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### Refugee agency through bare life? New forms of voice and strategies of imperceptibility at the European borders

¿Agencia de los refugiados a través de "bare life"? Nuevas formas de voz y estrategias de imperceptibilidad en las fronteras europeas

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## ¿Agencia de los refugiados a través de "bare life"? Nuevas formas de voz y estrategias de imperceptibilidad en las fronteras europeas

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**Abstract:** In the course of the comparatively high numbers of refugees arriving in Europe in 2015 and 2016, several practices of the European border regime became more restrictive. This development accounts for the precarious situation in refugee camps at the external borders of Southeast Europe and the refusal of Mediterranean countries to accept more asylum seekers —against the backdrop of a lacking European solidarity system. Literature suggests that refugees in these contexts find themselves more often in (what Agamben understands as) a bare life situation, which challenges the possibilities for refugee agency at the European borders. This paper reflects on two concrete cases interpreted as bare life situations based on field research in Greece and Italy. It explores conceptualizations considering an assumed change of refugee agency. The first case refers to the situation in former camp "Moria" and the second to practices of irregularization in Southern Italy. The article aims to specify the limitations of refugees' agency by building on an understanding of

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agency as relational to the border regime. The findings suggest that the bare life refugees have been reduced to explains the development of new forms of voice in refugee camps and strategies of imperceptibility in irregularity. Thereby refugee acts expose the adversity of border practices, while appropriating and redefining the bare life conditions.

**Keywords:** Bare life, refugees, agency, borders, Europe.

**Resumen:** Como resultado del número (comparativamente) alto de refugiados llegados a Europa en 2015 y 2016, varias prácticas del régimen fronterizo europeo se volvieron más restrictivas. Esta dinámica contribuye a la situación precaria de los campos de refugiados en las fronteras exteriores del sureste de Europa y la negativa parcial de los países mediterráneos a aceptar más solicitantes de asilo —en el marco de la falta de un sistema de solidaridad europeo. La literatura sugiere que los refugiados en estos contextos se encuentran más a menudo en (lo que Agamben describe como) una situación de "bare life", que desafía las posibilidades de agencia de los refugiados en las fronteras europeas. Este artículo reflexiona sobre dos casos concretos interpretados como situaciones de "bare life" a partir de un trabajo de campo realizado en Grecia e Italia. Explora las conceptualizaciones considerando un supuesto cambio de la agencia de los refugiados. El primer caso se refiere a la situación en el antiguo campo de "Moria" y el segundo a las prácticas de irregularización en el sur de Italia. Mi objetivo es especificar las limitaciones de la agencia de los refugiados partiendo de una comprensión de la misma en relación con el régimen fronterizo. Las conclusiones sugieren que la vida desnuda a la que se han visto reducidos los refugiados explica el desarrollo de nuevas formas de voz en los campos de refugiados y de estrategias de imperceptibilidad en la irregularidad. De este modo, los actos de los refugiados exponen la adversidad de las prácticas fronterizas, a la vez que se apropian y redefinen las condiciones de "bare life".

**Palabras clave:** "Bare life", refugiados, agencia, fronteras, Europa.

## Introduction[2]

   With increasingly violent actions towards refugees at the European borders, such as the withdrawal of state rescue in the Mediterranean, the prevention of refugees to enter the EU through bilateral agreements, the proliferation of overcrowded refugee camps, and the increasing irregularization of migration, the concept of bare life by Giorgio Agamben (2012) has been picked up for the context of EU migration and refugees (cf. Buckel and Wissel 2010; Schindel 2016). Bare life is characterized by exclusion and unprotectedness and lacks the potential for political action. Given such restrictions, this article asks what concrete situations at the European borders that can be interpreted as bare life situations mean for refugee agency.

