

Who Feels Safe? Uncertain Futures and Enduring Aspirations in Italy

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9 **Who feels safe?**

10 **Uncertain futures and enduring aspirations in Italy**

11

12 **Abstract**

13 In an attempt of going beyond a simple opposition between those conceived as agents and those  
14 seen as subjects of disciplinary power, this article engages with a reflection on differential states of  
15 precariousness and (un)safety, which involve both “forced migrants” and “citizens”. Drawing on  
16 ethnographic research in Milan (Italy), I outline some recent institutional changes in the Italian  
17 asylum system, which led to the political abandonment of refugees in situations of increasing  
18 marginalization, but also to the layoff of several frontline asylum workers, who were often young  
19 people hit by the consequences of economic recession. Through the words and biographical  
20 trajectories of three young women (two asylum workers and one refugee), I trace the emergence  
21 of contested temporal and work experiences, marked by widespread feelings of uncertainty and  
22 devaluation. I approach empirically the idea of (un)safety as a material and bodily condition and as  
23 an emotional state, directly linked to the perceived possibility of being able to orient oneself  
24 towards the future. By zooming in on differential experiences of (un)safety and precariousness -  
25 but also on enduring aspirations - I aim at documenting the material and affective entanglements  
26 of acts of government, as well as their inherent potential for empowerment and transformation.

27

28 **Keywords:** precarity; temporality; asylum; precarious labor; (un)safety; future; Italy

29

30 **Word count:** 9482 words.

31

## 32 **Introduction**

33 This article focuses on differential states of precariousness and (un)safety, which involve both  
34 forced migrants and citizens. Taking cue from recent calls to bring together the “commonalities  
35 of precarious times for both migrants and non-migrants” (Ramsay 2020, 388; Caglar and Glick  
36 Schiller 2018), I engage with a reflection on the pervasiveness of feelings of devaluation and future  
37 shrinking, which affect not only asylum seekers but also asylum workers - albeit at different scales  
38 and with different outcomes. This brings me to disentangle the very idea of “safe haven”, as well  
39 as the one of “safe (non)citizenship”, in order to ask: what does it mean to feel safe? And how is  
40 this (un)safety experienced? Building on ethnographic data and interviews collected in Milan (Italy)  
41 between 2019 and 2022, I approach empirically the idea of (un)safety as a material and bodily  
42 condition and as an emotional state, directly linked to the perceived possibility of being able to  
43 orient oneself towards the future.

44 It is important to stress that, by pulling together asylum workers’ and refugees’ perceptions and  
45 everyday struggles, I do not mean to argue that their experiences are identical, nor comparable. It  
46 goes without saying that the degree of material and existential precarity experienced by refugees in  
47 contemporary Italy is far from comparable to that experienced by Italian citizens. Not only have  
48 refugees undergone overwhelming and often traumatic experiences, both in their country of origin  
49 and during the migration journey. A growing body of scholarship has shown how refugees and  
50 asylum seekers are exposed to different forms of violence within European states: structural,  
51 bureaucratic and indirect (Artero and Fontanari 2021; Davies et al. 2017), but also direct and  
52 extralegal (Statewatch 2020). Furthermore, recent research has started documenting how  
53 protracted marginality often characterizes the lives of those who have been granted legal  
54 protection, due to the overlapping effects of uncertain legal statuses, racialized forms of  
55 discrimination, housing and labor precarity (Belloni and Massa 2022; Wyss and Fischer 2022).  
56 Whereas media attention and public discourse have often been fixated on “the spectacle” of the  
57 Mediterranean border (Dines et al. 2015), after the landing many refugees find themselves trapped  
58 in a protracted transit experience, which substantially hinders the possibility of building a  
59 meaningful life (Fontanari 2017; Vacchiano 2005).

60 Yet, recent critical work on refugeehood has started warning against the pitfalls of inadvertently  
61 exceptionalizing displacement and, by doing so, contribute to the reification of an  
62 incommensurable difference between “displaced others” and “citizens” (Anderson 2013; Cabot  
63 2019). “Crisis” as a social imaginary and as a dominant explanatory frame has deeply informed  
64 both scholarly understanding and political responses to issues of refugees and displacement

65 (Roitman 2014; Vigh 2008). At same time, displacement continues to be approached as an  
66 exceptional experience, almost invariably attached to migrants and refugees. Displaced others tend  
67 to be portrayed as “suffering subjects” (Robbins 2013; Coutin and Vogel 2016), permeated by an  
68 incessant uncertainty and situated in a temporality radically distinct from that of non-migrants. In  
69 an attempt of moving beyond such dichotomies, Ramsay (2020) suggests a more expansive  
70 theorization of displacement, conceived as “an existential experience of contested temporal being,  
71 in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their  
72 aspirations for, and sense of, the future.” (Ramsay 2020, 388). This definition rests on the  
73 burgeoning interest in various forms of temporality, not only within migration studies (Andersson  
74 2014; Glick Schiller 2018; Fravega et al. 2023), but also in scholarship more broadly concerned  
75 with the individual and collective temporal tensions of contemporary times (Bear 2014; Bryant and  
76 Knight 2019). This definition also strongly resonates with the experiences of different subjects -  
77 both migrants and non-migrants - that I encountered during my fieldwork. As a matter of fact, the  
78 feeling of “*not moving forward*” is far from exceptional in the current scenario of social, political and  
79 economic upheaval. In particular, the financial crisis of 2008 and the more recent health and  
80 environmental “crises” have fed visions of dramatic changes, filled with speculation, anxiety and  
81 uncertainty. As research on precarity and austerity suggests (Knight and Stewart 2016; Wilkinson  
82 and Ortega-Alcazar 2019), a growing number of people across the globe – both migrant and non-  
83 migrant – feel trapped within a time loop of the present and have hard time orienting themselves  
84 towards an aspirational future.

