Struggling for home where home is not meant to be
A study of asylum seekers in reception centers in Norway

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Abstract: This article focuses on how asylum seekers in Norway struggle to create a sense of home within a physical and political environment that puts significant challenges to their efforts to do so. Based on a national survey and fieldwork, we demonstrate that poor housing and the political derived marginality challenge existential and material home-making processes, thus making it an ambiguous and strenuous experience. This view is rooted in a critical phenomenological understanding in which home is built through inter-relational and intersubjective relations that constitute self and senses of belonging and/or estrangement, as well as well-being and mental health. The agentive struggle for home is a crucial aspect of asylum seekers' experiences of belonging, well-being and mental health, thus being at the heart of questions of social justice.

Keywords: asylum seekers, home, housing, mental health, self, well-being

The basis for this article is an interdisciplinary research project entitled What Buildings Do (2012–2018), which aimed to document and explore the effects of physical surroundings on the well-being and quality of life of asylum seekers in Norway. The project was initiated in part as a response to an increasingly heated social and political debate concerning Norwegian immigration and asylum policy, while simultaneously seeking to investigate the links between the material world and human well-being.

The housing standards of asylum seekers are a sensitive and complex topic to address. Across Europe there tends to be an understanding that asylum seekers should just put up with low standards of housing since they do not belong in the country they have come to. Even though Norwegians consider Norway to be a tolerant nation with a history of humanitarian traditions dating back to the diplomatic work of Fridtjof Nansen[1] during and after World War I, Norwegian politicians and voters tend to reflect similar attitudes. The exclusion of asylum seekers from the experience of house and home is reflective of a "domopolitics" (Darling 2011) in which there is a deliberate strategy of avoiding home attachments in housing policies for asylum seekers (Fox O'Mahony and Sweeney 2010). As an aspect of poor housing standards and marginality, we suggest that human and existential home-making processes (Ginsberg 1999; Ingold 1995) are profoundly challenged. We find

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that well-being is a matter of the embodied and emotional dimensions of health, homeliness being fundamental to this, as it foregrounds a sense of belonging (Raven-Ellisson 2013). Thus the struggle for home is a crucial aspect of asylum seekers' experiences of belonging, well-being, and mental health. Furthermore, research in Norway demonstrates that asylum seekers are at risk of developing psychological problems (Berg and Sveaas 2005) and that the physical housing environment may increase this risk, as well as levels of conflict among residents (Strumse et al. 2016). Research on reception centers for asylum seekers has foregrounded the challenges posed by a lack of privacy, institutional rules and regulations, poor physical conditions, and disturbances to daily routines and cultural practices (Archambault 2012; Horst 2004; Karlsson 2018).

Vulnerable homes: Precarious relations of making home and sustaining self

This study concerns the effect of the physical surroundings on well-being. We have chosen to explore the role of housing in reception centers for asylum seekers through the concept of home. House and home have often been conflated as concepts, however, it has been argued that this sort of conflation is reductive, as it represents home as one-dimensional (Douglas 1991; Rapport and Dawson 1998).

Instead, considering home in migration unsettles the static and sedentary notions of the home as a "safe haven," highlighting home-making rather as practice and ideal, as well as something that has to be performed and struggled for (Olwig 1998; Young 2005). In this view, home is seen as a process of creating and understanding different forms of dwelling and belonging (Blunt and Dowling 2006). In this article, moreover, we add an emphasis on its effects on senses of self and well-being. This emphasis is inspired by a phenomenological perspective in which home is lived as a relationship with tensions and negotiations between security and confinement (Jackson 1995: 122–123). Seeing home as constituted by "lived relationships" implies that the real, ideal, or imagined home is not a distinct opposition but exists in a relation of tension (Jackson 1995; Mallet 2004). As such, we see home as rather permeable and unstable, as it is constantly being constructed and negotiated, while at the same time memories of the past are not rejected or ignored. Rather, remembering and memories can be important in illuminating and transforming the present (Massey 1992; Rapport and Dawson 1998). Thus, in migration research, home is pointed out to be less about "where you are from" and more about "where you are going" (Ginsberg 1999: 35). In the context of asylum seekers, the question of where you are from and the following escape route are precarious, as their histories of the past may often be concealed so as not to expose others, though it is also the key to obtaining asylum. On the other hand, the question of where you are going is vulnerable when you are still waiting for the results of your asylum application, and many run the risk of being returned to their country of origin, whether voluntarily or by force. Coming to terms with home in a context of migration thus means engaging with a complex temporal register, where people's time and individual biographies are ruptured, and where connecting the past, present, and future is far from straightforward (Sheller 2019; Thorshaug and Brun 2019).

