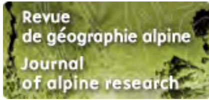

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Reception Centres Above. The Mountain, Emblem of the Paradox of the Integration of Asylum Seekers in Switzerland

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Reception Centres Above. The Mountain, Emblem of the Paradox of the Integration of Asylum Seekers in Switzerland

Viviane Cretton

1 This article[1] analyses “what the mountain does” to asylum seekers in Switzerland, by focusing on their experiences while living in reception centres at high altitudes.

2 Understood as a collective construction, a symbolic production born from social interactions and made up of shared representations (Debarbieux, 2003, p. 47), the mountain is both source and inspiration for diverse sets of imaginaries[2] (Boscoboinik, Cretton, 2017). Several studies have focused on the mountain as a preferred place of settlement (Perlik, 2006, 2011; Petite, Debarbieux, 2013; Clivaz, 2013), for a specific category of middle and higher class people (Cretton, Boscoboinik, Friedli, forthcoming; Cretton, 2018). This article takes the opposite stance, focusing on the representations and images created around the mountain, produced by people (men, women and children) and families who did not voluntarily choose to settle, whether temporarily or long-term, in the Swiss Alps. The article thus focuses on « what the mountain does» to people seeking refuge, generally people who are « not desired”, and whose movements are subject to national policies of control and demarcation (Cretton 2019; Perlik, Galera, Machold, Membretti, 2019). The experiences of the mountain analysed here are at odds with the romantic, touristy and gentrified vision of the mountain as a paradise (Boscoboinik, 2018). They are intimately linked with precarity and the uncertainty of the situations in which asylum seekers find themselves when they produce these experiences.

3 It has been shown that the process of asking for asylum forces asylum seekers into a specific temporality, characterised by waiting (Kobelinsky, 2010, 2012; Kwon, 2015; Elliot, 2015; Da Cruz Gaspar, 2018) and uncertainty (Griffith, 2014). Regardless of the location, in Switzerland and elsewhere, the process of asylum seeking involves

frustrations due to administrative obstacles (Fresia, Bozzini, Sala, 2013), and doubts as to the outcome of the process. It can also lead to feelings of being 'stuck' while their case is being considered, and interspersed moments of hope, intense joy, and despair, depending on the outcome of the bureaucratic process (Geoffrion, Cretton, forthcoming). Several authors also point out that the policies that surround asylum seekers' arrival rely on the fact that the people are –at least at first– set apart from the rest of the population (Kobelinsky, Makaremi, 2009).

4 This article shows that when waiting and uncertainty are experienced at over 1300 metres above sea level, the feeling of being isolated, discarded, held apart from life in the urban centres is reinforced; and the emotional weight of going through the asylum seeking process is exacerbated. The article shows through ethnographic evidence how this perception, understood as an "experience of the place" (Bourdieu, Delsaut, 1981), is accentuated by the fact that in Switzerland asylum seekers are subject to the imperative to be "integrated", regardless of the uncertain outcome of their application. Closely linked with "the ubiquitous formula for integration in Switzerland: 'encourage and demand'" (Kurt, 2017, p. 20), this command to integrate has been reinforced on a legal and political ground since 2018[3]. Social workers serving in receiving centres thus have the clear mandate to 'integrate' asylum seekers despite their precarious legal standing. However, it seems paradoxical to house people seen as both vulnerable and "undesirable" (Agier, 2010; Blanchard, 2013) in mountains far from urban centres, reinforcing their separation from the rest of society and making them socially invisible (Voirol, 2005a, 2005b; Mastrangelo, 2018; Sanchez-Mazas, 2011; Del Biaggio, 2018); while simultaneously pleading for social integration.

