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Submission to the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

*Title:* Radical hope in asylum seeking: Political agency beyond linear temporality

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## Radical hope in asylum seeking: Political agency beyond linear temporality

*Abstract:* Political agency of refugees and asylum seekers is usually recognised as different forms of activism, focusing on rights claiming or protesting on inferior living conditions. While these activities are vitally important in the struggle over refugee rights and policies, they are not the only ways in which asylum seekers and refugees act politically. Perhaps paradoxically, the publicly visible activities may hide from the view other forms of effective and critical agency. Based on research with asylum seekers in precarious situations, this paper discusses their subtle forms of agency seldom identified as political – least by those enacting them. Many asylum seekers and refugees have little faith in exerting change through public protest and explicitly dissociate themselves from politics. With focus on mundane critical attitudes and activities, this paper suggests that thin political possibilities open through agency motivated by 'radical hope'. The radically hopeful agencies in hopeless asylum situations, and their political dimensions, are identified through a non-linear understanding of temporality that challenges the received notion of refugeeness as generated in the past, struggled for in the present, and orienting towards a desired-for future.

Keywords: politics of time, asylum, refuge, destituent potential, thin political agency

### Introduction

Time and temporality have received increased attention within migration studies (Cwerner, 2001, 2004; Fontanari, 2017; Andersson, 2014; Griffiths, 2014; Bas and Yeoh, 2019), border studies (Little, 2015; Reitel, 2013), and geography (Sziarto and Leitner, 2010; Tazzioli, 2018; Thorshaug and Brun, 2019). From endless waiting at state borders, in refugee camps or so-called reception centres, to unlimited periods spent in detention centres while asylum claims or deportations are being processed, refugees and asylum seekers' lives have been placed within spaces of waiting, continual uncertainty and limbo (Griffiths, 2014; Dona, 2015; Rotter, 2016; Turnbull, 2016; Spathopoulou and Carastathis, 2020). In this paper, we follow scholarship understanding time as a technology of governmentality (Foucault, 2007, cf. Tazzioli, 2018; Fontanari, 2017), with particular attention to 'hidden' political possibilities and agencies within a politics of time (Peteet, 2018; Thorshaug and Brun, 2019).

Temporality is arguably a key element in the experienced realities of asylum seeking and refuge, in Europe and elsewhere. To most people seeking asylum the present becomes the immobile norm while the mobilities of future-past drift afar as remote dreams. In many EU countries, even when people have been recognised as refugees, they are only granted leave to remain for five years, illustrating the "permanent temporariness" many asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in (Bailey et al., 2002; Vosko et al., 2014). Indeed, construed impermanence is a key technology to control the mobility and lives of asylum seekers and refugees (Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban, 2018), along with the criminalisation and illegalisation of migrants through border control and policing, and the establishment of refugee camps and reception spaces including "safe" and "offshore processing" zones (De Genova, 2002; Fassin, 2011; Agier, 2011; Spathopoulou, Kallio & Häkli, forthcoming). The precarious realities created in the current EU border regime challenge linear readings of refugeeness as a temporal progression from life at risk to one in safety, and call for a more nuanced focus on the forms of agency embedded in the lived, experienced and negotiated temporalities that make up asylum seekers and refugees' everyday lives.

There is a broad literature showing that even in extremely subordinate positions, asylum seekers and refugees may find resources and ways to act politically. Their political agency is usually recognised from different forms of activism, including embodied resistance taking place in public space or made public through social and traditional media (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Owens, 2009; Conlon, 2013; Gabiam and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017; Mensink, 2019). Refugee activism focusing on rights claiming or protesting the conditions in which people are placed when seeking asylum or living as refugees is also often connected with local and transnational activist groups (Hammond, 2013; Sandri, 2018). Yet only a fraction of migrants gain access to such agency. Those involved are in a social position and mental condition that enable such activities and have resources to political participation stemming from their social background and education, with gender and class as divisive characteristics. While these explicit political activities are vitally important in struggles over refugee rights and resistance to harmful policies and bordering practices, we argue that attention should also be paid to other ways in which asylum seekers and refugees act politically.

Perhaps paradoxically, publicly visible activities tend to hide from view those forms of effective and critical agency that asylum seekers and refugees perform as part of their everyday living or by means of loosely organised activities. Specific to these agencies is that they are seldom identified as political – least by those enacting them. In fact, most asylum seekers and refugees explicitly dissociate themselves from politics writ large and the related practices of activism, simply to manage everyday precarity that takes up most of their energy (Pascucci, 2016; Meier, forthcoming; van Kooy and Bowman, 2019). While many have little faith in exerting change through public protest, this does not mean that they are passive or disconnected from what is going on in their communities or the society.

