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# Imagineries of ‘Refugee journeys’ into Europe and practices of inhospitality pending return

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## ABSTRACT

Employing journey as a critical lens of inquiry, this article interweaves theoretical analysis of anti-migrant narratives with empirical observation to examine hostile policies towards forced migratory journeys into Europe and the UK as an enactment of fear-based imagineries of the ‘refugee journey’. The paper develops the concept of inhospitality pending return, with focus on practices of inhospitality in places traditionally associated with leisure and tourism, such as ferries. The authors argue that this kind of inhospitality is shaped by a context of hostile European approaches to journeys of forced migration; these are informed by, and in turn reinforce, fear-based imagineries.

Χρησιμοποιώντας το ταξίδι ως κριτικό φακό διερεύνησης, το άρθρο αυτό διαπλέκει τη θεωρητική ανάλυση αντι-μεταναστευτικών αφηγημάτων με την εμπειρική παρατήρηση για να εξετάσει τις εχθρικές πολιτικές απέναντι στα αναγκαστικά μεταναστευτικά ταξίδια στην Ευρώπη και το Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο ως μια εφαρμογή των βασισμένων στο φόβο φαντασιώσεων του «προσφυγικού ταξιδιού». Το άρθρο αναπτύσσει την έννοια της αφιλοξενίας εν αναμονή της επιστροφής, με ιδιαίτερη έμφαση σε πρακτικές αφιλοξενίας σε χώρους που παραδοσιακά συνδέονται με την αναψυχή και τον τουρισμό, όπως τα πορθμεία. Οι συγγραφείς υποστηρίζουν ότι αυτό το ιδιαίτερο είδος αφιλοξενίας διαμορφώνεται από το πλαίσιο των εχθρικών ευρωπαϊκών προσεγγίσεων για τα ταξίδια αναγκαστικής μετανάστευσης- αυτές ενημερώνονται και με τη σειρά τους ενισχύουν φαντασιώσεις που βασίζονται στο φόβο.

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## Introduction

Within the global migration regime, individuals and their journeys are governed and perceived differently based on factors such as their passport’s power and their economic status (O’Regan et al., 2011; Sheller, 2018). Such factors influence the ways people’s journeys are imagined, narrated and bordered, leading to extreme variations in individual experiences of arrival, departure, hospitality and inhospitality. For people categorised as ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’, arrival may be aboard a small boat reaching the UK’s shores, often after multiple attempts and pushbacks at sea. In contrast, individuals considered ‘tourists’ may arrive on a luxurious cruise ship, free to depart shortly for another port. People classified as an ‘illegal migrant’ will likely be transferred,

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after arrival, to another location – perhaps a camp, a hotel, barracks or a barge – with potential deportation always looming on the horizon.

Employing journey as a critical lens of inquiry, this article interweaves analysis of narratives related to refugee journeys, theoretical discussion of these narratives and empirical observation to consider hostile policies towards forced migrants into Europe and the UK as an enactment of fear-based imaginaries of the ‘refugee journey’. Author 1 examines how such imaginaries are made manifest in the hostile narratives and bordering practices which mediate lived experiences of reception for people seeking sanctuary, and affect intercultural encounter between forced migrants and receiving populations even before such encounters occur. These experiences include practices of (in)hospitality or ‘hostipitality’ as theorised by Derrida (2000, 2005). Turning to empirical data, Author 2 considers such practices in the UK and Greece, in places traditionally associated with leisure and tourism, analysing examples of (in)hospitality related to journey, with a particular focus on ferries, cruise ships and barges as emerging geographies of refugee (in)hospitality, detention and return. The authors argue that situations of inhospitality towards people seeking sanctuary at the borders of the EU and the UK – such as detention, the use of ferries and barges as places of conditional or restricted mobility, or deportation for people seeking refuge – are examples of ‘inhospitality pending return’.

### *On positionality and labels*

We are scholars whose personal histories and professional experience inform and influence our work and loyalties. These lie with grassroots endeavours fostering intercultural dialogue and welcome with people forced to migrate to a new country, without seeking to justify why they migrate, on the premise that people will continue to move across borders seeking safety as is their legal right under the Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951). A wide range of actors – including politicians and policy makers, activists, NGO workers and academics – turn to research to understand, define and respond to phenomena related to forced migration (Hansen, 2018). We position ourselves among these actors while noting that most reports, books, definitions and frameworks regarding forced migration in a European context are made by people who are not themselves forced migrants. We ourselves are dual, bilingual citizens of European nations, born into the privilege of passports and languages which grant us power to move freely between and across the EU and the UK (see Moyer, 2018). Our identities are shaped by migration undertaken for economic and familial reasons – not ‘forced migration’. We acknowledge how our histories inform our interrogation of unequal border regimes as well as our solidarity with those friends, colleagues and fellow humans who were not born into the freedom of movement which we so often take for granted. We also recognise that these are ‘positions which are held by webs of privilege, education and choice’ (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020, p. 69).

