

Racialising age in the UK's border regime: a case for abolishing age assessment

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Abstract: Processes for assessing the age of young unaccompanied migrants have been roundly critiqued, with new concerns in the UK being raised about the increasing use of 'scientific' approaches. In this article, we suggest that, taking everything into account, analyses do not go far enough, arguing that technical questions of how 'best' to assess age or the new incursion of biometric measurements can obscure the political question of what work age does in hostile border regimes. As a result, the underpinning logics of age assessment – an essentialisation of age, 'race' and borders – are not only left in place but further augmented. We demonstrate, through a careful curation of assessment reports (that operate through the assertion of truth claims about the body, childhood and time) how such reports draw on and reproduce multiple and intersecting racist imaginaries as they are synthesised with developmental logics around childhood. Age, we argue, is being weaponised in the service of post-racial fantasies in liberal democracies, rising ethnonationalism and state retrenchment from social support.

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Introduction

Disputes over the age of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have hit the news again in the UK because of the controversial introduction of compulsory 'scientific methods' of age assessment and severe limitations being placed on the right to appeal age determinations – changes which have been incorporated into the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023. Age determinations are viewed as crucial because unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (categorised as those under 18 years old) are entitled to more comprehensive support and services than adult asylum seekers, as well as special protections due to their child status – on paper at least.

Third-sector organisations have also been raising the alarm about the intensification of age assessments across the UK, with the Humans for Rights Network tweeting in September 2023, 'We have been contacted by the 1000th child wrongly placed in adult accommodation' in over twenty-one months. As this implies, many advocates argue that correctly determining age is a safeguarding issue: necessary to protect 'genuine' children from adults, whether children are incorrectly placed in adult accommodation or adults are wrongly placed with the young in children's services. In response to what they consider to be 'flawed decision making' resulting in incorrect age assessments, the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium and others advocate for 'holistic' and 'child-friendly' assessments by 'expert' social workers, echoing previous academic research.¹ The most recent policy incorporation of 'scientific' methods for evaluating age, such as scans of teeth and bones, has also raised a loud outcry, with professional medical bodies condemning the use of potentially harmful technologies that have no therapeutic benefits as deeply unethical.² This chimes with the trenchant critiques of 'scientific methods' in much of the scholarly literature that focuses on parts of Europe where such practices have long been in place.

In this article, we both build upon and diverge from these critiques, suggesting that, all things considered, analyses do not go sufficiently far enough, with the result that the underpinning logics of age assessment – an essentialisation of age, 'race' and borders – are not only left in place but intensified. Picking up on Nanna Dahler's compelling argument in this journal that the 'scientific methods' used in Denmark on unaccompanied Afghans are a form of imperialism,³ here we look beyond the spectacle of biometrics to ask what gamut of age assessment technologies are operating and how, considering what this has to tell us about the place of age in state modalities of control, bordering and restructuring. We do this through close examination of young people's testimonies about age disputes and the age assessment reports that are produced in the process. We demonstrate how age assessments draw on and reproduce multiple and intersecting racist

imaginaries which are synthesised with developmental logics around childhood and the reification of age. Together, this produces the divisions, exclusions and expulsions that scaffold racial capitalism, albeit often masked under the humanitarian guise of 'safeguarding'.

Our focus here is on age assessment as a particularly incisive example of a larger framework of internal and external bordering against negatively racialised young people; for example, in the UK this includes the Prevent Strategy, the Gangs Violence Matrix and policing in schools. Our goal here then is to make a political as well as intellectual intervention and in what follows we make a case for the abolition of age assessments.

Techniques of bordering in racial capitalism

Despite the persistent tendency to imagine capitalism in terms of free movement, flow and space-time expansion, containing, directing and controlling mobility is just as central to its historical and contemporary logics. Who can move, under what conditions, and to where are central questions, answered by capital through the production, organisation and hierarchisation of differentiation – rather than increasing homogenisation of abstracted labour power. This is a key insight offered by theorists of racial capitalism who develop the concept, which was first introduced by Cedric Robinson,⁴ as a way of articulating racism as historically central to capital's opportunistic drive to accumulate. It calls attention not only to exploitation, but the production of 'edge populations'⁵ rendered 'surplus', 'disposable' or 'inhuman' on racialised terms when they cannot be incorporated by neoliberal regimes of accumulation.⁶

Borders – both external and internal – are central to this process, not least because ascribing expendability to people via racialisation also allows for their 'organised abandonment'.⁷ In this sense, borders do not just discipline and police the mobility of those populations, but justify the withholding of support and services from 'negatively racialised people'. We use this term as a reminder that all are racialised in racial states – in other words, whiteness is not 'race neutral' – and in reference to the dynamic morphing of racism. These insights are important in the context of Britain's post-racial fantasy where racism is at once unilaterally condemned, at the same time as 'race thinking' and racism continue to pervade state operations, albeit largely in the terms of cultural or national, rather than biological, difference.

