8. Home and Agency

There is a marked lack of agency in experiences of asylum-seeking. In Switzerland, asylum-seekers live in shared housing, survive on a small stipend, and have limited employment opportunities. The physical and bureaucratic structures exert control over their everyday lives and dictate where they can live, work, and go. Paradoxically, asylum-seekers are often fleeing from the control of a government or institution, only to arrive in another system they must then navigate with limited autonomy. As one asylum-seeker from Turkey described it, "We are the ones downtrodden by politics."[1] Whether in their country of origin or their country of arrival, asylum-seekers are at the mercy of systems of government and other social and cultural institutions.

When asylum-seekers arrive in Switzerland, they are both relegated to the margins and subjected to scrutiny through bureaucratic and legal systems. This marginal position of asylum-seekers is reinforced in laws, on news reports, and through popular images. Asylum-seekers experience a tension between this marginality and a hyper-focus on their actions and experiences. For new asylum-seekers, their ability to come and go is closely managed. This extends even to where they live, as asylum homes are run by the government and managed by nonprofit organizations. Often permission is needed to do activities like swimming or visiting others.[2] Especially if rooms are shared, there are few places that feel private. Therefore, even the physical place of living is highly regulated by outside systems. The ability to pursue personal and professional interests is also limited. One asylum-seeker was trained as an artist and lamented the fact that he had no place to do his art.[3]

The ability of asylum-seekers to change their circumstances is tenuous. On the one hand, they have already changed their circumstances by fleeing. Under the dire circumstances of war, the threat of imprisonment, or the needs of the family, asylum-seekers took control by fleeing. This is arguably an extreme and unwanted ex-

1 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, February 22, 2018: 20180222_16AS_DASEIN_II, Pos. 7.

2 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, October 19,2018: 20181019_Asylerfahren_SAH_v2_PO, Pos. 8.

3 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 19, 2018: 20180719_4AS_NO, Pos. 30.

perience of agency, where the other option is that one's life, livelihood, or family is taken away. Assigning agency to asylum-seeking acknowledges individual choice but can also obscure the many structures and systems that work against asylum-seekers and over which they have little sway. Growing up, starting a family of one's own, and changing jobs are all significant moments of individuation. Yet these steps are difficult for asylum-seekers, who are relegated to waiting, caught between the experience of leaving home and of not knowing whether they will be able to stay in Switzerland.

Yet, I noticed ways that asylum-seekers acted at Projekt DA-SEIN and in the broader community, how they shaped their experiences even with limited resources, and how they built relationships and took steps within the asylum system to make Basel more familiar. These activities show ways that asylum-seekers exercised agency in their lives, making choices that impacted their relationships to others and their environment. Sometimes these moments occurred through bringing familiar practices to the new place or by using spaces in Basel in familiar ways. Agency sometimes looked like adopting external integration requirements, such as a focus on learning German. By taking control of these activities, asylum-seekers claimed some sense of agency for themselves, even if the impact was difficult to assess. For example, those who expressed a connection to Basel as home often described the ways that they acted within the limits of the systems they were subject to. This included teaching themselves German through self-directed exercises, offering insights and assistance to newer asylum-seekers, and utilizing public places for personal purposes.

These activities were often hidden, even though they occurred in public spaces. As explored in Chapter 7, asylum-seekers often create and use places in new ways when more dominant ways of using space are unavailable to them, and this occurs in response to experiences of marginality and dislocation. This utilization of third space allows asylum-seekers to cultivate individual existences and create pieces of home. Using places in new ways, such as by creating locations that feel more familiar, finding places for reflection, and knowing how systems work, can be a way of acting to create home in inhospitable places. Home is not only a commodity or a designation, as argued by feminist scholars, but also a personal place marked by the ability to individuate and define oneself in relationship to history, community, material objects, and safety.[4] As Young writes, "A person without a home is quite literally deprived of individual existence."[5] While asylum-seekers occupy a precarious state, they also cultivate individual and collective existence. One way of doing this is make the unfamiliar familiar. Thus, for asylum-seekers who have lost home, acts of

4 Young, "House and Home," 163.

5 Young, "House and Home," 162.

agency help to recreate a sense of home, even while they remain dislocated from the dominant culture and dependent on an inhospitable government.

8.1 Relational Agency

Agency is about the potential or capacity to change things, often with a focus on structure and actors.[6] In this way, many philosophical definitions understand agency as occurring through the intentional use of existing structures.[7] Thus, agency arises from conscious choosing that includes reflexivity and the utilization of external structures.[8] Yet, there are complex reasons for acting, not all of which are known even to the actor. There is debate about how much agency can be attributed to intentionality and how much is the result of states of mind, circumstances, and responses to the given environment. While agency is more often associated with intentionality, agency cannot easily be reduced to intention and desire.[9]

In taking a step back from intentionality, agency also draws on the root of the word "act" and its consequences. Human activity of any kind is action and occurs whenever humans gather. In these moments people act on one another by being in relationship. Instead of intentionality, *relational agency* locates agency in interdependence and relationships. As sociologist Ian Burkitt writes, instead of seeing "agents as autonomous, independent, and reflexive individuals," relational sociology understands that "agents are always located in manifold social relations."[10] People are always acting within their social, political, and geographic environments and communities. This understanding of agency moves away from the more dominant view that individuals operate autonomously, and instead emphasizes interaction and joint action.

Agency is not only connected to the ability to make desired changes but is also linked to responses to external factors that impact a person. Simply acting conveys a sense of control, even when that impact is minimal. Instead of a definition of agency

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6 See: Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

7 Markus Schlosser, "Action," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/; Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events: The Philosophical Essays of Donald Davidson* (Oxford University Press, 2001), essay 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/0199246270.001.0001.

