Home as place and agency : asylum-seekers' perspectives and chruch practices

Home as Place and Agency

Asylum-Seekers' Perspectives and Church Practices

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1. Introduction

The surge in migration of the last decade has impacted national and local communities in multiple ways. Towns have absorbed newcomers; policies on migration, citizenship, and borders have shifted and become more contentious; and non-governmental organizations, including churches, have responded to the social and physical needs of migrants. While migration is often contextualized in terms of access to resources, another thread runs deeper – migration brings questions of identity and belonging into the foreground.

One way that identity and belonging are conceptualized is through definitions of home. Home is often defined as a personal connection to people, places, and practices. At a fundamental level home is an affective experience – feelings of familiarity and security build a connection to place. But home is also shaped by cultural, political, and religious concepts. Home is a political concept appearing directly in uses of words such as homeland or *Heimat* and indirectly in wording such as the Swiss citizenship requirement to «be familiar with the Swiss way of life.»[1] How home is inserted in political discourses around border and migration politics is highly contested and ambivalent. This is seen in the expectations for asylum-seekers to adapt to a way of life while also enforcing policies that keep people separate and in limbo.

Despite common associations across diverse groups, home is a social construct that offers both individual and collective identity markers. As a marker of these identities, home generates social cohesion, but it can also become rigid and nostalgic. Home is not a neutral or innocent word. Home is something that is defended from outsiders, debated during cultural and generational shifts, and fortified through borders, both symbolic and physical. Concepts of home have been part of colonial projects, served to reinforce ethnic and racial discrimination, and

1 State Secretariat for Migration 2018; Federal Act on Foreign Nationals and Integration 2015; Federal Act on Swiss Citizenship 2019.

been called upon shore up borders against migration. Building affective attachments across geographic areas has been part of the project of nation-state building by generating so-called imagined communities that connect otherwise unconnected people by creating shared history, attitudes, and beliefs.[2] While home is experienced through comfortable and cozy affective associations, these attachments can also serve to designate those who do not belong. In settled populations, home can become a boundary marker that protects a sense of collective identity. Thus, home operates in multiple directions, creating life-affirming attachments while also generating life-denying policies and practices.

Home is an ambivalent and highly contextual topic that impacts the people, policies, and programs within asylum-seeking. This article undertakes a critical examination of how home operates in the work of churches and the lives of those seeking asylum in Switzerland. In particular, two aspects of home, place and agency, are explored within the experiences of asylum-seekers and in the practices of Projekt DA-SEIN, a church outreach program for refugees and asylum-seekers in Basel, Switzerland.[3]

2. Background

This research into home and migration is contextualized within the work of churches and migration systems to consider the entire field of interaction. Asylum-seekers are not isolated entities but are situated within the complexities of the Swiss migration system, the practices of churches and NGOs, and personal experiences of home, revealing the complicated intersection of people from very different backgrounds living together in a specific location.

When arriving in Switzerland to apply for asylum, bureaucratic systems work to keep asylum-seekers in isolation.[4] While Switzerland offers basic sustenance

2 Anderson 2006: 6. Benedict Anderson coined the term «imagined community.» «I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.»

3 See: Bieler/Kunz 2019; Kunz 2022 (forthcoming).

4 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft 26. Juni 1998, United Nations December 2010. The process of applying for asylum in Switzerland is regulated by the Swiss Asylum Act, originally adopted in 1998 and applicants must prove they meet the standard of asylum defined by the United Nations Refugee Convention. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as «someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.»

such as asylum homes, stipends, and limited work, these offerings also separate asylum-seekers from other parts of Swiss society especially because of the length of the asylum process. When this research was conducted in 2018, the asylum process often took three years to complete from arrival to final decision.[5] Many asylum-seekers had arrived in 2015 and 2016 and were still waiting for their asylum cases to be decided in early 2018. In addition, the principle of integration is emphasized at every level of migration in Switzerland, focusing on political, social, and economic integration. This principle of integration reinforces migration as a one-way project, compelling newcomers to adopt to the normative culture without similar requirements for the receiving community.[6] There is an assumption that the «Swiss way of life» has specific parameters that should shape new arrivals in Switzerland but is not reciprocally changed by them.[7]

Many churches in Switzerland, including the Evangelical-Reformed Church of Switzerland, take political and ethical stands on migration drawing on the migration history within Christianity and practices such as hospitality, care for the marginalized, and a common dignity afforded by an incarnational theology. This theology addresses home, not as a privilege reserved only for some, but as a basic human right afforded by God. Creation is a gift from God and neither life nor home are earned, despite the limitations placed by borders and nation-states.[8] Considering home within migration foregrounds the tension of Christianity's migration history with its more settled aspects – the tension between being rooted in a place while also searching for home with God.[9] Established religions, including Christianity, are grounded in particular places and often become entrenched with local customs, governments, and values. These earthly connections to home impact how churches serve local populations, for example in migration, through direct service and outreach, fulfilling government contracts for resettlement, or partnering with migrant and organizations.