In exploring the experiences of asylum seekers, we lean on the phenomenological view in which home refers to intersubjective relations that bring self and person into existence, and as such is fundamental to our being. In this understanding, home is seen not as a concrete place or space, but rather as our "being with others" (Wu 1993: 193). As such, with Tim Ingold (1995) and Robert Ginsberg (1999), we argue that human beings are home-makers in that we construct our homes, while how we experience ourselves and function as persons is linked to how we make ourselves at home and are able to do so. Considering home as constituted by intersub-

jective relations and as a human construction in both its materiality and imagination, home becomes crucial for senses of self, belonging, well-being, marginalization, estrangement, and mental health. Home, self, and person are all seen to be shaped and formed by the everyday creations and routines in which both social and material relations are taken up and left behind. Building on postcolonial and feminist critiques, we rely further on a critical phenomenology with an understanding of embodiment and practice, highlighting that different bodies experience and inhabit the world differently, and thus obliging us to understand these experiences in light of the power and politics of difference (Ahmed 2000; Simonsen 2012). Thus, we follow Katherine Brickell's (2012) injunction that we should map domestic injustice by exploring the vulnerabilities that occur in asylum seekers' everyday embodied experiences of home-making in reception centers.

In documenting asylum seekers' housing conditions in Norway, we witness histories of vulnerability that are inscribed and visualized in peoples' homes, affected by a discriminatory housing system (Low and Iveson 2016), which puts vulnerable asylum seekers at risk of exclusion or segregation by placing them in accommodation that is often substandard and unfit. Here, vulnerability appears as a taxonomic concept that classifies people based on their exposure to harm, but it also becomes an active condition that compels people to learn how to live with disturbance and possibly overcome it (Vaughn 2016). In our exploration of the struggles to make a home in reception centers, we underscore the vulnerability that develops at the intersection of the specific material and institutional as well as the social and existential conditions that shape asylum seekers' home-making practices. However, rather than adapting a vulnerability framework that portrays people as powerless (see Faas 2016), our emphasis on home-making as practice and struggle further accentuates the agency that people express even in constraining circumstances.

Context: Reception centers in Norway

Research shows that the Norwegian welfare state is built on the cultural values and ideals of "equality" and "tolerance" (Gullestad 2002), "freedom," "independence," and "helpfulness" (Hellevik and Hellevik 2016), and a fundamental extension of "trust" and "autonomy" (Skirbekk 2010). However, the term "immigrant," as it is used by Norwegian politicians and in public debates on immigration and refugees, has become rhetorically charged. This term no longer has the neutral connotation of someone coming from outside of Norway and has instead come to invoke a negative image, reinforced by the media with caricatures of immigrants as "troublemakers" wont to violence and criminality (Gullestad 2002: 89). In spite of the aforementioned Nansen tradition, there is a clear political turn toward holding refugees at a distance by a politics of deterrence (Seeberg et al. 2009), which seems to outweigh the values of tolerance and humanitarianism. This also relates to how politicians, largely across parties, are reluctant to offer better conditions than those provided by the other European countries within the Schengen agreement because of the argument that it would lead to an increased flow of refugees to Norway.

While asylum seekers are waiting for their cases to be decided, they live in special reception centers (*asylmottak*) spread around the country. The time an asylum seeker spends in a reception center may vary from a few months to more than a year, and sometimes extend to several years (Lauritzen and Berg 1999; Strumse et al. 2016). Reception centers are usually established in already existing buildings, many of which have building-related problems such as moisture, drafts, worn-out surfaces, a poor indoor climate, and accessibility problems for the disabled (Strumse et al. 2016). Overcrowding is also a problem, since single residents must often share a room with one or several others (ibid.).

The contracts to run reception centers are tendered out for open competitions on the pri-

vate market, and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) maintains agreements with municipalities, voluntary organizations, and private operators (Larsen 2014). The use of short-term contracts, coupled with the risk of losing a contract at three months' notice, contributes to the low housing standards and permits only simple solutions.

Most reception centers are partly or fully decentralized (Strumse et al. 2016), that is, they are arranged in the form of a main site with staff offices and housing for some residents, combined with several smaller decentralized units off-site but somewhere else in the area. Centralized units may consist of former health institutions, hotels, educational institutions, or military barracks, while the fully or partly decentralized centers may offer housing in smaller former institutional buildings, flats, and detached or semi-detached housing such as terraced housing or apartment buildings (ibid.). Generally, asylum centers are located in low-status areas with low housing standards, run down, with some not being suitable as accommodation for people at all (Berg 2012; Hauge et al. 2015; Strumse et al. 2016). Moreover, often they are located on the outskirts of town or in less inhabited areas, meaning that their residents have little opportunity for interaction with the local population in public meeting places.

