

## A WAGER FOR LIFE: *Queer children seeking asylum in Norway*

Elisabeth Stubberud<sup>1\*</sup>, Deniz Akin<sup>1</sup>, Stine H. Bang Svendsen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway

\* E-mail: elisabeth.stubberud@ntnu.no

Received 15 October 2018; Accepted 19 September 2019

### Abstract

This article explores the experiences of queer children who have sought asylum alone in Norway, focussing on hope, fear and despair. The children who are denied asylum relate an experience of standing at the brink of death, while those who are granted asylum describe how the queer life they have hoped for is postponed by the settlement and integration system, where they live in isolation and in risk of violence and bullying. We analyse these experiences in light of decolonial theory in which the conditions of war and proximity to death are extended into the childrens' lives under the custodianship of the Norwegian state. Drawing on queer theory, the wager is life as these children have known it. The potential is living beyond the coloniality of Being, in relationships and communities that provide the possibility of a meaningful life.

### Keywords

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers • refugee children • queer • decolonial theory • affective biopolitics

## Introduction

*You will never understand how we live. Because you haven't lived it.*

—Arash

This article explores the experiences of queer children who have sought asylum as unaccompanied minors in Norway. Having no company of parents or other custodians, unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and refugees form one of the most vulnerable groups of children within the refugee system. They go through asylum interviews, age determination, being appointed a legal guardian, and being sent to care centres or reception centres for minors followed by a long wait for the processing of the asylum application – all

 Open Access. © 2019 Elisabeth Stubberud et al., published by Sciendo.  This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License.

with minimal adult support. This stressful chain of bureaucracy presents further difficulties for queer children whose non-normative sexuality or gender identity challenges their ability to pass as children in the system, heightens their isolation from relatives and other migrant support networks and puts them at risk of bullying and violence in care- and asylum centres.

The empirical material in this study is qualitative interviews with queer children who have sought asylum in Norway. The participants in this study convey two narratives; a sense of hope that the possibility of living a queer life fills them with and the fear or despair of being denied this life. The children who are denied asylum relate an experience of standing at the brink of death. The children who are granted it relate how the queer life they have hoped for is postponed by the settlement and integration system, in which they often live in isolation and in risk of violence and bullying. By exploring how our research participants make emotional sense out of what happens to them as queer children who have sought asylum in Norway, we shed light on the affective bio- and necropolitics of the system that frames their lives in Norway. The politics of childhood is a key issue in the children's lives, which is particularly evident in their experiences with age assessment.

The term "unaccompanied minor asylum seeker" is the Norwegian state's official term for this group. This refers to children up to 18 years of age who have come to Norway seeking asylum without the accompany of parents or other custodians. Those who receive a residence permit in Norway subsequent to their application process become resettled as an "unaccompanied refugee". We refer to children with non-conforming sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as "queer", an umbrella term that also contributes to anonymising the children. Some, however, may not identify as queer but may prefer other terms such as "trans\*", "gay" or "bisexual".

Our discussions here are in dialogue with migration studies, childhood studies and queer studies. Across these fields, we believe that decolonial thinking, which is our main analytic lens, has much to offer in order to address the deep divide between those who experience protection from the border regimes of states such as Norway and those who experience violence. We analyse the children's experiences as articulations of the "coloniality of Being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007), in which the conditions of war, with its extreme risks and proximity to death, are extended into the children's lives under the custodianship of the Norwegian state. Furthermore, we draw on queer theory to highlight how the children make sense of putting life as they have known it down as a wager for a queer life that would allow them the possibility of living in personally and relationally meaningful ways. Arash, whom we quoted earlier, knows that we will never understand what it is really like to live under the conditions he has to. Taking his anger and desperation seriously prompts an inquiry into what the divide between us consists of.

## Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Norway

Across the authorities and agencies involved in providing care for refugee children, there is a concern over meeting unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors' need for support,

which demands a degree of staff and care that far surpasses the needs of adults (Berg & Tronstad 2015). In Norway, the type of care provided to unaccompanied minor asylum seekers is determined according to the age of the child. Children less than the age of 15 years are offered care and housing in care centres under the direction of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. Those between the age of 15 and 18 years are housed in reception centres for unaccompanied minor refugees, under the direction of the Directorate of Immigration. Care centres are set in a space similar to a regular Norwegian home, and there are around two full-time equivalent staff per child. Reception centres on the other hand are organised as institutions, and there are 0.7 full-time equivalent staff per child (Sønsterudbråten, Tyldum & Raundalen 2018). These differences mean that children older than 15 years are offered a different care service from those younger than 15 years (Berg & Tronstad 2015; Sønsterudbråten, Tyldum & Raundalen 2018).

