

# “The curse of the refugee”. Narratives of slow violence, marginalization and non-belonging in the Danish welfare state

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## Abstract

Drawing on narrative interviews with people who have recently or in the past fled to Denmark, this article examines experiences of being cast as refugees within the Danish asylum and integration bureaucracy. The analysis is situated within a social context formed simultaneously by Nordic exceptionalism and racial colour-blindness, and by increasing restrictions within Danish asylum and integration policy. Within this context, the article analyses narrative accounts of structural violence and racialization within three central sites of refugee management: namely the reception and asylum camps, encounters with municipal integration workers, and in contexts of schooling and employment. The analysis conveys intersubjective perspectives on how being labelled as a ‘refugee’ involves being racialized, managed and controlled and it argues that such forms of legally-sanctioned control measures can be understood as a slow violence that harms the lives of those seeking protection in Denmark. Finally, the article discusses how people labelled as ‘refugees’ respond to and oppose experiences of racism and control, and how such responses are often silenced in ways that further legitimize racism.

**KEYWORDS:** refugee narratives, racialization, Nordic exceptionalism, necropolitics, slow violence

## Introduction

*I think it's inhumane. We have lived here for nine years, we have tried to learn the language, we know the Danish people, we got to know Denmark; all this culture and everything. And still, you worry; will you get this... permanent... passport? You won't. [...] Sometimes I think this is a wonderful country, but it's not anymore for refugees. I pity those who are refugees.*

In the above quote Daria, who fled to Denmark from Afghanistan in 2013, reflects on the prospects and challenges of living in Denmark as a refugee. While Daria – in line with so many others – has worked hard to comply with the requirements of ‘integration’, the gradual restrictions introduced in the Danish Integration Act make the prospect of permanent residence permit uncertain. As I will show in this article, this uncertainty adds to widespread and similar experiences of being kept at the borders of Danish society and of being subject to continued marginalization and racialization that are inherent in various asylum and integration interventions.

The legal and social conditions for people seeking refuge in Denmark and Northern Europe have been critically addressed in relation to restricted border control and asylum policy measures (Griffiths 2014; Mayblin 2020; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2021; Kohl 2021). This includes studies of rejected asylum seekers in Danish deportation centres (Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018). Likewise, scholars have studied how changing social welfare conditions and needs of local communities influence the reception and lives of people granted asylum (Eastmond 2007; 2011; Whyte et al. 2019; Weiss 2020; Shapiro & Jørgensen 2021). These studies document an increased austerity within Nordic asylum and integration policies and shed light on underlying racializing assumptions and logics as well as conveying some of the consequences they produce.

I build on this literature including its focus on the role of “the state and the law in producing

categories of undesired racialized populations” (Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018, 45). The article analyses how people who have arrived in Denmark as refugees experience processes of othering and racialization related to asylum and integration. I conceptualize such encounters as instances of structural (Galtung 1969) or bureaucratic violence (Abdelhady et al. 2020) in which people categorized as refugees are racialized and subjected to controlling measures and subordination (see also Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2022).

My analytical approach is informed by the theoretical concepts of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) and slow violence (Nixon 2011). Both are situated in decolonial thinking that critically addresses “the darker side of Modernity” (Mignolo 2011, 2), pinpointing how a dichotomous, colonial, worldview that contains Western hierarchical ideas of human difference and human worth installs differences between people through racial and patriarchal formulations of knowledge, gender, and subjectivity.

Through analysis of narrative interviews with people who have fled to and settled in Denmark within the last 30 years, the article explores the interpersonal experience of being incorporated as a ‘refugee’ within the Danish welfare state. This is addressed through the following research questions:

How do the research participants, who are categorized as ‘refugees’, experience and respond to the racializing policies and integrational logics that govern their rights and ways of living as ‘refugees’ in Denmark?

What long-term consequences do everyday racialization and structural violence have for the research participants in terms of feelings of worth and belonging in Danish society?

The article begins by placing the study within a broader research context of Nordic exceptionalism and racialization. Next, I present the theoretical concepts that inform the analysis and briefly convey central tendencies and shifts in the last

30 years of Danish asylum and integration policies. Moving on, I present the empirical material and overall research design that the analysis rests upon and discuss ethical considerations related to questions of voice, power and representation in sensitive empirical research. Finally, the analysis is structured around three central sites in which experiences of bureaucratic control and racializing encounters appear: namely in reception and asylum camps, in encounters with municipal integration workers, and in institutional contexts of schooling and employment. Throughout the analysis empirical accounts are used to illustrate how being labelled as a ‘refugee’ entails categorization that legitimizes and produces racism and long-term marginalization.

From a narrative, intersubjective perspective the article contributes to research that critically addresses the worldviews, experiences and life conditions of marginalized groups in society (Jackson 2002). The analysis shows how racialization and structural violence are experienced by people seeking asylum and safety in Denmark, and it shows how such experiences accumulate and transform over time and have long-term consequences related to notions of dignity, human worth and belonging.