Forced migration can be defined as movement undertaken by people who travel because they have to – the alternative being a life unsustainable because of dangers such as war or persecution as defined by the Geneva convention (UNHCR, 1951). These people are categorised in groups that include, but are not limited to, refugees and people seeking asylum. In contexts of hegemonic labelling such as European border regimes, the use of different categories to describe people who are forced to migrate is a contested and politicised practice, predominantly based on dichotomies relating to the temporal, spatial and causal elements of migratory journeys (Collyer & Haas, 2012). Tacitly accepting these categories risks making us complicit in a process which erodes the rights of refugees and migrants in Europe (Crowley & Skleparis, 2018). Throughout this paper, when using the terms such as ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’, we approach these words as categories which are used by a variety of actors to construct, control and criminalise people in racialised ways. We understand them as constructed labels which – as we argue in this paper – are constitutive of narratives around ‘refugee journeys’ and ‘refugee arrivals’ infested with fear and threat.

## Methodology

This article is informed by analysis of a range of ‘social’ and ‘political’ narratives about ‘refugee journeys’. Such narratives, interrogated by the authors of this paper as well as by other scholars of migration, are representative of a broad political spectrum and include a variety of sources such as media accounts, policy documents, NGO reports and political speeches. The authors offer a conceptual discussion, interwoven with theorisations around intercultural encounter and (in)hospitality, to consider how such narratives, and the practices that they reflect and further promote, are based on fear and the premise of ‘hosting’ those seeking asylum only temporarily. The authors further propose the concept of ‘inhospitality pending return’ to describe this fear-based approach to people seeking sanctuary.

This discussion is linked to, and illustrated by, people’s stories drawn from empirical data gathered during ethnographic studies<sup>1</sup> conducted by Author 2. These studies took place on the island of Lesbos in Greece during the years of 2015–2019, and on the Isle of Portland in the UK between May and September 2024, where the author engaged in ethnographic research on the Bibby Stockholm barge which – according to many of the people forced to live there – resembled a floating prison. Research methods included participant observations in and around the ports of Lesbos and Samos, on board ferries travelling from Lesbos to Turkey and Lesbos to Athens, and around the port on the Isle of Portland. Author 2’s understanding of participant observations as a method stems from her solidarity and engagement with refugees and asylum seekers’ struggles for their right to the ferry and freedom of movement across and against borders. In both research contexts, Author 2 participated in the activities that she was observing, immersing herself in the so-called ‘field’ through the more personal relationships that she established with the research interlocutors. In the case of Lesbos and Samos, Author 2 participated in activities that were organised by activist groups at Mytilene port (Lesbos) and Vathi port (Samos), such as bidding farewell to the asylum seekers who were boarding the ferry for the mainland, protesting against deportations and distributing essential items in the port. Author 2 also boarded the ferry multiple times and took the journey from Lesbos to Samos and back, and from the two islands to Piraeus port in the Greek mainland. On these ferry journeys, she met and conversed with people seeking asylum, some of whom became both research interlocutors and very close friends. During these journeys, Author 2 observed how ‘asylum seekers’ were segregated from other passengers while boarding and disembarking from the ferry, as well as being subject to surveillance and racial profiling, including on board, by the police and ferry personnel. These observations and interactions on the ferries were written down as field-notes immediately after the journey and, in combination with the notes from conversations she conducted with interlocutors, contributed towards this paper’s understanding and analysis of unequal journeys, mobile segregation and inhospitality towards return. In the case of the Isle of Portland, Author 2 participated in the various activities that volunteers organised for people seeking asylum living on the barge such as group walks around the island, board games and writing workshops as well as more intimate walks on a one-to-one basis with some of the individuals living on the barge from their meeting point at the bus stop and along the coastal paths.

On Lesbos, moreover, Author 2 had in-depth conversations (between one to two hours) with three people who were detained on a ferry and forcefully transferred across the Aegean Sea. On the Isle of Portland, Author 2 had in-depth conversations (between one to two hours) with five people categorised as ‘asylum seekers’ on the barge, and with five volunteers in solidarity with them; and a semi-structured interview with the former mayor of Portland. Author 2 presents recollections and interpretations of what was said and discussed, from notes taken immediately after conversations. Her field-notes comprise of personal reflections, narratives, experiences, and emotions in relation to these participant observations, along with recollections of the conversations that she engaged in and that contributed towards her understanding of the islands’ everyday incarcerations. To protect the anonymity of people involved, all information which could lead to identification has been removed and pseudonyms have been used, other than for the former mayor of

Portland who asked to be identified in Author 2's research publications and provided written informed consent to be interviewed. The people involved in the research gave informed verbal consent to share their experiences of living on the barge and to include our conversations in research publications. Structural injustices risk being repeated and reinforced if 'the voices, needs, and experiences of marginalised groups are not at the table' (Sorrells, 2013, p. 234); the observations and empirical research of Author 2 are an attempt to represent those voices, needs, and experiences.

