

The Formative Intersections of “Race”, Nation, and Generation: Learning from “Care” in the Lives of Unaccompanied Child Migrants in England

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journals.sagepub.com/home/abs**Veena Meetoo¹ and Rachel Rosen¹** 

Abstract

This article explores how “race”, nation, and generation intersect to make and mark the category of “unaccompanied minor” in Britain, thereby shaping conditions of care for unaccompanied child migrants. Drawing on interviews with unaccompanied children and adult professionals, we trace how discourses of the *unchildlike and unknowing child* render unaccompanied children *undeserving* of support. We demonstrate how these discourses embedded in neo-colonial and generational logics breed inaction from adult professionals, often resulting in substandard or absent care. Our article contributes to conceptualizations of childhood in contexts of rising ethnonationalism, attending to how “race”, nation, and generation roost in the routine.

Keywords

unaccompanied children, racialization, neo-colonialism, care, generationing, childhood

In a heated debate in the British parliament in March 2023, Home Secretary Suella Braverman attempted to counter critics of the *Illegal Migration Bill* she was rushing into law. The proposed legislation to detain and remove any migrant who arrives via an unauthorized route “will *not* be applied to . . . unaccompanied asylum-seeking children,” Braverman proclaimed in its defense (Savage, 2023). Setting aside whether this contested claim is consistent with the letter of her proposed law, and the fact there are

¹UCL Social Research Institute, London, UK

Corresponding Author:

Veena Meetoo, Social Research Institute, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UK.

Email: veena.meetoo@ucl.ac.uk

no state-sanctioned routes to enter the United Kingdom to claim asylum,¹ Braverman's statement reflects many public, political, as well as academic understandings of the position of lone child migrants in the United Kingdom. Despite Britain's increasingly restrictive and officially defined "hostile" migration regime which renders mobility a criminal act, especially for those who are poor, Black, or Brown (De Genova, 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), it is often assumed that unaccompanied children should be and are a special group largely protected from the violence of sovereign and everyday racialized borders.

As we will show in this article, however, this imagination of the vulnerable migrant child, safeguarded by a caring nation that understands itself in terms of liberal universalism, is far from the realities of unaccompanied young people's² lives and the children's services which are meant to care for them. Instead, this imaginary reflects the (neo)liberal post-racial fantasy Britain has of itself³ despite its ongoing neo-colonial role in a second age of empire (Dickson et al., 2023). In what follows, we argue that "race",⁴ nation, and generation (a reference to the socio-political positioning of childhood) not only intersectionally mark and make the category of the unaccompanied minor but that these positionings serve as a post-hoc rationalization for state racism which both marginalizes and subordinates unaccompanied young people within systems purported to care.

While children and childhood are often taken up as the subjects of wider intersectional scholarship, they are typically left largely assumed and undertheorized. We consider the concept of "generationing" to be one of the most fruitful advances in addressing this problematic theoretical lacuna. Understood as akin to processes of gendering or racialization, and key to structuring societies (Alanen, 2011), generationing refers to the micro and macro processes that create the relational and historical possibilities for what a child (or youth or adult) is imagined, allowed, and required to be. Rather than referring to age cohorts or generations over time, generationing provides a theoretical framework for understanding childhood as a socially and historically constructed institution which shapes the lives of those considered to be children as well as their Others, and not a natural and immutable period of life. Yet, in theorizing generation in this way, there continues to be some reluctance to take "race", class, and gender as formational in the constitution of childhood (e.g. see Qvortrup, 2010). This is evident in continuing articulations to grant childhood conceptual autonomy (Thorne, 1987; see critique in Thomson & Baraitser, 2018) in order to work out the ways that generationing plays out and affects *all* children as a social group, as well as claims that childhood is "an *essentially* generational phenomenon" (Alanen, 2001, p. 11, our italics) which is "systematically and repeatedly structured around generation" (Leonard, 2015, p. 121).

That said, there has been increasing interest in the complex and dynamic ways childhood is constituted, by attending to the intersections of generation and other social relations including gender (Wells, 2012) and colonial "race" (Balagopalan, 2019). To do this, scholars have fruitfully drawn on intersectional (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2016) and decolonial (Abebe et al., 2022; de Castro, 2022) theorizing. We see our paper as building on these efforts to advance conceptual understandings of

childhood, through an intersectional frame that attends to the categories and imaginaries of “race”, nation, and generation, exploring how they play out and inform each other to produce the figure of the unaccompanied child in the U.K.’s neo-colonial migration regime in relation to both adulthood and relative to “local”⁵ children.