### Research context: Nordic exceptionalism and racialization in a colour-blind society

In recent years a range of studies within the Danish and Nordic context have focused on race and racism as global structural principles, relating to the still-present influence of European colonialism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Hansen & Suárez-Krabbe 2018; Hervik 2018; Danbolt & Myong 2019; Øland 2019). These studies acknowledge the Nordic countries’ multiple entanglements and complicity with European colonialism and thus view structural racism as well as coloniality as constitutive parts of European modernity and Western civilization. This complicity still influences Nordic societies’ policymaking and knowledge production

as well as peoples’ everyday lives (Hansen & Suárez-Krabbe 2018; Keskinen 2022).

This body of research therefore calls for a critical engagement with the narrative of Nordic exceptionalism that, in brief, expresses the idea that the Nordic countries were not – or were only peripherally – active in European colonialism. Moreover, the term encompasses a form of Nordic self-perception formed by ideas of a Nordic national identity as being peace-loving, rational and good, global citizens (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012, 4). For instance, Mathias Danbolt and Lene Myong (2019, 43) speak of “racial exceptionalism”, denoting Nordic self-perception as one of being “without a history of racial difference and tensions”. Such perceptions render critical discussions of Nordic colonial involvement and complicity controversial. They furthermore work to silence the voices of those who experience and point out historical and current experiences of racialization and inequality, for instance through accusations of being over-sensitive (Hansen & Suárez-Krabbe 2018). Nordic exceptionalism presents Nordic history and identity as progressive, liberal, and modern. However, as Nanna Kristine Leets Hansen and Julia Suárez-Krabbe (2018, 2) point out, “such silencing mechanisms support notions of white supremacy and privilege, they close down possibilities for social and political change, and they lead to social and political death”.

Likewise, Fatima El-Tayeb (2011, xx) emphasizes the need to include the influence of historical memory to understand how ongoing reconstructions of European history and identity still take form as “silent racializations and ethnicizations” marked by colour-blindness, understood as the reluctance or even refusal to acknowledge racial thinking and its effects in society. El-Tayeb calls for visibilizing the consequences of a racism that “continues to place people of colour outside the limits of the new, inclusive, ‘postnational’ community” (ibid). She argues that such processes of othering in Europe appear to be strongest regarding Muslim ‘others’, who are subjected to a double-bind of being racialized and discriminated against in societies that do not acknowledge race. These processes relate to the ways in which

values such as democracy, humanism, gender equality and sexual freedom have been constructed as European (or Nordic) values within European discourse, in opposition to so-called ‘Muslim values’ (ibid., 82).

From a similar perspective, Nordic educational scholars have critically addressed how refugees and immigrants are ‘integrated’ into the Nordic societies through socializing institutions such as day-care, schooling, and through employment measures. These studies illustrate how pedagogical as well as policy interventions aimed at integrating and educating children and adults with refugee status often build on stereotypical, hierarchical and racializing categorizations that simultaneously assume and produce ethnic/racial difference and symbolic boundaries (Jaffe-Walter 2016; Rytter 2019; Øland 2019; Bregnbæk 2021; Li & Buchardt 2022; Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2022). Such pedagogical interventions thus build on and continue racially-informed conceptualizations of ‘others’, both as objects of concern (Jaffe-Walter 2016) and as subjects in need of management and improvement (Øland 2019) in order to ‘integrate’. Thus, as Mikkel Rytter (2019) points out, the concept of integration is neither neutral nor innocent but builds on dominant and exclusive social imaginaries about the nation and the welfare state. Rytter (ibid.) shows how the term integration has, since the 1990s, responded to shifting political demands according to which immigrants and refugees have been expected to assimilate with (most often undefined) Danish norms and standards.

## Theoretical approach

My analytical work is informed by the concepts of necropolitics, slow violence and everyday racism, and builds on a decolonial approach that enables critical analysis of Western societies’ willingness to accept that some people living within the borders of Europe – such as refugees and migrants – are legally and socially marginalized and impoverished (Mayblin et al. 2020).

As a function of coloniality, Achilles Mbembe (2003, 21) has defined the concept of necropolitics to theoretically capture brutal forms of oppression that permanently wound individuals in ways in which they are “kept alive, but in a state of injury”. Mbembe (ibid., 27) describes sovereignty as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not”. Building on Mbembe’s work, necropolitics has been used to analyse the conditions asylum-seekers meet in asylum camps and deportation centres (Davies et al. 2017; Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018) as well as the consequences for people seeking asylum, when living in state-sanctioned impoverishment (Mayblin 2020; Mayblin et al. 2020).

As Thom Davies et al. (2017) point out, within the context of the welfare state, state powers are exercised both through the provision of security and care, but also through their withdrawal or withholding. In such cases, the outcome of necropolitics and structural violence is normalized within state institutions and jurisdictions and often remains invisible, dispersed and slow, as a kind of violence with no perpetrators (Davies et al. 2017; Mayblin 2020).

Such invisibility is central to the concept of slow violence (Nixon 2011), which can be seen as a form of necropolitics. I employ this concept due to an interest in the delayed and dispersed forms of violence that take place over time and out of sight but that must be understood as an outcome of specific political decisions. In this way, slow violence is the result of state-supported structural violence that makes people suffer in situations that could, politically, have been avoided had there been a political will to end the suffering (Mayblin 2020, 6). Thus, slow violence can be understood as the mode of operation and outcome of necropolitics, and it puts the receiving subjects of the policy decisions into focus. As Rob Nixon (2011, 2) points out, slow violence conceptualizes “an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”. Thus, slow violence contains a temporal aspect and supports analysis of the long-term effects of not only war, but also of state-supported policy decisions, interventions and inaction.