8 Archer, *Culture and Agency*; Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Polity Press, 1986).

9 Markus Schlosser, "Agency," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/agency/.

10 Ian Burkitt, "Relational Agency: Relational Sociology, Agency, and Interaction," *European Journal of Social Theory* 19, no. 3 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431015591426.

that relies on external structures and reflexivity, relational agency argues that all actions are relational and affect others and the world through their connectedness.[11] Relational agency looks at how people affect the world through interactions and networks.[12] It focuses on how a sense of agency emerges when people interact together in everyday interactions. Considering the concept of agency as relational challenges notions of independence that are defined by self-sufficiency and even private property. Scholars argue that autonomy and agency are not synonymous with ownership and self-sufficiency. Feminist scholars offer a definition of home, in terms of relational autonomy, as "supportive interdependence."[13] This definition highlights interdependence and is seen in the many ways that women create and care for home.

Relational agency is also evident at Projekt DA-SEIN, where diverse members of the Basel community are invited to build relationships and to co-create a community. The program's focus on "being there" and supporting convivial interactions provides opportunities for relationships to occur and relational agency to emerge. These relationships underpin Projekt DA-SEIN's approach to home as being together in the joy and grief and across political advantages and disadvantages. Projekt DA-SEIN supports interdependence and mutual support, even while acknowledging the discrepancies in structural access and legal and social standing. Simply being together in the basement of the church offices means that people from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Switzerland, the United States, and many other countries act upon each other by engaging with one another through conversations, games, and shared meals.

This conviviality at Projekt DA-SEIN cultivates interdependence. This interdependence, as discussed in section 6.2, involves opportunities for working together, relying on each other, and impacting one another. Theologian HyeRan Kim-Cragg stresses the importance of interdependence within community. She explains that the community benefits when interdependence is undergirded by a "narrative agency": the action of telling one's story and having it heard by others.[14] This definition of interdependence is one of the hallmarks of Projekt DA-SEIN. Asylum-seekers and volunteers share stories and listen to one another on a daily basis. These mundane interactions of listening and narrating shape relationships and individuals. They impact one another relationally. The impact of this relational agency on one another is measurable less by concrete changes that occur, such as in opinions or in asylum results, and more on how individuals are impacted by the opportunity to be together. Participants at Projekt DA-SEIN act on one another,

11 Burkitt, "Relational Agency," 323.

12 Burkitt, "Relational Agency," 330.

13 Weir, "Home and Identity," 14.

14 HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Pickwick Publications, 2018), 5.

and their perspectives and experiences may influence each other; priorities may shift and friendships may develop. These relationships also develop in the midst of the difficult process of waiting for results of asylum applications. Because much of this process involves extended periods of waiting, the process both dominates asylum-seekers lives and is largely devoid of active steps. Instead, waiting becomes a constant backdrop in the lives of asylum-seekers.

8.2 Waiting

When immersed in the Swiss asylum process there is a lack of agency in waiting on decisions and navigating systems that dictate where one can live, work, and travel. For many asylum-seekers in Switzerland, much of the three years in the asylum process is spent waiting for the next step or for decisions from the Swiss government (see more details about the asylum process in Chapter 3). This period of waiting is marked by lack of access to education, employment, and social engagement. There is a pressure to adapt quickly to the new system, and at the same time asylum-seekers have little control or agency to affect this process. Thus, they must hurry up and wait at the same time.

Waiting is not exclusive to the asylum-seeking experience in Switzerland. Many steps on the journey to finding a new home involve waiting. One asylum-seeker recounted his journey to Europe like this: He traveled from Eritrea to Ethiopia (4 months), then Sudan (9 months), then Libya (4 months), then Italy (1 month), and then Switzerland. He had now been in Switzerland almost three years. He had left Eritrea when he was 17 and he was now about to turn 23, and he was still waiting to hear if he could stay in Switzerland. He said these six-plus years were a long time to wait and that the years were marked by boredom and frustration.[15]

Diane Singerman's concept of *waithood* describes how young adults who are unable to take the next steps of adulthood, such as employment and marriage, remain in a state of waiting.[16] This experience of waiting is characteristic of young people who are navigating the time between leaving home as youth and starting their lives as adults. In many practical ways, this time of waiting is characterized by an inability to move forward in life as well as by limited agency and curtailed options. Yet, waiting is not passive. Life continues even if obvious next steps are unavailable.

This concept of *waithood* applies to asylum-seekers in Switzerland who have little influence over the timing of the next steps and decisions from the Swiss govern-

15 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, April 12, 2018: 20180412_18AS_DA-SEIN_II, Pos. 4–5.

16 Diane Singerman, "Youth, Gender, and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9, no. 3 (2013), https://doi.org/10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.9.3.1.

ment. Not only can they not affect the asylum application process, they also cannot take action in other areas of their lives, such as finding employment, securing more permanent housing, getting married, starting a family, or visiting their families. In Switzerland, some opportunities, such as schooling, are restricted to those under a certain age, so waiting can also mean loss of opportunities. Due to the structural circumstances that asylum-seekers face, such as a lack of educational placements or of entry-level jobs, this period of waiting is especially precarious.[17]

The asylum process is an extreme form of waiting due to the need to wait for an outcome of an asylum application before being able to pursue education, work, travel, or even relationships and family life. Many times, I heard the lament from asylum-seekers that three years was a long time to wait without knowing if one could remain in Switzerland while also being unable to pursue activities that would lead them closer to the life they desire. An asylum-seeker who had recently received word that his asylum application was rejected said that waiting three years only to receive a negative decision was devastating.[18] The difficulty of waiting for a decision from the Swiss government emerged so frequently at Projekt DA-SEIN and in my conversations that it became part of the undercurrent of the program. "Waiting is hard," I was told numerous times during interviews and informal conversation at Projekt DA-SEIN. One asylum-seeker told me he was going to write the government to ask why his asylum decision was taking so long, something that both of us knew would be futile. Other asylum-seekers I spoke with described waiting as characterized by boredom, frustration, fear, or anxiety. Many asylum-seekers understood this waiting as something that required patience. Asylum-seekers need to simultaneously know the system, have patience with long waiting times between steps, and wrestle with their own lack of power to affect their lives or the lives of their families.