But spatial and racialised borders never fully achieve their objectives, not least because human mobility is an unruly historical constant, with people refusing to be contained despite the violences they are subjected to. Where 'spatial containment' has failed, 'temporal borders' have become a means for 'further restricting and hindering access to the asylum system', Martina Tazzioli points out.⁸ Although she is writing primarily about controls over the pace of mobility, tempo of settlement and speed of deportation, the notion of temporal borders draws our

attention to the way that generational time serves as a technology of 'migration management' in Europe. One's generational position, or whether one is positioned as a child or adult,⁹ profoundly affects the rights, entitlements, protections and supports available and indeed the conditions of (im)mobility.

It is here that age becomes salient as it has become a 'legal fetishism' for determining who is a child, thanks to dominant perceptions of age as seemingly obvious and predictable and the increasing concatenation of age and generational borders between childhood and adulthood in national and international policy frameworks.¹⁰ As one of the last bastions of seemingly acceptable essentialism, age appears as a neutral marker when contrasted with 'race' which is widely recognised as a 'fiction of embodied otherness'.¹¹ In contrast, we understand age as a 'strong' system of power propping up institutional borders and policing particularised notions of childhood under the auspices of protection.¹² Yet, age is not an objective measure but a human product that comes into being, is transformed and even erased by the definitions, techniques and practices which shape its production. Contestations of age are possible, in part, because this deceptively straightforward concept may refer to one or many of a range of referents, producing what Anne-Marie Peatrik refers to as an 'ocean of ages'.¹³ These include chronological age; biological age; legal, bureaucratic or civil age; and subjective age. Unsurprisingly then, measuring and marking, or more accurately *making*, age draws on a proliferating and often contradictory set of evidence, yet a singular age is ascribed which determines rights and entitlements dependent on whether one is deemed to be over or under 18 years.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that age assessment has been widely censured. Critiques fall into four broad categories with the first being that age assessment is a difficult and inaccurate process that can, at best, estimate a potential age. A second critique focuses on the *a priori* suspicion which shapes age assessment processes. IDs, where available, are treated as fundamentally suspect given that the nominal benefits of achieving child status are seen as an incentive to deceive at the same time as the testimonies of children and (formerly) colonised people are treated as erratic and unreliable. Third, previous research has emphasised that assessments often draw on assumptions of childhood shaped by Euro-American developmental norms and expectations.¹⁴ Achieving the age of minority therefore demands of its subjects the presentation, or performance, of vulnerability, innocence and a pre-sociality.

Another form of evidence used in age assessments relates to the body and this is where the fourth set of critiques focuses. Seen to be untainted by human deception, the body and its measurement through biometrics serve as a trump card in states' evidentiary assemblage. Critics nod to the racialised logics through which observations of the body operate, whether through visual comparison to White Europeans, the exclusion of 'external' factors like diet and hygiene or the ways in which nationality gets mapped on to broad racialised categories in creating a reference group, for example Eritrean on to Black African.¹⁵ Rather than offering

a scientific escape from colonial categorisations of the body, digital and biometric technologies amplify these. The force of these critiques has led authors to characterise the process of age assessment as 'temporal violence';¹⁶ a 'racialized procedure, [that] comes to exclude certain bodies from the protection that children are entitled to';¹⁷ and a core tool in 'a digital carceral infrastructure that is used to control the movement of people'.¹⁸

In response, many advocate what we qualify as technical solutions: improving data about specific reference groups for forensic assessments or showing that physical appearance is not a sufficient basis for determining age. Others focus on individual advocacy for young migrants in age contestations. While these efforts may make some difference in individual lives, the arguments here assume that age is inherently meaningful, even if difficult to determine, and that childhood exists as an *a priori* object, uniquely and inherently vulnerable. Here we build on recent social science literature that has made a compelling case for contesting the body as a site of 'truth' and exposing forensic practices of age assessment as a spectacular display of digital biopower. While extending this to questioning the truth of age itself, ultimately, we take a different path. We argue that we can get lost in the technical questions of how best to assess age or the 'new' incursion of biometric measurements, without asking the political question of what work age, in all its multiplicity, does in hostile border regimes.

Age assessment in the UK

State-instigated age assessment for the purposes of immigration control has a long and egregious history in the UK, in many ways paving the way for its most recent incarnation in public policy. Radiographic assessments were used during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹ This became public knowledge in 1979, when the media exposed that dependent children of parents settled in the UK, mostly from South Asia, were being subjected to wrist x-rays to estimate their so-called 'true age' via their 'bone age'. After the revelation, Sir Henry Yellowlees was tasked with investigating medical examinations used within immigration processes. His 1980 report recommended the continued use of radiographic assessments as a 'useful, fairly accurate and acceptable safe way of estimating age of children' up to 21, in order to identify 'genuine children under 18'.²⁰ Following resistance and pressure, including from the British Medical Association, Yellowlees revised his position, conceding 'the usefulness of the X-ray method of estimating age must be limited in the immigration context', largely due to the limited value of the 'scientific foundation' for using the skeletal maturation of children in the USA or Britain as a reference group for South Asian children.²¹ The practice was subsequently stopped in 1982, although the premise for identifying 'genuine' migrant children remained intact, meaning that age assessments continued in different forms.

