Sometimes, we get into really deep discussions when we are having the return dialogues, too. About global injustices, about how border and migration regimes are maintaining those injustices. How they serve geopolitical interests and enable economic exploitation … but it becomes too big to grasp. It’s up to you who are studying these issues to address the larger questions. Those of us who are working operationally are just like ants in a huge anthill … we know that what we are doing is absurd, but we do it anyway. And we get our salary for it. That’s how it is. Not everything can be meaningful. I don’t think everything can be meaningful.

(Palle, return caseworker, Swedish Migration Agency, 2017)

Many state officials keep being passive and continue to claim we are in a much lesser evil than we could have been. We hear this same thing from different governments in the North, we hear about colonialism, it’s always the same argumentation. It’s not just about the government. It’s about the people, too. Niels once pointed out that if anything needs to change in Sjælsmark, for rejected asylum seekers and migrants in general, it needs to come from the people. And as long as Danish people are indoctrinated and keep benefiting from perpetrating violence against us, nothing will change.

(Conversation with Steve, 2021)

This book has traced the continuum of state violence mobilised in the deportation limbo in Denmark and Sweden. Following a political ethnographic approach, it has centred on the perspectives of frontline workers tasked with implementing the policies designed to pressure non-deported people to leave, and how their efforts often perpetuate the same condition of limbo that they were meant to address, while exposing their target population to social, physical, and mental harm and premature death. The book has thus explored the adverse realities behind government fantasies assuming that deportations are normal, adequate, and politically necessary, and that they can be undertaken in an effective and humane manner (Coutin, 2015). Such fantasies of humane and effective enforcement, I have argued, are particularly prevalent in Nordic welfare states, where there is a widespread belief in
the good, benevolent state. The deportation limbo challenges such perceptions and renders visible the violent exclusion that is integral to the (welfare) state project. The deportation limbo and the state violence it mobilises is not an aberration to an otherwise functioning system; it is endemic to a border regime that is designed to prevent racialised travellers from accessing mobility, rights, and resources.

However, as Palle articulates in the quotation above, these ‘bigger questions’ of what the purpose of deportations is, what interests they serve, and whether they can be humane, fair, or defensible, are rarely asked within the system. Like ants in an anthill, officials feel compelled to carry on with their jobs regardless. The second quotation is from a conversation with Steve, where he comments on state officials’ routine attempts to downplay the violent nature of deportation regimes and their own role in sustaining them. He challenges the ahistorical and unfounded claim that at least things are not so bad in Northern Europe as they are elsewhere. He points out how the people living in these countries are invested and complicit in this violence, too. In this concluding chapter, I will depart from the reflections by Palle and Steve and connect them to the main arguments made in this book. I will consider three different directions in which deportation regimes – and the state violence they mobilise – expand, and discuss what is the potential and role of research in tracing and challenging them. Rather than offering conclusive remarks, I will throughout the chapter let colleagues and friends, with whom readers are by now familiar, speak with me through the pages in search for alternative future directions.

**Limbo and the global expansion of deportation regimes**

This book has demonstrated that deportations are what we can call productive policy failures, which sustain a system of global apartheid through regimes of discriminatory, violent regulation of the mobility of racialised people across scattered but interconnected locations (Besteman, 2020). As technologies of citizenship (Walters, 2002), deportations delineate the boundaries of membership and define hierarchies of human worth, structured along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and more (Anderson et al., 2011). Politically, they provide governments with useful folk devils (Cohen, 2002), the securitisation and criminalisation of whom justify the expansion of coercive state powers, as well as new forms of spatial, technological, and social regulation. This way, deportation regimes also generate novel opportunities for investments and profits for private security companies as well as humanitarian and research industries (Andersson, 2016; Besteman, 2020; Golash-Boza, 2015). I have suggested that the *deportation limbo* is a systemic
product of the intensified efforts of states to enforce deportations, on the one hand, and of the contestations and struggles waged by non-deported people, on the other. In this book, I have used ‘limbo’ to refer to the condition of liminal legality characterising the situation of non-deported people, which renders them vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence, including detention, forced deportation, and radical forms of exclusion. I have shown how state authorities use an ever-expanding repertoire of spatial, social, and temporal governing techniques to control non-deported people, including incarceration and encampment, but also evictions, and formal abandonment.

