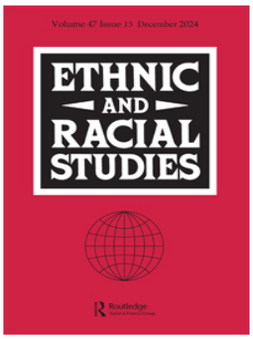

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Bordering subjectivities: the psychic holds of Britain's asylum system

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ABSTRACT

Questions of subjectivity are increasingly key to critical studies of migration, which highlight the production of subjectivities as one of the central functions of borders. Yet the question of how borders operate at a psychic level is rarely considered. Drawing inspiration from Gail Lewis's psychosocial approach to the racial formation of subjects and focusing on the UK asylum system, this article examines how borders shape and are navigated within psychic reality over time. Through close analysis of ethnographic material, I propose the concept of "psychic holds" to understand some of the ways in which borders impinge upon the psychic mobility of those they target over time. This term captures a dual process, invoking both the subjective chokeholds and deep attachments that may be involved in the bordering of subjectivities. These psychic holds, I argue, operate in the long durée, often far outlasting the temporary legal categories created by migration regimes.

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Introduction

Responding to the question, "What is a border?", Anderson et al., (2009, 6) write:

> While they are presented as filters, sorting people into desirable and non-desirable, skilled and unskilled, genuine and bogus, worker, wife, refugee, etc., national borders are better analyzed as moulds, *as attempts to create certain types of subjects and subjectivities*. (italics mine)

This way of understanding borders invites us to consider their more productive qualities – what it is that borders produce at a much more intangible level than, say, the generation of profit. It also locates questions of subjectivity at the heart of bordering. For Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, 266),

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recognising this productive dimension, rather than seeing borders as "acting as […] mere limit[s] on already-formed subjects", is essential to critically understanding the relationship between borders and (in)justice. How, then, do borders make and unmake subjects who migrate? In this article, I take up this question in relation to the UK asylum system, drawing on ethnographic research in a dispersal area. Anderson et al.'s sense of borders as "attempts" is central to my own endeavour here – flagging something important about how both borders and subjectivities are made. Borders are "attempts" to control movement, but they are always provisional, and their work is always incomplete. They are crossed, evaded, and exceeded. Likewise, the subject is always "in process", never completely fixed in position nor totally formed (Lewis 2006).

The term "subjectivity" is increasingly circulating in migration studies (Franceschelli 2023; Tazzioli 2020), alongside calls to attend to affect and desire (Collins 2018; Mills and Klein 2021), suggesting a recent shift in scholarship towards the subjective dimensions of bordering. "Subjectivity", for example, featured as an entry in "New Keywords: Migration and Borders", with the authors noting how the concept "oscillates between the subject as subjected by power and the subject as imbued with the power to transcend the processes of subjection that have shaped it" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 83). Subjectivity, therefore, emerges as a central terrain of struggle between the productive power of borders and potential resistance to them. This aspect of bordering has been helpfully theorised through Foucauldian understandings of the subject that emphasise processes of subjection and subjectification, as well as "[counter]strategies of desubjectivation, struggle and appropriation" (Tazzioli 2020, 7). Yet, the inadvertent and unconscious processes involved in subjectification are often overlooked, with the result that such accounts may fail to grasp the potential resistance to subjective "moulds" in psychic life – what Hall (1996) calls the "'too much' or too 'little' […] never a proper fit" of identification.

Building on this existing scholarship, I turn to psychosocial approaches, which offer a rich account of the complexities of psychic life, opening up new ways of understanding borders and the subjective "moulds" they (attempt to) make. Eschewing the more diagnostic frameworks associated with "mental health" approaches (Ryan, Kelly, and Kelly 2009), my emphasis is less on the impact of borders on "mental health" and more on how bordering is produced in psychic life. I take inspiration from Lewis' (2006) engagement with psychoanalysis in her work on the racial formation of subjects to examine how borders shape and are navigated within the psyche, venturing that drawing on ideas from psychoanalytic theory may be fruitful for this line of inquiry. Psychoanalytic insights into subjectivity have been little utilised in migration scholarship, reflecting a wider disinclination, and often suspicion, in the social sciences towards psychoanalysis. This is despite generative

