped preparing 'huge meals' anytime Henry visits, while Henry consciously avoids getting anything too costly for the two of them when they are out – 'because it feels wrong, you know? And I'm just so aware of his need for dignity.' Henry explains how Ali's daring life in Newcastle is a constant struggle against the threat of deportation, addiction and organised crime knocking at his door:

Henry: You know they offered him money to do things, to discharge, driving somewhere – “do this, do that”. He-he has been incredibly strong while he was about it, alright? He had a couple of periods of taking heroin and weaning himself off it, and I'm just so impressed by that, in his circumstances... but yeah he's really fighting hard to... stay [in the country], being fine, interested, alive, you know? It's very hard, against the impossible odds.

Amidst the 'complete chaos' of Ali's life, as Henry puts it, there are tragicomic moments too. He recalls, giggling, the time Ali hosted on the floor of his bedroom a stranded friend (strictly forbidden by the housing provider) with his two dogs, drawing the wrath of his violent, dog-hating housemate – 'I mean my friend [Ali] has nothing, he supports people who have less than

¹ Throughout the present thesis, I will always use pseudonyms instead of the research participant's given names for confidentiality purposes.

nothing, “because I’m damn alive!”

Looking from proximity at the working of the UK asylum system and its lived impact has deeply affected Henry too.

Henry: [Ali] was a torture victim, he came here in unimaginable circumstances and was refused asylum and then appealed and I went to his appeal... [deep breath] and... there were various things wrong with the defense with his case, you know, it wasn’t well presented, there was lack of getting the evidence together and so... nevertheless, the conclusion the judge came to was that he tortured himself to get to this country, that is written. [...] That changed my mind about loads of things really. And I came to this completely innocent, you know, kind of believing in British justice and I had that just swept away, you know, that’s gone. [...]

Silvia: I believe there’s also a barrister who represents the Home Office [at appeal hearings]

Henry: Yeah, someone expected to be nasty, they are paid to be nasty, the judge wasn’t. Yeah, it affected me, really greatly affected me. I-I had this fundamental belief in the fairness of society in this country and that’s gone and also belief in the rule of law, you know? You should support it and that also has gone, I would do anything now if I get away with it, you know? There’s nobody who can say “this is right this wrong”, nah nah, not anymore. That’s a corrosive thing, a very bad thing.²

Henry’s words have long stayed with me. The ‘legal legitimacy deficit’ he articulates exposes the mismatch between what is *legally* sanctioned and what is perceived as just, or *morally* acceptable (i.e. legitimate) in the implementation of immigration enforcement (Pasquetti, Casati and Sanyal, 2019; Haddeland and Franko, 2022, p. 293). Henry’s example hints to the ‘corrosive’ social impact of institutional mistrust, as the very authority of the rule of law is eroded once it no longer respects ‘core values’, such as judicial independence. This is how the ‘British justice system’, supposedly world-leading champion of human rights, loses its legitimacy. This thesis aims to explore this mismatch by foregrounding the perspective of those who bear the brunt of this problematic de-coupling of legality and legitimacy. As in my opening vignette, too often asylum seekers are simply outside the picture, or a voiceover. It is precisely asylum seekers’ moral reasoning and different understandings of legality and legitimacy that my research intends to bring to the fore.

Although I begin with an example from England, this thesis offers an ethnographic exploration of the subjective experience of the asylum system in two distinct local contexts. I

² Edited excerpt from recorded interview and field notes, 3/3/2019.

do so by foregrounding differently situated asylum seekers' moral agency, as they navigate the UK and Italian asylum reception system in North East England and Southern Italy – two settings marked by long-standing socio-economic and political marginalisation within each country and distinct regional ethos of hospitality. By 'moral agency', I mean asylum seekers' struggle 'to forge ahead in existentially trying circumstances' (Singer, 2018, p. 13) acting on their subjective understanding of what is 'right' and 'just' in different situations (Myers, 2016, 2021). Grounded in the ethnographic observation of asylum seekers' everyday life in Newcastle upon Tyne (North East England) and Catania (Sicily, Italy) between 2018 and 2019, the research investigates how differently situated people seeking international protection made sense of, judged and morally responded to their ascribed socio-legal position of asylum seekers. As Henry and Ali's reported experience illustrates, the asylum regime impinges upon asylum seekers' lives in both material and existential ways. Attending to asylum seekers' moral struggles is thus imperative to understand how different subjects craft 'inhabitable spaces' of existence and resistance while their legal legitimacy is suspended (tied as it is to their immigration status) and they are subject to widespread stigmatization (Willen, 2014).

In this dissertation, asylum seekers' moral agency is investigated through the empirical lens of their *moral reasoning* as it unfolds in formal and informal contexts of asylum reception in Newcastle and Catania. A prominent scholar in the sociology of everyday morality, Andrew Sayer, defines moral reasoning as the *lay normative* thoughts and feelings that underpin social actors' conduct and struggles 'in terms of their rationales' (Sayer, 2005, p. 5). In the simplest terms, such thoughts and feelings are normative or 'moral' because they rely on 'some ideas of what is good or acceptable' (Sayer, 2011, p. 143). The moral reasoning Sayer describes and that I am interested in is *lay* in the sense that it is not located in laws and scriptures – it is not the straightforward emanation of formally encoded moral norms – but is about social actors' everyday engagements (however inconsistent and contested) with the plurality of moral frameworks which have a bearing on our lives. With varying degrees of reflexivity (Howell, 1997, p. 14), moral reasoning 'ranges from concentrated deliberation on major ethical decisions, like whether to divorce, through to more fleeting and fragmented [moral] evaluations' of persons, actions, institutions and cultural scripts (Sayer, 2010, p. 166). My focus is thus on the multiple, often conflicting lines of moral reasoning contextually mobilised by asylum seekers as they navigate the asylum regime, within and across its legal boundaries, as it manifests in two peripheral cities of Europe.

As I became immersed in my fieldsites, three empirical domains inductively emerged as especially important to the people variously entangled in the legal asylum system that I was engaging with. First, their *housing* experience within the circuit of institutional asylum reception was ubiquitous in asylum seekers' everyday conversations and unsurprisingly a fundamental part of their life. Asylum seekers' state-funded housing conditions were also a constant reference as they morally evaluated their institutional treatment and made claims to justice. With important contextual differences, in both Newcastle and Catania, institutional reception conditions propelled different, at times conflicting, moral reflections on the legitimacy of state actions which also impacted asylum seekers' peer relations within and beyond their shared accommodations.

Destitution, the second empirical sphere I comparatively explore here, emerged as the necessary counterpart of institutional housing. Asylum seekers live under the constant threat of eviction as their right to institutional support is dependent on their evolving legal status, their 'good' conduct within the housing facility and, in Sicily, the ever-shrinking availability of beds in institutional reception centres. Whatever their stage in the asylum process, destitution impends over asylum seekers and is constitutive to the working of the asylum regime. For the many asylum seekers with lived experience of homelessness that I encountered, this was a scarring, deeply degrading threat to their ontological security and sense of self-worth. It was also a site of (moral) resistance as asylum seekers often managed to negotiate informal housing arrangements and strived to preserve their moral worth in the 'urban margin,' at the edge of legality (Hall, King and Finlay, 2017).

Interwoven with asylum seekers' experiences within and outside institutional housing, their *work life* is the third empirical domain I have ethnographically investigated. The vast majority of asylum seekers I have met through my research, and virtually all the male asylum seekers I encountered in both cities, were engaged in some forms of income-generating activity or were actively seeking one. With important gendered and ethno-national distinctions, providing for oneself (and often one's family) was not only generally perceived as materially necessary, given the scarce financial support available, but also an existential imperative to maintain a sense of purpose and legitimacy. For different reasons, both in Newcastle and Catania asylum seekers were mainly involved in informal, unregulated and often exploitative work. In Newcastle, asylum seekers were unable to seek formal employment because of the severe legal restrictions on their work rights. In Catania, by contrast, most asylum seekers were legally allowed to work, but were largely unable to get a formal contract due to the sky-

rocketing levels of unemployment in the region and widespread racial profiling both in the formal and informal economy. Once more, it was only by attending to differently situated asylum seekers' moral reasoning that I was able to make sense of the different paths of livelihood they crafted, negotiating between material needs and moral imperatives against the 'constraints and enablements' of their local socio-economic and moral contexts (Myers, 2016, p. 428).

Moving beyond abstract modelling of asylum dispersal and centring asylum seekers' standpoint as situated moral and political agents, my research thus lies at the intersection between migration studies, the anthropology of the state and the sociology and anthropology of lay morality. In particular, this research contributes to the field of ethnography of asylum migration in Europe by foregrounding asylum seekers' moral agency in two distinct social, cultural and institutional reception settings.

I shall be arguing that as asylum seekers live on the edges between legality and informality, their agency emerges not only as they strategically navigate the institutional constraints placed upon them, but also and relatedly as they attempt to act on their understanding of a 'good' and 'meaningful' life in the local contexts they inhabit. Asylum seekers are then neither passive victims of state governmentality, nor free-riders unfettered by the system they are subject to - whether depicted as no-border political heroes or calculative 'scums'. In fact, by looking closely to their situated moral reasoning and everyday struggles, a much more nuanced understanding of asylum seekers' agency comes to the fore. Following Saba Mahmood, my ethnographic material suggests that 'it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics' whereby it 'is conceptualised on the binary model of subordination and subversion' (2011, p. 14). Rather, 'the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself [...] is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms' (Mahmood, 2011, pp. 14–15). This thesis provides an illustration of differently situated asylum seekers' moral agency as they strive to find meaningful ways to inhabit two different institutional, socio-economic and moral landscapes.

In this introduction, I clarify how, in this thesis, I define 'asylum seekers', mindful of the implications of reifying legal categories (Castles, 2003; FitzGerald and Arar, 2018). I then sketch the conceptual underpinning of the thesis and the proposed rearticulation of the 'moral economy of asylum' it is based on. The theoretical framework I put forward engages sociological and anthropological conversations on everyday moralities with a view to illuminate asylum seekers' situated moral (and political) agency as they navigate formal and

informal reception domains. I will then draw a brief genealogy of the research project to explain the rationale behind its comparative focus foregrounding asylum seekers' moral reasoning across contexts. A succinct discussion of the research methods will follow, before presenting my key findings and the outline of the thesis.

Defining 'asylum seekers'

In this thesis, I use the term 'asylum seekers' to indicate subjects who have formally submitted a request for international protection but whose claim has not been accepted (yet). I have intentionally adopted a definition broad enough to encompass the legal categories of 'asylum seeker' and '*richiedente asilo*' as defined by the UK and Italian legislations, but that expands beyond the remits of the two countries' normative taxonomy. Being my focal point the everyday perspectives and interactions of people who have lived experience of the asylum system and are still subject to immigration enforcement (i.e. still *seeking* asylum), I have taken the formal submission of a request for international protection in the UK or Italy as my main selection criterion. In keeping my focus on the processual aspect of asylum seekers' socio-legal journey in the two countries, it was important to acknowledge that if this had an identifiable starting point, the destination of such journey was often elusive, with many appealing the rejection of their claim, or waiting for the 'right time' to file a new asylum application (or 'fresh claim') having exhausted their appeal rights. The category of 'asylum seeker' I drew was thus temporally delimited, on one end, by the filing of an asylum claim and, on the other, by the grant of a form of long-term leave to remain or *permesso di soggiorno* in the country. Falling in between these two benchmarks were people legally recognized as asylum seekers (i.e. still waiting for the outcome of their claim, or in the process of appealing), but also so-called 'refused' or 'destitute' asylum seekers (following the dominant UK terminology) or holders of *diniego* (literally 'rejection') who did not enjoy the same legal status and rights of institutionally recognized 'asylum seekers'. Regardless of their different legal status, all the asylum migrants who partook to the research were in a substantive way still seeking a form of legal protection from the 'ontological insecurity' ascribed by their liminal socio-legal position (Hynes, 2011; Vaughan-Williams and Pisani, 2020); they were still variously entangled with the national 'asylum system' whether through immigration lawyers, reporting centres or hosting facilities and would thus fit into my expansive definition of asylum seekers³. While grouping analytically together a 'super-diverse' (Vertovec, 2007)

³ By this, I do not intend to suggest that all people who have filed an asylum claim will then keep engaging with local authorities and institutions in the long term, especially after a negative response. Quite the contrary, I have

population, this broad definition allowed me to adopt the same minimal selection criteria in two different national legal contexts. This proved important to anchor the comparative framework of the research.

Importantly, for the purposes of my study, I was not interested in exploring individual asylum seekers' grounds for claiming asylum, nor the reasons for their possible rejections – although some asylum-seeking research participants volunteered such personal information.

Asylum seekers' liminal status of "refugees on probation" is intrinsically legally and morally ambiguous. By definition, asylum seekers' right to stay in the national territory is yet to be ascertained and always revokable. As Panella and Thomas (2015) remark in relation to criminalised groups of society, 'a special burden of justification, legal or otherwise' is placed upon subjects constructed as 'illegal' (p. 8). With the erosion of legal immigration routes and rising asylum rejection rates across Europe, this moral burden weights disproportionately on the majority of asylum seekers who see their asylum claim rejected and are subject to pervasive forms of criminalisation. It is also those still waiting for their asylum claim to be processed, however, who 'face institutionalized obstacles to legitimacy' (Panella and Thomas, 2015, p.7).

In Henry's words quoted above, Ali's fundamental 'need for dignity' is at stake as he is forbidden to provide for himself through legal means, is housed under unsafe conditions and his life story has been officially dismissed as fabricated, despite damning evidence. The situation Henry described resonates closely with that of the many asylum seekers I have met during my fieldwork in the North of England and South of Italy. "Welcomed" under highly constraining and stigmatising reception conditions; constantly threatened with eviction, detention and deportation and largely cut out of formal employment, asylum seekers are entangled in a system of 'inequality' where what is unequal is not only the access to 'material and social resources', but also the distribution of 'legitimacy' and 'recognition' (Lamont, 2014, p. 816). This onus of legitimacy, I suggest, makes an explicit focus on asylum seekers' own understandings of fairness, deservingness and social worth all the more important.

Asylum seekers' lived experience on the ground, however, is one of human relations and struggles that are affected by, but always exceed, the institutional framework they are subject

always been aware of asylum seekers 'disappearing from the radar' or, from a legal perspective, 'absconding'. The reasons why virtually the totality of the asylum seekers I engaged with in some depths were still 'hanging in there' is probably due to a process of natural selection. It seems reasonable to presume that those asylum seekers who did not intend to engage with local institutions and stay off the radar would avoid the organisational settings where I established most of my first contacts and/or turn down my invitation to partake in the research. It is also likely that many of these asylum seekers would decide to move elsewhere.

to. If we zoom into ‘the micropolitics of state work’ (Sharma and Gupta, 2006, pp. 11–12), it becomes clear how national asylum laws and policies do not simply land on asylum seekers’ lives but come into being in specific contexts mediated by the multiple, often conflicting, moral interpretations and discretionary practices of institutional and lay social actors (Fassin, 2015), including asylum seekers themselves. As the ethnographic data I collected overwhelmingly suggest, the super-diverse asylum population mobilise judgements and values as they actively engage with the legal restrictions placed upon them, often operating ‘within fissures between legality and informality’ (Pasquetti and Picker, 2017, p. 532). From this situated perspective, structural constraints (e.g. criminalisation of asylum seekers’ employment; ban on hosting in Home Office accommodations), material necessities (e.g. making a living, keeping oneself safe) and moral imperatives (e.g. reciprocity; hosting a friend in need; maintaining a sense of self-worth) are daily negotiated in the specific social, material and cultural contexts where they unfold. It is therefore in relation to these local worlds that different asylum seekers’ struggles to uphold ‘their own existential imperatives and moral commitments’ (Willen, 2014, p. 84) should be investigated.

Rethinking the ‘moral economies of asylum’ from below

Building on Didier Fassin’s articulation of the ‘moral economy of immigration and asylum’ in Europe (2005, 2011, 2012), my research is premised on an understanding of the current European immigration system as an historically contingent, political and moral regime. Ideas about which categories of people can legitimately enter the national territory (e.g. the politically persecuted, selected workers, survivors of natural disasters) and whose bodies are useful or desirable (e.g. to rebuilt European cities in the post-world period, provide exploitable labour force, gain international recognition) have indeed dramatically changed over time and across countries (Fassin, 2005; Fitzgerald and Arar, 2018).⁵ If the *criteria* defining desirability and legitimacy keep shifting across time and space, the issues at the heart of the immigration regime remain inextricably political and moral (Fassin, 2005; Anderson, 2013). This is most evident when we consider the contested moral contours of asylum migration management: Who deserves international protection and under what conditions? What responsibilities do single states and the international community have towards the ‘deserving’ Other? What ‘acceptable’ living standards should be granted to people seeking asylum? And what counts as fair treatment in the management of those deemed undeserving of asylum?

It is precisely the ‘ethics of contemporary states’ with regards to the non-citizen Other that Fassin’s ‘moral economy of migration’ attempts to capture (Fassin, 2005, p. 366).

Emphasizing the implication of the moral in the political and *vice versa*, Fassin defines moral economies as ‘the production, circulation, distribution and use of norms and obligations, values and affects’ (2011, p. 486) ‘in the social space around given social issues’ (2012a, p. 441). In the case of transnational forced migration, moral principles of deservingness, fairness, legitimacy and sovereignty feed into the laws and policies that supranational and national governments have introduced to regulate the management of asylum seekers and refugees. At the same time, legal and political discourses on migration and asylum do not simply encode existing moral attitudes but themselves influence public moral dispositions towards forced migration by introducing morally charged categories and values that enter the public arena (Fassin, 2005, 2011; Howell, 1997). In other words, political decisions over ‘how to manage transnational human flows’ (Fassin, 2005, p. 366) are partly the expression of moral public concerns and draw on supposedly shared moral principles to gain traction. At the same time, Fassin and other scholars underscore how laws, policies, political and public discourses shape dominant definitions of the ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’, the ‘genuine’ and the ‘bogus’, the ‘legal’ and the ‘illegal’ and thus co-construct the subjects they target (Anderson, 2013, p. 2; Andersson, 2014).

Anchored in asylum seekers’ contextual experiences of institutional and informal reception, my research builds from the moral economy framework of Fassin, inverting it and applying it not to public discourses and policies, but instead to the local lived level of experience, explored via ethnographic observation. My research asks: what moral and political articulations are produced and circulate in the space of asylum seekers’ institutional and informal reception in Newcastle and Catania? And to what extent are these ground-level moral economies resisted, accepted and/or reproduced by asylum seekers? What ‘norms and obligations, values and affects’ (Fassin, 2011, p. 486) are mobilised by asylum seekers as they navigate the asylum system in the two contexts? What is at stake in this liminal period of un/settlement?

In my reworking of Fassin’s moral economies of asylum framework, I maintain his original focus on the interplay between *the moral* and *the political* domains which are unpacked and analysed in their everyday, contextual articulations. As I shall explain in some depth in the next chapter, I have drawn on recent developments in the fields of political and urban ethnography with a focus on urban informality, on one side, and everyday moralities and existential anthropology, on the other, to refine my exploration of asylum seeker’s

institutional and informal reception. The resulting combined focus on ‘morality’ and ‘informality’ as they play out in asylum seekers’ everyday life offers an original approach to the field of asylum migration while shedding light on ‘the heart’ of the asylum system.

A photo negative: researching asylum seekers’ formal and informal reception in Newcastle upon Tyne and Catania

I have undertaken this research project keen to explore the working and fallacies of asylum seekers’ reception amidst the uneven social geography of Europe – a continent fraught with historical and present inequalities both between and within its countries (Boatcă, Costa and Rodríguez, 2010). In many respects, the Italian and UK national asylum reception systems are starkly different, most notably with regards to housing conditions and working rights. In both contexts, after a first-line reception period, asylum seekers are re-housed into state-funded housing facilities which could be anywhere in the country, on a no-choice basis. Asylum seekers’ ‘dispersal’ reception across the national territory comes then to intersect with fragmented political interventions, uneven socio-economic development and distinct historical legacies which make up the British and Italian internal ‘geographies of inequality’ (Nayak, 2003; Giglioli, 2017). Crucially, over the past decades, both the English North and the Southern edges of Italy have played a central role in the implementation of the respective national asylum reception systems. The two regions also share a long-standing position of political and economic marginality within their respective countries. It is with a focused interest in the locally situated, lived experiences of the asylum reception that my work has been concentrated.

Against this framework, I conceive of this study as the photo negative of an ‘institutional ethnography’ (Smith, 2005) of the Italian and UK asylum seekers’ reception system. If the ‘positive’ usual photographic image would capture the statutory regulations and services, the governmental spaces and institutional actors responsible for the housing and assistance of asylum seekers, I flip the picture to illuminate the values and practices that emerge around the contours, within the gaps and along blurred lines of the institutional system. It is in these grey areas that asylum seekers exercise their moral agency, that is strive to ‘craft inhabitable spaces’ and meaningful lives, ‘to achieve both existential and moral groundedness — not despite, but in relation to’ enforced physical and ontological insecurity, moral scrutiny and criminalisation (Willen, 2014, p. 97). Anchored in two distinct local contexts, the research explores how the moral principles of legitimacy, deservingness and moral worth enshrined in asylum reception policies are rearticulated and enacted by asylum seekers in their precarious

settlement process.

This dissertation is the outcome of two consecutive periods of ethnographic fieldwork in the north of England and then in the south of Italy. Between the end of August 2018 and the beginning of March 2019, I spent 6 months in Newcastle upon Tyne (North East of England) before moving south to Catania (Sicily, Southern Italy) where I lived for 5 months until the end of August 2019. In both cities, I conducted participant observation while volunteering for local charities and spent the rest of my time ‘hanging out’ with a small number of core research participants with direct experience of the asylum system.

As I shall discuss in Chapter Three on methodology, the stark differences between the cities in asylum seekers’ living conditions, my own positionality (as a white Italian citizen from the north of Italy), the urban layout and weather meant that the ethnographic periods of fieldwork I carried out in Newcastle and Catania took rather distinct shapes. In Newcastle, I would normally spend two to three half-days a week volunteering in two charities supporting exclusively asylum seekers. I also visited and occasionally volunteered in community kitchens, open to the wider public, but which appeared less popular among the asylum population of Newcastle. Outside of organisational settings, I would meet individually with about 10 people with first-hand experience of the UK asylum system either weekly or fortnightly. These informal meetings would usually take place indoors, either in cafes, the public library, a shopping mall or at the participant’s accommodation, according to their preference.

If the fieldwork in Newcastle was largely shaped by my engagement in the charity sector and one-on-one meetings with research participants in domestic and more private spheres of everyday life, in the Sicilian city of Catania it was public squares, the Villa Bellini city gardens, terraced cafes, and the docks that all became regular sites of (often spontaneous) encounters. These could be either for one-to-one, confidential conversations or for small group gatherings. Volunteering with three local charities was also a critical part of my fieldwork in Catania and significantly contributed to a process of gradually building a network of acquaintances among the asylum population and charity staff members. Unlike in Newcastle, no local charity in Catania would focus solely on asylum migrants, but virtually all asylum seekers in the city would know about the Jesuit migrant-support organisation and the Caritas help centre where I volunteered, both conveniently located close to the central railway station. On a more flexible basis, I would join mealtimes at a small guesthouse for the homeless, where half of the ‘guests’ were foreign-born, and with a small but steady

number of asylum seekers among them.

In both Newcastle and Catania, participant observation and informal conversations were complemented by a total of 71 semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 17 people with direct experience of the asylum system, 14 people variously involved in the local charity sector (including volunteer ‘befrienders’ like Henry), 3 religious spokespersons and 1 social service worker. All the material collected, either through field notes, handwritten or recorded interviews, vocal memos or printed leaflets, was transcribed and coded thematically using NVivo, following some preliminary analysis of the fieldwork data. As I shall discuss, the presentation of my ethnographic data (chapter 5 and 6) draws largely on transcribed verbal material to reproduce as closely as I could the participants’ choice of words, expressions, nuances and incongruences that I attempted to capture during our conversations. It was, however, only by putting these ‘spoken’ material in conversation with my cumulative, multi-sited observations that I was able to interpret these words, tap into their unspoken sub-text and select the most relevant fragments.

‘And so what?’

Moving beyond abstract modelling of asylum dispersal and centring asylum seekers’ standpoint as situated moral and political agents, this research lies at the intersection between migration studies, anthropology of the state and the sociology and anthropology of lay morality.

In particular, this research contributes to the field of ethnography of migration by integrating existing debates with an explicit focus on asylum seekers as moral agents who reproduce, re-appropriate and challenge dominant (but contextually mediated) notions of legality, legitimacy and moral worth which are at the very heart of the asylum system. Borrowing from the conceptual toolbox of the sociology and anthropology of morality, a refined focus on asylum seekers’ moral reasoning allows us to explore the extent to which dominant moral economies of asylum management discursively shape the subjects they target. Crucially, this analytical focus also pushes us to consider what *other* moral frameworks are mobilised by asylum seekers as they evaluate and (morally) respond to the asylum system they are formally subject to. At the same time, political ethnography’s (Auyero, 2006; Baiocchi and Connor, 2008) heightened attention to the context-specific configurations of political power and institutional cultures, allows us to question the relative weigh of formal rights and national policies in local contexts of weak institutional presence and widespread informality like Catania. More specifically, I show how asylum seekers’ institutional housing reception, the

institutional void that affect so many at different points of their legal journeys and their work rights and conditions are not only key aspects of asylum seekers' precarious settlement, but also terrains of moral contestation where both oppressive and counter-hegemonic notions of social justice are negotiated.

Thesis outline

The thesis is organised into six chapters. Following this Introduction chapter (**Chapter One**), **Chapter Two** expands on the theoretical framework I have adopted to investigate asylum seekers' experiences of institutional and informal reception in two specific contexts. Despite the centrality of moral principles and categories both in the framing of the governance of asylum migration and in the public responses to the phenomenon, the moral dimension of asylum seekers' reception has so far received little academic attention. If a small body of studies in the field have explicitly engaged with the importance of contextual hierarchies of values and moral dispositions, these were explored from the perspective of institutional actors or local citizens. With a view to centre asylum seekers' own moral dispositions, judgements and moral-political claims, I then critically engage with E. P. Thompson's seminal 'Moral economy of the English crowd' and Didier Fassin's moral economy of migration and asylum, mentioned above. By combining the strengths of both approaches, I propose an original reconceptualization of the moral economy framework to analyse asylum seekers' situated moral economies of institutional and informal reception through the prism of their moral reasoning. Finally, I apply this theoretical lens to discuss recent works in the study of asylum seekers' reception in Europe, focusing particularly on ethnographic contributions to the field.

The following chapter (**Chapter Three**) is divided into two macro parts. In the first half of the chapter, I present the two local and regional contexts that offer the framework of my comparative ethnography. I also discuss the methodological choices that gave shape to the ethnographic research I have conducted in Newcastle and Catania. Here, I expand on the relational nature of my comparative ethnography while reflecting on the major methodological steps I took to establish my presence in the two cities. Unsurprisingly, the ethnographic comparative set up of the project has come with its own challenges that I address in the second half of the chapter. Contextual differences alongside other relevant factors that I shall discuss in the chapter led to important asymmetries between the two fieldworks. I conclude the chapter by reflecting on three key ethical dimensions (i.e. confidentiality, consent, politics of representation) of conducting and writing up ethnographies of asylum migration and that I believe deserve ongoing attention.

The two following empirical chapters centre on asylum seekers' moral reasoning in Newcastle (**Chapter Four**) and Catania (**Chapter Five**) and share a similar three-part structure.

In both chapters, the first part dwells into asylum seekers' evaluations of their *institutional housing* conditions - the core of statutory asylum reception. Across the two contexts, the experience of institutional housing often emerged as (morally) harming for the imposed, highly constraining, living conditions significantly affected asylum seekers' physical and social mobility as well as their sense of self-worth. Many would fuel the resulting sense of unfairness and injustice into strong moral-political claims, whose content and address, however, would vary inter-subjectively and across Newcastle and Catania. Importantly, shared institutional housing facilities (whether in flats or hosting centres) are also sites where different, often contrasting, articulations of deservingness, fairness and moral worth are produced and circulate among asylum seekers as they morally reasoned about their own and their housemates' socio-legal position. It is precisely in these morally-laden interactions that dominant and alternative moral frameworks become embedded in social actors' everyday life and inhabitable spaces of 'homing' (Boccagni and Brighenti, 2017; Boccagni, 2021) come into being, against all odds.

The second section of both empirical chapters focuses on *policy-made destitution* and ethnographically maps out the gaps of the two asylum reception systems. Here again, I follow asylum seekers' moral reasoning and what this reveals about their lived experience of asylum reception (or lack thereof) not as victims of the system but as moral and political agents, even under the direst circumstances. In both Newcastle and Catania, moral self-sanctioning emerges as an important way in which asylum seekers exercise agency and attempt to preserve a sense of moral worth. Moreover, irrespective of the context, it was often current and former asylum seekers who filled in the gaps of the system by engaging in informal networks of hospitality.

Finally, the third part of Chapter Four and Five address the morally and legally contested terrain of asylum seekers' *working life*. Situated in two radically different legal and socio-economic contexts, the asylum seekers I met in Newcastle and Catania would often distinguish between legality and legitimacy as they morally reasoned about their own and others' income-generating activities. If many stressed the importance of making a living legitimately (if not necessarily legally), the moral parameters applied would unsurprisingly differ inter-subjectively and contextually. In both cities, however, having a job was

consistently perceived as much more than a material necessity, but as a moral, even existential, imperative, especially (but not exclusively) among male asylum seekers.

Chapter Six brings the thesis to its conclusions. The chapter provides a comparative analysis of asylum seekers' lived experience of institutional and informal reception as they morally navigate institutional housing, policy-made destitution and work. Unlike the previous two chapters where asylum seekers' moral reasoning is presented and analysed in relation to the local context it is inscribed, this last chapter takes a step back to reflect comparatively about what differences and convergences between the two sets of findings can tell us about asylum seekers' moral reasoning and the working of the asylum regime in Europe.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework: the im/moral economy of asylum in Europe

Introduction

The lived experiences I represent in this thesis provide snapshots of the operation of legal asylum as it was implemented and experienced within and beyond its legal contours in Newcastle upon Tyne and Catania between August 2018 and August 2019. In the fiction of ethnographic present, the frantic production of new immigration laws, legal taxonomy and international agreements is frozen, people's life trajectories are suspended - the time of research slows down to allow meaning to emerge. In the next chapter (Chapter 3), I will succinctly outline the legal, institutional and socio-cultural contexts within which the experiences I present in this thesis unfolded, in their spatial and temporal specificities. If those pages will sketch the present horizon of my empirical research, in this chapter I am instead concerned with situating my research within broader historical and academic trajectories. Indeed, my contribution focuses on a fragment of the much longer, unfolding history of the institution of asylum. Engaging critically with such history is essential to recognise the historically and politically contingent nature of past and present immigration regimes and their underlying moral frameworks. As Katy Long among others points out, by contextualising historically the genealogy of legal asylum, we de-naturalise 'the flawed construction of the contemporary refugee and migrant regimes' and we are reminded 'of the possibility of an alternative framework' (Long, 2013, p. 22; Bhambra, 2017; Mayblin, 2017; Lachenicht, 2018). To this scope, in the first part of the chapter I provide an overview of key historical studies unravelling the troubled foundation of legal asylum throughout the twentieth century. Here I integrate the seminal works of Long, Mayblin and Bhambra to highlight the problematic moral assumptions underpinning the birth of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention and that still hunt contemporary asylum regimes. In the second part, I move on to discuss E.P. Thompson and Didier Fassin's 'moral economy' framework which, I argue, offers a powerful theoretical lens to explore and make sense of the morally imbued working of the asylum system in context and in practice. The remaining of the chapter is dedicated to my own reworking of the 'moral economy of asylum' conceptual framework with a view to apply it to the study of asylum seekers' own moral engagement with the asylum system as they experience, re-interpret and resist it within and beyond its normative boundaries. To do so, I unpack what I understand as the two main components of the moral economy analytical toolkit and rework them in dialogue with recent debates in

political and urban ethnography (third part) and the anthropology and sociology of morality (fourth part).

In moving through admittedly disparate bodies of literatures, my aim in this chapter is thus to conceptually juxtapose asylum *Morality* (writ-large), that is the im/morality of laws and institutions, with asylum *moralities* (writ-small), namely the plural, fragmented moral narratives, emotions, principles that asylum seekers produce by engaging with the asylum system in their everyday practices and interactions. The ‘moral economy of asylum’, I suggest, offers a bridge between these two levels of analysis and pushes us to keep reflecting on the interplay between deep-rooted legal and political ‘logics of unequal humanity’ (Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2020, p. 108) and asylum seekers’ ‘postcolonial everyday’ (Merrill, 2014; Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2020).

The im/moral history of legal asylum

For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who: [...] As a result of events occurring *before 1 January 1951* and owing to well-founded social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Article 1.A.2 [emphasis added])

Article 40 - Territorial application clause:

Any State may, at the time of signature, ratification or accession, declare that this Convention shall extend *to all or any of the territories for the international relations of which it is responsible*. Such a declaration shall take effect when the Convention enters into force for the State concerned. [emphasis added] (UNHCR)

If the ‘sacred history’ of the right of asylum ‘dates back to the very beginning of regulated political life’ (Arendt, 1966, p. 280), it was only after the 1917 Russian Revolution and consequent mass emigrations that a first internationally coordinated scheme for the protection of refugees was established in Europe (Long, 2013). Long remarks how in the inter-war period no distinction was made between *economic* migrants and *political* asylum seekers, as it was clear that the Russian (and later Armenian, Assyrian and Saarland) refugees were ‘suffering from both political disenfranchisement [...] and economic poverty’ (Long, 2013, p. 9). In fact, the then president of the International Committee of the Red Cross was primarily

concerned about the dire economic conditions faced by Russian refugees, and it was with a view to facilitate refugees' socio-economic self-sufficiency that the League of Nations was involved in establishing the first international refugee scheme (Long, 2013, pp. 9, 10).

Throughout the 1920s, the newly formed High Commissioner for Refugees was tasked with 'solving refugee exile – which would be found through [refugees'] freedom of movement and resulting employment and settlement – rather than simply providing relief' (Long, 2013, p.10). The so-called 'Nansen passport' system provided the necessary documentation (and later small business loans) for refugees to move across Europe 'in pursuit of their livelihood or for health or family reasons' – as the then Refugee High Commissioner Fridtjof Nansen put it (League of Nations Archive, 1926 in Long, 2013, p.9). Crucially, these passports granted international protection to stateless people who could not avail of the legal protection any one state, but were also intended to encourage a more even distribution of refugees across the members of the League of Nations while enabling host states to control their movement (Gatrell, 2013). Gatrell also remarks that, however transformative, Nansen passports 'offered no assurances about the right of abode or the right to work' and that countless forcibly displaced people, especially from the Balkans region were denied access to these legal documents (Gatrell, 2013: 56). At the same time, refugees faced widespread 'contempt' in different countries – not the least in Britain, where Secretary for Foreign Affairs referred to refugees as 'an intolerable burden' (Ibid.).

In conjuncture with the progressive dismantling of European colonies, scholars have identified the 1929 Great Depression and subsequent economic crisis as a turning point in Europe's history of immigration management (Chimni, 1998). Decolonisation struggles and economic protectionism fueled nationalistic responses towards incoming migrants, leading to restrictive immigration policies 'intended to preserve "national" cultures not only in Europe, but also in the Americas, Palestine, and Australasia' (Long, 2013, p. 11). This had extremely dramatic consequences in the following decades. As refugees were always also, if not primarily, seen as economic migrants, the global economic crisis led to drastic limitations of their entry into European states where 'the added humanitarian imperative' to protect the political persecuted, including German Jews, had little traction at the time (Long, 2013, p.12). As Long (Ibid., p. 13) helpfully summarises:

The blurring of refugee and migrant identities—and the lack of any robust international refugee protection framework guaranteeing refugees' admission regardless of economic rational—meant that states did not have to compromise national political protection by accepting broader global responsibilities to admit those who could no longer remain in their country of origin.

This international refugee protection framework was not formalised until 1948 with the UN Declaration of Human Rights and subsequently the 1951 Convention of the Status of Refugee. The two texts codified the right to asylum in international law, where ‘asylum’ came to identify protection from specific forms of individual persecution, as cited above, granted by a signatory country abroad (Castles, 2003). The introduction of these international legal tools marked the schism between political-humanitarian and socio-economic migration. In the new economic landscape, decoupling humanitarian from economic grounds was indeed deemed necessary to overcome the discriminatory selection of able-bodied adult migrants, much needed for the reconstruction of post-war Europe, leaving ‘the old, sick, and disabled [...] trapped into displacement’ (Long, 2013, p. 20).

As scholars remind us, in the aftermath of the Holocaust the definitions and applicability of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Refugee Convention enshrined an historically contingent, Western-centric conception of human worth and inalienable rights (Mayblin 2017; Fitzgerald and Arar, 2018) – racialised conceptions vehemently contested by representatives of (former) colonized territories (Mayblin 2014). This should come as no surprise for, at the time of the negotiations, Western European countries were still holding colonies, ‘founded and maintained on ideas of racial hierarchy’ (Mayblin, 2014, p. 427). Most notably, as Mayblin’s archival study illustrates, Britain played a key role lobbying to give signatory states the right to apply human rights and refugee status discretionally ‘to all or any’ of the territories in their jurisdiction – an option that resulted in the exclusion of the ‘coloured populations’ (as British ministers put it) residing in the colonized territories (Mayblin, 2014, p. 432). This was because ‘right from the start, ministers were aware that their treatment of colonised subjects would not meet the standards demanded by a concept of rights based on humanity’, overtly at odds with the widespread use of forced labour in the colonies, a practice intrinsic to the working of the Empire (Mayblin, 2014, p. 430). The 1967 Protocol saw the lifting of the temporal and spatial limitations contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention which originally applied exclusively to refugees displaced over the course of World War II. What was left unchanged is the legal notion of ‘asylum’ as sanctuary from ‘the individualist criteria of political persecution’ (Chimni, 1998, p. 356), i.e. from violations of political or civil rights (Fitzgerald and Arar, 2018). This restrictive definition of the grounds for asylum excluded ‘distress caused by economic or environmental catastrophes’ and has to be contextualised in the geopolitical matrix operating at the time (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, p. 389). As FitzGerald and Arar (2018, p. 390) elucidate,

the Western powers adopted a classically liberal approach that privileged the protection of

refugees based on violations of political or civil rights. This worked to their advantage, given the recurring violation of those rights by totalitarian communist states. By contrast, a definition of refugees based on violations of social rights would have undermined laissez-faire liberalism.

The exclusive, politically inflected, definitions enshrined in what are still the pillars of displaced people's protection in much of the Global North have been the object of much criticism (Castles, 2003; Gatrell, 2013b; FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Pasquetti, Casati and Sanyal, 2019). I will briefly refer to what are arguable the two main issues at stake. The first point concerns the 'asylum-migration nexus' a concept that highlights how, in most cases, 'it is extremely hard to distinguish between environmental, economic and political factors' underlying international displacement (Castles, 2003, p. 15) which 'takes place on a continuum of compulsion' (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, p. 393). This discursive distinction between 'economic migrants' and 'refugees' is not only distant from the complex realities affecting people's movement, but it is also harming as it constructs the two categories as mutually exclusive, located at the opposite ends of an institutionally sanctioned hierarchy of deservingness (Anderson, 2013). The second point takes us a step back. Castles, among others, urges us to contextualise past and present migrations to the Global North, and Europe in particular, within the broader history of global inequalities that entangle sending and receiving countries in South-North migration flows (Castles, 2003, p. 17). In Bhambra's (2022, p. 240) powerful words:

Europe is the wealthiest continent on the planet. Its wealth is an 'inheritance' that derives from the very same historical processes that have left other places poor. Formal decolonization may have reduced the flow of wealth from elsewhere to Europe, but it has neither stopped it altogether nor has there been any reparation for the earlier histories of domination, oppression, or extraction. [...] [R]eparations would require to be worked through collectively all the while taking heed of Aime Cesaire's injunction that 'there are sins for which no one has the power to make amends and which can never be fully expiated' (Cesaire, 2000 [1955], p. 42)

Acknowledging our 'connected histories' (Bhambra, 2017, p. 404) bears important political and moral implications for the legal framing of (asylum) migration and, more broadly, for our understanding of historical justice (Merrill, 2014; Mayblin, Wake and Kazemi, 2020; Bhambra, 2022).

So far, I have condensed important contributions to the study of the institution of legal asylum in Europe across the 20th century, shedding light on its historical, political and moral construction and far-reaching exclusionary logics. Bearing in mind this colonial legacy, in the

following part of the chapter my focus shifts from the historically genealogy of the asylum legal framework to the study of contemporary, ever shifting immigration regimes and their lived impact on the ground. With a view to foreground asylum seekers' own understandings of deservingness, legitimacy and social justice, I first critically engage with E.P. Thompson's and Didier Fassin's complementary articulations of 'moral economy' before proposing my own re-interpretation of this theoretical framework.

Two moral economies in dialogue

E. P. Thompson's moral economy of the English crowd

A member of the Communist Part of Great Britain at the age of 18, a "comrade" in newly liberated Italy in 1942 and, throughout his life, a fervent militant man of the Left, Thompson committed much of his academic career to the understanding of anti-capitalist social struggles and class cultures (Edelman, 2015; Calhoun, 1994). E.P. Thompson's activist agenda against old and new forms of capitalist oppression shines through in his somewhat nostalgic historical reconstruction of the English pre-capitalistic socio-economic system – founded on community solidarity and reciprocity – right before its dissolution into the new free market economy (Edelman, 2015). Twenty years after his 1971 article marked the introduction of the expression 'moral economy' into contemporary social sciences, the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson declared himself the estranged father of the successful term which, variously re-appropriated, had now 'come to an age' and he was thus 'no longer answerable for its actions' (1991, p. 351). Later scholars from a variety of disciplines also proved generally oblivious to the expression's paternity (Edelman, 2015; Fassin, 2009). Yet, E.P. Thompson's seminal articulation of 'moral economies', which exposed the fundamental bond linking moral values and political action, still preserves its original analytical power as Didier Fassin's political and moral anthropology most notably testifies.

In his most articulated elaborations of the concept of the 'moral economy' (only one element of the historian's vast corpus of work), E.P. Thompson takes as the object of his inquiry the popular insurrections that arose unevenly across 18th century England as a result of the increased bread prices in times of shortage (E.P. Thompson, 1971, 1991). His thorough account boldly rejects the canonic interpretations of the so-called 'food riots' as compulsive 'rebellions of the belly' (1971, p. 77). Strayed from economic determinism, these reductionist readings, E.P. Thompson holds, fail to capture the complex socio-economic, moral and

political contours of the collective insurrections; in other words the norms, beliefs and traditions that made up the moral economy of the English crowd (Thompson 1971, 1991). In his historical reconstruction, E.P. Thompson describes miners, tanners, weavers, and hosiery workers as historical agents capable of effective, rational and organized actions. In the context of the 17th and 18th century English society, the historian interprets the working-class disturbances against profit-seeking bakers and millers as an expression of the crowd's deeper outrage at the gradual dismantling of the traditional 'paternalist model' of market supervision and consumer protection, gradually vanishing into the 'new political economy' of the free market (1971). What was at stake, then, was more than the contingent hardships suffered by the labouring classes, but the breach of a 'moral pact' binding upper classes, middlemen and the workers in a web of horizontal forms of class solidarities as well as vertical relations of mutual obligations and protection (Fassin, 2009, p. 1262; Thompson 1991, pp. 292-293). The English 'food riots' were acts of self-administered justice aimed at restoring the fair price of bread under statutory supervision, that is a fair economic system for the many, rather than strategies for immediate individual compensations (1971, p. 108). It is precisely in these 'definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal' that the political dimension of the 18th century English crowd actions, imbued in its moral underpinnings, becomes evident (Thompson, 1971, p. 79). In fact, far from being the only possible response to times of crisis (other observed reactions being theft, mass migration or fatalist resignation), the English working-class mobilisations are, in E.P. Thompson's reading, fully restored in their political value and moral legitimacy (Thompson, 1991, p. 263; 1971). E.P. Thompson stresses how such movements were made possible by an overwhelming popular *consensus* about the rightful 'social norms and obligations' and 'the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor' (1971, p. 71). These stances could also find official legitimization in the body of statutory emergency regulations in times of want/need codified in the Poor Laws and Book of Order which introduced extra-ordinary redistributive measures to limit the devastating effects of grinding poverty on the lower strata (Thompson 1971, pp. 108-109). More generally, ethics of social provision and market regulation had long been endorsed by the political authorities and the ruling classes and while these economic and moral apparatus had *de facto* lost its normative power by mid-17th century, its principles were still alive in the English 'popular memory' (1971, p. 109).