Several studies, our own included, discuss how asylum seekers and refugees reclaim waiting as a liveable space (Griffiths, 2014; Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2019; Thorshaug and Brun, 2019; also Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio 2017; Meier, 2018). Spaces of waiting are not only spaces of stagnation but are characterised by temporal complexity. While waiting in refugee camps, or for their asylum claim to be processed, people seeking asylum quest possibilities to act through new connections and friendships, attend educational programmes, learn languages, start families, and initiate other mundane activities. This highlights how waiting does not equal staying still, indifferent, or unchanged, as even stuckness is entangled with “transformation, movement and volatility” (Brun, 2016, p. 393; also El-Shaarawi, 2015; Turnbull, 2016). Spaces of waiting are thus also spaces of struggle, action and political possibility (Gill et al., 2014; Mountz, 2011; Sharma, 2009).

Inspired by this growing body of work, and in attempt to build a more nuanced understanding of refugees and asylum seekers' political agencies, this paper sets out to study the temporal orientations that help them to cope in dire circumstances, or even escape their hopeless situations. We ask, can being stuck in the present turn into agency that actively disengages with the hopes, desires and claims related to apparently despondent futures? Further, can this agency be understood as political, in the broad sense of the word including 'thin' forms of agency, i.e. as critical agency towards situations in which people seeking asylum are being subordinated?

Considering the potential of such political agency, and its significance in the politics of asylum and refuge, this paper analyses *non-linear temporalities* of asylum seeking through the concept of *radical hope*. Our conception of temporality is inspired by the Meadian tradition, theorized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as non-linear temporal facets of human agency. Following Lear (2008), we consider radical hope as the ability to maintain a meaningful existence when a person's life is at the brink of losing all meaning. In temporal terms, it involves an active orientation towards the present along with dissociation from the facts of anticipated futurity that constantly threaten to thwart people's agency. In our analysis we aim to find out if, leaning on radical hope, asylum seekers are able take up the challenge of making it through the day-

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to-day life that has become unliveable, and by doing so deny the right of other actors to define the direction of their active presence. Further, we consider how this conception of thin political agency speaks to Agamben's (2014) notion of "destituent potential".

The paper proceeds so that we first provide an overview of our theoretical approach that brings together the ideas of non-linear temporality and radical hope in a broader framework of relational understanding of political agency. After this we provide a short introduction to the empirical studies that the paper is based on, followed by two analytical sections that explore asylum seekers' political agency based on radical hope, drawing from our recent studies in Berlin, London and Tampere. The paper ends with a discussion on the potential of the proposed theoretical approach as well as its limitations and practical implications, and concludes with some propositions for future research and humanitarian practices.

### Non-linear temporalities and radical hope

The paper appreciates politics from an experiential perspective where 'the political' is an element of human life that exists as a potential in all social spaces. We build on feminist and post-colonial scholarships where political life is approached from below, actualising as experienced and enacted in people's lived realities (e.g. Mountz and Hyndman, 2006; Darling 2009; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013; Simonsen, 2013; Hodge, 2019). Here politics is about matters of importance that emerge contextually as meaningful to those with something at stake in them (Häkli and Kallio, 2014, 2018). This places the notion of the political in the geosocial context of mundane action where power relations between individuals, collectives and institutions are negotiated – more or less intentionally – through uneven subject positions that restrain and enable agency in different ways (e.g. Horschelmann and Reich, 2017; Gill, 2018; Bremner, 2020).

In subordinate positions, such as those related to asylum seeking and refugeeness, people struggle with their everyday matters to such an extent that their resources to participate in other societal activities may be almost non-existent. This makes their political agencies difficult to identify and calls for perspectives attuned to the ways in which mundane politics entangles with key parameters of social life, including time and temporality. What gains political value cannot here be read off from readily politicised issues or actions, but rather it must be traced from ways of 'being differently', taking unexpected stances, and negotiating thoughts or emotions in ways that have potential to subvert or render visible technologies of governmentality.

Emphasising temporality in the context of the EU asylum/border/migration regime, also means attending to the idea of time as giving particular shape to Western experiences and histories (Babalola and Alokun, 2013; Beyaraza, 2004; Adjaye, 1994)<sup>1</sup> In this tradition time is usually seen as moving in a straight line from past to present to future. In the European context, refugeeness is viewed in such linear progression: as generated in the past, struggled with in the present, and orienting towards a desired-for future. By definition, refugees escape situations that make it difficult to lead a meaningful and safe life, often in unbearable circumstances in dangerous places. Mobility apparently stems from this as people try to find ways to move physically away from their countries of origin and places of living, to seek a safer life and protection from hostilities elsewhere. Their journeys typically lead to periods of waiting in asylum centres, being stuck in policed camps such as the 'hotspots' in Italy and Greece, or protracted navigation as

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<sup>1</sup> Concepts of time vary widely around the world and a growing body of scholarship has attended to non-Western notions of time as circular, holistic, and continuous in contrast to Western understandings marked by linearity, disjunction, and discontinuity (e.g. Beyaraza, 2004; Okembe-RA Imani, 2012).