and influential engagements with psychoanalysis in cultural and postcolonial studies (Fanon 2008; Gilroy 2005; Hall 2018), repeated efforts to refute the stereotypes that pervade critiques (Hook and Neill 2008), and the existing, albeit limited, literature on migration that has drawn on psychoanalysis (Ahmad 2009; Bolognani 2016; Clarke and Garner 2005; Lewis 2005; Page 2021; Yang 2018). Perhaps as a result, critical scholarship on migration seems to come up against two significant limits in its ability to grapple with subjectivity. The first is that it lacks, in any proper sense, a notion of unconscious processes. By virtue of this lack, it struggles to adequately engage with the complexities of desire, the realm of fantasy (Bolognani 2016), or the intricacies of identification. Secondly, and precisely because of the first limit, there is a danger that we lose sight of "practices of subjective self-constitution", to borrow Hall's (1996, 9) diagnosis of what is absent in Foucauldian accounts of subjectivity. The subjective subject – a psyche, so to speak – seems to be missing. There is clarifying and important engagement with the processes by which subjects come to be formed – that is to say, the material, legal, and discursive production of the migrant subject – but the subject itself risks being evacuated of mental processes. One way of redressing this, I suggest, is by making use of the psychoanalytic notion of "psychic reality" – a term originally introduced by Freud to capture "everything in the psyche that takes on the force of reality for the subject" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 363). Following Frosh and Baraitser (2008, 354), I understand "psychic reality" as ultimately psychosocial, capturing "what the subject lives in" and replacing "an abstracted opposition of the "outer" as against the "inner" with a conceptualisation of the "psychic" as that which stands in for both". They explain that "the subject is always immersed in a flux that is neither inside nor out, but something else – a folding of space that is perhaps closer to the Moebius ideal". Such a conception of the subject offers a potential corrective to the somewhat hollow accounts of subjectivity provided, as Lewis has highlighted, by some sociological research (Gilroy and Lewis 2020).

In this article, I aim to show what such a conception of the psychic might add to critical understandings of the bordering of subjectivities. Taking up de Noronha's (2019, 2418) suggestion that "studies of racism and multiculture in urban Britain should be examining questions of belonging in legal as much as cultural terms, examining the weight of legal categorisations in the formation of identities", this paper focuses on how legal status bears on the subjectivities of those seeking asylum in Britain, with particular attention to how the past bears on the present in psychic reality. The relationship between racialised legal categories, (non)belonging, and identification, I argue, is complicated by unconscious processes, which constitute part of the subjective navigation of migration regimes.

This article begins with a discussion of UK asylum policy, before turning to the question of how borders shape psychic reality. Reading across

ethnographic material and engaging with a range of psychoanalytically informed thinkers, I examine what it might mean to psychically inhabit the highly charged and racialised category of the "asylum seeker". Following the narratives of my participants and co-researchers, I propose the concept of "psychic holds" to understand some of the ways in which borders impinge upon the psychic mobility of those they target over time, as well as the subjective remainders produced by borders, which may manifest long after legal status has been granted. In so doing, I perform close textual analysis to offer in-depth engagement with the language used by my interlocuters, bringing its affective texture to the fore. Using a psychoanalytically informed understanding of temporality, I highlight the role of subjective experiences of time in psychic bordering, emphasising how past and present can co-exist simultaneously at a psychic level. While much research has focused on the role of extended "waiting" in asylum regimes (Meier and Donà 2021), less has been said about the potential psychic aftermath of such experiences of waiting, which may indeed, in psychic reality at least, never really end.

These more enduring experiences, I suggest, may be helpfully conceptualised as "holds" on the subject. "Hold" at once connotes detention and immobility; the hold of ships and planes where stowaways hide to migrate; chattel slavery and the Middle Passage, as in the hold of slave-ships where slaves were held captive in brutal conditions; as well as the more figurative "to have a hold on", indicating something powerful and forcefully affective. However, "hold" also suggests maintaining an attachment to something – to not let go. As I go on to argue, the plurality and ambiguity of the term "holds" is important in capturing the impossible contradiction of the bind one needs to urgently get out of *and*, at the same time, desperately hold on to. Finally, I consider the ethical and political questions prompted by identifications with the category of the "asylum seeker", arguing for a nuanced understanding of the impossible contradictions of "psychic holds", which may be experienced as both subjective chokeholds and deep attachments that offer potential openings for solidarity with others.

The UK asylum system

At the beginning of 2023, Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that one of his pledges to the British public was to "stop the boats" (2023) – a phrase that has since come to symbolise the so-called threat of "illegal migration". While the criminalisation of people seeking asylum in Britain has a long history – from public anxiety around the arrival of Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century to the rampant scapegoating of "bogus asylum seekers" in the 1990s (Hayes 2002) – we are witnessing a renewed political zeal to demonise the

racialised figure of the "asylum seeker", who has come to stand in for the totality of Britain's social ills. Conjuring a racial invasion of the nation by sea, "stop the boats" speaks to historical anxieties around national sovereignty as well as nostalgia related to Britain's imperial legacy of "maritime conquest", (re)marking the offshore as a key site of contestation and (post)-colonial fantasies (Davies et al. 2021, 2315). The discursive shift evinced by the increasing use of such imagery goes hand in hand with the introduction of further punitive legislation that effectively bans the act of seeking asylum, building on other recently introduced technologies of racial control such as the (mooted) offshore processing of asylum claims. As de Noronha (2019, 2419, 2427) highlights, immigration controls such as these are "themselves productive of racial meanings and inequalities in the present", with "border regimes … central to the production, and reconfiguration, of race as a social relation and system of difference".