Following the introduction of the Children Act 1989, which imposed statutory duties on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in

their area, social workers acquired a more central position in age assessments. Ultimately, this resulted in the introduction of the 'holistic' or 'Merton-compliant' social work method. Named after the leading judgment of *R(B) v Merton*, EWHC 1689 (Admin) (14 July 2003) that delineated the requisites of a lawful age assessment, 'holistic' age assessments are meant to include exploration of a young person's background, family, education and other activities, through interviews with the young person and observations; the views of different professionals involved in a young person's life; and background information about their country of origin, not just visual appearance.

The development of the 'holistic' assessment took place against a political backdrop of consistent anti-migrant rhetoric and policies, as well as the demonisation of migrants by UK media in the 2000s. A target-focused New Labour government under Tony Blair responded with immigration policies that were described as a 'numbers game'²² designed to halve the number of asylum claims in the UK by, inter alia, externalising the British border into France in order to curtail people's ability to claim asylum in the UK, and intensifying efforts to limit asylum seekers' access to welfare benefits so as to prevent 'non-genuine' claimants from 'abusing the system'. Unaccompanied children, however, were to be cared for by local authorities, primarily under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, including through the provision of accommodation, financial support, education and social care. For media and political actors, the provision of such support for unaccompanied children raised perpetual questions as to whether they were genuine children or adults pretending to be children in order to abuse the UK's asylum and welfare systems. These questions have only intensified in the context of home secretary Theresa May's 'hostile environment' policies designed to push undocumented people out of the UK by further restricting their already restricted access to essential services such as housing, healthcare, employment and others, deputising the enforcement of hostile environment policies to public service workers such as social workers, and specifically the responsibility of controlling mobility by controlling access to welfare.²³ In 2022, it was revealed that Home Office immigration officers were placed in child social services and other departments in at least twenty-five local authorities, further blurring the lines between social services and immigration enforcement.

Central to present-day immigration policy under prime minister Rishi Sunak is a fixation on stopping migrants entering the UK 'irregularly', with the focal point being people travelling in 'small boats' across the Channel into the UK. Around 16 per cent of the total number of people that crossed the Channel in 2022 were children.²⁴ It is in this context that 'holistic' age assessments were codified into statute for the first time by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, purportedly to 'stop abuse of the system'. The Act also revives so-called 'scientific' methods of assessing age, conferring powers on the Secretary of State to make regulations about 'scientific' methods. The Immigration (Age Assessment) Regulations 2024, that came into force on 10 January 2024, specify that X-rays of teeth and bones of

the hands and wrists and MRIs of knees and collar bones may be used for the purposes of age assessments. Should a young person refuse to comply with radiographic testing, their credibility can be damaged. Decisions can be reviewed and reconsidered based on new evidence, and at present, young people can challenge decisions by way of judicial review. However, under provisions in the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which are not in force, as we write, children could be removed from the UK even while a challenge to their age assessment is underway.

Currently, age contestations are triggered when migrants present to the Home Office (the UK's ministry for internal immigration and policing matters) or local authorities as children. Where the state does not accept an individual's stated age, they can either treat the individual as an adult, contending that their 'physical appearance and demeanour very strongly suggests they are significantly over 18', which is typically stated in a one-page letter, or give them the benefit of the doubt and treat them as a child, or provisionally as a child pending a 'holistic' age assessment.²⁵ These assessments are either undertaken by a local authority or by the Home Office's new National Age Assessment Board.

Third-sector organisations report a notable increase in the use of age contestations. According to Home Office data, in 2022 there were over 5,010 asylum claims from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and 2,999 age disputes.²⁶ Of the 1,693 disputes marked as 'resolved' (i.e., a decision was made or the reasons for raising the dispute no longer applied), 62 per cent were 'resolved' as under 18. The most common countries of nationality of young people age disputed were Sudan and South Sudan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran and Syria. Not only does this indicate the mutual constitution and racialised production of nation and migration status, but the fact that negatively racialised young people from the global South are those most affected dovetails with Nicholas De Genova's argument that British/European borders, including age assessment, are part and parcel of yet another 're-drawing of the global colour line'.²⁷

Methodology

In what follows, we analyse how age is produced via assessment processes and to what ends, drawing on two sources of material from the Children Caring on the Move (CCoM) university-based research project, a four-year investigation about unaccompanied child migrants' experiences of care, and caring for others, as they navigate the complexities of the immigration-welfare nexus in England. The first source is the corpus of seventy-five interviews we undertook with thirty-eight unaccompanied young people as part of CCoM. These interviews were designed, carried out and analysed by our participatory research team made up of university-based researchers and co-researchers – young people with migration experiences. The interview material was coded using co-produced analytic themes, with 'Racialisation/racism', 'The difference a day makes', 'Contested childhoods', and '(Stolen) identities' particularly relevant to the following discussion.