The housing standards are officially considered suitable for short-term residence, despite the fact that many asylum seekers may stay in such housing for several years. The time spent waiting for a final assessment of an asylum application in Norway was steadily increasing up until 2014 (Larsen 2014). In December 2014, 36 percent of asylum seekers had been staying for more than 18 months at an asylum center and 25 percent for more than three years (UDI 2014). In 2014, when the empirical data for this article were collected, there were approximately 15,000 asylum seekers living in asylum centers in Norway, most of them originating from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Syria, or Afghanistan.

In addition to the low housing standards and unintended long-term residence, we identify a need to reinforce acknowledgment of asylum seekers' experiences of escaping persecution or war, their experiences of social and family ruptures and fragmentation, and of uncertainty regarding asylum and settlement (Kissoon 2010) as crucial to home-making processes. Moreover, in this article we call attention to the politically derived marginality that asylum seekers experience through the temporal injustice caused by indefinite waiting in reception centers (Fontanari 2017; Thorshaug and Brun 2019).

Methodological approaches: Ethnography and auto-photography

Both authors conducted ethnographic fieldwork individually at an asylum center, focusing on being there and engaging in everyday life with a particular concern for the resident asylum seekers. The research was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), thus ensuring the protection of personal data, and it also received support from the Directorate for Immigration (UDI). Anne Sigfrid visited the Open River Asylum Cent for five months from August to December of 2014, while Ragne made daily visits to the Solheim asylum center for three weeks each in May and August of 2014 (the names of both centers are pseudonyms). Both authors were also involved in shorter visits to several other reception centers as part of the larger research project and contributed in the work to document housing conditions and resident's everyday experiences. During the project, the entire research team organized seminars and project meetings, which included representatives from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and two of the main operators in the reception-center business,[2] to discuss the significance of housing standards and qualities with respect to asylum seekers' well-being. The research team also invited other relevant actors in the field, if the agenda and scope of

a given meeting called for their involvement. Accordingly, the research questions and results were continuously discussed with central civic services and agencies. As part of the project's dissemination of results, the research team also produced a guide for housing standard of reception centers (Støa et al. 2016).

At the time of Anne Sigfrid's fieldwork, there were about 80 asylum seekers at the Open River reception center, a semi-centralized center where most of the asylum seekers were living in the central building, a former hotel with a reception and office area. Others lived in more or less run down but ordinary flats and houses in the surrounding area. The residents had lived there for various lengths of time from two months to nine years, and some had previously lived in another reception center, which had since been closed down. Some of the residents were waiting for a decision on their applications, while others received a positive decision and were waiting for resettlement in a municipality, and yet others received a negative decision and were waiting to be returned to their country of origin.

The Solheim reception center consisted of a former barracks and had been established in the early 1990s on the outskirts of a medium-sized town. The main site contained staff offices and accommodation for around 80 asylum seekers, while the decentralized accommodation for around 40 people was found at different locations in and around the town center and consisted mainly of apartment blocks. The reception center was a rarity in Norway, given that it provided individual bedrooms, though people still shared kitchens and bathrooms with other residents on each floor. The buildings' interior and exterior were significantly run down, revealing that the temporary structures were in need of general upkeep and maintenance after being used as a reception center for more than 25 years.

In conducting fieldwork, both authors emphasized an approach whereby they engaged with the residents and their ongoing activities, with a special concern for the asylum seekers' well-being as an aspect of both everyday life experiences and the housing conditions. This implied a methodology based on visits and conversations with the residents in their private rooms, cooking and sharing meals, going shopping in the nearby town, and hanging around in the hallways, in the TV room, and on outdoor benches. Talks and interviews with our interlocutors Sara and Abel were conducted respectively in Norwegian and English, as both languages were mastered with fluency.[3] Using photography in preparing for the interviews was then an opportunity for the asylum seekers themselves to create richer and more thoughtful accounts of their everyday lives in the asylum center. Doing "auto-photography" and "photographic narratives" to access the informant's perceptions may stimulate the reader's bodily senses and empathic imaginations of what life is like for the "asylum seeker Other." The photos reveal some of their inner struggles of making home and self, all entangled in the material, emotional and reflective aspects of their connection to the outer world and their often lost visions for the future. The auto-photographic approach illuminates "hidden" spaces that are not typically featured in public or academic discourse about asylum seekers and that give access to new uses, meanings, and dynamics related to apparently already known spaces (Johnsen et al. 2008). In the following we present material from the two field sites through photographs taken by two asylum seekers[4] before moving on to discuss them in the analysis.