   On a macro-level, agency and autonomy-centered perspectives on refugee migration have explored a useful conceptual perspective to explain interactions between border regimes and migrants, given that state forces in Europe repeatedly had to move into a reactive position due to the refugee movement on the Balkan route in 2015 and 2016 (De Genova 2017, 11). However, it is questionable, how *singular* refugee acts can be performed in bare life situations. This article reflects on practices producing bare life conditions at the European borders and ponders new conceptualizations regarding refugee agency. I aim to specify the limitations of refugees' agency by exploring two cases, which illustrate a range of restrictions for persons seeking asylum in Europe. Focusing on abandonment and unprotectedness through irregularization, I assume that refugee agency as *voice* is severely restricted. This is suggested, because under such circumstances access to a public discourse is especially limited and could provide negative consequences for the refugees (e.g. deportation). Against this background, refugee agency might take on new forms or bring other forms of agency to the fore. This assumption goes hand in hand with a relational understanding of agency. This means that different border practices including practices of control and regulation (Scheel 2015, 8) are in constant interaction and influence each other. As such, certain aspects of border practices producing bare life would also be found in an examination of refugee acts.

This article is based on field notes and interview transcripts from field research in Italy in 2015 and field notes from a visit to Greece in 2017. The field research in Sicily was carried out during one week in September 2015.[3] Semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugees and representatives of support organizations. Observations of their work with refugees and background conversations were recorded in field notes. The idea of the study was to understand bordering processes from the perspective of refugees arriving by the Mediterranean Sea. The field visit in Lesbos took place during the conference "Lesbos Dialogues" (11/9/2017-11/11/2017) in Mytilene, while refugees were also part of the event and shared their experience. The exchange with them and with other participants of the conference was documented in field notes as well. The data from field observations and interviews are supplemented by data from newspaper articles and gray literature due to the lack of academic literature.

Following this introduction, in section one, I start from conceptual considerations on bare life in the context of refugee migration, which draws to its limited potential for political action. Section two introduces different forms of action regarding refugee agency. I present two cases that particularly challenged the understanding of agency in the form of refugee voice: the situation in the former refugee camp Moria on Lesbos and the production of irregularity in Sicily. I first present what I interpret as bare life situations in section three and ask to what extent refugee agency can be identified in these situations in section four. As my analysis focuses on the materiality of bordering processes, I find the materialized bare life and bare life conditions at the center of refugee acts. The bare life refugees have been reduced to explains the development of new forms of *voice* in camps and the recourse to "imperceptibility" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007) in irregularity. Corresponding acts reflect the relational character of agency.

## 1. **The concept of bare life**

Agamben (1998) introduces the concept of bare life through the figure of "homo sacer". It refers to a person who can be killed but should not be sacrificed. Homo sacer is situated exactly at the boundary between bare life and legally protected life. Bare life is marked by the state of exception in which law and nature become indistinguishable.

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[3] The field research was conducted together with Maximilian Mayer.

According to Agamben's thesis, while bare life is located initially at the margins of political orders, the exception coincides with political space in modernity. Here, bare life is excluded from the political order yet simultaneously included (Agamben 2012, 19). In this sense, the state of exception means (the normalization of) the annihilation or the surrender of human lives, typical of imperial peripheries and the gray areas of the international system (Biswas and Nair 2009). Agamben's (2012) distinction between life and bare life is helpful for a more thorough theoretical grounding. Bare life is characterized by its unprotectedness. It is human life without legal protection and form, deprived of the potential for political action. Sovereignty, accordingly, lies on the flip side of biopolitics. The concept of biopolitics (Foucault 2010) refers to the regulation of the health of the (biological) population. Bare life moves from biopolitical governance to sovereignty based on deciding whose life can be given up without public fuss, criminal proceedings, sacrificial ritual, or bureaucratic procedure.