5 State Secretariat for Migration 2018. In 2019 the asylum law was revised with the goal of completing the asylum claims process within 140 days.

6 Garcia 2016.

7 Mey/Streckeisen Mai 2019.

8 Adamavi-Aho Ekué/Mathwig/Zeindler 2017a.

9 Adamavi-Aho Ekué 2017.

The Offene Kirche Elisabethen (OKE) was founded in 1994 as a City-Church in Basel Switzerland.[10] Supported by both the Evangelical-Reformed Church of Basel-Stadt and the local Roman Catholic diocese, OKE was founded in response to shifting urban demographics and decreasing religious affiliation.[11] While rooted in the Christian tradition, the OKE's focus is on the social, cultural, and religious needs of all residents of Basel, regardless of religious affiliation or membership.[12] OKE's theology of openness means it is committed to being a place for all people in the city of Basel. The influx of asylum-seekers in 2015 prompted the OKE to imagine a place for asylum-seekers' needs and interests within the church, leading to the creation of Projekt DA-SEIN.[13]

From this research at Projekt DA-SEIN, two qualities of home emerged as significant to the experiences of asylum-seekers and the responses of churches to those seeking asylum. First, home as associated with place. While place is historically understood as land and location, the spatial turn in the social science redefined place as a socially produced process of relationships between people, places, and practices. Karen Joisten's philosophy of home further develops narrative aspects

10 See: Schubert 2004; Teschner 1994; Felix 2019; Cox 2013. With the birth of the City-Church movement, churches increased their engagement with secular and social concerns traditionally located outside of the church. These included more active participation with social and political issues, engaging people who do not affiliate with religious organizations or churches, and leading cultural, ecumenical, and interfaith projects. Instead of focusing on traditional offerings and serving local residents, they changed their programs to address the changing needs and populations of their communities. As early as the 1960s, scholars such as Harvey Cox argued against the religious-secular divide and for churches to engage more directly with the surrounding society and secular concerns, particularly in urban spaces.

11 Schubert 2004.

12 Hungerbühler 2013. On its webseite the Offene Kirche Elisabethen (11.11.2019) describes itself as a church in the following way: «The Offene Kirche Elisabethen (OKE) is a City-Church for Basel and the surrounding region. Since 1994 it has provided spiritual, cultural and social offerings for all people, regardless of origin, skin color, sexual orientation or religion. The church is open to all people of good will. It lives the Jewish-Christian tradition with an ecumenical responsibility and an interreligious awareness.»

13 Stade Juni 2014. Data in this article is drawn from one-year of ethnographic research at Projekt DA-SEIN at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen (OKE) in Basel, Switzerland. Projekt DA-SEIN is an outreach program for asylum-seekers and refugees in Basel and the surrounding cantons. It was launched in 2015 and offers a «piece of home» by providing asylum-seekers a place to connect with each other and Swiss volunteers. Projekt DA-SEIN has few programmatic elements and focuses instead on co-creating community together by providing a space to gather, tell stories, share meals, play games, and learn German.

of place focusing on the significance of both staying and leaving to experiences of home.[14] Put in conversation with ethnographic data from Projekt DA-SEIN, these philosophies build a more nuanced connection between home and place.

Second, home is experienced through agency. Agency is historically understood as structural, involving intentionality and reflexivity. This ability to act intentionally to determine outcomes is usually assigned to organizations and individuals with access to decision making, resources, and cultural capital, such as governmental migration offices and organizations like the OKE. Michel de Certeau's concept of strategies and tactics widens structural agency to include the intentional use of structures by those with less power, such as asylum-seekers use of public spaces in the city.[15] Yet other aspects of agency focus on everyday actions of being in relationship and decenters structures and intentionality.[16] This relational agency is based on interaction and interdependence and relies on lateral and social relationships. Relational agency was particularly evident at Projekt DA-SEIN.

3. Home as Place

An asylum-seeker from Afghanistan described his village to me, not with a description of the physical layout, but by explaining what I would experience when I arrived there. «When you come into my village, you will have no chance of paying money for anything, you will be given food for free and they will be happy to see you...my whole family, my father's family and my mother's family.» People, feelings, and practices such as sharing food, expressions of welcome and joy, and the presence of important people animate this description of home. The place of home is more than land, location, and geography, as reconceptualized by the spatial turn.[17]

Humans are immersed in the physical world and create meaning through relationships with the environment, including people and practices. These

14 Joisten 2003.

15 Certeau 1984.

16 Burkitt 2016.

17 See: Low 2016; Shields 2011: 281; Massey 2005. Before the spatial turn, static notions of space and place dominated discourse. Cartesian and Newtonian conceptions of space as absolute and fixed began to shift with 17th century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who conceived of space as having a relational dimension. For Leibniz, these relational processes impacted the content and meaning of space, in contrast to the static and unchanging

interactions are given further meaning through affective associations, including feelings, emotions, and moods.[18] These affective associations build a deeper sense of place which is especially resonate with culturally and personally meaningful places, such as home.[19] Thus, space is culturally determined and socially constructed and evolves and changes with time and circumstances.