Another central issue that shapes the precarious situation of some children are the temporary residence permits that expire when the child turns 18. Age assessment plays an important part in the process and relies on scientifically dubious medical assessments based on hand and teeth photography, as well as a tendency to rely on visual assessments of age (Noll 2015; Sørsveen 2018). Temporary permits are granted for unaccompanied children deemed to be between 16 and 18 years of age and who are not considered in need of asylum (Immigration Act § 8-8, UDI). In 2017, almost 45% of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers were given temporary residence permit (NOAS, FO & Redd Barna 2017). These temporary permits are reported to contribute to psychological trauma and is also seen in connection with the common issue of children running away from asylum reception centres due to fear of deportation (ibid).

## Presenting as a queer asylum-seeking child

Prejudice and stereotypes about queer people's lives and appearances have been documented in justifications for declining asylum seekers on the basis of sexual orientation, both in Norway and in Europe at large (Akin 2017; Akin & Svendsen 2018; Gartner 2015, Gustavsson 2016; Mühleisen, Røthing & Svendsen 2012). This research shows that asylum seekers are required to be recognizable as queer subjects according to Western stereotypes (ibid). Demonstrating a marriage-like relationships is helpful and suggests that homonormativity and homonationalism are at work in these processes (Akin & Svendsen 2018; Hedlund & Wimark 2019). Following this critique, Norwegian immigration authorities is now explicit that case workers should avoid stereotypes, expectations of specific sexual practice or early acknowledgement of a queer identity (UDI 2018, see also Stubberud and Akin 2018).

As Robinson and Davies (2018) explain, childhood has been understood in a dichotomous relation to adulthood, signifying vulnerability, innocence, immaturity and lacking agency. This social construction of childhood produces the protection of children as an absolute moral imperative. Legal texts along with prevailing social norms and conceptions of childhood in European countries suggest that all children, regardless of origin, have the

right to protection, love and support. Norway has implemented the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which involves a legal obligation to provide care for children, including children who are deprived from the care of their families. In research, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are constructed as in need of support and protection, but with little attention paid to both the children themselves and structural conditions including racism in the host country, as argued by Wernsjö (2011). This may lead to both pathologising as well as othering of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (ibid).

For asylum-seeking children who are queer, not addressing the structural dimensions of the asylum-seeking process, such as age assessment and living conditions in the host country, may be particularly troublesome. Cultural construction of childhood suggests that children are innocent and vulnerable non-agents who should be protected from key aspects of adult life, especially sexuality, politics and work (Crawley 2011). These aspects of the cultural construction of childhood amount to severe challenges for queer children who have fled their homes. They have demonstrated independence and agency, and they have a sexual identity, which points towards an adultlike way of being in the world (ibid). Hazeldean (2011) concludes in her review of adjudications that concern the protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans\* (LGBT) asylum-seeking children in the US that LGBT identity works against being seen as a child by judges. Hedlund and Wimark (2019) have furthermore traced a tendency among case workers to describe queer children's sexual relationships in terms that make them seem durable and adultlike in adjudication processes where children have been granted asylum based on sexual orientation. Notably, this is also the case when the relationships involved are between young children and significantly older adults, which would in most other contexts be seen as sexual abuse (ibid).

The empirical research on the struggles of queer children who seek asylum is echoed in theoretical work on queerness in Western culture. Queerness has the effect of symbolically cancelling childhood, partly because it takes the child out of the heteronormative imaginary and timeline that both childhood and adulthood are construed in. For Edelman (2004), this is what relates queerness to death, as queerness represents a refusal of futurity as it is commonly known, and an insistence living life here and now. The symbolic connection between queerness and death, as well as the radical refusal to give in to its threats that Edelman addresses, is very evident in the accounts of the participants in this study. So is the insight that queerness can and does point towards a life worth living above and beyond the constraints and realities of the present condition that Muños (2009) evokes in his work on queerness, hope and futurity. The affective tensions between hope for a queer life, and the disappointment, fear and despair that the process of seeking asylum also involves, are key issues for the children who have participated in this study. In order to properly account for the danger and violence the participants face as asylum seekers, and the radical vision that having hope for the future requires under these conditions, we suggest reading the system and the children's situation in light of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000).

## Affect, emotion and the coloniality of Being

The coloniality of power conceptualises how the colonial organisation of labour and the idea of race continue to be central for power in the world today (Quijano 2000). Coloniality is not the same as colonialism. Maldonado-Torres (2007: 243) describes coloniality as “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations”. Migration systems in contemporary Europe should in this light be understood within the patterns and methods of power that colonial administration inaugurated. Specifically, they work through the methodology of misanthropic scepticism that continues to reproduce distinctions between the more or less human instated by colonialism and the concept of race. Maldonado-Torres (ibid: 246) describes “misanthropic scepticism” as the systematic doubt of the most obvious, which transforms rights into suspicious questions. In the case of the asylum, adjudication process for unaccompanied children, the statement that the child is entitled to basic security is transformed into the question “are you really a child”? Similarly, the statement of queer people’s right to protection from persecution produces the question “are you really queer”? Through this logic, protection from persecution is produced as a privilege granted by the state as opposed to a right that the subject can expect.