85 The case of Italian asylum workers is particularly telling in this respect. Recent analyses of  
86 forced migration in Europe have drawn attention to the role of a range of heterogeneous  
87 “humanitarian workers” (asylum caseworkers, local government employees, NGOs staff, etc.)  
88 engaged in the daily assistance to asylum seekers and refugees. These intermediate actors, endowed  
89 with consistent discretionary power, have often been presented as “the left hand of the state” in  
90 the implementation of uneven asylum policies (Kalir and Wissink 2016; Ticktin 2006). Yet, many  
91 of the asylum workers I encountered during my fieldwork were overqualified young people, often  
92 outraged at the injustices that they were witnessing on a daily basis. Some of them were political  
93 activists outside their working time, engaged in mobilizations directed at reforming the very asylum  
94 system in which they were employed. Furthermore, many of them were – as they were often  
95 defining themselves - “precarious workers”, employed by third sector actors (social cooperatives  
96 or NGOs) under deregulated, temporary and uncertain working conditions. As I will detail below,  
97 the economic crisis that hit Europe and Italy has accentuated both the instability of workplace

98 regime and a shared imaginary of collective and subjective vulnerability. Thus, the idea of *precarity*  
99 does not merely refers to labour conditions, but it rather expand into *precariousness*, to “describe a  
100 dimension that spans multiple aspects of life, mapping out a condition of shared existence,  
101 precarious emotions, languages and affections” (Murgia 2014, 5). These shifts in collective forms  
102 of identification hint at the progressive erosion of social citizenship rights, in the context of  
103 European states’ welfare retrenchment and “market fundamentalism” (Somers 2008). Economic  
104 instability and various forms of neoliberalization have unsettled the assumed dichotomy between  
105 citizenship and alienage: “in diverse national contexts, then, citizens themselves are increasingly  
106 facing the radical precarization of rights, belonging, and *life* – a struggle that has often been ascribed  
107 to the domain of alienage” (Cabot 2018, 6; see also Ramsay 2017).

108 Against this background, this article seeks to “go beyond a simple opposition between those  
109 conceived as agents and those seen as subjects of disciplinary power” (Fortier 2016, 1038), in an  
110 attempt of showing how different social actors – both migrant and non-migrant – variously  
111 experience and feel shifting temporalities of asylum and socio-economic change (Hall 2023). It  
112 combines critical geographical and anthropological scholarship, with the aim of contributing to  
113 scholarship engaged in the unsettling of consolidated boundaries between the so-called “private  
114 sphere” of everyday life on the one hand, and the “public sphere” of geopolitics on the other  
115 (Brickell 2012; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Centering on differential states of uncertainty and  
116 (un)safety, - but also on *enduring aspirations* - I aim at documenting the material and affective  
117 entanglements of acts of government, as well as their unruly effects or, in other words, their  
118 inherent potential for emancipation.

119 In recent years, *endurance* emerged as a concept heterogeneously employed to speak of  
120 subjective experiences and livelihoods, in a world in which ideas and perceptions of conceivable  
121 future are radically shifting. For Hage (2009, 463), endurance is a “mode of confronting the crisis  
122 by a celebration of one’s capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change”. Weiss (2022),  
123 drawing on fieldwork on livelihoods in austerity-ridden Spain, stresses the ideological aspects of  
124 endurance, which she defines “thoroughly nonpolitical in that it eschews an orientation toward  
125 the future, placing moral weight on ongoing efforts to get by” (Weiss 2022, 64). Others have, on  
126 the contrary, described the transformative or, at least, affirmative and anticipatory effects of  
127 “endurance” in late liberal contexts (Povinelli 2011; Lancione and Simone 2021). Here I employ  
128 the idea of *enduring aspirations* in an attempt of combining both its straining and future-oriented

129 qualities<sup>1</sup>. By foregrounding dilemmas, everyday struggles and expectations of both asylum  
130 workers and people who have been granted a refugee status in Milan, Italy, I aim at expanding  
131 scholarship engaged in unsettling well-established borders between “us” and “them”, thereby re-  
132 integrating refugees and migrants within shared - albeit contested – geopolitical processes of  
133 modern time. At the same time, inspired by work on the affective life of late capitalist economies  
134 (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2003; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012), I wish to shed light on affective states  
135 and embodied experiences engendered by austerity and socio-economic change. Against this  
136 background, the narratives here analyzed are meant to evoke – rather than explain – how abstract  
137 notions such as “safety”, “future”, or “endurance” take shape in everyday life, in often  
138 contradictory and ambivalent ways. Thus, the article offers two main contributions. First, a focus  
139 on the underexplored connections between foreclosed expectations of both refugees and  
140 humanitarian workers allows for a consideration of the inherent ambivalences of taken-for-granted  
141 notions of “safety”, in contexts marked by widespread feelings of uncertainty and devaluation.  
142 Second, a close look to intimate narratives of foreclosure and impossibility brings to the fore the  
143 enduring persistence of - often fragmented - aspirations, which are ultimately essential in enabling  
144 a sense of life in the present, as well as a political orientation towards the future.