Home as place is not static, it is constantly shifting and being created, lost, and redefined. It is impacted by experiences of staying and leaving, of stability and mobility. For asylum-seekers, losing home means being uprooted from markers of identity – people, practices, and places – and yet asylum-seekers continue to be identified by these loses. This ambivalence is reflected in the complexity of navigating home in a place they do not know if they belong or will be invited to remain. As one asylum-seeker told me, home will be when he feels the ground under his feet again. This ground is cultivated by historical and bureaucratic structures as well as by the alchemy of relationships, resources, community, and place that is physical, imagined, and symbolic.

The Location of Home

Home is most often understood as a concrete location, a country, a city, a neighborhood, or a house. For asylum-seekers the specifics of home as a concrete location are dramatically interrupted. Most asylum-seekers I spoke with missed something specific about their country of origin – the food, family, the customs, the climate. A man from Syria described home as his history with a specific place. «Home for me is where I was born, where I grew up, where my family is, where my friends are, and where my childhood things are.» Connection to a physical place on earth can serve to spatially locate identity, such as in my house, my neighborhood, or my homeland. Spatial identities are often reinforced by bureaucratic designations that identify asylum-seekers by political and geographic categories.

qualities of Cartesian notions of space. Thus, relationships among objects, especially social relationships, became just as critical to spatial meanings as the locations themselves. Henri Lefebvre, in his book, *The Production of Space*, argued that space is not inert or fixed, but relational and social, and thus space happens through processes, that it is produced. As social geographer Doreen Massey later wrote, place is created through a particular confluence of time and space and is not only or necessarily a concrete geographic location.

18 Fuchs 2013.

19 Low 2016.

Therefore, for many asylum-seekers, home remained associated with country of origin, place of birth, or citizenship.

These designations are not always linear. Many asylum-seekers have been migrants for years, even their whole lives, and have moved numerous times, often to different countries. Where a person considers home is not always where they lived, grew up, or where their family resides. Sometimes the place an asylum-seeker identifies as home is a place they have never lived or have lived only briefly. An asylum-seeker from Afghanistan explained that he had never lived in Afghanistan. He grew up in Iran and left as a teenager for Europe, where he had lived in several different countries, including Switzerland. For others, ethnic or regional identities take precedence, such as those from groups that have experienced repeated forced displacement, such as Kurdish asylum-seekers. Several Kurdish asylum-seekers referred to Kurdish areas or towns, or the geographic region known as Kurdistan, as home.

Multiple Homes

In addition, migrants often identify with multiple homes due to the experience of living in between countries and in border regions. David Ralph and Lynn Staeheli write, «Both place of origin and destination influence migrants' routine practices and everyday lives, leading to their effective refusal to simply be located in just one place.»[20] A regular visitor to DA-SEIN, who had been in Switzerland seven years, said he felt 50% Swiss. He said in his country of origin he would know the cultural rules better. In addition, not being able to express himself in Swiss German made him feel less at home. An asylum-seeker from Sudan similarly said he missed his country of origin, «half, half.» For him, access to resources such as doctors and schools were important markers of home found in Switzerland but not Sudan. Another missed the religious rituals in their country of origin but associated political freedoms of Switzerland with home. Others said they would never consider Switzerland home, as it will never be associated with their family, religion, or language.

One asylum-seeker described the tension of multiple homes. He expressed the need to focus on one home or the other and, right now, focusing on Swiss migration requirements took precedence. «I can't think about my family too much or

20 Ralph/Staeheli 2011.

I just get sad and don't do anything. I really need a separation – to focus on here – on learning German so I can get a job and send my family money.» Especially when waiting for a decision on an asylum application or permanent residency, many asylum-seekers feel it is necessary to stay focused on the requirements of living in Switzerland. Some were also critical of other asylum-seekers who did not take advantages of opportunities to learn German or otherwise integrate into the local community.

Access to Resources

For some, access to resources in a place played an important role in defining home, especially for those who fled resource-poor countries. For those who fled due to political oppression, home as place was associated with freedoms, such as the ability to practice their religion, study, or have a family. Asylum-seekers expressed their sense of home in Switzerland as provided both by opportunities as well as safety and security. After telling me about the perils of his journey to Europe, especially over the Mediterranean, an asylum-seeker told me that when he arrived in Switzerland he was happy. He continued. «I like everything in Switzerland. I learned German, I learned math, I have learned so many things here.» Another asylum-seeker said he was glad to have options that were unavailable to him in the home he left, such as schooling and regular employment.