As E.P. Thompson himself discusses, his historical reconstruction has been subsequently criticized for its caricatural depiction of a traditionally moralistic model opposed to Adam

Smith's (author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) supposedly amoral political economy (Thompson, 1991, p. 274). It has also been sensibly pointed out that in his accounts, the English middlemen (bakers, millers, traders and the like) are somewhat inconsistently left untouched by the 'overwhelmingly popular' moral principles of redistributive justice and social solidarity (Thompson, 1971, p. 112; Fassin, 2009). More generally, E.P. Thompson's notion of *consensus* - even if circumscribed to the reportedly homogeneous 18th century English working class - remains problematic and arguably belies the author's 'utopian' hopes in a militant surge of renewed class consciousness (Edelman, 2015, p. 55).

Bearing in mind these criticisms, I suggest two important aspects distinguish E.P. Thompson's notion of the moral economy as one that is still a highly productive concept. First, E.P. Thompson's "historical logic" was one centrally concerned with the careful reconstruction of the historical and geographical context against which each piece of evidence or reported fact had to be evaluated (Calhoun, 1994; Edelman, 2015). His fine-grained attention to context is also evident in his scattered discussions of the specific socio-economic and occupational make-up of different English regions in the 18th century. He remarks in particular how the English manufacturing, corn-poor northern regions were especially active, not the least, with E.P. Thompson's words, thanks to the 'virility', the 'numbers and the natural discipline of the mining community' (1971, pp. 118-119). The geography of the moral economy resulted also in the 'differential mortality' which hit most dramatically in the less resourceful regions of the North-West (Thompson, 1991, p. 297).

The second feature that I would like to stress relates to E.P. Thompson's approach to the study of the political which takes as its point of depart the perspective of the 'dominated' lower classes which are nevertheless recognized as full political agents (Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017, pp. 239-240). Crucially, what the working class demanded was the restoration of the strongly hierarchical system of patronage (and not a more equal system) in which they occupy the bottom rank, but that at the same time ensured the respect of the moral pillars of 'social reciprocity' and 'mutual obligation' (Thompson, 1991: 343). As Fassin remarks, what the crowd's protests were about was not inequality, or 'effective justice', but rather the restoration of '*perceived* justice' grounded in local principles of fairness which might well co-exist with exploitative practices (2009, p. 1248, emphasis added). In this regard, E.P. Thompson does not fail to remark how 'hegemony is not just imposed (or contested) but is articulated in the everyday intercourse of a community' (1991, p. 345). As Benzecry and Baiocchi remind us (2017, pp. 239-240), the subtle, bottom-up analysis of political agency

and everyday meaning-making conveyed in E.P. Thompson's moral economy has been an exemplar inspiration for recent developments in the field of political ethnography.

To fully understand the significance of the moral dimension in E.P. Thompson's analysis, it turns to how he concludes his retrospective piece. In his words, what lies at the core of the food rioters' motivation are

certain essential premises, whether expressed in the simplest biblical terms of "love" and "charity", or whether in terms of notions of what humans "owe" to each other in time of need, notions which may have little to do with any Christian instruction but which arise from the elementary exchanges of material life. There was a plebeian "discourse" here, almost beneath the level of articulacy, appealing to solidarities so deeply assumed that they were almost nameless [...] Comparative enquiry into what is "the moral" (whether as norm or as cognitive structure) will help us to understand these meanings. It is an agenda for forward research. (1991, pp. 350-351)

Shifting the focus to different forms of social provision and moral labour, I shall propose a possible avenue to address E.P. Thompson's call for a comparative understanding of the values and meanings underlying social action vis-à-vis perceived injustices and economic struggle.

Didier Fassin's moral economy of immigration management

One of the many merits of Fassin's re-elaboration of Thompson's moral economy is that it demonstrates the enduring heuristic power of a concept which uncovers 'the historically situated moral configurations' and 'the related political issues' that are at work in any given society (2009, p. 1261, my translation). Emphasizing the profound implication of the moral in the political and *vice versa*, Fassin defines moral economies 'as the production, circulation, distribution and use of norms and obligations, values and affects' (2011a, p. 486) 'in the social space around given social issues' (2012a, p. 441).

Fassin's use of the moral economy, however, departs from Thompson's original conceptualisation in some important ways. The primary attention that Thompson reserves to the economic make-up of 18th century England - where the regional economy of subsistence is constituent part of his subjects' everyday life - becomes part of the broader social fabric against which moral and political public debates are examined. Also, shifting his focus on broader national and international phenomena such as humanitarian intervention, asylum protection, public security, Fassin acknowledges not only that multiple, intersecting moral

economies are being produced on different scales (eg on the local, national and supra-national level) but also that contradictory discourses may well co-exist and being simultaneously negotiated by the same social actors. Finally, Fassin's analysis overcomes some of Thompson's limitations by offering a critical assessment of the often unpredictable and incoherent products of the shifting moral economies of our time.

One case of shifting moral economies that Fassin investigates in depth is the French institutional response to asylum which, Fassin argues, is telling of a broader shift in the contemporary European moral economy of immigration. In tracing the genealogy of institutional immigration management in France⁴, Fassin aptly unfolds the historical junctures and ontological shifts which have shaped the current 'biopolitics' of the 'undesired and suffering others' of which undocumented migrants are a notable segment (2005, p. 366). The political, legal and discursive production of the categories of immigrant labour, asylum, humanitarian protection is dissected from critical distance and re-historicized within the French socio-economic fluctuations of the past 50 years. A profound change in public perceptions and forms of entitlement took place from the 1970s when, thanks to the modernization of most European economies, much unskilled labour was made redundant. At the same time, the number of new arrivals and asylum claims in France, as in other European countries, increased exponentially because of the enlargement of the European Union and, crucially, the end of the Cold War. In the new geopolitical climate on enhanced global displacement and transnational mobility, economic migration became increasingly unpopular, in 1974 France barred all legal channels to labour and the institution of asylum underwent a gradual but inexorable process of rights erosion and moral de-legitimation. The two movements, Fassin warns, cannot be understood separately. While the new political agenda, heavily influenced by public moral panic among other interests, demanded the suppression of a number of entitlements formerly granted to asylum seekers, alongside the criminalisation of undocumented migrants and the introduction of discretionary forms of temporary protection, these changes were accompanied by the public disqualification of the figure of the asylum seekers, increasingly portrayed as suspicious or unworthy. Through these shifts, a new moral economy of asylum was taking shape in France. While in the after war what legitimised the migrant's presence in the European country was their physical ability to work or their right to political protection, in the new regime only extreme cases of vulnerability would be

⁴ In what follows I will draw on Didier Fassin's elaboration of the 'moral economy of immigration', integrating the arguments exposed in Fassin 2005, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2012a, 2012b.

considered admissible. Moreover, migrants' suffering had to be proved, certified by unconfutable evidence. In the face of this repressive turn, French social workers and medical practitioners mobilized to denounce the blatant infringement of human rights that was taking place by rejecting people with life-threatening medical conditions (2005, pp. 369-370). Moved by the stories of these 'victims', the public opinion and political élite reacted. After a series of concessions, the 1998 Immigration Law formally introduced an ad hoc form of protection for those 'with severe pathologies for which they had no access to proper treatment in their home countries' – 'humanitarian reason' (2005, pp. 369-370). What risks going unnoticed in this moral and political reconfiguration and that Fassin boldly exposes is the different system of emotions, judgements, moral values that come to replace what was once granted by the law, namely the recognition of migrants' right to legally migrate and take active part in the national economy and society as well as the right to international protection on political grounds. Moreover, with the securitarian turn that has invested the Western world since 9/11, a new layer of political imperatives, public concerns and moral reconfigurations have further complicated the moral economy of migration management caught in a paradoxical forcefield. In Fassin's words (2005, p. 376):

A display of sympathy thus replaces the recognition of a right. The biopolitics of asylum must be understood as the substitution of a social order founded on "obligation" for a social order grounded in "solidarity" [...] The recognition of the refugee status by European nations appears as an act of generosity on the part of a national community toward a "suffering stranger" (Butt 2002) rather than the fulfillment of a political debt toward "citizens of humanity" (Malkki 1994). Constructed as illegal immigrants and commonly qualified as clandestins [sic], asylum seekers oscillate between being objects of repression and compassion.

To understand the many merits, but also limits, of Didier Fassin's work on the moral economy of migration, I believe it is essential to clearly delineate the scope of his contribution for what it intends to be and what it is not, nor tries to be. Fassin's study of the moral economy of migration is best understood as a piece of a wider puzzle he has reconstructed over the past twenty years of his career. The anthropologist has endeavoured to unpack the production and management of, however variously defined, 'social outcasts', that is 'to unveil the ethic of contemporary states when it comes to the moral evaluation of difference' (2005, p. 366). Within this framework, I suggest that his study of the European moral economies of immigration is a grounded study of governmentality, where the rationality of the state is problematised by exposing the historically produced, ever-shifting and often contradictory

political logics and moral configurations which are simultaneously at play in the management of the unwanted. The nation-state he researches is far from a coherent and almighty entity, its practices often blur the threshold of legitimacy, but its ‘sophisticated technologies’ of power are far reaching (Fassin, 2010, p. 217). In a clear Foucauldian tradition, the production and circulation of old and new sensibilities are largely interpreted as diffuse governmental tactics functional to the implementation of a new political regime.

Fassin’s main concern in his study of immigration to Europe lies in the macro-level discursive and social shifts happening in the public arena gauged through the critical analysis of policies, national statistics, media reports, politicians’ announcements, newspaper headlines, television coverage, national legislation. In the picture of the moral economy he assembles, the ethnographic material and the voice of his participants provide illustrative vignettes of the lived impact of the broader, ever shifting, paradigm he has pieced together. In this sense, I argue, Fassin’s study of the moral economy of immigration is ultimately much closer to the anthropological counterpart of the Foucauldian theorization of governmentality and biopower, than it is to the Marxist historian’s reconstruction of the ‘*mentalité*’ of the English working-class (Thompson, 1991, p. 260). Indeed, what Fassin’s work is *not*, I suggest, is an anthropological study of the moral economy of migration if, by that, we mean the composite system of ‘moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations’ (Fassin, 2009, p. 1257, my translation) mobilized by the variegated population that is governed *upon vis-à-vis* the moral and political phenomenon of global displacement. Fassin’s starting point is what is politically and publicly produced and not, as with Thompson, the point of view of lay social subjects. This shift of perspective from ‘the dominated’ as *subjects* to ‘the institutions, procedures, actions, and reflections that have populations as *object*’ (Fassin, 2011b, p. 140, emphasis added) is arguably Fassin’s most radical departure from Thompson’s original conceptualization of the moral economy.

But what would then a moral economy of immigration ‘from below’ would look like? And to what extent an explicit focus on the local experiential level of migration to contemporary Europe can be considered in disjunction from the institutional framework which seeks to govern it? In the attempt to build on Fassin’s excellent work on the moral economy of migration management, while restoring the legacy of Thompson’s moral economy of the crowd, I make two related observations:

The institutions and agents Fassin holds accountable for the national and local management of migration belong to either recognizable institutional loci (e.g. politicians, judges, lawyers,

civil servants, social workers) or to the world of non-governmental organisations. State directives filter down through the ranks of the bureaucratic apparatus and, at each level, are appropriated and re-worked by their human workforce through contextual ethical and work cultures (Fassin, 2015). In this perspective, however, while the local and cultural dimension of policy implementation is explicitly acknowledged (Fassin, 2012a, p. 440), idiosyncratic differences are but variances of the overarching *institutional* logic they express. Following Thompson's lesson, however, recent advances in political ethnography have significantly expanded traditional understandings of politics, problematizing the role of official policies in many segments of the society. Through this lens, multiple counter-hegemonic practices – not the least those used by the 'managed' migrant subjects – as well as non-institutional dominating actors (e.g. landlords, informal brokers, religious authorities) emerge as critical players in the field. In many contexts a heightened attention to the liminal space of 'informality' and to the multiple forms of political agency is not secondary to the critical analysis of public policies. These insights are essential for a close-grained study of the lived experience of migration to contemporary Europe. Whether we consider the countless gaps left by national systems of asylum reception, the use of 'informal' if not illegal practices by state agents to enforce border control, or the institutional void that follows initial statutory accommodation (for the few entitled to it), it is largely in a space that exceeds the institutional contours of the national systems of immigration management that migrants negotiate their social place and new home in the namely 'host' country (Marchetti and Pinelli, 2017; Pasquetti and Picker, 2017).

My second point addresses Fassin's neglect of sub-national contexts in favour of a closer account of national political and discursive trends - a choice coherent with his focus on contemporary forms of governmentality. To be clear, it is not case that Fassin ignores the co-existence of multiple scales of analysis, quite the contrary, but local cultural and political configurations, while bearing on social agents' experience with the institutions, do not override the governmental rationales of compassionate repression imposed on them. In this sense, the historical and social distinctiveness of specific places is secondary to the development of his argument and leaves the moral economy of migration *de facto* unchallenged. It is undeniable that a strikingly common rhetoric built on the primary concerns of border security and (although increasingly less so) humanitarian responsibility towards war-torn countries characterizes national political practices and discourses across Europe whose human cost can hardly be overstated. However, remaining vigilant to the many subtle (and sometimes self-defeating) ways in which state power is exerted, I argue that the specific

national and regional features of this discursive turn as well as its lived impact on the local level calls for further ethnographic scrutiny.

These two considerations will inform the discussion that follows. Drawing on the emergent literatures in political and urban ethnography and anthropology of morality I intend to broaden the analysis of the political and the moral to include forms of political agency and moral subjectivities that do not feature in the moral economy of immigration management, but that constitute the core of a moral economy of migrants' experience.

Reworking moral economies 'from below'

Political and urban ethnography

Ten years ago, Auyero and Joseph lamented the substantial neglect of ethnography from contemporary political sociology's agenda, despite the fact that 'ethnography is uniquely equipped to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant sets of practices, just as it is ideally suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life' (Auyero and Joseph, 2007, p. 2). The widely favoured quantitative, explanatory approach in political science and sociology, they held, inevitably missed the many nuances, ordinary practices, unspoken meanings and motivations that make up the political apparatus as it is enforced upon and experienced by social subjects. Later reviews of the current state of affairs, however, have traced the expanding contours of the field of political ethnography (Baiocchi and Connor, 2008; Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017). An increasing number of social and political scholars has indeed taken as their object of investigation 'the study of societal power (its distribution, reproduction, and transformation) and the structures, institutions, movements, and collective identities that both maintain and challenge it' (Baiocchi and Connor, 2008, p. 140). By placing politics under the ethnographic microscope (borrowing Auyero's expression), political ethnographers have provided a 'significant re-theorization' of the realm of politics, troubling traditional distinctions between institutional and informal actors, formal politics and associative life, in other words 'state' and 'society' (Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017, p. 230; Auyero 2006). Within this burgeoning discipline, different strands can be identified.

A number of influential political ethnographies have been grouped under the heading of 'ethnographies of governmentality' (Baiocchi and Connor, 2008; Benzecry and Baiocchi,

2017). These studies are primarily concerned with the many, often unnoticed and mundane ways in which neoliberal policies extend their discretionary power on certain subjects, creating new categories of exclusion through the production of specific, docile subjectivities. This approach has been particularly productive in the analysis of the making of ‘citizen-subjects’ in different national contexts. Aihwa Ong (2003) and Cristiana Giordano’s (2014) exemplary books aptly illustrate the point, delving into the problematic modes of citizenship-making experienced by Cambodian refugees in California and victims of sexual trafficking in Italy respectively.

Loïc Wacquant’s well-known work on ‘advanced’ urban marginality in the peripheral spaces of Chicago and Paris is also part of the emergent tradition of ethnography of governmentality. Although characterised by distinct historical trajectories and governmental modes, what the North American and French urban configurations share, Wacquant argues, is that they are both the product of macro-structural political and economic shifts in the 1980s and 1990s which have seen the neoliberal dismantling of the post-war Fordist regime and welfare state (Wacquant, 2008). His work is telling of a wider concern in the social sciences and political ethnography with the progressive ‘rolling back’ of formal political institutions from the lives of the disadvantaged (Ferguson, 1994; Bourgeois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2000). The vacuum left by the progressive erosion of statutory “safety nets”, leaving masses of people exposed to the precariousness of exclusionary housing markets, exploitative working conditions, increasingly privatised healthcare and education systems has been explored ethnographically to document the human cost of politically produced social suffering (Desmond, 2016; Collins, Jensen, Auyero, 2017).

Complementing and partly challenging the governmentality-focused strand of analyses, other political and urban ethnographers have advanced a more radically bottom-up approach to the study of everyday politics. These studies have paid attention not only to the multiple non-institutional ways in which state governance is re-worked and resisted in routine practices, but also to the ‘informal’ forms of political agency – whether empowering or dominating – that co-exist in the public life. Importantly, these scholars have championed a ‘relational definition of politics’ that emerges from the observation of contextual forms of public engagement, social networks and meaning-making which dissolve in the hybrid ‘gray zone’ (Auyero, 2007) at the ‘intersection of routine, everyday, and formal politics’ (Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017, p. 232). For instance, one of the most prominent academic in this field, Javier Auyero has skillfully represented the ways in which, for the deprived residents of the peripheral district of Conurbano Bonaerense at the outskirts of the Argentinian capital ‘[r]egular, routine

engagement with brokers and patrons produces an understanding of politics as a form of solving daily private and public problems (from access to a soup kitchen to the pavement of a street) that is highly personalized (this or that broker can obtain this or that private or public good)' (2017, p. 182). In that context, patronage and clientelism are resilient, naturalized forms of everyday politics, the internalized *habitus* resulting from the sustained exposure to and engagement with this form of political activity (Auyero and Benzecry, 2017). Drawing on Bourdieu's legacy, Auyero and Benzecry explain how the 'practical logic' of patronage is legitimised and sustained by both 'cognitive' (i.e. a certain understanding of the political) and emotional 'dispositions' which tie patrons, brokers and close supporters 'through *strong ties* [...] of long-lasting friendship, parentage, and/or fictive kinship' (2017, p. 187, emphasis in original). What we find in this marginalized place is not (or not just) the bleak landscape of a hopeless oppressed population made redundant by neoliberal forms of dispossessions - as Wacquant depicts the present and future of urban 'advanced' marginalisation - but a functioning system of informal redistributive justice grounded in inventiveness and 'diffuse, long-term reciprocity' where 'brokers provide public goods and services (street lighting, garbage collection trucks, bus shelters, etc.) for their neighbourhoods' (2017, p. 187). The mundane political reality of Conurbano Bonaerense is not judged against an 'ideal model' of political rule (eg. Fordism in Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts*), the intent is not that to denounce its deviance from formal, supposedly more legitimate, politics (see Caldeira's critique, 2009, p. 849), but rather to explore the practical working, meanings, emotions involved in the residents' daily engagement with the 'grey' political sphere.

With a view to further expand on the complex implications of the seemingly recoil of the state/the political from the social urban margins, I wish to address two interrelated debates drawing on literature from urban and political ethnography on the Global South and North alike.

First, '**informality**' and its role in the lives of marginalized urban dwellers has recently been the subject of a lively debate. The concept occupies a very prominent role in studies of megacities in the Global South and has also been increasingly applied to the understanding of practices in the 'fissures between legality and illegality' in the Western world (Pasquetti and Picker, 2017, p. 532).

Helpfully defined by Roy as 'a heuristic device that uncovers the ever-shifting urban relationships between the legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized' (2011, p. 233), 'urban informality' is not, however, a univalent term. For

instance, in their comparative study of African urbanism, Madhavan and Landau talk about the centrality of ‘institutional urban informality’, by which they mean ‘the relative absence of centralized social or political authorities who effectively grant or deny access to critical spaces, services, and opportunities’ (2011, p. 473). This idea of a weak institutional presence in certain urban settings has been often associated with a somewhat convivial subaltern informality. In this regard, Landau describes spaces of ‘horizontal’, ‘pragmatic’ forms of solidarity between migrant and long-term resident populations in what she calls ‘urban estuaries’ – ‘meeting places of multiple human flows that remain largely unregulated by states or dominant social institutions [...] at once unstable and fertile grounds’ (Landau, 2014, p. 361). In these urban contact zones characterized by high internal and transnational mobility and social fragmentation, ‘people form solidarities and communities in order to meet their daily needs and find rights and recognition’ (2014, p. 364). In her 2012 article, Sanyal also praises the relative agility enjoyed by marginalized urban dwellers, and refugees among them, in slum areas where ‘they can avail of the anonymity of the urban environment and the flexibility of labour that the informal sector affords’ (Sanyal, 2012, p. 638). What is more, Sanyal holds, most of the different forms of discrimination to which refugees are usually subjected (legally, socially and racially) are largely absent in urban environments where ‘refugees can be quite self-sufficient and industrious’ (Sanyal, 2012, p. 638).

However, a strongly critical voice has been recently raised by some urban ethnographers calling for a more careful and nuanced analysis of the many forms of informality and its social consequences (Pasquetti and Picker, 2017; Roy, 2011; Darling, 2016). For instance, in her critique to ‘subaltern urbanism’, Roy warns against ‘ontological’ or ‘topological’ understandings of urban informality, meaning by that interpretations that see informality as unique purview of the underclass or as a feature that can be circumscribed to specific, bounded, peripheral spaces (2011, p. 233). As an example of ‘elite informality’, Roy cites the case of prestigious buildings constructed without abiding to the planning or building law by well-known mafia organisations with the tacit consent of the authorities (2011, p. 233). Pasquetti and Picker pick up on these objections and make a further step. Not only does informality ‘cu[t] across socio-economic hierarchies’ (being deployed by the poor and wealthy alike) and is often condoned by institutional authorities, but it can also be used by state agents in ‘informal and even illegal practices vis-à-vis the urban poor’ (Pasquetti and Picker, 2017, pp. 532, 534). Reasoning on the subtle ways in which informality and urban confinement are often co-produced, Pasquetti and Picker argue for a relational analysis of the two seemingly opposite phenomena. This framework allows us to see how, for instance,

engaging in the informal economy or having informal, precarious accommodation are often practices made necessary by the structural confinement of certain categories of subjects systematically pushed to the margins of city and the society.

In fact, while urban informality certainly allows for some flexibility, this relative freedom is often circumscribed to the underground sphere, where access to mainstream public services or regular employment may be curtailed. At the same time, people's relegation to spaces of confinement can be attained through the illegitimate and arbitrary (i.e. informal) use of institutional powers (Pasquetti and Picker, 2017, pp. 539-540, see Clough Marinaro, 2017). Confinement and informality are also mutually implicated in the multiple ways in which social actors whose activities are confined to liminal urban spaces (e.g. rough sleepers or street vendors) engage in 'informal' (i.e. non-organised) forms of resistance against restrictive laws. In sum, the polymorphous concept of informality - ranging from its somewhat rose-tainted version of convivial subalternity to the ultimate governmental technique of social control - defies any clear-cut interpretation but provides a productive analytical tool for uncovering contextual (and overlapping) forms of power and resistance nested in the urban social fabric.

Secondly, scholars are sharply divided on the role of **charities** for the support of the urban marginalized and, among them, asylum seekers. Many critiques have been moved towards the legitimacy and implications of the activity of charitable asylum-support organisations. One of the main arguments is that charity 'beneficiaries' are bound, out of necessity, to their charitable helpers in an asymmetrical power relationship of dependency and gratefulness which they cannot reciprocate, if not in the sense of reward that the donor 'gains' from the interaction. In this view, charity is a form of unidirectional gift that does not produce a form of equal exchange between the subject involved, but relegates one of them to the role of dependent recipient. This imbalance can be experienced with great frustration, exacerbated by the fact that this form of support is usually temporary. In her ethnographic study of the UK city of sanctuary movement, Bagelman reports how for many of her research participants resorting to charitable help 'elicits [...] a sense of dependency, uselessness and invisibility. Although sanctuary is generally seen as a necessary good for and by these men, [...] it engenders an expectation to take and to wait' (2016, pp. 30-31). Presented as a set of welcoming practices for asylum seekers to provide refuge from overtly hostile immigration policies, the 'very practices of sanctuary that are supposedly temporary, protective, and mitigatory can end up functioning as a condition of liminality that entraps asylum seekers in a

permanent state of suspense' (Bagelman, 2016, p. 36).

In line with Bagelman's critique, other scholars have stressed how charitable gestures risk being nothing more than ephemeral episodes of compassion that do nothing to address the structural causes of social suffering (Darling, 2016, p. 185). Even more problematically, charitable bodies, and the Church among them, have been accused of being turned into 'the state's nurse' (Albahari, 2013, p. 243) de facto assisting, free of charge, in the implementation of exclusionary state practices. Charitable organisations have increasingly taken responsibility for the "human surplus" produced by the retrenchment of the welfare state, exacerbated by austerity measures. In some cases, as in the UK, some established charities have been found to be formally, although undercover, collaborating with immigration enforcement agents sharing personal information about the nationality and legal status of the migrants they were sheltering (Taylor, 2017). Without undermining the relevance and gravity of these critiques, a few observations may lead to a different, broader reflection on the implications of charitable practices towards marginalised migrants.

That is to say, it seems important to consider that, however limited in nature, the forms of practical and emotional support provided by grassroots charitable organisations may be of great importance to overcome the many bureaucratic, linguistic and emotional obstacles faced by newly arrived migrants. Moreover, organisational environments often offer a safe place for socialisation and networking with people from a variety of backgrounds and thus facilitating the restoration of social and affective ties. These experiences in the first stages of migrants' settlement have been proved especially significant for their later social and political engagement within the 'receiving' context (Diehl et al. 2016). Instead of reducing charity to a mere technology of power, although it certainly *can* be, we may consider the vital safety net charitable practices provide as the essential condition to the very presence of asylum seekers in hostile receiving countries. In conditions of deterrent immigration policies, the success of migrants' independent settlement may depend to a variable extent to the degree of help and solidarity they first encountered. It is, I argue, migrants' 'politics of presence' - which charitable action may significantly support - that constitutes the real challenge to repressive regimes of border control and social neglect of the unwanted (Darling, 2016: 191). Migrants' voices will be hardly heard if not from a place of, however precarious, refuge. Micro-acts of resistance and claims to political recognition may be sustained and encouraged by charitable organisations which might also provide the skills and visibility necessary to act as catalysts of episodic, disruptive 'acts of citizenship' which might incrementally result in vocal political *dissensus* (Darling, 2014).

Anthropology and sociology of everyday morality

If a focus on ‘informality’ and political agency can help us unpack the everyday political dimension of the moral economy of migrants’ reception, how are we then to conceptualise and investigate its experienced moral implications? As I have outlined above, Fassin’s critical moral anthropology takes issue with what he defines ‘the contemporary ethos, the “genius” or guiding spirit of [...] the policies of immigration and asylum’, looking ‘beyond the individual difficulties and contradictions of the social agents’ (2005, p. 366). What I attempt to do is then to flip the picture and take the analysis back to the ground-level of the social agents in their everyday reasoning, encounters and exchanges. I aim to attend to the inter/subjective, relational ‘difficulties and contradictions of the social agents’ who are directly affected by the shifting contemporary *ethos* of immigration and asylum management so aptly examined by Fassin. As Signe Howell points out, policies and legislations by prescribing obligations and duties formally enshrine concerns and values ‘on behalf of society’ and are therefore, at least to some extent, telling of contemporary, socially shared morals (Howell, 2009, p. 82). But just as formal politics are not coterminous with social subjects’ everyday political experiences, moral norms, however coded (e.g. encapsulated in national laws, organisational policies, codes of conduct, religious predicaments etc.), are variously endorsed, interpreted, disputed or circumvented in the contingencies of social life. Moving beyond Fassin’s focus on governmentality but also the abstract, prescriptive approach of much political theory concerned with the ethics of migration (Zapata-Barrero and Pécoud, 2012), the parallel fields of sociology and anthropology of morality have instead addressed the mundane, experiential level of ethics and morality. And this is where the central scope of my project lies.

Under Durkheim’s legacy, social sciences have often considered morality ‘a floating mantle over society, pervasive in all of its aspects’ and, as such, analytically and empirically elusive (Heintz, 2009, p. 2). While it is widely accepted that ‘the notions of ethics and morality on the register of the ordinary are more like threads woven into the weave of life rather than notions that stand out and call attention to themselves’ (Das, 2012, p.134), conceptual and terminological ambiguity still haunts current debates in the field. In standard English, ‘morality’ is commonly related to shared values which hold a normative connotation, whereas ‘ethics’ tends to refer to reflexive, individual judgements (Zigon, 2014). It has been noted, however, that the distinction between the two might be misleading as, in ordinary experiences, moral values and ethics blur into each other (Fassin, 2013).

Moreover, some anthropologists have remarked how focusing on either morality or ethics

would imply ‘operating a choice based on the holist/individualist dichotomy’ which assumes ‘how morality/ethics/moral values are experienced in various cultures – as determined by society or by an individual choice – while we need first to question the relevance of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ and even of the existence of a society/individual dichotomy in every cultural context’ (Heintz, 2009, p. 4). Sayer proposes conceptualising of ‘lay morality’ as the composite product of norms; individual reflexivity or moral reasoning; discourses which are sources of moral ideas; personal behavioural dispositions (i.e. virtues and vices); moral emotions (e.g. contempt, pity) and what he calls ‘fellow-feeling’, that is the supposedly pan-human capacity to reflexively understand, at least to some extent, what a wide range of common feelings (such as benevolence, selfishness, compassion, cruelty etc.) ‘are like for others’ (2010, pp. 171-173). In line with Heintz, Fassin and Sayer, for analytical purposes I hold it is preferable to specify whether we are referring to narratives, normative stances, emotions, reasoning rather than relying on the blurred distinction between ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ which might be used interchangeably. In what follows I will briefly outline some key works in the sociology and anthropology of morality, highlighting how these shall inform the analysis of asylum seekers’ and settled subjects’ moral labour at their encounter.

One of the most distinguished exponents of the sociology of morality, Andrew Sayer investigates how social positioning along intersecting axes of differentiation and inequality – e.g. class (a composite concept itself), ethnicity, nationality, gender, age etc. – acquire different moral inflections in social subjects’ valuations (2010). Importantly, Sayer remarks how reflexivity and moral feelings such as solidarity have the potential to cut across lines of inequality and overcome hierarchical principles of exclusion (2010, p. 171). At the same time, he underscores how moral sentiments and discourses can be mobilized to create social boundaries, as in the case of Chicago’s white working-class subjects who ‘lacking economic security and fearing slipping into poverty’ have drawn on class and ethnic divides to morally distinguish themselves from ‘the blacks and poor whites of the inner city’ (2010, p. 174). Making morally charged boundaries may become thus a strategy to project ‘despised and feared’ characteristics onto the othered subjects and create, by contrast, ‘a positive identity and sense of self-worth’ (Ibid.).

Shifting the focus from the discriminating to the discriminated, Michele Lamont’s comparative study of ethno-racial discrimination has originally enhanced the sociological understanding of ‘the experience and the subjectivity of the stigmatized’ across different national contexts (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 4; Lamont, 2000). Arguably her most insightful

contribution, Lamont's explanatory framework underscores the role that national 'cultural repertoires' play in moulding the ways social subjects make sense of and respond to stigmatisation and discrimination (2016, p. 3). In other words, 'historically constructed, culturally available narrative templates, public narratives, or meta-narratives' – alongside more pragmatic considerations about the immediate consequences of one's actions – are found to enable or constrain the kinds and frequency of reactions by the discriminated subjects (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 21). Nationhood rhetorics, philosophies of integration, historical social movements, neoliberal narratives and the like provide an aggregate 'set of tools' for the composition of subjective narratives and practices (2016, p. 21). For instance, Lamont and colleagues argue that if African Americans in New York City are more likely to respond confrontationally to (factual or perceived) discrimination this is due to 'the shared understanding of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and familiarity with a legal context that strongly discourages racial slurs' (2016, p. 3).

Stressing the contextual specificity of social and moral configurations, some anthropologists have sought to disentangle more explicitly the experiential dimension of morality and the implications of co-existing conflicting moral discourses. Jarrett Zigon addresses the first issue in his 'moral portrait' of a Russian ex-junkie, leading HIV activist in Moscow (Zigon, 2009). Zigon uncovers how his participant's personal experiences as 'a member of one of the most marginalised groups' in the country (2009, p. 51) at a time of deep social transformation in post-Soviet Russia provided him with a strongly critical disposition towards mainstream society which forged his 'personal ethic' (2009, p. 60). The Muscovite's experiential knowledge allowed him to distance himself from hegemonic Soviet discourses of social conformity and champion individual liberty and authenticity. Central to the man's personal ethic is the 'rhetorical distancing of self-analysis [which] allows him to work on himself to become the kind of person he wants to be' (2009, p. 56).

According to Zigon, however, what is interesting is that this same concern with self-discipline and individual ethical responsibility lies at the core of the 'New Soviet Man' rhetoric of early Soviet Russia, itself reminiscent of Russian Orthodox Church's moral discourses on 'self-transformation' to approach God's perfection (2009, p. 60; Zigon, 2011, p. 38). From a relational perspective, personal experiences and socio-cultural tropes are thus inevitably entangled, for while life trajectories and reflexivity may provide critical tools to question hegemonic moral conceptions, these same widely circulating discourses and values cannot but influence social subjects' moral reasoning (Zigon, 2009, pp. 60-61). Other scholars have

observed how, under different circumstances, ‘external’ public narratives may co-exist in overt tension with contradicting private experiences leading to situations of emotional - and moral - ‘complexity’ (Cangia, forthcoming).

Anthropologists have long interrogated themselves on the implications of cross-cultural as well as internal moral conflicts (Howell, 1997). For instance, in a somewhat canonical anthropological/culturalist tradition, Signe Howell questions the (moral) legitimacy of transnational adoption schemes that, drawing on contemporary Western values (e.g. the primacy of ‘the best interest of the child’) and discursive practices (heavily influenced by psychological expertise), impose an ethno-centric understanding of childhood, family and adoption on non-Western partner countries. Competing cultural meanings and values do not find recognition in international law and human rights discourse, and thus result in ‘explicit or implicit resistance to the regulations, [...] feelings of impotence, as well as a lack of understanding of the implications of the conventions’ (Howell, 2009, p. 90). Reflecting on the classical distinction between individualistic and socially-bounded conceptions of personhood, Howell explains how, for instance, the African understanding of children ‘as constituted through their relationship with others’ such as their parents and member of the wider kin group is at odds with Western dominant values of empowerment, individual worth and autonomy which are encapsulated in the UNCRC Charter (2009, pp. 90-91). Without undermining the deeply problematic ‘neo-colonial’ assumptions of the scheme (Howell, 2009, p.84), however, Howell’s approach implies a certain culturalist over-statement of local values and cultural meanings presented as neatly bounded and impermeable entities which have been virtually untouched by transnational circulation of people, discourses and practices and result therefore immune to change.

Radical socio-cultural transformation is, by contrast, the starting point of Joel Robbins’ discussion of value conflicts among the Urapmin population – less than 400 people living in West Papua New Guinea (Robbins, 2007; 2009). What fascinates the anthropologist is the socio-cultural impact of the Urapmin’s mass conversion to charismatic Christianity over the course of one year. By converting to the ‘Christian laws’, the Urapmin understand as their moral duty to avoid strong feelings which may result from imposing one’s will over others (Robbins, 2009, p. 71). The adherence to the novel Christian moral imperatives is publicly and privately patrolled by constant ‘moral vigilance’ evident in everyday conversations about one’s own and others’ moral conduct, public preaches, frequent church services and other collective rituals (Robbins, 2007; 2009). If, on the one hand, the Urapmin strive to fulfil their

individual moral responsibilities in line with the charismatic Protestant ideology of individual self-improvement (aiming at salvation), on the other hand they struggle to accommodate these requirements with their traditional social-value system. Robbins identifies ‘relationalism’ as the paramount value of the Urapmin society whereby one’s social worth is judged ‘by the quantity and quality of the relationships’ one has created and maintained (2009, p. 77). The resulting pressure to negotiate between the two fundamental but conflicting values of individualism and relationalism has thus led to a heightened moral reflexivity and constant moral patrolling to ensure adherence to Christian morality.

Robbins draws on the Urapmin’s case to exemplify his theoretical model of social structure – organised around a hierarchical value system governed by one paramount value – and cultural change which can occur either because of a modification in the existing value structure or by the introduction of a competing paramount value, as in the case of the Urapmin (Robbins, 2009, pp. 69-70). His overtly structuralist framework also allows Robbins to conceptualise the possibility for ethical critical distancing (or reflexivity) from what would otherwise be all-encompassing existential values. According to Robbins, reflexive reasoning takes place precisely in the unsettling interstices created by the disruption of a system of moral reproduction where moral norms remain unquestioned and smoothly reproduced in social actors’ routine practices and discourses (Robbins, 2007).

Rejecting Robbins’ social structural somewhat deterministic paradigm, Zigon has adopted a phenomenological approach to the study of ‘multiaspectual nature’ of morality and ethics (Zigon, 2011, p. 31). In this perspective, all social situations are recognised as characterised by ‘a unique local moral and ethical assemblage’ and not, as with Robbins, determined by ‘one totalizing morality’ (Zigon, 2011, p. 32). Routine moral reasoning is shaped by contextual ‘sociohistoric trajectories’, religious traditions, multiple moral discourses and feelings that provide a repertoire of possible ethical configurations for individual moral positioning. Zigon’s prolific work offers a conceptual and methodological framework to unpacking the overlapping discourses and practices that underlay global movements, and in particular drug rehabilitation cultures in contemporary Russia and United States. In tracing concurrent moral voices in the everyday, Zigon’s analysis acknowledges the role of transnational networks of values and meanings as variously reassembled in contingent local articulations (Zigon, 2015). Within both rehabilitation schemes and anti-war on drugs movements in Russia, for instance, Zigon identifies discursive elements of global militarism, biopolitical power, border security, neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility

(alongside Russian Orthodox and Soviet predicaments of moral labour and self-transformation) that encompass and transcend the local specificity of the discursive 'situation' (Zigon, 2011; 2015; 2009).

Where Zigon's theorisation is less convincing, I suggest, is in his discussion of ethical reflexivity. While he underscores the mundane character of moral plurality, Zigon conceives of full critical awareness and ethical agency as the product of exceptional, life-turning situations of 'moral breakdown' where social subjects find themselves alienated from their everyday lives and unable to live a meaningful life (Zigon, 2014, p. 756). The scholar argues that it is this deep existential fracture that has led, for example, a number of African-American and Latino residents - whose lives in NYC neighbours have been deprived of 'dignity' by routine, humiliating police interventions - 'to mobilize politically against this and other tactics of the war on drugs', regardless of their substance-use habits (Ibid.). The extra-ordinary depiction of such moments of reflexivity, however, appear inconsistent with the emphasis on the inherently creative and ordinary dimension of 'moral assemblages' which, in Zigon's words, provide 'a range of possibilities' for articulating one's thought and speech in unique and unpredictable ways (2009b, p. 251; 2011). Moreover, while Zigon repeatedly criticises Robbins' conceptualisation of 'totalizing moralities' governed by a single overarching set of values, his research seems to buy into the well-known 'governmentality' argument that sees neoliberal regimes of self-governance and diffuse social surveillance overriding any other political and moral stances. If in post-Soviet Russia the Orthodox Church plays a leading role in the physical and spiritual assistance of drug addicts, its religious foundations (namely the possibility of moral redemption through moral self-transformation) are found to have been absorbed – and exploited by – by secular 'neoliberal regimes of living' (Zigon, 2011, p. 46). The question then raises to what extent Zigon's nominal assemblic model is not in fact reduced to a more sophisticated paradigm of moral reproduction governed by the all-pervasive neoliberal moral and political discourse.

Exploring asylum seekers' moral economies of in/formal asylum

Blending together conceptual insights offered by political ethnography as well as anthropology and sociology of morality, I suggest that a comparative ethnography of the moral economies of asylum seekers' reception in two historically marginalised European regions offers a possible avenue to overcome de-contextualized, abstract modelling of asylum dispersal while also calling into question the colonial im/moral legacy that the institution of asylum still embodies. Aware of the plurality of moral discourses on migration and asylum

circulating at supra-national, national and local levels, in this thesis I take asylum seekers' moral agency as the vantage point from which I interrogate their impact on asylum seekers' everyday life. In particular, I focus on asylum seekers' 'moral reasoning' (borrowing from Zigon's and Sayer's conceptual toolkit) as it unfolds in formal and informal contexts of asylum reception in Newcastle and Catania. Sayer defines moral reasoning as the *lay normative* thoughts and feelings that underpin social actors' conduct and struggles 'in terms of their rationales' (2005, p. 5). In the simplest terms, such thoughts and feelings are normative or 'moral' because they rely on 'some ideas of what is good or acceptable' (Sayer, 2011, p. 143). The moral reasoning Sayer describes and that I am interested in is *lay* in the sense that it is not located in laws and scriptures - it is not the straightforward emanation of formally encoded moral norms - but is about social actors' everyday engagements (however inconsistent and contested) with the plurality of moral frameworks which have a bearing on our lives. With varying degrees of reflexivity (Howell, 1997, 14), moral reasoning 'ranges from concentrated deliberation on major ethical decisions, like whether to divorce, through to more fleeting and fragmented [moral] evaluations' of persons, actions, institutions and cultural scripts (Sayer, 2010, 166).

In such moral engagements, emotions play a key role. In real-life interactions and evaluations, more often than not, moral values and norms are not quietly endorsed or challenged on a purely cognitive level. Rather, moral principles and expectations are first and foremost 'felt' (Harkness and Hitlin 2014, p. 452) and that is where the binding power of morality lies. More specifically, sociologists have defined moral emotions as affective states which are 'aroused by conformity to or deviance from moral codes' (Stets and Turner, 2006, p. 557), in other words, semi-conscious expressions of 'what the self honors and values' (Ibid., p. 564). Morally laden emotions are thus understood as fundamental elements of everyday morality and social life where emotional and reflective modes feed into each other (Sayer, 2011). Emotional responses can in fact be the expression of conscious or unconscious moral reasoning, but can also '*prompt* reflection' (and thus lead to more explicit moral reasoning) when social actors interrogate themselves on their own or others affective reactions (Sayer, 2011, p. 147). Aware of the emotional complexity of moral reasoning in practice, throughout my fieldwork, I have tried to attune myself to what seemed to me moments of intense emotional labour as telling of something that my interlocutors were feeling strongly about and thus deserved heightened attention.

My focus is thus on the multiple, often conflicting lines of (often heart-felt) moral reasoning

contextually mobilised by asylum seekers as they navigate the asylum regime, within and across its legal boundaries, as it manifests in two peripheral cities of Europe. As I will illustrate empirically in Chapter 4 and 5, asylum seekers' situated moral reasoning in two distinct institutional, socio-cultural and economic contexts allows us to critically engage with the aforementioned debates on (urban)informality, charity work and more broadly on the moral legitimacy of the asylum system. Taking a step back from the intricacies of the theoretical dialogues presented in this chapter, what asylum seekers' moral economies of in/formal asylum enable us to see is the restless moral and emotional labour of social justice in context and practice.

Chapter 3. Research contexts and methodology

Introduction

My research draws on the empirical data collected during two consecutive stints of ethnographic fieldwork in the north of England and south of Italy. Between the end of August 2018 and the beginning of March 2019, I spent 6 months in Newcastle upon Tyne (North East of England) before moving south to Catania (Sicily) where I lived for 5 months until the end of August 2019. If there is a straight timeline linking the two fieldworks, the way I decided where and when to place myself to conduct participant observation, who to engage (or try to) in my research and what exactly I wanted to focus on (i.e. my units of analysis) was an iterative process of ‘cross-fertilization’ and ‘reciprocal limitations’ between the two field-sites (Gallo, 2009, p. 89; Ivry, 2010; Boccagni, 2016). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodological, analytical and ethical choices and the contingent constraints that gradually shaped the two distinct but relationally interrelated ‘fields’ of research. As Matei Candea puts it, ‘the field’ is ‘a framing cut out of a seamless reality’ (Candea, 2007, p. 171) which each ethnographer necessarily co-constructs ‘to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account’ (Ibid., p. 169). In comparative projects like my own, this process is especially complex for it requires careful consideration of possible parallels, connections and asymmetries that make (in my case) two local field sites at once unique and comparable – a point I will later expand on. In what follows, I retrospectively reflect on this nonlinear, trans-local journey and its many challenges to elucidate the underpinning of the ethnographic data and its limits that I present in this thesis.

The chapter is broadly divided into two macro parts. The first is dedicated to the discussion of the national and local research contexts where my ethnographic study took place and highlights the comparative rationales that guide my inquiry. It follows a methodological reflection on the arts and crafts of comparative ethnography. Here, I take stock of the lively academic debates surrounding this methodological approach, before presenting how I applied a relational comparative framework to the ethnographic study of asylum seekers’ moral reasoning in two different national and urban contexts. The second macro part of the chapter narrows down on the methodological practices and dilemmas that punctuated my fieldwork in Newcastle and subsequently in Catania. In doing so, I attempt to follow Pillow’s invite to ‘liv[e] with a reflexivity of discomfort’ – a form of reflexivity that steers away from ‘self-

indulgent' and self-absolving stories, but rather puts reflexivity at work 'to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning' (Pillow, 2003, p. 192).

Asylum seekers' reception in Newcastle upon Tyne and Catania: A comparative framework

Sunday 26th August 2018, Newcastle Central Mosque.

