
Another letter from the Home Office: reading the material politics of asylum

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Abstract. In an era of technologically mediated modes of border enforcement, this paper focuses upon a seemingly more anachronistic mode of governmental intervention: that of the letter. Exploring the use of letters by the UK Border Agency to communicate decisions on asylum claims I argue that taking the materiality of the letter seriously demands a reworking of the politics of asylum. Drawing on ethnographic research within a UK asylum drop-in centre, the paper opens by offering a governmental reading of letters as things which define the limits of present and future actions, whilst fixing individuals to specific locations. The paper then destabilises such a reading by considering how letters are understood through material-discursive entanglements of things, discourses, and spaces, such that letters are understood through, and help to constitute, different atmospheres, spaces, and subjectivities of asylum. Thus I argue that it is by taking seriously the connections between materials, discourses, and affective states that we might critically interrogate framings of the state as an oppressive force shaping the lives of those seeking asylum.

Keywords: asylum, materiality, governance, citizenship

“The point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices.”

Barad (2003, page 823)

“All states are rooted in writing, and the performance of the state in the routines of writing ... [is] fundamental to the naturalisation of the state.”

Joyce and Bennett (2010, page 14)

In a recent review of the role of state-theoretic work around forced migration, Gill (2010) argued for a more nuanced examination of how states come to be practised. Destabilising the image of an unwieldy and abstract state apparatus in this manner has become an important orientation within political geography (Jeffrey, 2012; Mountz, 2003; 2010; Painter, 2006). Rethinking the practice of the state has led to considerations of how the state is encountered through forms of citizen engagement (Jones, 2007), how the accomplishment of state projects relies upon the enrolment of prosaic routines (Blakeley, 2010; Staeheli et al, 2012), and how states seek to shape behaviours and perceptions ‘at a distance’ (Inda, 2007; Jones et al, 2010). In parallel with this work there have been discussions over the technical nature of governance, drawing attention to how the practice of government relies upon “an array of more or less formalised and more or less specialised technical devices” (Barry, 2001, page 5). This paper seeks to take forward Gill’s (2010) call for a “critical asylum politics” that unsettles a singular and abstract account of the state, by focusing upon one such “technical device” of government—that of letters sent to asylum seekers by the former UK Border Agency (UKBA). The paper develops a reading of asylum governance as not simply a

“technical matter” (Barry, 2001, page 5), but a material matter, an issue of things, associations, collectives, and the entanglements such a multitude implies. The paper thus takes forward Desbiens et al’s (2004, page 242) claim that “the state is not a unitary object but is, rather, a set of practices enacted through relationships between people, places, and institutions”, and adds to this view a concern with the materials that perform relations between these people, places, and institutions.

By focusing on letters as an entry point into debates over the governance of asylum, I want to consider how discourses on the ubiquity of borders rely upon the presence of mundane materials and modes of contact. Latour (2000, page 113) argues that society “has to be composed, made up, constructed, established, maintained, and assembled”, and it is this sense of the continual work involved in maintaining systems of bordering that a concern with the material politics of asylum might bring to the fore. Whilst letters are not alone in these effects, considering them as governmental interventions highlights how discussions of asylum dispersal (Darling, 2011a; Phillips, 2006), decision making (Good, 2007; Montgomery and Foldspang, 2005), and exclusion (Squire, 2009; Tyler, 2010) are *practised* through the production of paperwork, the filing of cases, and the posting of mail.

Considering letters as expressions of governmental practice is partly inspired by an increasing focus on the study of letters, or epistolary, within the social sciences (see Barton and Hall, 1999; Cardell and Haggis, 2011; Nevela and Palander-Collin, 2005). Within such work, letters have been examined as dialogical ‘documents of life’, which offer an insight into the relations formed between letter writers and their addressees (Plummer, 2001; Stanley, 2004). In this vein, research has considered the relations that letters produce between migrants and their homelands (Cancian, 2010), and how letters sustain social hierarchies (Dierks, 1999). Whilst UKBA letters are specific forms of correspondence, they do nonetheless share some of the key characteristics of epistolary. For example, they are produced in response to particular linguistic rules—in this case those of bureaucratic documentation (see Mémet, 2005). They are also situated on the “*boundaries of the personal and impersonal*” as, whilst they are modes of communication between the authority of the state and an individual, they are often “read in circumstances that are social rather than individual” (Jolly and Stanley, 2005, page 9, original emphasis). Within this field, however, Hall (1999) notes a lack of concern with the materiality of letters, with how they are produced, transported, and interpreted. It is to this point of material articulation and reception that this paper is addressed.