145 The article unfolds as follows. I first explore perceptions and ideas of “(un)safety”, in relation  
146 to recent transformations of workplace regimes, temporal orientations and subjectivities. I also  
147 introduce the reader to some recent reforms of asylum governance in Italy and to the setting of  
148 the research, the city of Milan. Then, I approach empirically the idea of (un)safety as a material  
149 and bodily condition and as an emotional state, through the words and experiences of three  
150 women, between 30 and 40 years old: two Italian asylum workers and one refugee from Pakistan.  
151 In conclusion, I reflect on how those intimate narratives of precariousness and transformation are  
152 embedded within broader stories of economic downturn and increasing social polarization.

153

154

## 155 **2. (Un)safety within and outside the asylum system**

156 Feelings and principles of (un)safety are central preoccupations of contemporary states, thereby  
157 shedding light on some of the deepest contradictions of contemporary times. “Safety” has been  
158 defined as one of the key qualities of modern citizenship, and yet a very problematic one (Weber  
159 2008). On the one hand modern liberal citizenship was designed precisely “to provide insecure

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that by referring to future-oriented qualities, I do not mean to imply an unquestionably positive or inherently political orientation towards what will come. Engagements towards the future, as well as forms of hope, occur in concrete social settings and may be empowering as well as constraining (Kleist and Jansen 2016).

160 citizens with protection within a secure state and insecure states with protection from their  
161 insecurity citizens” (Weber 2008, 130). On the other hand, the idea of safe citizenship is embedded  
162 in the separation and stigmatization of internal “threatening subjects”. Feelings and principles of  
163 unsafety, thus, may easily become instruments of exclusion, as when people are deported or  
164 marginalized in order to “enhance the safety” of entitled members of the society (Beattie 2016; see  
165 also Gargiulo 2023).

166 Within the liberal-Western framework of sovereignty, refugees have often been placed in an  
167 antithetical – albeit mutually constitutive – relationship with citizens (e.g., Agamben 1998). Yet,  
168 recent socio-political transformations have inspired some scholars to go beyond such rigid  
169 dichotomies, in order to explore how in the context of economic recession and social citizenship  
170 transformations, “citizens and their noncitizen counterparts are not always clearly distinguishable  
171 by a set dividing line but instead hover along a gradation of rights and rightlessness” (Muehlebach  
172 2012, 26). Following the consequences of the 2008 financial recession, several ethnographic studies  
173 have investigated the effects of growing economic instability and relative restriction of possibilities,  
174 in the everyday life of people across the world. In particular, the post-2008 economic crisis and  
175 the EU 2015 “refugee crisis” have come to be geographically associated with Southern European  
176 countries, thus bringing a new “Mediterranean” into focus, unified by common socio-economic  
177 shifts and problems (Ben-Yehoyada 2017). As Knight and Stewart wrote a few years ago: “the  
178 study of the Mediterranean thus no longer attempts to establish widely shared cultural forms, it  
179 analyses, rather, how societies in this region negotiate the structural violence (economic and  
180 political) to which they are all now subject” (Knight and Stewart 2016, 2).

181 In this context, “precarity” has emerged as a concept that captures – for ordinary people,  
182 scholars and activists alike – struggles for basic rights and livelihoods in the context of declining  
183 welfare and social support. In Italy, a well-developed body of scholarly work have documented the  
184 multiple effects of the progressive deregulation of labour not only on working conditions (Choi  
185 and Mattoni 2010), but also on social activism (Murgia and Semi 2012) and subjectivities (Molè  
186 2010; Muehlebach 2012). Although an increasingly precarious labour market dominates  
187 contemporary societies, the shift to unprotected and deregulated working conditions has been  
188 particularly abrupt in Italy (Ferrera and Gualmini 2004), thereby giving birth to different forms of  
189 social vulnerability and complex social movements (Murgia 2014). These transformations have  
190 routinised the everyday use of the utterance “I am a precarious one” (*Sono un precario*), with two  
191 distinct but intersecting socio-cultural meanings: “on the one hand, it refers colloquially to one’s  
192 employment with a particular kind of semipermanent work contract, and, on the other hand, it

193 implicitly indexes psychological doubt and uncertainty, a subject fraught with acute anxiety and  
194 nagging hypervigilance.” (Molè 2010, 38). The level of job uncertainty experienced by the asylum  
195 workers encountered during my fieldwork was particularly high, as their temporary contracts were  
196 dependent on the fluctuating availability of funding for refugee reception (Riccio and Tarabusi  
197 2018). As I have argued elsewhere (Giudici 2021), in Italy recent developments in asylum  
198 management profoundly affected both humanitarian workers’ labor conditions and the kind of  
199 support that they ended up providing to asylum seekers. The former were often young and  
200 overqualified people hit by the consequences of economic recession and unable to enjoy the social  
201 rights once taken for granted in advanced capitalist economies. As a result, a set of “unruly  
202 feelings” (Fortier 2016) – such as exhaustion and bitterness, but also indignation and anger –  
203 seemed to proliferate within the everyday workings of the state-managed asylum system.

204 The article draws on almost three years (2019-2021) of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in  
205 three different Northern Italian cities, as part of a collaborative research project on housing  
206 pathways and home experiences of refugees in Italy<sup>2</sup>. However, the material on which this article  
207 draws upon refers specifically to everyday encounters and interviews that took place in the city of  
208 Milan. Fieldwork in Milan was conducted in different settings, such as big refugee reception  
209 centers, but also small apartments and informal accommodations. It consisted in daily visits to the  
210 centers, visiting refugees in their apartment, but also hanging out informally with both refugees  
211 and social workers in public spaces and informal settings. While asylum workers’ feelings of  
212 precariousness and uncertainty were not initially a central concern of the project, they resounded  
213 powerfully within in-depth interviews and during participant observation. This prompted me to  
214 question more openly everyday experiences of future impossibility and feelings of (un)safety, both  
215 within and outside the asylum system. Although the article examines three selected life histories,  
216 my empirical analysis is based on long-term ethnographic engagement in the field of asylum and  
217 humanitarian work in Italy.