An asylum-seeker told me he could imagine Switzerland being home one day because of the opportunities he could take advantage of, including education. He also named the quiet and peace he experienced in Switzerland as a reason it could become home. «It is quiet in Switzerland. You know, you can sleep peacefully, do things in peace. No one says ‹Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?›» Others told me that they could imagine Switzerland as home, but only once they were able to work, have a family, and achieve a more permanent residence permit. This connection to the place of home with basic needs of health, education, and safety, are also reflected in the Islamic discourse on diaspora and home.

Some Islamic scholars writing about the Muslim diaspora, particularly to Western countries, argue that home on earth is wherever life can be lived and basic needs are met. Since the true home is with God in paradise, the earthly home is wherever basic needs for life are found. «Both Jurists and Sufi scholars describe the world, including one's homeland, as a guest house, or *watan al-sukna* (the country of residence), due to the inevitable departure from it through death. From this perspective, the only permanent home, or *watan al-asli*, is Paradise,

which is eternal unlike the world.»[21] Because of this spiritual understanding of home, leaving one's country or homeland does not necessarily mean separation from home. If certain criteria for life are met, such as having a livelihood, family, work, housing, and education, the new country can become a new home as the main criteria of home are an ability to meet basic needs.[22]

Relationships

The place of home is more than land, location, and geography, place is also connected to relationships with the environment, including people and practices. This relational underpinning of place makes space culturally determined and socially constructed, including the place of home. Many asylum-seekers identified home with family, especially mother, and being part of a community as a neighbor, friend, or brother. An interviewee from Eritrea told me that home is about family and people, not a specific location. «Home is when I live with my family, anywhere. When they are all around me, that is home.» An asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, when asked what he misses about home, first responded that he misses his mother, before naming other family members, and eventually the whole village. A man from Eritrea told me during our interview that he misses places, family, and friends, but especially his mother. «I miss family and also the friends that were together with me there and especially my family, my mom and two sisters, but especially my mother. I always pray that I will have a chance to look her again, face to face.»

Commitment and duty to family revealed relational aspect of home, especially in the desire to care for aging parents. Many asylum-seekers felt the loss of home in the inability to care for parents. One asylum-seeker commented, «When the mother and father are old, the sons and daughters help the mother. There are no old-persons-homes at all. Not at all. Until the mother, or until the father dies, the son always helps.» An asylum-seeker from Eritrea emphasized familiarity with one's role in the family as part of knowing the local «way of life.» He said, «I find that the way of life here is also different. For example, my parents, when they

21 Yucel 2015: 194.

22 Yucel 2015: 196; Ramadan 2004. Salih Yucel writes, «According to Islamic jurists, if a person leaves his or her country, immigrates to another country and finds a source of income, livelihood or marries there, and/or intends to live there permanently, then the new country becomes *watan al-asli*, the country of origin.»

get older, then I must have the responsibility for them, I must care for them, I must look after them.... But here in Europe it is totally different, totally different. In Islam it says: ‹When you care for your mother and your father, you have a great reward, you are in a great position.›»

In addition to familial relationships, roles in the community also define home including through school, games and sports, festivals, religious rituals, and food practices. When arriving in Switzerland, new relationships emerged, through connecting to familiar cultural and religious organizations, by playing games and music, or through food practices from their countries of origin. A man from Eritrea described feeling at home in Switzerland when he visits an older woman from Eritrea who prepares the traditional coffee ceremony and serves it with injera and lamb meat. The coffee ceremony a community practice, as are many religious practices, such as the celebration of festivals and holy days. These practices, reenacted in the new place, created familiar connections to the home that was lost. Even when these aspects of home were absent, affective experiences of homesickness, longing, memory, and imagination served to make them present.

In a similar vein, Sarah Albrecht argues that the idea of an Islamic homeland relies on a collective memory and a common community, sometimes referred to as the umma. Yet even the umma is disconnected from specific locations, apart from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.[23] Thus, in Islam, diaspora, community, and homeland are not primarily bound by territory but through affective associations with the imagined community of fellow believers.

Relationships to people, practices, experiences, and objects organize space into more bounded and knowable subsets, making place a malleable concept for meaning-making. Home is not static, places and the meaning they produce can and do shift over time. As anthropologist Mary Douglas writes: «Home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed space».[24] Even for those who never leave one geographic location, changes occur through loss of relationships; changes to local economies, cultural values, and landscapes; and the cycles of birth and death.[25] Human life occurs in a specific space, time, and location (Raum-Zeit-Stelle) with specific people, in a specific language, within certain traditions and

23 Albrecht 2016: 108f.
24 Douglas 1991: 289.
25 Ralph/Staeheli 2011.

histories with particular values and rules.[26] Therefore, embeddedness in the world is not fixed, but constantly in motion. This reconstellation of relationships creates a dynamic process whereby place is continually recreated.[27] Home is particular to a certain time and place, a certain configuration of relationships, memories, and places. This fluidity leads to constant renegotiations and reconfigurations and the disappearance of certain versions of home in the present time.