Bare life manifests, among others, in the figure of the refugee (Agamben 2012, 140-143). Agamben (2012, 135 and 143) relates these reflections to Hannah Arendt's (1958) considerations on totalitarianism and dehumanization and her conceptualization of the refugee as an excluded stateless person (Arendt 1949, 1994). What is new here is not the political exclusion per se, but that refugees do not find a new place in the world (Schulze-Wessel 2013, 97). Refugees do not find a new place precisely because human rights are not implemented if the most fundamental human right is not already granted: the right to have rights, to be a political subject, as it can only be guaranteed by a political community (Arendt 1949, 767). This highlights the distinction between bare life and legally protected life in the context of refugee migration. What is new in Agamben's considerations is that political orders actively produce bare life. According to Agamben, this becomes clear regarding the camp of control, the absolute biopolitical space (Agamben 2012, 179) in which the state of exception manifests itself. His reflections have been taken up precisely in arguments about refugee camps (Owens 2009) and with a view to irregularization and illegalization (Schindel 2016), both cases that are at the core of this study.

Crucial for the considerations of this article is now which connections exist between agency and bare life. As a politically not (anymore) relevant life (Agamben 2012, 148), bare life cannot be grasped with concepts of agency by citizens. Moreover, the separation between humanitarianism and politics in modernity ensures that bare life becomes a humanitarian object (Agamben 2012, 142-143), which

is denied agency. However, studies suggest that bare life should not be considered as a permanent condition deprived of agency (Schindel 2016, 230). Instead, the biopolitical abandonment of life on the one side and citizenship on the other are understood as two poles between which negotiations are possible (Schindel 2016, 230). As Dines *et al.* (2015) add to this thesis, these negotiations are characterized by contradictions and a range of migratory experiences. From these considerations, it can be deduced that the question of agency can best be addressed by examining concrete border situations and the corresponding conditions. Before examining such concrete situations in sections 3 and 4, I will first consider which forms of agency can offer conceptual reference in the context of refugee migration.

## 2. **Refugee agency as voice and imperceptibility**

As European refugee "hotspots", for example, on the Greek islands, have been described as places of abjection by NGOs, politicians, and researchers, they have also become "important sites of resistance against the European Union's border regime" (Stavinoha 2019, 1212). Against the backdrop of the often very adverse and restrictive circumstances of flight and asylum, scholars have also repeatedly referred to forms of refugee agency. This literature shows that refugees cannot be understood as objects that follow certain logic within the border regime, but they play their part in border practices (Schulze-Wessel 2012, 2017). Agency in this sense means that refugees are actors of the border and potentially in a constant process of negotiation with mechanisms of control (Schulze-Wessel 2012, 156).

The idea of voice, following Albert O. Hirschman's conceptualization of "voice and exit" (Hirschman 1970, 1978), has played a crucial part in debates about refugee agency. At the intersection of refugee/migration studies and citizenship studies, voice has been explored popularly in the form of claim-making (Isin 2008, Rygiel 2011). Refugees raise their voices when they become claimants of rights or responsibilities "through creating new sites and scales of struggle" (Isin 2008, 39). In this context, the role of (social) media for refugees' voices appears as a new site of collective strategies and struggle when refugees enact themselves as political subjects in and through communication via diverse media networks (Stavinoha 2019). Consequently, refugees' access to public and social networks is crucial for their voices to be heard. At the same time, raising their voices and making claims is challenging for refugees when politics hinder their access to publicity.

Illustrative for these characteristics is a recent decision by the Greek government to systematically prevent reporting from the camp Kara Tepe on Lesbos (Geisel 2021). Such measures may result in other forms of refugee agency coming to play. In a similar direction, Kim Rygiel proposed that refugees develop different strategies of agency depending on what they found necessary:

> "[I]f visibility and voice are a key part of the struggles of some irregular migrant groups like the sans-papiers in the struggles over migration, others have found it necessary to navigate the increasingly restrictive regime of border controls through strategies of disembodiment and invisibility" (Rygiel 2011, 157).