218 Traditionally considered as the financial and industrial hub of Italy, Milan is also one of the  
219 most important Italian scenes for urban activism. For instance, it is the city where “socially  
220 precarious workers” organized the first MayDay Parade (May 1st, 2001), which rapidly spread  
221 across Europe through transnational activist networks. The social movement, born to address  
222 manifold uncertainties connected to temporary forms of work, gathered a great variety of

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<sup>2</sup> The MIUR-FARE HOASI, based at the University of Trento, Italy. As in many other ethnographic projects carried out in those years, fieldwork underwent several interruptions due to the global pandemic and relative social distancing rules. However, I have personally been involved in different stages of ethnographic research with asylum seekers, refugees and social workers in Italy since 2010.



223 temporary employees, migrant and non-migrant (Murgia 2014). The period between 2014 and 2016  
224 registered one of the highest rates of arrivals and asylum applications in the EU and in Italy  
225 (Eurostat 2017). During and after the European “long summer of migration”, Milan re-emerged  
226 as a crucial setting in the current geography of migrant mobility and a transit hub for many people  
227 crossing the central Mediterranean route towards Europe (Grimaldi 2016; Sinatti 2022)<sup>3</sup>. Yet,  
228 after 2017 a turnover in key positions in the Milanese local governance, combined with the  
229 establishment of increasingly restrictive measures against migrants at the national and European  
230 level, led to significant shifts in the attitude towards migration (Campesi 2018). In particular, the  
231 resurgence of xenophobic and nationalist stances after the 2018 national elections brought drastic  
232 budget cuts in refugee reception, which involved the closure of several local reception facilities for  
233 refugees, to the abandonment of migrants in situations of increasing marginalization, and to the  
234 layoff of several frontline asylum workers (IDOS 2019; Marchetti 2020). Against this background,  
235 asylum workers’ ethical dilemmas and sentiments of uncertainty ended up being exacerbated.

236

237

### 238 **3. If I wanted safety, I would have chosen another job.**

239 I first met Elena<sup>4</sup> in December 2019. At that time, she was 32 years old, and she was employed in  
240 a service for the professional integration of refugees, on a temporary basis. She was also engaged  
241 as a volunteer in a non-governmental organization offering health services, counselling and legal  
242 support for migrants in Milan. Elena, born and raised in Milan, had lived for several years in the  
243 UK, where she graduated in Anthropology and Development. After completing her master’s  
244 degree, she worked a couple of years in London as social worker, in community-based services for  
245 migrants. In 2011 she was willing to go back to Italy, mainly for personal reasons, and she was  
246 offered a full-time job in one of the refugee reception centres that were created to face the so-  
247 called “North African Emergency”. The centre was managed by one of the biggest social  
248 cooperatives<sup>5</sup> active in Milan. Yet, after just three months, she decided to leave the job because as  
249 she said: “the conditions in which refugees were living were terrible, I really could not take it  
250 anymore”. She then worked for a while as a freelance English teacher. After the sharp increase of

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<sup>3</sup> At that time, the local administration aimed at establishing Milan as a “city of transit and refuge” (Caponio 2018). Yet, Italy was also criticized for its informal “policies of laissez-passer”. The municipal reception system for transit migrants was definitely closed in the first half of 2017 (see also Artero and Fontanari 2021).

<sup>4</sup> All names and some more recognizable details have been changed to protect research participants’ anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> In Italy social and immigration services are generally outsourced to a multiplicity of non-governmental actors, such as social cooperatives, NGOs, charitable and volunteer organizations. On the specificities of the governance of social services in Milan, see Polizzi and Vitale 2017. On the multi-level governance of asylum reception in Italy, see Campomori and Ambrosini 2020).

251 refugees' arrivals in 2014-2015 and the subsequent expansion of the Italian asylum system, refugee  
252 centers (re)opened in Milan and Elena decided to work again in refugee reception.

253 Interestingly, she ended up working part-time in the same building where she used to work few  
254 years before, a former school in a semi-peripheral neighborhood of Milan, where around fifty  
255 young male asylum seekers were hosted. Yet, at that time the center changed management and it  
256 was part of the SPRAR network<sup>6</sup>. SPRAR centers were managed by local authorities that were  
257 subcontracting their everyday management to third sector organizations (NGOs or cooperatives),  
258 active in the social sector. They were often considered a sort of “second-line reception system”,  
259 as they were offering many more services (such as legal support, intercultural mediation, etc.)  
260 compared to governmental reception centers. This time too, Elena was employed by the social  
261 cooperative that was managing the centre on a temporary basis, with six-months contracts that  
262 were periodically renewed. When I asked her why she decided to work in refugee reception, she  
263 replied:

264

265 “Because [...] because I decided to work in this environment. Because I really believe in  
266 some values, such as equality. Because I believe in the freedom of movement, I believe that  
267 nobody choses to be born in a place or in another. Because I am politically engaged and I  
268 take sides... through this work, I thought I could do something in which I believe, despite  
269 everything. Instead of just going away from everything and everyone, I thought that through  
270 this work I could find a mediation between my principles and the fact of living within this  
271 society”.