Proposing this form of material analysis shifts concern with asylum away from a purely discursive frame of reference. Much work has been done to consider, critique, and deconstruct the exclusionary discourses that frame asylum across much of the Global North, in press coverage (Finney and Simpson, 2007; Goodman and Speer, 2007), policy discussions (Bloch, 2000; Squire, 2008), political discourse (Capdevila and Callaghan, 2008; Kushner, 2003) and public imaginations (Lewis, 2005; Lynn and Lea, 2003). Whilst such work has been valuable in contesting the criminalisation of mobility, it may overlook and underplay the material constitution of discourse, of how media representations, policy discussions, and public opinion are translated in and through material things, which are themselves altered as they move. It is for this reason that a concern with the effects of letters, rather than purely their discursive meaning or legal content, is important. Methodologically, this paper therefore approaches letters through their effects, through the relations they enact and the affects they produce. In doing so, this paper adds to current work that examines the discursive and legal production of migrant subjectivities by the state (see Anderson, 2010; De Genova, 2007; Fuglerud, 2004; Squire, 2009), by offering a means to consider the affective politics of these categorisations—of how the state is enacted through patterns of desire, attachment, hope, and fear (Fortier, 2013).

This form of material analysis draws on a range of recent debates within the social sciences orientated around questions of materiality and agency and in doing so opens new avenues for exploring the constitution of asylum politics. Discussions that highlight the “productivity and resilience of matter” (Coole and Frost, 2010, page 7) have been influential in taking forward an ontology that detaches agency from a purely human frame of reference (see Barad, 2003; Coward, 2012; Latour, 2005). In this context, discussions of materiality have challenged “the terminology of matter as an inert substance subject to predictable causal forces” (Coole and Frost, 2010, page 9). To explore the agential capacities of matter is to consider how materials act in concert with other things, discourses, and spaces, forming associations that may move human actors in different ways. In this account of materiality, things may stabilise and reproduce social orders, being themselves coconstitutive with the social world (Aradau, 2010), yet they are also continually open to shifting appropriation, as the stabilisations of any material order are continually in play. Materialisation here becomes a state of turbulence in which “things” exist only in “transitory and unstable states” (Kirsch 2012, page 438), continually being positioned and repositioned in relations of gathering and distribution (Anderson and Wylie, 2009).

The approach to materiality drawn upon in this paper emerges from these ongoing debates over intentionality, matter, and discourse. Whilst I do not wish to privilege the material over the discursive, I also do not wish to enclose the efficacy of matter so tightly within a discursive framework, such that ‘materialisation’ always-already becomes the materialisation of discourse. Doing so risks denying the possibility that matter may exceed discursive intelligibility and representation. This paper thus draws upon an account of matter that views materiality and discourse as intimately linked, as coconstitutive in enacting relations and assemblages that produce effects, thereby reflecting a concern with ‘material-discursive’ formations (Barad, 2003; Dittmer, 2013). Yet it does not fully collapse materiality and discourse, as Squire (2013, page 8) suggests in examining the “materialdiscursive” nature of phenomena. It seeks instead to leave open the efficacy of matter as an always present possibility that exceeds discursive categorisation (Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Meehan et al, 2013). This means examining matter through the perspective of ‘things’ which take form not through the imposition of discourses ‘onto’ or ‘into’ them, but rather as emerging “in relation” with discursive practices (Aradau, 2010, page 494). Matter and meaning are co-constitutive and mutually emergent: as things are materialised in relation to discursive formations, so too are those discursive frames materialised through an entanglement with things. The term ‘things’, rather than ‘objects’, however, denotes “entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them” (Bennett, 2010, page 5). A language of ‘things’ thus situates material entities within relations that may be both material and discursive, reflecting temporary stabilisations within the turbulence of materialisation. Politically, the ‘turbulence’ of ‘things’ is central, as Anderson and Wylie (2009) suggest, for it highlights how capacities of action are connected to what things are at any given point (their current configuration and expression) and what they may become (their potential to effect and affect other things, people, and places differently).

In exploring letters through such a lens, the paper develops in three parts. The first considers the governmental role of letters in maintaining a system of asylum dispersal that disciplines the lives of asylum seekers. Here letters may be seen to reiterate state practices, discourses, and authority. The second section destabilises an image of the letter as a vessel for governmental authority, by considering how letters elicit responses. Here letters are considered as things that hold the capacity to move individuals in affective and interpersonal ways. The third section reflects upon these material qualities in considering how letters enact

logics of differentiation. I want to begin, however, by outlining an event that highlighted the significance of the letter as a tool of the state.

Governmental letters

In January 2013 the work of Capita, a private firm contracted by the UKBA to contact migrants suspected of overstaying their visas, made national headlines in the UK. Capita chose to address the migrants by sending thousands of text messages to individuals named on a UKBA database. The messages read: “Message from the UK Border Agency: You are required to leave the UK as you no longer have the right to remain” (Travis, 2013). Controversy arose not simply because of the inaccuracy of the UKBA’s records, but also because of the nature of this mode of communication. Migrant rights groups highlighted text messages as an inappropriate and intrusive form of contact; for example, a spokesperson for the Immigration Law Practitioners Association told the BBC:

“We were concerned at reports of people who had valid leave to be in the UK receiving the texts People will no doubt assume that the texts are spam as sending texts through a sub-contractor for a matter of this gravity is not what one would expect from a government department” (Crawford, 2013).

