

Sounds of Asylum Bristol: Musicking and secretly public commoning in a city of sanctuary and violence

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Abstract

This paper contributes to urban studies debates on the commons-as-practice by examining the “secretly public” musicking spaces co-created by people seeking asylum and allies in Bristol, UK—a city where the language of sanctuary coexists with state-sanctioned forms of slow violence and uneven processes of urban regeneration. The analysis draws on 18 months of ethnographic and participatory research with a group of around 60 men and women of diverse origins, many seeking asylum, who convened weekly music sessions. Building on perspectives that show how sound shapes the sensing, sharing, and reconfiguration of urban space, the study attends to the sonic and affective registers, urban geographies, and (in)visible spaces of sociality that emerged from the group. It argues that “public secrecy” constitutes a condition of possibility for commoning in cities shaped by sanctuary initiatives and state enforcement infrastructures. The paper conceptualises a secretly public commons as a collective practice that composes publicness through thresholds of visibility, generating shared affective, social and material resources while exceeding normative frames of (in)visibility and (un)deservingness that dominate public narratives of asylum. In doing so, this paper extends debates on the urban commons, sanctuary, and sonic urbanism by showing how sonic practices reconfigure public presence under intersecting forms of dispossession, and by using ethnographic and participatory approaches to address what tends to go unnoticed in studies on urban commons and sanctuary urbanism.

Keywords

urban commons, musicking, forced migration, secretly public communing, sanctuary urbanism

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摘要

本文以英国布里斯托尔 (Bristol) 为案例, 考察寻求庇护者及其同盟者共同建构的“隐秘公共”音乐实践空间, 以此推进城市研究中关于“作为实践的共有物” (commons-as-practice) 的学术争论。在这座城市中, 庇护话语与国家默许的慢暴力形式以及不均衡的城市更新进程并存。本文的分析依托为期 18 个月的民族志和参与式研究, 研究对象为约 60 名来源背景多元的男女, 其中不少是寻求庇护者, 该群体每周定期组织音乐集会。立足于阐释声音如何塑造城市空间感知、共享与重构的理论视角, 本文聚焦该群体中出现的声音与情感向度、城市地理, 以及可见与不可见的社会性空间。本文认为, 在由庇护倡议与国家管控基础设施共同塑造的城市之中, “公共隐秘性”构成了共有实践得以发生的可能性条件。本文将“隐秘公共共有物”概念化为一种集体实践, 通过可见性的阈值来构建公共性, 在生成共享的情感、社会和物质资源的同时, 突破了庇护议题公共叙事中占主导地位的可见性与不可见性以及值得与不值得的规范性框架。借此, 本文一方面揭示在多重剥夺机制交织的背景下, 声音实践如何重构公共在场; 另一方面借助民族志与参与式研究方法, 回应城市共有物与庇护城市主义研究中常常被忽视的问题, 从而拓展了有关城市共有物、庇护议题与声音城市主义的相关讨论。

关键词

城市共有物、音乐实践、强迫迁移、隐秘公共共处、庇护城市主义

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Introduction

Hussein and I are walking back from the police station where he must report every month. The reporting date punctually comes accompanied with sleepless nights and a mounting, suffocating anxiety, as the possibility of “disappearing” in the sprawling estate of immigration enforcement consistently return to haunt his days and thoughts every four weeks. We walk side by side towards his accommodation, and he seems to be in a better mood than on the way up. However, suddenly his expression frowns again as he falls silent for few seconds, staring at the city around us, to then observe: “This is a prison, you know? A prison ... Do you think a prison is only a building? A prison can be as big as a city, and Bristol is a prison for me ... I feel like living in prison here. I have a room, but the staff can come any time to ‘do checks’ ... every four weeks I must sign at the police station, they treat me

like a criminal for what? How can my life not be one of a prison here?” A few days later, after the weekly music session, some people from the music-group remain in the room to sip some more tea and exchange chatter, tips, and news. Hussein mentions our walk to the reporting centre, and we joke with the others about who was more stressed between the two of us on the way there ... When few of us remain I ask Hussein “if Bristol is like a prison, how does this [music] group feel to you then? Is that the prison’s recreation room?” Hussein replies laughing “No ... you don’t have these nice biscuits in prison ... ” but Farah, who was listening to our conversation, chimes in, “That’s not the recreation room Nico, that’s the *secret tunnel out of it*” Hussein nods and pauses to listen what Farah has to add “you see? Songs, they are like wind, you cannot block them, you can imprison a body, right? But how can you imprison a song? This is good to remember in the life we live” (ethnographic excerpt, June 2017, emphasis added)

How can the co-creation of a music space made by and for people seeking asylum¹ and allies contribute to and expand debates and praxis about the urban commons? How can “listening with displacement” (Western, 2020) offer relevant insights to enable participatory forms of knowledge production in contexts of urban sanctuary, dispossession and (slow) violence?

This paper addresses these questions by building on 18 months-long ethnographic and participatory research conducted with a group of about 60 women and men from different origins, many of which seeking asylum in Britain, who convened weekly music group sessions in Bristol, UK.