Age disputes and the significance of age in the lives of unaccompanied young people were identified as a core concern of participants and our collaborative research team early in the project, resonating with previous advocacy and academic literature. To allow for further exploration, and where relevant, we approached unaccompanied young people we met through the research to ask if they would share their age assessment reports with us to analyse in conjunction with the narratives offered by the broader group of CCoM participants. Eight young people provided their reports which make up the second source we draw on in this article. The age assessment reports range from one to seventy-nine pages. Our analytic approach has been informed by critical discourse analysis and involved close attention to framing, tone, frequency and valence in the reports.²⁸ We also analysed parallels and contradictions with interview data, including about the context, content and outcomes of assessment practices.

The research received ethics approval from the two lead universities involved in CCoM. All interview material has been anonymised and pseudonymised. As close textual analysis is central to our use of age assessment reports, ensuring confidentiality is crucial. For short excerpts we use full pseudonymisation and have removed identifying details. Longer excerpts are 'composites'. Following Rebecca Willis, this involves quoting turns of phrase directly from actual reports but combining phrases from different reports or slightly changing identifying features (e.g., weight and height) to ensure confidentiality without compromising meaning.²⁹ All composites are identified clearly in the text.

The body: age 'truths' in the visual register

To begin our analysis, we turn to a composite age assessment report:

Kareem's height was recorded as 174 cm, his weight as 46.4 kg, and his occipitofrontal circumference was 56cm. When charted against his stated age, the recorded data placed Kareem on the 75th percentile for height, the 25th percentile for weight and the 50th percentile for his occipitofrontal circumference.

Kareem has a slight developed frame and developed muscles on his arms. The assessors acknowledge that he had worked in construction before arriving in the UK. Kareem has frown lines, and his cheekbones are developed giving him a chiselled jawline.

Kareem's face was clean shaven however facial hair shadow covered under his chin, upper lip, and jawline up to his cheekbones. The shadowing observed suggests he can grow a significant beard if the hairs in this area were left uncut.

The shadowing appears well established so it is likely these hairs developed quite some time ago and have been shaved regularly. Hairs were observed on the upper side of his hands, down his arms, and on his chest. When asked, he

said he does not shave his chest hair as it does not grow that much, and no one can see it under his clothes.

Secondary sexual characteristics such as his Adams Apple appeared well developed. Kareem's voice had an even tone and pitch suggesting his voice has been broken for quite some time and has settled into a mature sound.

The assessors discussed his presentation and agreed that Kareem was presenting as a person who had been through the stages of puberty. Whilst some of the lines on his face could be attributed to the sun, they agreed this was more likely from maturing with age and his appearance was more in keeping with a young adult in his early twenties.

It is disturbing to read the intense and detailed observations of Kareem's body by the assessing social workers. Bodily descriptions such as these often run over multiple pages and are repeated at various stages of assessment reports. We can pause here to ask what allowed Kareem's body to be read, discussed and written about in this way by the assessing social workers which in other contexts might be viewed as invasive, harassment or even evidence of paedophilia with its determined focus on the sexual characteristics of a young body. The text also provides a glimpse of what must have happened over the course of three interviews where Kareem was measured, weighed, closely observed, recorded, photographed in parts and questioned repeatedly – an intensely dehumanising process.

Age assessment reports like Kareem's make use of scientific terminology ('occipitofrontal circumference', height and weight percentiles) and practices (e.g., forensic observation). But unlike a medical report which focuses on specific aspects of the body for therapeutic purposes, this reads, at best, akin to a baby book marking early stages of growth and development, or worse, as a eugenicist text measuring and recording multiple aspects of a young person's body for pseudo-scientific classification. In the intensely objectifying presentation of the reports, we see something of Dahler's argument that there is a 'colonial mapping of the body' at play through 'abstraction and de-corporealisation' in biometric age assessments.³⁰ Yet, this can happen and is happening even without the use of 'scientific methods'. Simultaneously, we see a process of Othering through infantilisation. Kareem's body is there to be measured and coded in the assumed absence of a speaking subject or at least in the presence of a subject whose utterances are rendered inadequate, even suspicious.

The assessors' repeated concerns with Kareem's bodily hair imply he is attempting to conceal the 'true' signs of adulthood: shaving to hide his facial hair growth or hiding his chest hair under his top. In contrast, assessors' recourse to the visual evidence of Kareem's body and their language act as powerful claims to truth. As Linda Alcoff points out, 'race', and we would add generation, is produced by assigning meanings and value to differences between bodies.