Coloniality informs the concept of biopower as coined by Foucault (1990) in important ways. Biopower can be summarised as the power to sustain life in certain ways for certain groups. For Foucault, the state “vests itself” in a population and produces biopower in a way that also creates a split between the population whose life should be produced and those who are left to die (Mbembe 2003:17). Racism is the key technology that separates the living (subjects of biopower) and the dead in Foucault’s (ibid) account of the concept. This understanding echoes the role of race in decolonial theory, as producing the lines between protected and disposable populations, what Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) described as the “color line” (Du Bois 2007). Mbembe (2003) has argued that necropower needs to be added to biopower in order to understand how warfare is included in the functioning of modern states. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Mbembe (2003) describes necropower as the technologies of modern states’ warfare, which make certain areas unliveable through the logics of military “safekeeping” and warfare. This is relevant to our discussion of unaccompanied asylum seekers in Norway because a large number of these children have fled Afghanistan, where Norway has been involved in warfare from 2001 and onwards. In this light, they have been subjected to the Norwegian (among other states’) bio/necropower prior to their flight from Afghanistan. We think it is important to understand the normalisation of the effects of war to understand these children’s experience of being asylum seekers in Norway.

To explain this further, we will introduce the “coloniality of Being” as an analytical concept (Maldonado-Torres 2007). The coloniality of Being describes the ontological difference between human and non-human that is inscribed in the concept of race and demonstrated by the systematic differential protection of life in the contemporary world (ibid). Maldonado-Torres (2007: 255) notes that the “coloniality of Being primarily refers to

the normalization of the extraordinary events that take place in war". Quoting Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism*, he describes the coloniality of Being as an "ever menacing death" that is experienced as a life in which death is ever present in the precarious lives of oneself and one's loved ones, and where any hope for the future is absent (Fanon 1994; Maldonado-Torres 2007: 255). Living the coloniality of Being is the experience of being dispensable and of being removed from the web of human relations and possibilities that gives life meaning (ibid).

## Empirical material<sup>1</sup>

We have conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with nine queer unaccompanied children who have come to Norway as asylum seekers. The initial goal of the interviews was to map the living conditions for queer unaccompanied children living in asylum reception centres and care centres, as part of a larger project done for the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. The project was done in collaboration with Skeiv Verden (Queer World), an organisation that assists and supports queer people with minority background in Norway. The interviews were carried out face-to-face, with a translator from Skeiv Verden present, or over the phone or Skype in Norwegian or English.

The recruitment was done with the help of Skeiv Verden. Through their role as trusted helpers for the participants, they were in a good position to explain our research and our role to the research participants (including explaining the difference between a research interview and an asylum interview, see also Øien 2010). With their help, we attempted to achieve "genuinely informed consent" (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007: 301) from the research participants. Skeiv Verden has also been following up research participants after the interviews by contacting them and answering any questions as well as providing emotional and practical support as needed. Without the collaboration with Skeiv Verden, this project could not have been carried out.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were transcribed. They have been collectively analysed in an anonymised form by the authors along with a representative from Skeiv Verden. The goal of the initial analysis was to map patterns and important themes that came up in the interviews. This article is based on the overall project report (Stubberud and Akin 2018) but focuses specifically on the interviews with queer unaccompanied children.

## Queerness, hope and risk

The participants in this study have shared a profound feeling of isolation (for a discussion of loneliness among unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, see Herz and Lalander 2017). Being an unaccompanied minor requires the child to seek asylum without adult support, in order to be considered to have the right to protection. The children are required to shed with, or hide, their relational support networks elsewhere, in order to be considered as custodians of the Norwegian state as an unaccompanied child. Yet, queerness intensifies

the process of isolation; queer people are sometimes figured as particularly assimilable into the nation because their separation from their family and nation of origin is considered particularly credible (Akin & Svendsen 2018). However, this potential assimilability comes at great costs for the asylum seeker. Being visible and open as queer is also risky if one comes from countries where homosexuality or alternative gender expressions are met with state sanctioned violence (Egebo, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018). The possibility of stepping out of these life conditions and into a life with more freedom and security fills many queer asylum seekers with great hopes for the future (ibid). Their hopes motivate them to also take great risks, such as coming out as queer. Several of the children who have participated in this study describe their hopes and expectations for the possibility of a queer livelihood in Norway. In some cases, they have been told by friends that Norway is a good place to be queer before arrival. More commonly, they learn about the possibility of living a queer life upon arrival in Norway and carve out an imagined future based on this information. Abdul<sup>2</sup> had no idea that he could live queer life in Norway, but slowly realised that this was a possibility:

I came from Afghanistan, and there and in other Muslim countries you don't talk about these things, it doesn't exist. So I didn't know that I needed to talk about it when I came to Norway. But then I found out that Pride existed, and that's when I considered coming out, and found out about freedom and such. But it would have been easier if someone at the reception centre told me.