Building on the above, I draw on an understanding of racism and racialization as global, historical and complex processes of domination that work through multiple but contextually specific structures of power. From this it follows that racialization must be studied from a perspective of intersectionality and in specific contexts, sensitive to aspects of class and gender (Ahmed 2012) as well as to racialized divides in broader welfare and policy logics of who is considered deserving and who is considered undeserving of security and welfare (Mayblin 2020, 34). Philomena Essed (2008, 448) uses the term “everyday racism” to address the significance of smaller, day-to-day instances of racism, pointing out three central and interdependent processes:

- (1) The marginalization of those identified as racially or ethnically different; (2) the problematization of other cultures and identities; and (3) symbolic or physical repression of (potential) resistance through humiliation or violence.

Everyday racism and discrimination are often difficult to point out, as such opposition is often met with counter accusations, or the risk of being ridiculed by those in power. Ignoring the very existence of racism by silencing these voices works to legitimize racial discrimination with the argument that ‘race does not matter’ (Hansen & Suárez-Krabbe 2018, 6). From this follows, that everydayness, invisibility and silencing are shared characteristics of the above concepts. While this might enable a decoupling of the concrete policies from their causes and from race issues more specifically, such policies are no less harmful and damaging for those experiencing them.

## Methodological approach

The article builds on empirical material consisting of 15 narrative interviews with people who have fled to Denmark within the last 30 years.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were generated as part of the research project RESTORE that explores narratives

of refugeedom (Gatrell 2016) both through the perspective of the displaced and through the narratives of local municipal employees working with refugee reception and integration. The interviews were conducted by the author during the period of autumn, winter and spring 2021/22. The interviews were mainly conducted in Danish, following the wish of the individuals,<sup>2</sup> and lasted between 1.5–2 hours.

My main research interest in the interviews centers around the intersubjective experiences and memories of the participants (Jackson 2002) related to their arrival in Denmark including their experiences of Danish reception, integration and welfare initiatives. After introducing each participant to my research interests, my questions were few and open-ended focusing on their experiences and meaning-making. My questions did not specifically focus on racism, but this topic became evident during the interviews.

In qualitative empirical research, questions of power, positionality and ethics are important to address, particularly in relations of unequal power balances between participant and interviewer in aspects concerning, for example, citizenship status and language. In this case, my presence and position as a white, ethnic majority woman cannot avoid influencing the dynamics of the interviews. While I tried to meet and minimize this imbalance and pursue an equal and open-minded space for conversation, I am aware of the impossibility of fully doing so, acknowledging my own part in producing certain power relations and spaces for subjectification (Christensen 2016). I have therefore consciously restrained myself from engaging in what Patti Lather (2000, 19) calls the “fantasies of mutuality, shared experience, and touristic invitations to intimacy”.

When introducing the interview to the participants, I stressed my interest in hearing their experiences and interpretations of events important to them. This is not to suggest that the voices of the interviewees always hold the ‘right’ or ‘true’ story nor that I as a researcher will know, let alone represent such ‘truths’. Rather, I seek to explore the contextualized and socially embedded meaning-making of the participant, while at the same



time acknowledging the multiple and often contradictory voices within each story. This acknowledges the always unstable and co-constructed quality of a story told, as well as the limits of telling, understanding, and knowing (Lather 2000; Jackson 2002; Butler 2005).

As part of my analytical work, I read the interview transcriptions repeatedly. From this I generated condensed descriptions of the interviews, enabling a better understanding of specific themes, plots, disruptions, and silences in each narrative. The ambition of my analysis is not, however, to depict a correct story of ‘the racialized refugee’, or to claim direct correlations between specific policy measures and the experiences of the participants. Rather it aims to depict how intersubjective experiences of structural violence and of being categorized and racialized appear in the narratives. By including narrative accounts of the participants’ arrival in Denmark, including those who arrived in the 1990s, I include a long-term perspective on the affective consequences of the abovementioned experiences. Consequently, several of the participants in the study no longer fit the juridical category of ‘refugee’ – and indeed do not consider themselves as such. It is therefore important to stress that my choice to include their stories in the study does not reflect a wish to insist on a lasting ‘refugee identity’, but rather to put focus on the long-term consequences of being labelled a refugee, acknowledging the processes by which the refugee label has become politicized, partly by governments and negative public discourses on ‘the other’ (Zetter 2007). Consequently, I do not understand the refugee label as a neutral legal category, but as a racial category “to the extent that they are ascribed to people marked as non-white and non-belonging to ‘Europe’” (Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018, 45) often used for governance purposes. In this way, critical analysis of the intersubjective consequences of being cast as a refugee supports a broader body of work that addresses how the refugee label works to legitimize and normalize institutional and state-sanctioned racism, that deprives those allocated to the category of the ‘refugee’ of basic human rights and political agency (see for instance Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018; Øland

2019; Mayblin 2020; Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2022).