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a paperless person in the agglomerations of international migration, such as in Cairo, Amman, Calais and many Lebanese and Turkish cities.

Asylum seeking is future-oriented but for many migrants this does not mean categorically turning away from their past. Close relationships are maintained over distance, internalised norms and learned routines are brought to bear in new contexts, and numerous banal aspects of communal life are incorporated in people's embodied subjectivities. The aim and challenge for many refugees is, hence, to balance between their past and the evolving realities and subjectivities, in and through myriad transnational and translocal constellations. The third major temporal dimension, the present, also has a seemingly clear role in asylum seeking: impermanence. What people presume, in general, as they leave to seek asylum, is entering a transient phase of life that involves a move from one place and position to another and beginning a new life someplace else. This idea of temporariness underlies the governance of forced migration and the provision of humanitarian aid.

In all, the notion of linear time seems to capture important aspects of asylum seeking as a process. However, we argue that focusing only on abstract, chronological time erases recognition of subjective truths and difference by viewing time as ahistorical, disembodied and objective. Time is also *lived*, experienced and (re)made through a person's location, positionality and experience. Geosocially conditioned and intensely relational experiences of time thus shape profoundly, and are shaped by, our everyday encounters.

Instead of taking time as a linear, objective and abstract given, we approach it as socially and culturally constructed temporality. We follow Shanti Robertson (2014) in her definition of *time* as the quantitative, chronological time. In the asylum context, this includes anything from lengths of an interview, the total amount of days someone was detained, to the years an asylum seeker had to wait for their claim to be decided. In contrast, we use the term *temporality* to examine embodied experiential time, the intimately and individually sensed and lived reality, produced and negotiated by asylum seekers in relation to the governing forces that outline the subject positions available to them as asylum seekers and refugees. This distinction is helpful in illustrating the diversity and plurality of time/temporality, and how they are constantly made and remade contextually, as embedded in the social and cultural dynamics of power and inequality.

To elaborate the idea of lived time as temporality, we lean on Mead's (1932) classical ideas regarding the three temporal facets of human agency: iterational past *conditioning* agency, the *problematization* of experiences in the present, and projective agency forming in *response* to future uncertainties (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Considering the three dimensions deeply entangled with each other helps in disrupting the linearity that informs dominating Western understandings of time in the context of asylum seeking and refugeeness.

For Emirbayer and Mische (1998) iterational past refers to the 'ordinary' that people carry with them, with little reflection to its elements: micro- and macro-cultures internalised during the life course and reproduced as part of mundane living. Hence, the past is not gone, like history, but with us as the habitual and routine in our lives. Any disruptions to the power of iteration embedded in *past* habits and routines may lead to the problematisation of *present* experiences and call forth *futurity* as the temporal dimension of responding to the disruption. In this sense the three temporal dimensions are organically intertwined and can only be separated analytically: the present is not a separate entity but the time-space of our embodied existence where the past (as routine) and the future (as orientation) intertwine.

Asylum seekers' lives are full of situations in which their routines are challenged and disrupted. Waiting zones, arrival centres, spaces of confinement such as detention or pre-deportation centres, as well as multiple forms of everyday incarceration disrupt their lives and habits of relating (Cassidy, 2019).

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Established facets of subjectivity regarding gender, race, class, age, religion and sexuality, for instance, may become questioned, which demands people seeking asylum to relate anew vis-à-vis the social positions and cultural settings they find themselves in. In Emirbayer and Miche's (1998) terms, exposed to exigencies of present situations, people seeking asylum find many of their routines and habits redundant, inoperative or meaningless, and instead are faced with challenges that bring forth futurity as the temporal orientation towards unresolved and problematic issues.

Without a stable iterational past life is an ongoing personal crisis, or put another way, life is all about the uncertainties of a daunting future. Moreover, if the future appears as set into unbearable scenarios only, there is nothing positive to orient towards, no reason to strive away from the present, nor the possibility to magically return to the past. Such disillusionment is not uncommon among asylum seekers who have lost hope for ever getting a refugee status or citizenship, for ever being reunited with their family, for ever getting a home and a job, or even medical help.