Case 1. Sara, age 20, from Ethiopia: "We are not allowed to live as normal people. . . . We just sit in one room all the time."

Sara is 20 years old and has lived in the Solheim asylum center for four years. She came as a single minor and was given temporary residence until she turned 18. Fearing persecution in her home country, she does not see returning as an alternative, although her temporary leave

has expired, and her asylum claim has been rejected. Now she doesn't know what will happen to her life: "Only God can decide something for me now," says Sara. She worries about being forcibly returned in the middle of the night, as she has witnessed happening to other people at the center several times. She tells Ragne:

> Whatever I do, it is just for now. I don't know what will happen in the future. I'm good at keeping myself busy, because I know that helps. If not, I will just start thinking, and then I'll get sad and depressed.

Sara points out how the corridors are all empty, as is the outside space. People are tired of waiting, so everyone spends most of their time in their room, alone. It's a very quiet place since everyone has their own problems. When they first came to the center they spent a lot of time outside, "drinking tea, chatting, and making noise." But after a while it "went quiet." Sara says: "It feels empty like a prison, like a voluntary prison. Everyone has lost their moods and spirits."

She invites me to her small room, prepares tea, which is served in two flower-imprinted cups, and offers me cookies from a small plate that she puts on the bed next to the chair where I am sitting. She has decorated her room with pictures of her friends and of her favorite artists. There are flowers on top of the drawers, above which she has hung some paintings she did herself. Sara says:

> I have put some things on the wall and tried to make it nice, but it is not because I'm doing well here. . . . People tell me that I'm good at painting, singing, and dancing, but I don't do it anymore. How does that help me when I do not know what will happen to my life?

She explains that on a normal day she spends lots of time in front of the computer. This is the view they see the most, as there are not many other options in the way of activities, and they don't find any reason to do anything else. "We just sit in one room all the time," she says. "We are not allowed to live as normal people." Life is spent waiting for a piece of paper.

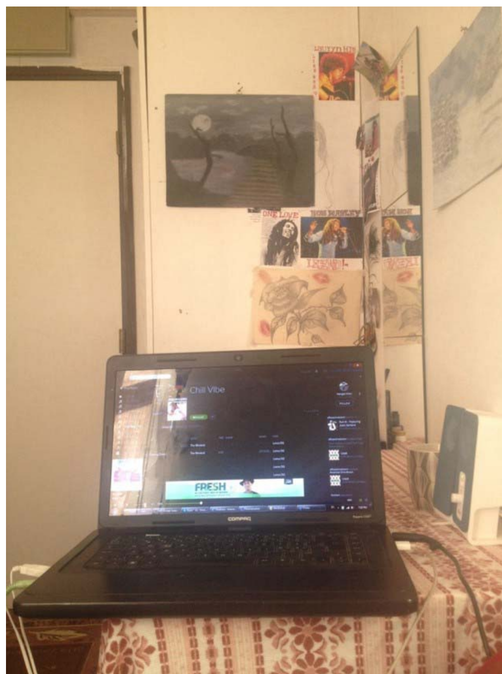

Figure 1. Photo by "Sara." Sara's view toward the computer

Sara shares the communal kitchen with seven other people. She explains that cleaning the shared kitchen is a source of conflict. Sara longs for something to call "my own." She explains that she would like to have everything one has in a normal home. She wants to buy things for herself that she can use in a home, a place for her own personal belongings. However, she refuses to make these investments now because, as she says, "Buying things would be to give up the hope for residence and settlement in Norway. It would be like saying I am never getting out of here." Instead, she prefers to buy small things like candles, teacups, canvas, and paint.

When a person is given residence and settlement rights, the remaining residents inherit whatever that person leaves behind. The carpet on the floor, the speakers, and the drawers are things they have inherited from earlier residents. The only things Sara buys for herself are

FIGURE 2. Photo by "Sara." A screenshot Sara made from a picture taken in Snapchat about shared things in the kitchen

