

Undoing Nothing: Waiting for Asylum, Struggling for Relevance (Book Review)

MCCARTHY, Lindsey <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5114-4288>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37560/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

MCCARTHY, Lindsey (2026). Undoing Nothing: Waiting for Asylum, Struggling for Relevance (Book Review). *Social & Cultural Geography*. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Paolo Boccagni

Undoing Nothing: Waiting for Asylum, Struggling for Relevance

Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2025

226 pp., \$34.95 / £30.00 paperback (ISBN 9780520404106); \$12.99 / £10.99 e-book (ISBN 9780520404113)

There are few political subjects more loudly debated and less carefully understood than asylum. Written against a backdrop of intensifying hostility towards refugees and people seeking asylum across Europe, *Undoing Nothing: Waiting for Asylum, Struggling for Relevance* offers a careful, nuanced, and deeply humane ethnographic account that challenges the simplifications of contemporary political narratives. As Paolo Boccagni himself states, ‘*Undoing Nothing* is a cumulative and emplaced story about ordinary, almost invisible (or invisibilized) people in a very unordinary social, legal and existential position’ (p.171). Invoking Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the book explores waiting, existential suspension, and ‘nothingness’ within the lived experience of asylum, as well as the possibilities that such conditions may be undone.

It does so through a rich ethnography, carried out between 2018 and 2022, with the young male residents of a reception centre in Northern Italy. Boccagni describes his ethnographic approach as ‘fine-grained’ and ‘patient’ (p.170), highlighting the trust-building that led to him being accepted into the centre and residents’ personal space, and ultimately facilitated meaningful engagement with approximately 100 male asylum seekers. As with any in-depth qualitative research, the accounts of Boccagni’s interlocutors are their own; intimate and unique. At the same time, you cannot help but draw relevance to other groups in temporary or precarious living situations; those ‘forced [...] to stay afloat in highly unpredictable or oppressive circumstances’ (p.173). As Boccagni infers, there is something universal to the endeavour of searching for a home.

The subject of home (or ‘non-home’) is explored in more detail in Chapter 7. Home is, as widely noted in the literature, a slippery and contested concept (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011), and this ambivalence is reflected throughout the accounts of the young men seeking asylum. While the men engage in numerous homemaking practices—through food, routine, and bodily care—these are continually undermined by conditions that render the space a ‘non-home’, not least by the lack of permanence, privacy, and family. This tension raises broader questions about whether home should be understood as a stable condition to be achieved, or as an ongoing and precarious process of making (Lancione, 2023; Baxter & Brickell, 2014). As Boccagni states, home ‘can only be in the future’ (p.166); it lives in the hope that these men will become unstuck in their housing, employment and family pathways.

Across the book’s five empirical chapters – ‘inside, outside’ (Chapter 3), ‘still, moving’ (Chapter 4), ‘present, absent’ (Chapter 5), ‘dirty, clean’ (Chapter 6), and ‘home, non-home’ (Chapter 7) – Boccagni gradually undoes seemingly oppositional states and reveals their entanglement in the everyday lived realities of asylum, where such binaries are continually negotiated and blurred (‘fields of ambivalence’, Boccagni calls them). ‘Inside, outside’ tackles themes of belonging – in the centre, Italy and Europe. It shows how feelings and interpretations of belonging are fluid and contingent: when outside the centre and without access to work or housing, the centre itself may come to be perceived, however ambivalently, as a form of sanctuary. ‘Still, moving’ explores the temporal liminality of waiting for asylum. The men’s life courses – and transitions to adulthood - are put on hold for as long as they are denied the means to support themselves and their families. In ‘present, absent’, the past, with

its accompanying traumas, is kept at bay but is simultaneously inconspicuous in its absence. The clean/dirty ambivalence—both symbolic and material—emerges in the men’s efforts to cultivate respectability in the face of stigmatising and racist discourses, as well as within the panopticon-like setting of the centre itself. The work of self-maintenance operates across multiple sensory registers; “they’re watching us” is also, as one participant puts it, “they’re sniffing us” (p.141). In ways reminiscent of Skeggs’ (1997) accounts of working-class women, aesthetic and bodily practices become more intensified precisely when the stakes of judgement are higher.

While the book engages with several complex themes, these are deeply interconnected and overlapping, resulting in an analysis that feels coherent and carefully integrated. Boccagni has paid careful attention to the accessibility of the book, and while it is undeniably philosophical, it is plainly written. I particularly appreciated the extent to which the text is interwoven with the voices of the young men themselves; it is rare to encounter a page where their words are not present. The same is true of the photographs taken around the centre and the illustrations produced by Woikat, one of the interlocutors, both of which are thoughtfully woven throughout the text.

Overall, *Undoing Nothing* is a thoughtful and compelling contribution to scholarship on asylum, migration, and home. The book will be of considerable interest to scholars and students across sociology, anthropology, geography, housing studies, and refugee studies, as well as to practitioners and policymakers seeking more grounded understandings of asylum and reception.

Lindsey McCarthy
Research Fellow
Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK
L.McCarthy@shu.ac.uk

References

Baxter, R. and Brickell, K. (2014). For Home UnMaking. *Home Cultures*, 11(2): 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174214X13891916944553>.

Lancione, M. (2023). *For a Liberatory Politics of Home*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ralph, D. and Staeheli, L.A. (2011). Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities. *Geography Compass*, 5: 517-530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2011.00434.x>

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.