After describing the 4-year study on which this article is based, we consider the often-contradictory discourses of adult professionals and advocates responsible for the care of unaccompanied children through statutory children’s services. We demonstrate how unaccompanied children are rendered *unknowing*, or racialized and generationed as backward and compliant. At the same time, they are viewed as *unchildlike* through their care practices for other young migrants and are figured as untrustworthy, suspicious, and relatively different or Other than local children. These discourses feature in the narratives of our interlocutors—adult professionals who articulate them and unaccompanied young people who experience them—which combine to construct a figure of the unaccompanied child as *underserving* in the current hostile border regime. We highlight how longstanding and contemporary manifestations of “race”, nation, and generation inform such articulations, drawing out their consequences for the lives of unaccompanied children, as well as efforts to theorize contemporary childhoods more broadly.

“Race”, Nation, and Generation

Our starting point is the recognition that liberal ideas of humans are based on exclusions, constituted relative to the so-called “uncivilized” and “savage.” Here, the colonial invention of “race” has been core to the “codified stratification of human worth and disposability” (Valluvan & Kalra, 2019, p. 2397), and the violent processes of exploitation, expropriation, and extraction this rationalizes (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Fraser, 2016). Racialized hierarchies render (formerly) colonized peoples as “not quite human or non-human” (Mayblin & Turner, 2021, p. 57) or inhabiting a “zone of non-being” (Grosfoguel et al., 2014). Separately, much has been written about how children, as a social group, are also positioned as human becomings rather than human beings (Qvortrup, 2009). Whether children are considered irrational, immature, dependent, or the property of some instantiation of *paterfamilias*, childhood serves as everything adulthood, and therefore society *cum* adult society, is not (an example of generationing). In such “us and them” formulations, children are rendered incomplete, animalistic, or not-yet humans: ideas that have survived in one form or another from ancient Greece until today (Rollo, 2016).

It is hardly surprising then that colonial racism was often articulated through infantilization, where children and childishness stood as both metaphors and marginalized social positions for colonized people (Mills & Lefrançois, 2018). Colonialization and “minorization,” the transformation of young humans into a subordinated social group (Rosen et al., 2023), are self-evidently different phenomena. However, as Gagen (2007) points out, theories of scientific racism and child development interpenetrate. Children, and the production of childhood, were and are also key sites of what we might call forms of civilizing interventionism of colonialism exemplified by Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, who infamously defended Canada’s

colonial residential schools for “tak[ing] the Indian out of the child.” While colonial bureaucracies produced “childhood” through generationing processes, these were, however, often childhoods geared more to extraction through their specialized labor than protection as in Europe’s core (Balagopalan, 2019).

Despite the exhaustive and detailed rejection of “race” as a natural or biological category, ideas which inhabited the scientific racism of colonialism, “race” thinking persists in a neo-/settler-colonial world (Mayblin & Turner, 2021; Valluvan & Kalra, 2019): hence our use of the term “neo-colonial childhoods” throughout. This new racism is sometimes referred to as cultural racism; however, biological and cultural logic continue to intertwine in the logic of contemporary racism. Alcoff (1999), for example, points out that cultural traits are often read off the body via historical modes of meaning-making, not least colonial stratifications of “race”, while others point out that cultural characteristics are typically linked to “blood and soil” (Hall, 2017, p. 126). The reference to soil is crucial for our purposes as it offers insights into the ways that nation and human mobility become bound up with racialized thinking. As Rattansi (2020) argues:

The notion of a world “naturally” divided into nations makes it that much easier to elide “nation” into “race”, especially if the cultures and “values” of other nations, especially “non-white nations” or Muslim nations, are represented as being intrinsically incommensurable with “our” values and “way of life.” (p. 53)

Indeed, while the “control of movement and construction of borders have historically been racialized,” neo-colonial nationalisms “continue to shape our present” (Mayblin & Turner, 2021, p. 67). Crucial here are the shifting ways in which belonging is constructed in ethnonational terms, and how people racialized as Other appear as matters out of place in the global North and inhabiting a fundamentally different developmental temporality (Andersson, 2014; Valluvan & Kalra, 2019).

