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Suffering and the Struggle for Recognition: Lived Experiences of the U.S. Political
Asylum Process

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Bridget Marie Haas

Committee in charge:

Professor Janis H. Jenkins, Chair
Professor Thomas J. Csordas
Professor Fonna Forman
Professor Steven M. Parish
Professor Jonathan Sadowsky
Professor Christena Turner

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATDs:	Alternatives to Detention
BI Inc.	Behavioral Interventions Incorporated
CHR:	Center for Human Rights
CPDM:	Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement
DHS:	Department of Homeland Security
DO:	Deportation Officer
DOJ:	Department of Justice
DRO:	Detention and Removal Operations
EAD:	Employment Authorization Document
EOIR:	Executive Office for Immigration Review
ERO:	Enforcement and Removal Operations
ICE:	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ISAP:	Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program
IJ:	Immigration Judge
SCNC:	Southern Cameroons National Council
SDF:	Social Democratic Front
THP:	The Healing Place
USCIS:	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Suffering and the Search for Recognition: Lived Experiences of the U.S. Political Asylum Process

by

Bridget Marie Haas

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Janis H. Jenkins, Chair

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of seeking political asylum in the United States. With the implementation of restrictive immigration measures, particularly following September 11, 2001, seeking asylum in the U.S. has become increasingly onerous and protracted. From an institutional standpoint, the goal of the asylum process is to discern ‘deserving’ migrants (‘authentic’ refugees) from ‘undeserving’ migrants (‘bogus’ asylum seekers, economic migrants), and the process is undergirded by a tension between humanitarian imperatives and concerns over national security and border control. Based on fifteen months of fieldwork in an urban area of the American Midwest, this dissertation explores the experiential dimensions of being embedded in this complex

landscape, focusing on how contemporary configurations of power mediate self and social processes. The study uses data collected among a multi-national sample of asylum seekers, with a particular focus on asylum seekers from Cameroon. Data were also collected within institutional settings (among immigration advocates, attorneys, government officials, legal proceedings).

This dissertation reveals that the asylum process evokes novel forms of suffering and modes of being-in-the-world. By lodging an asylum claim, migrants become both liminal (noncitizens whose legal status is to be determined) and (hyper)visible subjects who are ‘managed’ and policed via myriad techniques, ranging from barriers to employment and housing to tactics of surveillance and criminalization, including electronic ankle monitoring and detention. I argue that the asylum process entails a “paradox of visibility”: asylum seekers’ (hyper)visibility is at once a promise of security and a powerful source of *insecurity*. A significant finding of this dissertation is that asylum seekers locate their suffering not in their traumatic pasts, but rather in the *present* moment – in the political asylum process itself. More specifically, I posit asylum seekers as occupying a particular temporal, subjective state of “existential limbo,” in which life is understood as immobilized during the asylum process. In elaborating this existential state of being “stuck,” I argue that although the institutional forces of asylum are powerful in shaping experience, they are not wholly determinate of it. Thus, this dissertation also explores how asylum seekers exercise agency and practice hope within this constraining environment.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW, CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW AND SIGNIFICANCE

This dissertation, an ethnographic investigation of the process of seeking political asylum in the U.S., is based on fifteen months of fieldwork in an urban area of the American Midwest. Data collection comprised unstructured, open-ended interviews with asylum seekers; life history collection with asylum seekers; interviews with institutional actors (immigration officials, attorneys, human rights advocates); participant observation among asylum seekers; and observation within institutional settings (immigration court, legal meetings and trainings, immigration offices). While the study sample constituted a multi-ethnic/multi-national population, the study has a more specific focus on political asylum seekers from Cameroon, who comprised the largest subset of the sample.

This dissertation, more specifically, aims at elucidating how the process of, and activities associated with, seeking asylum mediate self and social processes. I argue that the asylum process is more than a politico-legal process. Rather, the asylum process produces migrants as particular categories of persons based on their ‘deservingness’ or ‘undeservingness’ of legal status. Undergirding the political asylum process in the U.S. are competing notions, practices, and discourses of humanitarianism, on the one hand, and national security, on the other. In this way, the asylum process is one that produces not only legal categories, but categories of moral personhood—that of “authentic” refugee or illegitimate/‘bogus’ asylum seeker. This dissertation, in turn, ethnographically investigates the experiences of being embedded in this process, as asylum seekers are subjected to the techniques of ‘management’ that the institutional bodies of political

asylum deploy. I argue that the asylum process has its own “ethos” that is productive of profound fear and insecurity for asylum seekers.

A major assertion of this dissertation is that the political asylum process is evocative of novel forms of suffering. In particular, my data reveal that the political asylum process, by producing asylum seekers as both hypervisible (subject to myriad forms of surveillance and control) and liminal (straddling the line between legal and illegal existence) subjects, evokes what I identify as a state of existential limbo, which was articulated as a specific kind of suffering. Study participants talked of life and meaning being “stuck” or “on hold” within the temporal—but, often, extremely protracted—category of seeking asylum. Moreover, study participants located their suffering not in their violent or traumatic pasts, but rather in the present—in the limbo and suffering evoked by the asylum process itself. The structural constraints, or ‘structural violence,’ as I define this in the literature review below, that confronted asylum seekers in this context articulated with these specific subjective and temporal orientations to reconfigure participants’ experiences of self, others, and social world.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Othering,” to refer to the processes and techniques by which dominant groups or individuals constitute and categorize certain individuals or groups as different or distinct, often with the primary aim of asserting power over these constructed groups of “Others.” Growing out of postcolonial theory, the idea of Othering (or what Foucault (1982: 777) terms “dividing practices”) has its roots in analyses of the ways in which colonized or marginal groups came to be identified, largely through discursive means, as different by the center; a way of creating Self and Other. The creation of difference – of an Other -- in turn, allows for the repression and exclusion

of these marginal groups (Fanon 1961; Said 1979; Spivak 1985, 1988; Foucault 1972, 1982; Hall 1997). In more recent scholarship, the idea of Othering has been extended to analyses of refugees and immigrants (Wong 1991; Malkki 1995b; Ong 1996; Essed, Freks, and Schrivers 2004; Grove and Zwi 2006; Horst 2006: 13; Kumsa 2006; Adjrouh and Kusow 2007; McKinnon 2008; Willen 2010). These scholars call attention to the myriad ways (e.g., via discourses, policies, practices, and laws) that refugees and immigrants are constructed as particular kinds of knowable and manageable—and, often, excluded or marginalized—subjects by dominant groups and institutions.

Drawing on these lines of scholarship, this dissertation illustrates that the asylum process is characterized by various techniques of institutional and governmental disciplining that powerfully shaped participants' everyday experiences and sense of self. Yet, I also argue that these techniques were not wholly determinate of experience in this context. Within this structurally constrained context, asylum seekers nonetheless revealed themselves to be agentive and creative social actors. My data suggest that asylum seekers engaged various tactics to maneuver through the asylum process and to survive on a day-to-day basis.

SETTING THE STAGE: ASYLUM IN THE UNITED STATES

Legal Definitions

This research is focused on the experiences of asylum seekers. The debate surrounding how to define particular migrants is a contentious one (Black 2001; Hathaway 2007; Voutira & Dona 2007; Scalleteris 2007). However, for the purposes of this study, I point to the legal definition of “asylum,” as I will be focused on those

persons who have lodged a claim with the United States government to seek asylum status. Moreover, study participants all self-identified as “asylum seekers.”

The same criteria is used to define refugees and asylees. Both forms of status are derived from the legal definition of “refugee.” The legal difference is that refugees are granted status prior to their admittance to the United States, while asylum status is granted to those who ask for protection after arriving in the U.S. Migrants who claim asylum may have arrived in the U.S. via ‘illegal’ border crossings or the use of ‘illegal’ or fraudulent travel documents, or they may have entered the U.S. legally via temporary visas, such as travel or student visas. The definition of “refugee” in U.S. law is taken from two international law treaties, the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and was incorporated into domestic (U.S.) law through the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The INA defines a “refugee” as:

Any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality, or in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable and unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Einolf 2001:4).

The United States received 55,000 asylum claims in 2010, the most of any of the 44 industrialized countries identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2011). In that same year, the U.S. government granted asylum to 11,504 individuals, with a considerable backlog of cases pending adjudication (U.S. Dept of Justice 2011).

In utilizing the legal definition of asylum seeker to delineate my study sample, I am not implying that asylum seekers constitute a specific sociological group or discrete domain of knowledge. Following Liisa Malkki's work on refugees (1995a, 1995b), I see "asylum seeker" as a politically, historically, and culturally produced category. As others have emphasized (Scallearis 2007; Black 2001; Zetter 1991, 2007), terms such as "refugee" or "asylum seeker" derive from policy agendas and should not be used uncritically. Anthropological work on refugees has been important in serving as a corrective to the problematic tendency in policy discourses and practices to dehistoricize and/or depoliticize refugees – and thus treat "refugees" as a universal and monolithic category (Malkki 1992, 1995b, 1996; Peteet 2005; Horst 2006; Feldman 2007). As an anthropological investigation, this research likewise writes against "asylum seekers" as a naturalized or monolithic category. Yet, as an ethnographic investigation of the asylum-seeking process specifically, this research focuses on those migrants who are subjected to a set of common processes and practices, including the subjection to certain mechanisms of power and techniques of 'management' that I outline throughout the dissertation. In other words, while I do not view asylum seekers as a monolithic or static category and I do attend to the variability of participants' experiences, I nonetheless see my participants as a population that is linked together, theoretically and experientially, by their engagement with a specific politico-legal process and their collective desire to be seen as 'authentic' refugees deserving of legal status.

Asylum: Its History and Contemporary Configurations

Asylum law is relatively new within the U.S.: it was not until the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 that the right to seek asylum was formulated and a system for processing asylum claims was established (Cianciarulo 2006). Up until this point, US refugee policy was adjudicated on an *ad hoc* basis and many, if not most, refugees to the U.S. came from Communist countries. The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the INA, adopting the INA's definition of "refugee." The Act's main purpose was to establish a uniform system for admitting and resettling refugees domestically, and thereby created the Office of U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Moreover, the Refugee Act of 1980 also outlined for the first time in U.S. law a category of "asylum," and established a systematic protocol for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)¹ and immigration courts to adjudicate asylum claims (Einolf 2001). Legislation in the decades following the Refugee Act of 1980 only served to increase restrictions on migration and to make asylum seeking more difficult.

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 made the asylum process "more onerous and exclusive" by creating new restrictions on asylum seeking, in one of the most significant pieces of immigration legislation in history. These new restrictions included the imposition of a one-year filing deadline, delays in work authorization eligibility, a broadening of the grounds for rejecting asylum claims, new restrictions on asylum appeals, and new policies of expedited removal and detention of asylum seekers (Gibney 2004: 164). The latter policy of "expedited

¹ The INS was later dismantled by the Homeland Security Act of 2003, which created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The adjudication of asylum claims now occurs under the auspices of both DHS (specifically, in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) division) as well as the Department of Justice (specifically, the Executive Office for Immigration Review, or EOIR).

removal” gave low-level immigration officers the power to immediately deport individuals who had arrived without proper travel documents. As scholars have pointed out, however, the fact that asylum seekers, by definition, are fleeing persecution, they often do not have adequate time or resources to obtain proper documents (Story 2005; Gibney 2004; Farnam 2005). In addition, the IIRIRA gave INS officials were given unprecedented power to indefinitely detain asylum seekers and to invoke secret evidence against them. The IIRIRA also eliminated judicial review of detention and deportation decisions (Story 2005: 12).

Additional immigration policies passed in the wake of September 11, 2001 have made the landscape of political asylum increasingly arduous. The U.S. Patriot Act of 2001, passed less than two months after the events of September 11th, widened the scope of the federal government’s power over migrants. This included policies of racial profiling and detention of immigrants for minor immigration status violations or those who were deemed a threat to national security (Story 2005: 13). In 2003, measures such as Operation Liberty Shield and Blanket Detention Order, which mandated detention of asylum applicants from select countries, continued to implement policies of deterrence and punishment directed towards immigrants, and asylum seekers in particular (Farnam 2004, Schoenholtz 2005, Welch and Schuster 2008).

Massive organizational changes were also implemented at this time. The Homeland Security Act of 2003 dissolved the Immigration and Naturalization Service, removing it from the Department of Justice, and divided it into three new structures under the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS): U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and

Customs and Borders Protection (CBP) (Farnam 2005). USCIS is the branch of DHS responsible for “lawful immigration to the United States,” which includes citizenship through naturalization; international adoptions; working in the U.S.; immigration of family members; and humanitarian programs, including the granting of asylum status to those who qualify for protection (see Chapter 2). ICE is the principle investigative arm of DHS and is responsible for the civil and criminal enforcement (primarily in non-border areas) of federal laws concerning border control, trade, customs, and immigration. ICE has two divisions: Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO); the latter division is charged, in part, with overseeing the physical removal of migrants who have been deemed “deportable,” which includes asylum seekers who have been denied asylum. CBP is the arm of DHS primarily responsible for securing U.S. borders (working on the U.S border and in ports of entry to the U.S.) and enforcing international trade and drug trafficking laws.

Critics have argued that the dismantling of INS and moving its duties from the Department of Justice to DHS is symbolically significant: “[A]sylum seekers and all immigrants are now perceived first as a security issue and then a justice issue” (Fischer 2005: 207). Post-September 11th measures continued to penalize and criminalize asylum seekers and other migrants. In 2004, new policies were implemented to require expanded collection of biometric data on asylum applicants and increased tracking procedures of asylum seekers. In 2005, the DHS budget increased funds for screening procedures of asylum seekers, detention, removal, and enforcement, with ICE seeing a budget increase of 10% (Schoenholtz 2005: 344).

Operating on an “alarmist agenda,” Congress passed the Real ID Act of 2005, touted as an anti-terrorism measure and specifically targeting asylum seekers (Cianciarulo 2006: 2). This act made significant changes to the asylum process and ensured that asylum seeking became an even more difficult process. Changes included expanding the basis upon which cases could be denied (e.g., immaterial inconsistencies), implementing new corroboration requirements, and loosening criteria for assessing credibility of applicants (e.g., allowing applicants’ demeanor to be considered grounds for lack of credibility), as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Implications of Restrictive Asylum Measures

Recent research has argued that contemporary immigration policies are increasingly defined by modes and interests of securitization (Bigo 2002; Tazreiter 2004; Story 2005; Goldstein 2007). Story (2005) analyzes the U.S. asylum process and argues that rather than a framework of securitization, contemporary policies concerning asylum seekers are best understood in terms of criminalization and penalty. She states: “insofar as the mechanisms of migration management uphold the structural goals of contemporary crime control – namely, deterrence, punishment, and segregation – they encourage a public perception that asylum seekers occupy the same societal role of essentialized threat as ‘criminals’, therefore legitimizing and indeed engendering popular hostility towards asylum seekers” (3). Story (2005) traces the mechanisms of migration management put into place since the 1980s to support her argument regarding the criminalization of asylum seekers. She cites the policy moves described above, such as mandatory detention for asylum seekers without proper documentation, increased border

security, increased surveillance, and increased detention and expedited removal. The discourses surrounding these new policies and procedures, Story (2005) argues, define asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (who are often undifferentiated in these discourses) in terms of danger, insecurity and threat. As Story (2005) sums up: “her ‘refugeeness’ discredited before even articulated, the asylum-seeker’s rights as a member of a particular legal category are obscured, even nullified, by her symbolic and legal construction as a member of *another* legal category: the criminal” (20).

Resulting from the increasingly restrictive asylum policies and procedures over the past several decades, asylum seekers in the U.S. today thus find themselves caught within the ambivalent and contradictory policies of U.S. immigration: on the one hand, the discourses of national security, which view the asylum seeker as suspect and dangerous, serve to legitimate increasingly restrictive immigration measures; on the other hand, the discourse of human rights underscores the moral obligation to attend to asylum seekers, who are seen as innocent victims (Gibney 2004: 2). “Undocumented migration and allegedly ‘bogus’ asylum seeking have widely become the central and often constitutive preoccupation of immigration politics and policy debates” (Peutz and De Genova 2010: 1). Indeed, as Cianciarulo (2006) has argued, policies implemented since the passage of the Refugee Act have made asylum “a unique, complex body of law and a lightning rod for the national immigration debate, forcing the country to balance traditional humanitarian interests against weighty national security concerns” (4). The result, Cianciarulo argues, is that legitimate goals of the asylum system are severely undermined. Increasingly, security concerns are overshadowing humanitarian concerns with regard to political asylum in the U.S. This is particular the case in the post-

September 11th context: since then “the United States has focused on fighting terrorism at a serious cost to our humanitarian programs” (Schoenholtz 2005: 347).

What I wish to emphasize here is that the asylum process goes beyond assessing and defining persons in terms of (putatively) neutral legal categories. Rather, the asylum process always concerns moral conceptions and codes of personhood. Legal and political conceptions of who is morally deserving of inclusion in the U.S. and who is morally undeserving are informed by larger discourses and ideologies. Thus, recent immigration measures aimed at penalizing and criminalizing asylum seekers need to be understood within the larger anti-immigration sentiments that have permeated the West in recent decades (Story 2005; Schrag 2000; Hyndman 2005). For example, Welch and Schuster (2008) posit contemporary immigration policies as embedded in a larger national state of “moral panic.”

At the heart of the asylum process is the question of who is the ‘right’ kind of migrant and who is the ‘wrong’ kind of migrant. Indeed, the political asylum process is one in which these very categories of persons are produced. Given the passage of increasingly restrictive asylum measures and the increasing tendency within immigration policies, practices, and discourses to equate asylum seekers with criminals—constructed as morally suspect Others—the quest to be seen as deserving emerges as complex and onerous. It is migrants’ engagement with this process that this dissertation ethnographically investigates.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

I discuss here three broad bodies of literature as a way of theoretical contextualizing my dissertation research: a) Anthropological theorizing on experience, subjectivity, and suffering; b) Refugee mental health and the politics of trauma; and c) Sociolegal and human rights literature. Within the discussion of these theoretical domains, I explicate how my dissertation research draws on, or is situated among, these lines of scholarship.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORIZING ON EXPERIENCE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND SUFFERING

Experience as an Domain of Inquiry

The category of experience has been critiqued and scholars have called its use into question in recent decades (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 93; Willen and Seeman 2012). Historian Joan Scott (1991), in a seminal article, argues that taking “experience” as evidence results in the essentializing of identity and reification of subjects (797). She writes: “(T)he project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation ... its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause” (Scott 1991: 778; c.f. Silbey 2005: 357). Scott (1991) urges scholars to focus attention, rather, on the discursive construction of experience and “the politics of its construction” (797).

Aretxaga (1997), whose interest is in political subjectivity, posits a similar stance. She suggests: “Experience is critically linked with subjectivity, but to locate subjectivity

solely in conscious experience is to take subjectivity for granted rather than to examine the mechanisms through which it is historically constituted” (18). Aretxaga insists that subjectivity is an important domain or concept of analysis precisely because it can be reveal what has been hidden in relations of power. She, too, argues for an approach that takes into account the discursive construction of experiences and subjectivities.

Desjarlais (1994, 1997) also offers a critique of the concept of “experience.” Like Scott, Desjarlais argues against the assumption that experience implies “authenticity.” Rather than taking experience as an authentic domain of life or given the status of fact, Desjarlais instead offers an alternative understanding: “(E)xperience is not an existential given, but rather a historical possibility predicated on a certain way of being in the world. Since this way of being is only one possibility among many, some people live in terms different from experience” (1994: 887). Indeed, he suggests that those living in the homeless shelter where he conducted fieldwork “struggle along”—a mode of engaging life that is distinct from “experience.” Desjarlais calls for a critical phenomenological approach in anthropology. Such an approach demands, on the one hand, a fine-grained examination of ‘phenomena’ or ‘things.’ Yet it simultaneously moves beyond the phenomenological by trying to understand why things are the way they are; taking into account “the making of its own perceptions” (1997: 24).

In a recent volume of *Ethos*, Willen and Seeman (2012) point to the contested nature of “experience” as a category of scholarship and inquiry. Rather than opt for a narrower definition of experience, Willen and Seeman insist on approaching experience—including what is glossed as “lived experience”—“ecumenically, as an open-ended point of departure for robust ethnographic inquiry into the fullness,

complexity, and indeterminacy of human life, both individual and collective, as it unfolds in space, over time, across moods and modes, and within multidimensional local worlds that are defined as much by their biographical and embodied particularity as by their intersubjective grounding” (5). While this broad definition of experience seems, I would suggest, a bit theoretically unwieldy, what this approach to experience does importantly capture is the necessary attention to the “lived complexity” of social existence and its ability to complicate, transform and contest discursive categories (Jackson 1996: 8; see also Biehl and Locke 2010).

Theorizing on Subjectivity

In many ways, I see recent scholarly debates surrounding “subjectivity” as analogous to those surrounding the concept of “experience.” I suggest that these map onto to each other in that the debates surrounding both “experience” and “subjectivity” concern the status of these categories as accessible and “authentic” domains of inquiry. Thus, for scholars of both ‘experience’ and ‘subjectivity,’ concerns surrounding where and how to locate these domains (i.e., in the realm of ethnopsychology vs. discursivity) are central.

On the one hand, some research offers the examination of “subject positions” as a fruitful avenue, whereby individuals are seen as products of discursive practices (Davies and Harre 1990; see also Holland et al. 1998, Holland and Lave 2001). In this vein, Butler (1990, 1992, 1997) and other scholars drawing on Foucault (Gregory 1994; Ong 1995, 2003; Rose 1998; Rose, O’Malley and Valverde 2006) engage the concepts of subjectification, or subjection. Like those scholars who argue against experience as an

authentic domain of life, Butler argues against the subject as an a priori fact, arguing that the self is constituted by “matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable ‘subject’” (1992, 9). The subject is dependent on these external powers for her very existence, even if from a position of subjugation. Fassin (2008) uses the term “political subjectification” to refer to the “production of subjects and subjectivities that hold political significance within the framework of social interaction” (533). Rose (1998), in outlining a “genealogy of subjectification,” has noted that many social identities have historically been created in order to police, regulate, and even eliminate individuals (39). Indeed, as Butler (1992) claims, “subjects are constituted through exclusion” and that “it becomes quite urgent to ask, who qualifies as a ‘who’” (13).

In an attempt to link subjectivity, understood as a domain of interiority, with structural and political forces, recent theorizing frames subjectivity as forged at the intersection of social positioning and human agency (Das and Kleinman 2000; Holland et al. 2001; Holland and Lave 2001; Ortner 2006; Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; DelVecchio Good et al. 2008). Holland and Leander (2004) note that power relations shape subjectivity in that “a person or group is ‘offered’ or ‘afforded’ a social position” by a powerful body (127). Ortner (2006) defines subjectivity as “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear” *in relation to* “the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect [and] thought” (107). Similarly, Blackman et al. (2008) define subjectivity as “experience of the lived multiplicity of positioning” (6). Much of this research posits the anthropology of subjectivity as cultural critique in that “the concept of subjectivity [can be] a critical tool

for analyzing the contemporary social and political situation” (Blackman et al. 2008: 14; see also Ortner 2006)

Theorizing on Experience and the Self

Scholars discussed above, such as Butler, Scott, and Aretxaga, take experience or subjectivity to be discursively-produced domains and therefore emphasize analysis of the historical, political economic and sociocultural forces that produce such experience or subjectivities. In contrast, anthropological theorizing on experience and the self takes as its focus the immediacies of human life, including issues of affect, thought, psychodynamics, bodily experience, and consciousness (Parish 1994, 1996, 2008; Csordas 1990, 1994, 1997; Jenkins 1991, 1996, 1998, Jenkins and Valiente 1996; Jenkins and Barrett 2004; Jackson 1996, 2002, 2005; Linger 2001). In these phenomenologically-inclined approaches, the self is the starting point of cultural analysis. Csordas (1990), for example, in his elaboration of embodiment as an anthropological paradigm, argues “that the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture” (5).

This is not to say, however, that larger social and cultural formations are excluded from theoretical consideration. Indeed, Csordas (1994, 1997) has noted the tension between semiotic/discursive approaches to the body and phenomenological/experiential approaches. In offering embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology, Csordas hopes to provide textuality “a dialectical partner” (1994: 12). Moreover, as many have argued, critiques of phenomenological or experiential studies of self are misguided in suggesting that such approaches fail to attend to issues of political economy, discourse, or larger

sociocultural formations (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Desjarlais 2012). Rather, the emphasis in these approaches is on the ways in which these larger formations and processes get ‘taken up’ – or not – as a matter of subjective experience and selfhood. Indeed, as Desjarlais (2012) notes: “Phenomenological approaches include within their orbit distinct empirical considerations, from the political to the psychological. They attend, that is, to the phenomenal, palpable force of the political, the cultural, the discursive, and the psychological in people’s lives” (100).

To be sure, Jenkins’ work has been critical in demonstrating how attention to subjective and embodied experience provides a greater understanding of larger scale political economic and sociocultural forces. Whether her focus is on how political-economic and cultural forces shape affective and bodily experiences of and responses to violence (1991, 1998); how cultural context mediates experience and expression of mental illness (1988, 1994; Jenkins and Barrett 2004; Jenkins and Carpenter-Song 2005, 2008) or how the global rise of psychopharmaceuticals transforms self-experience (2010), Jenkins’ analyses and elaborations of culture theory are anchored in fine-grained ethnographic attention to intimate affective, bodily, and (inter)subjective ways of being-in-the-world. Jenkins’ work underscores that if anthropology is to fully grasp human cultural experience, the acting subject/self cannot be eliminated from analysis (2010: 4; see also Ortner 2006).

A central theme in Parish’s work (1994, 1996, 2008) is the human struggle to come to terms with a world not of one’s own making (see also Jackson 2005). To this end, Parish closely attends to the ways in which social actors may form disparate and shifting relationships to cultural symbols and social formations, sometimes resisting or

struggling against dominant ideologies and cultural forces. Thus, Parish underlines the need to account for processes of self-making that may be obscured by analyses that only attend to ideological and/or discursive production of experience or subjectivity. Parish's approach to studies of the self and of consciousness is integrative: he is interested in selfhood and lived experience as it emerges *in relationship to* cultural symbols and social formations. If Scott (1991) has argued that experience is constituted historically, Parish (1996) pushes this stance further and through his work we see how subjective engagement – or resistance – to our historically and culturally produced subject positions is a crucial component of experience:

History and society do determine the basic terms of my existence. Perhaps my struggles can make a difference, perhaps not, but the struggles do begin with a historical reality, with a world I did not make. No wonder some think that human agency means nothing, that all matters can be explained in terms of mechanical social 'forces' that mock our intentions, sweeping our aspirations away with a careless hand. Yet history and social life show how reluctant people are to accept their determination. This perennial, stubborn unhappiness with social facts makes a difference – it stands as a social and historical force itself' (Parish 1996: 1).

Synthesizing Theoretical Approaches to Subjectivity, Experience, and Suffering

While I do employ the idea of subjectivity in this dissertation, I primarily frame my dissertation as an investigation into the *experience* of seeking asylum, particularly participants' experiences of various modes of suffering (defined in their own terms). In drawing on the theoretical lines discussed above, with regard to subjectivity and experience, I understand both experience and subjectivity to be forged at the intersection of power relations and social positioning, on the one hand, and human agency, affects, perceptions and thoughts, on the other hand. If Willen, in her work on undocumented

migrants in Israel (2007, 2010), posits her project as a “critical phenomenology of ‘illegality’,” then in many ways my research may be considered a ‘critical phenomenology of asylum-seeking.’ Throughout this dissertation, my ethnographic and theoretical attention is to both how my participants were structurally and discursively positioned in ways that provoked particular affective and subjective states and certain modes of being-in-the world *and* how these constructed modes of being were expressed, narrated, negotiated, and embodied. In this way, my project is both critical and phenomenological.

Taking into consideration the various approaches to subjectivity and experience described in this literature review thus far, I use the term “experience” or, more specifically, “lived experience,” in this dissertation to connote particular attention to the immediacy of my participants’ thoughts, feelings, and meaning-making processes (or daily survival strategies) while simultaneously recognizing that these thoughts, feelings, modes of consciousness, etc. emerge *in dialogue with* larger political economic and sociocultural forces. Thus, I situate my work among anthropological approaches that are anchored in ethnographic attention to the lifeworlds and everyday social existences of acting subjects. In grounding my work this way, however, I also critically consider the discursive, governmental/institutional, political economic, and sociocultural forces that profoundly shape those very existences, at once constraining and enabling various forms of selfhood and experience. Thus, throughout the dissertation I emphasize that within my research context, discursive and structural processes have force – and, often, enormously oppressive force -- but they are also always mediated by subjective and intersubjective experiences.

Subjectivity, Experience and Refugee Studies

In a seminal article, Malkki (1995) traces the emergence of ‘the refugee’ as a social category and as an anthropological object of knowledge. Her critique of refugee studies has been important in emphasizing ‘the refugee’ as a historically, politically, and culturally constructed category. Recognizing ‘the refugee’ as a constructed category, recent work in refugee studies has explicitly focused on the processes by which this identity formation occurs (Phillips and Hardy 1997, Hardy 2003, LaCroix 2004, Peteet 2005, Feldman 2007). In her examination of the effects of humanitarian aid on refugee subjectivity, Peteet (2005) is interested in articulating the relationship between forms of knowledge production and everyday lived realities: “[A] synchronization between forms of knowledge and practice is identifiable where the organization of power is such that those producing knowledge of a subject are in a position to *enact* as well as sustain and reproduce it” (p.36). Building on this claim, this research contends that the field of asylum seeking is indeed one in which the institutional bodies of asylum not only have the power to produce a categories of personhood, but they have the power to enact upon these produced categories, shaping migrants’ access to particular rights, resources, and social position.

How asylum seekers engage, adopt, transform, and/or reject imposed categories is a central concern of this study, and this research builds on anthropological work that has demonstrated the complex ways that migrants negotiate institutionally-produced identities (Ong 1996, 2003; Margolis 1998; Meredith 2000; Hardy 2003, Smith 2000; Essed, Freks and Schrivers 2004; Gale 2005; Horst 2006; Wise 2006). Whether

conceived of as tactics of resistance or strategies of survival, refugee studies research has highlighted that refugees are “active cultural producers” (Wise 2004: 25) and creatively refashion subjectivities even within contexts of structural constraint (Harrell-Bond 1986; Zetter 1991, 2007; Voutira 2003; Essed, Freks, and Schrivers 2004; Horst 2006). For those seeking legal status, the ability to learn “how to be a successful refugee” (Gale 2005: 56) is a matter of great material and social consequences (Coutin 2003b; Peteet 2005; Bohmer and Shuman 2007, 2008).

Theoretical Approaches to Social Suffering and Structural Violence

The anthropological concepts of social suffering and structural violence offer a theoretical bridging of the political and the personal; of the discursive and historical construction of subjectivities or experiences, on the one hand, and the phenomenology of these modes of living, on the other. Because my study is concerned with the structural and social production of suffering as well as the phenomenology of suffering, this line of theorizing is highly relevant to the dissertation.

Kleinman, Das, and Locke (1997) offered the term “social suffering” as way of anchoring lived experience of illness and/or distress within larger political and cultural processes. Kleinman, Das, and Locke (1997), though acknowledging that not all suffering is equal, use the concept of social suffering to “bring into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (ix).

Kleinman (1998) elaborates three primary ways in which he sees suffering as social. First, he insists on the fundamentally intersubjective nature of suffering. The “locus of suffering” is, when examined closely, not solely located with individuals but within the intersubjective space he or she shares with others (Kleinman 1998: 390).

Second, Kleinman underscores the social roots of illness and distress. In this way, social suffering shares with the concept of “structural violence” a view that larger social forces are powerful in their ability to shape embodied experience. Finally, Kleinman posits suffering as social in that health problems in poor or disenfranchised populations are often bracketed from other social problems (e.g., domestic violence, drug abuse) and differentially managed by welfare, medical, and legal institutions, etc. The effect of this, Kleinman argues is that “health and social problems [become] more intractable and deepen both the sense and substance of misery” (1998: 392).

Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) employ a similar concept to social suffering, when they use the term “politically structured suffering” to describe the suffering of homeless heroin users with whom they worked. This term is intended to account for not only the ways in which suffering is socially distributed but also critically highlights the link between suffering and power. Thus, Bourgois and Schonberg examine interpersonal distress, drug abuse and domestic violence as it relates to “political-economic, cultural-ideological, and institutional forces” ranging from drug policy to racism and gender inequality (2009:16). They position their project as one that expands the definition of violence “as something more than a directly assaultive physical and visible phenomenon with bounded limits” (2009:16).

Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) expansion of the definition of violence is rooted in a significant line of scholarship over the last two decades that has troubled ideas of violence as primarily overt and visible (Bourdieu 1977, 2004; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Bourgois 1995; Kleinman 1997; Das et al. 1997; Jenkins 1998; Goldstein 2003; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003; Farmer 2003, 2004; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004). Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence," defined as "the gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible" has been influential in this line of scholarship (Bourdieu 1977: 196). Integral to his elaboration of symbolic violence is Bourdieu's concept of "misrecognition": "the fact of recognizing violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004: 272). Such misrecognition(s) become incorporated into one's habitus, one's system of schemas of perception, thought, and action that is consistent with one's social positioning. For Bourdieu (1977), habitus is the bridge between position and practice. Thus, symbolic violence is powerful in its pernicious ability to dominate, though not be recognized as such. These patterns of domination, then, get reproduced over time, as they become part of one's experience of the world.

The concept of structural violence has gained currency in recent decades, particularly in medical anthropological approaches to understanding how political-economic forces come to be embodied and work to produce profound health disparities. Although the term was used by Latin American liberation theologians decades ago, it is commonly associated with the work of Paul Farmer (1997, 2003, 2004). He defines structural violence as "violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order ... In short, the concept of structural violence is

intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression (2004:307). Farmer sees, then, the ethnographic task to make visible these mechanisms of oppression that have become invisible, routinized, and normalized.

While Farmer's attempt to link history and macro-level forces to intimate experiences of health and suffering has been lauded as an important theoretical move, his elaboration of 'structural violence' is not without its critics. In their response to Farmer's article (2004) outlining his approach to structural violence, Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes (2004) assert that "structural violence," while having analytic value in understanding life experience, is nonetheless too broad and undefined a term and that "its relationship to other forms of violence and power, including discursive power, must be clarified lest our analysis become too linear and deterministic" (318). Wacquant (2004) perhaps offers the most trenchant critique of Farmer's use of "structural violence." He argues, as a first point, that not all violence or mechanisms of oppression are invisible (e.g., slavery), as Farmer seems to imply. Wacquant then address what he terms as an additional "defect" in Farmer's work, similar to the critique of Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes. He writes: "[T]he category of 'structural violence' conflates full-fledged domination with mere social disparity and then collapses forms of violence that need to be differentiated, such as physical, economic, political, and symbolic variants or those wielded by state, market, and other social entities" (322; c.f. Biehl and Locke 2010; Horton 2009).

In an effort to avoid the conflation of various forms of violence, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) have suggested a "violence continuum," that accounts for -- but differentiates -- forms of violence ranging from torture and genocide to the violence of

poverty and social exclusion. As they assert: “Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality - force, assault, or the infliction of pain - alone. Violence also includes assaults on personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1). Here, I think it important to heed Jenkins’ (1998) earlier warning regarding the “dangerous potential” of “a construct of violence that can include virtually any human invective” (124). It is thus the analytic work of ‘unpacking’ these various forms of violence and understanding their interrelationships that work against rendering “violence” a theoretically impotent concept. The idea of a “violence continuum” may be helpful in that it avoids the theoretical collapsing of different forms of violence.

As an alternative to “structural violence,” Quesada, Hart and Bourgois (2011) offer the concept of “structural vulnerability,” which they define as “a positionality that imposes physical/emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals in patterned ways[;] structural vulnerability is a product of class-based economic exploitation and cultural, gender/sexual, and racialized discrimination, as well as complementary processes of depreciated subjectivity formation” (340). Quesada et al. offer this term as a theoretical move away from the overarching framework of ‘structural violence,’ arguing that the term “violence” has alienated audiences because of its “political and humanitarian valence” and because of the term’s “purposefully provocative broadening of the concept of violence into a political-economic abstraction” (341). Instead, they see the more politically neutral and inclusive concept of “vulnerability” as able to “extend the economic, material, and political insights of structural violence to

encompass more explicitly (and to project to a wider audience) not only political-economic but also cultural and idiosyncratic sources of physical and psychodynamic distress” (Quesada et al. 2001: 341).

Key to Quesada et al.’s (2011) approach is their framing of structural vulnerability as a positionality, his/her location within a hierarchical field of power relations. This is aptly descriptive of my study participants. Indeed, as I elaborate in Chapter 4, it asylum seekers’ position within a network power relations that makes the temporal category of waiting emerge as form of suffering. In this chapter, I draw on theoretical approaches to waiting that posit some individual as more “vulnerable to the burden of time” based on their position of power (Chua 2011:129).

Structural Violence, Vulnerability and Suffering in the Context of this Dissertation

I situate my analysis of asylum seekers’ suffering among anthropological work that identifies suffering as: a) critically linked to and informed by larger sociocultural, historical, and political-economic forces, and b) as intersubjectively produced and experienced. In this way, I see my study participants’ suffering as a form of “social suffering.”

Regarding approaches to “structural violence,” while I understand the theoretical concerns surrounding the (potential) abstraction of violence and suffering that the concept of “structural violence” may represent, I nonetheless find Farmer’s elaboration of the term to be a useful and relevant concept, and thus I use the term within the dissertation. I find the concept of ‘structural violence’ the most theoretically useful with regard to Farmer’s elucidation of how forces of oppression, exclusion, and

marginalization (in various manifestations) come to be institutionalized, and normalized as part of everyday life. Thus, Farmer's call to uncover and reveal the ways in which mechanisms of oppression and systematic violence come to be routinized has, I think, immense value and is an important anthropological aim.

The concern expressed by Farmer's critics that 'structural violence,' as a concept, glosses and abstracts all forms of violence, from symbolic to physical, can be obviated by ethnographic and theoretical attention to the specificity of violence in particular contexts. In other words, in this dissertation I call attention to forces I identify as forms of structural violence not as an analytic end point, but rather as a starting point for tracing particular mechanisms of subjugation, oppression, and governmentality within the context of asylum seeking. To this end, for example, I ethnographically elaborate how specific structural forces, including techniques of surveillance and policing, economic marginalization, and the production of "deportable existence," come to be normalized through the discourses of humanitarianism, on the one hand, and national security, on the other (Talavera et al. 2010: 167).

I also use the term "structural vulnerability" in this dissertation (see Chapter 5). However, unlike Quesada et al. (2011) I see this concept not as an alternative to 'structural violence,' but rather as an elaboration and application of 'structural violence.' What I take from Quesada et al.'s conceptualization of "structural vulnerability" is their framing of vulnerability as a positionality. I find their critique of Farmer's concept of "structural violence" unconvincing given that their very definition of "structural vulnerability" relies on the concept of structural violence. That is, Quesada et al. (2011) conceptualize structural vulnerability as an extension of "the insights of structural

violence” (341). Forms of structural violence, as outlined via Farmer, are then an integral component of structural vulnerability, in that they position subjects in disparate ways, allowing for different levels of susceptibility to illness or suffering. It is this reading of structural vulnerability that underlies my use of the term in this dissertation.

REFUGEE MENTAL HEALTH AND THE POLITICS OF TRAUMA

Approaches to Refugee Mental Health

The psychological and psychiatric literature has highlighted the pernicious effects of forced migration on health and mental health (Marsella et al. 1994; Garcia-Peltoniemi 1991; Ahearn 2000; Williams & Westermeyer 1986; Wilson & Drozdek 2004). Some work within psychiatry has underscored the link between mental health and asylum seeking, in particular (Silove, Steel, and Watters 2000; Steel et al. 1999; Sinnerbrink et al. 1997; Laban et al. 2004; Kinzie 2006; Bohmer and Shuman 2007, 2008; Ryan, Benson and Dooley 2008). These studies point to the specific vulnerabilities that underlie the process of asylum seeking, including lack of access to healthcare, education, and employment, and the looming threat of deportation. Kinzie (2006) points to the increased securitization and criminalization of refugees and asylum seekers as having negative consequences in terms of mental health and psychopathology. Moreover, research has underscored the ways in which the asylum process itself can be seen as entailing a form of psychological violence, (re)traumatization, and demoralization (Shuman and Bohmer 2004; Bohmer and Shuman 2007, 2008; Rousseau et al. 2002, 2004; Eastmond 2007; Kinzie 2006).

Ingleby (2005) traces the historical trajectory of psychological attention to and treatment of refugees. The 1980s, he argues witnessed an increase in the attention towards psychological problems of refugees. This coincides with the significant rise in refugee populations during this period. Yet, in reviewing psychological articles published during this time, Ingleby finds that most were focused on the effects of previous trauma (or pre-migration trauma), with little focus on the effects of forced migration itself. Ingleby asserts that also during this period, the concept of ‘trauma,’ and in particular, ‘PTSD,’ emerged as a dominant focus within the psychological literature. This strong focus on trauma and PTSD extended to work on refugees. As Ingleby notes, half of all psychological articles published on refugees between 2000 and 2005 makes reference to the concept of ‘trauma’ (9).

As a counter to the increasing conflation of forced migration with trauma, a critique of the medicalization of suffering has been offered by scholars the fields of psychology and biomedicine (namely psychiatry) who study refugees (McNally 2003; Watters, 2001; Fischman, 1998; Bracken et al., 1995; Pedersen, 2002; Silove, 1999; Muecke, 1992). Increasingly, literature has emerged that has challenged not only the findings of studies suggesting high levels of PTSD in refugee populations, but also critiquing the very use of the PTSD model in such contexts (Becker, 1995; Bracken et al 1995; Bracken, 1998; Summerfield, 2003; Silove 1999, 2000; McNally, 2003; Watters, 2001; Pedersen, 2002; Ingleby 2005). Those in the clinical field have emphasized that the tendency to translate refugee experiences or trauma experiences into psychopathology without contextualizing those experiences is problematic.

Medical and psychological anthropology have been important in advancing an understanding of the political, moral, social, and cultural dimensions of violence, including those stemming from forced migration (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995; Willen 2007, 2010, 2012; Coker 2004; Zarowsky 2000, 2004; Gozdziaik and Tuskan 2000; Jenkins 1991, 1996, 1998; Jenkins & Valiente, 1994). This work has called attention to the polysemy of violence and dislocation. In highlighting the myriad cultural, political and sociomoral ways of interpreting forced migration, these medical and psychological anthropological approaches have revealed local understandings of violence and social rupture that may run counter to a framework of trauma or PTSD.

Theorizing the Politics of Trauma

Research has noted the increasing use of trauma discourse within immigration and humanitarian politics (Watters 2001; Breslau 2004; James 2004; Gross 2004; Ingleby 2005; Fassin 2008; Fassin & d'Halluin 2005, 2007; Ticktin 2006; Feldman 2007). Some of this work investigates the ways in which trauma operates as a *category* in the asylum process. The category of trauma, for example, may serve a kind of currency within the asylum arena (James 2004; Breslau 2004; Gross 2004), or as an arbiter of the credibility of narratives (Shuman & Bohmer, 2007; Bohmer & Shuman, 2008).

Fassin and d'Halluin (2005, 2007) posit the increasing invocation of trauma as a new technology of governing and investigation, whether this takes the form of medical and psychological affidavits or expert testimony (2007:304). Here, trauma operates as an important framework in the construction of the asylum seeker, where the compromised or traumatized body becomes politically legitimated and recognized (Colvin 2004, Ticktin

2006), what Fassin (2008) describes as “political subjectification” (553). Ticktin (2006) addresses a similar dilemma in her work on the *sans papiers* (undocumented migrants) in France. Ticktin focuses on the (unintended) consequences of an illness clause in French immigration policy that would grant legal status to persons with life-threatening illnesses. What results, according to Ticktin, is a context in which “people end up trading in biological integrity for political recognition” (2006: 33). Ticktin asserts that, although the biologically compromised body may be politically and legally recognized, this comes at a price, as suffering bodies admitted through the illness clause may continue living a marginal life of exclusion and pain.

Trauma as a category works to produce particular kinds of subjects. Yet the discursively produced ‘traumatic’ subject constitutes a highly fraught category that may pose dilemmas for asylum seekers in everyday life. Nyers (2006) specifically examines the kind of subject that is produced via the UN definition of a refugee, the definition upon which U.S. immigration law is based, described earlier. Nyers sees a fundamental tension in the definition. On the one hand, the reference to a “well-founded fear” emphasizes what Nyers considers “the human capacity to reason” (2006: 45). On the other hand, however, the notion of fear as a motivator of flight signifies a base emotional response that stands in contrast to reason. While fear may serve as a condition of gaining refugee or asylee status, a fearful subjectivity may pose difficulties in other realms of social life, whereby one may be marginalized or seen as a social outcast.

Framing asylum seekers as traumatized subjects or victims of human rights abuses may assist in gaining legal status and may sometimes – but not always – reflect asylum seekers’ own self-concepts. Yet this dissertation also importantly considers the

consequences of this framing. Anthropological contributions to the medicalization of suffering generally (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995; Jenkins 1996, 1998; Bracken and Petty 1998; Breslau 2004; Coker 2004; McKinney 2007), and the medicalization of refugees more specifically (Harrell-Bond 1986; Jenkins 1991, 1996; Jenkins and Valiente 1994; Malkki 1995; Gozdzik and Tuskan 2000; Zarowsky 2000, 2004; Colic-Peisker 2003; Gross 2004), suggest that the translation of refugee experience into psychological categories may delegitimize alternative understandings of dislocation. This dissertation ethnographically elucidates both the processes of subjectification through trauma and/or suffering and asylum seekers' engagement with these formations. The often ambiguous relationship that asylum seekers have to these categories provides a lens into the tension between "self-making" and "being-made" (Ong 2003).

In addition to trauma as a category, research has probed the *experience* of trauma in the context of asylum seeking. Here, an important paradox has been noted: while the trauma label may assist an asylum seeker in gaining legal status, the very effects of trauma have been shown to interfere with the ability to produce a coherent and linear narrative, which is privileged in the legal arena. The inability to produce a coherent and linear narrative is often misread as suspect or incredible and often results in a denial of status (Rousseau et al. 2002; Steel, Frommer & Silove 2004; Shuman & Bohmer 2004; Cohen 2003, Bohmer & Shuman 2007, 2008; Herlihy and Turner 2007; Piwowarczyk 2007; Ordonez 2008). Thus, trauma emerges as a particularly fraught category within the asylum process.

SOCIOLEGAL STUDIES

This project has been informed by sociolegal scholarship that posits law as an aspect of culture, rather than as two discrete entities (Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel 1994; Ewick and Silbey 1998; Silbey 2005; Saguy and Stuart 2008). Derived from Geertz, the ‘law as culture’ model conceives of legality “as interpretive cultural frameworks through which individuals come to understand their lives” (Saguy and Stuart 2008: 158). Here, the everyday becomes a site in which to investigate the role that law plays in ordering social relationships in often routinized or hidden ways, whereby legal authority manifests as “invisible constraint, suffusing and saturating our everyday life” (Silbey 2005: 331). Law, in this perspective, is seen as simultaneously constraining and enabling (Merry 2006; Wilson 2007). Research on legal consciousness uncovers the multiple forms of legality that co-exist, and emphasizes the experiential aspects of law. Silbey (2005) describes the study of legal consciousness as “the search for the forms of participation and interpretation through which actors construct, sustain, reproduce, or amend the circulating (contested or hegemonic) structures of meaning concerning law” (334). A crucial aspect of law’s saturation of everyday life is its ability to codify particular concepts of personhood in constructing and reproducing social identities (Harris 1996; Engel 2001; Cowan 2004, Coutin 2001, 2002, 2002b, 2003a, 2005b; Goldberg, Musheno & Bower 2001; White 2002a, 2002b). This dissertation draws on these lines of scholarship in examining how the law works to legitimize certain aspects of personhood, and ultimately offers “authoritative pronouncements” regarding who – and what -- constitutes a ‘deserving’ asylum seeker (Engel 2001: 18).

With regard to migration, sociolegal studies have highlighted the “new and legal political subjects” created via immigration law (Ngai 2004:4, Coutin 2005b). In her

research on Salvadoran migrants' struggle to establish legal status in the U.S., Coutin (2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b) has extensively explored the intersection of law and personhood. Coutin identifies the legal process as one of "procedural subjugation," to describe "the ways that legal personnel and legal proceedings discipline their subjects" (2003b: 107). Coutin (2003b) observes that migrants develop an alternative legality, a form of legal consciousness that often runs counter to 'official' legal constructs (11). She conceptualizes the spatial and social position within which Salvadoran migrants develop an alternative legality as "spaces of nonexistence" (2003b: 27). By this, she is calling attention to the "conflation of and disjuncture between physical and legal presence" (Coutin 2003b: 29). In El Salvador, migrants had been subjected to multiple forms of nonexistence through political repression and violence. In the U.S., these Salvadorans live lives of "legal clandestinity," where they are physically present, but legally nonexistent. While Coutin does point to the possibility of resistance within these spaces of nonexistence, she nonetheless concludes that "they are largely sites of subjugation" (2003b: 28).

In other work, Coutin (2001) examines the multiple notions of political subjectivity that emerge in within the legalization process, investigating this from the context of legal hearings, of advocacy groups, and of migrants themselves. Her analysis is focused on the "disjunctures" in the forms of subjectivity that each context produces. Coutin (2001, 2003b) shows advocacy groups to be in a particularly precarious situation, as they are both as both agents and critics of the state, and must recognize both the legal consciousness of migrants and the official discourses of immigration law. The dissertation draws on Coutin's work in examining how the multiple actors within the

research site contribute to the shaping of asylum seekers' experiences of self and social world. This project is concerned with the ways in which institutions and the positions offered to asylum seekers by these institutions mediate lived experience.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 2 provides important background and context regarding the research setting of this study, my sample, and methods of data collection. In this chapter, I also discuss ethical concerns regarding research with refugee populations, as well as address challenges I encountered with recruitment and data collection. These challenges, I argue, underscore many of the very themes of this dissertation; namely, highlighting the pervasive sense of fear and insecurity that mediated participants' experiences of the asylum process. I end this chapter with a brief but detailed overview of the asylum process and its associated institutional bodies.

Chapter 3 explores what I identify as a particular "political ethos" (Jenkins 1991) of the asylum process. The protracted nature of the asylum process, the lack of transparency and clarity of the associated institutional bodies, and the techniques of policing and 'management' to which asylum seekers are subjected, come together to shape participants' affective and subjective experiences in this context. As with undocumented migrants, asylum seekers live for extended periods in states of "deportability" (de Genova 2002). Unlike undocumented migrants, however, asylum seekers, by lodging a claim with the U.S. government for legal protection, become hypervisible and hyper-managed subjects. In this chapter, I posit asylum seekers as embodying what I refer to as a "paradox of visibility," in which asylum seekers' visibility

simultaneously represents a promise of security and a profound source of *insecurity*, especially in its hyper- forms of policing and criminalization.

Having fleshed out aspects of the asylum process that contribute to a particular ethos, Chapters 4 and 5 ethnographically elaborate and investigate asylum seekers' experiences of suffering. Beginning with an extended case study to open Chapter 4, this chapter investigates the intersection of power, temporality, and subjectivity within the context of asylum seeking. I argue that the structural positioning of asylum seekers as 'neither here nor there' critically transfigures and re-orientates the self's relationship to space and time. In particular, I posit asylum seekers' embodiment of 'inbetweenness' as evocative of a state of existential limbo, in which life and processes of meaning-making are understood and experienced as being "on hold." Moreover, while asylum seekers recognized the impact that past violence and trauma had on their lives, my study participants nonetheless primarily located their suffering *in the present*. I close this chapter by arguing that although asylum seekers found themselves in a highly constrained environment, they nonetheless exercised agency and forged visions of hope, albeit in ways that demand a rethinking of common approaches to "agency" and "hope."

Chapter 5 continues to ethnographically elucidate asylum seekers' experiences and expressions of suffering. This chapter posits asylum seekers as occupying spaces of "structural vulnerability" (Quesada et al. 2011), and I examine the specific structural forces that come to bear on lived experience in this context. This chapter namely addresses participants' economic marginalization/exclusion and ethnographically investigates how this form of structural vulnerability came to reshape relationships to self and others, including the reconfiguration of transnational relationships. I conclude this

chapter with a consideration of how both subjective and affective dimensions of uncertainty (Chapter 4) and structural vulnerability, in many instances, came to be embodied. Taken together, Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate and analyze how specific, affective and subjective orientations to space and time *articulate with* particular structural forces to produce novel forms of suffering.

Chapter 6 examines participants' engagement with therapeutic interventions, with particular focus on psychotherapy and psychiatric medications. In this chapter, I elucidate the various consequences—both intended and unintended—that therapeutic interventions had for asylum seekers. Ultimately, given that participants located their suffering in the present—in the protracted state of uncertainty and vulnerability of asylum seeking—therapeutic interventions, such as therapy and medications, held only partial promise, at best, of mitigating suffering and emotional pain. Asylum seekers, however, did creatively engage therapeutic interventions as a strategy to manage life within the temporal period of asylum seeking. It was legal status, however, that held “real” promise to assuaging suffering for study participants.

If Chapter 6 can be framed as an examination of the ‘psychologization’ of asylum seekers’ suffering, Chapter 7 investigates the processes of ‘legalization’ of participants’ life histories and testimonies of suffering. That is, this chapter examines, by drawing on data collected among institutional actors (asylum officers, immigration attorneys, human rights advocates, observations of court hearings), how “fear,” “persecution” and “suffering” are both ‘performed’ and expressed by asylum seekers, on the one hand, and assessed and judged by institutional actors, on the other hand. Here, I reveal critical disjunctures between how asylum seekers understand themselves as (morally) deserving,

‘authentic’ refugees and the logic and grammar of the legal process that assesses this. In particular, I examine what constitutes ‘evidence’ of suffering in this context and how emotional display can either be a form of strategic representation or an authentic reflection of inner states (or both). In this chapter, I also attend to how discourses and ideas of ‘trauma’ are deployed, with ambivalent results, in this arena.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation. In this chapter, I reflect on the contributions that this research makes to the discipline and beyond. I also identify limitations of this study and suggest paths for future research.

CHAPTER 2 SETTING, METHODS, AND BACKGROUND

RESEARCH SETTING

Fieldwork for this research was conducted over a fifteen-month period, primarily in the Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN area (while most participants lived in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, two participants resided at least 75 miles outside of the Twin Cities). The Twin Cities served as an ideal site for this research for several reasons. First, the area has a rich and diverse history of migration, including having recently been identified as a “twenty-first-century gateway” for migration (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008). Moreover, the Twin Cities has been considered a “re-emerging” gateway, suggesting that this Midwestern city had experienced a large influx of migrants in the early part of the 20th century, followed by a decline in immigration mid-century, and is characterized by a present resurgence in immigration. Migration to the Twin Cities experienced a peak after the Vietnam War when large numbers of refugees from Southeast Asia (Hmong, Vietnamese, Laotian) arrived and settled in the area (Advocates for Human Rights 2008). The Twin Cities continue to see the arrival of large numbers of refugees, not only from Southeast Asia, but also more recently from African countries such as Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Guinea, Togo, Cameroon, and Democratic Republic of Congo (MN Department of Health 2008, 2009, 2010). Statistics show that 25-50% of immigrants in Minnesota are refugees, compared to 8% nationally (Advocates for Human Rights 2008).

The diversity of asylum seekers in the Twin Cities area is a second reason that this geographic region was a compelling research site. Though accessing statistical

information specifically on asylum seekers in Minnesota is challenging, many sources point to rich ethnic and national diversity of asylum seekers in the area. In contrast to asylum seekers whose entry to the U.S. may or may not be clandestine, refugee arrivals are heavily regulated and require mandatory health screenings upon entry. Thus, state information on refugee populations are more readily accessible. Statistical data that include asylum seekers are largely not aggregated, and asylum seekers are most often, for statistical purposes, included in the category of “foreign born,” which refers to naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, asylees/asylum seekers, foreign students, and undocumented migrants. However, the director of USCIS’s Chicago Asylum Office, whose jurisdiction includes Minnesota, cited that jurisdiction, and, specifically, the Twin Cities, as having the most diversity of asylum applicants among all eight asylum offices in the United States (Kenneth Madsen, personal communication).

This claim is further supported by statistics from the human rights organization that assisted in recruitment for my study (see Recruitment section below), which show that of the over 500 asylum cases that the organization handles annually, over 60 nationalities are represented. As I will elucidate in more depth below (see “Sample” section), this national/ethnic diversity of asylum claimants in the Twin Cities area allowed for: a) an ethnographic concentration on a specific subset of asylum seekers (Cameroonians) and b) a simultaneous ethnographic investigation of asylum claimants who found themselves not connected to particular ethnic, national, or religious communities in the area. Thus, the diversity of asylum claimants in Minnesota was reflected in my study sample in a way that, I believe, allowed me to ethnographically capture a range of experiences of persons undergoing the same politico-legal process.

A third reason that the Twin Cities proved to be an ideal setting for investigating the political asylum process in the U.S. was the presence of existing institutional support for asylum seekers. As I will detail below, the assistance in study recruitment from a local, well-established human rights organization was essential to my ability to locate asylum seekers and conduct this research. Moreover, the Twin Cities is home to an established center for treating victims of torture. This organization, which I refer to in this dissertation as The Healing Place (THP), works closely with the human rights organization that facilitated my research. Furthermore, many of study participants were clients of The Healing Place and their involvement with THP was, in many cases, a central component of their lives at various times (see Chapter 6). In sum, the presence of established infrastructure aimed at aiding asylum seekers was a key factor in my ability to ethnographically elucidate a main goal of this research: how the myriad institutional discourses and practices associated with political asylum mediate personal and collective experiences of asylum claimants.

Finally, recent immigration policy changes and developments in the Twin Cities area that were reflective of national trends in immigration—namely, trends toward the securitization and criminalization of immigration and asylum seeking, as discussed in the previous chapter—made this geographic region an important research site. In particular, at the time I was preparing to begin this research, the ICE budget in the Twin Cities was tripled and the number of ICE staff increased significantly. Furthermore, St. Paul had, at the time of preparing for this research, been included as one of eight cities to test a new pilot program called Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program (ISAP) that used heightened surveillance and policing techniques to monitor “aliens” in the U.S., including

some asylum seekers. While only a handful of my study participants were involved with ISAP (see Chapter 3), both the presence of ISAP in the Twin Cities, along with the increased focus on immigration enforcement in the area, were an important backdrop for my research. Specifically, because this research is, in part, interested in examining how tensions between national security, on the one hand, and humanitarianism, on the other, come to be negotiated ‘on the ground’ and come to bear on lived experience, the presence of these policing forces in the Twin Cities provided a unique window into these processes of negotiation.

RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Before entering the field, I had established a relationship with a local human rights organization, to which I refer in the dissertation as the Center for Human Rights (CHR). CHR is one of the first human rights organizations in the United States and focuses its work on a broad range of issues, from legal reform and policy advocacy in the U.S. to issues of international justice and human rights monitoring across the globe. The Refugee and Immigrant Program at CHR is aimed at providing free legal services to over 500 asylum cases annually. With a staff of only three (an intake coordinator/assistant, a director, and a staff attorney), CHR’s Refugee and Immigrant Program, like much of CHR overall, relies on a network of volunteers to deliver services. Hundreds of trained volunteers provide *pro bono* legal representation, expert medical and psychological evaluations, and interpretation and translation services to CHR’s asylum clients.

Asylum seekers were referred to CHR via different avenues: by word of mouth, by THP, or through a list of resources provided by USCIS if their asylum claim was

referred to an immigration judge (IJ). The first step in becoming a CHR client is to have an intake appointment, in which the intake coordinator takes the asylum seeker's testimony. The potential case is then brought to a weekly staff meeting, in which the Refugee and Immigrant Program director, intake coordinator, and interns discuss the merits of the case and decide whether or not to accept him/her as a client. Per my findings of the staff meetings I was permitted to observe, as well as conversations with CHR staff, a decision to take on a client was based on assessment of credibility, meeting the requirements to claim refugee status, and the ability for a volunteer attorney to handle the case (e.g., depending on the complexity of the case, the needs/vulnerability of the client). If an asylum seeker was accepted as a CHR client, he or she was assigned to a *pro bono* attorney who would handle their case, under the supervision of the Refugee and Immigrant Program director and/or staff attorney.

Establishing a relationship with CHR and ensuring their willingness to facilitate with recruitment was essential to locating asylum seekers for my study. As this dissertation explores, asylum seekers often expressed fear and concern about revealing their legal (non)status to strangers. CHR's ability to broker an introduction was therefore crucial. In initial meetings with CHR staff prior to beginning research and entering the field, the option of approaching asylum claimants about participation in my research study at the time of their intake appointment was ruled out. CHR staff felt—and I concurred—that because the intake appointment was the first time asylum claimants were meeting with CHR and in this meeting, they were often quite emotionally vulnerable, this would not be an appropriate time to request their participation in an outside study. Moreover, there was also the option that CHR would not accept them as a client. The

recruitment plan that CHR director and I decided upon entailed CHR to conduct a recruitment mailing to eligible clients that included: a) a study flier that I had created outlining the study with my contact information should potential participants want to contact me directly; b) a cover letter from CHR indicating their view of my project as a valuable one, while simultaneously underscoring that my study was in no way connected with CHR. Both my flier and the cover letter sent from CHR emphasized the voluntary nature of the study and reiterated that their participation – or not -- in the study would not affect the outcome of their asylum cases. The CHR letter asked that interested asylum seekers call CHR (the name and number of an intern at the Refugee and Immigration Program was indicated on the CHR cover letter).

Prior to entering the field, I had discussed with CHR about targeting particular nationalities for participation in the study. I was particularly interested in recruiting Cameroonian asylum seekers, which the CHR director had told me was a particular trend in Minneapolis/St. Paul at that time. The director of CHR was wary of such a directed recruitment strategy, feeling that casting a wider net in terms of participants would be a better strategy given her concern about low response rate overall: a concern that proved to be quite valid. Moreover, unlike other cities in the U.S. where asylum seeker populations come largely from several distinct nationalities, the Minneapolis/St. Paul area is one of the most diverse in terms of asylum seekers, as noted above.