The research for this article took place prior to this most recent attack on those seeking asylum, however, as the research was being conducted, the government was already constructing the "small boats" problem. These latest policy developments represent new frontiers in the British state's callous treatment of people seeking asylum, but the system these measures supposedly seek to rectify is already highly punitive and has been for decades (Squire 2009), operating as it does according to racial and colonial logics of human value (Mayblin 2017). Mayblin (2019, 9) has termed the UK asylum policy regime a "technology of slow violence", noting its tendency to conceive of people seeking asylum as "economic migrants in disguise", resulting in a "near obsessive focus on economic 'pull factors'" (1-2). With the purported aim of reducing these putative "pull factors", those seeking asylum are generally barred from working and are subject to the (threat of) enforced destitution, detention, and deportation (De Genova 2002).

Excluded from the mainstream welfare system through restrictive legislation introduced in the 1990s, people seeking asylum are often forced to rely on asylum support – a meagre provision only available to those who can evidence "destitution". Asylum support, which was fully privatised in 2012, functions as a punitive apparatus, severely limiting the means of life through minimal financial support – during my fieldwork, this amounted to £40.85 per person per week – and dispersal accommodation on a no-choice basis. Darling (2022) has highlighted the everyday "distributed violence" of the dispersal system, showing how it serves to control, confine, and exhaust subjects through the quotidian harm it inflicts. People often spend years seeking asylum due to systemic delays in application processing times, as well as poor decision-making, leading to a high proportion of successful appeals (Sturge 2023). These conditions, therefore, are often endured for extended periods, working over time to constrain, deplete, and drain those who claim asylum. Here governance operates on the one

hand through surveillance, and, on the other, through the abandonment of racialised subjects. For instance, the Home Office and its private contractors monitor the movements and expenditure of people receiving asylum support, with the ever-present threat of support being curtailed if these do not conform to expectations (Privacy International 2021). At the same time, however, attempts to report issues with asylum support, such as disrepair, are met with neglect.

The UK's migration regime, as the "stop the boats" slogan shows, constructs racialised categories by discursive as well as legal means. In the case of asylum, government and media discourse set the "genuine refugee" against the figure of the "bogus", "abusive", and "illegal" "asylum seeker". The latter is represented as a threat to Britain's national security, economy, and (often more covertly) racial order through perilous metaphors of "swamps", "swarms", "floods" and "tides" (McFadyen 2016). Alongside these representations, those seeking asylum are framed as a national economic "burden" (Darling 2016) and the "undeserving" recipients of so-called "luxury" support. This discursive work produces and mobilises negative affect such as fear and disgust, shoring up public support for hostile policies (Mills and Klein 2021), as well as obscuring the real causes of social problems. Bearing in mind how the category of the "asylum seeker" operates discursively, as well as the high affective charge it holds, this article asks what it means to psychically inhabit such a label.

Methodology

Research for this article was part of an ethnographic study that examined how solidarities are imagined and practiced in negotiations of deservingness around asylum dispersal accommodation – a case-study within a larger international project. The case-study focused on two field sites: Halifax and Doncaster in Yorkshire, which became dispersal areas shortly after the National Asylum Support System was introduced in 2000. In each field site, the research team worked closely with a third-sector organisation supporting people in the asylum system. This article focuses on data that emerged in Halifax, a former mill town in the Calderdale district of Yorkshire. Government statistics show that there were 474 people in receipt of asylum support in Calderdale at the end of May 2023 (Migration Yorkshire n.d.). Asylum accommodation in Halifax is largely concentrated in Park Ward, an ethnically diverse and densely populated area, ranked among the ten per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country (Ministry of Housing 2019).

Research took place between April 2021 and March 2022, a period that encompassed several national lockdowns introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research design reflected this context, combining virtual and face-to-face fieldwork as part of a "patchwork ethnography"

(Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). The first strand of the research involved collaborative research in Halifax with six co-researchers with personal experience of the asylum system, who were recruited through a third-sector organisation. The group included three men and three women from five different countries who were at different stages of the asylum process. Group sessions were mainly held online and involved training in research ethics and methods, as well as analytic discussions and the co-production of outputs. These were complemented by one-to-one discussions between university researchers (myself and Mette Louise Berg) and co-researchers. In-between each meeting, co-researchers generated autoethnographic material in the form of written text, audio clips, video, and photography. Taking inspiration from other collaborative approaches, university researchers sought to foster non-extractive and meaningful relationships with co-researchers, as well as to learn from their experiences and analysis (Berg et al. 2023). The second strand of the research involved university researchers conducting participant observation at third-sector meetings and advice sessions, as well as in the co-research sessions themselves, alongside semi-structured interviews conducted with and independently of the co-researchers. Interviewees included twenty-one people who had sought asylum, twenty third-sector workers/volunteers, and three local authority staff and councillors. Most interviews with participants who had sought asylum took place in Halifax ($n = 19$) due to the division of researcher time between the two sites. These interviews were conducted by me and the co-researchers in English ($n = 13$), Spanish ($n = 3$), Kurdish Sorani ($n = 2$), and Farsi ($n = 1$), and were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were recruited through third-sector organisations and co-researchers' networks, reflecting a diverse sample in terms of country of origin, which included: Bangladesh, El-Salvador, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, and Zambia. Their migration routes were varied, while the length of time participants had spent seeking asylum ranged from six months to nine years. Recruiting through a third-sector organisation meant that participants and co-researchers often had more knowledge of their rights, which may have shaped how they interpreted the issues they encountered in the asylum system. Names and other identifying details have been changed for the purposes of anonymity throughout. Data was analysed iteratively according to key themes that emerged in group discussions and those identified through my close readings of transcripts and fieldnotes.