Waiting on bureaucratic systems that cannot be controlled can be understood as a less generative place of waiting. The German word *abwarten* is a distinct form of waiting that is different from waiting as defined by practices of patience, which anticipate the realization of a hoped-for outcome (*Geduld haben*). While waiting on the results of an asylum application has qualities of both, more often I experienced the frustration and stress of *abwarten* in asylum-seekers' stories, due in large part to the entrenched structural circumstances of asylum-seeking.

In contrast, Projekt DA-SEIN is a place of waiting and uncertainty while at the same time it is a place of engaging in life. There are opportunities to build relationships, learn German, and share stories – all despite, and at the same time as, the fear

17 Singerman, "Youth, Gender, and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising."

18 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 25, 2018: 20180725_8AS_Rhein_concert_II, Pos. 6.

and uncertainty. This uncertainty can also be understood as part of home. Home is defined not only by stability, but also by waiting, longing, and seeking.[19]

8.2.1 Separating from Home

During this period of waiting, some asylum-seekers also expressed the need to stay focused on requirements for living in Switzerland. Thinking too much about the home they left behind was viewed as a distraction, not a support. They needed to focus on the demands of life in Switzerland, not the places or people they left. Distancing themselves from the former home as well as its affective associations allows more effort and attention to be put on the work of establishing a life in Switzerland.

Thus, separating from the home that was left can be an intentional act and necessary for avoiding distraction and pursuing a home in Switzerland. The choice to keep one's former home at a distance is both encouraged by the Swiss migration system and a strategy for dealing with the affective emotions of separation that might surface, such as depression, sadness, or lack of motivation. One asylum-seeker from Afghanistan emphasized this point, saying that he needed to separate from family in order to focus on Swiss migration requirements. "I can't think about my family too much or I just get sad and don't do anything. I really need a separation – to focus on here – on learning German so I can get a job and send my family money. I need to focus on the future, not on right now but on what's ahead."[20] Especially when waiting for a decision on an asylum application or permanent residency, many asylum-seekers found that it is necessary to distance themselves from their families and the home that was left.[21]

This choice also serves to create distance from feelings of sadness associated with the home that was left. The asylum-seeker quoted above told me that he must focus on the steps to stay in Switzerland. If he did not, he would be depressed about his circumstances and sad about his family's situation. These feelings would prevent him from taking action in necessary areas. He felt that he must study and learn and motivate himself to move forward. He said he stays up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning everyday learning German by himself.[22] During a later conversation he described practices he observed in Switzerland, especially around dating and drinking, which he named as a distraction. He said, "That's not for me. I want to be really focused, do my German test, get a job now that I can, and after that I want to take English

19 Joisten, *Philosophie der Heimat*; Ralph and Staeheli, "Home and Migration"; Boccagni, *Migration and the Search for Home*.

20 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_NO, Pos. 8.

21 The expectations communicated by integration laws and the length of time needed to process asylum claims lead to uncertainty as well as to a focus on meeting requirements that are within one's control.

22 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_NO, Pos. 8.

classes in the evening. I really, really want to put myself on the right path."[23] This legalistic language of right and wrong reflects an understanding that following the system is of critical importance to building a life in Switzerland. And a focus on correct behavior and meeting necessary milestones reflects Swiss migration requirements for adapting to the "Swiss way of life," including learning the local language and participating in social and political life. While this is a response to the bureaucratic requirements, it can also be interpreted as an act of agency. Working towards specific goals is a way to have some power in a process marked by a lack of agency.

Another interviewee talked about whether he could imagine having his own family in Switzerland.

> That doesn't work right now. Right now I don't have a real job, I must learn German again. It takes time. I can't do everything. I must simply have patience. Have patience. If I say, "I need this, I need that, it must be today," that doesn't work. If it must be today, it is not today; tomorrow, it is not tomorrow; the day after tomorrow, it is also not the day after tomorrow. Slowly. Step by step.[24]

This sentiment of taking the next steps was reflected in the comments of another asylum-seeker who told me he must focus on the things he has to do in Switzerland in order to be allowed to stay. He had just received his provisional permit ("F") and was able to take additional German courses to help him meet the language requirements. His next hurdle was to get into a training school in order to get a job, an opportunity that is only available to him until the age of 25, which would be in one year. He said that facing all these challenges is not what he wants to be doing in Switzerland, but that he must do it. "But I must. But I must," he repeated often during our interview.[25] He just had to do it. He understands that in order to build a life in Switzerland he must keep focusing on each subsequent step. While the choices that lead to a separation from home are often painful, much of the asylum experience is characterized by narrow options. Agency can be understood as choosing to pursue the steps that are available, even when limited and constrained.