The group constituted an example of a burgeoning number of small-scale experiments in supporting refugees that emerged in the last decade among increasing governments’ inaction or outward hostility towards refugees in the wake of 2015 “long summer of migration,” with initiatives ranging from setting-up supply distribution centres, make-shift social spaces, and health clinics (Brković, 2023). While these forms of migration solidarity are far from devoid of contradictions and ambivalences (Darling, 2018), I take this starting point to discuss how a focus on sounds and musicking can contribute to debates on the urban commons vis-à-vis the expansion of enforcement infrastructures (e.g. police reporting, detention centres, compulsory dispersal) shaping everyday geographies of asylum. Following Pistrick (2020), I use the term musicking to refer to participating in music in any capacity, including performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, or dancing. Relatedly, I consider *working the hyphen of a militant investigation* as a reflexive participatory praxis that attends to the affordances and complexities of negotiating shifting positionalities between research, solidarity, and participation (see De Martini Ugolotti, 2024; Fine, 1994; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013).

To advance these considerations, the paper is organised in four sections. In the first, I address the main coordinates in the debate about urban commoning practices (Huron, 2017; Sanchez, 2023), including in relation to the politics and geographies of asylum (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022, 2024). In the second section, I discuss Asylum Bristol as a prism through which urban geographies of asylum and solidarity become perceptible. In the third, I discuss the affordances and challenges of working the hyphen of a militant investigation and address how music and sound shaped the group participants’ sensing, sharing, and reconfiguring of urban spaces under conditions of dehumanisation-by-policy. I then discuss in the fourth section how the material, affective, and sonic registers of the music group shaped “secretly public commoning.” Through this notion, rather than treating secrecy as retreat or closure (Birchall, 2021; Glouftsiou, 2023), I read it as calibrated forms of presence that recompose publicness and commoning through thresholds of visibility. In the conclusions, I consider how a focus on “secretly public” musicking spaces offers an entry point to consider impermanent yet productive forms of commoning that emerge through shared affective, social, and material resources. Relatedly, I discuss how these commoning practices supported the negotiation of liveable lives through dispossession, bordering and intersecting urban inequalities, a perspective that matters for urban commons and urban sanctuary debates at large.

Urban, uncommon and care commons

In recent years, an expanding body of urban scholarship has examined the intersection of struggles against the privatisation of resources—described as “new urban enclosures”—and migration solidarity movements

(Grazioli and Montagna, 2019; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022, 2024). Within this literature, urban commons are generally defined as spaces, services, and infrastructures, and the social practices through which these resources are collectively produced, managed, and cared for by communities of urban dwellers. These practices of collective stewardship and governance enable shared access and use of urban resources and operate at varying degrees of autonomy from state and market control (Feinberg et al., 2021; Huron, 2017).

Building on these understandings, migration and urban scholars have increasingly framed squatted buildings, housing struggles, and migrant encampments as commoning efforts grounded in mutuality, solidarity, care, and de-commodified exchange. By including “autonomous forms of inhabitation in the category of the urban commons” (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019: 579), these authors underlined the relevance of spatial practices enacted by subjects “who do not rely on formal status to claim their autonomy” (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019: 579). In doing so, urban commons can challenge juridical understandings of urban and migration politics, including the binaries between public and private spaces and between citizen and non-citizen. From these perspectives, commoning practices that sustain de-commodified and solidarity-based ways of inhabiting the city can also facilitate the enactment of (forced) migrants’ “mobile commons.” That is, (forced) migrants’ capacities to reclaim their autonomy of movement beyond state policy frameworks and border management structures (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

To date, much of the literature linking urban commons and migration has focused on housing struggles—particularly squatting—and on *visible* political claims articulated through these commoning practices. Yet, several authors have cautioned against

assuming that visibility is a precondition for resistance or for making claims to the city (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Haile, 2020). While research on urban commons and migration has been timely and generative, it has left comparatively unexplored a wide range of “actually existing” social and spatial practices similarly based on mutuality, solidarity, care, and de-commodified exchange.

Some scholars have addressed this gap by examining the bottom-up creation of what they termed “uncommon commons” in unequal mega-cities in South-East Asia (Chan, 2018; Pan and Shin, 2018; Shin, 2018). This literature explored the people-driven creation of music, art, and leisure spaces in Seoul, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, and Tokyo as experiments in commoning that tentatively “reinvent the vernacular vocabularies used by the actors of urban activism” (Pan and Shin, 2018: 356). Two elements of this work are particularly relevant here. First, “uncommon” commoning practices do not rely primarily on Western frameworks of political action, such as the right to the city or citizenship. Rather than mobilising claims to pre-existing commons, they offer ways to problematise and re-articulate what the commons might be (Chan, 2018: 454). In the cases examined by Shin (2018) and Chan (2018), these practices did not centre on the articulation of explicit claims to the city. Instead, they emerged through the co-creation of spaces where exchange, expression, and solidarity could take place beyond the frames of the state, the market, or existing categories of activism.