Abdul was a 17-year-old boy hiding from the police at the time of the interview. His appeal had been rejected, and he was past his deportation date. It had taken time for him to realise that he could live openly as queer in Norway, as it had for several other participants too. Furthermore, he could not imagine that disclosing sexual orientation could strengthen chance for asylum. Most of our participants learnt from their appointed representative or from the staff at the care or reception centre that it is OK to be queer in Norway. However, the token inclusion of homosexuality in the information program for minor refugees had not convinced them that it was safe to tell anyone about their identity. This had to come from someone they trusted. Upon learning about the child's sexual orientation or gender identity, representatives generally notify both their lawyer and the immigration office, so that their case is updated. The idea of a strengthened asylum case based on this information, combined with the prospect of a good life, gave Abdul hope. Learning about queerness gave a horizon to his life and pointed towards a future in which he could live and thrive beyond the constraints of society as he knew it (Muñoz 2009). These hopes were crushed, however, primarily by the age assessment, which claimed he was more than 18 years and hence not in need of protection as a child. He stated defeatedly: "I had hopes when I came to Norway, but the opposite [of my hopes] happened".

His grave disappointment and desperation at the verge of an uncertain future are echoed by another Afghan boy, Ehsan, who is 16 years old: "When I came here, I thought everything is good and I can live here, and it was great. I thought they would let me stay. Now I got the negative response". While Abdul's age was disputed by the immigration office

from the beginning, Ehsan was first placed in a care centre for children less than 16 years when he arrived. There, he got the necessary support from the staff to come out as queer and get involved in the queer community. The revision of his age to 18 years later on, based on hand and teeth measurements, tore apart the security and hopes for the future he had gained initially. At the time of the interview, he was placed in a reception centre for adults, with minimal care. He was depressed and terrified of both his immediate surroundings at the reception centre and the future. He feared for his life and expressed that he was unsure of whether he will survive the wait for a final judgement in his case, much less a negative outcome.

For these two boys, learning that they could potentially live good queer lives in Norway had filled them with hope. At the time of the interviews, their hopes were crushed and their future was uncertain. Not merely uncertain because they did not know what will happen, but in the sense that they felt their own proximity to death. What has crushed their hopes for a future and a liveable life is the age assessment, which has placed them at an older age and positioned them as liars vis-à-vis the system. When case workers are unsure of an asylum seeker's age, they are asked to undergo an age assessment (Munir 2017; Sørsvæn 2018). The age assessment process takes white western bodies as a standard, and physical deviance will place the child at a higher or lower "age" (ibid). The effects of the system is that boys from the Middle East and Afghanistan tend to be perceived as older than they say they are, while certain other groups such as boys from Eritrea or Ethiopia tend to be assessed as younger (Munir 2017). In a process of seeking asylum where the question of whether you are less than 18 or 16 years has serious consequences, the children's ability to pass as such is crucial for their future.

The age assessment technology and practice demonstrate how misanthropic scepticism is built into the asylum system (Maldonado-Torres 2007). The system queries; "are you really a child"? The system then proceeds to provide the answer to its own question by relying on racial constructs to quasi-scientifically determine age. For the boys who have been called into question above, the system is inexplicable. All they know is that they have been separated out. Their queerness accentuates a situation that they share with other asylum-seeking children. The hope of asylum also represents the hope of living a queer life. The rejection replaces hope with the realisation that they are seen as disposable. The coloniality of Being in their situation is evident in the depth of hopelessness and despair they experience, which is comparable to the experiences of war and flight, while being in the custody of the Norwegian state.

## Queer futures for those who stay

Many queer children who seek asylum are given temporary or permanent protection in Norway. This protection, however, does not shield them effectively from violence and harassment. Queer asylum seekers encounter various challenges during their stay in asylum reception centres and during their resettlement process. Racism within mainstream

queer communities and homophobia within particular racialised communities shape the everyday of queer refugees and immigrants (Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018; Lee & Brotman 2011). For children in care centres or reception centres, these risks of harassment, bullying and violence are crucial everyday-issues.