5 In the Swiss Alps, the tendency to render migrant people invisible is far from new (Cretton, 2013; Cretton, Amrein, Fellay, 2012). Through prior research conducted in Valais, we were able to show that in order to integrate in a village, migrants have to socialise in order to be observed, seen and identified by the local population group (Cretton, 2013, p. 69). People who choose to migrate based on love, labour or leisure all adopt, more or less freely, a strategy to participate in social life. Spending time in bistros, participating in village festivities, or joining a band (Cretton, 2012, p. 163-189): all of these tactics enable contact with the local population, and help one to become visible in other people's eyes. They also help acquire social recognition, reconnaisance (Honneth, 2000; Ricoeur, 2004). For asylum seekers who did not choose to be hosted in mountains however, these possible ways of gaining social recognition are limited, predetermined and restricted by the asylum system in which they evolve. Like other marginalised groups, asylum seekers are forced into invisibility by a constrained social life that is "deprived of other people's attention" (Voirol, 2005a, p. 16). This makes access to a "normal life" (De Coulon, 2019, p. 161), associated in this context with life either in cities or in the plains, even more difficult yet desirable.

6 To support the above argument, we will first present the context in which the data has been collected intermittently in four reception centres for asylum seekers, all situated above 1000 metres above sea level, since 2017[4]. This will allow us to analyse the process of being made socially invisible that asylum seekers experience while living in the mountains. The objective is to shed light on the integrationist paradox which underlies the asylum procedure in Switzerland[5]. That is, to enact social integration measures as part of a structure that in and of itself, makes asylum seekers invisible, by holding them separately from the rest of society.

The asylum seeking process in Valais

7 As of November 15th, 2019, proportionately to its population, the Valais canton was home to 2731 people with specific legal status depending on their position vis-à-vis the new Law on Asylum[6]. All statuses considered, the people hailed from: Afghanistan (563), Syria (422), Eritrea (303), Iraq (193) Somalia (169), Turkey (117), and Ethiopia[7].

8 Contrary to several other Swiss cantons[8], the Valais state does not subcontract out asylum seekers' settlement. That is to say, it does not mandate private companies to take charge of their settlement, as is the case with the ORS service AG[9], in the Fribourg and Vaud cantons[10]. In Valais, the Asylum Office[11] is responsible for housing, financial aid, and access to healthcare services as well as social integration; both for vulnerable migrant populations and for refugees present in Switzerland for under 5 years. As such, the Asylum Office manages a housing complex composed of 12 community centres (356 people), 819 apartments (2334 people), and several other welcome and health centres (39 people assisted)[12]. Several years ago, the canton put unused buildings at high altitudes at the disposal of the Asylum Office. Formerly used to host summer camps, a hostel, and a sanatorium, these buildings were re-affected to serve as housing for asylum seekers. As of today, four receiving centres are situated at or above 1300 meters above sea level, in touristy areas of the mountain (ski and secondary homes). They have kept their original names, anchored in local history: Inalp in Vernamiège (village of 184 people, 1321 metres above sea level); Le Temps de Vivre, in Mayens de Chamoison (village of 290 people, at 1350 metres above sea level); L'Ours in Mayens de Sion (1350 metres above sea level, with its 500 chalets); and finally, Sanaval in Crans-Montana (1500 metres above sea level, with about 6500 inhabitants).[13]

Fields of enquiry, methodology, data

9 In November of 2017, after several months of discussion with the Asylum Office of the canton, we[14] were allowed to take part in everyday life in two of the above-mentioned reception centres, and at the beginning of spring 2018, were allowed on the premises of the two other reception centres. Towards the end of the summer of 2019, we gained the authorisation to carry out more field observations, and to interact specifically with asylum seekers. The spread-out process of the study allowed us to follow several changes that occurred in the reception centres between November 2017 and November 2019 (notably in terms of arrivals, duration of stay, presence of professionals, organisation, etc.). It also allowed us to build trustful relationships with study participants, both with the professionals who understood our aims and gave us free range during our stays; and with asylum seekers and refugees who recognised us from our different visits.