Albeit referring to Mexican people in the U.S. context, Molina’s (2014) concept of racialized scripts offers an understanding of racialization as a dynamic and interactive process where racial constructions are formed not only in relation to whiteness but also in relation to other devalued and marginalized groups. We draw on Molina’s claim that cultural representations and institutional structures give rise to racialized scripts and specifically that immigration regimes can remake racial categories and the way we think about racial scripts to maintain racial hierarchies. We do so by centering the figure of the unaccompanied child in the U.K. context, highlighting how the figure of the migrant itself is racialized as alien through processes of othering due to migrants’ presumed essentialized mobility—movement that is rendered suspect in the context of assumptions about citizenship and belonging as sedentary with loyalties to a singular nation (Silverstein, 2005). Here, migrant background and status is a modality through which “race” is lived, where the “migrant ‘other’ often becomes shorthand for racialization as only certain migrants are considered migrants, while the children of these migrants are reproduced and racialized ‘others’ . . . [as] ‘second generation migrants’” (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2023, pp. 3–4).

Much in the way that “race” is read off bodily difference but is not a biological fact, we view generationing processes as reading somatic change within frameworks of age, development, and capability, naturalizing these as essentialized characteristics of generational positions, albeit ones that individuals are seen to move through over time, unlike “race.” Positioning children in a zone of non-being is used to justify paternalistic efforts to induce maturity (Rollo, 2016) or violence enacted in the name of protection (Mills & Lefrançois, 2018; Rosen et al., 2021). Generationing forecloses imaginaries of who children are and what children can and should do, often based on hegemonic ideas that smuggle in assumptions based on childhoods largely only available to bourgeois white male children. Othered children are read as minors (de Castro, 2022) or unchilded and evacuated from the category of childhood altogether (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019). Generational orders, like racialized ones, are time and place specific, such that they must be historicized and spatialized to avoid falling into the trap of depicting them as immutable or depicting the particular (for e.g. Eurocentric modernity) as the universal (de Castro, 2022).

The importance of historicization notwithstanding, we note the enduring ways in which children are intersectionally positioned as subordinate (via minorization processes). Sedimented associations persist between childhood and varying terms of inferiority (from frailty and dependence to irrationality and risk). It is this intense malleability of the category of childhood (Castañeda, 2003) that is perhaps most complex to grasp and at the same time most illuminating when considering the intersections of generation, “race”, and nation. For the unaccompanied migrant child is at once the exemplar *par excellence* of the deserving subject—imagined as an innocent, vulnerable victim not responsible for their own predicament (van Oorschot, 2000), and therefore deserving of care (Heidbrink, 2018). Yet, they are evicted from the category of deservingness due to negative racialized tropes as they intersect with the non-childlike child (Rosen & Crafter, 2018), as unauthorized outlaws subject to state discipline via detention and deportation (Heidbrink, 2018) or treated as a site of potential redemption and integration into the zone of being (Araneda-Urrutia, 2022; Gagen, 2007). The marking of the unaccompanied child as juvenile adult and criminal relative to local children and Western bourgeois ideals of childhood, rather than child as victim (Galli, 2018), we argue, are constitutive of the racialized script of the unaccompanied child as Other. Positioned between childhood and adulthood, infantilized as children but also positioned as suspicious interlopers, we demonstrate how such racialized scripts are generated by the institutional structures of the immigration system and cultural representations, ultimately diminishing the care afforded to unaccompanied children.

Methodology

The arguments in this paper draw on empirical material from Children Caring on the Move (CCoM), a 4-year investigation of unaccompanied child migrants’ experiences of care (formal and informal), and caring for others, as they navigate the complexities of the immigration-welfare nexus in two Local Authorities (LA) in England, in Greater

London and the West Midlands. CCoM is motivated by a participatory ethic, and a team of young co-researchers with migration experience was involved in refining research questions, designing methods, and generating data with unaccompanied young people, as well as analyzing and disseminating findings. Together with university-based researchers, they carried out 75 interviews with 38 unaccompanied young people using a variety of creative methods: object-based interviews, photo elicitation, and walking interviews. CCoM participants came from countries including Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. They were aged between 15 and 24 years. We intentionally offer a broad overview of the demographics of the participants and co-researchers and do not directly reference demographic characteristics in the subsequent analysis as our paper aims to demonstrate how “race” is not solely located in the body of the negatively racialized Other, but in the systemic process of racialization and generationing.

The unaccompanied young people who participated had been in the United Kingdom for up to 7 years while others were newly arrived. The participatory elements of CCoM informed and were complemented by, 112 interviews with adults involved in the immigration-welfare nexus surrounding lone child migrants. These included social workers, foster carers, lawyers, charity workers, regional and national policy-makers, and owners and managers of accommodation where unaccompanied young people are placed.

