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## **Enroling around—Reconfiguring place and space in the wake of a new reception centre in a small rural town**

### **Abstract**

The paper examines how a small rural town Kauhava, Finland, is reconfigured in the wake of a reception centre being established. Drawing on the conceptual toolbox of the sociology of associations, we find that regardless of attitudes towards asylum seekers, people springing into action and enrolling others leads to the problematisation and intensification of place. This involves turning public and private spaces into contested places. Competing definitions of community and identity emerge. While new identities are configured, new associations and ways of linking actors and places together also take form. The paper examines how the micropolitics of place and belonging are carried out in practice, and what types of mechanisms bring about or prevent new conjunctions and transformations in places. The data consist of interviews in Kauhava with town officials, reception centre volunteers, opponents of the centre and refugees who have stayed in the town.

**KEYWORDS:** assemblage, belonging, contested space, migration, sociology of associations

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

This study examines the events that were set in motion when a reception centre was established in Kauhava, Finland, during the large migratory movement into Europe in 2014–2015. The centre was set up in a building that formerly housed the *Kauhava Training Air Wing military flight school*, which had operated for 85 years and was regarded by many an esteemed symbol of local patriotism (Kelahaara & Mattila, 2017). The siting of the centre in this building instigated a backlash, which relied on nationalistic sentiments and rhetoric portraying a ‘foreign invasion’ of the local military base (Välimaa, 2021).

As Ulceluse et al. (2021) have noted, the attitude of locals towards asylum seekers can be affected by the purpose for which the reconsigned facilities were previously used. However, the imageries of invasion did not resonate with the whole populace in Kauhava. The events that followed the establishing of the centre highlight the complex nature of even small rural towns as places. Several actors with conflicting views on how the residents should react, sprang into action. What ensued was an intense renegotiation and reconfiguration of conceptions concerning the local community, belonging and of the everyday practices that uphold divisions among people. The problematisation of ‘us’ and ‘them’—and the asylum seekers were not the only ‘others’ in town—was entwined with the problematisation of who can safely occupy different spaces.

The focus of this paper is the rural town of Kauhava, which is a geographically large municipality with a population of 15,514 people. The economic structure of Kauhava includes primary production, processing and service sectors. The reception centre operated in Kauhava from 2015 to 2019. The reception centre had the capacity to provide emergency accommodation for 600 people. The maximum amount of people

concurrently accommodated in the Kauhava reception centre was approximately 400 people. A total of 2000 asylum seekers were accommodated in Kauhava during 2015- 2019 (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

**Picture 1: Map of Kauhava**



Our study looks at the micropolitics (Woods et al., 2021) of belonging, space and community in the context of migration. We examine the microprocesses and spatial practices that uphold, break down and reconfigure connections between people when a group of migrants arrives at a small town. How do people problematise, negotiate and redefine place—both in the sense of geographical space and an identifiable community—during the process? How do people form associations with others in the town and how do they enrol actors behind alleged common interests and shared identity? As Woods et al. (2021) mention, there is a need for studies.

interrogating the detailed mechanisms and conditions through which local and translocal entities connect, how these conjunctions affect the constitution of places and how they lead to certain outcomes prevailing over others.

We are interested in the role that space and material practices play in these processes. In our analysis, we draw on the sociology of associations (Latour, 2005) and the so-called assemblage thinking (DeLanda, 2016; Müller, 2015; Müller & Schurr, 2016).

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by presenting our theoretical starting points and outlining our empirical data and research methods. The findings are divided into three sections. First, we show how volunteers sprang into action in the town and tried to enrol others to join them. We then describe the counter-enrolling practices of the people opposing the reception centre. This is followed by an examination of how new practices emerged in the town, some of which built new connections between people while others led to divisions becoming more entrenched. We conclude with a discussion where we propose that, as a result of a reception centre being established, a community may become both intensified and problematized in a way that reconfigures place and space. We show that both private and public spaces can

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yle.fi/news/3-9712242>

play important, albeit different, roles in the process. The findings also highlight the significance of everyday microprocesses and spatial practices in the reconfiguration.

## **2 RECONFIGURING PEOPLE AND PLACES**

Studies examining the effects of place on refugee resettlement and asylum seekers' reception often conceptualise place in terms of objectively measurable variables. Many scholars examine how such things as the local labour market, employment rate, housing and the availability of services influence resettlement and 'integration' (see Ager & Strang, 2008; Castles et al., 2002). In integration studies place is easily perceived as a collection of quantitative features that a social scientist can bring together to explain why forced migrants are less or more successful in 'integrating' into a place.

From the viewpoint of this study, place is not merely a stable background for the everyday endeavours of residents. Nor is it just a collection of services and measurable variables. Place is a process (Massey, 1993a, 2005). It is something that is experienced subjectively, battled over collectively and infused with meaning in a complex relationship between individuals and their surroundings. (Massey, 1993a, 2005). Place is constantly changing and always open for contestation (Burte, 2003; Massey, 2005; Di Masso et al., 2011). This is especially apparent in situations where place becomes the focus of conflicts and disputes, as can happen, for example, when group of asylum seekers arrive at a new place. Both asylum seekers and the place they arrive at are reconfigured through their mutual engagement. While resettlement is grounded and embodied in space and place, places are shaped through changing social practices (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015).

