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The slow violence of austerity politics and the UK's 'hostile environment': Examining the responses of third sector organisations supporting people seeking asylum

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A B S T R A C T

Around the globe, people seeking asylum are subject to ever-increasing levels of securitisation, surveillance, hostility and violence. In the UK, successive Labour and Conservative governments have sought to create an increasingly 'hostile environment' for people without leave to remain in the country, generating and perpetuating anti-immigrant sentiment in the process. This paper centres attention on the implications of this politics of hostility, which has combined with sweeping levels of austerity, for third sector organisations in and around a city situated in the North East of England. We specifically focus on organisations offering cultural, sporting and artistic activities to gain an insight into how the ways they operate are affected by the UK's immigration and austerity politics. Through researcher volunteering and observation at several organisations and interviews with people associated with them, we document some of the shared practices of quiet care and solidarity, in spite of the significant funding challenges they face. We show how these organisations are providing a crucial support structure to people seeking asylum, offering shared spaces that facilitate the 'doing together' of various activities. However, we also show how these third sector responses, and the people who attend them, are shaped and constrained by this hostile politics. We examine how organisations initially set up to focus on the provision of cultural and artistic activities are increasingly having to tailor their services to provide vitally important forms of support through the provision of, for example, food, clothing and assistance with bureaucratic (but essential) form-filling. The paper makes a key contribution to the relatively scant literature on cultural and artistic initiatives in the third sector set up for people seeking asylum and calls for sensitive academic critiques of the sector that forefront state structural violence and the socio-political contexts in which asylum sector organisations operate.

1. Introduction

Around the globe, people seeking asylum are subject to ever-increasing levels of securitisation, surveillance, hostility and violence. In the UK, successive Labour and Conservative governments have sought to create an increasingly 'hostile environment' for people without leave to remain in the country, generating and perpetuating anti-immigrant sentiment in the process (Goodfellow, 2019). Critical scholars of migration have pointed to the consequences of these policies by highlighting the everyday 'instruments of bordering' (Hall, 2021) that are experienced unevenly by those classified as citizens and non-citizens (e. g. Cassidy et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). For those people

seeking asylum this hostile politics is generative of 'affective border violence', making lives as difficult, marginal and precarious as possible (Meier, 2020). The Nationality and Borders Act passed in April 2022 (or Anti-Refugee Bill as it has been dubbed by many third sector organisations such as *Freedom from Torture*) is the latest policy initiative that overtly perpetuates this precarity by criminalising those seeking asylum in the UK, making journeys across the English Channel increasingly perilous and seeking to 'relocate' people to Rwanda to have their claims processed (GOV.UK, 2022). Mayblin (2020) has shed light on the 'systematic impoverishment' of people living and seeking asylum in the UK, realised through the slow, structural violence enabled by the state and contextualised within broader British colonial logics and legacies (see

Gedalof, 2022). As O'Reilly (2020: 3) elucidates, these developments are not specific to the UK and 'are part of a broader global picture of exclusion of certain categories of migrant deemed disposable, surplus'. In response to this slow violence and climate of hostility, many cities in the UK, Europe, the US and beyond 'host a civic repertoire of allegiances, associations, and services that partially help with circumventing the borders of the state' (Hall, 2021: 47). This 'quotidian architecture of support' (Hall, 2021), referred to as the third sector in our paper, is highly diverse and encompasses charities, voluntary and community organisations offering practical advice and advocacy, as well as opportunities for people to participate in a range of activities including sport, art, gardening, drama, music, conversation practice, language learning and so on. These organisations collectively seek to mitigate the structural violence of asylum regimes in diverse countries marked by austerity politics, growing citizen poverty and rising anti-immigrant sentiment (Darling, 2022; Frazer, 2022; Mayblin, 2020).

Given the dearth of 'research that looks at this issue through the lens of the responding organisations' (Mayblin, 2020: 75), this paper focuses attention on the perspectives of those running, and volunteering for, third sector organisations in and around a city situated in the North East of England. In contrast to previous work that provides valuable critiques of individual organisations working in the asylum sector via detailed ethnographic research (e.g. Darling, 2011; Bagelman, 2016; Meziant, 2022), the work presented in our paper investigates a cross-section of hitherto under-explored organisations offering cultural, sporting and artistic activities, highlighting the effects of slow violence inflicted by immigration and austerity politics (see Gill et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2014 for research examining a broader range of migrant and asylum support groups in the UK and US). Through researcher volunteering and observation at several organisations and interviews with people associated with them, some of whom have refugee status, we document some of the shared practices of quiet care and solidarity, in spite of the significant challenges that they face (Askins, 2014, 2015; Bauder, 2020; Steele et al., 2021). We show how these organisations are providing a crucial support structure to people seeking asylum, offering shared spaces that facilitate the 'doing together' of various activities. In line with the work of others (Bagelman, 2016, 2019; Darling, 2011; Darling and Bauder, 2019; Mayblin, 2020; Meziant, 2022), we acknowledge the dangers of romanticising initiatives organised for/with people seeking asylum. As Mayblin (2020: 78) usefully points out, third sector organisations working in the asylum sector do not stand apart from the colonial logics of the UK government's wider immigration regime. We highlight some of these problematics in specific relation to third sector organisations and recognise the importance/ideal of promoting 'equitable forms of mutuality and the constitution of social, political and spatial systems that challenge rather than reproduce such systems of discrimination, exclusion and violence' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020: 17).