272

273 Elena's narrative was not exceptional. The very choice of working with asylum seekers and  
274 refugees often stemmed from a political engagement with issues of minority rights and social  
275 justice. Many times, working with refugees was perceived in continuity with long-term engagement  
276 with political activism. Yet, the multiple inadequacies of the asylum system, combined with an  
277 increasingly hostile social and political landscape, were often engendering deep frustration, if not  
278 anger, among asylum workers themselves. Elena worked for four years at that center (between  
279 2015 and 2019) and, as she recounted, during the final year the initial hopes for change often  
280 turned sour:

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<sup>6</sup> The Italian asylum reception system is very complex: it involves several state and non-governmental actors, strong regional variations and recurrent changes of functions. For a synthetic analysis of asylum procedures and policies until 2015, see Sorgoni (2015). For an exploration of recent shifts in Italian policies meant to govern asylum seekers, and their moral underpinnings, see Marchetti (2020).

281

282 “We had some important infrastructural problems at the centre. Broken closets, broken  
283 doors, problems in the toilets... And the guys were always coming to complain to us,  
284 obviously. But the cooperative did not have funds, they said, so the answer was always the  
285 same. And even if I was against the system, even if I was feeling angry exactly like them...  
286 you are always the white one, you have an office, you should always have the power to change  
287 things. Even though - I know it sounds funny - some of the refugees working full time were  
288 earning more than me, than us”.

289

290 Aid work, as Fechter (2016, 230) noted, requires a specific form of immaterial labour that arises  
291 “spontaneously and perhaps inevitably, from discrepancies between aspirations and ideals, and  
292 achieved - or achievable - realities”. In the case of Italian asylum workers, however, a growing  
293 uneasiness was not simply elicited by the chasm between “ideals” and “reality”, but also from the  
294 daily challenges of highly unprotected work conditions, which left little space for moments of rest,  
295 recognition, or future projects. For instance, Elena was often working overtime in the evening  
296 without being paid, as well as during weekends, and this was taken for granted by the cooperative  
297 managers. She was living in shared apartment with her sister and another friend, as rents were too  
298 high to find an apartment on her own. Furthermore, as she argued, nobody would rent her an  
299 apartment with her short-term contract. Elena’s material and existential uncertainty is illustrative  
300 of the reshaping of livelihood projects and hopes of many young people across contemporary  
301 Italy, and beyond (Narotzky 2016; Pozzi and Rimoldi 2017). However, Elena was also well aware  
302 that the refugees she worked with on a daily basis were undergoing a much deeper housing and  
303 existential precarity, due to the overlapping effects of an inadequate housing policies, skyrocketing  
304 rents and entrenched forms of discrimination (see also Dotsey and Chiodelli 2021).

305 In 2019 budget funds for refugee reception were drastically lowered and the cooperative chose  
306 not to renew Elena’s contract. She took this decision as a predictable outcome of her life decisions:

307

308 “Well, I was expecting it, soon or later. I mean, *if I wanted safety, I would have chosen another job,*  
309 *probably with a salary suitable for 2020.* Obviously, in some moments I felt also very  
310 rewarded. For example, when I meet some guys that I worked with, and I see them doing  
311 much better. [...] But there are ups and downs. Sometimes I would like just to break  
312 everything and go away, sometimes I ask myself why I studied for five years to get the same  
313 salary of my mum that did not even go to the university...”

314

315 Elena's words - and even her round-shouldered posture while having this conversation – were  
316 embodying the injuries of limited recognition and unrealized potential. By recalling the downward  
317 mobility experienced by her generation, Elena evokes the breakdown of consolidated expectations  
318 of improvement and “good life”, typical of many young adults across Europe (Narotsky and  
319 Besnier 2016). Surely, her words were informed by a deep resignation to structural instabilities  
320 and constraints. Elena's vignette points at how the economic crisis, especially in Southern  
321 European countries, has radically reworked everyday imaginings of the future, often foreclosing  
322 the aspirations of improvement that were once taken for granted. Yet, it is also noteworthy that  
323 Elena, like some of her colleagues, cultivated an enduring sense of pride concerning her “different”  
324 work path. For her, sacrificing middle-class goals of “stability” and “safety” was also a way of  
325 cultivating a deeper alignment with political ideals of social justice and solidarity. I now turn to the  
326 story of Miriam that, while in some ways similar to Elena's, is also more explicitly confronting the  
327 unbearable “ethics of sacrifice” creeping in precarious humanitarian work, in times of “emergency”  
328 and “migration crisis”.

329

330

#### 331 **4. It was the right time to leave**

332 Starting from 2018 the Italian approach to asylum and migration took a more restrictive,  
333 expulsive turn. In the context of steady economic recession, the cost of asylum reception became  
334 an important issue in Italian political and public life. Asylum seekers were increasingly depicted as  
335 “welfare freeloaders” taking advance of shrinking resources and, thus, undeserving of protection  
336 (see Burnett 2015). At the same time, the idea of criminalizing migrant solidarity - both inside  
337 European territory and during search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea - became  
338 widely accepted (Cutitta 2018; Tazzioli and Walters 2019). Interestingly, the internal enemies of  
339 the far-right nativist propaganda were not only pro-refugee activists and NGOs, but also social  
340 workers engaged in refugee support (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Thus, various forms of humanitarian  
341 aid, once at the center of anthropological scrutiny for their inherently de-politicizing effects (Fassin  
342 2012; Ticktin 2006), acquired a new contentious character (Ambrosini 2022; Della Porta 2020).