## EU and UK migration policies: from 'crisis' to deterrence and return

It has been argued that 2015 represented a turning point in European migration policies, with large numbers of people seeking to enter Europe portrayed widely as images of an 'uncontrolled invasion' which led to a 're-bordering' of Europe (Artero & Fontanari, 2021, p. 635). Greece was the European yardstick of the so-called 'refugee crisis', which many scholars have argued is a crisis of reception and solidarity (Campesi, 2018), a humanitarian crisis (Afouxenidis et al., 2017) and a moral crisis (Fassin, 2016). In a context defined by the EU as a problem of 'unprecedented pressure' caused by 'thousands of migrants' (European Commission (EC), 2015, p. 4, 2) arriving at the external borders of Europe, in 2015–2016, the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros, and Kos became the sites of five 'registration and identification centres', termed 'hotspots' (EC, 2015). These included a deportation mechanism, immediately connecting 'welcome' to enforced return.

Since then, European migratory policy has become increasingly hostile, with European governments enacting policies centred around narratives of borders to be defended against threats posed by refugee journeys, rather than around the right to seek asylum as defined by the Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951). With the implementation of the EU – Türkiye Deal in March 2016 (European Council, 2016), all migrants arriving on Greek border islands were geographically restricted to the five hotspot islands, rendering them deportable. Greece's role in the EU-Türkiye Deal – with its focus on preventing and deporting refugee arrivals – has become a model for the 2020 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (EC, 2020) and its linked new Common European System for Returns which focusses on refugee return and deterrence, envisioning that frontline member states will implement immediate fast-track border procedures, return hubs in and return schemes with 'safe third countries'.

The UK Government has mirrored these wider European policy trends, generating an increasingly hostile environment for people seeking sanctuary. The Illegal Migration Act 2023 stipulates that people reaching the UK via 'irregular' routes, such as by small boat crossings, cannot make a claim for asylum or protection, regardless of their need for protection, and that these individuals can be indefinitely detained and eventually removed from the UK to a third country (Home Office, 2023a). As a result, the UK has witnessed a proliferation of carceral spaces, where people labelled as 'migrants', 'asylum seekers', and 'refugees' have been progressively marginalised through measures of de jure and de facto spatial segregation linked to how individual journeys are classified and bordered.

## 'Refugee journeys'- hostile imaginaries and intercultural encounter

Journey is an important notion in the human psyche, as well as being a key element in experiences of forced migration (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015). We have seen that in the EU and UK contexts, migration policies are increasingly focussed on deterrence and detention: even prior to people's arrival, 'refugee journeys' are imagined and narrated along presumed return rather than refuge. This shift towards anti-immigration positions is closely related to narratives of forced migrants as the racialised, dangerous 'Other'. Such hostile narratives are widespread in political and media discourse (Jenks & Bhatia, 2020) and can be related to fear-based social imaginaries of 'refugee journeys'. Social imaginaries, understood as 'the deep presuppositions that underpin everyday life' (Philpott & Morgan, 2022, p. 7), are made up of shared images, analogies, metaphors, tropes,

and representations. There are clear connections with the key elements of cultural imaginaries, defined as ‘discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions’ (Dawson, 2013, p. 48).

A common element in fear-based imaginaries related to ‘refugee journeys’ is the visual trope of the ‘refugee boat’ (White, 2015), where people who are journeying and arriving as forced migrants are portrayed as an anonymised mass. This trope is referred to in politically charged slogans such as ‘Stop the Boats’, a metonym which simultaneously erases the people arriving in boats while presenting refugee arrivals as a dangerous, threatening ‘emergency’ (Crawley et al., 2016; Nicolosi, 2020). Fear – of the Other, the stranger (Ahmed, 2000) – is a central narrative element in the social imaginaries surrounding refugee journeys into Europe. Such imaginaries are expressed through dominant discourses and practices related to the journeys, arrival and presence of forced migrants in Europe. Examples of dominant, anti-immigration narrative themes include the proliferation of the oxymoronic term ‘illegal asylum seeker’; the racialised profiling of young men arriving to steal jobs and women; and the focus on how much ‘hotel barges’ such as the Bibby Stockholm cost the taxpayer, as if the people placed there are to blame. Kingsolver (2010) show that hostile lexical strategies are not merely a means of constructing and spreading anti-immigrant ideologies, but that pejorative metaphors and negative terms such as ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’, when applied to the cultural Other, are part of larger systems of power and discrimination.

European social and cultural consciousness has a long tradition of racialised attitudes, in which fear-based imaginaries of ‘refugee journeys’ are deeply rooted. Mbembe argues that these attitudes interpret any perception of the ‘Other’ as a ‘person with needs that are real and different to mine’ (Mbembe, 2001, p. 18) as a ‘moral threat or absolute danger’ to European hegemonies. Such attitudes are key elements in social imaginaries which present forced migrants as dangerous threat. They are also closely related to the dominant hostile narratives and representations of ‘refugee journeys’ which inform and support practices of (in)hospitality such as detention and deportation in the EU and the UK.

These practices can be interpreted through the lens of what Mbembe called necropolitics: a system which leads to certain people being ‘subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.’ (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40), and where ‘the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’ (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). Necropolitics is central to migratory policies which treat certain groups of people’s lives as expendable, and informs systems which focus on ‘crimmigration’, criminalising immigration (Bowling & Westera, 2020). We have seen how in Europe, migratory policies have become increasingly focussed on deterrence and return, leading to the re-bordering of a continent which is increasingly termed ‘Fortress Europe’ (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021). A similar dynamic can be observed in Britain, where the journeys of people crossing the Channel from France are widely labelled as ‘illegal’ in media accounts, with politicians calling for action to ‘stop the boats’ as part of the UK’s hostile environment.