However, we also show how these third sector responses are strongly shaped, constrained and (re)produced by and through the politics of the hostile environment. Austerity politics has seen reductions in state-provided social support services for the most vulnerable people throughout the world, including those seeking asylum, with equally deleterious impacts on third sector organisations that are under higher demand and forced to survive on ever-dwindling resources (Darling, 2022; Frazer, 2022; Gill et al., 2014; O'Reilly, 2020). We show how organisations initially set up to focus on the provision of cultural and artistic activities are increasingly having to tailor their services to provide vitally important forms of support and care through the provision of, for example, food, clothing and support with bureaucratic (but essential) form-filling. We make a conscious decision in this paper to centre our critique on the structural violence of the state's troubling and aggressive immigration and austerity policies and their impacts on how artistic, voluntary, and cultural initiatives are able to operate, rather than those doing their best to alleviate its impacts. At the same time, we conclude by posing key questions about the potential dangers of these third sector organisations being forced to overreach and provide care in

diverse ways that were not originally within their remit. The paper makes a key contribution, then, to the relatively scant literature on cultural and artistic initiatives in the third sector set up for people seeking asylum and calls for sensitive academic critiques of the sector that forefront state structural violence and the socio-political contexts in which asylum sector organisations are forced to operate.

The next section of the paper provides some context to the UK's immigration regime or hostile environment and reviews the work that has examined the care and quiet political activism of the third sector in the context of crippling levels of austerity. We then outline the research study and some geographical information about where the research was undertaken before presenting our empirical research and closing with some concluding provocations.

2. Third sector responses to the hostile environment

While the increasingly draconian and violent immigration regime in the UK encapsulated by the implementation of the so-called 'hostile environment' has received considerable attention, scholars have restated the importance of focusing on the *longer durée* of this hostility towards migrants and people seeking asylum (see Goodfellow, 2019; Mayblin, 2020). The politics of immigration witnessed in the UK in the past ten years has not arrived out of the blue and builds on the policies of successive post-war governments and the statements of influential politicians, both Labour and Conservative, that have set the scene for the demonisation and criminalisation of those constructed as 'undeserving outsiders' (O'Reilly, 2020). Mayblin (2020: 5) usefully views these policy initiatives and their dire consequences for people seeking asylum through the framework of the colonial present and with it, 'the ongoing resonance of colonially informed ideas of human difference, temporality, and hierarchy'. These colonial logics, she argues, make possible the systematic impoverishment and marginalisation of people seeking asylum in the UK, inflicting a form of slow violence upon all those associated with the asylum system (including organisations and initiatives attempting to support people in the system). Even if the political imperative to 'crack down' on immigration, and the historical relations of coloniality that enable such politics, are nothing necessarily new, the effects of recent policy decisions have seen immigration control, surveillance and restriction creep ever further into the everyday and intimate lives of migrants and people seeking asylum (see Mosselson, 2021).

First coined by Labour immigration minister Liam Byrne in 2007, and later implemented as official policy by then Conservative Home Secretary, Theresa May, the hostile environment brought the 'discipline of immigration control' to the centre of political debate, and to the lives of many people living in British cities (Hall, 2021: 47). In practice, the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 were geared to:

> 'extending bordering processes more deeply into everyday life, subcontracting and extending border-guard roles to employees of private and public organisations including banks, the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and hospitals as well as private landlords, so that irregular migrants would find it harder to find work and accommodation or to access health care and education' (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 233).

Attention has centred on the everyday manifestations of this 'borderwork' as it is increasingly enacted from below (Cassidy et al., 2018; Rumford, 2008), as well as the affective border violence and emotions that it generates (Gill, 2016; Meier, 2020). In short, while the political discourse on immigration and state security has long utilised hostile rhetoric, 'the geographies of borders have become more expansive, invading all aspects of people's everyday lives' (Meier, 2020: 2). Rumford, writing in 2008, observed that 'bordering, debordering and rebordering are no longer the exclusive business of nation-states, or even of the EU…Borderwork is very much the business of citizens, of ordinary people' (2008: 2–3). As he noted at the time, this borderwork was not exclusively about border enforcement, instead encompassing the ways