## Brief policy context

The legal conditions governing Danish asylum and integration policy have changed fundamentally during the last 30 years. When the first Aliens Act was adopted in 1983 it was one of the most liberal of its kind. Currently, however, Denmark is considered to have one of the most restrictive aliens and integration legislations in Europe (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2021). Due to the arrival of more than 20,000 refugees from Bosnia in around 1992, a special act was adopted that for the first time introduced the notion of ‘temporary protection’. While asylum previously had been granted on a permanent basis, this led to long-term temporary housing in barracks and refugee camps without the right to work and study, and with limited access to welfare benefits (Vedsted-Hansen 2022). Many of these restrictions were lifted in 1995, and most of the Bosnians seeking asylum were granted permanent asylum.

Following general tendencies have been marked by increased political and symbolic restrictions. These include the dispersal policy (‘spredningsloven’) in 1999 that served to disperse the responsibility of refugee reception between Danish municipalities, at times at the cost of undermining family relations, and the reduced introduction benefits (‘starthjælp’) in 2002. Refugees in Denmark today are enrolled in state-defined municipal integration programmes lasting one to five years, entailing mandatory language classes and short-term activation courses and internships (Kohl 2021; Shapiro & Jørgensen 2021).

As pointed out by scholars (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2021; Rytter et al. 2023) the above and other restrictions serve both as concrete measures towards the people granted asylum, but also as a symbolic negative nation-branding communicated to discourage possible future asylum seekers. This logic is evident, not least in the political responses to the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, when new restrictions stressed self-reliance

and further reduced integration benefits well below those of other receivers of welfare benefits. Also in 2015, a new category of temporary protection was introduced as a central pillar of the Danish Aliens Act. In the legislative amendments to the Aliens Act that marked the “paradigm shift” in 2019, these restrictions were repeated and widened through an increased focus on repatriation whenever possible, thus intensifying the precarious and uncertain status and living conditions of refugees in Denmark (Shapiro & Jørgensen 2021; Vedsted-Hansen 2022; Rytter et al. 2023).

Moreover, as a consequence of the so-called “paradigm shift” of 2019, people who have had their residence permit refused or withdrawn and who do not voluntarily leave the country are forced to move to one of the deportation centres, which since 2015 have served to contain those people who have been rejected legal protection in Denmark (Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018). In this way, not unlike the camps accommodating the Bosnian refugees in the 1990s, deportation centres have come to constitute potential permanent repositories for people with no place to go, just as they form legal grey zones that criminalize and deprive people of their sense of agency (Turner 2015). At the time of writing, 1250 Syrian refugees have had their asylum cases reopened, while 140 have permanently lost their residence permit. Irrespective of the numbers, it has been documented that these legal changes have had a great impact in terms of worries and fear about an uncertain future and, ultimately, deportation (Filskov et al. 2022).

### “I became another human being” – Structural violence in the camps

The life stories and trajectories of the participants differ in various ways. This is both related to the different times of arrival, the shifting asylum and integration legislation the participants have been subjected to, as well as to their overall different social and personal conditions. As a general theme, however, the empirical material shows how memories and experiences of displacement linger long after the participants have left the respective

integration programmes, and for some, even after they have obtained Danish citizenship.

For those who arrived from Bosnia and were granted temporary protection in 1992, the years of purposeless waiting for asylum in refugee camps are narrated as very difficult and harmful, and as “living in stagnation”. For instance, Mehmet recalls the experience of waiting in the camps as a bare existence: “Well, you didn’t do anything. You just sat there, there were no activities, no schooling, no work. There was a TV, a common room, but no one showed any particular interest. We just existed”. Likewise, Jovan reports on the traumatizing experience of everybody just “sitting in tv-rooms, watching the war and worrying [...] I think many people just broke and were traumatized sitting there”. Jovan recalls living a “life on standby”, not being able to work or attend schooling. Like several of the others, Jovan was subjected to living in a refugee centre for four years.

The collected narratives of long-term waiting in camps communicate experiences of social death, produced by a structural violence within the broader asylum bureaucracy. Restrictive measures such as isolation, waiting, and being denied schooling and work while observing others enjoying more rights produce the feeling of being disposable (Mayblin 2020). The feeling of being at the mercy of Danish bureaucracy does not end, however, when gaining either temporary or permanent refugee status or citizenship.

Insecurity and anxiety about the future were, at the time of the interviews, unsurprisingly much more present for those participants who had arrived since the 2010s and who still hold temporary residence permits that must be resubmitted every second year. Their stories illustrate how the gradual austerity within Danish asylum and integration bureaucracy is experienced, and how anxiety accumulates over time.

This is vividly illustrated in the narrative of Hemin, who fled from Syria and arrived as an unaccompanied minor in 2015 when he was 13 years old. Hemin’s story of arriving in the Danish asylum system is one of not receiving help to navigate his new social reality, and of not being able to make himself heard or understood. He repeatedly recalls

how basic provisions were withdrawn without any valid explanations. He describes the employees at the children’s camps as racist and indifferent to his most basic needs for safety, and how they on several occasions beat him when he misbehaved. For instance, he recounts a conflict in one of the children’s centres in which his weekly allowances were halved, while the staff neglected to provide sufficient food:

*I remember, after the first five days, I didn’t have any money at all. So, I told them [the staff], “I don’t have any money... what can I eat? I don’t have any food: you must find some food for me”. They replied, “you spend your money fast [...] that’s not our fault”.*