When analysing the role of place in connection with asylum seekers' or refugees' reception, it is important to keep in mind that neither the asylum seekers nor the local residents should be assumed to form homogenous groups that share a common identity. Asylum seekers arriving from the same country or even from the same town do not necessarily share similar resources, needs or hopes. Neither should one expect all of the people in the receiving town to hold common attitudes, values and ideals that the refugees could somehow agree or disagree with (Amin, 2002; Nagel & Staeheli, 2008). Even smaller towns are not 'single places' inhabited by uniform communities (Massey, 1993a; cf. Lecomte, 2013). When space is viewed from a topological perspective, actors who are geographically distant can appear tightly connected, while people living next to each other may have almost no associations between them (Latour, 1996; Müller, 2015). Towns are collections of actor-networks that may be local in scale, or they may reach far beyond the immediate geographical area and extend across continents (Latour, 2005, pp. 173–179; Lecomte, 2013). Technological development during the past decades has made this a very prevalent feature of modern life, even in smaller communities. Thanks to the ubiquity of social media sites and other online platforms, more and more places are starting to fit Amin's (2002, p. 972) description of urban neighbourhoods in terms of being 'mixtures of social groups with varying intensities of local affiliation, varying reasons for local attachment and varying values and cultural practices'.

For asylum seekers, migration may turn their whole lives around and land them in an unknown terrain. Having already experienced vulnerable situations in their country of origin, the process may be devastating, particularly if they are met with hostility (Stewart, 2005), while positive encounters in the host country may increase feelings of security and comfort (Healey, 2006). For the place they arrive at, the transformations may involve only subtle changes. Yet, sometimes the process can lead to a considerable break with the past. The arrival of new residents may be turned into a major political issue as the assumed self-evident and stable nature of the local community is problematized. What used to appear as a relatively inconspicuous background for daily activities is turned into a subject of heated exchanges and political speeches: place becomes visible in all its complexity.

Whatever form the changes take, from the viewpoint of the sociology of associations (Latour, 2005, pp. 34–35), they require active work by people in defining problems, demanding transformation and trying to get others to perceive issues in a specific way. Sociology of associations, which has also been called actor-network theory, views all forms of collectives as fragile assemblages whose construction and persistence needs explanation. Instead of taking social aggregates, such as a society or community, as the given that can be used to explain other features of human life, these aggregations themselves need to be placed at the centre of sociological analysis (Latour, 2005, pp. 5–9). As Latour (2005) mentions, if one is to talk about society at all, one should conceive it as a complex compilation of actor-networks that bond together people and things. These networks are made up of heterogeneous elements and require constant work and maintenance to persist despite the endless trials that they are subjected to by the surrounding world (Latour, 2013, pp. 31–33). Yet, this kind of precarious grouping is not a ‘building in need of restoration but a movement in need of continuation’ (Latour, 2005, p. 37).

Central to this approach is that even material things are conceived as actors that play a significant role in the assemblages. They can make things happen and provide support, sustainability and increased geographical reach for the practices and attachments between actors (Latour, 2005, pp. 34–35). They are the glue that holds things together, keeps assemblages alive and lends practices the stability that makes them appear as structures that guide people's behaviour. The assemblages of human and nonhuman elements make collectives, shared practices and concerted action possible both on local and global scale (Latour, 2005, pp. 174–179).

The task of the researcher is to trace the associations that make assemblages possible, and the sociomaterial supports that give them permanence: how are the associations built, modified and maintained. What kinds of vehicles are set up to connect actors in space? This means focusing on the attachments between actors, the controversies concerning them and the things that are transported through the links between actors. According to Latour (2005, pp. 37–39), one should not presume the linkages to be mere conduits that transport things without adding anything to the equation, or as intermediaries that only express pre-existing social relations. Rather, they often act as *mediators* that are essential for forging the relations into existence, and which affect those relations and the actors involved. Mediators transform and modify the meaning of the elements they carry.

The challenge for any assemblage that is being formed is to gain some stability and to mobilise allies to further a shared agenda (Latour, 2005, pp. 28–34). Efforts to affect people's understanding of the situation and to mobilise them into coordinated action can be viewed as the building of assemblages by enrolling actors through a translation of interests (Callon & Law, 1982; Latour, 1987, pp. 108–120; 2005). The process of recruiting allies and forging new associations can be broken down into four intertwined aspects: *problematization*, *interessement*, *enrolment* and *mobilisation* (Callon, 1984; Latour, 1987). Problematization refers to questioning the current state of affairs, the roles of different actors and the relationships between them. Interessement means inviting people to adapt a certain understanding of their own identity and key interests. If the interessement leads to successful enrolment, a new collective or assemblage is formed.

This paper looks at the problematization of the community and the battle to enrol actors into collectives after a reception centre is established in a small rural town in Finland. The analysis sheds light on the tools and tactics utilised in the micropolitics of space and place. The arrival of asylum seekers into a small town offers a good case to study these issues as it often involves a disturbance to the prevailing order of things. Following Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the process can be viewed as dynamic movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as people decode and recode the codes that order a community (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Müller, 2015; Woods et al., 2021). In Latour's (2005) terms this can be conceptualised as reassembling the social through acts of enrolment and counter-enrolment. We draw on both strands of scholarship on assemblages to unpack our findings.

### 3 DATA AND METHODS

The data of this study consists of interviews with local actors and have been collected by the first author. The interviews were conducted in 2020 and consisted of 19 group and individual interviews. Six of the interviews were done in a group and the remaining 13 were individual interviews. Of the interviewees, 10 were men and 17 were women. The ages of interviewees ranged from 17 to 75 years. One interview was conducted with the help of an interpreter in the native language of the interviewee. The interviews were semistructured and concerned themes of (1) community relations, (2) the operations and functions of the reception centre; and (3) interaction between residents and asylum seekers (Table 1).