Because these differences are material and operate in the visual register, they appear 'natural' – largely unchangeable by the social world.³¹ Yet, the attention paid to body hair and its status as the evidence par excellence of adulthood in many age assessment reports is itself a contemporary western preoccupation. Body hair has been indexed not only to constructions of developmental maturity, but to those of unkempt, 'grotesque', uncivilised or animalistic bodies.³² In the fixation on body hair across the reports, we see at work a set of implicit assumptions of what the child body does and should look like in a way that definitively map on to age *and* invoke the spectre of a negatively racialised Other: the bearded 'monster-terrorist'.³³

As childhood scholars have amply demonstrated, however, the universal child of developmental theory does not exist. At best, it is an average of a very particular white European child figure cemented through decades of situated research studies which present the particular as universal, sedimenting an imaginary of the child body through its ubiquitous representation.³⁴ No one would ever quite match up precisely to this norm, but not everyone is subjected to a process of age assessment whereby this mismatch is the reason for their punitive exclusion.

Childhood: age 'truths' in a developmental register

Like appearance, discussion of 'demeanour' and activities are central to 'holistic' age assessments, drawing on a combination of racialised and developmental logics which serve to make the age of childhood appear natural and immutable. Guidance in 'holistic' report templates prompts assessors to consider: 'Is his/her behaviour age appropriate?' Assessors are imbued with the expertise and authority to make such determinations, despite the emptiness and malleability of 'age appropriateness' as a signifier. Involvement in political activity, the ability to cook and even liking the colour black are concatenated with adulthood in age assessments, both in reports and as verbalised to CCoM participants. Such activities are used as evidence of behaviour 'uncharacteristic' of childhood. For example, one report states: 'His willingness to engage in political activities knowing the risk to himself and his family are uncharacteristic of the behaviour of a young person dependent on his family for care and support.'

'Mature', 'confident', 'not coming across as anxious or nervous' and having the ability to 'advocate' for oneself are well-worn phrases in reports that assert young people are older than they claim. Underlying these statements is the idea that 'real' children would be scared or hesitant when dealing with adult authorities, in keeping with figurations of 'real children' as inherently vulnerable – the idealised victim.³⁵ But more, read alongside reports that a young person was 'dismissive of the adults that were assessing him' or another was akin to 'a peer speaking with his peers', this calls up ideas of the risky 'foreign' man, embodying just restrained violence or violating the norms of humanitarian efforts to protect the vulnerable. For example, constructed moral panics about 'Muslim extremists and patriarchs' are mobilised to cast young migrants that are racialised

and perceived as Muslim as the suspect Other and antithetical to British values, marking them as 'unwanted' or unable to be saved.³⁶ Indeed, depicting young people as powerful – whether physically or socially – implies they can't really be children at all, rendering them worthless of care and primed for abandonment.

Assessors often assume that same-age groupings are natural and therefore age can be inferred by who a young person spends time with: age inscribed through friendship. One report reads:

At school, Neal did not join in if others were being silly and he does portray a sense of maturity. He clearly sees himself as being older than the foster carers children and is reported to adopt the 'head of the household' or dominant male role when his male carer is not present.

Another report commented that Simon spent his time with other 'young men' (notably not 'boys') including 'age disputed young men' – both aged and suspicious simply by association. Relationships across age are therefore seen as inherently suspicious, particularly when read through racialised lenses of criminal activity. As Michele, a CCoM participant, noted:

My Albanian friend . . . was very, very caring towards me. He is older than me, I think he is about, like, 25, and I was just 16 . . . And I think that's where it comes the difficulties I had with my foster carer again, because I really trusted him and I really, like, wanted to spend time with him and all that. On her side, she didn't really want that because he was Albanian and Albanians having a bad reputation and all that.

Yet, assumptions about activities and dispositions of childhood are just that: expectations framed by particularised figurations of 'normal' childhoods. Same-age friendships, for instance, are best understood as an artefact of age-graded institutions like schools in urban capitalist contexts rather than a natural occurrence. These provide organised frames for reading generational positional through their repetition, insistence and decontextualisation thereby rendering situated particularities universal.

The impossibility of determining age via demeanour, activity or friendships is perhaps most evident as the internal logics of assessments often undercut themselves or contradict claims made in other assessments. For example, adulthood in these reports is evidenced both by the ability to cook and the inability to cook. The first claim operates via a generic figuration of the dependent child and the latter via racialisation, an adult who does not cook maps misogyny onto a homogenised figure of the 'Muslim patriarch'. Some reports move between describing young people as 'mature' and 'confident' as evidence of adulthood and then writing about their infantile 'defiance' or churlish responses. In cases where young people's demeanour was so fitting with ideas of childlike vulnerability, it was undercut in other ways: 'Simon was upset but no tears were observed.

He was wiping his eyes', the report read. Rather than attending to his grief, the social work assessors imply deception: why would he wipe his eyes if he wasn't really crying? Should we believe him at all? Indeed, the idea of performance and rehearsed stories permeates these reports. For example, 'It was put to Colin that he was giving a learnt story and that any questions outside of his script was causing difficulties' and 'Simon's level of recall and articulation appeared beyond what you would expect from a young person who had never had any formal education'. The implication here is that the ability to prepare for, remember stories and perform at age assessment meetings is evidence of adulthood and a deceptive one at that. In such a logic, all statements of young people become suspicious.