Given that the Cameroonians who were seeking asylum were primarily Anglophones, I developed a research plan, in concert with CHR, to attempt to recruit a multi-ethnic/multi-national Anglophone sample (a significant portion of their clients), with a specific target of recruitment of asylum seekers from Cameroon. The initial

recruitment mailing was sent to an estimated 150 CHR clients. Over the course of several weeks, twelve (12) clients responded (8% response rate) to CHR indicating their interest in participating in the study, although some of them indicated that they needed more information about the study before making a decision. These asylum seekers' contact information was then passed on to me so that I could contact them directly to arrange a time and place to discuss the study with them and, if they remained willing to participate, discuss and complete informed consent forms. Because of the low response rate, about which the CHR director was unsurprised, given asylum seekers' sense of fear and mistrust, broadly speaking, we decided to conduct a follow-up mailing about one month later. In addition, after this mailing was sent out, a CHR intern telephoned those who were on the mailing list to see if they had received the letter and to ascertain their interest in participating. This follow-up mailing resulted in the response of an additional six (6) asylum seekers (for a total response rate of 12%). In sum, a total of 18 participants were recruited through the CHR mailing. To my frustration, only 3 of these recruited participants were asylum seekers from Cameroon. As I will discuss shortly, the remaining 10 Cameroonian asylum claimants (for a total N=13 Cameroonian asylum seekers) were recruited via snowball sampling after some immersion into the local Cameroonian community.

I will return to discussing my study sample in detail in the next section. In concluding this section on recruitment, however, I want to address challenges I experienced in this domain. These challenges, I believe, rather than be understood as study limitations (though consideration of this is presented in the conclusion of the dissertation), underscore many of the arguments and findings of the dissertation overall.

Namely, initial challenges in recruitment point to the pervasive sense of fear and insecurity that mediated asylum seekers' lives in this context. An incident that occurred early in my fieldwork illustrates this.

I had already recruited and enrolled Eric, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in his mid-thirties, in my research project and he was turning out to be a most valuable "key informant." Eric was well known in the local Cameroonian community and was enthusiastic about helping me locate additional Cameroonian asylum seekers for my study. Yet, he too, became frustrated at the challenge of getting people to agree to participate in the research. One afternoon, I met Eric for a meal at an inexpensive all-you-can-eat Chinese lunch buffet. After we filled our plates and prepared to eat, Eric looked at me chuckling, "I hear that you tried to get this lady Esther to talk to you." I understood that he was referring to a woman who another participant, Louise, had introduced to me at church the weekend prior. Louise had also been attempting to find additional study participants for me and had already led me to at least one other asylum seeker that I was able to enroll. Esther, a Cameroonian asylum seeker in her early 50s, would be a good candidate for the study, Louise had assured me. I talked with Esther after our introduction at church and told her a little about my project. She did not commit to participating, but didn't refuse either, and told me to call her so that we can arrange another time to meet. I had left a message for her the day before my lunch with Eric but had not heard back from her. I was surprised to hear Eric mention Esther's name since he was not a member of the same congregation and I had, of course, not mentioned Esther's name to him. Eric explained to me that Esther was a long-time friend of his family—they had known each

other in their hometown of Bamenda, Cameroon—and that they talk on a fairly regular basis.

“Yeah,” Eric continued to tell me, still chuckling, “Esther comes up to me and says ‘there’s this lady, a white lady, and she’s asking me to talk to her.’” Eric told me Esther found this very suspicious and had approached Eric about this when she saw him the day prior to our lunch. I was surprised at this information since Esther, though not overly enthusiastic about the research study, did not express any reservations or concerns about the research to me. In fact, I recalled feeling confident that she would be enrolled in the study, given the good rapport we had following our introduction that morning—a rapport that continued developing into the afternoon at a post-church get-together, where Esther cajoled me into dancing and drumming with her while she bounced my infant son in her arms. Eric told me that he tried explaining to her that I was a student, that this was part of my training, that I had no connection to the government, and that the research could potentially be used to help address policy issues that could help asylum seekers in the future (all things that I had underscored to Esther as well). He was unable to allay her suspicions and fears, however. I had recorded this interaction between Eric (E) and me (BH):

- E: She [Esther] was like trying to explain how scared she was ... about the white woman (chuckling).
 B: Why do you think there’s so much fear about it, about me?
 E: Because there’s been so much betrayal. There’s been so much betrayal. What we’ve been through, we English Cameroonians, and what we’ve experienced at the hands of the French. We learn to trust our own. We trust our own. ... As much as I tried to explain to this lady. I told her, you know, ‘you know how politically active I’ve been. You know how hard I am trying to help you [Eric had been helping Esther with her asylum

application], to fight to get you asylum. And I'm telling you it's okay to talk to this lady [Bridget]' But she just said 'tsk, tsk. \$25! [the IRB-approved honorarium for interview sessions]. They want to buy your conscience! They want to buy something from you!' She was like, 'you know these white people. They don't give you money for nothing. There must be something behind it. What do you think!?' (Eric laughing). She was talking from that mother perspective, like I was her son. Like 'I'm telling you ... (laughing). Watch out for this white lady' (laughing, shaking his head)

BH: Do you think that she's afraid of how I will use the information? That it will get back to the Cameroon government?

E: She—people like her, they don't understand, they just ... they don't trust. You could use it against them, they think.

BH: I can understand the fear.

E: Yeah. They don't have [legal] protection here. They don't know, you know this white girl taking this information, maybe she is here is trying to send them back, you know. Maybe she's being paid. I mean, because people were betrayed like that, you cannot believe it. It's that threatening.

BH: Is that fear common?

E: Yeah, well, it's also naivety. You know, she thinks maybe you are trying to get information, that you will go and give it the CPDM [ruling party in Cameroon] government. You know, maybe this will affect their status ... I mean—and she doesn't understand research, the nature of research. So ... I hate to tell you, but she's never gonna call you back (chuckling).

I asked Eric if there was, in his opinion, anything that I could do to allay potential participants' fears beyond what I've been doing and saying already. He insisted that I will continue to have problems finding Cameroonian asylum seekers willing to talk with me given the widespread unfamiliarity with research, broadly, and with the pervasive fear and mistrust that has dictated their lives in recent years, both in Cameroon and in the U.S. "It's about how we've been betrayed by the CPDM. We've been in life and death situations," he reiterated. I would add here that this fear and mistrust was not unique to asylum seekers from Cameroon. Indeed, the CHR director, who had anticipated recruitment challenges, speculated that this was likely a significant reason for a lower

response rate. To be sure, when I met with Linda, a Liberian asylum seeker in her early 40s, for our first interview she revealed to me that her boyfriend was trying to convince her that I may be a “spy for INS” (see Chapter 3).

Eric also suggested that people may be much more willing to talk to me once their asylum case was resolved. Indeed, I had already found this to be the case. Several Cameroonian asylum seekers to whom I was introduced indicated that they would be willing to participate in my research study only after their case was adjudicated. “Call me then,” they would tell me. Of course, given that the adjudication of a case could take years, postponing enrollment until then was not feasible. Likewise, the CHR intern reported to me that several CHR (non-Cameroonian) clients had responded to the mailing indicating the same stipulation: that they would be willing to participate in the study once a decision was made on their asylum case. Others, such as Emmanuel, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in his mid-30s, who was recruited via CHR, enrolled in the study with the declaration that we not talk about the specifics of his asylum hearing or engage in detailed information about his asylum case. (I hasten to add here, however, that once I established a relationship with Emmanuel and had been spending time with him, he would spontaneously reveal information about his asylum case or his thoughts on the asylum process, though he steadfastly refused to talk about this in recorded interviews until he was, indeed, granted asylum). These types of reservations on the part of asylum seekers need, I argue, to be understood within the particular geopolitical and historical context from which they emerge.

In their recent edited volume entitled *Postcolonial Disorders*, Good et al. (2008) had charged contributors to rethink “subjectivity through the lens of the postcolonial” in

order to “bring explicit attention to the haunting presence of the colonial” (5). The editors define “postcolonialism” as “an era and a historical legacy of violence and appropriation, carried into the present as traumatic memory, inherited institutional structures, and often unexamined assumptions. Postcolonialism denotes relationships between members of societies that were colonial powers and those that were colonies...between powerful political, economic, and state entities and those that are marginalized; between knowledge structures and modes of experience shapes by the often violent relationships of colonialism” (Good et al. 2008: 6-7).

Good et al.’s (2008) call for attention to the impact of postcolonialism in shaping subjective experience is relevant to my research context, as evidenced by the above example, in two primary ways. First, as I will describe more fully in the proceeding subsection, the colonial history of Cameroon (and other countries of origin of asylum seekers in this study) has informed collective and individual experiences of its citizens (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Argenti 2007). Importantly, for Anglophone Cameroonians, the struggle over political voice, even in the post-colonial era, has echoed colonial experiences of oppression, violence, and marginalization. France’s support of the current regime in Cameroon, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM), and its leader Paul Biya, have led political opposition leaders to decry the current political situation as one of “French neo-colonialism” (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003: 222). Indeed, as I will explore in this dissertation, Anglophone Cameroonians’ experiences of marginalization and oppression, recounted in life history narratives, was, at turns, embodied as social defeat and served as the impetus for political activism (see Chapter 3).

Second, as the above example regarding Esther's mistrust of me as a "white woman," who was perhaps trying to "buy [her] conscience," the specter of the colonial continues to structure present-day relationships in many cases. This became both a theoretical and a methodological concern for me. It was of theoretical concern in that the historical and embodied effects of a colonial (or neo-colonial) past come to shape study participants' experiences of seeking political asylum in the U.S. in particular ways. As the previous chapter emphasized, asylum seekers, though their experiences of self and social world I found to be powerfully shaped by the institutions 'managing' them in the U.S., asylum seekers were not a *tabula rasa* on which the disciplining effects of these institutions were writ. Thus, the experiences of the past informed how the present context was experienced and apprehended.

The specter of the colonial was of methodological concern given that the mistrust that Esther articulated to Eric rendered her unwilling to participate in my research. As a white woman, a symbol of both the colonial past and the current context of neo-colonial rule in Cameroon (note her concern that I would be relaying information to the CPDM), I was confronted with entrenched historical and racial components that informed the already-existing power differential between me, as the researcher, and Esther, as a (potential) research subject.

This incident urged me to pay close attention to the ways in which my positionality, not just as a researcher, but as a white woman with money to give—and all the historical implications that this carried, critically informed my research. Of course, mistrust must be understood not just as a potential aspect of postcolonialism, but also a highly understandable and legitimate response to contexts of political violence and

oppression more broadly (Knudsen and Daniel 1995). I will address these important issues regarding the ethical considerations of research with asylum seekers in the Methods section below.

Given these concerns, it is understandable that asylum seekers would be wary of talking to me about their experiences of the asylum process, as well as their experiences of past violence and suffering. I do not have empirical data to make an argument about any differences that characterized those who talked to me (enrolled in the study) versus those who did not (declined to participate or those who were not invited to participate because they lacked a connection to CHR). However, I can begin to hypothesize what might have driven those asylum seekers who did agree to participate to enroll in the study.

First, the enrolled study participants could be seen as disenfranchised. As this dissertation argues the asylum process itself is disenfranchising. In this way, then, I could make the argument that all asylum seekers are disenfranchised, albeit to varying degrees. Yet, because my study participants were enrolled through a human rights organization whose criteria for acceptance as clients included evidence of lack of financial means, my study participants may be seen as experiencing a higher level of disenfranchisement than those asylum seekers who arrive with a savings or source of income that allows them to hire private attorneys and live more comfortably during the asylum seeking process.

And while disenfranchisement could certainly result in a lack of trust about enrolling in the study, I would suggest that this could also have been a factor in their interest in participating in the study. In other words, it could also be the case that those who felt disenfranchised were the ones most in need of someone to bear witness to their

stories and their experiences as they continued through the asylum process. Indeed, many study participants told me that they hoped in talking to me that people would understand the suffering they are going through *presently*, as asylum seekers. As this dissertation will elaborate, asylum seekers' suffering *in the past* was a key focus in both therapeutic settings (Chapter 6) and in the legal arena (Chapter 7). Asylum seekers' narratives of present suffering evoked by the protracted and painfully uncertain asylum process therefore found little audience, it seemed. Because my study was aimed at understanding that process from their points of view, I arguably provided a setting in which such concerns could be voiced.

Second, as I argue in this dissertation, the asylum process can be quite alienating and study participants often expressed feeling lonely and isolated. Similar to the issue of disenfranchisement, then, I would hypothesize here that another impetus for participation in my research was the connection it provided to another person. Study participants' thirst for human connection was revealed even upon the first meetings I scheduled where I would review the study and assess their willingness to participate. These initial meetings, the purpose of which was to complete informed consent forms, not to collect data, often lasted hours, with participants' telling me about themselves, their histories, and the problems they were facing in the U.S. This only continued over time, where visits never seemed to last long enough. Participants would often encourage me to stay with them longer, and female participants would sometimes even offer me to stay the night in their apartments or rented rooms. Faced with pain of family separation (see Chapter 5) and the isolation that characterized many participants' days, their participation in my study may

have represented a much-desired and much-needed intersubjective experience. I turn now to a more in-depth look at my study sample.

SAMPLE

The total number of asylum seekers recruited and enrolled in the study was 26 (N=26)². As noted above, the overall sample was multi-national/multi-ethnic in its composition, with a total of 7 countries of origin represented. The largest subset of the sample comprised asylum seekers from Cameroon (N=13). As noted, having both a multi-national/multi-ethnic sample and a focused sample subset of asylum seekers from Cameroon allowed for ethnographic attention into how the relationship to a local, diasporic community mediated experiences of asylum seeking in this context. (Note that additional data were collected among institutional actors associated with political asylum, including CHR staff, immigration attorneys, and asylum officers; however, these subjects were not included in the overall N of my sample, considering that the focus of the dissertation was on the experiences of asylum seekers undergoing the asylum process). I first provide a discussion of the demographic background of my study participants. I then

² The total number of recruited and enrolled participants was actually 27 (N=27). However, one participant, a male asylum seeker from Iraq in his early 20s, only completed one brief interview before he moved from the area and I was unable to contact him upon follow-up. The data collected from this interview was not used in the analysis of the research data and I therefore decided not to include him in the total N for the purposes of this dissertation. Furthermore, by the time I had met him for our first interview, he had already had his asylum interview and received asylum status, having secured a private lawyer instead of using CHR (unbeknownst to CHR). It is worth noting here that this experience was highly anomalous in my study and he received asylum much more quickly than anyone else in my study. It may be worth noting here that this participant had worked for the U.S. government in Iraq and the central tenet of his claim was that he was persecuted due to his pro-American political views. I do not have empirical evidence to suggest that his connection to the U.S. government informed the rapid (and successful) adjudication of his claim, but given scholarly attention to the role that foreign policy plays in asylum adjudication, specifically, and immigration politics, more generally, it may certainly have been a factor (Sanwick 2007)

provide a brief overview of the historical background and contextualization of Anglophone Cameroonians, as this comprised the largest subset of my sample and is the focus of more in-depth ethnographic focus throughout the dissertation.

Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample

Of the 26 study participants, 25 were from African countries, including Cameroon (N=13), Liberia (N=4), Kenya (N=3), Ethiopia (N=3), Rwanda (N=1), and Zimbabwe (N=1). The one (1) non-African study participant was from Pakistan. Ten study participants (N=10) were female and sixteen (N=16) were male. Ages of study participants ranged from early-20s to mid-50s.

Of the five protected grounds on which asylum claims could be centered (see Chapter 1), almost all my study participants were claiming asylum based on persecution due to political opinion (N=23). This includes claims based on imputed political opinion. For example, Patrick, a male asylum seeker in his early-20s from Rwanda, had been detained and tortured based on his imputed political support for a professor who had ties to oppositional politics. Likewise, Sarah, an asylum seeker in her late 40s from Zimbabwe, had been assaulted, raped, and imprisoned due to her imputed political opinion: although she adamantly declared herself “totally uninterested in politics,” her husband had been a vocal political opponent of the ruling party. One study participant, Daniel, a Liberian male in his early-20s, was claiming persecution due to his ethnicity. And two study participants were claiming asylum based on membership in a particular social group: Rose, a female study participant in her early 40s from Kenya, whose claim

was based on domestic violence; and Hassan, a male participant from Pakistan in his early-30s, whose claim was based on persecution due to sexual identity³.

Historical Background – Cameroon

Cameroon was formally colonized by Germany from 1884 to 1916 (then called German Kamerum Protectorate). Following Germany's defeat in World War I, Cameroon was divided between the British (who administered Northern and Southern Cameroons) and the French (who administered East Cameroon). The independent administration of these two regions meant that “for nearly half a century, Britain and France inculcated quite contrasting political and legal systems into their respective territories” (Dicklitch 2002: 162). French-ruled (East) Cameroon, led by President Ahmadou Ahidjo, gained independence in 1960, adopting the name *La Republique du Cameroun*. In 1961, through a United Nations supervised plebiscite, Southern Cameroons (Anglophone Cameroon), was (re)unified with British-ruled (West) Cameroon, after Ahidjo defeated West Cameroon premier John Foncha (Gros 2003, Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). Ahidjo instituted a centralized form of government, contrasting to Foncha's (and Anglophone Cameroonians,' more generally) desire for a loose form of federalism. Ahidjo's conception of national identity relied increasingly on extreme authoritarian rule, during the tenure of his party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU), from 1961-1982 (Mbuagbo 2002; Konings 1999, 2009; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Dicklitch 2002; Gros 2003).

³ Many study participants' asylum claims incorporated more than one protected ground. What I present here is the aspect of their claims (per both participants' narratives and their prepared applications) that were presented as the primary protected grounds on which their claims were based.

In 1982 Ahidjo was followed by his handpicked successor, Paul Biya, in 1982, who still rules today. While Biya retained a centralized government and authoritarian style of rule, he did, following considerable domestic and international pressure, allow for some degree of political liberalization. From this limited political liberalization, several oppositional groups emerged within the Anglophone Provinces, with the most prominent being the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the Union Democratique du Cameroun (UDC) and the Southern Cameroon National Congress (SCNC) (Eyoh 1998, Konings 2002, Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003, Jua and Konings 2004, Krieger 2008). Anglophone Cameroonians (also referred to as English Cameroonians or Southern Cameroonians) continue to protest what they see as decades of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and violent oppression by the Francophone government, and Francophone population at large (Anyefru 2008; Mgbuagbo 2002; Konings 1999, 2009; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003).

The SDF, among the earliest and most prominent opposition groups, gained traction in the 1990s and is largely seen as beginning the development of an Anglophone consciousness and call to action by non-violent means. The party's main aim was to defend the interests of Anglophone Cameroonians and challenge the Francophone government's repressive policies (Krieger 2008; Anyefru 2008). The SCNC, of which all but one of my Cameroonian study participants were members (one Cameroonian participant, Maurice, was a SDF member only), emerged in the 1990s as well. Unlike the SDF, the SCNC adopted a platform of political separation. By calling for the secession of Southern Cameroons, the SCNC often invokes the 1961 plebiscite as a betrayal of the promise of a two-state federation and Anglophone autonomy (Anyefru 2008).

While Cameroon has been a relatively politically stable nation, its “political stability has been artificially based on the suppression of political participation” (Dicklitch 2002: 156). Indeed, Cameroon has been much discussed for its rampant corruption and extremely poor human rights record (Eyoh 1998, Nyamnjoh 1999, Dicklitch 2002, Gros 2003, Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003, Krieger 2008). Scholars have identified the so-called “Anglophone problem” in Cameroon as the country’s central source of tension and violence and a obstacle to a unified nation (Eyoh 1998; Awasom 2000; Konings 2002, 2003; Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Gros 2003; Jua and Konings 2004; Krieger 2008). The “Anglophone problem” refers to the political division between Anglophones in Cameroon (accounting for approximately 25% of the population) and the majority Francophone population. Biya has responded to the activities of oppositional groups in several ways: by stoking internal divisions among oppositional groups, by demonizing and/or trivializing the “Anglophone problem,” by suppressing mass media, and finally, by brutal repression (Gros 2003: 79-82). The repression of oppositional party members has been severe, including illegal detention, extra-judicial executions, and torture (Dicklitch 2002; Tande 2009; US. Dept of State 2010; As Dicklitch (2002) sums up:

The Republic of Cameroon has also resorted to more severe human rights repression to quell Anglophone dissent. The government has responded to the rise of the secessionist SCNC with torture and violent tactics in an attempt to suppress their freedom of expression. Overall, Cameroonian society suffers from torture, especially in the Anglophone provinces, and widespread extrajudicial murders, especially in the Extreme North province. Anglophones also suffer from economic, political, and cultural marginalization. Psychological torture is ubiquitous, while the rule of law remains far from secure (160-161).

All my participants from Cameroon had indeed reported experiences and feelings of marginalization and violent oppression; all of who came from the Northwest Province (primarily from the area of Bamenda) and all of whom were involved in political activism. While I agree with scholars who argue against reifying “Anglophone Cameroon” as a single, monolithic entity (Mbuagbo 2002)—indeed there is great ethnic and religious diversity among Anglophone Cameroonians—it was the case among my study participants that they stressed foremost their identity as “Anglophone Cameroonian” or “English Cameroonian” (c.f., Anyefru 2008, Eyoh 1998).

Study Participants and Various Levels of Community Engagement

Actual statistics regarding the size of the Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora in my research site were difficult to access, though most in the community estimated the number to be about 2,000. A significant portion of those in the local Cameroonian community had immigrated to Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s to study or work in the U.S., though some had come as refugees at that time, as Anglophones in Cameroon were beginning to oppose what they saw as a repressive ruling regime at that time. Newer waves of refugees and asylum seekers began to arrive in Minnesota in the early 1990s after the political liberalization resulted in the rise, and subsequent violent suppression, of opposition political groups in the country. While I was aware of established groups for those in the Cameroonian diaspora (as well as pan-African groups) within Minnesota, my study participants were not involved with these groups. These formally established groups catered primarily to professionals and focused on business development. My

participants reported having more immediate concerns related to legal issues (the struggle to be granted asylum) and financial struggles (see Chapter 5).

Thus, participation in the Cameroonian community for my study participants occurred on a much more informal level, often connected to religious activity. Of the thirteen participants from Cameroon, seven (7) of them identified as Roman Catholic, five (5) as Presbyterian, and one (1) as Pentecostal (Charismatic). Of the Roman Catholic Cameroonian participants, five of them were members of a large Roman Catholic Church that was primarily pan-African in membership, including a mixed Nigerian and Cameroonian choir. Three Roman Catholic Cameroonian participants chose to attend churches in their immediate local area (within walking distance), both because of the churches' proximities (transportation was an ongoing issue for asylum seekers in my study), as well as their desires to worship in a more private setting. Four of the five Presbyterian Cameroonian participants attended a moderate-sized church in the St. Paul area that comprised 2/3 Euro-Americans and 1/3 African (primarily Cameroonian) members. Ruth, the one Pentecostal participant, chose a church near her apartment, whose congregants were "all white people." For those Cameroonian participants involved in churches with diasporic populations, community events were often simultaneously religious and "Cameroonian" in nature. For example, much of my engagement in the Cameroonian community revolved around after-church gatherings.

As I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, several Cameroonian study participants chose not to be extensively involved with the local diasporic community, either in their choice of places of worship or otherwise. For several Cameroonian participants, connection to the local diasporic community comprised meeting with other

Cameroonians one-on-one or in small groups, often for meals or to prepare food. These meetings often fell along gender lines. A major finding of this study overall, however, was that the asylum process was often alienating and isolating, even to those who were members of an established diasporic community (see Chapter 5, in particular).

The sense of alienation and isolation was perhaps more pronounced among study participants who were not connected to well-established communities (national, ethnic, or religious), as was the case with my participants from Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, and Iraq. While there is a significant Liberian diasporic community in Minnesota, only two of the four study participants from Liberia had any connection to this community. Likewise, although refugees and immigrants from Kenya have established themselves within Minnesota, the three Kenyan study participants, all women, did not seek out any involvement in the Kenyan diaspora. Rose, who was a graduate student (she was the only participant in my study that was in the U.S. on a student visa), found some support in the pan-African international student association at the university where she studied. Sharon, who had been a practicing Buddhist in Kenya, explicitly noted: “my community, my people are Buddhists, not Kenyans” (although, I would note here that Sharon was not involved with any Buddhist groups in Minnesota during the time I knew her; rather she remained incredibly isolated and alone. After being granted asylum, she did move to the Pacific Northwest to live in a Buddhist commune).

Among my study participants from Ethiopia, two were Islamic. Both attended local mosques, but actively avoided other Ethiopians (and Ahmed actively avoided both Ethiopians and Somalis, the latter comprising a population of 25,000 in Minnesota). Moreover, Both Mohammed and Ahmed went to mosque “only to pray and come home,”

and thus were not well-connected to their respective religious communities either. As I will describe throughout this dissertation, this kind of social isolation was not uncommon to those seeking asylum. Indeed, as I elaborate, study participants found life to be painfully suspended and the asylum process as evocative of novel forms of suffering.

Arriving in the U.S.

As the previous chapter outlined, by definition asylum seekers have crossed the U.S. border fleeing persecution on one of five grounds: religion, race (ethnicity), nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While some claimants show evidence of more than one of these grounds, there is, in many cases, a primary ground for claiming persecution. While “grounds for persecution” is undoubtedly a legal concept, and asylum claimants’ testimonies are ‘translated’ into appropriate legal categories for the purposes of filing an asylum claim, these categories nonetheless begin to give a sense of the background of my study participants and their motivations for fleeing their countries of origin. As discussed, a majority of my study participants had listed political opinion as the (primary) grounds of their claims. Indeed, many of these participants engaged in political activism that often resulted in their detention, torture, or other forms of violence and harassment. Overall, while the political, cultural, and historical circumstances of participants’ experiences of violence differ (and these will be outlined as appropriate throughout the dissertation), what they all share is exposure to and experience with situations of physical and/or psychological violence. Moreover, these experiences of violence resulted in a sense of life as existentially

untenable in their countries of origin, where leaving “home”—family and friends—was understood as the only viable option.

The asylum seekers in my study largely came to the U.S. by obtaining a visitor visa to the U.S. Obtaining a visa, recounted asylum claimants, had to be done quickly, given the level of persecution and threats on their lives at the time, and also most involved a significant amount of bribery in order to evade the attention of the government (this was the case despite country of origin). Only one participant, as I have noted, came to the U.S. on a student visa. Five asylum seekers in the study entered the U.S. using false documents. Entry using false documents was not, at least according to legal precedent, a punishable offense for asylum seekers provided that they were forthcoming with this information to authorities and could establish “good reason” for the use of false documents (for more on this, see Chapter 7).

Participants had a variety of paths that brought them specifically to Minnesota. These ranged from being given false documents by a missionary and placed on a plane to Minneapolis-St.Paul without having anyone at the other end to receive him (Daniel, Liberian asylum seeker) to coming specifically to Minnesota to live with family members or friends (Bereket, Ethiopian asylum seeker; Sharon, Kenyan asylum seeker; Albert, Cameroonian asylum seeker; Lionel, Liberian asylum seeker). Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, had taken the most circuitous route of arrival by far. After Ahmed’s detention and torture by government forces (prompted by his role as a translator and investigator for a human rights organization), his father arranged for Ahmed to be taken to the U.S. by human traffickers. Ahmed traveled over a period of many months from Ethiopia to South Africa, where he traveled by boat to Brazil and was smuggled north

through South and Central America into Mexico. He crossed the Mexico-U.S. border on foot, accompanied by a *coyote* and other migrants, some of whom died in the desert. He was caught by border patrol in Arizona and was detained for several months, finally being released, under close Immigration and Customs Enforcement supervision, to live with his sister in Minnesota while his asylum case was pending.

Coming to Minnesota with knowledge of close friends or family in the area was, surprisingly, not the case for the majority of study participants. Most participants reported finding their way to Minnesota because of missed connections with people who had been arranged to receive them, or because they were given a plane ticket to Minnesota and handed the contact information of an acquaintance of a friend in their country of origin. For example, Ruth described being given a ticket to Cincinnati, Ohio by her pastor in Cameroon who arranged for her to secretly leave the country after she had been in hiding for months. Ruth arrived in Cincinnati but was unable to locate her pastor's daughter, who had been planning to receive Ruth. It was only after several frantic phone calls on a borrowed cell phone to a friend in Cameroon that Ruth was advised to get a bus to Minnesota, having been given the name and phone number of someone (a Cameroonian immigrant) who could help her there. It was often common for study participants' initial reception by acquaintances (or, more common, acquaintances of acquaintances) to quickly devolve, leading them to quickly scramble to find other housing arrangements (see Chapter 5). As the next chapter will elucidate, despite the myriad routes of arrival to the U.S., in general, and to Minnesota, specifically, a uniting theme across participants' narratives was the lack of knowledge about the concept of "asylum" in the U.S. before arriving. That is, while all the participants in my study were, by definition, asylum

seekers, this was an official label that was only conferred once they arrived in the U.S. and were informed about immigration policies in the U.S. Not one of my study participants had been aware that he or she needed to apply for asylum or that a process for determining if they had a right to stay within the borders even existed. All of them believed existential security came with crossing the border: a belief that was quickly—and painfully—proven illusory.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Hollan (1997) sees much of contemporary ethnography as focused on only one of three questions regarding subjective experience: (1) what people *say* about their subjective experiences (2) what people *do* that reveals their subjective experience, and (3) how people *embody* their subjective experience (p.224). This research used methods of data collection that attended to all three questions, by using a combination of unstructured ethnographic interviews, life history collection, and participant observation in a variety of contexts.

Unstructured, Open-ended Interviews

With all 26 participants, I conducted open-ended, unstructured ethnographic interviews, lasting approximately two hours (though they ranged from forty-five minutes to four hours). I conducted these interviews at regular intervals with each participant during fieldwork, resulting in at least three unstructured interviews per participant over the course of fieldwork. The unstructured and open-ended nature of these interviews allowed participants to discuss what was most salient to them at various points in the

asylum seeking process. Through these interviews, I was better able to understand how the social positioning and structural constraints confronting asylum seekers get interpreted and made meaningful in their lives.

Regular follow-up interviews allowed me to see how narratives changed over time and how the salience of different domains may have receded or magnified over time and with new experiences. These interviews contributed to the apprehension of how larger institutional and cultural forces shape social experience and sense of self, by focusing on “the relationship between subjective experience and the larger social, cultural, and political economic contexts from which it emerges” (Hollan 1997:225).

Life History Collection

I also collected life histories of each participant. These were either conducted as a separate interview or in tandem with an ethnographic interview. Eastmond (2007) has strongly argued for the use of narrative methods in forced migration research. Narrative methods can elicit data that challenge notions of refugees (and asylum seekers) as a naturalized, undifferentiated, and universal category. The collection of life histories, indeed, helped to elucidate the link between past and present and between self and society. Because life history narratives are shaped by the present context, this set of data therefore “can tell us something about how social actors, from a particular social position and cultural vantage point, make sense of their world” (Eastmond 2007: 250).

Furthermore, these life history narratives often shed important light on the varied ways in which the past articulated with the present (see especially Chapter 4).

Institutional Interviews

In addition to interviews with asylum seekers, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members of CHR, local immigration attorneys, volunteer (*pro bono*) attorneys working with CHR, and asylum officers from the USCIS field office in Chicago (who had jurisdiction over Minnesota). Because my project was focused on how the categories of persons that are produced via the discourses and practices of the institutions associated with asylum seeking get taken up (or not) as a matter of lived experience, examining the production and circulation of these categories was crucial. Interviews with staff and officials embedded in the institutional landscape of asylum helped me to understand how asylum seekers were perceived and discussed, what images circulated in these settings, how those in power envisioned their relationship to asylum seekers, and what assumptions about asylum seekers undergirded the institutional discourses and practices that these institutional actors engaged. Interviews with asylum officers allowed me to gain insight into the process of adjudicating asylum claims. In particular, the interviews with asylum officers revealed the ways in which discourses and practices concerning national security, on the one hand, and humanitarian discourses and practices, on the other come to be negotiated ‘on the ground.’ Moreover, through concurrent analysis of different data sets (e.g., asylum seekers narratives vs. institutional actors’ narratives), I was able to uncover disjunctures between the logic and institutional grammar of the legal and political bodies associated with asylum and the logic and apprehension of asylum seekers regarding the political asylum process.

All interviews (life histories, ethnographic, institutional) were audiorecorded and transcribed. There were some instances in which participants declined to be recorded. In

these cases, I was careful to take detailed notes during the interviews. All digital files, transcripts, and fieldnotes were kept on a password-protected computer or in locked file cabinets.

Participant Observation among Asylum Seekers

I engaged in some level of participant observation with most participants for the duration of the fieldwork. There were several participants, however, who agreed to participate in the interviewing portion of the study but declined my invitation to spend time with them in other contexts. For example, as Chapter 5 will explore more fully, some participants did not feel comfortable in their living situations and therefore did not feel comfortable having me in their home—or, more accurately, the home in which they were residing, as they, too, did not feel the ability to claim the space as a “home.” Especially in the beginning of my fieldwork, much of my participant observation revolved around taking study participants, who often had limited means of transportation, to various appointments—meetings with their lawyers; USCIS appointments to be fingerprinted; ISAP appointments (see Chapter 3); medical appointments and/or psychotherapeutic sessions, most often at THP. Visits such as these were often extended, particularly as I began to develop relationships with my participants, to spending time in their homes, helping to prepare and share meals; accompanying them to church on Sundays; grocery shopping; and attending community gatherings with them.

Whenever possible and to the extent that participants were willing, I accompanied them to activities related to their asylum cases. While most lawyers (and, to a lesser extent, participants) felt strongly about maintaining client-attorney confidentiality, I was

often not present in the meetings that asylum seekers had with their legal counsel. However, participants would recount to me what happened in these meetings, which occurred most frequently as the time of their asylum interview or court hearing neared. I was able to accompany some participants to meetings with their lawyers and, for the most part, was able to informally gather with participants and their lawyers before and after court hearings, for example.

USCIS regulations prohibit anyone other than an attorney, asylum claimant and, if required, an interpreter, to be present with an asylum officer during an asylum interview. Thus, I was not able to observe participants' asylum interviews with USCIS asylum officers. Again, however, participants recounted the interactions of these interviews to me in subsequent conversations I had with them. When possible, I accompanied participants to their court hearings. Given the protracted nature of the asylum process, whereby court hearings were often scheduled over a year in advance, the majority of study participants did not have their court hearings during my fieldwork period (and many were still awaiting their hearings at the time of writing this dissertation; see Table 2.1 below).

Participant observation in study participants' daily routines, including accompanying them to asylum-related activities, enabled me to better understand how the various political-legal institutions were navigated and made meaningful in the flow of quotidian life. As Weisner (2002) has suggested, "(a)ctivities crystallize culture directly in everyday experience, because they include values and goals, resources needed to make the activity happen, people in relationships, the tasks the activity is there to accomplish, emotions and motives of those engaged in the activity, and a script defining the appropriate, normative way to engage in that activity (275). Moreover, participant

observation in social settings was crucial to documenting and understanding social support networks and strategies that may be deployed when seeking asylum. On the other hand, participant observation also revealed how family and/or community life was sometimes a source of tension or struggle. A main finding of this dissertation was that the process of seeking asylum emerged as a fairly isolating and alienating experience, even among those who had connection to local communities. In this way, participant observation often took the form of spending time alone with participants, in their homes or on long walks, as this defined much of their own experience as asylum seekers.

Participant Observation within Institutional Contexts

As noted above, when possible, I observed court hearings and legal meetings with asylum seekers and their attorneys. In order to better understand the institutional landscape of my field site, in particular, and political asylum, more generally, I engaged in additional participant observation in institutional contexts. This included: observation of a limited number of CHR staff meetings in which the acceptance of potential clients (post-intake appointment) was discussed; observation of legal trainings provided by CHR to volunteer attorneys; attendance of an annual regional immigration conference during my fieldwork; regular observation at the offices of Behavioral Interventions Inc., the private company that runs the Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program (ISAP) in the St. Paul area with which several of my participants were involved; see Chapter 3).

Ethical Concerns in Research with Asylum Seekers

Reflecting on his research with refugees, Knudsen (1995: 29-30) points to the theoretical and ethical dilemmas that interpreting life history narratives pose to ethnographers. While he sees as a dilemma of qualitative research generally, he also locates this as a particular issues for those who research refugees. He writes:

Already before the first researchers ask their questions, refugees have passed through several interviews and conversations with various categories of ‘helpers.’ When the researchers finally arrive, the situation is redefined once more, and the conversation changes. This redefinition may be seen as a survival strategy, an attempt to have as much influence on the definition of self and situation as possible. Like many ‘helpers,’ the researcher becomes upset and frustrated if met with strategic self-presentation, silence, and withdrawal. The two parties are cast as opponents: the ones asked, in their presentations, the others doing the asking, in their frantic search for valid data. The result may be a folie a deux, a double illusion (Knudsen 1995: 29).

While I never found myself “upset” at study participants’ reticence or strategic narratives, Knudsen’s observations here resonate in some ways with my experiences in the field. First, as Knudsen notes, my study participants had been telling their “story” (of persecution and violence in the past, flight to the U.S.) to numerous stakeholders throughout the asylum seeking process. They told their stories to CHR staff members, to medical doctors, psychologists/therapists, social workers, to lawyers, asylum officers, and immigration judges. As later chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) will argue, the co-opting and subsequent ‘translation’ (into psychological/psychiatric nosology, or into legalese) often resulted in participants’ sense of alienation from their testimonies. As an ethnographer, whose purpose of listening to and making sense of participants’ narratives was quite different than these other stakeholders, I had to be very cognizant of how I explained my role to research participants. Initially, I thought I could avoid confusion over my role by

emphasizing during the informed consent process that I was in no way connected to CHR or to any government agency and, moreover, that participation in the study would not affect the outcome of his or case. I underscored that I was a graduate student who was interested in hearing about experiences of the asylum process. Yet, I was continually confronted with reminders of how asylum seekers' testimonies were often understood and treated as a form of "currency" (James 2006, 2010).

An early interview with a female Cameroonian asylum seeker (Barbara) is one example of this. I had met Barbara several times prior to our first interview and had established a loose and amicable relationship with her. As I arrived at her apartment and set up the recorder for the interview, she and I talked about various topics, from Cameroonian recipes to her mother in Cameroon who was ill. When I started the recorder and opened with one of my general questions: "tell me how you came to be here in Minnesota," Barbara excused herself from the table and retrieved her written affidavit that she had submitted with her asylum application, crafted under the guidance of her volunteer attorneys. She proceeded to read verbatim from the document, not making eye contact. Her voice had even changed register and the words came out rather mechanically, filled with legalese: "grounds for persecution," "party affiliation," "well-founded fear."

Barbara was not unique in this regard. Others I interviewed for the first time had also brought with them their affidavits to read. I was able to circumvent the recitation of affidavits after amending my research approach in two ways. First, I tried to ask other questions or engage other topics (e.g., "tell me about a typical day for you," "what has life in the U.S. been like for you so far?") before asking about the past or how

participants came to the U.S. This helped in establishing a “looser” rapport and helped ease into his or her asylum narrative. Second, I acknowledged that I was aware of how much they had told their stories repeatedly for different people. I became much more explicit at the outset of interviews that my position as a researcher was different than others with whom they have talked and that my reasons for wanting to hear their stories were not the same. I tried to frame the situation not as one in which I was a “helper,” but one of student. I tried to emphasize that they were the experts, and I sought to learn from them.

Returning to Knudsen (1995), his observations bring to light a second, related concern that was echoed in my field experience: the critical need to recognize my (perceived) role in asylum seekers’ struggle for recognition. If, as I have described in the previous chapter, the asylum process is one in which people struggle to be seen—and to be conferred—as ‘deserving,’ then my relationship to my participants needed to consider this contextual element. The self-presentation to which Knudsen refers was an important strategy for asylum seekers in my field site. To be sure, one of my interests with this research was how asylum seekers learn what it means to be a “good refugee” (Gross 2006; Gale 2008) and learn “new cultural and political codes” (Gilad 1990: 296).

In this way, documenting aspects or narratives of self-presentation was something to which I was careful to attend, rather than avoid as ‘invalid’ data. Furthermore, an integral part of the research design was not only data collection via interviews but also participant observation in various settings. The latter method of data collection, I believe, helped to document how presentations and articulations of self shifted from setting to setting. Thus, by spending time with participants not just in institutional contexts or

interview settings, but also within the quotidian flow of personal and social life, I was able to document the existence of multiple and, often, conflicting, self-understandings and self-presentations.

In addition to the issues Knudsen (1995) addresses, before and during my fieldwork, I was highly aware of scholarship describing particular ethical concerns when conducting research with refugees and asylum seekers. Much of this literature underscores the need to be attentive to power differentials between researcher and refugee participants, which can manifest as participants' mistrust of the researcher; participants' concerns about confidentiality; participants' unrealistic expectations of the researcher (e.g., the expectation of legal status); and increased feelings of marginalization on the part of refugee subjects (Krulfeld and MacDonald 1998; Jacobsen and Landau 2003a; Birman 2006; Dona 2007; McKenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007; Zwi et al. 2006; Smith 2009). Other literature has attended specifically to the ethical concerns of research with refugees given their histories of trauma (Seedat et al. 2004; Newman and Kaloupek 2004; Schweitzer and Steel 2008). A common theme across the literature on ethical concerns in refugee research focuses on balancing academic theory building with advocacy and the imperative to produce policy-relevant research (Silove et al. 2002; Jacobsen and Landau 2003b; Pringle and Cole 2009; Rousseau and Kirmayer 2010). In particular, these scholars urge those interested in investigating refugee suffering to be attentive to—and explicit about—ways in which such suffering may be mitigated or alleviated.

With regard to attention to power differentials, concerns over confidentiality and trust, and participants' expectations of the researcher, I developed a recruitment plan

(including informed consent process) and research design after careful consideration of these concerns, resulting in a research design that would make explicit my role as a researcher, allow for potential participants to voice any questions or concerns at any time during the research process, and emphasized my lack of association with any legal or political organization. I worked closely with CHR to develop the recruitment plan and the UCSD Human Subjects Review Board approved every aspect of the research design. While many participants were already involved with some form of psychotherapeutic or psychiatric treatment, I nonetheless was prepared prior to entering the field with a list of potential resources should study participants express the desire for such assistance or demonstrate the need for them.

I also take seriously the literature that emphasizes the ethical imperative for researchers to produce work that has relevance to the lives of refugees and that has the potential to mitigate suffering. While this dissertation does not include policy recommendations, I would argue that as a contribution to a much-needed “ethnographic base to refugee studies,” my research (Wise 2006: 9) nonetheless is highly relevant to those interested in addressing the kind of suffering that asylum seekers articulated to me. In this research, my intent is not to reify suffering or reify asylum seekers as ‘traumatized bodies.’ Rather, my aim is to do justice to how asylum seekers’ themselves experience and express their suffering. As this dissertation reveals, asylum seekers often located their suffering in the political asylum process itself. Theirs was often understood as a pain of the present, not of the past. In this way, I hope to contribute to an understanding of the often unintended consequences of policy in ways that have relevance to the contemporary world and those embedded in (trans)national processes that are reshaping notions of

belonging and exclusion. My goal, put differently, is to begin to make visible, *from the voices of asylum seekers themselves*, the sense of insecurity, confusion, and illegibility surrounding the political asylum process, which are produce of particular forms of suffering.

ASYLUM PROCESS

To end this chapter, which has provided important background information in order to contextualize the research, it is necessary to briefly outline the asylum process and provide relevant statistical data regarding asylum claims. The previous chapter discussed the asylum process in its broader historical and political context. My aim here is to provide readers with a sense of the flow of asylum cases and the different bodies involved in the adjudication of asylum claims.

An asylum claim may be filed affirmatively, with the Office of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) within Department of Homeland Security (DHS), or defensively, with the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), part of the Department of Justice (DOJ). A person may file an affirmative claim regardless of legal status (i.e., whether they maintain a valid nonimmigrant visa, such as a tourist or student visa; or have either overstayed their visa or entered the country without being processed by an immigration official), provided that he or she has not been apprehended by DHS. In an affirmative case, the asylum applicant is interviewed by a trained asylum office associated with one of the eight asylum offices in the country. Because the asylum office responsible for the jurisdiction of my field site was in another state (located in Chicago, IL), asylum applicants in Minneapolis-St. Paul needed to wait until asylum officers from

that office conducted “circuit rides,” in which an asylum officer would interview asylum applicants at the local immigration court outside of St. Paul. Circuit rides, on average, happen a couple of times per year. The asylum interview is considered, in legal terms, to be “non-adversarial” (though some asylum seekers’ experiences of the asylum interview counter this claim; see Chapter 7).

An asylum officer can grant an applicant asylum, deny asylum (only if the applicant has valid immigration status), or refer the applicant to an immigration judge (IJ), whereby the case is taken up by the EOIR, within the DOJ, and the applicant is considered to be in “removal proceedings.” While statistics vary, reliable information suggests that asylum officers nationally refer 65-70% of cases that they hear, granting around 30% and denying fewer than 5% (Ramji-Nogales, Schoenholtz, and Schrag 2009). If a case is referred to the DOJ, as are the majority of cases heard by asylum officers, then the applicant is served with a Notice to Appear in immigration court on a particular day. During this Master Calendar hearing, the applicant is formally charged with being “removable” and his or her eligibility for asylum is assessed. At that time, a date is scheduled for the immigration hearing then heard by the presiding IJ. Trial attorneys from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), part of DHS, act on behalf of the government during the hearing. Because an asylum hearing is considered adversarial, trial attorneys conduct cross-examination and attempt to present evidence that asylum is not warranted. Legal representation for asylum seekers is not provided by the DOJ. Unless asylum seekers can secure private or *pro bono* legal representation, however, they have very little chance of being granted asylum: statistics show that almost all

unrepresented asylum seekers (90%) are denied asylum status (Ramji-Nogales et al. 2009; Legomsky 2009b).

Statistics show that the judges presiding over cases at the immigration court in Minnesota had a significantly higher denial rate than the national average for IJs. The overall denial rate for MN judges was 72.8%, compared to the national average denial rate of 53.2%. MN judges also heard a slightly higher percentage of cases without legal representation (15-20%) than is reflected nationally (11%) (TRAC 2011).

The immigration court also hears defensive asylum claims. A defensive claim is one in which an asylum applicant, who is without valid immigration status, has been apprehended by DHS before he or she filed an asylum application. Asylum applicants filing a defensive claim do not have the opportunity to have their cases heard by a USCIS asylum officer. Rather, the case is handled by an immigration judge, and follows the same protocol as outlined above.

A significant problem with the asylum process continues to be the enormous backlog of cases. Despite the fact that new immigration court filings have fallen in recent years, Immigration Court backlogs continue to climb. As of July 2012, the backlog of immigration cases, nationally, reached an all-time high of 320,331 (TRAC 2012). As my participants can attest, this hefty backlog often results in delayed court hearings and delayed adjudication of claims. In terms of processing claims, current statistics (July 2012) show that the average amount of time that cases had been waiting for a decision was 528 days (TRAC 2012). In 2011, for those cases in which relief was granted (e.g., asylum status granted or another form of relief, such as withholding of removal), the average time a case was pending was 723 days. It is important to note that these cited

wait times only refer to the amount of time pending in Immigration Court and thus does not include the time spent at the USCIS level.

If an asylum applicant is denied asylum by an immigration judge, the applicant may appeal his or her case to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). Another institutional component of the DOJ, the BIA comprises 11-15 members appointed by the attorney general of the U.S. and is located in Falls Church, VA. The BIA has nationwide jurisdiction to hear appeals from decisions rendered by IJs or DHS officials. When appealing to the BIA, asylum claimants do not present themselves to the BIA; rather, a written application, which includes legal arguments from both sides (claimant and ICE), is reviewed and assessed. The BIA will then decide whether or not to uphold the immigration judge's decision. Only 8% of immigration court cases were appealed to the BIA and the BIA upheld the IJ's decision 89% of the time (U.S. Department of Justice 2011). Decisions usually take up to one year to be issued.

If not successful upon appeal to the BIA, most cases end at this point, largely due to the cost of further appeal as well as the requirements regarding eligibility for relief in federal court. Some "failed asylum claimants" may be granted "voluntary departure," which means that he or she may voluntarily leave the U.S. by a specified date rather than be deported by the U.S. government. Unlike a removal order (for deportation), voluntary departure does not bar an individual from re-entering the U.S. in the future, provided that he or she leave the country within the specified timeframe (those served with removal orders are barred from entering the country for ten years). Several participants (see Table 2.1) in my study who whose appeals to the BIA were unsuccessful were able to take

voluntary departure. These participants had to arrange for transportation out of the U.S. but were free to travel to a country other than their country of origin, if possible.

Some asylum cases that are unsuccessful at the BIA level, however, are taken to the Circuit Court of Appeals as a next step (Minnesota falls within the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals). This was the case with one of my participants, Ruth, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in her early fifties, who had been persuaded by CHR staff and legal advisors to appeal her case to the Court of Appeals. If a case is unsuccessful at this point—which was the case with Ruth—the asylum claimant is not given the option for voluntary departure. Rather, a removal order is issued and DHS (ICE) officials escort the claimant (considered, in legal terms, “a removable alien”) back to their country of origin.

Figure 2.1 provides a visual flow chart of the steps involved in the asylum process, both for affirmative and defensive claims. Table 2.1 details the steps taken by each study participant at various points in time. This table is designed both to give the reader important background information on each participant with regard to his or her asylum case, as well as capture the sense of protraction involved with the asylum process.

FLOW CHART: STEPS IN THE ASYLUM PROCESS

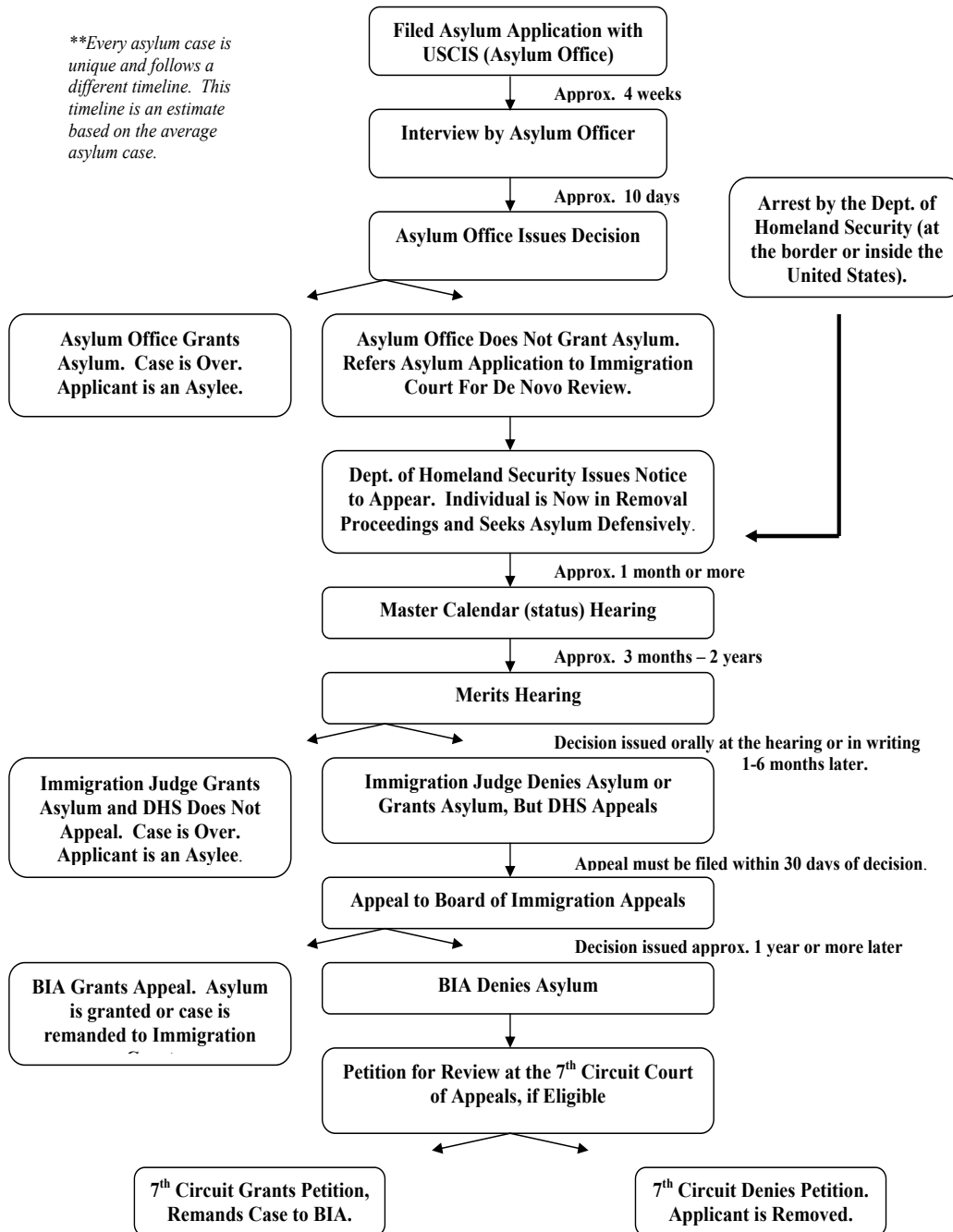


Figure 2.1: Asylum Process Flow Chart

Table 2.1: Study Participants' Location In Asylum Process

This table shows the location of study participants in the asylum process at three points in time: a) at time of enrollment in study; b) during fieldwork; and c) at the time of writing the dissertation

ID	ENROLLMENT	DURING FIELDWORK	WRITING OF DISS
Rose	Preparing asylum app	Submitted application; Received interview da	Referred to IJ; awaiting court date
Emmanuel	Asylum interview completed	Asylum decision pending; Asylum approved	
Sharon	Preparing asylum app	Asylum interview, Asylum granted	
Linda	Preparing asylum app	Submitted asylum application	Referred to IJ; awaiting court date
Joseph	Referred to IJ	Awaiting court date	Denied asylum; filing appeal with BIA
Hassan	Denied asylum by IJ; Appeal to BIA	Appeal pending; BIA ruled new hearing	Awaiting new court date
Albert	Preparing asylum application	asylum interview; Referred to IJ	Granted asylum by IJ
Bereket	Submitted asylum application	Referred to IJ; Denied; Appeal BIA	BIA upheld IJ; appeal to Fed Court
Solange	Denied asylum by IJ	Appeal to BIA; BIA upheld IJ decision; voluntary departure	
Eric	Denied asylum by IJ	Appeal to BIA	
Lionel	Referred to IJ, awaiting court date	Hearing scheduled and rescheduled	Awaiting court date (rescheduled)
Ruth	Denied asylum by IJ, appeal BIA	BIA upheld IJ; Unsuccessful appeal to Fed Ct	Detained and deported
Mohammed	Denied asylum by IJ, appeal BIA	BIA upheld IJ; Unsuccessful appeal to Fed Ct	Deported
Louise	Referred to IJ	International Investigation; Granted asylum	Paperwork for family reunification
Barbara	Asylum interview completed	Asylum granted	
Miriam	Referred to IJ	IJ denied asylum, appeal to BIA; BIA upheld IJ decision; voluntary departure	
Princewill	IJ denied asylum, appeal to BIA	Moved out of state, lost contact	
Rogers	Preparing asylum application	Asylum interview, asylum granted	
Roland	Referred to IJ	Awaiting court date	Unable to contact
Wilson	Asylum application completed	Asylum interview, decision pending	Asylum granted
Patrick	Submitted asylum application	Asylum interview, referred to IJ	Awaiting IJ decision
Sarah	Asylum application submitted	Asylum interview, asylum granted	
Daniel	Referred to IJ	Court hearing, IJ decision pending	IJ denied asylum; plan to appeal to BIA
Ahmed	Awaiting court date (defensive clai	Awaiting court date (rescheduled multiple tin	Awaiting court (scheduled for 2013)
Maurice	Submitted asylum application	Referred to IJ, awaiting court hearing	Awaiting court (scheduled for 12/2012)
Alice	Submitted asylum application	Asylum interview, Asylum granted	

CONCLUSION

The background outlined in this chapter on the research setting, sample, methods of data collection, and details of the asylum process provide necessary contextualization for the rest of the dissertation. The remainder of this dissertation aims to ethnographically elucidate the modes of experience, affect, and being-in-the-world that are elicited by being embedded in the complex and onerous process of seeking political asylum in the U.S. Having detailed the logistics of the asylum process, the next chapter investigates the kind of “ethos” that is generated via the institutional bodies of asylum and the ways in which this ethos shapes experience of self and social world.

CHAPTER 3

THE ETHOS OF ASYLUM AND THE PARADOX OF VISIBILITY

On a grey, winter afternoon early into my fieldwork, I sit with Ruth, a Cameroonian woman in her early fifties who was seeking political asylum. We are in the office of Behavioral Interventions Incorporated (BI Inc.), the private company contracted by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a division of the Department of Homeland Security, to run its Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program, better known by its acronym ISAP. ISAP was started in 2004 in a handful of U.S. cities as a pilot program included in ICE's Alternatives to Detention (ATDs). BI Inc. provides intensive monitoring and surveillance of "eligible aliens" which includes, but is not limited to, some asylum seekers. Methods of surveillance include global positioning system (GPS)-equipped ankle monitoring bracelets, self-reporting, random and scheduled home and workplace visits, and random telephone check-ins. In the BI Inc. office, Ruth and I sit quietly on uncomfortable fold-out chairs, as Ruth clutches her ISAP identification card – or what she has come to refer to as her "prisoner card" – waiting for the person at the front desk to check her in.

With a sudden burst through the lobby door, a young Ghanaian woman appears looking very distraught and panicked. Despite the single digit temperature outside, she is barefoot and wears only fleece pajama bottoms and a short-sleeved soccer jersey. "Be honest with me!" she shouts as she moves toward the desk, "Am I leaving!? I'm leaving, aren't I?" "Just tell me," she pleads, tears streaming down her face. The man at the desk, twenty-something with rumpled khakis and a shaggy haircut curtly asks for her name and tells her that she'll have to wait for her caseworker, who is currently on his lunch break. I

catch a glimpse of the hard, black plastic of a monitoring bracelet on her right ankle as she continues to pace the small lobby, crying and pleading for information from the man at the desk; “Just tell me what’s going on,” she repeatedly implores. Falling into a chair the woman wails to no one or perhaps to everyone “I can’t do this anymore. I’m gonna have a heart attack. What am I going to do? What’s gonna happen?”

Ruth looks uneasily at me and whispers bitterly: “You see, we’re prisoners. Prisoners in America. As if we’re criminals! As if we’re garbage!”

INTRODUCTION

This incident forcefully – and quite disconcertedly – introduced me to the extreme techniques of criminalization and surveillance to which several of my study participants were subjected. While not all study participants, and certainly not all asylum seekers, were involved with ISAP (only five study participants were), this incident, I now realize, was not necessarily an exception to the techniques of governmentality associated with the asylum process, but rather represented a node on a continuum of the institutional disciplining and policing of asylum seekers. That is, I contend that these more extreme forms of criminalization and surveillance, such as wearing an ankle bracelet, reporting weekly to ISAP, detailing one’s physical whereabouts 24 hours per day/7 days a week, and being subjected to random home and telephone “check-ins,” were an extension of subtler forms of surveillance and ‘management’ (biometric data collection, documentation verification) that characterized everyday life for asylum seekers. Furthermore, as this chapter will argue, these disciplinary techniques were a critical component of the production of personhood in this context. Indeed, as I intend to show,

notions of deservingness – who is deserving (of legal status) and who is not – undergird these techniques and the asylum process more generally.

I open with this scene from the ISAP office on that wintery afternoon because it begins to bring into view the main arguments I make in this chapter. First, it starkly introduces the techniques of criminalization and policing that were sometimes deployed during the asylum seeking process. Second, it highlights the kind of “ethos” generated by these tactics and the institutional bodies associated with political asylum. This “ethos,” moreover, came to be embodied in distinct ways (e.g., an embodied anxiety and fear demonstrated by that young asylum seeker barging through the office doors). Finally, this incident illustrates what I refer to in this chapter as a “paradox of visibility” that confronts asylum claimants given their unique subject position as ‘non-citizens’ who are temporarily lawfully present in the U.S. The asylum process, I argue, is best understood as a struggle to be seen as deserving. For asylum seekers, who, by definition, lodge a claim for protected legal status with the U.S. government, visibility represents a promise of protection and security. Yet, in a highly unexpected way, asylum seekers often find that such visibility is simultaneously a threat and a source of *insecurity*, especially in its hyper-visible forms outlined in the scene above.

This chapter begins by theoretically situating the construction of asylum seekers as a particular category of persons. Here, I argue that to fully understand the asylum process and the experiences of being embedded in this process, we must consider political asylum as a process of institutional and social construction of personhood. In this way, asylum seekers straddle the line between being seen and assessed as ‘legitimate’ or authentic humanitarian migrants (‘true’ refugees) and deportable, “bogus” asylum

claimants. Indeed, the asylum process produces them as one or the other. I thus engage theoretical work on both the condition of “illegality,” on the one hand, and refugee studies, on the other in order to tease out, theoretically and analytically, the ambiguous and tenuous position of asylum seekers as a category of migrants. I argue that the consideration of the social production of “illegality” or “legality” in this context needs to be understood against the broader backdrop of increased securitization and criminalization of immigration in the U.S. As detailed in Chapter 1, the humanitarian imperatives concerning asylum seekers and other migrants are increasingly subsumed by concerns over national security. This, then, necessarily undergirds the ways in which local negotiations of migrants’ personhood and categorization are played out.

I then move on to a discussion of the aspects of the asylum process that, along with the construction of asylum seekers as morally ambiguous, evoke a particular kind of “political ethos” (Jenkins 1991). The lack of clarity and lack of transparency in the asylum process imbue a sense of illegibility that results in states of confusion, anxiety, and fear for asylum claimants. In this section I examine tactics of visibility, surveillance and ‘management’ to which all asylum seekers were subjected. I also provide an ethnographic portrait of those participants who were involved with ISAP, with two aims: 1) to shed light on the kinds of underlying ideologies, institutional logic, and moral suspicion from which such techniques/tactics are born and which serve to rationalize and normalize these techniques; and 2) to illustrate the embodied, affective, and phenomenological dimensions of being a subject of these disciplinary procedures that are emblematic of the “political ethos” of asylum.

ASYLUM SEEKERS: 'PURE' REFUGEE OR 'POLLUTED' MIGRANT?

Asylum and "Illegality"

Recent scholarship on "illegality" (Dauvergne 2004; Essed and Wesenbeek 2004; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Peutz 2006; Willen 2007, 2010; Coutin 2002, 2003b, 2005b) has attempted to denaturalize the concept of "illegality" by calling attention to its historical and sociopolitical production. Thus, these scholars refer to "the manufacture of illegality" (Essed and Wesenbeek 2004), "making people illegal" (Dauvergne 2004), and the "social construction of illegality" (Wicker 2010). By uncovering the processes by which "illegality" is produced and, subsequently, normalized and reproduced these authors underscore the role that "illegality" plays in the production of national identity and forms of citizenship. Research taking a critical approach to "illegality" posits "illegality" as a crucial dimension of state power: by creating an "illegal" Other ("alien"), the "citizen" is simultaneously produced. Some scholars have analyzed undocumented migrants as this Other (De Genova and Peutz 2010) while other scholars posit the figure of the refugee as the citizen's opposite (Nyers 2006; Dauvergne 2004; Essed and Wesenbeek 2004).