Each set of interviews was analyzed using theoretically informed codes iteratively developed over the course of the fieldwork. Our paper turns to relevant coded material (e.g., categorized as “race, racialization, and racism” and “representations of childhood”) to analyze participants’ discourses about “race”, nation, and generation and their intersections with the care and immigration systems, and in so doing, make visible the racialized (and generationed) scripts.

Young participants in CCoM are among the 5,242 unaccompanied children who sought asylum in the United Kingdom in 2022. Unaccompanied child applications make up a small proportion of total asylum applications (e.g., 7% in 2022) (Home Office, 2023). CCoM participants reflect the demographics of unaccompanied children in the United Kingdom, who are predominantly male (94%) (Refugee Council, 2022) and come primarily from, in order, Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, and Albania. Those young people who make themselves known to the authorities, and who are assessed as under 18 years, are placed in the care of LA Children’s Services under Section 20 of *The Children Act 1989* until they reach 18 years old and after as care leavers. As of November 2022, there were 5,570 UASCs in care in England (Department for Education, 2022). Unaccompanied young people can be placed in foster care when under 18 years of age, with some staying put with their carers after 18 years, or placed in shared semi-independent accommodation. Increasingly, unaccompanied young people are put in this latter form of care, which is akin to a hostel or small shared house with limited adult support. Semi-independent accommodation is largely subcontracted to for-profit companies and is unregulated (Rosen, 2024).

Racialization, Othering, and Generationing in the Production of the “Undeserving” Child

We now explore three key discourses about unaccompanied young people that were featured in the CCoM data: the (a) *unknowing*; (b) *unchildlike*; which together generate the trope of the (c) *undeserving* unaccompanied child. In the analysis that follows, we trace how these scripts are crystalized in everyday practices through intersections of “race”, nation, and generation as a product of the neo-colonial border regime and minorization processes, and how these constructions are productive of the substandard care which unaccompanied young people widely reported.

The “Unknowing” *Tabula Rasa*: The Infantilization of Unaccompanied Young People

. . . when they come into the service [they] have had no experience of the British way of life. So, everything is new to them. So, they’re on like a clean slate basically. (Zoe, semi-independent accommodation)

The above extract from Zoe exemplifies how unaccompanied young people were typically constructed by adult stakeholders as unknowing and often positioned as “a clean slate,” or *tabula rasa*, upon their arrival. We suggest this script draws its force from both generational and (neo-)colonial logics of the knowledge and skills needed to navigate life in Britain.

The intersections of the negatively racialized as unknowing, backward Other (“everything is new to them”) and the child as “becoming” were instilled through the positioning of unaccompanied young people as needing more support than local born children in the care system:

When you’re dealing with a foreign national that’s travelled the world and come through as 16, 17, 18 . . . their social platform is not the same as a local young person who’s got . . . all the connections and the identity that they have . . . They have additional support needs that need to be met. If they are not met that will delay their development or it will support the development of generally high-risk lifestyles. (Kyle, local government)

Kyle positioned unaccompanied young people as particularly needy, requiring extra support, time, and resources. He also evoked scripts typically associated with very young children, namely that their “development” will be hampered if their “needs” are not attended to (Woodhead, 2015). Concurrently, a fundamental feature of the process of Othering is positioning the negatively racialized subject as deficit and subordinate to the “enlightened” white British subject (Said, 1995). Adult narratives of unaccompanied young people were similarly based on scripts about the unknowing racialized, backward Other, where the erasure of knowledge and skills they may have from outside Britain located them in need of being hailed into maturity. Kevin, a semi-independent accommodation owner, for example, evoked the image of the unaccompanied child as lacking knowledge and skills, such as using a “Western style toilet.”

Positioning unaccompanied young people as unknowing generated a sense they were less demanding, compliant, and easier to look after. Accommodation was a commonly cited area of support where unaccompanied young people were deemed to have “very, very low” expectations because they didn’t know better (Kyle, local government) and therefore would accept substandard living conditions:

Say one of my British young people had the same accommodation, they’ve been like, “No, this is not good, I don’t want it at all.” But then some of my unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people would find it acceptable . . . we’ve had an incident where there was maggots in a kitchen . . . no one raised it because they thought it was fine because obviously some of their living conditions before might have even been worse than that. (Hope, local government)

Constructions of unaccompanied young people as less vocal, more accepting, and compliant dovetail with the trope of the backward, less civilized migrant child from Other soils with lower standards of living and, therefore, not knowing anything better.