This article focuses specifically on two types of data generated by the research in Halifax where the bordering of subjectivities emerged: (1) interviews I conducted with participants who had spent several years seeking asylum and had subsequently been granted legal status; and (2) my fieldnotes from the co-research sessions and one-on-one conversations with co-researchers. No direct questions were asked about psychic experience, which was not the focus of the study but rather emerged as a theme over

the course of several co-research sessions and interviews. Psychic experience tended to be discussed in greater depth in the interviews I conducted, likely reflecting the longer periods of time my interviewees had spent seeking asylum as well as my own research interests. Other themes arising from the research included housing issues and local belonging (Berg and Dickson 2022). Questions and reflections around the bordering of psychic life were often invoked in conversations between women, potentially reflecting the broader feminisation of the domains of subjectivity, emotion and affect, though a higher proportion of interviewees were women ($n = 14$).

Being an "asylum seeker"

What might it mean to inhabit the highly charged category of the "asylum seeker" in contemporary Britain? In one of our group discussions, Faith, a co-researcher, articulated a profound shift that had occurred for her after claiming asylum:

> The first six months, the first year, I saw a change in me. I will just sleep, wake up, spend the whole day in the four walls of my room … eat … sleep. I sort of noticed that I became like, you are lazy […] you know the way I used to think fast. I am slowing down. I can't really put it in words. I can't say I am an intelligent person – sleeping, waking, eating. I then started joining groups […] now I am active again, back to myself … yet … I'm not sure if I am yet there. It's an ongoing thing. You are stuck for so long, can't work, can't do nothing. That impact you feel after the change – you are losing part of yourself, somewhere somehow, long or not long […] it takes your skill, culture, value. It drains everything in you.

Faith seems to be describing a psychosomatic process whereby the material and agential constraints that she experiences as someone seeking asylum ("can't work, can't do nothing") produce an affective state characterised by monotony and the "slow[ing] down" of her mind. Life is reduced to three basic physical functions: sleeping, waking, eating, which take place in a single small room. The references to a decline in her speed of cognition ("I used to think fast") and a vegetative existence ("you are lazy") give the impression of her life having decelerated almost to the point of stasis. Faith's struggle to verbalise her experience ("I can't really put it in words") suggests that aspects of this affective state lie beyond the grasp of consciousness or symbolisation ("somewhere, somehow"). The words "now […] I am […] back to myself" mark something of a subjective depletion in the previous state. The shift in tense appears to operate as a narrative attempt to wrest the self from the decelerated state that threatens to efface it, but this intention is immediately revealed as fragile by Faith's effortful pause (" … yet … I'm not sure if I am yet there"). It as though she performs in speech the very struggle she tries to describe. The "ongoing thing" Faith speaks of, then, seems to

denote both the change that is occurring – with "*losing* part of yourself" gesturing towards something in process – and the equally unfinished psychic work of trying to resist that change. Faith's reference to "long or not long" was in response to a discussion within our co-research group around the impact of being in the asylum system for very long periods of time – something I discuss more below. For Faith, who had been seeking asylum for around two years, the shift she described appeared less to do with the length of time in the asylum system and more tied to her subjective experience of everyday temporality, where the monotonous rhythms of daily life in the asylum system slowed down time and locked her into a vegetative cycle of repetition.

It is difficult to overstate the excruciating (although normalised) nature of the everyday conditions faced by those seeking asylum (Darling 2022). Ali, a young Syrian man I met at an advice drop-in, told me he hadn't slept properly in three months because of a severe infestation of bed bugs in his room – an issue that had been repeatedly ignored by the private housing provider, and which had driven him to recurring thoughts of suicide. While Ali's third-sector caseworker, Rachel, had been advocating on his behalf to try to get the infestation addressed, it was also apparent that this kind of duress had been somewhat normalised in the context of systemic poor housing conditions. When Rachel asked Ali if he had taken sleeping tablets to help him sleep, I could sense the frustration and despair he felt at such a suggestion, which seemed to risk inadvertently implying that he should, at least temporarily, carry on as though bed bugs were not crawling all over his face, arms, and legs as he tried to sleep. One part of the solution prescribed even by his advocate, it seemed, was for him to dull his senses to the reality he was finding unbearable. I emphasise this not to criticise Rachel, whose response likely reflected the fact that she had no control over the situation and may have realised that Ali's case would be treated with no urgency by those who did, but to give an example of how the degradation that is so characteristic of the asylum system operates at the level of subjective experience.