Operating within advanced capitalist time

The 'holistic' assessment places a demand on young people to prove their ages by narrating themselves in calendar days and months linearly, consistently and credibly. Assessments perpetuate rationalities of western capitalist constructions, divisions and measurements of time (work, school, leisure),³⁷ with assessors viewing a failure to understand and demonstrate this time-consciousness as evidence of an incapability of knowing one's own age.

In Colin's assessment, he tells the assessors that after both of his parents passed away, he became homeless on the streets, where he starved and had to eat from garbage. In response, assessors demanded that Colin calculate the number of months and years that he attended school before being orphaned, the time he spent on the streets after being orphaned, whether and for how long he attended school while homeless on the streets, when the sibling he had no relationship with married, how old he was at their wedding, how long it took him to walk across the Sahara Desert, how long he was enslaved in Libya and when in the Calais 'jungle', while he was 'living in woods, sleeping under trees', did he turn 16. The assessors then produced two possible timelines, which they allege showed Colin's calculations were 'missing a significant period'. Colin responded, 'That's all I know . . . what can I remember when walking across the world'.

There are comments about Colin's eyes 'welling up', but these are met with an abrupt and jarring return to cross-examination-style questions, demanding that Colin quantifies his losses, pain and terrors in days, months and years. Here we see a palpable disregard for the information that has been entrusted to the assessors by Colin, with their objective simply being to curate a timeframe, effectively falsifying his testimony regardless of their intentions. Assessors recalculated Colin's age in line with capitalist time, hailed their own report to be 'proof' of his age and 'discharged' him from their care. The malleability of childhood and age is again apparent: 'not understanding' time is often ascribed to young children, but here the intersection of age and 'race' inscribes a perceived lack of understanding of time as evidence of (deceitful) adulthood.

At the same time, it is not unusual for assessors to conclude that young people cannot know their own ages without having had formal education and an understanding of how capitalist time works. Here, time-consciousness is not treated as cause for suspicion but as a deficit or lack. Demands for obedience to capitalist time has a long history in colonialism.³⁸ Time-consciousness, shaped in the image of capitalism, was elevated as a symbol of European modernity, progress and superiority, with a perceived lack projected onto non-European societies to portray them as inferior and primitive. In the reports, it is often apparent that assessors have acquainted themselves with non-Gregorian calendars and 'diverse' time-markers they deem significant, such as Eid and Ramadan, neither of which have pre-fixed dates anywhere in the world, to ostensibly help young people calculate their chronological ages. In doing so, they portray themselves in their own reports as benevolent, supportive, not-racist and all-knowing as they purport to help young people recalculate their own ages using seemingly superior western calendric metrics. Young people are infantilised to make way for the benevolent and knowledgeable social workers to recalculate their *real* ages for them to be brought into modernity for the first time.

Like the body, capitalist/colonial time is reified and reproduced as a quantifiable, verifiable and unquestioned truth, despite the existence of alternative conceptualisations of time and complicated temporalities.³⁹ Through the practice of age assessment, colonial attitudes are being perpetuated against negatively racialised non-citizens, with the undergirding developmental logic of age assessments functioning to universalise and impose a man-made linear mode of western capitalist time on migrants or to deny their veracity and deservingness of support by way of ascriptions of deficits in time-consciousness.

The curation of an adult (or child)

A combination of official guidance and the dominance of racialised and generationed logics invite assessors to deploy specific, sometimes formulaic, techniques in their age assessment reports to enact Merton-compliance and legitimise their production of a 'vulnerable child' or an 'undeserving, deceptive adult'. The product then is not a transcript but a descriptive and curated report, documenting the assessors' (subjective) perceptions of young people's bodies, presentation, characteristics and activities elevated in the report as an objective assessment of age.

Ordinarily, reports contain a standardised opening statement professing to be cognisant of 'a number of factors [that] may influence the development of a child/young person such as genetic, physical, psychological factors as well as family, community and culture'. What this does is discursively position assessors as competent and impartial, capable of expertly assessing something as un-assessable as age. For despite these opening caveats, assessors are invited to respond in the register of age 'truths' and capitalist time-consciousness we have critiqued above. The new National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) builds on existing

practices in local authorities, giving assessors detailed templates for completing their reports. The NAAB assessments we have reviewed prompt assessors to comment on bodily appearance through questions like:

How does their physical presentation compare to their peers? Observations about: signs of development such as facial hair and growth, pronouncement of Adam's Apple, muscle development, voice tone etc., facial lines, jowl lines, receding hair line, body hair. . .

The template invites commentary on childhood 'truths' such as vulnerability, dependency, submission, low confidence, a-politicalness, in/ability to cook, same-age friendships, attitude and demeanour, asking:

Do they behave age-appropriately? Do they accept the views of adults or challenge them? . . . Do they appear interested in age-appropriate youth interests and activities? . . . What is their level of independence? How do they manage cooking, budgeting, public transport, laundry, personal hygiene, etc.