343 In 2018 a new Immigration and Security Decree (commonly referred to as “Salvini Decree”)  
344 introduced a sharp restriction of services and facilities available to asylum seekers and refugees in  
345 the country. These institutional and societal changes had a profound impact on self-perceptions  
346 and everyday activities of people involved in refugee reception, as Miriam, a 30-year-old ex-asylum

347 worker, explained: “After the Salvini Decree was approved, I felt weakened, I felt that I didn’t even  
348 have anymore the law by my side. I got this job with many resistances, about how it could be  
349 working inside this system, what it means... and I confess that I experienced it with lot of  
350 uneasiness.”

351 Miriam, like Elena, was engaged in pro-migrant activism outside her working time. She was also  
352 sharing an apartment with some friends, as she could not afford a place of her own with her salary.  
353 She held a master’s degree in human rights and started being involved in institutional refugee  
354 reception in 2016, after a summer spent as an activist at the Franco-Italian border of Ventimiglia  
355 (Aru 2021). During the peak of arrivals of the 2015-2016 “EU refugee crisis”, Miriam was  
356 employed by a social cooperative that was managing a big center for male refugees in the Milanese  
357 hinterland. After an internship period of six months, she was offered a permanent contract. Yet,  
358 the progressive deterioration of the asylum system impacted profoundly also on her everyday  
359 working conditions:

360 “We didn’t have a place where to have a lunch break, we were given cars without insurance  
361 for job duties, *with a huge personal danger, huge risks...* Our skills and degrees were not  
362 acknowledged, we never had a clear working schedule: I could finish at midnight or at 2  
363 am... We used work phones, which we were supposed to leave on day and night... If there  
364 was a problem or an emergency in one of the centres, refugees were calling us. And this  
365 guaranteed availability was never paid.”

366  
367 Miriam and some colleagues, exhausted by impossible demands, misrecognition and everyday  
368 devaluation ended up filing a lawsuit against the social cooperative<sup>7</sup> that employed them: “Last  
369 years’ political decisions gave us the final push to say: ‘This is not the work we want to do. We  
370 don’t find any meaning in it.’ We were people with degrees, with experiences, with many ideas.  
371 And we felt treated really like the last of the last, without any recognition. *We felt this injustice so*  
372 *strong. But we also didn’t know what to do.* In social services jobs are always underpaid and temporary.”  
373 Miriam and her colleagues were aware that their workers’ rights were infringed daily. Yet, this was  
374 an extremely common condition for people employed in social services in Italy (see also Pentaraki  
375 and Dyonopoulos 2019). As Miriam explained, being involved in refugee support – as well as in  
376 other kinds of social support – involved moralized expectations of working for solidaristic duties,  
377 rather than to earn a fair wage. In the name of the moral imperative to offer care and support,

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<sup>7</sup> Miriam and her colleagues were asking a dismissal for “just cause”, to prove that their contractual rights had not been respected. They were asking this kind of dismissal also in order to be eligible for some social benefits, such as unemployment allowance.

378 asylum workers were supposed to come to terms with their disappointment and frustration. A  
379 well-developed body of scholarly work has examined the transfer of the social and moral  
380 responsibility of care from the state to individual citizens, in “advanced liberal”, neoliberal or post-  
381 Fordist regimes (e.g, Rose 1999; Greenhouse et al. 2012). These shifts have led to moralized  
382 notions of individual responsibility, but also to dutiful engagements in volunteerism and  
383 community care work (Muehlebach 2012; Marchesi 2022). In Italy, the seminal work of Andrea  
384 Muehlebach (2012) on the rise of the “culture of voluntarism” have shed light on how the region  
385 of Milan have been particularly invested by these ethical and affective forms of citizenship. The  
386 new “public” emerging from these socio-economic transformations, in Muehlebach’s words,  
387 “weds hyperexploitation to intense moralization, nonremuneration to a public fetishization of  
388 sacrifice” (Muehlebach 2011, 75). Yet, as opposed to many social workers engaged in refugee  
389 reception, Miriam and her colleagues decided to step away from those self-sacrificing logics. They  
390 ended up winning the case: “The lawyer insisted on the fact that we were not volunteers, our work  
391 needed to be acknowledged, we needed to demand our rights. We suddenly felt that our anger was  
392 justified, it was legitimate. [...] I liked this job at the beginning, but *it was the right time to leave. I felt*  
393 *I was wasting my time and skills.*”

394 A set of “unruly feelings” (Fortier 2016) – such as anger, frustration, or indignation – pushed  
395 Miriam to leave the apparent *safety* of a permanent contract, in search of a job that could better  
396 accommodate her ethical values, political engagements, and personal aspirations. Miriam’s  
397 narrative hint at asylum workers’ efforts to re-instantiate their everyday tasks as a proper form of  
398 labor, with clear duties and rights. Her story is embedded in the broader politicization of welfare  
399 workers in Italy, which erupted mainly after the recent restrictive turns in migration management  
400 (see also Giudici 2021). Thus, it evokes the underexplored continuities between humanitarian work  
401 and forms of political activism. Interestingly, those struggles often deconstructed the dominant  
402 frame of “ethnic competition for scarce resources”, by trying “to reunite ‘those below’ against  
403 ‘those above’ across national and racializing lines” (Oliveri 2018, 1). Whereas Miriam and her  
404 colleagues faced different kinds of conflicts, both within and outside the workplace, the choice of  
405 leaving the supposed “safety” of a permanent job (*contratto indeterminato*), ultimately led to  
406 meaningful subjective and collective changes. At the time of the interview, she was always working  
407 in social services and for a relatively low salary, but she was much more satisfied as she was  
408 employed by a serious NGO concerned about workers’ rights. Miriam’s experience retained some  
409 transformative imaginaries, where to rebuild a sense of personal worth, as well as forms of  
410 collective political agency. Building on these insights, in the next section I turn to Susanna’s story,

411 to deepen attention to the constrained temporalities of asylum reception, but also to the everyday  
412 attempts of reconstructing a sense of meaningful futurity.