10 The data was collected through repeated, multi-sited, participant observation in the reception centres[15], including semi-directed individual (11) and collective (5) qualitative interviews, conducted with social work professionals, volunteers, and asylum seekers. The interviews with asylum seekers (men, women and children) were conducted in French and English. Occasionally the children spoke better French than their parents or other actors, and acted as translators during the discussion. In this case, the conversation would start in French or English, and the children translated

into Arabic, Russian, Kurdish; and provided a restitution of what was said in English or French back to us. Our objective was to gather different people's narrative of life in mountaintop reception centres, and specifically how they remembered their first arrival at the centre: their state of mind, their thoughts and emotions regarding their situation in the mountains rather than in the Plains; but also, their everyday activities, their social relations with the neighbourhood, their fears, hopes and expectations for the rest of their journeys.

11 In addition to this specific set of data, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with social workers (10), and interviews with asylum seekers (13) housed in other cantons (Genève, Vaud, Fribourg). This last set of interviews was carried out by students under my supervision since 2016, and provided a valuable comparative aspect which confirmed the specificity of high-altitude refugee housing, vis-à-vis the housing in plains.

12 On the one hand, high-altitude homing needs to cater to certain specific challenges, compared to housing in urban areas. These challenges are linked to topography (transport networks, contact with the area, easy access to medical care, climate depending on the season), to demography (neighbourhood relations with small-sized villages), or to perceptions (emotional experiences of the mountain, feeling far away or isolated). On the other hand, housing in mountain centres puts social work professionals in front of exactly the same moral and ethical dilemmas as those who work in urban centres (Cretton, 2014). Living in close proximity with asylum seekers, each and every one of them has felt affected, uneasy, powerless; caught between their personal convictions and their duty towards the institution that employs them – especially when faced with complex situations, negative decisions, and forced expulsions.

Waiting for asylum in the mountain

13 During our observations in late 2017, early 2018, the average stay in a front-line reception centre[16] was about 6 months long –the amount of time that the Asylum Office considered necessary for residents to become familiar with Swiss society, values, and norms of behaviour [17]. During our field stay in October 2019, on the other hand, several asylum seekers had been living in mountain reception centres for more than a year – two years for some–, most of whom were tired of waiting for their transfer to apartments in urban centres[18]. Even those who had been there between 4 and 7 months were impatient to be transferred. In two reception centres, we met families who had been living in apartments in the plains and who, after encountering issues with local authorities, were sent to live in high-altitude group housing as 'punishment'[19]. We also met people who had been (dis)placed from housing centre to housing centre for four years.

14 In summary, our short but repeated field immersions allowed us to see that the logistics of reception centres varies depending on both the number of asylum seekers, the amount of housing available (group and individual), and the number of employees[20].

Waiting for a transfer to the city

15 On their arrival to high-altitude housing in Valais, asylum seekers often feel disappointed to not having been assigned to an urban canton such as Geneva, Berne or Zurich. According to the professionals we spoke with, many of the asylum seekers burst into tears once they realise where they are:

> "When they arrive in far-off reception centres like the ones in Valais; not only are they disappointed, they are also very anxious, and a lot of them ask to be transferred [to apartments]" (Professional, April 6th, 2018)

16 Requests for transfers are frequent. Most of them imply a request to be transferred to a city –which can lead to disappointment for those who ask for them.

> "Because transfers… Basically your apartment isn't necessarily in Sion, it can also be in the mountain at Nendaz, at Montana. We have apartments everywhere, you see. During the months when you're in the high altitude centres, you give yourself ideas. You tell yourself « I'm going to have an apartment in Sion, it's going to be great. Just wait, wait». Then you get the answer. You're super happy, « Yes, a transfer! Where? » When they realise that it's actually on the road to Nendaz and it's as high up as here…" (Social worker, November 27th, 2017)

17 The desire –oft repeated by those involved– to be transferred to an apartment in a city can be understood as a desire to lead "a normal life", "like everyone else", "like others" (de Coulon, 2019, p. 161-163). Take Saya, who at 14 years old is schooled in the reception centre with all the other children, including 5 year-olds:

> "Here, it's not normal school. There's no, for example, German, English; there's no geography, no history… We don't have the same things as the others." (interview with Saya, October 25th, 2019)

18 'Normal' school is the public school that Saya used to go to in the plains, and that she misses. Being able to go to 'normal' school, "like other kids", having one's own place, leading a quiet life with family, having a job… all of these are signs of an ordinary life that the people we met with associate with life in the plains, or in the city.