**Table 1: Backgrounds of the interviewees**

Group	Number of interviews
Public officials	15
Volunteers (FRC, church actives)	4
Local residents	4
Refugees	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>

The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, where key persons associated with the reception centre were interviewed and they then helped to find more interviewees. An invitation to participate in the interviews was also published in a local newspaper. The topic of this study was considered quite sensitive in Kauhava. In small rural towns, active and politically vocal residents are typically well-known among the locals. There is a considerable risk that interviewees can be identified from the quotations. Therefore, to protect the interviewees, any detailed information regarding, for example, the official position of interviewees, country of origin, spoken language or any other specific identifying attributes are omitted from this paper. Interviewees names are pseudonyms.

During the interviews, the reception centre did not anymore operate in Kauhava and the majority of former asylum seekers had moved away from Kauhava. Therefore, the data mainly concerns local actors who had stayed in the town. Furthermore, as the purpose of this paper is to analyse how actors gather allies and build new connections, we should note that asylum seekers (and refugees) had a limited possibility for this kind of 'recruitment' work due to limited access to resources and spaces, which we elaborate in our analysis. For this reason, the actions of the long-term residents are more prominent in the findings.

The main ethical guideline in this study is the 'do no harm' principle put forward by refugee studies but is also key in any social scientific research encounters (see Krause, 2017). Research should never be disruptive or damaging to participants whether they are individuals or communities. During the analysis, transcribed interview data was organised thematically into categories which describe how people spring into action in a situation where a reception centre has been established in a rural context, and conceptions of place and community become intensified and problematized. The analysis traces and makes observable different ways of building associations among actors through practices of enrolment (Latour, 2005, p. 28). We examine various kinds of acts that reconfigure places and turn public and private places either into contested spaces or sites for generating new attachments between actors.

#### 4 FROM PROBLEMATISATION TO MOBILISATION—VOLUNTEERS GATHER FORCES

The first to take action in Kauhava were those trying to enrol people to act as volunteer support workers. Their role would be to act as welcoming guides for the asylum seekers and help ‘integrate’ the new residents into the local community. They were problematizing the idea of the asylum seekers being outsiders that did not belong to the community, which meant decoding prevailing conceptions of local identity. At the same time, they were gathering supporters to uphold this stance and trying to form linkages between local residents and the newcomers. This assemblage of actors was to be built around— and held together—by the values of inclusiveness, hospitality and solidarity, which were main tools of *interessement*.

The voluntary work was mostly organised through the Finnish Red Cross (FRC), which does not allow expressions of religious views or attempts to convert asylum seekers. However, many local Christians were especially keen to help out and there were three churches which cooperated in arranging voluntary work and putting on various religious events for asylum seekers: Evangelical Lutherans, Pentecostal Church and The Evangelical Free Church of Finland (EFCF). The churches were often the first contact that asylum seekers had to the Finnish people, alongside with the reception centre staff. Most volunteers were members of these congregations, but there were also secular volunteers (Figure 2).

**Picture 2: Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kauhava**



As one method of *enrolling* and *mobilising* volunteers, the FRC arranged a friendship course, which aimed to train individuals and families to act as supportive allies for asylum seekers. The course was arranged in



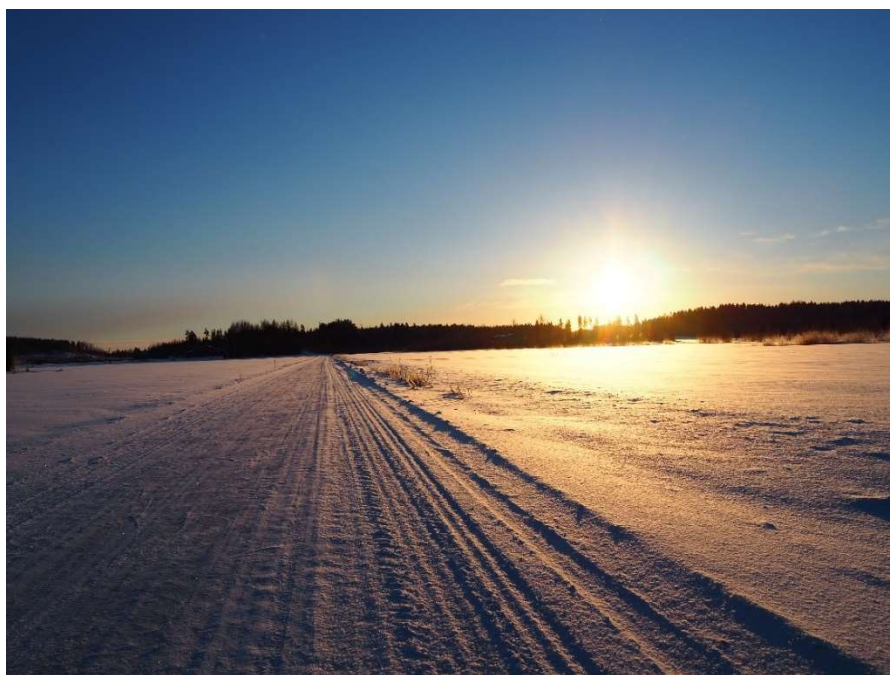
January 2015, after the reception centre had been in operation for 3 months. The hope was that this might lead to building new links and wider networks among locals and asylum seekers. However, the only participants in the course were those who were already involved in voluntary work. Consequently, the FRC was not able to enrol new actors into the collective they were building, and some volunteers felt that the course was condescending towards them. They thought that organising a special course implied that they were not considered capable of forming relationships with new people without expert advice, as can be seen from the following quote:

The course was worthless. I don't think there is any need to get training to interact with people. You just be yourself, you should be the kind of person that you are. You respect their culture and keep your ears open, try to get a sense of what they are like. It doesn't require any training at all. (Volunteer)

As we can see, even actors that are happily involved in a network tied together by shared values can be reluctant to take up identities and roles offered to them by an actor—here the FRC—aiming to make themselves the spokesperson for the whole collective. Like the person quoted above, they may reject a proposed identity, for example, a ‘trained integration worker’, because they considered it as inauthentic or useless for pursuing their goals. On the one hand, they may prefer to view themselves from an individualistic perspective and take distance from the idea of a centrally lead group. On the other hand, they may feel that they have stronger ties to another collective, such as a congregation, that happens to share some of the core values. Throughout the studied period, no-one seemed capable of establishing a unified identity for the network of volunteers. While they were apparently mobilised by the same values and objectives, nobody seemed to be in charge of the network. Nonetheless, the actors were able to pull off many concerted efforts both with and without the guidance of the FRC.