Imaginaries, then, are important and intangible factors which contribute to the formation of individual and collective actions. Social imaginaries are understood by Gaonkar (2002, p. 11) as occupying ‘a fluid middle ground between embodied practices and explicit doctrines.’ In relation to ‘refugee journeys’ into Europe, fear-based social imaginaries are clearly embodied in necropolitical politics and policies designed to deter and remove people seeking sanctuary in Europe (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019). These social imaginaries also reinforce – and are reinforced by – hostile doctrines expressed through labels like ‘illegal refugee’ and ‘bogus migrant’, which categorise to determine who is deserving of protection (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) or deportation. The spheres of embodied practice and fear-based doctrines are interconnected and mutually influential: both are integral to prevalent media narratives in the UK which promote fear in immigration debates (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008) and represent ‘refugee arrivals’ as part of the threatening ‘refugee journey’.

In Europe and the UK, fear-based imaginaries also inform socio-political and cultural contexts in which intercultural encounter occurs between people in receiving communities and people forced

to migrate there. Intercultural encounters are multifaceted interactions, dense with elements connected to identity, otherness and power dynamics (Liu & Kramer, 2019). In such encounters, identity and representation are negotiated (Kramsch, 1998) and complex dynamics evolve which can range from conflict to intercultural dialogue – the latter being defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a ‘process undertaken to realise transformative communication that requires space or opportunities for engagement and a diverse group of participants committed to values such as mutual respect, empathy and willingness to consider different perspectives.’ (UNESCO and Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020, p. 11). However, in contexts which are informed by fear-based social imaginaries of ‘refugee journeys’ and related necropolitical migratory policies, processes of transformative intercultural dialogue are inhibited by hostile practices which disrupt encounter.

### After arrival: ‘hostipitality’ and detention informed by fear-based imaginaries

For people reaching the UK and the EU as forced migrants, arrival often triggers processes whereby fear-based imaginaries related to ‘refugee journeys’ are made manifest in laws, policies and practices which overwhelmingly focus on detention and deterrence – the opposite of hospitality and welcome. In response to such practices, movements in the UK advocating for humanitarian responses to the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ have drawn on narratives highlighting British hospitality (ranging from the historical Kindertransport to Paddington Bear) to galvanise welcome and calling on the UK government and citizens to change from hostile to hospitable hosts (Kemp, 2021). This language highlights the close etymological connection between ‘host’ and ‘hostile’, analysed by Derrida (2005) in his critique of the lines of hierarchy and power between host and guest.

Derrida contrasts this conditional hospitality with the concept of absolute or unconditional hospitality: this asks the host to provide hospitality without conditions or restrictions. While the host maintains a position of sovereignty as the purveyor of hospitality in their home, a dynamic of conditional hospitality prevails, based on the acceptance of specific conditions – whether political, judicial or moral – by which guests must abide if hospitality is to be continued. The law of unconditional hospitality is proposed as a moral good and is commanded by many of the world’s religions; however, specific conditions – determined by factors as diverse as culture, legal frameworks, religious beliefs and financial circumstances – are often enacted to mediate between the absolute moral imperative of unconditional hospitality and the reality of human encounter and interaction. In this process, unconditional hospitality is transmuted into a framework of rights and duties, which can be more or less reciprocal depending on the power dynamics between host and guest.

Critiques of Derrida’s conceptualisations, informed by postcolonial perspectives, highlight that hospitality is a concept universally accepted as positive and also a culturally determined practice linked to forms of exclusion and repression (Still, 2010). Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) show how, particularly in contexts of forced migration, practices of hospitality and hostility are rooted in specific local contexts. In Europe, the influence exerted by culturally determined social imaginaries of ‘refugee journeys’ extends past arrival and informs practices of hospitality and ‘hostipitality’. This term, coined by Derrida (2000), expresses the entanglement of hospitality and hostility and is manifest in situations whereby hostile imaginaries of migration are embodied in practices of ‘hostipitality’ such as detention.

Detention is a particular spatial practice which bounds space to prevent bodily mobility (Martin & Mitchelson, 2009); it is also a temporal practice that seeks to govern people’s mobility through time. Carceral geographers have shown how ‘spatialities of containment’ (Mountz & Loyd, 2014) expand beyond detention centres’ infrastructure. Carceral spaces in the UK include camps at former RAF stations like Linton-on-Ouse, or former prisons like the derelict Northeye Prison at Bexhill and the offshore Bibby Stockholm barge on the Isle of Portland. Even if these places are not official prisons or detention sites, they are experienced as prisons by the people contained within

them, as indicated by multiple testimonies (Care4Calais, 2023; Refugee Action, 2023; Right to Remain, 2024). The multiplication of these prison sites, referred to as ‘alternative accommodation’ (Home Office, 2023b), is the government’s ‘solution’ to tackle the proclaimed financial burden of £8 million per day on ‘British’ taxpayers, allegedly arising from accommodation for asylum seekers (Home Office, 2023b).