Whether conceived as refugees or other forms of "aliens," by revealing these as constructed categories that emerge as part of the creation and reproduction of state power and national identity, critical work on "illegality" emphasizes that "illegal" or "alien" Others are defined by a kind of "inclusive exclusion" (Nyers xiii; c.f. De Genova 2002: 429, Willen 2010). That is, "refugees are included in the discourse of 'normality' and 'order' only by virtue of their exclusion from the normal identities and ordered spaces of the sovereign state" (Nyers 2006: xiii; c.f. Malkki 1995). This assertion aligns with recent

scholarly attention to the “margins” of the state as a way to gain a unique perspective on state practices precisely because “such margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule” (Das and Poole 2004: 4).

Underlying the construction of “illegality” or “illegal” as a category of personhood is the “view that there are proper and improper reasons to migrate” (Dauvergne 2004: 94). In this way, labeling certain patterns of migration or producing categories of persons as “illegal” simultaneously emerge as a casting of moral judgment about who should or should not belong. Within the U.S. (and the West, more generally), this division between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants typically maps on to the division between political refugees and economic migrants, a division that is reinforced by current immigration discourses and policies. Indeed, as Essed and Wesenbeek (2004), in their work examining Dutch institutions and their governing of asylum seekers, point to this presumptive difference between political refugees, whose human rights are portrayed in national discourses as being threatened by economic migrants. They suggest that “national preoccupations with criteria to distinguish between ‘pure’ refugees and ‘polluted’ immigrants,” both produce and obscure forms of discrimination and social inequality (65). Such a claim recalls Douglas’s (1966) early assertion that purity is a key concern for societies. Here, then, economic migrants emerge as emblematic of the danger that threatens societal purity.

While asylum seekers occupy a legally different position than undocumented migrants, there are many similarities in the way these groups are constructed and managed that make the literature on “illegality” helpful in analyzing my data. To be sure, “the rise of the ‘illegal’ as a discursive category [is] increasingly applied to unauthorized

immigrants and asylum seekers alike” (Story 2005: 17). Concerns with asylum – particular with putative “bogus” asylum seekers – are a crucial dimension of debates surrounding “illegality” (Castenada 2010; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Dauvergne 2004). The asylum process is one that produces migrants as either ‘deserving’ of legal status or ‘undeserving’ and therefore “illegal” and “deportable.” In this way, asylum seekers, both theoretically and categorically, straddle the line between “illegality” and “legality.” They are legally present in the U.S. while their claims are adjudicated, yet their relationship to the state and to “legality” remains tenuous and uncertain in the long-term. As Cabot (2012), in her work with asylum seekers in Greece, suggests:

Asylum applicants occupy positions precariously in-between undocumented, paperless illegality and “refugee” status. While recognition as a refugee conveys the right to protection in a host country, the category of “asylum seeker” connotes a temporary relationship to a nation- state in which the right to stay is itself highly transitory (Coutin 2005). In seeking asylum, one has asked to be granted the status of refugee, but one has not been “recognized” as such. Asylum seekers thus occupy neither a fully legal nor illegal position of nonbelonging. (17)

Likewise, in her examination of the criminalization of asylum seekers in the U.S., Story (2005) insists that it is “disingenuous and analytically unproductive” to approach undocumented/”illegal” migrants and asylum seekers as entirely discrete categories of migrants (3). She argues that these categories overlap with regard to policy and enforcement techniques, which often fail to make the distinction between types of migrants, as well as the fact that “asylum seekers for a variety of reasons often spend some time as unauthorized immigrants either before or after making an asylum claim, and therefore embody both categories simultaneously” (Ibid).

My contention here, as throughout the dissertation, is that how one is constructed (“illegal”/undeserving or “legal”/deserving) not only shapes the material aspects of everyday life but also informs and transfigures subjectivity and identity. Story (2005) aptly calls attention to the impact that the discursive and ideological production of categories of personhood has on social experience:

The use of the ‘illegal’ as a discursive category is a meaningful political act, with important repercussions for how asylum seekers and unauthorized immigrants are perceived and acted upon. As an ideological construct, the effect of ‘the law’ at the level of perception and evaluation is to induce a categorical division of right from wrong (17).

Furthermore, as Dauvergne (2004) points out with regard to refugees and asylum seekers: “many refugees have transgressed migration laws as a prerequisite for making a refugee claim. The connotations of the label ‘illegal’ are thus attached to them. Whether their claim is ultimately successful, part of this homogenizing, vilifying, other label remains with them” (94). While this dissertation will show that asylum seekers, including “failed asylum seekers,” often resisted, rejected, or transformed these imposed labels of morally suspect, of ‘undeserving’ and “illegal,” it is also the case that they internalize them as well. At the very least, they had to confront these categories and imposed labels in some way. My primary interest in this chapter, however, is to examine how the processes and techniques of governing associated with asylum seekers’ tenuous and ambiguous position between “illegality” and “legality” evoked particular affective states and forms of vulnerability.

Asylum Seekers as Liminal Persons

The concept of liminality is another useful way to understand asylum seekers' position as straddling "illegality" and legality, between exclusion and belonging. Malkki (1992, 1995b, 1996) has focused on the construction of categories of identity and how they are constructed, naturalized, and essentialized, particularly as they relate to refugees. Pointing to the long-standing disciplinary interest in categories, Malkki (1995a, 1995b) draws on anthropological work on liminality as a way of framing the historical and sociopolitical production of the figure of the refugee. She specifically attends to the construction of the refugee within academic and policy circles, where refugees are largely conceived as a "problem" to be solved. Turner (1967, 1969), who is perhaps most associated with the concept of liminality, has expanded on Van Gennep's discussion of rites of passage as having three distinct phases: rites of separation, rites of transition (or *limen*), and rites of reincorporation. Drawing on Turner's work Malkki argues that refugees can be understood as liminal persons in that they subvert the "national order of things" (Malkki 1995a: 6).

Malkki (1992, 1995a) particularly draws on two aspects of liminality stressed by Turner. First, Malkki finds Turner's assertion of liminality as a phase of "structural invisibility" instructive. As Turner suggests: "The subject of the ritual passage is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible' [...] The structural invisibility of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner 1967, cited in Malkki 1995: 7). While Malkki's concern is how this structural invisibility has accounted for the invisibility of refugees from literature on nations and nationalism, my interest is in how this structural invisibility comes to bear on subjective experience. Asylum seekers, I will argue shortly, complicate notions of

visibility: while they can be considered structurally invisible (unclassified/not yet classified), they are nonetheless rendered, in many ways, hypervisible subjects via institutional tactics of management and surveillance.

Indeed, concerns over the ‘management’ and regulation of refugees and asylum seekers bring to the fore the second aspect of Turner’s work emphasized by Malkki. As she argues, the invisibility of refugees in scholarship “is transformed into a particular kind of markedness in the domain of policy,” in that refugees become “a focal object of intervention and knowledge” (1995: 7). Malkki, drawing on Turner, posits that this perceived need for regulation and management arises from the view that liminal persons are “particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another, or may be both, or neither here nor there, or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography)” (Turner 1967, cited in Malkki 1995: 7). This understanding of refugees as a threat to the categorical order serves as the basis and justification for interventions intended to govern and manage such a “problem.” In the construction of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented persons as a ‘problem to be managed,’ these migrants are systematically denied political subjectivity, exposing them as “bare life” (Agamben 1995). Moreover, “[t]he issue is not that membership is simply denied but rather that individuals are reconstituted through special laws as populations on whom new forms of regulation can be exercised” (Das and Poole 2004: 12). As this chapter will illuminate, the construction of asylum seekers as liminal persons and, specifically, as politically and morally suspect, mobilized and justified the use of a range of techniques of governing and regulation.

I follow Malkki in finding the concept of liminality useful in teasing out how refugees or asylum seekers have been constructed as a polluting or dangerous Others, given the symbolic and political threat that they pose to (essentialized and reified) national boundaries and categories. Indeed, in the adjudication of asylum claims, we have a process in which migrants are assessed with regard to their potential threat to national security and their meeting of certain humanitarian requirements specified under international law that makes them either deserving or undeserving of inclusion in the state. Asylum seekers are, in a sense, “matter out of place,” until the resolution of their claims, whereby they are either categorically included in the national order of thing via legal asylum status or physically cast out of the nation (Douglas 1966).

Asylum seekers, then, can be seen as epitomizing “categorical liminality,” as they occupy a structural position of ‘betwixt and between,’ as ‘neither here nor there,’ and as structural and physical Other (Malkki 1992). The liminality of asylum seekers is evident both in the ways that their legal status defies categorization (indeed, the asylum process can be read as one that categorizes or produces migrants as specific kinds of subjects) as well as the way in which, from a theoretical vantage point, asylum seekers occupy a slippery area between studies of “illegality,” on the one hand, and studies of those with “legal” immigration status (e.g., ‘recognized’ refugees), on the other.

POLITICAL ETHOS OF ASYLUM AND THE PARADOX OF VISIBILITY

This section describes the kind of “ethos” that is generated via the institutions associated with the asylum process. This ethos, in turn, critically shapes the contours of social reality and social experience for those asylum seekers embedded in this ethos. Life

as an asylum seeker, like life as an undocumented person, was greatly informed by the potential for deportation. However, asylum seekers' relationship to the state is configured differently than is the relationship that undocumented migrants have to the state, resulting in different patterns of vulnerability and insecurity. In particular, asylum claimants have a hypervisible presence in the U.S. that entails its own promises as well as threats, as I examine below.

Deportability as Lived Condition

Recent theorizing on “illegality” is perhaps most instructive to my research with regard to the role of deportation in the lives of both undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. Peutz and De Genova (2010) look specifically at deportation “as a *disciplinary* practice while also an instrument of state sovereignty that renders certain populations ‘deportable,’ regardless of their practical connections or affective ties to the ‘host’ society” (6). As others have done with “illegality” more broadly, Peutz and De Genova, in adopting “a critical analysis of deportation,” seek to denaturalize deportation and argue against its inevitability. Deportation, they argue, as a practice that contributes to the construction of “illegality,” relies on normative divisions between “citizen” and “alien.”

As Peutz and De Genova (2010) argue, it is the power to deport, or to impose the possibility of being deported that gives deportation regimes their effectiveness: “It is *deportability*, then, or the protracted possibility of being deported –along with multiple vulnerabilities that this susceptibility for deportation engenders – that is the real effect of these policies and practices” (14). Asylum seekers share with undocumented migrants this sense of “deportable existence” (Talavera et al. 2010: 167). Indeed, this was a salient

aspect of asylum seekers' lived experiences in the U.S. 'Failed asylum seekers' that had "fallen out of status" (i.e., no longer had a legal status in the U.S., such as a valid student or visitor visa), which described all my study participants who were denied asylum, were rendered "illegal" and "removable" Others. Study participants thus were constantly aware of the possibility of deportation and, as this dissertation will elaborate, their "deportability" was the cause of much anxiety of suffering. Such fear of deportation was made evident when the young Ghanaian woman burst through the doors of the ISAP office shouting: "am I leaving!?" Indeed, this potential for expulsion infused everyday life for my study participants. Their status as asylum claimants was simultaneously symbolic of the potential for security and the potential for deportation.

Paradox of Visibility

By lodging a claim with the U.S. government for political asylum, asylum claimants were rendered, in effect, hypervisible subjects. Applicants show proof of identity (if they have traveled with identity documents), provide photographs of themselves, and must notify USCIS of any changes in address or other contact information. Applicants are tracked at every step within the asylum process. As an initial part of the asylum process, applicants must be fingerprinted and all biometric and informational data of applicants are put into myriad national databases. The USCIS Affirmative Asylum Procedures Manual lists a dozen different databases into which all asylum applicants' information is entered (USCIS 2010). Many of these databases are shared with other branches of DHS, including ICE and Border Patrol. Indeed, many of the database names call attention to the increasing enforcement-focus of immigration

policy more broadly: Deportable Alien Control System, Nonimmigrant Information System, National Automated Immigration Lookout System, and the Interagency Border Inspection System. It becomes evident that these databases are aimed not only at ‘managing’ or tracking individuals who apply for political asylum, but that such ‘management’ has a larger, ideological and practical aim: to discern and identify fraudulent, suspect, or “criminal” migrants (i.e., ‘undeserving’ of inclusion) versus those who are deemed genuine humanitarian refugees (i.e., ‘deserving’ of inclusion) (c.f. Tormey 2007: 87).

While my study participants were, without exception, initially unaware that the asylum process would be so bureaucratically onerous and protracted, they nonetheless submitted to the process of having their claims of persecution adjudicated for the very reason that it promised existential security – the hope at being granted permission to stay in the U.S. In essence, by officially filing an asylum application, study participants sought to be “on the radar” of the government. Indeed, I contend that the asylum process must be understood as a struggle to be seen, to become visible. Of course, applicants are struggling to be seen as particular kinds of persons, namely, as ‘deserving’ or ‘authentic’ refugees. All study participants thoroughly identified themselves as “authentic” refugees. It became clear to them after being embedded in the asylum process, particularly after being denied asylum at the level of the asylum interview, that the possibility of being categorized as the opposite, as a “bogus” or fraudulent asylum seeker (i.e., “undeserving” of status/inclusion), was an inherent risk of the process. Hence, “deportability” became an even more salient condition of their lives.

Cabot (2012) discusses the dual meaning of the pink card,” or residency permit, issued to asylum seekers in Greece: “The pink card and its bureaucratic apparatuses inflect the terror, unpredictability, and also indeterminacy of state regulatory power. Although this document protects its bearers from material and imagined dangers, its ties to policing, surveillance, and classification also make it an object of intense fear and anxiety” (16). In a similar way, the asylum application, the I-589, is infused with disparate meanings. On the one hand, the asylum application gives claimants both a legal, even if temporary, relationship with the state as well as a promise of long-term security/status. Yet, on the other, opening up oneself to the adjudication of one’s claim represents the risk of being denied asylum and thus being forcibly removed from the United States.

Thus, herein lies a paradox of visibility with which asylum seekers must contend: visibility for asylum seekers emerges as the only, or at least most promising, way (not to mention “authentic” way given asylum seekers’ self-identification as ‘true’ refugees) to find existential security and yet this visibility, particularly in its hyper- forms discussed below, became a symbol of deportability and, hence, an existential *threat*. Castenada (2010), for example, examines how temporary suspensions of deportation for some categories of migrants in Germany resulted in their hypervisibility. Subsequently, these migrants were subjected to regulations that restricted their movement and inhibited their ability to find work. Coutin (2005b) has also examined the effects of being a hypervisible figure, arguing that migrants’ subjection to state surveillance is a source of great stress and anxiety. Likewise, in my research site, the hypervisibility of asylum seekers, who were conceived of as a population ‘to be managed,’ resulted both in restrictions on their

movement and activities, as well as in a pervasive sense of insecurity. Moreover, because of their hypervisibility, asylum seekers (especially those in “deportation proceedings”) were perhaps less likely to evade deportation than migrants whose “legal clandestinity” resulted in their being ‘off the radar’ of the government, so to speak (Coutin 2003b). In fact, as Ordonez (2008) has argued with regard to asylum seekers in the U.S. whose claims are denied twice, they “can eventually be deported, which means they have indirectly brought about their own expulsion by coming forward in the first place” (39).

Nyers (2006) has noted a similar disjuncture in his work on refugees, arguing that refugees’ bodies are made highly visible in terms of their animality or “bare life,” but that they are denied political subjectivity and voice (Agamben 1995 c.f. Tormey 2007). Indeed, as Malkki (1992, 1995a) has argued, refugees’ structural invisibility or “categorical liminality” results in their status as nonpersons in the categorical sense and, yet, they are made highly visible in terms of the pollution or problem they pose to the national/natural order of things. In a much similar way, in my research site, it was participants’ Otherness that was rendered hypervisible while their political subjectivity was denied.

“Political Ethos” of Asylum Process

I have begun to sketch out above asylum seekers’ prolonged state of “deportability,” as well to introduce the various tactics of governing and ‘management’ that were associated with the asylum process. These factors, I intend to illustrate, were evocative of particular subjective and affective states. Furthermore, as I will explore in this chapter, the institutions associated with the political asylum process (USCIS, EOIR,

ICE, BI Inc.) often adopted procedures, policies, and techniques of everyday operation that resulted in a lack of clarity, lack of transparency, and illegibility for asylum seekers. In addition, institutions associated with the “enforcement” branch of immigration (ICE, BI Inc.) often adopted techniques that were perceived to be intimidating and humiliating (e.g., ankle bracelet monitoring, surveillance of daily schedule, curfews, random home visits).

Taken together, I contend that these institutional processes, procedures, and policies converge to produce a particular “political ethos,” that in turn shapes the social realities and experiences of asylum seekers (Jenkins 1991). In her work on Salvadoran migrants and clinical mental health care, Jenkins (1991) defines “political ethos” as “the culturally standardized organization of feeling and sentiment pertaining to the social domains of power and interest” (140). With this, Jenkins aims to bridge political and personal domains with regard to emotional life, putting into dialogue analyses of discourses of emotion with the phenomenology of those affects. She provides ethnographic evidence highlighting the role of the state and other institutions in the construction of a dominant ethos, or “the state construction of affect.” Unlike Jenkins, my intent is not to elaborate a particular ethnopsychology (e.g., “Salvadoran ethos”). However, her work is instructive to my goals in this chapter, which are to ethnographically investigate the ways in which institutions responsible for the production of “illegality” or “authenticity” evoke certain affective ways of being in the world. That is, drawing on Jenkins, I hope to show how state and other institutions associated with political asylum play a significant role in shaping the subjective and emotional experiences of asylum claimants.

A significant aspect of this ethos concerns the (hyper)visible status of asylum claimants. Part of asylum seekers' subjective experience in this context relates to the phenomenology of surveillance and policing. Study participants' sense of their social worlds within the context of asylum seeking was critically informed by their sense of being 'managed' by institutional forces. This may be the case even at the outset of the asylum process, when claimants submit to biometric data collection. As Farraj (2011) argues: "For refugees and asylum seekers, the collection of biometric information may be an uncomfortable or alarming experience. Such apprehension stems primarily from the stigma of criminality and perceived punitive intent which are compounded by reports of widespread hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers (939).

It is important to note that, as described in the opening chapters of the dissertation, Anglophone Cameroonians were systematically marginalized and oppressed in their home country. As a result, their relationship to the government was tenuous, at best, and antagonistic, at worst. Police, military, and other state officials represented a thoroughly existential threat to Anglophone Cameroonians. To be sure, the detention and torture that my Cameroonian study participants experienced in the past were perpetrated by the Cameroonian state. This was not unique, however, to study participants from Cameroon. All participants fled environments in which their governments were either persecuting them or failing to protect them. Thus, when examining asylum claimants' relationship to the U.S. state, it is necessary to recognize that government and authorities have largely been experienced as a threat and source of insecurity. In this way, mistrust of authorities may be considered part of asylum seekers' "habitus" (Daniel and Knudsen 1995).

Thus, in claiming that the political asylum process embodies its own ethos that is evocative of particular subjective and affective experiences, I do not mean to imply that asylum seekers are a *tabula rasa* on which these experiences are writ. To be sure, asylum seekers, like the Cameroonians whose history I discussed in the previous chapter, had been embedded in a specific “political ethos” that informed affective and subjective life prior to their flight to the U.S. Any response to the U.S. political asylum process, then, will necessarily be informed by previous experiences of governments in asylum seekers’ countries of origin. In this way, making a discrete distinction between affective states evoked by the asylum process vs. affective states informed by past experiences of home governments is not a theoretically tenable one and is, subsequently, not my aim. Yet, my data show that asylum claimants linked specific feelings of fear, confusion, anxiety, and anger to the tactics and procedures of the political asylum process in the U.S. As the next chapter will elaborate, participants’ suffering in this context often resulted in temporal categories being blurred and indistinct.

Thus, we can see how past experiences of mistrust, fear, and insecurity within the “political ethos” in Cameroon very much informed how Cameroonian asylum seekers interpreted and experienced the political asylum process, particularly when we take into account the (leveled) expectation of the U.S. as being an immediate “safe haven.” Indeed, as Daniel and Knudsen (1995) observe about refugees and asylum seekers: “Paradoxically, in their flight from violence it is now another state, albeit a new one, that they must turn for refuge. Unfortunately, these states, especially those in the first world, meet the refugee with further displays of state power and violence, even if the latter takes on only bureaucratic and juridical forms” (7).

“Political Ethos” in Cameroon and Political Activity as Moral Action

While almost all study participants’ narratives were rife with descriptions of past experiences of violence and fear, I focus here, as way of example, on Cameroonian participants’ elaborations of life in Cameroon as political activists. I do this both to describe a particular, collective political ethos and to show how such a framework is put into dialogue with the political ethos of the asylum process.

Cameroonian asylum seekers in my study, all of whom came from the same geographic region and all of whom were involved with oppositional politics, describes a similar context in which fear became a way of life (Green 1994,1999). While many Cameroonian participants (as well as participants from other countries) did not wish to talk in detail—and, in some cases, not at all—about their experiences of violence or trauma, those that did described daily life as fraught with intense fear of being apprehended by the *gendarmes* (military police). Some participants told me of their experiences of detention and described the deplorable prison conditions in which they were forced in small rooms with many other prisoners with no access to light or exercise, forced to defecate and urinate in a shared bucket that was cleaned infrequently. These participants recounted daily beatings and torture sessions, often occurring first thing in the morning.

Yet, it was not the individual experiences of violence, or even torture, that Cameroonian participants highlighted in discussing their life histories. Rather, what emerged as the most salient framing of the past was the collective sense of marginalization and oppression that they felt as Anglophone Cameroonians. These

participants talked about the government's use of violence in terms of the damage it did to the collective Anglophone community, including social and family relations. Importantly, it was the systematic oppression and marginalization of Anglophones—not just of participants themselves, but of their families and community members, that served as the impetus for their political activism. The following narrative excerpts illustrate how political activism was understood as a collective response to marginalization, oppression, and violence:

We [Anglophone Cameroonians] were treated as second-class citizens. Our voices were being taken away. Our rights. Our livelihoods, even. And a hungry stomach is an angry stomach. (Princewill, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

It [political activism] was like a moral obligation. It was a moral obligation. If you open your eyes and look around, then what else would you do? (Eric, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

Exchange with Emmanuel (E):

BH: How did you get involved with the opposition movement?
 E: You had no choice! If you are a human being and you care about your environment, what is going on around you, then you must enter into it [politics]. So, that is how I entered into that. Yes, and then I discovered they [military police] suffered by mother, they suffered my—I have sisters that have children and the children don't have fathers. Why? Because they bring in military and then the military boys they just terrorize and rape ... I mean, your own wife, they rape! Your mother, your, your—can you imagine a situation where they rape your mother. So ... those kinds of things. We can't just sit down and fold your hands and watch it. No!! It's happening all around you. And of course you must look for a way to solve it. When you are pushed to the walls, of course you will look for a solution.

Exchange with Albert (A):

- A: What was driving us was that we could not afford to lose our rights. Our rights were being taken away and we were being treated like slaves. That was what was happening.
- BH: Were you afraid during that time, when you were being so politically active? Do you remember being afraid?
- A: Well, yeah, we were scared for a while. But, still, I put in more effort because we knew we were fighting for what belongs to us.

Cameroonian women, in particular, described the impetus for their political activism driven by both the systematic marginalization and the violent oppression of their children and their fears, as mothers, about the futures of their sons and daughters. Alice described her involvement as a member of the Takumbeng, a non-violent women's resistance movement who took to the streets naked daily in protest of the government's treatment of Anglophones. She became a member of the Takumbeng, she told me, after she was forced to witness the beating and rape of her oldest daughter when Alice and her daughter were accosted by military police after attending a peaceful SCNC rally. She recounted her experience with the Takumbeng:

- Alice: The Takumbeng, it helped a lot because everyday they [government police] were killing eh- eh, they were killing us. They were raping our children. Killing our brothers. So as a member of Takumbeng every morning, we will go out naked. Naked. And we begin to walk- we start walking around the streets. Every day. So the *gendarmes*, when they see us, they'll run because in our country, when you see a woman's naked, it's a curse. So, they [*gendarmes*] were running away from us.
- BH: Because, they felt it was a curse.
- Alice: Yeah. Yeah. So, it really help us a lot. We had to do something. We had to. Because they were killing, raping, beating, all around us.

What all the narrative excerpts presented here underscore is the understanding of political activism in Cameroon as a form of moral action. In many ways, political action became,

for Anglophone Cameroonians, a significant aspect of moral personhood: it was a “moral obligation” borne out of simple activity of opening one’s eyes to what was happening around him or her. Political activism was a moral imperative in that it sought to rectify—or at least call attention to—the collective damage upon Anglophones inflicted by the Francophone government. It was a moral stance against the violence that was wounding and killing community members and violating the bodies of mothers, daughters, and wives. Cameroonians talked about political activism as if there were no alternative, as if political activism was a logical extension of being a moral person in that particular historical and cultural context. In this way, political activism was an aspect of morality in the sense that Zigon (2007, 2009) has described: as an unreflective way of being in-the-world. Participants’ political activism as a moral response to collective suffering also points to what Parish (n.d.) has identified as “the existential grounds of moral experience in embodiment and intersubjectivity” (2). Parish describes this further:

(T)he possibility of moral experience appears, takes cultural form and potentially coalesces into agency, as a psychoexistential process within the open-ended, transactional, interpersonal, incomplete, and fragilely intersubjective spaces ‘between persons.’ It is not the mere reflection of some cultural ethic or discourse, or the mechanical product of a universal innate mind, but part of the rough and tumble of human interaction (Parish n.d.: 2-3).

Indeed, as Cameroonians describe it, political activism was a form of moral action not because of a cultural script that dictated their involvement in politics. Rather, political activism emerged, for these participants, as a component of moral personhood through the intersubjective milieu of collective suffering and violence.

Understanding the cultural and historical context of political violence and the political action of Cameroonians provides a better understanding of how these participants experience the asylum process and its ethos of confusion, fear, and insecurity. What I want to highlight here is how Cameroonian asylum seekers' understandings of themselves as moral actors and their political activism as an important form of moral action were often called into question during the asylum process. The asylum process is, as I have argued, a process in which the "authenticity" and "deservingness" of claimants is—literally, in the case of immigration court hearings—put on trial. The institutional tactics of managing and disciplining to which asylum seekers are subjected serve to criminalize participants and render their testimonies of the past suspect or, at the very least, necessary to "prove" with corroborating evidence (see Chapter 7 for more extended discussion of this). Thus, the effects of the tactics of policing and, in some cases, criminalizing need to be understood as not only restricting mobility and agency, which I will illustrate in this chapter. It is also the case that these tactics and the "ethos" that is produced via the institutions of political asylum profoundly challenged notions of moral personhood and claims to political activity as a form of moral action.

Furthermore, as other parts of this dissertation will explore, the powerlessness and fear generated via the "political ethos" in Cameroon was sometimes recalled through the sense of insecurity evoked by the asylum process. Yet, as the narratives regarding political activism in Cameroon demonstrated, this sense of powerlessness and fear served as an impetus for action in their home countries. In contrast, participants described the

sense of powerlessness and insecurity evoked by the asylum process in the U.S. as defeating and confining, constricting (and, in some cases, punishing) their ability to act.

CONFUSION, ANXIETY AND ANGER WITHIN THE ASYLUM PROCESS

Rousseau et al. (2004), drawing on de Certeau, have argued that those seeking political asylum “are subjected to forms of ‘clean violence,’ a form of violence associated with technocratic organizations that is more subtle but as damaging as other forms of organizational violence” (11). While the next section will discuss techniques of policing and criminalization to which many asylum seekers were subjected as particular forms of structural violence, to claim that all asylum claimants are subjected to a sort of technocratic violence seems warranted if we consider the myriad factors that made the asylum process generative of confusion, anxiety, and insecurity.

“When I came here, I thought I would be free”: The unexpected bureaucratic maze of political asylum

Because the asylum seekers in my study reported being unaware of “asylum” before coming to the U.S., there was much confusion surrounding the bureaucratic procedures involved with filing an asylum application. The very fact that they would need to engage in such a process was often totally unexpected. Study participants assumed that once in the U.S., “the land of human rights,” as one participant told me, they would be able to live securely. Yet, this expectation of the U.S. as an automatic “safe haven,” was shattered once participants were informed, either by other asylum applicants that they had met in their local communities, or via the Center for Human

Rights, that they would need to apply for and be granted asylum in order to remain in the U.S. As Alice, a female asylum seeker from Cameroon stated: “When I came here I thought I was free. I didn’t know that when you reach America you have to...make all these documents and file for asylum.” Or, as Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia in his early thirties, told me: “I never did anything wrong. I crossed the border, but I didn’t know it was wrong. I didn’t even know the word ‘asylum.’ I only did these things to save my life.” I heard these kinds of sentiments repeated over and over in my interviews and conversations with asylum applicants. Asylum seekers were also grossly unaware of the complexity and the length of time required by the asylum process. Participants had assumed they would only need to “tell my story,” and they would be granted asylum. Moreover, most participants had expected the asylum process to last “a couple of days” or “a matter of weeks.”

As Alice alluded, it was not just the need to complete an application for asylum, but the need to acquire the necessary documentation to accompany the application that was a cause of stress and concern for participants. Because study participants did not come to the United States intending to apply for asylum (such a concept/process was unknown to them), most study participants did not arrive with all necessary resources and documents to support their application. Documents such as identity documents, birth and death certificates of family members, political party membership cards, and photographs, while, in theory, were not required for the application, in practice were often crucial components of the asylum claim (see Chapter 7). As one immigration attorney told me: “If you don’t have at least identity documents, then it’s gonna be pretty damn hard to win your case.”

Chapter 7 will explore, in detail, the ways in which the legal process not only alienated asylum claimants from their personal histories/narratives, but also involved myriad disjunctures between how asylum seekers conceive of themselves as deserving of status, on the one hand, and how the logic of the legal system requires them to (re)present their ‘deservingness.’ For the present discussion, what I wish to highlight is how complex bureaucratic maze involved with asylum provoked a deep sense of confusion and anxiety for asylum seekers. That the process to be granted asylum would be such an arduous and protracted one was beyond their imaginations. Furthermore, before filing an asylum application and becoming an “asylum seeker,” participants had not conceived of a scenario in which their stories and personal histories would be denied credibility or be labeled ‘inauthentic.’ Ultimately, the disjuncture between expectations of treatment in the U.S. and the reality they faced, was a source of confusion and pain for the asylum seekers with whom I met. As Barbara, a female asylum seeker from Cameroon summed up:

Because they [U.S. government] say things that they don’t put into practice. That is where the pain comes from. It’s very, very hard because every day I live in fear. I just don’t understand it, why it is like this.

The rift between expected treatment and reality was a recurring theme in my interviews and conversations. The internationally promoted and reproduced notion of America as a defender of human rights undergirded much of asylum seekers’ expectations. Indeed, as asylum claimants told me when recounting their stories of fleeing to the U.S., when they were able to secure a visa and airline ticket to the U.S. (by either ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ means; i.e., with either authentic or false documents), they felt the promise of safety despite the social and personal rupture that their forced migration would surely cause.

The difficulty involved with the asylum process and the embodied and structural vulnerabilities that the process generated were a stark contrast to these idealized notions of the U.S., as my following exchange with Sarah (S), an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe, highlights:

- Sarah: All the waiting and the paperwork. And knowing, uh the way they [U.S.] advocate for human rights. This is what we hear when we are back home [Zimbabwe] ... that they care for people who are in trouble. Who come for safety. But the reality is—is it's just what we hear, but that's not the reality. That's not what is on the ground. It's totally different. Totally different.
- BH: Is—and is that something that surprised you? About this country?
- Sarah: Yeah, because I thought America advocates for democracy, human freedom, you know people's freedom. And I thought you know they really stand up for you when you go through things like that [torture, persecution], they are there for you. That they really, you know, want you to be, you know, where you should really be to get past your problems, but you know it's different. It's not the case. You know it's—it's really different and it's not what I expected. It is very difficult. Too difficult.

In his ethnography focusing on Central American migrants applying for asylum in the San Francisco area, Ordonez (2008) documents what he refers to as “a generalized state of confusion” (38). He argues that the asylum applicants he studied found the process to be challenging and obscure and that they failed to fully comprehend what was involved with the process and what was expected of them. Ordonez (2008) contends that “the state of confusion engulfs the asylum application at every stage” and that “confusion is not limited to one event. It marks the parameters under which the relationship between these asylum seekers and the state functions” (57). Here, Ordonez uses an expanded definition of confusion to entail “a situation of panic, of breakdown of order ... a state of being bewildered or unclear in one's mind” (ibid). Important to Ordonez's argument is his

claim that such institutionally produced confusion is “an effect of power relations” (ibid). Such a claim echoes Jenkins’ (1991) insistence that affective states be understood as constructed, in part, via institutions in which people are embedded.

My data reveal a very similar state of confusion as documented by Ordonez (2008). The institutions associated with political asylum, in both intended and unintended ways, can be understood as manufacturing uncertainty and anxiety. This ‘manufactured uncertainty’ is, I contend, critically tied to these institutions’ ability to manufacture ‘illegality’ or, its flip side, ‘legality’ and ‘deservingness.’ Furthermore, asylum claimants’ anxiety, confusion, and fear need to be considered within the context of their (hyper)visible status. Not only are they subjected to techniques of governmentality that serve as constant reminders of their deportability and tenuous relationship with the state, but they are less likely to evade deportation should they be denied asylum, given their hyper-managed status. Of course, undocumented migrants’ lives are also filled with profound uncertainty and anxiety, as their very presence is criminalized. As research has shown, everyday activities for undocumented migrants are often risky business (Chavez 1997; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Willen 2007, 2010; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010). My point here is not to compare anxiety and vulnerability between categories of migrants (and thus reproduce a kind of hierarchy of suffering against which this dissertation writes). Rather, I want to suggest that becoming an asylum claimant inheres an existential risk (as well as hope/promise) and that the hypervisible/hypermanaged status that accompanies the political asylum process results in novel constellations of vulnerabilities and experiences for those involved.

An example here is helpful in elucidating how asylum seekers' particular relationship to the state, or desired relationship to the state, is structured in terms of visibility, and how this shaped experience in this context. Louise, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in her early fifties, had come to the U.S. after being harassed, abused, and detained several times in Cameroon due to her political activism. As with almost all my study participants, she had been unaware of the need to apply for asylum in the U.S. until an acquaintance at her church notified her of the need to do so and put her in touch with a friend who assisted her with the asylum application. Louise filed the application and received a notice that her application had been received. She waited almost three years after that with no word from USCIS. During this time, she was unable to work (she had not received a work permit) and shuffled from house to house, as various community and church members were able to accommodate her for only relatively short time periods. Finally, after being put in touch with the Center for Human Rights through her social worker at a nonprofit treatment center for survivors of torture, Louise found out that her file was missing from the USCIS system. She was thus not registered as an asylum claimant and was told that she would need to file another application, and start the process anew. Louise described her reaction upon learning this information:

It was very bad, very bad. I left my country because of problems. For three years, if I were to die, then no one would even know. When I came to the U.S. I thought this is where my problems can be solved. But then I realized that they didn't even know she existed, you know. It was a horrible situation. It weighed me down because I felt like if I died, then nobody would even know. Nobody would even recognize me. But I thought that I was doing the right thing, going through the proper paperwork.

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, it underscores Louise's, and, indeed

all asylum claimants' desire for visibility and recognition by the U.S. Second, it points to a common presumption that coming to the U.S. represented an end to the political problems that posed a threat to one's life, as discussed earlier. That is, study participants did not come to the U.S. as "asylum seekers" since they did not know that such a category existed. Rather, they came as migrants fleeing for their lives, in search of a "safe haven," only to discover that arriving in the U.S. was only the beginning of the struggle for security, not the end. Finally, this passage highlights the importance of political or legal recognition to asylum seekers' very existence. Louise's realization that she wasn't in the USCIS system was not merely a bureaucratic headache, but rather represented her lack of existence/recognition in the U.S.

Here, I am reminded of Coutin's recounting of a Salvadoran migrant's exclamation: "We need to be here legally or its like we're not here" (Coutin 2003: 29). Indeed, Louise's lack of relationship to the state, even a temporary and/or ambiguous one, threw her very existence into question. This lack of recognition or acknowledgment of Louise's presence/existence in the U.S. was made all the more distressful since she had been following "the proper paperwork." Coutin (2001, 2003a), in her work with Salvadoran migrants, has addressed the connection—or, rather, disjuncture—between legal and physical personhood, which Louise's narrative underscores. Coutin calls attention to the "conflation of and disjuncture between physical and legal presence" and suggests that these migrants occupy "spaces of nonexistence" (Coutin 2003a: 29, 28). In El Salvador, during the civil war in the 1980s, citizens had been subjected to multiple forms of nonexistence: from political repression and physical disappearances to the social erasure of personhood resulting from torture and rape. In the United States, Salvadorans

lived lives of “legal clandestiny,” where they were physically present, but legally nonexistent. This erasure of legal personhood, Coutin (2003a) argues, can be read as a form of violence. As others have remarked, it is “a space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression” (De Genova 2002: 427). While my study participants did not live in “legal clandestiny,” they were nonetheless liminal figures that were not yet classified as wholly legal persons. Thus, though asylum seekers’ legal relationship was different than undocumented Salvadorans, Coutin’s work (2003a) is applicable in that it urges a consideration of the relationship between how persons are legal defined – or not defined – and their sense of existence in a particular space and time.

While Louise expressed a sense of feeling nonexistent without legal recognition, even if only a temporarily legal relationship to the state, other asylum applicants reported initially feeling wary about applying for asylum precisely because of the visibility that asylum seeking inhered. For example, Eric, a male asylum seeker from Cameroon, recalled being warned by others in the Cameroonian community about applying for asylum, given the possibility that his case could be denied and he would be deported. Feeling like he had “a good case,” Eric decided to apply for asylum. When he told his friend of his intent to file an asylum application, his friend, who was without any legal status, grabbed Eric’s cell phone and deleted his (the friend’s) number from Eric’s contact list, fearing that “immigration” may be “on the lookout” for persons “without papers.”

This incident highlights the pervasive fear that “immigration,” broadly conceived by migrants, had upon the lives of asylum seekers and undocumented persons. It also brings to the fore confusion regarding the complex system of immigration enforcement

and management in the U.S. For example, Eric's friend was unaware—understandably so, given the bureaucratic complexity of U.S. immigration institutions—that Eric's filing a claim with USCIS, the “humanitarian” branch of immigration, would not result in the surveillance and enforcement of social contacts. Finally, this incident urges us to consider the ways in which asylum seekers, as liminal persons, were not just “polluting” in terms of the national/natural order (Malkki 1995b), but that they were often also “matter out of place,” within their own communities (Douglas 1966).

In less dramatic terms, Linda, a female Liberian asylum seeker, echoed many participants' feelings about their initial filing of the asylum application:

I was afraid to apply for asylum because if they deny you have to leave the country. And then what would happen to me!? But then my friend said that you could, uh, appeal. You could appeal if you get denied. So, I thought about it and I decided to apply.

Part of Linda's decision to apply was informed by her friend's insistence that “you could appeal if you get denied.” While this is accurate—asylum applicants could often appeal their cases if not granted at the initial hearing, what this claim fails to consider is the statistical likelihood (or, rather, unlikelihood) of being granted asylum upon appeal. This decontextualized piece of advice to Linda brings to light the misinformation and lack of awareness among potential asylum applicants of what the asylum process actually entails. It simultaneously underscores the fact that most participants had great conviction about winning their cases and being granted asylum. This conviction accounted for the reason that many other asylum seekers in my study did not hesitate in applying for asylum. That is, asylum seekers in my study did not, at least upon the initial filing of their claim,

consider the possibility of being denied asylum. This is both because they were unaware of the protracted and difficult nature of the process and because their self-identification as ‘true refugees’ did not provide room for considering the possibility of denial.

“The phone just rings and rings”: Illegibility, lack of access to information, and more confusion

Overall, I found the institutions associated with asylum to not only be complicated in terms of required paperwork, documentation, policies and procedures, but that the workings of these institutions (USCIS, EOIR, ICE) promoted a lack of clarity, transparency, and access to information. This, in turn, only provoked more confusion and insecurity among study participants. Maurice, a Cameroonian asylum seeker in his late thirties, described the asylum process as “inhumane,” noting that he didn’t think asylum and immigration officials “recognized the human side” of the process. By this claim, Maurice called attention to the ways in which interacting (or attempting to interact) with the institutions associated with political asylum was often demoralizing and impersonal, at best, dehumanizing, at worst.

A major complaint among study participants was that they were often unable to get questions answered about their cases and their status. Frequently, participants told me of their unsuccessful attempts to call the asylum office, immigration court, or ICE (namely, the Enforcement and Removal Operations division). Their calls either went unanswered or they were referred to an automated system, which prompted callers to input their “alien ID number” and could receive the minimal information about their current status (e.g., data of asylum hearing, whether decision was still pending, etc.).

Maurice explained his frustration to me about his inability to get someone—anyone—at USCIS to answer questions about his case. Namely, he wanted more information about why his case was denied at the asylum interview level. He had not had legal representation at this point, but was quite resourceful and knowledgeable. Yet, his attempts at gaining access to this information were unsuccessful, as the following exchange between Maurice (M) and I (BH) illustrates:

- M: So-so it's really hard to know what is going on, you know?
- BH: Yeah.
- M: I-I-I- again, I know that the system, the country is an open country. There are people of all types of character and things like that. You-you really don't want to expose government workers to public like that because...they are a risk. I mean, guns are everywhere in this country. So, something can happen to him. That's fine. But, at least, if- if you could just speak with somebody who is handling a case over the phone, not necessarily going to meet the person. Just to talk with that person over- let the person be accessible. So that you can talk. The person [asylum claimant] can ask questions. Or, even to the person's assistant. The office should be able to- to- to put their document before you, to take a look at it and talk to you about it.
- BH: Mmhmm.
- M: Okay, you know, to say this what is going- this is what going on. We verify this information, unfortunately this was not correct. This information you gave us, is correct. But no. I receive instead a letter. It has come in the mail, only says we denied your case. You have the right to do this, this, this, this, and this.
- BH: Yeah. And they [asylum officers] aren't accessible like that, to talk to?
- M: Oh, no! Everything is by mail. Everything is by mail. And if you do ever get someone on the phone, they are just repeating the same thing that you see online, not 'so do you have any other questions?' You get nothing. It's—yeah, it's a really terrible ... To be honest with you, until you get here and get into the immigration system, you will never believe that there is any department in the United States that works this way.
- BH: Hmmm.
- M: You would never believe it. You cannot- you cannot even- because it's- it is either exactly the way things are done in Africa, or worse.

This exchange brings into relief the significant power differentials involved in the asylum process. An asylum officer has the power to deny someone asylum, effectively rendering their testimony either not meritorious (i.e., did not meet legal criteria) or not credible, often based on subjective dimensions of their testimony (see Chapter 7). And while asylum officers must produce written justifications of their decisions for their supervisors, this information is not readily imparted to applicants themselves.

In this exchange, Maurice attempted to make sense of this lack of transparency and accessibility, speculating that asylum officers may need to protect themselves from dangerous people who may have guns, but emphasizes what he saw as his right to human interaction regarding the details of his case, even if only to talk to an assistant on the phone. Maurice's experience was not unique. Many study participants expressed feeling that their claims to information about their cases—their very selves-- were systematically denied, or at least made very challenging within the asylum process. “The phone just rings and rings and rings” one participant told me about trying to find out information about her status from her Deportation Officer, to whom she was referred after being put into deportation proceedings.

Maurice's comparison of USCIS to government offices in his home country was also a sentiment echoed by other study participants. Indeed, it was not uncommon for me to hear participants tell me that they were “no better off here” or that “America, Africa, for me it's the same right now.” These sentiments reflected their sense of powerlessness and status of being with “no rights,” which was particularly hard to swallow given their expectation that once in America they would be free and secure.

The sense of powerlessness and concomitant anger and insecurity that the asylum process evoked for study participants was further reinforced by bureaucratic policies regarding scheduling. As the next chapter will investigate in-depth, asylum seekers were made to wait for protracted periods of time, particularly for immigration hearings before a judge. Once a defensive claim for asylum is made or a case is referred to an immigration judge (IJ), claimants are assigned a date for their immigration hearing. Among my participants, most waited one to two years just to have their hearing (the full adjudication of the case often took much longer than this). Asylum claimants imbued these dates with the promise that “all my suffering will be over,” or that “I will finally be safe.” In practice, however, these dates were changed multiple times for reasons that were not always clear, causing confusion, worry, and anger among participants. For example, Louise, discussed above, had suffered further delays in her case when the government attorney asked for an overseas investigation (to Cameroon) in order to verify several aspects of Louise’s testimony that he, the government attorney, found suspect. This put the adjudication of Louise’s case on hold for almost two years. This would not be the end of the delays, however. Her final hearing (post-overseas investigation) was rescheduled four times, at the request of the government attorney, within a five-month period for reasons that were unclear to both Louise and her pro bono lawyers.

This was not the only time that I would experience or hear of scheduling nightmares. Several months after I had left the field, I scheduled a trip back to my field site so that I could accompany Ahmed, an asylum claimant from Ethiopia, to immigration court. When I arrived in town the evening before his scheduled hearing and called him to check in, he answered the phone in an anxious state, and told me that he had just received

word that his hearing was rescheduled because the IJ presiding over his case would not be there. That was the only information that he and his pro bono attorney received, less than 24 hours before the scheduled date. Though the rescheduling was not at his or his attorney's request, his case was nonetheless put in the back of the queue and he was issued a new hearing date 22 months away. He was devastated and keep repeating that he was "so confused, so confused." "Why is this happening?" he asked me over and over. He began to ruminate on why this might be the case: "did the judge already decide to deny me?" "is it because I am Muslim?" As if remembering something important, Ahmed suddenly declared: "I noticed that my A number [alien ID number] is eight digits but others are nine. Maybe this means something, that I've already been denied." As Crapanzano (1985) has noted, when being made to wait in situations of powerlessness and vulnerability, a common response it to "see omens everywhere" (45).

On yet another occasion, Lionel, an asylum seeker from Liberia, made the 130-mile drive in a snowstorm from where he was staying in a neighboring state to the Immigration Court, only to find a scribbled hand-written note that read "Closed" on the outside of the Immigration Court's door. As I stood there with him wondering what to do next, I observed other asylum claimants and immigrants with scheduled hearings gathering in the hallways, nervously looking around, clutching laminated folders with documents inside, and peering through the dark, locked glass door of the Court's lobby. Lionel's attorney had made a phone call to the court, but got only an automated message. After close to an hour of waiting, hoping in vain that judges and staff would appear and that claimants like Lionel, who had been waiting over a year for his hearing, would get

the chance to tell their stories, we parted ways. The next day, Lionel was told the date of his rescheduled hearing: he would have to wait another 14 months to be back at court.

These incidents were institutionally normalized and routinized as part of the bureaucratic humdrum of the asylum process. Yet, examined a different way, these policies can be understood as a performance of state power, reproducing asylum claimants as voiceless and powerless ‘non-citizen’ subjects. It was not, however, just in these isolated incidents of the performance of state power that insecurity, anger, and anxiety were produced, but also in the everyday illegibility of politico-legal processes and discourses associated with the asylum process. Thus, while the purpose of the political asylum process is to make legible to the state particular populations or categories of persons, a coinciding result is that the process itself is rendered illegible to those going through it.

Legal documents and discourses were obtuse and asylum claimants often failed to understand what they meant. For example, Ruth agreed to take “voluntary departure” at the end of her hearing though she confided in me: “I just said ‘yes,’ without knowing what that means. Now I have to come up with \$500!” Joseph, who I picked up to take to his immigration hearing, was thoroughly confused when his required appearance turned out to be for the Master Calendar hearing, in which claimants appear before a judge in order to state the purpose of their claims and receive the scheduled date of their actual hearings. For Joseph, he was given a date for his hearing almost a year and a half away—quite a blow for someone who was preparing to have their case heard and, hopefully, decided that day.

The illegibility of legal procedures, documents, and discourses meant that asylum seekers were often significantly alienated from the process. If they had attorneys, as my study participants did, *pro bono*, then asylum applicants largely let the attorneys “do what’s best.” As participants told me about their lawyers, “I do what they say,” or “it’s his/her decision, not mine.” Often adding that they “don’t understand,” or are “confused” by the legal process, participants, to some degree, abdicated ownership of their cases—an ‘exchange’ that they saw necessary if they were to successfully navigate the asylum process. Chapter 7 will discuss more specifically the interactions within asylum interviews and immigration hearings, exploring the ‘logic’ and ‘grammar’ of the politico-legal arena and asylum claimants’ attempts at navigating this. Presently, I want to emphasize that these factors combined to create a context that supported and reproduced a sense of confusion and insecurity. Moreover, these institutions’ illegibility and lack of face-to-face contact with applicants reinforced sense of powerlessness and can be read as a form of erasure of claimants’ personhood. Here, we see the ‘clean violence’ to which Rousseau and colleagues (2004) referred.

The lack of effective communication between government branches and between the government and other institutional actors associated with the asylum process served to sediment the illegibility of the process. Different institutional actors or organizations would provide conflicting information to participants about the asylum process. Ahmed summed up the feelings of many participants when he exclaimed: “I’m so confused. I have so many questions in my mind ... no explanation ... some people tell you one thing and then another and it just becomes more confusing.”

For asylum seekers in deportation proceedings – those whose cases have been referred to an immigration judge (IJ) by USCIS or who have filed defensive claims and are currently “out of status” – getting accurate and consistent access to information about their cases is all the more difficult, given the multiple levels of bureaucracies involved with their ‘management’ and oversight. USCIS or EOIR work closely with Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), a branch of ICE that is responsible for “removing aliens” if they have received deportation orders. Thus, applicants in ‘deportation proceedings’ would be dealing with EOIR, who is responsible for adjudicating their cases, as well as ERO, who is responsible for ‘managing’ and tracking them should they be given final deportation orders. As immigration lawyers and advocates with whom I talked lamented, the lack of communication and information exchange between ICE and EOIR made for situations of great confusion and anxiety. Lawyers themselves complained of not always having accurate information about the cases or receiving conflicting information from different government branches (e.g., ICE/ERO vs. EOIR). As I will illustrate below, this context is made all the more complicated by the involvement of BI Inc., the private company responsible for overseeing ISAP.

Examples of confusion due to conflicting information abound, but two shall suffice here. Ruth, who, when I met her, had been put into removal proceedings and her asylum case was denied by the IJ. As noted above, Ruth had told the IJ that she (Ruth) would take “voluntary departure,” though she did not know what this meant until after she had left court and her lawyers explained this to her. Ruth struggled to navigate the confusion surrounding how she would, in fact, ‘voluntarily’ depart. The IJ had issued voluntary departure and, at the time, Ruth thought she would be leaving. When she

approached ICE about getting her Cameroon passport, she was told that it had expired and they would contact the Cameroon embassy for renewal. During this time, her deportation officer also told her that she “may” be detained while she waited for a renewed passport, even though she had also been enrolled in ISAP and was being heavily monitored. Ruth was never able to get accurate information about the status of her passport renewal (which was ultimately unsuccessful, as Cameroon refused to recognize her as a citizen given her attempt at seeking asylum in the U.S.), nor was she able to get answers about whether or not she would be detained. A staff of a human rights advocacy group told Ruth that detention was highly unlikely, while another lawyer told her that detention was “definitely immanent.” Exasperated and distraught, Ruth told me:

I’m just so upset and so disappointed with the government here. With the oppression, with the way they do things. I’m just so confused. I really don’t understand. To seek for asylum doesn’t mean you are a criminal ... it’s very aching and I’m so stressed and so depressed ... If you don’t want somebody, tell the person to go. Give the documents [passport]. But you are keeping somebody’s documents and then you are asking them to go, to go away. By what means!? By what means is that person supposed to go!?! So that is why my anger is so deep.

The policies and procedures surrounding detention and deportation were perhaps the ones that participants found the most secretive and illegible. Concerns and confusion about deportation and detention were cited by participants as being the most stressful producing the most anxiety and fear. Such fears about detention and deportation were also reproduced within communities. Maurice, in an early interview I had with him, recounted a story of a friend who had been, from his perspective, arbitrarily detained and had been held in detention without access to any information on his case.

- M: His [M's friend's] case was denied. He appealed.
 BH: Yes.
 M: It was denied. He appealed to the court. They [the BIA] said, 'Okay.' They are looking at it. Now, his paper- his [work] authorization got expired.
 BH: Okay.
 M: He went there to renew it. And they arrested him. Four years ago.
 BH: So he's been in- in prison, or in jail for four years?
 M: For four years! He has been in different jails, from jail to jail.
 BH: Wh- Why? What did they---?
 M: ---They don't say anything!
 BH: Are they trying to deport him?
 M: We don't know. He has said...just allow me go. But nobody's saying anything. They just- they keep pushing him left and right. Left and right. Left- I mean...so- so for four years ... Oh, God. I'm telling you, just one morning he left the house to go renew his work authorization. He was trying to do the right thing.
 BH: Yeah. And at that time, was he still—was his decision pending with the court?
 M: Yes. His decision was still pending. So-so-so, so his heart is really hard. The immigration system is, uh, is really hard to- to find out information. To know what is going on. People don't want to identify themselves. People don't want to say anything. It's really hard.
 BH: Yeah.
 M: One guy from immigration called me...last year. And said, 'Oh, we're gonna deport him. Uh, just come around with clothes. We gonna deport him. We gonna-' And that was last year. He's still there. Still in jail.

While I cannot comment on the details of this case, the recounting and circulation of stories like this speak to the pervasive fear that “deportability” as a state- and institutionally-produced condition evoke. It is, however, not just that detention or deportation remained a possibility for asylum seekers with pending claims that was so anxiety provoking. It was also the illegibility of these processes and the seemingly arbitrary nature with which they were overseen that increased asylum claimants sense of powerlessness and fear.

Indeed, the depth of fear regarding deportation, or deportability, was palpable throughout my fieldwork with asylum claimants. Fear of detention and deportation were reproduced intersubjectively, namely through community interactions and conversations. Within the Cameroonian community in my field site, for example, it was not infrequent to hear references to “Kondengui,” or the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Over and over again, I heard stories of ‘failed asylum seekers’ who were deported back to Cameroon and who were taken to Kondengui immediately upon return at the airport. “If you are taken there, you are never seen again,” Cameroonian participants would tell me. “It’s the worst place in the world. Hell on Earth,” they would tell me, sometimes adding the motion of a throat slitting. The circulation and reproduction of stories connecting failed and deported asylum seekers to imprisonment at Kondengui highlights not only the depth and pervasiveness of existential anxiety regarding “deportability,” but also points to the risk associated with filing as an asylum claim in the first place. An immigration lawyer with whom I spoke during my fieldwork suggested that the fears surrounding Kondengui and deportation, while perhaps exaggerated, are not completely unfounded. She explained that Cameroon’s government is “very good at keeping tabs” on their citizens who file asylum claims in the U.S. and “will often follow-up and punish” should they return to Cameroon.

Anger as Response to Insecurity

Ruth’s narrative passage above concluded with reference to her “deep” anger. Indeed, I found anger to be a common emotional response to asylum seekers’ situations of legal limbo. Similar to Ruth, Maurice expressed a sense of anger associated with the

confusion and illegibility of the political asylum process: “Seven years ago, I should have had this [asylum status]. It’s ruined my life. Now, I don’t even know what is going on. I’ve become so angry with the system.” Participants’ often claimed to feel disappointed, disillusioned, and/or angry with the U.S. government, yet they also felt limited in their ability to express this anger and disappointment. Because they were positioned in spaces of relative powerlessness, study participants did not feel they had the right or ability to voice anger over the asylum process.

A component of the pervasive anxiety and insecurity generated by this process was the feeling that participants were continuously being watched or judged. Consequently, part of the asylum claimants’ successful navigation of the asylum process involved being able to interpret institutional and cultural expectations of them as asylum claimants. This largely meant passively, silently, and patiently biding time until the adjudication of their claims. Given the construction of asylum seekers as unclassified/not yet classified, participants were also highly aware of not engaging in behavior that would be ‘read’ as undeserving or inauthentic, though given the illegibility of the process, determining what actually constitutes such behavior was rendered challenging. To be sure, as research has shown, conceptions of ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ refugee-ness are not just juridically-based, but are, rather, embedded in cultural assumptions of what constitutes a ‘true’ or ‘deserving’ refugee, including expectations/assumptions of passivity, and lack of voice and agency (Nyers 2006). For study participants, expressing anger was not only a futile activity, given the inaccessibility of institutional figures who would actually listen to them; it was also risky in the sense that it contradicted the discursively and institutionally produced expectations of ‘authentic’ refugees as being passively suffering

subjects. In later chapters, I will examine, following Jenkins (1991, 1996), how anger and fear evoked via a dominant political ethos was experienced and expressed through various bodily symptoms. This was a particularly important consideration given the sense of powerlessness that asylum claimants felt in narratively articulating their anger and fear. Now, I turn to an examination of how the pervasiveness of anxiety and fear evoked by the asylum process informed everyday activities for asylum seekers.

Pervasive Insecurity and Everyday Tactics

Even those not in deportation proceedings felt a sense of fear and insecurity. As the next chapter will elucidate, this insecurity and fear is, in part, an effect of asylum seekers' particular temporal orientation as liminal or limbo subjects. Yet, as I have been arguing here, fear and insecurity are also effects of the techniques and tactics of asylum institutions. Lack of access to information about one's case, the illegibility of the asylum process/system, and the sense of powerlessness to voice anger and concern resulted in participants' struggle to navigate not only the politico-judicial process of asylum, but also everyday life as asylum seekers.

Ordonez (2008) has argued that, given asylum seekers partial understanding of the process of political asylum, they often misinterpret procedures or processes or are given misinformation about the process. This, he asserts, can be detrimental: "The ways in which people 'approximate' to knowledge about asylum not only have dire consequences to their well-being, but also mark their future association to the state and determine their position within the current social structure" (Ordonez 2008: 40). For asylum claimants in my study, such "approximation" of knowledge often meant curtailing activities and

movement due to fear and anxiety, even when such limited mobility was not, in the legal sense, necessary or beneficial. Yet, everyday life was affectively infused with fear, anxiety, and confusion and participants' daily activities were often borne out of and in response to such affects.

Many scholars of “illegality” have discussed the tactics of invisibility that undocumented migrants adopt in order to maneuver through their daily lives, evading being seen, and hence reducing the risk of deportation (Chavez 1998; Wicker 2010; Willen 2007, 2010; Coutin 2005a, 2005b). Because asylum seekers in my study were rendered hypervisible, being invisible *to the state* was not necessarily possible and yet asylum seekers nonetheless displayed similar tactics of avoiding state actors such as police, as well as avoiding social situations in which they would be asked about their status. The fact that many participants felt the need to adopt similar tactics of invisibility reveals the ambiguity of their legal status and the awareness of their tenuous and partial relationship to the state. It also reveals the sense of insecurity and anxiety that pervaded everyday life. The paradox of visibility, in which the hyper-visibility that accompanies asylum seeking can be simultaneously a promise of long-term security *and* an existential threat (i.e., a constant reminder of legal limbo and “deportability”) often inhered a pervasive fear of everyday activities, even if these are only imagined fears (i.e., not legally-founded, such as deportation while asylum case is pending).

Lionel, for example, in describing life while going through the asylum process, alluded frequently to his sense of insecurity:

Then you also worry about, you know, mingling with people. Each time you go among people when they...start trouble, you gotta run away. The first thing the police come, what do they do? They ask for ID cards. I don't

have one. So and people, um somewheres and um, anywheres people are causing problems. So I ask people – I beg people to drop me out of the place [location where he’s going] quick. So those are kinda—those are the kinda depressing conditions.

Here, the fact that Lionel was, by definition of being an asylum claimant, lawfully present in the U.S. despite his lack of an American “ID card,” was either unknown to him or was unable to allay his fear of authorities. Rather, he experienced his liminal status in the U.S. as a threat and a source of insecurity. Lionel’s narrative brings to light several experiential dimensions that were shared with study participants overall. First, his narrative highlights his, like other participants’, mistrust of authority, especially the police. As discussed earlier, previous experiences with police and government officials in home countries critically inform how asylum claimants thought about and reacted towards police and other state authorities in the U.S. Second, this passage reflects a form of internalization of asylum claimants’ liminal status, in the sense that Malkki (1995) has written. That is, asylum claimants like Lionel saw themselves as unclassified/not yet classified in ways that made them “matter out of place.” This is not to say that asylum claimants did not assert their ‘authenticity’ and sense of deservingness of legal status and right to belong within U.S. borders. Yet, despite their own identification as ‘true refugees,’ participants were keenly aware that they were viewed with some level of suspicion and apprehension.

Finally, Lionel illustrates here the pervasive ways that fear, confusion, and insecurity shaped everyday life for study participants. This was the case despite the legal realities of asylum seekers’ status. As Fujiwara (2008), in her study of Cambodian female immigrants in the U.S., claims: “As legally defined noncitizens, subject to different

policy requirements than were citizen women, these immigrant and refugee women's fear of doing something wrong led to fears of jeopardizing their immigration status ... In the anti-immigrant climate, fear of deportation took hold, even if specific [legal] provisions would not result in forced removal" (135).

In particular, asylum claimants like other transnational migrants, such as undocumented migrants, often restricted and confined their everyday activities and movements as an everyday tactic of daily survival. Willen (2007) has posited such confinement within space as part of the "critical phenomenology of illegality" and Coutin (2000) describes undocumented migrants as being "confined to illegality through practices that limit their mobility" (33). What is striking in my research context is that I observed similar practices of confinement and immobility among asylum claimants who were, by definition and in practice, (hyper)visible subjects. In other words, while undocumented migrants may engage in tactics of confinement and immobility as a way to evade visibility, asylum claimants deployed these same tactics despite their status as already visible. This can be interpreted in several ways. First, participants' confinement may be a way to evade increased surveillance and policing. Second, immobility as a tactic could be seen as a way to avoid behavior that would cast asylum seekers negatively, especially given the confusion over expectations and rights within the asylum context. For example, Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, told me shortly after filing his application for asylum that he had stopped going out for daily long walks. When I asked him why this was the case, he told me that he didn't want to "do anything wrong by accident." He elaborated, telling me he was afraid he would violate a law he didn't know existed or that he may be randomly asked to show an ID, which, like Lionel,

he did not have. Staying home, then, obviated the risk of exposing Ahmed's tenuous relationship with the state. Finally, given the argument made in this chapter that asylum claimants, like undocumented migrants, share the "the conditional state of possible deportation," such tactics of confinement and restricting movement can arguably be seen as a response to the dominant ethos of insecurity and fear that is generated via the asylum process (Talavera 2010: 167).