Related insights emerge from studies of refugees’ practices of conviviality and mutual support with other urban residents in Athens (Zaman, 2020), and analyses of artistic production within sanctuary movements in Canada and the UK (Bagelman, 2019). Although these works do not explicitly engage with the urban commons, they

illuminate generative urban practices that exceed established, and often Western-centric, framings of political action (Zaman, 2020), and foreground affective registers and practices that complicate notions of “sanctuary as simply a designation or policy” (Bagelman, 2019: 150–151). Resonating with this literature, a second key contribution of work on “uncommon commons” lies in its attention to the affective intensities emerging from commoning practices and how these embodied registers can become resources for crafting liveable lives on local and communal scales amid unequal urban geographies (Pan and Shin, 2018; Shin, 2018).

Questions of relationality, affect, and care are further developed in a third strand of scholarship—emerging largely from studies of Southern European and South American contexts—that examines “care commons” (Sanchez, 2023; Sciarelli, 2024). This literature conceptualises care commons as forms of grassroots urban organisation grounded in relationality, care, repair, and connectivity, and articulated as “living alternatives at the service of life [...] amidst crisis yet against crisis regimes” (Sanchez, 2023: 2458, 2470). Sanchez (2023) argues that care commons render “public and visible” the notion of life sustenance, understood as “the sphere in which social and material needs are collectively provided for” (p. 2459). Drawing on Latin American struggles against colonialism and extractivism, as well as feminist interventions on care and social reproduction, this work highlights commoning practices that sustain community health clinics, kitchens, gardens, and self-organised sport, art, and leisure spaces. Through material, social, and affective practices, these initiatives negotiate the compounding effects of austerity, bordering, and uneven urban regeneration processes on the possibility of sustaining liveable lives (Sciarelli, 2024).

Taken together, debates on urban, uncommon, and care commons have

expanded understandings of social infrastructures and relationships “mediated neither by the state nor the market” (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019: 581) that have also foregrounded questions of sustenance, relationality, affect, and ethics across diverse urban contexts. At the same time, across much of this literature, questions of visibility remain under-theorised, and often assumed to be an intrinsically desirable element of urban commoning practices and claims (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019; Sanchez, 2023). The relatively few studies that complicate dominant understandings of commoning (Pan and Shin, 2018; Shin, 2018) or sanctuary initiatives (Bagelman, 2019; Zaman, 2020) do not explicitly examine how (in)visibility relates to power, agency, and the conditions under which commoning practices can emerge and be sustained.

Building on and extending these debates—which conceptualise commoning and urbanisation as a dialectic of mutually constitutive spatial processes (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2026)—this study examines how secrecy can become a condition of possibility for commoning at the intersection of urban geographies of bordering and sanctuary. Drawing on analyses of the non-linear relationships between (in)visibility, publicness, agency, and control in urban life (Iveson, 2007), this article explores how “secretly public” forms of commoning exceed state-sanctioned frameworks of dispersal and integration, humanitarian discourses of vulnerability and resilience, and economic rationales that frame refugees as either “resources” or “burdens.” I argue that attending to practices of secretly public commoning makes a distinctive contribution to debates on the urban commons and the politics of urban sanctuary. It shows how the co-existence and mutual reconfiguration of urban solidarity and enforcement infrastructures can push commoning experiments into low or variably visible initiatives. In doing

so, the article responds to calls to better understand how urban conditions shape refugee experiences and how cities and their politics are reworked through the presence of refugees (Darling, 2021: 911).

Introducing Asylum Bristol

Bristol constitutes a relevant site to address the overlapping factors that shape how refugee practices and solidarity initiatives “intersect with, are remade by, and themselves constitute and rework the urban” (Darling, 2021: 895–896). With around 470,000 inhabitants, the city’s history has been shaped by slavery trade, migration, and (de)industrialisation, alongside long-standing traditions of social mobilisation and cultural activism (Clement, 2012). Contemporary Bristol exemplifies the uneven geographies of neo-liberal urbanism: it contains some of the most deprived and racially unequal areas in Britain while also exhibiting the highest economic output of any metropolitan area outside London (The Runnymede Trust, 2017). Since the early 2000s, post-industrial regeneration has promoted Bristol as a creative, cosmopolitan, and socially engaged city, reinforced by national and international awards (e.g. as one of Europe’s “Green Capitals”) and the city council’s narratives celebrating the city’s vibrancy, diversity, and commitment to social issues. However, these commitments co-exist with deep urban inequalities, rising nativism, and restrictive national immigration policies. Bristol is a compulsory dispersal area where asylum seekers are “accommodated” on a no-choice basis by the Home Office while being barred from working and receiving a £49.18 weekly allowance (during the research, this was £37.75). This level of financial support for people seeking asylum is below what is needed to meet basic living costs (food, personal hygiene, health, transport), as a single

adult in the UK is considered destitute when living on less than £95 per week (Bramley, 2023). Notably, in her work on asylum policies in Britain, Mayblin (2020) employed Nixon’s notion of slow violence to capture the slowly attritional, debilitating, and suffocating effects of asylum policies that operate to make refugees “docile through pain” (p. 14), as they endure purposeful impoverishment, sub-standard housing, and restricted access to health and education resources.