The expansion of deportation regimes shows no sign of decline: on the contrary, deportation measures evolve and travel both within and between states. In Denmark, the government continues its spectacularised hunt for the most remote location that can be found within its limited geography to establish yet another deportation camp for criminalised foreign nationals, while simultaneously trying to find a partner country outside Europe that is willing to host its externalised asylum processing camp. Their fantasy of externalising asylum processing takes inspiration from Australia’s colonial offshore detention model, which is practised in Nauru and Manus Island. Similar fantasies are reflected in the expanding archipelago of detention-like reception facilities and hotspots across Europe’s southern borderlands, which serve both deterrence and containment purposes (Mountz et al., 2013; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018). Meanwhile, in Sweden, the government plans for new deportation prisons to be built for non-deported migrants and explores models for increased monitoring and regulation of people seeking asylum (SOU 2018:22). The Swedish Conservative Party has suggested that all non-deported people should be forced to carry electronic ankle bracelets, which would imply a drastic expansion of state surveillance, similar to what has been tried and practised elsewhere in the United States (see Sanchez Boe, forthcoming). If deportation measures travel between states, we are also witnessing intensified police collaborations on the EU level, facilitated through integrated biometric identity systems, which are meant to enhance identification and control of travellers’ identity and to facilitate deportations (Statwatch, 2022). As part of their efforts to create a ‘deportation union’ (Statwatch, 2022: 1), the EU and individual member states are also working to establish more bilateral and multilateral readmission agreements and to strengthen their cooperation with countries of deportation. These processes partly operate through informal exchanges (Cassarino, 2020), discussions in expert networks (Bigo, 2006), and diplomatic negotiations (Collyer, 2016). The informalisation and externalisation of deportation regimes warrant sustained critical scrutiny. For this purpose, political ethnography continues to be useful for tracing these dynamics along the global corridors of expulsion.
These measures all contribute to making non-deported people’s lives more precarious and hazardous, and to prolonging their journeys and the time spent in stuckedness in camps, detention centres, and other liminal border zones. Yet, if deportation regimes keep expanding globally, connecting state and security apparatuses, they are also forging new connections between deportable and deported people. These people also actively partake in shaping deportation regimes through their tactics of navigation, evasion, and confrontation with state authorities and other actors who seek to limit and steer their mobility. While their perspectives have not been the focus of this book, the non-deported people waiting in limbo in the Danish deportation camps, or the young people who moved on to Paris, continuously forge new relationships and bonds of sociality and solidarity with their communities in the countries they risk being deported from, and in the countries where they are deported to. They partake in forming the global deportspora (Khosravi, 2017a) consisting of travellers who get caught in cycles of containment and forced onward mobility, and who at the same time continue to undo the nationalist order that states so desperately try to perform and sustain.

From deportation regimes to ordinary expulsions

Tracing deportation processes thus necessitates research to go beyond the nation state as a ‘container’ of analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). If deportation regimes expand through global connections, a second direction in which they move is ‘inwards’, as they encompass more groups of people who hold different legal status. This research has focused on states’ efforts to deport foreign nationals lacking legal authorisation to remain, but deportation regimes also impact other populations. Among those immediately affected are foreign nationals whose legal status is made precarious because of ever-more restrictive migration politics, including temporary labour migrants, and people holding refugee status and their families. While they may hold (temporary) legal status, they are also impacted by the intensified policing, rights differentiation, and heightened risk of losing their right to remain, which are the result of states’ intensified focus on deportations, even though they are formally not threatened by deportation – or not yet. Chapter 1 discussed how the normalisation of temporary and more precarious protection status and a renewed deportation turn in both Sweden and Denmark resulted in more people becoming exposed to the threat of deportation. In Denmark, refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Somalia, and other countries ridden by protracted conflict are having their protection statuses reassessed, and for some – notably women, young people, and
those of older age – their protection status is withdrawn. Those among them who receive deportation orders but who fear returning to the countries that they or their parents fled from risk ending up in limbo. Meanwhile, in Denmark and Sweden, permanent leave to remain has increasingly been made contingent upon labour market performance, with the result that people seeking protection are accepted only as cheap if not free exploitable labour (see Rytter and Ghandchi, 2019). Similarly, many of the young Afghans in Sweden whose situation was described in Chapter 5 had little prospects of obtaining asylum, and those who did would only receive temporary protection. Rendering themselves available as exploitable labour remained for some their only option to ensure their economic and physical survival (Khosravi, 2019). These cases demonstrate what some scholars have warned is a hollowing out of the principle of asylum (Schultz, 2020) through the conflation of vulnerability and performance-based ‘deservingness’ criteria, where protection is rendered contingent on labour market performance, turning refugees into ‘humanitarian exploits’ (Ramsay, 2019: 11). Their exploitation is enabled through the unevenly distributed susceptibility to deportation; in this way, the ‘internal’ expansion of deportation regimes reinforces racial, gendered, and classed hierarchies in the labour market and in access to a liveable life among people holding precarious legal status. It does also, to some extent, affect racialised citizens as well.