However, numerous people seeking asylum in different parts of the world survive in such hostile situations, retaining their humanity and dignity, and certain capacities for agency. In our previous work we have argued that when people face situations where they end up problematising their own experiences, they enter a 'state of becoming' in which their habitual life is called into question and they change as subjects (Häkli & Kallio, 2018). When a person's life is problematized, the future appears as a pressing temporal dimension in need of one's attention. While this may be a very challenging life condition, we argue that it is possible to cope if a sense of futurity is retained – not as a goal that only keeps drifting further away, but rather as a horizon of *hope* for a life out there, even if not a clearly foreseeable one.

Hope is often defined as an optimistic expectation of something desired for in the future. The idea of *radical hope* differs from this traditional conception. In probing into the notion, we take as our starting point Jonathan Lear's (2006) study of the Crow Nation – aboriginal to the United States – where he accounts for the repertoires of possibility that people draw on in desperate situations. Specifically, these situations are characterised by a fundamental loss of meaning attached to life forms, within which certain social and personal dimensions of subjectivity are negotiated. Put briefly, when traditional forms of life are at the brink of extinction, people themselves risk losing meaningful existence as the subjects of these life forms.

However, Lear's key message is that, as desperate and demanding as these situations are, they also open possibilities for the negotiation of personal and collective subjectivities. Speaking in the Crow Nation context he describes that surviving cultural devastation required a "thinning out of what had been a thick concept" of courage to face a new form of life without knowing beforehand what it will look like on the other side of the storm (Lear 2006, 108). This "radical hope", Lear contends, enables people to act in new ways, sustain vestiges of the past, and avoid the utter annihilation of their sense of self by focusing on the possibilities in the present, rather than succumbing to the hopelessness of the imminent future.

Instead of 'courage' that carries defining aspects of Crow culture, we prefer to discuss these opportunities in terms of thin political possibilities. In the context of our research, the notion of radical hope is intimately linked with the idea of non-linear temporality in asylum seekers' lives. It helps to appreciate that people may be able to cope with a desperately looking future with little left to hope for by tapping into the thin possibilities available here and now, however mundane and insignificant these may seem. With this move from hopelessness to radical hope, we trace how people turn away from the idea of future defined by closed-off and unattainable goals – such as gaining a refugee status, getting an education, receiving adequate treatment – and instead embrace futurity as an unsettled and ambiguous horizon in which a meaningful life may continue. This turn does not manifest in forms of political activism but instead

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calls forth a different mode of being where matters of importance are negotiated in amidst the thin political possibilities available now and here.

With the aim of developing Lear's concept further in this specific context where people often find their agencies fundamentally constricted, we deem that radical hope enables asylum seekers to actively maintain the open-endedness of their futurity. And here precisely lies its political moment: By focusing on the here-and-now, and thus rejecting the closed prospects of an inescapable negative future, they make space for mundane forms of agency through which to act; perhaps by means of newly negotiated subjectivities, yet as persons whom oneself and others can rightly recognise. Following Lear's thought, and borrowing James Scott's (1985) classic idea, this enactment of thin political possibilities provides "weapons of the weak" in surviving asylum and refuge situations, even if it means facing whatever comes with no certainty or clear orientation.

To summarise, in our interpretation of the concept of radical hope, 'radical' refers to breaking away from linear temporalities, which acknowledges the subject in a formative state of becoming. 'Hope' instead stands for the open-ended future as potentiality, in contrast to future as a set of expectations and set parameters. To underline the political dimensions of agency stemming from such radical hope, we employ Agamben's (2014) notion of "destituent potential" (*potenza destituente*) to capture the ways in which mere resilient presence and subtle forms of agency may reveal, or make inoperative, the dominant power relations through which asylum seekers and refugees are governed (also Joronen 2017; Prozorov 2017). This conceptualisation helps to take further notions of mundane political agency by emphasising the human capacity to maintain the open-endedness of futurity by focusing on the present and actively distancing from set future prospects.

#### Learning about asylum seekers' political agencies

The paper stems from two research projects with people seeking asylum, exploring their everyday lives and struggles in different urban settings. Both studies focused on asylum seekers' political agencies with genuine interest in learning about them, instead of framing in advance what is political about them. One of the projects paid specific attention to the development of political subjectivities in people's processes of 'becoming refugees' through their asylum-seeking journeys and periods of waiting, whereas the other study explored political agencies of people stuck in the asylum system in the UK and Germany in the context of activism and no border struggles, paying particular attention to the role of affect and emotion.