Nostalgia

During my research, I was introduced to the homes asylum-seekers left through verbal descriptions, photos, google maps, and even by sampling foods common to these areas. There was often pride in the home that was lost, as well as nostalgia. Sometimes this was conveyed through stories and memories of a place. A Kurdish man described the beauty of the village where he grew up, especially the mountains and the wild peppermint that grew there. Other times pride and nostalgia were expressed through descriptions of the history of a place, such as Asmara, Eritrea being known as «Little Rome» and a Turkish village that is home to one of the world's first churches.

Leaving home generates affective feelings of homesickness and loss. Yet, connections to the former home are still present in memories, longings, and narratives.[28] These connections continue, in new ways, in Basel, through the telling of stories, in the dreams of returning, and through embodied practices such as food, religious ritual, and music. Karen Joisten's philosophy of home foregrounds the tension between absence and presence in home. While home is often associated with words such as living, security, and familiarity, Joisten argues that home is also, and equally, found in leaving, insecurity, and unfamiliarity.[29] She defines home with the phrase Heim-weg, a play on the German words for home and away, arguing that there is no pure form of living because it is always tied to leaving.[30] Human experience is defined by this tension of being grounded in a place while at the same time being defined by its absence or leaving. Homesickness is

26 Joisten 2003: 38.
27 Joisten 2012: 36.
28 Bieler 2018.
29 Joisten 2003: 51.
30 Joisten 2003: 27. Colloquially, Heimweg means the path home, usually one taken frequently from home or work. Joisten›s phrase plays on this association, acknowledging that staying and going are both defining aspects of home.

not the opposite of home, but an experience of home, where absence itself makes home visible. What is longed for, imagined, and lost is as much a part of home as what is concrete, solid, and present. Homesickness makes what is absent present, even if it no longer exists.[31]

4. Home as Agency

The ability of asylum-seekers to change their circumstances is tenuous. On the one hand, they have already changed their circumstances by fleeing. Under dire circumstances of war, threat of imprisonment, or due to the needs of the family, asylum-seekers took control by fleeing. Arguably this is an extreme and unwanted experience of agency, when the other option is that one's life, livelihood, or family is taken away.

When immersed in the Swiss asylum process there is a marked lack of agency in waiting on decisions and navigating systems that dictate where one can live, work, and travel. This period of waiting is marked by lack of access to education, work, and social engagement. For many asylum-seekers in Switzerland, much of the three years in the asylum process is spent waiting for the next step or for decisions from the Swiss government. There is a pressure to adapt quickly to the new system and at the same time asylum-seekers have little control or agency to affect this process. Thus, they must hurry up and wait at the same time.

Waiting

Diane Singermann's concept of *waithood* describes how young adults who are unable to take the next steps of adulthood, such as employment and marriage, remain in a state of waiting.[32] This time is characterized by an inability to move forward in life. On the surface, this concept applies to asylum-seekers in Switzerland who have little influence over the timing of next steps and decisions from the Swiss government. Not only can they not affect the asylum application process, they also cannot take action in other areas of their lives, such as finding employment, securing more permanent housing, getting married, starting a family, or visiting

31 Schlink 2000; Schüle 2017.

32 Singerman 2013.

their families. In Switzerland, some opportunities, such as schooling, are restricted to those under a certain age so waiting can also mean loss of opportunities.

«Waiting is hard,» I was told numerous times during interviews and informal conversation at Projekt DA-SEIN. One asylum-seeker told me he was going to write the government to ask why his asylum decision was taking so long, something that both of us knew would be futile. Other asylum-seekers I spoke with described waiting as characterized by boredom, frustration, fear, or anxiety. Many asylum-seekers understood this waiting as requiring patience. One asylum-seeker told me, «Here in Switzerland, when you are coming from another country, you have to have patience. When you don't have patience, then you don't understand the way of life, and you don't understand the system.» Asylum-seekers need to simultaneously know the system, have patience with long waiting times between steps, and wrestle with their own lack of power to affect their lives or the lives of their families.

While waiting is characterized by limited agency and curtailed options, waiting is not passive. Life continues even if obvious next steps are unavailable. Asylum-seekers who are waiting for responses to their asylum applications occupy a kind of heterotopia, to use Foucault's phrase.[33] Often associated with marginal places, heterotopia operates on the edges and utilizes places in ways they were not necessarily intended. When arriving in Switzerland asylum-seekers enter a heterotopic space of being physically in Switzerland but not yet knowing if their asylum application will be accepted and if they can remain long-term.