We can see, then, how the fear of deportation within the Cameroon community illustrates how (hyper)visibility is associated with particular forms of risk and vulnerability for asylum seekers. Asylum claimants' visibility in the U.S., what I have come to think of as an aspect of the phenomenology of policing and surveillance, was also a source of fear and insecurity. Linda, the Liberian asylum seeker discussed above who had been wary about filing an asylum claim in the first place, continued to express worry and concern about establishing a relationship with the state and becoming visible. For Linda, while she did see filing an asylum claim as her hope for legal, permanent status in the U.S., her experience of the visibility it entailed was experienced largely as a threat and source of insecurity. I had met Linda and enrolled her in the study after spending an hour at her house chatting amicably and going over the informed consent, goals of the study, etc. When I arrived at her house the following week for our first interview, she seemed hesitant and uncomfortable. It was only after talking for a bit that she revealed her concerns: her boyfriend, after hearing about Linda's enrollment in the study, had speculated that I may have been "a spy for INS or the FBI" and that my motives in talking to her may have been to "catch her in lies" and have her "taken away." I was able to allay her fears only slightly by reiterating my position as a researcher,

underscoring that I had no ties to the government, and reassuring her that everything would remain confidential. She listened to this, but then brushed it off by telling me a story of a Liberian acquaintance who had applied for asylum and then was arrested and detained by “someone from immigration or FBI.” This person’s whereabouts were apparently unknown and were the topic of much speculation and concern within the Liberian community. Linda told me she had heard that this person had “told immigration one thing about his story but then said something different later,” inferring that perhaps this contradiction in information was responsible for his arrest and detention. I again did my best to put her at ease and explain my role and my project. She nodded and added, rhetorically: “But do you know what happens when Immigration comes to your house!?”

While Linda’s mistrust of me was arguably attributable, in part, to both her past experiences with abusive government authorities in Liberia (she had been raped by government officers), as well as to her lack of familiarity with research protocol in general (see Chapter 2), Linda’s fear of me also provided an important window into how asylum applicants’ visibility was partially experienced as threat and insecurity. What the stories of failed asylum seekers imprisoned in Kondengui or the story of asylum seekers being arrested and disappeared by an unknown government official in the U.S. illustrate is how the phenomenology of being visible, of being surveilled and ‘managed,’ instantiate particular kinds of fears and vulnerabilities. In these cases, fear emanated not necessarily from being rendered visible, but rather from the uncertainty regarding how one, as a now-visible subject, will be assessed, and, in effect, constructed, as a particular kind of person (i.e., legal/deserving or illegal/undeserving).

Fear and insecurity and the subsequent adaptation of movement and activities were, of course, not only responses to circulated stories of others' detention and deportation. Many asylum claimants in my study had been subjected to forms of harassment and targeted surveillance that are best understood as forms of structural violence. While I will examine ISAP as involving particularly overt and heightened forms of structural violence or oppression, I will here provide two examples of study participants who were subjected to such oppressive tactics outside of the context of ISAP, indeed outside of the political asylum process itself. That these incidents took place outside the institutions directly associated with political asylum supports the claim that legal personhood (or non-personhood) informs everyday life and 'private' spheres (Coutin 1993, 2000; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010).

Roland, a Liberian asylum seeker who lived in a suburban area that was home to a significant population of Liberians, complained often of being targeted or "profiled" by the mostly white police force in his community. He recounted several times when he was apprehended by the police while walking to his car outside his apartment building or outside the local McDonald's. Having no ID, Roland told me he was particular subject to increased scrutiny, as police bombarded him with questions concerning his asylum claimant-status. Though he had never been arrested or issued a ticket, as a result of such 'profiling,' Roland often chose to stay home instead of going out or walked only during daylight hours: "I'm scared, you know. I don't want to say anything. Do anything. You know, you don't do things when you're scared." His main concern was that the police would "tarnish my reputation" and then "I'd never win my [asylum] case."

Surveillance and policing of migrants, as De Genova (2002) has noted, increasingly takes place outside the state, within the private realm. As he points out, “citizens” are called on to report the presence of “illegal” or undocumented migrants. For migrants, this results in everyday public *and* private spaces being zones of potential risk of criminalization. For one of my participants, in particular, the effects of being policed within non-state zones were especially hard to bear. Ruth, a devoutly religious (Pentecostal) woman and former preacher, had joined a nearby church shortly after her arrival in the U.S. While she was aware of other churches that had large African, including Cameroonian, congregants, Ruth chose instead a church “with almost all white people,” where she could “just go and worship and be with God,” rather than engage in the social aspects that some associated (and enjoyed) with church life. She had shared with the pastor of the church her current struggle trying to attain asylum status, who had been supportive of her claim once she told him her story of persecution and struggle in Cameroon. Yet, a year later, this same pastor had called Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) when he learned of Ruth’s initial denial of asylum, urging ICE to deport her. While Ruth was extremely hurt and confused by this, she was, in hindsight, not altogether surprised, given that he often alluded to his anti-immigration political stance. In addition to exposing the very real and painful effects of being interpellated as an unwanted Other—the ‘wrong’ or ‘undeserving’ kind of migrant—Ruth’s experience of being policed from within the private arena exposes the reach of the discursive construction of ‘failed asylum seekers’ in terms of criminology. That is, Ruth’s pastor reinterpreted Ruth in light of a juridically- and politically-imposed status/label. Having

been denied asylum, in the pastor's eyes, then, Ruth was no longer a "morally legitimate suffering body," but rather a morally suspect, 'illegal alien' (Ticktin 2011:11).

The experiences of Roland and Ruth surely speak to the forms of symbolic and structural violence that confronted asylum seekers. While not all participants had experiences such as these, given the larger backdrop of increased securitization and criminalization of asylum seekers and immigrants (see Chapter 1), these tactics of governmentality should be understood not as exceptions but as points on a continuum of violence against transnational migrants in the U.S.

I now look specifically at techniques employed under the guise of "alternatives to detention," focusing on the overt forms of surveillance, criminalization, and policing to which those participants enrolled in ISAP were subjected.

CRIMINALIZING TACTICS: ISAP AND BEING A "PRISONER IN AMERICA"

Five study participants had had experience with the Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program (ISAP), introduced in the beginning of this chapter. Four participants had been actively enrolled in ISAP during my fieldwork (Eric, Ruth, Barbara, Roland), while one other had been enrolled in ISAP prior to my meeting her (Solange). While I describe below the official institutional criteria for being enrolled in ISAP, most immigration lawyers and advocates with whom I talked felt that who gets enrolled in ISAP is highly arbitrary. All five study participants who had been involved with ISAP had been placed in "removal proceedings," one criterion for enrollment, though none of them were ever clearly explained why they were enrolled in ISAP. Eric, for example, recounted receiving a vague letter instructing him to report to the Office of

Detention and Removal Operations. He was certain that he was going to be detained. When he arrived at the immigration office, Eric was told that he was being enrolled in ISAP and was required to wear an ankle-monitoring bracelet, which officials proceeded to tighten around his leg. When he asked why he was being part of ISAP, officials told Eric they only carry out the orders of ICE and that if he wished to ask more questions, he could “go next door to ICE” and would likely be detained instead.

Two participants (Solange, Barbara) refused to discuss ISAP with me. One of these participants (Barbara) cited “all the pain and suffering” ISAP caused; the other participant (Solange) only told me that “it [ISAP] was so bad. I really almost went crazy.” Of the three remaining participants who were enrolled in ISAP during my fieldwork, one of them (Roland) was quite hesitant to discuss the subject. He would speak mostly in general terms about ISAP and would either change the subject or inform me of his desire to stop talking about ISAP. The other two participants (Eric and Ruth) were willing to discuss ISAP with me and were quite forthcoming about their thoughts and experiences with the program. Ruth allowed me to accompany her to the BI Incorporated office, which I did almost every week during my fieldwork. Before ethnographically exploring participants’ thoughts, feelings, and responses to ISAP, I first provide more detailed background on the program. I also argue that the tactics and techniques of ISAP, which are embedded in a larger political context of the criminalization of immigration, are best understood as forms of structural violence.

ISAP: Background

The Intensive Supervision and Appearance Program, or ISAP, was started in response to ICE's creation of a \$3 million Alternatives to Detention (ATD) program that would ensure that immigrants released from detention and/or those in "removal proceedings" would comply with the requirements to appear in court. In 2004, ISAP began in 8 pilot cities, including the one where I conducted my fieldwork. As of 2010, ISAP operates in 30 cities across the nation and ICE's 2010 budget for ATDs was set at \$69.9 million (Phelan 2010). To be eligible for ISAP, migrants must "not pose a threat to the public or national security," and not be subject to mandatory detention (e.g., have committed a felony, found to materially support terrorist organization, deemed a risk to national security). All eligible and enrolled "participants" in ISAP are subjected to a range of surveillance and policing tactics, including wearing tracking devices, observing curfews, regular scheduled and random meetings and check-ins with immigration officials, and the installation of voice recognition software on his/her telephone line, so that BI caseworkers can confirm the identity of the ISAP participant over the phone.

Theoretically, there are three phases to ISAP. Phase one ("intensive phase") consists of the ISAP "participant" wearing a GPS ankle monitoring bracelet, a nightly curfew, reporting to the BI office several times per week, unscheduled home visits and telephone check-ins from BI case managers. While this initial period is, in theory, set to last for thirty days, policy reports have shown that this is not always the case (Human Rights First 2010). Eric and Ruth, for example, both wore ankle-monitoring bracelets for longer than thirty days and both of them wore the bracelet at several different points during my fieldwork period (i.e., bracelet was removed and reapplied later). If the participant complies with these requirements, then he/she moves to phase two

(“intermediate phase”), which consists of regular reporting to BI offices, home visits and telephone check-ins (no ankle bracelet or curfew). Finally, in Phase three (“regular phase”), the participants continue the same activities as phase two, but at a reduced frequency. The last phase usually lasts until the participant is detained or deported, or until his/her case is successfully adjudicated.

ISAP: Alternative to detention or alternative form of detention?

As noted in the opening of this chapter, ICE and BI Incorporated, the company responsible for running ISAP since 2009, frame ISAP as a “compassionate alternative to detention,” and emphasize it’s “voluntary” nature. As this section will highlight, the asylum seekers in my study that were enrolled in ISAP found the program to be dehumanizing and criminalizing. Moreover, the “voluntary” nature of ISAP can surely be challenged when one considers that asylum seekers are often given a choice of enrolling in ISAP or being detained.

Yet, institutional attempts at portraying ISAP as successful and humane program continue. Brochures from BI Inc., outlining ISAP, highlight the “community connections” and case management aspect of the program, including physical and mental health referrals, medical and legal assistance, and assistance with “basic life needs.” In one BI, Inc. brochure that outlines the ISAP II program, there is no mention of any surveillance techniques or even to its classification of an Alternative to Detention (ATD) program. Rather, ISAP is introduced as follows:

BI Incorporated currently operates over 30 ISAP II programs in communities across the nation. ISAP II partners with local services providers and the Office of Detention and Removal (DRO) to help

stabilize participants in the community as they move through the immigration court process.

Such a framing of ISAP belies the program's very penal aims and techniques. The fact that BI Incorporated is a private company whose majority of clients are penal institutions indeed bolsters the understanding of ISAP as a program of disciplining and policing. As BI Inc.'s website boasts, they "provide a full continuum of offender monitoring technologies and community reentry services for parolees, probationers, pretrial defendants and illegal aliens involved in the U.S. immigration court process ... BI's solutions help federal, state, and local agencies to supervise a range of individuals – from low- to high-risk offender populations." Contrast the above description of ISAP on BI's brochure with the one provided by ICE on its website:

ISAP is a contracted program that BI Incorporated operates for the Alternative to Detention (ATD) unit within Detention and Removal Operations (DRO). As participants move through the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR) court process, detention is a limited and costly option. Yet DHS must track these individuals when released to community supervision. ISAP enhances this supervision and facilitates quick removals of individuals from the United States, resulting in reduced pressure on available detention beds. The focus of ISAP is to engage participants in the court process and ensure compliance to hearings and final court orders through intensive supervision and case management.

By incorporating asylum seekers who have been placed in removal proceedings into a framework of criminality, these migrants are recast as "offenders" who threaten the security of local communities and the nation at large. The implications of this recasting, as this section will ethnographically elucidate, are far-reaching.

All of these characterizations have significant implication when applied to the asylum seeker. Policed, criminalized, and incarcerated, asylum seekers are by implication social deviants ... Socially, moreover, the asylum

seeker is estranged from the political community even more so than she already was by constructions of racialized and nationalized difference, by her association with the image of the criminal (Story 2005: 20)

To be sure, legal communities and advocacy groups across the country have expressed serious concerns about ISAP and have especially questioned its claim as an *alternative* to detention (Human Rights First 2010; Reardon 2008; Phelan 2010). For example, the American Bar Association has argued that the electronic monitoring involved with ISAP “constitutes another form of detention rather than a meaningful alternative to it” (Reardon 2008). As Reardon (2008) reports, significant concern about ISAP surrounds the lack of transparency in how the program is run: “It [the government] has not shared, for example, its enrollment criteria or the specific indicators of success that permit participants to graduate to the less intense phases. Individual officers appear to have a lot of discretion in each case and decisions on individual cases sometimes appear arbitrary.”

Given the criminalizing tactics employed by ISAP and the lack of transparency with which the program is run, I argue that these forms of governing and disciplining be understood as forms of structural violence. Willen (2007, 2010) has examined the criminalization of “illegal” migrants in Israel as a key factor in shaping their social and embodied realities. Looking specifically at the mass deportation campaigns in Israel, Willen (2010) suggests that these migrants’ lives are “shaped and constrained by multiple, overlapping forms of ‘structural violence’ ... not only do they inhabit positions of disadvantage within an unequal global political economy, but they are also forced to inhabit zones of social, political, and economic marginality and ‘abjectivity’” (169).

While Willen is examining the violent expulsion of migrants, her framework of structural violence is nonetheless relevant to my discussion of ISAP. Indeed, the tactics of governmentality associated with ISAP must be seen within the broader framework of securitization and criminalization of immigrants in the U.S., which include detention and deportation. These forms of governmentality – electronic monitoring, voice recognition technologies, curfews, regular surveillance meetings – must be understood as powerful techniques of Othering that resulted in the social and political exclusion of asylum seekers. It is through these processes of Othering that asylum seekers are made (hyper)visible and legible to state. In this way, the asylum claimant “finds her human identity intersecting with the exclusionary, marginal spaces of animality and the inclusive, controlling spaces of digital surveillance” (Nyers 2006: 95). With respect to ISAP participants, in particular, the very entity to which asylum claimants appeal for security – the U.S. government – became a primary source of *insecurity*.

Criminalization and the Reconfiguration of Social and Personal Lives

On a practical level, participation in ISAP restricted activities and movement on a daily basis: leaving his/her house after curfew was prohibited; during assigned days, he/she would need to be home the entire day in case of a random home visit from BI case managers; assigned in-person reporting times to BI Inc. needed to be maintained, often several times per week. During every weekly visit to the BI Inc. office, ISAP participants were required to fill out and present a schedule for the upcoming week that detailed their whereabouts 24 hours per day. Eric explained to me the frustration and interference that this caused:

- BH: So what do you have to put down on the schedule?
 Eric: Well, they want you to be as comprehensive as possible, like tell them I'm gonna go to church. I'm gonna go to the store ... If a friend calls me and is, like, 'Hey, can we hang out at the park,' I'm not supposed to do that. Yeah. But—so, it's like you lose a chunk of your life, your freedom, your liberty. And with this [points to ankle monitoring bracelet] they're monitoring you all the time.

The techniques of criminalization and policing employed by ISAP resulted in Eric and Ruth, and other asylum seekers like them, being made legible in terms of their putative criminality. Ruth, for example, referred (not always consciously) to her ISAP identification card as her “prisoner card,” and referred to her need to stay home in case of ISAP home visits as being on “house arrest.” She often told me that she was a “prisoner in America.” Thus, Ruth’s experience as an asylum seeker in the U.S. was very much shaped by forms of criminalization. While she experienced herself as other things as well – mother, woman of God, political activist, etc. – the fact of living under the label of criminal/failed asylum seeker had a profound bearing on her everyday life. Being rendered a criminal -- a morally suspect Other -- was perhaps the aspect of ISAP that was the most painful for my study participants who were enrolled in the program, as the following excerpts illustrate:

All the intimidation, putting the bracelet on my leg, it's for what? Keeping me in my house is for what? I can't understand. What have I done? Am I a criminal? Am I supposed to be treated that way? (Ruth)

ISAP is like ... selling your life, you know. There's no human dignity, there's no privacy, you know? I don't know how to actually—I don't know—but the most frustrating thing about it is they treat us like criminals. Like thieves. Like people are there watching to see what next crime are they going to commit. But they never ask me why am I here in the first place. Bridget, I wish my country was a nice place. I would *never, never, never*

step out of my country to go to *any* country that would treat my nationality like garbage. I'll bet you an American would not be treated like this any place. A European would not be treated like this *anywhere*. Do you know the people I see [at the ISAP office]? Mostly from Third World countries. Mexicans. Africans ... So, I'm treated like a criminal in a land where it's not—I mean, they say America, Land of the Free. It's a lie! Land of the Chosen Free. (Eric)

Eric's narrative excerpt above not only illustrates the indignity that he felt at being subjected to ISAP's techniques of policing and criminalization; it also calls important attention to the ways in which the criminalization of asylum seekers is significantly racialized (Tormey 2007; Palidda 2011). Tormey (2007), in her work on citizenship and migrants in Ireland, has noted that in that country's "crisis of immigration," "Irish anxieties were laminated upon black bodies" to the extent that it justified the alteration of citizenship laws within the Irish Constitution (86). As Eric pointed out, the marking of certain asylum seekers as "criminal" was not neutral, but rather mapped onto specific racialized notions of Otherness.

If the color of participants' bodies contributed to their classification as criminal Other, then the ankle bracelet ensured that that label was, in the most literal sense, writ on their bodies. With this, asylum claimants enrolled in ISAP may be "subjectively overwhelmed by the "crushing objecthood" of [their] body and of [their] race" (Tormey 2007: 81). With electronic monitoring, state power was extended to the actual bodies of migrants (c.f. Maira 2010). The material qualities of the bracelet also ensured that participants were aware of it constantly. Those ISAP participants with whom I talked complained of it being heavy, itchy, and cumbersome, causing difficulty sleeping and doing other daily activities. Its physical presence on the body served to constantly

remind asylum seekers of their deportability while also communicating their Otherness to the social world. Describing the experience of wearing an ankle bracelet, Eric told me: “I mean every second, every minute you feel it, you know? And then you think about your life, how it is here, every second of every minute.” Here, “feeling it” has a dual meaning: Eric both physically felt the bracelet as a material object *and* affectively apprehended its symbolic meaning of alterity and criminality.

Being subjected to ISAP’s techniques of governmentality reshaped how these asylum claimants inhabited their social worlds. On a practical level, ISAP participants with ankle bracelets, went to great lengths to hide the bracelet, even wearing long pants on hot, humid summer days outside. If in public, they were careful to sit or stand a certain way that would expose the bracelet, effectively revealing their putative criminality. My study participants with ankle bracelets all told me of their sense of shame and tentativeness about going out in public, aware of “what people will think,” should they see participants’ monitoring devices. A conversation recorded between Ruth (R) and Eric (E) illustrates the way in which the presence of the device interrupts and mediates the quotidian.

- R: It’s very aching and so disappointing because you are so stressed and so depressed. Every night. This thing talks! It talks, Bridget!! “Charge me! Charge batteries please!!” (Ruth and Eric break into laughter)
- E: Oh, my God!
- R: (In a booming voice) Battery charge! Charge batteries!
- E: (in loud, mechanical voice) Vreep! Vreep!
- R: Yes, yes!
- E: When the battery’s running low. It signals. (loudly) Tweeeeeet. And then when you charge it. “Battery charged” ... Yeah, and if you don’t do it, it will start vibrating really loud.
- R: And you can’t take it off!
- E: And you can be anywhere and it will start talking.

At this point, Ruth stopped laughing, her eyes instead welling up with tears as she recounted a story of being in the local African grocery when her ankle monitor started making noise. She was “humiliated” she told us, and she was forced to abandon her basket of groceries to go home and attend to the device. Wiping her tears, she looked at me and said angrily: “Are we criminals!? Do we deserve this? Because this thing is made for criminals. Are we criminals!? Have immigrants become criminals!?”

This exchange highlights illegality as a social relation that mediates the quotidian in various and, often unexpected ways (Coutin 2005b; De Genova 2002). Ruth’s incident at the grocery store illustrates that “[m]uch of the time [asylum seekers, undocumented migrants] are undifferentiated from those around them, but suddenly .. legal reality is superimposed on daily life” (Coutin 2000 cited in De Genova 2002: 422). The ankle bracelet, of course, ensures that legal reality is superimposed on daily life in a much more overt and symbolically violent way.

If the tactics of criminalization mediated social relations among strangers, Eric’s experience shows how these forms of disciplining and policing also critically informed family life. Eric was the only participant in my study who had come to the U.S. with a dependent (his wife) who was also listed on his asylum application. At the time that I met Eric, his claim had been pending for several years, having just been denied by the immigration judge. He was then preparing to appeal his case to the Board of Immigration Appeals. During this time, his wife had given birth to two children. Although his wife declined to participate in the study in any way, she was always very friendly and welcoming when I would spend time at their home. Eric talked to me often about how the

asylum case, particularly the protracted uncertainty involved, was posing challenges to their relationship. When they were both assigned to wear ankle-monitoring bracelets, Eric's wife became particularly distraught. Shortly after the bracelets were first placed on them, Eric returned home from work to find his wife locked in the bedroom sobbing while the baby, unattended, cried in the next room. Eric told me that while the bracelets were "scary" and "intimidating" for both of them, their required use was particularly difficult for his wife. He recalled one incident:

At one point my wife was like—one night she was like all furious and upset. She's like 'I cannot take this anymore. I'm going to remove it. I don't care, you know. If they want to kill me, let them kill me. I cannot take it.' I could not sleep. I stayed up begging her the whole night, patting her leg until she feel back asleep.

Both he and his wife took great pains to avoid exposing the ankle bracelet to their young children. Eric told me that he took a picture of it and someday when they were older he would show it to them and explain. At their young ages, 2 and 4, however, Eric said that he didn't want them to be confused or to ask other adults about the device. Navigating daily life, then, became more challenging and restrictive in this regard. Having to wear an ankle bracelet in the summer, Eric and his wife could not take their children to the local pool, something that they had enjoyed doing up until then. "I can't even play Kriss Kross Applesauce with my kids," Eric lamented. With this statement, Eric seemed to be speaking not just about a children's game, but also about his inability to fulfill desired aspects of parenting. Here, the imposed criminality and Otherness via ISAP's techniques of policing informed even the most intimate of spaces.

Criminalization and Powerlessness

Study participants involved in ISAP often underscored the intimidation that they felt from ICE and BI Inc. authorities, which resulted in a sense of “humiliation,” “confusion,” and “anger.” As with the ethos of the political asylum process largely, these tactics were implemented in ways that evoked profound feelings of insecurity, fear and anxiety. As described above, if asylum claimants, in general, felt a sense of powerlessness while their claims were adjudicated, then this was all the more pronounced with ISAP participants. The following interview excerpts illustrate the power inequities that undergirded asylum claimants’ interactions with ISAP officials, and the affective and subjective states that such tactics of policing generated:

BH: What’s your experience of that office?

Eric: That is like hell on--it’s a mini Hell. It’s like (sing-songy) ‘nah-nah-nah-nah-nah’ We can ask immigration to deport you if we want to. You better listen to us and kiss our ass or else I’m gonna call immigration. I’m gonna make your life more miserable. I’m gonna make you come here everyday. You don’t have a choice but to do that. I’m gonna tell you to blah, blah, blah (voice rising at this point). And hell, no, you don’t have any voice. You don’t have any power to do anything about it. What are you gonna do? Take it or leave it. (softer now). That’s my experience. That’s what I know about it. They. Don’t. Care. ... And they do not listen to anything you have to say. Those, those ladies there are ruthless and heartless.

BH: The ladies at ISAP?

Eric: Oh. My. God. I’ve never been in a place. Since I came the United States. I’ve never seen people who treat people ... like ... you’re garbage, you know.

BH: Mmmm. And that’s how—

Eric: --Yeah. ‘why are you here for? You should not exist’ you know, like you’re the—it’s like they have a button. They can either kick you out or let you stay here. (voice raises) You better listen to me. This is how it’s gonna go. No, I’m telling you.’ You have no voice. You just have to comply. So, they’re like you’re out of reach [of the monitor] at 1 o’clock. I’m like ‘okay, if I was out of range at 1 o’clock and 1:05 I’m in range, ‘at 1:10

you're out of range.' I'm like 'okay, just'—I'm a smoker. Can't I go out for a smoke? In my own garage, in my own house? 'No you cannot do that. You have to—this is ISAP, you have to follow it. This is Immigration—or else we're gonna ask them to take you into custody. Would you prefer being out there and following these recommendations or do you want to be in custody? ... So, again, we get scared. They scare us a lot. So we have to do what they say.

I don't know, it's hard to continue anymore. It's unbearable. I don't know, it's like they [ISAP officials] are trying to aggravate you so much that you can't take it anymore you know. Aggravate you to lose your mind, that's what they do. You know? And you can't do anything about it. (Roland)

For the little that Roland discussed ISAP, it was clear that the sense of powerlessness within his interactions with ISAP officials was a serious concern of his. Roland worried that he would become so aggravated with ISAP officials that he might “slip up” and become verbally abuse to the ISAP staff. Not wanting to go into detail, Roland also said he worried about his own mental health in a situation in which he was, from his perspective, harassed and intimidated. Thus, his suggestion that ISAP officials were attempting to aggravate him “to lose your mind,” was not just a facile idiom, but rather reflected a genuine concern about his emotional and psychological well-being in the face of such techniques of disciplining and policing.

Further punitive aspects of ISAP reinforced a sense of criminalization and disempowerment. Study participants involved with the program complained frequently of the punishments they would receive if they failed to meet or comply with even the smallest of requirements. For example, a missed phone call from ISAP at a time when Ruth was scheduled to be home resulted in an immediate increase in the frequency of in-person visits to the ISAP office, from once a week to three times per week. Eric's case

manager reprimanded him for failing to submit a paystub during his weekly visit and scheduled him for an additional mandatory home visit during the month. These punitive measures, however, were most frustrating and evoked the most anger when they were, according to participants, false accusations. This happened, for example, when Eric's wife answered the phone during a random ISAP call – at 1AM – and the voice recognition technology did not recognize the voice as hers. Similarly, Ruth had been accused by her case manager of tampering with her ankle-monitoring bracelet. But, as Ruth, insisted to me: “how would I ever be tampering with that thing. I've never been able to look at that thing like this with my eyes (demonstrates shielding her eyes). Whenever I look at it hurts my feelings all through.”

Indeed, Ruth and I learned later that the young Ghanaian woman whose burst through the ISAP doors was recounted at the outset of this chapter had been called by the ISAP office accusing her of turning off or tampering with her electronic monitoring device and left a message for her to report immediately to the ISAP office, giving no further information. Yet, as this young woman insisted to the man at the ISAP desk and to her case manager, who had arrived back from lunch some time after she arrived, she had not even touched her device.

We need to consider the policies and techniques used by ISAP as forms of structural violence, which work to criminalize and marginalize asylum seekers. While such tactics may be institutionally routinized and normalized as part of the necessary management of national borders and the “problem” of immigration, ethnographic attention to the lived effects of such techniques of policing, disciplining, and ‘management,’ reveals a different reality. Such tactics contribute to a particular ethos of

the political asylum process that renders asylum seekers suspect and ambiguous Others. The effects of this ethos, moreover, are not confined to the context of political asylum: the anger, anxiety, and fear evoked by the asylum process become embodied in ways that reconfigured how asylum seekers inhabited their bodies and their social worlds.

The Production of Madness

Jenkins (2010: 8-9) outlines the numerous, recurring paradoxes regarding the use of psychopharmaceuticals for those struggling with long-term mental illness, including frustrations over “recovery *without* cure” or “stigma *despite* recovery;” the experience of side effects which require persons to “choose” the symptoms of mental illness over weight gain or blunted sexual desire; and the tension embedded in “biochemical” narrative that absolves one from “fault” regarding his or her illness but nonetheless demands responsibility over it (Jenkins and Carpenter-Song 2005, 2008). Jenkins concludes that “(t)aken together, I am convinced that these paradoxical conditions of illness experience can ironically create madness and suffering for individuals and their kin” (2010: 9).

In a similar vein, I suggest here that the techniques and overall “ethos” associated with the political asylum process, a putative “humanitarian” process – including aspects of illegibility, protracted legal limbo, lack of access to information, and, perhaps most powerfully, the techniques of policing, surveillance, and criminalization that I’ve outlined in this chapter – can be seen as productive of madness in this context. As I argue throughout this dissertation, study participants largely located their suffering in the present context of asylum seeking. Participants talked not only of their anger and

disillusionment in response to the political asylum process, but also articulated a deep sense of fear, confinement, and existential insecurity that this process produced. For those participants subjected to increased forms of surveillance, policing, and criminalization, madness and suffering were produced all the more acutely. As Roland emphasized, with regard to ISAP, it was as if immigration officials were “trying to aggravate you so much that you can’t take it anymore ... Aggravate you to lose your mind.”

My assertion that the institutional processes of political asylum are productive of certain forms of suffering and/or madness reflects scholarship on social suffering (Kleinman, Das and Locke 1997; Biehl 2007). Social suffering, defined as a result “from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people,” aptly describes the forms of suffering I have described throughout this chapter (ibid: ix). Sedimenting asylum seekers’ suffering is the fact that the exertion of institutional power in this context – what I have identified as forms of symbolic or structural violence – becomes routinized (see Farmer 2004). The discourses of both humanitarianism and national security not only justify the use of techniques of policing, surveillance, and criminalization, but work to normalize these techniques and naturalize the categories of personhood that they create.

A key aspect of the production of madness in this context is the accompanying sense of powerlessness and immobility that participants felt. Integral to Roland’s assertion that ISAP officials were trying to provoke him to lose his mind was the fact that “you can’t do anything about it.” The irony here is that asylum seekers, who were defined by their transnational mobility, found themselves profoundly immobilized by the political asylum process. This was the case not only with regard to their (legal) inability to leave

U.S. soil during the adjudication of their asylum claims, but also with regard to their lived sense of immobility in everyday life: fear of leaving the house, of walking to the library, of going to the store. As the next chapter elaborates, this sense of immobility extended to asylum seekers' ability to make meaning of their suffering and their life trajectories. Ultimately, the institutional techniques of disciplining and managing associated with the asylum process, coupled with asylum seekers' positions of powerlessness, produced novel forms of suffering, including what could be understood as madness in this context.

Confronting Institutional Tactics of Othering: Asserting Alternative Identities

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how institutional processes of Othering and the generation of an ethos of confusion, insecurity, and fear came to intimately shape participants' experiences. To a large extent, asylum seekers felt highly restricted in how they could respond to their situations. Yet, as I have insisted from the outset of this dissertation, study participants did not take up these institutional categories and labels wholesale. Indeed, this chapter has shown the resistance and agentive maneuvering that participants demonstrated against attempts to criminalize them or render them suspect in terms of their deservingness of legal status. In this way, "identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera" (Malkki 1992: 37; see also Essed and Wessenbeek 2004; Peteet 2005).

Given this flexible understanding of identity, we can see how participants' assertions of alternative narratives or identities—those that run counter to the institutionally-imposed categories and labels—are important in grasping how lives are

made meaningful within the context of asylum seeking. For example, in a context in which asylum seekers' credibility and 'deservingness' are rendered suspect, his or her identity as a "freedom fighter," as a morally and politically engaged person, takes on significant meaning and serves as a way to reclaim the power to define his or her life history. Within the asylum process, institutionally-imposed categories, like the ones discussed throughout this chapter, often posed formidable challenges to asylum seekers' processes of meaning-making. In the face of these challenges, "people may try to neutralize cultural meanings that do so [pose problems of meaning] or seek to redefine self in ways that also redefine the implications of particular cultural conceptions ... Many seek alternative, self-affirming terms for understanding self" (Parish 2008: 131). The assertion of alternative ways of understanding and experiencing the self—what Parish (2008) describes as "self-work"—is an agentive and creative act. As the next chapter will elucidate, in exploring the concept of uncertainty, temporality, and power, asylum seekers' sense of agency within the asylum-seeking context may have been restricted, but they remained creative social actors throughout this process.

CONCLUSION

Through the political asylum process, asylum claimants are constructed as liminal, deportable Others that must be assessed by the state to be either deserving or undeserving of inclusion within its borders. I suggested that asylum claimants have a complicated relationship with notions visibility. That is, asylum applicants are rendered (hyper)visible via the techniques of the asylum process, but that this (hyper)visibility is paradoxical: it represents both a promise of security and a source of *insecurity*.

Furthermore, this chapter argued that the techniques of managing and disciplining asylum claimants, ranging from the illegibility and lack of transparency of processes and policies to the policing mechanisms of electronic monitoring, are productive of a particular “political ethos” (Jenkins 1991). I illustrated how this particular ethos evokes or constructs certain subjective and affective states: anxiety, fear, confusion, and anger. The significant inequities in power among the stakeholders of the asylum process (namely, government vs. asylum claimants) resulted, furthermore, in asylum seekers’ sense of powerlessness to express and articulate their feelings and concerns.

This chapter considered ISAP as a particularly heightened (and increasingly used) form of policing and surveillance and suggested these tactics as forms of structural violence. These forms of structural violence are: a) normalized, routinized, and justified under the name of security and b) are integral to the maintenance of moral citizenship, and of belonging and exclusion. I will return to the issue of structural violence in Chapter 5, when I discuss additional aspects of economic and social marginality that informed asylum seekers’ experiences. Having laid the groundwork of a particular kind of ethos, the next chapter outlines how the political asylum process reconfigured asylum seekers’ relationship to time and power and how this manifested in particular forms of social suffering.

CHAPTER 4
**“IT’S A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH”: UNCERTAINTY, TEMPORALITY,
AND SUFFERING**

RUTH

One chilly autumn afternoon, I made my way through the dark hallway of a low-income housing complex, dodging the dripping, rusty water from the numerous leaks in the ceiling. I found the apartment number of Ruth, a woman whose name was given to me by Eric, another study participant. “This woman,” Eric told me, “is really going through a lot. Really going through hell.” I knocked at the door and was greeted with a warm smile and a hug by Ruth, a stout Cameroonian woman in her early fifties. I immediately noticed a thick scar that ran across the left side of her face. She ushered me in to her small, one bedroom apartment, which was strewn with fabric and sewing supplies, pill bottles both empty and full, various papers and overdue bills, several Bibles and religious literature. Pots and pans, boxes of Maggi bullion cubes, containers of dried shrimp and peppers, and large bags of rice filled the small kitchen space where she had now returned, and sat mashing coco yams. She poured me a large glass of orange juice and motioned to me to sit. I explained who I was and told her about my research project. She told me that she would be happy to participate, explaining that she is “suffering too much” in this country. She continued: “I never thought I would be treated this way in America. When I was able to get a visa to come to America, everyone thought I was so lucky, that I would be safe. I never thought it would be like this. Asylum seekers here are treated like animals. But we are not animals! We only want to be safe.”

Ruth came from Bamenda, in the Northwest Province of Cameroon. A mother of five children, Ruth also worked part-time as a seamstress and devoted much of her time to church activities. She became involved in politics in the early 1990s, with the emergence of the SDF. At that time, she claims, she was not an “active member” but supported the party primarily by hosting and providing meals for party meetings. During the elections in Cameroon in October 1992, the gendarmes arrested Ruth as she attempted to deliver food to SDF members in their compound. She was imprisoned for close to one month where she endured daily beatings and interrogation. After her release from prison, Ruth refrained from political activities for several years and became increasingly involved in her Pentecostal church. At that time, she “had a call into ministry,” and began doing work on HIV/AIDS education and care work in surrounding rural areas. Ruth did not stay away from politics for too long, however, as she soon became a member of the SCNC. While her involvement with the SCNC included financial support and meeting attendance, she also established a visible role as a preacher at SCNC functions. When I asked Ruth about her desire to return to politics even after she had been detained and tortured previously, she -- like all my Cameroonian study participants -- underscored the moral imperative of fighting against the oppression of Anglophones in Cameroon: “We had to be [politically active]! I am a mother, Bridget. We need to give our children a chance. We are trying to give them a future. So we are fighting for our families, our children. For our human rights. Not to be beaten and put in jail. We have no power. We do not have a voice to argue but we must keep trying and we are crying--crying out.”

In 2001, during the large October 1st rally marking the independence of Southern Cameroon, Ruth was again arrested, as she handed out SCNC t-shirts. The details of the

arrest are fuzzy for her: she remembers being hit repeatedly on the face with “a large wooden object,” dragged through a field and thrown into a police van. The next thing she recalled was awakening inside a small prison cell, her face covered in thick blood and her head “burning like fire.” In our conversations about her detention, Ruth recounted the deplorable prison experience: sharing a 2 1/2’ by 3’ cell with two other women; defecating and urinating into a small, shared bucket that was emptied infrequently; and being beaten and interrogated every morning. What remains most vivid in her mind, she told me, were the words carved into the top of the doorframe in the cell: “God No Dey” (in Pidgin, “*No God Here*”). During her three-week detention, her legs became grossly swollen and the large, deep wound on her face grew heavily infected. She was released in order to obtain medical care on the condition that she report back to the police on a weekly basis. Ruth had her face stitched and received medication for her swollen legs, but refused to be admitted to the hospital. Ruth’s pastor arranged for her to hide in a mission in a small town on the outskirts of Bamenda, where she stayed for several months. The pastor urged Ruth to find a way out of Cameroon, but Ruth refused, telling him she couldn’t leave her children. During this time, Ruth’s husband and children were routinely harassed, threatened, and their house searched when they came looking for Ruth. After almost a year in hiding, Ruth received word that her husband, a university lecturer with some involvement in politics, had been killed while traveling to work one morning. Her husband’s death and the continual harassment and threats to her family, coupled with the increasing number of SCNC members being detained, tortured, and killed, led Ruth to acquiesce to her pastor’s insistence that she escape the country. The pastor had quickly arranged for an official letter of invitation to be sent from his

daughter's church in the United States and the congregation raised enough money for the visa (obtained by bribes) and plane ticket in a matter of months. Ruth arranged for her children to stay with neighbors in her absence. Ruth left, very reluctantly, but under the assumption that it would only be for a short period. She had believed that she could escape until the violence settled and she could return.

Ruth's journey to the U.S., in 2003, was filled with trepidation, confusion, and sadness over leaving her children. Yet, she fully expected to find a place that would end the pervasive fear for her life. She had assumed America was "the land of human rights" and would welcome her as someone who was fleeing a situation of violence and egregious human rights violations.. When she arrived, she was unable to connect with the pastor's daughter. Instead, after two nights in bus stations, she was able to locate a friend of a congregant's sister, with whom she initially stayed. She had never heard of 'asylum' before and it was not until a Cameroonian acquaintance suggested that she apply for asylum that she had known this to be a possibility or necessity. As she told me with a sad chuckle, she had expected the asylum process to take but a few days. "I thought I would tell them my story, my truth, and they would see why I needed to have safety." The protracted and onerous process in which she would soon be embedded was beyond any conceivable scenario in her mind.

On that autumn day when I first arrived at her apartment, Ruth's asylum case had already been pending for three years. After two years of waiting for the adjudication of her claim, she received her work permit and was able to secure a job as a home health care nursing assistant, making minimum wage with little benefits. Ruth's initial asylum application was completed and submitted with the help of a lawyer who had been

recommended by a new friend in the Cameroonian community where she resided. She used all the money that she had had in her savings to pay him. As she discovered later, the application was riddled with mistakes in dates and material facts and rife with inconsistencies. In her initial asylum interview, she inadvertently contradicted her written testimony because of the numerous mistakes on her original application. Her case was referred to an immigration judge and she was put into "removal proceedings." It was then that the local center for victims of torture, of which she was a client, referred her to the Center for Human Rights (CHR). The director of CHR told me that they receive many cases in which the initial application was littered with problems and a large part of CHR's initial job in these cases is to address those mistakes and submit a corrected application to the court.

In 2005, Ruth had her court hearing in front of an immigration judge -- almost two years after filing her initial asylum claim -- represented *pro bono*, by a lawyer volunteering with CHR. The immigration judge eventually denied Ruth's asylum claim, taking over six months to issue her decision (while this is often done at the conclusion of the hearing). Ruth was denied due to "adverse credibility." While I was not yet conducting research at the time of this hearing and therefore was not able to observe the proceedings, Ruth granted me access to her files, where I could read the court transcript and view the supporting documents that were submitted in her case. The primary issue in her court hearing -- and the reason for the adverse credibility judgment -- surrounded discrepancies with her SCNC identification card. Ruth's denial -- her "adverse credibility" finding -- was based on her allegedly fraudulent SCNC membership card and other discrepancies between her written and oral testimony (especially with regard to

medical records). The year noted on the membership card was several years before she had received the beating to her face that produced her thick scar across her jawline. In the photo, however, her scar was visible. Both the prosecuting attorney and the Immigration Judge (IJ) pointed to this fact in their assertion that she had either altered the card or that it was a fraudulent card.

Ruth consistently, in both the court records and in her recounting to me, had the same explanation for the alleged alteration of her membership card. She claimed that she had originally submitted a card without a photo on it, and then later adhered her photo to the card, on the advice of a local ranking official of the SCNC. As both she and other Cameroonians who I met explained to me, this was not uncommon practice. Ruth also submitted a letter from the president of the SCNC attesting to her membership in the party. However, because Ruth only offered any explanation for the alleged alteration of the card *after* being questioned by the prosecuting attorney on this matter (i.e., not offering an explanation proactively), the IJ ruled that this cast doubt on her credibility. And, as court records indicate, if she was possibly not credible about the card “this consequently casts doubt on the whole of her testimony.” Further discrepancies were highlighted in the IJ’s written decision to call into question Ruth’s credibility. Most of this focused on discrepancies between Ruth’s written and oral testimony and medical records surrounding dates of treatment and diagnoses. While these were issues that did not affect the core of her claim, such discrepancies were highlighted as further evidence of a lack of credibility.

Ruth’s recounting of her court hearing highlighted that she was confused and extremely nervous, especially during cross-examination conducted by the

prosecuting/government attorney. She also admitted (to me) that she failed to understand many questions, but attempted to answer them out of nervousness driven by the adversarial nature of the court hearing. Ruth reminded me many times that, prior to this, she had “never in [her] life been inside a courthouse.”

At the time of our first meeting, Ruth was in the process of appealing her case to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA). Her lawyers had submitted the written appeal and she was awaiting the results, which often took up to a year to be issued. While Ruth’s deportation orders were on hold while she awaited her appeal, she was nonetheless determined, in the eyes of the law, to be a “removable alien,” without any form of legal status in the U.S. She was placed in ISAP, which required her to wear a GPS-monitoring ankle bracelet, report to the ISAP office on a weekly basis, and be home from 8AM until 6PM every Thursday in case of intermittent home visits. Though Ruth had been wrestling with the insecurity and uncertainty inherent in the asylum process for several years, the denial of her claim and her subjection to heightened surveillance and criminalization tactics exacerbated these feelings. Her daily routine was structured around activities associated with the political asylum process (reporting to ISAP and immigration offices, meetings with lawyers, being home during specified hours for monitoring visits). Ruth complained often of being “so stressed,” “confused,” and “depressed.” She wondered aloud why she was made to suffer so much here in the U.S. Ruth struggled to move through her days. Indeed, sometimes she would find herself unable to get out of bed for days on end. She developed somatic symptoms as well: sweating, reduced appetite, acute headaches, “paining all over,” and intense feelings of heat in her head or, often, her whole body feeling “on fire.”

Ruth explicitly traced these symptoms, what she termed her “sicknesses,” to the process of seeking political asylum. Though in interviews and conversations with me and in her legal testimony Ruth described the forms of past abuse she endured at the hands of military police, she primarily located her suffering in the present, tracing her “sickness” not to past trauma, but to the U.S. asylum process. Ruth had been diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury (postulated as being from a beating she endured in Cameroon) that, according to medical records, was responsible for “60-75%” of her compromised mental and emotional state. And while Ruth fully recognized her “brain problem,” she insisted repeatedly that she “got these sickness in America” and that the “[asylum] process turns you into a fool.” This observation was echoed by those who knew her. One afternoon, I was leaving Ruth’s apartment with Eric, who had been a neighbor of hers in Bamenda. In a rather offhanded way, he told me: “you know, she did suffer trauma back home. But it’s this system, this country, that’s driven her mad.”

Ruth herself used words such as “mad” and “foolish” to describe her then current state of being during the asylum process (and, as she saw it, produced by that very process). As a brief exchange of ours details:

R: Everyday I have pains and I’m confused. Look at my house. Is this the house of a normal woman? I don’t even know--I go to the room to pick something, I come back empty. I forget what I’ve gone to do. It will go on and on like this. (long pause). It is too heavy. It’s too heavy. It’s too heavy on me. It’s too heavy for me to carry.

BH: Too heavy?

R: Yes, because you don’t have sleep. You don’t have peace. You don’t know if you are to be deported. How can you run from trouble and they send you back?

The uncertainty of whether Ruth would be allowed to remain in the U.S. or deported to

Cameroon was made excruciatingly palpable when we would go to the ISAP office. I accompanied Ruth to her weekly reporting visits, picking her up and making the half hour drive south to the small, unfriendly office. Ruth would say very little when we sat on our plastic chairs waiting for her name to be called, only to whisper “this is all to scare me,” or “this is so stressful.” She described activities associated with ISAP in language of criminality, though I don’t think she was always aware of using such language: being made to wait at home all day on Thursdays in the event of a random home visit was understood by Ruth to be “house arrest”; she referred to her ISAP identification card as a “prisoner card.” She often told me how perplexed she was by these rules and the asylum process in general. After her first appeal was denied and she was made to wear an ankle monitor bracelet, her sense of fear and insecurity was heightened and caused her to be “so confused.” She struggled to understand what was happening and why:

Someone should protect me, what I’m going through. ‘Cause this is really torture. It’s more like torture itself. Because being under house arrest, how can you leave one problem, come and enter more problems? ... but this is the worst because this life here ... every day you, you, you are scared that they are coming to pick you--they are coming to take you back to the same hell you came from ... I never thought I would go through this in America. I’ve been through a lot here. All the intimidation, putting the bracelet on my leg. It’s for what? Keeping me in my house is for what? I can’t understand. What have I done? Am I a criminal? Am I supposed to be treated this way?

Going to ISAP always seemed to increase Ruth’s sense of fear and panic and she would often have to lie down the rest of the day after going to the ISAP office, complaining of headaches, intense body heat and/or general “pain all over.” She explained to me:

R: I’ve been through a lot. Like when I’m going to ISAP like this. When the last ruling came out that I’ve been denied. Everyday when there’s a knock, or somebody knocks, I’m off. Yes, I’m

- just, I panic.
- BH: When you say ‘your off, what do you mean?
- R: I panic! Panic. I panic and then it’s as if I get a stroke. And the whole day it doesn’t stop. Every day I live in fear. I live in fear everyday. Because I think what is the next thing. What’s going to happen to me. It’s like this every day! Every day!

Ruth worried frequently about the increasing likelihood that she would “be sent back to die” and complained “I have no say in it [asylum case]. There’s nothing I can say, nothing I can do. It’s out of my hands.” She was frequently consumed with thoughts about her asylum case and would often recount the perceived mistakes that her lawyers may have made that adversely affected her case. Ruth would sometimes shift this narrative to find blame with her former pastor in the church she joined when she came to the U.S. According to Ruth, this pastor “hates immigrants” and after his initial support of her asylum claim, had turned on her once she was denied asylum, writing a note to the immigration office urging them to deport her.

Her lawyers from the human rights organization had encouraged her not to take voluntary departure and to instead continue to appeal her case, feeling confident that her denial would be overturned on appeal. Years had elapsed during the appeal process; her Cameroon passport had expired and the Cameroon embassy refused to recognize her as a citizen. She was without any legal identity documents -- in effect, stateless. During her ISAP visits, Ruth would try to gain information about her asylum case, but ISAP officials insisted that she would have to talk to her deportation officer (DO), employed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Most often, Ruth’s messages to her DO went unanswered. When she receive a call back, her DO would have “nothing to report” and could give Ruth no further information on her case.

Part of Ruth's feelings of suffering was tied to her separation from her children. As noted, Ruth had expected that her escape to safety in the U.S. would be a matter of months and then she could return to Cameroon, to her children, to her life as a mother. Once it had become clear that this would not happen swiftly, and she would instead seek asylum, she assumed that she would be able to gain status quickly and then bring her children to the U.S. She had known others in the Cameroonian community who had brought their children and other family members to the U.S. through legal channels of family reunification. Though this often took years, being granted asylum, for Ruth, became integrally tied to being with her children again -- something, she told me, she "needs to do before she dies."

Ruth put a priority on sending money back to her children whenever she could. As she reminded me often: "I'm here but I'm still their mother. They are still my children. I have to provide for them." In the midst of the recession her work hours were cut and, given the minimum wage she was making, she struggled to pay her own bills and feed herself; providing for her children became increasingly difficult and some months, impossible. Ruth's job as a nursing assistant not only came with low wages, but the work environment was difficult. She cared for one woman in particular who spent her days yelling at Ruth, shouting "go back to Africa, you nigger bitch!" Ruth said she was able to brush off her client's comments "because she is not right in the head, and I know she doesn't mean it." Yet, Ruth added wearily, "but it does make me so uncomfortable sometimes." Ruth felt that she didn't have any other options for employment, insisting that she needed to endure her work situation "for the sake of my children."

Ruth made extra money by sewing and cooking for others in the Cameroonian

community. During the time I knew Ruth, she would occasionally attend community events/parties, but more often than not she stayed home, receiving visitors, particularly those who came for dress fittings or to pick up large bowls of rice or stew that she had prepared. The months when she was unable to send money or clothes to her children, it was devastating for Ruth. She was often unable to talk about her children without crying and several times during one of my visits, one of her children would call, crying himself about missing her and not having enough to eat or not being able to afford school fees. Wrestling already with feelings of guilt from these kinds of incidents, Ruth also had to contend with the fact that her children were often visited by the *gendarmes* who came looking for her. One morning when I arrived at her house, Ruth was on the couch weeping and holding her head. She had just received word that her youngest son -- 14 years old at the time -- had been seriously beaten and detained when the military police came to question the children, yet again, about Ruth's whereabouts.

Ruth constantly underscored the fact that she was in the U.S. not by choice, but because she was forced to leave: "I never thought of coming to the United States. I didn't even dream of it." But now that she was in the U.S., she said, she was "a responsible person" and "hard-working." One afternoon, as we watched Judge Judy -- one of her favorite programs -- a clip advertising the upcoming news program appeared on the screen, showing a national anti-immigration demonstration that took place the day before. This incensed Ruth, who shouted "what is wrong with this country!?! Why does this country hate immigrants!" She turned to me, exclaiming: "Look at me! I'm trying to change the corruption in my own government, why would I come here and take advantage of the government here!?! I don't understand why this government thinks we

are like animals!”

Ruth also often declared herself a “good Christian woman,” and talked often of her past as a missionary and a preacher. She loved to tell me stories about attracting crowds of people with her preaching. Her eyes would light up as she recounted particular sermons or lectures she had given and the response that she received. During my field work, as it became clear that her deportation was immanent, Ruth seemed to draw on religion and God more and more, especially as it related to her future. At one point in talking about the denial of her final appeal at the appellate (Federal Court) level, Ruth said that she felt “depressed” and “so stressed” about her present situation and her unknown future. But, she quickly added: “God parted the Red Sea and he will make a path for me, too.” As she insisted:

God will take control of my situation. God will take control of my case. God knows I’m sick so I know he’ll help me. He knows how much I’m suffering so he’ll help me. God will take care of me because I seek the truth.

Immigration and ISAP officials and the lawyers at the human rights organization had told Ruth that the usual course of action for deportation was that ICE officials would either come to her house and take her directly to an airport, where she would be escorted all the way across the Cameroon border; or, alternately, they claimed, it was more likely that ICE would come one day to take her into detention where she would remain until final paperwork was processed for her deportation. As is standard procedure, they would provide no dates or timeframe in which this would happen, or any speculation on how long or where she would be detained. The uncertainty of when this would happen and what it would be like had a profound impact on Ruth. She had stopped going to work and

she spent days on end in bed, unable to eat or get up. Often she would want me to stay with her into the night, as she slept on her couch in the blue light of the television, waking occasionally to squeeze my hand or get a cold washcloth for her head. On the days where she was able to get up and get dressed, she spent her time praying or leaving messages with the human rights office to refer her to another, “better lawyer who would help her.”

Her sense of desperation and fear would at turns immobilize her and make her panicked and frenzied. Her apartment and living conditions during this time seemed to reflect that chaos and unraveling of her emotions and thoughts. Her apartment was increasingly messier and dirtier. She would often lock herself out of her apartment. One day I pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building to find a fire truck there, tending to the smoke billowing into the hallway from her apartment. She had left a pot on the stove while she went outside. When the police officer on the scene asked why she had needed to go outside, she was silent: she had forgotten the reason.

In the months leading up to her eventual detention and deportation, Ruth became increasingly isolated, partly because of her lack of interest or inability to leave the house and engage socially. She also had largely stopped cooking and sewing for other -- primarily, she said, because she was “too stressed,” and “too depressed and confused” to focus on such tasks. But she also told me that ever since she received her deportation orders, people cut off contact with her. “No one comes and sees me anymore. Everyone has stopped calling me.” When I asked her why this would be the case, she told me that Cameroonians -- even those with legal status -- are afraid to be around her. They are scared, she said, that if immigration officials were to find out about their friendship with

Ruth that “Immigration” would come and raid their houses and intimidate them. While I couldn’t confirm whether or not community members really feared this or if this was conjecture on Ruth’s part, the impact of this isolation had a significant impact on Ruth: “It’s humiliating. It makes me so sad and stressed.” We sat with this --with her sense of humiliation and abandonment--for a while in silence, until she spoke again: “I’m a missionary. People used to always come and hear me preach. They would always come, filling up the rooms to hear me. They respected me. Very much.”

Ruth was taken into custody by ICE officials when she appeared at one of her regular weekly ISAP appointments. She had been given warning the day before by ISAP officials that there was a “possibility” that this would happen and that she may want to bring a suitcase -- but only one -- “just in case.” I had already left the field when this happened, but I talked to Ruth that evening before she was to report to ISAP as she struggled to determine what things to pack. Her mood was somber, resigned. Whereas usually anytime we discussed her asylum case, she would animatedly and excitedly offer declarations of the injustice being done to her or cast blame on her lawyers, the judges, or her pastor, there was none of that. I later spoke with her several times from the jail where she was taken by ICE agents, some 75 miles north of the ISAP office. She had stayed there for three weeks before being deported. During our last phone call from jail, Ruth implored me to “write letters” and to “tell them that I am a sick, old woman,” adding repeatedly, “this isn’t supposed to be happening. I’ve done nothing wrong.” “To whom should I write letters? Who is the “them?” I asked her. She replied that I should write letters to the United Nations, to the U.S. government, to ISAP, to “immigration,” to her church. I could write the letters, I said, but I didn’t think it would change anything and I

wasn't sure what to write. "Just tell them--tell them my story. Tell them the truth" she urged quietly before hanging up.

INTRODUCTION

I begin this chapter with Ruth's story because it exemplifies many of the themes that I address in the pages and chapters that follow. As the previous chapter illustrated, the political asylum process can be seen as embodying its own "political ethos" informed by the onerous and often illegible nature of the process and, in many instances, its associated techniques of criminalization and policing, including the tactics to which Ruth was subjected. It is a context in which asylum seekers' potential "deportability" is produced and sustained for protracted periods. This current chapter furthers the examination of the subjective experiences of asylum seekers embedded in that ethos. More specifically, this chapter attends to the intersection of power, temporality, and subjectivity within this context. I posit asylum seeking as generative of a particular temporal and subjective orientation that mediates everyday life and sense of self. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to ethnographically and theoretically capture the subjective dimensions of living with the profound uncertainty that is such a defining feature of the political asylum process.

Ruth's experience was unique in its particularities, as is the case with all individual experience. Yet, her positionality as an asylum seeker -- a position shared by all my study participants -- mediated her sense of self and social reality in ways that resonated with other participants. My study participants inhabited a liminal world of 'inbetweenness,' a space of 'neither here nor there.' This was, however, not just a space

of transition or passage, but a space fraught with existential uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness. The uncertainty inherent in the asylum process was experienced as an extreme form of vulnerability: “a matter of life and death” as asylum claimants told me. As Ruth’s experience highlights, uncertainty permeated everyday life and critically shaped asylum seekers’ relationships to themselves, others, and their local worlds. So many of my study participants lived what I have come to think of as partial existences. In the legal sense, as the previous chapter elucidated, they were not full person. As Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, noted: “you have limitations ... you are not like other people, you are different. You are without rights, without freedom. There are limitations on your life.” How these perceived limitations came to bear on self-experience is a key consideration of this chapter.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework I use to approach the relationship between temporality, subjectivity and suffering in this context. In this attempt to theoretically situate my study participants’ narratives of suffering, I draw on various conceptualizations of and approaches to waiting. Engaging these theoretical strands, and putting my research in dialogue with these bodies of work, I sketch out a portrait of suffering specific to one’s status as an asylum seeker -- of inhabiting a lived space of being ‘neither here nor there.’ Here, I elaborate on what I describe as ‘existential limbo’-- a particular temporal and subjective orientation in which the asylum process, in the present moment, is seen as the locus of suffering and in which life and meaning-making is made challenging, at best, and immobilized, at worst. For study participants, the present was palpable not in its fullness, but rather in its lack, its emptiness, and its absences. Next, I address how participants’ sense of being existentially

‘stuck,’ *in the present*, produced what I understand as a form of ‘temporal blurring,’ so that suffering was often understood and experienced as a continuum. In this way, past, present and future were not perceived or experienced as discrete categories; rather, they often folded in on each other. Finally, given participants’ existential limbo and sense of powerlessness, I consider how asylum seekers asserted agency within this context, including how the cultivation of hope emerged as a practice.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO TEMPORALITY, POWER AND SUBJECTIVITY

In his theorizing on temporality, Bourdieu (1997) asserts that time is produced through practice and is, as with all aspects of practice, embedded in relations of power. Central to Bourdieu’s notion of time is the link between social actors’ subjective aspirations and objective possibilities of realizing those aspirations. For most people, subjective aspirations are, on a largely unconscious level, adjusted to fit one’s objective chances. Power is central to this relationship, as power relations “governs the potentialities objectively offered to each player, her possibilities and impossibilities, her degrees of empowerment, of power-to-be, and at the same time her desire for power” (Bourdieu 1997: 217). Within life trajectories in which possibilities and aspirations unfold, Bourdieu argues, time is not really felt, but rather passes unnoticed. However, he notes that when there are disconnects between aspirations and chances, the experience of time shifts: “Time (or at least what we call time) is really experienced only when the quasi-automatic coincidence between expectations and chances, *illusio* and *lusiones*, expectations and the world which is there to fulfill them, is broken” (Bourdieu 1997:

208). As Bourdieu (1997) insists, we need to consider the circumstances and positioning of persons for whom time is able to pass unnoticed. Those who have the power to attain their aspirations often find themselves unaware of time's passage. For those in less powerful positions, the elapsing of time is brought to the fore.

The context of waiting, for Bourdieu, epitomizes the connection between power (or powerlessness) and temporality. Waiting, he asserts, "is one of the privileged ways of experiencing power" and one which "implies submission" (Bourdieu 1997: 228). Using Kafka's *The Trial* as an example, Bourdieu posits an important aspect of power as the generation of "extreme anxiety by condemning its victim to very strong investment combined with very great insecurity" (1997: 229). The following quote from Bourdieu describes and situates this relationship between power and temporality in contexts of waiting and is aptly descriptive of the context of asylum seeking. Bourdieu (1997) here returns to his discussion of K, the protagonist in *The Trial*:

His uncertainty about the future is simply another form of uncertainty about what he is, his social being, his 'identity,' as one would say nowadays. Dispossessed of the power to give sense, in both senses, to his life, to state the meaning and direction of his existence, he is condemned to live in a time oriented by others, an alienated time. This is, very exactly, the fate of all the dominated, who are obliged to wait for everything to come from others, from holders of power over the game and over the objective and subjective prospect of gain that is can offer, being therefore masters at playing on the anxiety that inevitably arises from the tension between the intensity of the expectancy and the improbability of its being satisfied" (237).

The element of powerlessness inherent in waiting is also a key concern to Vincent Crapanzano. In his ethnography titled *Waiting* (1985), Crapanzano examines white South Africans' experiences and discourses of being part of a dominant minority in a time of political upheaval and change. Like Bourdieu, Crapanzano theorizes on the subjective

dimensions of temporality, and argues that his informants' lives were critically structured by the "event" of waiting. He describes waiting as "a sort of holding action--a lingering," and elaborates as follows:

Waiting is always waiting for something ... It is marked by contingency--the perhaps--and all the anxiety that comes with the experience of contingency. It is a passive activity. We can never actively seek the object of waiting. We can, to be sure, do what we can to ensure its arrival if we desire or prevent its arrival if we do not desire it, but ultimately its arrival or non-arrival is beyond our control ... Waiting produces in us feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and vulnerability" (Crapanzano 1985: 44-45).

Thus, both Bourdieu (1997) and Crapanzano (1985) highlight the role that power plays in shaping the temporal category of waiting. Indeed, as the previous chapter elucidated, my study participants expressed strong feelings of powerlessness, feeling unable to control the circumstances of their lives or their futures. They were propelled into and caught up in a protracted and confusing asylum process that was beyond anything that they had anticipated (recall Ruth's statement: "I never thought I'd be treated like this in America"). The object of desire -- legal status -- was perceived to be out of their control. As my study participants forcefully underscored, their abilities to shape the circumstances of their future were seen as severely limited. This sense of limited agency in defining one's future was reiterated again and again in everyday conversations with my participants. The refrains of "I have no say in it" and "It's not in my control," were ubiquitous. As Ruth insisted: "There's nothing I can say, nothing I can do," to effectively shape the contours of her current situation. Furthermore, as this chapter will show, waiting -- and the powerlessness that it signified and reproduced -- evoked feelings of anxiety, fear, and distress for my study participants, as both Bourdieu and Crapanzano

describe in their respective work.