This experience is the first of many in Hemin’s narrative, describing employees at the centres as controlling, unsympathetic and “very racist”. I read these descriptions in the narratives as accounts of how centre officials are experienced as controlling and exercising power over the children at the centre in ways in which inaction, such as the *withholding* of help and care, plays an active part (see also Davies et al. 2017). This is also experienced through insufficient or complete absence of information given to the young residents about centre rules and their most basic rights as refugees in Denmark:

*I knew they were lying. There are no rules. It was their rules, they made up some rules. [...] They were stronger because they speak the language, they know the rules, they can do everything. We cannot do anything. We don’t speak the language. We don’t know the rules. Then he [the centre employee] tells me: “Okay, we are stealing from you. What are you going to do about it?”*

Hemin is left with no understanding or knowledge of his rights in Denmark. While Hemin’s experience does not necessarily mirror the specific official asylum policies in 2015, his narrative conveys the experience of being humiliated and marginalized as a central part of life in the camps, and it

is thus a testimony of some of the personal and affective consequences of the hardening of the Danish asylum regime. Hemin recalls being continuously problematized and controlled. He was moved more than once, and isolated in remote centres, disregarding his fear of dark woods and of being alone:

*I felt this anxiety. If I stay at one place, I have difficulties breathing. I felt the room shrinking. I felt this at the centre, but they didn’t try to help me. I tried to explain to them [...] that it is ok, I won’t go out. I don’t have a problem. I’ll just stay inside. Because they tell me that I can’t go out. [I said] “I’ll just stay inside, but I just want to have internet access so I can talk with my parents”. Then they tell me: “These are our rules. We cannot do anything”.*

In a Danish context, the work of Katrine Sypli Kohl (2021) and Suárez-Krabbe et al. (2018) among others supports the picture of a Danish asylum system stripped of care and which is upheld through deliberate political measures such as dispersal of asylum seekers to isolated and remote areas as well as denial of their political agency. Hemin’s narrative shows the desperate experience of being dominated and disregarded in a hierarchical system of power. I understand these experiences to be the outcome of a slow violence of necropolitics, in which asylum seekers are “kept alive but in a state of injury” (Mbembe 2003, 21). Such injury appears in Hemin’s story, for instance when he falls ill, becomes apathetic and stops eating, while he persistently asks for medical help. Looking back, he reflects on his own development: “I remember, I was like a normal human being before... In the children’s centre, there were lots of problems, but I was normal. But when I [was] moved to [the new centre], I became another human being. I became all different”.

In the following section I direct my focus to the experiences of racialization and structural violence in encounters related to the municipal integration programmes.



## “You should work in Denmark” – imperatives of integration and work

Experiences of being othered and controlled in meetings with municipal integration workers is a central theme in the majority of the interviews with those who have arrived since the 2010s. In this regard, the material illustrates a heightened experience that the imperative to ‘integrate’ involves being pushed towards immediate employment, often in unpaid internships or predefined, unskilled jobs in sectors in need of manpower. This is evident in the story of Esin who arrived from Afghanistan in 2011 with two small children through family reunification with her husband. Esin recalls a meeting with an integration worker to whom she expressed her wish to continue the education she began in Afghanistan:

*[The integration worker] told me: “No. First you should learn Danish then you can start your education”. I said: “It’s okay, I’ll do both”. She told me: “No, when you can’t speak Danish, you are nothing for us. [...] You’re like a useless person for us if you can’t speak Danish. It is not necessary for us [that you educate]” [...] If you want to live in Denmark, you should forget about that, you should learn Danish, you should work in Denmark.*

Esin’s encounters with the integration programme led to enduring feelings of being controlled, put down and treated as being less worthy than others. She expresses lingering feelings of shame and humiliation for having had “big dreams for the future” when she ended up in several low-status internships as a cleaning assistant. Her experience of being quickly pushed into low-skilled internships, wherever there is a need, is reflected in existing studies (see e.g., Eastmond 2011; Shapiro & Jørgensen 2021).

Similarly, Mayar from Syria recalls her experience from 2016 onwards; that the aim of the municipal workers was to just: “get [us] into the job market. That’s just how it is, just passing people on”. Due to experiences of violence and fear

in Syria, Mayar suffers from a trauma-related disease that causes her chronic pain in her body. Nevertheless, like Esin, she was placed in unpaid internships that were “filled with stress and frustration because it didn’t make sense to be there.” Likewise, Mayar recounts the job opportunities she was offered: “to work either in a kitchen, an old people’s home, a factory, or cleaning. Despite my illness and that I can’t work [in] such places”.

While the political imperative of integration through employment is presented as self-reliance, the everyday experiences and struggles of the participants more often point towards meaninglessness and control that negatively affect their sense of worth, agency and belonging.

Waahid who fled Afghanistan reports similar experiences of being pushed towards low-skilled, ‘fast jobs’ upon his arrival in 2010. At the time, he was 26-years-old and brought with him a half-finished university education, work experience and high ambitions. He recalls how the integration workers presented his job opportunities:

*They were saying instantly: “Good jobs are [...] bus driver; become a taxi driver. If you learn how to make pizza, you’ll have a good job.” They were always saying that, and I was like “why should I?” [...] why would the municipality tell me to permanently stay like that?*

Trying to make sense of the integration workers’ advice to aim only for low-skilled immediate employment, Waahid reflects:

*Back then, I was thinking, they think of us as lower-class people, so they want [us] to stay [lower] than other Danes. That’s what I thought. An issue of class and race or something. But now I understand that the Danish integration system is designed like that. It is designed for getting people into these fast jobs that do not demand a lot of skills.*

Reasoning like this, Waahid moves from a perception of a personal racist motive to a (seemingly neutral and faceless) structural explanation. This points to a structural racism and bureaucratic

violence, enabled by assumptions of human worth, knowledge and subjectivity, but at the same time masked and performed without any visible perpetrators.