The template questions also draw assessors' attention to young people's skills in literacy and numeracy and asks them to comment on young people's 'understanding of the calendar and passing of time'.

It is no accident then that the processes of age assessment and the systematic curation of the deserving child and the suspicious adult are built on the racialised and generational logics we have interrogated above: indeed, they lie at the very core of 'acceptable' holistic age assessment practices. Unlike the young person objectified in the report, professionals are considered authoritative and legitimate producers of knowledge about childhood, despite the fact the questions they are invited to answer rely on Euro-American logics about the body, age, time and racialisation which assessors respond to using, as indicated above, pseudo-scientific language and numeric evidence that act as powerful claims to truth.

To further exhibit a 'comprehensive understanding' of the person being assessed, greater preference and space are given in reports to the observations and views of other professionals that are hand-picked by assessors, who commonly use their experiences of working with people of certain nationalities and ethnicities as a device or frame of reference to comment on and measure the ages of an individual unaccompanied young person. In one report about a young person from Afghanistan, a teacher's observations are prefaced by 'lots of experience working with Asian boys'. Some reports print the views of several professionals consecutively over multiple pages, all of which essentially say the same thing. For example, one teacher was quoted as saying 'Kareem is very sure of himself and confident and that he can be manipulative towards others'. This was followed by another teacher quoted as reporting that Kareem is 'defiant and will respond with a definite "no" when asked to do something'. By printing almost identical professional views consecutively that undermine the young person's

account and credibility using racialised and developmental logics, one after the other, over multiple pages, the assessors create a spectacle of undeniable truth that constitutes the suspect 'imposter-child' that is popularised in hysterical media representations and which the largely unquoted object of the assessment cannot easily refute.⁴⁰ The holistic assessment, therefore, nefariously turns these seemingly benevolent public, education and charity workers into *post-hoc* border guards – calling on them to remember, reexamine, reframe and even relive their past interactions with young people based on suspicion and potential danger: is this an adult pretending to be a child? Do they pose a risk to the British public, especially British children? Age assessments are therefore part of an apparatus of power that reproduces wider vigilance, suspicion and fear about migrants.

It is not surprising then that reports from 'holistic' Merton-compliant assessments are usually lengthy (sometimes over fifty pages). Yet, this is not simply the result of including views of multiple professionals. Assessors' comments punctuate reports, appearing word for word at different stages of the report. The most common repetition in the reports we examined was of language that has an obviously negative meaning. In Manzoor's twenty-four-page report, for example, words such as 'defiant', 'dismissive', 'dominant' and even 'man' appear repeatedly, their ubiquity performatively making his generational positioning and racialisation seem both natural and immutable. In some cases, there is evidence of cutting and pasting commentary across reports for different young people. One CCoM participant, a young Kurdish Sorani speaker from Iran, was chastised in his report for not having an Afghan identity card or Tazkera and was then provided a copy of the final report in Arabic. This suggests that rather than a coincidence or reflection of reality, the commentary provided by assessors comes from a repository of textual commentary that is, in practice, drawn on regardless of the young person in question.

The report length then is more an artefact of repetition than depth. Repetition, and what comes across as an onslaught of negative but rational commentary, anchors in the reader's mind an image of a deceptive adult performing childishness. The report is not about biology, racialisation or generation, and yet it is. The assessors do not typically use language that is explicitly racist or colonial, yet each repetition reinforces and reproduces demonising tropes of the negatively racialised asylum seeker through pseudo-scientific developmental language. Age is critically weaponised against young migrants at the same time as age assessments lure professionals from different corners of public services to participate in the naturalisation, reification and reproduction of racialised and generational logics and immigration control.

God-complex – birthing of people

I was 15, really . . . In my document I was 16 . . . But they changed me . . . my date of birth here is different because we are different countries . . . they

changed it . . . I've got three date of births here. With the GP different, dentist different, my own different [laughs] . . . I don't know. Because of social worker . . . They just give me like what they had . . . I say, 'It's not mine'. (Femi)

And now I feel that my life is being destroyed . . . I have no age . . . I mean I don't know who I am even. [Laughs.] If someone ask me who you are, how could I say that . . . I am 19? How could I say that? (Tyler)

Femi and Tyler's words illustrate how age assessments can erase young people's own date of birth and bind them to another one that is not their own. Their accounts also reveal the enormity of the power which assessors conducting age assessments possess. Assessors can render someone non-existent or bring them into being as someone new. Effectively then, age disputes grant assessors license to play God by assigning migrants a new date of birth, catalogued in Home Office-issued documentation. This could mean changing the day, month and/or year of an individual's stated date of birth using hegemonic western capitalist metrics that are imbued with objectivity over and above an individual's knowledge of themselves. For example, in Colin's age assessment report, his stated date of birth is 15 March 2002, which the assessors recalculated to 15 July 1998, not only excluding him from the domain of childhood completely and therefore out of their support remit, but arbitrarily taking from him the month, in addition to the year, of his birth.