Drawing on Bourdieu and Crapanzano, Chua (2011) is likewise interested in “how experts and authorities make, manage, and discipline temporality at the level of quotidian practice” (116). Chua examines the “acceleration of modern family life” in late capitalism in India. Taking the high suicide rate of middle-class adolescents in Kerala as her point of departure, Chua (2011) looks at temporalization practices of “skillful waiting” embedded in the reform of suicidal children (“suicide inoculation efforts”) (117). She compares the figure of the “spoiled child” to that of the labor migrant in Kerala, who is “taught to bide time against voluntary death” (Chua 2011: 117). For Chua, these temporalization practices are integral to the idea of capitalism/global economic practices: the spoiled, potentially suicidal middle-class child who is taught to wait skillfully for material possessions and economic rewards represents potential for capitalist production. The labor migrant who is made to wait represents a form of exploited labor that is critical to the capitalist system. Thus, both figures are produced -- though differentially situated -- as “subject positions necessary to forms of capitalist accumulation” (117).

Chua (2011) understands waiting to be either active or passive, depending on how one is positioned in the global market economy. The next chapter will attend to structural and economic processes that further evoke states of vulnerability and (re)shape conceptualizations of temporality among asylum seekers. Yet given the previous discussions of asylum seekers’ feelings of powerlessness within the political asylum process itself, Chua’s work here allows us to see that the politico-legal category of asylum seeker, like that of the labor migrant, entails a lack of control to fully define his or

her future and results in an experience of waiting as passive and anxiety-provoking. This stands in opposition to the middle-class child -- or, in this context, the asylum officer, Immigration Judge, or lawyer -- whose position of power ensures that he/she can realize his/her aspirations and for whom waiting can be an active process.

Positing waiting as an effect of subjugation or an aspect of submission brings into sharp relief the force of power relations and institutions in shaping lived experience. The literature discussed above underscores the important role that power has in shaping experiences of time. The context or event of waiting is proffered as a window into this relationship between temporality and power, though conceptualized in different ways. In his approach to waiting, Crapanzano (1985) is interested in what he terms “social entrapment--with the ways in which a people’s understanding of themselves, their world, their past, and their future limits their possibility” (xiii). Within psychology, the idea of entrapment – of “being defeated and having to stay in, or being trapped in, the arena” – has been shown to be a powerful predictor of depression (Gilbert and Allan 1998: 585; Brown, Harris, and Hepworth 1995).

For Crapanzano (1985), waiting is always a passive activity. Bourdieu (1997) highlights how aspirations and possibilities are differently produced and unequally distributed. These differential relationships to future orientations result in time being experienced in disparate ways. Waiting, for Bourdieu is foremost an effect of power: “the all-powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait” (1997: 228). Chua (2011) draws on both of these theoretical lines to suggest that waiting can be either an active or passive act, informed by one’s position in a neoliberal regime: “(W)aiting, perhaps more than any other form of temporalization, dramatizes relations of power in

the age of late capitalism: who is made to wait and how contingency is inhabited tell us much about social and economic inequities as it does the resources that differently situated subjects draw on to render time sufferable or anticipatory, boring or hopeful” (130). Taken together, the above literature urges careful consideration of my study participants’ claims of “I have no say in it [asylum case],” “I have no voice,” or “It’s out of my control.” The sentiments underlying such claims critically shaped their experiences and understandings of time, particularly the temporal category of waiting.

In their study of illness narratives of cancer patients, Little et al. (1998) do not explicitly engage the category of waiting, but they do employ the concept of liminality in a way that is useful to the present discussion. While the previous chapter discussed liminality in terms of refugees/asylum seekers being constructed as liminal persons, Little et al. approach liminality in terms of phenomenological experience. They are interested in issues of boundedness, whereby illness categories structure the contours of experience. For Little et al. (1998), liminality is not a state of transition as Turner (1967, 1969) elaborated, but rather an indefinite state following a cancer diagnosis. They view liminality not as part of a tripartite process, but rather as “an enduring and variable state” or “a long term existential state” (Little et al. 1998: 1490). For cancer patients, liminality is characterized by rupture or abandonment of routine and a sense of the known. Little et al. argue that liminality “imposes a role on the sufferer” whereby “social constraints may demand a prescribed course” (Little et al. 1998: 1491). Such an approach to liminality may certainly be relevant to my data, in that asylum seekers’ imposed positionality shaped the contours of time and experience. Indeed, as Little et al. outline, cancer patients’ liminality is integrally tied to relations of power: they define “acute liminality”

as “a discontinuity of subjective time, in which powerful forces operate to change perceptions of time, space, and personal values. It resembles the singularities in space (such as ‘black holes’) which Hawking (1988) writes about, within which time and space no longer obey the familiar rules that we expect of them” (Little et al. 1998: 1492). This echoes Bourdieu’s (1997) claims that relations of power can displace and destabilize categories of temporality.

The theoretical discussion thus far has arguably focused more on life’s foreclosures and limitations than its openings and possibilities. It is against this academic tendency to highlight limitation over possibility that Biehl and Locke (2010) position their work. Drawing on Deleuzian concepts of desire and sublimation, Biehl and Locke (2010) have posited an “anthropology of becoming.” By this, they urge an ethnographic privileging of individual and collective desire over power and insist on a focus of social life as open-ended and in flux. A focus on the temporal notion of becoming, they assert, will “bring into view the immanent fields that people, in all their ambiguity, invent and live by” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 335). Biehl and Locke (2010) recognize that social fields and everyday lives are “mediated by power and knowledge, but they are also animated by claims to basic rights and desires” (335). Thus, their project acknowledges the power relations that inform contemporary life and (re)shape subjectivities while crucially recognizing that these larger institutional or structural forces do not determinate or wholly constitute life for social actors. As Biehl and Locke conceptualize, the temporal category of becoming represents “those individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions” (2010: 317).

Their article outlining an anthropology of becoming can perhaps be read more as a treatise on how ethnographers should approach their objects of study. Suggesting that there are two distinct modes of ethnographic listening, Biehl and Locke (2010) assert that ethnographers can hear/see despair and destruction over desire and reconstitution or they can, through long-term, committed ethnography, find ways in which actors maneuver past constraints and impasses. In the article, Locke (Biehl and Locke 2010) puts his own ethnographic data on post-war Sarajevo to task in this regard. He suggests that viewing Sarajevans in terms of collective depression and stagnation, as much of the literature does, closes off the desires and actions that Sarajevans take to break through constraints in their lives. Specifically, Locke writes against viewing waiting as a passive activity, as a form of stagnation. If, as he argues “there is an agency... an alternative future, in this waiting *a becoming*,” then “my listening brings something else to my ears--a nascent ‘life in things’ as Deleuze would put it [Deleuze 1972:2]” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 332).

Following this, Locke suggests an alternate view:

Their waiting is something other than a passive depression: it is a holding pattern, an abiding of intolerable present circumstances, a new kind of day-to-day survival ... It connects them in an unnamed, unrecognized collectivity, a ‘tissue of shifting relations’ woven by the shared relations of a loaded temporality, a *meantime*--between destruction and renewal--of grieving and anger and anticipation.” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 332)

Thus, whereas Crapanzano (1985) sees waiting as passive, Biehl and Locke (2010) offer another reading of the context, or event, of waiting. For them, waiting is not necessarily a time of foreclosure of life’s possibilities, but rather a time of becoming, in which inchoate trajectories, animated by individual or collective desire, are forming and ready to “leak through.” Han (2011) likewise emphasizes “‘the possible’ as an indeterminacy of lived

relations” in her work examining the entanglement of debt and kin relations among the mentally ill and addicted in neoliberal Chile (8). For Han, however, ‘the possible’ comprises “an active waiting and patience that is more laterally oriented than forward moving, allowing different, but unpredictable, aspects of others to emerge” (2011: 8). In Han’s view, then, waiting is active yet may not necessarily involve a *becoming* in the sense that Biehl and Locke conceive. Returning to Little et al. (1998), their notion of “sustained liminality” points to a similar sense of movement within an environment of constraint. By this term, they emphasize that patients do not emerge from a liminal state; again, in their view this is a sustained and ongoing existential state. Rather, Little et al. describe “sustained liminality” as a phase, following acute liminality, in which patients “begin to reassert control by the small acts of independence” but where they remain aware of their cancer-patient status, the alienation that comes from the diagnosis and the difficulty of communicating the nature of the experience of illness and treatment, and a sense of boundedness in time, space, work, power, and social functioning” (1998: 1492).

While the scholars discussed thus far all recognize the creativity and agency of social actors in moving through social fields, they seem to do so in varying degrees. Chua (2011), for example, following Crapanzano (1985) and Bourdieu (1997), seems to highlight the ways in which social actors forge lives *within* structural constraints and relations of power, whereas Biehl and Locke (2010) look for the ways in which people resists and move *beyond* these constraints. Notable within their varying conceptualizations of waiting is the use of the metaphor of “holding pattern” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 332) or “holding action” (Crapanzano 1985: 44). Chua (2011) offers a similar description of migrants “biding time.” What we find, however, is that each

author/set of authors derives from this idea of ‘holding pattern/action’ a different meaning, or orientation. Crapanzano suggests waiting as a “holding pattern” in highlighting waiting as a passive activity. For Chua’s labor migrants, biding time is also a passive activity. Yet, for Biehl and Locke, the idea of “holding action” is proffered as a way to support their claim that waiting is something *other than* a passive act.

Biehl and Locke’s (2010) attention is toward this collective *meantime* in which there is ‘life in things’ that is emergent, waiting to burst forth. They draw attention to this and posit recent anthropological frameworks of ‘structural violence’ or ‘biopolitics’ as failing to fully capture the ways in which people navigate through and around life’s impasses. Later in this chapter (and throughout the dissertation), I follow Biehl and Locke in attending to the desires, hopes, and imagined futures of participants and how these propel them forward. I will examine the ways in which my study participants found spaces in which to assert identities and narratives that contrasted with institutionally imposed categories. Yet, for our discussion here, a crucial question remains: to what extent can those desires, hopes and imagined trajectories truly burst forth? It may be possible to document the emergent quality of these desires, but the question of their actual emergence remains problematic, at least in the context of asylum seeking. As Bourdieu (1997) and Chua (2011), following him, have underscored, the issue of who has the capacity to control time, to dictate the terms of waiting, is of central concern. For Chua, though waiting can be active, or can represent a mechanism for unleashing latent potential (as Biehl and Locke (2010) would likely support), she shows that this is not always the case. For those with less power, such as an asylum seeker or labor migrant, waiting, rather, is “something that happens to” them (Chua 2011: 126). Engaging these

myriad theoretical lines, I now turn to the task of explicating the relationship between power, temporality, and subjectivity within the particular context of asylum seeking.

EXISTENTIAL LIMBO: TIME AND POWER IN THE CONTEXT OF ASYLUM SEEKING

I heard references to or descriptions of “waiting” over and over again in daily conversations with my study participants. Study participants waited not only for the outcome of their cases. Waiting was involved with many aspects of the asylum process and shaped the quotidian: waiting to hear back from lawyers, waiting to receive word of their court dates, to be scheduled for appointments for fingerprinting, to be allowed to complete a work authorization application. As one study participant quipped “we asylum seekers are always waiting for something.” Their lives were indelibly marked by the “social condition of waiting” (Gilad 1990:120).

As I will elaborate shortly, I understand the relationship between temporality and power in the context of asylum seeking to be evocative of a sense ‘existential limbo.’ This resonates with and is similar to the idea of a “holding pattern/action” or “biding time.” For study participants, asylum seeking was a time in which life was viewed as ‘stuck’ or was rendered immobile. Informed by the theoretical work discussed above, the ethnographic task of capturing the ways in which my participants move in or through protracted periods of indeterminacy and waiting was informed not only by ethnographic “modes of listening” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 332) but also by critical and close attention to the constellation of power dynamics within this particular context -- the context in which such listening occurs. I sought to understand how waiting and its contingencies

were inhabited by asylum seekers. This stance highlights that waiting must be seen as socioculturally and politically elaborated in ways that produce varied and distinct subjective experiences. In the context of asylum seeking, I found that waiting, and the limbo, or sense of ‘stuckness,’ that such a protracted event generated, provided a space in which certain desires were animated and futures imagined, but that these occurred in tandem with the constant foreclosing of possibilities and continual reminders of limitations.

As this dissertation explicates, the delicate and fluctuating dance between foreclosure and possibility, between desire and despair, shaped subjectivities and lived experience in myriad ways. Thus, while some of my participants’ desire for a “new life” or a “new chapter” allowed them to patiently bide time, such desires were often countered -- or foreclosed -- by anxiety, fear, or a sense of despair. For example, Eric, the Cameroonian asylum seeker discussed earlier, made the difficult decision to accept ‘voluntary departure’ rather than be forcibly deported after a five-year-struggle for legal status in the U.S. He described his experience of waiting over this protracted period:

I mean, I’ve been lingering for so long that I’ve lost all patience for it. You know? ... I think now I’m just like ‘whatever,’ you know? ... It’s hurt me so much that I don’t even feel the pain anymore. You know, it’s like they’re poking me, poking me, poking me and at some point I just don’t care anymore. Keep poking me. I’m done.

Other asylum claimants expressed a similar sense of resignation. As Barbara, a female asylum seeker from Cameroon, exasperatedly declared one afternoon: “I can’t take this stress, this suffering. It’s too much. If they [ICE] are going to come and pick me then let them come and pick me and deport me already. I am so tired of living like this!” And

Albert, another Cameroonian asylum seeker told me: “I have cared so much that now, I just don’t care anymore. What happens, let it happen, you know?”

These narratives of wearing down, of being rendered powerless, echoes what Luhrmann (2010) has described as “social defeat” as a form of subjectivity. Waiting, for these asylum seekers, has ultimately ended in defeat, with the foreclosure of the possibility of legal status, of starting anew. Such a narrative also highlights waiting as an effect of power, as Bourdieu (1997) has emphasized. These asylum seekers felt the pernicious effects of the “unequal distribution of imagined possibility and foreclosure” (Chua 2011: 129). Just as the middle class children and the labor migrants that Chua discusses occupy disparate subject positions that allow them to experience and understand the temporal category of waiting in vastly different ways, the subject position of the asylum seeker shapes the relationship between subjectivity and temporality in critical ways.

Returning to Crapanzano’s (1985) idea of social entrapment, we can see how the meaning and experience of waiting is dependent on the context in which it occurs. In suggesting that social entrapment entails a limitation of possibilities, Crapanzano (1985) recognizes, then, that “[p]otentially, there is a tragic dimension to entrapment,” yet asserts: “but tragedy demands a kind of consciousness that is generally lacking in white South Africans” (xiii). As Crapanzano (1985) describes, whites waiting (in fear) for the then uncertain, but nonetheless imminent, political change in South Africa lost “the capability of so negating their identity as to be imaginatively open to the complex and never very certain reality around them. Instead, they close off; they create a kind of psychological apartheid, an apartness” (Crapanzano 1985: xxii). It is this derealization of

the present, then, that prevents Crapanzano's informants from recognizing their entrapment; their lack of consciousness obscures any sense of the tragic. What is critical to his elaboration of waiting in this context, however, is the fact that Crapanzano is writing about a dominant class. My study participants, in contrast, were subjected to myriad techniques of governmentality and very often occupied marginal positions in the community. Consequently, waiting, for them, did not entail the detachment and lack of consciousness that Crapanzano (1985) observed among his informants. Instead, their perceived lack of control over their circumstances and their futures and the quotidian reminders of their insecure status, ensured that they were keenly "vulnerable to feeling the burden of time" (Chua 2011: 129). As Bourdieu (1997) notes: "powerlessness breaks the relation of the immersion of the immanent, makes one conscious of the passage of time, as when waiting" (224). Waiting made palpable the seemingly endless enfolding of time and the threats to self and world that such enfolding could possibly reveal.

Indeed, I argue that in the context of asylum seeking, waiting evoked a sense of 'existential limbo' in which moving through life was a struggle and in which meaning-making was a sticky task. This existential limbo emerged from the particular positioning of asylum seekers as 'neither here nor there,' as not able to return to one's country of origin and the life that that entailed but not able to establish oneself in the U.S. Both the life and death stakes of their asylum case and the hypervisibility/hyper-managed status of asylum seekers ensured that the present did not recede into the background of experience. The context of asylum seeking is one of these "extreme situations," as Bourdieu (1997) terms them, "where uncertainty and investment are simultaneously maximized" (230). My study participants were highly invested in the asylum process because of the

existential stakes involved, and simultaneously placed in highly insecure states given their perceived lack of control over the outcome of their cases. Waiting, for my study participants, was thus largely experienced as a passive event, or activity. In suggesting this, I do not mean that life itself was passive. To be sure, this chapter will return to the issue of how asylum seekers navigated this complex terrain and exercised agency, albeit in often new or compromised ways. Rather, my assertion regarding the passivity of waiting underscores the feeling of asylum seekers that they were *made to wait* by forces beyond their control.

As Crapanzano (1985) describes, waiting produces a temporal orientation to the future. While my participants certainly felt that their lives were contingent on the future outcome of their asylum cases, it was the present state of uncertainty that occupied the forefront of their minds. Asylum seekers' lives, in this way, were characterized by an "enforced orientation to the present" (De Genova 2002: 427). Here, it was the case, following Crapanzano (1985), that the present, for my study participants was numb and deadened, always being encroached by a near -- and, in this case, unknown -- future. For the white South Africans about which Crapanzano (1985) wrote, the present became numb, derealized, and devoid of vitality because they were oriented toward the future, not the present. Yet, in my context, it was the very absence of a full existence in the present -- this void -- that resulted in a focus *on the present*, not the future. My study participants were often consumed with thoughts and feelings toward what they lacked in the present: lack of legal status, lack of a home, lack of family, lack of a job, lack of control over their fate. In other words, it was the absences of the present -- a lack of a full existence -- that made the present the main focal point and perceived locus of their suffering. Indeed, Ruth

enumerated the voids that made her existence feel far from full: the painful separation from her children; her lack of legal status that ensured deportation increasingly likely; and her lack of a sense of belonging, having been renounced by the Cameroon government and, in the end, alienated from the local Cameroonian community.

Metaphors of Limbo

By using the term ‘existential limbo,’ I want to call attention to the ways in which my study participants described and experienced their present lives as suspended, as a time in which life -- at least life as they understood it -- was rendered immobile. The following narrative from Rose, a female asylum seeker from Kenya who was seeking asylum on the grounds of domestic violence, illustrates how the uncertainty of the asylum process evoked a sense of existential suspension:

What worries me is that I can't have this [asylum case] hanging around in the background because I think about it all the time— you know when you're not secure it's something that lays in your mind...and it also become very tricky because you can't plan your life. It's like you put **your life on hold** for some time. You don't know what's next you—even if somebody asks you what are you going—where are going to be in the next five years, you're not sure ... And just the thought of not having security and maybe having to face the same situate—same situation again, that scares me. Because what I see for me is ...it's a matter of life and death. (emphasis added)

In addition to highlighting the existential stakes of her asylum claim, what this narrative excerpt also shows is the pervasiveness of this insecurity in everyday experience and the ways in which it provoked worry, stress, and suffering, which were expressed by study participants in myriad forms. Indeed, this sense of thinking about his/her uncertainty “all the time” was a theme that ran across all my study participants’ narratives. Rose’s life,

she claims, is “on hold.” Thus, the insecurity of her position/status was experienced as a form of existential immobility. Rose, like others, experienced asylum seeking as a temporality in which life was suspended but that was simultaneously marked by the hyper-awareness of that suspension, of the slow passage of time.

Close ethnographic attention to other, frequent descriptions of the asylum process and the feelings and actions that it provoked (or prevented) led me to this understanding of ‘existential limbo.’ In particular, descriptions and metaphors that invoked feeling “caught,” “trapped,” “stuck” and “frozen” recurred throughout participants’ narratives. Like Ruth describing her experience of the asylum process as being a “prisoner in America,” these recurring descriptions and metaphors of immobility or being stuck emerged as salient and defining. I approach metaphor here by drawing on Kirmayer (1992, 2000), in his insistence that metaphor be understood not merely as a literary trope but as a way of creating and making meaning of experience. As he argues: “Metaphor confers the properties of one concept on another and all of our cognitive, affective, and somatic ways of knowing may be brought to bear to elaborate metaphoric correspondences” (Kirmayer 1992: 332). The metaphoric concepts my participants used, then, reflect their attempts to both communicate and make meaning of their experiences of the asylum process. The following narrative excerpts highlight the way in which life during the asylum process was understood and experienced in terms of entrapment:

And...uh, it's just whatever they [immigration officials] say. If...well, like...you ser- you freeze, you know what I mean? If an animal comes to you and you just- you don't know what to do. **You just freeze.** So, just like I'm in that status right now. And I just wait what they tell me. And I know the end is not...um, I understand that people were, at the end, detained or deported and...and my fate is not different than theirs. So, I'm

just waiting. I'm just waiting, yeah. I- I just see where my fate takes me ... So...it's just like there's nothing I can do...And it's- it's of course very hard. And everyday, I think what my destiny will be. (Mohammed; male asylum seeker from Ethiopia, early twenties)

You are in this dark situation here and it was a dark situation that led you to be in this country [America] and you can't break out—**you are like in a cubicle**—it's a dark cubicle ... You are just in this cubicle -- you can't do anything. You can't feed yourself, you don't have a shelter you—It's so so difficult. It's just so difficult in this country. You are applying for the papers, you know it's just the grace of God if you get the papers ... We are just on zero. We're on zero ... for me it's like torture. It's another torture. We are in another hell.
(Sarah; female asylum seeker from Zimbabwe, mid-forties)

These metaphors of being frozen within the view of a threatening animal or being in a dark cubicle are but two examples of the ways in which study participants came to understand their experiences of asylum seeking in terms of limbo or stuckness. Critically tied to and shaping this sense of limbo is the perception that his or her fate or “destiny” is out of his or her hands, whether by immigration officials or by the “grace of God.” These types of descriptions articulate an experience of waiting as passive. This is not to say that study participants did not actively engage their social worlds, but rather that they did so within perceived limitations and constraints. If, following Biehl and Locke, the ethnographic task is to see desire over power, possibility over foreclosure, or hope over despair, I feel I would be grossly inattentive to the recurring articulations of my participants' lives as powerless and desolate. How, for example, to find Ruth's sense of desire or hope when she lay immobile on the bed for days after being told to prepare to be arrested and deported in the near future? This is not to say that Ruth was not “deeply involved with finding a way to live” throughout the asylum process (Garcia 2008: 723).

Rather, I aim to call attention to the sometimes-crushing sense of despair that made finding a way to live such a struggle for many of my participants.

To this end, I want to attend closely to the ways in which asylum seekers in my study articulated their experiences of suffering and powerlessness -- how they told their stories to me. If, as Kirmayer argues, metaphoric concepts are grounded in both bodily and social experience, we can understand this sense of being frozen in an animal's path, of being in a cubicle, being in hell, or being a prisoner as not just rhetorical or descriptive devices, but rather as indexes of participants' affective and bodily states within this context. Kirmayer (1992) writes:

The meaning of words and gestures is grounded in bodily experience. Meaning resides not exclusively in the relationships between concepts (as structuralism would have it) but in their connection to the body and its skills and practices. Meaning emerges from the capacity to use bodily experience (including socially embodied experience) to think with metaphorically" (334).

This connection that Kirmayer underscores between bodily experience and metaphor is an important one. Taking this into account provides a window into participants' attempts at understanding their lives as asylum seekers. These attempts at understanding and communicating experience are not always coherent; rather, they are embedded in "emergent narratives," and reflect inchoate struggles to understand a situation that was unplanned, unchartered, and evocative of a deep sense of suffering. Yet it is this very sense of the inchoate or the unknown that attention to metaphoric concepts allows us to see (c.f. Becker 1997: 59-79). While narratives, including the metaphoric concepts people use, should not be understood as unmediated replicas/representations of lived experience, they are nonetheless important for what they reveal about what matters for

people in certain situations (Mattingly 1998, 2000; c.f. Rosaldo 1986). Indeed, as Kleinman and Kleinman (1997) have argued, a key anthropological task is to determine “what is at stake for particular participants in particular situations” (7). By paying close attention to the bodily, affective, and cognitive ways of being that participants’ metaphoric concepts conveyed and produced, asylum seekers’ narratives, then, are rich in revealing how the asylum process and its concomitant existential insecurity was experienced and understood.

An important dimension of the metaphoric concepts of stuckness is their ability to bring into focus both the sense of immobility and confinement that characterizes such images as well as the powerlessness and lack of control that these situations entailed. Implicit to conceptions or images of the self as prey to a predator in its path or the self as a prisoner or occupier of a dark cubicle is the notion of a more powerful Other -- an Other who has the power and capacity to place one in a subordinate position. Thus, these metaphoric concepts point to participants’ limbo *as it relates to* their limited capacity to define the conditions or parameters of this positionality. Narratives, in this way, are always “a positioned account,” that reveal “differential access to power” (Garro and Mattingly 2000: 18, 17). Two additional examples of participants’ elaborations of stuckness in this context provide further insight into the intimate ways in which asylum seeking was experienced, including how their experiences were critically informed by their positions of perceived powerlessness.

Hassan was one of the few study participants who was not claiming asylum on the grounds of political opinion. He had fled his native Pakistan because of persecution due to his sexual orientation. Echoing somewhat Ruth’s sentiments of feeling like a prisoner,

Hassan describes his experience as an asylum seeker as follows:

You come here for freedom but then **you feel you're locked in here**. You know, what's the point of coming when—when you're given this life and you gonna get—you're gonna be locked in. you can be gay, you can be yourself, but all they can do is live here and that's it. You cannot travel anywhere, you cannot go anywhere, you cannot see your family anymore, and... and we don't know if you will be here for good or not, we might just send you away any time. So it's like—it's in one ways it's even worse...I just came to this country to be openly gay man. And live a life where I can be free, I can do—b—I can productive, you know, live a happy life. And I feel it's ... it's there but I cannot touch it. It's given to me, but still I cannot touch it, I cannot have it. So, it's like you get a taste of it, but you're not gonna have it—we're gonna take it away from you. It's like, you know what—it just, like I said it's very painful. Because I really want to go back to college, I want study, I want finish my school, I wanna do uh, I wanna do so much more. ... I want to do things, but I just—because of my [asylum] case, the way things are in my life right now I'm so tired and drained and so de-motivated and so tired and...so mad and angry. And I just don't want to do it. I'm just like, you know what—I'm just—I'm just angry, so angry. You know pain can turn into anger. (emphasis added)

Hassan described being stuck in a position where he can see and partly experience a “free” life, one where he can be productive and happy and live as an openly gay man, but with the knowledge that this alternative life is (or may be) illusory. As he noted, its existence almost served as a painful tease and was experienced with the knowledge that such a promise of freedom and happiness can recede from the horizon at a moment's notice. The language of “it can be taken away” further underscores the sense of powerlessness that many asylum seekers felt over determining their futures. Legal status, while in theory was something that is earned (see Chapter 7), was more often experienced as something that was given or taken away (and often seen by asylum seekers as arbitrarily or unjustly determined). Hassan's use of “locked in” underscored his sense of being existentially stuck. This is partly informed by the legal parameters of asylum, in

which an asylum claimant cannot travel outside of the U.S. But there is another layer here. Hassan's inability to move forward in life, to do the things he wants to do -- finish school, for example, reflects the difficulty in "emplotting" one's life during this protracted period of uncertainty (Mattingly 1994; cf Del Vecchio Good *et al.* 1994).

Indeed, the inability to plan life events and envision life trajectories were common concerns among study participants and contributed to their sense of suffering. In the stuckness of life during the temporal process of asylum seeking, participants put dreams, goals, and desires on hold or, oftentimes, closed the door on them. As Ahmed lamented: "I no longer dream about the future. I cannot dream about that anymore." Or, as Maurice acknowledged: "I wanted to do things with my life. I wanted to do certain things. But now there is just no way. And a lot of people [asylum seekers] go through that." Joseph, a migrant from Cameroon in his early thirties, reflected frequently on how the asylum process had affected his ability to move through life. Ruminating one day on why his asylum case had been pending for so long and why the Office of Chief Council (attorneys for the government) insisted on taking two years for an overseas investigation while he waited in limbo, Joseph stated:

I don't know why they are doing this [overseas investigation]. When they send immigration officers there [Cameroon] what do they need? What else do they need? I don't understand those things. So, that's--it's really a waste of people's time. I don't know. I don't know what they are thinking. Maybe they think it's good for them [government/prosecuting attorneys]. But I don't know any reason why it's good for them. And it makes people ... by the time the result come out. Even if they are granted, they've gone through some kind of psychological torture, because you've delayed someone from going to school. You probably delayed someone from doing something else because they didn't ever know what was going to happen tomorrow, you know?

In framing the protracted uncertainty embedded in the asylum process as “some kind of psychological torture,” Joseph underlines the depth of suffering associated with the temporal category of waiting in this context. Life for asylum seekers was mediated by their sense of stuckness and they often found themselves unable to both engage in activities in the present and imagine, or plot, future pathways.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the marginal status and lack of access to resources of asylum seekers contributed to the experience of limbo in this context, often making a sense of ‘moving forward’ structurally difficult. But here, Hassan is not highlighting these structural issues, but rather draws attention to the phenomenology of his existential limbo: his emotional and physical state of being “tired,” “drained” and “demotivated” from the protracted uncertainty of the asylum process. Like Eric’s earlier metaphor of being “poked” so much that he no longer felt anything, Hassan reflects a similar sense of self-defeat and wearing down. Here, we are reminded of Bourdieu’s (1997) insistence that waiting is a form of submission. And, as the narratives of both Eric and Hassan highlight, the powerless linked to waiting critically transformed asylum seekers’ relationships to their selves and their social worlds. In this way, the subject position of asylum seekers can be seen as transformative not just of material circumstances, but also of subjective and intimate ways of being. Recalling Ruth’s story, she viewed her subject-position of asylum seeker as transforming her into someone “mad” or “foolish.” Ruth became someone who forgot things around the house, who left smoking pans on a lit stove, and whose everyday life became infused with ambiguity and disorientation.

The present as the locus of suffering

As I have underscored, key to the condition or orientation of existential limbo is the sense of the present, and the powerlessness and void associated with it, as hyper-realized. In this way, the uncertainty of the present mediated asylum seekers' way of inhabiting themselves and their social worlds. Rose was not unique in suggesting that the insecurity inherent in the context of asylum seeking was at the forefront of experience "all the time." When I asked Eric to describe his life in the U.S., it became immediately clear that his position/status as an asylum seeker shaped his experience in crucial ways:

It's, it's like always limbo. Limbo, limbo, limbo. You don't know what to do today, you know. I think like this. Sometimes it's hard for me to sleep. Sometimes I need to get drunk to sleep. Because I will not--I cannot shut off my brain. I don't know how. I take deep breaths. I exercise. I walk around at 1AM. It's hard for me to sleep ... because of that limbo. That uncertainty. You that is so, so unsettling... I try not to worry about the things I don't have control over but sometimes I can't help. I cannot help it. You know, this is my family. This is my life ... So, the hardest thing is that limbo. There is so much uncertainty.

This situation of existential limbo - this sense of being 'neither here nor there' -- thus mediated everyday life and sense of self.. Eric's narrative here also underscores asylum seekers' perceived lack of control over the configuration of life's circumstances, which exacerbated the felt sense of insecurity. It was a period of limbo whose terms, as Bourdieu (1997: 228) has noted, were dictated by others -- here, lawyers, judges, and other immigration officials.

A conversation that took place on afternoon between Louise and Eric, who had known each other previously in Bamenda and, by coincidence, met again in the U.S., brought into further relief the suffering evoked by the uncertainty of the asylum process.

This conversation ensued after Louise learned about yet another delay in her court hearing. She had just received a letter indicating that her immigration hearing had been moved from November to February because the prosecuting attorney had requested additional time to prepare the case. This was after the prosecuting attorney had already postponed the case for one year in order to gather more information for court. In all, at this point, Louise had been waiting for four years for her asylum hearing. The conversation between Louise (L) and Eric (E) unfolded as follows:

- L: I don't understand why they are making me to suffer so much. There is so much uncertainty. So much uncertainty. That is, that is that hardest thing ... When people are running from trouble, like political problems, those kinds of things, they are going through a lot. So it's very important that they have some sort of shield, you know, some sort of protection. Because, I feel as if I'm homeless. I don't have anywhere to go, nothing. And that feeling is like, it's like you're still fighting a war psychologically. You're still, you're still in danger, you know. You still feel that sense of being left, of not being protected. Not safe, you know. They can tell you to go back from where you came from, you know. But I cannot go back home. So, I cannot go back home, but maybe I cannot stay. So where am I? That is the biggest problem I am having, that is making me suffer so much.
- E: I feel that same way, too. I feel that same way, too. And I have kids. And if they tell me to go, then what will I do? So, I'm not safe here, but I'm not safe in Cameroon. So, it's like, I'm not safe anywhere.
- L: You are in the middle of war. Even here.
- E: Yes, Yes
- L: --I left my children. But maybe now I can't stay here. What is this for!? (starting to cry). I leave my children, to come and here for what!? To be homeless! (upset, crying). I need to sleep. Since I've come here, I don't sleep. They gave me medicine for depression, it does nothing. Sometimes I forget things. Sometimes I leave things and then look for them in a different place.
- E: Yes, yes. Psychologically, it's very tormenting. This process is very tormenting.
- L: It's been too long. Too long. (pause) I don't know where I belong. It's something I think about everyday. Every day. Every night. Day and night. Day and night. Sometimes I discover myself talking on

- the road alone.
- E: See, Bridget, this is the psychological effect of this [asylum] process—the mind is never at ease. Like she said, she takes medication for depression. It doesn't help. She takes medication just to sleep. But she doesn't sleep.

This exchange is notable for many reasons. First, as Eric noted in the earlier narrative excerpt, Louise's everyday experience was mediated by and filtered through the lens of uncertainty and insecurity. Such uncertainty, furthermore, was productive of an affective state of suffering that was impervious to medication (for depression or sleep) and which informed Louise's being-in-the world "day and night." Second, this passage highlights the prominent theme of homelessness in asylum seekers' narratives. Again, feeling like she cannot go back to Cameroon but always aware of the possibility that she cannot stay in the U.S., Louise is confronted with a profound sense of not belonging anywhere, of having no grounding. Like Ruth, her life was imbued with disorientation. For these women, misplaced items around their homes seemed to reflect their embodied sense of displacement or destabilized personhood, as they sought to navigate their days. Louise's claim that even though she left an environment of political violence behind, Louise is nonetheless still "fighting a war" makes clear both the struggle involved in the asylum process and the depth of insecurity that the process evoked. Indeed, as Eric describes, the asylum process was "psychologically tormenting."

Finally, this exchange highlights the existential stakes involved with the asylum process, whereby the protracted asylum process itself was understood to generate or prolong suffering. The unknown outcome of her asylum case means that Louise may be sent back to a place in which she is certain would result in her life being threatened. Yet,

even this period of limbo in which a decision about her future is made, Louise's life was characterized by a palpable existential threat. Thus, though it may have been her future existence that was threatened (in the sense that a return to Cameroon meant the possibility of death), that existential threat was lived *in the present*. Here, the present represents for Louise both a distinct moment that produces novel forms of suffering while simultaneously recalling suffering in the past (to which she may be forced to return in the future) and the uncertainty of the future (which represents a possible return to the past).

I will return shortly to a discussion of how temporal divisions of past, present, and future are blurred in this context. What I want to highlight here, however, is how the asylum process is perceived as being a primary source and focal point of suffering. I found the protracted uncertainty that characterized the asylum process to be productive of particular affective states of emotional stress and suffering. While the extent of this was variable, it was the case that all my study participants viewed the asylum process as productive of some level of suffering and generative of a sense of existential limbo that permeated the quotidian. This was the case even for those participants who denied any psychological or emotional effects of past violence. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, Eric felt that the moral obligation of fighting against the Francophone government of Cameroon led him to feel excitement, camaraderie, and a sense of virtue rather than feel "traumatized" by involvement in political activities. Yet, he described the asylum process as a "psychological game" and psychologically "tormenting."

Likewise, Lionel, a former journalist from Liberia, denied suffering any emotional or psychological problems from his political activities, but did point to the "psychological effects" of the asylum process: the feelings of insecurity, being unable to

help his family in Liberia, being afraid of going to the hospital or even walking on the street because of his lack of legal status. Sharon, too, clearly saw the asylum process as a key locus of her suffering, as she described the asylum process itself as “a kind of trauma.”

Returning to Joseph, who had similarly described the asylum process as “some kind of psychological torture,” we can see in his narratives a recurring invocation of ideas of home and, more often, homelessness, as they relate to suffering in the present moment. This dual concept of ‘home’/‘homelessness’ was a salient one among study participants and the metaphor of homelessness was often used by asylum claimants to describe his/her present state of non-belonging -- neither secure in the U.S. nor in his/her country of origin. For many asylum seekers, like Joseph, the idea of homelessness was embedded in their sense of existential limbo, as the below exchange reveals:

- J: I cannot go back to Cameroon. But, in the U.S. I can't get out and get in when I want either. So-so- so for me, right now, there's no home. In a sense. There is no home. I-I-I just have to make believe ... So-so that's the truth. So, it's like somebody without a home. A homeless person.
- BH: And what is that like for you? I mean to—
- J: ---Terrible!
- BH: Mmhmm.
- J: It's terrible. I- it knocks me all the time. I-I-I...I-I go to work at times and actually stop and think about it. It cuts into my daily activities all the time. Yeah. it makes me very uncomfortable. I...i-i-it's- it's really hard...when I leave work, I know I'm going to my house. I know that. I know that ... But, you see, you are limited. When you turn around- if I had papers [legal status/documents] (voice trails off) ... (long pause) I mean, in a way, I'm stuck, you see? So I-I- you want to call it [U.S.] home ... but, then you say what is going on? What is going on? You don't believe what is going on.
- BH: Mmhmm.
- J: Now you say, 'Okay, you- you are a Cameroonian. But you can't go to Cameroon, you see?

- BH: Mmmm.
- J: So, it's really- it's something that...makes me...worry. And the thing is when I get worried about it I say, 'Okay. I can't change it.' I mean, I can't change it now. So, I just have to take what I have. I just tell myself, I have to just deal with what I have. I cannot change things. Now my worry is how long am I going to be in this position, you know? If I had a date- a [asylum hearing] date set then maybe I could say okay...tomorrow maybe I'm gonna get out of this.
- BH: Yeah.
- J: But, I have no clue what is going to happen. You see? So, that is what worries me a lot. So much.

In the above passage, Joseph links his claim of being “stuck” to being “a homeless person.” As with Eric and Louise, the uncertainty he experienced while waiting shaped the parameters of everyday life, “knocking” him and “cutting” into his daily routine “all the time.” The fact of his ungroundedness or non-belonging was an ever-present specter. And, yet, as Joseph’s narrative here also forcefully emphasizes, he feels powerless to change these circumstances. Furthermore, Joseph’s feelings of homelessness were, like other participants,’ linked to notions of safety and security. This is underscored by Joseph’s differential use in the above narrative of “house” and “home.” As he acknowledged, he had a house that he returned to on a daily basis, yet he still experienced the sense of being without a home. Without “papers,” Joseph insists, his “house” is not his “home.” Sharon, an asylum seeker from Kenya in her early fifties, also describes the link between “home” and safety/security:

The fear that I have is too much now. I’m afraid to go back to Kenya. But without a home here, you sometimes wish to go back and yet you are not able to go back, you are not wanted back. What goes on in the mind is the world is forsaking you. I haven’t found refuge where I can call home ... I’m still walking. Maybe one day I will find a home. A place to call home.

As Joseph's and Sharon's narratives show, the search for "home" was a complicated struggle for asylum seekers. Because of their limbo status, asylum claimants felt uncertain about where to locate home. This notion of homelessness, in turn, reflected their sense of being suspended and stuck in time/space. Malkki (1992, 1995b) has argued against the "sedentary bias" in anthropology, whereby "culture" is linked to a particular place, and her work thus troubles common notions of "home" (see also Essed et al. 2004; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006). In critiquing "the sedentary analytical scheme," Malkki (1995b) suggest two problems with the concept of home as such a framework envisions it. First, she points to recent theoretical work that "has shown how fraught the concept and the lived experience of home can be" (509). As Roland, a young male Liberian asylum seeker told me: "Home isn't a place anymore, it's up here (pointing to his head). Home is in my mind." Second, Malkki (1995b) argues that "if 'home' is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning where one fled is the same things as 'going home'" (509). To be sure, Malkki (1995b) asserts that displacement often occurs because "home" has become strange and/or unfamiliar. Home became, for asylum seekers, a fraught concept, indeed. For my participants, Cameroon (or other countries of origin) became a place where they felt increasingly marginalized and alienated, and were often subjected to forms of abuse that threatened their lives and personhood. Cameroon, for those asylum seekers, represented not a place of peace, but an existential threat. Yet, they were also in a situation where they were unable to claim their current environment as 'home.' They were stuck.

In asylum seekers' narratives of homelessness, we again see that it is not

displacement per se or past violence that is seen as the key focus of suffering in this context. Rather, suffering was understood as generated by the current political system in which they were embedded and which was perceived as both extending enduring suffering as well as generating new forms of suffering. In line with Malkki's assertion that displacement should not unequivocally and unproblematically be understood as a "problem" or source of trauma, my data show that it is not the uprooting that asylum seekers see as the biggest source of pain (though, to be sure, this was understood as painful). Rather, it was the present, protracted situation that disallowed *anywhere* to be called home that generated suffering and a sense of partial existence. As Chapters 6 and 7 will more fully explore, study participants that were granted asylum during my field work were quick to claim the U.S. as "home": "I'm home now;" "I belong here. I am wanted;" "This is my home now." Such claims emphasize the ways in which "home" and safety are powerfully connected for asylum seekers.

If the protracted situation of asylum seeking prevented anywhere from being understood as home, study participants often experienced this sense of homelessness as an existential void. Joseph referred to the prolonged asylum process as "wasting people's time." This idea of waste is symbolic of the void, or absence of living, that is perceived during this period. Participants' sense of wasting time also challenged their ability to emplot their lives, as discussed earlier. Ahmed repeatedly told me "I'm wasting years of my life now." Wilson, a Cameroonian asylum seeker in his late-fifties also saw his life trajectory come to be understood in terms of waste: "I was a civil servant for thirty five years. I was supposed to retire, to get my retirement. I was instrumental, a great asset to the younger generation. But see where I am now? I am wasting."

The following excerpts further illustrate how life as an asylum seeker was often actually experienced as an absence of life:

Exchange with Sharon (S):

- S: It [time in U.S.] has been very difficult. And, um, I've been comparing this life with my life back in Kenya. Finally, I haven't found a life.
- BH: You haven't found a life?
- S: No (crying). I have not. I have not starting living again. I'm still walking. Still walking. And I've become so tired. I'm still walking. Looking for life. Looking to settle down.

Description of current situation (asylum process) from Sarah, an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe:

But like now life is, it's like blank. You don't know whether you're going forward or going backwards, to the left or to the right, you don't know. You don't know where you are going, like you are going in a circle. You don't know where you are. Is this where I began or this where I end it? You know .. it's like just so dark and you can't see the light.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, asylum seekers were aware, and reminded constantly, of their present insecurity. Narratives of asylum claimants having an existence devoid of living, or of life as blank and dark bring to the fore how deeply the present was experienced in its emptiness, absences, or lack.

While the asylum process was largely seen as a primary source or foci of suffering, this did not mean that asylum seekers were unaware of or unappreciative of the impact that past experiences of violence and persecution had on their lives and their psyches. Though some participants claimed not to have any psychological effects of past violence (as I indicated with Eric and Lionel), many others clearly recognized the emotional and/or psychological ramifications of the past. As Ahmed noted, the painful

experiences of his past have reshaped his subjectivity, as he noted: “I’ve been tortured, I’ve seen horrible things, so I know I will never be the same person.” Many other participants also acknowledged the enduring effects of past experiences of violence or torture. Many complained of nightmares connected to past experiences of detention, torture, or other forms of persecution. Others, like Ahmed, expressed feeling like a changed person after such experiences. However, much more often, participants pointed to symptoms of suffering or modes of being-in-the world that they traced specifically to the asylum process. Feelings of panic, anxiety, and confusion were largely understood as being novel modes/symptoms -- symptoms rooted in the indeterminacy and insecurity of the present asylum process. Recalling Ruth’s story, while both she and Eric point to her “trauma” due to past violence, it was the asylum process that was perceived to be the cause of her suffering, of what Eric referred to as her ‘madness.’ This is an important point that crosses asylum seekers’ narratives. Thus, while participants described their past experiences as entailing pain and suffering, they did not see the violent or painful past as the cause of their suffering *in the present*.

Moreover, asylum seekers clearly traced their status as asylum seekers to past experiences of violence. Especially as their legal cases progressed, they framed their current status as an effect of political or other forms of persecution (see Chapter 7). Here, we can see how participants made a distinction between the suffering that caused them to hold the status as ‘asylum seeker,’ and the novel forms of suffering that such a status evoked. For example, as previous chapters outlined, Cameroonian asylum seekers clearly traced their forced displacement -- their arrival to the U.S. -- to the Francophone government in Cameroon. Oftentimes, with my Cameroonian participants, discussions of

their suffering or their frequent references to their suffering would be followed by indictments of Biya, the president of Cameroon. Discussions of the arduous asylum process would often be punctuated by: “can you believe all of this trouble because of one man! Paul Biya has been running our country into the ground for thirty years!” Thus, my Cameroonian participants placed blame with the Biya government, with their home country, for their current position as an asylum seeker. Yet, they nonetheless did not conceive of their current state of suffering as being necessarily rooted in the past. In other words, the violence of the past, generated by a malevolent president, was seen as responsible for their forced displacement and need to seek asylum in the U.S. Yet, now here, as asylum seekers, they understood their current state of suffering to be evoked by the asylum process and the existential limbo that accompanied it.

TEMPORAL BLURRING

A central effect of this sense of ‘existential limbo,’ is what I understand as a form of ‘temporal blurring.’ While suffering was understood as located in the present moment -- in the protracted and onerous political asylum process, I found that the construction and experience of time defied categorization into discrete categories. In this sense, then, when I write that the suffering of participants is very present-focused, it does not mean that the past and future are bracketed. Rather, the past and future are enfolded into the present -- into this context of stuckness, of waiting. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1997) argues, the present cannot be reduced to a “momentary instant,” but rather “it encompasses the practical anticipations and retrospectives that are inscribed as objective potentialities or traces in the immediate given” (210).

Part of what I want to capture with a discussion of the idea of temporal blurring in this context is the way in which the past and the (potential) future-as-return-to-past remain *present* - incorporated as part of everyday lived experience -- during the protracted state of uncertainty of the asylum process. Temporal blurring, as an effect of existential limbo, is evident in the narratives presented above. For example, in Rose's narrative, she began by talking about the present: her asylum case, which she doesn't want "in the background" because she "thinks about it all the time." The pervasiveness of her current state of insecurity and worry puts her life "on hold" and mediated her orientation towards the future, whereby she "can't plan [her] life" and is "not sure" where she was going. A possible future for Rose -- like all study participants -- is a "return to the same situation," which is existentially threatening and instills great fear. Thus, the past, in this context, is not just the past, but remains a possible future as long as her asylum case is pending. Given the protracted period of the adjudication of asylum claims, the existential threat of the future and reminders of the past remain part of asylum seekers' present lived experience.

In this way, for Rose and many other participants, suffering was often understood as a continuum, whereby temporal divisions were hazy. Many participants described their suffering as continuing from the past into the present despite their expectations that reaching the U.S. would provide a sense of security and relief from suffering. Some participants noted that without legal or political rights, their position was not much different in the U.S. than it had been in their home countries. As one participant, whose asylum hearing had just been rescheduled for a third time, told me: "(F)or me, being in Africa and being in America--it's the same ... because now, America scares me more than

Africa.” The understanding of suffering as a continuum was furthered echoed in statements such as: “I have been walking this Earth for ten years in search of a home and I’m still walking now” (Sharon). Many participants framed their displacement from their home country and their years of seeking asylum as a continuous journey. They would often highlight the suffering that this journey comprised, not in terms of past and present events but as an overall experience in which “I’ve suffered so much” or “I’ve suffered too much,” and implore “when will this journey end!?” As Sarah put it: “the past is not anymore traumatic than the present... you still do not have peace.” The exchange between Eric and Louise presented above richly captures the sense of suffering that continued from the past to the present for both of these participants. The claim that Louise is “still fighting a war psychologically” and that Eric and Louise were still “in the middle of a war,” underscores the depth of suffering evoked by the asylum process and the temporal blurring that it effected.

Limbo, Temporality, and Meaning-making

If study participants felt that they were, in the words of another participant “just hanging in the air,” or that they were trapped, locked in, frozen, or otherwise stuck, meaning-making was also rendered challenging, at best, and immobilized, at worst. Temporal blurring, as an effect of existential limbo, ensured that making meaning of the past, present, and future were all in a holding pattern. The future was contingent on the present, but so was the past. As Good (1994) argues: “New experiences call for reinterpretation of past experiences and suggest new possibilities for the future” (155). The present in this context also held meaning for the past and the future -- they were

intricately and critically tied to each other. The uncertainty of the present rendered both the past and the future uncertain as well. A resolution of the present situation also held promise for understanding the past and forging a new future.

As the narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate, the lingering of the present moment challenged participants' ability to conceive of moving forward. Returning to Hassan's narrative, while he had the desire to "do things" with his life, it was the affective assault of the asylum process, resulting in fatigue, anger, demotivation, and a sense of being "drained," that prevented him from realizing or acting on these desires. For many others -- and very likely for Hassan, too -- it was not only a sense of wearing and demotivation that prevented taking future-oriented actions (e.g., going to school, learning to drive), but also the sense that these actions would be done in vain if he/she were to be deported. Thus, these actions would be devoid of meaning if the situation in which they were learned and performed were removed. For example, Louise had a chance to attend, free of charge, classes to get her certification in nursing assistance (CNA). Like Ruth, Louise he had been working for minimum wage as a caregiver to a woman with disabilities, barely getting enough hours to cover her bills. A CNA certificate would have provided Louise with opportunities to better-paid employment. However, given the uncertainty of her future, she found this to be an illogical step: "Why would I do that? Why should I spend my time doing that? If they send me back to Cameroon, CNA will be useless. It won't mean anything. It won't help me." Thus, an uncertain future -- and one that is perceived to be decided by external forces -- reshaped the meaning that life activities have in the present. De Genova (2002), citing Carter (1997) describes this as "the revocability of the promise of the future,' occasioned by the

uncertainties arising from the possibility of deportation which inhibit the undocumented from making many long-term plans” (427).

And if we can see how the future, or lack of one, informed everyday life in the present, just as crucial was the relationship between the present and future to the past. As I posited, the sense of existential limbo that I observed in this context was not just about the inability or difficulty of life events unfolding. A crucial dimension of this existential state of being stuck was the simultaneous inability or difficulty in rendering life -- past, present, or future -- meaningful. Uncertainty mediated everyday life so that, as Eric exclaimed, “you don’t know what to do today.” For Louise, learning a skill (nursing) and optimizing job prospects had no meaning in the face of her uncertain and indeterminate future. For Sharon, the desire for security, for a “home,” held importance for making meaning of the past:

This homelessness, for a person who... has no roots also. You know I have been uprooted from Africa. I am here. I don’t have roots. I...if I am not careful I dry up. And I’m not...I am very afraid to go back...to Africa. And I don’t have...a home in the U.S. So...I feel I am walking on the face of the planet, you know? Homelessness is a very...difficult eh, situation for a person. Any person. And I see when I shall make...start to make roots. And yet I don’t have, clearly, when. So, so I’m under big stress ... I don’t know when I am starting to make roots. Making roots is to start to self sustaining. To have my home. To...look back to see how...I have been. And to gain from the experiences...for something better. **To see meaning in the suffering.** (Sharon, emphasis added).

Here, Sharon must contend with the “difficult process of looking backward to make sense of a life under the shadow of its boundedness and of confronting the entropy of the future” (Little et al. 1998: 1491). Sharon saw her search for ‘home’ as crucially linked to her search for meaning of her suffering. As she stressed, the present-focus of establishing

a 'home' is central to both Sharon's future and past. In terms of the future, 'home' (which, in this context, is critically tied to legal status) would allow for the ability "start making roots," to grow and pursue new paths. In terms of the past, Sharon saw the security of 'home' as a necessary requirement for looking back and making meaning of past suffering. In this sense, although the present was the focus here, understanding of the past and future were important contingencies. As the following chapters will elucidate, legal status (and the sense of 'home' or place or security that it entailed) had the effect of not just conferring a sense of safety, but also served to legitimate suffering, past and present. Indeed "processes of meaning-making are often tied to temporality. Meaning arises through the active linking of a present moment to past or future moments." (Throop 2010: 237). What Sharon sought was an ability to link these temporal divisions - divisions that were often blurred and indistinct in this context. Home -- security -- would, her narrative suggests, provide a way to meaningfully link the present with the past and the future. Home, as conceived of here, would serve to bridge the void of the present.

ENACTMENTS OF TEMPORAL BLURRING

As I have been elaborating, the sense of existential limbo evoked by the asylum process shaped both engagement (actual or projected/imagined) in the social world as well as the meaning of those engagements. The indeterminacy and uncertainty inherent in the asylum process shaped the very terms of existence, within which temporal categories were often blurred and indistinct. In order to more robustly elucidate temporal blurring as an effect and component of existential 'stuckness' and suffering, I focus now on two

different ways in which temporal blurring is enacted, or experienced, in this context. Here, I borrow from Mattingly (1998, 2000, 2010), who, in her ongoing work examining narratives of illness and healing views narratives, or stories, as enacted; as a form of practice (2010). Likewise, Kirmayer (2000), in pointing to the limitations of an understanding of narrative-as-text, instead argues that “*enactment* offers a better--because broader--notion than writing for how clinical narratives comes into being” (156). While my data here are not concerned with clinical settings or stories of physical illness per se, the framing of narratives as enacted experience or forms of practice is nonetheless instructive. In this way, I wish to underscore the very *lived* dimensions of limbo and the temporal blurring it created rather than highlight these narrative aspects as particular discursive or rhetorical devices. I first turn toward illustrating how the present context of asylum seeking often recalled the past. Then, I focus on how the past and present were understood and narratively conveyed in similar and parallel ways.

Present Recalling the Past

The temporal blurring associated with the sense of existential limbo and suffering in this context was often manifest, as I alluded to above, as an incorporation of the past into the present moment. As scholarship on trauma has highlighted, the past is often *lived* in the present (Herman 1997; van der Kolk 1996a, 1996b, van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995; Prager 2006). For example, Prager (2006), writing from a psychoanalytic framework suggests that “psychological trauma is a condition of the present ... It manifests itself in individuals, as in collectivities, as a collapse of timeliness, when remembering prior experiences or events intrude on a present-day being-ness” (229).

Though I am not making a claim here about the clinical presence (or not) of psychological trauma, Prager's notion of "a collapse of timeliness" is helpful in elucidating how temporal categories may lose definition in the face of challenging circumstances. Indeed, as Prager asserts, within these contexts "time is experienced as frozen and unyielding" and "prevents the creation of the sense of a person moving through time" (235).

Many of my study participants made explicit connections between the past and the present; specifically, they pointed attention to the ways in which the activities associated with asylum seeking and the emotions/thoughts evoked by these activities resulted in the recall of past painful experiences. Returning to Rose's narrative presented above, we can see not only how temporal categories are blurred and indistinct, but also how her current insecurity results in the past leaking through the porous borders of the present. As Rose (R) went on to describe:

- R: Like now, with my [asylum] case, my situation, anything that triggers remembering that you're not secure just brings it all together and everything comes back to life.
- BH: And you said when things trigger knowing that you don't have security, what kinds of things trigger that?
- R: When I realize that I'm not secure, that I don't have peace because I don't know what will happen with my case, it reminds me of my [past] abuse. Yeah. Everything comes back.

Likewise, Sharon would often point to the ways in which her then-current situation evoked a reliving of the past. Upon arriving in the U.S., Sharon had initially lived with her brother, who had come to the U.S. years before and had already obtained a green card. Sharon's inability to work (she was without a work permit) and therefore contribute financially to the household, made her already tenuous relationship with her brother all

the more difficult and fraught. After a year, he kicked Sharon out of his apartment, despite the fact that she had no money and no other housing option. The day her brother told her to leave (he told her he would give her a week to find another place to stay), I sat with Sharon on a bench at a small, unkempt park near their apartment building. She was distraught as we tried to think of options of where she could go. I had called the director of the human rights organization handling Sharon's case and she confirmed what I already knew: because of Sharon's lack of legal status, she would not qualify for any housing assistance, including from non-profit groups that receive any sort of federal or state funding. The best option, the director told me, was to refer Sharon to a homeless shelter.

Sharon's face fell when I told her this and she said she could not go to a homeless shelter. As is evident in her narratives presented throughout this chapter, being homeless represented, for Sharon, an absence of both life and meaning. Essentially, homelessness meant social death (c.f. Becker, Beyene, and Ken 2000). Being told to leave her brother's house, she told me, was bringing up the same painful emotions and thoughts that she had when she was kicked out of her government-supported home in Kenya. She had been discharged from the "mental hospital" to find all her belongings on the street corner near her home. Her family, including her children, refused to take her in and she was forced to live outside in the slums of Nairobi. "Now it's the same thing," she said through tears, "the same abandonment and neglect." After sitting in silence for a bit, she elaborated:

It is very painful. It really breaks me. I feel so--more abandoned ... My brother has put me in a position that confuses me ... where the hopelessness, the homelessness ... it leaves me with a lot of stress ... it reminds me of the time that I have really taken, the ten years I have walked this same stress. The homelessness, the lack of literally everything

has come back again.

While a familial encounter provoked Sharon's reliving of the past, for many other study participants it was activities directly associated with the asylum process that evoked the recall of the past into the present. The summoning of the past in the present was quite common for those study participants who were subjected to heightened surveillance and policing. Eric and Ruth, both ISAP "participants," repeatedly made connections between these forms of policing/'management' -- or what they experienced as criminalization tactics -- and past experiences of violence and persecution in Cameroon. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, the "ethos" associated with the enforcement branch of the immigrant system, and ISAP, in particular, served as a constant reminder of asylum seekers' legal limbo and existential insecurity. As Rose suggested, a moment of realization of her insecure status -- what she calls a "trigger" -- provoked a state in which "everything comes back." Because of the association of ISAP with the threat of detention and/or deportation, visits to the ISAP office, phone check-ins or the use of ankle bracelets were powerful reminders or "triggers" that were consistently present in these asylum claimants' everyday lives. Eric told me: "Every time you go there [ISAP office], you remember *everything* that has happened to you." Ruth's experiences also exemplify this. It was especially after visits to ISAP that she would feel physically and emotionally vulnerable and would provoke ruminations not only on her uncertain future, but also her painful past. These examples underscore the inability of the present--and with it, the past--to recede into the background of everyday life. Waiting was not banal (Crapanzano 1985); rather, waiting, and the sense of being stuck, painfully mediated asylum seekers'

lives, where reminders of insecurity were embedded in everyday routines. Moreover, waiting not only prevented the closure of past suffering, but it layered novel forms of suffering and indeterminacy upon that initial pain.

Parallels Between Past and Present

There were numerous examples, then, of asylum seekers making explicit, or conscious, connections between the past and the present, namely in drawing attention to how the past recalled the present. However, my data also reveal a past/present overlap on a different level. That is, I found that many participants would describe moments or experiences in the past in similar (and at times identical) language as experiences of the present, even if not seemingly consciously aware of these parallels. This was especially evident among my study participants from Cameroon. As noted in previous chapters, Cameroonian asylum seekers framed their involvement in political activities as a moral obligation or a form of moral action. As Ruth underscored, despite the risk it represented, she became involved and continued to be involved in political activity for the sake of her children. Her involvement in political activity, she felt, was part of her moral responsibility as a mother. She was trying to effect change not for herself, but for her kin. As all Cameroonian asylum seekers told me, it was their sense of being “second-class citizens,” of feeling “oppressed,” and of having “no power” that drove them to become, on some level, political activists or supporters of the opposition movement. The sense of powerlessness and stuckness that I have been discussing in this chapter as part of the asylum process was also evident in the past, though stemming from a different source: the Cameroonian government. The following narrative excerpt illustrates the parallel

between the uncertainty and fear of the past and the uncertainty and fear of the present, whereby the “fear as a way of life” that permeated the past often continues, albeit in different instantiations, into the present (Green 1994, 1999):

Barbara, talking about her life in Cameroon:

Even in your house, **you don’t have peace**. You **can’t even sleep**. You are scared, always scared of the military, that **they are coming to get you**.

Barbara, talking about her life as an asylum seeker:

I **cannot sleep**. Even with the pills they give me, I don’t sleep. There’s **no peace**. I’m too scared. All the time thinking they [immigration officials] maybe are **going to come and pick me**.

Coutin (2003b), in her ethnography of Salvadorans’ struggle for legalization in the U.S., notes similar kinds of parallels between past and present experiences of fear and violence (34-35). As discussed in the previous chapter, Coutin (2003b) describes both El Salvador and the U.S. as representing “spaces of nonexistence” for the undocumented migrants with whom she worked. While I argued that Coutin’s notion of “nonexistence” was instructive, though not wholly applicable, to my research context, her observation that “becoming an unauthorized immigrant is often a continuation rather than an initiation of nonexistence” aptly resonates with my discussion here (2003b: 34). For example, Eric’s description of both life under the political system in Cameroon and his involvement with ISAP suggest that his subjection to new tactics of criminalization and policing “is merely the latest in a series of violent erasures of personhood” (Coutin 2003b: 35):

Eric, describing life in Cameroon as an Anglophone:

The system [Cameroon government] is really messed up. We have no power. We have no voice. They can come and pull you from the house and start beating you without questioning you. They will arrest you and put you in jail without asking you a question. And **they don't even tell you why**. What type of government is that!? You don't have a voice to argue. **We don't have a voice to argue!** If you protest, you are in hell. You are beaten and locked in jail and nobody will care. Nobody cares about you. **You are a nobody! They don't tell you anything** and you can't ask a single question.

Eric, describing his experiences with ISAP in the U.S.:

They [ICE] said it's a new government program and they are working with the government to implement this. So we cannot question it. You don't have a say in any of it. **No voice to argue**. If you ask a question, it's 'Immigration has ordered us to do this. So, 'okay, can you talk to immigration, then?' 'Well, do you want to be in jail if I talk to them? Or do you want to listen to us and do what we say? **They won't explain anything** to you and it's like "well, if you don't want to do what we say, then we can call immigration and they can take you into custody.' So, they're just intimidating us. They don't care about us, really. It's **like we're not even people to them**.

In these excerpts, which, upon analysis, bring to the fore parallels between the past and present, we can see that the violent mechanisms of political oppression in Cameroon and the tactics of policing in the U.S. both result in the effacement of voice and personhood ("you are a nobody," "we're not even people to them"). I am not arguing that the forms of violence or levels of threat are the same in Cameroon as in the U.S. To be sure, there are critical differences, both theoretically and phenomenologically, between physical violence and symbolic or structural violence (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). Rather, what I want to emphasize here is the parallel experiences in the past and the present of political illegibility and lack of transparency ("they don't tell you anything,"

“they won’t explain anything”) and the sense of powerlessness that such tactics effect (“no voice to argue”).