Applying a perspective that considers the lasting effects of coloniality as constitutive of modern Europe’s management of ‘others’, however, reveals how ‘refugees’ are considered and handled along implicit racial divisions as ‘matter out of place’ within the symbolic and spatial organization of modern societies and the nation (see also Turner 2015; Mayblin 2017). Within this logic, the very category of ‘refugee’ connotes a subject that can legitimately be managed and controlled as commodified labour in order to become beneficial for society (see also Padovan-Özdemir & Øland 2022). Indeed, as El-Tayeb points out, “hierarchized labour structures [do] not merely use but produce ‘ethnic’ difference” (2011, xiii), and it is within such processes and hierarchical divisions of labour, that racialized (or ethnicized) citizens are permanently defined and produced as ‘migrants’ or ‘outsiders’, thus constructing a lasting internal boundary between the valuable superior and the worthless inferior subject (ibid.). Within this line of argument, Waahid’s evaluative account of the integration workers’ advice seems poignant: “They were not suggesting, this is the way you move one step ahead and you get a good education. They were saying, ‘this is going to be permanent’”.

### “I just had to put up with it” – silenced racialization in educational contexts

A final site in which racialization appears in the material, is that of public educational institutions and workplaces. This emerges in the form of school memories from the 1990s and onwards, in accounts of more recent experiences at language schools and other educational institutions, and finally through incidents in which the participants’ children experience racism in school contexts.

In the narrative of Sahra, who arrived from Somaliland in 1992, and who has since lived

in Denmark, racism appears in all the three above-mentioned contexts. Sahra recalls being racialized as a pupil in the 1990s by a teacher who openly “didn’t like foreigners”. She struggled with racial prejudice and othering later during her education and afterwards at her workplace. Likewise, her children have experienced racist discrimination in school. For instance, Sahra describes an incident in which her son suddenly “performed badly in everything” and Sahra was called to a meeting on the matter: “This teacher, she was just smearing my son, and the other teachers present did not say anything.” Sahra tried to solve the problem through extensive efforts of helping her son with his schoolwork. Still, the teacher’s smearing behaviour continued. Sahra gives an account of the response when she addressed the school administrator:

*He closed the door and said: “Now, sit down, Sahra. [...] Now listen, that teacher is teaching 25 Danish pupils, and then someone who looks like him [her son] has come into her class. She can’t take it, that’s why. But Sahra, you must take it easy. It is not only you, she is like that towards [all] immigrants”.*

While the school administrator acknowledges the racist behaviour of the teacher, he does not offer any solution:

*He is sorry, well yes, but what could he do? I just had to put up with it. That day, I thought, that woman, she is about to ruin my child. That was when I started writing complaints and coming to the office. I often came there. [...] I fought for a while, but in the end, I said: “We will do it, we’ll change [school]”.*

Sahra moved her children to another school. Looking back, she recalls the teacher’s comments about her son: “She said, ‘He will not be able to make it. He is unintelligent’. Today, my son has a bachelor’s degree. He is studying for his master [degree] at the university.”

Sahra’s story is one of working hard to adapt to a new society while fighting for herself and her

children. As she long ago obtained Danish citizenship, Sahra is no longer a refugee in legal terms. Still, her narrative illustrates how racialization sticks to her body and how, even after obtaining citizenship, she is continuously kept at the margin of society. From this I conclude that while the refugee category in itself must be seen as actively producing difference and marginalization, this marginalization does not end with the acquisition of citizenship. Rather, the marginalizing effects of the category seem to linger as a lasting and active form of labelling in ways in which the label quietly transforms to one such as ‘the immigrant’, ‘the foreigner’ or ‘the other’. Either way, Sahra is subjected to politicized and racial categories.

Finally, Sahra’s story illustrates how racism takes different forms depending on its intersections with gender, race and social positioning. Sahra reports on several incidents of discrimination in her workplace such as being treated in a patronizing way and yelled at as if she “was a child.” When she tried to oppose and confront her leader, she was met with the comment, “he is just making fun, if he cannot interfere like that, you don’t understand Danish humour.” While Sahra is thus silenced, she reflects on her gendered reactions when experiencing racism:

*It has broken me so many times. I have felt on my body that this is too much. [...] But I think that women more easily... I don't think a man would be able to stand the things I have dealt with. I think that would be too much. [...] Men would not put up with the things I have put up with, they would take the battle, they would fight. I can't fight, that's too big, I'd rather come again in another way.*

Sahra views her response to racism as gendered and as encompassing both humiliation and dignity. When asked about this ‘other way’ of fighting, she explains: “I can go home and break and cry, but when I come back, I must fight the right way. And only with the right people.” In this way, her fights seem well considered and purposeful and as a fight “for dignity” and a space of her own, aiming for long-term goals that at times require

acceptance of disrespect. She states: “[I have to] use my head. I am Sahra. I can do what I want to, and I am happy for who I am. But I want to be here.”