The participants who have been granted asylum in Norway generally have some queer network and are aware of the possibility of living a safe queer life. However, their actual possibilities for doing so are often very limited. Participants who have been granted asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity and who have been open upon arrival to Norway experience being closeted very effectively when entering the state's system for care and protection for minor refugees. At care centres and reception centres for minor asylum seekers, the participants are often either hiding their identity for their own safety or suffering from bullying and violence from their peers. Many are scared of being "outed" by others, which means that information about their sexual orientation or gender identity is passed on. Some are open to all or select staff members but not their peers.

Ismail, who came from Somalia at the age of 16, was singled out by his peers as queer almost immediately and heavily bullied. His case was processed within just over a month. He did not seek protection based on his sexual orientation, but the short processing time and his appearance made the other kids suspect that he got to stay because he was queer. He relates:

That's when it started, the rumour, that "he is queer". I was very insecure. I kind of knew myself but had never told anyone. At this reception centre there were many who did not have permanent residency, and it was surprising to them that I got it after being in Norway for so short a time. So everyone were like "Jesus, he *has* to be queer". If I had had someone to talk to it would have helped, but at the time I just denied it, and kept saying "no, I am not queer!". I started showing the other boys my case papers, so they could see that there was nothing about my sexuality in there.

Ismail's experiences powerfully demonstrate how uncertainties about one's own future related to one's asylum case trigger the tension among children at the asylum reception and care centres, establishing an atmosphere open for rage, competition and bullying. For Ismail, the bullying primarily took a homophobic form that made him request to be moved several times to different facilities. As a result, he became fully closeted and depressed. He relates that the living conditions became unbearable for him: "Every time someone mentioned it, I pulled more into myself. I tried to kill myself at one time".

Being granted asylum in Norway did not shield Ismail from extreme risk and despair. His living situation made him subject to continued violence and bullying. Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains how the coloniality of Being is not something that one can easily step out of or transcend from. Drawing on Fanon, he explains how the coloniality of Being implies an excessive injurability that is organised through race, gender and sexuality (ibid). Femininity on the dark side of the colour line, including male femininity, is associated with a heightened risk of sexual harassment and violence. For Ismail, the care system for minor refugees amounted to an extension of the conditions of war in his life, where race, sexuality

and gender continued to render him particularly injurable. Before he had fled from country to country, and then his life as a custodian of the Norwegian state was marked by constantly being on the move, looking for a safe space in the system.

At the time of the interview, Ismail was 21 years old and had survived his teenage years as a custodian of the Norwegian state. He reflected over his experiences as a queer unaccompanied refugee child. When asked about whether he knew it was OK to be queer and open about it in Norway when he was younger, he responded that “I knew it was OK for Norwegian people, but I never thought it was OK for someone from, like, Somalia, to be queer”. He seemed to have learnt this distinction from the discrepancy between how the Norwegian society was described when it came to LGBT issues and his lived reality. He refrained from asking staff for help when he was bullied on several occasions. As difficult as that was, his future settlement in a community as a permanent resident was his primary concern. He explained:

All you think about is getting permanent residency, and then, you think, everything is going to change. But it stays the same. If you live in a reception centre or you are settled in a municipality, it is kind of the same lifestyle. We refugees attend the same school, live in the same way. I had to make a major change in my life to have some peace.

The major change he was talking about was moving out of the reception centres and shared housing for refugees provided by the municipality. By making such a move, however, he would lose the little financial support he had. He commented:

I wanted to move, but the system makes it very difficult to move from the municipality where you are settled the first five years. I have moved before the five years ended, because I thought I would die before they were over, I couldn't handle it. I just had to move.

In Norway, refugees who are granted residence permit are settled in municipalities, and their rights to education and financial support are tied to residency in that municipality. The municipality provides housing, which is usually in shared living arrangements with other refugees. This practice ensures that refugees are placed all over the country, including rural areas. For queer children and young people who are refugees, however, the cultural aspects of rural life, combined with the practice of shared and segregated housing and education for refugees, make life in many local communities challenging. All our participants have experienced bullying and fear of disclosure in care centres, reception centres or housing provided by the municipality. They cannot find space to be themselves at home or in school. Nor can they find a community in their spare time that supports their identity and allows them to interact with others without fearing homophobia, transphobia, racism, or a combination in rural areas (see also Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018). For these reasons, the years of settlement and introduction into Norwegian language and the society can be very challenging. Many choose to move to cities in the hope of finding a community of people in a similar situation. In addition, adult queer asylum seekers living in reception

centres located in rural and remote areas experience similar problems and yearn to move to big cities in Norway where queer culture and queer racialised communities are concentrated (Akin 2017; Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018).