Likewise, as Ruth underscored, she, too, felt constantly “intimidated” by officials and administrators associated with the political asylum process, particularly by ISAP officials. She interpreted their tactics of surveillance and policing as a form of harassment that evoked a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. Ruth’s experience of the political asylum process echoed her experiences of everyday life in Cameroon. As she noted, in Cameroon: “It’s a myth of the government protecting your interests. Ha! Instead, they are there to intimidate, harass, they intimidate, wreak havoc in your life!” Indeed, as Ruth would often implore about the U.S: “What kind of government is this, harassing and intimidating immigrants?!” Moreover, Ruth would often assert that she was treated “like an animal” in both her discussion of her life in Cameroon and in the U.S. Such parallel descriptions highlight the sense of alterity that Ruth faced, both in Cameroon and in the U.S. In both contexts, she was embedded in a system and positioned in relations of power in ways that contributed to a sense of dehumanization. Animality here can be seen and is experienced as space constructed outside the political, whereby refugees in particular are cast as speechless subjects (Nyers 2006; c.f. Malkki 1995, 1996). Thus, Ruth’s (and other asylum seekers’) experience of being treated “like an animal” was an effect of the “politically structured suffering” of both her past and present (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Epitomizing the lived parallels between the past and the present was Ruth’s claim that in Cameroon, she “became a prison everyday of [her] life.” This sense of containment was strikingly reverberated in her repeated claims of being “a prisoner in America.”

If, as Eric's and Ruth's narratives reveal, a salient aspect of Cameroonian asylum seekers' experiences of the past was their lack of "voice" and political agency, this was also highlighted in narratives about their experiences of the political asylum process. Cameroonians' narratives of lived experience in the past and lived experience in the present were often similar in tone and language. Cameroonian asylum claimants lamented the fact that they were never able to "express our emotions, our anger" in Cameroon without suffering consequences at the hands of the *gendarmes*. In discussing the asylum process, they also underscored their inability to fully express anger at the perceived injustices of the U.S. political asylum process. And, as Crapanzano (1985), observed, and what I found to be true in my research context as well, waiting often produces a sense of anger (45). Yet, asylum seekers were careful to temper their anger in order to conform to notions of passive and 'deserving' refugees. Or, as happened often, anger was transformed into social defeat. In Chapter 7, I will return to a discussion of the ways in which emotions, and narratives more broadly, are shaped by the institutions involved in the asylum process, where I consider who is allowed to narrate experience, what aspects of experience are allowed to be voiced, and in what ways.

Presently, though, I want to highlight how both contexts--Cameroon/past and U.S./present--were understood as having silencing, oppressive, and, often dehumanizing effects on lived experience. Both contexts entailed a sense of powerlessness and lack of control in shaping the contingencies of their lives, and contributed to the sense of existential limbo that I describe in this chapter. These past/present overlaps, while not always articulated on a conscious level, represent an enactment of temporal blurring that is an effect of this existential limbo and suffering in the context of asylum seeking. A

very important difference is that while Cameroonian asylum seekers' lives were informed by a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in both Cameroon and the U.S., these feelings manifested in different ways depending on the context. In Cameroon, powerlessness and hopelessness were often understood as generating feelings of oppression and despair *but also* were the catalysts for political activity, an important form of exercising agency. In the U.S., however, the sense of powerlessness and hopelessness evoked by the asylum process did not result in political action, but rather complicated the notion of what forms of agency could be asserted in the context of political asylum. As noncitizens "stuck" in the asylum process in the U.S., these migrants' political subjectivities were denied and their sense of agency constrained.

While descriptive parallels between the past and the present may reflect the limitations of language in describing or representing experience, I suggest that these descriptive overlaps are indicative of something more than this. Following Kirmayer (1992, 2000) and Mattingly (1998, 2000, 2010), I argue that the ways in which experiences -- past and present -- are articulated/narrated give us a sense of what those experiences mean for the narrator/social actor. In the previous discussion on metaphors of limbo or 'stuckness,' I drew on Kirmayer to argue that the metaphors used by study participants provided insight into their perceived position within relations of power. As Kirmayer (2000) insists, "metaphor situates user of metaphor" (155). What the above descriptions show is that study participants' experiences of powerlessness, fear, and insecurity occur across temporal divisions. Particularly for those participants who were subjected to heightened techniques of policing, it is likely that the tactics of surveillance and policing echo past experiences of similar techniques -- even if they do not represent

the same ultimate threat (i.e., ISAP policing will not directly result in brutal interrogation or torture). Yet, until the resolution of his/her asylum case, because the past remained a possible future (in the form of a return to the past), the activities associated with the asylum process evoked similar kinds of fear and feelings of powerlessness. Thus, the suffering connected to the asylum process produced a temporal blurring, where the threat of harm, torture, or even death, loomed on the horizon and was experienced in the present.

FORGING HOPE AND EXERCISING AGENCY

In the beginning of this chapter, I explored the concept of waiting as one that was largely experienced by asylum seekers as a passive event. Study participants were *made to wait*. In elaborating the suffering that study participants endured during the asylum seeking process, I have highlighted a sense of powerlessness as a critical component to this suffering. Indeed, this was a salient theme across participants' narratives and everyday experiences. Yet, asylum seekers in my study, though located in sociopolitical positions of vulnerability, nonetheless exercised agency and carved out spaces of hope within an environment of multiple, structural constraints. This last section considers the enactment of hope and the exercising of agency within such a context, asking what hope and agency "look like" on the ground, given participants' sense of their worlds as limited and oppressive. As Mattingly (2011) has suggested: "[R]eality needs to be exposed as a space of possibility and not only of imprisonment or social reproduction. Despite the immense power of oppressive social structures, reality is not summed up by their existence. It is not more real to disclose our imprisonment within everyday life than to

disclose the possibilities for transformation that this life also admits” (39). Here, we return to the theoretical and methodological proposition of Biehl and Locke (2010), outlined earlier in this chapter: that the ethnographic task is to see the process of *becoming* as much as the process of foreclosure; to “think of life in terms of both limits and crossroads” (318).

Foreclosure and Possibility: Recasting “Agency”

As I suggested, finding narratives of possibility among my data was sometimes a challenging task. The sense of existential foreclosure among study participants permeated everyday conversations and interactions. I felt it when Mohammed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia in his mid-twenties, described his experience of asylum in terms of being diagnosed with a deadly disease: “It’s just like when you’re sick and the doctor tells you ‘in three months you’re gonna die. And there is no treatment for you. You’re gonna die ... you just, uh, start the count down, you know?’” I also felt the profound sense of despair and darkness sitting in a dimly lit living room with Bereket, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia in his fifties, revealing to me, in a whispered tone, that he would like to find a way to end his life. The wish to die or the allusion to suicidal ideation was not uncommon in my fieldwork, as the following narrative excerpts illustrate:

Sometimes I am completely at the point where I see nothing in front of me and I am very hopeless and I see my life has just gone down and I’m not anymore, ever going to come out of it. And I have the thought of ending it (pause). That moment is so real, you know? It’s so real. Because you even calculate how long it is going to take you to go—to finish it. To finish your life. Maybe within one hour it will be gone. Or even three hours ... Instead of living like this for years. (Sharon, asylum seeker from Kenya)

With asylum, my status being—hanging like this, basically they're [the US government] giving you freedom but they can take it away any time. So, it always there on your mind, always, always. Day and night. When I get out of bed, go to bed ... and I get so frustrated. Sometimes I want to go and jump, jump off the building. I talk to my psychiatrist and my psychologist about this so many times. Many times. Seriously. To the point where I just—you know I'm gonna just get up and this is how I'm gonna do it ... I'm gonna do it and I'm gonna leave letters for my friends and for my family. And write a letter for—to friends and my family to forgive me what I did. (Hassan, asylum seeker from Pakistan)

All my happiness is gone. I have no happiness anymore. Sometimes I really want to die. I just want life to be over. (Louise, asylum seeker from Cameroon).

I have nothing to live for. I think about suicide. So I need a little hope ... but I'm not sure where to find it. (Ahmed, asylum seeker from Ethiopia).

At one point in his monograph examining suffering and subjectivity in American society, Parish (2008) notes that one of his interviewees expressed her desire to die. Parish speculates on the meaning of this wish to die, suggesting that, for this woman, “it is presented as a way out, an escape,” but that it may also “represent an intuition that suicide is an act of agency, that it allows a person to have some control over his or her fate, some choice in what happens” (Parish 2008: 169). Parish’s observations here are instructive in parsing the meaning behind my participants’ wishes to die or the thoughts of suicide as an option in this context. The narrative excerpts above seem to reflect a view of suicide as a way out; a way to escape when happiness is gone, when life is no longer worth living. And yet, in these narrative excerpts there is also room for consideration of suicide as an agentive act. Sharon and Hassan, for example, describe suicide as an *act*, one that can be performed as an alternative to “living like this for years.”

In talking about her struggles as an asylum seeker, Ruth revealed to me that she would likely have considered suicide had she not been “a good Christian.” She went on to tell me: “People don’t want to die, but they *choose* to die because they want to end their stress, their suffering. It’s too much. It’s too much” [emphasis added]. Of course, in positing suicide (and perhaps even imagining suicide) as an agentic act, what is paramount to underscore is the immensity and depth of suffering that propels one to see this as a viable option.

Despite the considerations of suicide and the felt desire for life to be over, none of my study participants ended his or her life. Indeed, they found other ways to contend with the emotional and social pain of their situations. The question that arises, then, is how did participants forge ahead despite structural constraints and frequent feelings of despair? As Parish (2008) reminds us “human beings are not passive in relation to the process of suffering, to the way their lives go tumbling out of control, or to the way they are thrown back on, even turned against, themselves in the process. They attempt to sustain life and self, even if life and self seem to keep collapsing as they do so” (127)

The narratives and experiences that I have been detailing in this chapter challenge commonsense notions of agency and meaning-making. Thinking of suicide as agentic, for example, recasts how we seek to define and locate agency in contexts of suffering. I find most relevant to the present discussion definitions of agency that take into account the constraints that shape movement within a certain context (Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1977, 2004; Sahlins 1981; Ortner 2006; Coutin 2003; Holland et al. 1998; Cabot 2012: 23; Biehl and Locke 2010; Hay 2010). Cabot (2012), for example, defines agency as “the maneuverings through which individuals attempt to make tolerable lives within sets of

conditions and constraints, and the entailment of bureaucratic artifacts within social networks” (23). Also important are theoretical approaches that equate agency not with resistance, but rather with the maintenance of the status quo, with the ability to engage with life in a way that makes existence tolerable (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2001; Zigon 2009: 257). Agency among my research participants needs to be understood as being exercised within a context where they often felt powerless to change the material conditions of their lives. Study participants were confronted with a sense of existential limbo. Yet, they must be seen as creative social actors within this limbo.

Kleinman (1997), parsing the work of Veena Das, observes a distinction between meaning-making and everyday survival. He suggests that Das and others in subaltern studies:

[A]rgue that meaning-making needs to be critically evaluated as a political tool that reworks experience so that it conforms to the demands of power. On the other hand, these social theorists and historians claim that fashioning meaning perhaps should be understood as a largely bourgeois preoccupation, incongruent with the sheer exigency of surviving that is the destiny of one-fifth of humankind existing under the grinding deprivations of extreme poverty (Kleinman 1997: 318).

While my participants are not living in extreme poverty and are in significantly different circumstances than the Indian population discussed by Das, Kleinman’s reading of Das has relevance to my argument here. Having laid out the context of profound uncertainty, of existential limbo, for my study participants, it seems appropriate to assert, then, that meaning-making is perhaps not only difficult given the sense of “life on hold,” but also because amidst the confusion and insecurity of asylum-seeking, surviving the process becomes the main concern for participants.

In this way, everyday activities emerge as essential “tactics” for moving through the asylum process, shifting how and where we locate agency (de Certeau 1984). For example, participants often told me that they actively avoided thinking about the uncertainty of their lives and the pain it entailed, as well as avoided thinking about the past and about family members they left behind—other aspects of their lives that were often overwhelmingly painful. To this end, participants often stressed the desire to “keep busy,” though this was often challenging due to lack of access to work opportunities and limited financial and material resources (see Chapter 5). Louise would often spend days “eye shopping” at local thrift stores. Ahmed spent his afternoons walking for miles around the city. Joseph told me that he tries to make sure that he sleeps late into the morning so that the days feel less long and difficult to endure. Many of these agentive tactics appeared to be a kind of resistance to engagement with emotional pain, a “struggle not to be transformed by suffering” (Parish 2008: 168). As Ahmed told me: “My sister and I, we sit and we talk everyday. Sometimes we ignore the reality, the problem we have.” Likewise, Mohammed, who was in removal proceedings and who was awaiting an appeal decision from the BIA, described how he coped with his sense of suffering:

I don't know. It's gloomy. It's very dark. It's not clear for me. But what I know is that I just don't know. I just don't know. It's, um, it's too much. I mean, in my head. You know, I just make—live just like a **fake life**, you know what I mean? Just like the others. Just like, just like living like nothing is happening, you know what I mean?

These acts of keeping busy, of sleeping time away, of living a “fake life,” or denying reality can be considered agentive within a context of relative powerlessness and constraint. As the next section explores, activities that allow for everyday maintenance

and continuity may also be understood as iterations of hope. Returning to Ahmed's narrative earlier in this section, we can see hope as central to existence in this context. He states: "I need a little hope ... but I'm not sure where to find it." Hope, for Ahmed, as it was for many of my participants, was perceived as a necessary component of survival. The struggle to find hope can be understood in terms of what Parish (2008) describes as a "search for orientation and identity" in the face of suffering (139).

Theorizing Hope

"Hope" was a word that my study participants used frequently. Initially, I understood participants' claims such as "all I can do is hope," "It's out of my hands, I just hope the judge approves my case," or "I can only hope," as remarks of passivity, an abdication of agency, or as reflections of powerlessness. To be sure, Crapanzano (2003, 2004) has addressed hope, like waiting, largely in terms of its passive nature. He suggests that hope is "desire's passive counterpart," and argues: "Except where hope is used as an equivalent to desire, hope depends on some other agency—a god, fate, chance, an other—for its fulfillment" (2004: 100). As scholars have agreed, hope is integrally tied to hopelessness (Crapanzano 2003, 2004; Zigon 2009). Hope is largely born out of a "condition of struggle" (Zigon 2009: 262).

In contrast, Mattingly (2011) frames hope as "practice," thus infusing hope with an agentic dimension. In documenting the lived experiences of people with chronic illness, Mattingly centers her analysis on the concept of hope: "Hope most centrally involves the practice of creating, or trying to create, lives worth living even in the midst of suffering, even with no happy ending in sight" (7). Mattingly's framework of "hope as

practice” or “cultivating hope” offers one way to think about hope and agency among my participants, especially given that Mattingly is so attentive to the structural constraints that confronted her research participants.

Yet, it is Zigon (2009) who perhaps offers the most helpful pathway for understanding how “hope” was engaged in my field site. Zigon is critical of assumptions of hope as either passive or active as well as the presumption that hope is always future-oriented. Zigon’s view of hope is tied to his theorizing on morality (2007, 2009), in which he suggests a distinction between “unreflective and nonconscious everyday way of being in the world” (morality) and “reflective and conscious ethical action necessary in moments of what [he] call[s] moral breakdown or ethical dilemma” (ethics) (Zigon 2009: 254). Like the slippages between morality and ethics, Zigon argues, there are constant slippages between hope as passive and hope as active. Moreover, Zigon argues against a view of hope as future-oriented, rather positing hope as a resource for maintaining continuity. His description of his approach to analyzing hope is worth presenting here at length:

[H]ope ... is better considered as, on the one hand, an existential stance of being-in-the-world. In this way hope can be thought of as the temporal structure of the background attitude that allows one to keep going or persevere through one’s life. This aspect of hope can be seen as similar to what is often characterized as the passive nature of hope. On the other hand, hope is the temporal orientation of conscious and intentional action in moments of what I call moral breakdown, that is, those moments when social and moral life is reflectively and consciously called into question and posed as a problem. This aspect of hope is similar to what is often called the active nature of hope. As such, this aspect of hope is the temporalization process – the intentional and creative uses of the past and the future – that allows for intentional and ethical action. In recasting hope in this way I seek to express the centrality of hope as the temporal motivation in the social lives of my interlocutors. In doing so I think we can better see how hope works not only as motivation for working and

living-through breakdowns, but perhaps more importantly, as motivation for persevering through the life into which one has been thrown. In this way, hope is not necessarily aimed at the future good, but primarily at the perseverance of a sane life. (Zigon 2009: 258)

In returning to my participants' narratives and references to hope, it is evident that the concept of hope emerges as both passive and active, as both a resource for perseverance (passive) and an activity to cultivate and sustain that perseverance (active) (Zigon 2009: 262). Hassan's use of hope demonstrates hope as a resource, as an existential stance of being in-the-world:

And with the conditions now, it's just ... my motivation has gone out from the window. But I haven't lost my hope. If I—if I start losing my hope, then I probably won't be sitting here with you right now... But, yeah, I don't have any motivation now ... I don't—I'm not—I mean, I'm just living.

Here, hope, for Hassan, emerged as a way to survive, to keep going. Despite his lack of motivation to engage with life on a level that he was accustomed or that he wish he felt, his capacity to hope allows him to continue "just living." Understanding asylum seekers' hope as a way of "struggling along" (Desjarlais 1997) or "just living," allows for a consideration of hope as a resource that can be mobilized in order to sustain the self.

Oftentimes for my study participants, hope was connected to religion and faith, as the following narratives illustrate:

You know, I'm a person who believes in God. And on Sunday when I go to church, it's like I can take out all that I have in my mind and what I have in my soul. Like I tell God help me for this. He's the only one I can trust and say what I have in my mind and heart. So, it's only Him that can help me. So for me, the church and to believe in God, that's helped me. It's given me something to have hope. (Patrick, Catholic; asylum seeker from Rwanda)

I've become religious because I don't understand my life anymore. In my country, I never prayed but now I don't understand my life anymore, so I pray. I need hope. (Ahmed, Islamic; asylum seeker from Ethiopia)

And my only source of strength and hope right now is in Christ. It's just you know, just in—getting that confidence that God is the only one who can help me, not man. You'll be disappointed in man, but not God. So...I just pray. And just keep hoping every day. Yeah, I wake up every day, kneel down and pray. When I feel depressed, I kneel down and pray. When I cry, I cry and pray. It's all I can do. (Sarah, Protestant; asylum seeker from Zimbabwe)

On the one hand, the framing of God and/or religion as a source of hope may also be a way of maintaining the quotidian or, as Zigon (2009) posits, an existential stance of being in the world (for Zigon, the passive nature of hope). Yet, on the other hand, these narratives also underscore religion and faith as activities to be practiced in order to maintain the self in the face of suffering. If hope-as-active is defined by Zigon (2009) as intentional action in the moment of moral breakdown, then Ahmed's engagement in prayer as an intentional and conscious attempt to maneuver through confusion and suffering lends support to Zigon's argument. This example also speaks to Parish's claim that amidst suffering, "events 'crash' into our lives, forcing us into struggles to adapt, raising questions about self and existence in the process" (Parish 2008: 127). In other words, for many participants religion was not a passive resource of hope; rather, it was in the active engagement with and practice of religion – in activities such as praying and attending church – that hope was cultivated. Another example of this would be Emmanuel's regular fasting. When I asked him about this, Emmanuel, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in his early thirties, demurred and declined to talk about it in detail. He

did, however, note the connection between the religious practice of fasting and his asylum case, suggesting that he was fasting in case he had “offended God” and that was the cause of the protracted adjudication of his case.

Religion and Life Trajectories

Following Zigon (2009), I have discussed how my participants experienced hope as both passive and active. This was most evident with regard to religious belief and practice. Participants’ attempts at “cultivating” or “practicing” hope may have been everyday survival mechanisms as well as ways to engage, however tenuously or ambivalently, with alternative possibilities for their lives. While hope often represented a way to continue, to “just live” in the present, asylum seekers also hoped for things to change in the future. They hoped to have a successful case (to be granted asylum), to be reunited with their children and families, and to simply “start to feel human again,” as one participant put it. Good (1994), drawing on Bruner, has analyzed “subjunctivizing elements” of people’s illness narratives whereby the future is rendered open to possibilities (155). As Good stresses, this “subjunctivizing” is not just a structural narrative element but is also an important strategy for making meaning of illness and in “attempting to influence its outcome” (153). Understanding hope as part of the subjunctivizing elements of asylum seekers’ narratives helps to understand how participants’ narratives of foreclosure existed alongside narratives that offered a glimpse of alternative visions of the future (the hope that it would be something other than dark and bleak). Sharon, for example, who talked to me of her thoughts of suicide, also offered the following:

What I can say it that ... I have seen the hand of God in my life. And uh ... there is no need for somebody—even if there is a lot of difficulty—to commit suicide. Because the future is very uncertain. You can hope. You can imagine it to be very, very good.

Here, Sharon suggests that hope can be put into practice via imagination, in which the future can be recast or re-envisioned as positive. Sharon connects this ability to hope and to imagine to having “the hand of God in my life.”

Other aspects of participants’ narratives did not engage the idea of “hope” directly, yet nonetheless framed religion and belief in God in similar ways as Sharon did above. That is, God, and the hope that God will take care of things, were powerful forces in forging alternative visions for the future. Consider these narratives:

Right now, I am finding things very difficult. But then, I know my Lord is not the one that will take me to the middle of this, this water and then abandon me ... If he wants to cross me, he will cross me completely. (Emmanuel)

So, even though what I am going through is really hard, I know the Lord. Because I’m a Christian, I believe in God. And I believe what the Lord says. I believe tomorrow will be better. And the Lord will always usher me into that better place. (Barbara)

God parted the Red Sea, he will make a path for me, too. (Ruth)

Here, God and religion are cultural resources that were mobilized in participants’ efforts to respond to suffering (Parish 2008). They were mobilized as a way to envision other kinds of selves, to recast future life trajectories. These narratives may appear to situate hope as passive. Yet, as Zigon insists, “this passivity comes about not because the hope itself is passive, but because this situation, the condition in which hope arises, precludes

the ability to act” (2009: 255). Indeed, my participants found themselves in a world not of their making, forced to contend with the uncertainty of the asylum process and the pain of social rupture. In this context, participants perceived their capacity for action to be limited (sometimes even absent), but this is not to say that they did not actively and creatively engage their social worlds, often in an attempt to “just live.” Their lives fluctuated between despair and hope. As Parish (2008) has so eloquently written of his own response to having cancer: “Depression, despair, a sense of futility, a judgment of hopelessness were making claims on my self-awareness, on my capacity for response; but some part of me wanted to equip hope and acceptance with the means to seize the executive apparatus and self-awareness” (172). Indeed, what I’ve attempted to illustrate in the pages above is my participants’ struggle to respond to suffering in a way that made life tolerable, perhaps even worth living.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that the positioning of asylum seekers as ‘neither here nor there,’ and the profound uncertainty inherent in the asylum process (as part of the “political ethos” of asylum seeking) shaped the relationship between temporality, subjectivity, and power in ways that produce novel modes of being in the world. In explicating ‘existential limbo’ as a particular form of suffering generated within the process of seeking political asylum, this chapter calls attention to the ways in which study participants understood and experienced their lives as suspended, caught, trapped, on hold, or otherwise stuck. Within this context of limbo, waiting--experienced by asylum seekers as a form of powerlessness--characterized everyday life, whereby the present

emerged as the focal point and perceived locus of suffering. Yet, through what I term as ‘temporal blurring,’ the past and future often folded in on the present, and I discussed different ways in which this temporal blurring was enacted.

This chapter also explored the interplay between hopelessness and hope within participants’ lives. Here, I argued that despite the context of uncertainty and powerlessness, asylum seekers exercised agency, albeit in ways that were not forms of overt resistance but rather tactics of daily survival and maintenance. I considered the “practice” of hope as one way in which asylum seekers exercised agency, and also considered the connection of religion and belief in God to the concepts of hope and agency.

The indeterminacy and insecurity associated with the asylum process were experienced as extreme forms of vulnerability. As the next chapter will explore, asylum seekers’ lives were characterized by numerous “intersecting vulnerabilities” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh 2010). In this way, the protracted state of uncertainty and indeterminacy inherent in the asylum process *articulated with* multiple forms of “structural vulnerability” and/or marginalization that confronted asylum seekers (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011). Ruth’s experiences of low wages and verbal abuse in her place of employment, along with her isolation from the community, and her inability to financially provide for her children, all highlight the ways in which other structural and material forces contribute to forms of suffering in the context of asylum seeking. These chapters, taken together, then, provide a richer understanding of how the context of the asylum process and asylum seekers’ unique positionality of ‘inbetweenness’ came to shape their lived experience and sense of self.

CHAPTER 5 STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY AND THE RESHAPING OF SELF AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters focused on the phenomenological and affective dimensions of living within a protracted state of uncertainty, of grappling with a sense of being ‘neither here nor there.’ In that chapter, I argued that the social positioning of asylum seekers within a context of prolonged waiting evoked a state of existential limbo. In this way, that chapter may be understood as exploring the ways in which the liminal status of asylum seekers came to inform sense of self; or, rather, how asylum seekers’ status (or non-status), particularly their sense of potential deportability shaped individual relationships to time and space. In focusing on the ways in which temporality informed asylum seekers’ self-experience, I simultaneously underscored the relational nature of their experiences of self. That is, asylum seekers’ experience of time and power (i.e., their sense of being stuck in time/place) was critically shaped by their social position within a field of power relations.

This chapter expands that discussion by ethnographically examining additional structural forces that came to bear on asylum seekers’ lives in this context, often resulting in experiences of exclusion, marginality, and vulnerability. Legally and politically categorized as “noncitizens,” asylum seekers had limited access to resources such as housing assistance and social welfare services. For example, asylum claimants do not qualify for any housing assistance that relies on federal or state aid (which, as I show, meant that homeless shelters were often the only options for asylum claimants without

another place to stay). Under federal law, non-pregnant, adult asylum seekers without children living with them (which describes all my study participants) also do not apply for federal or state cash assistance programs. Most difficult for study participants were the protracted delays in gaining access to employment authorization. Previously in the dissertation (Chapter 3), I examined the tactics of policing, surveillance, and ‘management’ and argued that these techniques of governmentality be understood as forms of structural violence. Indeed, as I elucidated in that chapter, such tactics emerged as practices of Othering and worked to politically and socially exclude asylum seekers. In this chapter, I explore additional structural forces and processes that served to further marginalize and exclude asylum seekers. Foremost among these structural forces were processes of economic exclusion and marginalization.

I concentrate this chapter primarily on economic marginality and vulnerability for two reasons. First, this was the most salient form of vulnerability or exclusion reported by asylum seekers. Lack of access to employment frequently recurred in participants’ narratives as a key structural factor informing their sense of exclusion and suffering. Economic marginalization, as I will discuss, was also understood as a main challenge to asylum seekers’ sense of self and identity and was also seen as a primary catalyst in reconfiguring social and familial relations in this context. Second, other structural forces, or “violences,” were critically tied to economic marginalization. For example, struggles with housing or cohabiting were often centered on participants’ inability to financially contribute to rent or household expenses; and the potential need for social services (particularly food and material assistance) were understood by asylum seekers as a consequence of being rendered ineligible to work.

If the temporal orientation of existentially lingering in time and space evoked a sense of only partially existing, of life “on hold,” then additional forms of structural violence served to sediment this sense of stuckness. Ultimately, then, I suggest that the phenomenological and affective dimensions of uncertainty articulated with various structural and social forces of exclusion and marginalization in particular ways, further provoking a state of suffering. Lack of access to housing or employment and prolonged separation from family—all aspects of asylum seekers’ vulnerability in this context—were constant and continual reminders of asylum seekers’ ambiguous state of legal and existential limbo. Vulnerability, from this vantage point, is understood as a positionality informed by the interrelationship of various forms of forces, “some tangible and others intangible; some structural and others experiential [,] whose accumulation yields powerful biological and subjective effects” (Willen 2012a: 809).

The various dimensions of asylum seekers’ structural vulnerability were intertwined in ways that produced novel forms of suffering. The interrelationship of aspects of violence and suffering has been variously theoretically approached: as “conjugated oppression” (Bourgois 1988, 1995; Holmes 2007), “hierarchies of embodied suffering” (Holmes 2007), “intersecting vulnerabilities” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh 2010) and “cumulative vulnerabilities” (Huffman et al. 2012). In line with these theoretical approaches, I argue that it is not necessarily the case that myriad forms of structural violence, vulnerability or oppression produced more suffering for asylum seekers, but that they produced particular constellations of suffering and novel states of being. Thus, in attempting to both denaturalize suffering and to avoid abstractly glossing asylum seekers’ suffering as “structural violence” (see Chapter 1), this chapter

ethnographically explicates the specific structural forces that challenge asylum seekers' well-being, sense of self, and social relationships. This chapter will also elucidate the pathways by which these structural forces and processes came to bear on lived experience and interpersonal relations.

This chapter begins by ethnographically examining, in several sections, how economic and political exclusion and marginality emerged as not only a material or existential threat, but also profoundly challenged asylum seekers' identities on multiple levels. Next, I consider how the forms of structural violence to which participants were subjected also critically reconfigured social relations. Thus, I explore and expound on the ways in which relationships and roles among community members and, especially, family members were challenged and often transformed by asylum seekers' positions of vulnerability and marginality in the U.S. In closing this larger discussion of the impact of economic marginalization, I ethnographically and theoretically consider the impact that securing a work permit had on the lives of asylum seekers' and trace the vicissitudes of experience as asylum seekers with work permits attempted to enter the labor force.

Finally, this chapter explores the ways in which both the tangible and intangible, both structural and phenomenological/affective dimensions of vulnerability come to be embodied in ways that produce ill health and challenge well-being. I contextualize this discussion with a consideration of how economic and social marginalization impacted access to and use of healthcare. By ethnographically considering how fear, vulnerability, and uncertainty were embodied, I posit attention to bodily ways of being in the world as a critical aspect to more fully apprehending the suffering and experiences of asylum seekers in protracted states of legal and existential limbo.

EMPLOYMENT AUTHORIZATION DOCUMENTS AND INSTITUTIONAL LOGIC OF DESERVINGNESS

In 1994, the U.S. government imposed new procedures mandating delays in the issuance of work permits, or Employment Authorization Documents (EADs), for those seeking asylum. Also at this time, the U.S. became the first country in the world to attempt to impose an application fee (of \$130 USD) for those claiming to flee political persecution in their home countries. This attempted move at charging asylum claimants, however, was quickly revoked in the face of significant criticism from refugee advocacy groups and legal organizations. Prior to the new mandated delays in issuing EADs, asylum applicants were issued an EAD once they had submitted their asylum application. A New York Times article (1994) reported on the institutional justification for these changes, which at the time included the proposed application fee:

The Deputy Immigration Commissioner, Chris Sale, who described the proposed changes, said current asylum procedures were "encouraging people to abuse the system."

Existing procedures generally make it easy for immigrants to apply for asylum but place them in a legal no-man's-land awaiting hearings. Ms. Sale said the long delays in the system were also "damaging the bona fide candidates" for protection under the asylum laws.

Ms. Sale said that a work permit was a prize sought by fraudulent asylum-seekers and that delaying the permit would deter the fraud. Immigration officials say they expect word of the fees and the work-permit delays to go out on a global grapevine, slowing the flood of new asylum applicants.

The moral tone of Ms. Sale's rhetoric and, indeed, of the proposed changes themselves, are striking and bring into sharp relief conceptualizations of 'deservingness' that underlie the political asylum process. As Chapter 7 will examine, immigration officials often

framed political asylum in the language of “benefits” that need to be “earned” and not a “gift” to be doled out to those who are not entitled. In some officials’ terms, asylum seekers’ were “customers” seeking a “service” (legal status), of which they may or may not be deserving. For these immigration officials, fraudulent asylum claimants were viewed as morally suspect and a kind of moral cancer on the “integrity of the system.” Indeed, the decision to delay the issuance of EADs relied on the same moral logic. Moreover, the new policy of delaying EADs is a striking example of immigration policy as “a disciplinary practice providing a mechanism for differentiating between various categories of migrants” (Castenada 2010: 260). That is, with the new EAD requirements in place, “authentic” asylum seekers would be revealed as those who could patiently bide time for employment authorizations, while fraudulent, ‘bogus’ asylum seekers would presumably be deterred from making an asylum claim for the purpose of accessing an EAD.

Here, then, the EAD regulations emerge not merely as a disciplinary mechanism for differentiating between types of migrants, but more precisely as a disciplinary mechanism for discerning ‘deserving’/morally legitimate and ‘undeserving’/morally suspect migrants. Indeed, as I have emphasized in previous chapters, concepts of “deservingness” underlie the categorical distinction between putative “voluntary” (economic) vs. so-called “involuntary” (humanitarian) migrants. A key concern driving the EAD policy changes was that “economic migrants” (or, so-called “voluntary migrants”) were undeservedly gaining access to work permits, which were, in theory, supposed to be reserved for “involuntary” or “forced” migrants -- i.e, “authentic” refugees.

The expectation, then, is that those asylum claimants who wait are ‘rewarded’ with the “prize” of the right to (legal) work opportunities. The newly imposed delay (which stands today) requires asylum applicants to wait 150 days after submitting a completed asylum application before applying for an EAD. The government (initially INS, now DHS) then has another 30 days to adjudicate the EAD application, and the EAD cannot be issued until a claimant’s asylum application has been pending for at least 180 days. This waiting period of 180 or more to obtain an EAD has become known as “the EAD asylum clock” or, simply, “the clock.” While the creation of the asylum clock was intended to both decrease the length of time to adjudicate asylum claims as well as prevent the submission of fraudulent or “frivolous” claims (i.e., to deter “bogus” asylum seekers), the results have been much different in practice. There continues to be a backlog of asylum cases and the adjudication of cases continues to be seriously delayed (Legomsky 2009a, 2009b; TRAC 2012). Moreover, significant problems associated with “the clock” have been documented (Saucedo and Rodriguez 2010). To be sure, problems with EADs were the subject of a lengthy and extremely well attended conference panel at a large, regional immigration conference I attend during my field work.

Recent research suggests that problems with the clock hinge on the lack of clarity and transparency of the government’s management of the clock, as well as the government’s misinterpretation of regulations and improper implementation of clock rules (Saucedo and Rodriguez 2010: 15). Asylum officials and Immigration Judges can stop the clock for a litany of reasons (e.g., failing to show up for a fingerprinting appointment, requesting a change of date for an asylum hearing; asking for additional time to secure necessary documents; and for problems in government coding/data entry

errors) and the clock is often be stopped without the knowledge of an asylum claimant and his or her lawyer(s), if the asylum claimants has legal representation (Saucedo and Rodriguez 2010: 17). Oftentimes, the clock is stopped indefinitely. As a recent legal research report noted: “The problems with government’s administration of the EAD asylum clock take many forms and result in the asylum applicant encountering delays in obtaining work authorization or never obtaining it at all” (Saucedo and Rodriguez 2010: 15).

Moreover, it is important to note that “the clock” would not even start until a completed application was submitted. By law, asylum seekers have one year from the time they enter the U.S. to file an asylum application, and most of my study participants took close to the year to do this. Thus, the time spent preparing an application and waiting for acknowledgement that an application was fully complete is not included in ‘the clock’ calculations, yet this is critical time in which migrants begin their liminal state of uncertainty and must attempt to survive in their new environments. Among my study participants who did receive work permits, the average wait, from the time they arrived in the U.S. until the time they received their EAD, was close to two years. The lack of clarity and transparency of “the clock” and its regulations, along with the seemingly frequent nature of its stopping and re-starting (though the clock, once stopped, was not always restarted), caused confusion among study participants and furthered their sense of insecurity and vulnerability. In many instances, the government’s interpretation of the EAD clock appeared punitive—yet another form of criminalization or deterrence to which asylum seekers were subjected. For example, the clock would be stopped if attorneys needed additional time to gather required documents or evidence for court

hearings (and give that documents often needed to be procured from overseas, this was not uncommon). The clock would also stop if claimants or their attorneys needed to reschedule court appearances or even biometrics (fingerprinting) appointments. The overall effect of this, according to a major policy report concluded: “The EAD asylum regulations were not intended to punish applicants who participate in the proper adjudication of their asylum claims ... but current EOIR interpretations punish legitimate asylum applicants” (Saucedo and Rodriguez 2010: 20).

As this chapter will discuss, the time spent without work authorization documents was extremely challenging for asylum seekers. Lack of access to employment was a key facet of asylum seekers’ structural vulnerability and threatened their ability to not only survive on a day to day basis, but also provoked a threat to their sense of self and identity, especially with regard to their inability to provide for family in their home countries. Yet, even though receiving a work permit, for some, provided some sense of security and ‘movement,’ often times participants were unable to find a job or were subjected to difficult work environments. Recall, for example, the case of Ruth, with which I opened the previous chapter. Not only was she paid poor wages, but she was also confronted with verbal abuse from her clients on a daily basis. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, Ruth’s experience was not anomalous. For those, however, without access to employment, their ability to provide for themselves or others - indeed, their very survival - was perceived to be at stake.

“HOW CAN I SURVIVE?”: ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AS EXISTENTIAL THREAT

Because most of my study participants arrived in the U.S. with little or no savings, employment was a primary focus of theirs. Most asylum seekers were unaware that they would be made to wait for such long periods until getting a work authorization. Lack of employment had very real material consequences for my study participants. Asylum seekers struggled to pay rent or contribute to household expenses, put food on the table, or buy clothes and other necessities. As I will discuss, for those asylum seekers who stayed with friends or family members or who were immersed in a community, this issue was somewhat easier to navigate (although, as I will show, such connection to community was not without its challenges). For those who were relatively isolated, the problem of lack of employment was more painfully experienced. Ahmed, who was living with his sister (who, though she had a green card, had just lost her job as a cashier at WalMart) and who was quite isolated, staying in the house except to occasionally go to the local mosque, felt the effects of not having employment opportunities and interpreted this as a threat to his very survival. As he exclaimed to me, after learning that his initial application for a work permit was denied:

If they [US government] don't let me work and I don't have money to survive, then how do I live? ... I want to work. If anybody could give me a job, I would work. That is no question. But I have no document. So the cruel thing is, how can I survive? But nobody can understand. Before you win your case, you are nothing. And the government is not helping me, and now my sister and I, we are both suffering here very bad. Really very, very bad situation.

For Ahmed, it was not just that there were no opportunities for work. It was the very fact that he was denied the opportunity that was so painful. Ahmed experienced and understood this as a form of exclusion and a kind of dehumanization. In suggesting that

“before you win your case, you are nothing.” Ahmed underscored the way in which he is seen, from an institutional standpoint, as a non-person within this context of legal limbo. Not yet seen as ‘deserving’ of employment opportunities, Ahmed was left to himself to find ways to survive without official access to financial earning power.

Lodging a claim for political asylum and thus being declared (by self and state) as an asylum seeker can be read as a specific attempt to not be labeled as an economic migrant. Yet, such a positionality presented a paradox that posed great challenges for asylum seekers: being an ‘authentic’ political refugee by definition meant migrating to the U.S. for “humanitarian,” not economic reasons, yet many asylum seekers were nonetheless without financial means or support while in the U.S. Moreover, as hyper-visible subjects, study participants were very reluctant to engage in jobs that would be deemed illegal given their unauthorized (to work) status. Such unauthorized work, if discovered, would pose a severe risk to their ability to secure legal status. Prolonged delays or even denials of EADS, then, reinforced asylum seekers’ economic marginalization and sharpened the struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis for many study participants.

Similar to Ahmed, Lionel, an asylum seeker from Liberia in his mid thirties, explicitly located his lack of access to employment as a primary struggle that he faced in the U.S. He stated in an early interview:

My inability to work, earn, and dispense money by myself, it’s a...problem. It keeps me down. Downhearted. It’s- it’s a- it’s a trauma for me. So then you keep thinking about it, about not being able to work and earn money and then it becomes a psychological problem.

In framing the inability to work as a form of “trauma,” Lionel’s narrative powerfully emphasizes the impact of economic exclusion that extends beyond its material effects. As Coutin (2003b) has argued with regard to undocumented migrants, because wage labor is a “key marker of presence, personhood, and citizenship,” their lack of work authorization served to deny migrants’ existence (31). Though temporary for many asylum seekers, this inability or illegalization of work was experienced as an erasure of personhood and was a painful reminder of asylum seekers’ state of limbo.

Sharon, too, saw her lack of work authorization as an psychological and emotional issue, namely with regard to an affective state of anxiety it generated. As she elaborated:

Well, because we [asylum seekers] haven’t been given a [work] permit, we are not allowed [to work]. There is much anxiety. This anxiety because of all the fear of where we are going. What is awaiting us... it is a very long and enduring anxiety. We don’t know. We don’t have an income, which could help ease the mind. You know, people are very anxious when they don’t have money. They are lacking this, lacking that.

Sharon’s narrative also importantly points to the intersection and interrelationship between asylum seekers’ temporal condition of waiting that is itself evocative of suffering and the structural barriers to labor that serve to further marginalize and exclude them. Here, the losses that asylum seekers suffer are both material and nonmaterial (Kibreab 2004), tangible and intangible. The anxiety that Sharon speaks of is doubly produced: generated by the uncertainty inherent in the asylum process as well as by her systematic exclusion from the labor force. In addition to the very real concerns of not being able to buy food or clothing or to pay rent or contribute to household finances,

asylum seekers experienced their lack of authorization to work (or, as I will discuss below, the inability to find employment) as an assault on their social identities.

Here, I understand identity to be fluid, emergent and shifting. I take identity to be “neither fixed nor given, but rather, a dynamic process of, a changing view of the self and the other, constantly acquiring new meanings and forms through interactions with social contexts and within historical moments” (Ghorashi 2004: 106; see also Malkki 1995; Holland et al. 1998; Linger 2001). Indeed, I will be talking about shifting aspects of self as they emerge within particular contexts and constellations of structural and social forces. The following sections address various aspects of self and social identities (as they relate to community membership, professional identities, family roles, and political subjecthood, etc.). What I aim to show in the sections that follow is how asylum seekers respond to their structural vulnerability by transfiguring the relationships they have to themselves and to others. I begin with an examination of participants’ notions of professional identity and ‘productive’ subjecthood.

“I’M NOT A LAZY MAN!”: ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND ‘PRODUCTIVE’ PERSONHOOD

When I had asked Emmanuel, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in his mid-30s, what the most difficult aspect of not having a work permit was, he immediately responded: “Because, you see, I am not a lazy man! I am not a lazy man.” Here, Emmanuel emphasized not the material struggle associated with economic exclusion or marginality, but rather the intrapersonal consequences of this. Economic exclusion, for Emmanuel and other participants, was not solely, and sometimes not even primarily,

about the financial strain it inhaled; exclusion or marginalization also emerged as a profound threat to personhood. This was a threat in two primary ways. First, being rendered unable to work or to re-engage with previous and, often, longstanding careers (such as journalists, civil servants, small business owners, farmers) as well as their political activity, asylum seekers' sense of themselves as independent and politically and socially agentive was destabilized and threatened.

Study participants often emphasized that they wanted to work and would often detail to me their strong work ethic or ambitious drives, telling me how hard they worked in their home countries. Often, asylum seekers' past livelihoods had been abruptly cut short when they had fled for safety in the U.S. and the possibility of restoring these livelihoods or professions was often bleak. Study participants' recurring narratives about their employment or professions in their countries of origin, then, were often offered as a way of asserting their identities and maintaining a sense of 'productive personhood' that had been stifled or silenced in their new environment. Very often, these narratives of past work experience and professional identities would emerge within the context of talking about either their lack of work authorization or their inability to find a job in the U.S. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2010) report that the asylum seekers with whom they worked in the UK would present certificates of volunteer work, which the authors interpret as migrants' attempts at stressing their productivity in the face of being legally unable to work. Work, even if unpaid or voluntary, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2010) assert, was a way for asylum seekers to "regain [their] position as an active participant and actor" in society and within their families (308). Several of my study participants did perform volunteer work. Two participants engaged in volunteer work

with their local Catholic churches, working as ushers during Sunday mass and doing ministry work with the critically ill. Another participant, Sharon took great pride in her volunteer work with a local human rights organization, passing out informational brochures at community festivals and farmers' markets. Following Fiddian Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2010), I would argue that these volunteer activities did help these asylum seekers regain some sense of active participation in their social worlds.

Yet, it was more often the case that certificates or other "proof" of productivity from the past, rather than volunteer work in the present, were presented or discussed as a way of asserting and sustaining these aspects of their identities. Examples of this recurred frequently throughout my field work, both in interviews and in everyday conversations with asylum seekers. Upon our first meeting, Lionel, a former Liberian journalist, showed me several articles he had written and pointed me to internet news stories written both by him and about him in Liberia. Bereket, a former civil servant and political activist from Ethiopia, would show me the social policy documents and research he had been working on prior to his flight to the U.S. During one of our first meetings, Ahmed showed me a tattered ID card from his work as an interpreter for an international NGO working on the Somalia-Ethiopia border.

These are but a few of the examples of study participants emphasizing their past work or productivity to me, as well as reinforcing their social identities as politically active in the past. I understood these aspects of participants' narratives to be a way for asylum seekers to convey to me these important aspects of their identities - aspects that were, due to various structural and economic barriers in the U.S., challenged or silenced. That these narratives of professionalism, political activity, or other forms of

‘productivity’ often arose in the context of talking about financial hardships in the U.S. or the frustrations - even “trauma” - of not being able to work, can be read as an intra- and inter-personal way to assert an alternative narrative or label, one that contradicts the institutionally-produced identity as an ‘unauthorized’ or ‘illegitimate,’ and therefore ‘unproductive’ person. I will return later in this chapter to a discussion of how asylum seekers’ maintained engagement with politics (in home countries), albeit to limited degrees, and how this engagement mediated self and social relationships.

The second way in which the economic exclusion or marginalization of asylum seekers emerged as a threat to personhood related to the status of being ‘unauthorized to work’ and its relationship to dominant images, representations, and discourses in the U.S. that equate moral worth with professional or financial productivity. As noted earlier, exclusion from the labor force can be seen as an erasure of personhood, given that wage labor is a key marker of inclusion and existence (Coutin 2003b). That they were, for legal and political reasons, not considered, or not allowed to be considered, as a ‘contributing member of society’ was not lost on my study participants. Asylum seekers often told me that they sought to contribute to American society; or as one participant put it, “I want to work! I want to be a tax-paying citizen!”

Asylum seekers seemed quite cognizant of the fact that their systematic exclusion from the labor force produced them, in the moral logic of a capitalism/neoliberalism, as an ‘unproductive’ or ‘lazy’ Other. My observation here echoes what Tormey (2007), in her work with African asylum seekers in Ireland, posits: “Crucially, because they are not legally allowed to work, asylees are not perceived by Irish citizens as visibly contributing to the productive force of the nation and, consequently, are unable to stake a moral claim

to membership of their communities” (Tormey 2007: 76). The structural barriers to inclusion made this a formidable position for study participants to navigate. As Sharon put it: “In U.S., they say to work hard. But you know, the only way I can work hard is to ask, to beg, to borrow.” As I will examine shortly, the intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of this need to “beg” and “borrow” were numerous.

Asylum seekers’ assertion of identities stressing ‘productive personhood’ (e.g., “I’m not a lazy man!”), must to be understood, then, not just as communicating salient aspects of their identities, but also as challenging this discursively and institutionally-produced positionality of unproductive Other. In this way, I found study participants’ fairly common engagement with rhetoric that emphasized their desires to “pay taxes” or “work any job at all” as well as participants’ common disparagement of people they saw begging for money on the street as “lazy” or “a disgrace” to be way of distancing themselves, both inwardly and outwardly, from a low-class status and its accompanying sense of moral failing. Moreover, these assertions of identities need also to be considered in the larger framework of the asylum process as a struggle to be seen as deserving, a framework that, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, undergirds and informs everyday activities in this context. In other words, we need to understand assertions of ‘productive personhood’ as simultaneously a struggle with self and identity and a subtle, even unconscious, ‘performance’ or assertion of authenticity and deservingness (of legal status) in the broader context of asylum seeking.

“I’M STILL THEIR MOTHER”: STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY AND THE RESHAPING OF FAMILY RELATIONS

Asylum seekers' protracted state of limbo and its concomitant forms of vulnerability were also a threat to their identities with regard to their inability to provide for their families, both in the U.S. and, particularly, in their countries of origin. Furthermore, participants' structural vulnerability reshaped not only their relationships to themselves, but also reconfigured family relationships and roles. Many study participants had been either the sole economic provider for his or her family or contributed significantly to their households. For male study participants, the role of the "breadwinner" was especially salient, but this role was also attached to many female participants, especially those who were divorced or widowed before their flight to the U.S. (which describes the majority of female participants). Of course, family roles extended far beyond financial responsibilities. Indeed, as the following sections will explore, structural vulnerability transformed understandings and expectations of what it meant to be a mother, father, sister, brother, son, or daughter.

In these ways, the structural vulnerability generated by a lack of an EAD or lack of employment opportunities evoked a form of suffering that was social in the very sense that Kleinman (1998) has outlined. That is, asylum seekers' suffering was socially and structurally rooted, both in terms of the state violence and oppression that made their flight to the U.S. necessary and in terms of the social and economic marginalization of these migrants once in the U.S. In addition, asylum seekers' suffering was social in that it was intersubjectively experienced. Asylum seekers repeatedly told me that their asylum claim was not "just about me ... it's about my family." Participants often underscored that they sought asylum "for the sake of my children" or emphasized that they were seeking asylum "so that my family can be safe."

Ahmed captured the ways in which he understood his asylum case to be thoroughly relational. As he noted: “Maybe I can find the patience to wait for the [asylum] hearing, but I need help. I need work. My family needs me. I don’t know how I’m going to handle this. I can’t handle not being able to take care of my family.” Thus, obtaining an EAD and, ultimately, legal status was not just about individual security, but rather was integrally tied to asylum seekers’ ability to continue to provide safety and security to their families on the other side of the world. Indeed, as Joseph, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, declared: “I just have to get asylum so that I can take care of my family.” Recall Ruth’s declaration to me that even though she was physically absent from her children, her responsibilities to them remained: “I’m still their mother!” she had emphasized. Yet, Ruth’s economic and social marginality presented a painful and challenging problem to navigate, a problem that presented itself to most study participants: if material support emerged as the primary way to continue her role as mother but she was unable to access the financial means to do this, what did this mean in terms of familial roles and relationships?

This was a common dilemma and evoked a deep sense of struggle and suffering among my study participants. Ahmed was explicit in the connection between his inability to work and the inability to fulfill critical familial roles:

Ahh, um this my life now. This my life. I lost my uncle and my father now [killed in Ethiopia]. According to my religion, according to my culture or my people, the first child, he should be same like the father. So my younger brothers, they need a father, so I should be—replace my father—I should provide help for them. But I can’t even help myself ... And not them.

For study participants who had not yet received an EAD, negotiating the obligation to send money or material goods was all the more difficult for these asylum seekers and their families. Indeed, the structural vulnerability of asylum seekers “does not structure individual experience alone, but sets in motion a concatenation of shared vulnerabilities and intimate interdependencies between family members” (Horton 2009: 22).

Separation and Expectation: The Pain of Not Being Able to Provide

Bourdieu (1997) points to the intersubjective nature of human experience in suggesting recognition from and interaction with others as vital components of life or “reasons for existing” (240). A sense of full existence demands, to some extent, an engagement with one’s social world. As Bourdieu outlines:

To be expected, solicited, overwhelmed with obligations and commitments is not only to be snatched from solitude or insignificance, but also to experience, in the most continuous and concrete way, the feeling of counting for others, being important for them, and therefore in oneself, and finding in the permanent plebiscite of testimonies of interest--requests, expectations, invitations -- a kind of continuous justification for existing (1997: 240).

In the context of asylum seeking, this sense of being important to others, participating in activities and fulfilling expectations -- all things that serve as a justification for existing -- were greatly challenged. Separation from family was one of the most salient aspects of suffering for study participants.

Yet, family separation had many layers. It was not just the sense of not fully existing without them, of feeling the pain and sadness associated with separation. Study participants also struggled deeply with their inability to continue or reconstruct what they

saw as their appropriate familial roles (mother, father, brother, wife, husband, etc.). In this way, then, the expectations and solicitations to which Bourdieu (1997) refers took on a different meaning, and often had a different effect in this context. Rather than become a reason or justification for existence, familial expectations, pleas, and solicitations often contributed to asylum seekers' sense of suffering. In his rich examination of suffering and subjectivity in American society, Parish (2008) notes that for individuals facing major existential challenges or crises, himself included, suffering is thoroughly intersubjective. He writes: "our power to know the world, to evaluate and orient self, to find meaning in others and be something for others was challenged ... We had to deal with the feelings that happened to us as well as cope with practical circumstances" (Parish 2008: 151). Parish's observations are also keenly descriptive of my participants' struggle to negotiate their vulnerability in this context. Economic marginalization/exclusion manifested not just in concrete, material struggles, but also in emotional and existential dilemmas. Suffering was not merely a matter of subjectivity but was a thoroughly intersubjective state.

Even for those with employment, the struggle to balance living expenses with providing for family back home was still a challenge and a source of stress, anxiety, and sadness. Almost all study participants stressed the need to send money or material items, such as clothes, back to their families in their home countries. They also simultaneously emphasized both the pain that not being able to do this caused them. The suffering caused by their inability to provide materially for their families was compounded by the fact that family members often failed to understand why participants were not able to send more,

or any, money. Maurice (M), who had recently received his EAD and found work doing various jobs for a temp agency, wrestled with these concerns:

- M: It's very important [to send money/material goods to family back home]. Very important. But, unless you have a really good job here, you will not be able to support them financially all the time.
- BH: Mmhmm.
- M: You have a limit.
- BH: Mmhmm. And do you find that people back in Cameroon understand that?
- M: Well, only those who've traveled, they understand it.
- BH: Yeah.
- M: Those who've not, they don't- they don't got a clue why .. people think, oh, well, in America's everyone's rich and you should be sending money all the time ... It's very frustrating.

Alice (A), another asylum seeker from Cameroon in her early-fifties, who had also obtained her EAD and worked as an assistant in a nursing home, articulated the struggle of balancing her living expenses in the U.S. on a meager salary with continuing to provide for her children:

- A: Yeah. I tell them [children]...tell them that United States is very hard. You suffer a lot before you have anything. So, everything that I sent you, then you should...manage it better.
- BH: Mmhmm. So do you send money back?
- A: Yeah. I send them money. I'm working, but I don't earn much and I have the house that I'm paying the rent. I have other bills....I am unable to pay my bills now. It's hard. It's really hard ... The economy of the country [US] is...is a...is low. Especially for- for us. We send money home. So when we are sending money the rate is cheap. If you have a hundred dollar here to send it to Cameroon. Before it was uh, 50,000 in Cameroon. But now it's about forty, forty something.
- BH: Yeah. So it's less and less.
- A: Mmhmm. So...it makes us worry... and still I must send money back home. But then the bills I have to pay too. It worries me. For everything you must pay. I send money, but then they [children] say 'It's not enough for us.' I have to send them

money for school fee. Medications and food, clothing.

Similarly, Linda, an asylum seeker from Liberia, who had recently received her EAD and was able to get a part-time housekeeping job at a hotel, explained to me why she continued to struggle to pay bills: “I have my brothers and sisters back in Africa. They don’t have a job. So all my money, I have to help them first. And it’s never enough!”

Struggle of Motherhood in Context of Asylum Seeking

Horton (2009), in her work with undocumented Salvadoran migrants who left behind children, examines the intricate ways in which these parents occupy a space of pain and suffering. She writes:

Many Salvadoran parents inhabit a local moral world defined by a paradox in parenthood unfamiliar to many Americans, as they must make a dichotomous choice between financially supporting their children and physically serving as their caretakers ... Although the Salvadoran mothers I interviewed had expected to reunite with their children within months after their departure, they found that the tightening of the border and their inability to reach their economic goals had indefinitely prolonged their separation. These parents do not tell their stories with a sense of righteous victimhood but, rather, with a sense of profound moral failing, their perceived inability to serve as proper parents only extended and reinforced by their inability to succeed economically (Horton 2009: 27).

Horton’s observations here are quite relevant to the present discussion, though with some important differences. Horton (2009), like other scholars of transnational mothering (see Coe 2011, Dreby 2010), suggests that undocumented mothers, feeling “profound moral failure for not being able to physical caretakers for their children,” then “exchange” this failure for financial support (Horton 2009: 30). While this is exactly what asylum seekers aim to do (provide financially for their families), their explicit exclusion from the labor

force (temporary in theory, but delayed, sometimes indefinitely, in practice) prohibits them from the possibility of such an “exchange.”

Horton’s (2009) assertion that these parents expected the separation from their children to be temporary aptly describes my study participants as well. An important difference between Horton’s study participants and mine is that asylum seekers have a legally protected status and that by definition they have fled not for economic reasons but for humanitarian ones. However, the experiences between the two groups are nonetheless highly similar. That is, my study participants, all of whom were unfamiliar with the concept of asylum before coming to the U.S., had fully expected that they would stay in the U.S. briefly until they were able to return to their countries of origin. When it became clear that this was not a viable option and they were made aware of applying for asylum, all study participants initially expected this to be a swift process -- most thought a matter of days -- and that they would then be able to quickly bring their children and other family members to the U.S. Like Horton’s (2009) undocumented Salvadoran subjects, asylum seekers were unexpectedly embedded in a structurally vulnerable situation, whereby institutional forces prolonged their separation from family and their economic struggles.

The observations that Horton (2009) makes regarding the sense of moral failing of her Salvadoran participants also echoes asylum seekers’ stance toward themselves and their situation in my research site. The following quotes from two female participants, Sharon and Louise, highlight how both asylum seekers and their families back home, struggle to reconcile their flight to the U.S. with appropriate forms of mothering and the guilt and shame that ensue:

Sometimes it causes a lot of pain, talking to my children. You know, sometimes they ask “what have you left us? Why have you, a mother, left your family behind, living this life we are living? (Louise, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

I tell me children ‘I have let you down. I wasn’t the mother I was supposed to be ... I left my children running in the world and I feel so bad because of that (Sharon, asylum seeker from Kenya)

Here, with these quotes, we can see the profound ways in which family relationships were critically challenged and, often, restructured by the asylum process. Female asylum seekers had to confront the guilt, shame, and sadness that they felt because of their flight to the U.S., even though in many, if not most, cases, they were urged by their families to leave. These feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness were deepened and prolonged, however, by the protracted asylum process that marginalized and excluded them. This protracted state of legal limbo made their perceived familial failings constantly at the fore of asylum seekers’ thoughts and deepened the suffering of both asylum seekers and their families across the globe.

The sense of moral failing that parents, especially mothers, experienced in my study was often exacerbated by the reports that family back home were being harassed and threatened in the wake of my participants’ disappearances from their countries of origin. Hence, asylum seekers were sometimes confronted with another cruel irony: they fled their home countries in order to provide safety to themselves and, by extension, their families and yet, now here, their families back home were not only struggling in a material sense, but were also continually harassed and threatened. Consequently, asylum

seekers' family members would often express feelings of confusion and abandonment, increasing tension and emotional pain on both sides of the globe.

Transnational Ties and Coping with Feelings of Guilt

How, then, did participants cope with or assuage these feelings of guilt or moral failing? Before investigating the strategies for coping with or mitigating guilt, I want to underscore that these feelings were expressed by participants not only with regard to their roles as parents or caregivers. Many participants, especially those involved in political activism, grappled with feelings of guilt about fleeing their countries of origin, leaving others to continue fighting the political struggle in their homelands. In this section, I focus on my Cameroonian participants, as way of offering a particular ethnographic example, to examine how feelings of guilt—evoked by either the guilt of leaving behind children or other family members or by the sense of moral failing by abandoning a political movement in their homelands (or both)—were negotiated.

While my female Cameroonian participants did express, at times, feelings of guilt about leaving fellow SCNC members back home to struggle politically without their assistance, their sense of guilt or moral failing, when articulated, seemed much more connected to leaving behind family. Cameroonian men, on the other hand, though they spoke of the loss of family separation, pointed more frequently to a sense of guilt or moral failing about leaving the political struggle in Cameroon. Though they were not always forthcoming about these feelings, Cameroonian men sometimes revealed to me their fear that they had (or, at least, would be perceived as having) abdicated their moral obligation to fight against the oppression of Anglophone Cameroonians.

If, however, feelings of guilt and moral failing seemed to be derived differently, in somewhat gendered ways, male and female Cameroonian participants nonetheless shared what I identified as several similar tactics for negotiating these feelings of guilt. First, these participants, when possible, sent money back home. As I have described in this chapter thus far, this was often due to cultural and familial expectations of continuing his or her role as provider. With regard to mothers, in particular, I suggested that this financial support also represented a sort of symbolic ‘exchange’ (albeit a highly fraught one) for their physical presence. In the case of most Cameroonian participants, but particularly for men, money sent back home was also importantly directed toward supporting the SCNC and the strength of the opposition movement. The following excerpts demonstrate the importance placed on continuing to financially support the political opposition movement:

Even if it’s only \$20 that I can send to them [SCNC], I want it on record that I contributed to the cause. So if I can ever go back home, then I can say yes I wasn’t here but I contributed. I was with you. With my money, with my heart, my ideas. (Eric, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

So even though I am here, I know we are still supposed to support [financially] the movement to change the conditions [in Cameroon]. I am still a fighter. It is not as if I have run away from the situation completely. (Emmanuel)

Wise (2006), drawing on Hage’s (2002) notion of “migration guilt” has suggested that refugees’ transnational engagement with political activities emerges as a way to “share in and produce the moral economy” of their homeland communities, and to simultaneously “appease feelings of guilt arising from the sense that they had fled their war-ravaged homeland to save themselves and their own families” (Wise 2006: 154). Likewise, by

continuing to financially support the SCNC, Cameroonian participants were able to maintain a sense of moral engagement with the political movement, thus mitigating feelings of guilt for not being physically present to engage in political activism.

Furthermore, participants reflected a sense of contribution or productivity through their financial and ideological support of the SCNC. As Emmanuel emphasized: “I am still a fighter.” This ability to claim, or maintain, some aspect of their political identity was an important strategy of “self work” in a context where participants were denied other opportunities (namely, economic ones) to engage in their social worlds (Parish 2008).

A second tactic that participants engaged as a way to assuage guilt surrounded the assertion of themselves as “forced” migrants. That is, in the face of feelings of guilt and moral failing for leaving their country and their families, the notion that he or she had “no choice but to leave”—something repeated over and over by my participants—had significant purpose and meaning. By framing their flight to the U.S. and abandonment of children as something that was necessary and out of their control, asylum seekers were able to recast themselves not as a morally suspect mother but as a kind of “morally legitimate suffering body” (Ticktin 2011: 11). Related to this narrative of “forced” migration was the understanding and articulation of their flight to the U.S. as an act of sacrifice. Again and again, participants told me: “I did it for my children.” By recasting themselves through these alternative narratives of “forced” to flee and as sacrificial parent, participants sought not only to make sense of the shifting family dynamics brought on by their current state of existential limbo, but also to assuage the feelings of guilt and moral failing that arose in this context.