In this sense, Bristol represents an urban geography where spaces and practices of sanctuary co-exist with policies that make the city a container for lives “placed on hold by the classification processes of sovereign attempts to ‘manage migration’” (Darling, 2017: 183). As research has shown, these “holding sites” are often within urban sacks of inequality and deprivation (Hynes, 2011) where practices of sanctuary exist alongside regulation, marginalisation, and hostility. These tensions have been starkly revealed through racist violence, including the xenophobia-motivated murders of Bijan Ebrahimi in 2013 and Kamil Ahmad in 2016 (a few weeks after the Brexit referendum), and a documented rise in racially and religiously motivated hate crimes, underscoring the cleavages scarring Bristol as a city of sanctuary, dispersal, and violence.

Yet, as the excerpt at the start of this paper showed, Bristol was not simply the backdrop of national dispersal policies, public narratives on asylum, or the music group. Migration and urban scholars (Darling, 2017; De Genova, 2015) have critiqued research that has considered the city as a backdrop to political decisions and exclusions defined at state-level and imposed upon an urban context. As a result, Darling (2017) argued that cities and their inhabitants are denied their role in shaping how the politics of asylum play out in specific urban environments, and people seeking

asylum have been “denied the agency to shape the city” (p. 183). Relatedly, De Genova’s (2015) notion of the migrant metropolis conceptualises urban domains as sites where bordering practices saturate the spaces of everyday lives but also where migrants’ practices re-position border struggles as urban struggles.

Building on these discussions, in this study I specifically refer to Asylum Bristol—instead of Bristol as an already-defined urban scenario—to foreground the urban experiences and geographies emerging from the contemporary, contested politics of asylum, sanctuary, and commoning practices discussed in these pages. Referring to Asylum Bristol centres the lived experiences of the city by people dispersed as asylum seekers or resettling there. While these lived experiences cannot be conflated or assumed as universal, talking of Asylum Bristol refers to specific urban geographies that were shaped, though not determined, by most of the group participants’ legal and social status as people seeking asylum and/or refugees in Britain (De Martini Ugolotti, 2024). Put it differently, talking about Asylum Bristol addresses a geography of “ordinary” spaces, objects and urban encounters (temporary accommodations, police reporting, drop-in centres, free-food parcels and/or clothing) that spatially materialised state enforcement processes and specific legal and social categories, such as, for example, “destitute” refugee and/or “asylum seeker.” In this sense, Asylum Bristol elucidates how the slow violence of asylum policies does not simply take place *in cities* but actively shapes specific urban forms and geographies (see Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023). At the same time, focusing on Asylum Bristol centres the attempts that people seeking asylum and their allies put in place to navigate, respond to, and negotiate urban geographies that were often experienced as an enclosure

(Meier, 2020). In other words, speaking of Asylum Bristol is a way to foreground how Bristol’s embrace of sanctuary initiatives sat alongside enforcement infrastructures in shaping specific experiences of the urban, which will help to explain why commoning took “secretly public” forms among the music group participants. As the excerpt at the start of the paper indicated, such a perspective was the result of an ethnographic and participatory stance that enabled me to “think through theory ethnographically” (Khan, 2020: 83) through musicking with the group. From such a positionality, musicking emerged not as an object of study but as a form of relationality through which I could attend to what often remains unnoticed in analyses of urban geographies of asylum and commoning practices.

Sounding Asylum Bristol: Working the hyphens of a militant investigation

The music space that constituted the focus of this work started in Bristol in October 2016, when a group of refugee men and women joined two local musicians and community organisations to organise informal sessions with the aim of creating a social space for people seeking asylum and other urban residents through playing, learning, and sharing music.

As Danny, one of the group co-organisers, explained in a 2017 informal conversation, people seeking asylum in Bristol had long expressed the need for freely accessible spaces for socialising and community engagement. However, refugee support organisations, constrained by limited resources and focused on basic service provision, often viewed creating such spaces as beyond their remit. In late summer 2016, informal encounters between refugees, local musicians, and members of the Community Interest Company Co-Resist led to the weekly in-

kind use of a room at Hamilton House, a community and cultural hub in Stokes Croft. The Lorraine Ayensu Refugee Arts (LARA) group provided logistical support through second-hand instruments and access to small grants, alongside self-funded activities to cover childcare and transport costs. Sessions lasted 2–3 hours and combined social time with musicking across a wide range of musical genres, often mixing with spontaneous dances. Musical experience varied widely and, over the research period, more than 60 people participated, with weekly attendance ranging from 7 to over 20. Most participants were people seeking asylum aged between 18 and 55 who had been in the UK from a few weeks to 12 years and originated from 16 different countries, with a roughly even gender balance. For 18 months between January 2017 and May 2018, I attended and contributed to the group on a weekly basis as both participant and researcher, exploring the role of leisure and sociality in grassroots migration and asylum solidarity initiatives after the research had been discussed with and accepted by group members.

My presence within the group reflected a militant investigation praxis, a mode of inquiry that seeks to engage with and privilege perspectives emerging from migrants' struggles, which often unfold through the contested terrains of everyday life (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). Rather than treating knowledge production as a neutral process in the analysis of migration and urban experiences, I participated as a researcher, ally, and co-musician, engaging with participants as interlocutors whose reflections, practices, and refusals informed both the research process and its analytical development.