FIGURE 3. Photo by "Sara." The corner of Sara's room

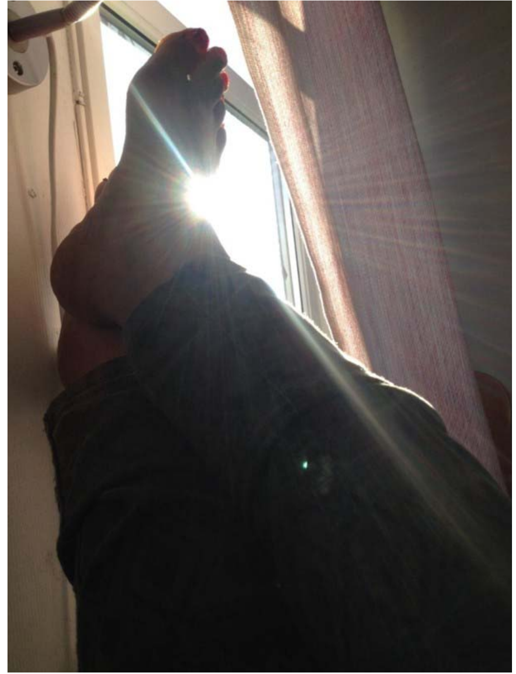

FIGURE 4. Photo by "Sara." Sara's feet against the window

new clothes. In spite of the things in her small room, Sara feels the room is not hers. She says: "It is not a home, I cannot think that it is. But then, what choice do I have?"

Commenting on this picture, Sara says: "This is hope. I hope that something good will happen in my life. I hope for a better life. A free life. But, hope is still lost."

Case 2. Abel, age early twenties, from East-Africa: "You see, it is very small and it gets very messy"

My (Anne Sigfrid's) conversations with Abel always took place in his room. Occasionally, I met him when he was on his way to the gym or to the local grocer's. He was always friendly and open-hearted. He willingly shared his story with me and told me how he experienced everyday life in the center, as well as accepting my invitation to take some photos of things that he felt described his life in the center.

When I met Abel, he was in his early twenties. Abel was the youngest of six siblings. His father was a rich man, and the family had everything they needed to have a comfortable life. Then their life was destroyed. One of Abel's sisters and his parents were killed as casualties of war. With the help of neighbors, Abel and his nephew fled to a neighboring country and stayed in a refugee camp. It was not long before the government destroyed the camp and Abel and his nephew managed to make their way to Norway. Abel said he loved his nephew and was very sad that they could not stay in the same reception center. Abel worried for him, and they spoke on the phone every day. They had both lived in various asylum centers in Norway for about two years. Even though Abel had already been granted asylum several months ago, he was still waiting for resettlement in a municipality. Abel said he felt he was "losing himself," that "everything is messy and troublesome," and that he "struggled to hold on." Coming to Norway, Abel felt very "lonely and uncertain." He had trouble sleeping, difficulties in concentrating, felt restless, and was troubled by nightmares, flashbacks, and memories from war actions. He longed to be settled in a municipality, to be free to visit the few relatives who had already been resettled in Norway whenever he wanted to and start his new life in Norway. When he had difficulties sleeping at night, he worked out in his room. Not feeling comfortable with the others who were living in the asylum center, he spent a lot of time on his own in his room, which he shared with another young man from Somalia. They did not engage much with each other, but there were no real conflicts. Abel said he appreciated having time on his own and did not feel like being with others. He felt the asylum center was "made for animals" and said that "this is no life for people." Abel explained: "There is nothing we can do, no place to be, everyone is alone, we only sit and wait."

Figure 5. Photo by "Abel." Abel's barbell for use day and night

> You see the barbell, next to my closet. I use this barbell. I like sport and gym. I feel good when I do gym. I use the barbell in this room in the night when I cannot sleep. I do not make a noise, so it is OK with my roommate. I go to the gym at daytime. I am stronger now. It took a long time. To be strong is not so important, but it is good for my health and for my mind. You see the micro. We both use it. I make food for several days and put in the freezer. The freezer and the refrigerator are both very small.
>
> This picture is from my room and shows something inside. It is where I keep my clothing. You see, it is very small and it gets very messy. Actually, everything here is small and messy. There is no room for me here.
>
> You see the bed and the TV. But now the TV is broken, and they will not give me money to buy a new one. My bed-carpet is from my other older sister. I like it very much. I cannot change it. It is African, from Burundi. She was there [in Burundi], when I was in Tanzania refugee camp. Now, I got the carpet.

Figure 6. Photo by "Abel." Abel's room

Figure 7. Photo by "Abel." Abel's haircut as "big-boss"

The carpet on the floor is a gift from another who used to live here. Now, my friend is settled in a municipality. He is a good connection. Those who are deported are usually from Afghanistan. They [the police] come in the middle of the night and take them away, so they cannot give their stuff to others.

This is a good room. Before, we were four people here, now we are only two. Earlier there were two men from Ethiopia and one from Somalia.