Lizzie and Martin say they are happy to show me around the mosque. We are in the heart of Newcastle's East End. The middle-aged white couple, I learn, is originally from a tiny village in nearby County Durham 'where everyone knows each other, very narrow minded!' The village, they explain, used to be a steelworks town, people used to work together, socialize among each other, 'that's all they know.' Lizzie and Martin decided to move to Newcastle 6 years ago, following their conversion to Islam, because there were no mosques in the area. They have since become very active members of the local mosque.

Martin: 'Newcastle is good, there is very little racism, people here are used to Muslims, in this area there has been a Muslim community since the 60s! Now people are scared of East Europeans who live in this area, but there have been different waves of migration, many different communities...'

I ask them about the area where they live in the city – they live close by, opposite a large convenience store, in what is commonly referred to as the 'most diverse' or 'ethnic' part of the city.

Lizzie: 'Many people are struggling here, many people come to the mosque for help, also people from here [...]. [In our neighbourhood] we try to do as much as we can, but people in our estate keep very much to themselves... we managed to set up some spaces to share stuff, furniture, books in our staircase, that is nice. Older people still have the mentality to share, help out'

Martin: 'People here are warmer because they have been through very hard times, people had to help each other out, what they had they stretched it to share it with everyone.'

Martin distinctively recalls the episode of the collective killing of the pig, when a family had a pork and would cut it in many pieces, nothing could go wasted, to share it with neighbours. It was expected, Martin explains, that's how people used to do.

Lizzie: 'I wonder if young people here still have this mentality, I'm not sure, young people don't seem to have much respect for the elderly... maybe it's something that is getting lost?'

Martin: ‘No, it’s in the culture, they are breaded with it, it’s generational, people haven’t moved out, they know each other’s family’. This, Mark holds firmly, is what feeds the local sense of ‘community’.

~

Monday 15th April 2019, Caritas Community Kitchen (breakfast shift), Catania.

I’m in the large restaurant-like kitchen with Agata and Christian, two young ‘interns’⁵ as well as Giuseppe and Franco, the service coordinator and a senior volunteer respectively. We are sorting out the breakfast pastries (all food donations from local bakeries and supermarkets) on the large trays that in a few minutes will be displayed on a long string of plastic tables in the centre’s main room, open to the public. It’s one of the first times I join the group, all but me are originally from the Catania province. I try to catch up with the local dialect which is normally turned down when addressing me, an Italian ‘from the North’. As it often happens when meeting new Catanese, my northern origins urge words of warning:

Agata: ‘Catania is a stunning city, plus it’s my city, so to me it’s the most beautiful city in the world, right? But unfortunately the Catanese make it sucks [*la rendono uno schifo*]’

To support her statement, Agata reports the following situation she witnessed a few days ago: a woman walked down the street and dropped a dirty baby nappy in the middle of the street. In front of the woman stands a policeman [*un vigile*] who looks at her but doesn’t say a word and turns to the other side.

Agata: I’ve worked as an animator in tourist resorts during the summer for a few years and I’ve made friends with some girls from Milan, Padua [Italian city in the North-Eastern region of Veneto]... as you go to any other city you realise that it’s beautiful because it’s civilised, clean... As for us - MAYBE in 20 years we will get to the ’50s! Not to talk about public health... May you [Silvia] never have any health issues while you are here, because it’s absolutely shocking, in terms of public health we are even worse than Naples – have you ever been to Naples? Each city has its periphery and its... it’s more elegant areas, richer areas, right? Well, Naples it’s all periphery. And our public health it’s even worse than Naples. [Addressing the rest of the room] Have you watched *Le Iene*⁶ last night? Here if you call the ambulance and tell them that you’ve just had a car accident, they come without even a piece of gauze! But not because of them, because at the hospital they don’t have any, they don’t get the money, even the

⁵ Every year about 5 people aged 18 to 29yo are selected to work at the Caritas Centre, as in many other organisations in the third-sector, as part of the national Civil Service. This has very little to do with the prestigious British Civil Service: in Italy those who pass the selection carry out a work placement of 12 months, working 25h per week, with a monthly net salary of €439.50 (about £ 371.70). The young Catanese ‘interns’ I met at the Caritas centre in Catania welcomed this rare opportunity that granted them steady employment for a whole year, although they were aware there were no chance of the being employed by the charity afterwards.

⁶ Popular Italian tv show showcasing journalistic investigations, often using hidden cameras.

city council doesn't get the money... [...] In Catanese [dialect] we say 'the fish smells from the head' [said in dialect], the problem is higher up!

Giuseppe: No, the problem is each of us and also you who vote for them! The problem is that here there's a lot of poverty and when one is poor, is struggling he has to look for himself, we stop thinking about the common good and society doesn't work anymore.

I listen intently to the conversation I've unintentionally triggered. I seize the opportunity to ask how they think migrants, many of whom are regulars at the community kitchen, find the city. Here the answers from my Catanese interlocutors are strikingly similar

Cristian: Here more than anywhere else you find goodhearted people [*persone di buon cuore*], who help each other, it's a characteristic of us Sicilians

Franco: No, it's actually like that in all the South [of Italy], also in Campania, Calabria [all southern Italian regions]...

Giuseppe: That's true, here neighbours know each other, we land each other a hand, you'll find many good hearted people. Indeed, the foreigners [*gli stranieri*] tell us that they like here better than the north! You know, Sicily is a 'multiculture land' [*una terra multicultura*], we've had the Arabs, the Normans, everyone, so you don't find much of that [racism? Xenophobia?]

Cristian: In the North of course neighbours don't know each other, they can't see each other because of the fog! [all laughing]

At its earliest stages, my interest in two disparate contexts like the North East of England and Sicily sparked by a paradox which is summarised in this excerpt from my research proposal:

Across Europe, asylum seekers and refugees are target of everyday racisms (Kundnani, 2001) expressing itself in verbal and physical assaults, public demonstrations against their local reception as well as in the expanding popularity of far-right, 'nativist' parties (Stavrakakis et al., 2017; Bauman, 2015). Reported episodes of blatant violence directed towards newcomers in European cities reflect painful images of defensive, resentful residents where anti-immigrant and racist attitudes appear exacerbated by forced proximity with resettled asylum seekers (Zetter et al., 2006; Phillips, 2006; Robinson; 2003). The chronic shortage of social housing and other welfare services has been often instrumentalised by xenophobic propaganda whereby the responsibility for structural inadequacy of the system has shifted from the central government to unwanted, 'competing' disadvantaged, fomenting (real or imagined) 'war between the poor' (Dell'Olio, 2004: 120). And yet these same frictional 'contact zones' in peripheral Europe have also been described in terms of narratives and practices of hospitality (Heyman & Symons, 2012; Rogozen-Soltar, 2016; Lauth-Bacas, 2013; Fokas, 2013) whose impact on the living

targets of widespread hostility escapes synoptic large-scale accounts of public attitudes towards immigration (Piacentini, 2015). In fact, migrants' reception in places historically recognised as peripheral have come to intersect with a stratified nexus of pre-existing economic, political and symbolic marginalities which interestingly complicate current debates about meaningful contact across difference (see Mayblin et al., 2016; Valentine, 2008; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011).

Throughout the 12 months of my ethnographic research, I was able to reflect on and question these seemingly competing logics by immersing myself in two urban contexts that, underneath the surface, I have learnt share more than it may look. I have opened this section with two pages of my fieldwork diary which capture two early moments of my fieldwork in Newcastle and, some 6 months later, in Catania. Both situations, it seems to me, well represent the sort of conflicting narratives that circulated widely in the cities and the surrounding regions of the North East of England and Sicily. In both conversations, my local interlocutors juxtaposed references to the deprivation and social struggles they could observe in the two cities with narratives that emphasised the local ethos of 'community', a popular concept in Newcastle, and 'generosity' (or *buon cuore*) as the Catanese people would often describe the 'natural character' of the city's inhabitants. It also emerges quite clearly how these two dimensions, i.e. deprivation and solidarity, were explicitly causally related in the words of Lizzie and Martin (since people were struggling they had to come together and help each other), whereas according to interlocutors in the Caritas' kitchen the generosity and openness of Sicilians/Southern Italians had more to do with inherited cultural heritage. The fieldwork diary excerpts, however, bear witness not just to the pervasiveness of certain discourses, but also to the 'multivocality' implicit in the social construction of place (Rodman, 1992). Lizzie and Martin, I could sense from our conversations, held different views on the generational aspect of Newcastle and the North East's 'community' culture; Agata, Franco, Cristian and Giuseppe did not necessarily agree on who should be deemed responsible for the state of the city's infrastructures and public health, nor on the geographical contours of Southern generosity. Many other narratives and experiences made up the places I chose to carry out my comparative ethnography, not the least the multiple, often conflicting 'voices' of migrants and, among them, asylum seekers – which will be the subject of the empirical chapters of this thesis. With a view to situate asylum seekers' everyday life and perspectives in context, in the next session, I discuss in some length the socio-cultural and institutional landscape that help us situate Newcastle and Catania within their regional and national contexts.

Regional contexts

By accommodating asylum seekers across the national territory, asylum dispersal schemes are deeply implicated in locally contextual practices and sensibilities. Not only do local historical, political and economic configurations impact on migrants' access to housing (Phillips, 2006), social and health services (Bambra, 2016), occupational opportunities (Booth and Cole, 1999) and support networks (Piacentini, 2015), but they also affect local actors' attitudes towards diversity (Casati, 2018a). In both contemporary Italy and the UK, asylum seekers' reception and 'integration' projects come to intersect with fragmented political interventions, uneven socio-economic development and distinct historical legacies which make up the British and Italian internal 'geographies of inequality' (Nayak, 2003; Giglioli, 2017a, 2017b).

Crucially, over the past two decades both the English North and the Italian Southern edges have been housing some of the highest numbers of asylum seekers over the critical transitional period following the formalisation of their asylum request and the migrants' independent settlement following the judicial outcome of the asylum claim (known as second-line reception, or *seconda accoglienza*). Following the 1999 Immigration Act, since 2001 asylum seekers in the UK have been dispersed through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS, now COMPASS) to the Northern regions of England and increasingly Scotland and Wales with the explicit intent of spreading the "burden" of asylum seekers' reception – historically clustered in the English South – while exploiting cheap housing stocks largely available in de-industrialized North (Robinson, Anderson and Musterd, 2003). Born in 2001 in response to the need for a homogeneous national reception system, the Italian Protection Service to Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) relies on the voluntary participation of municipalities which are called to offer nationally-funded projects of *accoglienza* ('welcoming reception') and 'integration'⁷ to destitute asylum seekers after their provisional stay in 'first reception' or 'emergency' hosting centres (SPRAR, 2017). Despite the stated intention to cast a wide net of *accoglienza* throughout the national territory, the number of SPRAR projects (either shared apartments or small-scale hosting centres) appear to be highly unevenly scattered across Italy, with high concentrations in its Southern regions (Open Migration, 2017; SPRAR, 2017). The concentration of second-line reception units in the South can be partially explained by the proximity to the many first-aid hubs and first

⁷ SPRAR 'integrated' projects (either publicly managed by local authorities or outsourced to the third-sector) are supposed to offer 'person-centred', individualised 'integration support', meaning that the provision of accommodation should be combined with: linguistic-cultural mediation, legal advice, Italian language classes, health care, socio-psychological support and professional training (SPRAR, 2017).

reception centres providing temporary shelter to the migrants rescued in their desperate attempts to cross the Mediterranean. However, more or less transparent economic interests⁸ have also motivated a number of third sector organisations to swiftly convert to the burgeoning ‘*accoglienza* business’, particularly attractive in areas of dramatically high level of unemployment (Malaguti, 2017).

The North East

With the lowest percentage of foreign-born residents (5%), the North East of England has long been commonly represented as a paradigmatic parochial stronghold of the white English working class (Robinson, 1988, p. 190; Nayak, 2003). Its population, however, has also seen the sharpest demographic change, with a +75% increase in the number of registered non-UK born inhabitants since 2001 (National Statistics, 2017), when the region became part of the national asylum dispersal programme. Indeed, the proportion of asylum seekers supported either through Section 95⁹ or the ‘Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme’¹⁰ per capita in this region is the highest in England (personal elaboration of Asylum data vol. 4 Jul-Nov 2017, National Statistics). Narratives of welcome have been vocally championed by city councils and local media. The largest city in the North East, Newcastle upon Tyne has been described as ‘a proud City of Sanctuary’ and arguably best exemplifies the public discourse mobilized around the regional population’s hospitality (Newcastle City of Sanctuary, 2015). As stated on the Newcastle City Council website ‘Newcastle has been welcoming asylum seekers for many years. While those seeking asylum have no choice over where in the UK they are dispersed to, we take great pride in the fact that so many refugees chose to settle here once their claim for asylum is determined’ (Newcastle City Council, 2017). Local discourses of pride have typically hinted at distinct regional traits of openness and solidarity depicted against the image of a wider, less sympathetic, national public.

As the 2017 50th anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King’s visit to Newcastle symbolically

⁸ An increasing number of makeshift social cooperatives and privates providing ‘emergency accommodation’ to asylum seekers have been found to retain for personal profit part of the public funding allocated for migrants’ living expenses (Malaguti, 2017). The widespread infiltration of Italian organised crime into the lucrative network of the national asylum reception system has also been widely documented by judicial investigations - most notably as part of the 2015 *Mafia Capitale* scandal (Nadeau, 2018).

⁹ People awaiting for the refugee claim to processed are entitled to section 95 support (introduced in Section 95 of the 1999 Immigration Act) ‘if they do not have adequate accommodation or enough money to meet living expenses for themselves and any dependents now or within the next 14 days.’ This support can be in the form of housing or basic living expenses (ASAP, 2016).

¹⁰ In partnership with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the UK Government has been relocating Syrian nationals deemed in particularly precarious conditions directly from the refugee camps to UK local authorities willing and able to host them (Home Office, 2017b).

reminded us, however, the North East's 'traditions of tolerance and inclusivity' (Ward, 2017) long predate the institution of asylum dispersal and the pan-European Islamophobic surge. For instance, the 2017 Freedom City commemorative programme has shed new light on the city's honoured history of abolitionist and anti-racist activism (Ward, 2017). Without dismissing the impact of hostile undercurrents, instances of progressive inclusiveness and inter-ethnic solidarity have dotted Tyneside's past over the 19th and 20th century (Carr, 1992; Ward, 2017). The elsewhere strongly racialized and discriminated Irish who fled in mass the devastating 'potato famines' had a strong presence in the conurbation where they found a 'generally hospitable' refuge (Ward, 2017: 133). During the second World War, pockets of British Union of Fascists (BUF) supporters scattered across the North East were largely countered by the action of the anti-fascist population mobilized around local unions and the Communist-controlled National Unemployment Workers' Movement (NUWM), with local women playing a decisive role in anti-war and anti-fascist activism (Ward, 2017, pp. 141 - 142). Women and men of the North East also militated against Francisco Franco's rise over the Spanish Civil War and gave sanctuary to hundreds of Basque children evacuated from war-torn Spain in 1937. In the post-war 'Tyneside and the greater North East continued to be a tough market when it came to organising sustained racist activism' (Ward, 2017, p. 143). It was somewhat in continuity with this regional trend of comparatively widespread tolerance and inclusivity that in the 1960s a number of newspapers and reports praised the seemingly exemplary, peaceful integration of South Shields' Arab sailors (initially predominantly from Yemeni origins, but soon comprising Somali and Pakistani among other nationalities) (Carr, 1992; Ward, 2017, p. 135). 'The Arabs' had long been an integral part of the local shipping industry, engaged with inter-marriage with the white British population and gradually earned a reputation 'for hard work, honesty, generosity and affability' which closely resonated with the Geordie working-class culture (Carr, 1992: 144; Ward, 2017: 135).

When, on 13th November 1967, Dr Martin Luther King was awarded an honorary degree at Newcastle University, he was welcomed by a city shaped by a vibrant history of resistance and tolerance whose legacy has not yet faded. However, as both Barry Carr and Brian Ward do not fail to emphasise in their historical analyses, the North East past (and present) has been far from untouched by xenophobic undercurrents and racial conflict exacerbated in times of depression and underemployment. In the first half of 20th century local law courts were repeatedly found overtly racially biased (Ward, 2017: 137). The same South Shields Muslims' relative harmonious settlement on the coast which was so proudly showcased in the 1960s had been gradually negotiated with their English working-class neighbourhoods over decades of

violent tensions and discrimination (Carr, 1992). It would be incorrect, however, to completely silence the dominant narrative that - '[f]orged in the 18th and 19th centuries' and 'etched into the popular imagination by a steady stream of feel-good stories' – has presented Tyneside as 'a bastion of unusually good interfaith, interethnic and interracial relations' (Ward, 2017: 134). As Ward compellingly argues:

The region's cultures of welcome really did exist, not as some kind of preternatural indigenous form of racial tolerance, but as a historic process in which enough people in the region, whether inspired by faith, philosophy, education, self-interest or political ideology were willing to mobilise against the scaremongering and stereotyping that underpinned racial prejudice, discrimination and violence. (2017: 143)

While romanticizing the history of the North East would mean to erase fundamental, if painful, chapters of its collective memory, failing to recognise the many instances of collective mobilization in acts of resistance and solidarity would be equally flawed.

The North East socio-economic marginalization represents much more than the historical backdrop to the 'UK's jobless hotspot' (NorthernEcho, 2017) scoring the highest unemployment rate in the country (5.2%). The region's past of chronic manufacturing crises over the course of the 20th century culminated with the 1980s terminal decline of its traditional industries suffocated by the British government's aggressive economic restructuring of the country. The abrupt de-industrialization and its devastating consequences on the region's working and living conditions are still inscribed in the urban landscape of its cities just as much as in the collective memory of the North East (Robinson, 1988; Nettle, 2015). In the preface to their book 'by Geordies, about Geordies' (Colls and Lancaster, 1992:i) Colls and Lancaster write '[t]he "North-East is essentially a state of mind to do with historical feelings about itself.' (Ibid. xii) The distinct local sense of belonging, many have observed, has been constructed 'against the centralised nation-state and its absolutist claims' (Colls and Lancaster, 1992: xii) and has been related to a certain regional pride and patriotism (Robinson, 1988; Nayak, 2003). The local ethos, so strictly linked to the North East working class culture, however, should not be reduced to a certain inward-looking, self-conserving disposition, but also recognised as embedded in a long tradition of cross-ethnic class solidarity historically catalysed by the local unions (Ward, 2017).

Sicily

With its unique geographical position, the Italian region of Sicily is simultaneously at the centre of the Mediterranean and the southernmost periphery of Europe (Karagoz and

Summerfield, 2015). Sicily's past and present have been marked by sustained outward and inward mobility which has given the island a distinctive character of cross-cultural contamination and identitarian hybridity (Licciardello and Damigella, 2011; Karagoz and Summerfield, 2015:2).

Since its political annexation to Italy, Sicily has been characterised (and still is) by subsequent waves of mass emigration, most notably to the French Protectorate of Tunisia (where in the 1920s some 97000 Italians had resettled under the French colonial rule), the country's wealthier North and abroad (Giglioli, 2017a, 2017b; Andall, 2011). In the post war, Italy's own impoverished southern emigrants, and many Sicilians among them, provided the exploitable reservoir of cheap workforce necessary to restore their depressed economy (Lombardi-Diop, 2011b) – the same role that overseas colonies covered for other European countries, firstly the UK (Fassin, 2015; Hall, King and Finlay, 2017:1315-6). A stronghold of Magna Graecia in the ancient world, Sicily was an Arab Emirate between 827 until 902 A.D. before falling under Norman rule in 1061. Its rich ancient and Medieval history and subsequent domination of Angevin, Aragon, Bourbon dynasties - before the region's unification to the nascent Italy in 1860 - have sedimented in stratified 'cultural and material legacies' which have long coexisted in 'multiple religious, linguistic, and literary traditions' (Karagoz and Summerfield, 2015, p. 5). Emblematic of the far-reaching power unbalances between the Italian North and the *Meridione*, the island's political annexation to the Italian kingdom collided with the discursive construction of the 'Southern issue' (*la Questione Meridionale*) whereby 'Italy's South, from being an object of study and an historical formation, was transformed [by political thinkers, state bureaucrats and members of Parliament] into a conceptual, monolithic entity described as ahistorical, morally corrupt and devoid of complexities and diversities' (Schneider, 1998; Schneider and Schneider, 2005; Lombardi-Diop, 2011a). The economic and social interventions which followed the Unification of Italy took the character of a grand civilizing mission aiming to address the essentialized and racialized opposition between 'North versus South, advanced industrial versus backward agrarian, well-governed "civic" versus clientelistic' (Schneider, 1998, p. 3). Fundamentally, in what Jane Schneider branded the Italian 'neo-Orientalist discourse' (1998, p. 8), the trope of the primitive, irrational, racially inferior South provided the essential 'Other' against which the myth of a civilized, 'modern' national identity could be forged (Gribaudo, 1997, pp. 83-84).

Insightful re-readings of Italy's pervasive moral and symbolic geographies have been recently

revisited to encompass ‘emigration, the Southern Question, and immigration as phenomena closely intertwined with the postcolonial condition’ (Lombardi-Diop, 2011:2; Giglioli, 2017a, 2017b). Complicating the scales of othering and belonging, Giglioli (2017) reflects on how Sicily was discursively constructed as part of Italy mainly through its sustained relationship and comparison with Tunisia, whereas the institutionalisation of the EU southern border – embodied by the island’s coastline since 1997 – has prompted islanders’ identification with Europe. At the mirror with their own past (and present) of stigmatisation and mobility, Sicilians are currently hosting the highest percentage of asylum seekers in receipt of statutory accommodation per number of Italian residents (Open Migration, 2017). A certain Southern pride and sense of moral righteousness have often emerged from local accounts of openness and hospitality towards ‘boat migrants’ depicted in contrast with the wealthier Northern Italian and European selfish refusal to offer refuge (Cole, 1997:131-2; Giglioli, 2017b:420-1).

Narratives of Italian southerners’ generosity and hospitality abound in Sicily’s self- and external representations. For instance, referring to the anecdotal good-spirit of the Southern islanders, a report on asylum seekers’ reception in Sicily published by the Jesuit Refugee Service holds that ‘the attitude of the Sicilian people is obviously a key factor in determining the wellbeing of the migrants on the island. There is no doubt that Sicilians display concrete solidarity towards those who arrive to their shores: daily gestures by individuals, NGOs and communities bear witness to their compassion’ (Jesuit Refugee Service, 2014) . The reportedly ‘extraordinary’ hospitality of Sicily and of its highly mediatic border-island of Lampedusa in particular has not failed to trigger academic attention. Most remarkably, in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, a number of Lampedusans opened their doors to and offered to feed the rapidly increasing number of young Tunisians arrived to their shores only to find a complete institutional vacuum (Bartoli, 2012; Orsini, 2015). For more than three months no statutory reception facilities were provided and by March 2011 undocumented Tunisian migrants had outnumbered the islanders. The unbearable conditions on the tiny island – aggravated by threats of extra-judiciary mass deportations of Tunisians and the highly deficient institutional response – fuelled tensions between migrants, islanders and the police which escalated over the course of the summer. The dramatic circumstances, however, did not prevent most Lampedusans to lucidly and vocally identify the Italian Government as the first and only responsible for the so-called ‘Tunisian crisis’ (Bartoli, 2012) while sympathising with the stranded migrants, fellow victims of the negligent state (Maggiore, 2012). In their socio-historical reconstruction of Lampedusa's local *ethos* of hospitality, a number of scholars have interpreted the islanders' ‘exceptional’ acts of solidarity as sedimented relicts of what for

generations had constituted the distinctive character of the island's close-knit 'community' - now severely endangered by the institutionalization of border patrolling (Friese, 2010, 2012; Bartoli, 2012), and the profit-oriented logic introduced by the tourism industry (Orsini, 2015). In this view, islanders' solidarity towards migrants should be retraced to fishermen's ancient 'ethics of the sea' (Orsini, 2015) and 'their unquestioned practice of human solidarity, which asks to rescue people from life-threatening danger' whoever they might be (Friese, 2010: 332, Bartoli, 2012). Countless fishermen have indeed distinguished themselves for rescuing shipwrecked migrants at the shores of Lampedusa, Sicily, Apulia, urging the Italian government to harshly sanction and criminalise these acts of unsolicited solidarity as complicit in illegal migration (Albahari, 2006, 2013; Friese, 2010, 2012; Orsini, 2015). In 2004 Lampedusans' hospitality 'which went far beyond legal obligations' was decorated with the Gold Medal for civil merit by the President of the Italian Republic (Cutitta, 2014:214). The idiom of Sicily's distinctive solidarity has also been echoed by the Mayor of Palermo Leoluca Orlando who, in his 2015 launch speech of the International Human Mobility Charter of Palermo at Goldsmith University optimistically affirmed that 'you will never hear of racial assault in our region' (REF). The front-line role of Sicily in the reception of migrants has also been formally celebrated in July 2017 when the Home Office Minister Marco Minniti and the European Parliament's ex-president Martin Schulz visited a reception centre for foreign unaccompanied minors and the Coastal Guard in the harbour Sicilian city of Catania. Minniti publicly thanked the city of Catania - from the 1980s home to some of the highest numbers of migrants in the region (Licciardello and Damigella, 2011) - and Sicilians more generally for their 'extraordinary' work in providing a warm welcoming and humane reception to incoming migrants (*Blogsicilia*, 2017).

Looking beyond its constitutive discursive dimension, Sicily's cross-cultural tradition and historical subalternity cannot, however, be assumed to consistently inform the islanders' relationship with new forms of diversity and inward mobility. Narratives and practices of migrants' settlement in Sicily - cross-road of multidirectional migrant trajectories and marked by its vivid memory of marginalisation - uncover fundamental questions about integration of 'difference' (whether from national 'peripheries' or other countries) and shifting forms of belonging (Giglioli, 2017b: 409) which trouble univocal readings of migrants' and citizens' encounters at the many symbolic margins of Europe. In his ethnographic study of working-class Palermitans' responses to immigration, Jeffrey Cole reflects on how, 'within specific cultural and socio-economic contexts', people in Palermo employ an array of ideologies to situate themselves with regard to immigration and Italian society. [...] Working people rail at

their oppressors in bureaucratic Rome and the rich north [...]. The confluence of class and southern identity leads working people to see their African and Asian neighbors as merely additional proof of the injustice of the system.

Despite their fears of competing with Africans and Asians for work, few working people express “working-class racism”. In other words, few assert white superiority, denigrate immigrants, or blame them for the countless ills and indignities suffered by the poor and unemployed in Palermo. At the same time, exaggerated descriptions of the effect of immigrant employment and a deep-seated reluctance to see current immigration as the equal of Sicilian emigration belie a sense of European superiority (1997: 131-2).

The convergence of political and public ideologies, local idioms of diversity and belonging, personal and collective experiences provide rich repertoires for contextual meaning-making vis-à-vis ‘the Other’ (Giudici, 2014; Zigon, 2015; Lamont *et al.*, 2016; Rogozen-Soltar, 2016). Possible axes of identification (e.g. common migration or stigmatisation experience; same place of residency, worship or work; shared condition of young/mature man, woman, parent, or simply human being) have been found to be situationally and inconsistently activated in morally and emotionally laden processes of boundary making (Cole, 1997; Rogozen-Soltar, 2016; Cangià, 2017). Within the same context and the varied range of available discourses and social memories can be selectively deployed to construct essentialized and racialized categories of people and distance themselves from derogative characterisations projected on ‘the Other’ (Sayer, 2010; Rogozen-Soltar, 2016). Important discrepancies may also occur between the same subject’s verbal reasoning and their same daily practices and non-verbal attitudes. For instance, seemingly dismantling the rose-painted image of Sicily’s warm hospitality towards migrants, Licciardello and Damigella report that in Catania ‘[c]ontact with local people is superficial and suffers from prejudice, distrust, ignorance and fear’ (2011: 150). The growing popularity of far-right, anti-immigration parties such Forza Nuova and, although to a much lesser extent, Casa Pound is also a clear indicator of strongly contrasting feelings about migration and diversity.

Sicily’s startling economic conditions, reminiscent of the region’s historical institutional marginalisation and recently exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis and consequent austerity counter-measures, result in a highly fragile labour market, poor infrastructures and chronic socio-economic instability for settled residents and newly arrived migrants alike. Sicily is the Italian region with the highest risk of poverty and, after the neighbouring Calabria, claims the second highest unemployment rate in the country (Istat, 2017), almost

three times as high as the European average (*Giornale Di Sicilia*, 2017). The protracted situation of economic stagnation can be variously attributed to myopic or insufficient national plans of regional development, political mismanagement and widespread corruption, mis-use of national and European funds as well as to an endemic institutional mistrust and established underground economy (Schneider, 1998; Schneider and Schneider, 2005). Under such complex circumstances, a growing number of local subjects from different backgrounds are pushed to the margins of the society revitalising narratives of social injustice and forms of subaltern solidarity, while fueling frictions among differently situated and perceived 'social outcasts'. Just like in the North East, history of welcome and history of marginalization are strictly intertwined, as part one the same complex past and lived memory of the two regions.

Comparative ethnography: some methodological reflections

Having set out the contextual embedding of my comparative framework, I now move on to consider the methodological challenges and opportunities offered by comparative ethnography. Interestingly, comparative ethnography has long been seen as impossible and inevitable at once. For too long the legitimacy of cross-site comparative ethnography has been questioned as building on shaky epistemological grounds, while ethnographers have never stopped drawing comparisons since the very inception of the ethnographic tradition (Candea, 2018). In this session, I briefly outline the contours of this methodological debate and consider how ethnographers can (and do!) productively turn centennial epistemological unrest into sharper methodological awareness. In reflecting on my own ethnographic comparison, I approach these issues by first examining three, compelling comparative ethnographies which, I believe, well illustrate how differently the comparative approach has been interpreted and applied in contemporary ethnography, leading way to a broader methodological reflection. While covering a variety of topics, ranging from migrants' livelihoods in segregated US neighbourhoods to technologies of birth in Japan, ultimately the three ethnographies all tell us something about (moral) meaning-making across difference, questioning critically the meanings and relevance of "cultures" – whether migrant, national, religious or class culture/s and their many intersections. For each one of Dohan, Parvez and Ivry's works, I first schematically describe their theoretical backbone, the comparative logic and methods adopted. I then briefly discuss these three works highlighting how their different methodological choices trace back to deeper divergencies at the core of the debate on comparative ethnography and the nature of social research itself. I will finally attempt to take stock of these insights to outline my own comparative ethnographic approach.

Daniel Dohan's comparative ethnography is set up to expand our understanding of immigrant-native differential participation into US urban labour markets.

Theory. Dissatisfied with existing theories accounting for migrants' stronger labour-force attachment, Dohan takes to task three competing explanatory frameworks and tests them against his own findings. The "Guadalupe" and "Chavez" Mexican-American barrios within the California cities of San Jose' and Los Angeles respectively are the selected field sites to question the impact of a) differential access to job opportunities and practical resources necessary for job keeping (*structural-economic perspective*); b) different work ethos, the migrant population supposedly having a stronger work culture compared to natives' 'oppositional culture' which disdains the belittled social prestige attached to low-wage work (*cultural perspective*); c) differences in the range of income-generating activities which are locally available and the differential social value attached to them (what Dohan somewhat confusingly labels the '*institutional perspective*') (Dohan, 2002, pp. 178 – 182).

Comparative logic. Dohan's units of comparison are two low-income neighbourhoods of two distinct cities. "Guadalupe" is a *barrio* of 'barrack-like apartment complexes' and 'makeshift accommodations' whose residents are mainly newly arrived Mexican migrants (p. 182). By contrast, most residents of "Chavez" are US-born citizens of Mexican background. The spatial unit of this second field-site is given by the physical delimitations of a 'medium-sized public housing development' (p. 183). Dohan integrates census data on employment rates in the two neighbourhoods with aggregate data from his fieldwork which allow him to differentiate between income earners (whether through formal, informal, illicit occupation or through welfare aid), job holders and the formally employed. Being Guadalupe residents (mostly recent migrants) significantly more likely to be job holders than citizens living in Chavez, the two barrios, with their contrasting demographic composition coupled with divergent labour patterns, offer a somewhat natural casing for Dohan's comparative project.

Methods. Dohan's fieldwork consisted of 10 consecutive months of participant observation as volunteer English teacher and informal befriender in Guadalupe and 12 months in Chavez, with four-month break between the two. In both places, he spent a considerable amount of time with few core participants and their families sharing daily activities both inside and outside their households. Data on income-generating activities were also extensively collected with 'as many residents as possible through observation and conversation' (p. 185).

By looking at different forms of Muslim minority politics in France and India, Faren Parvez's 'global ethnography' aptly problematizes 'the meaning and effectiveness of secularism' in the post-9/11 era (Parvez, 2017, p. 6).

Theory. The choice of the comparative framework (across countries and classes) follows Parvez's engagement with the existing literature around the politicization of religious practice. In a nutshell her argument goes like this. In the wake of the War on Terror, much public debate and lay publications have taken issue with Islam, often portrayed as a homogeneous, 'inherently political and potentially violent' doctrine (p. 15). Academic literature has challenged this static and essentializing perspective, although most scholars have failed to acknowledge class differences as well as different Islamic movements' distinct aims (p. 15). Finally, Parvez criticizes studies which do look at class inequalities and/or cultural effects of global forces (e.g. macro-economic shifts, transnational migration), but that offer a deterministic view of such changes – as Parvez's own ethnography shows, the rolling back of state welfare does not necessarily lead to Muslim community politics, just as sustained social marginalisation does not always translate into new forms of Muslim fundamentalism (p. 15). The comparative matrix Parvez creates allows to debunk these theories and advance an alternative explanation: what really influences different forms of political engagement is not merely class positioning, but rather the contextual interplay between middle and lower classes within the Muslim community. These class relationships are in turn molded by different national models of secularism, that is the degree of recognition and liberty that religious minorities enjoy in the public arena.

Comparative logic. In discussing her comparative framework, Parvez outlines the main (many!) differences between France and India – two apparently opposite secular countries which, however, have both been the scenarios of 'a similar crisis of secularism' in relation to their longstanding Muslim minorities (p. 6). In the two countries, widespread discrimination and violence towards the racialized Muslim population; the growth of Islam revival movements; public allegations of religious sectarianism; and the dramatic terrorist attacks carried out by Muslim subjects provide the common ground against which different minorities' claims and experiences can be productively compared. With some of the highest Muslim presence in the respective countries, the two cities of Lyon and Hyderabad are then selected for their increased Islamic participation. Parvez's selected field sites further break down into four sub-fields. In a cross-class design, in each city she places herself in both a middle-class area and a stigmatised neighbourhood to explore divergent, yet highly interrelated, claims and practices.

Methods. Parvez carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Lyon and Hyderabad travelling back and forth over the course of 10 years (2004 – 2014), for a total of 2 years spent in the two cities. She conducted extensive participant observation coupled with about 20 in-depth

interviews in each city. In the book's methodological appendix, Parvez helpfully points to the technical and epistemological challenges posed by cross-language research and how, being herself a foreign speaker in both French and Urdu, this inevitably affected her positionality in the field. Crucially, the very definition of her analytical categories, such as 'class' and 'religiosity', had to take into account substantial differences in meanings across and within the two national contexts. Parvez also acknowledges the limitations posed by the breath-depth trade-off inherent in the comparative design and adds: '[t]his was not always an analytic strategy, but sometimes resulted from my subjects' real constraints and my own weaknesses. There were many moments when I wanted to (or did) run from the combination of responsibility and intimacy that any deep relationship requires' (p. 203).

In *Embodying culture*, Tsipy Ivry explores the 'social path' of pregnancy as it is constructed and experienced in Japan and Israel (Ivry, 2010, p. 22).

Theory. At the off-set, Ivry's comparative structuring is minimal. Her theoretical pillar is Jordan's conceptualisation of 'authoritative knowledge', defined as 'the knowledge that within a community is considered legitimate, consequential, official, worthy of discussion and appropriate for justifying particular actions [...]' (Jordan, 1997, p. 58 in Ivry, 2010, p. 10). Being authoritative knowledge 'always locally produced and displayed', Ivry puts side by side 'two local versions of authoritative knowledge about pregnancy' (Ivry, 2010, p. 10). The cultural comparison Ivry crafts, takes issue with the global trend of birth technological medicalisation and the related circulation of medical regimes of truths. By questioning the overarching and supposedly standardised power of biotechnology (at the core of much anthropology of reproduction), her ethnographies show the central role played by 'ethnotheories' (p. 19) in shaping practices and meanings around medicalised pregnancy (p. 263).

Comparative logic. Borrowing from the work of comparative historians (Skocpol and Somers, 1980), Ivry adopts a 'contrast-oriented' comparison model. In line with the model's predicaments, she is careful not to turn the Japanese and Israeli societies, that is two 'wholes', into opposite straw-manned cases, but rather presents two distinct, if inextricably intertwined, ethnographies. Stark historical, governmental, demographic differences across the two settings emerge on the backdrop of similar national systems of healthcare insurance, high birth medicalisation, and industrialisation rates. In order to engage with such macro differences, Ivry's cultural comparison inductively proceeds from two types of empirical differences: how same practices (e.g. a routine ob-gyn visits) are conducted and experienced on the ground in Israel and Japan and the differential importance attributed to certain medical

theories over others in the two settings. Such empirical differences serve as analytical ‘stimuli’ she gradually traces back to distinct ‘socio-cultural perceptions of the body, the self, and social relations within their local political settings’ (p.12).

Methods. Across the two field-sites, data was gathered from more than 100 in-depth interviews and extensive participant observation at multiple sites. Fieldwork in Japan was conducted during 4 visits over 9 years (1996-2007) for a total of 9 non-consecutive months of fieldwork. Over the same years, Ivry conducted fieldwork in Israel (where she was living) through weekly activities, alongside routine work commitments. Written and phone conversations with her research participants in Japan complemented her data. ‘Each of these different fieldwork trajectories [...] shaped the data that emerge from each site’ (p. 22).

The studies above represent three distinct examples of how ethnographic comparison can be differently carried out and employed in relation to theory. In this sense, Dohan and Ivry’s works can be placed at the two opposite ends of a hypothetical spectrum ranging between a deductive, explanatory approach and an inductive, exploratory one. In the methodological discussion of his book, Dohan makes for an interesting argument. Methodological rigour in casing multiple field-sites (firstly relying on official statistics), collecting data following the overarching sampling rationale and presenting findings as liable to the researcher’s biases he argues are necessary steps not only to ‘developing and testing social theory’, but also for creating a methodological common-ground for ‘the social scientific community’ (2003, p. 247).

Ivry’s methodological discussion, by contrast, explains precisely how the comparative framework of her work developed not from preliminary theoretical casing, but from her own ‘multi-sited’ positionality as researcher and pregnant woman shuttling back and forth between Israel and Japan. The salient points of convergence and divergence emerge from alternate empirical observations in the two sites. As Ivry takes her reader “behind the scenes” of the art and craft of grounded ethnography, she shows how her analytical comparative framework has gradually built up in an inductive, open-ended process. The anthropological theories she critically engages with are not dissected into somewhat measurable variables to control for as in Dohan’s study, but are holistically discussed from two distinct, thickly contextualized standpoints. Quite opposite to Dohan’s ultimate goal to offer ‘universal insights’ into urban poverty through ‘comparison’ and ‘replication’ (Dohan, 2003, p. 247), Ivry’s only “universal” message is - culture matters.

Unlike in the other two works, the *genesis* of Parvez’s comparative (cross-nationally) and

multi-sited (cross-class) ethnography is not explicitly discussed in her book. In the methodological appendix she briefly explains – ‘The research for this book was informed by the ideal of reflexive ethnography and the extended case method: I relied on dialogue with participants and observations across space and time that *revealed connections* between processes of *everyday* religious revival and *macro-level* forces of state and economy. I used these dialogues and observations to extend theories about the politicization of religious practice’ (2017, p. 193, emphasis added). Her phrasing suggests that the empirical data directed her attention to the working of political and economic super- structures (i.e. state governmentalities, class relationships), allowing her to contribute to existing theories in a bottom-up, micro-to-macro movement. And yet, the very casing matrix of her comparative framework belies a carefully structured research design aimed at comparing cross-class relations embedded in two disparate national secular paradigms. Of course, researchers will always enter ‘the field’ with an understanding of the relevant existing literature and there is no such thing as a theory-blind ethnographer, however ‘inductive’ their approach might be. This is particularly true in the case of comparative research which, even in its simplest structuring, requires ‘a minimal amount of reflexivity concerning how one gathers these data and the categories used for description and analysis’ (Sallaz, 2008, p. 7). However, in Parvez’s ethnography, an explicit account of the conceptual genealogy of her casing would help rule out the allegation of ‘locking’ her analysis into pre-determined ‘theoretical frameworks at the moment of case selection’ – one of the main criticisms of extended-case- method research (Gong, 2018, p. 2; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

What we are left with is thus a daunting series of binaries – pre-determined casing vs open-ended comparison, theory testing vs theory building, explanation vs interpretation, cultural repertoires vs socio-economic structures, micro vs macro. In the next section, I try to unpack what lies beneath these stark differences and how one might find their way around them.

Clearing the way to ethnographic comparison: the ontological and epistemological challenge

The more one delves into ethnographic comparison, the more the enterprise seems insidious. In the discipline of anthropology which has made ethnography and cultural comparison its hallmark methodology, epistemological dilemmas around the possibility and feasibility of explicit, cross-sites comparison have long been a battlefield (Candea, 2018). Leaving aside the development of subsequent paradigmatic shifts and related methodological sensitivities

(see Candea 2018), boiled down to its barest form, the methodological debate¹¹ revolves around the questions: are ethnography and lateral comparison mutually exclusive endeavours? How can context-specific phenomena be abstracted and translated to work, as comparative references, into a different socio-cultural setting? How can we extract commensurable units of comparison out of the inherent complexity of social life?

First off, if one wants to embark into explicitly comparative ethnography, its very legitimacy needs to be restored. While the power of ethnography lies in its immersive flexibility uniquely apt to capture contextual and subjective meanings and practices, the comparative framework requires some sorts of abstracted, de-contextualised backbone against which similarities and differences can be observed. In a strongly constructivist tradition, this operation has been charged of ‘naïve positivism’ arbitrarily reducing what is subjective and context-specific to commensurable terms of comparison. Writing from an interpretivist-constructivist standpoint, however, Lambek and Strathern (1998) debunk this ontological impasse making for two important arguments.

First, *incommensurability* and *incomparability* are not equivalent. We may accept that two distinct fields are incommensurable as ‘there is no neutral universal framework, no objectivist language into which alternative theories, paradigms, or cultures could be set side by side, point by point’ (1998, p. 21). But rather than ruling out any possibility for comparison, ‘it is the very incommensurability of the constructs and concepts that makes the comparison interesting, requiring ingenuity in the carrying out and producing unexpected outcomes. [...] Comparison is not a matter of standing back and coolly observing but wading in and putting the concepts derived in one study to work in another’ (1998, p. 24).

Their second, fundamental point spells out the very premise of the anthropological project. Whether or not neat correspondences can be identified between two fields, the researcher’s academic language with its shared conceptual apparatus and terminology invariably provides a third term of comparison and the analytical common ground through which idiosyncratic elements can be translated and interpreted. In other words, in cross-field comparative ethnography there is no such thing as a ‘simply binary comparison’, but an ongoing ‘process of triangulation’ (Lambek and Strathern, 1998, p. 23) through which the virtually incommensurable can become comparable.

¹¹ Here I am referring to the methodological debate within the anthropological, interpretivist tradition which aligns with my personal orientation.

As we steer away from the threats of incommensurability, another thorny issue comes on the way. If we accept that ethnographic comparison across contexts is, at least on paper, a legitimate epistemological device, how should we construct our ethnographic units of analysis in order to make the comparison meaningful? Lambek and Strathern edited volume pursues what can be called a ‘weak’ form of comparativism whereby independent ethnographic accounts on the idea of ‘body’ are juxtaposed and put in dialogue *post-hoc*. In its stronger, explicit form, however, comparative ethnography has been called to reflect on the arbitrary construction of comparative units of analysis by questioning the ontological assumptions underpinning the making of the ethnographic object of study (Desmond, 2014, Candea, 2009). In what follows I draw on Desmond’s controversial plea for relational ethnography to reflect on interlocked epistemological and theoretical issues.

Processes and not products

Desmond compellingly argues that ethnographers too often select seemingly bounded groups or sites as their privileged units of analysis. What he calls ‘substantialist’ units, however, are nothing but arbitrary analytical constructs which present their empirical referents as internally homogeneous and static entities somehow discernible from the continuum of social reality (Desmond, 2014, p. 548). In his view, the risk posed by this substantialist perspective is twofold. On one side, ethnographic accounts tend to reify essentializing views about groups or places which are in fact ‘inseparable from their transactional contexts’ (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 287 quoted in Desmond, 2014, p. 551); on the other, due to their transient and dynamic nature, fundamental inter-connections and struggles between actors and organizations risk go unnoticed.

Endorsing the multi-sited ethnography basic tenet of following people and relations (Marcus 1998), Desmond posits that ethnographers should rather concern themselves with ‘systems of relations’ across a given field (Desmond, 2014, pp. 554). This implies that ‘one must, at minimum, study multiple actors and agencies who are *engaged with one another* (because they belong to the same field and are participants in the struggles that defines its stakes) *and dissimilar from one another* (because they occupy objectively different positions within that field)’ (Desmond, 2014, pp. 554, 555, emphasis in original). Instead of bounded units, ‘points of contact and conflict’, the ‘production of coordinated action’ and ‘the ecology of a field’ emerge as empirically relevant ethnographic objects (Desmond, 2014, p. 557).