The political focus on deportation of racialised non-citizens has impacted long-term residents and citizens who, despite having stable legal status, are continuously racialised as belonging to elsewhere, regardless of whether they are born in the country, have ancestors from the country, and so on. The expansion of internal bordering practices, such as intensified policing in certain areas and of certain people, and the introduction of new technologies for conducting identity checks, increases the risk for racialised and minoritised citizens and non-citizens to be made into targets (De Noronha, 2019; Parmar, 2019; Statewatch, 2022). As a technology of citizenship, deportation enforcement becomes a way of identifying and targeting those who, according to prevailing racial matrices, are imagined to be ‘others’ out of place (Tudor, 2017). Denaturalisation laws are perhaps the starkest example of how, for certain racialised citizens, citizenship remains a conditional status. In Denmark, such a procedure is already in place for cases where a person has been convicted of a terrorist offence, yet a new legal initiative is underway that will allow for the revocation of citizenship and deportation of people convicted of having partaken in organised crime (see Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2021). The condition of deportability (De Genova 2002) thus extends across the migrant-citizen divide and reconfigures the conditions for citizenship. The above examples also underscore the importance of the reorientation in (a predominantly Eurocentric) border and migration studies that
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has highlighted the inadequacy of taking for granted statist categorisations of ‘migrants’ and ‘citizens’, respectively (Anderson, 2011). Indeed, deportation regimes do not only or primarily delineate the legal boundaries of citizenship, but enforce the racial order reflected and produced through border and citizenship regimes. Here, research on border and migration control regimes needs to enter – and indeed, catch up with – ongoing conversations within scholarship on race, policing, incarceration, and criminal (in)justice addressing not only how mobility freedoms are curtailed but importantly, how they can be abolished (Davis and Dent, 2001; Davis et al., 2021; Gilmore, 2020; Loyd, Mitchelson, and Burridge, 2012; Sharma, 2021).

There is a movement among border scholars who strive to overcome this methodologically nationalist bias and ‘de-exceptionalise’ transnational displacement, instead considering how expulsions have been and are still used to forge categories of citizens and ‘others’ – be they indigenous, historically marginalised groups, racialised citizens, criminalised people, or mobile poor (Anderson, 2019; Drotbohm and Lems, 2018; Ramsay, 2019). Such a research agenda entails tracing genealogies and contemporary continuities in the discourses, policy measures, and forms of regulation that produce illegalisation, imprisonment, segregation, and ‘ghettoisation’. It enables at once a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the different manifestations of state racism which, while part of the same global system of oppression, target ‘dissimilar populations differently’ (Leets Hansen and Suárez-Krabbe, 2019: 3; see also Eika et al., 2019), without reifying the methodological statism that (re)produces the state’s classifications. Importantly, it also enables us to connect struggles against forced and restricted mobility waged by different oppressed groups who are disproportionately exposed to eviction, incarceration, criminalisation, and deportation (Davis and Dent, 2001; Loyd et al., 2012) and for a radical freedom to move, live, and remain.

Deportation and the challenge of ‘liberal’ violence

First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism […] at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery.

(Césaire, 1972 [1955]: 13)

This book has been concerned with how ‘the state’ manifests through various forms of violence, which are justified as normal and necessary elements of sustaining the borders of a ‘liberal’ order rooted in modernity/
The varieties of violence detailed have almost exclusively been state-sanctioned, legally codified, and within the confines of human rights obligations; with few exceptions, the violence of deportations remains within the ‘threshold’ of public acceptability (Walters, 2019: 176). Most state officials I interviewed and observed interacting with non-deported people agreed on the location of this threshold and showed commitment to ‘the state’ as an inherently ‘good’ and benevolent structure, which they saw as necessary to sustain social order (see also Keskinen et al., 2019). With few exceptions, officials performed their jobs within their legally codified professional mandates: few went beyond their mandate to make matters worse for non-deported people, and few did so to support them. Like the ‘ants in a huge anthill’, as Palle put it, they went about their everyday work, witnessing the injurious and at times absurd effects of the policies they were enforcing. Some considered their work to be of humanitarian nature, while others would articulate criticism against the policies they were enacting; yet others admitted that their profession had left them numb, dehumanised, desensitised to the suffering of others. Hence, as Julia pointed out in our conversation, frontline officials were simultaneously aware and not aware, complicit in and critical of the state violence they were enacting; and none of them questioned its fundamental premise: that the harms inflicted upon non-deported people were justified, even necessary, in the interest of controlling immigration.