Sahra’s narrative shows how she continuously balances humiliation and dignity in order to achieve her greater goals. As several others, she repeatedly experiences not being heard and ends up keeping quiet. As Sara Ahmed (2012, 157) has described, keeping quiet and “going along” when encountering racism can be a way of protecting oneself; as a form of passing and a “labor of minimizing the signs of difference”. In this way the above forms of racism must be seen as exercises of power and control over those who are othered, whereby complaining or speaking up about racism results in individualized blame and comments such as “you don’t understand Danish humour” and “you must take it easy”. Consequently, such forms of silencing send the message that those targeted do not (and will not) qualify as ‘Danish’ but will have to accept and endure racism.

Other incidents of structural violence in educational contexts visibilize stereotypical conceptions of ‘the refugee family’ as an entity subjected to distrust and control (see also Mathiessen 2023). This is the case when Esin describes incidents in which teachers, municipal workers and volunteers interrogate her and her family about private matters and the information is passed on to the municipality:

*Sometimes they are controlling us. Sometimes, they are even controlling us through our children in school. [...] Sometimes, volunteers [...] from the municipality [come] [...] and they want information, sometimes private information, asking the kids: “How is your father?” “How is it going with your mother?” Like that. “How is the relation with your father and mother?” And then they send it to the municipality.*

In one instance, the teacher of Esin’s 7-year-old daughter repeatedly questioned Esin and her husband if they were divorced. It turned out that the teacher had asked Esin’s daughter as well. Not knowing the meaning of the word ‘divorce’, the

child had answered ‘yes’. Esin explains: “She said ‘yes’. Yeah, she didn’t know what it meant. And at that time, I was in the municipality [integration programme] and they told me: ‘If you’re divorced from your husband, you [do] not belong in Denmark’. On other occasions, the teacher asked Esin’s daughter if she was beaten or punished by her parents:

*[The teacher asked if we were] hitting our kids or if we were punishing our kids. [...] Why are they asking about this? [...] And they sent all the information to the municipality. It was very shocking.*

Interrogating children on possible domestic violence or whether their parents are divorced, can at first glance be seen as well-intentioned concern for the wellbeing of the child. In Esin’s narrative, however, such questions appear as strong markers of power and control as they relate directly to Esin’s basis of residence in Denmark. In this context, such interrogations work to amplify Esin’s already precarious position in Danish society.<sup>3</sup>

The examples above illustrate what Reva Jaffe-Walter (2016) has framed as ‘coercive concern’, namely how policy-driven interventions of control are often veiled as acts of caring and helping but are based on racialized and Islamophobic prejudices. As Jaffe-Walter points out, such prejudices build on a negative image of Muslim family values and gender norms as a threat to the Danish nation-state and liberal values. Consequently, such representations legitimize controlling interventions, such as scrutinizing the acts and values of Muslim men and families, while Muslim girls and women are seen as in need of help and liberation (ibid.; see also Brodersen & Øland this issue).

Esin does not, however, experience being helped, let alone liberated by the municipal interventions. On the contrary, she consistently reports feeling controlled and othered. In this way, Esin’s story illuminates how subordinating power relations silently racialize and deny subjectivity and agency to those people who are categorized as refugees, while at the same time representing them as people in need of help and intervention.

## Discussion: “the curse of the refugee”

In this article I have analysed ways in which people categorized as refugees experience and respond to structural and everyday racism and slow violence. In this final part, I revisit these experiences with the purpose of illuminating the long-term consequences of slow violence for people living in protracted environments of hostility and uncertainty.

While those of the participants in this study who arrived in Denmark in the 1990s have by now all acquired Danish citizenship and are no longer legally refugees, feelings of uncertainty and non-belonging linger and are easily activated, for instance in relation to incidents of racist public discourse or political changes. In such cases, Mehmet speaks of “the curse of the refugee” as a fundamental fear that his basic rights and safe life in Denmark can be withdrawn. He explains how this feeling has stayed with him and made him take certain precautions in his everyday life: “I have some money ready; I have my hard disk and my passport. [...] It’s super irrational... [...] that’s the curse.”

This fear speaks to the precarious condition of never feeling fully safe, feeling denigrated, and not entitled to have the sense of being someone who truly belongs in Denmark. Such emotions are present in almost all the narratives, but they dominate, unsurprisingly, amongst those who still hold a temporary residence permit and who are thus living under the restricted possibilities of ever obtaining permanent legal residence in Denmark. For instance, Waahid describes his reaction when he realized the consequences that the 2015 legislative amendments introducing temporary protection and increased focus on repatriation would have for his prospects of permanent residence in Denmark:

*I was like: No, this is not going to be your country. You cannot think that. You just need to think about how to survive. And that’s good enough, you just have to protect your children from being deported to another*



*country or sent to Rwanda or somewhere. Those were the things we were thinking about. Day and night.*

Similarly, Mayar expresses how strong sentiments of safety and gratitude upon her arrival in 2015 have since been blurred by contradictory emotions of distress, fear and not feeling entitled to be a part of Danish society:

*I lose my motivation to go on. Because I have tried to do everything I can. I have a problem with my health and with the physical pressure. I have pain in my body all the time. And now I feel I am without a clear future. [...] The psychological pressure causes my health to worsen with time. [...] [The pain] is developing due to the pressure I am living with, unfortunately.*