Some of our participants have been able to complete compulsory education and stay in the municipality they have been settled in until they have been free to move, albeit at great costs for their health. For others, this was not an option. Both Ismail and Leyla explained that giving up on the system and the support that comes with it was their only way to survive. Leyla arrived in Norway at the age of 17 years and left her shared housing for unaccompanied minor refugees at the age of 18 years. She could not bear to hide her gender identity 24/7 any longer. This meant that she lost her right to financial support and was on her own also in terms of care. She did not know anybody, and nobody came to check on her. At the time of the interview, she was 22 years old and had moved to Oslo and found a queer community.

In the accounts of Leyla and Ismail of what it is like to be a custodian of the Norwegian state as a queer minor refugee, we see how the pretence of protection amounts to a continuation of a life in extreme risk. In both narratives, escaping the “protection” of the state is crucial for their chance to live a liveable life. In Nordic countries, the trust in state institutions is generally high and people tend to see the state as a provider of stability and security. For the participants in this study, the state is rather experienced as an agent of power that decides over their fate and keeps them in unbearable life situations over time. Although escaping state protection means being economically destitute, this appears preferable to continuing the “refugee” life. Outside the state and municipalities’ arrangements lies the possibility of emerging from isolation and into some form of relationality.

## Liveable queer lives on the horizon

The danger of being a queer child in the asylum system is paradoxical, granted that many of these children have been given asylum precisely because of persecution for the sexual orientation or gender identity. As we have shown earlier, elements of that persecution continue in Norway, due to insufficient protection from bullying by peers, who are also in a very challenging life situation. The children who are granted asylum learn to be cautionary, and some find ways of dealing with the paradox that they both can and cannot be open about who they are in Norway. Mirzaman related a piece of advice to others in his situation, which sheds light on this:

When you come to Norway, not everyone are the same. Some people like it, some people do not like it. You have to choose the people you will talk to about it carefully.

He had learnt this the hard way. He had, like several others, experienced being outed by people he had confided in and suffered bullying as a consequence. He had also met carers who he trusted and who had helped him. He had met staff who tried to help him get in touch with the queer community and staff who tried to prevent him from going to the meeting

places that were available to him. It is evident from the accounts of our participants that individual carers and representatives have made a great difference in their lives after they came to Norway. In the cases where professionals have been able to secure safe living conditions, if only temporarily, they are grateful. In addition to securing immediate safety, the route to a liveable queer life in Norway has relied on getting in touch with a queer community, with or without the help of carers.

The participants in this project have been recruited through the work of an organisation by and for queer migrants, which provides community services, contacts for legal assistance and political advocacy. For the participants who have been granted asylum, the possibility of joining a queer community appears as a way of moving out of what they experience as the state's migrant prison and moving into a better life. Wahid explains that he travelled from the north where he was living to Oslo and met with the organised community of queer migrants:

I came to Oslo as a visitor. A friend invited me to this Christmas party. We came to the party that the organization had set up, and I was so happy, I have never ever been so happy. I was also afraid, and told them please not to take my picture, I am not open. It was nice to communicate with other queers. Each time I went to Oslo, I visited them.

In accounts like these, it is possible to see how the prospect of a community and friends whom one does not need to hide from gives hope and enjoyment that signify the possibility of a future and a better life.

For others, the precarity of their situation also after being granted asylum is so evident that they doubt the possibilities of moving on from their current desperate situation even with a permanent residence permit. Arash had just received a letter with a positive reply on his asylum application at the time of the interview. He had also, however, just lost his boyfriend. The boyfriend, who had been denied asylum, had escaped the reception centre where they lived together and was as far as Arash knew in France at the time. In the interview, his grief and anger were evident. He did not trust that he himself would be allowed to stay despite his positive verdict. He also did not think anyone, including the queer activist community, could help his boyfriend. In the interview, he expressed the futility of trying to understand the situation from the outside:

You will never understand how we live. Because you haven't lived it. It is so hard even to get here. If you wait a year in Greece, and a year here. That is two years, in which you wait. And then you get a negative response and you travel to another country and try again. It is so very difficult. If he (boyfriend) gets a negative response there, then ... I don't know.

Arash expresses anger, grief and disillusionment in his interview. He does not trust the letter he has got, which states that he has been granted a permanent residence permit. He will not be led to believe that he is out of the woods and that he is suddenly safe. He is not about to believe that anyone who trusts the system is going to help his boyfriend, because

they do not know what it is to be on the other side of the state's mechanism of protection: to be a perceived danger that the state protects its subjects from, rather than a subject of protection.