8.2.2 Learning German

Agency was often revealed in asylum-seekers' choices to pursue specific activities, as illustrated above. One pursuit that was frequently mentioned was learning German. As discussed in Chapter 6, German was an activity that volunteers often helped asylum-seekers with at Projekt DA-SEIN. Many bureaucratic requirements shape

23 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 4, 2018: 20180704_2AS_DA-SEIN_II, Pos. 4.

24 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, Pos. 414.

25 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 19, 2018: 20180719_4AS_NO, Pos. 23.

the initial possibility of a new home, but perhaps none as much as learning the local language. Adapting to the Swiss way of life, whether in employment, education, or social systems, is predicated on language skills (achieving oral B2/written A1 levels).[26] While the migration requirements to learn German represent external expectations, some asylum-seekers embraced these requirements as a way to achieve a new home and sought out opportunities to learn German as well as local customs and practices. Since asylum-seekers waiting for immigration decisions can pursue few educational or employment opportunities, asylum programs focus especially on language acquisition. Thus, the pressure many asylum-seekers feel, as well as one of the few things within their control, is learning German.

Most asylum-seekers I encountered did not question the importance of learning German. They took seriously the need to learn German and applied themselves with consistency and rigor. During an activity at Projekt DA-SEIN's *Sommerfest*, one of the most common "wishes" expressed by asylum-seekers was for help learning German.[27] Similarly, during an interview, a man from Afghanistan gave examples of prayers he makes, one being for help in learning German.[28] When I visited Education and Participation (ECAP), a language school in Basel, the director said that while refugees and asylum-seekers vary in basic language skills, a common factor is their motivation to learn.[29] Asylum-seekers often told me that their first year in Switzerland was difficult when they could not speak the language. They told me they were very depressed and sad. Once they learned the language, they began doing more and going out of the asylum home, which made them feel happier and more connected. One asylum-seeker told me, "Without language it is difficult. With no language, it was so hard."[30] One asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, who did not have access to additional German courses, spent his time working through a book of conjugations of German verbs.[31]

Asylum-seekers often relayed that because their opportunities to work are limited while they are waiting for their asylum claim to process, they can be very bored, and activities like learning German can help fill their time.[32] Learning German was

26 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, EJPD, *Migration Report 2018*.

27 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, August 11, 2018: 20180811_Sommerfest_v1_PO, Pos. 9–16.

28 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, Pos. 301.

29 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, October 19, 2018: 20181019_Asylerfahren_SAH_v2_PO, Pos. 11–12.

30 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, October 29, 2018: 20181029_8AS_IN, Pos. 182.

31 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 4, 2018: 20180704_11AS_DA-SEIN_II, Pos. 3.

32 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, February 15, 2018: 20180215_2AS_DA-SEIN_II, Pos. 7.

also a popular reason for attending the program. Some refugees told me they only attend the program when they need help with German. One day at Projekt DA-SEIN I talked with a woman from Tibet who had a test for her German class the next day – speaking, writing, and listening. She was nervous, but her teacher told her not to study too much.[33] I knew from an earlier conversation that she spent any free time she had, when she was not taking care of her children, studying at the University of Basel medical library. For her, studying German offered some agency in the process. As with many other asylum-seekers, staying focused on the necessary legal steps laid out by the Swiss government was seen as a necessity.[34]

Some asylum-seekers adopted a critical stance towards fellow asylum-seekers who did not fully apply themselves to learning German or who did not take advantage of the systems of integration that were offered to them. One asylum-seeker was especially critical because, as he told me, "Without German, you have no chance."[35] This sense of having a chance was precariously balanced between trying to meet requirements to improve their situations and waiting for asylum application results over which they had little control. The criticism of those who did not meet integration requirements was practical. It expressed concern for the asylum-seekers' abilities to survive in Switzerland given the lack of alternative paths, even if the concern was also misplaced in terms of its assumption as to the degree that these choices could affect the situation. The importance that many asylum-seekers granted to learning German reflected stress about their future and an attempt to control some aspect of the process.[36]

At the same time, some asylum-seekers expressed overt resistance to learning German. One of my interview partners told me he refused to learn or speak German his first year in Switzerland. He said he hated learning it. If needed, he would speak English instead. He said that even if they would have paid him one million Swiss Francs for each word he learned, he would not have wanted to learn it more, nor would he have learned it with more ease. While eventually he did learn German, this resistance speaks to a small stand against the dominance of language and integration.

Efforts to exert agency, as well as acts of resistance, are responses to the pressure to adapt to a system while also having little agency to affect the process. Asylum-

33 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, June 21, 2018: 20180621_DA-SEIN_v2_PO, Pos. 6

34 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 29, 2018: 20180929_7AS_NO, Pos. 18.

35 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, Pos. 147, 211; Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 13, 2018: 20180913_13AS_DA-SEIN_Museum_II, Pos. 3.

36 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 29, 2018: 20180929_7AS_NO, Pos. 6.

seekers know that there is little room for mistakes, and they often work hard to try to meet the requirements within the given structures and time frames. Asylum claims are evaluated on whether they meet the criterion of asylum, namely danger in their country of origin, and the most common reason given when an asylum application is denied is lack of credibility. While these aspects are difficult for an asylum-seeker to control, knowing how the system functions can impact one's ability to answer questions in ways that convey "believability." Knowing the system can potentially impact their ability to stay and to establish a life in Switzerland. Failure to integrate and learn German, criminal or civil infractions, or deviations from the asylum system could result in a claim being denied or could prevent asylum-seekers from establishing themselves in Switzerland long-term; it could limit their ability to work, to live independently, or to visit their families.[37] The stress of having overcome so many challenges only to miss the last hurdle was another motivation for choosing to focus on migration requirements. As one asylum-seeker told me, he prays to God for help learning German. But, he explained, "God says, I will help you, but only if you also help yourself."[38]

8.3 Familiarity

Familiarity is a characteristic often associated with home. Familiar people, landscapes, and languages are often identified as aspects of home. Yet, when home is defined by familiarity, these familiar aspects are almost too close to be recognized. As Kaufmann writes, the familiar home is one that is secluded and withdrawn.[39] Often, it is only when home is lost that it is revealed. In the experience of asylum-seeking, familiar places and people are taken away, and there is a lack of choice in these separations. Choosing to find and reengage familiarity is an act of agency and a way to locate home.

