Epilogue: Abolfazl’s death and other afterlives

I opened this book with the assertion that the Danish deportation regime was responsible for the death of Abolfazl Salehian, known in Sjælsmark as ‘the Gardener’. The state-sanctioned violence he was subjected to was to a large extent invisible: it was slow, and indirect, structural, and, as prison officers suggested, ‘ghostly’. Yet, it was explicitly intended to remove his possibilities to live a tolerable life. I have been uncertain about using Abolfazl’s name and story to illustrate the injurious and, indeed, haunting effects of the violence he was subjected to. I only knew him from his time in the camp, and his death prevents me from asking for his consent to have his story shared. I spoke to Steve about the ethics of this mode of representing him. Steve said,

The guards liked to talk about Abolfazl as a model of a ‘good’ resident. Someone who doesn’t speak up, who follows the rules, and if anything, internalises the intolerable system. What the guards expect from the residents is that they pretend to be happy, that they water the plants, don’t disturb the peace, so they can pretend they are not there. Don’t cause us problem, they say – so when you die it’s not our problem, either. But Abolfazl was also the one who then couldn’t stand the system anymore. He died forgotten. Nobody said anything. This is also in line with the system, you know; if everyone could just die like Abolfazl. When we use him as an example we are not trying to portray him or give him a certain status. He is a human who was subjected to the system. His life is a different story. But his death also deserves recognition, to be kept alive. For so many people … the faces of people who are never seen, the people, families, who die invisible, without anybody ever mentioning it.

I decided to use Abolfazl's name as a way of commemorating him. Those invested in defending the border regime may argue that there is no way of establishing the connection between Abolfazl’s death and the slow violence of the deportation camps, since his physical death occurred outside the camp, after he had regained a possibility to live. However, and as Steve also emphasised when he shared his own struggles to rid himself from the haunting memories of Sjælsmark, such claims to disconnection – in time, in
space, and in terms of responsibility – are part of how state violence renders itself invisible (see also Mountz, 2020). Boochani has argued, ‘when someone killed themselves, the government or the system would say “he killed himself”. So, he committed suicide. But in fact, I think it’s not that. In fact, it’s the system that has killed this person, you know. The system. We should talk about this ... as it happens they are no longer in detention’ (quoted in Bhatia and Bruce-Jones, 2021: 83). Deportation regimes travel into the future, through the absences they create, and the haunting feelings they leave behind. We should talk about the often-discounted afterlives of state violence, and how it impacts those who enforced it, those who survived, and those who died from it. And we should, to return to the question that Julia posed in our conversation, talk about alternative identities, imaginaries, and ways of being in the world that do not require the premature death of people like Abolfazl to be sustained.