Mezzadra (in Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013) described this research praxis as a "double opening": the articulation of domains of struggle—in this case, struggles for spaces of sociality, expression, and more broadly

liveable lives—with an opening towards the co-production of concepts capable of making sense of those struggles. Methodologically, this meant attending not only to what participants said about their urban experiences but also to how they addressed them through musicking and shared forms of sociality. At the same time, I remained attentive to how my position as a White European male academic shaped my participation in the group, the relationships that became possible within it, and the forms of knowledge that emerged through the research, what I call *working the hyphen of a militant investigation*.

Working the hyphen (Fine, 1994) of a militant investigation involved navigating the shifting positionalities of researcher—co-musician and attending to how they shaped access, participation, interpretation, and accountability throughout the research process. Rather than treating these positions as fixed categories and boundaries, I approached them as relational spaces of negotiation through which the terms, asymmetries, and temporalities of participation, solidarity, and knowledge production were continuously reworked. For example, the group participants repeatedly made clear that they would not become "my guinea pigs" (Yanet), at times refusing audio recording and setting conditions for photographs taken by local advocates. Through these acts, they resisted being fixed as objects of research or advocacy while opening the possibility of dialogue about how knowledge could be produced in ways that remained accountable to their perspectives, experiences, and priorities (see also Sciarelli, 2024). By working the hyphen of a militant investigation, participants' reflections, refusals, and creative practices informed the conceptual framing and interpretation of their experiences. This occurred not through formal co-analysis sessions but through

conversations, melodies, rhythms, poetry, and everyday encounters that generated insights informing both the empirical and conceptual development of the study. As a result of this research approach, the ethnographic fragments, poems, and interview excerpts that inform this study attune to an “urban ecology” (Atkinson, 2007) in which the affective and embodied registers of sound and music reflect and reshape relationships with spaces and places emerging across differently experienced urban geographies (Aceska et al., 2024). These fragments are methodologically provocative, providing “juxtapositions, analogies, poetic images, epiphanies and anecdotes” (Khan, 2020: 160) that expand analyses of commoning practices and urban sanctuary by articulating political, embodied and affective dimensions of urban life through sound (Aceska et al., 2024: 1953).

Working the hyphen also involved negotiating the limits of what could be rendered public through research. Consequently, some conversations and instances that informed my relationship with the group are intentionally absent from this article. An engagement with and discussion of secretly public commoning practices in this paper is therefore not about disclosing what was not meant to be public, but about examining how forms of public secrecy shaped possibilities for sociality, solidarity, and commoning while remaining accountable to those whose lives and relationships made such analysis possible. This methodological approach enabled me to explore how sonic practices consolidated or reconfigured urban geographies of asylum, while tracing how they gathered publics and enabled or constrained relations of support and care. While these dynamics may be overlooked in predominantly policy-based, textual, or visual forms of urban research, the sections that follow discuss their relevance for research and praxis on the

urban commons, migration, and sanctuary scholarship.

Everyday geographies of asylum and secretly public commoning

In the neighbourhood where I live, no one greets me, but everyone stares at me, *it is a heavy silence that makes my ears ring...* and I can feel that ... *that angry silence*, on my skin, even the walls seem to be angry at me sometimes ... (Abdi, March 2018, emphasis added)

My city is a sea of faces,

unknown, indifferent, smiling, hostile,

My city is an ocean of bricks,

concrete as waves that can crush you,

that make you feel small, weak, and gasping for air,

My city is a forest of hands,

touching their foreheads and their hearts, clapping and swinging,

cooking food to feed tummies and souls,

My city is an ocean that can make you vanish, as if you have never existed,

but I am learning its rhythms and tricks,

there are peaceful bays hidden behind threatening routes and indifferent walls,

the sound of a prayer or a song, a friendly hand, a piece of paper will guide you there,

so that me and you can rest a bit and take a breath before continuing our journey. (Poem co-written with Shukry, July 2017)

As emerged in Hussein's excerpt at the start of this paper, Bristol's urban land- and soundscape was ever-present in the everyday lives of the men and women in the group, as an agent that inscribed upon them the mark of the “mobile state enforcement

infrastructure” (Mountz, 2020: 6) through ordinary and even intimate spaces (Bagelman, 2019). Shukri’s poem and Abdi’s excerpt conveyed some of many instances in which casual comments, creative expressions and interactions provided recurring embodied, affective and sonic references to how urban contexts materialised forms of border control and enclosure that saturated the spaces of everyday life (De Genova, 2015). Relatedly, Abdi’s description of a deafening and dizzying silence charged with hostility resonated with Pavoni and Tulumello’s (2023) conceptualisation of *atmospheric urban violence* in capturing how embodied, affective and sonic registers could compound each other to debilitate his capacity “to think, sense, act, move and live” (p. 24). Within these urban experiences, and as Shukri’s poem hinted, the music group constituted for many a space that catalysed and mobilised social encounters, mutual support, and feelings of trust and solidarity as “relational goods” (Sciarelli, 2024) that resonated with practices of “care commoning” centred on questions of life sustenance, affects, care, and mutuality (Sanchez, 2023). At the same time, an emphasis on the sounds of Asylum Bristol and of the music group provided a unique perspective to address how the politics of asylum, commoning and sanctuary intersected and were negotiated in that space, complicating discussions on urban and care commons. If, as Waitt et al. (2014) argued, “sound connects us to uneven networks of power” (p. 287), what kind of commoning practices did musicking reflect and shape within a cityscape experienced by many as an enclosure? This question and the answers provided to it complicated and expanded discussions about urban commons, highlighting the relevance of questions of visibility that unfold at the intersection of relations of perception and relations of power (Brighenti, 2007) in urban

geographies shaped by sanctuary and enforcement geographies.