In the asylum system, familiarity is often understood as a top-down requirement, as in the Swiss citizenship law that applicants must "be familiar with the Swiss way of life."[40] This emphasis on familiarity fuels the focus on integration into these "familiar" systems and trickles down to shape migration and asylum systems. This requirement "to be familiar with the Swiss way of life" influences asylum-seekers' focus on learning German as well as on familiarizing themselves with Swiss laws and

37 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, *Bundesgesetz über die Ausländerinnen und Ausländer*, 142.20; Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, *Asylverordnung 1 über Verfahrensfragen*, 142.311; Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, *Bundesgesetz über das Schweizer Bürgerrecht*, 141.0.

38 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, Pos. 301.

39 Kaufmann, "Heimat als Präsenz im Entzug," 31.

40 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, *Bundesgesetz über die Ausländerinnen und Ausländer*, 142.20.

social customs. Many asylum-seekers understood this learning as something that required patience. An Eritrean asylum-seeker told me, "Here in Switzerland, when you are coming from another country, you have to have patience. When you don't have patience, then you don't understand the way of life, and you don't understand the system."[41] These systems might include bureaucratic or organizational systems, including the migration system, schools, or transportation infrastructure. It might also refer to cultural and social systems such as customs, traditions, and habits. The asylum-seeker further explained that in Eritrea he had grown up knowing the rules and is familiar with them, but that in Switzerland he is not familiar with the social, cultural, and political rules.

In this way, a lack of familiarity was often named a as a reason asylum-seekers did not experience home in Switzerland. In the experience of asylum-seekers, familiar places had been lost, along with the agency to decide when and how this loss occurs.[42] Yet, familiarity is also arguably a crucial lifeline in the ability to make Switzerland a home. This disconnect often defines the asylum experience. In this section I illustrate two ways that asylum-seekers cultivated familiarity, despite these real limitations. The first is by bringing practices and customs from their country of origin to Basel. This might include practices such as language, games, religious practices, and food. The second way is by making aspects of the new place familiar. This might include frequenting certain locations in Basel and making these places home-like through regular activities and friendships. Just as the psalmist writes "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?,"[43] asylum-seekers look for ways to be themselves in spaces where they are other.

8.3.1 Bringing Practices from Home to Basel

When arriving in Switzerland and while waiting for results of their asylum applications, asylum-seekers bring practices of home from their countries of origin. These diverse practices, while rarely officially acknowledged, become part of the spatial landscape of Basel. Asylum-seekers practice their religions at store-front mosques, play sports, meet with friends for meals or along the river, and live, work, and learn in local neighborhoods. These practices serve to remind asylum-seekers of home, and while they can sometimes make their experiences in Basel more familiar, they often also highlight the unfamiliarity of the new place. Absence was also a significant aspect of these familiar practices. Practices that were brought to Basel, including familiar religious services and rituals, reminded asylum-seekers of the communities they had left. One asylum-seeker noted the lack of the call to prayer in Switzerland as

41 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 13, 2018: 20180713_3AS_IN, Pos. 454.

42 Bieler and Kunz, "Responding to the Loss of Home," 142.

43 Psalms 137:4–6 King James Version.

a reminder of his disconnect from home. Making places familiar creates a sense of identity that includes the new place and that at the same time can incorporate that which is strange or different into the new. Missing the amplified call to prayer connects the asylum-seeker to their sense of home because it makes the missed home present. As René Kaufmann, and others, write, it is often the loss of home that brings home into focus.[44] Thus, home can often only be recognized with distance; home is often hidden from view until it is gone.

Many religious practices, such as those that celebrate festivals and holy days, center community and, when reenacted in a new place, create familiar connections to the home, while also drawing attention to those who are not there. Other rituals involving food and community do the same thing. These religious practices were often closely linked to their countries of origin, connecting asylum-seekers to the culture, beliefs, and education of those places, as well as to specific memories of the people and places of home. Yet, when they took place in Basel, these often occurred in alternate locations. Orthodox Christian services took place in Protestant churches, such as the Offene Kirche Elisabethen, mosques were located in storefronts, and other religious practices might occur privately in homes or while walking along the river (see section 8.1.3).

One of interviewees shared his experience in Basel of the celebration of *Muharram*, a Muslim holiday that commemorates the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad and one of the first Imams for Shi'a Muslims. This event connected him to the Shi'a community in Basel as well as to memories of home. Yet, in Basel, the ten-day event is shortened to six or seven days and takes place at a sports club, not a mosque. For him, there were many things missing from the observance of Muharram in Switzerland, including the practice of visiting the homes of other families in his village. He shared that his village has about 200 homes and that he knows everyone. That's very different from Basel, he remarked. On the occasion of these religious feast days, he would go to visit neighbors in their homes and there would be huge spreads of food. "I know everyone," he said, and if he needed help, they would help him, including financially.[45] This kind of familiarity also denotes a willingness to show up in one another's lives in a way that was not always mirrored in Switzerland.