Detention is increasingly based on presumed return – a trend which is changing the spaces and temporalities of asylum reception in Europe into what this paper refers to as ‘inhospitality pending return’. This operates at the level of imaginaries – through specific narratives and representations around ‘refugee journeys’ and ‘refugee arrivals’, such as tropes and images around the boat – as well as in practice – through pushbacks and official deportations, temporary accommodation and detention. From European borderlands to the ‘hostile environment’ of the UK (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), the emphasis on return has transformed ideas of asylum and refugee resettlement into conditional, temporary accommodation. Short-term humanitarian legal categories have proliferated; these are not internationally recognised, require frequent renewal and can be revoked at any time (Schultz, 2020). Fear-based social imaginaries related to ‘refugee journeys’ inform, and are reinforced by, hostile border and migration practices predicated on presumed return. The current use of ferries and barges as carceral spaces for so-called ‘illegal migrants’ provides abundant examples of such practices.

### **Ferries, barges, cruise ships: differently imagined journeys and inhospitality pending return**

Conditional and temporary accommodation, as one manifestation of what we have termed ‘inhospitality pending return’, often occurs in places traditionally associated with hospitality, mobility, travel, leisure and even luxury for differently constructed, bordered and narrated journeys. Ferries, cruise ships and barges have been used as spaces of accommodation, detention and return for people racialised and criminalised as ‘migrants’, ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ in various contexts across Europe and the UK (Spathopoulou, 2025). Such racialised labels reproduce dichotomies and fixed categories along notions of deservingness vs un-deservingness and passivity vs agency. At the same time, detention, containment, and return (deportation) intersect in floating offshore spaces. Ferries, cruise ships and barges mobilise different perceptions, narratives and imaginaries that disrupt the spatio-temporal dichotomies within the ‘refugee journey’, blurring the distinctions between ‘arrival’ and the ‘departure’, ‘stay’ and ‘transit’, ‘mobility’ and ‘immobility’. In what follows, we show how ferries, cruise ships and barges are turned into pre-emptive, immediate and projected vehicles of return, as well as offshore, conditional and temporary accommodation/detention for racialised and criminalised people, turning to specific examples in the context of the Greek islands and the Isle of Portland in the UK.

#### ***The deportation ferry: pre-emptive and immediate return***

In Greece, ferries are the main mode of transport between islands and the mainland and from one island to another. The ferry is tied to experiences of immobility and mobility and is graphically reproduced in scenes of arrival/departure in and from the Greek islands and mainland (Spathopoulou, 2023), but, also, in borderlands between Greece and Türkiye and Greece and Italy. On the shores of the Greek islands, sites of more luxurious modes of travel/tourism are frequently evident with the arrival and departure of large cruise ships. The cruise ship’s stay is imagined as temporary (by a variety of actors, including individuals, states, and the media), its passengers are not expected to remain on the island. Rather, the cruise ship’s passengers are expected to disembark from the ship, stroll around the island, consume and purchase some ‘local’ products as souvenirs and depart the very same evening for another port, in some other country or sea.

With the implementation of the EU- Türkiye Deal in 2016, the Turyol ferries were used as ‘deportation ferries’ for people seeking asylum, from Lesvos to Ayvalik (Greece-Türkiye) on the Aegean border – the same ferry and route that people labelled as ‘tourists’ embark on when making their leisurely Aegean crossing between Greece and Türkiye. At the same time, ‘asylum seekers’ are frequently detained on ferries that travel between the Greek islands. Since ‘floating detention’ occurs on a passenger ferry making its regular route, detained transportees are subjected to various forms of authority on the ferry. These include the captain of the ferry, or the surveillant gaze of the other passengers, in addition to the police escorting them on board. As Miriam, a young woman asylum seeker who was detained on a ferry from Samos to Lesvos shared with Author 2 on Lesvos in July 2017, *‘as other passengers were entering normally [the ferry], I was wearing handcuffs and accompanied by a policeman. When the ferry began to leave the port, I realised that the handcuffs would remain on my hands. That I was not going to be let free, that I was still a prisoner [...] I, also, felt ashamed. Ashamed, when the other passengers were looking with curiosity at my handcuffs’* (Author 2, from personal conversation with Miriam, Lesvos, 2017 in Spathopoulou, 2023).

As argued elsewhere, ‘floating detention challenges our idea of detention and its violences as always something static, remote, deprived, isolated, and performed in darkness. Detention can also be experienced as something mobile and out in the public, as a form of captivity occurring within a crowd in motion.’ (Spathopoulou, 2023 p. 141). Nevertheless, the ‘corporal removal’ (Khosravi, 2009, p. 52) that occurs on board the ferry during the ‘deportation journey’ impedes bodies from touching others, smiles from being exchanged, and dialogues from emerging; all these are elements that fulfil the vital need for basic forms of human contact (see Jones, 2022).