borders could be contested, undermined or pushed back against. In this paper, we are interested in Rumford's provocative question of 'who performs the borderwork', but we also consider it important to outline where, how and why this borderwork is performed (2008: 2). Our focus, therefore, is on cultural and artistic third sector organisations and the individuals associated with them (either those volunteering or working), who are increasingly undertaking diverse forms of borderwork to support people trying to negotiate the deliberately complex and bureaucratic UK asylum system. The implications of the structural violence (Canning, 2017) unleashed by the UK's immigration regime are, of course, most severely felt through the emotional everyday realities of people seeking asylum (Meier, 2020). However, the operation of initiatives set up to offer people seeking asylum opportunities to engage in different cultural and artistic activities are also heavily affected by the hostile environment. As Mosselson (2021: 1725) and others have stated, 'the hostile environment and racialised hierarchies intrude into spaces and systems designed to care for forced migrants' in ways that we must remain critically attuned to (see also Bagelman, 2016; Darling, 2011). We outline below the ways these initiatives are implicated in the provision of diverse forms of care for people seeking asylum, and argue that they are increasingly having to respond to structural inequalities exacerbated by the withdrawal of key public services (including immigration support) that has been a feature of the hostile environment and austerity politics more broadly (see Goodfellow, 2019).

Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence has been prolifically applied to a range of contexts beyond his original thesis including the structural violence of austerity (e.g. Ellis, 2022; Pain, 2019; Pain and Cahill, 2022) and social policy related to the asylum regime (Mayblin, 2020). For Nixon (2011: 2), slow violence, 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'. Mayblin's (2020) work highlights how slow, structural violence maps on to social policies that constitute the asylum regime through the deliberate and targeted impoverishment of refugees and people seeking asylum. This state-inflicted violence 'gradually degrades bodies and minds quietly, behind closed doors, making it largely invisible to the majority of the population' (Mayblin, 2020: 6), and has been linked to, for instance, the hollowing out of state-run welfare services, inadequate and substandard housing provision and the temporal/spatial suspension experienced by people making asylum claims (Bagelman, 2016). Third sector organisations working in the asylum sector have attracted critical attention from researchers who have examined how they work to alleviate (or, in some cases, reproduce) slow, structural violence. Much less work has investigated the effects of this structural violence on the functioning of third sector organisations in the asylum sector (for a notable exception see Darling, 2022), most especially those offering cultural and artistic activities. For this reason, we choose to frame our critique in ways that keep the slow, structural violence of the hostile environment front and central, whilst foregrounding the voices of those running a wide range of third sector initiatives doing their best to negotiate extremely challenging socio-economic and political conditions.

More broadly, the role of third sector and voluntary organisations in the context of austerity politics has received considerable attention from geographers (e.g. Cloke et al., 2017; DeVerteuil et al. 2020; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Marie Hall, 2020; Strong, 2020; Trudeau, 2008; Williams et al., 2016). As these studies have shown, it is often the voluntary sector that 'fills the void', offering care provision to people and communities most adversely affected by welfare reform and drastic cuts to state services and spending. Given the growing pressures placed on the voluntary sector because of ongoing austerity, DeVerteuil et al. (2020: 924) point to its mitigatory role 'as an in-between and mediating actor' vis-à-vis the state, rather than 'an agent for revolutionary change'. Critiques have underlined the increasingly complex relationships between state and non-state institutions (Trudeau, 2008), as well as highlighting the potential complicity of third sector organisations in enabling welfare austerity and the privatisation (rather than politicisation) of responsibility (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Gill et al., 2014; Lawson, 2007; Power and Williams, 2019). Strong (2020) asks further critical questions about *who* takes on the burden of responsibility in these processes of 'actually existing austerity', showing how this is 'unevenly distributed and performed – often by those already excluded, marginalised and impoverished' (Strong, 2020: 211). Others have suggested how the sector can 'potentially serve to articulate a newly emerging and not yet fully formed ethical and political response to welfare *'in the meantime'*, introducing values other than those of neoliberal capitalism as a response to the austere conditions of the here and now' (Cloke et al., 2017: 704, emphasis in original). There are, then, alternative and progressive possibilities that have been identified through the spaces, practices and politics of care and welfare provision within third sector and voluntary organisations (Cloke et al., 2017; DeVerteuil et al., 2020; Trudeau, 2008). Instead of dismissing these responses outright as being incorporated in austerity politics (as opposed to directly challenging them), Cloke et al. (2017: 707) stress the importance of developing 'appropriately critical but open-handed analytical tools to examine the geographies, politics and ethics of welfare and care' in relation to their provision by third sector organisations. This is crucial given the potential 'transformation of roles, responsibilities and institutional configurations of the (local) state and citizens in urban spatial politics' as a consequence of cuts to welfare and care services (Rosol, 2012: 241).