Desmond’s remarks are certainly valuable to reflect on the implications of analytical casing. As with transnational and multi-sited ethnography’s proponents before him (Vertovec, 2004;

Falzon, 2009), the explicit focus on connections and mobility has significantly expanded the ‘research imaginary’ (Candea, 2007, p. 169) in the attempt to reduce the mismatch between the empirical and the conceptual. Yet, despite Desmond’s fierce critique of bounded field sites and ‘substantialist’ units of analysis, it remains unclear how ethnographers should avoid:

a) the (arbitrary) selection of somewhat delimited field sites. As Candea points out with regards to multi-sited research, what relational ethnography cannot prevent but might mask are the ‘processes of bounding, selection, and choice - processes which any ethnographer has to undergo to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account’ (Candea, 2007, p. 169);

b) analytical categories which, by grouping together a plurality of social entities sharing a certain trait, social position, interest etc. conceptually reduce the complexity and heterogeneity of their empirical constituents. If we look at the examples of relational ethnographies Desmond provides (2014, p. 560), one might argue that taking as ethnographic object the relationships between ‘local bureaucrats and poor people (Gupta 2012), East and West Germans (Glaeser 2000), hospital managers and their employees (Kellogg 2009), tenants and landlords (Desmond forthcoming)’ builds on, rather than breaks with, substantialist categories variously defined by social or geographical attributes. After all, giving up on categorization as a cognitive short-cut would mean giving up on processing of simplification and ordering which make meaning-making possible (Cabot, 2016, p. 651).

While I agree there is much to gain in engaging with relations and processes, on the conceptual level we can (and in fact always do) carve out bounded analytical units which may refer to clear-cut locales as much as relationships or processes – a point I will return to in relation to my own comparative ethnography.

For a relational comparison

The reflexive production of ethnographic units of analysis has particularly important implications for comparative ethnography (Candea, 2018). Desmond argues that relational ethnography ‘is not propelled by the logic of comparison [...]. It does not seek to understand if a certain group or community is peculiar vis-à-vis their counterparts in other contexts. It often does not seek to understand if a certain group is anything at all’ (2014, p. 554). The ethnographer is especially critical of the ‘theoretically strategic’ selection of comparative ‘cases’ as these feature in Burawoy’s formulation of the Extended Case Method (Desmond, 2014, p. 555). Desmond sees the construction of the ethnographic object as a process

grounded in the gradual empirical exploration of relational configurations. By contrast, as in Dohan's and Parvez's works reviewed before, the Extended Case Method builds on theoretical premises which guide the construction of theoretically relevant units of analysis.

Quite rightly, Desmond argues that the ECM 'structural ethnographies' (Burawoy, 2017, p. 261) invariably 'tend to pitch their study as a "case" of some macro force, viewing groups and places as receptacles of large-scale processes. [...] The micro field setting is "determined" by macro-historical forces (Burawoy 1991), and the ethnographer's task is to observe how people "respond" to those forces' (Desmond, 2014, p. 553). If the ECM is criticised for fostering top-down, structural determinism, Burawoy argues back that Desmond's ethnographic project is 'locked in the field' contenting himself with a flat interpretation of contingent interactions artificially separated from the broader socio-economic forces that impinge on them (Burawoy, 2017, p. 263 footnote; Gong, 2018).

What is at stake is nothing less than a (heart-felt) intellectual dispute over the preeminence of the empirical (Desmond) *versus* the preeminence of theory (Burawoy) in the set-up of ethnographic research. Far from new, the discussion follows on the methodological debate which sees Grounded Theory (GT) and the Extended Case Method as 'two epistemologically competing perspectives' each favouring a certain set of theories – neo-Marxist grand theories with ECM and interpretative micro- or meso-theories with GT (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009, p. 243). The discomfort with the comparative logic that Desmond (as the proponent of a specific type of GT) voices out should then be understood as stemming from interlocked epistemological and theoretical questions.

At a closer look, however, relational vs comparative ethnography appears as a false dichotomy. By taking the ECM as his main counter-reference, Desmond's dismissal of comparativism risks conflating comparative ethnography and structural ethnography – a specific genre of ethnographic comparison whose epistemological foundation lies in theoretical casing. Desmond also seems to reduce the analytical power of ethnographic comparison to a compare-and-contrast exercise functional to deductive theory testing (as in much ECM ethnography), or, on the contrary, aiming at eliciting contextual peculiarity against some common phenomena (Desmond, 2014, p. 554).

If anything can be learnt from the eclectic history of anthropological comparativisms, however, is precisely that the comparative framework has long been put to work for a plurality of (often contrasting) purposes, using a variety of methods (Candea, 2018). As in

Ivry's work, the very epistemological pillars of reflexive ethnography and grounded theory can thus be combined and in fact strengthened by iterative comparison between two or more field-sites. In a way, comparative ethnography is the product of the same relational focus which Desmond applies to the empirical research but scaled-up to inform a relational analysis across different contexts. Finally, depending on one's focus and purposes, the comparative logic may be deployed not as a ladder to abstract, macro generalisations, but rather as a powerful analytical tool to be used on the micro and meso level of analysis, allowing constitutive elements of the phenomenon under study to be reciprocally illuminated in an on-going process of cross-contamination between the fields (Gallo, 2009; Ivry, 2010).

Making my own comparative ethnography: researching situated moral reasoning across contexts

Building on the methodological insights summarised above, I have come to conceive of my project as a relational comparative ethnography. As I shall explain in some depth in the remaining of this chapter, the minimal comparative structure that gradually gave shape to my empirical observations has meant that the ethnographic fieldworks that I carried out in Newcastle and Catania have been in many respects two distinct, highly heterogeneous experiences. If the present ethnography is thus the outcome of two, partly independent, fieldworks, I have selectively drawn on the material collected to produce a single ethnography of asylum seekers' moral reasoning across contexts – the overarching object of study that binds together the whole project. In these terms, I suggest that my inductive comparative study, while drawing much on Ivry's grounded ethnographic work, cannot be considered a case of two distinct, if inextricably intertwined ethnographies of national socio-cultural and political apparatuses, but a single one where the two field contexts emerge through the lens of asylum seekers' moral gaze and are investigated in light of this engagement.

Let me now expand on the strategies of field 'bounding' (Candea, 2007) or ethnographic sampling (Burgess, 1982) that I have adopted to turn this bundle of intersubjective, institutional, and spatial relations into 'researchable' and effectively comparable units of analysis.

If the research's ethnographic approach allowed certain flexibility in the shaping of my fieldwork, as it is normally the case, some limits were set at its very inception. To begin with, I was given a maximum of 12 months to conduct data collection in both contexts. Having to move between two countries, however easily connected, further increased the time pressure

and my analytical anxiety, conscious as I was of the well-known challenge ‘of finding a good balance between depth and breadth’ in transnational research (Mazzucato, 2006, p. 215). Hard choices had to be made to circumscribe the remits of my presence in the field, keeping in mind the possibilities and constraints that such decisions in Newcastle would have on my subsequent fieldwork in Catania. As Burgess puts it, ‘[f]ield researchers need to consider where to observe, when to observe, whom to observe and what to observe’ (Burgess, 1982, p. 115) – four dimensions of ethnographic sampling that I now move on to briefly discuss in turns.

Where. Driven by a strong interest in the intersection between Europe’s uneven social geographies and asylum seekers’ scattered reception across ‘centres’ and more often ‘peripheries’, the North East of England and Sicily in the Italian South were identified as suitable contexts for comparison. As others have pointed out, there is an almost inescapable element of arbitrariness in choosing two or more units for comparison among the virtually infinite possible combinations (Candea, 2007; Boccagni, 2016). In my case, different pairings of European sub-national contexts would likely lead to equally productive comparisons. The North East and Sicily, however, were favoured based on both theoretical and opportunistic criteria - not least my language skills. With this selection, I could also benefit from my supervisors’ existing contacts and extensive experience in the two settings.

While I consider the regional histories and socio-economic landscapes (outlined in the first part of the chapter) inseparable from the urban realities of Newcastle and Catania, these (i.e., regions and cities) are not interchangeable and a further choice had to be made on the scale of the analysis I intended to pursue. The time constraints I was operating with and my relative unfamiliarity with the two regional contexts lead me to restrict my analytical and empirical focus to the two urban contexts. I then gradually identified specific sites within each city where I could place myself on a regular basis and carry out participant observation. Charity settings were an obvious (and seemingly easy) option for both cities. By getting involved in asylum-support services I would be able to 1) familiarize myself with the impact of national and local policies affecting asylum seekers in the city; 2) engage with asylum seekers’ mediated interactions (i.e. mediated by the support of charity workers/volunteers often operating as gatekeepers) with local institutions and stakeholders, lawyers, accommodation providers etc.; 3) establish some initial contacts with asylum seekers possibly willing to partake to the research; 4) benefit from the exposure (and participation) to charity workers’ and volunteers’ exchange of information and casual conversations about asylum seekers’

predicaments in the city across the years, being most of them long-term Newcastle/Catania residents. To look beyond organizational spaces in both cities I made sure that I spent time in more informal spaces too, the selection of which was almost entirely relegated to the research participants. As I will discuss in the next section of the chapter, what these informal spaces turned out to be was highly context-specific and participant-dependent. Asylum seekers' shared accommodations, shopping malls, cafes, work premises, specific benches and street segments all offered important sites from which to engage with asylum seekers' everyday social interactions and situated moral reasoning. As my analytical focus sharpened over the course of the months of fieldwork, I tried to be more directive and ask research participants if they were comfortable showing me their housing facilities or hosting arrangements and in/formal workplaces, when appropriate.

When. The fixed time frame of my research did not leave much margin of manoeuvre in terms of 'time sampling' – the 6 months of data collection in Newcastle spanned from the end of summer to deep winter, whereas I could enjoy a brief mild spring in Catania before the arrival of the hot summer which is when most of my second fieldwork took place. While the timing affected the number of activities and thus opportunities for outdoor participant observation during the winter months in England, it is also true for the opposite reason in Catania where the boiling temperatures made it quite hard to spend long hours under the sun. In both cities, despite my efforts, my varied research activities (e.g. volunteering, home visits, shared meals, strolls etc.) defied any fixed schedule, taking place at different times of the day, evening and night – although I cannot recall any meeting, however informal, happening beyond 10 pm. In other words, time sampling was largely opportunistic, but in both contexts, I was able to carry out research activities at all times of the day.

Who. Interested in asylum seekers' everyday life and interactions, I initially cast my net wide. My original grand plan was indeed to integrate the (moral) perspectives of a group of core asylum-seeking participants but also that of several other differently situated local actors (e.g. landlords, friends, colleagues, significant others, neighbours), that is anyone who would emerge as important in the precarious process of settlement of each asylum seeking participant. Needless to say, this was way too ambitious given the resources I had at my disposal and my limited ethnographic experience. Meeting (and chasing up to meet) even a handful of research participants proved more time-consuming than expected and I did not want to turn down opportunities for more extensive participant observation following my core research participants when, for instance, I was invited to day-long gatherings or endless

meals. What was initially an unconscious inclination whereby I tended to make time for asylum-seeking participants but always felt too busy to reach out to others then coalesced into the deliberate choice to foreground asylum seekers' standpoint over other local subjects' perspectives.

My sampling criteria for the people I here refer to as 'core participants' were kept to a minimum and concerned social actors' asylum experience. Any adult person habitually living in Newcastle or Catania who had formally submitted a request for international protection but whose claim has not been accepted (yet) would be welcome to partake in the research, provided they could give their informed consent. While I attempted to reach out to asylum seekers as different as possible (in terms of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and immigration background) given the small size of the sample, once more I had to rely on contingent opportunities, the only criterion being the asylum seeker's willingness and ability to engage in multiple research-related encounters. Besides the research core participants, other actors (mainly charity workers/volunteers, please see table below) gave their consent to partake in the research, although their commitment required would normally involve the time of one or two semi-structured interviews. Finally, my two fieldwork experiences were populated by countless social actors whose immigration status I was often unaware of – be they volunteers, community kitchen regulars, shopping assistants, friends of friends etc. - with whom I shared casual conversations, passing comments, impromptu gatherings that substantially contributed, somewhat accidentally, to my cumulative knowledge of the two cities and their super-diverse inhabitants.

What. Taking as my broader unit of analysis asylum seekers' situated moral engagement with a pervasive yet elusive system of legal and social constraints requires, at the very least, some reflection on what it takes, in practice, to observe and study relational categories (Desmond, 2014; Boccagni, 2016; Hart, 2018). As mentioned before, in my research, an important step in this direction has been operationalizing what aspects of 'the system' I wanted to focus on through the lens of asylum seekers' moral reasoning. Institutional housing, in/formal work and destitution have gradually emerged as especially salient empirical domains through which asylum seekers experience the system in their day-to-day lives. If these categories significantly delimited the 'what' that I intended to research, it is important to acknowledge that these are still relational, rather than substantive, units of analysis. In other words, my primary concern was not to research and compare institutional housing, rough-sleeping, and in/formal work *per se* (although their cross-context comparison has proved analytically

powerful), but asylum seekers' moral gaze on and morally laden, intersubjective experiences in relation to these important aspects of their everyday life. Let me illustrate this point concerning, say, asylum seekers' moral reasoning on institutional housing. What I was able to observe in practice and that I found heuristically salient was: institutionally housed asylum seekers' *evaluations* of the motives and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved in their housing reception; asylum-seeking housemates' *peer judgement*; their *claim-making*; and the *moral emotions* that were triggered by their housing experiences. Evaluations, peer-judgements, claim-making and moral emotions provide the foci, or empirical references, through which I was able to ethnographically research participants' moral reasoning in context and across contexts, whether in relation to housing reception, policy-made destitution or in/formal work.

As Clifford Geertz aptly wrote, 'the central task is to discover, or invent, the appropriate terms of comparison, the appropriate frameworks within which to view material phenomenally disparate in such a way that its very disparateness leads us into a deeper understanding of it' (Geertz, 1971, pp. 54, 55). The process of delimiting the field and discovering or inventing my comparative references has been iterative and tentative – the countless comparison-matrix tables that punctuate my field notes bear witness to this methodological struggle. This implied living with analytical indeterminacy for much of my fieldwork where I collected a much broader range of material that I was only able to productively re-organize and select post-hoc. Having discussed the 'where', 'when', 'who' and 'what' of my comparative ethnography, in the remaining of the chapter I move on to address 'how' I carried out my two fieldworks in Newcastle and Catania and collected 'phenomenally disparate' ethnographic data.

Finding a place in the field: negotiating positionality, access and multiple roles within charities and people's lives

'You are a good Italian girl, you have Italian blood that's why you're so good, I know because I work with many Italians!' *Antoine - fleeting encounter opposite charity's entrance, Newcastle.*

'No, you are not Italian, by the way you speak you are not Italian, where are you from?'
Boubakar – informal conversation while queuing up at Caritas community centre, Catania.

Entering the field in Newcastle first and Catania then immediately confronted me with the interactive and processual nature of my positionality in the two cities (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010). Esther Anderson, among others, highlights how the insider-outsider researcher dichotomy traditionally based on the latter's nationality and language (Ergun and Erdemir,

2010, p. 18) is highly reductive and ‘obfuscates the unstable relationships of power and uncertainty that can be present in any type of fieldwork, and ignores that researcher identity is also informed by gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, class, and a host of other factors’ (Anderson, 2021, p. 214). My fieldwork ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ clearly exemplify this point. To start with, which one of the two contexts was ‘home’, and which one was ‘abroad’ was a distinction that was unclear even to me - being a Northern Italian who, at the time of the fieldwork, had been living in England for 5 years (although mostly in London). In fact, through the interactions with my research participants and other social actors my status as researcher/befriender kept transforming ‘along the continuum between insidership and outsidership’ (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010, p. 16).

As the two small excerpts above illustrate, my ascribed position was highly dependent on the markers and meaning that different subjects attributed to, for instance, being Italian (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010, p. 24). If Antoine, a long-term Newcastle resident and refugee, associated my Italianness with positive stereotypes of friendliness and kindness, Boubakar – a young man of Western African origins who had lived in Catania since his arrival to Italy – questioned my nationality based on my language skills (and specifically my unrecognised Northern Italian accent), an important marker of belonging. More generally, in Newcastle, my nationality was unproblematic if not irrelevant¹² in my interactions with long-term residents and newcomers alike. With asylum seekers who had to cross the Mediterranean and Italy in their journey to the UK, however, I intentionally discussed my Italian origins and my commitment to work in Sicily as a stimulus to gauge their comparative perspectives on the two countries. But what was more salient in most cases was my ‘foreignness’ in the UK – a trait that I shared with all my core research participants - and in some cases my ‘Southern Europeanness’ which, according to some of my research participants, meant that I was culturally closer to the ‘Eastern mentality’, as a Kurdish asylum seeker put it. In Catania, on the other hand, my Italianness, when recognised, was hardly a marker of local belonging. Having a Northern Italian accent not only confused many of the migrant research participants but would often result in different degrees of distancing and suspicion on the part of Sicilian social actors, at least initially. Although such distancing was very rarely hostile, being ‘from the North’ was often associated with naivety and excessive formality and was often the object

¹² An important exception of this point was the case of asylum seekers, refugees or non-asylum migrants who were originally from countries that had been subject to Italian colonisation, or people who had lived in Italy in the past. In such instances, my nationality was highlighted as an important axis of positive commonality, to my surprise even with people coming from former Italian colonies.

of benign mockery. This banter not only became a good icebreaker when introducing myself to new local actors but also spontaneously gave way to insightful conversations about the real and perceived divides between the 'North' and 'South' of the country with both migrant and citizen interlocutors.

In both cities, my geographical origins were inextricably intertwined with other dimensions of my positionality, mainly my gender, age, and professional identity, which in different ways affected my status. Qualitative researchers have demonstrated how the researcher's gender positionality may well lead to unexpected access opportunities that defy simplistic gendered assumptions about, for instance, the vulnerability of women researchers in patriarchal societies (Silverman, 2006, pp. 91, 92). Being seen as a young single woman certainly affected my interactions in both fields, although with important situational and participant-dependent differences, and led to some important analytical insights. In Newcastle as in Catania, the majority of the asylum-seeking research participants were young men. Most of them (and virtually the totality of those who had some form of income) would categorically refuse to let me pay for our coffees, cakes, ice-creams, bus tickets etc. when out for a research-related informal meeting or during the recording of semi-structured interviews. Their gallantry was unshakable despite my attempts at marginally reciprocating, with university funds, for their time. On a few occasions, I was also explicitly asked out for a date, and I was once sent a written declaration of love. By contrast, much to my frustration, most of the women asylum-seekers I tried to meet and engage in my research seemed completely uninterested in my company, suspicious of my research agenda and invariably too busy to meet up.

This gender imbalance in the composition of my samples and my social interactions with research participants was a cause of great discomfort and anxiety. While I was unable to redress the gender gap among my research participants, especially in Catania, I did develop a personal 'protocol' to deal with unsolicited romantic attentions with as much clarity and tact as I could. Leveraging the existing relationship of mutual trust and familiarity, I would first try to clarify my position as both researcher and befriender and my willingness to collaborate on this basis only. If the comments or requests did not stop, I would then normally arrange a meeting in a semi-public space (e.g. a café) to have an open, explicit discussion about mutual expectations and boundaries. Sometimes, I would also bring with me the university paperwork (i.e. information sheet and consent forms) and ask the person to look again with me what they stated. This process did not always lead to a mutual agreement and in a few

cases resulted in the interruption of the research collaboration. I argue, however, that these difficult, often embarrassing conversations were not just obstacles in the fieldwork, but critical moments to share very open conversations about gendered life roles, social pressures and aspirations that would have otherwise been foreclosed to me. What emerged was indeed of much broader importance and pointed to asylum seekers' gendered understandings of what a 'good life' (Butler, 2012) would look like. In Newcastle as in Catania, having a partner or a family was often considered by many men asylum-seeking participants a moral or 'existential imperative' (Jackson, 2005a) that overshadowed the issue of 'getting documents'. It was telling, for instance, that the day after one of my core research participants in Newcastle was granted refugee status after more than 3 years of limbo, he told me that he yes, he was happy about the news, but added looking visibly sad: 'I have nothing.' He then whispered, looking down, 'I need wife'.

Thinking reflexively about my positionality in the two fields has hopefully illustrated the analytical power of methodological (self)consciousness. The following sections are similarly oriented to shed light on some of the most relevant methodological choices and challenges I faced in trying to establish my presence in Newcastle and Catania. I focus on access negotiations, situational consent and the many grey areas arising from juggling multiple roles within organisational settings and in my relationships with asylum-seeking research participants. For clarity purposes, I will discuss these important dimensions of my fieldwork in Newcastle and Catania separately, in each section highlighting the aspects that emerged as most problematic – and thus heuristically salient – in each city. The two sections are therefore asymmetrical but speak to each other in important ways.

Newcastle

In Newcastle, I spent six months volunteering in a local asylum-support charity before I began collecting data for my research project. Along with other volunteers, some of whom were asylum seekers or refugees themselves, I was first involved with the running of the charity's free clothing store and then moved on to provide one-to-one (non-legal) advice to people seeking asylum in the city. If the charity workers were aware of my research plans from the very beginning of my volunteering activity, the transition into data collection has been formally marked by sharing a written agreement between the university and the charity and by explicitly informing the asylum-seeking people I was engaging with about my research agenda. This has been a delicate transition. While migrant-support charities in Newcastle had had extensive experience in welcoming volunteering university students, my request to 'hang

out' with asylum seekers in private spaces too as part of my research was met with resistance and had to be carefully negotiated. In other cases, the issue was more clearly related to 'research mistrust'. That was the case of a volunteer-led social hub for refugees and asylum seekers where I was told by a senior volunteer/gatekeeper the very moment I walked in that 'we [they] don't like to mix business with pleasure'.

I was able to partly overcome these barriers by recruiting some research participants outside the organisational settings, something that became possible only after a few months of volunteering and networking around the city. Still, a grey area arose when the people I casually met around the city or through contacts and who agreed to partake in the research were also regulars at the charities I was volunteering with that had pushed for policy-bound interactions. Should the individual person's preferences in terms of research involvement be framed by the organisation's policies? To what extent could the charities in case claim ownership over these evolving collaborations and, in some cases, friendships taking shape outside the organisational setting? Interestingly, the flexibility and blurred nature of my role as an ethnographer was both cause of frictions and alliances. My relationship with the senior volunteer gatekeeper mentioned above, for instance, evolved significantly over time after being 'vetted' in numerous social gatherings. In fact, they became a generous source of information and support throughout (and after) my fieldwork in Newcastle – this time, I believe, precisely because it became clear that my engagement with research participants extended beyond bounded institutional roles thus mitigating the extractive nature of social research.

Perhaps even more delicate in the researcher-researched roles was transitioning from the informal relationships with those asylum seekers I had made acquaintance with as a fellow volunteer or befriender before data collection to then establishing a relationship with them. On a few occasions, an explicit discussion of my research agenda resulted in the (gradual) detachment on the part of my asylum-seeking acquaintances or friends. I soon realised that if most people were willing to chit-chat in a waiting room or during serendipitous encounters, these same conversations understandably acquired a different meaning outside the organisational setting, framed as part of a research project. I also appreciate that while being a known face substantially helped me gain some trust, this very fact also made it harder for some people to turn down my offer to partake in the research, even when they were unwilling to do so. Such difficulties were at times compounded by other issues I had not fully considered – including informal work commitments, childcare, partners' jealousy, and

substance addiction.

My experience with Shona - a bright woman, mother of three, whose asylum claim had been rejected - is emblematic of the complex mix of time pressure, but also research mistrust and tacit ambivalence about our evolving relationship that tainted her and others' full participation in the research. To illustrate the difficulties I encountered when I tried to involve Shona in my research, not least my own emotional turmoil (see Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015), I am reporting below my field notes from our first research-related encounter, about 6 months after we first met as fellow volunteers at a local charity.

14 September 2018

B. Community Centre

Went to B. Community Centre, pay-as-you-feel soup kitchen evening, this time much more crowded [...] Shona came too, following my recommendation. I had already mentioned to her that I had something I wanted to discuss with her privately. I've thought about her as a possible key participant from the very beginning, but I've felt very nervous at the idea of telling her (although she knows about my research already) cause she has become more like a friend now and I don't know how she will take it. Her 5yo son runs to hug me as they walk in, I know I am scared of losing them. I wait for the boy to leave our table, he is joining other children playing around. Shona listens carefully as I tell her a bit about my research and her possible participation. I explain I'm mainly interested in her point of view, she doesn't need to share personal information if she doesn't feel comfortable, but she might have experienced and seen relevant things as she's been through the asylum system (still in) and her views are thus very valuable to me. I mention that one of my key focus areas are problems with asylum reception system, gaps in the system, how people cope. She looks at me very seriously as I talk, strict mouth, quite cold look, she's wary. I can feel her unease, I feel terrible, but I know I have to brave through this conversation. She knows me, we've hung out together, I've played with her son, but she's not sure what I'm setting her up for now. [...] I explain the anonymisation process and she relaxes a bit – she tells me she has been set up with a journalist in the past, this person took pictures of her, asked for all her personal details [...] she didn't feel comfortable disclosing personal information with a person she didn't even know. I try to reassure her by explaining the nature of my research, which is not necessarily about recorded interviews, but more about open conversations and sharing moments, she can take the lead and I know she has a lot to say! We laugh. [...] She said she thinks it will be fine because we're friends already so it will come quite naturally. I encourage her to have a think about it and take a look at the information and consent forms I am handing her out, we will see each other at [asylum-support charity where we both volunteer] next Tuesday anyways.

Stream of consciousness: is this a good deal for her? Why do I feel like I am betraying her? I wish I didn't feel this uncomfortable asking people if they want to get involved... just a matter of practice? Would it be easier with people I know less? Should I try to approach people who don't know me already and try to develop a working relationship around the research?

After this first conversation at the community centre, Shona agreed to meet with me in a café that allowed for some privacy. She showed me the consent forms scribbled with her remarks – she did not agree to digital recording, and she was not willing to refer people over to me as potential research participants. It was only at this point that we could start our semi-structured interview which turned out to be one of the most insightful, rich and emotional exchanges I would have in my time in Newcastle. It also turned out to be the last research-related conversation I would ever have with Shona. In the following months, I repeatedly tried to arrange other meetings and offered to accompany her in her daily errands, but she would often cancel last-minute and was invariably too busy to 'help you with your research'. In the meantime, we would still see each other at the charity and for sporadic social events; I was delighted to be invited at her son's birthday, we would keep in touch over the phone, share pictures and family updates, but it was clear that for Shona these were not 'research moments' – a distinction that was much more fluid for other research participants – and thus did not make it to my fieldwork diary. With no explicit rupture, Shona had consented to let me be part of her life, but only briefly as an ethnographer.

Beside Shona's specific situation, the nature of participants' involvement with my research was always individually and repeatedly negotiated over the course of the fieldwork – a common feature across Newcastle and Catania. This implied attending to silences and non-verbal communication too, sometimes deciding to delete parts of my field notes post-hoc, after careful consideration (O'Connell Davidson, 2008). While rejection was a rather common experience when I tried to reach out to possible asylum-seeking research participants in Newcastle, a small number of them not only agreed to get involved but also allowed me to become part of their day-to-day life as at once befriender and ethnographer. These tended to be single people with some spare time at disposal, who were keen to have company and believed in the importance of sharing their lived experiences as subjects of the UK asylum regime. With this sub-group of 'core' research participants, the relationship eventually evolved into multiple weekly encounters, mainly at their shared Home-Office accommodations, cafes or at the City Library.

It is telling that only one person, however, volunteered to introduce me to some neighbours

and friends. In Newcastle, the vast majority of my encounters with research participants were indeed one-to-one informal meetings that, upon participants' request, took place in private or semi-public spaces, with a preference for the 'inattentive forms of sociality' granted by the anonymity of crowded franchised cafes (Jones *et al.*, 2015, p. 649). This was largely due to the widespread stigma surrounding asylum seekers' immigration status (Hynes, 2011), further intensified in the case of so-called 'failed asylum seekers' (Bloch, 2014a). The asylum seekers I met were thus extremely wary of sharing any personal information that may give away their immigration status in the presence of others, or mentioning everyday situations (e.g. being late at work, driving a car) that were formally forbidden due to their precarious legal status. I was repeatedly told that one's immigration status was something to keep private, 'you don't talk about it', 'it's very very personal', even with close friends, romantic partners and within co-ethnic/nationals circles. In this context, having open conversations about their day-to-day life and letting me participate to daily activities required a great degree of trust and discretion. My very company in semi-public or public spaces around Newcastle was somewhat hard to justify without explaining the nature of my research and thus identifying my interlocutors as asylum seekers. In the case of single men, our repeated encounters were also likely to (and did) spread rumours about alleged romantic liaisons and thus placed the additional onus of managing social expectations on the participants' shoulders – a gendered dynamic I will further discuss in the last section of the chapter.

But it was not only the risk of stigmatisation and reputational damage that concerned the asylum seekers who partook in the research in Newcastle. Way more dangerous, the Home Office has eyes and ears everywhere – as I was warned by asylum seekers and solicitors alike. In a climate of generalised mistrust (Hynes, 2009, 2011), anything from hosting a friend to requesting a ticket refund was feared to negatively affect one's asylum case. An immigration solicitor recounted how one of their clients' private correspondences on Facebook were accessed and used by the Home Office to dismiss the asylum claim they had put forward and warned me not to mention any sensitive information while waiting with my asylum-seeking friend in the immigration court's waiting room. When a couple of asylum seekers claimed that their phone calls were being bugged by the Home Office, it was hard to tell paranoia from reality. Unsurprisingly, this pervasive mistrust affected my relationship with many asylum-seeking research participants, at least initially. In fact, mistrust often coexisted with wilful hope when research participants decided to share with me how they had learnt to navigate the informal labour market after years of exploitation, or detailed the Home Office's

contradictory handling of their case, or again explained the creative (and risky) ways they had resorted to rent a flat, make online payments or send prescription medications to family members abroad. This is, for instance, how Iqbal, a long-term asylum seeker, and I parted way after a two-hour (hand noted) conversation where he shared highly sensitive information: ‘Will I see you next week?’ I asked - ‘If you don’t grass me [*sic*] by then! And if I’m still around! [giggling] It’s hard to trust you, you seem to know everything, I hope you don’t fuck me up!’ But it was Iqbal’s determination to expose the violence of the system that he and many others were subject to that made him come back, with the wilful hope that his contribution would be worth the risk.

Catania

If my fieldwork in Newcastle was largely shaped by my engagement in the charity sector and private, individual meetings with research participants, in the Sicilian city of Catania, public squares, the Villa Bellini city gardens, terraced cafes and the docks all became regular sites of (often spontaneous) encounters. These could either be one-to-one, confidential conversations or small group gatherings. No secrecy surrounded asylum-seeking research participants’ immigration status, which was either known or assumed, and my presence as an acquaintance, friend, volunteer, university student, activist or presumed ‘cultural and language mediator’¹³ was normally perceived as neither exceptional nor inconvenient.

As in Newcastle volunteering with local charities played a critical part in my fieldwork, especially in the early stages. No local charity in Catania would focus solely on asylum migrants, but virtually all asylum seekers in the city would know about the Jesuit migrant-support organisation and the Caritas community kitchen both conveniently located close to the central railway station. After a first contact via email and a preliminary visit, I was welcome to join the daily running of both charities as at once a researcher and volunteer. My position was somewhat distinct, more varied and in many ways privileged compared to the rest of the volunteers, as I was granted access to all different available services, my tasks ranging from serving food at the free breakfast shift, sorting out clothes donations to teaching Italian and shadowing social workers, lawyers and occasionally medical staff at free drop-ins.

¹³ In Italy, *mediatore linguistico e culturale* (or simply *mediatore*) is a recognised professional figure who has received formal training in interpreting, translating and trans-cultural communication. In Catania, I have met many *mediatori* working at migrants’ reception facilities or on-call offering their services to charities, law firms, humanitarian agencies, police offices and immigration courts. Due to their much-needed language and social skills, it was also quite common for asylum seekers to work informally as un-paid *mediatori* while being themselves hosted within reception centres and some of them then decided to pursue professional training once they regularised their legal status in the country.

If this flexible arrangement singled me out of the rest of the volunteers, it turned out to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. I was often asked to support staff members with English or French interpreting/translations, forms-filling and appointments at immigration offices, while this exposure allowed me to familiarise myself with the variety of institutional challenges asylum seekers faced in their everyday life in Catania.

Building on my recent experience in Newcastle, I was adamant from the very beginning of my volunteer experience that my engagement with asylum-seeking research participants would extend beyond the organisational settings – a request that was accepted with little notice. I was also careful to keep a week day free from any scheduled activities. This, I had learnt, was important to make sure I could keep up with my field notes, arrange interviews and informal meetings, and take stock of the emerging data. I also agreed early on that I would ‘phase out’ the time I would spend within charity spaces. Over the course of 5 months, my volunteer activity decreased from about 4 days to 2 days a week – with both morning and afternoon/evening shifts. I was well aware of the risk of prioritising structured volunteering over unstructured time with research participants in the informal private and public spaces that made up their social geographies in Catania. If both formal and informal contexts were subjects of participant observation, the charity settings offered me a familiar, contained space where interactions with migrant ‘beneficiaries’, volunteers and staff members followed a rather predictable etiquette, I had a recognisable (if composite) role and could exchange questions and worries with a plurality of experienced actors. The relative comfort I could enjoy inside the charities’ ventilated rooms was at odds with the messy, often desperate situations I would find ‘outside.’ I thus tried to keep a balance between these two very different forms of engagement in the field and planned to gradually dedicate more time and energy to walking conversations, informal gatherings, and serendipitous street encounters. In this endeavour, I was greatly facilitated by a few old acquaintances from my previous experiences in Catania. The teenagers I had met a few years before in a hosting centre for unaccompanied foreign minors (MSNA) were now young adults juggling institutional obstacles, elusive work contracts and busy social lives – some ‘stuck’ in strictly regimented hosting facilities, others transitioning into independent living, and others again already well-versed in the city centre’s open-air squatting scene. Many more, however, were no longer in Catania, nor in Italy, discouraged by the meagre employment opportunities and scared by the rampant xenophobic political climate in the country.

Thanks to my previous volunteer experiences in Catania and my scattered presence around the

city, I was able to frequently attend other organisations and keep contact with social workers, cultural-language mediators, activists and members of the clergy actively involved in the reception of migrants and asylum seekers among them. Alongside my language skills, this informal network of stakeholders and the time I had at disposal were the resources that proved most useful, for instance when it was important to quickly check the availability of beds in hosting facilities, share training/employment opportunities, flag up critical situations.

Becoming so embedded in the heterogeneous migrant-support scene of Catania certainly fed my ‘humanitarian ego’ - as one of my supervisors rightly put it - and made me feel part of a wider ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1999) providing some respite from the sense of disorientation and loneliness that often lingered upon me in the field. But it also took its toll. The number of ‘housing emergencies’ (*emergenze abitative*) affecting migrants who were made homeless from one day to the next - or following their forced return to Catania from abroad - increased exponentially after the Mineo reception camp shut down, adding to the crowds of destitute people living on the streets of the city. Even in the case of recognised high priority cases, such as a destitute asylum seeker with a psychiatric diagnosis or a single mother with two dependent children, there was no institutional solution available. Social workers, charity members and concerned lawyers alike would thus rely on word of mouth hoping for an ad-hoc fix or a discretionary act of benevolence which in the majority of cases failed to materialise. I had succeeded in making myself needed, or so I thought, but I was left with frustration, guilt and hopelessness. Everything was urgent and my research commitments faded in comparison – a well-known risk in immersive research confronted with social suffering (Rager, 2005; Watts, 2008; Vincett, 2018). Even worse, I caught myself feeling increasingly impatient and judgemental towards those asylum-seeking participants who struggled to understand how to navigate access to charity services, decided to turn down what seemed to me precious employment opportunities, or again refused to comply with restrictive shelter regulations and thus nullifying their chances of getting some form of accommodation. An English saying kept coming up to my mind: ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ as a destitute friend taught me in Newcastle, trying to persuade themselves. This was certainly the attitude of most charity workers I was meeting and that I was unwittingly internalising. Reflecting from a (geographical and temporal) distance on these especially challenging aspects of my fieldwork in Catania, I realised that this frustration and emotional fatigue certainly negatively affected my presence in the field, but also allowed me to empathise and better understand the constellation of local actors that were variously involved in the chronic emergency of ‘asylum seekers’ in/formal reception in the city. This, as I will show empirically in Chapter X, was a

constitutive element of local moral economy of asylum seekers' reception. Importantly, it also helped me bring to fore what, by contrast, my asylum-seeking participants were stubbornly showing me: they *were* 'choosers', as they acted upon their own understandings of what was and was not morally acceptable in their circumstances, sometimes against all odds. I just had to respect it; moving beyond my colonialist sense of entitlement to somewhat interfere with their lives (Stacey, 1988).

As already discussed in relation to my experience in Newcastle, having friends in the city did not easily translate into finding research participants. For sure, some asylum seekers simply did not mind my presence and rather welcomed my company and offer to help with their Italian learning, email writing and internet access through my laptop or smartphone. As Hammersley and Atkinson write, '[w]hether or not people have knowledge of social research, they are often more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself. They will try to gauge how far he or she can be trusted, what he or she might be able to offer as an acquaintance or a friend [...]' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, p. 78). But getting consent was not always smooth. Beyond the expected research mistrust, I found that in Catania resistance to partake to interviews or more informal research-related encounters had little to do with asylum seekers' fear of potential consequences on the determination of their asylum claim. Rather, what was often openly contested was my position as white European paid researcher extracting information from largely black, African under-paid or unemployed migrants. Even when talking to friends who had agreed (with little enthusiasm) to collaborate, our different racialised and power-laden positions were object of recurrent side comments and mockery – something that I never recorded happening with the limited number of asylum-seeking research participants in Newcastle. I cannot know the reasons of the asylum seekers who I approached and declined my request to partake to the research by simply avoiding any one-to-one meeting or by hijacking any attempt from my part to direct the conversation towards research-related content. What I observed, however, was that there was some significant overlap between the criticisms that were directed at my research and the widespread mistrust towards (mainly white Italian) social workers/educators operating within asylum reception facilities in Catania and the surrounding province. In both cases, I suggest that an underpinning colonial consciousness framed the relationship between racialised migrants and white workers (me included) as a perpetuation of neo/colonial exploitation – I point I will return to in Chapter 4. The fact that I was able to gauge this form of political and moral reasoning in Catania and not Newcastle does not mean, of course, that all my asylum-seeking participants in Newcastle were blind to historical and present forms of

racialised injustice. Rather, this asymmetry in my findings highlights an important theme that would need to be expressively researched in Newcastle (as in other contexts) in a logic of cross-fertilisation.

Research participants matrix and research methods

Fieldwork activities in Newcastle (August 2018 – March 2019)

- Participant observation
- Naturally occurring conversations of various lengths
- Interviews
 - 32 unstructured interviews with 11 asylum seekers
 - 11 semi-structured interviews with 9 asylum seekers
 - 12 semi-structured interviews with 12 charity workers and volunteers

Table 1. Core research participants (4 female; 7 male), Newcastle

Approx. age	Country of origin	Time in UK	Immigration status*	Housing
1. Late 20s	Sudan	3y	R [S95]	Jomast, friends' house
2. 30s	Pakistan	5m	S95 a	Jomast, hostel
3. 30s	Afghanistan	3y	d	friend's council house
4. Late 40s	Algeria	19y	S4 [d]	Jomast, Charity1 hosting scheme Charity2 hosting scheme Street homeless
5. Late 20s	Kurdistan	?	d	Private rent/friend
6. Late 20s	Kurdistan	15y?	d	Private rent
7. 30s	Zimbabwe	8y	S4 [d]	Jomast
8. 30s	Eritrea	1y	d	Friend's house Charity2 hosting scheme Street homeless
9. 40s	Nigeria	3y	S95/S4?	Jomast
10. 30s	Iran	5m	S95	Jomast
11. 40s	Georgia	3y	S95	Jomast

*Table legend – research participants' immigration status

R = indefinite leave to remain (e.g. through refugee status). Right to work & access to public funds. Eligible to apply for British citizenship after 5 years of lawful residence in the country.

S95 = ‘Support under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 is provided to asylum seekers who have not received a final decision or have an appeal pending and are destitute or likely to become destitute.’ S95 support consists of housing (Jomast and G4S were the housing contractors for the North East at the time of my research) and £ 37.75 per person/week. If someone has somewhere else to stay, they will only receive the monetary support. ^[1]

d = ‘destitute’ asylum seeker, meaning people whose asylum claim has been rejected either with no rights of appeal or who have exhausted their appeal rights. No right to work + no access to public funds (benefits, homeless hostels, scholarships...)

S4 = ‘Support under section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 is provided to refused asylum seekers who are destitute/likely to become destitute and meets one of these conditions:

- Taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK
- Unable to leave the UK because they are physically unable to travel or as a result of a medical issue
- There is no viable route of return (in the opinion of the UK government)
- A judicial review has been lodged and permission to review has been granted
- Human rights would be breached if accommodation was not provided.’^[2]

Table 2. Research participants from local organisations (10 female, 4 male), Newcastle

Approx Age	Country of origin	Research-related position
1. 70s	UK (South England)	Charity founder, informal host
2. 30s	UK (England)	Charity coordinator
3. 60s	UK (North East England)	Charity worker
4. 50s	Singapore	Charity Volunteer
5. 60s	UK North East England)	Mosque member
6. 70s	UK (North East England)	Charity volunteer
7. 20s	Germany	Charity volunteer
8. 20s	UK (North East England)	Charity volunteer
9. 60s	UK (South England)	Charity volunteer
10. 40s	UK (South England)	Charity volunteer
11. 60s	Ireland	Charity volunteer
12. 70s	UK (England)	Charity volunteer
13. 30s	?	Charity coordinator
14. ?	Bosnia	Social worker

Fieldwork activities in Catania (April 2019 – August 2019):

- Participant observation
- Naturally occurring conversations of various lengths
- Interviews
 - 18 unstructured interviews with 15 asylum seekers
 - 10 semi-structured interviews with 9 asylum seekers

- 7 semi-structured interviews with 7 charity workers/volunteers/activists

Table 3. Core research participants (8 males), Catania

Approx. Age	Country of origin	Time in Italy	Immigration status*	Accommodation
1. 20s	Guinea Conakry	2y	Humanitarian Protection	Foreign Unaccompanied Minors' reception centre
2. 30s	Mali	4y	Expired Humanitarian Protection	Faith-based, private shared accommodation for the homeless (half citizens, half foreigners)
3. 20s	Gambia	6y	Refused asylum seeker	Informal rent in shared flat
4. 20s	Nigeria	2y + 4 months (after being sent back from Germany)	Asylum seeker (awaiting decision)	Street homeless. 'fixed' spot on the large roofed pavement surrounding a large bus-terminal square (many people of different nationalities sleep there)
5. 30s	Mali	4y	Sussidiary Protection	Formal rent in shared flat
6. 20	Ivory Coast	1y	Asylum seeker (awaiting decision)	Homeless hostel
7. 20	Ivory Coast	?	Sussidiary Protection	Faith-based, private shared accommodation for the homeless (half citizens, half foreigners)
8. 20	Guinea Conakry	3y	Humanitarian Protection	Foreign Unaccompanied Minors' reception centre

Table 4. Research participants from local organisations (5 female, 4 male), Catania

Approx Age	Country of origin	Research-related position
1. 70s	Italy (Sicily)	Charity coordinator
2. ?	Eritrea/Sudan	Activist, researcher, journalist, informal broker
3. 50s	Italy (Sicily)	Charity volunteer
4. 60s	Italy (Sicily)	Charity volunteer
5. 50s	Italy (Sicily)	Hostel manager
6. 30s	Italy (Sicily)	Social worker
7. 40s	Italy (Puglia)	Nun, charity coordinator
8. 30s	Italy (Sicily)	Charity coordinator, informal broker
9. ?	Tunisia	Imam
10. 60s	Italy (Sicily)	Activist

Research ethics

Confidentiality

In a context of pernicious criminalization of both asylum seekers and solidarity towards undocumented migrants, protecting the anonymity of the people who partook to the research has been my paramount concern. While ‘complete anonymity’ is seldom attainable in practice, all efforts have been put to minimize the risk of participants’ identification, especially given the circumscribed context of local charities, grass-roots organisations, activists and asylum ‘accidental communities’ inhabited by my asylum-seeking research participants. The time passed since the collection of my empirical data grants some additional degree of confidentiality, as many asylum seekers I met in Newcastle and Catania are now in different geographical and social positions, whether through the grant to some form of leave to remain, the decision to move elsewhere, or other changes in their personal and family circumstances. Back in the fieldwork ‘present’, however, I soon realized there was a very real risk of what I call ‘cross-identification’ either among asylum seekers or between asylum seekers and their surrounding in/formal support networks. While asylum seekers’ collaboration with me was not and could not be a secret as we often moved across different public and semi-public spaces (especially in Catania), I had to be extremely cautious about mentioning any emerging situation, or theme relating to participants’ personal circumstances even when, I thought, I was giving no identification markers. That was the case, for instance, when I wanted to cross-check information about changing policies or when I sought advice from other social actors on emerging issues – be they charity workers, friends or other research participants. Even with no reference to participants’ name, gender, age nor nationality people variously involved in the local reception of asylum seekers may well be aware of the specific case I was referring to. This had clearly to do with the rather small size of the cities and the even smaller and tightly interconnected world of the local asylum charity ‘scene.’ While this was also a very obvious concern for my interlocutors in Newcastle who were similarly wary of disclosing any potentially sensitive information, in Catania the opposite seemed to be true. Just to give one example, asylum seekers’ identification documents were often shared through pictures on WhatsApp among the network of in/formal ‘brokers’ (Tuckett, 2018) operating in the city – usually to try to find missing/unreachable asylum seekers and pass on important legal correspondence about their case, or to expedite referrals to third parties. Most of the asylum seekers I met were themselves relaxed about showing me or others their legal documents whose effective relevance (e.g. in granting them access to any form of social provision,

accommodation or employment) often escaped them. An important exception regarded asylum seekers' exact housing circumstances for those who could not or did not want to access asylum seekers' reception centres. If the people I got to know more and who partook to the research always shared such information, it was much harder to gauge the largely informal housing arrangements of those asylum seekers' I only met sporadically or once. As it will be discussed in the next empirical chapter, this was a common theme across Catania and Newcastle where so many people had to rely on discretionary hospitality and where informal hosts risked being legally sanctioned.