19 The aspiration towards normality or the desire for a legitimate life, specifically in excluded groups, has been observed both in 'illegalised' people in Switzerland (de Coulon, 2019), and undocumented people (Mastrangelo, 2019) and asylum seekers in France (Kobelinsky, 2010). Yearning for an everyday routine expresses the hope of graduating beyond the social invisibility that reception centres condemn their hosts to, the hope of becoming socially visible. Zain expresses this in his own words, he who if he could choose between living in the mountain or in the plain, would choose beyond the shadow of a doubt to live:

> "below, to see people walking in the street, to be able to go shopping, to see people." (interview with Zain, November 6th, 2019)

20 The life experiences that we collected indicate that people feel excluded from the social life of reception centres situated in the plains, or in the city. At least, from the social life that they imagine. Several people that we met appreciate the mountain as a landscape and natural feature, they feel comforted and at peace by admiring the views or by walking in the forest. The geographical distance and life in a group home, however, are more often than not viewed as obstacles to being able to participate in social life (notably the social life one can aspire to in the cities).

Becoming visible to others

21 To exist socially, one must be visible in other peoples' eyes (Arendt, 1968), that is to say to foster relationships and interactions, to "make one's sentiments visible through actions" (Voirol, 2005a). In the high-altitude reception centres we studied, social relationships and interactions are almost exclusively carried out in a closed environment, always with the same people, between professionals, asylum seekers and volunteers. While not entirely unheard of, encounters between those living around the reception centres and the residents of these centres remain occasional, often limited by language barriers:

> "We just say hello, we smile. Because we don't know French, we couldn't speak any more than we do. But sometimes the people here say hello and ask what we are doing here, and I say that I live in the reception centre. We can talk more with people who speak English. But sometimes no, we just smile". (Interview with Rifat, November 6th, 2019)

22 On the reverse side, these same individuals can sometimes become too visible, particularly when they find themselves in spaces or places that they are not expected to be in. This would be the case, for example, for a person begging unnoticed on the side walk, who would become very visible if they were to sit down at a café terrace (Voirol, 2005a). It's also the situation in which asylum seekers find themselves when they are involved in community service, such as grounds-keeping or cleaning certain hiking trails:

> "It's good for the population to see them working, it shows a good image!" (Reception centre director, field notes, DG, April 13th, 2018)

23 Making asylum seekers and refugees visible in the eyes of the local population, by showing them as active, can be understood as a way to activate a double recognition process. On the one hand, the Asylum Office can show the canton that they are developing socio-professional insertion programs and can publicise them. On the other hand, they also hope that the people concerned (refugees and asylum seekers themselves) will acquire social recognition and self-esteem by having an activity that makes them visible by the locals. As one of the mediators who participated in our study put it, referring to the programs developed by the Asylum Office: "When people are occupied, it helps".

« Doing » social work in the mountain

24 The emphasis that the Valais canton puts on social and professional integration has become an important component of their asylum process for a few years. Housing refugees and asylum seekers in the mountain, however, is at odds with that objective. According to this social worker:

> "The problem is that we're a bit isolated, so they don't often get to wander around the city to see things. It's always a question of organisation, it needs to be organised...» (Social worker, December 14th, 2018)

25 Being dependant on public transport (the frequency of which is very limited, compared to urban areas) is a main obstacle towards professional insertion, as this other social worker explains:

> "When it comes to professional insertion, if for example the person finds a job and he has to be at the freight depot in the industrial area of Sion at 6.45am, it's toast. Even if the first bus that comes by here is quite early. (....). Here, stuck in the mountain, you have buses during the day, but not the evening. If you want to be integrated socially, well, you have to be part of a club, or a group, whatever. But how do you do that here? The evening, you're stuck. You need a driver". (Social worker, November 27th, 2017)

26 "Doing" social work in the mountain requires strict organisation, particularly when it comes to coordinating transports and appointments in the plains; or meetings and activities outside of the centre. This means having to anticipate far more than when working in the plains.