413

414

415 **5. Until today, it has been a constant struggle.**

416 I first met Susanna on a warm Saturday afternoon in the summer 2022, in the yard of the Social  
417 Centre (*centro sociale*)<sup>8</sup>, a squatted building in a peripheral neighborhood of Milan. Among the  
418 activities of the centre, there was the organization of Italian classes for migrants, run by volunteers.  
419 The multiplication of such places, offering various self-managed community services, is indicative  
420 of how grassroots actors are increasingly embodying a duty of care progressively abandoned by  
421 state institutions (MacLeavy 2023). Susanna, a 36-year-old woman from Pakistan, was attending  
422 one of those Italian classes. She had arrived in Italy in 2020, with her two children, in the middle  
423 of lockdown measures. As she explained to me, she didn't choose Italy as a destination, but she  
424 was told that it was a *safe place*: "You don't choose the place, but people tell you that this is a place  
425 where you can be safe. It's like... we call it destiny (*laughs*). Many people that are in difficult  
426 circumstances, they have to choose what it comes". After one year and half of waiting, she had  
427 been granted a refugee status.

428 Several ethnographic studies on asylum in Europe have stressed how, for refugees and asylum  
429 seekers, perceptions of the future tend to be transformed: "it becomes a temporal horizon that is  
430 detached from the present and imagined as lying far ahead in a blurred temporal dimension quite  
431 distant from the real situation of the present day" (Fontanari 2017, 33). In particular, the long  
432 waiting times (for legal status, for economic independence, etc.) so typical of the asylum experience  
433 represent temporal ruptures in people's biographical trajectories. They can produce subjective  
434 effects of subordination, as well as the feeling of not being able to move forward with life  
435 (Khosravi 2010). Nevertheless, numerous people in several parts of the world endure such hostile  
436 contexts, retaining certain capacities for agency and the ability to imagine and hope for a new life  
437 (Brun 2015; Kallio et al. 2021). This was the case of Susanna, who had particularly clear ideas about  
438 her aspirations and goals. Susanna was hosted in an apartment of the locally managed asylum  
439 system. The accommodation was temporary, and she was supposed to gain economic  
440 independence soon, as her rights to asylum reception were about to end. As a single mother with  
441 children, she was considered a particularly vulnerable subject and, thus, she knew she was not

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<sup>8</sup> Grounded in leftist social movements, self-managed Social Centers are a typical feature of Italian post-industrial urban landscape. Squatted empty warehouses, factories or vacant schools are the setting for a multiplicity of self-organized social, cultural and political activities (see, e.g., Casaglia 2016).

442 going to be left on the street. However, the pressure to find a job and housing was very high, even  
443 though to find an affordable accommodation was extremely challenging. Susanna had a university  
444 education and, before leaving, she was working as a bank clerk in Pakistan. In Italy her university  
445 degree was not recognized and, since her arrival, she had been struggling to have the time to get a  
446 university education.

447

448 “I have been fighting, I have been struggling. *Until today, it has been a constant struggle.* I am  
449 explaining that I am doing exactly what I am meant to do. My goal and your goals (i.e. *the ones*  
450 *of asylum caseworkers*) are the same, it’s just that my strategy is different. I want to continue doing  
451 what I know doing. But they have been “no, no, you are wasting your time. How can you  
452 attend the university, you are “mamma”, your children should be your first priority”. [...] You  
453 know, when I entered, they told me that the project is for six months, plus six months, plus  
454 six months. That is 1.5 year. And it’s already 1.5 years that I am there. So, they need me to get  
455 out of it as soon as possible.”

456

457 Conflicting temporal frameworks come together in how the temporariness of asylum reception  
458 measures clashes with the time and efforts needed to rebuild a meaningful life (Thorshaug and  
459 Brun, 2019; Pitzalis 2023). Whereas her physical safety was preserved within the asylum system,  
460 Susanna was feeling that the possibility to build her own future was profoundly hampered. Those  
461 everyday clashes point to feelings of misrecognition and devaluation, which may be integral part  
462 of refugees’ experience even after being granted protection. At the same time, it is important to  
463 emphasize that conditions of *safety* – just like feeling “at home” – do not necessarily only generate  
464 positive and warm feelings (Brickell 2012; Yuval-Davis 2011). Susanna’s “faith” in university  
465 education and its potentials stands in stark contrast with asylum workers’ own sense of downward  
466 mobility and devaluation. By insisting to go back to the university, Susanna was refusing to get  
467 trapped in the unskilled labor market reserved to immigrants: “I know that everybody thinks I  
468 should find a job as a cleaner or *badante* (elderly caretaker). But I simply cannot do this. These are  
469 not my skills; I don’t know how to do it. Also, the salary is going to be very low, it would be very  
470 difficult to support my children”.