A more critical perspective was offered by some adult professionals who, rather than reading young people’s silence as “stupidity,” instead highlighted how unaccompanied children were less likely to complain due to their precarious immigration status and associated fear of deportation. Indeed, in contrast to adult scripts suggesting they did not know any better, unaccompanied young people were critical of the poor quality of care they often received and described facing disbelief and suspicion. For instance, referring to the low-quality shared accommodation where he was placed, Smith described the challenges of making complaints:

I don’t have the power to complain . . . I really want to complain, but it’s hard . . . I don’t feel comfortable . . . because actually, I haven’t gone for my Home Office interview. But I feel like . . . maybe people in my status, or, like, even if you complain, it won’t make any sense.

Rather than being unaware of poor quality of care and accommodation, unaccompanied young people’s experiences of the immigration system instilled fear and shaped the (im)possibilities for voicing discontent.

The “Unchildlike” Child: Unaccompanied Young People as Different and Untrustworthy

In contrast, and rather contradictorily to the unknowing child, adult stakeholders like Russell also positioned unaccompanied young people as adult-like:

If you’re travelling and you’re obviously . . . the agents and the routes you’re taking . . . for want of a better term, you’ve got to be tough in that situation. So, I think sometimes they make themselves feel and present as a lot older. (Russell, local government)

A similar trend has been noted in the United States (see Heidbrink, 2018), where arduous migration journeys and associated experiences of traveling alone were seen to make unaccompanied young people grow up faster, be more skilled and resilient, and more caring than local children. Unaccompanied young people were also typically understood as originating from societies where roles and expectations differ from Western norms of childhood, and—crucially—such roles were framed unchildlike and “wrong.” To explore this point, we focus on adults’ narratives about unaccompanied children’s care for others and the racialized and generationed scripts they draw on. Susan (charity worker), for example, described unaccompanied young people as unusually kind and caring relative to local children:

Kindness is something I see every day from them, and it’s really powerful. Normally adolescents are not that kind to each other. They tend to be like, you know, a bit mean sometimes. But these kids are really, really, really, really caring and kind to each other.

By evoking cultural differences, unaccompanied young people’s care was depicted as “not normal” and attributed to “their role in the society back home.” Although it is well documented that children care for others (Bauer, 2016; Crafter & Iqbal, 2022), scripts about “Western” children typically do not figure them as caring for others, as the traits of dependence and immaturity are typically associated with the white Western bourgeois child *cum* universal child. Although attributes of the caring and kind unaccompanied child may be seen as positive, positioning them as unchildlike, even model minorities (Chou & Feagin, 2010), is based on racialized scripts of the Other vis-à-vis local children. In this case, it served to render unaccompanied children as needing less support than local children.

Unaccompanied young people’s care for others was also seen as necessary because they performed acts that some adult stakeholders felt they themselves did not have the capacity and skills to do, more evidence of the Othering of unaccompanied children. This included translating and guiding new arrivals in “culturally appropriate” ways to navigate life in Britain. For others, unaccompanied children’s caring practices were induced by the lack of quality care and the hostile border regime. Bushra (charity worker) commented:

They are forced to care for each other . . . people are very scared of being returned. . . But you know, this attitude, and then misinformation . . . They are too scared to seek help, and then the only thing that they can rely on is others who are the same age as themselves.

While such narratives demonstrate adult stakeholders’ reflexive and critical stance toward the immigration system, and even a sense of respect, our point here is that even when viewed positively, unaccompanied children’s caring practices were treated as fundamentally unchildlike, based on generational scripts that figure the child as essentially dependent on others for care.

Discourses of the unchildlike child were also productive of a more negative construction of the untrustworthy child and generative of the problematization of their friendships. Baan (foster carer/social worker) commented that through their caring practices, unaccompanied children may “cover” for others:

The loyalty that they had for one another is second-to-none really . . . Even if they were cross with one another for things, they would never say anything to undermine the important things, like their [immigration] claim for example. So, they might know that somebody might be claiming to be Eritrean and they were perhaps from Ethiopia—but they would never say!

The implication that strategies for surviving the hostile border regime evidenced a problematic deceptiveness resonates with research highlighting adult carers’ suspicions about seemingly incomplete or “inaccurate” stories unaccompanied children tell about themselves (Kohli, 2005). Untrustworthiness was additionally indexed to cultural differences and gender. Young men’s caring friendships were seen as particularly unusual and even essentially violent, occasionally dubbed as gang-like or associated with origins in countries assumed to be in perennial conflict:

We do get occasional culture clashes . . . It could be that the young person has come from an Iranian background, for various reasons you may not necessarily want to place them in a house that has got an Iraqi, because of the tensions there could be . . . And, again with other African nations who are at war with each other, and I honestly can’t keep up! (Mark, accommodation manager)

According to other participants, foster carers were particularly concerned about friendships: “Not wanting the young people to go out, not wanting them to be in groups with their friends” (Ophelia, charity worker). Albanian boys, a highly demonized group by the current U.K. government as bogus asylum seekers coming from a “safe country” (Dearden, 2023), were understood to be overly independent, protective of each other, and “lik[ing] to stick together” (Umeed, local government), evoking images of gang-like friendships and young people’s refusals to integrate.