In this context, asylum-seekers cultivate agency in two ways – one is by bringing practices and customs from their country of origin to the new place, thereby creating more familiar activities. This might include language, games, religious practices, and food. The second way is by making aspects of the new place familiar. This might be by frequenting certain locations in Basel and making these places home-like through regular activities and friendships.

Tactics

Those who expressed the most connection to Basel as home also described ways they acted within the limits the systems they were subject to. This included teaching themselves German through self-directed exercises, offering insights and

33 Foucault 1986.

assistance to newer asylum-seekers, and utilizing public places for personal purposes. These acts of agency made places familiar by creating a sense of home that included the new place, even while remaining dislocated from the dominant culture and dependent on an inhospitable government.

When I asked about ways that Basel felt like home, asylum-seekers often named places that were outdoors and public, even if places were not originally designed for the activities they were used for. This included the utilizing spaces of Projekt DA-SEIN in the basement of the church administrative building, frequenting cafes that do not require purchase, attending public events, or gathering along the Rhine River and in public parks. These locations were frequented for socializing, exercise, or reflection and, despite being public, they became personal and familiar.

One asylum-seeker from Eritrea said that the Rhine River made the city livable. He said that without the Rhine River, he could not live in Basel. Another asylum-seeker from Afghanistan told me that he found the water very calming. When he was feeling sad, out-of-sorts, or unwell, he walked by the river and it always helped him. Another asylum-seeker emphasized how he spent time along the Rhine River, in an area with fewer people so he could enjoy the quiet and have space to think and pray. Walking and thinking in the early morning or late evening was also something he did in his country of origin. «When I want to think about things for myself, to speak with myself, I like places that are not so loud – silent places. The other side over the river is more silent so I like to walk there. Most of the time I walk in the evening – ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. You don't find any disturbing sounds or moving cars... Also it is the time, as a Muslim, the time of the first prayer.» At the river, he cultivated a place of quiet, personal reflection, and prayer.

Agency sometimes looked like adopting external integration requirements, such as a focus on learning German. By taking control of these activities, asylum-seekers claimed some sense of agency for themselves, even if the impact was minimal. One asylum-seeker from Afghanistan who did not have access to additional German courses, spent his time working through a book of conjugations of German verbs in order to improve his German.

Michel de Certeau's concept of strategies and tactics considers agency within marginal places.[34] Those with greater power use strategies to employ the city in

34 Certeau 1984.

ways it was intended to be used, such as: the church for prayer, the café for conversation and socializing, and the river for relaxing. Those with less power employ tactics to repurpose the cityscape and utilize it in non-conventual ways. Tactics provide asylum-seekers a means of creative resistance and agency to use the created landscape for their own purposes.[35]

Relational Agency

Agency has historically been defined as stemming from conscious choosing that includes intentionality and reflexivity and utilizes external structures.[36] This focus on structure and actors understands agency as occurring through the intentional use of existing structures. Yet, there are complex reasons for acting, not all of which are known even to the actor. While agency is more often associated with intentionality, agency cannot easily be reduced to intention and desire.[37]

Agency is not only connected to the ability to make desired changes but is linked to responses to external factors that impact a person. Simply acting conveys a sense of control, even when that impact is minimal. Instead of a definition of agency which relies on external structures and reflexivity, relational agency argues that all actions are relational and affect others and the world through these connections.[38] Instead of understanding agency as intentional and individual actions, relational agency looks how people affect the world through interactions and networks.[39] Relational agency focuses on how a sense of agency emerges when people act on one another in everyday interactions.

5. The Work of Projekt DA-SEIN

For the OKE, the surge in arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers posed the question of how to live together as a global community in local places. The Offene Kirche Elisabethen occupies a specific place in the context of Basel and responds politically as well as religiously to the city, including the asylum-seekers who reside there. By engaging questions of home with concrete locality, it creates a space that counters dominant interactions with asylum-seeking. At the same time, the

35 Blauvelt 2003.
36 Giddens 1984/1986; Archer 1989.
37 Schlosser 2019.
38 Burkitt 2016: 323.
39 Burkitt 2016: 330.

Offene Kirche Elisabethen is embedded in the local concepts of home through teaching local values and customs and focusing efforts on helping asylum-seekers integrate into the social, political, and cultural environment. There is a tension between ensuring the ability of migrants to participate fully in the new society while also acknowledging their diverse contributions and practices.