> "Right so you need... you have a doctor's appointment at, let's say 10.30am, so you need to be ready to take the bus at 8am because at 10am, there's no bus. In the plains, you could have gone by yourself. Here, there's a whole mechanism we need to put into place." (Social worker, April 3rd, 2018).

27 To help "social integration", the terminology used by the employees, there are mandatory French classes given in the reception centre, both for the children and for the adults. One could say that everyday life is regulated by French lessons, regular meals taken together[21], child care, medical or psychological appointments down in the plains, as well as by the activities organised more often not by volunteers to the centre ("beauty" workshops for women[22], "chocolates" workshops for the children, sports outings, etc.). Local festivities, the Swiss National Day on August 1st and Christian festivities such as Easter and Christmas punctuate the year while also, according to employees, offering specific opportunities to engage with the surrounding village communities. Bluntly speaking, activities organised in the centres are first and foremost geared towards "occupying" asylum seekers, distracting them from the waiting and trying to help them forget their difficulties:

> "[It's about] occupying people because it's true (...) they are in a centre, there's nothing much to do on the side, so it's rally about being able to occupy them, and they're asking for it. Changing a bit...to allow them to not think too much about their procedure. And also [having] a basis of integration, having a rhythm, knowing to be there on time. When we say that at 2pm we're leaving, so that they have time to sort things out, etc. Social integration [is] about helping people psychologically." (Social worker, December 14th, 2018).

28 Social workers in Switzerland, and elsewhere in Europe, use social entertaining as a way to deal with waiting and to normalize everyday routines. In the reception centres we studied, just as in the reception centres in France studied by Kobelinsky (2010, 2012), employees try to motivate residents to participate in activities. The aim is to offer the opportunity to think about something else than the asylum process, and to alleviate some of the tension, for it has to be said that the despair created by uncertain wait times creates heavy atmospheres. In the centres we studied, some days there was a pervasive sense of anxiety in the air, laced with exhaustion.

> "The first day, it's good, it's pretty. They say we can wait here. But today it's been a year and a month... because of this, my mother is tired." (Interview with Dunya and her mother, October 25th, 2019)

29 The asylum procedure requires asylum seekers to wait and be patient. Auyero (2011, 2012) showed that for social aid services in Argentina, waiting is a powerful tool to discipline subjects –particularly when they are poor, vulnerable, and in precarious situations. By analogy, as asylum seekers' waiting is put to the test, their subjectivity is

altered and they become "state patients", docile, resigned and tired, like Dunya's mother quoted above. And when this waiting process is confined to a group home in the mountain, it can make it seem like time is slowing down. As if the hours, when there is nothing to do, up so high, go past more slowly (field notes, November 2019).

From home to home

30 Dunya, 18 years old, born in Iran to Afghani parents, is as tired as her mother (quoted above) after four years spent living in "camps". After arriving in Switzerland from Greece as an unaccompanied minor, aged 16, she was able to get her family to join her. They have now spent over a year together in this mountain top reception centre, all sharing a single room.