Lucy, meanwhile, a North African woman who had spent nine years in asylum accommodation with her daughter, described living with extreme damp and flooding for several months:

> It got really so bad, the floor was just wet all the time, the walls were wet, pouring water […] that's when they intervened. But otherwise, at first, I used to put … you know that wrapping paper for presents? I would just cover it, so that we forget that there's a bad wall there – it's a bad wall, we don't want to look at that wall […] so I would put wrapping paper at the time just to cover it.

Lucy's example, like Faith's excerpt above, illustrates a struggle to counter the punitive conditions of the asylum system. The wrapping paper is not simply a

pasting over of the damp, but an attempt to make life more bearable by transforming the "bad wall" – which could also be taken as a metaphorical representation of the border – into something nicer. Lucy articulates various strategies employed to withstand the poor housing she had to live in – from disavowal to refusal ("we don't want to look at that wall"). Such psychic processes, discussed more fully below, are often at work beyond the lifetime of the "bad wall" (the border), which, even when no longer present in a strictly material sense, may have been erected in a far more enduring way in the psyche.

The living conditions participants had to endure often left them feeling like they were not fully human. As Rocher put it, "if you are [an] asylum seeker, you are not a person, you are nothing, because you have no [national] insurance number". Rocher, who had come to the UK from the Middle East, had been waiting for his claim to be processed for three years. His words are suggestive of what life is like for those whom Bhattacharyya (2018, 65) has characterised as "the edge populations of capitalism", whereby those who are excluded from the sphere of productive work lose their "full human status". Concerns around lack of full humanness emerged repeatedly in the research, particularly in relation to labelling and visual markers of status. Mary, who had come to the UK from West Africa a decade ago, for example, described the everyday racism she encountered when people saw her Home Office-issued pre-paid debit card or her "Application Registration Card" (a form of ID issued to asylum applicants by the Home Office), and the discrimination she experienced as a result of being, in her words, "branded" as an "asylum seeker". Mary's suggestive metaphor calls attention to the brutal history of racial inscription and its bearing on the present, seemingly drawing a continuity between the violent branding of black flesh under regimes of racial slavery and the symbolic marking of the "asylum seeker" in contemporary Britain.

These cards symbolically marked her and other participants as "asylum seekers" in their everyday lives:

> I applied to do Maths and English [at college], and this person asked me, "Why have you stayed in the UK without status?" and I totally looked at her and said, "It's none of your business, you're not Home Office or Police." […] I was with my friend, who was seeking asylum, and straight away she refused to go back to college. She's like, "No, no, no […] I'll stay in the house".

Mary's friend's decision to "stay in the house" is reminiscent of Faith's experience, described above; the two examples highlight how "everyday bordering" (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018) works to entrench the restriction of mobility at the heart of the asylum system. At the same time as being stigmatised for "being an asylum seeker", participants experienced suspicion if they did not conform to imaginaries of what an "asylum

seeker" was or should be. When Mary gave a speech about her experience of seeking asylum at a public event, one person in the audience remarked: "I don't want to sound rude, but you don't look like an asylum seeker". This was understood to imply that Mary was too well-dressed to be an "asylum seeker" – perhaps failing to uphold her status as a national abject (Tyler 2013) – but it may equally point to racialised ideas about who is or can be a person fleeing persecution.

Speaking of the "asylum seeker" label, Mary said: "it comes into just everything. Everything. Your whole life. You end up being kind of defined in that way, through that label". Zetter (1991, 45) has used the term "delinkage" to describe the process by which an "individual identity [is replaced] by a stereotyped identity with a categorical prescription of assumed needs". Perhaps in response to these processes of labelling, many participants spoke of passionate attachments to their names (see also Berg et al. 2023), which seemed to serve as attempts to hold on to the self:

> A name is a very powerful thing, that's somebody's identity […] no matter how they word it […] "seeking sanctuary" "seeking asylum", seeking whatever they want to call it […] I believe like you start owning your identity by your name.
>
> (Mary)

Like Mary, Faith makes a rhetorical assertion of her identity in the face of bureaucratic labels: "Asylum seekers are human, they are not a statistic. You ring Migrant Help, they want a number, a reference number … No, I'm Faith. I'm a face before I am a number. I am not a statistic". Mary and Faith's insistence on the use of their names – assertions of their humanness – denote an interruption of the attempted reduction of their identities to the nation state's bureaucratic terms. Such strategies, as Darling (2021) has discussed with respect to the broader politics of humanisation in the asylum context, may have their limits in terms of challenging structural power relations through their reliance on empathy and compassion. Yet, when we think through the lens of subjectivity, the gesture takes on a potentially different light, working as a moment in which the "mould" one is cast into is refused or exceeded – however fleeting, it marks a psychic break in the border.