Avoidance of Family Interaction as Self-Protection

In part because family interactions often provoked feelings of moral failing and suffering, many study participants would avoid talking to family members in their country of origin. My data show that this avoidance of talking to family emerged as twofold. First, it was often a tactic to avoid the emotional pain that talking to family members provoked, much in the same way that “thinking too much” about one’s problems was understood as something to be avoided. Longing for or missing family was cited by study participants as one of the most difficult aspects of asylum seeking. Separation from family contributed to the sense of partial existence that asylum seekers articulated and that was described in the previous chapter. As Sarah, an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe, explained:

I think if they [Immigration officials] would let me bring my family at least I’d be having peace of mind. You know, and ...you would just feel like, you know a human again. Human again.

Framed this way, life without family was only a partial existence. Sarah’s very being -- her humanness -- depended on the presence of her family. The protracted indeterminacy of the asylum process only served to prolong this sense of dehumanization. Sarah was not unique in drawing such a deep connection between a “life worth living” and the presence of family (Biehl 2005). Many other participants echoed Sarah’s connection of her sense of self, of her very existence, and her connection to her family. For participants, asylum claims represented the ability “to see my family before I die,” or to “be with my children before I go to the grave.” The existential power of these claims calls attention to

the intersubjective nature of not only suffering but of the self more generally (Horton 2009; Jenkins and Barrett 2004; Parish 2008; Csordas 1994, 1997).

Talking to family members back home often emerged, then, as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, study participants were able to maintain an important connection to family members and could express care and concern through conversations with loved ones. Yet, on the other hand, talking to family members often provoked painful feelings of longing and reminders of separation. Family interactions were bound together by an “intimately shared space of loss and grief” (Horton 2009: 22). As Alice (A) explains:

- A: So...I always think about them. Yeah. I miss them so much And when I think about them or talk to them, I don't eat. I will only lie in the house. I don't even open my door. I feel very bad.
- BH: Mhmm. And very bad, do you mean, do you feel sad? Do you feel—
- A: —I'm very sad. I don't eat. I don't go outside.

The pain and grief of family separation was most palpable when participants received word of family members' illnesses or even death. These events back home “brought an overwhelming immediacy to the loss of family separation” (Horton 2009: 35). For example, recall Ruth's weeping on her couch after hearing that her 14-year-old son had been detained and beaten. Likewise, there were numerous times that I sat with Louise on the bed in the small room she rented as she cried after her daughter had called her to tell her that her husband, who suffered from a heart condition, was again in need of hospitalization or medication but was unable to afford it. Sometimes Louise had a small savings from her job as a nursing assistant that she could send, but more often she was unable to even afford the fee for a wire transfer. On one particular occasion, Louise had

called me from a stranger's cell phone asking me to come pick her up outside a Western Union station. Demoralized and distraught, she told me that she had been so excited to get a shopper's reward credit card from Marshall's (a discount clothing store) that morning and had attempted to use this, unsuccessfully, of course, to wire money to Cameroon for her husband's medications.

The pain of family separation perhaps most vividly punctured the quotidian during my fieldwork when both Patrick, an asylum seeker from Rwanda, and Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, had been told that their fathers had been killed, in Rwanda and Ethiopia, respectively. These incidents happened within a relative short time period of each other and the circumstances surrounding their fathers' deaths, and the emotional struggle that their deaths provoked, had many similarities, despite occurring in different geopolitical contexts. Both Patrick and Ahmed had emphasized to me the role that their fathers played in their flight from their home countries. Ahmed's father had sold his business (jewelry store) in order to pay for human traffickers to escort Ahmed to the U.S. Patrick, who had been accused (falsely) of colluding with his university teacher's anti-government sentiments, had been arrested and tortured in Rwanda. After Patrick was released from detention, his father had made immediate arrangements, involving numerous risky bribes, to secure a visa and airline ticket for Patrick to flee to the United States.

The circumstances surrounding Ahmed's and Patrick's fathers were similar in that both fathers' had been arrested and detained when government police had come looking for Ahmed and Patrick, respectively. Both fathers were questioned about their sons' whereabouts and were killed in prison. Ahmed's father was tortured to death and

Patrick's father was shot after being accused of attempting to escape prison. News of their fathers' death had a profound impact on Ahmed and Patrick. Not only were they unable to return to their home countries to bury their fathers and mourn with loved ones, but also both participants were confronted with an enormous sense of confusion and, especially, guilt. In the wake of their fathers' death, as I talked with Ahmed and Patrick, two distinct narratives, with which these participants wrestled, seemed to take hold. On the one hand, Ahmed and Patrick repeatedly underscored their culpability in their fathers' deaths: "My father died because of me," they both told me over and over. On the other hand, however, this narrative was often replaced or juxtaposed by Ahmed's and Patrick's indictment of their home countries in their fathers' deaths. They expressed their sense of betrayal at their home countries: "I hate my country," Patrick seethed bitterly. "I. Hate. It." Likewise, Ahmed wondered aloud: "Why has my government done this to my country? That is the real reason my father has died."

In the vacillation between these two narratives of culpability, Ahmed and Patrick also repeatedly asserted that they had no choice but to leave their countries of origin. Like the parents and political activists discussed above who grappled with a sense of moral failing or creeping feelings of guilt at abandoning family and community members, Ahmed and Patrick issued reminders—to themselves, to me—that they were "forced" to flee and that their status as an asylum seeker was one not borne of free will but rather thrust upon them. This seemed to be a strategy of assuaging guilt and making sense of the confusion and pain that the deaths of their fathers evoked—a strategy that perhaps worked in some ways, but was ultimately engaged ambivalently.

In addition to evoking feelings of guilt, news of their fathers' deaths, for both Ahmed and Patrick, prompted heightened concerns over the safety of other family members back home. The deaths of their fathers served as painful reminders of the social meaning of asylum for these, like all, participants. If asylum status meant security not just for participants but also for their families, then the protracted limbo of the asylum process meant continued insecurity and danger for family in their countries of origin. As Ahmed told me: "now, I think—I know, that all my family is in danger in Ethiopia." Likewise, Patrick, through tears, expressed such a fear: "So who will be the next? (crying) ... is it my mom? ... or my brother?" These concerns over the safety of family members across the globe were rendered more painful during conversations with family, as family members echoed these feelings themselves. In this way, family interactions were now mediated by a new layer of fear and insecurity, about which both participants and their families could do little to mitigate.

This brings into relief a second and interrelated reason that study participants sometimes avoided talking to family members in their countries of origin: these conversations evoked feelings of guilt and confusion. These feelings, I will elaborate, were often co-produced. As the earlier narratives of Maurice and Alice highlight, and that was echoed by many other participants, misunderstandings regarding asylum seekers' financial (in)abilities to provide for family were common. Additionally, in a broader sense, misunderstandings often arose regarding the logistics of the asylum process. Asylum seekers told me repeatedly that they were unable to effectively convey to family members why they were stuck in legal limbo. As Hassan, an asylum seeker from Pakistan explains:

They tell me when are we gonna see you, and and uh that's the hardest thing not to see them...So they always grill me when I call them. When are you coming? When are you coming? When are you coming? When are you coming? And I have to keep telling them, wait for me it's going to happen. I've been telling them since 2004...When are you gonna come? You always tell us, can't you just come home one month. I said I can't leave. They don't understand, I mean they don't know the whole procedures... and it's hard not to see them...my whole family. It's very hard not to see them. When I see them, their pictures, I cry thinking that, when I will see them again? Or will I just live like this? Or what's gonna happen? And my mother, she knows she's gonna die...she doesn't have many much—many years left. Three times cancer survivor and she told me, [Hassan], I don't wanna die before—I don't wanna close my eyes without--until I see you.

As a way to evade the pain of these interactions, Hassan confided in me that he sometimes avoided phone calls to family members, though with the advent of social media, this was increasingly difficult to sustain. Likewise, Ahmed avoided talking to his family members, in particular, his mother because of his inability to explain his situation of economic and political exclusion in the U.S. As noted, after the death of his father and uncle, Ahmed was culturally and socially obligated to adopt a father figure role. Yet, both his physical absence and his economic exclusion -- both aspects of his structural vulnerability that were prolonged by the bureaucratic procedures of the asylum process -- rendered his fulfillment of this role impossible. For Ahmed, this generated feelings of profound guilt and moral failing. Through tears, he insisted to me one afternoon as we discussed his lack of communication with his family: "I cannot talk to my mother knowing that she sees me as the only person who can help, but I can't help." When I asked Ahmed if he explained to his mother that his lack of employment is no fault of his own, but a result of the laws governing the asylum process, he shook his head: "She doesn't understand my situation. She will never understand asylum, immigration ... She

just keeps asking me when I am going to get my papers and work but she doesn't understand asylum, the system, this country.”

Indeed, the asylum process was a tiresome and confusing process for claimants. Cases were delayed for reasons that were unclear to asylum claimants themselves. Communicating the logistics of such a protracted and difficult process to others was therefore difficult, if not impossible. Avoiding talking to family would sometimes then emerge as a careful tactic to evade the emotional fallout from these various misunderstandings. Avoidance of family interaction became a way to step out, even if only momentarily, from the “continuous feedback loop between their [families'] grief and their own” (Horton 2009: 22).

“AT THE MERCY OF SOMEONE ELSE”: RELYING ON OTHERS AND ITS PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

With rare exception, study participants, both those with work authorization and those without, found the need to rely on other people and/or organizations for material assistance. In addition to the material threat that the lack of employment represented for asylum seekers, the lack of independence or, more specifically, the forms of dependence provoked by their inability to work produced feelings of shame, humiliation and demoralization. A passage from my field notes with Sharon highlights this:

Driving back to her house, which took a while because of the snow and the rush hour, she spontaneously exclaimed – it had been fairly silent between us until then – “You know, it's very humiliating to lose your independence.” This instigated a conversation about what she views as a continuation of trauma from Kenya into her present day situation. She views this as a continuum of painful events. She talked about being “at the

mercy of someone else,” adding that she “looks into their eyes and can see they are burdened by me.” As she talks about being at the “mercy of others,” she animates this by stretching out her arms and cupping her hand as if begging. She later describes an element of guilt along with shame that comes with being in this position.
(Sharon, Field notes)

Asylum seekers often explicitly linked these feelings of humiliation and demoralization from being dependent on others to their lack of an EAD. These feelings were not created in a vacuum, of course; they were co-created within an intersubjective milieu. In my field site, very few participants were living with relatives. Most had arrived knowing only an acquaintance or had been directed to the city of my field work through others. Some who had received their EAD were able to afford apartments on their own, while several other participants were living in homeless shelters. Most participants were living with others (primarily non-asylum claimants) who they first knew only slightly or not at all. As with the effect on family relations, the impact of asylum seekers’ economic and political marginalization/exclusion indelibly shaped these interpersonal relationships.

Asylum seekers’ sense of themselves as burdensome was oftentimes reinforced by the interactions they had with others, namely surrounding their inability to financially or materially contribute to household expenses. After being kicked out of her brother’s house, Sharon moved from home to home (found by acquaintances of someone in her previous apartment building) where she was allowed to stay only for minimal times (about a week at a time). She described the feelings of suspicion and discomfort she encountered:

You know, no one wants to keep a person in their house, whom he doesn’t know...you know, what he’s doing and what...you are keeping – you –

you, 'I am keeping you until when?,' you know? 'What is going on? Who are you?'

For those participants who lived with others, relationships with household members often grew increasingly tenuous or tense as they were subjected to prolonged delays with work authorization or, in some cases, struggled to find employment. Emmanuel, whose work permit was delayed for years (the reasons for which both he and his pro bono attorney were uncertain), confided in me that he was increasingly being treated unkindly at the house where he stayed and was feeling "tormented." He was living in the basement, along with several other men (relatives of the home owner), in a house in a semi-suburban area. The house was owned by a Cameroonian who had immigrated to the U.S. decades ago and who Emmanuel had, by complete coincidence, met at the airport when he arrived to the U.S. in a different city. I asked him why he thought the treatment toward him was turning sour, and he speculated that it was because he was not able to provide anything to the household. He told me that household members had started making comments about his lack of contributions to food or household supplies. They would increasingly eat meals upstairs without calling him to dine and would often fail to leave him anything to eat. Emmanuel struggled with these forms of social exclusion and told me it was making him feel "so bad" and "so low" because "it is now as if they do not even look at me. They no longer greet me." He went on to say: "you know, sometimes when you live with people and you have nothing to give, these people start to ignore. They ignore me. You have nothing. You know, you are here like a burden."

Indeed, this sense of feeling ignored or excluded was a recurring concern among my study participants. If economic exclusion had, as argued earlier, contributed to

asylum seekers' status as non-persons in the larger, sociocultural context, then this invisible status often extended to intimate settings. Again we see yet another iteration of the paradox of visibility for asylum seekers: their hyper-visibility resulted in their reluctance to engage in work without legal authorization for fear of risking asylum status, but their lack of employment often translated to a form of social invisibility. This social invisibility, moreover, sometimes painfully permeated social life, whereby asylum seekers were excluded and marginalized even among family and friends, thus exposing the limits of "community" in this context.

Even for those participants whose household members were supportive and understanding of their economic vulnerability and legal limbo, the inability to contribute materially to the household was a source of distress and anxiety. For example, Lionel, who was living with his brother (who had a green card), his brother's wife and their two small children in a mobile home in a semi-rural area, expressed his concern over his dependence on his brother:

You know, my little brother is doing okay . But he has a very small place. He lives in a very meager income community. He has his kids. A wife. And with all that he- he- he has still shared a little with me. So I am benefiting from that, but you also know that...I'm not supposed to be here [brother's house] anymore. That I gotta earn on my own, have my own place. But I can't. And that plays on your mind a lot. So that has been a big problem for me.

Living with family, however, did not ensure a supportive environment. Bereket, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia, had been living with his in-laws in a middle-class suburban area. His relatives at first were welcoming, but as his asylum application was pending over two years, with delays in his work authorization, they became increasingly burdened

by his presence. They encouraged him to leave the house during the days; and while this may have been an expression of care or encouragement, Bereket experienced this as a form of exclusion or alienation. “They don’t want me in their home,” he insisted. He began to spend large portions of his day at the local library. Once he received his work authorization, the pressure from his relatives heightened. As I will discuss shortly, although Bereket spent time trying to find work, he was unable to secure a job and his home life became increasingly difficult. Bereket reported that his relatives hounded him about getting a job but did not provide any assistance with this. They began to tell Bereket that he would need to start contributing to household expenses or find another place to live. As with other asylum seekers’ experiences that I have been detailing in this chapter, Bereket’s politico-legal and economic marginality transfigured social relations in ways that provoked a deep sense of political and social alienation.

Material Consequences of Being Dependent on Others

While the discussion thus far has been concentrating the intra- and inter-personal consequences of being “at the mercy of others,” being unable to provide for oneself had very real material consequences. For many asylum seekers who lived with others, their living conditions were difficult. Many asylum seekers complained of lack of privacy and/or of poor living conditions where they lived, yet felt they had little, if any, power to change these. Some participants told me that they felt unsafe in their living quarters. Louise’s purse had been stolen when she left it on chair in the lobby to quickly retrieve her mail. After having her apartment robbed, Barbara tried numerous times—to no avail—to get her landlord to fix the broken lock to the lobby door. In a more startling

incident, Ruth was attacked and robbed in her apartment building hallway, with the perpetrator taking away her (fake) gold cross and the only money she had on her: \$2. Although she filed a police report and there was an ensuing investigation, no suspect was ever apprehended and Ruth continued to feel highly vulnerable living in that building.

Emmanuel, too, struggled with his living conditions. He shared a small basement with four or five other people (there were often different configurations of people residing at the house), all sleeping on old sofas or the outdoor carpeting of the floor. There was little heat in the basement and they shared a toilet in a mold-infested bathroom. Having the opportunity to work, Emmanuel insisted, would be a way to extricate himself from this vulnerable situation:

I need to get something [a job] that you can be doing in order to continue your own life. I think that is the most difficult thing right now. I don't want this situation where I go to sleep under somebody's uh, basement and then...you start crying of course. Start crying on this one.

The previous chapter discussed homelessness namely with regard to its symbolic meaning. That is, asylum seekers felt suspended between being neither grounded or welcome in one's country of origin nor in the U.S. "Home," in this sense, represented safety and security -- something legal status would confer and ensure. However, as we saw with Sharon, there was a literal dimension to homelessness. Being kicked out of her brother's apartment, Sharon was confronted with the naked fact of being physically without a home. This situation was not unique; I documented homelessness or the threat of homelessness with many other asylum seekers in my study as well. Three of my participants, for example, were living in homeless shelters; two of whom lived in homeless shelters for the duration of my field work. For others, the threat of

homelessness, due to being kicked out of apartments or houses, posed not only a material threat of having nowhere to live, but also instantiated asylum seekers' sense of themselves as burdensome or "unwanted." Indeed, as Louise lamented: "I have been going from house to house to house. It's too much."

Bereket, discussed above, was finally given an ultimatum by his relatives: get a job or leave their home. When I met him one blustery winter morning during one of our twice weekly meetings at the local library (he preferred to meet outside his relatives' home), he was quite upset and declared: "I will soon be homeless. On the street, buried in this snow." He, like Sharon, was adamant about not going to a homeless shelter, but knew he had limited options. He was able to temporarily live with a family, who were friends of his relatives, in a city several hours away. Being told that he could only stay there for a matter of weeks, he then arranged to stay with distant relatives in Washington, D.C. We continued to communicate via email and his messages revealed little in the way of detail, though he constantly reiterated that "my life is so dark here," and that "I am so unhappy in my life." Participants' experiences of homelessness or of being physically expelled from others' homes are stark examples of the ways in which the structural forces and constraints associated the asylum process - economic marginalization/exclusion, lack of access to material resources, prolonged legal limbo - emerge as "violences of everyday life" that produce both tangible and intangible forms of vulnerability and suffering (Kleinman 2000. Suffering here is tangible in the sense that these forces produce material conditions in which asylum seekers often had to struggle to survive. Yet, these structural forces also produce intangible forms of suffering, whereby asylum seekers are subjected to the emotional and psychological assaults of feeling unwelcome and rejected.

Another material threat that asylum seekers sometimes faced concerned access to food. Either by being excluded from household meals or not being able to purchase their own food, getting enough to eat was sometimes a primary concern, as the following quotes illustrate:

And I, and I feel I should work, but I can't work—I don't have, uh, I'm not allowed to work. And I don't have an income. I am not very happy here, not a very happy person, the way I live, you know. I am not very happy. I am still very sad. Ok, at least I have somewhere to live, to put my head. But I cannot be on my own, cannot provide for myself ... and sometimes he [person with whom he was living] doesn't buy food. So I don't eat. (Albert, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

So, um, of course...life is very harsh. When you're not working. And, uh...it is really very harsh. You know, driving... and people are not uh, free for you. You wanna go somewhere and you can't get a ride. And uh, if your friend eats outside [at a restaurant] or he doesn't wanna cook or something, and...you end up like not eating, and, uh,- well, life is very, very hard. Really very hard. (Mohammed, asylum seeker from Ethiopia)

Again, as with housing concerns, asylum seekers saw economic opportunity as a way out of their structural vulnerability. And it is here that the “conjugated” aspects of suffering or oppression take hold (Bourgois 1988; Holmes 2007; see also Huffman et al. 2012).

Asylum seekers' economic marginalization and legal limbo translated into myriad “intersecting vulnerabilities”: lack of access to adequate housing, health care (addressed below), and nutrition, that in turn furthered their suffering and social isolation (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh 2010).

Organizations and the Receipt of ‘Formal’ Aid

Many of my study participants received material support from The Healing Place (THP), a local organization that treated victims of torture. As Chapter 6 details, asylum seekers often initially sought out THP for material assistance (clothing, legal aid, bus passes, etc.) and not for the therapeutic interventions they provided (a necessary component of being a client of THP). THP also assisted their asylum seeker clients with access to (a limited form) of health care (discussed below), including transportation to and from THP or medical appointments. Because this chapter is focused on the ways in which asylum seekers' structural vulnerability impacts their sense of self, social identities and social relations, a discussion here is warranted regarding how aid from organizations such as THP play into this complex dynamic.

Overall, I found that asylum seekers did not experienced receiving aid from THP in the same way that they experienced or interpreted receiving aid from family, friends, or acquaintances. That is, participants did not talk about the help they received from THP in a framework of demoralization, humiliation, or loss of dependence. Rather, asylum seekers expressed profound gratitude for THP's assistance and there seemed to be little stigma attached to the receipt of such aid. While Chapter 6 will elucidate the complex and sometimes unanticipated ways in which asylum seekers engaged with THP, I can offer here some thoughts on what may account for the neutral or, more often, positive dynamic between participants' sense of self and identity and the receipt of THP assistance. This is all the more noteworthy when we consider that study participants were often reluctant to accept, or even refused, other forms of assistance, such as food pantries or soup kitchens to which both THP and I referred them. In these cases, participants would often claim that such resources were for those that were for those "less fortunate." Furthermore, as

Harrell-Bond has long argued (1986, 1999), the “gift” of refugee aid often has the consequence of imposing on refugees (an often unspoken) obligation to return the gift, or favor. And yet, with no ability to return the gift, refugees experience such ‘gift-giving’ in the form of aid as demoralizing and socially threatening. If we take this to be true, then, what accounts for asylum seekers’ seeming lack of discomfort in accepting aid from THP?

While this was not a question that I engaged directly in my research and a large discussion of this issue is not within the purview of this chapter, I want to suggest briefly here that the relationship between THP and asylum seekers often provided asylum seekers with a sense of ‘formal’ or ‘institutional’ recognition and a sense of agency that was not present in other interpersonal relationships where assistance was given. First, with regard to the issue of recognition, THP, as the next chapter will elucidate, provided an important form of recognition to asylum seekers as ‘legitimate’ or ‘authentic’ refugees despite legal categories (e.g., denied asylum claimant, or “removable alien”) that called such legitimacy into question. This, I suggest, imbued a sense of ‘deservingness’ to the aid. Such ‘deservingness’ of aid is arguably bolstered by the consideration of ‘trauma narratives’ as a form of exchange (DelVecchio Good 2010:54; see also James 2006, 2010; Ticktin 2006, 2011). In other words, it may be the case that asylum seekers, who, in order to be THP clients needed to assert their ‘victim of torture’ status via narratives of trauma, understood their relationship with THP to be one of exchange rather than dependence.

Secondly, in terms of agency, asylum seekers were able to accept some, but often not all, of the aid provided to them by THP. I see this situation, then, as providing some

latitude for asylum seekers whereby they could deny some forms of aid, thereby bolstering their sense of independence. For example, participants often bragged to me that they turned down the taxi transportation offered by THP in lieu of taking a bus for less money. Participants offered this as an example of their “independence” or ability to “be responsible” and “not take advantage of the system.” Thus, because aid from THP was not embedded in cultural or familial roles, dynamics, and obligations, and because participants were in a position to not have to accept all aid offered to them, their relationship to this type of aid was perhaps experienced in a different way than other, more intimate exchanges of assistance. I turn now toward examining how asylum seekers engaged in the workforce, both informally and ‘formally,’ once they received an EAD.

STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET: WORK, WAGES, AND DOCUMENTATION

As I have argued, asylum seekers were overall very reluctant to engage in any work that may have been considered ‘illegal,’ and would thereby pose a risk to a successful outcome of their asylum claims. Thus, asylum claimants, being subjected to heightened forms of visibility and ‘management,’ would not attempt to work in the ‘formal’ sector without proper work authorization. Rather, as they insisted to me, they were unable to work or find employment because they were, legally, “not allowed to work,” and they were very careful to “follow the rules” or “follow the law,” given their state of legal limbo and subsequent (hyper)visibility. For those study participants who were not embedded in ethnic or national communities (or other types of communities, e.g., religious ones), gaining access to work in informal settings was extremely difficult.

Thus, for the majority of my non-Cameroonian participants, no work permit meant no access to income.

In contrast, many, but not all, of study participants from Cameroon found ways to generate income through informal networks. This was the case for both those participants without an EAD and those with an EAD but struggling to make ends meet with their current wages. Female participants from Cameroon, Ruth, Louise, Barbara, and Alice, all of whom had an EAD and all of whom worked as nursing home assistants (at different locations), would also periodically cook and prepare meals for others for a fee. Ruth was especially prolific in her meal preparation for others. Our conversations and visits often took place in her small kitchen, with her putting me to work mashing coco yams or stirring overflowing pots of stew. Likewise, my visits with Alice and Barbara were often interrupted when people came to pick up large containers of fish rolls or big bowls of Ndole, a traditional stew of bitterleaf and meat. Other female Cameroonian asylum claimants collected fees for hair braiding, sometimes spending whole weekend days weaving and plating friends' hair in their small apartments or rented rooms. Such informal work was not exclusive to female participants. Eric, for example, had quickly saved money for a camcorder through a job he secured once he got his EAD, and had established a reputation as a videographer within the Cameroonian community, recording weddings and parties.

As I have alluded to earlier in this chapter, community support also had its limits and participants sometimes experienced the Cameroonian community as being exclusive and alienating. However, the informal networks outlined here highlight how the community could also be an important source of support. Such informal means of

generating income not only provided participants with important and necessary financial support, but also allowed these participants to regain some sense of productivity and to establish (and, in many ways, continue) recognized roles within their social networks. This was the case even though the amount of money generated seemed to “never be enough.”

“I can talk to my mother now”: Work permits and their non-material meaning

As described earlier in this chapter, even participants that had jobs struggled financially, especially with regard to being able to provide support to family in their home countries. Yet, asylum seekers that did have jobs were grateful to have them and recognized the importance that they had in providing them with some, even if not enough, financial stability. This was all the more crucial given that the U.S. was, at the time of my fieldwork, in the throes of a recession. Indeed, for those participants that had received their work permit, they viewed this as a changing point in their lives as asylum seekers. After waiting long periods of time, sometimes a matter of years, asylum seekers told me that receiving a work permit and being able to get a job enabled them to “breathe a little” or “start to provide for myself.”

Yet, for many, it was not just financial opportunity that work permits represented. On a basic level, a work permit symbolized the opportunity to be connected to something outside the confines of their home, to be engaged in something other than the protracted state waiting that the asylum process entailed. This struck me when one evening I arrived to dinner at Emmanuel’s home much later than I had originally planned. I apologized, explaining wearily that I had had a long day with interviews and appointments. “Why are

you complaining, Bridget?” Emmanuel asked, adding: “Oh, you don’t know how happy I would be if I could be going from appointment to appointment all day.” Indeed, as my fieldwork progressed, I noted that a common complaint among study participants was the lack of “something to do” or “somewhere to go.” Beyond the material implications of a job (or the sense of productivity that it instilled in participants), a work permit represented a way out of “always staying in the house” and “thinking too much”—common refrains among participants. Linda reflected many participants’ thoughts when she described this to me:

The hardest thing was coming here and I was in the house for over a year. Because I didn’t have papers, I couldn’t do anything. I was just home every day. And when I would be home, I would just cry every day. I was not happy. Even though I was here, I was not happy. And I just stayed like that until I was able to start working.

Work authorizations, however, held additional meanings for participants beyond a way out of social isolation and confinement in one’s home. If the economic exclusion of asylum seekers contributed to their social marginalization and the reshaping of their interpersonal relations, then an EAD also held the promise of repairing or establishing new relationships to self and others. Ahmed, who waited two years for an EAD and was told several times by his lawyers and immigration officials that he was not even eligible for a work permit, called me one afternoon shortly after I had left the field. “You are the first person I am calling,” he exclaimed in an almost breathless voice, announcing that he had received his work authorization in the mail. He recounted to me, in detail, coming home from a walk and seeing the mail from “immigration.” His immediate reaction, he told me, was that it was a “deportation letter:” “I became paralyzed when I saw the mail,”

Ahmed said. “I mean, I could not even move. I became so weak, my body so heavy. It took me five minutes until I was able to open it.”

Ahmed went on to talk at length about how the work authorization can “change my whole life now,” and that “I can wait for my case with more patience now.” Ahmed mused during that phone call: “I ask myself, why has my life been dependent on this little card, this little piece of paper? ... but I cannot deny the system. That is the reality of the system.” In this way, the EAD takes on a kind of “magical” quality that, as the next section will examine, does not always bear out in reality (Ticktin 2011). Yet, my interest here is not necessarily in whether or not the promise of the EAD actually materializes. Rather, what is important for the present discussion is the very profound ways in which the EAD was infused with meaning and hope for Ahmed. This infused meaning of the EAD, moreover, went far beyond the financial opportunities the document represented. What Ahmed repeatedly emphasized to me during that phone call was the way in which the EAD allows for intersubjective transformations: “I can help my family now. And I can help myself.” He sighed and said: “Now I can talk to my mother again. Before I couldn’t say anything to her because I was not able to work and help my family and she didn’t understand this ... now we can talk again as mother and son. I am so happy about that.” Here, Ahmed critically underscores the perceived potential of the work authorization to restore or recreate important social and familial connections. Viewed this way, his repeated exclamations of “now I am eligible,” take on added meaning. With this declaration, Ahmed seemed to be not only claiming his legal right to employment, but also reinstating his legitimacy and worthiness as a son and a provider.

Cabot (2012) has focused on the “life of documents” in her analysis of the “pink card,” a temporary residence permit issued to asylum seekers in Greece. Her work illustrates the ways in which the pink card, by marking asylum seekers as temporary Others, symbolizes the vulnerable, oppressive, and limbo state in which these migrants live. Yet, she argues, “individuals also infuse the pink card with hopes for belonging, recognition, freedom, access to rights, and economic survival, thus reinterpreting both the pink card and the condition of limbo that it consigns” (Cabot 2012: 17).

In an analogous way, Ahmed imbues the EAD with meaning beyond its primary legal meaning of authorizing employment. That is, Ahmed instilled in the EAD hopes for familial reconnection, the re-establishment of social roles (as son-cum-‘father-figure’/provider), and a way to reconfigure his relationship to the temporal condition of waiting, i.e., to more “patiently bide time” (Chua 2011). For study participants, work authorization, then, held promise of restoring ruptured family and social relations and of repairing feelings of demoralization and shame evoked by their structural marginalization and the structural and symbolic violences associated with the asylum process. I turn now to an examination of how much, or little, work authorization documents did to relieve asylum seekers’ sense of struggle.

Realities of Employment: Low Wages, Struggle, and Frustration

As noted, having a job did provide asylum seekers with a sense of being able to provide for themselves and others, even if they struggled to do this at a level they desired. The experiences of Louise, Maurice, and Alice, described earlier, illustrate that, even with jobs, asylum seekers were often unable to send sufficient amounts of money back

home to family, a fact that caused them distress and that reshaped family dynamics. Employment did not guarantee a sense of security nor did it always materialize as a way to mitigate suffering. In the case study presented at the outset of the previous chapter, we saw how Ruth's employment situation was often challenging. She was subject to verbal abuse and poor wages, yet feeling like she "had no choice" but to stay, she endured this form of structurally routinized and legitimated violence. Likewise, Louise, who also worked as a home health aid, reported being routinely berated by the client for whom she worked. These tirades of insults thrown at Louise were often infused with anti-immigrant and racial epithets like the ones that Ruth endured. Furthermore, both Ruth and Louise, among other study participants, often had their work hours cut without notice or explanation, making it difficult to ensure that bills could be paid (and, during many months they were not) or that they could put food on the table.

As Sargent and Larchanche (2012) assert, citing Briggs (2005), "linguistically and culturally constructed notions of state, citizen, and 'illegal alien' produce hierarchies in which Latinos, African Americans, and 'immigrants' fall to the bottom" (Sargent and Larchanche 2012: 347). To be sure, study participants - many of whom held specialized and highly regarded jobs in their countries of origin - were only able to secure employment, if at all, in menial and low-paying positions. The effects of this were myriad. Not only were study participants (with work permits) left to work jobs that failed to fully financially support them (not to mention their families back home or current household members), but oftentimes working in positions for which they were severely overqualified was a challenge to their sense of self and social identity. For instance, Bereket struggled to make sense of his being rejected as an applicant for a janitor at

multiple locations in the U.S. when he had been a high-level civil servant and researcher in Ethiopia. Ruth, after telling me of a particularly difficult day at work, stressed to me that she was a successful seamstress and pattern maker in Cameroon and had had aspirations of opening her own sewing school. Louise, too, often emphasized that she had run her own small restaurant in Cameroon, “but look at me now,” she said sadly. I hasten to point out, however, that this sense of demoralization was not ubiquitous. Albert, an asylum seeker from Cameroon in his mid-twenties, for example, took great pride in his newly acquired position at Wendy’s, as did Eric in his job as an afterschool aide at a community center. Overall, however, while participants were quick to say they were grateful for any job, and working did provide participants with some sense of productivity/momentum, their lower-class position within the labor force continued and exacerbated their sense of vulnerability and marginalization. In this way, an EAD and/or employment were sometimes quickly disavowed of their promise to “change my life.” This was particularly palpable given participants’ prolonged state of legal limbo in which life trajectories remained uncertain.

In addition to difficult work conditions, asylum seekers told me that employers sometimes expressed wariness about hiring someone who, although ‘living under the color of the law’ was nonetheless categorized as a ‘non-citizen.’ Here, asylum seekers share with undocumented migrants the fact of their “deportability,” which makes both categories of migrants understood as potentially temporary and therefore disposable labor (De Genova 2002). An example of this is the experience of Princewill, a Cameroonian participant, who was fired from his job when his place of employment was notified that his asylum claim was denied, even though he provided proof to his boss of his intent to

legally appeal his denial. Thus, given the tenuous and ambivalent status of asylum seekers, employment itself was often experienced as only a partial sense of security in their lives. As Linda, the asylum seeker from Liberia discussed earlier, insisted to me: “I am afraid every day. I worry every day. Because at my job, they inform you guys [employers] two months ahead, if your papers are going to expire, then they will fire you.”

Crucial to appreciating participants’ experiences in the U.S. is the awareness of how asylum seekers (and immigrants, in general) are categorized, constructed, and positioned not only as ‘non-citizens’ but as racial and cultural Others. The impact of this on lived experience is variable. While Ruth and Louise were subjected to forms of racism and bigotry at their places of employment, other participants denied experiencing any form of racism, whether at work or in the U.S. at all. Nonetheless, I would argue that asylum seekers are always, even if not overtly, structurally positioned and defined “in racialized, classed, and gendered terms.” (Ong 2003:191).

Sarah, who worked for two decades as an executive assistant in Zimbabwe, perceived her lack of ability to get a “good job” as located in the racism of the United States. She very much believed her inability to get a job was due not necessarily to her asylum-claimant status, but rather to the color of her skin: “they see a black person, an African, and they don’t want me in their office.” Like Louise and Ruth, in these social situations Sarah was “subjectively overwhelmed by the ‘crushing objecthood’ of her body and of her race” (Tormey 2007: 81). Rather than be visible as nurses aids or administrative assistants, these women were instead seen as “the abject categories of asylum-seeker and suspect patriot. (ibid).

Sarah also understood her employment opportunities to be thoroughly gendered. The fact that the majority of my female participants worked as health-aids or nursing assistants should be understood in the context of racialized and gendered forms of labor. Underscoring the idea of “conjugated” oppression or vulnerability, Sarah spoke to her frustration that as an African (Black) female, she saw very little opportunities for employment:

It’s like the only option people like me have is to go into nursing aid, or to be a CNA but you know what that’s why you find that a lot of people they become cruel to the patients because they are not there—because they don’t have passion for it. They are there for money. And then the money is not even good ... Is that the only thing I can do to get money!?! but it’s not in me, Bridget, it’s not—it’s not—I’ve not got passion for that. Why should I be forced to do something that I don’t have the passion for? I have qualifications. I have twenty-one years working experience. Why can’t that mean something here? I don’t understand.

Thus, for asylum seekers, the promise of a work permit did not always materialize, and study participants with EADs and who could find work often had to contend with low wages, difficult work environments, and workplace discrimination. Yet, EADs and formal employment overall did provide some way of mitigating participants’ financial struggles and associated feelings of demoralization and shame. In addition, work and even work permits themselves were imbued with meaning beyond materiality: they held promise in regaining a way to help family back home and to begin to reconstruct normative social and familial roles despite geographical separation and existential limbo. However, for those participants without access to EADs or those unable to find jobs, their structural vulnerability was “a physical noose around their necks” that remained ever-present and ever-threatening (Farmer 2004: 315). The final section of this chapter

explores how the structural vulnerability informs health and well-being, including access to care.

HEALTH CARE, SUFFERING, AND STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

This section examines the embodied effects of vulnerability in two primary, related ways. First, I argue that the existential state of being stuck that characterized the temporal category of asylum seekers' waiting (Chapter 4) manifested as embodied forms of suffering. Using the examples of Ruth and Ahmed, I will illustrate how these participants' bodies were rendered immobile, suggesting that this was a bodily way of apprehending and wrestling with their existential and legal limbo. Second, an analysis of these embodied effects of asylum seeking also need to consider the ways in which the structural constraints and "violences of everyday life" that I have been detailing in this chapter are also a critical part of asylum seekers' embodied suffering (Kleinman 2000). Before offering case examples and an ethnographically grounded discussion of embodied suffering in this context, I first provide a brief discussion of health care access for asylum seekers in my field site.

Healthcare Access for Asylum Seekers

Prior to 1996, asylum seekers in the U.S. were able to access federally funded forms of health care coverage (i.e., Medicaid and State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)), provided they met financial and other eligibility requirements. However, with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, all non-citizens were cut off from accessing these federally

funded forms of coverage. The state in which I conducted my research was one of 22 states that had established a health care coverage program similar to Medicaid for “legal” immigrants. Though categorized as “non-citizens,” asylum seekers are considered “persons residing under the color of the law” (PRUCOL) and are therefore considered to be “lawfully present” in the U.S., giving them access to this state-funded health care coverage. However, as research has shown, information regarding asylum seekers’ eligibility for these forms of coverage are not widely or effectively disseminated and many asylum seekers remain unaware of their eligibility for the duration of their time in the U.S. (Fremstad and Cox 2004). This same research has shown that immigrants in general, though they may be eligible for state-funded health care coverage, “face barriers to coverage that relate specifically to their status as immigrants,” including lack of information or confusion about programs and requirements, concern that receiving these forms of coverage will have adverse effects on their legal status, and fear regarding requests for sensitive information, such as ID cards or information on legal status (Fremstad and Cox 2004: 39).

The state in which I carried out my research had an additional amendment that all immigrants who were victims of torture, regardless of legal status, would be ensured health care coverage through the state. Because many of my study participants were clients of THP, which exclusively treated victims of torture, a large portion of them had access to health care coverage - coverage for which most of them were unaware of being eligible until they became clients of THP. If the debate around which categories of migrants should or should not have access to health care is undergirded by “local ways of reckoning health-related deservingness,” then the automatic eligibility to health care of

‘victims of torture’ warrants some attention here (Willen 2012: 805). While I am certainly not arguing against the right of victims of torture to health care, what I want to highlight here is the ways in which such categories of eligibility, predicated on ‘deservingness’ reveal a “hierarchy of suffering” (Farmer 2003). In this way, being a victim of torture emerges as a way to present oneself (or be presented) as legitimately suffering, in the eyes of the state - a status that implies a deservingness to health care. The question remains, though, why label or identify victims of torture as deserving of health care but not other suffering migrants? Addressing this question fully is not in the purview of this chapter (I will take up the idea of moral suffering and the subjectification of asylum seekers via the category of trauma in Chapter 7). However, I pose it here to emphasize that notions of deservingness underlie myriad structural forces in asylum seekers’ lives (including the notion that only “authentic” refugees - and not “bogus” asylum seekers - deserve access to employment in the U.S.) and come to inform both subjective and material dimensions of experience.

EMBODYING ‘(UN)DESERVINGNESS,’ VULNERABILITY, AND UNCERTAINTY

While many of my study participants had health care coverage, not all did. For those that did not have coverage, they largely avoided hospitals and doctors. Even when I informed them that they were eligible for state-funded health insurance and offered to help with the application process, several study participants balked. For example, Rogers, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, told me “I don’t like to go there [hospitals or doctors’ offices]” because “it takes so long to explain my [legal] situation to them.” He added that

he doesn't feel he "has security" without an "ID card," and that hospital staff have, in the past, treated him "like I'm an illegal or something ... it makes me nervous." Thus, despite his "lawful" presence in the U.S. and the fact that he can provide proof of his PRUCOL status, his lack of privileged documents (e.g., state ID or green card) renders him a suspect Other.

Likewise, Lionel expressed a similar anxiety generated from the questions directed toward him during a past hospital visit:

Even if I'm sick, like I've been sometimes, I don't go to hospital because I'm not legal. So then, what do I do? Take hot water and drink it? Or go in the bathroom and put it on- the tap on cold. So the cold can go through your head and the headache go down. Because I don't have money. I don't have insurance. I don't even want to go to the hospital. Before they [hospital staff] said, 'What are you doing here?' I don't like to answer too many questions like that. So it has- this plays on my mind too.

Lionel's declaration of himself as "not legal" speaks to the confusion about the meaning of immigration categories in general, as well as highlights how the temporal condition of waiting during asylum seeking is evocative of pervasive fear and insecurity on an everyday level. Lionel's claim of, essentially, being 'illegal' and therefore careful to avoid hospitals, also importantly brings to light the ways in which migrants may internalize arguments that they are undeservingness of access to health care (Larchanche 2012). Indeed, as Quesada (2012) has argued: "Whereas 'deservingness' is socially produced, politically-determined, and institutionally implemented, the vulnerability that results from being rendered undeserving becomes embodied" (895).

Embodied Suffering as Mode of Being In-the-World

In closing this chapter, I want to highlight the ways in which suffering and vulnerability was often experienced and expressed through participants' bodies. In the previous chapter, I elucidated the ways in which temporality, power, and subjectivity intersected within the context of asylum seeking to reshape participants' ways of inhabiting their worlds, evoking a sense of existential limbo. This chapter has examined how structural forces placed asylum seekers in vulnerable and marginal positions, in turn reconfiguring participants' relationships to self and others. Taking into consideration these multiple aspects of asylum seekers' experience (both the subjective/affective and the structural), I suggest that asylum seekers' physical suffering be understood as an embodiment of the temporal and existential state of uncertainty and limbo that articulates with the particular forms of structural vulnerability that impinge on participants in their everyday lives.

Up to this point, I have been primarily presenting participants' narratives as a way of understanding the subjective experience of asylum seeking. Yet, it is crucial to consider how the experience of seeking asylum, including the suffering it evoked, may defy linguistic representation. Anthropological theorizing on illness and healing is instructive here, given that "(i)n illness we have the breaking through into consciousness of nonnarrativized, inchoate experience that resists narrative smoothing and containment" (Kirmayer 2000: 169). Hence, attending to participants' bodily experiences also tells us something important about how the asylum process is experienced and understood. If, as Csordas (1990: 5) asserts, the body is not only an object, but a subject of culture and, thus, is a way of being-in-the-world, attention to bodily experience can only further enrich our understanding of the lived experiences of these asylum seekers.

While access and utilization of health care did alleviate suffering in many cases, this did not necessarily result in positive well-being for all study participants. In many ways, we can see participants' embodied distress as a response to their structural vulnerability and subjective state of uncertainty and limbo, regardless of their access to healthcare. Horton (2009) has suggested that "the embodied distress of Salvadoran mothers stems from a sociolegal system that renders them "illegal," producing an immobility and powerlessness that can be felt across borders" (37). Indeed, as I have suggested, participants who were mothers, such as Ruth, Louise, and Alice, experienced the pain of family separation through their bodies: Ruth would be wracked with heat, sweat, and head pain following news of her children's distress back in Cameroon; Louise and Alice would be rendered immobile, unable to eat or sleep, after hearing their children's pleas for financial help or their longing for their mother's presence. The fact that these participants were structurally positioned in ways that rendered them unable to mitigate their children's suffering only exacerbated their own embodied distress.

Many study participants complained of physical symptoms, such as headaches, difficulty sleeping, and reduced appetite. Asylum seekers insisted to me, as Ruth did, that these symptoms or illnesses were produced not by past experiences of violence or torture, but by the fear and insecurity connected to the asylum process. Though anthropological attention to the embodiment of past violence and trauma is not new (Becker *et al.* 2000; Coker 2004; Daniel 1996; Green 1994; Hinton & Hinton 2002; Kleinman & Kleinman 1994), what I want to attend to here is the way in which the *present* situation of insecurity and vulnerability comes to be embodied.

While physical symptoms such as heat, diffuse pain, headaches and sleeplessness

may arguably be understood as somatic manifestations of stress, I suggest an examination of these physical experiences as “an embodied understanding of the complex social and political relations” of the political asylum process (Green 1994: 248), or as the “embodied effects of social positioning,” that are specific to the context of asylum seeking (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011: 350). This may, in part, speak to the reasons why these embodied ways of being in the world are particular to their new environment and position as asylum seekers. For example, as alluded to earlier, in Cameroon (as with other participants’ countries of origin), participants had a different relationship to temporality, where the context of waiting for political change in their country involved their active pursuit of political transformation, in the form of opposition political involvement. Yet, in the U.S., such political involvement was rendered impossible and, embedded in a confusing and burdensome asylum process, asylum seekers must wait passively for the outcomes of their asylum cases to be decided. Without a voice--without political agency--and without a clear way to *attempt* to assert his/her voice (something that political activity represented), study participants’ bodies became an important vehicle for apprehending and confronting the experiences of seeking political asylum, particularly the temporal category of waiting.

Examples of Embodied Vulnerability and Uncertainty: Ruth and Ahmed

Two participants in particular, Ruth and Ahmed, experienced high levels of embodied distress. Put another way, their sense of structural marginality and their existential state of being ‘stuck’ was very much expressed through their bodies. As I will illustrate, this is true in its most literal sense: both Ruth and Ahmed, at various times

throughout my field work, experienced symptoms that rendered them physically immobile, unable to move their bodies off their couches. In this way, participants' bodies were a mode of being in the world, a way of apprehending their current situations of profound insecurity. Ruth, as described in the case example that began this chapter, was often overcome with headaches, pains that engulfed her whole body, and an intense heat that was sometimes concentrated in her head, but at other times spread to her entire body. Jenkins' work on the phenomenon of *calor* as a form of embodied violence in Salvadoran women is instructive here (Jenkins, 1991, 1996, 1998; Jenkins & Valiente, 1994). Jenkins and Valiente (1994), in their exploration of this bodily phenomenon, insist on a view of the body as a site of experience, a way of apprehending the world, and not merely a blank slate on which culture is inscribed. Jenkins and Valiente argue against "the more typical psychosomatic strategy that describes transformation of an essentially psychological event into a secondary somatic expression" (p.173). Indeed, Kirmayer and Young (1998), in their overview of perspectives on somatization, have suggested that somatic forms of engagement with the world are often translated into a disease entity fitting the available biomedical nosology. In contrast to such a biomedical translation, *calor*, Jenkins insists, needs to be seen as intimately connected to Salvadoran women's violent and traumatic pasts, wherein "*calor* is existentially isomorphic with anger and fear" (173). Jenkins' ethnographic and theoretical engagement with *calor* allows for a consideration of Ruth's experiences of bodily heat as a similar kind of embodied violence. Yet, whereas *calor* is an embodied form of past violence, Ruth's bodily heat presented itself as an embodied form of anger and fear generated in the present moment. It was also a potently embodied form of vulnerability and 'stuckness.' Here, it is not just that Ruth struggled to make

sense of the past, present, and future and to maneuver through this context of limbo.

Rather, it was also the case that Ruth's body was itself rendered immobile--stuck--as she lay, sometimes for days, sweating and "on fire" in her small apartment.

Ahmed also displayed powerful forms of embodied fear, anger, and uncertainty. As noted elsewhere in the dissertation, Ahmed was often consumed--overcome, really--by worries and fears about his asylum case. "My case is my life," he would tell me repeatedly. "I am nothing if I don't win my case." Ahmed was aware of the affective toll that the waiting he was made to experience was taking on him, detailing to me his sadness, fear, and sense of isolation plaguing him during this period. Furthermore, as I illustrated in this chapter, his structurally marginal position in the U.S. foreclosed the possibility of providing for himself, let alone his family in his home country. Ahmed sometimes wondered aloud why he even came here, that he should have stayed in Brazil, one of the countries he passed through as a "client" of a human smuggler on a circuitous route from Ethiopia to the U.S. Soon after arriving in the U.S., Ahmed began to experience new bodily symptoms. Alarmed, he described this to me one afternoon:

Something is happening with my body, something I've never experienced before. I'm becoming so weak. It's something I've never felt before in my life. It's all my body. My whole body. This morning I couldn't stand. I couldn't sleep. My appetite is gone. My heart is weak, my heartbeat is slowing down ... I think maybe I now I'm starting to have a heart problem... I'm afraid for my health. I'm desperate.

As with Ruth, Ahmed's bodily mode of being in the world was a manifestation of his structural vulnerability and his existential limbo: a novel form of suffering evoked by the asylum-seeking process. If, as Jenkins (1994) posits, "*calor* is existentially isomorphic

with anger and fear,” then in a similar way we can see Ahmed’s bodily slowing down, shrinking away, and weakness, as an existential mode of passive waiting, of being structurally confined. Ahmed often framed his quest for legal status as a desire for “true freedom.” In the protracted period in which he was made to wait with insecurity and uncertainty about his ability to realize such a desire, Ahmed would often spend entire days walking the city. This, he told me, was partly to distract himself from “thinking too much about my case, my life,” as well as a form of asserting agency: “It’s the only real freedom I have, the freedom to walk.” Yet, Ahmed was stripped of this minimal sense of freedom by his body’s sudden weakness. For months on end, he was immobilized, stuck in his bed, struggling to find a way forward. Thus, for Ruth and Ahmed, it was not just a sense of time and meaning that were suspended. Rather, for them, the insecurity, fear, and vulnerability of the asylum process were experienced and expressed at the most existential level of all: their bodies.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the forces that construct asylum seekers’ “structural vulnerability” as a specific positionality. I ethnographically traced how processes of economic and social marginalization and exclusion shaped asylum seekers’ relationships to self, others, and their social worlds. These forms of marginality and exclusion not only emerged as very material and existential threats, but they indelibly transfigured social and family relations in ways that were often a source of pain, sadness, and demoralization. Such ethnographic evidence supports an understanding of suffering as thoroughly intersubjective and social.

Moreover, these forms of structural violence, which are productive of social suffering, need to be understood as articulating with other, phenomenological and affective forms of vulnerability associated with asylum seekers' legal and existential limbo discussed in previous chapters -- participants' sense of ungroundedness, the anxiety generated by their subjection to heightened forms of surveillance and criminalization, and the fear associated with the fact of their potential "deportability." In many ways, then, these myriad aspects of asylum seekers' lived experiences need to be understood as interrelated, intersecting, and "conjugated," all informing a position of structural vulnerability in this context. As Quesada (2012) emphasizes "Structural vulnerability limits human agency and discloses how little control individuals have over their environments" (896).

Finally, this chapter explored how structural vulnerability not only shaped access to and utilization of health care, but also how aspects of vulnerability and marginality came to be embodied in ways that produce myriad forms of pain and suffering. By focusing specifically on two examples, Ruth and Ahmed, I suggested that the liminal state of asylum seeking comprised both affective/subjective and material/structural dimensions that may be experienced and articulated through bodily means.

The next chapter examines how asylum seekers' suffering was interpreted and configured within the context of therapeutic interventions, where I investigate the consequences, both intended and unintended, of the 'psychologization' of participants' suffering and sense of vulnerability.

CHAPTER 6

THE ‘PSYCHOLOGIZATION’ OF SUFFERING: THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS AND THE STRUGGLE OVER MEANING

INTRODUCTION

Almost all of my study participants were involved with or had been referred for psychological and/or psychiatric treatment -- what I will refer to in this chapter as “therapeutic interventions.” I use this term to refer to the range of psychological and psychiatric services in which asylum seekers were engaged. This includes activities such as group and individual therapy sessions, psychiatric medications, self-help workshops, and meetings with case managers and social workers. On the surface, asylum seekers’ engagement with these treatment modalities is perhaps not surprising, given the extent of suffering associated with the asylum process and the past experiences of political violence and/or torture of many asylum claimants. As discussed at the outset of the dissertation, ‘refugee mental health’ is a burgeoning field and the status of ‘refugee’ is, in the ‘Western’ context, often conflated with the concept of ‘trauma victim’ (Bracken 1998; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, 2007; Gross 2004; Summerfield 2003, 2005; Ong 1995, 2003; Malkki 1995; Watters 2001). However, the idea of receiving psychological or psychiatric care was a novel concept to almost all of my study participants. The discourses of psychological medicine, particularly that of ‘trauma,’ and the corresponding psychiatric nosology were largely unknown phenomena to my informants.

The majority of asylum claimants who I met were receiving care at The Healing Place (THP), a local center that treats victims of torture. Asylum seekers in my study found their way to treatment in one of two ways. First, many study participants were

referred to THP by CHR staff who were handling their legal cases. As will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, the impetus for this referral would often be a client's inability to recount his or her story, thereby posing a challenge to presenting his or her legal case before an asylum officer or immigration judge. The second way in which participants became aware of THP was through other refugees or asylum seekers in surrounding communities. THP is one of the oldest centers of its kind and is a well-known establishment in the area (as well as nationally and internationally). It is important to note, however, that my study participants were primarily referred to THP by fellow refugees or asylum seekers not for psychological or psychiatric treatment, but rather for the material resources. Thus, when I asked participants how they initially discovered THP or what the impetus was for contacting THP, the responses I received included "Someone told me they give you winter coats and shoes," "I heard they could help with your asylum case," "They give you bus passes," or "they show you how to get a medical card [insurance]."

In order, however, to qualify as a client of THP, one had to demonstrate a personal history of torture. Part of the explicit criteria was that one had to be a "victim" of torture to be considered eligible for care. Establishing this victim status and becoming a THP client did mean being assigned to a social worker who could help with material resources and referrals to external assistance programs. However, the organization's emphasis was on its "healing services," and these primarily took the form of therapeutic interventions such as psychotherapy, prescription of psychiatric medications, life skills classes, and self-help workshops. In this way, asylum seekers became psychiatric/psychological "patients" engaged in therapeutic interventions that were not

only previously unknown to them, but that were also not something that they initially identified as desirable or necessary.

This chapter examines study participants' experiences of and responses to various therapeutic interventions, principally psychiatric medication and psychotherapy. My point of departure here is to examine the subjective experiences of being subject to such interventions. I examine the experiences and consequences of being labeled a 'trauma victim,' given a diagnosis of PTSD, or ingesting psychopharmaceuticals. How do asylum seekers engage with therapeutic interventions and their corresponding psychological/psychiatric ideologies and discourses? As this chapter will outline, the experiences and responses of asylum seekers in this context are varied and highly ambivalent. Study participants conceptualized their suffering as primarily a social and political issue, not a biological or psychological one. In this way, asylum seekers' personal and collective understandings of suffering and distress often stood in contrast to the psychological medical model espoused by THP. Yet, the purpose of this chapter is not to denounce therapeutic interventions as a means of asserting control over asylum claimants (though they do this on some level). Rather, I elucidate how therapeutic interventions were engaged creatively by asylum claimants. To this end, I wish to highlight how study participants, as social actors, find ways to maneuver within the often powerful constraints on their everyday lives as asylum seekers. Ultimately, therapeutic treatments, including the use of psychopharmaceuticals, were foremost understood by the asylum seekers in my study not as acting on biochemical abnormalities or even in treating past trauma. Rather, these therapeutic interventions, when they were utilized, were namely seen as a way to manage or mitigate the "anxious subjectivities" evoked by the

political asylum process (Nyers 2006). Therapy sessions, meetings with social workers, and the use of psychiatric medication provided a way to survive on a day-to-day basis and to contend with the profound existential insecurity that permeated their everyday lives. Yet, participants conceptualized these interventions in contrast to “real help” or a “real solution”: the granting of legal status.

This chapter begins with an overview of the treatment approaches and philosophies adopted by THP. Attention to the organization’s “working principles” provide an important context for investigating how THP, as an institution that is highly involved with many study participants’ lives, constructs asylum seekers as particular subjects (patients/clients) and conceives of their suffering - both in terms of etiology and healing. I then turn to a discussion of participants who rejected therapeutic interventions and, more specifically, psychiatric medications. While these participants rejected psychiatric medications for different reasons, their narratives point to a similar conceptualization of suffering as politically, socially, and morally grounded. Next, I examine asylum seekers who used therapeutic interventions, but remained ambivalent about their efficacy. These interventions, I argue, were used not as healing modalities, but rather as tools to manage their everyday lives in their roles as asylum claimants. As study participants located their suffering in the anxiety of the present, therapeutic interventions may have been seen as temporarily necessary or helpful, but not seen as part of extended treatment for a ‘disordered’ self. I then move on to investigate what aspects of therapeutic interventions were embraced by study participants and the reasons for this embrace. I argue that participants agentively engaged therapeutic interventions and found them supportive and palliative in ways that may have been unintended or not an explicit

goal of THP. Finally, I highlight the assertion that underscores all participants' narratives -- that a 'real' solution to suffering or to the possibility of healing lies in the conferring of legal status – and I consider the social, moral, and political implications of this stance.

THP: APPROACHES AND PHILOSOPHIES⁴

THP's "healing services" rely on a multidisciplinary "team approach" to treatment. Clients are assessed and treated by psychological and medical experts; this includes evaluations by psychiatrists, psychotherapists and social services staff. An initial intake appointment includes psychological testing and assessment and then subsequent referrals to primary care physicians, psychiatrists, nurses, and, if deemed necessary, other treatment providers such as physical or massage therapists.

Though THP documents do not use the term "medical model," it is, I think, clear that such a model underlies their approach to treatment. Though framed in rather ambiguous terms of "healing care," THP focuses explicitly on "the emotional and mental aspects of the survivor's life." Furthermore, the first step in "healing care" is psychological testing and evaluations. In this way, clients' narratives and symptoms are 'read' through a psychological lens as a point of entry. During these evaluations clients were often charged with "cram[ming] the riot of their suffering into little boxes on the

⁴ THP maintained strict rules regarding engagement in outside research; staff members were unable or unavailable to participate in my research project during my fieldwork period. Due to my frequent presence at THP (e.g., dropping off and picking up study participants who were THP clients), I developed quite amicable relationships with staff members and they expressed interest in and support of my project. In lieu of granting interviews, staff members made me aware of THP's institutional documents and white papers that outline and discuss the organization's approaches and philosophies to treatment -- from which data regarding THP's perspectives in this chapter are drawn.

psychiatrists' charts," as they completed a battery of psychological evaluations upon their initial intake (Ong 1995:1247). THP staff seems aware that that their almost-exclusively immigrant client base will be unfamiliar with such an approach, but the organization nonetheless privileges a psychological medical model. Indeed, in a discussion of approaches to psychotherapy in the institutional documents, THP states: "We recognize that psychotherapy, as an approach to healing is Western in origin and often in practice." Yet, the document continues to assert "the universality of telling one's story as a ritual of healing" in the defense of using psychotherapy as a primary mode of treatment for survivors of torture and violence. However, as I will discuss in this chapter, many of my study participants had ambivalent feelings towards talking about painful past events and instead emphasized a desire to, in the words on one participant, "look forward not back."

In urging the necessity of "piecing together one's story," THP explicitly outlines the therapist's role as aiding in the reframing or reinterpretation of life events. Though THP therapists emphasize the "relational" aspect of the patient/therapist dyad, they cite Herman (1997) in highlighting the "intellectual" aspects of the therapist role. They continue, citing Kardiner, "who noted that 'the central part of the therapy should always be to enlighten the patient' about the nature and meaning of symptoms." Framed this way, it is the therapist-expert who has the power to claim meaning over the patient-asylum claimant's narrative. The use of "cognitive restructuring" is one tool that THP therapists use to renegotiate the meaning of their clients' narratives in the therapeutic realm with the aim of "enlightening" clients. Based in a cognitive behavioral framework, cognitive restructuring, according to THP, intends to identify negative or "irrational" thoughts and replace them with "realistic," "appropriate" thoughts as a way to mitigate

distress and promote positive thinking and behavior. My interest here is not in determining the efficacy of this method, but rather in highlighting how power is implicated in this modality. In the patient-therapist relationship, it is the therapist/‘expert’ -- not the client -- that has the power to define which thoughts are “irrational” or “rational.” In this way, therapists are not just ‘enlightening’ their clients but are, in effect, producing a particular “regime of truth” that aims to regulate thoughts and behavior (Foucault 1980; Rose 1990, 1998; Ong 1995, 2003). It is the therapist or other psychological ‘expert’ that asserts his or her ability to clinically categorize thoughts and behaviors and thereby produce certain behaviors or persons as ‘abnormal.’

If study participants were interpellated as traumatized, mentally ill, or otherwise psychologically compromised, then they are, according to the model of psychological medicine, bound to the ‘proper’ treatments of psychotherapy and/or psychiatric medication. Daniel, an asylum seeker from Liberia in his early twenties, among all my study participants used psychiatric medication with the least amount of questioning or resistance (at least outwardly). He would be, in biomedical parlance, a very “compliant” patient. He was shy, quiet, deferential and although very pleasant, fairly reticent. The following exchange occurred when I asked him about his experiences of THP, specifically with regard to his PTSD and the medication a THP psychiatrist had prescribed:

- D: Um, well they said I got PTSD.
 BH: Mmhmm. And is that something that you learned about -- PTSD -- from THP?
 D: Yeah.
 BH: Or had you heard of it before?
 D: No, I never heard of that .. I never knew what that was. So they just told me I got it.

- BH: And how did they explain it to you? Or how do you understand PTSD?
- D: Um, it's post traumatic disorder something. Yeah, um, they said those who've been through trauma get it and, um, like have nightmares, that sort of stuff.
- BH: And what do you think about that, the diagnosis of PTSD?
- D: I didn't know I had it, you know. But, um, they said I got it and that I need to be taking medication .. so that's why I'm taking it [medication].

In many ways, this case epitomizes the medical model, in that a biomedical/psychological expert, during an assessment, discovers an underlying problem, in the form of pathology (here, PTSD), and finds an appropriate biomedical solution to the problem (medication). Daniel did not express much ambivalence about the medication or other therapeutic interventions, even with my probing further about his experience and thoughts as I got to know him over the course of fieldwork. As was consistent with his demeanor and personality, he remained greatly deferential to “experts” of any kind. And this kind of logic of expertise is what underlies the medical model in general, and the practices and philosophies of THP in particular. Here, however, I think it critical to heed Scheper-Hughes’s (1992) warning that silence and a sense of ‘compliance’ should not be conflated with acceptance; as she argues, these can be important strategies for survival. Scheper-Hughes’s words take on importance here particularly as we recognize that study participants were often drawn into THP for material and economic resources/aid, often connected to their asylum claimant status. Thus, for many study participants therapeutic interventions such as medication and psychotherapy were seen as part of a ‘package’ of assistance in the larger context of their quest for asylum. We must therefore consider the possibility that study participants’ involvement in therapeutic interventions represent, even partially, an attempt at being recognized as an authentic and deserving refugee.