Michele, for example, described how his foster carer was suspicious of a close “family like” friendship with an Albanian adult he met on arrival to the United Kingdom and the monitoring and regulation he was subjected to as a result. From his perspective, this was based on his carer’s racial scripts:

He is older than me, like, 25 . . . he’s showed clearly that he cares about me . . . he took me under his shoulder and just tried to help me . . . I really trusted him and I really wanted to spend time with him. On her side, she didn’t really want that because he was Albanian and Albanians having a bad reputation . . . and the whole argument started up . . . “if you go, I’ll call the police,” . . . and it continued from on there . . . I would tell her I’m going out with some other friends that are not Albanians, she wouldn’t have a problem . . . I could see that [she] thought, “He’s Albanian, I don’t really trust him.”

Michele's experience demonstrates how concerns about separated child migrants' relationships are shaped by negative racialized stereotypes of male Others and generational constructions of childhood. Care by adult professionals is typically framed in protectionist terms and legal obligations for safeguarding, which sometimes resulted in regulating what were deemed to be problematic friendships.

While unaccompanied young people may be vulnerable to risky relationships, adult stakeholders work within remits shaped by neo-colonial versions of childhood that fail to consider the complexities of care relationships that go beyond the immediate nuclear family. Caring relationships between unaccompanied young people, often described by them as "family like," were intricate, sometimes formed via their journeys to the United Kingdom, to navigate and buffer smugglers' en route and enduring the U.K.'s border regime. Sara, for example, described a strong bond with a friend she met in Belgium, and the importance of staying together in the Calais Jungle and traveling together to the United Kingdom. She explained how "because she is with me, everything was easy" and the importance of their relationship continuing despite being placed in foster care in different LA.

Unaccompanied young people's care for each other, while in part borne out of necessity to fill gaps in the care and immigration system, was also shaped by multi-generational ethical orientations to others, fostered in many of the countries unaccompanied young people came from and passed through. Children's caring practices in these contexts were often expected, rather than met with suspicion and characterized as unchildlike. In contrast, in England, unaccompanied young people's caring practices clashed with hegemonic ideas about childhood, and indeed many stakeholders positioned them as unchildlike but also untrustworthy. In the process, unaccompanied young people were rendered undeserving of support from the care and immigration systems. In the following section, we discuss the harm that these racial and generational scripts produce and how such constructs of the unaccompanied children as unchildlike and unknowing render them "undeserving" and subject to the withdrawal of an absence of care.

The "Underserving" Child: Racism and the Racialization of Deservingness in the Hostile Border Regime

We know secret(ly) in the country, deep down in some people's heads, they will never let it come out their mouth, but we know this is what they say—"You're lucky to even have a house." (Marco, local government)

Echoing previous research on racial scripts about migrants and indeed citizens who require welfare and other forms of support, unaccompanied young people were subject to negative tropes in media and far-right narratives on migration, and to being positioned as undeserving scroungers (Musloff, 2022; Rosen & Crafter, 2018). While most adult participants did not agree with such sentiments openly, they identified the presence of these stereotypes in children's services as Marco does above. This, they

explained, produced expectations that unaccompanied children should be “grateful” for any care they received, regardless of standards.

Unaccompanied young people were extremely aware of racist government rhetoric toward asylum seekers, leading to a fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against:

The Home Office and the government and the media, all those things are kind of against the migrants. So let’s say, for example, you will hear Priti Patel [then Home Secretary] and Boris Johnson [then Prime Minister] all the time talk about “the migrants who came to steal our jobs,” and those kind of things. So that will carry the people to be racist against the people. (Dahi)

Such rhetoric was also manifest in young people’s everyday experiences. Tony recounted being targeted and negatively racialized as a young Albanian asylum seeker, from being physically attacked and hospitalized in his local area, through to the strained relationship with his Personal Advisor from children’s services. The extract below details negative tropes of young Albanian men which limited the support Tony received:

I was just calmly like, I was just telling him, like just please help me . . . And he didn’t help me, and he was changing the conversation. He was telling me like, “Well, do you do drugs? Do you do this?” And he was kind of like telling me, kind of asking me like, “Why did you come to U.K.? Like you’re doing drugs.”