471 Her aspirations were stubborn and enduring, despite overwhelming and harsh conditions  
472 (Povinelli 2011). Susanna’s word and actions kept a future-oriented stance, which counterbalanced  
473 experiences of “enforced presentism” (Guyer 2007) and passive waiting (Hyndman and Giles  
474 2011) that tend to characterize the asylum experience. She ended up getting a master’s degree



475 scholarship for refugees. As she observed, she was determined not to spend her time waiting  
476 passively, like many other asylum seekers. Her everyday struggle entailed a long-term investment  
477 in an activity - studying - which would not give immediate, or certain, results. Of course, her  
478 endurance may also be interpreted as a desperate effort to maintain her middle-class identity  
479 unaltered (Hage 2009). Yet, in a context in which her life path and work integration seemed pre-  
480 determined by her condition of single mother and racialized migrant, her aspirations retained a  
481 disruptive character. This is also why they sounded so unrealistic, in the eyes of the caseworkers  
482 in charge of her case. Through her stubbornness in pursuing a university education, Susanna  
483 enacted a form of temporal agency, in that she was not merely showing her capacity to stick it out  
484 despite the absence of alternatives. Thus, her narrative, rather than being focused on loss and  
485 existential immobility, was interwoven with the demand to find a path of hope and fulfillment  
486 through the altered present.

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#### 489 **Conclusions**

490 Through a reflection on “the enduring significance of austerity and its multifaceted influence on  
491 society” (MacLeavy 2023: 1), this article approached multi-layered experiences of precariousness  
492 and (un)safety within and outside the asylum system, in an attempt of avoiding the reproduction  
493 of well-worn dichotomies between “us” and “them”. Again, this does not mean underestimating  
494 the differential positioning of subjects across borders and boundaries, whereby “societal hope”  
495 and the capacity to aspire become resources unevenly distributed within societies (Hage 2003).  
496 Admittedly, asylum workers’ and refugees’ experiences are extremely different in scale and nature  
497 and, ultimately, incomparable. Yet, as the cases analyzed above show, the focus on shared  
498 temporalities of uncertainty and (un)safety allows us to see the pervasiveness of feelings of  
499 precariousness, devaluation and future shrinking across different subjects within contemporary  
500 societies. On the one hand, young and overqualified asylum workers, like Elena and Miriam,  
501 struggle to reconcile their ideals of social justice with their daily work routine, while also being  
502 affected by the mismatch between consolidated expectations and multiple structural and subjective  
503 constraints. They both end up, for different reasons, leaving their precarious and exploited jobs  
504 within the asylum reception system. While having hard time in orienting themselves toward an  
505 aspirational future, they are also not ready to sacrifice ethical values and political engagements in  
506 the name of a blurred idea of *safety*, to which they feel they are not even entitled. On the other  
507 hand, Susanna, a refugee and a single mother, is determined to get a university education in Italy,

508 while also refusing to be trapped in the unskilled labor market reserved to immigrants. Her  
509 aspirations are openly regarded as “unrealistic” for someone in her position. As a person assisted  
510 by an institutional asylum project, her control over her daily and biographical time is quite limited.  
511 Yet, her future orientations seem stubborn and enduring, despite multi-layered structural  
512 constraints.

513 This article adds weight to scholarship where political life is approached from below, in  
514 everyday settings where multi-scalar power relations between individuals, collectives and  
515 institutions are shaped and negotiated (Brickell 2012; Hydman, 2004). I approached empirically  
516 the idea of (un)safety as a material and bodily condition and as an emotional state, directly linked  
517 to the perceived possibility of being able to orient oneself towards the future. Going beyond a  
518 certain tendency to speak unquestionably positively of hope and indeterminacy, I presented a  
519 critical analysis of the actual work of future engagements as they occur in concrete social settings  
520 and geopolitical moments. As a matter of fact, the future “is a placeholder, a placebo, a no-place,  
521 but it is also a commonplace that we need to investigate in all its cultural and historical density”  
522 (Rosenberg and Harding 2005, 9). The narratives here analyzed evoke post-austerity landscapes,  
523 marked by the erosion of safety nets and a growing tension surrounding access to basic  
524 opportunities and rights. When the future is increasingly perceived as risk, feelings and principles  
525 of unsafety may easily become instruments of exclusion and separation. It is not by chance that in  
526 times of economic “crisis” and welfare states restructuring, narratives of victimhood are shifted  
527 from refugees to “Italians”, thereby feeding an exponential growth in inequality and social  
528 polarization (Perocco and Della Puppa 2023). Approaching asylum workers’ and refugees’  
529 temporal (dis)orientations within a shared analytical framework enables the questioning of  
530 normative imaginaries of a “normal” time, beyond the uncertainty and unsafety of the immigration  
531 process.

532 As a result, the very idea of Europe as “safe haven” is inevitably exposed and unraveled.  
533 Experiences of marginality, devaluation and precariousness punctuate refugees’ everyday lives,  
534 before *and* after the granting of a legal status. Furthermore, in contexts increasingly marked by  
535 economic downturn and manifold “crises”, the supposed values of “freedom, security and justice”  
536 on which European democracies are grounded are increasingly called into question, for citizens  
537 and non-citizens alike. Against this background, ideas of “dignified life” are being reworked, while  
538 consolidated expectations of unlimited possibilities of upward social mobility, typical of capitalist  
539 economies, have started to crumble (Hage 2003; Guyer 2007). These processes are personal and

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<sup>9</sup> Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Lisbon Treaty), Article 67.

540 affective but, also, inherently political. An ethnographic appreciation of how uncertainty *feels* in  
541 specific geopolitical and historical contexts eventually brings to the fore the naturalization of logics  
542 of exclusion and distinction, which end up exacerbating barriers and boundaries between  
543 territories and people. It also reminds us of the intrinsic political potential of less visible, often  
544 overlooked, everyday struggles.

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