On the Turyol ferry from Lesvos to Ayvalik, we can observe how spaces of tourism/leisure, travel and detention/deportation intersect across the same route at sea. Across these very same waters of the Aegean Sea unofficial deportations take place, in the form of pushbacks at sea of people on their way to Europe. These pushbacks are pre-emptive spaces-times of return, and they constitute life-threatening border policies. Greece’s unlawful practice of pushbacks led to 3,413 migrants being forcibly and clandestinely returned in the Aegean sea during the last quarter of 2024, according to the Turkish Coast Guard, and to the deaths of at least 36 migrants during the same period (Legal Centre Lesvos, 2025).

On another sea route, secret pushback ‘prisons’ on the ferries of the Greece-Italy route have been documented (Creta et al., 2023). As the Lighthouse Report (Creta et al., 2023) documents, asylum seekers are detained below deck in secret cells on ferries between Greece and Italy. In the authors’ words:

as holidaymakers sip on cold beer and cocktails on the deck of a passenger ferry, a buzz of excitement in the air, a very different situation is playing out below deck. In the bowels of this vessel there are people, including children, chained and locked up in dark places against their will (Creta et al., 2023, unpaginated).

Furthermore, they emphasise how ‘this is Europe’s lesser-known pushback practice, where secret prisons on private ships are used to illegally return asylum seekers back to where they came from’ (Creta et al., 2023, unpaginated). Here we discern how ‘mobilities simultaneously presuppose and reproduce immobile “others”’ (Sheller, 2018, p. 10). In Laleh Khalili’s words, ‘from very early on, captivity at sea has been both a means of producing value *and* wielding coercive power across the surface of the globe, and sometimes both at once’ (Khalili, 2021, p. 463). Ferries, in this way, partake in the broader spatial strategy of containment within the political economies of ‘carceral seas’ (Khalili, 2021), representing the physical manifestation of practices of forced and immediate return.

Within the mobile world of the ferry, where different cultures, stories, and worlds emerge, people’s mobilities are unevenly governed and journeys differently bordered, thereby rendering intercultural encounter – between receiving communities and forced migrants – difficult if not impossible. In the same sea space, unequal modes of arrival and departure take place, occurring often on the same vessel, as the above examples illustrate. Whereas the spatio-temporalities of

different journeys intersect, the people who are experiencing them are discursively and physically kept separate; their bodies are so close, yet some remain out of sight/mind, their journeys imagined and narrated (by a variety of actors, including individuals, states, and the media) on the basis of fear and deterrence even prior to their arrival ashore. Indeed, with ‘refugee journeys’ and ‘refugee arrivals’ constructed as a ‘threat’ by politicians who routinely employ slogans such as ‘Stop the Boats’ returns and deportations are expected, awaited, tolerated, normalised and even applauded within systems informed by hostile narratives.

### ***The barge: anticipated/projected return***

On another island in the UK, the symbolic timing of the Bibby Stockholm’s journey and arrival in Portland on 17 July 2023 – coinciding with the passage into Law of the Illegal Migration Bill (Home Office, 2023a) – could not be more indicative of the assumption that ‘illegal migrants’, arriving on boats and housed on boats or in other kinds of offshore accommodation detention centres, will be returned. Alongside the barge’s arrival at Portland Harbour, large cruise ships were arriving and departing from the same port, with data indicating a significant influx of cruise ships during the summer months (Portland Port).

The Bibby Stockholm was refitted and refurbished to accommodate up to 500 asylum seekers on the Isle of Portland, the first of whom arrived on 7 August 2023. The UK Government had justified the use of ‘offshore accommodation’, as ‘cheaper and more manageable for communities as our European neighbours are also doing’ (Home Office, 2023b; Spathopoulou, 2025). The usage of the barge was constructed as a temporary solution, where ‘asylum seekers’ were said to be accommodated for a maximum of 9 months but could be kept there longer if the Home Secretary was unable to find suitable accommodation elsewhere (Home Office, 2023b). It also constituted a conditional form of accommodation; if an individual refused to be transferred to the barge, they were rendered homeless. Only ‘single adult male asylum seekers’, aged 18–65 years, who would otherwise be destitute, were housed on the barge (Home Office, 2023b).

Housing ‘asylum seekers’ on the barge is a stark example of how dominant, hostile narratives and imaginaries of ‘refugee journeys’ are closely related to practices of inhospitality such as offshore accommodation. The barge as a temporary and conditional accommodation, moreover, serves as the material embodiment of fear-based social imaginaries, manifest in hostile policies which are constructed around pending and projected return rather than on human rights and dignity. As Shiraz, a young person who was seeking asylum and living on the barge, shared during Author 2’s fieldwork on Portland in May 2024, ‘*when I told my friends that I was going to be transferred to the barge, they jokingly told me that perhaps during the night it will sail off back to your country*’ (Author 2, from personal conversation with Shiraz, Isle of Portland, 2024). The barge immobilises people in floating prisons – literally in offshore, quasi-extraterritorial spaces – which nonetheless can become mobile vehicles of deportation (Spathopoulou, 2023).