The previous project involved two sub-studies, one in Cairo, Egypt and the other in Tampere, Finland. In this paper we draw from the in-depth interviews carried out with people seeking asylum in Finland and our field notes related to them (for other parts of the studies, see Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio, 2017; Kallio, Häkli and Pascucci, 2019; Pascucci, Häkli and Kallio, 2019). We carried out interviews with six young men from Iraq and five Afghan families, in 2016–2017. The discussions focused on our participants' personal experiences regarding their asylum-seeking journeys and situations related to encounters with the migration regime, aid agencies, other migrants, and the local population, and we encouraged them to bring up experiences that stood out as particularly important.

The latter ethnographic study was conducted in Berlin, Germany and London, UK between 2015 and 2018, including long-term participation in groups involved in border struggles. The fieldwork drew upon informal modes of engagement, through participation, observation and in-depth interviews, producing extensive fieldnotes as well as recorded and transcribed interviews. Ongoing conversations with people stuck in the asylum system at protest events, demonstrations, activist group meetings, and significantly in intimate relationships and the everyday, contemplated the construction of contemporary political spaces, the role of affect and emotion within them, and asylum seekers' precarious positioning. The study



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problematized the ways in which asylum activism is understood as public and organized politics and, instead, examined its mundane manifestations.

In both research projects, much consideration and reflection went into our ethical commitment to participants' safety and comfortability, as well as into considering issues raised by Rozakou (2019, 80) regarding researchers' role in reproducing dominating policy and media discourses related to asylum and refuge. Acknowledging the existence of power differentials in research relationships between subjects with secure and insecure status, and the fact that this ultimately cannot be rebalanced, we tried our best to be in conversation about issues of power, consent and trust by maintaining contact with research participants throughout all stages of the projects. The participants could actively draw their personal boundaries in the research, and we did not return to matters that seemed too stressful to share with us. In dealing with ethical issues, we sought to ensure that all concerns could be communicated with us, during and after the fieldwork, either face-to-face or over email or phone. When referring to our research participants we use pseudonyms throughout.

### Opening the horizon in the midst of hopelessness

As it often happens in ethnographic research, unforeseen encounters lead us to finding things we did not know to look for. Meeting Godfrey, a 35-year-old asylum-seeking man from Uganda, is a case in point. Fieldnotes from the occasion in London in spring 2015 describe him as "the most positive person I have ever met". Godfrey was engaged in many kinds of activities in the local asylum community, including regular visits at detention centres and supporting others as part of an extensive network of asylum-seeking friends and family that met up regularly and engaged in mundane acts of care, such as emotional support, child care and cooking for each other.

Two aspects in Godfrey's agency seemed perplexing. First, he was determined to focus on emerging mundane issues and things happening *here and now*, instead of chasing far-reaching aims related to good life. Second, upon getting to know him, a deep-rooted *hopelessness* and disappointment that he felt towards the asylum activist community, as well as the international humanitarian aid system, became explicit. During his time in the UK, Godfrey had felt deep desperation and grief, lost family members, and witnessed many friends' depression that resulted from the feeling of being stuck and powerless while waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. "The darkest time", he shared, was in 2013 during his detention of three and a half months in Colnbrook, one of UK's detention centres located in Harmondsworth. It was then when he realised that "I can either kill myself or have hope, there is nothing in between" (Godfrey, 2016). Having decided not to take his own life, he instead devoted it completely to hope – yet, in a very particular form.

Godfrey's case sparked off our interest towards radical hope via two different routes. His determination and resourcefulness in attending to matters presently at hand attuned us to the importance of dealing with futurity in situations characterized by uncertainty and general lack of future possibilities. Further, his seemingly inexhaustible energy put in stark contrast a broader set of observations from our different research projects in regard to agential and political dimensions of everyday acts that do not fit the current norms of active political engagement. To show how both elements speak to and intersect in the notion of radical hope, before returning to Godfrey's case and asylum seekers' radically hopeful activities, we will reflect upon the political potential of everyday acts usually *not* perceived as revealing political agency, such as disengagement, resignation and acts of refusal. In the following we read these forms of seeming passivity as a species of agency where giving up or "doing nothing" is an act.

In activist meetings that took place in Berlin and London, it was typical that about half of the asylum seekers attending were passively present in different ways: some had their eyes closed while others were

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reading the news, watching football or simply keeping quiet. While such observations had felt significant throughout the research, the questions posed by Mary, a forty-six-year-old Cameroonian woman seeking asylum, urged us to explore them in more detail: "You need to ask yourself why are people sleeping. There are people that are sleeping all the time during the meeting. You need to ask yourself why are they here" (Mary, 2016). Inspired by her questions we began to interpret these modes of disengagement as a technique used by asylum seekers to manage their experiences and emotions in activist spaces, revealing a form of agency distinct from activist expectations.