Mayar's memories of fear and of having lost her future during the war in Syria intersect with the uncertainty of the present. While Mayar expresses this as a loss of believing in a future, Daria reflects on the future as being continuously marked as 'refugee', and she directly relates this permanent refugeedom to the structural and everyday racism she continues to experience:

*I am a refugee, that is also what I am. [...] I don't know in other countries, but I think [you] never [stop being a refugee] in Denmark [...] because of the continuous racism. This is what you experience [...] from the state, with all these law restrictions. And also, from some people, not all; the way they look at us, you can feel it, that they don't like... They don't like refugees.*

In the above quote, Daria relates the continued categorization as a refugee that she experiences to ongoing experiences of racism and thus the ascription of the permanent, predefined and marginal identity this produces. As Essed (2008, 448) points out, everyday experiences of racism accumulate over time: “Expressions of racism in one particular situation are related to all other racist

practices”. In this way, the continued experience, legitimated through the refugee label and related public discourses on immigrant Muslims, produces a slow violence that supports a self-fulfilling prophecy of racial division. This is clearly illustrated in the words of Hemin:

*You can never be Danish, because so many racist things happened to me. Even if they speak to you, if they smile to you, if they walk with you, they see you with Danish eyes. They don't see you as a Dane. And they are right. It is their country.*

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s Danish refugee and asylum policies have shifted from constituting one of the most liberal legislations in the world, to being one of Europe's most restrictive. Most significantly this has played out as a response to the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, which marked a turning point in Danish – as well as Scandinavian – asylum and immigration policy both in terms of specific juridical as well as symbolic and administrative policy changes.

Within this context, the above analysis has focused on narrative accounts of experiences of racialization and structural violence in three central sites, namely in asylum camps, in encounters related to municipal integration programmes as well as in educational contexts. The analysis illuminates how the refugee category works in ambiguous ways to racialize and marginalize those labelled as 'refugees'. As the analysis has shown, living in uncertainty of what the future holds and having your political agency to influence your own future and life conditions restricted, has long-term affective and embodied consequences, such as being on guard, focusing on mere survival or, as is well documented elsewhere, psychological as well as somatic illness (see e.g. Mayblin 2020; Filskov et al. 2022). As the narratives above have illustrated, the consequences of living under such insecure conditions seem to accumulate over



time and harm people’s everyday interactions and societal engagement.

As shown in the analysis of Hemin’s narrative of life in Danish asylum camps for children, the withdrawal of rights and withholding of help can be seen as a ‘violent inaction’ that, in his case, had severe consequences for his wellbeing as well as his continued experience of non-belonging in Denmark. This supports Davies et al.’s (2017) suggestion that political *inaction* be seen as a means of control that advances slow violence. In order to understand such inaction and deliberate restrictions of people’s life prospects, I have employed the concept of necropolitics and its underlying logic of hierarchical divisions of human worth. Doing so, as applied to Esin’s, Mayar’s and Waahid’s narrated experiences, reveals a racializing integration and employment bureaucracy. The refugee label works as a legally-sanctioned racializing category that legitimizes and increases the ongoing exclusion and marginalization of ‘refugees’ through hierarchical ideas of deservingness and undeservingness.

The concepts of necropolitics and slow violence have been used to examine the lives of people seeking refuge in the UK (Mayblin 2020) and France (Davies et al. 2017), as well as to rejected asylum seekers in Denmark (Suárez-Krabbe et al. 2018), and to the assessment of queer asylum seekers (Lunau 2019). What sets my study apart from these is that it makes the point that the slow violence of being cast as a refugee is present even for people who have formally and juridically obtained protection and ceased to be refugees in a legal sense. In this way the article brings together nuanced and differing narratives of displacement across a long-term perspective of three decades, covering different groups of ‘refugees’. Disregarding their many differences, the narratives convey the “gradual wounding” (Mbembe 2003) as a

common experience of refugeedom that encompasses the lasting and affective consequences of having once been cast as ‘a refugee.’ These lasting consequences have been illustrated through the narrative of Sahra where her marginalized position as a refugee was taken over by equally racializing but permanent categorizations that make clear that even for those who do acquire permanent protection in Denmark, legal protection does not automatically lead to either recognition or feelings of belonging and safety. In conclusion, the article conceptualizes ‘the curse of the refugee’ as an experience of insecurity and harm that lingers and in different ways continues to affect the lives of the displaced. It is a gradual and slow violence, enabled by policies that communicate precariousness and insecurity, that fuels self-fulfilling prophecies and feelings of not belonging and not believing in a future in Denmark.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My main selection criteria for participation was the prior experience of having been categorized as a refugee. As none of the participants were any longer part of any municipal integration arrangement, my contact to them was diverse and initiated, for instance, through social media as well as various professional networks.
- <sup>2</sup> Some exceptions were made however, as two participants were helped with translations by a classmate and a family member, in order to speak in more detail, while two others preferred to speak in English.
- <sup>3</sup> This precarity relates to Esin’s legal basis of residence in Denmark, as she is granted residence permit in Denmark due to her family reunification with her husband. Therefore, had Esin in fact been divorced, she would consequently lose her basis of residence in Denmark.