In these discussions text messages were positioned in contrast to the use of letters as a formal channel of communication. Letters are a standard form of contact from the UKBA to a wide range of migrant groups, and for asylum seekers in particular letters form the key mechanism of contact with the state. Since 2000, asylum seekers in the UK have been ‘dispersed’ across the country to accommodation on a ‘no choice’ basis (Phillips, 2006). In this context the UKBA use letters to communicate initial asylum decisions, to respond to appeals, to explain undue delays, and to inform individuals of enforced moves. Letters act as the ‘appropriate’ form of communication for the state with those seeking asylum—feeding into perceptions of what form official correspondence should take. With such perceptions in mind, I want to highlight three roles letters play in governing asylum, each in contrast to the text message, which is rendered an ‘inappropriate’ form of contact.

First, the governmental role of the letter can be seen in the ways in which it serves to inscribe the authority of the state onto the lives of those seeking asylum. Letters mediate and communicate the decisions and policies of the UKBA as an arm of the UK government. Yet in doing so they act to legitimate and substantiate the authority of such a government over those seeking asylum—letters pass down decisions, communicate outcomes, and shape the horizons of those on the margins of the state. As Stanley (2004, page 212) notes, letters “involve a performance of self by the writer, but one tempered by recognising that the addressee is not just a mute audience”; rather, the addressee is expected to respond. This ‘epistolary pact’ (Altman, 1982) is notable because of the way it directs asylum seekers to respond in specific ways. This may be by vacating dispersal accommodation, reporting to a police station, completing further paperwork, or simply waiting passively for the decision of the UKBA. Letters in this manner shape the relation between an individual and authority as the presence of the state is “materialized” (Hull, 2012, page 260). By contrast to the text messages of Capita, letters carry cultural legitimacy and authority, framed around an image of bureaucracy wherein documents are “the very image of formal organizational practice” (Hull, 2012, page 256). In this sense, letters construct and communicate the shared meanings associated with the state—they position those receiving such letters as subject to this decision-making body. Legitimacy relies upon what Joyce (2010, page 109) terms the “systematic regularity” that typifies the style of the bureaucratic letter, a style “conducive to discipline and conformity” and essential to the performance of the state.

This legitimising mechanism finds expression in a number of ways. First, letters display the UKBA logo as a header and often contain a footer displaying the Home Office’s slogan of

“Building a safe, just, and tolerant society”. Second, whilst letters communicating negative decisions vary in length considerably—from two or three pages to fifteen depending on the complexity of the case—they rely upon a common structure and mode of bureaucratic writing. These letters are set out in numbered paragraphs, so as to be able to cross-reference claims. The numbered and sequential nature of this structure enables the production of what Shaw and Kaye (2013, page 5) term the “domino effect” in asylum decision making—where decision makers focus on “one part of the case that they thought inconsistent or implausible” and use this as “the basis for undermining other aspects of the individual’s account”. This numbered and sequential structure produces the image of a logical process of legal determination, in which each element of an individual’s narrative is examined and assessed.

Third, the use of ‘case numbers’ to identify and communicate with individual asylum seekers is notable. These act as distancing mechanisms linked to the nature of bureaucratic writing: “because it is self-referential, the authority of bureaucratic writing seems autonomous from political institutions, seems to inhere in an autonomous ‘system’. This autonomy conveys authority” (Joyce, 2010, page 109). Reference to case types, case numbers, past files, and documented evidence combine to reproduce a discourse of the abstract ‘system’, removed from the individual and their life story (Fuglerud, 2004). It was perhaps the breaking of these codes of accepted discourse that led the UKBA text message to be questioned. These texts did not contain the essential ingredients of the bureaucratic—the case number, the paper trail, the signature, all of which perform the legitimacy of state authority. The abstraction of bureaucratic writing that establishes an ‘appropriate’ relation between the individual and the state is also expressed through the nature of other modes of asylum paperwork. For example, Gill (2014, page 3) argues that application forms for asylum “mobilise a detached, partial presentation of the asylum seekers they describe, distilling ‘facts’ from emotions, abbreviating long histories of often arduous travel, and curtailing accounts of suffering and loss”. Just as letters serve to materialise the state, so these forms act to channel the voices of those seeking asylum into particular modalities of legibility.

The second role of the letter as a governmental device is tied to the temporality of asylum. Whilst waiting is a central characteristic of the asylum process (Conlon, 2011; Schuster, 2011), letters from the UKBA both punctuate this experience, giving it form and limitation, and act as a technology of deferral, of processing times, delays, inefficiencies, and frustrations. Letters become events within this temporal politics, occurrences that may transform and shift the meaning of waiting—from a passive process of ‘seeking’ sanctuary to an active process of beginning an appeal or the transition to life as a refugee. Similarly, the absence of a letter and the expectation of a decision serve to govern asylum seekers as much as the arrival of such a decision. As Bagelman (2013, page 50) argues, in this context sovereignty operates precisely in and through unpredictability, the “deferral of a decision or knowable future”. The authority of the state is reiterated through the right to deliberate and defer. Cases must be cross-referenced, claims checked, country backgrounds explored, and motives considered. Whilst the dominant narrative of asylum decision making in the UK is of a desire for decisions to be made ever faster (Cwerner, 2004), the well-publicised reality is one of inefficiencies, delays, and backlogs (Vine, 2012). The holding in limbo of those seeking asylum becomes an expression of governmental authority in this context (Bagelman, 2013). Letters represent a final expression of this logic of deferral—a form of communication less immediate than a text message or a phone call. The letter *takes* time, it speaks of a governmental position which directs the time of others and imposes a temporal rhythm onto the experience of seeking asylum.