Elusive consent

I have discussed above the often complicated and contextual processes of obtaining and maintaining research participants' informed consent over the course of my fieldworks in Newcastle and Catania. Much more could be said of the fundamental and delicate issue of consent in immersive qualitative research with asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (see Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007; Hugman, Bartolomei and Pittaway, 2011; Lewis, 2016). In this more focused reflection, however, I would like to highlight one specific dimension that emerged as especially important in my ethnographic experience. For a long time, I was unable to fully understand my constant sense of unease and even guilt when asking people I knew if they wanted to take part to my research. I have already touched upon the power relations that impinged on these unbalanced forms of exchange between researcher and researched, but I believe there was more to that. O'Connell Davidson's (2008) article 'If no means no, does yes mean yes?' helped me elucidate this point. The ethnographer discusses the ethical dilemmas that haunted her while conducting data collection and later writing up her ethnography which was largely drew on her intimate, years-long friendship with what I would call her 'core research participant'. While her friend/participant fully consented to be the protagonist of her ethnographic research which documented both formal and intimate situations, O'Connell Davidson (2008, p.57) asks:

When social researchers, especially those who undertake small-scale, ethnographic studies such as my study with Desiree, seek free and informed consent from research participants, they are actually asking them to agree to have their lives and experience very publicly dissected, and so, in effect, to consent to their own objectification. What does it mean to say 'Yes' to such a request?

I argue that people who agree (or even offer) to contribute to ethnographic research are rarely fully aware of what this would exactly entail in the short and long run, but that they may

nevertheless be willing to consent to the objectification of the portions of their lives that they are willing to share with their befriending ethnographer if they believe in the broader relevance of the project. Once more, however, more transparency would help the ethnographer in inhabiting multiple roles in the field and research participants in having a say on the limits of their participation.

Speaking for the Other

Often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject. and you are now at the center of my talk." (hooks, 1989, p. 22)

Taking asylum seekers' standpoint as the pillar of my observations, the question naturally occurs: am I the right person to research and represent racialized asylum seekers' perspectives? In light of my multiple privileges as a white, able-bodied and highly educated European national, am I entitled to intrude in less-privileged people's lives, extract data to author my own elaboration of such data and pursue a degree that benefits my personal intellectual and career goals? The answer to both questions is no. With varying degrees of self-consciousness, I have co-existed with this awareness throughout the research project, but it has admittedly taken me some time to mature an acute, at times paralysing, sense of illegitimacy. In so many ways, I held a position of power in relation to the asylum-seeking participants, not just in virtue of my racial, national and class positionality, but also due to my role of researcher who could enter and leave 'the field' with much ease, not to mention the international mobility I could enjoy in stark contrast to the asylum seekers I engaged with. There was indeed a tension between the empathetic, egalitarian and ubiquitous ethnographer I wanted to be and the overwhelmed, privileged and disorganised ethnographer I was most of the time.

A burgeoning body of literature has recently tried to explicitly address these issues, prompting qualitative researcher to co-construct their research design, data collection methods and analysis with the people they study (with) (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; Darrouzet, Wild and Wilkinson, 2009; Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014). Participatory methodologies and action research seek to challenge the traditional assumption about ethnographic representations, namely that the ethnographer lack[s] the authenticity of the participant and

the participant lack[s] the authoritative voice of the ethnographer' (Leaney and Webb, 2021, p.4). Such methodological approaches present their own limitations and challenges (David, 2002; Carpi, 2020), but are largely welcomed as important step forwards in ethical, methodological and analytical terms. If I share the ethical and epistemological pillars of participatory approaches, it will be clear by now that I did not conduct a participatory, action-oriented project. Rather, this thesis testifies to my very partial and simplistic understanding of what it meant to carry out 'ethical research' when I conducted my fieldworks back in 2018 and 2019. These two experiences represent 'two important moments in a "personal trajectory"', where different interests developed thanks to the processual feedback between related "sites" (Coleman, 2006, 39-41)' (Gallo, 2009, p. 91). If Gallo's (following Coleman) reflection certainly applies to the iterative construction of my analytical focus, this ongoing 'personal trajectory' has been very much about developing a sounder ethical reflexivity¹⁴ that I was able to fully appreciate only after my direct involvement in the two fields. For these reasons, I normally refer to the people who generously volunteered their time and energy to help me with my research as 'research participants' as opposed to more egalitarian terms such as 'collaborators' or 'friends', although many of them were *also*, at least in some situations, collaborators and friends. This terminological choice aims to highlight rather than obfuscate the power dynamic that affected my relationships with asylum-seeking research participants and that inevitably influenced the nature of the data I was able to collect.

Beyond the specificity of my own ethnographic experience, I tend to share Stacey's sharp remarks about the almost inescapable ethical limits of the ethnographic approach that arguably can only be partially redressed by participatory methodologies (David, 2002):

No matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker's presence may appear to "natives", fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship seems inescapable. So too does the exploitative aspect of ethnographic process seem unavoidable. The lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power. (Stacey, 1988, p. 23)

In light of these considerations, my efforts at minimising the extractive dimension of my fieldwork were undoubtedly insufficient but nevertheless important. First, I made sure that

¹⁴ The human geographer Alessandro Boussalem and the historical architect Sonali Dhanpal have been invaluable and patient allies in this often uncomfortable, on-going process.

each research participant I was spending at least as much time carrying out strictly research-related activities (e.g. semi-structured or unstructured interviews) as socialising, accompanying during errands, helping with language learning, email writings, phone calls etc. In fact, in a few cases I never managed to get to explicitly talk about my research topics with the people I was following and trying to support in various ways – of course all-important occasions to understand their lived experiences of the city in question. Secondly, being fairly well connected in the charity scene of both cities, I attempted as much as I could to circulate any useful information or contact I was able to gather. In fact, this was perhaps the most helpful thing I was able to offer as a few asylum-seeking participants explicitly asked me to gather reliable information on specific issues they were trying to navigate e.g. access to higher education, benefits claiming, institutional procedures. In Catania, where asylum seekers are legally allowed to work, I also helped in writing Curriculum Vitae and assisted with online and street-level job hunting. With a handful of research participants, my attempts at reciprocating also involved offering home-made meals, movie nights, drawing sessions and unlimited internet access from my flat.

Being conscious about our privileges and responsibilities as researchers and authors also implies thinking very carefully about the politics of representation in ethnography. This is an aspect that I have found especially challenging given the structured nature of thesis writing and the limited space available to depict situations and subjects in both contexts without overly reducing their complexity and nuances. Here again, as in the construction of ‘the field’, a process of reflexive selection is required. For the purposes of this thesis, in my empirical chapters I decided to centre asylum seekers’ moral reasoning as it was verbally articulated by my asylum-seeking research participants. Whenever possible, however, I have tried to contextualise and integrate this specific type of data with my field observations, other participants’ lines of reasoning and more generally with the cumulative knowledge I amassed through my engagement in the field. This important corrective resonates with Cabot’s invite to beware of bidimensional, however well-intended, tropes in the rendering of refugees (Cabot, 2016) as well as Mazzei and Jackson’s criticism of approaches that profess to ‘let the voices speak for themselves’ (2012, p. 746) – an impossible and undesirable task in social research.

Walking on eggshells: concluding remarks

In this chapter I have first discussed the comparative contextual framework within which my

ethnographic study took place. I then engaged in a methodological discussion on the debated epistemological foundations of comparative ethnography before illustrating the methodological considerations that informed my relational comparative ethnography. In the rest of the chapter I have expanded on the methodological, ethical and analytical challenges and opportunities that arose as a consequence of navigating between two cross-national fieldworks in contexts of widespread research mistrust. In the last section I have finally tried to reflexively address some of the most prominent ethical dilemmas that have accompanied mine and other ethnographers' journeys towards ethical research. The past pages have offered me the occasion to critically engage with the many limits of my comparative ethnography, but also with the heuristic power of the challenges I faced, with a view to contribute to ongoing debates on the difficult arts and craft of trans-local immersive research.

Chapter 4. “Jomast is a big liar!”: the informal moral economies of asylum seekers’ un/settlement in Newcastle upon Tyne

Introduction

The variegated humanity which has populated my research of asylum in the North East of England shares very little but the ‘lottery’ of their resettlement location - single and parents, middle-age and young adults, postgraduates and illiterate, soldiers, teachers, entrepreneurs and plumbers from a variety of national, ethnic, faith, class and immigration backgrounds, each carving their way through the UK asylum system. Under varying degrees of institutional support and control, Jasmine, Ateef, Zendaya, Hakim, Faris are all deeply entangled in the unfinished business of their quest for asylum in the country. From this perspective, the different legal stages they find themselves in (i.e. waiting for their asylum claim to be processed; appealing a negative decision; becoming a ‘refused’ or ‘failed’ asylum seeker) are better understood as interconnected positions in the often-tortuous process of seeking asylum in the UK in general and in the social and urban specificity of Newcastle in particular.

If there are substantial differences between the rights that 'regular' and 'refused' asylum seekers enjoy, as well as in the non-statutory institutional support they have access to, neither of the two categories of people enjoy full legal recognition in the country, for both parts the quality of their life still hangs in important ways on the Home Office decision.

My goal in this chapter is to ethnographically explore how, in Newcastle, differently situated asylum seekers: 1) make sense of and morally evaluate their ascribed socio-legal position and consequent institutional treatment; 2) discursively and practically respond to (perceived) threats to their moral worth and 3) morally challenge enforced marginalisation and illegality. To do so, I centre my analysis on asylum seekers' moral agency as I trace three stages in the journey of people seeking asylum in the UK – “regular” asylum seekers’ housing reception into dispersal accommodation; refused asylum seekers’ policy-made destitution; “settled” refused asylum seekers’ independent living under the radar. Moving from Home Office accommodation to homelessness and then to some forms of informal self-maintenance arrangement is indeed the chronological path followed by a considerable number of asylum seekers I met in Newcastle who saw their asylum claim rejected. Importantly, however, for many asylum seekers, what I sketch as a seemingly linear movement from governmental support to informality takes instead a circular, even cyclical trajectory, shuttling between informal hosting, precarious work, supported accommodation and informal rentals as their

immigration, health, working and family situations (and therefore their eligibility for different forms of formal and informal support) keep changing over time.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I understand ‘moral agency’ as referring to the multiple, situational ways in which social agents actively engage (whether discursively and/or in praxis) with what they recognise as moral obligations and values. Such focus seems especially relevant in the case of asylum seekers upon which weights a ‘special burden of justification, legal and otherwise’ (Panella and Thomas, 2015, p. 8).¹⁵ In the present analysis, I attend to asylum seekers’ moral agency as expressed by both their moral reasoning and morally-justified actions. More specifically, across the three empirical scenarios analysed (i.e. institutional housing; refused asylum seekers’ destitution; informal livelihoods), moral evaluations, reaffirmations of moral worth and moral challenges to ascribed marginalisation and illegality provide the analytical foci through which I investigate the interplay between structural constraints and asylum seekers’ (moral) agency.

In this view, the chapter foregrounds the perspectives of those who are *seeking* international protection, while leaving aside the complex realities of those who have been granted leave to remain in the country (e.g. legally recognised ‘refugees’)¹⁶. This choice mirrors my primary interest in asylum seekers’ responses to the legal and existential indeterminacy which affects, without defining, their daily lives, while also bringing to the fore the experiences of the ever-growing submerged population of so-called ‘failed’ asylum seekers living in the country. It seems also important to underline that my selective representation of the following scenarios can only capture glimpses of the complex ways in which asylum seekers’ intersectional identities affect their everyday experiences (and moral agency) in the uneven social geographies of Newcastle. Asylum seekers’ ascribed race, gender, age, religion, family situation, physical and mental capacity, but also economic and social capital can indeed (and often do) situationally and contextually shape, among other things, their access to institutional

¹⁵ Indeed, the socio-legal status ascribed to people seeking asylum makes them the target of pervasive moral scrutiny aimed at ‘sorting out the desirable from the undesirable, the genuine from the bogus, the legal from the illegal, and permitting only the deserving to enter state territory’ (Anderson, 2013, p. 2). As outlined in the second chapter, by centring my analysis on asylum seekers’ moral agency, my hope is to shed light on the multiple, at times conflicting, ways through which social actors strive to ‘craft inhabitable spaces’ and meaningful lives, ‘to achieve both existential and moral groundedness— not despite, but in relation to the impositions of illegalization, criminalization, abjection, and deportability’ (Willen, 2014, p. 97).

¹⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, I draw on insights from asylum seekers who have been granted some form of ‘leave to remain’ solely when these are relevant to illuminate documented asylum seekers’ experiences prior to their change in legal status and, importantly, when they emerge as meaningful actors in ‘regular’ or refused asylum seekers’ daily life. As I do not always have accurate information on the details of legally ‘successful’ asylum seekers’ forms of leave to remain, I will generically refer to them as ‘former asylum seekers’.

services and informal employment opportunities as well as degrees of real and perceived insecurity. To give just one example, Faris and Ibrahim's (two refused asylum seekers) relative economic and social security which I analyse in the last session of the chapter, cannot be understood independently from their specific positionality of young, able-bodied, heterosexual bachelor men from Iraqi Kurdistan who could count on their extended families' financial and emotional support as well as on the established presence of settled co-ethnic members in Newcastle and in the rest of the country. Unsurprisingly, intersectional identities and ascriptions are indeed actively mobilised by asylum seekers as they judge their own and others' contingent social position and aspired life roles. While an explicit analysis of the intersecting axes of identity and discrimination lies beyond the scope of the present discussion, I understand asylum seekers' multiple and shifting positionalities as constitutive/shaping elements of the 'spaces of possibility' they inhabit as moral (and political) agents. This finds empirical illustration in the situations analysed in the rest of the chapter, where asylum seekers' gender, racialisation, faith, national and ethnic identities, other than their legal status can become especially salient aspects in their process of local un/settlement.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first part is concerned with asylum seekers' everyday experiences of institutional housing in dispersed Home Office accommodations. By focusing primarily on the moral reasoning and practices mobilised by the tenants of a specific household in the periphery of Newcastle's West End, I highlight how their treatment by the Home Office is variously morally contested and partly redressed in everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion. The second part of the chapter focuses on who and how steps into the policy-made destitution gap whereby asylum seekers are systematically made homeless once their asylum claim has been rejected with no further rights of appeal. In particular, I take issue with the moral reasoning and actions of current and former asylum seekers who, I suggest, play a key role in mitigating the effects of refused asylum seekers' enforced destitution. Finally, in the third part I centre my analysis on three main ways in which self-sufficient refused asylum seekers exercise their moral agency vis-à-vis the ever-expanding criminalisation of immigration law offences. In this final session, I argue that (1) refused asylum seekers' engagement in informal work can be discursively mobilised to reaffirm their contested moral worth, while also offering an important platform to produce spaces of legitimacy amid illegality (2). Finally, I suggest that (3) refused asylum seekers exercise their moral agency by managing their own affective settlement in the city to conform to what they consider morally acceptable given their socio-legal condition.

In a Home Office shared accommodation, on a friend's couch or in a rented flat alike, people seeking asylum make sense of the immigration system they are subject to, their social position and their relationships with others through thick moral lenses. As the empirical scenarios I explore will make clear, the moral values and categories asylum seekers refer to in their narratives (i.e. in their moral reasoning) and that arguably inform their moral actions (e.g. acts of solidarity or exclusion, self and others' moral sanctioning) are brought to life *relationally* and through reference to the physical and social *contexts* they inhabit (Jackson, 2005b; Zigon, 2009, 2015; Mattingly, 2012, 2013). By enacting their moral agency, asylum seekers across the board routinely internalise, contest and re-signify values of *justice*, *deservingness* and *legitimacy* which are encapsulated in the UK moral economy of asylum seekers' management they are subject to. In fact, multiple and at times competing understandings of these values coexist in the everyday lives of asylum seekers in Newcastle, caught between marginalisation and enforced proximity. Throughout the three scenarios I analyse in the chapter, a tension between solidarity and exclusion, care and exploitation, generosity and mistrust appears to characterise the intersubjective life of fellow asylum seekers. This tension, I suggest, speaks to the ambiguity intrinsic to the UK asylum system. On the one hand, the Home Office's 'massive experiments in social engineering' (Refugee Council, 2000, p. 6, in Hynes, 2011, p. 45) are heavily centralised and homogeneously enforced upon its diverse subjects, creating to some extent a shared institutional context for asylum seekers. On the other hand, the very process of asylum case determination is atomised to the extent that the positive or negative response to an asylum claim is more likely determined by the individual's ability to strategically present 'a good case' than by the living conditions in one's country of origin.

In a national context arguably characterised by a strong institutional and legal culture, I suggest that the framework of informal moral economies of asylum seekers' un/settlement makes visible the multiple moral tensions that incessantly make and unmake asylum seekers' precarious networks of care, reciprocity and dependency in Newcastle.

Institutional housing: dispersed home-making in Scotswood Terrace

In the accounts of the vast majority of the asylum seekers I met throughout my fieldwork in Newcastle, the negligent management of their institutional dispersed accommodations was the epitome of the Home Office contractors' unjust treatment of the people they were supposed to protect and 'manage'. For the rationale of 'burden sharing' it embodies and its controversial privatised governance (see chapter x), the dispersed asylum seekers' housing system can indeed be considered the cornerstone of the UK asylum policy. On this matter, Jonathan

Darling has compellingly argued that 'framing asylum seekers as a burden represents both a move to position asylum as a specific and managerial issue, and at the same time reiterates an economic account of asylum as a question of resource allocation, cost and productivity' (Darling, 2016, p. 230). Indeed, Darling's point is that following the privatisation of asylum housing contracts in 2010, the governance of asylum seekers' housing has been fragmented, and thus diluted, into an opaque assemblage of market-oriented stakeholders. This 'displacement of issues and functions from the governmental to the nongovernmental sphere' Darling stresses, is the hallmark of asylum policy and results in the problematic depoliticisation of asylum issues (Darling, 2016, p. 233).

By switching the perspective from a policy-centred analysis to an ethnographic engagement with asylum seekers' moral agency, in this section of the chapter I show how dispersed asylum seekers like Donya and Jasmine evaluate their enforced housing condition in strongly moral (and political) terms. As we shall see, much of asylum seekers' claims are explicitly directed against the Home Office's spatialized marginalisation of the asylum population. Because of the uneven socio-economic geography of the city, most of the areas currently used for asylum seekers' housing are both symbolically and geographically peripheral (i.e. widely framed as 'deprived', 'dangerous', 'bad' areas *and* located afar from key services and social hubs), making the no-choice placement of asylum seekers doubly problematic from the asylum seekers' perspective.

Crucially, a close reading of asylum seekers' moral reasoning allows us to pin-point what different asylum seekers deem 'wrong', 'unjust', symbolically (other than physically) harmful about their socio-legal status and what, on the contrary, goes unchallenged. In the following section, I draw on a long excerpt from my recorded interview with Donya to explore how, in her moral reasoning, understandings of justice, deservingness and moral worth are mobilised to evaluate the working of the Home Office and its despised contractor Jomast.

Justice and moral worth under attack in the periphery

Donya is an energetic, outspoken Iranian woman in her early 30s. As I learnt earlier on through our informal encounters, she spent one year for her postgraduate business studies in Italy, which allowed for a more personalised connection between us as well as a 'safe' language for side commentary we wished to keep private. At the time of this interview in March 2019, Donya had just received a positive answer from the Home Office granting her refugee status. Importantly, this meant that she had 28 days to leave the Home Office

accommodation run by the housing sub-contractor Jomast. The shared flat was located in Scotswood, in the West End riverbank of Newcastle, and this was where she had lived for about 6 months sharing the flat with two other asylum-seeking single women. In this extended segment of our lively conversation that I am reporting below, Donya strongly articulates what was substantially 'wrong' and 'unfair' about her institutional housing experience, touching upon a number of recurrent themes in my conversations with 'dispersed' asylum seekers in the city:

Silvia: I want ask you about your neighbourhood in Newcastle, how would you describe it? Obviously you didn't choose it

Donya: Oh you know Tamaz [name of Georgian man living with his family in flat downstairs] and tell me now, they are very kind, very nice family

Silvia: Yeah they are lovely

Donya: They are very lovely, but the other neighbour in the same street, they are very very noisy and impolite, especially the house that they are in front of us, they are asylum seekers as well or I don't know because they are not British and I recognize they are from another country because they speak another language, they are very rude, very impolite, they don't know about the social living. [...] It's not a good street that we live, actually is not a good area that we live there

Silvia: How do you know, why do you think...

Donya: Because most of them they are addicted, they are seller of the drug, do you know about the Jessica that she lived with us?

Silvia: Yeah...

Donya: Immediately, easily she could provide her material, drug, yeah in that area, it was perfect for her

Silvia: Okay, so is it something that you see on the street? Or is it because the police told you something?

Donya: Nono, I saw a lot of time, I saw a lot of people that they use the drug in the street. You know that actually that area is not good, there is no British people in that area, all of them they are from another country, some of them asylum seekers, some of them just worker from another country and that's why the fucking Jomast they provide this house for us because they wanted we separate from the British people!

Silvia: Mmmm you think they choose an area...

Donya: Yeah, it's a catastrophe really, I cannot tolerate anymore. I just want as soon as possible that the Jomast give me the letter for the leaving of the house [...]

Donya: Because of Jessica all the police officers know about that address [Donya laughs].

Silvia: What do you think about her, why do you think she was acting like that?

Donya: She wasn't asylum seeker, I don't know, maybe she was but first of all she was a drug user, she waste all of her money the 35 pound for the drug, and she brought- she take in two, a lot of men in the house during that time and you know it was very dangerous for us because most of them they were over-drunken

Silvia: Mmmm

Donya: They used the sharing toilet that we were using... [...]

Donya: [Talking about her former housemate Jessica] This is again another fucking behaviour of the Jomast that I say I hate the Jomast, this is again another mistake of the Jomast. The Jomast provide for a drug user, girl, actually they mix asylum seeker with drug user It's again a big mistake of the Jomast. And my question is - why, why the Home Office doesn't manage Jomast and why again they have contract with Jomast because I know it's a very long time that the Home Office has contract with the Jomast, they should stop it because Jomast is not qualified for provide the house for asylum seeker

Silvia: I think this is now changing, I think Jomast has now lost the contract with the Home Office.

Donya: After a lot of problem it's not fair, why should we be in terrible for a long time, for two month I couldn't sleep very well because of Jessica, you know?

[...] Even the organizations that they work for the Home Office, like Jomast, I really hate them, I really hate the Jomast. Because they are very very unreliable person, they are big liar, they don't advise them, because I'm a single woman, I don't have a personal car, I don't have enough money for living, so why you give me a house that its location is very very far from the city centre? How can I come to the city centre to visit my solicitor? How can I come to the city centre for nights, I don't know for anything, for shopping, for visit my friend... how can I come? And in my opinion I think one day if I have the power in the political situation in the UK, I usually ask to the Council that please give a free [bus] ticket to the asylum seeker

Silvia: You think that is very important

Donya: It should be-it's VERY-it's important more than food! You know because 15 pound is a sizeable part of the budget that they give us, we cannot pay every week 15 pounds, 14 pounds!

It's not fair!

In Donya's account, Jomast's 'unfairness' is most acutely experienced in relation to two main issues: the wilful placement of asylum seekers' in peripheral, deprived and 'non-British' areas and the substantial neglect of the people under their management. In Donya's words, 'the Jomast' is personified as a morally dishonest actor – 'a very very unreliable person', 'a big liar!' – who makes many 'mistakes' out of negligence and professional incompetence. This, in Donya's view, reveals a clear punitive intentionality shared by Jomast with the Home Office. Importantly, in her experience, what is perceived as especially problematic, even hurtful, is not only the actual impact of living in a visibly deprived area, but also Jomast's (and by-proxy the Home Office) wilful choice to lump together the unwanted foreigners, whether asylum seekers or 'just non-British workers', and 'drug addicts' (right at the bottom of Donya's hierarchy of social worth), that makes being placed in that area fundamentally 'unfair'.

Donya's harsh statements against 'Jomast' resonate with the complaints raised by countless other dispersed asylum seekers I met through my fieldwork in Newcastle, and whose mobility is severely affected by the peripheral location of their accommodation. Asylum seekers' mobility is in fact hindered not only by their allocated peripheral position but also by the minimal finances at their disposal which means that they would need to spend almost half of their weekly budget to purchase a bus pass. Donya is adamant: mobility for her, as for any other asylum seeker, 'is VERY important, it's more important than food!' This is not just because being on such a low budget with no right to work requires to be able to get to foodbanks, convenience stores and charity shops which may well be out of walking distance, but importantly because the very possibility of exercising a social life - visiting a friend, going for the occasional night out, attending appointments, partaking in the city life – becomes prohibitive and blatantly beyond the institutionally expected (or allowed) 'needs' of asylum seekers. Unsurprisingly, shared or gifted bus tickets are indeed a strong currency in asylum seekers' social transactions in Newcastle. It is not uncommon, for instance to share a 'day-rider' ticket between two or more housemates who'd need to go out at different times in the day, or to call a friend to pass on a still valid weekly ticket. Bus tickets were also meaningful ways faith-based or charities' volunteers would support those asylum seekers they considered most in need or with whom they had developed a close relationship.¹⁷ Still, the cost of public

¹⁷ Newcastle College would also provide free bus tickets to asylum seekers attending in their courses – an important bonus reported to be one of the main reasons for enrolment by some asylum seekers.

transport was a constant source of worry for most asylum seekers who saw their range of action substantially restricted, affecting families and disabled asylum seekers disproportionately. Quite straightforwardly, the imposed social immobility enforced by their liminal legal status is indeed mirrored by the physical immobility asylum seekers endure and which powerfully reinforces the prescribed, fixed social position they have been ascribed.

Under restrained mobility, asylum accommodations' immediate surroundings acquire even greater importance. In Donya's narrative, two equally 'bad' features characterise the part of the city she has been placed in – visible drug-related activities (both dealing and consumption) and the perceived lack of British citizens in the local area which per se signals devaluation. Interestingly, while 'foreigners' and 'drug addicts' are syntactically correspondent terms, Donya somewhat struggles to pair-up the categories of 'asylum seekers' and 'drug addicts' which emerge as mutually exclusive: 'the Jomast provide for a drug user, girl, actually they mix asylum seeker with drug user'. Donya is well aware that the very fact that Jessica lives in her same Home Office asylum accommodation means in itself that she is an asylum seeker, and yet this is clearly an information that Donya (and partly her other housemate too) finds confusing and tries to reject. The sticking point is precisely that, by juxtaposing and even 'mixing' in the same asylum seekers' accommodation someone who is struggling with heroin addiction and engaging with sex work and others who are not, 'the Jomast' puts at risk not just these latter's safety but also, critically, asylum seekers' reputational worth. It is telling, for instance, that Donya feels compelled to rank the two attributes of 'asylum seeker' and 'drug addict' in labelling Jessica. As she put it later on in our conversation, 'she wasn't asylum seeker, I don't know, maybe she was but first of all she was a drug user. [...] I think they should transfer her to her country, in England there is no place for this kind of single women, maybe she should be in a special hospital that they want to help her to stop the drug.' I shall expand later (see chapter 7) on competing understandings of 'deservingness', in this case problematically interwoven with Jessica's racialised identity - as Jessica (unlike her two housemates) is a black woman of Caribbean descent who in the house was often referred to as 'the crazy black woman'. Here I'd just like to highlight how, by talking about the social and moral landscape of the area where Donya and many other asylum seekers are housed, the category of the 'proper' asylum seeker from which, according to Donya, Jessica should be excluded, is constructed as morally distinct (i.e. superior) from the surrounding 'rude', uncivilised foreigners and 'drug addicts' – that is the 'good' asylum seekers' constitutive others. It is this moral hierarchy that the Home Office, via its private contractors, at once produces and harmfully unsettles.

Importantly, Donya adopts a harshly critical stance against the Home Office, while implicitly reiterating dominant social hierarchies of deservingness (e.g. ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ migrant, the ‘good’ and the ‘failed’ citizen; see Anderson, 2013) largely deployed in neoliberal and anti-immigration discourses (e.g. demonising the ‘benefit scroungers’ and ‘scam refugees’ alike) and crystallised in the very working of the asylum system. This finding points to the broader realisation that for a number of asylum seekers, the injustice of the system is ultimately proved (and bodily perceived through strong moral emotions like Donya’s righteous anger) by the Home Office’s failure to live up to its own agenda of management and control of the asylum population. In other words, if many asylum seekers certainly held more radical positions, a number of asylum seekers who partook to the research expressed their demands for justice and asserted their social worth from *within* a moral-political framework which assumes the inviolability of the nation-state and classifies its subjects on moral hierarchies of deservingness.

Betrayed safety – Jasmine

Without necessarily challenging the Home Office’s managerial mandate, asylum seekers’ heterogeneous positionalities, beliefs and experiential backgrounds manifested in a plurality of moral positions regarding their institutional treatment through dispersed housing.

Talking to Donya’s housemate Jasmine (a single woman from Pakistan in her early 30s), for example, provided me with a different evaluation of the people and events that dotted the troubled housing relationships in Scotswood Terrace.

Unsurprisingly, Jasmine is also concerned and upset about their housing situation which she frequently compares to her previous experience in a first-reception hostel for asylum seekers. Unlike the second-line dispersal accommodations for asylum seekers where they are currently living, the hostels are run by charities and have strict rules of conduct.

Jasmine: It’s necessary that in the morning everyone did sign. It’s more important that the person is still present, if it’s here, alive. If it’s not, nobody came to do sign then you need to be worried. And before we go out it was necessary we do sign and after coming back you have to do sign. I don’t know about other hostels, I’m only sharing experience of my hostel.

[...] Because they set some rules that we were following and if you misbehave like something... like you said something bad, either you fight with someone three times – three times if they face any complaints regarding a person and it’s a genuine... and if it’s true and if it’s that person’s fault then they will deport that person.

Silvia: Deport?

Jasmine: Yeah,¹⁸ it was really strict restriction because of behaviour, any fighting issue or any such complains

Silvia: Okay, wow...

Jasmine: So everyone live very very good over there because they know we should behave very good [giggles] and there are a lot of cameras everywhere you can't even lie

Silvia: And you said that the staff there they were very nice right?

Jasmine: Very cooperative, very cooperative. Even reception people they were very cooperative, very helping, very jolly, they never misbehaved, they never treat us like that you are less civilized or any less... creatures than us, they treat us like human beings as any educated person should behave. [...] from a lot of views, I'm thinking that hostel is very good for asylum seekers because Jomast is not working properly [...] they never misguided us and [...] you never push any woman to do anything wrong, like some woman start doing prostitution as you... as I told you my housemate [Jessica]. Just for the... you don't let them - you don't need to put someone in such situation that she had any choice to do! [...] In hostel you were not allowed to bring any other guest other than asylum seekers although you are allowed to meet anyone outside, but not inside. You can't bring any stranger. And you know even in corridors, in sitting areas, in kitchen there are camera, nobody can do anything harm with anybody, you don't feel at any time that you are unsafe and you don't feel like anyone can come inside your house, inside your room, no it's not like that. Because there are reception people those who have duties at night and different people in the morning. And everywhere there are cameras and they will keep looking around.

Silvia: Mm-mm. So you didn't mind having your freedom restricted because of that? Do you feel it was necessary in a way?

Jasmine: Because in my country I was living in a restriction before. For me that's why I didn't feel that. Because I had not any social gatherings, I just moved for my job and then came back. So, I don't have any social gatherings which I felt that 'oh, it's missing now, what I will do? with whom I will go out?'. More important thing for me what I was facing that I should feel secure, that I am safe, that I am alive!' [raising her tone of voice, Jasmine gets emotional].

Jasmine's nostalgic memories of the "good old days" at the asylum hostel became an

¹⁸ It is possible that Jasmine here meant that asylum seekers could be evicted by the hostel (instead of deported from the country) following disciplinary procedures. It might also be that the hostel administrators made reference to the risk jeopardising their asylum case (ultimately leading to the removal from the country) following reported misconduct.

increasingly frequent topic in our conversations. The more critical the situation in her shared Jomast flat became, due to Jessica's violent crises but also caused by the growing tension waiting for her asylum decision, the more vividly she would dwell into her happier past. Recalling her experience at the hostel allows Jasmine to identify, by contrast, what she believes is 'wrong' in her shared dispersal accommodation. The hostel offered all that her current housing situation lacks: constant surveillance; personal safety; a humane, accountable institutional interface; monitored conviviality; and sure punishment for any 'bad behaviour'. Coming from a protracted situation of life-threatening domestic violence within her family in Pakistan, Jasmine welcomes the ubiquitous presence of cameras and the hostel's curfew times that she understands as necessary to ensure asylum seekers' safety. Jasmine's haunting traumas and fear come through in her demand to be 'safe' and 'alive', a paramount concern which overrides any further considerations regarding her privacy or independence, at least for the supposedly limited time she will need to wait for her case resolution. Reinforcing what was perhaps more implicit in Donya's argument, from Jasmine's perspective what is fundamentally 'wrong' about the institutional reception of asylum seekers is that it substantially denies them such safety in the passage from the first-line hostel to dispersal accommodation. Note how, in the reverse picture Jasmine draws, the institutional actors she has encountered now that she is her dispersal location are depicted as immoral agents – they have 'misbehaved', 'misguided us', 'treat[ed] us like that you are less civilized or any less... creatures' behaving as someone who is not 'educated'.

As she lucidly reflects, restrained personal freedom is far from new to her. Her father has never allowed Jasmine or her unmarried sister to mingle with other people in their free time, not even at their older sisters' weddings – as she would often complain in regret. Unlike in her past, however, she believes the hostel restrictions work to the benefit of the asylum seekers temporarily housed there who are prevented from doing any harm to themselves or others. Here, Jasmine shifts her focus from her own to Jessica's situation which further exemplifies her point. Notably, compared to Donya's judgement on the matter, Jasmine's argument starts from different premises, this time anchored in a seemingly non-judgemental evaluation of Jessica's situation although both housemates seem to come to a similar conclusion. In Jasmine's words,

what I felt [is that] no-one of any woman is born alcohol and prostitute, these are circumstances and her bad... you can say experiences which makes her like this! It's this society which push her to do such things, rather than to help her and to put her in any social organisation which they can do something for her! I'm sure if she live under a hostel she never push herself to do such

things! Because we were not allowed to bring any male person in our house!

Here Jessica is not reduced to a 'drug addict' misplaced in an asylum seekers' accommodation but is presented as a woman whose current struggles can be explained by her troubled past (of which neither Donya, Jasmine or myself knew much about) and unhelpful current circumstances. To be held accountable is not Jessica, but what Jasmine calls generically 'this society', and, in her view, the unsuitable housing arrangement Jessica and herself have been placed in. As she comments earlier in the conversation, 'Jomast is not working properly' and Jasmine insists that Jessica would not be engaging in sex work or substance abuse if she could only live in a more caring and regimented environment as the hostel was to her.

Whether a dangerous 'single woman' to be deported or a victim to be re-educated, in her housemates' narratives Jessica embodies the failures of the asylum seekers' dispersal reception. In her reasoning, Jasmine is less quick than Donya to pin down Jomast and thus the Home Office's immoral management of asylum seekers and her language does not convey the piercing demand for fairness Donya aptly articulates. Yet, Jasmine arguably points to the underlying 'lie' eroding the very foundation of the principle of asylum - the betrayed promise of ensuring the safety of people seeking international protection.

As the complex interactions between Donya, Jessica and Jasmine suggest, asylum seekers' everyday experience of institutional housing is first and foremost a relational experience of coerced intimacy/proximity and ongoing moral boundary making within and around the social space of the house. *Looking outside*, both Donya and Mariam (her downstairs asylum-seeking neighbour) expressed contempt towards the local 'Others', which made their area 'terrible', and Jessica who ultimately was perceived to belong to this same, somewhat external, category of people. If these exogenous threats to asylum seekers' moral and reputational worth were imputed to the unfair, negligent work of the Home Office, *looking indoors*, as we shall see in the next section, personal clashes and competitive attitudes were not related to the broader, testing institutional context in which all of them were located as asylum seekers. The relationships of care and reciprocity that Jasmine, her downstairs neighbour Mariam and partly Donya developed importantly made their stay in Scotswood Terrace safer and even enjoyable. What made this network of support possible and so meaningful for them, however, was the same shared socio-legal condition that menaced their moral worth and placed 'unfair' constraints upon their day-to-day life.

In sum, my argument to this point is that moral boundary making within and around the Jomast accommodations is both the expression of and a response to the unfairness and danger of the asylum system epitomised by asylum dispersal housing. In the following section I further explore the double-edged nature of the 'accidental community' (Malkki, 1997, pp. 91-92). Donya, Jasmine and Mariam happen to inhabit, but with an eye towards coexisting expressions of care and competition.

Enforced proximity between makeshift family and competition

When asked about her neighbourhood, Donya's first comment referred to her immediate neighbours, a 'lovely' Georgian family of five who have been living in the Jomast flat downstairs for three years, while waiting for their asylum claim to be assessed. As I would come to witness over the course of my fieldwork, Mariam and her exuberant husband Tamaz have been the unshakable source of physical and emotional rescue, information, affectionate conviviality, moral authority and much-needed mediation with institutional stakeholders throughout Donya's and her housemates' troubled stay in Scotswood Terrace. It is telling that, much to my worry, Jasmine repeatedly refused to request to be re-located into a different Home Office accommodation while dealing with Jessica's unpredictable behaviour, aggressive outbursts and the seamless visits of male clients and dealers alike. The reason, she explained, was that she would then need to move away from Mariam and Tamaz, her downstairs neighbours who granted her a ready safe escape when the situation in the house escalated, as it often did.

Over time, Mariam also became the main company for Jasmine's long, lonely days with a busy reciprocal traffic of home-baked cakes, Biryani rice, dolmas, pakoras, custard doughnuts (Jasmine's favourite) travelling up and down the stairs overlooking their leafy backyard. If Jasmine as a fluent English speaker could help Mariam practice her English, Mariam was a trusty, warm confidant for Jasmine, someone she could share difficult memories with, and also a mother who, with her family, could offer a safe, affectionate space of ordinary family business that Jasmine was always welcome to join. Their relationship allowed Jasmine, a schoolteacher in Pakistan, to retrieve her professional self as she advised and comforted Mariam over her many worries about her three children's school education and moral upbringing in England. In the following conversation, for example, Mariam is complaining about her teenage daughter while the three of us are having tea and cake around the family's dining table:

Mariam: 'She's good at school, but after school only boxing! She never reads books, she never

asks if I am okay, if I need any help, only her friends are important, only her friends are the best and look after her.’

Jasmine: ‘You need to give her a hug, a kiss, you need to tell her...’

Mariam: ‘I am not only mum! Because of her less education she thinks she knows everything, if I want to give some advice, she doesn’t listen to me, I am afraid if she doesn’t read books, she never improves her personality, this will not change. [...] You know sometimes I see many children on public transport, they are really loud, do many bad things and their parents don’t say a word. In my opinion, this is only my opinion, without books, no internet, no social media can grow their personality, can’t develop. They need to learn what is good and what is bad! [...] You know here you can’t leave your children alone until they are 13, not even to go to the shop two minutes, because my friend told me she went out to do some shopping, her daughter, 13 years old, was in the house and Jomast called the police! I like [that] you need to be careful, but sex is okay, it’s not your right to say nothing [to your children], it’s their personal life! [...] Because my daughter’s classmates belong to this country, to this tradition, it’s normal to them. It’s not my job to say this is wrong, but I think it’s very bad for children.’

Jasmine: ‘You know, in my experience, it is very helpful if you talk to other mums at the school, they can also give you advice’

Mariam: ‘They can’t understand, because they can’t even imagine other countries, other traditions! My daughter told me “mum I don’t want to be a housewife like you” – “we throw away our personal life for our children, you are very lucky, your parents love you so much. You don’t have a problem, don’t make your life complicated, your family is very strong, why do you think you have a problem?” You love your children because they are yours! You give all your energy, all your life, not just birth, birth is nothing. We have to be very clever, because I know a lot of examples of people who have many children, but in despite of this they died alone.’

Jasmine: ‘This is the harsh reality! [...] The way you correct them, you need to talk indirectly, you need to make stories, give examples like “I have a good friend, her daughter helps her a lot, that’s amazing”, but at this stage it’s a very dangerous stage...’

Mariam: ‘Oh my God, you’re psychologist, you’re my angel!’

Mariam is venting out her concerns over what she sees as questionable, even contradictory regulations regarding children’s upbringing that she understands as embedded in the specific ‘tradition’ of ‘this country’. As in other kitchen conversations that I occasionally joined, these were opportunities not only to consolidate Jasmine and Mariam’s rapport, but also to dialogically engage with their unfolding understandings of their social surroundings,

questioning (or restating) long-held values and contextual social norms. This social space was a core part of both Jasmine and Mariam's settlement process where the shared fragility of their legal situation and the physical and social immobility imposed by their status could be temporarily left in the background. The home they socially co-constructed was placed neither in their precarious and morally ambiguous 'here' nor really in their respective 'back there', but was a space where Jasmine could put on her teacher's hat and Mariam concern herself with the best possible intellectual and moral education for her children - suspending the fear that they could be stripped of their right to stay in country the next day. In this affective community, even kinship ties could be re-arranged and amended, as Tamaz (Mariam's husband) once told Jasmine that if her biological father had disowned her, he would then be her father, Jasmine being already part of their family. If the shared experience of dispersed asylum seekers was certainly the catalyst of Jasmine and her neighbours' close relationship, however, this same proximity gave rise to strong tensions in the flat upstairs. In the following excerpt, for example, Donya is talking about the young woman, from Iran like herself, who used to live in their flat before Jessica moved in.

Donya: I don't know, her characteristics are completely different with Iranian people - Iranian people I find them very lovely, but she was one of the unique, one of the... you know, exception. She was HARDLY Iranian, I couldn't believe that she is Iranian because she was completely different character!

Silvia: Mmmm what characteristics?

Donya: For example, Iranian girls when they visit each other they are very honest, one day they can explain about their personal life, boyfriend, family background... they are...

Silvia: They share a lot

Donya: Yeah share and usually they are very talkative like Italians they are talkative, Iranians they are talkative [giggling], but she was very secret, she didn't tell me about her family, her boyfriend, background experience... nothing, just she said I was a doctor in Iran, a biology doctor. Okay, but I explained to her a lot of detail of my life, you know? [...] Even when she understand that I give a positive answer from the Court, she didn't give me a hug and say congratulations Donya! congratulations, it's a good news! never, because she is jealous on me, she didn't give a positive answer from the Court, we are in the same situation and now she think I win and she lost.

Donya mobilises their shared nationality to first make sense of her housemate's behaviour, but that proves an inadequate lens as Parvin fails to meet Donya's expectations. According to

Donya, Parvin is not talkative, refrains from sharing personal information and is 'jealous' of Donya's positive asylum response – all features that make her 'hardly Iranian'. If Donya seems to feel strongly about what 'proper' Iranian girls should and should not act like, it is Donya's last sentence that I find especially revealing. In many ways, Parvin and Donya find themselves in the same situation, both have fled Iran and are hoping to be granted leave to remain in the country, they are two single young women happening to live in the same flat in a city neither of them knows, yet this shared experience sparks competition and not solidarity.