We heard similar stories from other young people about difficult relationships with adult professionals which were fueled by racist attitudes. When requesting to change his social worker due to inadequate care, Illir, another young Albanian, recounted how he was told by the manager, “If you don’t like it, go back to your country” and subsequently did not “know where to complain anymore.”

Although not typically associated with neo-coloniality, young Albanian boys and men were, as previously discussed, Othered by adult stakeholders as dangerous and suspicious: a reflection of “race” as a malleable social construct. Michele’s experience detailed below highlights how the uneven and chaotic system differentiates young people through “race” and nation through racialized notions of deservingness:

I have an Eritrean friend . . . we basically came pretty much at the same time . . . and we were talking about just, like, our cases and what’s happening. . . . And I asked him “Oh, did you do your interview?” He was, like, “No, I didn’t do my interview,” and he was, like, “I got my leave to remain, but I didn’t do my interview” . . . I got so shocked, because I was, like, “I’ve got to do my interview, I’ve got to do this, and a refusal, and an appeal, and all that bullshit.” And then, like, it comes to, like, someone else, for example, just getting their leave to remain just like that . . . so that’s what I basically mean with all this, like, not treated fairly, and the same.

Such racialized constructs of deservingness, which reify hierarchies of difference, strained conditions for friendship and care between young people across ethnic groups.

Young people's experiences reflected how age—in conjunction with “race” and nation—was key in shaping precarious care conditions (see also Meloni & Chase, 2017). Being age disputed and deemed over 18 years resulted in instability and the withdrawal of care, and a striking marker of undeservingness relative to local children in care:

The truth is a British looked after child who is born here will always have more attention given to them than an asylum seeker . . . We had an asylum seeker, he had more concerns than a British looked after child, but the support wasn't being agreed because the history wasn't prior to 16 . . . They had to go for an age assessment, their age was disputed for one and a half years, by then he'd nearly turned 18. “Bye-bye, we're not going to spend money on you.” Whereas a British born would be: “We've got a history of trauma, sexual abuse from the age of 11 to 14, we need to provide some more support.” (Iqbal, accommodation owner)

Young people's experiences of age assessments demonstrate how the intersections of “race”, nation, and generation afforded them worse or, as in Mohammed's case, no care. Originally from Sudan, Mohammed identified as 15 years old on arrival and was placed in foster care. After being age disputed, he was removed from foster care and placed in a hotel in the North of the city. Over the 3 months that the research team was in touch with him, he was subsequently moved twice to two different cities in the north of England, and then to a hotel on the outskirts of a Northern city, with no access to transport links to enable him to travel to third sector organizations in the center. The age dispute meant that Mohammed was placed in dangerous substandard accommodation (we were sent videos of collapsing ceilings), with no access to formal education, and withdrawal of support from a social worker.

When not recognized as children through age assessment processes or deemed unchildlike through their caring practices for others, unaccompanied children were constructed as not in need of care. Assessments of deservingness are often predicated on whether someone is held responsible for their predicament. While hegemonic constructions of childhood constitute children as fundamentally dependent, and therefore non-responsible, adult stakeholders often accepted that unchildlike and less deserving unaccompanied children would shoulder the “burden” of care (Florence, Charity project coordinator) in a way that local children would not be expected to do.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored three racialized and generationed scripts of the unaccompanied child migrant to demonstrate how these are based on longstanding and novel constructions of who is a “child,” modeled on normative middle-class, neo-colonial ideals. The scripts of the unchildlike and unknowing unaccompanied young person we have outlined above are embedded in a system that is supposed to care for

children on the edge of society, but instead reflects state rhetoric of the undeserving asylum seeker. These play out in everyday micro-enactments within the care system.

Racialized scripts of the backward Other positioned unaccompanied young people as unknowing, or *tabula rasa*, with limited knowledge, lacking in skills, and having lower expectations resulting from their racialized origins in “uncivilized” countries. Due to their perceived unknowingness, which draws on a long tradition of colonialism and minorization, unaccompanied young people were often afforded substandard care, and also not expected to dispute the quality of their care. Their perceived compliance often breeds inaction on the part of professionals. Concurrently, if contradictorily, the care unaccompanied young people gave to others was deemed by adult professionals as a necessary response in a retrenched care system but also suspicious, resonating with tropes of the unaccompanied child as adult-like criminals or outlaws (Galli, 2018; Heidbrink, 2018). In the context of a hostile border regime, this care served to position them as unchildlike in the eyes of professionals. Consequently, unaccompanied young people were deemed to neither need nor deserve the levels of care afforded to local children in the care system.⁶ Although unaccompanied young people we spoke with did talk about pockets of good care, their narratives predominantly demonstrate the destructive and exclusionary effects of these scripts.