Offshoring people creates the assumption that certain groups categorised as ‘illegal migrants’, ‘refugees’, or ‘asylum seekers’ constitute a separate population whose presence on national territory is illicit until proven otherwise (see Carastathis et al., [forthcoming](#)). By ‘accommodating’ people offshore and at a distance – in the case of the barge, with controlled exit and entry, 24-hour security system, airport-like bodily scans, and curfews – governments are claiming to be minimising the impact on local communities and services, thus constructing ‘asylum seekers’ as a problem to be managed (Home Office, 2023b; Spathopoulou, 2025). Constructing ‘asylum seekers’ as a problem draws upon their representation as a ‘threat’ even before their arrival. In this way, the ‘small boat arrivals’ are turned into the ‘bargies’ who ‘kill and rape women’, as Author 2 heard the barge’s residents being referred to on the Isle of Portland by certain individuals during her fieldwork. In these remarks (like the fear-based claims prevailing in anti-migration and racist protests across the UK, as we write this paper), we see how these imaginaries are grounded in racialised constructions of forced

migrants as the threatening Other, ‘a moral threat or absolute danger’ (Mbembe, 2001, p. 18) informed by hostile practices such as the barge.<sup>2</sup>

Portland Harbour is a restricted, securitised and private space: cruise ships passengers and barge residents are bussed in out and from the harbour. Excel buses, transferring ‘asylum seekers’ from the barge to the three locations that they are allowed to disembark from, are marked with the words ‘Private: not for public use’, creating a paradoxical situation: whilst the barge remains out of sight, its inhabitants are exposed to public scrutiny through mobile segregation on these private buses (Spathopoulou, 2025). In July 2024, when a lot of cruise ships were disembarking on Portland, Author 2 came across the cruise ship buses, transferring ‘tourists’ who were taking photos of the surrounding landscape of the island, passing an Excel bus with the barge’s residents on board coming from the opposite direction and heading towards the barge. Here two groups of people were being moving back and forth from the harbour – with movements which were bordered unequally, embodying how their journeys, arrival and departures were differently imagined, narrated and managed by state actors such as port authorities.

The Bibby Stockholm barge is connected to cruise ships not only geographically but also through Landry & Kling, the Miami-based cruise ship company subcontracted by the UK Home Office, via the Australian Corporate Travel Management (CTM) company, to manage and operate the barge. CTM was also provided with a £1.6 billion contract by the Home Office to manage an unspecified number of hotels, barges, and cruise ships across the UK (Dear-den, 2023). The only port that accepted a floating vessel like the Bibby Stockholm barge was Portland Port, a former military naval base and now a private port owned by Langham Industries. Turner et al. (2023) highlight that accepting the Bibby Stockholm was motivated by desire for profit:

As indicated by the Chair of Portland Port, Bill Reeves, the docking of the Bibby Stockholm is part of a wider port expansion, with significant extra investment alongside the £4,500 per day paid by the state to moor the barge. (...) this is in addition to the company profiting from nine new agreements with cruise liners that began docking in April 2023, despite the negative environmental impact on local residents and marine life (Turner, et al., 2023, pp. 8–9).

On the last day of Author 2’s fieldwork on Portland, during a farewell walk, Shiraz recounted witnessing a cruise ship from Norway arrive next to the barge: ‘*I watched the cruise ship arrive from my window on the barge. Like us, people were being bussed off the cruise ship to visit the island [...] No, I was not able to speak with them. I don’t think they could even see us, but I saw them*’. The uneven ways in which people’s journeys are bordered, controlled and securitised – depending on the power (or lack thereof) of one’s passport, and their mode of arrival in the UK – become evident in Shiraz’s comment on the unequal degrees of visibility/invisibility at Portland Harbour. Who can be seen and who is hidden out of sight, whose journey is encouraged and welcomed and whose is constructed as a threat, are decisions related to processes of bordering: ‘the processes through which the boundaries demarcating what is proper to a nation state (geographical territory, social body, history, etc.) – what legitimately belongs in or to it, versus that which does not, and is excluded, expunged, removed, or differentially included, generally by violence – are constituted, reproduced, and naturalised’ (Bridges Collective, 2022, p. 2; Cassidy et al., 2018). While cruise ships encounter no walls at sea as they come and go, the barge itself becomes a walled-off space or enclosure on the sea. Unlike the cruise ship, the barge does not have its own engine; it is dependent on the land, the territory, constituting an immobilised and in-between space par excellence.

Moreover, unlike the residents of the barge, cruise ship passengers are not subjected to security checks upon returning and entering the ship. Questioning the discrepancy in security measures with the former mayor of Portland, Author 2 was told:

The reason they give is because the barge is not departing, it remains at the port overnight with people sleeping overnight on the barge, including personnel and staff and security from the company that is operating the

barge. You can say that it is the safety of those people they are concerned about (Semi-structured interview conducted by Author 2 with former mayor of Portland, Isle of Portland, 2024).

In bordered spaces like Portland port, where the uneven geographies of mobility, arrival, and departure intersect, a cruise ship in transit arrives and departs next to an immobilised barge, leaving us wondering whether the cruise ship's passengers were even aware that people were forced to live inside the floating barge.