Age assessments do not always simply produce the age of legal adulthood but work in more complex ways to destabilise young people's birth details. For example, Kareem stated that he was 15 when he was assessed, born on 1 February 2001, but assessors decided he was 16, and decided his date of birth was 21 March 2000. In another case, the assessors allocated as a new birthday the date and month an age assessment came to an end. (Thus, cementing age assessment as a practice of bringing negatively racialised non-citizens into being in the UK.)

This is experienced as akin to 'stealing' one's personhood, as Fawad put it. He commented: '[They have] stolen everything at this time. Stolen everything. They're stealing your age, your time, your identity, your everything.' The violence of this existential theft echoes colonial violence against formerly colonised peoples. Even when young people succeed in overturning age contestations, they can be enmeshed for years in a temporal suspension in which they do not, institutionally, exist as themselves or, as Femi and Tyler's accounts suggest, they become entrapped in a state of perpetual institutional and existential confusion. Different dates of birth in different institutions make it difficult for young people to access necessary services, sometimes even impeding their access altogether if they cannot confirm which date of birth is on which system, as it is not, as Femi says, their actual date of birth. This is regardless of whether they are assessed as a child or adult. Thus, the violence of age assessment is compounded by institutional demands to deny one's own identity over and over again.

Age contestations (whether 'holistic' or 'scientific') are therefore best understood as institutionally fabricated and sanctioned means of consolidating the state's power to play God with the lives of negatively racialised people on the move: from stealing their age, time and identity; to creating a state of institutional non-existence; to remaking them in the image of the state's generational and racialised logic.

Conclusion

In this article, we have taken age assessments of unaccompanied children in the UK as a powerful example of the mobilisation of age as a technology of 'migration control'. By looking closely at the processes of producing childhood/adulthood, we have shown how age is weaponised in a hostile border regime. In the context of Britain's post-racial fantasy, age serves as a convenient foil, determined by seemingly neutral technical processes. However, as we demonstrated, age assessments draw on developmental and racialised logics which derive their force from Britain's (neo)coloniality. As such, age contestations are best understood as a tool of state violence which makes the division and hierarchisation of people and their 'deservingness' appear as given, thereby justifying conditional rights to welfare and protection.

Second, we have extended the literature by showing that age assessment is not only about controlling access to services from cash-strapped local authorities, but it is part of an intensifying set of punitive border technologies used by the British nation state in its effort to control and punish 'unruly' and 'autonomous' human mobility. When young people's mobility cannot be stopped at the border, age assessment serves as a form of intensive and hostile internal bordering. Practices of curating both age and a suspicious, negatively racialised figure entail a form of existential theft through which the state seeks to control the subject.

Third, we have made the case that the fundamental problem with age assessment lies neither in its imprecision nor in its inaccurate recourse to the 'truth' of the child body and age-appropriate demeanour and activity. Efforts which respond to the formulation of the problem in these ways risk directing energies down a path of reformist reforms, rather than refreshing our critical stance and political imaginaries. As 'tweaks that make some kind of change while ultimately maintaining, or even expanding, the oppressive structures they seek to improve',⁴¹ reformist reforms of age assessment are doomed to fail as benchmarks shift and the same evidence is read in conflicting ways. More substantially, reforming age assessment simply reproduces a deeper structural logic of reified adult-child age binaries, shoring up the figure of the vulnerable and deserving child vis-à-vis the undeserving adult (and particularly the 'risky' migrant Muslim man). The call for 'holistic age assessments' simply increases the evidentiary burden on professionals, as we have shown, effectively condoning further surveillance and objectification of young people, regardless of whether it relies on biometrics. Not only is

there no reforming the age assessment process without legitimising its racist and generational logics, but reforms do nothing to contest the bordering of social support. In contrast, reforming age assessment serves to rationalise and bolster a purported need for ‘migration management’, thereby tying imaginaries of rights and belonging to regularised immigration status in a nation state and attribution of a fixed bureaucratic age. Rather than requiring tweaking to work properly, age assessments are working as they are meant to: as a technology of division bred by racial capitalism, separating those deemed deserving of (at best partial) support and those subject to organised abandonment.

As De Genova points out, ‘the migration researcher is a part of the field of struggle and a participant therein’.⁴² Thus, he makes the case for ‘militant’ theory and practice, an insight echoed in the call to produce knowledge about childhood with ‘preferable material consequences for children and those human and non-human others with whom they live their lives’.⁴³ Our goal here then is not only to make an intellectual intervention by demonstrating how age is made, racialised and weaponised in the service of a violent border regime; we are insistent on mobilising knowledge production for political intervention, and we conclude with a call for the abolition, not reform, of age assessment. Echoing border abolitionists who urge us to focus our attention from increasing migration management towards ‘increasing freedom’,⁴⁴ we embrace a radically expansive vision of possibility and world-making. We do so by refusing an artificially produced scarcity of necessary resources and services, or the designation of any person or place as expendable, whether because of ascribed age or otherwise. In the words of Harsha Walia, ‘Why would we fight for anything less than freedom for all people?’⁴⁵

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