"The feeling of asylum seeker"

Whilst acknowledging such pushbacks against being "hailed into place" (Hall 1996), the psychic hold of the "asylum seeker" label that we glimpsed earlier in Faith's words should not be underestimated. That is to say, the struggle involved in "being an asylum seeker" involves a complex process of psychic navigation, generating an internal conflict for the subject who both identifies and dis-identifies with the category at hand – processes which, as Lewis (2006, 346) suggests, are always at work in the production of racial identities. Such processes operate consciously and unconsciously, and cannot,

therefore, be easily resolved by agentic decisions. At the same time, identification seems to be a necessity – one that may be a matter of life and death (Sigona 2018). To refuse such identification altogether would be tantamount to withdrawing one's claim for asylum. As Farrier (2011, 3–4) has highlighted, the designation "asylum seeker" encapsulates within it both a "desire to *join*" and a "desire for recognition and sanctuary by the territorial sovereign". While in one sense, then, representing a necessary plea to the sovereignty of the nation state by virtue of the legal process of seeking asylum, the claim also threatens this "sovereign power to exclude […] by presupposing a right to sanctuary that supersedes the nation's founding prescriptions" (Farrier 2011, 6). This "split statement" contained in the very act of seeking asylum – its fundamental contradiction – may be helpful for thinking through the psychic conflicts it engenders, which produce an equally split subject, caught up in the entanglements of identifications that may be necessary for survival and yet work to deplete the subject itself.

To consider the ways in which subjects are split in and through the asylum system, we need to attend carefully to the psychic "holds" borders enact at the level of subjectivity. How do migration regimes take hold of the subject? This question was particularly pertinent in relation to the idea of "getting [psychically] stuck", which emerged in conversations with participants and co-researchers who had spent extremely long periods of time seeking asylum (six to nine years), but who had since been granted legal status of varying kinds. Although their legal status had changed, giving them more socio-economic rights and altering their material circumstances, these participants and co-researchers articulated a persisting subjective feeling of "stuckness". It was as though their new legal status was under constant threat in psychic reality, continually disrupted by a psychic remainder. Sanaa, a co-researcher who had spent eight years claiming asylum, explained: "I am still feeling I am asylum seeker. I didn't convince [myself] that I have status … The feeling that I suffered before, it still controls me. People who get status quickly, they don't know the feeling of asylum seeker". Sanaa's psychic reality, then, seemed characterised by the continual irruption of the past into the present – the "feeling" of "being an asylum seeker" continued. We might understand Sanaa's reference to being unable to "convince" herself as communicating the affective unreality of the new category in the migration regime to which she had been assigned. The legal status she had acquired was much less feelingly real to her than the, perhaps all too real, "feeling of asylum seeker". Her sense of being "controlled" by this feeling suggests a kind of split, with the "feeling" she experiences identified as the mechanism of control, and thus a sense in which this feeling is at once both hers and not hers – a foreign (or unconscious) element lodged within, perhaps akin to what Fanon (2008, 23) terms the "dangerous foreign bodies" injected by the white man into the black man. Or, if we turn to the psychoanalyst Bion (1984, 6–8), we may understand

this "feeling" as a "beta-element", a term for raw "sense impressions" that remain "undigested" and beyond thought, and are therefore felt to be "things in themselves" as opposed to psychic phenomena. This feeling seemed to be a kind of psychic hold, one that far outlasted Sanaa's legal status, which after eight years had finally changed. As Faith, commenting on this, put it, "your mind, somewhere, somehow, goes back there". Faith's "somewhere, somehow", gesturing towards something beyond conscious understanding, and Sanaa's experience of feeling internally controlled suggest that a grasp of unconscious processes may be crucial to understanding how borders (un)make subjectivities.

Lucy spoke similarly of her continued psychic "imprisonment" after being granted refugee status. She vividly described her struggle to process the change:

> I struggled with [the] transition, I struggled so much with my mind transitioning, you know, from this to that. Because I've been in that for many years, it was so hard, I felt like my head was going to blow up. Because I was just trying to tell myself, I had to speak to myself in the mirror. I had to speak to myself in the mirror and tell myself that now life has changed, you need to start thinking of what to do. It was so hard. Very hard. I'm just praying to God to help me – my head …

Lucy's emphasis on her "mind" and "head" clearly locates the conflict within the psyche, while her feeling that her head was going to explode suggests an intense pressure on her subjectivity, as though it is on the verge of shattering. The imagery she uses is reminiscent of the "phantasms of bodily fragmentation or the crumbling of the ego" that Fanon and Geronimi (2018, 504) associated with experiences of internment amongst Algerian refugees in Tunisia, which is suggestive of how (neo)colonial controls on mobility may bear on the register of fantasy. The only way to get out, it seems, is through violent explosion. At the same time, "I've been in that for many years" gives the impression of a submerged psyche, with the possibility of emergence seeming too great a feat to survive. This is a "transition" that threatens to unleash psychic destruction: "I felt like my head was going to blow up".