This was not an isolated instance, quite the contrary. Although Donya frames Parvin's secrecy and jealousy as expressions of her non-Iranian character, examples of mistrust and competition amongst peer asylum seekers were far from uncommon in my fieldwork experience in Newcastle. Indeed, the more two asylum cases were potentially similar, as in the case of two fellow country people, the riskier it would be to share personal information for, as Jasmine explained to me, 'people can steal your case'. Expectations of solidarity and mutual trust, especially among co-ethnic or national groups could then be betrayed under the pressure of 'finding' a 'good' asylum case. Among the asylum seekers I met in Newcastle, it was common knowledge that asylum claims were often 'augmented' with additional fabricated information in the hope to raise the claimant's chances of a positive asylum response in the face of the Home Office's overt hostility. Paradoxically, sharing information among fellow asylum seekers was thus considered both vital to attempt to meet the Home Office extremely high (country-specific) asylum acceptance threshold, but also potentially dangerous in that it was commonly thought that two similar cases could spoil one's chances of success. Unsurprisingly then, Jasmine and Donya never shared information about each other's asylum applications and Jasmine would often wonder if Donya's swift changes of mood were due to some new communication she might have received from the Home Office on her asylum case. Jasmine could only guess because, she was sure, Donya would never share such information with her.

A sanctuary by whom? In the gap of policy-made destitution

When you have nothing and you are on the street some people look down at you, some people find it funny, they think is a joke! To me these people are puppets, like toys, they are empty, they are stupid, they know nothing about life. [...] Life is hard sometimes, but you need to have faith, God has a plan for you, God will show you the way. Ask your grandma!¹⁹ For me life

¹⁹ Over the course of our informal meetings, Hakim learnt how that my devout Catholic Italian grandmother has long been my main source of theological knowledge and she would be often invoked by Hakim or me alike

without religion is nothing! If you don't have faith how can you do? You would not survive one day in a forest with no food. Now I hope there is still something for me in this life, I don't know! I am waiting, what can I do?

Queuing up in front of the biggest community kitchen of Newcastle, this is how Hakim, a charismatic Maghrebi man in his late 40s, reflects on the time he was living on the street after his asylum application was refused. Hakim's asylum application was rejected, but because of the serious health conditions he has since developed, he is now housed in a shared Home Office accommodation (known as a Section 4 accommodation) in the West End of the city. The perverse irony is that, according to Hakim, the cardiac issue that has made him eligible for statutory housing was caused in the first place by the unbearable stress he endured since he received a negative asylum decision. In front of the crowded community kitchen as in other conversations we had, however, Hakim underscores his strong belief in God's providence and the transcendental strength he gains from his faith. This, he is positive, is what allowed him to survive the time when he was made street homeless. If there is no justice, no 'human concern' in the Home Office draconian actions – as Hakim would often put it – his faith tells him that 'God has a plan' for everyone which gives teleological meaning to all human suffering.

If Hakim's faith has helped him endure and make sense of policy-made destitution, street homelessness is undoubtedly a traumatic experience, and for some participants still an open wound which was too painful to talk about over the course of our encounters. In Newcastle, at the time of my fieldwork, a significant number of 'destitute' asylum seekers managed to access some form of informal (i.e. non-governmental) hospitality after intermittent periods of street homelessness, while others could afford independent rentals as they engaged in a variety of informal jobs. As I will explore in some depth in the last section of the chapter, this latter group would typically include refused asylum seekers who had been in the country for a few years and who could count on established social networks of support. Whatever their circumstances, however, none of these housing arrangements were permanent or secure. None of these solutions was left untouched by the constant threat of eviction or enforced removal from the country. Crucially, regardless of the living standards they may have managed to secure for themselves, all 'refused' asylum seekers I met were acutely aware of the fact that, as far as the Home Office were concerned, 'we could be dying on the street'. As in the sinister, somewhat sudden, realisation of a young refused asylum seeker queuing up in a

when, for instance, we were drawing parallels between similar Muslim and Catholic faith-based sayings.

charity's hallway, the question many asked themselves was 'how do they think we are surviving?' The seemingly foregone disposability of refused asylum seekers' livelihood is the baseline against which to understand the fragile workings of informal hospitality and life under the radar I explore in the next two parts of the chapter.

In the following section, I focus on the realities of predominantly single male destitute asylum seekers and their informal hosts in the attempt to illuminate the moral transactions at play in the 'gap' of the system. With important exceptions (see Zendaya's case), a number of charity workers and volunteers seemed to agree that single women would be normally prioritised in charities' private hosting schemes, making single men especially vulnerable to street homelessness.

A sanctuary by whom?

Even the charities are poor at offering overnight accommodation, you know we need somebody to have an all-night drop-in, there are difficulties if... with churches for example - said it, they do it in some cities so I don't know if it's local rules here, but as soon as somebody is sleeping it affects your insurance, then there is all the health and safety about how many lavatories you've got for the number of people [...] we actually have a very, very efficient system for taking everything away from them, to make everything against the law – go and sleep in a public space, not being allowed to sleep anywhere, even when you, if you want to give someone a few quid and put them in a bunk house, the grottiest one, they can't if they haven't got ID.

Liz, longer-term charity worker and informal host.

Newcastle has been the third city in the country to be awarded the title of 'City of Sanctuary' in 2013 after the movement took off in Sheffield in 2005 and Swansea followed in 2010. This is a status officially recognised by the council's cabinet that made Newcastle 'part of a network of towns and cities throughout the country that are proud to be places of safety, and which include people seeking sanctuary fully in the lives of their communities' (Newcastle City of Sanctuary, 2015). True to its inclusive agenda but also telling of a much longer local history of socio-economic struggles, the city is dotted by countless charitable initiatives, community cafes, soup kitchens, 'city angels' homelessness-relief interventions, free language classes and also institutional collaborations with colleges and universities (if still very tentative and symbolic in character). In Chapter 7 [Across and beyond contexts], I will expand on this much-promoted aspect of the city public agenda and self-image in dialogue with 'welcome culture' discourses circulating in Catania. From the empirical perspective of refused asylum seekers' everyday experience, however, the extent to which charitable organisations

could counter the void in statutory support faced by refused asylum seekers (and their need of shelter in particular) was limited. Echoing Liz's words, the UK hostile environment has resulted in 'a very, very efficient system for taking everything away from them, to make everything against the law'. Despite the structural limitations of the third sector, only a relatively small, ever shifting, number of refused asylum seekers were living on the streets of Newcastle. This, I suggest, reflects *not* the fact that homelessness was a marginal issue among refused asylum seekers in the city, quite the contrary, but rather that a substantial number of them were able to secure some form of informal accommodation, if often intermittent and precarious, either in-between or in place of organisational support.

Although some long-term charity workers and volunteers voiced more or less veiled criticism at the alleged inaction of religious institutions in terms of practical support to destitute asylum seekers in the city, this was explained as the inescapable result of bureaucratic constraints, as Liz also pointed out in frustration. At least in the case of some mosques and churches, however, such constraints were tacitly circumvented on limited occasions and in some cases, refused asylum seekers found support from individual members of their religious communities. Under such circumstances, what was less exceptional was for refused asylum seekers to be hosted by other current or former asylum seekers. In these regards, Ephrem's path was in many ways similar to that of other refused asylum seekers.

A single man from Eritrea in his 30s, Ephrem once showed me the street where he was hosted for some 7 months by an asylum seeking 'very good friend' living in a Jomast accommodation. He tells me he used to leave the house between 7 and 8 in the morning and come back at night to avoid Jomast staff's unannounced inspections to the flat. He stressed how he was always in a state of alert, vigilant to the noise of any car that would park outside the house. On these occasions, he would quickly pack up his clothes and hide them behind the sofa where he would be sitting pretending to be visiting the friend – that was the go-to response to Jomast's impromptu visits during daytime. One morning, however, he was too tired and did not hear Jomast's car approaching. He was found asleep in the house. Although some Jomast staff members were known to occasionally turn a blind eye to informal hosting, on that morning, Jomast's reaction was firm. As Ephram recalls, there was 'too much talking, [Jomast staff were] shouting too many things: "what are you doing here?? you go now! I call the police!" too angry man!'. Ephram had to leave the flat in a rush. He tried to find alternative solutions, he asked for help at the church he normally attended, but the pastor said he was already hosting three or four other people. Ephram was also let down by the few co-

nationals he contacted for support - 'they no reply, from my country, but no help.'

With no exception, all asylum seekers in receipt of housing support were aware, and routinely reminded by Jomast, that hosting someone else in their 'Section 95' accommodation could jeopardize their asylum claim. When I asked Ateef, a serial 'host' in his Scotswood Jomast accommodation, if he was concerned about this risk, he replied that in his experience Jomast visits were quite rare and there were times when nobody turned up for more than a month. He also added that he knew 'Jomast usually working start 9 o'clock, it finish 6 o'clock', which made their control checks predictable and easy to avoid. In a way then, Jomast's much-condemned negligence in looking after their properties' maintenance, responding to complaints and even replying to emergency calls allowed a certain flexibility within asylum seekers' house-shares that could be exploited to the advantage of friends or acquaintances. The very negligence that for so many asylum seekers was the most tangible proof of their institutional abandonment made informal hosting arrangements between 'regular' and refused asylum seekers relatively less risky for the informal hosts. Furthermore, as in Ateef's Jomast accommodation, asylum seekers' widespread engagement in the informal job market meant that Jomast flats had often more free beds than officially recorded, making more space available for 'guests'.

“The basic thing is you're human”

When asked about their motivations in opening their doors to destitute asylum seekers, a number of 'regular' asylum seekers conveyed a sense of almost unquestionable moral obligation. This is, for example, how Ateef explained to me his choice to host his friend Yunis, a refused asylum seeker from a Sub-Saharan African country (like Ateef a Arab-speaking man in his late 20s), for one year in his shared Jomast accommodation:

Ateef: Because he don't have anybody here Yunis. He go from somebody say nonono you can't sleep with me. Many many body he go because my house too far away, say nonono I can't live with you in this, here. [...] Any people say no. *I say come with me, no problem.* I was thinking one hundred people, what I do for him? If you want to stay you stay, no problem. One year, after he go. Say no, just enough, I want to open my case...

Silvia: I see. So why do you think many many people said no, and you said yes?

Ateef: I don't know. Because Yunis he don't do anything wrong, very nice guy, I don't know.

As discussed earlier on in this chapter, the peripheral location of Ateef's Jomast accommodation was perceived as an important obstacle to asylum seekers' day-to-day life and

this is also the reason why Yunis declined Ateef's offer of hospitality at first. However, after 'many many people' refused to host him, Yunis took on Ateef's offer and moved into the flat for one year, until he decided to work on a fresh asylum claim and was then (although unrelatedly) accepted on a long-term charity hosting scheme. This conversation also highlights that, if informal hosting among asylum seekers was not uncommon in Newcastle, it is fair to presume that a much larger number of asylum seekers were understandably not willing to allow an extra person inside their house, at their own risk.

What I found interesting, however, was that those asylum seekers who *did* open their doors to their destitute friends would often articulate their decision as an almost natural choice, being them perfectly aware of the fact that their destitute asylum-seeking friends had no alternative safety net. What was also self-evident to the asylum seekers I talked to was that they could easily find themselves in the very same situation of enforced homelessness. In a matter of weeks, they could be the ones knocking at friends' doors, should their asylum claim be unsuccessful or, as it was often the case, if they would experience delays in the transition between Home Office housing support to Council housing if they were granted leave to remain. This, I believe, played an important role in binding 'regular' and refused asylum seekers together within networks of support and reciprocity which often bridged national and ethnic boundaries.

For some asylum seekers like Ateef, then, offering hospitality was perceived less as a virtuous ethical gesture and more as the only morally acceptable response to the given situation – leaving a fellow asylum seeker, be them a friend or acquaintance, who 'didn't do anything wrong' on the street was simply not an option. In Ateef's narrative, the only reason why potential 'hosts' may refuse to shelter someone is if the proponent guest has breached moral expectations of doing 'good', however differently understood, but this, he insisted, was not the case of his friend Yunis, a 'very nice guy'. This idea of moral duty was also echoed by Frack, a seasoned activist and long-term refugee in Newcastle, who talking about asylum seeker's informal hosting commented that 'people *don't have any choice*, they break the rules, but they can't see a friend living outside'.

As it emerged more clearly over the course of my fieldwork in Newcastle, these same networks of care and reciprocity extended beyond the current asylum-seeking population in the city to include migrants who, whatever their current legal status, had themselves been through the asylum process in their past. This is for instance how Al, a refugee from Iraq and owner of a pizza shop, explained his drive to help other asylum seekers in need:

The basic thing is you're human. Loads of people helped me, *if I forget all of them obviously I am not a human*. [...] I see people who don't believe in anything. Religion definitely helps to make you a better person, but also how you understand different cultures, different people, it's all about that understanding.

His words struck me for how incisively they expressed what he perceived as his moral obligation towards others for the very 'basic thing' that they, as him, are 'human'. For Al, not helping others in need would mean failing to reciprocate the help he received from the many people who stepped in to support him when he was struggling in the past. Stepping out of the chain of humane reciprocity he is already entangled with would ultimately mean that he is not fully human. This excerpt was part of a longer conversation we had in a popular Persian 'community restaurant', as it was described to me by its regular clients. In the loud restaurant, Al recalled the time when he found himself homeless in the critical transition between his Home Office accommodation and Council housing. At that time, he was able to find a family willing to host him through the help of a Christian charity – a charity that, as many others, did not survive the later government's cuts to the third sector and no longer exists. Al repeatedly referred to this hosting family as his 'English family' and told me he is still in touch with his 'sister', now that both parents have passed away. He reflected that most asylum seekers who find themselves homeless would turn to a friend for help, if they have any. In fact, he himself hosted other destitute asylum seekers once he moved into his council flat - 'I had a two-bedroom flat, in one there was always someone who didn't have a place. it was good for me as well, I had some company, we cooked together, played football...'. These were not always people he was already friend with. For example, he recalls 'one guy' he had only seen once before at the football pitch and who had managed to get in touch with Al through other people. Al tells me the guy turned out to be a great cook, 'he always cooked for me' and became a good friend of his.

Between pure gift and 'civil slavery'

So far, I have tried to shed some light on the largely neglected reality of informal hosting among asylum seekers in Newcastle. However fragile, I suggest that these networks of care and reciprocity are the vital safety net that makes refused asylum seekers' life at the margin of society possible. For many destitute asylum seekers, these forms of informal hospitality are what 'fills the gap' purposely created by the UK immigration legal system and that institutionalised charity can only marginally alleviate. As I argue below, however, it is fundamental to develop a nuanced understanding of these relationships of support which

might be best conceived of as moral transactions.

Given the power unbalance existing between destitute 'guests' and their housed 'hosts', such informal arrangements are also, necessarily, relationships of dependency. If a number of asylum seeking 'hosts' phrased their willingness to help destitute friends or acquaintances in terms of moral obligation, it is hard to tell whether their respective 'guests' also held a similar perspective on their hosts' motivations, whether there were any expectations of material reciprocity on the part of destitute asylum seekers and, if so, what was understood to then be a 'fair' exchange. I have no reason to doubt that in some cases the hosting part, knowing that their guests' constrained circumstances, was not interested in any material compensation, as some research participants like Ateef and Al told me. I also do not question that these social transactions were perceived as morally sound from the perspective of the asylum-seeking hosts I talked to. And yet, it is likely that a number of these same informal arrangements involved forms of exchange that could be judged as unfair or even exploitative.

On this matter, an experienced charity worker and former refugee told me he suspected that a significant part of refused asylum seekers were hosted by family, friends, or co-ethnic community members in exchange of a symbolic contribution to the bills. For instance, if they get £ 10 per week as financial support from a local charity, their host might ask to give them £5 for the bills. He also told me he knew that an increasing number of refused asylum seekers were 'exploited by their hosts', 'they are asked to do this and that job and then the host gives them a tiny fraction of what they have earned. These people know they have no choice.' Confirming the charity worker's fear, Lamine, a refused asylum seeker from Gambia, expressed a mixture of shame for his recent unemployment (after a life of financial independence) and disenchanting resentment towards his co-national 'community':

I have worked all my life since I was 15, never asked a penny for benefits, this is the first time I am unemployed to be honest with you. [...] You know unfortunately when you find yourself in need your community turn their back at you, they want to enslave you, you have to do things for them without asking any questions, honestly it's civil slavery, modern civil slavery. The whites help you and the blacks use you. It's sad, but it's true.

A man in his early 40s who had lived in the UK for almost 20 years, Lamine was referring to the pressure he felt to take part to petty criminal activities (i.e. street drug dealing) in order to join the network of support and reciprocity the 'community' he knew would offer him. In his account, these exploitative expectations were common among black 'communities', unlike among the helping 'whites'.

Zendaya's opinion echoed Lamine's words. A bright woman in her late 30s originally from a Southern African country, Zendaya found herself street homeless when her asylum appeal was rejected about 8 years ago. At the time, she was pregnant with her son and it was not until she reached the eighth month of pregnancy that she was able to access a supported shelter for single mothers. 'You know Silvia, many of us suffer from the hands of our own [ethnic-national] community [...] even if you don't know them, they know you!' Through word of mouth, she explains, everyone would know who you are and 'if you have papers'. 'When they have documents they think they are superior, they don't help you, they just call you if they need you.' Similarly, other refused asylum-seeking women from Western and Southern African countries reported instances of work exploitation, especially with regards to underpaid or unpaid domestic work at other co-nationals' houses. As Bloch's (2014) study of Zimbabwean refused asylum seekers across the UK also shows, these are common reported practices caught up in highly uneven relationships of dependency.

The institutional gap refused asylum seekers inhabit is thus a hybrid space traversed by precarious and highly heterogeneous networks of reciprocity, dependency and exploitation. These, I argue, are morally laden social and material transactions which can range from disinterested enactments of moral obligations towards fellow human beings to what are articulated as instances of civil 'enslavement'. Where on this spectrum each of these informal hosting arrangements belongs is largely defined by who in those situations holds the power to name and frame these moral transactions. In line with what observed with institutionally housed asylum seekers, destitute asylum seekers are deeply entangled in the double-edged 'accidental community' (Malkki, 1997, pp. 91-92) of Newcastle's heterogeneous asylum population. However, while in the Home Office house-shares exclusive moral boundary making can result in tense horizontal relationships inside and around the house, in the case of refused asylum seekers and their informal 'hosts' what is at stake is the moral negotiation of vertical ties of dependency. In these scenarios, refused asylum seekers' institutionally enforced destitution can thus be situationally mobilised by better-off (current or former) asylum seekers as demanding moral obligations of care, justifying interested arrangements or, most likely, something in between the two.

In the last session of this chapter, I move on to explore how those who could be considered (in a seeming oxymoron) 'settled' refused asylum seekers exercise moral agency. In particular, starting from the experiences of two Kurdish young men, I reflect on how their material and affective settlement in the city can become important loci through which moral worth,

legitimacy and a moral life are negotiated. Before analysing long-term refused asylum seekers' legal constraints and moral responses, I first draw on interview transcripts and fieldnotes to briefly sketch the profile of the two research participants who featured most prominently in my exploration of 'settled' asylum seekers' everyday moral life.

“There is no other way”? Shame and legitimacy in refused asylum seekers' livelihoods

Reshaping the crimmigration margin - Faris & Ibrahim

The first thing **Faris** tells me when we meet at a Costa cafe is that he has put on weight recently, he stopped exercising. He used to go to a boxing club, a 'good club' - he boxes at a competitive level. He has been going there for years, but he was recently asked to provide a copy of his passport, he's not sure why, possibly for the medical checks. He ignored the request, kept quiet, but then they asked again, so he decided to leave the gym. He misses it, also the guys at the gym keep texting him, asking to come back. He has never thought of telling them about his immigration status - 'they won't understand, they don't know about this, maybe they will laugh at me, how can I tell them?' 'You know I have many English friends, I've been here for a long time, and every time they ask me "why can't you come with us?" Like to Amsterdam, they know nothing about not having a passport, they have no idea what it means and I'll never tell them I have no documents, it's something very private, you don't say that! [...] sometimes I say I go on holidays and I disappear for a couple of weeks!' Secrecy and mistrust are indeed a recurring theme in our conversations, especially in reference to fellow Kurdish or 'other international people' - 'you know friends is different... I can say I know many people, but I don't think they are all friends. If they like you, if they know you well, they like to see you down. I know from my experience, to be honest many people try to take advantage of my situation. They know that people in my situation need to work, need to survive. Nowadays I've learnt a lot from the past, I don't think someone else can grass me, I've seen a lot, not just to me...'

Not having legal status in the country is also proving an issue with his current landlord. 'It's not easy to find a place to rent in my situation, I think it's a new law, but landlords get fined 10,000 pounds if they rent to people with no papers... my landlord asked me to give him a copy of my passport, I didn't and I paid one, two, three months and he went quiet! I asked if he could put the flat under my uncle's name but he said no.' Faris is living with another friend, but is now looking for another place, he knows the landlord will eventually start chasing him again asking for his passport, he needs to leave soon. He tells me he wants to live by himself 'I need peace, I need calm. If someone is unemployed, is desperate [then] I want to help, he can stay with me, but otherwise I want to be by myself... For 10 years I lived with other people, share flats... now

it's enough.'

Faris's asylum claim was refused with no further right of appeal ten years ago. 'I can only do my best for myself and see how it goes'. He is now paying for a private solicitor who asked him to get his birth certificate and his father's death certificate from Iraqi Kurdistan, 'but I have nobody there, nobody is going there, it's too dangerous, how can I get this evidence for my case? Sometimes I even think to go back, try to get these certificates and come back.'

For a couple of years Faris lived in Bristol and Manchester, where he was working informally, but then decided to come back to Newcastle, the city to which he was dispersed as an asylum seeker when he arrived in the country: 'it was my choice. Here I get along with everyone, I'm really - I feel like home you know? Because the first 10 years of your life you know nothing, it's true, you don't even remember... your real life starts when you're 18, 19 and I've been here since I was 18! I know more about here than over there, honestly! I like the people in here.'

Faris has been working in Gosforth for two years and a half now, he drives a car, although he is not legally allowed to do either. 'Let me ask you something' he shows me his hand and counting on his fingers he tells me: 'I could either live on the street, homeless [first option, one finger down]; go and sell drugs [second finger down] or go to work and pay my rent – honestly, what would you do? These are the only options. To be honest I think the Home Office is very stupid, they know we have to survive, they know we all work. I would like to pay taxes, pay my bills, but I am not allowed to! Who is losing? Is them! It's me as well, stressing everyday... [...]' Because you're never guaranteed in this country, you don't know what happens the next day! To be honest I almost got married in 2014... but it's very difficult, my friend had a girlfriend and a beautiful baby, a girl, but then he had to leave, he went back home [Iraq] and he doesn't know if will ever see them again, he had to leave the girlfriend and the baby... how can you live like that?'

~

For months, **Ibrahim** has been one of the refused asylum seekers I would regularly see on a Wednesday morning during my volunteer shift at a charity drop-in. At the very top of his file record, the ticked box on the side of the 'destitute' field informed me that, as a refused asylum seeker with no recourse to public funds or right to work, Ibrahim was entitled to the weekly financial support (£10) the charity offered to this specific group of people, drawing from ever shrinking private donations. For months, Ibrahim would join the drop-in just before the charity's closing time at 1pm wearing his home clothes, his eyes swollen, slurring words in between strings of yawns. For months, I jotted down on my notepad my hypothetical worries about this young man with impeccable manners and a tendency for loquacity slowed down but substantially unscathed by his visible exhaustion - was he clinically depressed? Taking heavy

medications and/or drugs? Was he sleeping through his empty days to evade from a life of enforced destitution and inactivity? As it turned out, Ibrahim was yes exhausted, but from his late-night shifts at the take-away he was managing, occasionally helping out with the deliveries, while also running a corner shop. He was managing these two small businesses on behalf of a co-ethnic friend ‘with papers’ who was at the time living abroad. The employees he managed were not aware of his legal situation, which he would often refer to as being ‘stateless’ or ‘without status’, while also self-identifying as an Iraqi Kurdish.

In Ibrahim’s opinion, being ‘without status’, however, did not affect the ‘regularity’ of the two legally registered and taxed businesses. Indeed, ‘everything and everyone is legal, just me, the boss, I am not legal! [laughing] It’s okay, let them to catch me and blah-blah, let them to ask me why I do this one, I tell them! [...] to be honest with you I’d like to, what do you call, pay tax. I’d like to be someone who is legalised and pay [taxes] instead of paying [another] person to open the insurance for me and blah-blah to give them [taxes to the state] directly! [...] but the issue is they don’t let you! Whereas if they don’t let you, you have to go another way. And to go as another way I know it’s not nice, but there’s no other option, you have to! [...] they force you to leave, mentally they make you ill because of overthinking about status blah-blah that’s why... [...] It’s a reality about life, if you are overthinking about something that you are not getting because you are powerless it has effect on your body!’

Under the pressure of becoming ‘legalised’, Ibrahim tells me that a friend offered to sell him his own passport for £5,000, which would allow him to cross the border and settle elsewhere, ‘maybe Canada’, ‘but I say no for now... this is the dirty way, to be honest, I wish I had my documents, I want to go to university, study at master level and beyond that. To be honest I could even pay for all the fees, but I have no documents to work, they will just be papers in the corner of the room, why I get a degree if I can’t use it?’

Buying someone else’s passport is not the only back route into legalization Ibrahim has been offered. He is visibly agitated as he tells me about the conversation he has recently had with ‘the British woman’ he is currently dating. ‘The other day she asked me if I wanted to get married for the documents you know, get the visa for 3 years and stuff... “just apply on my name” - no way! [...] she is British, you can’t trust British people, they always come to you when they need something then if you need them they disappear, what if she changes her mind?’ ‘I can’t say it’s a relationship, it’s not a relationship, but it was kind of, what you call, friendship which is try to go further but because of my situation I never ever accept it because I cannot let myself, what you call, later on, somebody... or even my children later on tell me “you’ve got a kid because to have your status”, no chance! I won’t let myself, if later on I will be someone who is independent maybe I will make my own family, but not now [...] just kind of, what you call... interested relationship blah-blah, I don’t like it. Maybe some people do differently, maybe some

people do that, that's why Home Office sometimes they'll give a refuse about those people, but for myself... I never ever accepted even without my status all my life, I don't care, but [with] children, how do you call, is quite a disaster!'

Refused asylum seekers like Faris and Ibrahim routinely wrestle with the pervasive powers of the UK 'crimmigration' system (Stumpf, 2006). By normalizing the progressive 'confluence of criminal and immigration law' in Britain as elsewhere (Bowling and Westera, 2020, p. 164), not the least in Italy (but see Fabini, 2017), 'individuals now face harsh criminal sanctions for immigration offences' (Bhatia, 2020, p. 36). This is how in the UK undocumented stay in the country, forgery of identification documents, breaches of immigration restrictions, as the work ban for undocumented migrants, have been turned 'from administrative matters dealt with civil courts into ones that are dealt through the criminal courts' (Bhatia, 2020, p. 39). This, Bhatia argues, translates into 'the institutional infliction of injuries on asylum seekers', not 'because of their personal characteristics but as a result of their classification in a racialized group' (Bhatia, 2020, p. 38). As many scholars have showed through the lens of 'everyday bordering' (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018; Cassidy, 2019), the endemic 'crimmigration' trend goes hand in hand with the proliferation of 'internal borders' performed not only through exemplary immigration raids or employers' bordering duties, but also, as Faris's situation illustrates, through the banal ID checks carried out by landlords, administrators in sports centres, as well as healthcare personnel (as confirmed by interviewed charity workers) and even institutional charities (Taylor, 2017).

Zooming into the everyday experiential level, scholars have tended to depict irregular migrants, and refused asylum seekers among them, as 'living completely outside of the system' (Bloch, 2014, p. 1508), inhabiting 'a contemporary form of *abjectivity*: subjective experience, either individual or collective, that is categorically defined by the penetrating influence of sociopolitical abjection' (Willen, 2014, p. 86 italics in original). Yet, when we look at Faris and Ibrahim's everyday life, the concepts of 'categorical' exclusion and "abjectivity" fail to capture how they exercise their moral agency in navigating the multiple moral dilemmas they encounter in their day-to-day life, as well as the material and affective reality of their settlement in Newcastle.

With Willen (2014, p. 87), I underscore how migrant illegality is a 'juridical, sociopolitical, and experiential condition' which influences 'the texture and contours' of undocumented migrants' 'existential and moral reality'. I suggest, however, that the multiple and subjective ways in which refused asylum seekers' are affected by and respond to processes of

criminalization are not simply the product of crimmigration policies but are situational outcomes of intersecting (and often competing) normative, moral frameworks. For example, the legal-bureaucratic obstacles to asylum seekers' right to get married, one could argue, are not *per se* a threat to refused asylum seekers' sense of self-worth, but can become such if one's sense of accomplishment, or 'respectability', often articulated in gendered notions (Pasura and Christou, 2018), is tightly bound to one's marital status, and/or if marriage is endorsed as the normative prerequisite for partnerships. In other words, the institutional harm (Bhatia, 2020) refused asylum seekers are subject to becomes fully legible only if we account for the implications of punitive regulations in relation to the (shifting and subjectively interpreted) moral and 'existential imperatives' (Jackson, 2005b) they breach. Likewise, refused asylum seekers' responses to legal prohibitions cannot be reduced to reactive tactics of survival or, on the discursive level, 'strategic rationalization' (Pasquetti, Casati and Sanyal, 2019, p. 295) - although they *can* be so - but I suggest are better understood as discursive and pragmatic responses mobilized by fully moral agents.

In the rest of this section, I illustrate this point with reference to three critical ways through which refused asylum seekers exercise moral agency at the crossroad between structural constraints, competing values and aspirations: 1) affirmations of moral worth through work life; 2) disarticulation of legitimacy and legality; 3) 'self-management' of affective settlement in Newcastle.

'I would like to pay taxes!' - Working towards moral worth

In many ways, Faris and Ibrahim can be seen as 'successful' migrants who, in a relatively short span of time, have achieved economic independence and established meaningful social connections in their 'host society'. Exemplary neoliberal subjects, resourceful refused asylum seekers like them have 'refashion[ed] themselves as resilient, entrepreneurial subjects' (Ilean and Rygiel, 2015, p. 333) and have managed to carve their way through an overtly hostile socio-political environment and competitive labour market. What is more, Faris' and Ibrahim's everyday moral reasoning suggests that their socio-economic settlement in Newcastle is not only manifested in their current participation to the local labour market, but finds expression also in their aspiration to become 'legalised' taxpayers and thus formally contribute to the welfare of the national community. Note how, in the case of Ibrahim, his condition of illegality did not mean that his business activities were exempt from taxation, but rather that he had to 'go another way', namely pay taxes through a name-giver. In this case, then, bridging the gap between formal illegality (Ibrahim's lack of right to work) and informal

legality (paying taxes through a name-giver) meant reaching a compromise between the two through the help of a broker at an additional cost (the name-giver's service charge) that Ibrahim was willing to pay.

If the high risk of business revenues checks was admittedly the main reason behind this move, in the accounts of differently situated asylum seekers, being allowed to work and pay taxes is recurrently constructed as a key marker of legitimate belonging/participation/contribution to the wider society. For example, this is how Rashad expressed his frustration at being legally prevented from exercising an active life: 'I am a young man, I can *work, pay taxes*, but they are wasting the best part of my life, time is going!' Different shades of this sentiment were articulated through a direct opposition between asylum seekers' dutiful actions, or at least aspirations, and documented subjects' supposedly immoral conduct. As Faris puts it: 'I would like to pay taxes, pay my bills, but I am not allowed to! [...] I know many British people who don't pay taxes [...] why they don't go after them? Why do they go after us [asylum seekers]? We need to survive! I used to work for an Iranian guy, he was paying half taxes, they should go after him!'

In line with what we observed with some institutionally housed asylum seekers like Donya and Mariam, people on welfare benefits can be mobilized as morally dubious 'others' and discursively constructed in opposition to self-sufficient (migrant) workers. For instance, talking about his largely British clientele at the pizza shop in a predominantly white working-class area, Al commented that his local clients 'make many questions, like "why do you work so hard?" – well, if everybody spend all day at the Job Centre, somebody [else] needs to work and pay taxes!' Or again this is how a chatty taxi driver and former asylum seeker from the Horn of Africa expressed his emotionally charged judgment on the matter:

Since 2004 I've never been to a job centre, I don't like anything help, I don't like to go and claim benefits, how many people get benefits and work full time? Like I know this Romanian woman, we were becoming friends, I know she works full time, I met her at her job, but then one day we get on the bus and I see she has a bus-pass, 'why do you have a bus-pass?' and she say it's because she needs it, they don't know she has a full-time job [...] after that I hate this woman, you are not a human being, I don't want to see her again! You see some people abuse the system, there are people who really need help... [...] I am glad I pay my taxes, I am proud I pay my taxes!

In the case of many refused asylum seekers, I suggest, their criminalised engagement with the

labour market in fact offers an important avenue for the reaffirmation of their moral worth and take them a step closer to their aspired legitimate participation to society, in this context epitomised by the figure of the dutiful taxpayer. By discursively distancing themselves from devious documented employers and dishonest benefit claimants, a number of asylum seekers across the board at once challenge ascribed socio-economic exclusion and passivity (especially damning in the case of refused asylum seekers) while, once more, reproducing dominant hierarchies of deservingness shaped by neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and resilience.

In my observations, however, disparaging comments on supposedly undeserving benefit holders could well acquire much more nuanced tones, as in my conversation with Ibrahim, caught between his employees' demands and his formal duties as (secretly undocumented) business manager:

Ibrahim: I don't like to help somebody who is on benefit [...] *some*, trust me, *some* are stealing money from this country - they are working and they are getting money, but for example rare conditions can happen, I say it's okay, I accept for a while, but if anything happen it's your responsibility. [...] I've got three employees which are on benefits but all of them they told me different excuse and they are working as well. [...] I don't know how you can get disable benefit and is working as well, trust me more than 240 pound he's getting weekly! and he's working as well, I say what do you do with that money?! what do you do, just tell me! [laughing] [...]

Silvia: And what do you think about that? That some people are on benefits

Ibrahim: *I cannot decide about this one*, for example, say, "Aw my mum was sick", "my family need blah-blah" they'll give you an excuse but *sometimes we have to be some kind of human* [...] Oh my God, Mary or something, I can't remember her name properly, she was working for a while, now she's gone. She was working for me as a driver, I gave her I think two days, yeah, I gave her Monday and Saturday [as work shifts], she was working well, later on I say "if you want I give you payslip and blah- blah" – "nonono, I am on benefit" – "WHAT?!"

Silvia: So you didn't know at the beginning?

Ibrahim: Nono! She was working for us, she has four children, I said okay.

Employees' family situations were indeed a recurrent element in Ibrahim's moral calculus amid the many ethical dilemmas he faced at the workplace. Here again, the categories of 'people on benefit' and 'asylum seekers' were discursively constructed as mutually exclusive. In fact, my attempt to clarify this point in our conversation was cause of amusement – 'Of course the people who are on benefits they are the English people! [laughing]'. 'The English

people', in Ibrahim's narratives, were often essentialized in culturalist interpretations of generalised immoral traits which he would explain in relation to 'their culture'. When I asked Ibrahim to expand on these assertions in a recorded interview, he was adamant: 'to be honest with you, let this be recorded for everyone [looking at the recording smartphone, we both laugh] I never ever ever ever trust English people, 99 per cent point 9 [...] I never ever trust them because I used to work with them, live with them, deal with them all the stuff.'

This example enlarges our analytical focus from discursive reassertion of moral worth to factual enactments of moral agency at the workplace. Indeed, I argue that refused asylum seekers, due to their ascribed illegality, routinely engage with ethical dilemmas and decision-making processes through which the relationship between illegality and legitimacy is situationally and contextually negotiated. As I discuss in the following session, refused asylum seekers' efforts at disentangling legal and moral abiding norms is most visible when we look at how they evaluate multiple, if limited, income opportunities.

Negotiating illegal legitimacy and illegitimate legality

I could either live on the street, homeless; go and sell drugs or go to work and pay my rent – honestly, what would you do? These are the only options.

Faris' poignant illustration of the three livelihood options he had to choose from (i.e. homelessness, drug dealing, undocumented work) echoes the accounts of other single male refused asylum seekers I met throughout my fieldwork in Newcastle. As Faris further elaborated 'I'll never sell drugs unless they make me do it. What happens if one day they tell me "you are not allowed to work"? Of course I'll do it, but I'll never do it unless they make me do it. [...] The amount of people I know, the number of drug dealers I know... It would be very very easy! But I don't want to do it.' Similarly, another refused asylum seeker told me that, to get involved in street-level dealing, 'I just need to press a button' – 'this is what they want us to do, this is what they push us to do! You know what they say? "you either sell spice [a popular, cheap drug] or you smoke it" You have no other choices.'

Within the British ever-expanding field of crimmigration enforcement, a refused asylum seeker working in the informal economy with a fake passport and another engaging in drug dealing are both likely to be subject to indefinite detention while waiting to be forcibly removed from the country. It is therefore paramount to understand how refused asylum seekers negotiate legitimate livelihoods amid this seemingly undifferentiated space of illegality. Many referred to the possibility to 'make easy money' through criminal activities as

an always viable option, but one that was not morally acceptable, at least until other more legitimate (if still illegal) sources of income were available. While the drug market could always count on a steady demand in Newcastle, drug dealing was not the only morally contentious income opportunity on the table.

Ibrahim: [My friend and I] we had a fight [over the phone], I don't think he wants to talk to me anymore. He said "come with me [to Belgium], you can make big money" and I was like "what?! You've just come out prison for that, that's not good man, and now you want to start again?" but I know why, whatever job he'll do he will never get as much as he takes with this [smuggling people across European borders] [...] I'm not saying I am perfect, everybody likes the money, but I told him, "look brother, that's not for me, no way, no way I will help with that job, sorry man!" So he said, "okay then if you want you can just look after the lorries, manage that" but I told him I don't want to have nothing, nothing to do with it and he started insult me and blah blah blah... why? Because I am the only person he can trust, now he is in big trouble without me, like you have two hands and now you need to work just with one... if you find someone you can trust so much you can't let him go... he was in France, now he is in Belgium, many people want to cross the border and get to France and here. It's a very easy job, people pay you 100, 200 [euros] each, you just find the driver, usually Polish or Czech - they are good drivers, you then give them [their cut] and they disappear. All the rest is for you. Also if you want a 'safe' travel, like if it's a woman then you pay more because you want to be sure she is okay, nothing happens, you understand? So sometimes just for one woman they pay 300 or 400 [euros], so you exploit these poor people who want to come here, who are desperate, if it was to help them to come I would do that, but like this, just to take the money of someone who is worried for their daughter, or sister...

People's smuggling, Ibrahim explained, is a remunerative 'very easy job' comprising different logistical roles with different degrees of (moral) responsibility, at least in Ibrahim's friend's view. Ibrahim seems familiar with the practicalities involved (including drivers' desirable nationalities) but makes the critical distinction between a legitimate "humanitarian" and illegitimate exploitative form of human smuggling. By distancing himself from his friend's actions and refusing to cooperate, Ibrahim is aware he is breaching the relationship of 'trust' (and dependency) that ties the two in a bond of mutual obligation. Indeed, a lot is at stake as Ibrahim draws the line between the legitimate and the morally unacceptable.

Within the multifarious realm of illegality (or criminality), then, the same criminalised activity (e.g. human smuggling) may acquire legitimacy depending on the actors' motivations ('if it was to help them to come I would do that, but like this, just to take the money of

someone who is worried for their daughter, or sister...’) and hence the moral nature of the transaction. Similarly, some Muslim refused asylum seekers I spoke to attributed different degrees of legitimacy to informal retail work depending on whether or not ‘haram’ products (i.e. forbidden by the Islamic law, such as cigarettes or alcohol) were also on sell on the premises. Betting, another ‘haram’ activity classified as ‘a grave sin’ in Quranic scriptures, was also widely seen as a morally contentious practice. As a mosque spokesperson explained to me, ‘Muslim people are not allowed to gamble, drink or take drugs. These are all things that make you weak’. In the city’s West End, however, bookies offered a heated semi-public gathering space, popular among the diverse visitors gravitating around the local convenience stores, Halal shops and renown take-aways. As another research participant explained, male asylum seekers would go to the bookies to hang out, hope to make some money, while they could connect to the shop’s wi-fi, charge their phones and even get a free hot drink from the counter. If certainly legal, for a number of asylum seekers I came across, frequenting the bookies was subject to constant (self) moral scrutiny, as an activity triggering moral sentiments of guilt when not altogether stigmatised as shameful. This is why, for example, Awat, a middle-aged cashier and former asylum seeker (as Faris and Ibrahim also a man from Iraqi Kurdistan) told me he would never go to change money to the betting shop opposite his Halal business in the commercial heart of Fenham - ‘if I walk in, people think I gamble!’.

If, as Faris and Ibrahim among others illustrate, many refused asylum seekers strive to create spaces of legitimacy within the illegal domain, the moral turmoil stirred by gambling tells us that the reverse can also be true. In this case, what is at stake is indeed the moral legitimacy of a legal practice, in fact the only legal source of ‘income’ lawfully available to refused asylum seekers beside negligible charity donations²⁰.

‘I cannot let myself’ – managing affective settlement in Newcastle

There is a third important way through which I suggest that refused asylum seekers like Faris and Ibrahim exercise their moral agency in the ‘cimmigration’ margin they inhabit, namely by managing, ‘keeping on check’ their emotional investment in the affective relationships they have developed in the country. Significantly, both Faris (who had been living in the UK for more than 10 years at the time of my fieldwork) and Ibrahim (who had arrived in Newcastle four years before our encounter) articulated a strong sense of belonging when talking about Newcastle:

²⁰ This would amount to about £16 per week when combining together the two forms of financial charitable support that was available to refused asylum seekers in Newcastle at the time of my fieldwork.

Ibrahim: Oh my God, I know too many stuff about Newcastle, even about Geordie people [...] I've always been here, but trust me if I go anywhere, I'll be back to here. Maybe I'll go for a while, I don't mind, but if I go anywhere, even another city, another place, I will come back here [...] because I know too many people who live here! Not only one, two, three, and even if I want to stay and even without status I can spend most of my life in the city. For example, even if I don't work, I don't get a money, I spend all my money, for example, I know where I go as a charity! That's the way... [...] step by step I'm used to here [...] I know more people, *I can trust more people*, at the same time it is quite easier if you spend time with them, they make you happy! You know what I mean? *This is my hometown!* I don't know if they let me stay or not, but I'll be here! [laughing]

~

Faris: To be honest everything is great here. [...] Here I get along with everyone, I'm really - *I feel like home you know?* Because the first 10 years of your life you know nothing, it's true, you don't even remember... your real life starts when you're 18, 19 and I've been here since I was 18! I know more about here than over there, honestly! I like the people in here.

And yet, their ascribed illegality admittedly has far-reaching effects on their life planning and affective lives. Both Faris and Ibrahim, for instance, talked about how their aspiration to attain higher education degrees was frustrated by their inability to provide a recognised proof of ID. Paradoxically, they would have been able to pay for the university fees drawing on their personal finances, but they would not be able to explain how, as technically destitute refused asylum seekers, they could possibly (legally) own those sums of money. With regards to their affective lives, however, the problem is not merely legal. Indeed, refused asylum seekers like Faris and Ibrahim may consciously decide to hold back from becoming too emotionally involved in relationships and defer settling down with someone because they *morally* 'can't let themselves'. As both young men explained, they enjoy rich social and affective lives in Newcastle, Faris was in fact close to getting married a few years ago, while Ibrahim repeatedly stated that he could not possibly allow himself to have serious relationships and 'get too close to people who like' him, although he 'could easily find someone'. If they have made themselves a life despite the structural fragility of their 'juridical, sociopolitical, and experiential condition' (Willen, 2014, p. 87) and the constant threat of deportation, imposing this same ontological insecurity onto loved ones is not acceptable in their moral reasoning. In Ibrahim's projections, settling down with someone would mean 'living illegally, hiding', being unable to travel and having to explain this to his children – 'shame, shame!'

In this sense, I contend, the protracted deferral of family planning and related affective 'self-

management' express possibly the most intimate and suffered way through which asylum seekers, and refused asylum seekers especially, morally restrict their 'space of possibility' in the asylum margin.

Another sanctuary: the informal moral economies of asylum in Newcastle

In this chapter, I have argued that asylum seeker's everyday moral reasoning and morally motivated actions, that is what I call their moral agency, provide an essential lens to interrogate the lived experience of UK asylum system. In a move to complement the policy-centred literature about urban asylum in the UK and de-centre institutional charity, the analysis that emerges points to multiple junctures between governmental (e.g. dispersal housing), organisational (e.g. charities' hosting schemes and practical support) and grassroots (e.g. informal hosting) spaces, actors and practices that make up the different, intersecting realms of asylum seekers' everyday life in Newcastle. From an experiential perspective these intersections become visible as we juxtapose the trajectories of the different social actors which populated the chapter. For example, the experience of statutory housing that I explore mainly from the perspective of first-time asylum seekers waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim (like Donya, Mariam, Ateef), is also shared by technically 'destitute' asylum seekers if they have children (as in the case of Zendaya), suffer from severe health conditions (like Hakim) or if they have formally attempted to arrange their 'voluntary' return to their recognised country of origin. At the same time, many refused asylum seekers with no access to statutory housing (as Ephrem and Yunis) would not have a temporary roof to sleep under if just as many formal and informal 'hosts' (like Ateef and Al) had not opened their doors. Moreover, informal (or illegal) employment is certainly not exclusive prerogative of 'refused' asylum seekers (like Faris and Ibrahim), but rather a widespread practice observed at all stages of the asylum process, including with statutory housed asylum seekers and holders of international protection.