On another front, the FRC would organise field trips, Christmas celebrations, Finnish language clubs and other activities for the asylum seekers. The volunteers also arranged events on their own initiative (Figure 3).

**Picture 3: Country road in the middle of fields**





Some of the activities focused on sharing information about cultural conventions. Others were geared towards forming associations through shared everyday activities and inclusive spatial gestures, such as letting others enter one's private space. For example, many of the volunteers invited asylum seekers to their homes, sending a strong signal of trust. It was challenging for the asylum seekers to return the gesture, as they did not have similar control and ownership of any private space in Finland. They had no homes that would reflect their interests and activities through the décor and furniture. They had no proper material backstage (cf. Goffman, 1959) that could be exposed and shared with selected others. Therefore, they lacked a significant spatial resource for building connections through mutual exchange. Nonetheless, they would invite people to visit their dwellings at the reception centre. In each case, some form of intimate space was shared to build bonds. This enabled the forming of relationships, which would have been difficult to build in an institutional setting or public space.

Along the way, many volunteers formed friendships with asylum seekers and established new connections with other local residents. The participants talked about a strong commitment to building and upholding the ideal of community spirit (*kökkähenki*), but even more so, sharing everyday life with the newcomers. A volunteer described this in the following way:

I feel that, when people talk about there being community spirit (*kökkähenki*), I feel that people have volunteered and given a lot of their time. People have wanted to look after the children so that their parents can go to language courses. And people have taken trips to Oulu (the nearest larger city) and tended to the children while the parents have an immigration hearing. It has been unselfish. [...] *Kökkä* projects used to be small things, but this is more about long-term commitment to helping and walking side-by-side with people. (Volunteer)

*Kökkä* is a local word for a community bee, which are events where people express and build solidarity by voluntarily coming together and helping a member of a community to carry out a chore. They are a tool of intersement as they invite actors to assume a group identity, but they are also labour-intensive events that help showcase the capacities of the collective. Other interviewees also talked about how common activities with asylum seekers emerged as a result of shared problem-solving. On the surface, these undertakings might appear mundane. Yet, they can have a major significance in linking actors together. They also presented an alternative strategy to approaches, that seemed to uphold prescribed cultural identities and divisions among people by inviting actors to identify themselves and others as representatives of national or regional culture. The rationale was not to integrate the representatives of one culture into another, but to create new links between individuals.

Many would have liked to help the asylum seekers, but they feared hostility from other residents. Nonetheless, they found ways around this, for example, through various types of *mediators* (Latour, 2005, pp. 37–39). People used material things to carry sentiments and to build connections to the new residents by, for example, donating old clothes and other goods. These things could be infused with both practical and symbolic value. Even a local politician was transformed into a protective conduit that connected the locals to asylum seekers, while insulating them from accusations and hatred. As one interviewee noted:

They wanted to help, but didn't dare take their donations to the reception centre themselves, because they would have been singled out and subjected to hatred. So, they took their donations to the Christian democrat candidate, since she was going there anyway. And she was already being berated. So, she ended up getting a bit more hate mail. (Public official)

The clandestine connection, described in the quote, enabled feelings of solidarity to flow undetected from local homes to the reception centre. Money donated goods and even people could be used as carriers and

mediators (Latour, 2005, pp. 37–39) of sentiments. As material supports make possible action at a distance (Latour, 1987, pp. 219–223), they can enable not only *governing at a distance* (Rose et al., 2006) but also *solidarity at a distance*.

The churches also provided opportunities for encounters by inviting asylum seekers to their events, with church staff leaving invitations at the reception centre. For everyone's surprise, the first event drew together 120 asylum seekers waiting for rides. This required all the congregation members to participate in driving asylum seekers to the church. In this case, the 'vehicles' connecting actors were literal vehicles that enabled the flow of people across space. Because the cars were private spaces, they formed a safe channel across hostile territory. However, their private nature also made the linkages especially precarious and—as ended up happening—the flow of people could easily dry up without a dedicated effort by few actors.

Congregations offered one form of helping asylum seekers to 'plug in' to the local assemblages (cf. Hiitola & Vähä-Savo, 2021). Given that many of the volunteers were associated with the church, some claimed that their mobilisation had a faith-based motive and that their mission was to convert people to Christianity. For example, a local business owner stated that 'some asylum seekers understood that they would have to join a congregation to stay here, and that is quite terrible'. Another interviewee said the following:

Perhaps these religious actors were mostly active in these things. I would say that on their side you could find most of the activism. The others just kept to themselves, like we are used to doing here; not minding other people's business, letting others be. I know that religious groups were active. But that is how they always behave. (Public official)

The interviewee makes a distinction between two types of actors welcoming of asylum seekers. On one 'side' are the religious people. They are implied to 'bother' others with their activism, and their involvement is seen as selfish. Engaging with asylum seekers is presented as yet another excuse for them to involve themselves in someone else's business. Thus, the believers are positioned as 'others' in relation to the 'regular townspeople' on the other side, who express their consideration for others through respecting their privacy, as is allegedly the local custom. A division is introduced within the group of volunteers and within the 'community' of Kauhava, while an othering identity is imposed on the religious participants (Figure 4).