Finally, letters form part of the geographical governance of asylum mobility through the fixing of asylum seekers to specific ‘known’ spaces of accommodation. In this effort,

the impact of addressing letters to individuals' allocated spaces of accommodation is to reinforce the fixity of an asylum seeker to a dispersal location, to tie an individual to an address. This connection is furthered when we consider that an initial decision letter contains the option of an appeal if an asylum claim is unsuccessful, but that such an appeal must be lodged within ten days of receipt, which attaches significant risks to leaving one's dispersal accommodation. The use of letters to address those seeking asylum through allocated accommodation spaces therefore acts to tacitly enforce the restrictions of dispersal.

Taking these readings of asylum letters together, we can see how letters materialise the state in different ways, finding expression for the logics of state discipline, regulation, and deferral that construct asylum seekers. It would perhaps be easy to suggest that letters are *designed* as mechanisms of disciplinary authority and regulation. Such a reading, though, would overstate the intentionality behind the use of letters. For, as Joerges (1999, page 414) cautions, the power of such things "does not lie in themselves. It lies in their associations; it is the product of the way they are put together and distributed." Thus whilst the consequence of letters may be the production of a 'politics of discomfort' (Darling, 2011a), the intention may be simply the bureaucratic functioning of the state as a governmental entity, a complex formation of interests, processes, human capacities and fallibilities, and more-than-human entanglements. As Anjaria (2011) illustrates, whilst the very regulatory nature of bureaucracy may produce a veneer of intentionality, the state is often based on everyday compromises, failings, and contingencies. We should thus be wary of overstating the *governmental intentions* of this material, whilst being alive to the *governmental effects* of such letters. This is to be attentive to a path between "contingency and control" (Joerges, 1999, page 424), wherein state authority may be intentional at points and emergent at others. It is here that discussions of the vibrancy of matter may come into play (Bennett, 2010), for whilst documents such as letters may "index the state", their "participation in different projects within the state arena depends on their variable material qualities, discourses, and careers" (Hull 2008, page 503). It is to these "careers" that I turn in the next section.

'Thing-power' and the letter

In order to explore these material relations, I want to consider the effects of letters in a drop-in centre for asylum seekers in Sheffield. Drop-in environments have been studied as spaces of social interaction by a number of geographers (see Cloke et al, 2005; Conradson, 2003; Parr, 2000), and here I draw upon a ten-month period of participant observation (see Darling, 2011b). I attended the drop-in centre as a researcher and volunteer, following an invitation from one of the founders of the centre. My role as a researcher was highlighted from the outset by an introduction by the coordinators of the centre and, following this, I highlighted my research role in subsequent conversations during my time at the centre. The drop-in centre was held each Friday afternoon in a church hall with a small kitchen in which tea, coffee, and biscuits were provided; there were a number of small tables, normally with four or five chairs arranged to facilitate small group discussions and a larger table for creative exercises.⁽¹⁾ The environment was often chaotic, with individuals moving between tables, making tea, conducting discussions in a variety of languages, and scraping the chairs along the wooden floor. On average the centre attracted between thirty to forty asylum seekers and around ten to fifteen volunteers. There was no set pattern of activities or positions; rather, individuals were free to come and go as they pleased and volunteers were asked to socialise with asylum seekers as a means of tackling social isolation and practising conversational English. During

⁽¹⁾ Whilst the centre was based in a church hall, the coordinators were keen to detach the centre from any sense of religious exclusivity. Thus whilst religious iconography surrounded the centre, and undoubtedly influenced the atmosphere in subtle ways, formally a secular tone was sought in which 'all faiths and none' were welcomed.

my time at the drop-in centre I kept a research diary to document the varied conversations, events, and relationships that shaped this space. I draw upon this diary here, in order to consider how letters had a number of effects within this space. The first point at which letters emerged as potentially significant things within this environment was during a volunteer training session:

“One aspect of today was discussing the limits of what volunteers might be expected to do. Lynn (one of the coordinators), stressed that whilst volunteers did not have specific roles, we should avoid discussing the legal side of individual claims as this may lead to misunderstandings in which volunteers become perceived as offering legal advice. We were asked not to directly enquire about asylum status or the details of cases, and Lynn highlighted decision letters as points where such issues may arise. We were advised that it was common for asylum seekers to bring letters with them and to ask volunteers to translate. We were welcome to do so, but were also warned that these were difficult documents to communicate. Lynn suggested seeking out a more experienced volunteer to translate letters and to do so in one of the quieter corners of the centre—the kitchen or the corner by the piano being two examples offered” (Research diary, 27 January 2007).