In sum, if we look beyond the simplistic binaries between the legal and illegal, the formal and informal produced by the governmental asylum regime, what emerges are thick networks of morally and emotionally-charged transactions between differently positioned social actors which range from instances of (self-reported) disinterested hospitality and (reportedly) greedy exploitation. Along these ever shifting and often precarious ties of care, reciprocity and dependency, understandings of moral worth, deservingness, legitimacy and meaningful life are intersubjectively and relationally produced. In the urban context of Newcastle, the uneven

socio-economic geographies of the city are mobilized in asylum seekers' self- and others' moral evaluations, as well as in their moral (and political) reasoning about their unjust treatment by the Home Office. Comparisons between the 'here and now' and past (or imagined) elsewhere are also part and parcel of asylum seekers' efforts to make sense of their varying socio-legal and moral positions as they navigate the UK immigration enforcement.

Given the contextual salience of legal boundaries and taxonomies in the UK context and the relative homogeneity in the application of immigration policies across the country, I suggest that regardless of their current legal position, asylum seekers in Newcastle belong to an 'accidental community' of institutional experience. What I see as asylum seekers' shared condition, however, is variously morally mobilized and, in a highly atomised and agonistic asylum system, can lead way to inclusive as well exclusive moral boundary making. In a way then, the cause of much exclusionary, or even exploitative practices among asylum seekers can also be the source of its (always partial) cure as the countless instances of solidarity we encountered exemplify.

Taking a further step back from the minutiae of asylum seekers' everyday life in Newcastle, the informal moral economies framework which guided the chapter allows us to reconsider the wider question of the relationship of structure and agency, constraints and 'freedom'. I contend that it is asylum seekers' moral agency that substantially enlarges or restrains the spaces of possibility drawn by immigration enforcement. By this I mean that the truncated socio-legal position institutionally imposed upon asylum seekers significantly restricts the range of actions and life roles they are able to perform – being asylum seekers, among other things, forbidden to choose where and with whom they live; legally forbidden to work, get married, open a bank account or get a driving license; forced to live with a minimal weekly budget or out of charity if their asylum claim has been rejected; forbidden to access homeless shelters or any form of welfare benefits; forbidden to enroll into higher education. And yet, accounting for informal practices and spaces importantly allows to see how institutional barriers might be circumvented, while making visible other informal (supposedly 'invisible') barriers which have a tangible bearing, for instance, on asylum seekers' access to services or opportunities. It is only at this point, once we can see how asylum seekers' spaces of possibility are contextually shaped by both institutional and informal constraints that we can make sense of asylum seekers' moral agency. If this is perhaps most striking when we look at how asylum seekers navigate 'gray' and 'black' economies, I suggest that asylum seekers' moral agency also cements asylum seekers' precarious home-making as well as the moral

transactions 'filling the gap' of the system. Moral agency, in other words, is what allows asylum seekers to turn a life of constraints into a meaningful existence.

Chapter 5. Making do and doing justice in Catania's asylum margin

Introduction

April 2019

It is a busy Tuesday afternoon at the Astalli centre's free legal surgery. I am sitting next to a long-term volunteer lawyer, Angelo, in a barren, artificially-lit room with two desks, one for each volunteer and their respective 'clients'. Only a calendar and a small wooden cross are hanging from the wall. Abdoulie, the young man from Gambia sitting in front of us, looks puzzled - Angelo is talking fast, casually interspersing Italian with Catanese idioms, while I translate into English the few legal options he has in order to extend his stay permit now that his humanitarian protection is expiring. With the recent withdrawal/erasure of humanitarian protection in Italy, this is the tricky situation so many migrants coming to the legal drop-in find themselves in. We explain that he *might* be able to renew the humanitarian protection for one more year, but at that point, one year down the line, he will not be able to further renew his stay permit on humanitarian grounds, nor will he be allowed to convert it into any other kind of leave to remain, e.g. a work permit, even if legally employed. In other words, in the current legal framework, this is a dead-ended pathway to repatriation, or more likely, illegal stay in the country. Alternatively, before its expiry date, he can *now* try to convert his stay permit on humanitarian grounds into a work or study permit if he can provide his Gambian passport, a work contract or evidence of enrolment into formal education and a legally registered residency address. Except, none of this has been explained to our worried interlocutor when he went to the Questura²¹. After half a day of waiting in the crowded office forecourt (with no seating nor toilets), Abdoulie was asked to sign a form in Italian to officially state his willingness to renew his humanitarian protection for 12 months, that is committing to an unspoken dead-end road into irregular stay. Angelo takes a close look at the form shaking his head. With a grin he shows the form to the other volunteer lawyer sitting at the other end of the room - 'have you seen what a nice trick they're playing now?' We also inform Abdoulie that anyone who wants to renew their stay permit, including the renewable six-month permit for those waiting for their asylum claim to be processed, is an official declaration of address (residency) or a declaration of 'hospitality' by a recognised organisation. Abdoulie tells us he has a place to stay, 'that is no problem', but his confidence starts shaking when we specify that the declaration of residency will need to be signed by his current landlord too. As with the vast majority of migrants in Catania, he is informally sharing a flat with a friend and co-worker, but they have no registered housing contract. Officially declaring his address would expose his friend too, the one who has arranged the informal rental in the first place. Abdoulie is now alarmed: 'how do I get this

²¹ Central police station, the place where migrants would go for all matters related to their stay permits.

residency? Where can I buy it?’ He will not be the only person I meet at the legal drop-in to assume that, given the police’s unrealistic request of registered housing contracts, there must be in Catania an under- desk market of fake residency declarations. As the conversation goes by the script, Angelo has already pulled out from the drawer a little notebook containing an endless list of names and phone numbers. With a smile on his face, he reassures the young man, he will not need to pay anyone, ‘that’s what we are here for!’ Abdoulie looks even more confused when we introduce him to the concept of ‘virtual residency’. In agreement with Catania City Council, Angelo and the other lawyers volunteering at the charity have started registering migrants without a formal address under ‘1, Welcome Road’ – a fictitious address which is nevertheless accepted by the local Registry Office (Ufficio Anagrafe). In Catania, migrants, charity volunteers, City Council officers, Questura functionaries and the like are all aware of the inexistence of this crowded virtual street, and yet this institutional²² informal practice offers a necessary, if nominal, hook into legality for all those pushed to its edge.

I am going to the centre’s reception office to make a copy of Abdoulie’s humanitarian permit when I bump into Amadou who is showing some paperwork to Grazia, another long-term volunteer at the centre and qualified cultural mediator. I first met Amadou, a young man from Mali, two years ago in a first-line reception centre for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (abbreviated in the Italian acronym MSNA) a few days after he disembarked at Catania’s harbour. Since the last time we met, his features have changed, his visage looks older/adult and his hair is now a cascade of bleached plaits. We hug each other, moved by the unexpected reunion. I tell him I find him grown up, but he rebukes in his now nearly perfect Italian ‘I’ve always been a grown up!’ (*Ma io sono sempre stato grande!*). He keeps laughing nervously, his eyes to the floor, as I ask him how things are now. He tells me he has come to talk to a lawyer about his documents, his stay permit has been renewed and he is now legally entitled to get an Italian ID. However, he has not received yet the physical copy of his stay permit and this is delaying the process. He is worried, as without the ID it is harder to get a work contract, although he has already found someone who seems willing to regularly hire him in a restaurant on the seafront as soon as he can show his ID. Amadou is fully aware of how difficult it is to be formally employed in Catania, especially for migrants. He does not want to let this opportunity go: ‘I’m no longer a minor, I have to work, I can’t stay at home to just eat and sleep!’ Grazia steps into the conversation admonishing: ‘*first* documents and *then* work, music...’ She is referring to Amadou’s passion for song writing and singing – some of his trap singles have been digitally recorded and filmed in amateur video-clips that he is promoting on various social

²² In Italy, the figure of the ‘cultural and language mediator’ is a professional trained in interpreting and translating across languages and cultures. Most *mediatori* in Catania were employed in migrants’ reception centres and social organisations working with migrants.

media – ‘cause I know this one...’ she adds, this time knowingly addressing Angelo who has joined us in the corridor. Amadou’s apt reply is quick: ‘but Grazia, you need no documents for music, lyrics are my documents!’

Grazia has known Amadou for some time - she knows all too well that Amadou, as so many others in his situation, is craving to start working and finally become economically independent, whatever it takes, in a context of normalised work exploitation. She was a staff member at the first-line MSNA reception centre, now shut down, where Amadou was first housed as a minor and where we all met a couple of years ago. ‘The [hosting] centre’s closure was inevitable’, she explains, ‘we could all see it coming’. With the 2017 Libya-Italy ‘Memorandum d’Intesa’ struck by the then ruling centre-left government (the latest revamp of a longer history of transactional agreements between Italy and its former colony), migrants trying to leave the Libyan shores to reach Europe’s southernmost border are systematically stopped by the Libyan coastguard (generously financed, trained and equipped by Italy) and detained in torture-rife camps. Unaccompanied minors make no exception and the MSNA hosting centre that both Grazia and Amadou recall with affection has gradually emptied. This, I have been repeatedly told, has been the destiny of countless other migrants’ reception centres in Sicily as elsewhere in Italy. Migrants’ presence in the MSNA centre further plummeted in the immediate aftermath of Matteo Salvini’s appointment as Minister of Interior, when a group of minors fled the hosting centre overnight²³. I ask about the other *educatori* (social educators) I met there - most of them are currently unemployed in Catania but are still in touch with Amadou and the other migrants who have decided to stay in the city. As I will realise over the course of the next months, for someone like Amadou, but also other young men who have been through the hosting centre, its former director and the young *educatori* formerly employed there as well as some long-term volunteers have become parental figures to consult for any important decision (e.g. whether or not to pursue further studies, move to another city, leave their current hosting centre) and invaluable local brokers to get access to (often informal) work opportunities, flat rentals, charity shelters, training opportunities drawing on their personal, trusted contacts. If it is still hard to secure Amadou and his former “house mates” a regular work and housing contract, former staff members at the centre try to make sure they are at least fairly paid and treated.

According to Amadou, the hosting centre for adult holders of international protection (SPRAR) where he is currently living could not be more different from the one where he was first housed. He complains that the social workers in the *comunità* (literally ‘community’, as small-scale reception centres are usually called) ‘don’t do anything for us, they piss me off!’ By this he

²³ As other migrants and charity workers explained, many foreigners with temporary stay permits feared that their legal rights would be scrapped the moment Salvini, the Lega party leader well-known for his populist xenophobic agenda, took office.

means, first of all, that they are not supportive of their ‘guests’ efforts at getting a job, enrolling into secondary school, nor cultivating their passions. A widespread sentiment among institutionally housed migrants is indeed that *comunità* staff do not solely wish to domesticate the migrant adults they ‘manage’, encouraging inactivity and dependency to keep them at bay, but that they also proactively hinder any opportunity that may lead a ‘guest’ to leave the centre. ‘They want to keep the numbers high, you see? They need us to stay there so they can get the money, if they have less people in, they get paid less’ – aware that the contracted organisations running the hosting centres are indeed funded per capita, this is how Diallo, also living in Amadou’s *comunità*, would cynically explain me some weeks later.

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It is fair to say that my main occupation during the six months of fieldwork in Catania has been one of translating, not just switching between Italian, English and my rusty French, but more fundamentally shuttling back and forth between the rarefied idiom of nominal rights and regulations and the messy reality of asylum seekers’ daily struggles in the vibrant harbour city. It soon became evident that there was a substantial mismatch between the officially recognised legal status and the substantive rights enjoyed by the asylum seekers I met in Catania in the spring and summer of 2019. Holding any form of international protection or being legally recognised as ‘asylum seeker’ (having formally lodged an asylum claim and still awaiting the response of the Territorial Commission) was no guarantee of housing, employment or statutory social provision, regardless of the formal rights these subjects were legally entitled to (Marchetti and Pinelli, 2017). If this had also been the case in the previous years, since December 2018 asylum seekers’ struggles for subsistence were dramatically exacerbated by the then far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini’s ‘Security Decrees’ whose implementation, in the case of Catania, landed on a city already in Municipal bankruptcy. In many ways, the situation I found in April 2019 was thus one of raw despair and ‘horizontal’ destitution affecting asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, holders of temporary forms of international protection and, above all, subjects with care needs who, regardless of their migration or citizen status, inevitably fell into the gaps left by chronically deficient public infrastructures, a recently slashed asylum reception system, and the *de facto* suspended operation of the Council’s social services that impacted on all residents.

Against this challenging background, my aim in this chapter is to explore how asylum seekers, as moral agents, make sense of the socio-legal, morally connotated space they are ascribed into and how they produce (or fail to) meaningful ways to inhabit Catania. To do so, I explore three interconnected domains – institutional housing, homelessness and work –

which I investigate by foregrounding asylum seekers' moral agency and focusing in particular on multiple, often conflicting, lines of moral reasoning. As I will show ethnographically, alongside structural constraints and contingent needs, asylum seekers' moral agency is a fundamental, if overlooked, force that gives shape and meaning to their everyday life, whether in a wired hosting camp, a street corner or a car wash. In a context of weak institutional presence and shaky legality culture, there was an institutionally unmediated interaction between asylum seekers and the socio-economic landscape they happened to inhabit. No institutional safety net separated asylum seekers from widespread unemployment, ubiquitous work exploitation and discrimination in private lettings, as widely reported by both migrant and citizen research participants. Much more than asylum seekers' legal status, then, what mattered in this context was one's ability to understand and negotiate (with the help of informal brokers) access to 'the system'. It was also essential to be able to (morally) position oneself in the moral economies of deservingness, charity, solidarity and employment co-existing in the city. My argument, however, is not that legality and status regularisation had no importance for the asylum seekers I encountered in Catania, quite the opposite this was a recurrent, often overwhelming concern for many of them, especially in light of the newly introduced law decrees. I suggest, however, that the struggle for regularisation of one's status and more broadly the widespread strive for a legal life had, in this specific context, more symbolical than factual value. 'Getting documents' in Catania, I believe, is less a strategy to ensure access to the job or housing markets (regulated, as we shall see, by other logics and hierarchies) but to formally legitimise one's presence in line with formal statutory regulations. It is not a way to self-integrate in Catania, but a way to legitimately belong to Italy and Europe, an imagined elsewhere where legal justice applies.

The chapter is organised as follows. In the first part, I explore asylum seekers' experiences of statutory institutional housing. Here, asylum seekers' moral reasoning allows us to understand how, for too many, inhabiting hosting centres amount to a moral injury, but also what discursive strategies and practices are mobilised to resist structural humiliation. The next section is dedicated to the social and moral margin many asylum seekers fall into. By questioning the different forces shaping asylum seekers' destitution, I show how this is not just the outcome of structural failures, but also the product of trans-local moral economies of charity and solidarity and, crucially, asylum seekers' moral agency in navigating them. The last part of the chapter is finally centres on the morally-laden issue of making a living, often against all odds. My argument here is twofold – first it is only by accounting for their moral agency in its transnational configuration that we can understand how asylum seekers trade

between different forms of income-generating activities. Secondly, asylum seekers' involvement in the local work market offers us an important entry point into not just local im/moral economies of labour, but also asylum seekers' moral evaluation of Sicily as essentially 'other' from Europe.

### **The moral injury of institutional *accoglienza***

If you start to engage with guests of a centre like Mineo... these are people who, on one side, are not integrated into Europe, because they were dreaming of a big city, they were dreaming of finding a woman, a job, a house, a future and so on, whereas they found themselves [...] in the middle of the countryside, among orange trees, with barbed wire all around, the army checking the entrance, the Carabinieri<sup>24</sup>, the fiscal police [*la Finanza*], the police inside, and so... that's anything but an idea of integration. So they found themselves there and they saw their dream breaking apart and to pursue this dream they struggled a lot, they went through the desert and the tortures and rapes of Libya, they went through the Mediterranean Sea and all that this means... [...] On the other hand, most of them interrupted their relations with their families of origin because [...] they start asking 'send us money! Send us money! Send us money!' [...] and they [asylum seekers] were not even able to explain that they were waiting for the Territorial Commission of the Interior Ministry to submit a request of international protection – you can only explain this once you've understood it! And so they stayed there and many went mad [*molti impazzivano*], because you're in Europe, but you're not in Europe because you're in the reception camp [*CARA*] and all the people who have motivated your leaving – you did it to give a future to your children, to your wife, to your parents... and then you stop talking to them because you can't take it anymore. (Giovanni, volunteer president of a faith-based charity)

As Giovanni powerfully captured, for too many the suffering inflicted by the indefinite existential limbo and the imposed physical and social segregation of some hosting centres, most notably the Mineo *CARA*, was just too much to take as it produced a double rejection: from the Italian (and European) socio-legal system and from the affective networks which funded and motivated the deadly journey. Being unable to fulfil one's role as breadwinner, often under the moral obligation of financially supporting family members and repaying debts, was indeed so painful to become unbearable for many 'guests' in the camp. The emotional burden of unmet social expectations and infringed values did push some to cut out all communications with their families, self-sanctioning for their perceived failures, while also

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<sup>24</sup> Italian armed body with both civil and military duties. Unlike the 'State police' which is under the Ministry of Interior, the Carabinieri armed body is under the Ministry of Defense. Both police bodies were present at the Mineo *CARA*.

visibly affecting the mental wellbeing of many ‘lost boys’, as I shall discuss in the second part of the chapter. Countless asylum seekers fled the hosting centres, losing their right to ‘accoglienza’ in any institutional hosting facility in the country, but also, crucially, losing their registered address and access to their legal correspondence. As I explore in this session, however, many other asylum seekers found ways to make sense of and inhabit the reception system they were subject to and whose actors, practices and motives were under constant moral scrutiny.

Institutional housing reception can and often does result in a moral injury. This is what the asylum seekers I have met in Catania overwhelmingly suggested when they expressed ‘the humiliation’ of inactivity and endless waiting in an existential limbo; when they reported the unfair or ‘ill- treatment’ they were subject to by the hands of hosting centres’ workers; or again when they decried asylum seekers’ systematic ‘political and economic instrumentalisation’ – an exploitative transnational phenomenon of which the Italian *accoglienza* system is just the last, charity-coated, manifestation. In this institutional rite of passage, the individually felt moral injury is also, inseparably, a shared moral wound. In their moral reasoning, the asylum seekers I have met highlighted different aspects of what was largely perceived as an unjust, deeply damaging, institutional response to asylum seekers’ arrival on the Southern Italian shores – a consciousness rooted in their individual biographies, but also their shared suffering and the collective experience of being constructed as a homogeneous, infantilised category precisely by coercively inhabiting the housing reception system. From the material collected, three interconnected ‘layers’ (denouncing structural humiliation; demanding legality and claiming responsibly) emerge as key, overlapping, articulations of and responses to the injustice of the *accoglienza* system, where individual judgements and coping strategies are inextricably intertwined with public discourses circulating at the local, national and transnational level and reworked into moral and political demands.

#### *Denouncing structural humiliation*

Tellingly, for someone like Uzoma, a young Nigerian man and previous ‘guest’ in CARA Mineo, sleeping rough under the arcades of Piazza della Repubblica (one of Catania’s biggest squares) while engaging in odd jobs was preferable to life in the camp – ‘I don’t like to think about that place. It was just sleeping, sleeping and eating. There was nothing to do. [...] What I did was just take a bike to go to the gate and come back. There is no work there, what can you do? Here [Catania] I am working, it’s good, I get some money.’ The physical isolation of

the gated camp compounded asylum seekers' struggles to find any kind of jobs, let alone regular employment, in what has long been an economically deprived area. This empty waiting was itself 'humiliating' as Seikou, another former asylum-seeking resident of CARA Mineo put it: '[guests] feel humiliated especially because they think about the fact that they have no job, they have no documents, they keep getting *diniego* [rejection of asylum claim], they wait one year, two years, nothing. So they always have to wait, wait without being able to do anything. Even to get into the CARA, the entry and exit times are fixed, so this has limited the guests' freedom a bit – from 8 am to 8 pm when you must get back in, it wasn't easy for them.' By defining the experience of encampment as humiliating, a moral emotion of pain (Rothbart and Poder, 2017; Rothbart, 2018). Seikou highlights how the camp regime harmed, first of all, asylum seekers' sense of self-worth, reducing its adult population to a collective status of 'patients of the state' (Auyero, 2011), a secluded mass of infantilised (in need of threatening subjects (hence the presence of four different armed forces).

As previously discussed (see contextual chapter), if we understand Mineo CARA as the infamous epitome of the dysfunctional Italian asylum reception system, rather than the exceptional 'black hole of accoglienza in Sicily', from many asylum seekers' perspective, the underlying logics of profitable, centripetal *assistenzialismo* emerges as the hallmark of most remote hosting camps and small-sized urban reception centres alike. The lucrative moral economy of the institutional reception apparatus that asylum seekers routinely denounced is indeed perceived as structurally ingrained, regardless of the physical reception conditions. In my conversations with asylum seekers in Catania, reception centres were routinely criticised as places of mismanagement and wrongdoing, even when judged by the centres' own internal rules and declared purposes. This is how, for instance, Diallo explained the work ethics of the social operators working in the *comunità* (literally 'community', as small-scale reception centres are usually called) where he was then living, in a peripheral working-class neighbourhood of Catania:

I've stopped trusting those working in the comunità. At the beginning I used to tell them everything because I thought they were there to help us, that's their job, right? Then I understood, they don't do anything – they cook and then they spend the rest of the time on the computer in their [staff] room, they don't talk to us. They are only happy if you sleep and eat, stay calm, so you're not a problem for them, you see? [...] I'm the only one who speaks out [...] but it's difficult to be the only one who speaks out, you know? Because even if the others agree, they don't say it, they are scared [*hanno paura*]



Echoing Diallo's bitter reflections, Mohamed (also a young man from Guinea Conakry) similarly comments referring to the *comunità* where he has been living for some years now, located in a residential area of the city:

If you're a social worker in a *comunità*, you see the truth, but you never say the truth, you turn to the other side, you know what I mean? Because sometimes you see things that are wrong, you see some minors who are ill-treated [*trattati male*], but you must not say anything, otherwise they will kick you out.

Arguing with staff members was indeed perceived as dangerous for the risk of being 'kicked out' (and then hardly re-housed in other institutional hosting centres), but also for the potential implications this would have on the 'guests'' immigration cases and stay permit renewal. Following my interlocutors, *comunità* staff's unfairness was evident in their double standards when, for instance, an asylum seeker would not be allowed to eat if they came home late for dinner time, whereas they would all need to wait for the *operatore* in charge of the night shift even if the staff member was late. Reportedly, double standards would also apply to different 'guests' – among the all adult population hosted in Diallo's *comunità*, for instance, it was not clear why some were encouraged to pursue secondary education, while others like Diallo himself, were stopped from enrolling 'because they said I would be much older than all the other students in the [high school] class'. Holders of humanitarian protection like Diallo and Mohamed were also threatened by the centre's managers to lose their spot in their respective *comunità* if they travelled back to Guinea (at their own expenses) to produce their passport – a newly introduced legal requirement to convert their temporary stay permit on humanitarian grounds, now scrapped, into another form of leave to remain. If this turned out to be an empty threat, before their compulsory and expensive travel to Conakry they were faced with the impossible choice between securing themselves a legal future in the country and complying with the hosting centre's rules to ensure they could still have stable accommodation – an increasingly scarce resource for asylum migrants in Catania and Italy.

*'Here there's the law'? The moral short-circuit of il/legality in the accoglienza business*

In this testing environment, tensions among hosted asylum seekers were not rare. Physically reacting, however, was often judged as unwise in the broader scheme of proving one's goodwill at 'self-integrating' - what was widely perceived as the necessary premise to 'getting documents'. For example, when Diallo was physically confronted by one of his room-mates who had wrongly accused him of stealing some money, he explained: 'I didn't do anything because here there's the law, I thought about my documents, that's why I didn't want to have

any issues'. Other Western African asylum seekers provided similar explanations for holding themselves back when confronted with verbal and physical violence. Importantly, the law was recurrently referred to as ruling in Europe and Italy as opposed to 'Africa', whether in relation to sub-Saharan countries of origin or transit countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. This would be mainly taken to mean that people's personal safety is granted by institutional authorities and did not require individual score setting. The rule of law and the enjoyment of rights as experienced by asylum migrants in Catania, however, resulted severely deficient when compared to asylum seekers' previous expectations and the rights enjoyed by asylum seekers in other European countries, as it often was. In this sense, the Sicilian *accoglienza* system provided a loaded meter of the country's shaky 'rule of law':

**Diallo:** When I talk to my friends in Germany, in France, they give them [fellow migrant friends institutionally housed] 400 euros per month! Here eeeeh [laughing], they give us 10 euros per week [pocket money provided by the organisation running the hosting centre] not even if you kill yourself they'll give you 400 euros! Here they said they would give us 35 euros a day, but the mafia eats it all, they don't give anything to us. They eat it all!

Once more, the Mineo CARA was no doubt provided the most glaring manifestation of institutional corruption and mismanagement sharply criticised by its hosted asylum population. As widely reported, in the Mineo CARA, asylum seeking 'guests' did not receive the daily pocket money of €2.50 they were formally entitled to, but this was replaced by the distribution of cigarettes or mobile credit top-up cards. Massimo, a seasoned Sicilian activist, well explained the most dramatic implications of this practice:

This condition of indigence pushed migrant women to become prostitutes and [male] migrants to work in the countryside, but asylum seekers made €15, €12 euros per day, that is half [of what workers normally earned for a nine-hour working day of orange picking] because those who used to pick them up to work [driving them to the orange fields] knew that they had bed and board and also A/C inside the CARA. And so they used to give them half the salary and this is of unprecedented gravity because there [the camp] was hyper-patrolled, because the fiscal police, Carabinieri, mounted police, the army [...] only the Alpine guards were not at the Mineo CARA! And nobody noticed that opposite the centre, women were sold for sex and migrants were exploited for work.

The harming co-existence of displayed hyper-surveillance (most evident in the constant presence of multiple armed bodies, migrants' signing duties on entry and exit and social workers' moral patrolling of migrants' conduct) and colluded institutional abandonment (see Pinelli, 2015b) in fact resulted in a legality deficit, a normative vacuum filled by the centre's

dwellers' own interpretations and enactments of justice, as Seikou pointed out:

the law does not protect those who are kind [...] everything in the CARA was law, because the State was represented by the police, the judiciary police and... all the police was there, Carabinieri, everyone was there. Thus, as soon as something happens they carry out investigations, they call the people [involved], but there is no consequence. One hits you, hurts you, and you see him walking around tomorrow, the day after... [...] the explanation was missing – they [police] have to follow the law, if you press charges, they run investigations and after three months they ask you if you want to proceed or to withdraw your charges, but this was not explained to the guests. [...] I personally don't think there's any need to use violence, [...] but it depends, there are moments where okay, I can hold back, if you don't cross my limits [...] but other times, you have to be brave enough to defend yourself, don't go to attack, but when someone really wants to hurt me, I can't stand still, look at this person harming me and let them go! Who should I go to then? The police? No, it's not like the police can do anything after someone has killed me. It's over for me, it's not over for the police, so I have to do anything I can to protect myself.

If the scandals surrounding the criminal management of CARA Mineo made national and international headlines, the dubious legality and legitimacy of institutional reception practices were also under asylum seekers' constant scrutiny in smaller-scale reception centres in the city of Catania. Here another important dimension of asylum seekers' moral reasoning comes to the fore as they make sense of and evaluate their institutional treatment in light of their transnational experiences.

**Diallo:** This immigration is business, all of it - from there [Africa] to here [Italy], you know those who do this trafficking in Libya are the military and those who buy us from the Tuareg are the Africans, fellow Africans like us, our brothers. [...] To some extent I agree with Salvini, he is doing his job, there are many people messing around [*ci sono tante persone che fanno casino*]: not just migrants, also the people who work with migrants, the reception centres' workers [*gli operatori*], because they just steal money.

By linking asylum seekers' experiences in the murky *accoglienza* system in Italy to the violence and exploitation suffered on their tortuous journeys across the Sahel route, Diallo identifies a clear thread: from the Sahara to Sicily, migrants are subject to a continuum of lucrative commodification. In this transnational trajectory, Italy emerges as a country where, comparatively, the law rules, but the rights and protection granted by it remain elusive for people seeking international protection. It is from these premises that the invocation of the then Interior Minister Matteo Salvini by the part of some asylum seekers becomes intelligible,

if striking. Taking Salvini's professed fight for 'legality' and 'security' at face value, asylum seekers like Diallo reclaim migrants' own right to a legal and safe stay in the country, in line with the national and international regulations they saw trampled by institutional and professional actors operating in the asylum reception business, but also routinely circumvented by local employers and landlords at asylum seekers' expenses. In a moral short-circuit, the values formally enshrined in the ethno-nationalist discourse that legitimised the financial dismantling of the Italian asylum reception system and the erasure of the main avenue of regularisation for asylum seekers (humanitarian protection) are reappropriated by asylum seekers to demand rights and legal protection from exploitation. On other occasions, Salvini's controversial slogans were half-jokingly directed by fellow asylum seekers to loud groups of migrants 'messing around', for example, by fighting on the street, disrupting a legal surgery drop-in or again getting high in plain sight, crouched on the pavement of a side street. This reflected widely spread judgements where peer asylum seekers' lifestyle, public conduct, source of income, but also willingness to learn Italian and 'integrating themselves' were salient parameters to distinguish between those perceived as deserving to stay in the country and those who 'should be sent back home'.

*'We are not all equal' - reclaiming 'integration' response-ability*

A Malian national in his 30s, Seikou lived in the Mineo camp for 3 years while waiting for his asylum claim to be lodged and processed. In the meantime, he acted as a cultural-language mediator and peace maker within the camp, first informally and then as a contracted employee once he was granted international protection. Often commended for his wise and calm disposition by other residents of the camp and charity workers, Seikou gradually became a well-known figure in CARA Mineo, helping out with language classes, interpreting, conflict resolution, counselling and external events. Gaining the (largely Italian) staff members' trust was however a struggle:

It is not just lack of trust, there are also people who think that we are nothing, that we are ignorant. [...] but even if the [social] operators were idiots [*cretini*], they were not idiots by accident, but because we [asylum-seeking residents] have showed them we were idiots! The majority [of the 'guests'] behaved like idiots, so the operators understood that we are all idiots.

In our many conversations, Seikou did validate the encamped asylum seekers' widespread feelings of 'disrespect' and 'abandonment'. Seikou's moral reasoning, however, also points to asylum seekers' own role in reinforcing Italian social workers' prejudices against them by showing that 'we were idiots'. Behaving like *cretini*, in Seikou's view, meant first of all not

understanding the system and one's responsibilities within it. The most classical example reported by Seikou was that many 'guests' were unwilling to take part to the free Italian language classes offered within the camp, despite 'they had nothing to do for 24 hours. They were waiting to get a job before learning Italian. They still haven't understood that if you don't speak Italian, you can't find a job easily.' For many asylum seekers, charity workers and various members of the public I encountered in Catania, showing efforts in learning Italian, having some command of the language was indeed a recognised marker of 'goodwill' at 'integrating themselves' (*integrarsi*). Along these lines, Seikou's fellow 'guests' at the camp jeopardised the wider asylum-seeking population's reputational worth by also refusing to follow the camp's internal rules regarding, for instance, the 'right' behaviour when queuing-up at the canteen, or by constantly complaining about the living conditions in the camps and generally 'behaving like children by expecting to get everything without any effort', 'placing all the blame on others and never on themselves' – in Seikou's words.

I suggest that Seikou's moral reasoning is emblematic as it operates on two, seemingly conflicting, levels which were often enmeshed in the words of the asylum seekers I encountered in Catania. On one hand, Seikou rejects asylum seekers' paternalistic 'assistenzialismo' by the part of institutional actors as he denounces their ascribed, humiliating condition of passive patients. This, however, does not prevent Seikou from condemning asylum seekers' own victimhood which, in his view, risks legitimising their subsumed position of incapacitated 'guests'. Seikou's moral stances disrupt dominant narratives of asylum seekers' reception not by complaining about the reception conditions *per se*, nor by offering a blanket justification of fellow asylum seekers' conduct, but by reclaiming asylum seekers' capabilities and responsibility in shaping their own settlement process. This implies becoming aware of how 'things work' in the place they now inhabit and taking advantage of the opportunities at hand. Seikou's counter-narrative also forces the dominant othering gaze to acknowledge not just the agency, but also the moral heterogeneity of the asylum-seeking subjects hosted within the barbed-wired walls of the camp, for 'each person who was at the [Mineo] CARA had his own education, [...] his own lifestyle, his own character before being in the CARA. Those who had a bad one, have worsened it [by living in the camp]'.

On the other hand, Seikou's moral reasoning reproduces the dominant discourse of 'integration' and 'deservingness' circulating within and beyond asylum reception facilities. In this view, 'integrating oneself' (the Italian verb being mainly used in its reflexive form

*integrarsi*) is a unidirectional process of acculturation whose onus weights on ‘foreigners’ as ‘especially us, who have come here, we really have to be able to accept many things’ – a recurring trope among many asylum seekers I have met. Besides their duty to learn Italian, according to Seikou, good-willing asylum seekers in the camp just had to follow the instructions all ‘guests’ apparently received upon arrival:

Seikou: There was a programme, it was all written, [explaining] how you have to do to integrate, first of all, before thinking of your friends in the camp, like I am a foreigner, you are a foreigner, we are in Italy, if we keep just staying among each other we can’t do anything, it’s like we’re closing ourselves out. So it’s better that we make friends with also Italians, know their culture, their habits, how people live here, how people behave here. [...] to me [CARA Mineo] is a big school because there were all the cultures of the world. So you must be happy to always get to know new people, new views, you must make the most of this moment after which you can become someone important for yourself and for others.

Despite Seikou’s peculiar position of guest-employee in Mineo camp, he was certainly not alone in fiercely asserting asylum seekers’ (moral) agency and responsibility at self-integrating. For instance, this is how Diallo, also a strenuous critic of the *accoglienza* business, once reflected:

We are really too many, I see it, we are too many and not all of them know why they are here, why they made the journey. Millions and millions of guys come and 50% of them think that once they reach Catania or Lampedusa they’re done, life is easy then, God will send them everything, you see what I mean? They are here and they do nothing, they sleep, eat and they think that life is easy here because we are in Europe. But it’s not like that, it’s hard, you have to study hard, you have to work hard, if you put effort then God will help you. [...] but many come all the way to another country, they make the journey and then they mess around [*fanno casini*], that’s not fine, why have you come all the way here then? We all come from different countries, we are different, this is what people here don’t understand: we are not equal [*noi non siamo pari*], we are not all the same.

Against the backdrop of neo-colonial assistenzialismo, where infantilisation, hyper-surveillance and institutional abandonment concur in the production of racialised patients of the state, claiming asylum seekers’ moral heterogeneity and response-abilities disrupts the very *raison d’être* of the institutional reception apparatus, while reproducing moral hierarchy of deservingness. Once more, I suggest, moral values circulating on the national and supra-

national level in highly politicised discourses are reclaimed by asylum seekers and partly re-signified in light of their lived, contextual experiences. If we consider the widespread informal and illegal practices that pervaded the running of reception centres within and around Catania (as certainly elsewhere too), but also the normalised exploitative practices so many institutionally housed migrants endured to make a living, asylum seekers' emphasis on rules following becomes, somewhat ironically, a breach of the *status quo*, a challenge to the prevailing culture of institutional illegality. Likewise, among the hyper-diverse asylum population, stressing asylum seekers' moral diversity becomes an important counter-narrative in a time and place where they are commonly stigmatised for their enforced socio-economic marginality and often associated with criminal activities, especially in the case of Western African migrants. As we shall see in the next section, asylum seekers' normative understandings of 'integration' and 'goodwill' and more broadly the moral lexicon circulating within institutional hosting centres had far-reaching implications also for the increasing number of asylum seekers living outside (or right at the edge) of statutory *accoglienza*.

### **'The system is wicked' – inhabiting Catania's urban margin**

*'Caritas is not giving us a place to sleep'*

July 2019

In the tiny storehouse of the Caritas day-care centre, Giusy, one of the young, underpaid civil servants<sup>25</sup> working at the centre, and I are bent over piles of plastic bags of all sizes, full of donated clothes. We are going through our respective piles of bags when Aldo storms into the room, he asks me if I can help with a guy who can only speak English. Exuding good will and faith, Aldo is one the centre's directive figures, a passionate man 'serving the least' – in Aldo's words, 'our wee brothers and sisters' (*i nostri fratellini e sorelline*) supported by the Caritas. I follow Aldo into the main room where a queue has formed behind the free breakfast tables. I briefly greet some of the community kitchen's regulars I know: there's Olga, the middle-aged Bulgarian woman who is lately sleeping in a A&E hall while she waits to find her next post as live-in carer. A few metres ahead in the queue another familiar face is leaning on the food trays. Salvatore is gulping down a chocolate croissant as he hastily puts two sandwiches in a plastic

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<sup>25</sup> In Italy, young people under the age of 30 can apply for a year of 'national civil service' in a variety of social organisations. The stipend perceived for full-time service is €440 per month (about £374). Most civil servants I talked to in Catania considered it a very good opportunity to secure a stable source of income for 12 consecutive months. Some of them explained that they would share the money they earned with their parents to support their families.

bag and makes stock of arancini<sup>26</sup>, ‘for my lunch’, ignoring the repeated reprimands by the more seasoned breakfast volunteers standing on the other side of the tables. As some others, Salvatore sleeps in his car, but he undoubtedly stands out from the crowd for his silver tongue and his unshared love for obscure philosophical debates. At the edge of the long line of white plastic tables there is Moussa, with his usual straight face, eyes down, giving one-word answers to the retired teacher who is handing out plastic glasses of tea. ‘Good morning – please - thank you - good bye! Some manners wouldn’t hurt!’ Mocks him another senior volunteer, checking that nobody is taking ‘more than one needs’. I distinctly recall Moussa’s words when I first met him. He told me he is from Senegal, he has been living in Italy for five years, ‘but I want to go back home because I don’t want to turn evil [*non voglio diventare cattivo*], I don’t want to become a criminal, you understand? Italy is like that. I’m just waiting for someone to give me the ticket.’

Aldo and I make our way through the loud, messy crowd gravitating around the food trays and get to the quieter side of the big room. Here people are sitting around large plastic tables, some are eating quietly their breakfast, others are sleeping, their heads down on the table or laying against the wall, while they are charging their phones.

Fatima is among them, she replies to my weaving with a tired half-smile. A young woman in her early twenties, Fatima has recently learnt that she is pregnant. She looks exhausted – ‘yesterday I slept on the train tracks, but I don’t sleep very well because if I sleep too much then I wake up and I don’t find any of this’ she explained to me some weeks ago, pointing to her phone, charger and powerbank. She told me she is waiting to be placed into a supported accommodation, ‘they will give me the place in two weeks [...] cause now “that one” has kicked me out!’ - referring to the Senegalese lady running an unlicensed restaurant based in the landing of a run-down building, a semi-celebrity among the Western African population of Catania. ‘She said that I’ve been badmouthing her and she told me to get out, she still owes me 250 euros!’

The person Aldo wants me to talk to is standing in front of us, shaking nervously. I recognise his face by the small, circle eyeglasses he is wearing, a fashionable retro frame, and his narrow dreadlocks weaving as he talks animatedly. I do not know him, but his face looks familiar, I wonder if we have crossed path at the Astalli centre, or under the shade of Villa Bellini gardens’ tall trees. Aldo tells me that Sister Lucia called him last night, telling him that this guy has nowhere to sleep and is desperate. Aldo has now the thankless task of saying that there’s currently no room in any night shelter. I translate into English what we have been saying to most people seeking shelter over the past months. His reply is a cry of anger and

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<sup>26</sup> A typically Sicilian ‘dish consisting of balls of rice stuffed with a savoury filling, coated in breadcrumbs and fried’ (Collins Dictionary).



despair:

I've been sleeping on the street for two weeks, this is not life, you sleep wherever you find a place, people don't respect you, because you're nothing, you've got nothing! I went to Germany and they sent me back to this life! I've travelled from very far, I've suffered for so long and now I'm in the same conditions I was before, life has no meaning! We were living like that back home, it's better there where they kill us! How can I keep strong if I don't sleep? Why can't I sleep here?? And you tell me you have no place – it's just four walls and a bed, so that I can lay down! Life has no meaning!

I can hardly hold his gaze while he spits out at us the cruelty of the systemic gap he has fallen into. In line with the Dublin III Regulation, he was forced to come back to the European place where he was first fingerprinted only to be made homeless, rejected by their destination country and abandoned by the Italian state, that, at least in Catania, has been unable to provide any form of institutional response to so many coerced 'returnees'. His words sharply question the hypocrisy of an institution called 'Charity' but whose evangelical mission to help 'the least' is subject to office hours and internal regulations. Attracted by the shouting, a gaggle has gathered around us. Pino, another *aficionado* at the Caritas community kitchen, shrugs his shoulders and heads back to the breakfast tables for a second round; I wonder how many times he has witnessed similar displays of despair. Standing behind me, a young, tall man from the Horn of Africa whispers that a friend of his found himself in the same situation, he too had been sent back from Germany without a place to stay; with a sober face he mimics someone committing suicide by hanging themselves – 'he died alone'. For my upset interlocutor as for many others, being back in Catania nullified their years of efforts at 'building up': the suffering they had endured for years had 'no meaning' if not leading at least a step closer to the projected 'better future' in the teleological journey of life. Despite the achievement they had earned by reaching a desirable destination in central or northern Europe, in no time they were back to ground zero. Life becomes absurd, it has no intelligible direction nor meaning if the promise of (existential) justice whereby efforts and suffering shall be rewarded is broken. As another asylum seeker phrased it, 'you travel to build up, but if you travel and you don't build up then it's too much.'

'The guy has been whining [*lagnarsi*] no end, but he didn't even have a document with himself, just his lawyer's papers, I've had to send him away!' – will later comment Federica, the Caritas centre's social worker on duty<sup>27</sup>, recounting her own exchange with 'il ragazzo' in

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<sup>27</sup> For a few hours every morning a social worker, usually paired by an experienced volunteer, holds one-to-one surgeries with whoever knocks on the door asking for any form of social support, e.g. help to buy a train ticket to

frustration. In fact, regardless of the chronically shortage of beds, people in need must show an identification document, even if expired<sup>31</sup>, to get access to either of the two dorms still running in Catania. Except, this turns out to be difficult for many people sleeping rough and whose belongings are regularly stolen overnight. This is what happened to Uzoma, a Nigerian man in his late 20s, also a familiar face at the community kitchen. He was stolen the €90 he had painstakingly earned after a week of informal work in a car wash. Uzoma is the holder of a 6-month stay permit while he is waiting to have his asylum claim processed. He too has been 'sent back' from Germany where he has spent five months. 'They said they need me in Italia, but I am here now and they didn't assign me nothing, me I don't know what's the problem. In the camp they said I should go, I should go to Italy... I said okay'. Since he got back to Catania, Uzoma has been sleeping rough on the pavement underneath a tall building in Piazza della Repubblica, alongside a high number of other street homeless of all nationalities. Uzoma calls the place where he sleeps 'Ali Baba', after the nearby shawarma that he regularly visits to charge his powerbank even if he has no money to get anything to eat. 'Too many people sleep at Ali Baba, Caritas is not giving us a place to stay!' he would often complain. Sometimes Uzoma pops by a Nigerian shop, it's a little walk from 'Ali Baba'. The Nigerian lady working there lives in a 'room with parlour', a one-room flat where she lives with her husband and children. She has no room to host him, but he can come over during the day to rest and he is now leaving there his heavy backpack stuffed with all his belongings. He likes to visit the Nigerian shop, even 'just to greet them'. 'I am so tired' – he tells me slowly and I know that he means that he is tired of his relentless struggle to survive in the margin.

Between April and August 2019, the Caritas centre next to Catania's central station offered me a window into the busy crossroad of lives that coalesced around the centre's large hall twice a day. In this nexus of institutional failures, stagnant economies, private tragedies, tensions and conviviality, everyday retired (mainly divorced) men, undocumented migrants, the under-employed as well as the physically and mentally unwell of all nationalities dwelled next to the many asylum seekers formally entitled to statutory accommodation and legal work. Among the migrant population I met at the time of my fieldwork, pregnant women like

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get to a job interview or court hearing, requests to get access to free showers, support to renew stay permits or reach out to negligent lawyers, other than working as the main referent for the city's night shelters.<sup>31</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, in the private, Church-funded dorm of Catania people had to show some sort of official ID even if expired. The second shelter, by contrast, was ran by a private cooperative sub-contracted by the Catania City Council and would only accept people with valid stay permits.