In the context of asylum, the voluntary sector is similarly having to respond to the inadequate provision of welfare support, most especially in marginalised areas (see Hall, 2021). Urban practices of solidarity and care construct 'supportive infrastructures…that attempt to mitigate the effects of the hostile environment and create a welcoming, supportive city that is open to (forced) migration' (Mosselson, 2021: 1725; Astolfo and Boano, 2019; Bauder, 2020; Rast and Ghorashi, 2018). Darling and Bauder (2019: 5) argue that studies of migration have tended to prioritise the exclusionary policies and discourses of the nation-state, whilst eschewing the city as, 'a space in which networks of political solidarity, organising, and mutual support give presence to the claims of illegalised migrants and refugees'. This connects with Williams' (2016: 514) prior call to more comprehensively consider the ways that 'care and justice might be practised as actually existing grounded, relational, radical and everyday ethics in all spheres of the city and across distance'. Work exploring these various initiatives, informed by geographical scholarship on care (Williams, 2016, 2017, 2020) and the politics of quiet activism (Askins, 2014, 2015; Steele et al., 2021), has emphasised the intimate relationships and encounters they make possible. Williams (2017: 824-5) contends that the, '"implicit activisms", "small acts" and "kind words" that comprise everyday practices within activist projects need to be understood as contributing to social change and constituting the city'. The growing number of civil society organisations provide what Mayblin (2020: 75) defines as a 'humanitarian response' to the structural violence of the asylum regime: 'These organisations, many refugee run, say that people seeking asylum are not invisible or disposable.' (cf. Meziant (2022) who sensitively highlights how third sector organisations that adopt a 'humanitarian' approach can ultimately reinforce state sovereignty and its violent bordering practices). For Mayblin (Meziant, 2022: 76), the scale of the response from third sector organisations 'is only necessary when there has been a failure of state provision, in this case a failure in adequate subsistence support for people seeking asylum'.

As a consequence of this absence of the state, the scope of services and care provided by these organisations is extremely broad and can include advice and advocacy in relation to housing, health, education, legal advice, financial support (Mayblin, 2020), the provision of language learning (Darling, 2011), befriending schemes (Askins, 2014, 2015), as well as a plethora of cultural and artistic activities (Bagelman, 2016). This body of work has undoubtedly provided rich and important critical perspectives on the operation of third sector organisations working with people seeking asylum, which we draw on below.

However, existing research has rarely attempted to provide an overview of the sector within and across one concentrated urban area by documenting the perspectives of people working or volunteering in a range of diverse organisations (Mayblin, 2020; although see Gill et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2014). The study we draw upon in this paper responds to this lacuna by foregrounding the voices of those volunteering and working in the sector, in the North East of England. This facilitates an overview of the shared challenges that these organisations face, as well as the ways they attempt to support people trying to get by in the face of an increasingly hostile and austere asylum regime. The commonalities in experience draw attention to the pervasive impacts of limited funding and structural violence on how these varied initiatives operate, as well as the kinds of care and borderwork that their staff and volunteers are having to undertake. It sheds further light on the dearth of support for people seeking asylum from the state and local government, and its wide-ranging consequences for the forms of critical care that voluntary organisations and initiatives in the asylum sector are providing.

A growing body of critical scholarship is attuned to 'the practices and politics of care' (Power and Williams, 2019: 3; Hanrahan and Smith, 2018; Lawson, 2007), and more specifically to the response of third sector organisations working with refugees and people seeking asylum (e.g. Bagelman, 2016; Bauder, 2020; Darling, 2011; Darling and Bauder, 2019; Meziant, 2022). Mayblin (2020) underlines the importance of being sensitive to the potentially problematic hierarchies and relations that such organisations can reproduce. As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020: 3) has noted, responses can often 'position refugees as particular "types" of people who require external intervention to variously "save", "assist", "protect" or "control" them'. This has the effect of framing, '*non*-refugee actors as actual and potential agents, while refugees are, and have to be, acted upon' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020: 3). The ways that practices of urban solidarity can be productive of asymmetrical relations and the denial of agency have been sensitively identified through ethnographic work undertaken by Darling (2011) at an asylum drop-in centre in the UK. Similarly, Bagelman (2016: 5) highlights how third sector organisations and the broader sanctuary movements of which they form a part, might be implicated in extending the waiting, uncertainty and state of suspension experienced by many people who are refugees or seeking asylum:

> 'The charity work that aims to alleviate problems facing asylum seekers and refugees in this respect may risk operating as a technology of this serious problem of suspension. The danger is that activist work of this kind may lock in, rather than challenge, statist asylum practices.' (Bagelman, 2016: 8)

These critiques, then, argue that third sector organisations are, perhaps unintentionally, part of the logics of the asylum regime, all too easily reproducing colonially informed hierarchies whilst not doing enough to push back or contest government immigration policy.

Notwithstanding the importance of such academic critiques, the organisations attempting to mitigate the effects of the hostile environment for people seeking asylum, are doing so in the context of unprecedented levels of government cuts and extremely limited funding. For Mayblin (2020: 95), this third sector response is already 'against the odds', most especially given, 'the backdrop of austerity in public spending and increased citizen poverty…a growing and emboldened far right, and a mainstreaming of right wing, racist, anti-immigrant views'. Foregrounding the voices of those running these voluntary initiatives, as we do below, emphasises the unprecedented challenges they face in trying to support those who are subjected to the systematic impoverishment characteristic of the UK asylum regime (Mayblin, 2020). Few would dispute the importance of generating 'equitable forms of mutuality and the constitution of social, political and spatial systems that challenge rather than reproduce such systems of discrimination, exclusion and violence' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020: 17). However, these ambitions need to be set alongside the everyday realities facing third sector organisations, as well as their volunteers and staff, who are often working hard to alleviate the slow, structural violence of the state's asylum regime with ever diminishing resources. Bauder (2020: 1068) posits a slightly more pragmatic understanding of urban solidarity that more openly acknowledges and works with existing social, political and economic contexts and hierarchies:

> 'Solidarity is a never-finished practice that prevents political closure and preserves plurality, while acknowledging the complex, fragmented and multifaceted relations between people and groups in different circumstances.'