Food was also closely associated with home and often missed by asylum-seekers. The asylum-seeker who shared his experience of marking Muharram in Switzerland told me he really misses Afghan food and does not like Swiss food. He showed me

44 Kaufmann, "Heimat als Präsenz im Entzug."

45 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 19, 2018: 20180719_4AS_IN; 20180719_4AS_NO, Pos. 16.

photographs of some of the dishes associated with the Muharram holiday.[46] Another asylum-seeker from Eritrea commented on times he felt at home in Switzerland. He said that he has a feeling of home when he is with close friends or when he visits an older woman from Eritrea who prepares the traditional coffee ceremony and serves it with injera and lamb meat.[47] The coffee ceremony is always done with other people; it is both relational and embodied. Several men from Afghanistan regularly cooked for the Islamic festivals of *Eid Al-Fitr* and *Eid Al-Adha*, preparing traditional dishes with pride and adding a few Swiss touches.[48] At the *Eid al-Adha* feast that I attended, traditional dishes were prepared, and the room was arranged to reflect how the meal would be served if we had been in Afghanistan. The "chapel" of Projekt DA-SEIN was converted to a mosque, a white cloth was laid out, shoes were required to be removed before entering, and the meal was served on the floor.[49] The organizers expressed a desire to recreate the experience as it would be in Afghanistan. Yet, another man from Afghanistan scoffed at this choice. He said in Afghanistan everyone wore lose-fitting clothes that made sitting on the floor more comfortable. Yet, in Switzerland everyone wore jeans or other more fitted clothing that made sitting on the floor less practical.[50] This is an example of the tension that can arise when familiar experiences are enacted in a new place and are layered with the unfamiliar.

The unfamiliar aspects of the familiar also occurred due to differences in social norms and cultural practices. For example, games and sports that were played in Switzerland often connected participants to home, yet they were also experienced in unfamiliar social contexts. Dominos were frequently played at Projekt DA-SEIN, especially by men from Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. They all spoke Arabic and shared a history of playing dominos in their countries of origin. When they played at the program, they were happy to include volunteers and asylum-seekers from other countries. A man from Algeria told me that the game reminded him of home, since in Algeria men often play dominos in cafes.[51] He then commented how the game, while familiar, was different to play in Switzerland. He told me it is different to play with

46 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 19, 2018: 20180719_4AS_IN; 20180719_4AS_NO.

47 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 13, 2018: 20180713_3AS_IN.

48 *Eid al-Fitr* is the Islamic festival that marks the end of Ramadan, a month of fasting observed by Muslims. *Eid al-Adha* is the second main Islamic festival and is known as the Festival of Sacrifice. It commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to obey God and sacrifice his son.

49 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, August 23, 2018: 20180823_DA-SEIN_v1_PO.

50 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, August 23, 2018: 20180823_DA-SEIN_v1_PO.

51 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, April 19, 2018: 20180419_DA-SEIN_v1_PO, Pos. 7.

women, as occurs in Switzerland.[52] In Algeria, women only play dominos at home and never in public places. This mixing of the familiar and unfamiliar reflects and reshapes understandings of home. In addition to bringing familiar practices to Basel, asylum-seekers also created familiarity by engaging in the place of Basel. In particular, asylum-seekers made places familiar by creatively using them, not always in ways they were intended.

8.3.2 Creating Familiar Places in Basel

When I asked about ways that Basel felt like home, asylum-seekers often named places that were outdoors and public, even if those places were not originally designed for the activities they were used for. This included utilizing the spaces of Projekt DA-SEIN in the basement of the church administrative building, frequenting cafes that do not require purchase, attending public events, or gathering along the Rhine River and in public parks. These locations were used for socializing, exercise, or reflection and, despite being public, they became personal and familiar. Occupying these spaces was often a necessary part of inhabiting a third space, where opportunities for ownership or social membership are limited. While privacy and individuation are often important aspects of home, these markers are noticeably lacking for many asylum-seekers and are difficult to find in the dislocation and the uncertainty of navigating a new home.[53]

Thus, activities that may often occur in private homes sometimes take place elsewhere for asylum-seekers, including in public locations. For example, many asylum-seekers mentioned the Rhine River, a prominent landmark in Basel, as a place where they spent time. Outside of Projekt DA–SEIN, asylum-seekers often met at the river, in parks, at public events, or in cafes. These places have multiple advantages because they are public, offer experiences that might feel familiar to former homes, and provide anonymity and the chance to be alone. In addition, they are outside of centers of commerce and therefore do not require money for entrance or participation. These public locations were frequented for socializing, exercise, or reflection and often became both personal and familiar.

8.3.2.1 The Rhine River

One asylum-seeker from Eritrea emphasized the necessity of public spaces more directly, saying that the Rhine River made the city livable. He described swimming in the river in the village where he grew up and said that without the Rhine River, he

52 Participant Observation by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, April 19, 2018: 20180419_DA-SEIN_v1_PO, Pos. 9.

53 Young, "House and Home."

could not live in Basel.[54] There was a physical connection and familiarity for him between the river of his youth and the Rhine. Another asylum-seeker from Afghanistan told me that he found the water of the Rhine very calming. When he is feeling sad, out-of-sorts, or unwell, he walks by the water and it always helps him.[55] Another asylum-seeker emphasized how he spends time along the Rhine River, in an area with fewer people, so he can enjoy the quiet and have space to think and pray. Walking and thinking in the early morning or late evening was also something he did in his country of origin.