Place and Agency at Projekt DA-SEIN

Projekt DA-SEIN attempts to create an ephemeral community that is different from the asylum system and interrupts practices of isolation. Within the asylum process, integration is understood as a one-way project, compelling newcomers to adopt to the normative culture without similar requirements for the receiving community.[40] Similarly, churches often «include» diverse practices instead of recognizing that the «other» already exists.[41] Doing so reinforces the power differential of hospitality, where those with more access to resources can offer welcome and control access.[42]

Instead, Projekt DA-SEIN counters the isolation of migration by offering experiences of home through convivial interactions of sharing time, food, and stories. Projekt DA-SEIN facilitates agency by creating a space to freely come and go, limiting programing, encouraging participates to engage as the choose, and offering opportunities for participants to contribute their expertise. Examples include everyday activities which occur when participants and volunteers show up each day. Sharing stories and skills, negotiating power dynamics, and building networks, both vertical and horizontal, created opportunities for reciprocity (as well as revealing efforts that sometimes fell short).

Projekt DA-SEIN provided a space that had the potential of cultivating a sense of agency for asylum-seekers. They could show up when and if they wanted, engage in activities of their choice, and contribute to the program by offering food, music, or suggestions for activities. From these activities, new relationships emerged by playing games and music or through food practices from their countries of origin. At Projekt DA-SEIN, laughter and playfulness built connections that generated intimacy, safety, community, and trust. Dominos was a common

40 Mey/Streckeisen 2019.
41 Fenn 2001: 65f.
42 See: Derrida/Dufourmantelle 2000; Dufourmantelle 2013; Russell/Clarkson/Ott 2009; Oden 2001.

game played at Projekt DA-SEIN, especially by men from Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. They all spoke Arabic and shared a history of playing dominoes in their countries of origin. When they played at the program, they were happy to include volunteers and asylum-seekers from other countries.

Several men from Afghanistan regularly cooked feasts for the Islamic festivals. At the Eid al-Adha feast, traditional dishes were prepared, and the room was arranged to reflect how the meal would be served in their countries of origin. The «chapel» of Projekt DA-SEIN was converted to a mosque, a white cloth laid out, shoes were required to be removed before entering, and the meal was served on the floor. Projekt DA-SEIN does not ask about religious affiliation or evangelize. Everyone is free to practice their faith and follow their own beliefs. Catholic theologian and director of Projekt DA-SEIN, Monika Hungerbühler says, «Downstairs religiosity, in an explicit sense, does not play a role. Rather, downstairs, everything must be very free...that is very, very important to us, so it is not an issue. Downstairs people can feel at home with their religiosity and traditions.»[43] Opportunities for prayer and learning about different faiths occurred around religious holidays, through the presence of a prayer book where participants could write intentions, and during conversations where difficult experiences, longings, and losses were shared.

In addition, a sewing machine at the program was in frequent use. A woman visited the program one day specifically to ask for assistance in sewing a traditional dress she would wear in Eritrea. A man from Afghanistan used the sewing machine to alter clothes for both asylum-seekers and volunteers as he had worked previously as a tailor. Other participants used it to alter or mend clothes, extending their use or making do with available resources. This act of self-sufficiency was in marked contrast to many other experiences in Switzerland that reinforced a lack of agency. Projekt DA-SEIN taps into people's abilities and skills, allowing agency to emerge.

By contributing to the well-being of themselves, each other, and the Projekt DA-SEIN community, asylum-seekers were able to use their agency to make a contribution. The activities of helping and contributing created more connections and more possibilities for creating home. This was true for both asylum-seekers and volunteers who found meaning in contributing and impacting each other's lives. During my time at Projekt DA-SEIN, I spoke with a person with a computer

43 Hungerbühler 16 January 2019.

science degree, a physicist, a beautician, a tailor, and many teachers, artists, and accomplished athletes. These parts of themselves, hidden in the broader community and within the asylum process, were witnessed and sometimes actualized at the program. At Projekt DA-SEIN asylum-seekers could show other parts of themselves, including professional and personal capacities, and be defined beyond the characteristics that also oppressed them. Asylum-seekers project themselves into a livable future by acting in these ways. Projekt DA-SEIN creates a space that allows for people's potential, even if it was not actual in the moment. Home, as revealed in asylum-seeking, is longed for, forecast into the future, and sought within displacement.

These interactions allow for relational agency while also acknowledging the ways home is both present and absent for asylum-seekers. Through these practices, the OKE acknowledges the grievability of the lives of asylum-seekers. Judith Butler's concept of the «grievability of life,» argues that only under conditions when loss would matter, does life appear. By caring for the lives of asylum-seekers and celebrating and grieving losses, the OKE broadens definitions of who matters in the local definitions of home.[44] Projekt DA-SEIN provided opportunities for collective expressions of grief. This occurred through Christian practices, such as remembering the dead on All Saints Day, and community rituals such as gathering to send prayers and thoughts to a community member detained under new asylum laws. At Projekt DA-SEIN, grief is not only considered in retrospect, but also in its future possible iterations. The results of an asylum interview, the possibility of securing work or schooling, and even the ability to connect with family and friends or learn German, all impact the grief that is possible in life.