Moving beyond the specific case of unaccompanied young people, our article offers insights into efforts to conceptualize contemporary childhoods, particularly in relation to debates about the primacy or intersectionality of generation. We suggest that while it is an empirical question as to what aspects of social positioning matter, or come to matter, and in what ways, it is equally necessary to attend to if and how racialization, nation, and generation (and other social relations) intersect to produce childhood. While it is possible that “race”, for example, is not inevitably involved in the constitution of childhood, we suggest that it is nonetheless crucial to understanding the production of contemporary childhoods along with generation. Rising ethnonationalism builds on the long history of segregation, stratification, and evacuation of racially minoritized young humans from the category of childhood (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019) or at the very least their rendering as emblematic of partial or pathological childhoods.

At the same time, we argue that understanding contemporary ethnonationalisms and welfare state retrenchment in countries like the United Kingdom requires attention to generation. Tropes of the child migrant (whether unknowing, unchildlike, or undeserving) serve to vindicate punitive, exclusionary, and extractive aspects of child services and, in turn, Britain’s renewed ethnonationalism. They provide fodder and post-hoc rationalizations for the increasing conditionality of welfare support, even where welfare provision is informed by purportedly universal children’s rights commitments. What is practiced in relation to those children deemed undeserving of children’s services—be this substandard accommodation or restricted care provision—becomes normalized and institutionalized. Ultimately, the withdrawal of support through conditionality and underfunding, privatization, and deregulation of care and support impacts all, citizens or not. This is not to say that the issues raised in this paper matter simply because they do, or may eventually, also affect citizens.

Instead, our argument lends weight to understandings of contemporary ethnonationalisms as fundamentally entwined with neoliberalism, rather than against its purported goals of free border-free flow (Davies & Gane, 2021).

Secondly, in pointing to the specificity of the intersectional constitution of childhood as an empirical question, we advance substantive understandings of the ways that racism and the subjugation of children roost in the routine: through the production of racialized scripts that shape the ways in which unaccompanied children are characterized, positioned, and treated by the children's services which are meant to provide them with care. In looking specifically at everyday practices and discourses, our point is not that policy and political economy do not matter, but that "race", nation, and generation are made "real" in their everyday enactment, in this case within children's services which articulate with the U.K.'s contemporary border regime. Our work demonstrates how childhoods are shaped by generationed, nationalistic, and racialized scripts embedded in state rhetoric and rules, care services, and adult stakeholders' everyday practices. This exploration sheds light on the importance of asking intersectional questions about "childhood" in neo-colonial contexts which also speak across scale and time. These processes must continue to be unpacked and theorized to challenge injustices to ensure all children can thrive and be safe.

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ORCID iD

Rachel Rosen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9916-5910>

Notes

1. See Minister of State (Immigration) Robert Jenrick on immigration rules: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-03-15/166166>
2. People under 18 years old who migrate without parents/primary carers and seek refuge are referred to in U.K. policy contexts as "unaccompanied asylum-seeking children" (UASC) or "unaccompanied minors." Alternatively, the term "separated child migrants" highlights that many maintain transnational relationships or reunite at various points in the migration process and are often accompanied by other adults and children. We use these terms, and "unaccompanied young people," interchangeably to denote their contestation.

3. For example, the March 2021 *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (the “Sewell Report”) argued that the country is not institutionally or structurally racist, advancing the claim that “we no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities” (p. 8).
4. We place “race” in commas to denote the term as constructed rather than essential and fixed, and other terms such as “uncivilized” and “savage” to denote them as “so-called” to avoid a literal interpretation.
5. Our interlocutors contrast unaccompanied children with “local” children in the care of the state, often implicitly in reference to British citizens, including children of color.
6. While local children are also hierarchically positioned and receive differential treatment, when speaking about unaccompanied children, our adult interviewees typically articulated a binary of local and unaccompanied children.

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Author Biographies

Veena Meetoo is a lecturer in sociology, University College London. Her research focuses on the reproduction of inequalities through the intersections of “race”, generation and migration, and with children and young people in familial, care and school contexts.

Rachel Rosen is a professor of sociology at University College London. Her research, teaching, and public engagement focus on childhood (im)mobility in neoliberal welfare and border regimes.