Psychoanalysis appears useful analytically here, with its fundamental premise that psychic reality is composed of multiple temporalities simultaneously. Freud (2002, 10-11) famously discussed the co-existence of the past and present in the psyche in *Civilization and its Discontents*, while Freudian concepts such as "deferred action" [Nachträglichkeit] – the idea that memories may be revised at a later stage, acquiring new meaning and affective vicissitudes after the fact – offer more fluid ways of thinking about subjective time, disrupting linear or static conceptions. Lucy's description of addressing herself in the mirror shows how a change in legal status can produce temporal splitting, in which the past is lived in the present.

She told me this was something she had to do daily: "I speak to myself, yeah Lucy, I now can go and find a job […] Now I can do this […] I can do this". The constant reiteration of this mantra was part of a necessary struggle against the long experience of having "no freedom to do anything" as a person seeking asylum. Yet the experience of being "in a cage, in a prison" had become a "mental prison" Lucy could not escape, even if she now had the legal right to live and work in the UK. The change was too immense, too extreme – seemingly beyond psychic metabolisation. It threatened to fragment the (bordered) subject into pieces.

Others described a similar experience of psychic fissuring. Mary spoke of the experience of seeking asylum as a form of "trauma" that would "never go away", explaining that "status" was "just [a] paper that [says] you're allowed to work". This felt permanence of trauma contrasted with the ephemeral quality ascribed to "legal status". While my point here is to emphasise how bureaucratic racial categories are lived psychically, it is also worth noting that legal status, like racialised citizenship, is becoming increasingly fragile in Britain, with "refugees" being rendered ever more "temporary" as new forms of status come to replace more secure forms of legal protection (Vassilou 2022). Mary described checking her Biometric Residence Permit every morning and night, feeling that at any moment it could "change" and she would "become an asylum seeker" again. Like Sanaa and Lucy, she felt there was something profoundly "unreal" about her legal status. There was a sense that participants who had spent such long periods of time seeking asylum had become "stuck" in the perpetual experience of waiting, unable to arrive at the next position.

In the conversations where this psychic "stuckness" arose, the specificity of temporal experience was repeatedly emphasised, with participants and co-researchers highlighting two key dimensions of temporality. The first was the clashing of temporalities, as the slow, decelerated time of seeking asylum (with its shadow of "stolen" time (Khosravi 2018)) was suddenly replaced by the rapid velocity of late capitalism (Crary 2013), in which everything became about "work, work, work" (Sanaa) as new demands from the welfare system – which increasingly operates through conditionality and (threats of) sanctions (Fletcher and Flint 2018) – were unleashed on those granted status, and their asylum accommodation was abruptly terminated. This radical shift was often experienced as disorienting and bewildering, producing the kind of psychic fissures Lucy described earlier. The second dimension concerned the length of time between claiming asylum and being granted status, with longer experiences generally understood as producing the stuck subjectivities described above. These intensely long experiences of waiting could feel, as Lucy put it, like "a whole lifetime". But the perceived specificity of these longer experiences at times required careful navigation in

discussions with co-researchers, as the emphasis on duration prompted questions around solidarity.

Identification and the (im)possibilities of solidarity

While continued identification with the figure of the "asylum seeker" was often experienced as a kind of psychic chokehold, it was also ambivalently held up as a potential basis for solidarity. This dimension was particularly associated with the problems of forgetting. Hedi, another co-researcher, whose claim had been processed relatively quickly, spoke of "forgetting everything" once he had been granted refugee status: "after I got the status, I forgot I am asylum and I [forgot I had] a lot of problem[s]". In a group session, he described attending a community meeting on issues in asylum policy shortly after being granted status and explained that he felt unable to contribute anything around the experiences of those seeking asylum. "That day, I say I have to not forget this situation, to help people in the situation. You are in a sea, in a boat, you are close to drowning. You try to catch everyone to help you. When you get to [the] beach, you feel safe, you forget everything", he told us. Hedi seemed to suggest that to forget what it meant to be an "asylum seeker" constituted a kind of betrayal of others seeking asylum. His imperative ("I have to not forget") was an ethical demand he made upon himself, one that spoke to the importance of remembering his own traumatic experiences.

This struggle to remember contrasted sharply with the impossibility of forgetting, which impeded those who had sought asylum for very long periods of time. In the same discussion, Sanaa told us: "People who get status quickly, they don't know the feeling of asylum seeker. One to two years […] is not enough to be asylum seeker. It's like this", she said, snapping her fingers. This prompted interjections from Hedi and others that six months in the asylum system was "more than enough" – seemingly warning against the potential dangers of Sanaa's statement – but, at the same time, the ethical and political significance that Sanaa ascribed to holding to the "feeling of asylum seeker" was connected to Hedi's own anxieties about forgetting. This continued identification, as Sanaa showed us, was complex. It was not only a mechanism of control, but also a form of belonging:

> I don't know why I feel that I belong to asylum seeker. I feel I belong, even if I got my paper. Until now, I feel I belong to them. Does this make sense? I can work. I like to work. I can have a car in the future, but from inside I feel I belong to them.