Volunteers in this social space were therefore made aware of the potential impact that letters could have in terms of their legal and emotional consequences. In order to explore these relational effects further, we might consider Bennett’s (2004) discussion of ‘thing-power’ as a means of highlighting the distributed agency of materiality. To follow such a path would be to view a UKBA letter as “that which *does* something, has sufficient coherence to perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations” (Bennett, 2004, page 355, original emphasis). As ‘things’, letters have the capacity to “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour, 2005, page 39), just as their material form produces such a meaning. The effects of UKBA letters are thus not reducible to the text that they express; rather, this is part of a material technology that produces diverse effects through the relations formed around letters, as meaning is translated, transformed, and recited. As Bennett (2004, pages 353–354, original emphasis) asserts, a “thing has power by virtue of its operating *in conjunction* with other things”. Thus whilst things do not act alone, neither are they stable entities that retain meaning beyond their collaborations. Squire’s (2013, page 14) configuration of “subjects–objects–environments” takes such thought further in asserting that “there is no object (‘thing’), no subject (‘person’), and no environment (‘place’) that pre-exists the materialdiscursive constitution of objects–subjects–environments.” This compositional theory extends an account of the relational agency of materials through asserting the spatial dynamics that are entangled within processes of material and discursive interaction. It is to this relational account that I now turn by considering how letters play a role in producing two forms of affective response; first, a series of individual attachments and second, the emergence of contingent ‘affective atmospheres’ within drop-in space.

Attachments

“The Friday drop-in has been underway for just under an hour and I’ve been talking with Naveed, Omar, and Rubi about plans for Refugee Week. We’re looking through a leaflet prepared by the council, and discussing whether they intend to go to any of the events. It’s reasonably quiet, but it’s a warm day and often this means people prefer to go to the Peace Gardens. We’re sitting at a large rectangular table in the centre of the room when Hassan enters and turns immediately into the kitchen. Our conversation continues but it’s noticeable that Rubi’s eyes are focused on the hatch into the kitchen where Hassan is talking with Anna. After a few minutes, Rubi gets up and asks if any of us would like tea, we all say yes, recognising this is a ploy to check on Hassan whose lateness has not gone unnoticed. She leaves and we continue our conversation. In the relative quiet of today’s

session Hassan's voice cuts clearly through the air—'Nowhere', he exclaims agitatedly, suddenly aware that others have turned to look as he stands, shoulders hunched, over his bag open on the kitchen counter. The word is elongated, with an emphasis on 'no'. People turn back to their tables. Rubi returns with the tea and, in a hushed tone that forces us to lean to the centre of table, informs us that 'Hassan has lost his last letter'" (Research diary, 15 June 2007).

The first response I wish to highlight is how letters may become "affectively loaded phenomena" (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, page 81), things onto which individuals project meanings, aspirations, and attachments. In the drop-in centre it was common for individuals to carry such documentation with them at all times. Letters became part of the fabric of everyday life, things to be carried as evidence of progression through the asylum process, but also as expressions of a relation to the state. In this context letters took on a role as possessions critical to an individual's sense of self, for whilst the asylum process and its time politics dominated everyday life, letters provided a critical orientation point in this process. It is for this reason that the loss of Hassan's letter was felt so keenly. Misplacing a letter was not, in itself, a major legal setback, as the UKBA were expected to send copies of all correspondence to asylum seekers' representatives as well as to the individuals themselves. Indeed, one of Lynn's consolations to Hassan was precisely that "there will be copies". Yet, focusing purely on the legal consequences of this loss overlooks the attachment that Hassan had to this letter. Losing a letter was an issue of disorientation, of losing track of one's own position, of the one thing that tied one to the state. As Conlon (2011) notes, asylum seekers often display a stark absence of possessions and it is perhaps in relation to this absence that letters take on greater affective significance. Not only are letters protected, held on to, and carried as markers of a process, they are held on to precisely as *things*, as possessions whose material form might allow for the projection of hopes and aspirations.

We can begin to see such affective resonances further if we consider a piece of creative writing undertaken through The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture's writer-in-residence scheme (Allnutt, 2010). As part of this project, asylum seekers in Newcastle were invited to participate in writing workshops to explore how writing may enable creative expression. Part of this work was the production of a series of poems by asylum seekers and it is one of these, entitled "Another letter from the Home Office", that I wish to consider (Anonymous, 2010, page 61). The poem reads:

"Walking home
A winter night
The landscape is this
Scurrying shoppers
Snow-dusted
Cold stars hanging
high above the black river
The earth still turning
toward deepest dark

Clutching my coat
keeping scraps of hope
warm in my pocket.
Pavement glittering hard
Wind across the bridge
pinching my legs

Bobbing lights
and black water
below

The landscape is this

A mother's ring
wrapped in cloth
Relentless dreams
Shut faces in
shop windows
the English words
read over and over again

another letter from the Home Office"⁽²⁾

The letter of this poem forces us to reflect further upon the affective qualities of the letter as a thing, for it is this affective potential that exceeds the intentions of its authors. Thus, whilst letters may be argued to produce and perform the identity of their authors (materialising the state in this case), they are never able to fully control the responses they evoke. Such affective qualities were clear in the ways in which letters became enrolled into emotive discussions of the asylum process within the drop-in centre environment. It was thus common for individuals discussing the asylum process to bring forth their correspondence with the UKBA. In most cases such disclosure led to two interlinked claims: the first was of a distrust of the 'system' and anger at the marginalising policies of the government at large, from substandard support and inadequate accommodation to an inability to tackle racial harassment and tabloid scapegoating. Letters were pointed at, waved as evidence of the government's disregard, and as a manifestation of what was felt to be a distant, cold, and uncaring state. At the same time, letters were coveted as precious evidence of a stake within a process. Thus whilst letters were waved in anger, they were also carefully folded, returned to envelopes, files, and pockets, and kept safe from the dangers of wayward hands and spilt coffee. In these moments the power that such documents held was clear, a power expressed in the repeated reading of the poem's letter and in the frustration felt at losing a letter. In a context that places those seeking asylum outside normalised routines of social interaction and material possession, letters became a thing to cling to, both materially and affectively.