One way of making sense of this is to emphasise the officials’ ‘commitment to blindness’ (Gordon, 2008: 207) to the effects of their job, on non-deported people and on themselves. Blindness and denial have been pointed out as central to the continued operation and public acceptability of the ‘extraordinary’ violence of expulsion, incarceration, indefinite confinement, and destitution (Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Mountz, 2020). Only by denying the violent nature of such practices, the argument goes, or by redressing them as humanitarian interventions, can they continue to operate. Therefore, concealment has been pointed out as an important strategy used in particular in liberal, democratic states to cultivate public ignorance of state violence and its injurious effects (Mountz, 2020; Walters, 2019). However, the broad acceptance of these harms amongst frontline officials and among the broader public cannot be explained by blindness alone. Instead, to understand its operation, we must consider the fundamental role of such violence in the formation of the political identities of ‘liberal’ welfare states, and their bureaucracies and populations. As Steve mentions in his reflection above, ‘as long as Danish people are indoctrinated and keep benefiting from perpetrating violence against us, nothing will change’.

The sharp observation by Aimé Césaire of the brutalising effects that colonisation had, not only on the colonised but also on the coloniser, captures...
this constitutive role of dehumanisation and violence in the political identities forged through colonialism. So does the comprehensive body of post-colonial scholarship that has demonstrated the violence that underpins liberal European political theory, politics, and society, and which offers important insights to border scholarship about the dehumanisation that borders presuppose and reproduce (Anzaldúa, 1987; see also Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Suárez-Krabbe, 2022). Indeed, for this reason, states, communities, and individuals may not only tacitly tolerate but actively desire ‘the violent arrangements supporting their communities’ (Kotef, 2020: 30). This active commitment to violence is different from a mere denial or consideration of violence as ‘a necessary evil’ to sustain the present order. It suggests that violence has become internalised and incorporated into the identity not only of those subjected to it but also of those perpetrating it. To insist that deportation regimes generate and sustain political identities that are premised on a racial order, a hierarchical differentiation in human value that normalises the systematic injuries inflicted on deportable ‘surplus’ populations, is not to say that state violence is always conscious and desirable by everyone who profits from it, nor that it is inevitable. But it enables us to consider how investments in political and social hierarchies generate not only tacit tolerance but an actual affective and political attachment to the structures that harm; a point made by scholars working on settler colonial societies (Kotef, 2020: 31). It may help explain why, as Julia suggested, most frontline officials had come to accept the current system as inevitable and necessary, despite its obvious, injurious effects; since these injuries seemed to affirm their own subject position, their humanity in face of those who were deprived of theirs. It might partly explain the insistence on and ongoing investments in ‘humanising’ reforms of border enforcement since a fundamental rethinking of borders would require rethinking – and rehumanising – those oppressed by borders as well as those who structurally benefit from them. As Steve said in one of our conversations, ‘they invested so much in building these structures, that they cannot afford to sacrifice them’. Finally, it might suggest that exposing violence is not enough to undo it. However, that is not to say that political identities premised upon violence cannot change; as Julia suggested, it just means we need to look for the fissures.

The deportation research industry and the need for different knowledge

What, then, do we learn from documenting state at the border? What are the potential political uses and misuses of this knowledge? And role can research have in enhancing transformative change of violent border regimes?
As Tuck and Yang (2014) write in their essay on refusals, not everything should be known or researched, nor is research necessarily the intervention that is ‘needed’ to address social and political problems (see also Simpson, 2008). The research industry devoted to documenting border violence and the suffering it generates runs the risk of reifying those same structures of violence (see Cabot, 2016; Robbins, 2013), and of revealing and exploiting stories that are better left untold (Khosravi, 2020). Hence, we need to consider the conditions under which research should be conducted on, in this case, repressive border or deportation regimes (Coutin, 2015) and for whom this research is imagined to be beneficial. This entails asking who is invited to speak on border violence, in what language can critique be articulated, and who do we expect to listen.