Nicola: ... Okay, right, *but this group is not really a secret tunnel though*, as you often say how it is good to have more and more people from this city and beyond to know about it and join, right?

Hussein: (re-joining the conversation) *What is a secret my friend? Isn't it a secret something you know about, but not what is it for?* (Ethnographic excerpt, June 2017, emphasis added)

If urban and care commoning practices have been consistently described as making “public and visible” issues of life sustenance and (forced) migrants’ right to the city (Grazioli and Montagna, 2019; Sanchez, 2023; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022), urban scholars have for some time interrogated static definitions of publicness, usually defined around issues of property, accessibility, and visibility (Bertoni, 2018; Iveson, 2007; Tuvikene et al., 2023). These studies have argued that, rather than operating as a binary, public and private spaces intersect across multiple scales, forming a mosaic of sites with shifting degrees and thresholds of access, openness, and visibility along intersecting lines of exclusion, including racialisation, legal and economic status, gender, sexuality, age, and dis/ability. From this perspective, Hussein’s insight invites an understanding of the music group as both *public* and *secret*. The group was open to anyone, yet not everyone in Bristol could give it the same meaning and relevance and thus was not able to “see it” and, in fact, “feel it” and understand “what it was for.” Somehow echoing Hussein, scholars have argued that, instead of being out of sight, hidden and concealed, *secrecy circulates* via specific “distributions of the sensible” (Glouftsiou, 2023: 3), shaping how things, persons, and knowledges can be seen, known, or heard. On this,

Birchall (2021) suggested that forms of art and expression, such as music, can make secrecy *public* not because they reveal secrets, but because secrecy shapes what can be *known, said, and done* through art forms.

These insights resonate with participants' accounts, which indicated that visibility was not understood as a defining feature of what made a space public. Urban scholarship similarly conceptualises publicness as continuously produced through urban practices rather than as a fixed spatial attribute (Bertoni, 2018; Tuvikene et al., 2023). Following Iveson (2007), a space becomes public when it functions as a site of "public address": that is, when it enables people to reach a public of potentially unknown, yet meaningful, recipients. From this angle, a space can be public even when its visibility is limited or situational.

The publicness of a space that was at once open and secret became evident on several occasions within the music group. In one of these, singing a song authored by the Kurdish singer Salar Salman and entitled *KotiriSpî* (White Dove) became an opportunity for Taban to publicly discuss with the group the intimate, yet shared and collective *dilemma* of being compelled to leave their country (see also Khan, 2020):

"It's very important that we talk about this... this dilemma stays even when you have decided to go. I came here 11 years ago, and many days I think if that was right or not... now, even if I wanted to come back, it's kind of impossible because it's getting worse and worse at home, with IS [Islamic State] and every time something and every time a new story happens, and I can't really go back ... and also, my child she is born here and it's like, how am I going to drag my British daughter to Iraq? That's the dilemma, just like the White Dove and I felt like not having a space for me, like the White Dove, in this city, in Bristol, in UK ... that's what I mean when I say this is a good group ..." as Taban stops

talking for a moment many in the group clap, others nod intently, voicing in agreement ... "that's what I mean when I say this is a good group ... because when I sing in Kurdish, I do not just remember my culture, I am not just thinking of 'going back' ... *I am reimagining this place too for me and for others*, you know?" (Ethnographic excerpt, June 2017, emphasis added)

Taban's words highlighted how sound and music, their affective intensities and meanings, are not only inherently spatial in their capacity to "reimagining this place" and generate "moments of emotional intensity through which the personal and the public, the individual and the social, indeed shape each other" (Waitt et al., 2014: 290). In this case, a song's melody, texture, and rhythm also inspired a form of public address that resonated intimately with most of the group participants, who *knew* and *could feel* her dilemma and thus would *hear* and *talk* about it.