#### **Picture 4: The center of Kauhava**



This way of dividing the volunteers and hospitable local actors into separate—or even opposing—groups was surprisingly common in our data. While the people welcoming asylum seekers were ‘othered’ by many local people calling them traitors or ‘failed women’, divisions were also made among the volunteers. They were presented not as a single actor but as many. They appeared as a loosely assembled network whose participants likely followed divergent interests, with some enrolling actors for the church and others trying to build an inclusive local collective.

As is typical for building assemblages, it is not always clear who is enrolling whom (Latour, 1987, p. 118). When community is problematized and identities contested one may find surprisingly many dividing lines being drawn even among apparent allies in a small town. This makes it important to analyse how articulations and associations between actors are built and how they enable concerted action. For an outsider, it might have been easy to lump all the volunteers together as agents of the FRC or the church. However, there were clear differences in their identifications by the volunteers themselves, and some did not seem to identify with either institution. Furthermore, it cannot be taken for granted that the different congregations would consider each other as allies. The volunteers formed an unstable assemblage that could have easily come apart without careful maintenance (cf. Latour, 2005, pp. 34–36). However, given the hostile circumstances, they were operating in, they had great success in mobilising actors through values that were vague enough to allow for different interpretations. Even though they did not get everyone on board, their action turned the whole local community into an intensely problematic object in need of reflection.

## **5 COUNTER-ENROLLING THE LOCALS—THE OPPOSITION EMERGES**

Alongside the volunteers working towards connecting asylum seekers with local collectives, the reception centre was followed by efforts to mobilise an opposition with a clearly xenophobic mission. The local newspaper was an important site for enrolment and for coding operations (Välimaa, 2021) that tried to push one definition of local identity and desired social order. The newspaper's opinion column was turned into a platform for circulating accusations against the reception centre and for recruiting allies. Unmodified discussions on local online forums served the same purpose (ibid.). News coverage at the time was likewise

polarised and sensationalized, which added more fuel to the fire. As one town official said: 'they only read the worst news they can find and there is nothing but bad things in the news'.

In an attempt to avoid negative rumours, a public briefing was held at the reception centre in September 2015 as it was just about to start operating. The atmosphere at this briefing was highly agitated, and participants said that those welcoming and opposing asylum seekers sat at different sides of the room. 'It was a clear division', one interviewee said. The interviewees felt that the statements of opposition had been prepared beforehand:

Interviewee A: The atmosphere was very tense from the beginning. The arguments had been planned earlier and then no one from the majority dared to say anything reasonable. (Public official)

Interviewee B: And then I noticed the charged atmosphere and how they were shouting. It felt strange at times how people could get so riled up. So charged with emotion, almost an electric atmosphere. (Public official)

The public briefing did not lead to the intended result of greater understanding and consensus. Instead, the divisions among residents grew deeper and became more glaring. The unity of the 'community', which had not been an issue before, became problematized through divergent views concerning belonging. These discussions intensified the community and made it an object of reflection and strong emotions as opposing camps relied on strong rhetorical tactics to interest new supporters. This was accompanied by increasing tensions and severe ruptures forming among the residents. Many interviewees expressed that after the reception centre was established it felt like the community was suddenly divided in half.

The main focal point of the opposition's rhetoric was the question of who has the right to occupy public space. Some of the opponents argued that asylum seekers were 'invading' their space and acting in an inappropriate manner. It was claimed, for example, that asylum seekers were 'smoking cannabis' on a local beach. Their *Shisha* pipes (a Turkish water pipe) created confusion and came to represent 'otherness'. One interviewee described the battle over space as follows:

Beaches, everything was conquered. Women didn't dare to go to the beach with the children because the flock of men had taken over the space. They were there at the break of dawn. No one dared to go there swimming. They started drinking in the morning. They had water pipes, it reeked of cannabis all the time. It was awful. (Local resident)

The asylum seekers are depicted like a 'flock' of animals that 'conquered' and took over the beach from the locals simply by their presence. The interviewee continues that the Training Air Wing flight school, where the reception centre was established, could have been put to a better use—something that would have benefitted the real 'locals'.

Different places around the town became politicised. Public spaces such as the beach and the Training Air Wing were used to draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Many aspects of daily life in Kauhava were changed as newcomers appeared in local spaces. Some residents tried to avoid newcomers, for example, by going the grocery store at different times to when asylum seekers would usually shop. There was talk about the risk of diseases spreading, and some townspeople were afraid to use the credit card terminal in the store because they were afraid of getting infected. People spread rumours that the asylum seekers will 'stain' the facilities and make them dangerous for others. Public places were turned into contested spaces as affects were attached on small everyday material surfaces that acted as rare points of encounter for most long-time residents and asylum seekers (Figure 5).