The strategy of migrants to become invisible, in the sense of their ability to become everybody and not to be distinguished as a certain subject of migration, is at the center of the concept of imperceptibility (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007). Migrants refuse to follow the logic of border administration and what authorities want them to be; they want for themselves to become imperceptible (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 230). The ability of migrants to become imperceptible in this reading is to be understood as an immanent act of resistance "[…] because it makes it impossible to identify migration as a process which consists of fixed collective subjects" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 228) and is thus less palpable for authorities. Imperceptibility is understood as a form of refugee agency, particularly in highly restricted settings. Nevertheless, it prioritizes the subjectivity of migrant actors drawing on the materiality of migration (Boutang 2007, 170). In this understanding, materiality by no means only applies to the materiality of controlling practices with which migrants have to interact, but also to the migrants as human beings, who are not simply malleable bodies (Boutang 2007, 170).[4] Assuming that restrictive border practices impact refugee agency, I use a relational understanding of agency. This means methodologically that the interplay between control and agency is explored via border practices producing bare life and refugee practices of agency. Agency is then understood as a border practice that is permanently negotiated with other kinds of border practices. Thereby, I seek to avoid a romanticized understanding of refugee agency, focusing on the means and ways of appropriation in the encounters of migrants with mechanisms and actors of control (cf. Scheel 2013).

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[4] The materiality of migration has received increased attention in migration research in recent years, especially with regard to border practices and the life-world experiences of migrants (cf. Wang 2016).

## 3. **Bare Life at the European borders: The camp and irregularization**

I illustrate here practices that —as I interpret it— produce bare life conditions by looking at concrete situations at the European borders. Accordingly, this section explores the conditions for refugee agency. I will focus on two cases: first, abandonment in former camp Moria and, second, the production of irregularity in Sicily in the context of the 2015/16 refugee migration to Europe. The aim is not to make general statements about the nature of the European borders. Instead, I focus on these cases because they a) concretize the continuing production and reinforcement of conditions that can be interpreted as bare life and b) point to different bare life situations. The cases were selected based on the field research, as they refer to situations characterized by particular restrictions. In this sense, they seem to be best explained by bare life, as will be shown in this section. They represent a suitable starting point before I wonder in the following section about the role and possibilities of agency in these extreme situations.

### 3.1. *Abandonment in camp Moria*

In Agambens (2012, 127-198) considerations, camps of control are at the center of questions about the exceptional state, power, and sovereignty. Insofar as life in the camp is reduced to its mere existence (bare life), it is, according to Agamben, "the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* that has ever existed on earth was realized" (Agamben 1998, 180). The camp embodies the state of exception and includes the exclusion (Agamben 2002, 175, 179). Refugee camps that are meant by state actors to control refugees have been considered as spaces of biopolitical power (Davies and Isakjee 2019; Gordon and Larsen 2021; Martin *et al.* 2019). A key element for the camp conditions seems to be whether there is sufficient support for refugees also by third actors like humanitarian organizations or media, or whether a situation of "abandonment" has arisen. Such an abandonment would lead to direct and violent impact upon the refugee body:

> "[…] from the confinement of living in the polluted and ill-equipped makeshift encampment, to the violence then enacted very directly on —and within— refugee bodies, through assault, preventable illness and the systematic deprivation of food" (Davies *et al.* 2017, 1275).

These considerations relate to bare life since they question who deserves to live (cf. Agamben 2012, 145-152). The former camp Moria on the island of Lesbos has been interpreted as emblematic for abandonment (Gordon *et al.* 2021, Cordova Morales 2021). In order to situate this interpretation, the background to this camp should first be clarified. Camp Moria became a detention center in 2016 in the context of the EU hotspot approach[5] and the EU-Turkey deal (Cordova Morales 2021, 74). This allowed for the detention, illegalization, and deportation of migrants (Cordova Morales 2021). The situation in the camp was characterized by constant overcrowding partly because European countries failed to meet promised reception quotas. Repeatedly, the mayor of Lesbos claimed that Europe was abandoning the island (Hoehler 2019). The infrastructures including sanitation, water, and electricity were neither designed for that many people nor for a longer stay (Gordon and Larsen 2021, 424). Built for 3,000 people, the number in and around the camp meanwhile had been estimated at 20,000 persons (Gordon and Larsen 2021). The camp operated since 2015 under authority of the Ministry of Migration Policy. Responsibilities within the camp involved a complex set of state, supra-state, inter-governmental, and non-state actors (Rozakou 2019, 73). Despite this potential presence of various actors, it was exactly this fragmentation of authorities and jurisdiction that lead to a lack of responsibility, accountability, and liability (Rozakou 2019, 73 and 80). Responsibilities and access also differentiated between centers within the camp (Rozakou 2019, 73). For instance, humanitarian actors had only restricted access to certain securitized areas (Gordon and Larsen 2021, 431). The same accounted for media representatives and communication between refugees and media was limited (Gordon and Larsen 2021, 433-434).