31 "In my head, there's a lot, a lot, a lot of things. About life with my family, life in the reception centre (...). Before when I was with my family in Greece or Iran, I wasn't like that. I was smart, but I wasn't like that." (Interview with Dunya, October 25th, 2019)

32 What Dunya expresses when she says "I wasn't like that" is the emotional and psychological difficulty that she is going through after four years spent in the limbo of the asylum system. She is also referring to the agonies that a young woman of 18 years old can legitimately experience due to sharing a room with both her parents and her siblings, the youngest of which is almost 2 years old. The experience of mountain top reception centres is influenced by the duration of prior stays in federal centres or other reception centres, as is revealed by Akam, 11 years old. For the last four years, he and his family have also been transferred from reception centre to reception centre. After going over all the centres where he has lived, the young Kurdish boy tells us, laughing:

> "Actually we've done all the Valais homes, we're only missing two!" (Interview with Akam, Octobre 25th, 2019)

33 Dunya and Akam's experiences in the Valaisan asylum system are strikingly similar to that of Saïd, Anna and Omar in the French reception centres observed by Kobelinsky and Makaremi (2009). Notwithstanding geographic and individual particularities, they accumulate and are rocked back and forth between different living situations and care systems, all articulated with each other to form a single reality. In Switzerland, like elsewhere in Europe, individuals' journeys in the limbo of the asylum system tell of "a constellation of places, zones, accommodations, which become signposts in increasingly complex life trajectories" (Kobelinsky et Makaremi 2009, p. 13).

Conclusion

34 In high altitude reception centres, the feeling of being isolated on a geographical level is reinforced for refugees and asylum seekers by having neither car, nor money, nor residence permit; and precious few points of social contact. However, the problem is not in and of itself the distance from urban centres or from the plain, but rather resides in what that distance implies, in terms of social integration and in people's imaginaries. Feeling "set aside" from the rest of society living "below" is a feeling that is built long-term, and is reinforced by high-altitude stays getting longer and longer. In this perspective, housing asylum seekers in high-altitude reception centres may well be beneficial in the short term. But when welcoming refugees "above" becomes long-term,

it feeds into a process of social erasing "below" that makes integration into Valaisan society eminently difficult.

35 This exploratory study suggests that geographic binaries such as above-below (valley-plain) and periphery-centres (mountain-city) form the underlying structure of the narratives that we collected. Both inscribed in and providing the template to read the world (Lévi-Strauss, 1974), here these oppositions keep alive a situated representation of the mountain. That of a far-off, isolated piece of social life, as opposed to urban centres. In the stories told by asylum seekers and refugees, life above and life below are juxtaposed and muddled with life in "group housing" (in side valleys at high altitudes and far from cities), in opposition to "individual apartments" (more often than not, situated in the plains, near urban centres). These ways of talking about space and place reveal a desire to live "normally", like "the others" (non-asylum seekers, non-refugees), and show asylum seekers' need to have a "social existence", as opposed to the in-existence in a closed system, to which the asylum system condemns them.

36 As an opening, we might perhaps suggest that this situated experience of the mountain as a non-place of social life (Augé, 2002) –that is, as a place that humans can neither settle in nor appropriate for themselves, with neither recognition nor social existence– is experienced as a punishment. Is this hypothesis exact? To be continued...

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NOTES

1. Which would never have seen the light of day without the precious collaboration of Daniela Da Cruz Gaspar, collaboratrice scientifique à la Haute Ecole de Travail Social de Sierre, for the fieldwork on which the article is based. My utmost gratitude.

2. Understood as a « set of representations that make sense, together and in a system, for a group or any one individual, which make the world conceptualisable, understandable, and navigatable» (Staszak, p. 179).

3. Through the passing of new laws, notably the law regarding nationality (‘loi sur la nationalité’, LN), on 01.01.2018; the federal law regarding foreigners and integration (loi fédérale sur les étrangers et l’intégration, LEI) on 01.01.2019; and the law regarding asylum (loi sur l’asile), on 01.03.2019); all of which set out in the legal canon a model of gradual integration (see Kurt, 2017). Regarding the new restructuration and the current issues around asylum policies, see Piguet, 2019. For a critical analysis of Swiss migratory policies, see Del Biaggio, Soysüren, 2019.