In our studies most asylum seekers involved with activism expressed that their activist involvement provides them with important social networks as well as support for their asylum claims. However, the power relations within asylum activist meetings generated a lot of discomfort for many who spoke about already being engulfed with the great amount of everyday issues they have to negotiate. Managing emotions in these spaces, on top of struggles in their everyday lives, were sometimes felt as "overwhelming" and "too much". We read the latter tensions as expressions of asylum seekers' stress in regard their future fixed in *linear temporality*, and the felt need to turn away from this exhausting reality towards a more *open-ended sense of futurity*, enacted largely by means of actively withdrawing from attentive presence in the activist space. 'Turning passive' can hence be understood as a form of 'thin' political action revealing critical agency that allows people seeking asylum, at least momentarily, to break away from the suppressing nets of power that offer them only hopeless positions in the linear timeframe.

The idea of passivity as critical agency in a formative 'state of becoming' resonates with Agamben's (2014: 73) distinction between life in the realm of the society (form of life) and life as the mode of living (form-of-life). By arguing that, "[a]ll living beings are *in* a form of life, but not all are (or are not always) a form-of-life", he underlines that while we are always defined by what we are in a given political order, we acquire potential to employ different ways of living this 'whatness' (Agamben 2016: 231, cf. Rancière's idea of 'rupture'). The political dimension of the latter lies in that, as a mode of being, form-of-life has the capacity to turn away from power as an established order enforcing linear temporality – it is "constitutively destituent" (Agamben 2014: 72). In this sense passivity is powerful in its very potentiality to make existing social orders inoperative, rather than in building explicit forms of resistance. Asylum seekers' disengagement from distressing spaces and encounters becomes a form of political agency precisely because it subverts affective technologies of power, embedded in these spaces and encounters. Their disengagement "turns the gaze back upon power" as it makes possible moments of comfort, relief and reflection (Tuck & Yang, 2014: 817).

Another example of how passive agency was employed takes us to a specific activist meeting in Berlin, in July 2017, where a press conference was being prepared to prevent the eviction of asylum seekers from a public building. Next to those facing eviction, a number of people from different solidarity initiatives attended the meeting. It was held in part German and in part English, languages that only few of the attending asylum seekers were fluent in. Speakers were repeatedly reminded to make enough breaks for the three interpreters in the room. However, as the meeting went on, the majority of German and English speakers with regular status made less and less space for interpretation. At one point, a 45-year-old asylum-seeking man from Ivory Coast raised his voice and announced: "I'm not able to do any interpretation, when you do that. I stop listening!" Shortly after, all three interpreters started reading the news on their phone, chatting with their direct neighbours or closed their eyes. When they were asked to interpret, they said: "Sorry, I have not been listening." Here it is even more explicit how passivity can be used as a technique that renders existing orders inoperative. The interpreters' reclaimed passivity redirects agential attention away from the future-oriented activist initiative and the linear temporality where it is embedded, towards the mundane here-and-now where maintaining a certain state of comfort contains

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inherent value, presenting critique to the constant alertness requested from them through threat of detention and deportation.

Beyond activist spaces, passivity may take the form of avoidance of undesirable encounters with other people or pressing issues. This form of agentic passivity we identified in an asylum centre in Tampere where some women that we worked with spent a large part of their time, staying in their family room and entering shared spaces only when others were not present. One of them was Damsa, a young Iranian Afghan woman, who told us that due to her Iranian background, she had not found a comfortable social position in the asylum community. The families coming from Afghanistan despised her liberal ways, including the clothes and the makeup that she wore, as these departed from the Afghan tradition.

An Afghan wife and mother speaking only Dari, Damsa had not found ways to engage with other women in the facility and she found her social isolation distressing. Yet, instead of seeking recognition in the asylum community or among local activist groups working with asylum seekers, she had chosen to withdraw to her family life. Through this active social disengagement she was, drawing from Lear (2008), enacting the thin political possibilities of living with her husband and children as the person she felt herself to be, *here and now*, in a situation where it seemed ever more probable that the whole family would be deported to Afghanistan as their asylum applications had been rejected and they did not have Iranian citizenship. Damsa's case provides another example of breaking away from the oppressiveness of linear temporality through an active stance of passivity, drawing attention to the significance of retaining a sense of self and a focus on the present as radical hope. The futurity that this destituent passivity sustains is that of an Iranian Afghan refugee family who knows *how* they are what they are in a 'form-of-life', regardless of a society that allows only a limited space for such a 'form of life'.