The notion of solidarity as unfinished, emergent and always in the making (also see Askins, 2014), remains sensitive to the complex relationalities and circumstances faced by voluntary and third sector organisations. Importantly, it flags the very marked structural constraints placed upon the sector and appears to offer space for constructive criticism and ways to improve practices of solidarity, that are fully cognisant of the wider social, political and economic conditions faced by voluntary and third sector initiatives.

3. Research context: introducing the study

The research context that we draw upon in this paper is the North East of England, one of the whitest regions of the country (Nayak, 2012; Meziant, 2022) and an area with a long history of anti-immigration sentiment and far right activism (Burrell et al., 2019; Clayton et al., 2022; Finlay et al., 2020; Hopkins et al., 2020). The region became a key location that received people seeking asylum following the introduction of the UK dispersal policy through the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Indeed, a report about asylum statistics from the House of Commons library in 2022 notes that the North East has the highest number of people seeking asylum relative to its overall population (21 per 10,000 residents) compared to any other region of the UK (Sturge, 2022). Between January 2014 and September 2022, a cumulative total of 2,019 resettled refugees were living in the North East of England. In addition to this, there were 5,699 people seeking asylum receiving section 95 or section 4 support in the North East as of the end of September 2022 (5, 537 in dispersal accommodation).[1] As such, the North East is home to a sizeable population of people who are refugees or seeking asylum, which is accompanied by many organisations working to meet the needs of this diverse and often-changing community. It is also important to point out that the North East has faced large-scale deindustrialisation and is one of the regions with the highest number of deprived neighbourhoods in the UK (Casla, 2018). Indeed, over 10 years of UK government austerity policies are considered to have fallen hardest on the North East, as well as other northern regions (Centre for Cities, 2019). In this context of government spending cuts, many third sector organisations in the North East have experienced a reduction in funding and resources, but nonetheless and rather paradoxically, have had an enhanced role to play in providing public services (Clayton et al., 2016).

The project we draw upon in this paper focused on the everyday experiences of refugee youth in the North East of England. One of our primary objectives focused on considering the role played by third sector organisations, and especially arts and cultural initiatives, that are part of the 'arrival infrastructures' engaged by those who are dispersed to the region. This project involved working closely with young people who are refugees and seeking asylum, as well as the organisations and groups who provide services for them. We also engaged with 49 people who are refugees or seeking asylum in different forms of data collection

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[1] Section 95 and Section 4 support are forms of housing and financial support provided to asylum seekers if they do not have housing and cannot afford to meet their basic needs. Section 95 support includes accommodation and subsistence support but in the rare cases where an applicant already has accommodation, it will be subsistence-only support. This increased to £39.63 per week from £37.75 in June 2020.

including interviews, focus groups, walking interviews and creative map making sessions (Huizinga et al., 2022), and supported our data collection through forty hours of researcher volunteering at third sector organisations both in-person and online (see Williams, 2016). In addition to this, we interviewed 29 service providers working in the arts, cultural and voluntary sector, and we supplemented this primary data with an analysis of both local media representations and migration histories. The 29 interviews with service providers are the primary focus of this paper but our other work in this area also supports our observations and analysis. All the interviews were transcribed fully, coded, and then analysed in further depth to identify key issues.

Given our political and activist interests in asylum issues, we approached this work as anti-racist scholar activists (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021); we are also partly 'volunteer practitioners' (Blazek and Askins, 2020: 464; O'Reilly, 2020; Steele et al., 2021; Williams, 2016) as all of the authors of this paper have either previously volunteered with refugee community groups or were volunteering during and after fieldwork for this project had taken place. Whilst such an approach can be useful for building trust and reciprocity in the field, we are conscious that power imbalances and hierarchies often remain (Blazek and Askins, 2020). As three white men all with secure citizenship status, we occupy multiple positions of privilege in comparison to the people we were working with, and often reflected on this during the research process (Fisher, 2015; Kohl and McCutcheon, 2015) including considerations about the power of whiteness in the field (Faria and Mollett, 2016) and the powerful position we occupy as employees of a UK university. In this context, we engaged in what Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021: 88) have referred to as 'reparative theft', whereby anti-racist scholar activists use the material resources of the university, alongside their social and symbolic capital, to challenge racial injustices and to promote anti-racism. They make the point that such 'theft' is 'both morally and ethically justifiable' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021: 113); moreover, it is a 'duty' given the 'extractive and exploitative' nature of universities. We enacted this through encouraging third sector community groups to charge us a room booking fee so the university could send funds to their organisations, through the purchase of stationary for asylum organisations, and through booking university spaces to enable such groups to host meetings and events.[2] Having set out the research we did and our approach to this topic, we turn to the perspectives of those working and volunteering for third sector organisations in the context of austerity politics and the hostile environment.