**Picture 5: Kauhava shopping center**



Issues of perceived safety were typically at the core of debates over space and belonging. One of the tactics used by the opposition to control space was to drive around shouting abuse and obscenities from their cars. Some went even further and tried to turn public space into a hunting ground by setting 'traps' for asylum seekers. The aim was to strengthen the prejudicial image of asylum seekers as criminals. A member of staff at the reception centre described the situation as follows:

Traps were set for asylum seekers. They would leave car windows open and stick around to see if someone would try to get in. In case that would have happened, they would beat up the person. Bicycles were left in the ditches on the regular routes of the asylum seekers and people would hide in the bushes to see whether they would take the bikes, so that there would be a reason to chase and capture them. (Public official)

The intention of setting traps was to lure asylum seekers into committing petty crimes and thus provide support for the depiction of them as threatening outsiders. Those hostile to asylum seekers viewed them as criminals and went out of their way to make them such, which turned cars and old bicycles central to constructing a community. While these stereotypes did not turn out to be accurate and the newcomers did not commit crimes, these activities certainly helped to make the asylum seekers wary of the local people. As one interviewed refugee mentioned 'the Finnish people are startled by foreigners', which made it difficult to even start a conversation with them.

Asylum seekers were not the only ones presented as a threat by those running counter-enrolment operations. Volunteers and others acting in solidarity with asylum seekers were accused of working against the best interests of the town. The Evangelic Lutheran Church was criticised for organising events and for translating church services in Arabic. In fact, when the church held services in Arabic, members of the local anti-immigration movement would attend wearing clothes with racist symbols and messages, making their presence felt both in the church and on the streets outside. One member even took a baton with him into the church to signal his readiness for a physical fight. Like the abovementioned volunteer community bees, the logic of these events was to interest new members whilst manifesting the strength of the network.

Constructing the asylum seekers as a threat was used as an interestment tool. Xenophobic ideas were spread among locals and shared on social media channels like YouTube. A church service, which held a

large attendance of asylum seekers, was filmed by opponents. Rumours were spread that the church in Kauhava was preaching the word of Islam. A woman volunteering with the asylum seekers said:

I found out that the chair of SISU (a Finnish nationalistic far-right organization) had been streaming pictures from the church and criticized our event. He had written a comment that the priest was talking about the Winter War and about Karelians. And that Allah had been mentioned. He wanted to make it sound like something else, like we had been preaching about Islam at the church. But as the Arabic language translation for God is Allah, it means that any God would be called Allah. (Volunteer)

The situation escalated rapidly. Those who believed the disturbing claims about the church's motives and actions threatened to resign. Eventually, this resulted in increased division: the church started arranging separate services for asylum seekers and for locals. All the hard work of building connections and managing flows came to a halt.

To become more organised and to recruit new members, the anti-immigration movement held their own public event. It pushed to bring together people that, as they portrayed it, would form a collective to 'protect the local people from the invasion of dangerous and violent people who hoped to live luxurious lives at the expense of Finnish taxpayers'. Interestingly, the members of the most vocal opposition were not residents at all but came from other cities to rally to the cause. They were described as being so threatening that even the locals feared them:

At the school field there was this event where the (anti-immigration) activists were inciting people to oppose the asylum seekers with more vigour. We did not know these people. As I browsed through the brochure for the event, I could not recognize the organizers. You could hear from their accents that they were not Southern Ostrobothnians. They were huge tough guys (*karpaaseja*). They had black military parka jackets and sunglasses and then they were making obnoxious statements and asking awful questions trying to get the audience to join them. (Public official)

As with the volunteers, there were conflicting views concerning the identities of the actors involved in the opposition. Contradictory identifications were offered, marketed and imposed on people by various actors, which is a sign of groups and anti-groups being actively formed and belonging becoming a subject of controversy (cf. Latour, 2005, pp. 28–31). First, there were the 'agitators', who some considered 'hateful right-wing radicals', coming from other cities to enrol people to join their mission. They, in turn, liked to identify themselves as the 'benevolent protectors' of the local folk. Working alongside them there were the local actors who started enrolling others for the same agenda. An interviewed official described these people by using the metaphor '*kellokas*' (one wearing a bell), which literally means a cow or a reindeer who has a bell around their neck and leads the rest of the herd. The metaphor depicts these activists as simple-minded herd animals that make a lot of noise and may gather a following of other dim-witted people. The ones being enrolled to join this 'proud resistance' against the 'dangerous invaders' were described by others as an 'uneducated and 'naïve' group of 'basement-dwellers'.

A key part of the war over place and space is the battle over contradictory identifications offered and imposed on people, as we can see in the case of Kauhava. As each 'team' that emerges through these micropolitical encounters, tries to enrol and mobilise new actors by constructing collective identities tied to historical narratives and geographical space, one can see an ever increasing intensification of local community.

## 6 THE DUST SETTLES— RETERRITORIALIZED EVERYDAY PRACTICES

As the heated exchanges of enrolling and mobilising people as well as coding and decoding identities started to cool down, one could notice new practices taking form. Some of them were geared towards upholding divisions among people and making them a permanent feature of the town. Institutionalised discriminatory practices emerged, such as the previously mentioned situation with the church holding separate services just for asylum seekers, as one of our interviewees noted:

After enough people resigned from the church the head pastor said they cannot bring the asylum seekers to the church services anymore. And it was decided that asylum seekers cannot take part in the regular services, and separate services will be organised for them. (...) When the church notified that some event included translation in Arabic, other people knew to stay away, they knew there would be Arabs there. (Volunteer)

It would be illegal in Finland to ban a group of people from entering a church. Nonetheless, in a small town, it was possible to make this happen. The asylum seekers had relied on the locals to take them in their cars to the church. When this material support was taken away the asylum seekers were effectively cut off from these spaces. Suddenly, Kauhava became a lot smaller place for newcomers in terms of access to people. Similarly, a local school was moved from the proximity of the reception centre. Children were said to be in danger as the schoolyard shared the same courtyard as the reception centre. Although the buildings were located in an area of 400 hectares, the school was relocated (Figure 6).