Based on lack of infrastructure and responsibility and limited access for humanitarian actors, it can be asked whether these conditions can lead to situations of bare life in camp Moria. Certain direct interventions on refugee bodies can be identified. They take place, for example, when conflicts among refugees are not prevented, or when the lack of existential infrastructure (water, energy, health services) leads to hardship. A refugee story from 2017 on Lesbos can illustrate the severe conditions inside the camp. While talking about the extreme living conditions in the camp, what was most striking is how he had lost a friend who died of cold and who did not even get any kind of

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[5] The hotspot was a unit within camp Moria (Rozakou 2019, 73).

funeral but was buried outside the camp in an earth hole. The refugee had to observe how his friend's dead body was kicked, so that it would fit inside the hole. While here not only death through cold can be grasped as an inaction, this also culminates in the abandonment of the dead body. One is reminded of Agamben's homo sacer, the bare life, which must not get any meaning, not even in dying. Similarly, the refugee body is not given any meaning by the camp administration. Death is rather made invisible, when it does not receive a burial, no grave or sign referring to the dead.

While this presents a strong example of a situation that bare life can explain, Gordon and Larsen (2021, 437) noted, it was vague to speak in the context of refugee camps of a permanent state of bare life. Their exploration of refugees' everyday life in Moria rather draws to the grey areas of suffering, struggle, and resistance (Larsen 2021, 437). Following their considerations it is crucial to define bare life situations closely and analyze exactly the interplay between questions of agency and control.

### 3.2. *Unprotectedness through irregularization in Sicily*

Irregularization refers to framing migration (or at least certain kinds of migration) as irregular.[6] A key strategy of irregularization is the differential application of rights (Nyers 2011, 185). Irregularity can not only be understood as an identity of persons who have crossed borders without authority by the host state, but it is also a form of (border) governance (cf. Nyers 2011, 187). Irregularization leads to grey areas where distinctions between citizens and non-citizens are difficult to maintain. It lays the ground for depriving migrants of basic rights when access to health care, safety, legal processes, and defense from aggressors is restricted due to (non-) status (Round and Kuznetsova 2016, 1020). Such a withdrawal or deprivation of rights is characteristic of how asylum seekers are consigned to a bare life situation and thus an unprotected existence (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004, 47). The following data from field research refers to a situation in which practices of governance lead to irregularization. The case is particularly significant, since refugees have been deprived of a crucial right.

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[6] A comprehensive overview of research on the irregularization of migration in Europe is provided by Jansen *et al.* (2015).

In Catania, Sicily, in October 2015, we witnessed a case in which 25 African boat refugees from Gambia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, among others, were effectively denied the right to apply for asylum. We met them seeking support at an NGO we had interviewed. They showed us documents informing them about a negative decision of their request for asylum together with an order to leave the country within seven days. As they told us, they were given the request one day after they arrived at the port of Catania. This experience was not an isolated case, but according to the monitoring organization Borderline Sicily, a common border practice since the establishment of the Italian "hotspots". Apparently, the process was meant to distinguish between political and economic refugees. Information from Borderline Sicily reveals that Italy saw itself prompted to this behavior by European decisions (Freddi 2015). In a meeting between the organization and a representative of the Immigration Office of Catania, the latter stated that, according to the European Summit at the end of September 2015, the Ministry of the Interior had been instructed to separate political and economic refugees. Syrians, Eritreans, and citizens of the Central African Republic should belong to the former and all others to the latter (Freddi 2015). Thereby, so-called economic refugees are not considered to have access to asylum.