Fatima and single mothers with children were especially at risk of homelessness due to the lack of adequate facilities in the Catania province. Just like asylum seekers with serious mental health issues, fitting into the category of the ‘too vulnerable’ had often the perverse effect of dramatically restricting the housing options of those in most dire need. Many other asylum seekers were made destitute after being forced to leave an asylum seekers’ hosting centre as so many were shutting down. Others again were formally residing in Catania but actually living in another Italian city (or even abroad) – they were seeking a temporary shelter in Catania just for the time needed to attend their appointment at Catania’s Questura to renew their stay permits. It was, however, “i dublinanti”<sup>28</sup> like ‘il ragazzo’ and Uzoma that I most commonly came across on Catania’s streets. Italy ‘needed’ them, in Uzoma’s understanding, their return was peremptorily requested only to let them languish on the street, waiting for their asylum claim to be processed for months or years. In spite of the European agreements regulating removal to supposedly safe third countries, the forcibly returned would soon realise that there was nothing awaiting them in Catania.

And yet, in a context of weak institutional presence and shaky legality culture, the legal violence manifested, for instance, in the systematic production of policy-made destitution as in the case of the forcibly returned and the many illegalized *and* undeportable migrants (Fabini, 2017) did not linearly translate into homelessness and deprivation. Rather, I propose, laws and policies’ exclusionary/inclusionary powers were heavily mediated by the interaction between trans-local moral economies of deservingness and solidarity and asylum seekers’ own moral agency. More than migrants’ legal status, what determined the difference between being institutionally or informally housed and sleeping rough was one’s readiness to understand the multiple moral economies at play, and the ability to draw on local social networks to negotiate access to institutional circuits or make a living at their edges.

Critically, the majority of ‘dublinanti’ had lost touch with local contacts or had fled Sicily before having the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships within hosting centres and the city, hence before learning to decode the moral hierarchies regulating access to institutionalised charity (e.g. private shelters, faith-based organisations). In the unspoken

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<sup>28</sup> Literally ‘those who are Dublinning’, referring to asylum seekers subject to enforced return to the first EU country of arrival in line with the to highlight asylum seekers’ ongoing mobility across European countries, slowed down, rather than stopped, by imposed set-backs punctuating in their evolving migration projects. Following Nunzia (a long-term Caritas volunteer), I prefer using this term as opposed to the more common informal term ‘Dublinati’ (Dublined) which suggest a definitive, enforced end to asylum seekers’ secondary migration in Europe.

<sup>33</sup> Getting the spelling right, registering someone’s full name was a primary concern for charities which would often help liaising with lawyers, would keep a copy of the person’s document in a safe space and may receive formal correspondence on behalf of people without a regularly registered address.

moral economy of Catania's charity sector, 'il ragazzo' had no chance to get a bed because he ignored the contextual, highly discretionary working of this field. Understandably concerned about his expired ID, he did not know that first he should have gone to the police station to report his missing document, whether or not that was still valid and regardless of his current legal status. This, he could not know, was not a legal requirement, he would not have been discharged because he did not possess a valid ID or stay permit, but it was rather a convention adopted by some private charities to identify their new 'guests', 'to make sure we've got the spelling right'<sup>33</sup>. No in/formal broker had explained that to him, nor had he had the time to learn through socialisation. The guy also failed to know that by manifesting his righteous anger and deep frustration raising his voice he had further reduced his chances to 'get in', one way or another. As I could observe on other situations of ordinary despair, his agitated behaviour exasperated by prolonged sleep deprivation could have been quickly classified by a charity worker or other institutional actors as an aggressive 'altered state' attributed to presumed drugs use – a deviant behaviour that (I was repeatedly told) should be met by 'a wall: we need to create void around them, so that they are forced to get clean to receive help.' This is how *il ragazzo* did not only lack a proof of identity, but also failed to gain the sympathy of the social worker on duty. In this case, failing to perform the vulnerable (but not too vulnerable), good-willing (but unthreatening) migrant did not deprive him of a bed in a shelter, that was at full capacity anyway, but it meant that Federica, annoyed by his 'whiner', did not try to make any extra call to explore 'informal reception' options, she did not link him up with any informal broker who (like Abdel) would be occasionally consulted in similar situations, nor she made sure he knew how to get a copy of his lost document.

Uzoma, by his side, was systematically dismissed and ridiculed by some staff members working in a shelter. A couple of social workers I spoke to were amused by the fact that over the winter, for weeks and weeks, Uzoma would turn up almost daily asking if a bed had become available. A meek smile on his face, Uzoma had kept hopeful way longer than expected. Day in and day out he would walk in with the same question and walk out with the same negative answer, without protesting, without trying to persuade the shelter workers of the exceptionality of his case, without anyone vouching for him. Uzoma failed to see what many others in his situation had soon realised and attempted to counter: nothing would distinguish himself from the many other people sleeping rough in the cold and waiting for a bed to become available. What was laughable to some staff members, I suspect, was this chiasm between the hopelessness of the situation and his artless, stubborn optimism. Unable to 'read the system', however, it was this same blind hope that sustained him through months

and months of loneliness and desperate job hunt. His dedicated perseverance did not admit any social distraction. When I asked him if he had any friends around him, Uzoma explained that: ‘I don’t have any friends, you are my only friend here. Let me find a job first, then I will find some friends. You know if I don’t have a job, I don’t like to stay with someone, some people don’t work, they are lazy, they stay in the house, they sleep and if you are with them, you just waste your time. [...] I can’t give up until I find a job, you understand?’ And yet, his restless endeavours to sustain himself were largely unsuccessful precisely because he lacked someone to help him navigate access to local charities or find alternative, informal, living arrangements.

#### *Finding one’s place in Catania’s trans-local moral economies of solidarity*

Understanding the bureaucratic and moral system regulating the discretionary access to institutional support and legal status determination was essential and constituted the object of ongoing moral brokerage. But other sets of values and practices regulated grassroots forms of support and mutuality for all those who were denied or chose not to avail of institutionalised charity. Fatima’s situation clearly exemplifies this point. She was made homeless firstly because there was hardly any institutional place to host single pregnant women in Catania (i.e. a structural obstacle), but also – as reported by a charity worker and a shelter ‘guest’ - because she refused to follow Church-run shelters’ internal regulations by sneaking out at night after curfew, and by manifesting unacceptable ‘promiscuous behaviours’ (i.e. rejection of local moral economy of deservingness). By refusing to conform to the norms and values regulating access to institutionalised charity, she did not partake to the local moral economy of deservingness whereby hospitality and social/moral rehabilitation was offered in exchange of ‘good’ conduct and a limitation of personal freedoms. The reason why Fatima was not just outside of any institutional circuit of statutory support or charitable reception but also sleeping on train tracks and not, as she used to, on a couch was yet another – she had breached a different set of moral expectations regulating grassroots solidarity among co-nationals (i.e. failure of trans-local moral economy of solidarity). According to her informal ex-employer and host, she had undermined the restaurateur’s reputational worth by ‘badmouthing’ her. A breach in trust had outweighed the Senegalese lady’s willingness to host and provide a source of income to ‘a sister’ in need.

If existing literature has long highlighted the important role of street bureaucrats’ discretionary powers and moral dispositions in translating nominal laws into contextual practices, such accounts tend to underestimate the pivotal role not just of non-institutional

actors, but also, more fundamentally, of the plurality and transnational character of moral normative assemblages that intersect with state-driven practices, values and discourses. My intention here is certainly not to suggest that the city's social services, the Church and the Senegalese restaurateur had comparable responsibilities towards the young woman. Nor do I believe that acts of discretionary charity and grassroots solidarity can ever be a sustainable or desirable answer to the structural production of social suffering.

What I argue, however, is that it is only by moving beyond a state-centred and strictly local perspective that we can fully appreciate the social and moral forces that keep shaping Catania's social margin and what is at stake for the people directly involved.

In this thick morally laden power field, I argue that asylum seekers' moral agency emerges most prominently in two ways. First, by taking a stance on/negotiating their own positioning towards in/formal moral expectations and practices constituting specific social contexts, be it a community kitchen, a Church-run shelter, a co-national's restaurant or an occupied house. Similarly to Fatima, many other asylum seekers disapproved of shelters' regulations and everyday practices of moral patrolling, leading some to renounce to housing support altogether and others to contest the legitimacy of such institutions from within (whether verbally or in practice). As I will discuss at some length in the next section, the very act of going to the Caritas community centre was subject to contested moral deliberations. Asylum seekers' moral agency, however, is not just essential to understand *how*, in what social and physical spaces, with what dispositions destitute asylum seekers inhabited Catania's social margin, but also to understand *whether* life in the social and moral margin was considered worth living. This is the second, essential way, in which I argue asylum seekers' moral agency shaped their life at the margin. Back in the Caritas hall, in a de-humanising, seemingly hopeless situation, *il ragazzo* struggled to find meaning in life and thus a valid reason to keep going. A few meters apart, Moussa reasoned that the conditions to make a living in Catania and Italy were morally unacceptable to him – he did not want to get involved into criminal activities, in his view the only option he had in the country that would end up corrupting himself, 'turning evil'. For the young Senegalese man, this was not a life worth living and for this reason he had decided to return voluntarily to his country of origin. Many other asylum seekers would try to leave Sicily or Italy, perhaps for the second or third time, seeking a morally acceptable form of livelihood. Others again exercised their moral agency by negotiating meaningful, legitimate ways to stay and make a living. It is to this latter group that I now move on to look at from some proximity.

## 'People here don't like *in regula*' - Producing moral worth and legitimacy in Babylon

Uzoma and I are sitting next to each other on two chairs in the corridor of the Astalli centre, apart from the busy waiting room. He feels self-conscious about the strong smell of his clothes after working all morning at the fish market; he looks forward to having a shower tomorrow morning, when the public lavatories will open. Uzoma points to the overloaded backpack he constantly carries with himself – a colourful schoolbag stuffed with all his belongings or what remains from the routine pickpocketing. A yardstick with a spongy brush is popping out on one side of the backpack, it is still in its plastic packing. It is a new windscreen wiper. 'Do you know what it is?' he asks me serious. He mimics the gesture of someone cleaning a car's windscreen. I nod. He tells me someone gave it to him so that he could get some change from car drivers waiting at the traffic light. We both know that the windscreen wiper in Catania, as in many other Italian cities, is more than a cleaning tool, it can become a job of sort.<sup>29</sup> "I feel shame, now everyone look at me, now everyone think I am a beggar..." – "Who do you think looks at you?" I ask - "Everyone, black, white, everyone know this is for begging on the street. I don't like this job you know?" Uzoma speaks softly, ensuring no one else can hear us from the waiting room.

*Participant observation at Centro Astalli, fieldnotes.*

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**Lamine:** We Gambians, we're stubborn, even the Nigerians know, we don't like to beg! God say...

**Silvia:** ...what does God say about selling drugs?

**Lamine:** Okay, you know why we can't eat *maiale* ['pork', in Italian], but there is one condition when God say you can. If you are in the desert and all you can eat is *maiale*, then I won't allow me to depend on you, I need to feed myself.

*Informal conversation in San Berillo, fieldnotes.*

Often framed as a 'family mandate', securing some form of income and, whenever possible, send some money back home was no doubt the number one existential imperative weighting on virtually all asylum seekers I spoke to in Catania. Whatever the asylum seekers' legal status and living conditions, the need to make a living was a horizontal issue subject to conflicting, heart-felt moral judgements. As discussed in the first part of the chapter, the

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<sup>29</sup> In Catania as elsewhere in Italy, it is very common to find someone (often of migrant origin and in pairs) stationed at busy traffic lights, who would quickly clean the windscreen of cars waiting at the red light hoping to get some change from the driver. The figure of the migrant windscreen cleaner at the traffic light has become a common trope in the Italian public imaginary and discourse around immigration, often associated with the stereotype of the pushy foreign beggar too lazy to get themselves a proper job.

frustrated responsibility to gain some financial independence was, according to Giovanni and Seikou among others, the main source of moral suffering in isolated reception camps. Outside institutional reception circuits, the struggle to find a job, alongside a shelter, was also destitute asylum seekers' paramount concern. In fact, for many, the fundamental issue of housing was somewhat subsumed by the urge to 'get some money'. At the very bare minimum, some cash was essential to get some water, top-up mobile credit and, ideally, save some money for a future, shared rent. In the clutches of 'the system', it was 'because of job' that so many 'Gambian brothers' were 'frustrated, they are not feeling well' and ending up 'destroying their lives over here' – in Omar's words.

*'I'd rather starve to death than doing it'*

But not *any* kind of income-generating activity would do, even in the direst circumstances. Between the spring and summer 2019, Uzoma had been informally employed as a car washer (€20/day for 10 working hours), orange picker (€2/hour), handy man at the fish market (the compensation for half a day ranging between €15 and zero depending on the daily sales and the salesman's whims) and then in another car wash (but paid 5 euros/day more than in the first one), all the while he was sleeping on the pavement in a shielded corner of Piazza della Repubblica. I was then surprised when he turned down the offer to work as live-in factotum in a lido located in a touristy coastal town in the Catania province. The lido owner would offer €300 per month for helping with the running of the lido all day long, but bread and board would be covered. In Sicily's desperate and racialised work market, I reasoned, this would be a good chance (and so far the *only* chance) for Uzoma to get out of the street and have some respite from the daily struggle for survival, at least for the summer months. I was then quick to inform Uzoma of this opportunity, knowing how quickly the post would be filled, but Uzoma did not share my enthusiasm. After some hesitation, he told me that the money was too little and he did not want to be stuck there at someone's dependency. The trade-off between some level of security, with a shelter and a fixed income, however minimal, and the relative flexibility he could enjoy by inhabiting Catania's urban margin was not worth it for him. Uzoma kept sleeping outside for months, constantly trading cash-in-hand jobs. If he was eager to take on any such opportunities in the city, he drew a line when he was offered to clean (unsolicited) the windscreen of cars waiting at busy traffic lights hoping to get some change from the drivers. In his view, this quite widespread activity amounted to 'begging' and was therefore morally unacceptable. He was aware to be exploited in all his odd jobs, 'the money is too small and the work is too much', he would often complain, but he was not a



beggar – to him, a fundamental distinction to maintain a sense of self-worth.

What exactly counted as begging and whether that was to be considered substantially and morally different from other informal income-generating activities was subject to divergent interpretations. Unlike Uzoma, other people I talked to, when asked if they had a job, gave an affirmative answer before specifying that their occupation was ‘semaforo’, the traffic light. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, a number of destitute asylum seekers I met in Catania would refuse to eat at the Caritas community kitchen for this was perceived, just like begging, as stigmatising and morally unacceptable, being them young and able-bodied men. Drissa, however, explained to me why he disagreed with this moral evaluation. A man from Mali who had been educated in a Quranic school for nine years back home, Drissa held that ‘Caritas is not like begging, because they just give you food, not money and also because Caritas is not personal pocket [*Caritas non è tasca personale*]’. In my observations, only one other source of maintenance stirred comparable, or greater, moral unrest. In well-known areas of Catania’s city centre, street-level drugs dealing was a highly visible activity and involved, among others, high numbers of Western African asylum seekers – the most visible and stigmatised segment of a hierarchical, transnational criminal network. ‘Over there, the sellers are more than the buyers’ was a common saying about the open-air selling happening in the crumbling neighbourhood of San Berillo, in the heart of the city. ‘The money is not there. The police know, they let them, this is freedom of life and then they come and catch you! [...] In Germany they don’t let you stay like that on the street, they give you a job, they check if you are selling, they don’t allow that’ - Omar once commented bitterly after one of his regular visits to the ‘Gambian brothers’ hanging out in San Berillo. A common way to morally justify this activity was by pitting drugs dealing against begging in a race to the moral bottom. Selling drugs was judged by some as a last resort way to ‘fill in your gap’, that is providing for oneself without relying on anyone else under strenuous circumstances. Following this line of reasoning, should no other means of survival be available (‘if you’re in the desert’, in the aforementioned Islamic parable), even an illicit activity (such as eating pork meat) becomes legitimate<sup>30</sup>. Drug dealing and asking for charity when physically able to provide for oneself were discursively juxtaposed as comparably illegitimate activities. In Drissa’s moral

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<sup>30</sup> This interpretation (i.e. *fatwa*) of Islamic teaching was harshly criticized by one of Catania’s Imams who explained: ‘both things [i.e. undeserving begging and drugs dealing] are wrong, for a Muslim person these are wrong. But selling, for us, is like consuming, for us it’s the same thing because a Muslim person, when they give something to someone... For me, for example, alcohol is forbidden because it damages health first of all, I dare not to donate it to someone who is not a believer... it’s wrong, it’s like hurting someone, be they a believer or not, it doesn’t matter, these are Islam’s teachings, there’s no double standard!’

reasoning, for example, ‘the worst behaviour is selling something that you can’t sell here, weed, drugs...’ at the same time, he commented that ‘it is very wrong to ask for money, if you are not handicapped, you mustn’t do. You have to find a job, even if it’s difficult. *If I’m here and do like it...* I’d rather starve to death than doing it, yes, it’s fundamental, I can’t do it, I feel too much ashamed. Also, those cleaning at the traffic lights, that’s not work.’ From Drissa’s words another important aspect in evaluating the moral acceptability of income-generating activities emerges – *where* they take place concurs to shape their degree of legitimacy legitimacy. By this, I am referring less to country-specific legal sanctioning (although this was occasionally mentioned) or the contextual meanings attached to specific occupations on the local level, even if this was certainly something asylum seekers would get attuned to. In my observations, context mattered firstly in the sense that higher or lower moral standards would apply in different places. This was most explicitly articulated by Diallo, in one of our rambling conversations over an espresso:

It’s true that nobody came here carrying drugs, but it is also true that many sell drugs. In Guinea I used to have this kind of life, but *when I get out of my country, I don’t like that people see me [doing such things]. [...] this is not money, because it’s like wind, you see? Because I got this money too easily. And also because this is not good money to give to someone of your family, it’s not good because it’s haram. You must have clean money. [...] My brother told me to go to the market, to sell loads of [burned] CDs, but I said no, I don’t want to do this job, I did many countries [‘ho fatto tanti paesi’], I would eat all the money!*

‘Eating money’ is a colloquial, Sicilian expression to indicate an improper use of money, often referred to politicians and other institutional actors, suggesting that someone has illicitly squandered money diverted from its intended, legitimate purpose to one’s own profits. Diallo would not be able to value in the same way the money he could easily get from what he considers improper activities, ranging from drugs dealing to selling counterfeit items. ‘Dirty’ money coming from illegitimate activities as opposed to ‘proper’ labour is forbidden by Islam and is therefore of no use as remittances. What Diallo is also telling us is that while the same illicit activity is considered substantially wrong both back home and abroad, it is even less morally acceptable in a foreign country. The moral bar is higher abroad where one must prove their worthiness to belong. According to numerous asylum seekers I spoke to, a person must deserve their social position abroad not just by working hard but also by working ‘clean’ – in a moral, more than legal, sense. As Omar emphatically put it: ‘You have to live normally, you must have a life *en regula* [broken Italian for ‘in regola’, meaning ‘regularly’, ‘by the rules’]. Like everyone, you pay rent, you act normal, *this is not your country, you need to follow the*

*rules.*' This was all the more important in 'Europe', the destination only a few managed to reach at a very high cost, and where the rule of law is expected to apply. Diallo "had done many countries", an expression that hints not just to the length of his migration journey, but to the fact that he had to spend months and sometimes years in the countries he crossed, each time struggling to sustain himself, experiencing destitution and relying on any source of income to keep going and save money for the next step of his travel. He had not gone through all this to end up getting involved in legally or morally dubious jobs, but to attain a higher standard of life, also from a moral perspective. For many, the migration journey is indeed supposed to follow an ascending moral trajectory where one's source of income becomes a key measure of social and moral progression. The question though remained – could Catania and Sicily be considered 'Europe'?

*Diallo's long summer – Navigating Catania's im/moral economies of employment*

'I was here when Salvini came, he had to run! People here don't like him, nonono, but I've observed many things, people here don't like *en regula*, because Salvini is trying to do something good for them, to let people have legal jobs, you know what I mean? He wants to put *en regula*, but people here like their own system, their traditions, they don't want to change their old way of life. Definitely.' *Omar, informal conversation.*

Omar was indeed a careful observer, he did 'his own research into this society' he explained to me when I first told him about my fieldwork. At times, he would take short videos with his smartphone to document what struck him the most, like a severely ill Tunisian man who had spent 20 years in Italy and that Omar found laying down on a street of San Berillo, or a group of elderly people gathering in a square to slow dance in a circle. What he was mostly interested in, however, were the local youths. He figured that in the deprived neighbourhood of San Cristoforo where he lived, it was the local kids who were often involved in drugs dealing and other petty crimes, something that bewildered Omar. This was all part of the corrupt 'system' he was studying, and morally evaluating, in Catania. Working informally or illegally was part of the local 'system' too. Among other social dynamics that caught Omar's attention, from his favourite spot in a popular square of Catania, he would keep an eye on the large touristy restaurant (which I will call Casa Pasta) where many West African asylum seekers had ended up working, sometimes for months, sometimes for just a few weeks, knowing that it was one of the few places in the city always looking for new waiters which would not systematically turn down black migrants and that would provide work contracts. A real rarity. As always, the money was little and the work hard, but this one restaurant had an

especially negative reputation for exploiting ‘the foreigners’ and rumour had it the owners were all ‘mafiosi’. Unlike the Italian waiters, West African workers were not allowed to have the 30 minutes lunch break<sup>31</sup>, many migrants reported that they were not fully paid and there was very little transparency with regards to work contracts, often declaring half the hours that were actually worked. ‘I told them they have to stop working for this bloody Casa Pasta, they are exploiting us, I’ve seen Carabinieri [one of Italy’s two police forces] here so many times! they must be linked you know’ Omar commented in disapproval.

Accessing the local work market was not only a fundamental way to fulfil a moral imperative and ‘fill in one’s gap’, as discussed above, but it was also the main avenue of legalisation for the majority of migrants (and many asylum seekers among them) I came across in Catania. In the Italian moral economy of immigration management, demonstrable employment is indeed a tangible proof of ‘integration’ and deservingness, a key step towards legalisation. To get a foot in and, even more challenging, keep one’s job in Catania, asylum seekers, however, had soon to come to terms with local moral expectations and practices. In the words of a Catanese charity worker, ‘I think [informal economy] is a problem in all of Italy, but surely in Sicily you feel it more. Here the norm is that if I offer you a job, I decide the salary, I don’t make a contract and you also have to thank me. Nobody wants to make a contract.’ The widespread issue of irregular labour was especially problematic for people like Diallo who needed to provide a work contract in order to renew his stay permit. This is how, well aware of the restaurant’s exploitative praxis, Diallo ended up working at Casa Pasta. After months of unsuccessful job hunt, he had reluctantly handed in his CV and started working full-time.

But after two weeks of 12-hour shifts Diallo decided to leave. Referring to the employees’ manager, Lucia, Diallo explained: ‘she is not talking to me nicely as before, [she said] we can no longer pay you on the 15<sup>th</sup> but on the 20<sup>th</sup>, at the beginning she told me that after 2 days of trial you start working with your pay slip, contract, everything. I’ve worked one week, two weeks and no contract. I’ve seen that two Gambians have a fake contract, it’s written 16 hours [a week], but they’re there every day full-time.’ Worried about the delays in getting a contract, Diallo communicated to Lucia that he would no longer come at work. A week later, he had still received no word about the payment for the 10 days he had worked at Casa Pasta. When Diallo and I walked into the restaurant to clarify the situation, Lucia welcomed us with

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<sup>31</sup> When asked about this differential treatment, the restaurant manager explained that the ‘foreign guys’ working there could take small breaks for a cigarette ‘whenever they want’, but were not given a proper lunch break because, she held, they would always take too long to eat, unlike the Italians who would just have a quick snack and get back to work.

a conciliatory smile, she could instantly tell what we were there for, and I had the impression she had already had this same conversation times and again - 'I've already explained these things to Diallo, but I'll tell you [Silvia] again, so that perhaps he will understand.'

**Lucia:** Diallo had notified me that he would leave on Sunday, but then he has not turned up at all since Wednesday, without telling us, so unfortunately I had to communicate this to the partners [*'i soci'* meaning the restaurant co-owners], especially because being a Saturday and Sunday [i.e. the busiest days of the week] he put me in trouble, they had to find an extra, I had to pay someone else to replace him... [...] Had it been another day of the week I would have turned a blind eye because I know Diallo and to me he is great [validissimo], actually when he told me that he wanted to leave I said 'no, why? Stay!' but now I have to seat down with the owner and have a proper chat with him... because when the guys leave without notice we take two weeks off their stipend... we tell them...

**Silvia:** Diallo, did you know this thing about giving notice?

**Diallo:** No, they didn't tell me anything **Silvia:** Is there anything in writing about this? **Lucia:**

No

**Silvia:** And do you tell all the guys when they start about this rule of the two weeks of stipend off in case of no notice?

**Lucia:** Well, no, maybe we didn't tell *him*, we don't tell *everyone*, but just those who we see that they may want to leave, or those who have some problems and start to not turn up... but with Diallo honestly we had nothing to complain about, quite the opposite! Now, just because it's Diallo, I'm gonna make a try and talk to the boss and let's see what he says... [...]

**Diallo:** I don't like to come here every time to disturb, to ask for money, you understand? I don't want to, but I've seen that you make fake contracts, loads of guys told me not to come to work here, loads of them, but still I've come here, I must work, you understand? I have documents, I need a work contract for my documents, it's not fine like this!

**Lucia** [with a condescending smile]: But Diallo, think about it, if the first thing that you ['voi', plural] do when we give you the contract is to take it to *Questura*, how could they renew their stay permit if the contracts were fake? It wouldn't be very smart of us, would it? [addressing me] Here everyone works regularly [*in regola*], absolutely. Unfortunately, we have a bad reputation, but I've seen how things work here, unfortunately often the guys have no steadfastness, and the work is a lot, that's true, actually I think very highly of these guys for all the work they do... but Silvia, let me just tell you that there's a gentleman who works for us and we have let him sleep inside for two years! Diallo, do you think he would stay here if we

exploited him?

In a loop of mutual mistrust, Diallo had abruptly interrupted to work at the restaurant, fearing he would end up with a ‘fake contract’ and no money, while the restaurant’s manager, by her part, did not trust her young waiters’ commitment and had set up an informal (and unspoken) system to discourage unannounced leaving. Diallo was expected to be flexible and understanding about the delays in getting a contract, despite he was initially given a fixed date. By not turning up for work two days before his announced departure he had breached Lucia’s trust, according to the restaurant’s unspoken rule Diallo should not therefore be paid for the previously two weeks, which in his case amounted to the entirety of his employment at Casa Pasta. Now, ‘just because it’s Diallo’, Lucia told us she would attempt to mollify the boss, to make an exception given Diallo’s hard work, but she did not sound optimistic. Diallo struggled to explain the reasons of his worries because between him and Lucia there was no shared understanding of what a ‘real’ or ‘fake’ contract was. The restaurant’s owners, as many others, exploited exactly this ambiguity. Was a contract that declared a fifth of the actual number of worked hours a ‘real’ contract? It *was not*, in Diallo’s view, but it *was* for the restaurant’s manager, at least as long as it was officially recognised by the police. To further persuade us of the honesty and goodwill of the restaurant’s directors, Lucia made us aware of their generosity in allowing one of their workers to sleep in the restaurant overnight. This act of ‘good heart’ (*buon cuore*), as many Catanese would put it, served as guarantee of their honesty as employers, a recurring discursive strategy in Catania’s labour market.

Both Diallo and I knew for a fact that not all the people working at Casa Pasta were regularly employed, in fact some did not hold any valid document and it would thus be impossible for the employers to produce a contract. We also knew that the elderly man who was informally hosted there, also an undocumented migrant, had little options but staying there, whatever the working conditions. We would also soon learn from the newspapers that a long-term investigation had uncovered an illicit traffic of fake housing and work contracts sold to migrants – a criminal ring that involved some of Catania’s statutory officiants, later arrested. Diallo’s brief work experience at Casa Pasta, however, served him as a useful training in the local im/moral economy of employment when he found a new job as handyman in a family-run lido, on Catania’s northern coast.

‘Diallo has found a family with us’, told me Mimmo, the young, groomed Catanese man who had hired Diallo just a week before. Diallo had told me about the incident he had had on his way to work, while he was cycling from his Comunita in the outskirts of Catania to the lido

and car had run into him. He was fine, but the bike was severely damaged. He had immediately called Mimmo to let him know he was running late and Mimmo had gone to pick him up with his car. The man had offered to take Diallo to the hospital for a check and gave him a ride to a bike repair. This time, Diallo did not complain when Mimmo told him to say that he just worked for 2 hours a day (and not 7am to 7 pm as he actually did), should the Finance Police come to check. The one thing he had to fight for was to get one day a week off, something his new employers was reluctant to allow as the lido was very busy at the time and the family relied on Diallo for most of the work. Diallo was also told never to ask for his stipend, they would pay him, it was made clear that it was not okay to explicitly ask for it. Other unspoken rules included not swimming (a rule that applied only to Diallo and no other family member working at the lido), not eating without asking for permission and bringing his own bottle of water. 'At the beginning they used to give me a bottle of water at the café [of the lido] but now the older man told me that I have to bring my own bottle from home because I drink too much.' 'Mimmo told me that he was looking for someone like me, "you are my brother", he asked me all sorts of things about Africa...' but it did not take long for Diallo to realise that Mimmo would often check what he was doing, would time Diallo's lunch break, count how many bottles of water he got from the café and give him orders to avoid doing the work himself. 'Mimmo doesn't do anything, anything! For you [Italians] it's not a problem, you don't work, I am a foreigner here, I can't stay here without money, you know each other, you're Italians...' Diallo would especially complain about the tone Mimmo, his self-appointed 'brother', would use when addressing him in public – 'he talks to me badly [mi parla male], run here, come there... eehh, the Italians' hearts sometimes... like the Arabs! [giggling]' Having been through severe forms of exploitation and discrimination in Northern Africa before reaching Sicily, being 'like the Arabs' indicated for Diallo the lowest expression of humanity, the heartless and dehumanising treatment of fellow human beings reduced to slaves. If in this context comparing his employers to the Arabs was a half-joke, Diallo, like Drissa and other sub-Saharan African migrants I spoke to had no doubts:

Sicily is not Italy, it's Africa! Because here people don't study well and they don't want to work! It's not Italy because in Italy people are obliged to go to school until they are 15, but here they don't go. That's the problem. Law here doesn't work, you know that.

*Drissa, semi-structured interview.*

## **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have moved through asylum seekers' moral experiences of larger and smaller reception centres, the different moral 'contours' of destitution in Catania and the variegated realities of in/formal 'work' and their attendant frameworks of legitimacy. I have argued that, above all, asylum seekers in the city are faced with the challenge of making moral sense of 'the system', that is the complex nexus of often conflicting moral economies of deservingness that regulate access to institutional and informal forms of support. This was perhaps most evident when looking at the predicaments of destitute asylum seekers and when following Diallo in his moral apprentice from one job to the next. At the same time, asylum seekers' strong moral condemnation of the humiliating, patronising and colonial logics underpinning asylum seekers' institutional reception remind us of the significance of asylum seekers' moral reasoning in navigating and often rejecting 'the system'. Importantly, multiple frameworks of moral worth and legitimacy emerged in the interstices of the system as, for instance, asylum seekers socially constructed lives worth living within and outside reception centres and morally negotiated the meanings of 'work'. A tension, however, runs through the empirical material presented in this chapter. If many asylum seekers I met were quick to denounce the racialised, colonial underpinning of much institutional intervention and uneven social relations (including with me), this political and historical awareness coexisted with pervasive neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and moral hierarchies that were often uncritically reproduced in asylum seekers' moral reasoning.

By juxtaposing the present empirical chapter with the past one set in Newcastle, the contours of two dominant governmental logics seem to emerge: the survival of the documented in the North East England and the survival of the fittest in Sicily. Far from determining the respective multiple local moral economies of asylum seekers' un/settlement, I suggest that these two principles of internal moral bordering strongly affected not only asylum seekers' living conditions but also and most notably their social interactions and peer relations in the two contexts.

The ethnographically informed perspective I have put forward arguably allows us to look beyond Fassin's European moral economy of compassionate repression as expressed in highly polarized public moral discourses. In stark contrast with popular anti-migrant rhetoric, violent processes of border externalization and anachronistic ethno-national fantasies, on a smaller scale, ethnographic investigation brings to the fore what can be understood as two forms of 'differential inclusion', that is the 'selective non-enforcement of immigration laws' (Fabini, 2017, p. 46) following different dominant moral logics. In Newcastle, asylum seekers



were *de facto* allowed to make a living despite the stringent legal ban on work and the majority of so-called refused asylum seekers were able to stay in the country. In Catania, as we have seen, all asylum seekers had the right to safe accommodation and work, but this right was selectively applied. Here too, the vast majority of ‘refused’ asylum seekers would overstay and engage in some form of income-generating activity, if ‘fit’ enough. What distinguished these two contextual forms of differential inclusion were the relative costs of infringing the dominant principles of ‘having papers’ and ‘fitting into the system’. At stake was not the actual possibility to stay in the country – as enforced removal or deportation affects the minority of the undocumented population in both places – but the possibility to live in an existentially meaningful way.

## Chapter 6. Thinking across and beyond contexts

Speaking from his third-hand couch in his shared Jomast accommodation, Ateef tells me he only has blurred memories of his landing on the Catania docks. He remembers the warm weather he enjoyed for about a week before getting on a train to reach the North of Italy (Milan, Turin and Ventimiglia), the next ‘steppingstone’ in his and many others’ longer journey to the UK (Tuckett, 2016). ‘Lampedusa’ is another word that he recalls, as most of the other asylum seekers I met in Newcastle who reached European soil ‘the hard way’. In the middle of the Mediterranean Sea (70 miles away from Tunisia and about 120 miles from Sicily’s southwest coast), the tiny border island of Lampedusa was Ateef’s, but also Ephrem’s (a man in his early 30s from Ethiopia) intended destination when they embarked on an overcrowded boat on the Libyan shore. The two unrelated men report similarly vague, distant images of a sunny, welcoming country. As Ephrem told me once, staring intently at an empty glass on the pub table between us, ‘water is never free in this country, it’s not like in Italy. In Italy water free for everybody. Italy very good... train [is] free, if people check they see you black and say “okay, go go!” Italy too beautiful! Many many asylum seekers, people give you food... you ask everyone, ALL asylum seekers say Italy best country in Europe, everyone love Italy. But no work!’ Indeed, most asylum seekers I met in Newcastle who transited through the Southern European country on their way North conveyed a likewise rose-tinted image. ‘If here no good after two, three months, I go Italy. Italy is very good’, commented another asylum seeker who saw his asylum claim refused in England and, as a result, had been couch-surfing and intermittingly sleeping rough for the past five months, while waiting for his appeal to be lodged.

In the eyes of the asylum-seeking participants I met in Catania, however, the blurred image of Italy as a permissive, welcoming borderland came soon into focus with its contradictions and sharp edges. From the Sicilian city, it was the North of Europe, including the UK, to be commonly referred to as the most desirable destination for living conditions and employment opportunities. Some of the youngest asylum seekers I encountered would repeatedly beg me to take them with me on my return to England, or at least help them find a way. Others again, through their transnational connections, had matured more balanced expectations. Murab, a man from Pakistan who had been living and working in Catania for a few years, once commented: ‘in Italy it’s impossible to build your future, you earn too little to be able to save money, buy a house... you only work to survive. Many of my friends are in England, there you can build your future, but it’s very hard to get documents, it’s too hard...’

The comparative framework of the research has allowed me to zoom into differently situated asylum seekers' moral reasoning, all the while they were themselves assessing their place of (un)settlement by deploying comparisons and rankings, not the least between England and Italy. In these narratives, asylum seekers' comparative meaning-making tended to discursively construct Southern Italy and England (or Italy and the UK on a larger scale) as mutually exclusive 'systems' imbued with either a benevolent or punitive intentionality: an allegedly humane but economically weak region versus a hostile but economically appealing destination.

Taking the lead from Ateef, Ephrem and Murad's own comparative consciousness, the aim of the present chapter is to explicitly articulate how the comparative approach adopted allows to unpack the question of 'context', thinking critically about the relevance of scale and history/histories in ethnographic studies of asylum migration.

**What context? The question of scale**

The 'double attention' that has informed my work has propelled a deeper reflection on the very foundation of my comparative project: context matters. Which contexts mattered when looking at asylum seekers' moral reasoning in Newcastle and Catania? In line with Zigon's articulation of 'moral assemblage' (Zigon, 2015), my empirical findings show that not only multiple lines of moral reasoning come to intersect and are selectively mobilized by asylum seekers as they evaluate and respond to institutional treatment, but these principles, discourses, values, and emotions are produced and circulate on different scales. Throughout the research, conversations would variously span from universal human rights, "Eastern" (as in "non-Western") traditional generosity, faith-inspired charity, xenophobic nationalisms to regional (e.g. Sicilian or Geordie) welcome cultures and co-national solidarity. All of these different discursive scales were certainly relevant in research participants' (moral) meaning making. In both contexts, the asylum seekers that I met would often draw on different local, trans-local, regional, national, and supra-national references according to the situation, other than their social positioning.

Looking at the articulation and scales of asylum seekers' moral reasoning in two distinct national and local contexts, however, has pushed my considerations a step further: when looking at asylum seekers' un/settlement processes, the scale of context matters differently in different places.

I first entertained this reflection on my second ethnographic fieldwork in Catania. While there, I met a number of asylum seekers who would openly support the then Interior Ministry

Matteo Salvini's populist slogans and securitarian rhetoric. In their understanding, Salvini's main message was that everyone should live according to the rule of law, crimes should be severely punished and the government's priority should always be to protect the interests of national citizens first. This last point was mostly accepted as the unsurprising, legitimate concern of any national government. The friction would arise when confronting their claims to legality and safety, echoed in dominant national and nationalist discourses, with their lived reality in Catania, therefore looking at a sub-national scale. In a context characterized by pervasive institutional mistrust, informality and scarce economic resources, asylum seekers' efforts to secure a regular rental or work contract were considered laughable, even when they had 'all the right papers'. The burden of legality placed disproportionately upon foreign-nationals and asylum seekers among them was not judged as problematic nor discriminatory per se, but only in relation to a flawed regional and local context that failed to respect and enforce national laws and regulations. In this context, the resources, networks of support and informal arrangements available on the regional and local scale mattered greatly because in the institutional void experienced by many asylum seekers on the ground, one's connections and ability to navigate the local hierarchies of deservingness could tell the difference, for instance, between sleeping rough and living in supported accommodation.

In Newcastle, on the other hand, my findings suggest that national laws and policies and their underlying moral frameworks had a much stronger bearing on asylum seekers' everyday lives and outweighed local efforts to promote alternative cultures of welcome. The asylum seekers I met in Newcastle would still exert their moral agency by informally hosting each other, working, building social and affective relations, but at a much higher risk of legal and moral sanctioning. Morally laden distinctions between 'those with papers' and 'refused asylum seekers', by-products of the national legal taxonomy, were salient markers of social status among co-nationals, housemates, friends and neighbours. Immigration enforcement also affected local charities' ability to step into the gaps of the system by offering free shelter to stranded undocumented migrants, part of a wider move to effectively criminalise acts of solidarity towards those deemed underserving of staying in the country.

This reflection speaks to the open debate around the extent to which urban movements such as sanctuary cities 'can be the setting for a political transformation' and 'counter the general tendency towards restrictive policies and anti-migrant stances with a more open, city-based approach to migration' (Ataç et al., 2023, p. 3). Much could be said about the discursive construction of Catania and Newcastle as 'multicultural' (as people often put it in Catania) and 'increasingly cosmopolitan' (as in Newcastle city branding) cities of welcome, embedded

as they are in rich regional histories of mobility and social struggles. From the perspective of asylum seekers' everyday experiences and moral reasoning, however, I suggest that the relative weight of local discourses, practices and related moral hierarchies is strongly affected by the institutional and legal culture of the country as a whole, as well as its degree of political de/centralization.

### ***What context? The question of History and histories***

By examining asylum seekers' moral reasoning in context, both personal life trajectories and historical references have emerged as highly significant elements in their moral evaluations. In other words, it may not suffice to contextualise asylum seekers' moral reasoning in a specific time and place, but we should take into account broader individual and collective histories to make sense of everyday moral labour. History and histories matter. In the case of asylum seekers, more specifically, I argue that different immigrations paths and varying degrees of postcolonial awareness impinge upon the different ways in which they morally make sense of, evaluate and respond to institutional and informal reception conditions. While immigration trajectories varied greatly among the asylum seekers who partook to the research in Newcastle, virtually all asylum seekers in Catania had reached Sicily by crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat. At the time, that meant that nearly all the newcomers had been through similar life-threatening journeys and had all lived for weeks, months or years in Libya under degrading inhumane conditions. As I have empirically illustrated in the last chapter, the geographical and temporal proximity between asylum seekers' stay in Libya and their life in Catania propelled many to make sense of the two places in relation to each other. The two places were often compared also on the grounds of asylum seekers' institutional treatment and perceived injustices. In Catania, a number of participants originally from former French and British African colonies would also draw on broader historical genealogies to make sense of the institutional racism they were experiencing and, importantly, legitimize their presence in Europe. Interestingly, none but one of the research participants in Newcastle made references to the country's historical and present responsibilities to former colonies in their moral reasoning about their own and others' hostile reception. The unrepresentative nature of my samples does not allow me to make any conclusive claims about this asymmetry in my findings. The degree of asylum seekers' historical and postcolonial awareness is likely to vary greatly according to, among other dimensions, one's nationality, age and cultural background. However, it would be interesting to compare more systematically the historical moral trajectories drawn by asylum seekers living in two distinct reception contexts as they evaluate their formal and informal reception.

## Conclusions

Exploring asylum seekers' situated moral agency sheds light on a fundamental, but under-researched dimension of the asylum system understood as a moral, other than a socio-historical, political and economic construct (Gatrell, 2013; Andersson, 2014; Bhambra, 2017; Mayblin, 2017). If a growing body of literature is concerned with national and supra-national moral economies of immigration management (Fassin, 2005, 2011; Andersson, 2014; Forkert et al., 2020), the bordering of national and local 'communities of value' (Anderson, 2013b; Bacas, 2013; Casati, 2018b; Marchetti, 2020; Fassin et al., 2015; Pinelli, 2015a; Rogozen-Soltar, 2016; Whyte, Larsen and Fog Olwig, 2019), little is known of how asylum seekers themselves morally evaluate and engage with the 'system' they encounter. This 'system', I suggest, is much broader than the sum of international and national laws and policies, but is routinely co-constructed, reinterpreted and resisted as asylum seekers interact with a variety of institutional and informal actors in the specific local contexts they inhabit.

The approach I have illustrated in this thesis switches the 'moral gaze', which is normally researched as unidirectionally projected towards migrants, to centre asylum seekers' own moral standpoint. As moral and political subjects, the asylum seekers who participated to the research not only strove to make sense of the opaque and often contradictory working of the asylum regime, but also questioned the legitimacy of its practices, made claims to fairness and social worth, and often challenged institutional/legal boundaries acting upon contextually mediated understandings of justice.

Through the lens of asylum seekers' moral reasoning, the two empirical chapters (chapter 4 and 5) ethnographically have explored the lived impact of what emerge as two dominant principles: "the survival of the documented" in the North East England and "the survival of the fittest" in Sicily. Asylum seekers routinely engage with highly ambiguous 'systems' that are co-produced by a plurality of actors, laws, policies, regulations, spoken and unspoken rules, customs which result in different forms of 'differential inclusion'. Importantly, what is at stake is less whether or not certain asylum seekers will be allowed to stay or forced to leave the country, but rather at what cost they will be able to carry existentially meaningful lives, largely depending on their legal status (in Newcastle) and their ability to fit into the local 'system' (in Catania).

Finally, in this last chapter, I have leveraged on the analytical insights afforded by the comparative framework of my research to further unpack the contextual nature of (asylum seekers') moral reasoning. While I have illustrated how asylum seekers discursively draw on a variety of moral frameworks circulating at supranational, national, regional and

local levels, here I argue that the extent to which local discourses and practices (e.g. city of sanctuary movements) can outweigh national legal and political discourses is in itself context-specific. Comparing two starkly different national and local contexts, allows me to suggest that the relative weight of the regional and local scale is strongly related to the existing institutional culture. I have also argued that asylum seekers' moral reasoning should be thickly contextualized by taking into account the biographical and historical trajectories in which their life experiences are inscribed. Asylum seekers' postcolonial consciousness in evaluating their present institutional treatment in Europe seems especially important and would deserve further comparative investigation, as it points to the very colonial and racialized foundation of the legal institution of asylum (as sketched in chapter 2).

Taken together, the findings bear theoretical, empirical and epistemological implications. Exploring ethnographically asylum seekers' moral reasoning in context and practice is theoretically and ethically important for it fully acknowledges asylum seekers' political and moral agency. On the empirical level, asylum seekers' moral positioning bears very tangible implications on whether and how asylum-seeking subjects engage with local institutions, reception providers and other social actors – including fellow asylum seekers and foreign nationals who make up the local social fabric. Moreover, I suggest that taking asylum seekers' moral reasoning with the seriousness it deserves brings to the fore fundamental epistemological challenges not just for the disciplines of refugee studies and more broadly for social sciences (Rodríguez, Boatca and Costa, 2010; Go, 2013, 2017) but more fundamentally for dominant euro-centric understandings of historical and social justice (Mignolo, 2012; Bhambra, 2022).

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