Again, we are reminded of the importance of unconscious processes, as Sanaa's words convey something inexplicable ("I don't know why") and beyond conscious sense ("Does this make sense?"). Through attention to

these unconscious elements, we can see that the psychic remainder of identification may also be a kind of attachment – not just a psychic hold, but also a "holding to". "Being an asylum seeker" was, then, also a way of "being with". This feeling of belonging was important to Sanaa in the interviews she carried out, seemingly allowing her to identify more closely with her interlocutors' experiences. In a conversation with me, she recounted:

> [In the interview] I felt as if Sanaa was back many years ago. In that time, I wanted to cry, but I don't want to let her see. I want her to be strong. Crying, you will not give her anything. Yes, I am feeling with you, but now I am strong […] Only the one who puts his hand in hot water will feel what they are going through.

As Sanaa hears the interviewee's words, her own past intrudes upon the present, evoking deep feelings that resonate with what she hears. The affirmation, "I am feeling with you", becomes a potential moment of recognition and empathy, while the strength that Sanaa tries to perform seems solidaristic, showing that she can receive the feelings the interviewee is communicating without breaking down, and, at the same time, that strength in the face of the experiences being described is possible – a gesture attempting to encourage the other to keep going.

Hedi, meanwhile, spoke to me of struggling against himself in one of his interviews, feeling that he "couldn't have a feel[ing] when [the interviewee] spoke about his problem", which he seemed to attribute to the ease of forgetting his own experiences of seeking asylum. But at stake here, perhaps, is not just the potential to relate to the other, but also to the self. There is a question about the processing of psychic and material violence, with "forgetting" perhaps having shades of what in psychoanalysis is called "splitting" – the process by which parts of the subject and its objects are psychically "split off" in an unconscious act of defence (Soreanu 2018). I raise this not to draw conclusions about Hedi's own "forgetting", but to point to the intricate psychic processes that may lie behind such instances where memory fails. To return to Sanaa's metaphor above, if the possibility of solidarity is dependent on putting one's "hand in hot water" – a scalding experience by which one is hurt in the process – then it may, at times, be too much for the subject to bear. Although Sanaa sometimes linked this capacity for solidarity to the length of time spent in the asylum system, in other moments, it was more capacious. For example, Sanaa told us that Rachel, a third-sector advice worker, also had a "feeling about asylum seeker", seemingly opening up the possibilities for solidarity.

Sanaa and Hedi's reflections on forgetting raise important ethical and political questions about the relationship between identification and solidarity. It is possible to claim the modes of relating to others that Sanaa associates with (still) "being an asylum seeker" – here understood as a form of subjectivity

that is both situated in and in excess of the experience of the legal category – as a kind of political resistance borne out of the experience of oppression, as Nguyen (2019) does with the concept of "refugeetude". This term describes:

> consciousness of the forces that produce and structure "refuge" and "refugee", naming the forms of recognition, articulation, and relation that emerge from the experience of refuge(e), as well as the attempts to redefine and live it differently from what the legal framework […] allows. (111)

Yet such an analysis may risk romanticising what are complex psychic processes of identification – harmful as well as potentially generative; it also potentially overstates the role of conscious agency in such processes. As Tazzioli (2020, 48) cautions, such readings raise the question of why, in migration studies, "we are so interested in finding in migrants their capacity to resist". Approaching the subject somewhat cautiously, then, may allow for a more careful consideration of the complexities of subjectivity that are produced by and intersect with the borders of nation-states.

Conclusion

Through a psychoanalytically informed close reading of ethnographic material, I have argued that to grapple with the work of bordering in the psychic landscape, we need a framework for being able to think with and about unconscious experience. Paying close attention to psychic processes, and the texture, tone, and mood of the language used by my interlocuters, I proposed the concept of "psychic holds" to understand some of the ways in which migration and asylum regimes border subjectivities. The term captures a dual process, invoking "hold" in the sense of detaining, constraining, and keeping the subject in thrall, and simultaneously "hold" as in "holding to" – a kind of unconscious identification or attachment on the part of the subject. The ambiguity of the term is important, signifying the irreducibility of the "holds" to one or the other.

As a concept that emphasises the significance of psychic processes in the contradictory production of the border, the idea of psychic holds has implications for the study of migration beyond the UK, offering a way of understanding the complexities of the racialised "moulds" that national borders create more broadly. This article has shown that the "politics of duration" (Meier and Donà 2021, 50–51) used by nation-states in migration regimes produces ambiguous mental processes that, like more precarious forms of legal status, threaten to keep migrants in states of "permanent temporariness". The racialised state violence of "migrant time" (Bhatia and Canning 2021, xvi) – where life is constantly governed by policy, law, and legislation – is also produced psychically. The "hold" of a legal category such as "asylum seeker", therefore, does not necessarily loosen with a change in

legal status, but may continue in the psychic reality of those re-categorised by migration regimes as "refugees" or other kinds of "legal" migrants. Such labels are political constructions through which racialised hierarchies of belonging and value are enacted, not fixed existential categories. But they make and unmake subjectivities and may indeed be experienced as all too "real" through the enduring ways in which they govern psychic mobility.

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