**Picture 6: The Fouga statue in *Kauhava Training Air Wing* military flight school**



Conversely, there were also new collectives and shared practices forming. For example, a group of asylum-seeker men started fishing at the local lake, which was first met with suspicion but later came to be valued by some locals:

They stock rainbow trout at the Lake *Ojutjärvi*. When they (asylum seekers) found it and understood the trout thing, they got so excited. First it was written in the *Komiat*-newspaper (a local newspaper) that they are ruining the place. But it was maybe about three weeks later



that I went by the lake and the local guys started saying that it is such a shame that the asylum seekers don't come around anymore, since they are nice guys. They would put down their fishing gear and help to build a pier, and things like that. (Public official)

People found ways to ease tensions and fears through very simple everyday solutions that did not involve extensive cultural education. For example, people had become worried that perhaps some of the asylum seekers were 'up to no good' as they were going around taking photos of houses and other buildings. Turned out that the asylum seekers were simply surveying their new neighbourhoods and the local scenery. Nonetheless, they were accused of intrusion into private yards and even of planning burglaries. A local business owner told us how this issue was solved by merely putting up a sign in Arabic explaining to the asylum seekers that this behaviour was concerning to the residents. The locals were not accustomed to the idea of their everyday surroundings being an exotic venue worth of being photographed and explored by people, as one might in a popular tourist destination. Another problem was also solved easily by circulating a notice in Arabic. Some of the asylum seekers turned out to be very sociable and talkative, and they would strike up long conversations with the cashiers at the check-out counter of a store. Meanwhile, other residents became annoyed with the long queues forming as they waited to pay their groceries. When the asylum seekers were made aware of this grievance via a simple note, they instantly modified this practice that had, unbeknownst to them, upset some of the residents.

The refugees who stayed in Kauhava seemed willing to actively form connections with locals. One interviewee with a refugee background told that the small size of the town made it easier to know 'who is decent and who may cause problems'. The refugees who stayed in Kauhava after receiving residence permits said they had become recognised as locals. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) terms, reterritorialization had taken place in Kauhava to the extent that many newcomers had plugged themselves—or had been enroled —into local assemblages and had now a part to play in the 'normal' order of things (Figure 7).

**Picture 7: Wall painting in *Kauhava Training Air Wing* military flight school**



The asylum seekers were not the only ones who had to adapt and get used to new habits and practices. For example, many of the Kauhava villagers did not typically greet others with a 'hello'. Instead, a quick nod

was considered enough to acknowledge another person's presence. When asylum seekers arrived in the town, this had to change. Reception centre workers reflected upon the changes in the following way:

Interviewee 5: These old men were drinking coffee at the gas station, they were swearing that “goddamit, nowadays you have to greet everyone, due to these asylum seekers”. [...] (Public official)

Interviewee 6: The people in Kauhava are forced to greet even each other now. Because these new folks came along, and their greeting habits are so strong. I mean, if you see a person often, you know they are from the same town. Even if you do not know them you have to say hello. So, the men were swearing about having to greet everyone now. They have been forced in this situation where you feel like you need to respond to greetings. Life was a lot easier for them before. (Public official)

While the asylum seekers lacked the resources to participate in public discussions, they were able to attach themselves to everyday life in Kauhava and to shape the town through these small but significant gestures. Overall, the reception centre changed the town in many ways. As people had encounters with the asylum seekers and they became more familiar, many of the initial prejudices started to fade away. While most asylum seekers did move to larger cities after receiving asylum, some remained in the small town and often managed to create networks with the locals

## 7 DISCUSSION

This paper analysed how the identities and networks of relations among actors—and among actors and spaces—are reassembled following the arrival of large group of new residents into a rural town. Like Woods et al. (2021, p. 285) we are interested in the

acts of transformation through which components are gathered, arranged, and dispersed, and relations established, reconfigured, and broken [...] analysing how relations come into being, and how places are transformed through these relations.

This led us to examine the ‘situated moments of engagement and transformation’ that enable connectivity or enforce boundaries (Woods et al., 2021, p. 286) in these situations.

We see the processes of creating assemblages through enrolment and de/recoding central for the creation of a *sense of place* in three ways. First, they contribute to the idea that it makes sense to conceive a combination of people, space and geographical features as a specific place with an identity. Hence, there is the *sense of a particular place existing*. Second, as people try to *make sense of a place*, meaning is attached to it. This happens discursively through accounts and narratives that may lead to conflicting understandings of the place. Third, by articulating identities and meanings with spaces, and by creating barriers and conduits in space, the conditions for *sensing a place* are assembled in a certain way. This affects the way different actors may exist in, experience, and navigate in space (Massey, 1993b). Both material and discursive arrangements shape how a place becomes meaningful for different actors in an affective sense (cf. Woods et al., 2021). The division between public and private spaces, the various ways of controlling access to places and the practices that generate either threatening minefields or therapeutical landscapes all have a key role here.

Our study finds that regardless of whether they have a positive or negative attitude towards asylum seekers, the springing to action of local people leads to *problematization* and *intensification* of community. Local community is brought to the fore as a battleground of competing definitions and distinctions

concerning how people bond together and what are the core values of the 'community'? People start to argue over issues of identity and belonging that previously have not been prominent topics in the town. These issues can be debated in various public forums. They may also become entwined with arguments concerning legitimate claims to ownership of public space. These acts turn public spaces into arenas of contestation (cf. Burte, 2003; Di Masso et al., 2011; Toolis & Hammack, 2015).