HyeRan Kim-Cragg stresses the importance of interdependence within community. The community benefits when interdependence is undergirded by narrative agency; the action of telling one's story and having it heard by others.[45] This subset of relational agency is especially present at Projekt DA-SEIN which intentionally focuses on creating a space to be together over programmatic elements. My experiences at the program revolved around talking, cooking, sharing stories, and being together. Within this convivial context, participants acted on one another and perspectives were shared, priorities shifted, and friendships were formed.

44 Butler 2009: 14.
45 Kim-Cragg 2018: 5.

Conviviality and the practices of Projekt DA-SEIN serve to shift home from one-directional hospitality to co-creative community practices. At Projekt DA-SEIN reciprocity occurs when diverse members of the Basel community gather to build relationships and connections. Gathering in the basement of the church offices means that people from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Switzerland, and other countries, act upon each other through conversations, games, and shared meals. The impact of this relational agency was measurable less by changes that occurred, in opinions or in asylum results, and more on how individuals were impacted by the opportunity to be together.

Broadening the Horizon

Projekt DA-SEIN's location in Basel informs the program's desire to help asylum-seekers by attending to the needs and realities of the urban context and acting politically to engage and care for all members of the local community. Caring for those on the margins of society stretches the borders of home, emphasizing home as a process of becoming and one that is not exclusively an established and settled concept.

This is especially relevant within the life-and-death reality of migration. Being denied asylum has consequences ranging from personal safety to whether one can build a more lasting home in Switzerland. For migrants, especially those waiting for decisions on their cases, home is largely shaped either by loss or by restrictive migration systems. Yet, the Offene Kirche Elisabethen cultivates alterative experiences of home based on their theologies of openness and convivence. Projekt DA-SEIN creates an open space for asylum-seekers to bring themselves, their concerns, and their contributions. Refugees recounted that playing games, laughing with people across cultures, and sharing a meal served to create a feeling of home and closeness. As one asylum-seeker told me about his experience of Projekt DA-SEIN, «I feel that when you are open with people, like when you joke with each other, you feel like brothers and sisters.»

Marc Engelhardt has challenged the term «migration crisis» and argued instead that it is a «migration revolution.»[46] Continued conflict, climate change, globalization, and other political and social factors will cause migration to continue, even if political agreements deter and redirect migration flows. Addressing

46 Engelhardt 2016.

migration as an enduring reality, instead of a short-term crisis to be fixed, asks for a more nuanced approaches to meeting the needs of migrants within local communities. Instead of something to be fixed and eliminated, migration is an established part of political, social, and economic frameworks.

The migration revolution calls for reimagining church responses to asylum-seeking and challenging the notion that migration is separate from church. This is especially true when considering how concepts of home shape the experiences of asylum-seeking and the practices of church outreach. Projekt DA-SEIN's engagement with home reveals the possibilities and limitations of churches operating in politically informed and interreligious border spaces. Attending to the public sphere can center normative markers of home and reinforce social hierarches. Yet, a willingness of churches to attend to new social realities, such as those generated by asylum-seeking, can produce sites of theological engagement that counter the isolation of migration, argue for the grievability of marginalized lives, and center convivial practices within local communities.

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Abstracts

Heimat ist ein ambivalentes und kontextuell geprägtes Konzept, das eine Spannung im Kontext von Asylverfahren kreiert und zugleich für Asylsuchende bedeutsam ist. Projekt DA-SEIN, ein Programm für Asylsuchende in Basel, wurde in 2015 von der Offenen Kirche Elisabethen (OKE) gegründet, um ein «Stück Heimat» zu bieten, indem für Asylsuchende ein Ort geschaffen wurde, an dem sich Schweizer Freiwillige und geflüchtete Menschen begegnen können. Anhand von ethnografischer Forschung untersucht dieser Artikel zwei Aspekte von Heimat im Kontext von Asylsuche und kirchlicher Praxis: Ort (*Place*) und Handlungsmacht (*Agency*). Projekt DA-SEIN's Bezugnahme auf diese Aspekte demonstrieren die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen kirchlichen Engagements, das in politischen und interreligiösen Grenzräumen agiert.

Home is an ambivalent and highly contextual topic that creates tensions for asylum seekers. Furthermore, it impacts the people, policies, and programs. Projekt DA-SEIN, an outreach program to asylum-seekers in Basel, Switzerland was launched in 2015 by the Offene Kirche Elisabethen (OKE) to offer a «piece of home» by providing asylum-seekers a place to connect with each other and Swiss volunteers. Drawing on ethnographic research, this article explores two aspects of home in the context of asylum-seeking and church practices: place and agency. Projekt DA-SEIN's engagement with these aspects of home reveal the possibilities and limitations of churches operating in politically informed and interreligious border spaces.

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