Atmospheres

"Marie's English is good and so she needs little translation. Instead, she has arrived at the drop-in wanting to confirm the news her letter conveys. Her letter is read by Lynn and passed back, the two of them stand side-on to the rest of the room, partially behind the corner of the piano. Marie stares at the letter, and from across the room I, and everyone else it seems, look on. We try to work out what is being said. No obvious signs. Marie stands, staring at the letter. Aware of the growing tension in the room, Lynn claps her hands together. Leaning on the end of the piano, Lynn now clasps her hands together and, as if releasing some intangible weight, then extends her arms outwards as she announces that Marie has temporary leave to remain. Behind her, the uncertain beginnings of a smile creep across Marie's face, but she still stares at the letter in her hands. Around her people get out of their chairs and shout 'congratulations', there is some polite applause, and a crowd forms of people waiting to hug Marie. I'm clapping and smiling to Omar next to me who pats me on the back. The whole room feels more active, people are now bustling

⁽²⁾The poem is written by an asylum seeker who chose to be anonymous. As Allnutt (2010, page 9) notes, "in our present world it is a privilege to be able to retain your given identity in print".

around, smiling at each other, discussing the good news, waiting to talk to Marie. Amid this noise and excitement Lynn is the first to embrace her. In this moment Marie passes her letter to Elizabeth who carefully scans its contents. The letter travels from hand to hand across the room, being checked, perused, considered, and compared as it moves. Omar, always a little impatient, takes possession of the letter as soon as he can, bringing it over to our table and placing it carefully next to the newspapers. The letter is reasonably short, and already looks worn from the imprint of different fingers, and the closeness of Marie's grasp. 'Great!' Omar exclaims, before carefully folding the letter and passing it on to the next table" (Research diary, 23 March 2007).

Navaro-Yashin (2007, page 81) argues that documents are "capable of carrying, containing, or inciting affective energies when ... put to use in specific webs of social relation". In the drop-in centre these affective energies were evident in the ways in which letters produced affective atmospheres, such as the infectious joy transmitted between individuals with the news of an individual's right to remain as described above (see Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2008; Wilson, 2011). Atmospheres denote "collective affects" that are "generated by bodies—of multiple types—affecting one another" (Anderson, 2009, pages 78, 80). Atmospheres thus emerge as "temporary configurations of energy and feeling that arise but then dissipate" (Conradson and Latham, 2007, page 238). In the drop-in centre such affective atmospheres were evident in the presentation, discussion, and circulation of letters as things which held the potential to "generate particular events and actions, feelings and emotions" (Bissell, 2010, page 273). For example, the passage of Marie's letter around the room served to extend its affective reach. In touching, reading, and examining this document, all those present in the drop-in centre were brought into relation with the possibility of a positive decision. In part, this letter was widely read to check its existence, validity, and authority, yet it was also read as a means of sharing in this moment. Joy and hope were communicated through the room in the form of shared embraces, clapping, and infectious smiles, as this letter was passed around, being celebrated and scrutinised as it moved.

By contrast, negative decisions, deferrals, and deportation notices drew silence, self-conscious glances, and consoling embraces, reactions that dampened the affective atmosphere. Hopes were diminished as fears and desperations spread through shared reactions and the felt intensity of common precarity. Unlike Marie's letter, these documents were shoved in pockets, abandoned in disgust only to be reclaimed later, passed pointedly from hand to hand, torn and crumpled. These letters were often removed from vision, as volunteers would discourage asylum seekers from passing around negative decision letters. It was also common for those visibly upset by the contents of a letter to be taken to the relative privacy of the kitchen to discuss the options left open to them. In these moments, negative letters altered the spatial structure of the drop-in centre, as the kitchen was transformed into a temporarily private space and the types of relations that could be enacted there were shifted.

This reading of asylum letters imbues these material-discursive collectives with the capacity to produce particular affective fields and to generate feelings, responses, and actions. Letters are not alone in this capacity; indeed, as Anderson (2009, page 80) argues, "affective qualities emanate from the assembling of human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations." The ability of the letter to shape the mood in the drop-in centre was therefore never confined to the letter alone. Rather, it arises from the placement of a letter in relation to other things and other bodies, from the volunteer's sympathetic ear to the wooden table on which the letter is placed to be considered by a shifting audience. The ability of the letter to produce certain atmospheres cannot be understood outside of these collective entanglements. Instead, the mood of the drop-in centre is formed through the connections played out between these elements—

between those individuals present on any given day, the arrangement of the tables and chairs, the dispositions people bring with them, and the materials they carry into the room. Each of these plays a part in shaping this affective field, and it is for this reason that the role of the letter is hard to predict. For example, at times, negative letters did not result in a debilitating silence but in shouts of anger and protestation, in frustrated demands for appeal, hurried phone calls, and the beginning of political sequences of protest and demonstration. In each case the atmospheres produced by these material entanglements “exceed that from which they emanate” (Anderson, 2009, page 80), as letters hung in the air.