The significance of such spaces and moments becomes clearer when considering how refugees' visibility in social domains could entail exposure to racist violence or be conditional to pre-defined scripts of refugee-hood: what Giudici and Boccagni (2022) define as a "politics of exposure" linking legitimacy and deservingness through narratives of suffering and/or displays of their desire to integrate. Moreover, in Bristol, becoming visible was far from an inherently positive or affirming experience for many group participants across intersecting social positions (e.g. legal and economic status, gender, racialisation, dis/abilities). Several Muslim women in the group openly discussed how wearing a veil could cause them to stand out and become a victim of harassment in some areas where I, as a white man, would I receive no particular "attention." Relatedly, several men and women in the group discussed how they felt that their

accents and clothing—often worn and sometimes unwashed because of the conditions of destitution imposed by the asylum system—made them feel ashamed and stand out “in all the wrong ways” (Azhari) in parks, buses, shops, and other urban spaces (see also Mayblin, 2020). Within the “regimes of visibility” (Brighenti, 2007) and intersecting inequalities that shaped their urban experiences, the participants’ secretly public commoning practices instead imbued an anonymous community space in Bristol with an atmosphere of publicness (Anderson, 2009) that maintained and supported generative domains of public address, mutuality and support *through* its relative (in)visibility, *not despite it*.

Beyond musicking, secretly public commoning practices within the group took multiple forms. In the weeks following the Manchester Arena bombing on the 22nd of May 2017, the secret, yet open space of the music group spontaneously morphed into a weekly “talking circle” where those in attendance shared concerns, thoughts, and resonances across present and past experiences amid tea and occasionally music or poetry. On other occasions, cooking and sharing food became opportunities for the group participants to actualise a “future in the present” (De Angelis, 2019) enacted through co-created spaces and relationships of mutual support, care, and sociality (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). Across shared but differently lived dimensions of precariousness, uncertainty, and marginality, the (in)visible “care infrastructures” (Sanchez, 2023) of the group emerged through the sounds of conversations, music, poetry, and cooking/sharing food. Tracing the sounds generated by and emerging from the group illuminated diverse urban trajectories of commoning that emerged within and against everyday geographies shaped by asylum and bordering. Far from only revealing an “unseen city” (Atkinson, 2007), paying attention to the

sonic register of being-in-common addressed how everyday geographies of asylum, what I have called Asylum Bristol, were continuously produced, inhabited, and negotiated through relationships between sound, place, and urban experience (Aceska et al., 2024). A focus on the sounds of Asylum Bristol thus offers a prism to make perceptible and meaningful shared but differently experienced urban geographies of asylum and to contribute re-scaling “border struggles as urban struggles” (De Genova, 2015: 3). It highlights both the generative potential and the inherent fragility of secretly public commoning practices that are contingent, temporary, and deeply shaped by uneven urban conditions and the slow, atmospheric, and explicit violences that permeate everyday geographies of asylum. The discussion that follows reflects on these dimensions to draw out the broader contributions and implications of this study.

On the fragility and productivity of secretly public commons

The music group at the centre of this research ceased to meet in May 2018, when the community venue that hosted it, Hamilton House, came under eviction and was slated for conversion into residential apartments. This event reflected broader dynamics of unequal urban change in Bristol, but also the processes of enclosure and co-optation that constrain, displace, and reshape commoning practices in migration and urban contexts (De Angelis, 2019). As Tsavdaroglou and Kaika’s (2024) work in Belgrade demonstrates, state-bordering practices and urban regeneration can converge to expel urban commoning and those reclaiming their right to inhabit the city. In Bristol, the eviction of Hamilton House was not incidental but exemplary of culture-led regeneration that unsettles spaces where commoning flourishes, while simultaneously

extracting value from the very social and cultural dynamism they produce (Colomb, 2012).

Yet, the loss of a physical meeting place did not signal the disappearance of the commoning practices cultivated through the group. Rather, these practices travelled across Bristol and elsewhere via a range of grassroots experiments in sociality, leisure, and expression (De Martini Ugolotti and Webster, 2024). These included painting sessions, women-only music and dance groups, and a lullaby-exchange meet-up created by and for mothers, often inspired and co-convened by the former participants. The organisational practices and care infrastructures developed through the music group travelled into new “secretly public” initiatives based on the pooling of material and immaterial resources and the cultivation of domains of care, sociality, and mutuality by and for people seeking asylum and allies in Bristol.

These commoning trajectories continue to resonate with Hussein’s reflection on secrecy: “Isn’t it a secret something you know about, but not what is it for?” which provides a distinctive entry point to debates on the commons, as spaces and communities “that appear relatively closed” (Huron, 2017: 1065) while maintaining a willingness to keep boundaries porous. Building on the group participants’ nuanced engagement with dimensions of secrecy, publicness, and (in)visibility, I contend that issues of openness and access in commoning practices are not only spatial or organisational but are constituted through constructions of publicness that respond to differentiated experiences of the urban. While scholars have examined how commoning blurs distinctions between formality and informality (Sciarelli, 2024), less attention has been paid to how the intersection of grassroots sanctuary initiatives and asylum enforcement infrastructures pushes commoning to materialise across

variable thresholds of visibility. Beyond revealing an “unseen city” (Atkinson, 2007), attending to music and sound enables an analysis of commoning practices that are accessible to those who not only “see” but also “hear” and “feel” their significance across urban geographies shaped by solidarity and violence.