This is my computer. I use it to listen to music and the news. Mostly, I listen to African music and news from my home country. I have no Skype. Most of the time I sit outside, or I sit on the sofa and listen to music and the news. I can forget. I cannot think too much. I must forget what happened in the past. If I sit and have nothing to do, I start to think. When I am occupied with music, I do not think too much. This is important.

I sent this picture to my nephew on Snapchat. I was cutting my hair like a boss. I wanted to show my nephew.

Figure 8. Photo by "Abel." Boat on the water

> This is the first time I see a boat. I liked it. It was going—moving. I would like to be moving myself. I feel very worried, but I cannot cry. I do not know how to pray, but God knows what I need. Gives me blessing. In troubled situations there is someone to help you; the Almighty.

It appears that the pictures as a whole revolve around Sara's and Abel's rooms and a longing for home outside the reception center. The pictures demonstrate the smallness and messiness of their rooms, where basic items of clothing, food, and furniture are all cluttered and tangled with each other. There is little or no space left for activities, meals, visitors, or any form of contemplation and reflection on their own. We suggest that the two sets of pictures together describe how they both struggle to make themselves at home, while strongly communicating the limits, restrictions, inadequacies, and ambivalences in their struggle for home. We propose that these pictures represent an existential and emotional worry, a longing and struggle for home in a physical, emotional and existential sense, while they are confined to material structures that challenge their hopes and struggles for home and fight for self.

The asylum home in an everyday of vulnerable selves and well-being

In light of the foregoing stories, Sara and Abel tell us about the asylum seekers' restricted opportunities and inner existential dilemmas to engage in home-making practices, such as furnishing, decorating, cooking, and sharing meals, to get involved in meaningful activities, or to be with others of one's own choice. Recognizing the limited access and ability to engage in home-making, we are shown how our constant and continuous creation of our existential home and self is set at hazard in the asylum centers.

While some things, images, and memories can reinforce the senses of home, self, and well-being, others represent difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences that may threaten to cause destruction and sometimes ill health. The fact that some images and memories disturb Abel's sense of home and self is made apparent when he says he "must forget what happened in the past" (Abel, picture 6). In Abel' story, we see how his experiences of actions in warfare and his experiences as a refugee ruptured and destroyed his previous home and the relationships he associates with significant others. To help him forget, he listens to music and works out at the gym or in the darkness at night in his room. However, other images and memories reinforce the self, as appears in the several pictures previously shown that include the bed-carpet he got from Abel's older sister (Abel, picture 6). Abel says he "like[s it] very much . . . [and] cannot change [it]. . . . It is African, from Burundi." The bed-carpet evokes memories of positive relations with his sister and with Africa, as well as engaging with and connecting memories, images, and persons who are crucial for creating a sense of home, self, and well-being or, so to speak, "making himself at home." In Sara's case too, we can see how disjointed images, memories, and material things are involved when furnishing and decorating her room. Taken together, they show how relations to things, images, memories, and persons have become fragmented and vulnerable, not being fully able to connect and establish a sufficient wholeness in the experience of home.

However, Sara and many asylum seekers succeed in making small-scale furnishing and decorative touches using smaller items like candles, tablecloths, and teacups, and as such creating a minimum sense of home. With Deirdre Conlon (2011), we might call this a "fractured mosaic" where asylum seekers are seeking to emplace themselves in a new context by engaging with the limited and fragmented material resources at hand. While we can identify several aspects of small-scale home-making, we argue that many asylum seekers nevertheless express sadness, pain, worry, and despair at not feeling the comfort and ease of "being at home" as it is imagined and hoped for. It is also expected to supply

a minimum of "keeping up spirits," "offering a better future," "live as normal people," "being free," and in essence "being at home with one's self."

It appears that the home-making Sara and Abel engage in, as with the other asylum seekers, is vulnerable and demanding. The opportunities are scarce and fragmented in the sense that there is little or no suitable place, only limited access to items for purposes of furnishing and decorating, unstable and ruptured social relations, troublesome memories, uncertain futures, and vague and disorderly imageries of home as it was and will be. Understanding the migrant home to be less about "where you are from" and more about "where you are going" (Ginsberg 1999: 35), we suggest that the asylum seeker's home involves a strenuous and tensional experience of fragmented in-betweens and incompleteness. These asylum seekers' lives are characterized by multiple temporal tensions and especially by temporal uncertainties that are disorienting and disempowering when the future cannot be envisaged (Griffiths 2014; Thorshaug and Brun 2019.). This also manifests itself in the relations people have with the physical structures in reception centers and how they relate to home-making within them: not being able to make a home that speaks of imageries of the past, or of an imagined future, the present becomes even more vague and uncertain. Moreover, not being able to engage in meaningful daily routines as a part of making a home of their own means that they are deprived of daily routines, which, as Henri Lefebvre pointed out, supply "a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct" (Lefebvre 1987: 9). Acknowledging how everyday life is a condition that is both universal and unique, both social and individuated, and both noticeable and concealed (Lefebvre 1987: 9), we suggest that a lack of such experiences poses serious threats to feelings of self, well-being, and mental health.