Consequently, the framing of some to be economic refugees (and not political refugees) was part of a practice of irregularization. According to the estimation of our interviewees from Borderline Sicily based on their monitoring activities, approximately 15-20% of all arriving refugees were subject to such a treatment of irregularization during that time. As an interviewee from the above mentioned NGO put, the people in question were neither housed nor taken into custody for deportation but were "thrown away at the train station". While it was unclear why they were left at the train station (to travel elsewhere? to seek help?), they were at first placed in a defenseless state. Their situation and the way they were dealt with defies any logic of bureaucracy and the rule of law. Neither can it be explained on what legal basis the police officers refused to admit exactly these 25 people of all people nor were the people seeking protection given the opportunity to understand themselves as subjects of the law or even to express themselves. This treatment leads at least temporarily to a bare life situation when refugees are left without access to the legal system to apply for asylum and without social support. This situation points to Arendt's understanding of the most basic human right being a "right to have rights" (Arendt 1949, 760). They were precisely prevented from access to the political community that could provide them with rights and protection.

## 4. **Refugee agency in bare life situations: voice and imperceptibility**

The two cases presented point to specific situations in which refugees ended in an abandoned and unprotected situation. Without basic rights, refugees were exposed to bare life conditions. In the case of camp Moria, there were situations of intervention in refugee bodies through lack of infrastructure, support, and responsibility. In the case of Sicily, irregularization occurred at least temporarily, depriving refugees of legal protection and undermining the foundations of the right to asylum. Against this background, what do such situations mean for refugee agency? Given the deprivation of fundamental human rights, it can be assumed that agency in the sense of voice is severely restricted in bare life situations. Does voice take on new forms, or do other forms of refugee agency come to the foreground? In order to approach this question, I come back to the situations introduced previously. Can we find refugee agency in bare life situations of camp Moria and irregularization in Sicily?

### 4.1. *Fires in the camp as voice*

Referring again to camp Moria on Lesbos, at least one act by refugees recently gained public attention but has little been analyzed in academic literature yet: the fires according to court decision set by refugees (Markham 2022) in camp Moria in September 2020, which destroyed almost the whole infrastructure of the camp. Fires had hit the camp during outbreaks of violence, accidents, and protests against deportations several times before (Martens 2020). However, this one was "unusual in its duration, intensity, and circumstances" (Hamilakis 2022, 1). Although the circumstances of the fires are still not entirely clear, there are suggestions that they were related to a revolt. While refugee protests in Moria and Mytilene were not uncommon, this revolt occurred when the adversities within Moria escalated. With regard to the question of agency under such conditions, the fires are thus particularly interesting.[7] With about 12,000 people in Moria at the time of the fires, the camp was still far beyond its capacity. In addition, the situation was exacerbated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which included a curfew lasting several months (Hamilakis 2022, 7).

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[7] It goes without saying that this is not meant to morally justify a case of arson, but an attempt to clarify the occurrence.

Accordingly, the situation at the time of the fires seems to have been particularly adverse but must be seen in the context of the above-described abandonment.