> When I want to think about things for myself, to speak with myself, I like places that are not so loud – silent places. The other side over the river is more silent so I like to walk there. Most of the time I walk in the evening – ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. You don't find any disturbing sounds or moving cars. […] Also, it is the time, as a Muslim, the time of the first prayer.[56]

At the river he found a place of quiet, personal reflection, and prayer, especially at night when there were fewer people. He made a public place both personal and familiar, even tying the place to his Muslim religious practice, something largely unfamiliar in Basel. Another asylum-seeker also expressed the importance of finding public places that are quiet. He said he liked to go to a particular city park because it was very quiet and very clean. When I asked where he wanted to do his interview, he took me to this park. It was on the other side of the train station, and as we walked there, he emphasized, "Oh, yeah, it's always very quiet here."[57] The quiet that might be missing from their asylum homes was sought elsewhere.

8.3.2.2 Interviews

The places of Offene Kirche Elisabethen and Projekt DA-SEIN were significant places of interaction and relationship-building. Many of my informal interviews as well as most of my participant observations occurred in the spaces of Projekt DA-SEIN: the garden, the kitchen, the chapel, and the main activity room. The importance of familiar places also emerged when I conducted formal interviews. Projekt DA-SEIN and the Offene Kirche Elisabethen did not have consistent rooms or spaces available for interviews, I did not have an office or other private space, and asylum-seekers primarily lived in asylum homes with limited privacy. As discussed in Chapter 5, I collaborated with my interview partners to find places for our

54 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 26, 2018: 20180726_8AS_swim_II, Pos. 2.

55 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, January 18, 2019: 20190118_2AS_walk_II, Pos. 2.

56 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 13, 2018: 20180713_3AS_IN.

57 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 19, 2018: 20180719_4AS_NO, Pos. 5.

interviews. I started by asking them where they would like to do the interview. If they were unsure or did not want to choose a place, I suggested one. I conducted interviews along the Rhine River, in a local park, in the main garden of the Offene Kirche Elisabethen, in the public plaza in front of the theater, and at the University of Basel's theology faculty. Many of these places are public: the OKE (by its own definition, an open church), the local café that does not require purchase, the park, and the paths along the Rhine River. With a few exceptions, these places were not designed or intended for academic interviews. Instead, the interviews were embedded in the location of Basel and further shaped by the ways place was constructed by my interviewees as well as by our relational and collaborative process of engaging in an interview. Finding a place for the interview was also an exercise in finding public places that also felt private.

One of my first interviews illustrates how an "interview-in-motion" can reveal agency and reveal relationships to place.[58] Originally, my interview partner expressed a desire to do the interview inside the church at the OKE, which is located a few hundred yards from the meeting space of the DA-SEIN program. When I met him, we realized that the church was closed for cleaning and there was no private space available in the Projekt DA-SEIN rooms. So, the interviewee suggested a route for us to take, and I followed. As we conversed along the way, I refrained from suggesting meeting places or directing our walk. We first stopped at a café that does not require purchase, to see if that would work. However, we ran into another asylum-seeker, also a Projekt DA-SEIN participant, and my interview partner suggested we continue walking. We walked further and ended up at an outcropping along the Rhine River. He told me that he likes to go there to sit, think, and watch.[59] Giving up some of my agency to let interviewees select interview locations was not only a courtesy and a chance to share power but also an opportunity to see how they use and relate to the city.

8.3.2.3 Tactics

How individuals use a cityscape is explored in de Certeau's concept of strategies and tactics, and it provides a helpful lens to understand how those on the margins access agency and make places familiar.[60] In his book *The Practices of Everyday Life*, de Certeau considers agency within marginal places.[61] *Strategies* are employed by those with more cultural power, whereas *tactics* are more subversive practices used by those with less institutional power. Strategies utilize space to create systems that

58 For a definition of "interview-in-motion," see Chapter 5 and Kusenbach, "Street Phenomenology."

59 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_NO.

60 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

61 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

serve strategic objectives.[62] Those with greater power use these strategies to employ the city in ways it was intended to be used, such as: the church for prayer, the café for conversation and socializing, and the river for relaxing. This also happens at the level of migration policies and at the level of urban design, which designates uses for public spaces. Yet, those with less power employ tactics to repurpose the cityscape and utilize it in non-conventual ways. Tactics provide asylum-seekers a means of creative resistance and agency to use the created landscape for their own purposes.[63] Tactics are a form of agency and a way to create meaning with less direct access to power.

De Certeau's most famous example of a tactic is from his chapter "Walking in the City."[64] In this chapter, de Certeau describes two views of New York City, one of which is from the top of the World Trade Center Tower. This view reveals the strategies of governments, businesses, churches, and other organizations that create a unified system designed and produced with clear objectives and modes of engagement. The second view is from street level, where the viewer is walking. In contrast to the bird's eye view, the walker on the street does not necessarily experience a unified view of the city nor engage with it in designated ways.[65] The walker wanders, making connections and choices in the moment that may or may not use the cityscape in its intended capacity.

Tactics provide a means of creative resistance and agency for the average person, who is thus able to use the created landscape for their own purposes. As artist and historian Andrew Blauvelt writes, "Tactics, on the other hand, are employed by those who are subjugated. By their very nature tactics are defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited ways and seized momentarily within spaces, both physical and psychological, produced and governed by more powerful strategic relations."[66] Tactics create more familiarity in the city by allowing everyday interactions to create personal meaning, affective attachments, and familiar corners. Michel Foucault similarly explores and expands the spatial and geographic aspects of power, showing how the construction of space can serve to control the body.[67] Yet, the body can also navigate space in new ways. For example, an asylum-seeker from Syria felt most at home by making the area where he lived in Basel familiar and focusing his activities there. He preferred to shop and socialize in the neighborhood where he lived, a section of town on the opposite side of the Rhine River from the OKE. In his town in Syria, he also kept a small range, preferring to stay in the neighborhood where he

62 *Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life*, 52–56.