It was clear that those present at the drop-in centre were aware of the affective potential of such documents. From hiding negative letters in bags or coat pockets to passing around positive decisions, letters were drawn upon by both volunteers and asylum seekers as a means of avoiding or encouraging particular atmospheres. Such interventions were not so much planned responses as gestures aimed at maintaining a particular type of social space. The drop-in centre was not a space that denied the exclusionary politics of the asylum process; indeed, these politics were made present in a myriad of ways, from the intrusion of a letter to the absence of a deported friend. It was a space that sought to momentarily dampen the impact of such intrusions, though. In this context small gestures of modulation, from hiding letters and moving to the privacy of the kitchen to shared embraces, might be seen as examples of a politics of ‘small achievements’, one that has been argued to be essential in the prosaic negotiation of difference (see Swanton, 2010; Wilson, 2013). Counter to such a reading, others have argued that such forms of ethical responsiveness might serve to reinstate the passivity of those seeking asylum, to ‘ease’ the politics of waiting whilst not critically engaging the exclusions that waiting implies (Bagelman, 2013). I would suggest, however, that by drawing on the affective atmospheres that letters may produce and modulate, we can focus instead on the ways in which drop-in space is produced as an interplay between these impulses, and identify moments of care that are affectively loaded as well as moments of political contestation that are shaped by such responsive gestures. It is with this sense of a materially and discursively entangled social space that I want lastly to consider the role of letters in practices of differentiation.

Positionings

Exploring the relations of the drop-in centre leads to a final role played by letters: that of positional devices serving to communicate practices of differentiation. By differentiation I refer to the ways in which distinctions of status, position, and, most critically, citizenship patterned drop-in space. Differentiation arose on a series of levels: between individual asylum seekers in relation to their status, between these individuals and the volunteers who helped to run the drop-in centre, and between the social space of the drop-in centre and the wider publics that were encountered beyond its walls. Within the drop-in centre, volunteers attempted to undermine and destabilise common modes of differentiation, most notably the assumptions of charity that came through a concern with citizenship status. Doing so meant attempting to ensure that all those present felt able to play a role in shaping the nature of this centre, regardless of status—from the placement of asylum seekers on the centre’s steering committee to the breaking down of assumed spatial and social barriers with regard to who could access and use the kitchen. Yet if we return briefly to epistolary, we might see how letters acted to undermine such efforts. For Stanley (2004), letters are dialogical, opening relations between the author and *any* reader, as a letter’s “structure and content changes according to the particular recipient” (page 203). Letters thus produce relations not simply between the author and the addressee; rather, all readers are placed in relations through the reading of a letter.

The text these letters carried therefore positioned individual asylum seekers within the asylum process, but these positional gestures spilled over. Status, position, and legitimacy became comparable states of being as letters were passed around, reread, and their meanings internalised. Most obviously this was the case with the manner in which letters conveyed the legal status of the individual. In this environment the production of the ‘asylum seeker’ as a particular subjectivity, was forged through a “conjunction of material and immaterial elements” (Swanton, 2010, page 448). Through their circulation and performance as authoritative texts, letters placed individuals in relation to one another, and, despite attempts to produce solidarity, a letter passed from hand to hand could serve to reinstate the fissure between citizen and noncitizen.

Thus, letters positioned individuals in relation to a wider performance of state legitimacy. As Fortier (2013) argues in the context of the UK’s naturalisation process, states reassure themselves of their own desirability through performative displays of commitment and dependence. It is through this mechanism that citizenship ceremonies shape an affective relation between the citizen and the state, as “affective exchange emerges as a primary means of expressing and experiencing sovereign authority” (Chalfin, 2008, page 522; see also Byrne, 2012; Fortier, 2013). In the processes of differentiation that emerge in the drop-in centre, letters may be seen to act as one mode of governing such an affective relationship—through the production of subjectivities that are expected to ‘need’ or ‘desire’ the acceptance of the state. As a joyful atmosphere resonates in the wake of a positive letter, so the social relations of the drop-in centre are drawn into a tacit acceptance of the desirable status bestowed on an individual as a refugee and of a longed-for relation to the state (Fortier, 2013). In the positioning of individuals that letters effect, a normative subjectivity of the ‘asylum seeker’ is reproduced. This is an image of a desiring subject *seeking the state*, one who is subject to the bureaucracy of the state yet who must wait for the state to communicate an acceptance of this a desire. The opening, reading, and discussion of letters thus performs citizen and noncitizen subjectivities—communicating both an expectation that those seeking asylum should desire the state and a reassurance to the state of their desirability.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined some of the ways in which a particular ‘thing’ (letters sent from the UKBA to asylum seekers) forms part of the governance of asylum. In doing so, the paper has moved from a concern with the letter as a governmental object to an account of the letter as an affective ‘thing’ that produces, reiterates, and reconstitutes discursive practices in and through their relations. Taking such a material analysis forward implies a reworking of how the politics of asylum is envisaged. As Gill (2010) argues, this calls for a debunking of the oppositional logics that position the state as a singular and authoritative entity imposing its will upon individuals through abstract processes of discipline and management. By taking letters as a starting point for analysis I have instead sought to illustrate how asylum itself, as a subjective experience, a spatial relation, and a discursive category, is constantly under the work of production, being made and remade by a confluence of discourses and materials in interaction. A central implication of exploring the material relations of the letter is, therefore, the need to view asylum as never simply a fixed process, a legal status, or a political issue, but as *a material-discursive collective that takes shape differently across different spaces*. Asylum is performed, practised, and understood differently in the drop-in centre than it is in the public library, the town hall, and the television studio, just as the materials that constitute asylum—the forms, letters, certificates, bodies, and belongings—*take meaning and make meaning* as they encounter new spaces, discourses, and practices, from humanitarian good intentions to political mobilisations (Squire, 2014).