While part of the abandonment was a lack of European attention, the attention of the 2020 fires was different from other incidents. The incident was reported in the news and taken up by politicians. At the same time, these specific fires also differed from earlier ones, as they hit the whole space and directly endangered the lives of *all* the inhabitants. Research has analyzed other acts by refugees risking their lives. Due to extreme restrictions and suppression, their bodies are at the center of resistance (e.g., Puumala *et al.* 2011): for instance, when refugees sew their mouths shut and when they go on hunger strike. The fires in camp Moria did not only mean danger to an individual refugee body, but by destroying the space, they also put a risk the life of all inhabitants. While the act of setting such a fire can be interpreted as reflecting desperation, it must be seen in context. After the European public stopped reporting from Lesbos and various relief organizations had left Moria out of protest against the conditions in the camp, the refugees' chances for activism, for an improvement of their situation effectively declined. Meanwhile, there was hardly any chance to move since most European countries did not organize resettlement according to the quotas they had promised. The refugees were stuck and had hardly any attention or access to publicity to make their voices heard. Following my analysis, setting a fire meant using what was left: the refugee bodies and the space that had reduced them to bare life. In such a reading, the act can be interpreted as resistance against abandonment.

### 4.2. *Sabri as an imperceptible everybody*

Referring to the situation observed in Sicily, I had the opportunity to stay in touch with one of the rejected refugees that I call here Sabri. Even though his story is only one among the many rejected refugees, it is helpful for the analysis to gain insight into how refugees potentially deal with irregularization. Fearing that he would be sent back to his country of origin if he reencountered the authorities and with little chance of gaining access to the asylum system in Italy, Sabri set off north before the one-week deadline for departure expired. Undetected, he managed to cross the border to Switzerland, where he lives today. Since then, his life there has been marked by different stages of becoming, which can best be understood with an approach

to migration as nomadism (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 224): As of May 2021, Sabri has still not fully arrived. He faced a possible Dublin transfer[8]; he waited for the answer to his asylum application in a collective accommodation, which he described as similar to a bunker; he got involved in the community and made friends; his asylum application was rejected, and he sued with the help of his friends; he temporarily hid from authorities in the city; he got involved as a coach in youth sports; he had a job as a gardener's helper, and he is now waiting for the possibility to finally get a residence permit as a case of hardship.

Sabri's various experiences of becoming can be understood through the concept of imperceptibility. Similar to the case described above, Sabri is using what his life was reduced to: He used the space of irregularity and of invisibility to hide from the authorities and he used his body to become a gardener and a coach as a way to become included into society. He became imperceptible to the logic of border administration when he made his way to Switzerland. He became a regular asylum applicant trying his chances to get asylum. He became a member of the community doing voluntary work. He became part of the working society when he tried to work as far as his status allowed it. He became invisible when he feared being deported because his asylum claim was denied. After having been denied access to apply for asylum in Sicily and thus to a right to protection, Sabri had to fear a permanent life in irregularity or a deportation to the region he fled from. He therefore became whatever seemed necessary to him to become included —at some end— into the political community.


## Conclusion

Based on the assumption that increasingly restrictive border practices influence refugee agency, I introduced two situations that were characterized by abandonment and unprotectedness. The two cases were focused on the situation in camp Moria in Lesbos and on the production of irregularity despite asylum law in Sicily. Exploring these cases suggests that the respective contexts can lead to bare life situations. Taking up the question of what such conditions mean for refugee agency, I find the bare life notion at the center of refugee

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[8] According to the European Dublin regulation, the European state through which an asylum seeker has entered Schengen is responsible for the asylum procedure. Consequently, an asylum seeker can be returned to the respective country, which, in the case of Sabri would be Italy.

acts. Thereby voice takes on a different form in camp Moria, when communicative acts are hardly possible due to lack of public attention and lack of access to protective rights. Similarly, Sabri adopted imperceptibility as a strategy, who experienced irregularization in Sicily and became "everybody" to gain access to the political community. What is found at the center of those acts is the bare life situation refugees have been reduced to —the camp conditions in the case of Moria, and the conditions of irregularity and invisibility in the case of irregularization in Sicily. Based on this interpretation, refugee agency does not exist *despite* bare life. Instead, the material conditions of bare life become part of refugee acts. This becomes clear with regard to the fires in camp Moria, which happen at the same time *through* but also *against* the camp. In this sense, the relational understanding of agency and control as an interplay between various border practices becomes clarified. Refugee acts here expose the adversity of border practices, when they appropriate and re-define bare life conditions.

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