In the accounts mentioned earlier, we see how unaccompanied children who have sought asylum in Norway learn that there is a queer future for them there. The promise of a queer future is not merely a promise of a good life to a child with a queer sexual orientation or gender identity. The glimpse they get of living a good life as queer is also a vision of a future in which the relational support and possibilities in life are available for them. Muñoz (2009) has explained that queerness as possibility, as hope, is “always on the horizon” representing a life beyond the here and now. The hope that learning of a queer life represents and the relations and possibilities of community that they also experience shows how queerness can indeed represent such a horizon. Being queer also heightens their vulnerability to the coloniality of power in the asylum adjudication process and risk of exposure to violence when part of this system. It accentuates the isolation and lack of alternative possibilities that they share with other children seeking asylum. Research on queer youth and suicide shows that the sense of not having a future, of not being able to imagine a life in which they can be themselves, is key in young queers' considerations of suicide (Hellesund 2008). To lose the possibility of a viable life may feel like a death sentence. For the participants in this study, the theoretical equation between childhood and futurity is literal. Without passing as a child, there is no future: “The future is kid stuff” (Edelman 2004).

For children who have been granted asylum, the hope of a future where they can live as queer is kept alive. Yet, as our participants above explain, that hope is arrested by the settlement and integration system. To postpone your own needs for five years in order to secure a future for yourself is hard but imaginable for an adult. A child, however, can only see this situation as temporary after having survived it and learnt of another way of living. In the USA, Englert (2014) has found that refugee children who are queer are prone to end up in “migration limbo” for prolonged periods of time. This makes them particularly vulnerable to violence, homelessness and ostracising from family or carers, in addition to the challenges with finding a queer identity and life course that they share with queer youth in general (ibid). For our participants, the situation in which they have to hide their identity and live with heightened levels of fear and stress in order to have a minimum of security keeps being extended. Their experiences of violence, bullying and harassment are of the kind that leave lasting wounds. By the time they come out of the state system for settlement and integration, they have known no other reality.

## Conclusion: A wager for life

The coloniality of Being describes a life without protection, in which the security measures of the modern state are experienced as threats to one's life (Maldonado-Torres 2007). In the accounts of our participants, the affective structure of the asylum institute is experienced as extension of the affective structures of war. Their accounts relate fear of violence and

abuse, lack of hopes for any future, despair with their life situation and a close proximity to death, which are associated with an unbearable life. How can we best describe the affective structure that inflicts these experiences? In this article, we have suggested that we need to understand this as a structure of coloniality, in which the coloniality of Being describes the affective conditions for life, following Maldonado-Torres (2007). The management of populations in modern nation states, including migration policies and the asylum system, should be understood as part of the biopolitical apparatus of the state. To understand the experience of being a child seeking asylum requires accounting for the necropolitical aspects of modern state power as well. The asylum institute does not mark an end to the affective experience of being a victim of war. Rather, it extends it. Children who flee from Afghanistan or other countries to seek protection in Norway meet the same state system, as authorities rely on misanthropic scepticism to judge who is worthy of protection and who is disposable. The system is the same for all children who seek asylum alone. Queer children risk even more, however, because their relational support and security while waiting are often weaker.

However, the coloniality of Being that the asylum system produces for unaccompanied children who are queer does not foreclose their hope of coming out of the system and into a meaningful life. When given the chance, in the form of a positive decision in their asylum case, some of the children who have participated in this study have also fought their way out of the settlement and integration system. Their queerness heightens isolation and risk of violence and abuse in the system, and lessens their ability to rely on migrant solidarity within the system. Queerness also provides a vision of another life, which they might be able to build for themselves. For those who get the chance however, racism in the mainstream queer community and in the Norwegian society at large is a major obstacle (Eggebø, Stubberud & Karlstrøm 2018). However, queer migrant solidarity outside settlement and integration system provides the minimum of relationality and love they need to come into another life. For the queer children who have given their accounts of seeking asylum in this study, the asylum claim is a huge gamble. The wager is life as they have known it. The potential is living beyond the coloniality of Being, in relationships and communities that provide the possibility of a meaningful life.

## Notes

1. The data material was originally gathered for the project 'Alene og skeiv. En studie av livssituasjonen for skeive enslige mindreårige asylsøkere i omsorgssentre og asylmottak' ('Alone and queer. A study of the life situation for queer unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in care- and reception centres'), financed by the The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. This article builds on the findings from the project research report. For this project, we also interviewed 13 staff who were working in care centres, asylum reception centres for unaccompanied minors or as formal representatives. These interviews are not analysed here. We are indebted to the

participants, as well as to Hasti Hamidi (Salam) and Susanne Demou Øvergaard (Skeiv Verden) for their participation in the project.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