Up to this point, we hope to have made clear that radical hope and the thin political possibilities embedded in it do not suggest a romanticised empowering condition, criticised by many who agree on the fragility of refugee political agency (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Conlon, 2013). Quite the contrary, we propose a mode of political agency with destituent potential that may, often very momentarily, deactivate dominant power without explicitly opposing it. It is precisely the non-oppositional aspect of passivity, in contrast to overt forms of active resistance, that drew our attention. We hence suggest that passive agency may sustain radical hope in the form of life horizons that diverge fundamentally from those rooted in linear temporality by locating the political potential in the present moment through acts of disengagement and refusal. Further, they may provide people with capacities to act in the present in ways that we will now turn to.

### Practicing radical hope

"I try to help by focusing on what is possible. This helps me and my friends. Sometimes people are in the asylum process for two and a half years, so I encourage them to find some comfort. Being in the asylum process is quite a challenge, I know. But once you embrace it, it has... You have to find the belief within you. If you don't find a silver lining in this situation... oh my God it can really do a lot of harm..." (Godfrey, 2017)

To consider how a move from destituent passivity to radically hopeful activity may occur, we will return to Godfrey's case introduced in the opening of the previous section. While his exceptionally hopeful attitude towards friendships, solidarity as well as navigating the asylum system itself is worthy of attention as such, it is particularly his time in detention that illustrates the agential possibilities stemming from destituent potential. Godfrey explained that being an asylum seeker had changed him as he had not always been that

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hopeful. Quite the contrary, in the deepest darkness of the detention his ideas of how to live a meaningful life had lost all meaning – he had felt completely hopeless. This is not a rare narration among our research participants. Similar loss of meaning was portrayed by many refugees and asylum seekers, in different geographical contexts and institutional settings. For example, a twenty-five-year-old woman from Albania kept asking herself: "Who am I anyway? Who am I?" (Sara, 2017), and another asylum-seeking woman from Nigeria repeatedly revealed: "I've lost myself in the asylum process." (Mary, 2017). A common way of communicating hopelessness was crying, sometimes taking place during our field work, but also as described by the participants as something that happens when they consider their current situation or try to figure out how to go on, either alone or with their family, friends, other asylum seekers or volunteers and activists. One of the participants in the Tampere study depicted how young men may share such feelings: "Sometimes people are really depressed here because [...] we just think about it and, yesterday one of my friends, he just came and cry" (Fadhil, 2015), or as an eighteen-year-old young man from Iraq put it, after receiving a negative decision on his asylum application: "Now I don't have any futures, and I am eighteen." (Milad, 2015). While these moments of hopelessness could lead to desperate thoughts, including suicidal, it is not uncommon that something similar to Godfrey's case followed.

In the midst of absolute hopelessness Godfrey had found a connection to new possibilities of leading a meaningful life. The situation had forced him to re-orient himself, off from the day-to-day that had become unliveable due to the complete lack of prospects, towards what is possible here and now. He had started to invest his energy in offering everything in his power to make other asylum seekers' lives a bit better. Instead of thinking about how meaningless and precarious his and others life had become – which had made him feel utterly alone and powerless – he focused on the very reduced, but existing, amount of political possibilities within the space of detention. In the following months, as he reported, he experienced much less distress than before, and gradually turned into the overwhelmingly positive person who participated in the research project. Portraying what active agency meant to him, Godfrey shared at least twenty examples of how he supported people in detention:

"Someone's solicitor told them they need a photocopy, and for that person in detention it felt like the end of the world. I said, no problem, you just go tomorrow and get a photocopy. I used to ask: What do you need? How can I help? I always tried to take away some of the pressures that person was feeling by offering my company, my support. Some people would say, they don't have any money in their account so I would give them mine. I would call people outside and tell them please buy me airtime and top up this number and I give it to others. My sister used to put money on my card, and I used to give it to other people in detention who needed it more. They were complaining that they need money and I just said – let's go and I give you money. All the money I had I shared." (Godfrey, 2016)

What is this kind of agency about and how should we understand its political dimensions? In Godfrey's own words, his present condition was characterised by deep trust in life that made meaningful what he was going through, little by little if not immediately. This conviction allowed him to confront the uncertainty of being in the asylum process and, instead of submitting to the hopeless future, actively encountering the present situation as an unknown and open question. This is how, in his case, destituent passivity turned into radically hopeful activity. What Lear (2008: 50) would call "the death of the subject" giving rise to a fundamental re-negotiation of subjectivity and radically hopeful agency empowered by "thin courage", we consider a critical state of becoming in which Godfrey turned his back to linear temporality that had closed before him, to face the constantly changing and thus ungovernable open-ended futurity in the present.