4. In the context of an exploratory research funded by the Social Work Research Institute, HES-SO Valais Wallis.

5. The new law on asylum, which came into effect on le 01.032019, officially aims to shorten the administrative work associated with processing asylum claims directly from federal centres, thus operationalising sorting and managing asylum claims. People who receive asylum after going through the expedited process are attributed to an individual canton. Said canton is then responsible for their settlement and their ‘integration’. For a critical reading of the expedited process, see Brina, 2019 https://asile.ch/2019/06/25/comptoir-des-medias-acceleration-des-procedures-protection-juridique-la-communication-au-pouvoir/

6. According to a cantonal allocative key which was revised in March of 2019, with the new LAsi. (Art. 21, alinea 3, LAsi, annex 3), retrieved from https://www.admin.ch/opc/fr/classified-compilation/19994776/index.html#a21. In 2018, the allocative key was of 3,9 %.

7. Statistics regarding asylum, Asylum Office, Valais Canton. As of 15.11.2019.

8. Argovie, Bâle, Berne, Fribourg, Neuchâtel, Soleure, Saint-Gall, Vaud, Zürich.

9. https://www.ors.ch/fr-ch/Home

10. Regarding the privatisation of asylum seeker’s settlement in the Fribourg and Neuchâtel cantons, see Alberti, 2019.

11. Subordinate to the Service valaisan de l’Action Sociale, in the Cantonal department of health, social affairs and culture.

12. As of 15.11.2019, data provided by the Asylum Office, Valais Canton.

13. These four receiving centres range in capacity from 27 to 75 spaces. They employ between 4 and 12 people (night guard, director, social worker, interns, accountant, French teacher, cook, and volunteers) to run the centre, depending on the amount of residents. In order to respect the anonymity of both the centres and personnel, they will not be distinguished by name in the rest article.

14. Daniela Da Cruz Gaspar and myself.

15. In total, 12 days of immersion, 3 per centre, carried out between October of 2017 and November of 2019. During these immersions, we were able to participate in mealtimes and certain daytime activities -notably workshops for women-, and held informal discussions with residents and employees.
16. Which house asylum seekers directly from federal registering centres.
17. Formal and informal interviews with key managers at the Asylum Office, Valais.
18. According to one reception centre director, the number of asylum claimants arriving has gone down and so has the amount of subsidies.
given per candidate. The Asylum Office had to give up a certain amount of apartments in the plains, and as a result, the duration of stays in group housing is increasingly long.
19. This notion of the mountain as a form of 'punishment' has also been noted by employees in other social institutions, but it is never explicitly endorsed. This hypothesis remains to be explored in more depth.
20. In 2019, several employees were on sick leave.
21. In the reception centres that we studied, asylum seekers and employees do not eat together.
22. Nicknamed "beauty workshops" by the volunteers, in which residents of the group home can showcase beauty or well-being techniques from their home country, such as face lotions, hair removal techniques, or hairstyles.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyses "what the mountain does" to people seeking asylum in Switzerland. It focuses on their experiences while they are accommodated in collective reception centres at high altitudes. At the level of Swiss society, asylum seekers are subject to an « integration » injunction, despite the uncertain outcome of their application. When the waiting and uncertainty imposed by the asylum procedure is experienced at an altitude of more than 1300 metres, the feeling of being kept away from life in urban centres is reinforced and the emotional burden exacerbated.

The specific experiences of collective accommodation in the mountains, experienced by asylum seekers - and by the professionals or volunteers accompanying them - are expressed in their story telling of the place. Far from the tourist and romantic representations of the mountains, the oppositions between the top and the bottom (the valley and the plain), between the periphery and the centre (the mountain and the town) run repeatedly through the collected narratives. They maintain a representation of the mountain as a non-place of social life, an isolated place, as opposed to cities on the plain. When the reception "above" lasts, it sustains a process of social effacement « below» which makes the injunction to integrate into Swiss society eminently paradoxical.

INDEX

Keywords: mountain, asylum, Valais, Switzerland, reception centres, integration, visibility, recognition

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