This is not to suggest that asylum is always and everywhere performed and understood as radically different; indeed, within these shifting constellations of matter, discourse, and spatiality, coherent and reiterative patterns emerge—especially the exclusionary impulses of categorical distinction that mark biopolitical regimes of citizenship (see Darling, 2014; Tyler, 2010). However, it does imply that subtle shifts and variations are at work within these formations. This is in part what makes an exclusionary account of asylum so invasive: it is able to adapt to different contexts, materials, and frames of reference. Challenging the reiterative power of an exclusionary framing of asylum thus requires a politics that is attentive to more than simply the discursive channels through which abjection works. It requires a politics that employs the very materials and environments on which an exclusionary politics is based, from spaces of accommodation to UKBA letters. One possibility emerges here, if we consider how letters have been reappropriated by asylum activists. For whilst letters perform the bureaucratic efficacy of the state—through the case number and the paper trail—these same mechanisms act to fix the state to certain decisions. Thus, in examining the inconsistencies of the UK's asylum decision-making process, Shaw and Kaye (2013) utilise refusal letters as a means to question the legal determinations handed down by the state. The gravity and legitimacy attached to such documents here serves to work against the interests of the state, opening the possibility of oversights, inconsistencies, and failures being highlighted and acting as catalysts for opposition.

In providing an anthropological account of the state and its practice, Anjaria (2011, page 64) argues that what comes to matter “is not only the strategies of governance but also how people inhabit them”. In this paper I have sought to extend such a concern by showing how material ‘things’ may also ‘inhabit’ governance. As the reappropriation of letters by asylum advocates suggests, such ‘things’ are never fixed in their role. To extend this, however, we might return to the ‘turbulence’ of matter as a political force (Anderson and Wylie, 2009). For the promise of a ‘turbulent’ materialism is that ‘things’ may always act or appear differently, may always be repositioned through the relations they enact and the material-discursive combinations they help to constitute. ‘Turbulence’ thus implies a tension between order and disorder, a recognition of the instability of ‘things’ as only ever temporary material-discursive stabilisations (Anderson and Wylie, 2009). Whilst one such stabilisation may be in the reiterative production of certain forms of governable subjectivity—the desirable citizen and the desiring asylum seeker—a focus on how ‘things’ produce such stabilisations highlights the continual processes of ordering that are required to maintain these categorisations. The importance of retaining a focus on these materials of the state, and on the material-discursive constitution of asylum subjectivities, is that such materials and subjectivities are shown to be unstable, never fully or finally constituted. In this sense, taking seriously the role of letters in the politics of asylum presents a view of the state “from the margins” (Das and Poole, 2004, page 5), through the very materials that produce those on the margins. Yet it is precisely through marginality that we might witness the affective power of materials, for it is here that the relations they enact have the most impact in shaping lives and futures. Whilst other materials, spaces, and ‘things’ may be regarded as enacting relations between the citizen and the state (from the passport and the tax return to the job centre and the public park), the precarious nature of the relation between asylum subjectivities, and the state may show how material-discursive configurations of categorisation, subjectivity and affectivity are constantly in process. As Anderson and Wylie (2009, page 321) suggest, “a material imagination cast in terms of turbulence calls up a world of agitation and disruption seemingly far removed from many of our mundane encounters with things”, and it is this turbulent disruption at the heart of the state–asylum seeker relation that a concern with letters brings to the fore. Whilst encounters with state materials may

appear relatively ‘mundane’ for many, this unremarkable quality is precisely what normalises the subjectivity of the citizen and seeks to efface the instabilities behind such normative order. An attentiveness to the material-discursive constitution of asylum, by contrast, seeks to explore instabilities through the turbulence enacted by ‘things’, as they exceed the work of the state, as they modulate affective atmospheres, as they produce moments of

“Clutching my coat
keeping scraps of hope
warm in my pocket.”

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