In the previous section we discussed how different journeys intersect on the same vehicle, the ferry, however, the people who are experiencing them are discursively and physically kept separate, rendering in this way any intercultural encounter difficult if not impossible to emerge. On the Isle of Portland, the separation of those housed on the barge from both the local population of Portland and from tourists visiting on cruise ships, as well as their mobile segregation on the private bus to and from the barge and the main bus stops on the island, renders migrants undeserving of or even a threat to intercultural encounters. Migrants are contained within spaces normally associated with travel and leisure, and where intercultural dialogues and connections are meant to emerge; however, in the case of people racialised as 'illegal travellers' (Khosravi, 2010), they are kept separate and at distance within these very spaces that 'deserving citizens' can enjoy and where they are allowed to interact with one another.

On the 30th of January 2025, the Bibby Stockholm barge was towed away from Portland Harbour and returned to its owners, Bibby Marine. The last residents were moved off the barge at the end of November 2024. They were 'dispersed' across the UK and moved into temporary and conditional hosting/accommodation sites: the uncertain journey continues for those constructed as 'undeserving' and 'illegal' travellers (Khosravi, 2010), whose trajectories are contained within technocratic language of 'migration management', along the lines of 'reception', 'dispersal', 'integration', 'detention' and 'removal'.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to understanding the role of the imaginary in contexts of forced migration by exploring social imaginaries constructed around 'refugee journeys' into Europe, considering their consequences in terms of border and migration policies, and showing how they distinguish and discriminate between different types of migratory journey. Interweaving theoretical discussion with empirical observations, this paper shows that social imaginaries constructed around 'refugee journeys' into Europe are prevalently fear-based. The authors argue that the fear-based ways in which refugee journeys are imagined, narrated and bordered go on to shape expectations of intercultural encounter and therefore mediate lived experiences of reception and (in)hospitality. By focusing on examples of pre-emptive, immediate and projected spaces-times of return (pushbacks, deportations and temporary accommodation pending return) this paper shows how 'refugee journeys' are narrated and bordered through deterrence and return at landing points, and through detention and deferred deportations after arrival.

The authors introduce the concept of 'inhospitality pending return': the assumption that those arriving on boats and housed on boats and in other kinds of offshore accommodation (ferries, cruise ships and barges) will return (or be returned). This particular type of inhospitality is constitutive of the shifting spatio-temporalities of refugee hosting and return and shaped by a context of hostile European approaches to journeys of forced migration; these are informed by, and in turn reinforce, fear-based imaginaries centred around narratives of defense and deterrence against a racialised, threatening Other. The authors conclude that there is a continuum between these practices of inhospitality and hostile European and UK imaginaries related to 'refugee journeys': fear-based social imaginaries inform hostile practices which in turn reinforce fear-based imaginaries and critically affect intercultural encounters between refugees and receiving populations – often before these encounters can even occur.

Borders – their creation, defense and perpetuation – are central to this continuum of hostility. According to the hegemonically constructed narrative put forward by governments, borders are necessary boundaries for the protection of so-called ‘citizens’ from those constructed as ‘others’ who pose a threat to the security of nation-states (see Bridges Collective, 2022). Gloria Anzaldúa describes the borderland as ‘a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural border’ (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25). Borders are legitimised by, and in turn reinforce, fear-based imaginaries centred around narratives of defence, deterrence and forced return to, from and across borderlands. These imaginaries are grounded in racialised constructions of forced migrants as the threatening Other; they are enacted through necropolitical migratory policies focussed on deterrence, detention and return.

We conclude this paper with an invitation to constructively contribute to the world we share by critically questioning our dominant narratives and imaginaries; rejecting practices of ‘inhospitality pending return’; and calling for mobilities informed by the shared human needs, instead of imaginaries rooted in fear.

## Notes

1. The ethnographic research that this paper is based on has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the department of Geography, University of Durham (2022–2025) and from the Ethics Committee from the department of Geography at King’s College University of London (2015–2019).
2. It is important to emphasise here that while anti-migration, racist and hostile narratives are put forward by certain individuals and groups based on Portland, narratives and acts of solidarity, welcoming and support towards people living on the barge and resistance against racist rhetoric prevail by many individuals living on Portland. An inspiring example of this is the Portland Global Friendship Group, a grassroots organisation formed on Portland to offer friendship and support to people seeking asylum and that Author 2 is grateful to have learned from.

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*Esa Aldegheri* holds a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Glasgow, investigating how unequal narratives and borderings of refugee journeys affect integration, with a focus on Scotland as an internationally relevant case study. This interdisciplinary and multilingual research project uses a combination of qualitative, narrative-based and multilingual research methods, linking Esa’s academic research with her work as a creative writer and facilitator of community education and integration projects. She is an Affiliate Researcher with the UNESCO Chair for refugee integration through education, language and the arts (RIELA) at the University of Glasgow, where she previously worked as Research Associate supporting the development of the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. Esa is also the author of *Free To Go* (John Murray 2022), a travel book exploring the limits of freedom and non-freedom, motorbike journeys, motherhood and more; and the editor of an anthology of new travel writing by women, *There She Goes* (Saraband 2025).

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