The experiences of asylum seekers in reception centers illustrates the frustrations and anxieties of not mastering the space in which their everyday lives are placed, thus demonstrating how their embodied experiences of reception centers situate them on the margins of home. Reflecting on home as constituted in and by relations, images, and materiality, as well as by the body's enactment of aims and purposes in daily routines (Young 2005), we suggest that "making home" and "being home" provide processes and experiences of wholeness. As the cases of Sara and Abel demonstrate, asylum seeker's dwellings are reduced to a limit in which sustaining life becomes a struggle for home and a fight not to "lose one's spirit" or "lose one's self."

Struggling for home and fighting for self

In the preceding stories, we see that memories, imagery, materiality, and persons become vital elements in the struggles for home and the self. However, they appear to be both vulnerable and challenging.

The communal rooms, like the TV room and kitchen, as well as the "private" rooms, make dwellings that only rarely provide an opportunity to become "whatever I make of it," and even less as a place that connects with where "I come from" (see Latimer and Munro 2009).

Home-making may facilitate health and well-being by building a sense of belonging. Especially for migrants, engaging in such practices may provide an opportunity to mitigate the challenges inherent in migratory experiences by engaging with both the material and ideological registers of home (Raven-Ellison 2013). However, Sara, like several asylum seekers, explained how they tend to refrain from involvement in features of home-making, since this would imply a kind of surrender to a "place" that does not fit with the imaginaries of what home or one's self is or should be, thus making the struggle for home in the reception center a highly ambiguous and contradictory experience. Rather than representing images of what home should be, the reception center represents a dwelling in which both Sara and Abel, like several other asylum seekers, state that they "see no future"

and "cannot be themselves." This emerges when Sara says that she can no longer sing, dance, or paint, and in how Abel, throughout his footage, states how everything is "small and messy," with no "room for himself."

Sara points out that after a while they all [the asylum seekers] "went quiet," ceasing "drinking tea, chatting and making noise." Abel is now resigned to mostly staying on his own in his room listening to music to stop him thinking. While creating "home" by activating memories and transnational relations, Abel is in the here and now quite on his own, not engaging much with others who share the same space and time at the reception center. Like most of the other asylum seekers, Abel and Sara largely spend their time in solitude. While Abel occasionally shares a meal with one of the other young men, he generally passes his days and nights on his own. He explains that he has little energy and does not want to discuss his situation with the others because it would easily lead to raised tensions between them, even though many asylum seekers found meaningful support in social interaction with others at the center.

Sara and Abel, who had stayed at the reception center for some time and experienced that new asylum seekers constantly came and went, were wearied by engaging in such relations. The lack of social interaction with others in the here and now underlines an existential emptiness and the struggle of making a home for themselves at the reception centers.

The withdrawal and silence were also strongly felt by both authors when staying at the asylum center. Wandering around the common rooms and corridors and visiting "private" rooms, we usually encountered a sad and heavy stillness and silence. Many times, Anne Sigfrid would wonder if they had all left, though she also sensed a heavy and silent kind of presence. Even when they spent time in the kitchen making food together, there was a kind of stillness and heaviness accompanying the small moments of enjoyment, movement, smiles, and laughter. The experience of the "silence of the asylum center" may also be described as a "deafening expression." This is underlined by the silent moments frozen in the photographs, as when Sarah puts her feet against the window. As such, we suggest that the images express their inner voices, in which we can recognize the asylum seekers as individuals with the human capacity to make home and self, rather than their position as "victims." In picking up on their "inner voices," we see a chance to disrupt the dominant political narrative and challenge the associated assumptions about asylum seekers. Simultaneously, we see our approach as avoiding reinforcing discourses that label asylum seekers with reductive categories (Grønseth 2013).