Related to this, a focus on the ephemeral yet spatially and socially productive domains of sound and music expanded previous reflections on the capacity of temporally limited social and spatial commoning practices to influence geographies of care and mutuality across unequal urban geographies (Huron, 2017). Urban and migration scholars have similarly argued that the dichotomy between permanency and temporariness obscures how power and agency operate in contexts shaped by dispersal, bordering, and uneven regeneration (Meeus et al., 2019). As secrecy constituted a calibrated form of presence that composed publicness and commoning through thresholds of visibility, the temporariness of the music group was not understood simply as a lack of stability, opportunity, or justice. Rather, temporariness often enabled flexibility to adjust the group’s music-oriented practices of sociality, care, and mutuality, such as shifting the activities to a talking group in response to the Manchester terror attack, and the increased Islamophobic and xenophobic hostility that followed and affected participants in uneven ways. The capacity of sounds, melodies, and music to generate relations of care, mutual support, and public address that extended beyond the physical space that hosted them complicated notions of temporariness for the secretly public commoning practices considered here. This became evident as multiple spaces of art, leisure, and socialisation—often co-created and inspired by participants—re-emerged in Bristol following the closure of Hamilton House. Situating the secretly public

commoning practices discussed here in Asylum Bristol constituted a key conceptual step in understanding how and why these practices emerged within and against urban geographies shaped by sanctuary and violence, marginalisation and solidarity, rather than simply within the city of Bristol. Throughout this paper, Asylum Bristol has functioned not simply as the empirical setting in which secretly public commoning unfolded, but as an analytical prism through which wider geographies of asylum become perceptible. From this perspective, attending to the sounds of Asylum Bristol and the secretly public commoning practices that nurtured them expands urban and migration scholars' analyses that have illuminated the global proliferation of border enforcement sites in urban contexts and underlined how (forced) migrants and allies' spatial practices "intersect with, are remade by, and themselves constitute and rework the urban" (Darling, 2021: 895–896; De Genova, 2015).

As shown in the ethnographic vignette that opened this paper, and through the poetry, musicking and conversations discussed throughout it, despite, and through, fragility and temporariness, sound and music constituted shared registers of commoning that interrupted and negotiated experiences of Bristol as an enclosure: urban experiences that were simultaneously material and affective, legal and sensory. Musicking and the sounds of commoning practices materially enabled the creation of spaces of sociality and solidarity, and mobilised intensities and forms of public address that did not translate neatly into claims for citizenship, asylum rights, or "integration." The practices documented here—mundane, affective, sonic, and variably visible—attend to "the diverse spatialities of publicness" (Tuvikene et al., 2023: 2964) and highlight the limits of conventional vocabularies for describing what counts as "public and visible" in urban commoning practices. Despite

being temporary, variably visible, and not formally articulated, the commoning practices considered here challenge the tendency to equate visibility and legibility with political or social significance and exemplify how acts of expression, as well as urban presence and solidarity, can simultaneously inhabit secrecy and publicness (Birchall, 2021; Glouftsiou, 2023). As with discussions of "uncommon" commoning practices (Pan and Shin, 2018) and forms of mutuality enacted by people seeking asylum (Zaman, 2020), secretly public commoning emerges through fragmented experiences of urban asylum yet reconfigures them "through the everyday and seemingly non-political experiences and actions" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013: 188). These commoning practices extend the grounds on which liveable lives can be imagined and sustained within intersecting geographies of enforcement, uneven regeneration and sanctuary.

Concurrently, the conceptual expansions discussed here cannot be disentangled from the engaged and situated perspective and relationships that informed them, what I have discussed in this paper as *working the hyphen of a militant investigation*. As shown in the ethnographic vignettes and exchanges discussed in this paper, this involved considering my multiple positionalities (researcher, ally, co-musician) as relational spaces through which the terms and asymmetries of solidarity and knowledge production could be continuously reworked to inform the co-production of concepts originating from the group's everyday practices and struggles. In practice, this meant reflecting on how and when my roles as ally and co-musician shaped my engagement with the group, approaching participants' everyday practices and struggles as key sites for generating knowledge with and for urban commoners. In this process, musicking emerged not as an object of study but as a register of relationality through which I could critically and

reflexively engage with what goes unnoticed in analyses of urban geographies of asylum and commoning practices.

Building on these situated, reflexive and engaged processes, this paper provides a novel lens to engage with the “plurality of knowledges, experiences of the city, affective intensities, resources and responsibilities” (Sanchez, 2023: 2471) that can emerge through sonic registers and simultaneously inhabit secrecy and publicness. While grounded in one specific urban context, the dynamics of secretly public commoning identified here resonate with other urban settings in which migrants, refugees, and racialised groups navigate conditions of slow, atmospheric, and explicit violence and conditional inclusion. Attending to secretly public commoning invites urban scholars to reconsider how publicness, care, and political significance are constituted in cities marked by overlapping geographies of enforcement, solidarity, and uneven (re)development. In doing so, this study raises critical questions about which urban practices remain analytically absent when visibility is treated as a neutral or self-evident register of urban life, rather than as a terrain through which “the denial of recognition and the possibility of resistance” (Brighenti, 2013: xix) are ambiguously and continuously negotiated.

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1. In this work, the terms “refugee,” “people seeking sanctuary/asylum,” or “forced migrant” are used inclusively to refer to people at all stages of the asylum process, except when drawing attention to the differences produced by the maze of the asylum system.

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