In a conversation we had about the conditions and challenges of ‘critical’ border and deportation studies, Shahram Khosravi said, ‘a recurrent question you get when you talk about borders is, “what is the alternative?” The second question is, “what solution do you suggest as social scientists”? These questions are misleading, because they presume that the problem is located outside the system [...] when in fact, it is the nation state system that is the problem.’ The fact that the border regime and the system of nation states that it is supposed to sustain has problems is something that most governments and frontline workers would agree on, and something that border researchers, alongside NGOs, are earning our income from documenting, analysing, and sometimes offering ‘solutions’ to. However, as Shahram notes, there is a fundamental difference between the approaches that consider these problems to be external to and caused by ‘flaws’ within the current system, and the perspectives that see the system as inherently and structurally flawed. The first approach prevails in political and public discourse, but does not have room for what Palle, the return caseworker at the Swedish Migration Agency, referred to as ‘the bigger questions’. Hence, and as Shahram noted in our conversation, these discourses place limits on the language in which critique can be articulated if it wants to be heard. Shahram shared an anecdote from when he had been invited to give a talk on waiting to staff at the Swedish Migration Agency. After he finished his talk, a participant came up to him and noted, ironically, ‘thank you for telling us about all these things we knew nothing about’. Shahram reflected, maybe they only partly heard what I said, and therefore, they only heard the repetition of what they knew already. It is the classic question posed by Spivak, can the subaltern speak? But the other part of the problem is who can listen. Not everyone has the capacity to listen when they hear someone speak. We can place more responsibility on the receiver, and instead of asking if the poor can speak, ask whether the rich can listen. We generate so much knowledge, but who can understand it? That is a different question. As for the
other question we get, ‘what is the alternative’? This is also a way in which the nation state defends itself by questioning that there exist other alternatives. It asks, how could you abolish borders, when there are no alternatives? It is not because I have the answer, but the question is also misleading, and threatening, suggesting that the alternative is an absence of law, an absence of order. But it’s all about which subject position you are coming from. When somebody asks what the alternative is, it comes from the subject position of someone who has something to lose. Those who are crossing the Mediterranean by boat, those who are confined in camps on Lesvos ... for them, there is no alternative. They represent what the nation-state system is afraid of. The lack of order, the chaos; but for them, this system has already brought chaos.

The system defends itself by denying the existence of alternatives. The ‘solutions’ offered to the chaotic and lethal operation of border and deportation regimes are spoken in the language of reform, regulation, and reinforcement of existing measures. Changes are indeed urgently needed to save lives and minimise the harms inflicted on people who are exposed to border violence, but, as border abolitionists have argued, reformist efforts to ‘humanise’ and regulate violent borders have not only shown to be ineffective but risk lending normative coverage to the continued operation of an essentially flawed border regime (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright, 2009; Cowan, 2021; Gilmore, 2020; Walia, 2021).

What knowledge and what language is needed to envision alternatives to the border regime? There are ongoing efforts, inside but even more so beyond the confines of academia, to undertake such projects. Speaking to an academic audience, Tuck and Yang (2014: 231) have called for a shift away from the ‘pain and damage-centred research’ towards ‘desire-based research’, which centres the knowledge derived from struggles within and against the harmful structures of power, and explores the alternative ways of being and knowing that emerge from them. Boochani and Tofigham (in Paik, 2021) suggest that another language is needed to articulate alternative imaginaries for understanding and challenging the global border regime. They write,

There’s a difference between changing the material conditions [of a social or political problem] and [changing its] intellectual framework. On the one hand, there’s trying to change the policies, the power structures, the economic side – all the investment that’s involved when it comes to the detention industry. And then, on the other hand, there’s trying to change the epistemic, the cultural, the intellectual, the symbolic, the social or colonial imaginary. And if the two aren’t addressed hand in hand, then there are huge gaps in the activism. If activism only focuses on one of those dimensions, then we don’t see the outcomes that we would like.

Boochani and Tofigham insist that knowledge on how border violence operates is needed to understand and unpack the political fantasies identities
that are premised on and sustain this violence, and the hierarchies of human value, which prevent us from, as Julia put it, being in the world together. However, we simultaneously need to speak about, write about, and practise alternative social imaginaries to this chaotic, damaging, global system of states, borders, and deportations.