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Not orienting towards the (unrealistically) imagined and the (vainly) desired, but the unknown and the unexpected creates another way of being and relating within the asylum, with capacity to deactivate by actively disengaging from the temporal order of asylum governmentality. Reclaiming the moment as possibility, connection and hope – in contrast to worry, fear and desperation – is one tactic for asylum seekers to survive their desperate situations, to retain their humanity and dignity, and to gain capacities to political agency be it however thin or mundane. This was clearly the case with Fadhil, a man in his thirties from Iraq, who described his activities in Tampere while having to wait for his second asylum application being processed, in terms of radical hope:

“So, I'm so happy here, and anything in my hand I can do it now. I have over twenty certificates of volunteer job, and also like – you can find me everywhere. I can be everywhere. I think I'm doing everything. [...] I've got a small job, it's like delivering advertisement. It is between 70 to 130 euros per month. I love it. And I can say I have a job here.” (Fadhil, 2016).

In a similar tone, around the time of the Brexit vote in spring 2016, Justine, a thirty-nine-year-old woman from Uganda, expressed the political potential of her present activities in London:

“People keep calling me up and tell me about their struggles. Everyone has so many problems and its overwhelming, so I say, ok let's just enjoy today, now – what can we do today? If you are spending your whole life waiting for that day, then you are wasting your whole life. And these days have not helped you. The anger you have, the resentment you have – you can even go and shout at someone, but if you just look for that good thing, this one good thing – at least you have the chance that something will come up. It takes you away from being so negative, you get some relief from the situation”.

The excerpts above are but select examples, albeit illustrative ones, of what we came to appreciate as asylum seekers' attachment to radical hope by disrupting the linear temporalities of the asylum system and the (dim) expectations for the future embedded in it. In many cases their agencies were directed to the thin political possibilities available in the present, here and now, whether in the form of untiring mundane activities or more contemplative modes of withdrawal and passivity. Either way, we argue, these tactics are about sustaining the sense of futurity as open-endedness in the face of a dismal future looming ahead, while performing acts of non-opposition with destituent potential to render the linear temporality of the asylum system inoperative.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed two interwoven dimensions of asylum seekers' political agency that often go unnoticed: agentic passivity and radically hopeful action. We argue that by deactivating dominant power without explicitly opposing it, such destituent forms of agency provide people with thin political possibilities and capacities to act in their present situations perceived as hopeless by many. To disturb the bipolar notion of hope/hopelessness, we have introduced the idea of *radical* hope to emphasise how critical orientations may evolve through breaking away from linear temporalities that significantly shape asylum and refuge as experienced by asylum seekers and refugees, portrayed in media discourses, reported by NGOs and activists, and enforced by migration policies, institutions, border guarding and other governing bodies in Europe and beyond. By turning to the present, we argue, people seeking asylum can actively disengage from a future defined by deprivation and unreachable dreams and goals, instead

embracing futurity as an unsettled and ambiguous horizon opening unpredictably here and now. This temporal re-orientation does not manifest in grand political initiatives or explicit forms of political activism but, rather, takes shape in mundane (asylum and refugee) communities. Noticing that the emotional, mental, social and financial resources of asylum seekers and refugees to take part in collective public action vary considerably, in favour of those with better resources overall, we call for further attention to attitudes and activities unfolding through a wider range of political possibilities.

The thinly reclaimed futurities that we have identified in our analysis resonate with findings on asylum seekers' precarious queer subjectivities. A body of literature on queer time and futurity has explored how subjects and collectives mobilise utopias and imaginaries, to escape a grim and precarious life situation (Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2019). We agree with Seitz (2017) that, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, people seeking asylum may disrupt linear temporalities by reclaiming their future in the present as a space in which alternative ways of being and relating can be embodied, lived and practiced. In particular we want to emphasise the importance for critical scholarship, activist collectives, grassroots organisations and others working with and for asylum seekers, of focusing on the *present as possibilities for dynamic future-making*. With this we refer to radically hopeful political agency that may not always seem active or productive nor follow the path set by refugee advocates – quite the contrary, it may occur in forms of passivity, withdrawal and disengagement from organised activities, with focus on seemingly apolitical issues without long-standing aims. Yet in its very passivity and mundaneness, such agency involves potential to depart from dominating orders and thereby render them inoperative. Moreover, it turns away from the dominant linear temporality that underlies the current transnational migration regime, actualising in various national and supra-national policies, border guarding systems, and policing activities designed and implemented in connection with humanitarian policies and practices. While this subtle politics may not lead to revolutionary action or quick change, it may be crucially effective in those sites where refuge and asylum are lived and experienced by many.

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