4. The quiet politics of doing (culture and art) together

Third sector organisations in the North East of England offer practical and legal support to people who are refugees or seeking asylum, as well as the opportunity to partake in a range of cultural, artistic, conversational/educational (i.e. language learning through conversation practice) and sporting endeavours. It is important to acknowledge this diversity within the third sector in terms of the vastly different provision of services in one region and the variegated challenges these organisations each face. The majority of people we interviewed, and the accounts we draw upon in this paper, were associated with organisations that fall into the cultural, artistic, conversational/educational and sporting categories. While the kinds of activities they offered differ, interviewees (some were people who are refugees or seeking asylum themselves) consistently emphasised the care and support they felt was generated through being together and doing activities as a collective:

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[2] Whilst a substantial discussion of dissemination is beyond the scope of this paper, the findings generated from the research project were communicated to third sector organisations and broader publics through a lay policy report (Finlay et al., 2022), a collaborative stage production with a theatre company of sanctuary, an end of project conference attended by academics and representatives of third sector organisations and via several animated videos.

'It's become a support network, I think, as well. There's my artistic agenda in terms of the play I'm making and they're really invested in that, but there's all of this stuff around it, which is about company, support, network and family, friendship and fun and nights out and all of that kind of stuff…Something that we learned is that the best conversations with people happen over food and everyone is up for it if there's some food, but also it's a natural place to be having a conversation with people, isn't it? While you're eating together.' (Zoe, member of a theatre group, 03 July 2019)

In the interviews, staff and volunteers of third sector organisations referred to the sense of support and companionship they experienced and/or attempted to cultivate, derived from bringing people together, sharing experiences, conversation and food. What might appear as fairly mundane experiences as a consequence of being part of a collective and the affective relations it facilitates, are not insignificant when considered alongside the lived effects of the hostile environment as an 'everyday reality in which migrants are never settled or at peace, but are constantly made to feel uncomfortable, isolated and unwanted' (Mosselson, 2021: 1728).

Other interviewees, including Haady, a person formerly seeking asylum, referenced the significance of specific activities they were able to undertake at third sector organisations, as critical to their sense of well-being:

'I think it's really good if you have something to do, like gardening. When you start gardening, your mind gets busy with gardening so you cannot think about all of those troubles that happened before. So you can have a rest for a while when you come here and you do something else…For a while you are busy with the Home Office for your case, lots of those things but after that you don't have anything to do. You just sit at home and you just think about all of those things: "Why did I come here? Why did that happen?" You think about your old life in your country and you just get anxious and depressed about it. But when you come here, you have something to do. Everybody is the same as you. You can find people that are like you, so you feel, "I'm not alone. Now I have something to do." You think, "I'm useful to the community." I think it is really important people can feel I'm useful because when you don't have anything, you think, "I'm not useful for the community."' (Haady, member of a gardening group, 09 July 2019)

The quote above is replete with the emotional impacts of borderwork that created feelings of anxiety, discomfort, depression and isolation for Haady. Meier (2020: 2) uses the term 'affective governmentality' to refer to the 'diffuse set of strategies and tactics including state regulations through affect and emotion that manage the bodies of those seeking asylum'. The importance of making and doing together in everyday spaces through practices of gardening, music making, and other cultural and artistic pursuits were effective ways for some to temporarily background troubled personal histories and the everyday reminders of bordering that generated considerable temporal uncertainty (Hall, 2021; Sennett, 2013). Askins (2014: 353), in her research on befriending schemes that pair people who are refugees or asylum seekers with local residents in the North East of England, underlines the 'quiet politics' inherent to these kinds of interpersonal encounters (see Steele et al., 2021). This quiet politics was not only evident through people's emotional interactions with one another but can be similarly applied to their embodied engagements with non-human elements through the doing of diverse activities at third sector organisations (Williams, 2016). The opportunity to engage with tools, plants and earth, as well as other people through the embodied practice of gardening (as in Haady's case), music making and other forms of artistic practice, for instance, offered 'temporary respite from a wider environment of hostility' (Mosselson, 2021: 1734). The final part of Haady's quote is perhaps more revealing of problematic hierarchies that can be (re)produced between 'guest' and 'host', which can place pressure on people who are refugees to perform

this hostile regime (Bagelman, 2016; Darling, 2011, 2022; Meziant, 2022; Mosselson, 2021). The example explored above shows how organisations can arguably shore-up the legitimacy of structural violence linked to the bureaucratic procedures of the asylum regime by assisting with the work of form-filling (Bagelman, 2016). Mosselson (2021: 1739) states:

'Rather than directly challenging the processes that produce illegality and deportability, they [the third sector and the City of Sanctuary movement more broadly] confine themselves to providing people with the means and materials that allow them to survive.'