63 Andrew Blauvelt, *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* (Walker Art Center, 2003).

64 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.

65 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.

66 Blauvelt, *Strangely Familiar*.

67 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

and his family lived.[68] This mode of walking as a tactic was also reflected in my own engagement with asylum-seekers in Basel. I often met asylum-seekers outdoors, in public places, or at the Offene Kirche Elisabethen. Tactics make public and private spheres more fluid.

8.3.3 Agency and Helping

Agency was also seen in the desire to help others or to create opportunities. Frequently, upon thanking my interview partners for their participation, asylum-seekers reciprocated by saying how much they hoped they had been helpful. One asylum-seeker said that since he had been helped by so many, he also wanted to help in return.[69] In the same fashion, asylum-seekers often contributed to Projekt DA-SEIN by teaching games, cooking meals, or sharing cultural and religious practices, as was made possible through the structure of the program. In addition, asylum-seekers also helped one another. One of my interviews was rescheduled because the participant needed to accompany another asylum-seeker, whose asylum application had been recently rejected, to a legal office.[70] Another interview was interrupted when the interviewee received a phone call from a newer asylum-seeker who needed help figuring out how to buy a pass for the local tram system.[71] Advocating for and accompanying other asylum-seekers was a way of helping one another and affecting the system by working on behalf of others. Helping one another creates horizontal networks and reciprocity that can establish a sense of agency for asylum-seekers. One day, I was struggling to help an asylum-seeker with a math course he was enrolled in.[72] Another man from Afghanistan joined us and was far more adept at explaining math concepts than I was. This inverting of assumed roles and challenging assumptions about who can help did not always occur, even at Projekt DA-SEIN. The roles of those who can help and of those who need help can become entrenched in systems including the asylum system; this can also happen when hospitality becomes "inverted" or serves to protect those with resources.[73] Yet, despite its limitations, Projekt DA-SEIN often provides a distinct sense of agency for asylum-seekers and volunteers. The very act of bringing people together means that they impact

68 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 29, 2018: 20180929_7AS_IN, Pos. 434.

69 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, 133.

70 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 3, 2018: 20180903_6AS_NO, Pos. 13.

71 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, July 5, 2018: 20180705_2AS_IN, Pos. 219–22.

72 Interview by Katherine Kunz, Basel, Switzerland, September 20, 2018: 20180920_6AS_DA-SEIN_II, Pos. 7.

73 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*. For more information on inverted hospitality, see section 6.3.2.

one another and that roles, along with assumptions about who can help who, can be challenged.

Asylum-seekers do not only want to be helped. Even in the liminal space of asylum-seeking, migrants sought out places where they could exercise power and agency. Asylum-seekers often helped each other with German or math homework, and did not rely solely on volunteers. The annual Ramadan and *Eid al-Fitr* meals were hosted by Afghan men who took over the cooking and converted the room known as the chapel into a mosque, where shoes were banned and the feast was set out on the floor. As noted in Chapter 6, participating in something greater than oneself meets personal needs and enables people to be actors in the greater world.[74] This desire is not the exclusive domain of those who have greater resources to give. By contributing to the well-being of themselves, each other, and the Projekt DA-SEIN community, asylum-seekers were able to use their agency to build connections and contribute a larger goal.

8.4 Creating Home

Asylum-seekers' connection to home in the new location was impacted by their own agency. On the surface this was often expressed as the hoped-for ability to work, to live in Basel, and to have a family and children. Other times this was expressed more subversively through the use of marginal spaces or through *tactics*, de Certeau's term for using resources in unintended ways to cultivate agency and control.[75] This was seen in the utilization of public places for personal purposes, such as walking along the Rhine River as a place of reflection and prayer. Agency sometimes looked like adopting external integration requirements, such as a focus on learning German. By taking control of these activities, asylum-seekers claimed some sense of agency for themselves, even if the impact was minimal, instead of leaving their fate only in the hands of bureaucrats and systems. In addition, asylum-seekers offered their own leadership and cultural resources to the program. Asylum-seekers challenged rules and assumptions, such as when they spoke their first languages and thus went against the program requirement to speak only Standard German, or when they played music and games from their countries of origin.

I began the exploration of home in Chapter 2 by deepening the definition of place as socially constructed and embedded in affectivity. Home is constantly shifting, often illusive, and deeply longed-for. This understanding of home is embedded in relationships to places and people and connected to experiences of both familiarity and

74 Malkki, *The Need to Help*, 7.

75 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

unfamiliarity. In engaging asylum-seekers in an exploration of home, the importance of relational agency emerged. Home, and longings for home, are connected with the ability to act on one another, or to "be together" in convivial spaces. This relational autonomy is also reflected in Projekt DA-SEIN's focus on being there, showing up, embracing ambivalence, and creating a space in which to be together, rather than on programmatic elements. Yet, the togetherness cultivated by eating, laughing, sharing stories, and mourning losses is not orchestrated by Projekt DA-SEIN. Instead, Projekt DA-SEIN offers space for asylum-seekers and volunteers to act on one another, to influence and shape one another and the spaces of the program. This relational agency emphasizes home as a verb, as a process of becoming, of living between the known and the unknown.[76] Through building relationships and cultivating their own agency, asylum-seekers actively create home, even if their efforts are limited by the circumstances of migration and they remain subject to powerful political systems.

76 Buchanan, *Go Home!*; Boccagni, *Migration and the Search for Home*.