In understanding home to be not only material but as referring to intra-relational and intersubjective relations, we grasp this quietness and withdrawal as a response to a limited opportunity of "making home," as it includes "making self." We suggest that the self-imposed silence and act of withdrawal creates a boundary to stop oneself being "hurt" by exterior forces. Rather, asylum seekers strive to create a home for themselves by having candles, teacups, canvas and paint, the barbell, music, and "boss-like" haircut. In this sense, the withdrawal and silence can be seen as communicating the sense of a precarious self and a vulnerable home in order to achieve control over the surrounding world outside. Moreover, we underline how the asylum seekers' struggle for home includes an emotional and existential dimension that creates an ambiguity in the fight for home. On the one hand, they fight for home in the here and now and engage in home-making practices, and, on the other hand, they simultaneously resist home in the here and now as they fight even more for a home that should be elsewhere and lies in the future. Thus, seeing the candles, music, and boss-like haircut as part of home-making, we accentuate how the asylum seekers are more than just victims to a system, but they are also agents with feelings, desires, hopes, and dreams. In asylum seekers' negotiation with the ambivalence in engaging with home-making, we see a "politics of hope" in which the asylum seekers point toward an imagined better

future—in a similar fashion as Arjun Appadurai (2013) describes urban slum dwellers in Mumbai, India, as agentive people who strive to create something good within a highly marginalized framework.

Vulnerable home-making: Living at the margins of home and self

By way of concluding, we highlight how dwelling in a reception center accentuates the unstable and porous quality of home as it was experienced by Abel, Sara, and the other asylum seekers in struggling to make a home where their home is not meant to be. In exploring asylum seekers' struggle to make a home, it appears that home is not so much "where we come from," but more "what we make it," as asylum seekers engage with things, images, memories, and persons within the realms of ongoing everyday life. In the context of reception centers, in which many residents live for months and years, the "making of it" is significantly challenged, as images, materiality, and physical surroundings, along with memories and relations with others, become fragmented and incomplete, offering only a home of rupture and fragments. As such, living and dwelling under such circumstances accentuates home as a quest for and a constant making and re-making of a wholeness within one's ongoing everyday life.

While pointing out the vulnerability, ambiguities, and struggles involved in making home in a reception center, we also highlight how asylum seekers nevertheless negotiate the center as home by engaging with things, memories, images, and persons that provide a minimum of meaning and wholeness. At the same time, however, asylum seekers distance themselves from seeing the reception center as home, as this appears to imply surrendering and giving up on themselves, as manifested in pain and illness, as well as a loss of hope and spirit. Moreover, being deprived of crucial experiences of everyday life, which establishes relations and routines that support senses of home, we argue that the reception center's physical surroundings and housing standards represent significant challenges to asylum seekers' well-being and mental health. While pointing out the limiting and marginalizing frames for Home-making and the sustaining of self in the reception center, we accentuate the asylum seekers' agency and struggle as they resist the fragmented and ruptured social relations, the silence and withdrawal, sometimes by rejecting the notion of the reception center as home completely, but still engaging in small-scale Home-making. In doing so, the asylum seekers seek to define what a home in the reception center can be and protest against being so restricted by the poor housing standards and their marginal social position alone. However, we call attention to the ambiguity of the asylum seeker home, as the physical and material plays into the existential experience and longing for a home, a home meant to come into being somewhere else and in the coming future.

Recognizing how a politics of home is reflected in asylum policies, we call on other researchers to document and respond to the experiences of those living on the margins of home. Furthermore, we need to draw attention to how people are differently positioned in negotiating their experiences of home as a result of these political considerations, as well as revealing the vulnerability of certain groups to domestic injustice in being deprived of the right to have a home. This agrees with how we see home as crucial for maintaining human well-being but not necessarily as something that is all harmonic and that comes easily. Rather, home is a contested domain in which different interests struggle to define their own place, and in which self and well-being are negotiated and nurtured. Thus, senses of self and well-being are constantly in the making and must always be fought for, as must homes.

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Notes

1. Nansen led aid projects in hunger-stricken areas of the Soviet Union, Armenia, the Ukraine, and the Volga region, conducted rescue operations for war prisoners, and made efforts to find new homelands for political refugees. In 1922 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his achievements. Norwegians tend to stress Norway's continuous contributions to international peace negotiations (especially the Israel–Palestine and Sri-Lanka conflicts) and the country's worldwide support of human rights.
2. Norwegian People's Aid (https://www.npaid.org/) and HERO (https://www.hero.no/en/).
3. Depending on the fluency in different languages, we generally conversed with our interlocutors in Norwegian or English, and occasionally, we used a third person as an interpreter.
4. We credit our informants for the photos via their pseudonyms: Sara and Abel. The research project What Buildings Do received permission from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), which assess data production with informed written or oral consent, personal privacy management, data management, and protection. This project was granted use of informed oral consent and assessed to secure personal privacy and anonymity of informants. We further inform that the researchers secured consent for publishing photos by underlining the full voluntary option to show and reflect on the photos during conversation or to additionally submit the photos to the researchers for possible publication.

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