## References

- Akin, D 2017, 'Queer asylum seekers: translating sexuality in Norway', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 43, pp. 458-474.
- Akin, D & Svendsen, SHB 2018, 'Becoming family. Orientalism, homonormativity and queer asylum in Norway', in *National politics and sexuality in transregional perspective*, eds. A Rohde, Cv Braum & S Schüler-Springorum, Routledge, London, pp. 39-54.
- Berg, B & Tronstad, KR 2015, *Levekår for barn i asylsøkerfasen*, NTNU Samfunnsforskning, Trondheim.
- Crawley, H. 2011. 'Asexual, Apolitical Beings: The Interpretation of Children's Identities and Experiences in the UK Asylum System'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37, 1171-1184.
- Du Bois, WEB 2007, *The souls of black folk*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Edelman, L 2004 *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke University Press, Durham
- Eggebø, H, Stubberud, E & Karlstrøm, H 2018, *Levekår blant skeive med innvandrerbakgrunn i Norge*, NF-Report 9/2018.
- Englert, E 2014, 'No gaiety here: the plight of undocumented LGBT youth in America', *Indonesian Journal of International & Comparative Law*, vol. 1, p. 1011.
- Fanon, F 1994, *A dying colonialism*, Grove Press, New York.
- Foucault, M 1990, *The history of sexuality. Volume 1: an introduction*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Gartner, JL 2015, 'Incredibly queer: sexuality-based Asylum in the European Union', in *Transatlantic perspectives on diplomacy and diversity*, ed. A Chase, Humanity in Action Press, New York, pp. 39-66.
- Gustavsson, A 2016, *Fra handling til identitet*. The Faculty of Law. University of Oslo, Oslo, 117.
- Hazeldean, S 2011, 'Confounding identities: the paradox of LGBT children under asylum law', *UC Davis Law Review*, vol. 45, p. 373.
- Hedlund, D & Wimark, T 2019, 'Unaccompanied children claiming Asylum on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 257-277.
- Hellesund, T 2008, *Identitet på liv og død*, Spartacus, Oslo.
- Herz, M & Lalander, P 2017, 'Being alone or becoming lonely? The complexity of portraying 'unaccompanied children' as being alone in Sweden', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 20, no. 8, pp. 1062-1076.

- Lee, EOJ & Brotman, S 2011, 'Identity, refugeeness, belonging: experiences of sexual minority refugees in Canada', *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, vol. 48, pp. 241-274.
- Mackenzie, C, McDowell, C & Pittaway, E 2007, 'Beyond 'do no harm': the challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 20, pp. 299-319.
- Maldonado-Torres, N 2007, 'On the coloniality of being', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, pp. 240-270.
- Mbembe, A 2003, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, vol. 15, pp. 11-40.
- Mühleisen, W, Røthing, Å & Svendsen, SHB 2012, 'Norwegian sexualities: assimilation and exclusion in Norwegian immigration policy', *Sexualities*, vol. 15, pp. 139-155.
- Munir, A 2017, *Aldersundersøkelse av enslige mindreårige asylsøkere*, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Oslo.
- Muñoz, J 2009, *Cruising utopia: the then and there of queer futurity*, NYU Press, New York.
- NOAS, FO & Redd Barna 2017, *En gjennomgang av midlertidig opphold til enslige mindreårige asylsøkere*, NOAS Report.
- Noll, G 2015, 'Junk science? Four arguments against the radiological age assessment of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum', *SSRN*. Available from: <<https://ssrn.com/abstract=2546221>>.
- Øien, C 2010, *Underveis. En studie av enslige mindreårige asylsøkere*. Fafo-Report.
- Quijano, A 2000, 'Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 533-580.
- Robinson, KH & Davies, C 2018, 'A history of construction of child and youth sexualities: innocence, vulnerability, and the construction of the normative citizen subject', in *Youth Sexualities*, ed. S Talburt, Praeger, Santa Barbara, pp. 3-30.
- Sønsterudbråten, S, Tyldum, G & Raundalen, M 2018, *Et trygt sted å vente*. FAFO-Report 2018: 05.
- Sørsveen, AT 2018, *The ageless*, Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, NTNU, Trondheim, p. 172.
- Stubberud, E & Akin, D 2018, *Alene og skeiv*, KUN-Report.
- UDI 2018, *UDI internmeldinger: Søknad om beskyttelse der det er anført frykt for forfølgelse på grunn av seksuell orientering og kjønnsidentitet*. Available from: <[https://www.udiregelverk.no/no/rettskilder/udi-interne-meldinger/im-2018-004/#\\_Toc510602449](https://www.udiregelverk.no/no/rettskilder/udi-interne-meldinger/im-2018-004/#_Toc510602449)>. [Last accessed 27.09.2018].
- UDI 2010 Utlendingsforskriften § 8-8 Begrenset oppholdstillatelse til enslige mindreårige asylsøkere over 16 år som får opphold på grunn av mangel på forsvarlig omsorg ved retur. Available from <<https://www.udiregelverk.no/no/rettskilder/sentrale/utlendingsforskriften/kap8/8-8/>> [Last accessed 26.09.2019]
- Wernsjö, U 2011, 'Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: whose perspective?', *Childhood*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 495-507.