While the act of challenging the state with the objective of overtly resisting its hostile immigration policies can appear a logical 'call to arms' for critical scholars of the social sciences, the situation on the ground for third sector organisations and their staff/volunteers does not always make this simple. Darling (2022) and Meziant (2022) rightfully point to the structural conditions and levels of precarity in the sector that limit the capacity of such organisations to launch a critical challenge to the state's policies. The voices of people working and volunteering for third sector initiatives are revealing of other concerns regarding the extent of their involvement in volunteering initiatives:

'The only issue is we don't want to expand it [the organisation] more where it might affect our asylum cases again…A lot of people's cases got refused, where they were volunteering, the support worker wrote that this person is doing volunteer work with us from this date and time, and the Home Office said are you doing volunteer work, you're not allowed to do this, so they got refused.' (Taliha, member of a food initiative, 19 July 2019)

A number of those running and volunteering at arts and cultural initiatives in the third sector in our study were people who are, or were previously, refugees and/or seeking asylum. As Taliha indicates above, her voluntary work needs to be carefully considered alongside her asylum claim and status to avoid negatively affecting her case. Many of our interviewees were acutely aware of the everyday bordering and surveillance they could be subjected to and tailored their involvement in volunteering, or activities that could be construed as work. Thus, the expectation that third sector organisations will actively resist and challenge the state's immigration policies is problematic without more sensitively accounting for the positionalities of the volunteers and staff involved. Academic critiques of the third sector as somehow complicit in the hostile environment need to more fully acknowledge the anxieties of their staff or volunteers who hold concerns about their asylum claims being compromised. The act of resisting or challenging state immigration policy is not a simple one for many of the people involved in arts and cultural initiatives in the third sector.

That said, it is important not to generalise and assume all people who are refugees or seeking asylum avoid activism as Bella makes clear in relation to the running of an English conversation group:

'People who are in the asylum system and not in the asylum system, wanted to do more kind of like asylum case work support. So, we started this group that was kind of more like campaigning, political – like expressly political, and that was like organising yes, campaigning and demonstrations and stuff…[But] like I've felt a tension sometimes that like because mostly I see people when they're like having a shit time. If everything's going great with your asylum case, I might not really know about it. So, I have this impression that you've kind of like a never-ending onslaught of crises that need to be managed by asylum seekers. Like people being forced from a house; people being made destitute; people being refused da-da-da-dah and like put in detention da-da-da; but for most people who are in the asylum system they don't want to think about that all the time. So, I think for a lot of them that's where the arts and culture, other like community spaces and stuff come in, so that you can, yes, fill your

days and feel more productive.' (Bella, member of an English conversation group, 07 June 2019)

The quote above is illustrative of how people attending artistic and cultural organisations had extremely diverse attitudes and approaches to political activism related to asylum. Some were comfortable getting involved in political campaigns and demonstrations, showing how third sector organisations, 'may provide the foundations for other forms of political intervention and transformation' (Darling, 2022: 172). As we have seen, others had concerns about the surveillance that could be placed on them by the Home Office and this also dictated their willingness to take part in activities that were considered to be overtly political. Moreover, many found that engaging artistic and cultural activities provided a break from the exhaustion of their asylum claim and its associated emotional labour and, as a consequence, made a conscious decision to avoid anything related to the politics of asylum (Darling, 2022). For these people, the act of doing something creative momentarily shifted attention away from the waiting and other frustrations bound up with claiming asylum and could also be framed as an everyday, emergent form of resistance (Hughes, 2020). Given that the UK asylum system actively limits the societal participation of people seeking asylum, these activities of 'doing' and 'making' work as important modes of self-care and an 'expression of recognition'.

The fact that some of the organisations involved in our research opened their doors to people of all backgrounds, and not only those who were seeking asylum, was also considered significant. This had the effect of taking emphasis away from peoples' asylum claims and the categories that so often pre-determine aspects of their everyday lives:

'We were trying to promote something and someone's like, oh, "Is there just going to be like asylum seekers there?" Because they just end up feeling like yes, like boxed off and like you know everyone already and you're sort of like a separate culture. The group of people like who you might not have much in common with, they're from a completely different country and different religion and you might prefer to be with yes, like a project where you're doing something you're genuinely interested in.' (Bella, member of an English conversation group, 07 June 2019)

Groups focusing on artistic, cultural and sporting pursuits that involved different people in the local community were seen to offer opportunities to reduce the prominence of simplistic and restrictive categories that are constantly imposed by the state. In his work on drop-in centres throughout the UK, Darling (2022: 167) has identified subtle acts of defiance by drawing on Foucault's notion of 'counter-conduct' to explore 'forms of struggle situated at the margins of more assertive forms of resistance' (Darling, 2022: 167). Read in this way, artistic and cultural organisations that hosted a diverse range of attendees, refused to reinforce markers that regularly distinguish and 'other' people seeking asylum. Although they largely avoided mobilising explicit political resistance, these were sites of 'solidaristic potential' where 'care was centred upon the development of relationships that established connections between individuals, offering networks of engagement that carried with them opportunities' (Darling, 2022: 173; Hughes, 2016). These connections were forged through shared interests that brought different people from the community together in ways that crosscut and complicate binary categories distinguishing those with/without citizenship.