As seen in Kauhava, it may become unclear who is considered a true resident and who is a threatening 'other' or a traitor. New—and often conflicting—identities are marketed and imposed on people in efforts to form alliances, justify certain claims or discredit others. There may be a long standoff involving decoding and recoding of the prevailing idea of social order. In Kauhava, the same people could be hailed as the guardians of the town's women and children in one instance and declared as violent racists in another. Some invited the local people to recognise themselves as open-hearted neighbours willing to lend a hand to the newcomers. Others called the residents to join the battle to protect the community from the dangerous foreign invaders and the local traitors that were collaborating with them. In a small town, where most people know each other, the intensification of the community can build up into an all-embracing phenomenon that raises the stakes for everyone involved (see also Hubbard, 2005; Whyte et al., 2019). Being anonymous is next to impossible.

Various self-proclaimed spokespeople (Latour, 2005, p. 31) may take the stage and claim to represent the townspeople or the asylum seekers, while enrolling and mobilising allies. Agitators try to shape people's understanding of what is happening, what they ought to be worried about and what are rational measures to be taken. However, even when the stakes were raised in Kauhava, people found ways to exercise *solidarity at a distance* through *insulated mediators* and material supports that could carry sentiments over long geographical and social distances. Of course, people were not able to control the way that the mediators affected the sentiments they tried to send to the asylum seekers (cf. Latour, 2005, pp. 37–39). It is impossible to say what was actually 'received' by the asylum seekers that met with the local Christian politician delivering donations from the townsfolk.

The division between private and public space played a significant role in building associations and reassembling place in Kauhava. Two major factors made this division influential. First, *control of the space* is different. The ownership of private space is limited and clearly designated. For the asylum seekers in Kauhava, private spaces were often safer and more welcoming than public spaces. Volunteers would invite them to their homes as a friendly gesture. Despite the battles raging in the town, the volunteers could share these safe spaces with the asylum seekers, which offered a chance to interact in an informal environment. Then again, the private nature of these safe spaces meant that they were not open for asylum seekers to explore and to make their own. While public spaces are always characterised by struggles and negotiations (Massey, 2005, pp. 152–153), they nonetheless offer a platform for collective action and creative use of one's surroundings. They can also lead to random encounters that generate new groupings, as happened with the asylum seekers and local fishermen by Lake Ojutjärvi.

The asylum seekers had very little control over space. For example, the car rides offered by the volunteers helped the asylum seekers to cover large geographical distances in small privately owned spaces. However, these links could easily be cut off by those who owned the cars. Cars offered on way of controlling space. These safe conduits were extremely precarious and, in many cases, did break down. Even public and private buildings that are open for wide variety of people (e.g., churches, stores, libraries and bathing halls) could restrict access to their premises and control activities within, sometimes leading to othering practices.

Public and private spaces also differ in terms of *intimacy*. Private space has a high symbolic value as it is intimate and can be used to express the owner's identity. Inviting someone to private space is a more powerful gesture than arranging a meeting at a public place. Even though people may build strong

emotional ties to public spaces, the relationship is not as exclusive and sharing the space with someone does not carry the same symbolic weight. This puts asylum seekers at a disadvantaged position as they do not typically have their own private space, unless one counts their rooms in a reception centre. Hence it is difficult for them to build symmetrical relationships with the local people who invite them to their homes. The gesture cannot be returned, if you do not possess a private space that you can mould as you wish to reflect your identity. The distinction between private and public is blurred in the lives of asylum seekers who live in reception centres. If one is not able to return the 'gift' of allowing someone to one's intimate space it is challenging to build an equal and reciprocal relationship that generates solidarity (cf. Mauss, 1990).

All these activities had a part in reconfiguring Kauhava as a place. Established associations between people—and between people and places—faced trials as attachments were formed and severed through enrolment, changing institutional arrangements and setting up of material mediators and conduits for transporting people and sentiments across space. Actors with diverging interests fought to make certain sociomaterial assemblages withstand and others to dissolve. New forms of collective action and novel social practices took form, that likely would never have taken place without the reception centre. These encounters facilitated forming new links between locals and asylum seekers, among formerly distant groups of residents and between local and national activists. New practices created associations between people but, in some cases, also reinforced divisions and made them more persistent (e.g. relocating the school, modifying the church services). Some of the changes involved political decision-making, others arose from revised everyday practices. Continuous contacts across initial group boundaries also formed a fertile ground for the creation of unexpected practices and ways of being together in a common space (cf. Wilson, 2017). Our findings support the argument that everyday encounters are especially significant in overcoming prejudices, building connections and forming a sense of belonging, but they may also lead to conflicts and reinforcing established power relations (Cook et al., 2011; Leitner, 2012; Lobo, 2013; Wilson, 2017), which makes them charged events.

Place, as a combination of space and community, is difficult to define as it is formed through a complex articulation of things and never-ending processes (Massey, 2005), which is why it is always in a constant state of becoming (Woods et al., 2021). For this reason, it is important to focus on the microprocesses and micropolitics that go into defining a place (Woods et al., 2021) and in stabilising taken-for-granted everyday practices that either uphold a sense of belonging or reinforce divisions among people. A fruitful way to analyse these activities is to focus on events that trigger the problematisation of belonging in space and place, and cause the intensification of community. The arrival of large group of asylum seekers in an area is likely to trigger this kind of event. For this reason, integration studies could benefit greatly from a wider contribution by human geography scholars, who might help to expand the conceptual toolkit for analysing place in the context of integration. We believe that the sociology of associations and assemblage thinking can play an important role in this effort. This also requires finding ways to spatialise the insights offered by these strands of thought. Our paper contributes to this effort by looking at the different roles that private and public spaces as well as vehicles that enable the flow of things between spaces can play in building associations and collectives. The sociology of associations helps to direct attention to the material supports and spatial practices, whose role in connecting and separating actors can easily go overlooked. It is through them that new identities, spaces and collectives are constructed, and places become transformed.

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