7. Conclusion

In early March 2023, the UK Government launched its 'Illegal Migration Bill' with the slogan, 'Stop the boats', the latest in a string of increasingly extreme immigration policies that look to dehumanise and criminalise people seeking asylum, subjecting them to yet more violence at the border (Sherwood and Savage, 2023). The toxic politics bound up with this form of governance through spectacle is the sharp end of the

hostile environment that continues to characterise the UK's asylum regime and those of other countries around the world (see Cantat, 2020; Frazer, 2022; Gill et al., 2014). The structural violence foregrounded in this paper, however, is not spectacular or immediately perceptible. It is not launched with political fanfare and yet it plays a critical role in shaping people's experiences of asylum in this country. The combination of austerity politics and the 'slow violence' of everyday bordering that are constitutive of the hostile environment are what Davies et al. (2017: 1281) might identify as, 'stealthier forms of structural violence', that have deleterious effects on the lives of people seeking asylum. Our paper is a reminder of the importance of remaining 'attentive to what states choose *not* to do', as well as how people seeking asylum, and those supporting them in the third sector, can push back, mitigate and resist the politics of hostile asylum politics (Davies et al., 2017: 1281).

In the research presented above we respond to Mayblin's (2020) call for more research focusing on the third sector, and in particular cultural and artistic initiatives working predominantly (although often not exclusively) with people seeking asylum. Existing studies of asylum and the third sector have very often involved embedded ethnographic research that have yielded important critiques of the ways individual organisations operate through, for example, the reinforcement of power hierarchies underpinned by problematic logics of humanitarianism and 'white governmentality' (e.g. Bagelman, 2016; Darling, 2011; Meziant, 2022). The research we present in this paper does something slightly different by drawing on the accounts of people involved in a broad cross-section of third sector organisations working in the North East of England. Rather than examining the micro-politics of how each functions, we underline the shared challenges they face in ways that foreground the structural violence of the state and its influence on how asylum sector organisations operate.

Despite the many challenges they face, third sector organisations focusing on the provision of artistic and cultural activities for people seeking asylum continue to offer shared spaces for being and doing together. We draw on Askins' (2014) notion of a 'quiet politics of care' to conceptualise the embodied acts of doing gardening, art, theatre and preparing food together in these spaces (Steele et al., 2021). For some, these 'doings' were an important 'time-out' from the everyday emotional and bureaucratic labour bound up with claiming asylum in the UK. For others, they were a way of gaining recognition and visibility in their relatively new communities, although we are cognisant of the dangers in reinforcing certain expectations and tropes of the 'deserving refugee'. Those volunteering and working at third sector organisations in our research study were also aware that some people seeking asylum chose not to attend the activities they offered and there is more research required to further understand these forms of (dis)engagement and non-participation (see Meziant, 2022).

There is little doubt, however, that the third sector organisations involved in our study (as well as the people who volunteer and work at them) are operating in ways that are shaped and constrained by the politics of the hostile environment and ever-deepening levels of austerity. Most chillingly, this is evidenced by the ways people seeking asylum were required to carefully consider the extent of their participation in third sector organisations, given their very real concerns with the surveillance inherent to everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). We argue that the hostile environment's everyday borders that constrain the lives of people seeking asylum, needs to be considered alongside the pernicious effects of sweeping and enduring austerity that continues to hollow out public services and support (Darling, 2022). Organisations that were originally conceived to offer, for instance, artistic and sporting activities or conversation practice, increasingly provide basic forms of life support to the people who attend. This shift is a direct result of the contraction in state structural support for those negotiating the asylum regime, characterised by 'slow violence' and a system set up to be indifferent towards suffering, as others have powerfully highlighted (Mayblin, 2020; Darling, 2022; Gill, 2016). The provision of such support, while laudable and a response to genuine

need, can end up reinforcing the humanitarian logics of, and power distribution within, such organisations. This is unfortunate given the quiet politics of people (i.e. those with citizenship status *and* those without) in communities doing things like art, theatre and sport together arguably offer opportunities to do solidarity in ways that disrupt these power differentials, although this is by no means inevitable (see Mayblin, 2020; Meziant, 2022). Our engagement with a number of third sector organisations and their members has enabled the identification of some of the shared challenges they face, which are exacerbated by structural violence of the state and its politics. The politics associated with the hostile environment and austerity are certainly not unique to the UK and result in third sector organisations continuing to play a central role in the lives and welfare of people seeking asylum in different contexts around the world. We call for further research across diverse national contexts that draws critical attention to the knock-on effects of what the state 'chooses not to do' for people seeking asylum.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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