Regardless of study participants' reasons for participating in them, therapeutic interventions hold potential power in reshaping subjectivity and lived experience, even when taken up ambivalently. The power of clinicians to (re)define experiences and expressions of suffering in terms of psychology/psychiatry require us to ask: what are the consequences of this 'translation' for study participants? As this chapter argues, the translation of suffering into psychiatric nosology is both productive and deleterious of certain forms of subjectivity. A key aspect of participants' subjectivity that is threatened in the clinical translation of suffering surrounds political identity.

Political struggle, as I discussed in previous chapters, was often a centrally defining role in participants' experiences and expressions of self. THP documents outlining institutional philosophies aptly recognize the centrality of politics in many of their clients' lives. However, the way in which THP frames clients' political concerns ultimately effaces politics as an experience of self and serves as a reinforcement of the (putative) legitimacy of the psychological/medical model. The THP documents state:

Because the political realm plays a more central role in our clients' personal identities, they are more inclined to use it as an indirect or symbolic way to talking about themselves. A client may talk at length about the political turmoil and transitions that his/her country is undergoing as a substitute for the major personal transformations that s/he is undergoing. In this manner, political discourse may be used for expressing strong emotions and country of origin may be used as a metaphor for the self.

Anthropologist-physician Christine Zarowsky (2000, 2004) has argued that psychological medicine provides but one framework for interpreting and understanding extreme events such as political violence -- namely, interpreting reactions to such events as "psychological trauma and PTSD." In her work examining Somali interpretations of

violence, she argues that such a model is inappropriate given that Somalis interpret violent events in the framework of politics, not in terms of intrapsychic processes.

Zarowsky (2000) points to recent scholarship that attempts to integrate considerations of culture into the processes of psychological diagnostics, but finds that too often “PTSD and individual psycho-emotional trauma remain the ‘real,’ underlying responses, which can be shaped by ‘ethnocultural traditions’” (384; see also Ong 1995; Jenkins 1996).

Similarly, THP asserts the need to be attentive to clients’ political narratives, but sees politics not as a valid interpretive framework or as an actual experience of self, but rather as a proxy for intrapsychic processes. Thus, though it may appear that THP gives consideration to the centrality of politics as a form of self-experience and self-identity, THP’s stance of politics-as-proxy ultimately disavows clients’ political narratives of that centrality in the therapeutic arena. To speak of politics as an “indirect” way of talking about the self fails to acknowledge that for some people, like many of my study participants, as a matter of phenomenology and of self-representation, there is no separation between a private self and a social/political self.

Indeed, as medical anthropological literature has addressed, the medicalization of suffering often elides important political, sociocultural, and moral dimensions of distress (Kleinman and Desjarlais 1995, Jenkins 1991, 1996, 1998; Jenkins and Valiente 1994; Coker 2004, Zarowsky 2000, 2004, Dwyer and Santikarma 2007, Fassin and Rechtman 2010). More specifically, recent scholarship has shown how the emergence of ‘trauma’ as the dominant paradigm in which to understand suffering has effaced other interpretive frameworks for experiencing and expressing violence (Fassin and Rechtman 2010; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, 2007; Ticktin 2006, 2011; Pupavac 2002; James 2004, 2010). A

subset of this literature is particularly aimed at critiquing the rapidly growing trend to diagnose post-conflict or refugee populations with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bracken and Petty 1998; Becker 1995; Summerfield 2003, 2005; Pedersen 2001, Breslau 2004; Ingleby 2005). As noted in previous discussions of this literature, it is not that the medical model of psychological trauma is inherently inappropriate in cross-cultural settings. What is critical to recognize, however, is the ways in which such a model may supplant indigenous and/or more culturally appropriate understandings of distress. And here, I want to underscore the power that interpretive frameworks (e.g, the psychological medical model) have in mediating experience. By offering a way of reconceptualizing past and present suffering, such interpretive frameworks are reshaping the very lived experiences of those who engage these frameworks. If experience, as Joan Scott (1991) has argued, is inextricably linked to discursivity, then we can see the framework of psychological medicine as shaping both the form and content of experience (see also van Alphen 1999). Garro and Mattingly (2000) have posited a similar argument with respect to the relationship between narrative and experience: “as narrative is constructed, it constructs” (16). Narrative is always enacted. Drawing on these theoretical strands, then, this chapter explores the consequences for study participants of reframing their suffering in terms of ‘trauma’ or psychological categories.

Gross (2004) suggests that “the appropriation of the body of the asylum seeker and refugee by the health sector and the state produces specific formats for identification with and resistance to the new context, affects practices concerning illness and health, and ultimately restricts social, economic, and cultural integration” (158). Indeed, as I have been arguing here, the struggle to categorize and make meaning of study

participants' suffering produces new categories and frameworks for understanding the self and for refashioning subjectivity. This process is one of negotiation and contest; categories of meaning and available narrative frameworks are rarely taken up wholesale. In her analysis, Gross (2004) engages De Certeau's (1984) ideas of tactics (see also Scheper-Hughes 1992) to describe how asylum seekers navigate these daily attempts at categorizing and labeling by either identifying with the categories (attempts at being a "good refugee"), by struggling with these categories, and by resisting these categories. In my research site, all of these were at play, often simultaneously.

“THERE’S NO PILL FOR THAT”: REJECTION OF THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Almost all of my informants participated in some form of therapeutic intervention. Eric was a particular exception to this, in that he rejected any kind of therapeutic intervention, although psychiatric medications, he felt, were the most odious. He was not alone, however, in the rejection of psychiatric medications. Rejection of medication use followed several lines of thought. First, some participants, such as Eric, conceived of medications as masking the 'real' problem: the unfair and prolonged asylum system in the U.S. Second, some asylum seekers rejected the use of medications claiming that the pain of social rupture and the anxiety of asylum seeking evoked suffering that was not treatable via medication and/or therapy. Finally, some asylum claimants rejected medication use because of the association between psychiatric medication and abnormality – conceived of as 'crazy', 'sick' or irrational.

In Eric's view, psychiatric medications were not palliative or therapeutic.

Medications temporarily erase painful memories or fearful thoughts, but these thoughts remain close to the surface. The following passage represents Eric's adamant rejection of psychiatry. His wife, also going through the asylum process, had struggled with severe emotional issues since arriving in the U.S., and this came up frequently in our conversations.

- Eric: Oh, she's—she's depressed. She's taking medication for depression.
- B: Is it helping?
- Eric: I don't believe in that crap!
- B: You don't believe in it?
- Eric: I don't ... It doesn't do anything. It just dopes you. Drugs you. It's like you're frustrated and you go and drink beer. Like chhhh, chhhh (makes chugging sound and motion).
- B: And you think the medication is similar to that?
- Eric: Yeah. It's like okay, I'm fine now. But bet you, get sober and okay, you're thinking about the same thing. So what are you doing? ... it's like 'ffffmmmm' Just forget about it for a while. But when that medicine wears away you're gonna think about it. So they just keep giving you more medication. Take it after six hours. Take it after three hours. They increase the dose. You know? Well, I'm thinking about blah, blah, blah. Well, you're taking 20 milligrams. Let's make it thirty. It's crap!

In this passage, Eric posits medication as a diversionary tactic, a temporary mask of one's suffering. When I ask him if he feels the same way about other psychosocial modalities, such as therapy, he responds: “well, maybe that's better, but it still only doing the same thing.” He makes a comparison between himself and his wife in their responses to both violent events of the past and their current anxieties regarding their pending asylum cases. Eric described his wife as “dramatic” and “very emotional.” In contrast, he described himself as “a rock” and “very rational,” often invoking the fact that he has a college degree whereas she never completed high school. Throughout my conversations

with Eric, his self-reliance and his ability to “handle things that others can’t” emerged as a salient aspect of his narratives and assertions of his identity. Eric’s conceptualizing -- and rejection -- of therapeutic interventions aligns with his overall experience and view of the asylum seeking process as one in which institutional bodies/actors assert control over claimants’ lives.

In the above narrative, Eric describes a “they” who give medication, not a self who takes medication. Such language subtly underscores his view of therapeutic interventions -- like other institutions and forces that interact with asylum seekers -- as a form of social control. Pupavac (2002) has forcefully argued that psychosocial programs offered by humanitarian or international aid organizations constitute a form of “therapeutic governance.” By this, she means to draw attention to the ways in which psychosocial programs demand a new way of thinking about and acting on the self, which become part of the “regulation of people’s lives.” Pupavac (2002) points to an underlying assumption of these interventions: that populations in post-conflict situations are vulnerable or emotionally ‘damaged’ and are therefore at risk of perpetuating the kind of violence that gave rise to their purported ‘trauma.’ Psychosocial interventions in these contexts, she argues, require its constituents to conform to a particular kind of “psychological functionalism” as a form of risk management. Similarly, Ong (2003) posits the various institutions with which refugees interact (social welfare, medical or psychiatric clinics, counseling centers, etc.) as technologies of governing that are integral to the (re)formation of proper citizenship. As Ong suggests, diseased or disordered bodies are regulated and ‘managed’ by institutions that aim to normalize them. By reframing experiences of violence and distress as clinical conditions, therapeutic interventions

interpellate study participants as traumatized clients whose condition requires new forms of bodily and intrapsychic regulation.

By rejecting psychiatric medication, Eric is refusing the (potential) regulatory power that psychiatry has over his body. His assertion that medication “dopes you” echoes concerns about the use of medications to ensure the docility of patients and even the “social abandonment” of them (Biehl 2007, Biehl and Locke 2010, Basaglia 1987). Eric’s stance on psychiatric medication highlights medication’s limits to effectively alleviate suffering as well as its disciplining effects. As Jenkins (2010) has suggested, a central question when considering the relationship between subjectivity and psychopharmaceuticals is whether “such drugs alleviate personal and social suffering that is otherwise overwhelming, or [if] they merely mask and dislocate the source of such suffering” (4). For Eric, the answer is the latter. Yet rejection of medication did not always follow this line of thinking.

Other participants rejected medication not because of its ‘doping’ effects but rather because of its perceived lack of efficacy in this context. For example, Ahmed and Patrick asserted that their pain and suffering was something that was outside the realm of treatment with medication. As Ahmed described his daily anxiety and fear regarding his insecure status and the emotional pain caused by leaving his family behind, he concluded strongly: “there is no pill for that.” Likewise, Patrick tried several different types of antidepressants but claimed they didn’t help and only produced unwanted side effects. We talked about the medications, shortly before he stopped taking them altogether:

P: It doesn’t help ... like, the help that I want.

BH: What’s the help that you want?

P: Umm (laughs uncomfortably) ... Well, it’s very hard to say.

Um, the help I want is like—if I take medication, then I want, like, totally the pain gone. But now it’s like six months or five months of taking the medication but still ... the pain is still there.

BH: Mmhmm.

P: I want to take out all the pain I have and feel like ... (voice trails off) ... but there are times you can’t take pills. Like if you have the problems like I do. I think about my family and how do I feel? So, I don’t think you can take pills for that ... They [medications] can’t help me. Help me to feel better. I don’t think it’s gonna be that way. To feel better would be, like, to have my brothers and mom be with me and to know we are safe and know everything about them. How they are living, if they have enough to eat, if they are in school.

The examples cited above reflect different reasons for rejecting the use of psychiatric medications. Implicit in Eric’s narrative was that the suffering and anxious thoughts surrounding asylum seeking should not be erased. In contrast to this view, Patrick desired an “unattainable ideal”: for medication to end all his pain (Jenkins 2010: 32). Yet, he finds that medications cannot do so. His conclusion, that his pain is not treatable, not able to be alleviated by medication, does not reflect his desire to hold on to painful thoughts; rather, it is a comment on the lack of efficacy of medications in the face of profound suffering. Both of these narratives tell us something about how the etiology of this type of emotional and social suffering is conceived. That is, underlying both narratives is a sense that the solution to (and the origin of) suffering lies “in their social worlds, not in the space between their ears” (Summerfield 2005: 267). Seen from this perspective, healing cannot be achieved through the alteration of biochemistry; rather, one must attend to the sociocultural and political ground of suffering.

Other participants rejected medication because of the perception that psychiatric medications represented compromised or abnormal personhood. Emmanuel emphatically

answered “no” when I asked if he was taking or had taken any psychiatric medications during his treatment at THP. He elaborates: “Well, yes, they do have psychiatrists there. So when it gets to a certain point, when the psychiatrists discover that you are not reasoning well, then they give you the medication.” Here, Emmanuel was making a distinction between a reasoning/reasonable person and a person who needs medication. As a former academic, Emmanuel, like Eric, very much emphasized his capacity to reason as a key aspect of his identity. To become a person who required psychiatric medication would challenge his sense of self-determination, a core aspect of his identity.

Similarly, Ahmed declined to get his prescriptions for antidepressant and anxiolytic (anxiety) medication filled. “If I do that, I will be a crazy person,” he told me. “I can’t be a crazy person or my family would lose all hope.” This claim underscores the responsibility that Ahmed had in supporting his family and remaining the father figure in the wake of his father’s death, despite being on the other side of the world without legal status or employment. It also indicates a strong perceived association between medications and abnormality. For Ahmed, to take psychiatric medication would signal – or produce – him as “a crazy person.” Like Emmanuel’s conception of medication use for irrational personhood, Ahmed rejects the notion that he is ‘crazy’ by declining to take psychiatric medications.

Lurhmann (2010), in her work with homeless mentally ill women, notes that many of these women reject psychiatric medication for the similar reason that it indicates ‘craziness.’ Lurhmann suggests that for these women, taking medications signifies social defeat. Rather, they assert narratives of self-will and survival. This is similar to what I observed with Ahmed and Emmanuel. For them, taking medication would constitute a

form of social defeat that contrasts with their identities as resilient and strong-willed, able to take control of their own emotional difficulties. While Luhrmann's subjects often exhibit symptoms of psychosis, which were not present with my informants, both ethnographic examples – hers and mine – demand a consideration of the structural conditions that are productive of symptoms that get identified as mental illness.

Luhrmann (2010) argues that institutionalized racism and structural and physical violence place women in vulnerable positions, materially and emotionally. In my research, the anxieties of the asylum process and the legal limbo facing asylum seekers evoked symptoms identified as depression and anxiety. Yet, for the study participants discussed above an acquiescence to psychiatric medication represented a threat to self-determination, at best, and a collusion with an unjust immigration process, at worst.

While needing to acknowledge the immense constraints on asylum seekers' lives, I think it simultaneously important to recognize the refusal of medication as an agentic act, if not an act of resistance. As discussed in previous chapters, the process of seeking asylum evoked feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. In one sense, then, the refusal to take medication -- to become a person who requires medication or to become medicated body -- can be seen as an assertion of self-determination. By refusing such therapeutic treatment, these study participants are simultaneously rejecting the "preconceived notions of vulnerability" that underlie a psychological model of intervention (Pupavac 2002: 365). For study participants, such as Emmanuel, Eric, and Ahmed, for whom self-reliance and independence were crucial to their sense of self, rejecting medication may have restored some semblance of control over their lives and their identities within a highly constrained environment.

For the majority of study participants that did participate in some form of therapeutic intervention, they did so ambivalently. Therapeutic interventions and their corresponding ideologies were not taken up wholesale. Indeed, “people do not simply become the diagnostic categories applied to them” (Biehl and Locke 2010: 330). The next section discusses this ambivalence and highlights the ways in which therapeutic interventions were concurrently suppressive and productive of new ways of being in the world and understanding the self.

THE AMBIVALENT EMBRACE OF THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Jenkins (2010) has referred to “the pharmaceutical self” as “the aspect of the self that is oriented by and toward pharmaceutical drugs.” She sees this as one part of a dialectic informing subjectivity, in dialogue with the “pharmaceutical imaginary,” in which pharmaceutical drugs shape the “conceivable potentials of or possibilities for human life” (2010: 23). Within the therapeutic milieu of THP, study participants approached the constitution of their “pharmaceutical selves” in varied ways. For almost all participants, therapeutic interventions, especially medication, were imbued with ambiguity. Psychiatric medications emerged as the form of therapeutic intervention that was seen as the most contentious and suspect. I briefly examine three participants, Ruth, Sharon and Sarah, to illustrate the ambivalent and sometimes fraught relationship between these study participants and therapeutic interventions, particularly medication. Jenkins’ work (2010; Jenkins and Barrett 2004; Jenkins and Carpenter-Song 2005, 2008) has ethnographically documented the ways in which psychotropic medications produce a range of subjective, and often paradoxical, experiences. Moreover, Jenkins (2010)

elucidates the ways in which medication simultaneously provides a sense of hope for mitigating suffering and evokes deep frustrations in its limitations to do so. This tension between hope and frustration undergirds the narratives of the three women whose cases I briefly present here. For these women, their “pharmaceutical selves” were foreign -- not in the sense of being culturally Other, but in an experiential sense, whereby becoming a medicated self meant being a partial stranger in her own skin.

Ruth

One afternoon, I sat quietly with Ruth in her living room watching the Tyra show. Increasingly, as the possibility of deportation became more likely, Ruth was unable to leave the house, complaining of “burning all over,” and intense headaches. She also said that she was feeling so “stressed” and “scared.” She started refusing to answer the phone or the buzzer to her apartment. On days like this, she would not have much to say, but would implore me to stay longer, even if she was dozing off on the couch. She began to talk wearily about her pain and her increasing “confusion” and panic. She suddenly sat up and with a dramatic movement dumped out a plastic shopping bag full of pill bottles. “Can you believe this?” she shouted, waving her hands, motioning to the bottles that had spread out to cover the area of the coffee table. She exclaimed:

How can people take that much medication!? How!!? I take a pill to sleep, then a pill to keep me awake, then a pill to stop my confusion, then a pill to stop my pain. For how long will I be doing that!? For how long!?

As discussed in the previous chapter, Ruth’s suffering manifested in embodied forms: burning and generalized pain throughout her body, weakness, sweating, loss of appetite

and insomnia. The pills that were strewn across her coffee table that afternoon were numerous, indeed, and included pain medications such as Tramadol, Restoril (sleep aid), and medications for high blood pressure, restless leg syndrome, and gastroesophageal reflux disease. Psychiatric medications included Ritalin, Celexa (anti-depressant), and Buspar (anti-anxiety).

Whereas Ahmed and Emmanuel rejected psychiatric medication because of the association between such medication and compromised personhood (i.e., “craziness”), Ruth acknowledged her identity as a ‘sick’ person -- an identity that was signaled by the myriad medications she ingested on a daily basis. For Ruth, it was the prolonged asylum process and her impending deportation that she saw as productive of her illness(es). And here, she conceptualized both physical problems (high blood pressure, GERD, bodily pain) and psychological/psychiatric problems (depression, anxiety, attention deficit) as part of a general “sickness” that she associated with her status as an asylum seeker (see previous chapter). She declared: “These sicknesses I got in America. I was never sick before.” Ruth clearly traces the root of her illness to her current situation/status: “The [asylum] system is crazy. It turns you into a fool.” For Ruth, this subject-position of a “fool” was twofold. Her experience of self had become one of confusion and anxiety, which she identified as “mad” or “foolish.” In addition, her newly adopted status as a medicated person conferred her as disordered and pathological.

Sharon

In contrast to Ruth’s claim that she was “never sick before” coming to the U.S. and claiming asylum, Sharon, an asylum seeker from Kenya in her late forties, was

keenly aware of the impact that past experiences of violence have had on her, emotionally and psychologically. She told me of her “madness” after being a victim of the terrorist bombing in Nairobi and then being targeted by the Kenyan government because of her public calls for justice. Hospitalized in a Kenyan “mental institution” for two years, Sharon talked extensively of her depression as an enduring symptom of past trauma. Yet, Sharon also declared the asylum process to be “a particular kind of trauma,” in that asylum claimants like her live in a constant state of insecurity and uncertainty. The anxiety provoked by this uncertainty, she felt, was exacerbated by the “humiliation” associated with being dependent on others throughout the asylum process, given her inability to work or to receive any government assistance. For Sharon, the pain of the past was recalled by the pain of the present. She experienced suffering as a continuum. As noted in Chapter 4, Sharon found the present anxieties brought past struggles and pain to the fore: “Everything has come back again.”

When I first met Sharon, she had only been in the U.S. for several months and had been directed to a free counseling center by the director of the legal aid NGO helping her with her asylum case. She had quickly been prescribed Lexapro, an antidepressant. When I ask her if the medication helped, she responded:

It is very helpful. In fact, I told the doctor who told me that this is not magic—I later told him, ‘This is magic!’ You know, I was feeling, like, in moments, you know like, in minutes, one minute I had become so bad, I feel so hot, I feel like a fool ... I am here and I am almost going bananas. But the medicine ... I started to take it ... and I at least found sense, you know? I was able to see reality ... I had become desperate, you know ... and that medicine helped me very much.

Yet, this sense of the magical qualities of medications diminished as time progressed and

her asylum case remained pending for over a year. Without a work permit or permanent housing, Sharon moved from apartment to apartment, often sleeping on living room couches or a spare mattress on the floor. When I asked about her feelings toward her psychological/psychiatric treatment in follow-up interviews and in conversations, her response reflected much more ambivalence than her previous assertion of the “magic” of medication:

You know, without papers, without these numbers [social security number], it is as if you don't exist. I am with doctors [psychiatrists]--one of the best doctors in the world. But still there are all these stressors ... that are hindering me from getting better, from, you know, getting alignment. If I am denied asylum, where am I going?

Despite the mixed feelings toward the efficacy of treatment, Sharon went to counseling twice a week, sees a psychiatrist regularly, and took antidepressants. She took three buses, taking almost two hours to travel each way to THP. She discussed how much her life had become structured around her therapeutic treatment, in both a practical and emotional/psychological way, and expressed concern over this:

Sharon: I don't want to, to get addicted. Addicted to a doctor. You know, it's an addiction ... it's 'Ahhhh when will Tuesday come and I go to see the doctor?'
 BH: This is the psychologist?
 Sharon: The psychologist. The psychiatrist. Yes, 'Ohhhhh let me see the doctor.' It is an addiction! Not that the doctor is bad but it is me who is getting addicted to seeing the doctor. To come out of this is, is a daring move. To come out of addiction is daring.

That Sharon felt “addicted” to psychiatric professionals attests to pharmaceutical drugs’ simultaneous role as a mechanism “of both social control and treatment” (Jenkins

2010:10). Sharon's narrative excerpts reflect the tension between her desire to assuage her suffering and her confrontation of medication's limits to fulfill this desire -- a tension embedded in many study participants' lived experience as well.

Sarah

When I first met Sarah, a female asylum seeker from Zimbabwe in her mid-forties, she expressed ambivalence about taking psychiatric medication. Like Sharon, Sarah also told me about the "trauma" that she suffered in the past, though mostly in generalizations, as the details, she stressed, were too difficult to discuss. Though she herself had not been involved in politics in Zimbabwe, her husband had been a key member in a political party opposing Robert Mugabe, the president at that time. After her husband's sudden disappearance, she and her two children were targets of harassment and threats on their lives. One evening she was taken by military officers and was raped and beaten. She fled the country shortly thereafter and left her children in the custody of a neighbor who promised to take them into hiding. Since arriving in the U.S. a few months prior to our first meeting, Sarah had been unable to contact her husband or children or gain any information regarding their whereabouts. She was consumed with anxiety and fear about her family and this was the most salient issue to her during our first interview. As we discussed her daily emotional struggles, she told me that she was recently given antidepressants from THP and expressed her ambivalence about using them:

Sarah: Yeah, I'm actually on tablets, which is one thing I never wanted to do. To take tablets for depression. I've never taken a can of medication in my life. And I know they've got after-effects. I know that they will—but because of my situation otherwise I'll have a break—a nervous breakdown and die before I get my

kids here, so, I just have to do it for them. I have to take the medication.

BH: So you're taking the antidepressants now?

Sarah: Yeah, that's what I'm taking right now, yeah. Though I know it's not good for me. It's not good for me at all. They-I've been putting on weight. This is not my weight. I've put on sooo much weight. When I came here I was like a size 12. And I'm on a size 18 or 20 now.

BH: From the medication?

Sarah: Mhhhm. I know it's the medication, food and everything else, the stress and that kind of thing. You know you develop so many diseases here. Like I have gastric acid now.

BH: And that wasn't happening before?

Sarah: No. No.

Like Ruth, Sarah traces the development of “so many diseases” and the need for medication to the current “situation” of being an asylum seeker in the U.S. Indeed, all three case examples highlight the ways in which the context of asylum seeking evoked particular forms of illness and suffering. This occurred on both a phenomenological and discursive level. As the previous chapter(s) have illustrated, daily life was imbued with profound insecurity and reminders of familial rupture that produced embodied states of suffering. In addition to this, we see here the translation of this suffering into psychological/psychiatric nosology that discursively produced these women as ‘depressed,’ ‘traumatized,’ or otherwise ill. Thus, expressions of suffering become a matter of pathology. As these case examples show, despite their ambivalence to therapeutic interventions, study participants often ‘took up’ (to varying extents) the labels assigned to them. Options that were once unthinkable remained unappealing but necessary for survival. The context of asylum seeking reshaped the contours of daily life, challenging and reshaping notions of ‘surviving.’ It is within these particular structural and sociopolitical circumstances therapeutic interventions, like medications, seem like

the only viable options for surviving. Here, medications emerged as an existential mechanism as well as a form of “management of everyday life” (Jenkins 2010: 28). Ruth found that she needed a pill to perform the most mundane but imperative tasks of getting up in the morning or going to sleep. It is Sharon’s “desperation” that prompted her to use antidepressants. For Sarah, medication emerged as the only viable way of preventing a nervous breakdown -- and, possibly, death.

Yet, as the narratives of these case examples show, participation in therapeutic interventions, including the use of medication, was undertaken with a high degree of ambivalence. Examined closely, this ambivalence reveals a disconnect between THP’s emphasis on past trauma and study participants’ focus on the present as evoking suffering. As elaborated in previous chapter(s), it was not that study participants failed to recognize the impact of past experiences of violence. However, study participants primarily located their present suffering not in the trauma of the past, but in the present context of asylum seeking. They see the (successful) adjudication of their asylum claims as offering the ultimate potential for healing. Though Sharon took psychiatric medication and went to therapy appointments to discuss past trauma, she explained that this held only partial possibility for healing. The current stressors associated with the asylum process prevented full “alignment.” As she explained, legal recognition/status is a prerequisite for a sense of full existence.

The social and familial rupture caused by forced migration is a salient theme across all my study participants’ narratives and is represented by Sarah’s narrative above. She decided to take medication in order to survive to see her children. Despite her concern about the adverse effects of medication, she decided “I just have to do it for

them.” Her existence, like that of so many other study participants, is contingent on the possibility of familial reconnection. Joao Biehl (2005) has described the “social death” that takes place in “zones of social abandonment” where excluded or undesirable members of society are left to struggle and, ultimately, die. In these sites, he argues, psychopharmaceuticals emerge as a way to mediate people’s separation from the social world. While my study participants have not been abandoned in the same sense as Biehl’s (2005) subjects, they have nonetheless been unexpectedly and unwittingly displaced and separated from homeland and loved ones. From this perspective, we can see how in the ethnographic context of my research “pharmaceuticals [may] substitute for the lack of social links” (Biehl 2005:107).

These study participants, then, saw medications, as providing a way to survive the present context of asylum seeking. Medications, framed this way, supported a partial, liminal and temporary state of existence until a ‘true’ existence was realized, marked by legal recognition and subsequent family reunification. This approach to medication contrasts with the psychological medical model of THP, which sees medication and other therapeutic interventions as acting on enduring intrapsychic symptoms of trauma originating in the past. None of my study participants conceived of medications as curative or as providing ultimate relief. Rather, medication was, in the words of one participant, a way to “continue surviving” amidst quotidian fear and uncertainty.

Of course, as discussed earlier, some study participants rejected the use of medication, either as a tactic of everyday survival or a healing modality. Sarah’s case illustrates a trajectory from an ambivalent embrace of medication to an eventual rejection of it – and of therapeutic interventions more generally. When I met Sarah again after our

initial meeting, she elaborated on why she had stopped taking the prescribed antidepressants and provided an impassioned case against therapeutic interventions:

S: I've just realized like I've been g-going for counseling, but I realize what is now a—what affects me now it's not really the trauma of going through what I did. I think I've—I've accepted that it happened. Right, the rape and everything else. It happened. Uh the real thing affecting me right now is the fact that my family is not here. I don't know where my kids are. ... I don't have the money to bring them in this country. I don't have a home. I don't have a job. Those are the things that are affecting me. Yeah.

BH: Does counseling help with those things as well?

S: It doesn't. Because they are focusing on my trauma but it's not gonna go away. The pain's not going away because the best that's—there's no way you know you can actually say okay fine I can relax and forget and have peace of mind you know given the scenario I am giving you like right now. How do you do that? Do you really have the solution to th—how do you really do that? Can you tell me how you can do that!? How can you do that, Bridget? You can't! We are lying to ourselves. There is no way you can do that. You can't!

BH: So you can't forget about the past and all that's happening

S: You can't! You can't. Because what makes it come back every time is the fact that you ask yourself what about--what if they're going through what I'm going through? What about if they're using my children to find my husband? What about—you know? You—you never get well. You never—that's why I've st—stopped taking those anti-depressants.

BH: You did stop taking them?

S: I said to—they're not gonna help me and it's making me turn me into a zombie you know. I don't wanna be a zombie. You know. The only thing is you know I just need to find a job. I just need to find accommodation. I just need to raise money for the air tickets. I need the immigration to process out the papers. That's all I need. Otherwise all this and anything else even the food, even when it's there, you can't eat food. Because you ask yourself I'm eating, what about my kids? Are they eating? I'm a mother, don't forget that I'm a mother. You know? ... Can you imagine me without knowing what's happening to my daughter.

In many ways, Sarah's narrative can be read as a powerful resistance to the

medicalization of her suffering, and as a moral narrative regarding what constitutes “a life worth living” (Biehl 2005). Sarah explicitly rejects that her past trauma (rape) is the ‘real problem.’ Rather, she located her suffering in the painful separation from her children and the legal and material inability to redress this. This was not a psychological problem; rather, it was a political and moral issue. Again, this narrative underscores the contrast between the logic of THP (the framework of psychopathology) and study participants’ conceptualization of “the real thing affecting me.” Thus, in the end, for Sarah, the psychopathological framework espoused by THP represented “an (unsuccessful) attempt [...] to bypass what matters most to people: agency, morality, and kin attachments” (Jenkins 2010: 35). Whereas Sarah’s initial reason for taking medication was to survive in order to see her children again, here we see her assertion that medication, in fact, does not facilitate survival. It was not, as previously expected -- or hoped -- a tool for existing without legal status, material resources, and, above all, her family. What her narrative tells us is that a life without her children is not a life worth living. Without that, she insisted: “you never get well.”

Sarah’s narrative also echoes concerns of previously discussed study participants who rejected the use of medication. Like Patrick and Ahmed, Sarah insists on the impossibility of medication (and, for her, psychotherapy as well) to mitigate suffering in this context. Her refusal to let medication “turn me into a zombie,” reflects a similar stand against the “doping” effects of medication expressed by Eric. Like Eric, Sarah is resisting the displacement of a political and structural issue onto her body/psyche. Such a stance recalls Green’s (1994) assertion that the “body stands as political testimony” (247). To be sure, Sarah’s suffering and her refusal to allow for its translation into

clinical pathology calls attention to the pervasiveness of both her painful past and the “everyday violences” of the present (Kleinman 2000).

AMBIVALENCE BEYOND MEDICATION: PERCEIVED LIMITATIONS OF THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

As Sarah’s case highlights, ambivalence was not directed just toward medication, but often to other therapeutic interventions as well. While Sarah ultimately rejected all forms of therapeutic intervention, other study participants engaged in them despite the perceived limitations of such treatments. Study participants, both implicitly and explicitly, pointed to the limitations of representation in cases of extreme violence and suffering. For example, Patrick wavered a bit when I asked him about his thoughts on the therapy he was receiving. “I think it’s helpful,” he says, a bit tenuously, “but I don’t even think I can ever really say how I’m feeling.” Whereas this highlights the difficulty in communicating suffering, other study participants highlighted what they viewed as the limits of others’ understanding of their suffering. These study participants suggested that therapists and social workers, however well-intentioned, may not be able to fully comprehend the particularities and the enormity of their pain and suffering. As Ahmed told me: “You can tell them but they don’t know how it feels. They don’t understand that kind of fear and pain. They might think I’m just crazy. But when someone kills your uncle and your father, how are you supposed to feel?”

‘Normal’ and ‘Abnormal’ Suffering

The above quote from Ahmed highlights not only the perceived limits in

communicating and understanding pain and suffering; it also importantly underscores the appropriateness of fear and pain in response to egregious acts of violence. In Ahmed's rhetorical imploring "how are you supposed to feel?," he is asserting the legitimacy and, indeed, 'normalcy' of such feelings in this context. Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) have decried the "massive pathologization of normal sadness" that has occurred with the widespread trend to clinically diagnosis sadness as depressive disorder (103). They suggest that psychiatry's tendency to conflate normal sadness (or what they refer to as "nondisordered sadness") with depressive disorder is supported by the DSM-III's "largely decontextualized, symptom-based criteria" of depressive diagnoses (103). "Normal" or "disordered" sadness may very well manifest in the same way as depression. It is the context of the symptoms, then, that may help to identify whether or not such symptomatology is pathological or not. Certainly, as anthropological studies of culture and emotion have pointed out, the moral valence of emotions and the context in which they are deemed appropriate or not is often locally-specific and highly variable (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Jenkins and Valiente 1994; Jenkins 1996; Lutz 1998; Rosaldo 1983). Psychiatry's failing to account for both the context and the cultural variability of sadness, Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) argue, has pernicious effects, from patients being subjected to unnecessary or inappropriate treatments to patients' acceptance of oppression (20-22). In my research context, the translation of what study participants saw as appropriate responses to political and moral transgressions into clinical pathology highlights both the potential inappropriateness of treatment as well as the potential for reproducing inequities. That is, if participants' expressions of suffering stand as testimony to their perceived past and present injustices, then a pathologization of that

suffering reduces those injustices to a disordered self -- not a disordered social world.

Kirmayer (2003) has argued that the clinical encounter entails both a similar form of decontextualization identified by Horwitz and Wakefield as well as limitations on clinicians' apperception of patients' suffering. He sees the refugee-therapist relationship as posing multiple "challenges to the clinician's imagination" (168). In the clinical encounter, which Kirmayer (2003) argues is microcosm of the larger social world, the first challenge of the imagination for the clinician is to understand the refugee's trauma narrative using a model of psychiatric pathology, whereby refugees' stories are reduced to a series of symptoms, signs, and pathologies. This translation, Kirmayer (2003) asserts, decontextualizes the narrative, so it is removed from any larger framework that would allow for a more coherent understanding. A second challenge to the clinician's imagination emerges when the stories included in the refugee's narrative are outside of the realm of the clinician's world, outside of what he/she believes to be possible or just. In this case, Kirmayer (2003) proposes that there are several possible reactions: "we can expand our vision of the possible; we can interpret the narratives as defective, indicating cognitive dysfunction or some other form of psychopathology; or we can question the motives and credibility of the narrator" (168).

Despite THP clinicians' moral imperative to bear witness, their response may sometimes indicate an inability to expand one's vision of the possible, and the refugee/patient is faced with consequences of the clinician's "failure of imagination" (Kirmayer 2003: 168). Put another way, that failure of imagination may manifest as an inability to understand a morally or politically justifiable -- in other words, 'normal' -- response to something as egregious as witnessing a daughter's rape or seeing one's

family killed: events that constituted study participants' realm of the possible. Here, we can recall Renato Rosaldo's (2007 [1984]) assertion that until the death of his wife, he was "not yet in a position to comprehend the force of anger possible in bereavement," despite years of fieldwork investigating grief and rage (222). In the clinical encounter, the potential limitations of comprehension, coupled with the decontextualization inherent in the interpretive framework of psychopathology, can have deleterious effects. Thus, even though THP clinicians do not deny the occurrence of a violent event, the failure to fully apprehend an appropriate, 'nondisordered' response to that event may result in the translation of that response into clinical pathology, as dictated by the DSM criteria.

In addition to the limits on both the communication and comprehension of suffering within therapeutic encounters, a recurring theme across study participants' narratives was an emphasis on "moving on" and forgetting – not talking about – their pain and suffering, particularly as it related to their pasts. Daniel echoed the sentiment of many of my study participants when he asserted: "I just want to forget about some things and just move forward." Ahmed, too, found his therapist's urging of talking about the past disconcerting and he failed to see the value in it. "I can't talk about torture every week," he exclaimed to me. Sharon would vacillate between acknowledging that talking about her emotional pain with her therapist was helpful and wondering about its usefulness given that she would always cry on the two-hour bus ride home from therapy. The resistance to talking about painful memories manifested in my relationships with study participants as many were often unwilling to talk about the painful aspects of the past; or at least not in much detail. Some participants, like Eric, felt strongly that talking about the past was ineffective. When he asked me why I thought someone in his situation

would go to therapy, I suggested that some may find relief in having someone listen to his or her story. He let out a loud guffaw. “Listening to them -- yep, that’s America! But that doesn’t help anyone,” he insisted. “That doesn’t help me. It just postpones my problem!” Or as yet another participant declared: “I cannot think about the past, about what has made me suffer in the past. I must only think about the future.” Thus, for many of my interlocutors, thinking and talking about the past reinforced the sense of ‘stuckness’ that they felt in their everyday lives as asylum seekers. By concentrating on the future, participants were able to restore a sense of movement, even if only a partial and imagined one.

This chapter thus far has focused on the ambivalence with which asylum seekers approached therapeutic interventions, particularly with regard to the ways in which the clinical encounter often elided alternative ways of understanding suffering. However, I do not wish to overstate the power of the regulatory mechanisms of therapeutic interventions. In other words, it is crucial to recognize my interlocutors as active participants in these clinical encounters. While the clinician-patient relationship is an inequitable one, my study participants nonetheless often engaged and transformed therapeutic interventions in ways that were useful to them. In the next section, I argue that the act of going to THP and being listened to – despite the limitations on articulating and understanding – constituted an important act of recognition and social connection. This form of recognition, moreover, was very often denied to study participants during the legal asylum process.

THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION AS RECOGNITION, CONNECTION, AND

STRUCTURE

Even if study participants were unsure of the efficacy of therapeutic interventions in mitigating their suffering, they continued to attend therapy sessions, meetings with social workers, and psychiatric appointments. If the initial purpose of going to THP was to gain access to material resources, and participants expressed ambivalence regarding the therapeutic interventions provided by THP, then the question remains as to why many study participants remained such loyal clients to THP and, often, spoke highly of the center. In her study of political violence and social insecurity in Haiti, James (2010) uses the concept of “spaces of security” to describe therapeutic interventions “that created spatial and temporal intervals or breaks in the otherwise unremitting *ensekirite* [insecurity]” of the country (133).

In a somewhat similar manner, my data suggest that the very act of going to a center like THP helped asylum claimants to “struggle along” in several, perhaps somewhat unintended, ways (Desjarlais 1994). First, therapeutic interventions and the discourse of ‘trauma,’ emerged, for some participants, as a new tool for attempting to make meaning of their experiences or for reframing self-understanding. Therapeutic practices and their corresponding ideologies, consequently, evoked a sense of hope that was otherwise missing in many study participants’ lives. Second, THP provided a sense of social connection and recognition as study participants went through the asylum process -- a process often characterized by disbelief and suspicion. Finally, for many participants, going to THP became a way to structure time and attention and served as a diversion from, as one study participant put it, “just sitting at home thinking.”

‘Trauma’ Narrative as Hope/Renewal

Louise, as did other participants, often talked about her gratitude for THP and talked highly of the care and resources that THP had provided her. Louise would often repeat to me a story about standing on a cold, snowy street corner in the dead of winter shortly after she had arrived in the U.S. She had taken a wrong bus and didn’t know where she was. She had no coat and wore slip on shoes without socks. She describes a sense of utter panic that set in and then recalled someone telling her that she should call 9-1-1 if she were ever in trouble. The police eventually found her based on her limited description of where she was located and, after hearing her story, took her THP. She described her arrival at THP as a kind of rebirth: “It was as if I was drowning and then I was pulled at the last minute from this water.” Louise, like others, framed her involvement with THP in terms of a renewed humanity.

When I ask Emmanuel if he received any psychological services in Cameroon, he chuckled lightly and shook his head. “That’s an American idea” he retorted. I knew that he saw a psychologist and social worker at THP, so I pressed him a bit to see how he thought about this “American” idea. His diagnosis of “trauma,” he told me “gives hope.” When I asked Emmanuel (E) how THP helped to restore hope and treat ‘trauma,’ he elaborated:

E: What- what I’m saying is that it gives hope in the sense that...if you are coming out of that place, you feel that is the end because there are so many persons that they come out of like this thing and then they are blind. So, when you are coming out, when you have lost your sight, what do you do? What do you do again? Are you still anybody useful to the society? ... No, you are not still useful- you are not anymore useful to the society. ... And...does such a person think he still have...have life in him? He doesn’t! Do you see what I mean? The person comes out. He

will not still have- he doesn't think as if he is still living because he doesn't have life in him. But he wasn't- wasn't his fault that he went to that prison. Why should that person think he's still living?

BH: Mhmm, and so does THP change the way you think about yourself and your situation?

E: Of course. So much. So much.

BH: In what ways?

E: When you are going through their therapy, those are the type of things that they educate you on. They will tell you that, 'Don't think that it is all over. You still have hope. You still have life.' ... So, in THP, they try to tell you that you still- you're a human being. You still have life in you. And you will still get to anywhere you are going. So they teach you that this was trauma. It's not your fault, but you can...move on.

For Emmanuel, "hope is a kind of birth ... it doesn't come out of what went before, it comes out of in spite of what went before" (Lingis 2003: 24). Here, we return to the notion of hope as a practice (see Chapter 4). For Emmanuel, 'taking up' the trauma narrative emerged as an important form of practice. Although he rejected medication and resisted the application of psychiatric nosology, Emmanuel nonetheless engaged the clinical narrative of trauma in order to cull a strategy for moving forward: "practicing hope" (Mattingly 2011). As discussed earlier, Patrick, like Emmanuel, saw his pain as untreatable by medications and also noted the limitations of communicating his suffering. Yet, despite this, he also cited a sense of hope that he received from his visits to THP:

So, when I go there I talk and ... my therapist says she understands, she listens and she gives me some, you know, some advice on how I can struggle with things... so ... when I leave it's like I have some hope.

These narratives here, from Emmanuel and Patrick, appear to reflect a different stance toward therapeutic interventions and the reframing of their suffering into the framework of 'trauma.' Whereas Eric and Sarah, for example, resisted the translation of their

suffering into clinical categories, Emmanuel engages this concept as a way of making meaning of his experiences. How do we make sense of the “allure” of a “bionarrative,” such as that of the trauma narrative, in these circumstances (Carpenter-Song 2009). In asking this, I want to highlight the agency involved in engaging such frameworks of meaning despite -- or, perhaps, in addition to -- the argument offered earlier that posits the potential effacement of politico-moral understandings of suffering associated with the psychological/medical model. For example, Pupavac (2002), focusing specifically on post-conflict situations, is concerned with the consequences of psychosocial interventions. The result of such interventions, she argues, is a disavowal of political agency and an effacement of self-determination:

What is problematic about psychosocial intervention is therefore not merely the question of the relevance of trauma counselling for people who are exhibiting rational responses to their plight and who have their own support networks and coping strategies. Reading the aid literature, understandably anxious, tired, depressed refugees in insecure situations are being pathologised as unable to function. As a consequence of the pathologisation of their condition, psychosocial intervention implicitly denies the capacity of populations for self-determination (Pupavac 2002: 365).

Indeed, as my data show, study participants may lay claim to the legitimacy and rationality of their responses to past and current distress. Sadness or rage, for example, was not experienced or articulated as pathological but rather as an appropriate moral response to past and present injustices. However, an important difference between Pupavac’s (2002) subjects and my study participants is that Pupavac’s subjects have remained within their community (albeit a ruptured one), where they can draw on local coping mechanisms and sources of support. As described in the previous chapter, the

social rupture of forced dislocation and the prolonged adjudication of their asylum cases had disrupted familiar coping mechanisms and sources of support -- namely, their families and political communities -- that many of my study participants would otherwise rely on. Here, the particularities of the status of ‘asylum seeker’ -- being ‘neither here nor there’ -- produced an environment in which familiar mechanisms of “cultivating hope” had been eroded (Mattingly 2011). Thus, I would argue that in the absence of other coping mechanisms and considering the novel forms of suffering and life circumstances in which my study participants were embedded, therapeutic interventions could emerge as a way of “cultivating hope.”

For Emmanuel, the ‘trauma’ model allowed him to confront his sense of social death brought about by his torture and subsequent blindness. Understanding himself as “traumatized” and taught that he can “get over” the trauma (via psychotherapy), both freed him from any felt culpability regarding past experiences (“it’s not your fault”) as well opened a future horizon. Like Louise’s metaphor of being rescued from drowning, Emmanuel framed his experience of THP as one of existential renewal. THP’s recognition of Emmanuel as “still a human being” provided him with a way of practicing hope and emplotting his life in ways that he had felt were impossible before (Mattingly 2011). In this way, the sense of hope that Emmanuel finds in THP’s therapeutic interventions counteract the pervasive sense of “stuckness” so characteristic of the asylum process. Whereas Emmanuel found therapeutic interventions helpful in reframing the past, Patrick found hope in the act of being heard and in being given practical advice on how to struggle with present-day concerns. It is in this way that Mattingly’s discussion of “hope as practice” is instructive in this context. Because my study participants felt

suspended in time and place and unable to control the circumstances of their situation, the ability to actively cultivate a sense of moving forward – of hoping – emerged as a critical aspect of their everyday survival.

THP as Source of Social Connection and Recognition

An important aspect of participants' narratives about THP was the recognition that they received. Implicit in THP's work was bearing witness to the stories of asylum seekers, both of past experiences of trauma/torture and of present suffering. As THP documents outline: "The technical neutrality of the therapist is not the same as moral neutrality. Working with victimized people requires a committed moral stance. The therapist is called upon to bear witness to a crime. She must affirm a position of solidarity with the victim." This reception often stood in stark contrast to the one received during the asylum process, where study participants were met with suspicion or disbelief. Study participants were well-versed in telling the story of their past persecution and flight to the U.S. They were required to tell this numerous times to myriad parties: human rights groups, lawyers, therapists, and immigration judges. Lawyers and human rights groups were arguably 'on the side' of study participants but meetings with these groups were not framed as therapeutic. While immigration lawyers and human rights organization members were empathic and committed to helping their clients, they nonetheless approached clients' stories with a rather emotionally-neutral stance, looking for ways to translate testimony into legalese (this will be discussed further in the next chapter). As the next chapter will elaborate, within the legal context, asylum officers, prosecuting attorneys and immigration judges attempted to devalue and discredit participants'

testimonies. Thus, study participants found an important sense of recognition and connection in therapists' affirmation of solidarity with them, despite their views on the efficacy of psychotherapy as a healing modality. Indeed, Emmanuel's renewed sense of personhood in being recognized as fully human after being tortured underscores the profound nature of this connection for some participants.

As Ong (1995) has argued, therapy, or "talking medicine" can be seen as dually productive. On the one hand, therapy is used by clinicians to elicit information in order to better diagnosis patients. In this way, cultural information is elicited in order to be "invalidated" via the translation into clinical categories (1249). On the other hand, however, therapy is often experienced by refugee clients as a way to "receive sympathy for their less tangible afflictions" without having to succumb to psychiatric interventions that might otherwise label them as "crazy" (i.e., medication or hospitalization) (ibid). Indeed, this was the case for many of my study participants, as those like Emmanuel and Patrick resisted medication but found support through talking with their therapists. These data support a view of the clinical encounter as an intersubjective process that involves constant negotiation over the meaning and recognition of their suffering.

It was not just in the recounting of past experiences that some study participants found recognition, however. THP's recognition of study participants' current situation of struggle was especially important given that study participants often resisted talking about the painful events of their past. Social workers not only connected study participants to important material resources such as food, clothing, and transportation options, but in doing so, they also recognized the "structural vulnerability" of study participants. As one study participant explained:

I think I feel supported here [THP] ... I think one of the things that...probably makes my loneliness, my pain, not so intense is the fact that, like I have I have a care manager – a case manager, who knows who – who wants to know my issues and stuff and housing problems, you know? (Miriam, asylum seeker from Kenya)

As outlined in earlier chapters, asylum seekers are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible subjects. Because they are often viewed by the state to be illegitimate border-crossers until they ‘prove’ their deservingness, they are not recognized as full persons, in both a politico-legal and a sociomoral sense. Many study participants pointed to the importance of THP’s recognition of their difficult present struggle as legitimate and just. In this way, social workers and therapists made the moral, political and economic struggle of asylum claimants visible. This provided an important contrast to the ways in which asylum claimants were made visible within the asylum process, namely through the Othering processes of criminalization and surveillance discussed in the opening chapter(s).

Of course, we need to acknowledge that THP arguably engages in an Othering process of its own by categorizing certain forms and expressions of suffering as ‘abnormal.’ Seen from this perspective, study participants must confront multiple forms of labeling and regulation, from the therapeutic to the politico-legal realm. If the asylum process, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, can be seen as not only a politico-legal one, but also a moral one, then asylum claimants were engaged in a constant struggle to be seen as deserving. Therefore, it was necessary for study participants to identify a means of presenting oneself as morally legitimate. And while this is a matter of performance, it is also a matter of subjectivity. As we have seen, the demoralizing

techniques of state and legal institutions involved with the asylum process greatly impacted lived experience and sense of self, evoking novel forms of suffering for study participants. These state and legal tactics of ‘Othering’ are ones that produce the asylum claimant as morally suspect. In contrast, the therapeutic interventions of THP produce study participants as “morally legitimate” via the framework of trauma and victimhood (Ticktin 2011, Fassin and Rechtman 2010). While this chapter has discussed the sometimes pernicious effects of interpellating asylum claimants as psychologically compromised, here I consider how the availability of a ‘traumatized’ identity can simultaneously be a route to asserting one’s moral personhood and identifying a path for ‘moving forward.’ As Emmanuel illustrated, therapeutic interventions, including their categorization of him as ‘traumatized,’ resonated with him in a way that the criminalizing techniques of the state immigration institutions surely did not.

THP Visits as Structuring Time

In addition to the forms of social connection and recognition gained from their interactions with THP, study participants often found the physical act of going to appointments at THP beneficial. Having to go somewhere, at a particular time and date, provided participants a welcome distraction from the threat of “thinking too much.” For example, when I first met Ahmed, he had been referred to THP by his lawyer working with CHR and had been put on a waiting list as they were operating at full client capacity at the time. In addition to the profound uncertainty associated with the asylum process, Ahmed complained of feelings of isolation and loneliness. “I only go library, home, library, home, library, home,” he said. He only had contact with his lawyer, his sister

with whom he shared a small apartment, and me. Given his minority status and oppositional views in his homeland, he intentionally avoided anyone from Ethiopia (or neighboring Somalia): “I am scared of people from my country.” He longed to get his work permit, which had been significantly – and perhaps indefinitely – delayed because of his “criminal” background (he had been arrested while crossing the border into the United States and was unaware that he could have claimed asylum). The work permit held promise for him in terms of addressing his isolation and ‘stuckness.’ With a work permit – or, better yet, asylum status – he declared: “I can have some movement ... feel like I’m doing something. Because now, I’m just sitting and sitting everyday.”

While Ahmed did not receive a work permit until after I had left the field (almost two years after applying for it), and his case remained pending throughout my fieldwork, his acceptance as a client of THP provided him with an important sense of structure and purpose. This was despite his insistence on the profound limits of the interventions offered by THP and his adamant rejection of psychiatric medication. In the same conversation that he told me that THP is not “the real help I want,” he said he was happy to go to his appointments “because I’m finally doing something. It’s almost like I have a job to go to.” In fact, the day before his first appointment at THP, Ahmed borrowed several dollars from his sister and did a ‘dry run’ on the bus, taking the hour and twenty-minute trip each way so that he would be certain to catch the correct buses and be early to his appointment the following day.

Ahmed was not alone in viewing unstructured time as source of anxiety and feeling of loneliness. Many of my study participants cited the enormous amount of unstructured time in which to “sit and think” as a major difficulty associated with the

asylum process. With no job and little, if any, access to transportation, asylum seekers often complained of feeling isolated and alone. Such free, unstructured time was threatening in that my informants' minds would often become preoccupied with anxious thoughts about their asylum case or desperate longing for family and loved ones in their home countries. Spending time at THP helped give daily life structure and purpose; that in itself was seen as mitigating stress and often manifested in improved emotional well-being. The following claim by one study participant about THP echoes the sentiments of many other study participants:

I mean, I'm better because now I don't stay in the house all day. I can go somewhere, I can talk to people, I can, you know, keep moving. Keep doing something.

Again, we see a narrative reference to 'movement.' Going to THP thus provided this 'movement' in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Some study participants found an internal sense of movement via the hope they cultivated through THP's therapeutic interventions. Here, we also see the ways in which the physical movement of traveling to THP appointments provided a counter to the everyday lived 'stuckness' of the present.

THE PARADOX OF 'EMPOWERMENT'

Integral to both Emmanuel's and Patrick's discussions of the sense of hope evoked from interactions with THP was the fact that they were taught skills to manage what was professionally (re)framed as "trauma." After being diagnosed with "trauma" or, more specifically, PTSD – categories that were unheard of by almost all study participants before their interaction with THP – they were then instructed on a course of

treatment. As I have discussed, interventions such as medications and therapy were often fraught with ambivalence. However, when I asked what particular aspects of THP's interventions or techniques were most helpful, study participants, including Emmanuel and Patrick, often included 'tools' such as breathing techniques, diversion tactics (e.g., taking a walk, reading a book), and relaxation exercises that they were taught to do at home. As Emmanuel stressed: "They [THP] teach you how to get over your trauma." Implicit in this assertion is that the locus of power is with one's own self not with therapeutic professionals or within psychological/psychiatric expertise. If study participants experienced the asylum process as one in which power and control is located external to one's self, then we can see the allure of therapeutic interventions that restore some sense of control over one's being-in-the-world.

However, as this chapter has also argued, the sense of having power over one's self within the therapeutic process was not constant or universal. Many aspects of therapeutic interventions were perceived and experienced as delegitimizing or, for some study participants, as a form of social control. For those who ingested psychopharmaceuticals on a daily basis, this was often recognized as a (temporary) necessity in order to maintain everyday life; yet, medications for these individuals also produced an experience of self that was foreign. Sharon's experience of "addiction to doctors," for example, highlights the ways in which medication can be simultaneously beneficial (alleviating symptoms) and threatening (loss of control over self).

The theme of control over self was central to THP's treatment philosophy, as demonstrated by the centrality of the concept of "empowerment" in institutional documents. And while THP highlights the importance of the therapist-patient

relationship, their emphasis is on “maintaining the individual’s responsibility for his/her care throughout the rehabilitative process.” To this end, “empowerment,” THP documents insist, “is the fundamental principle of recovery.” I have discussed how this idea of empowerment may resonate with study participants engaged in therapeutic interventions. For example, teaching participants concrete, practical tools for mitigating daily distress (breathing, meditation, etc.) seemed to be an activity welcomed by many study participants, regardless of their views on the efficacy of other treatment modalities. However, I see a critical paradox regarding THP’s focus on ‘empowerment’ in this context. Namely, in becoming a THP client, participants are required to be “the author and arbiter of [their] own recovery,” but are not given the tools that they themselves see as necessary to do so.

As elucidated in this chapter, study participants’ experiences were translated into clinical categories in order for therapists and psychiatrists to determine ‘appropriate’ psychological/medical treatment. But for many participants, the translation of their symptoms into psychological problems was experienced as depoliticizing and disempowering. Their conception of the ‘problem’ was sociomoral and political (i.e., past political oppression, unjust and prolonged asylum process), not psychological. Furthermore, participants/clients – now charged with being in control of their recovery – were, within the therapeutic context, only offered tools to repair intrapsychic problems, not political or social ones. If participants, then, saw the promise for ‘real’ recovery in political recognition and social reparations, therapeutic interventions that intend to act on a disordered psyche would be impotent. As the next section illustrates, the ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ as conceptualized by study participants themselves were often very different

than the ones espoused by THP and a psychological medical model.

“ASYLUM IS THE MOST POWERFUL MEDICINE”: LEGAL STATUS AS ‘REAL’ HEALING

A similar theme underscored almost all study participants’ narratives. That is, the U.S. political asylum process was understood as being the ‘real’ problem with the ‘real’ solution to their suffering was gaining legal status. As I have suggested, is not that therapeutic interventions had no role in the lives of my study participants. In this context medications were recruited and/or accepted as a treatment with the knowledge that they held only partial possibility of alleviating suffering. Medications were valuable as a tool to “get up in the morning” or “continue surviving” until the resolution of their asylum case, but they did not hold promise in diminishing suffering over time or allowing healing more fully.

The ethnographic portraits of study participants’ lives that were presented in the previous chapters underscores the pervasive, at times consuming, sense of anxiety and insecurity associated with one’s status as an asylum claimant. The ever-present possibility of deportation shaped not only the material circumstances of participants’ lives, but also greatly impacted the way they inhabited their bodies and social worlds. As Ahmed told me: “Before you win your case you are nothing ... I have to win my case. My case is my life.” For Ahmed, because his life was defined by his struggle for legal status, therapeutic interventions held little promise of alleviating suffering. After his initial intake appointment at THP, Ahmed expressed great skepticism about becoming a client of THP:

I don't know how they can help me – my asylum case is the same. I don't know what kind of help they can give me. The help is, you know, really the immigration status. That's the problem I have. All the frustration, anxiety is caused by the immigration. I say this is what I need help with, but they don't understand. They don't help with that. When I need help I know what kind of help I want but they can only help with other things ... so I don't know how they can change things for me. This isn't the real help that I want.

As with the other study participants discussed in this chapter who resisted medication or other therapeutic interventions, Ahmed here constructs THP as unable to provide any sort of “real” help. This echoes Sarah's claim that her “real” issue was not past trauma (the target of THP's interventions) but her current state of political, economic, and social insecurity (for which THP had no treatment).

Returning to Sharon, we can further analyze her trajectory from a full embrace of therapeutic interventions (namely, medication) to an ambivalent stance to an eventual reframing of therapeutic interventions as temporal modalities. While her asylum claim was pending, Sharon asserted the limited potential that these interventions held for mitigating distress in the face of the enduring threat of deportation. Sharon was one of only three of my study participants whose case was decided at the asylum interview level (i.e., not referred to an immigration judge). Her case was also adjudicated quickly; she received a response within two weeks of her interview granting her legal status (though she had waited over a year for the asylum interview). She called me immediately after receiving the letter from the asylum office, jubilant from the news. When we met a few days afterwards, she was still elated. I asked her to tell me about how she was feeling:

I feel I am worthy ... Having been granted asylum is having been

appreciated ... It is finished. I don't need anything else. This is now the conclusion of all of my sorrows and worries. And pains and suffering and everything. Before I would say I might be going ... you know, I did not concentrate on good things. I was just thinking about my going. If I am going. If I would be told to leave. This was always on my mind—but now it is like ... I look at everything differently. I feel I belong.

She continued by telling me that “now I can get away from medicine.” When I asked her to elaborate on this, she stated:

I don't think I still need it ... I think asylum has become more of a healing to me. Than even medicine. Yes, yes. Asylum is the most powerful medicine. Because it has lifted me up. I even have self-esteem now. I can now walk on the road ... and I can see things, beautiful things.

With the threat of deportation no longer present, Sharon's new legal status has reshaped the material circumstances of her life. Asylum status, Sharon posited, was the ultimate healing mechanism -- “the most powerful medicine.” Her immediate disavowal of psychiatric medications as unnecessary underscores the view that therapeutic interventions are a temporary resource in struggling through the asylum process. Here, Sharon reflects the perspective of many participants that medications act on the anxious and chaotic state of being provoked by the asylum process. The resolution of this liminal status renders the use of medications moot. And while asylum status surely provides an important sense of political security, what is striking in Sharon's narrative is her focus on how the granting of asylum has reshaped her sense of self, instilling in her a feeling of worthiness and self-esteem. The moral terminology with which Sharon frames the granting of asylum status importantly illustrates the power of asylum status in legitimating suffering and personhood.

The legitimation of suffering conferred by the granting of asylum was acutely

evident after the final court hearing in which Louise was granted asylum after five years of pending adjudication. The following field note excerpt illustrates this:

We went into a small room off the lobby of the court waiting room. [Louise] was wiping the tears from her eyes and hugging all of us. She thanked the lawyers several times and then began talking – to all of us, and then to whoever would listen, as [lawyer x] was tending to some conversation with [lawyer y] about the logistics of wrapping up the case. She starting talking passionately about the state of Cameroon and the torture and suffering she and fellow political activists had gone through. She talked of the political situation, the oppression of the Anglophones and spoke fervently to all of us in the room about the history of Cameroon, from the period of colonization to the increasing oppression and political marginality of the Anglophones. Almost shouting, she exclaimed: “They [immigration court officials/judge] are seeing all of this. They are understanding all of this now. Everything I’ve gone through. Everything we’ve gone through.” (BMH fieldnotes, Louise).

In many ways, this incident hints at the ways in which asylum status provided a sense of recognition that therapeutic interventions cannot. If politics were denied centrality or viewed as a proxy for inner states within the therapeutic realm, they were privileged in the legal arena. The successful adjudication of the asylum claim was seen, then, as recognition of that political struggle that was so central to study participants’ subjectivities and identities.

In addition to the legitimation of suffering conferred by asylum status, study participants also articulated a sense of momentum or movement that came with asylum status. As Sharon described, she could now “walk down a road,” in which she was metaphorically referring to a path to the future. In Mattingly’s terms (1998), she could now “emplot” her life in ways that were impossible before, even with therapeutic interventions. We have seen how therapeutic interventions helped some participants to restore a sense of hope, a sense of imagining the future. If therapeutic interventions

could, for some, begin to make this vision possible, then asylum status is what could make it realized. Through therapy, for example, Emmanuel found that he was “still a human being.” It was by being granted asylum, though, that he was given the possibility to, as he asserted, “finally find a way to make a life worth living, worth human living.”

CONCLUSION

Because asylum seekers and refugees are often understood a priori as ‘traumatized victims,’ the existence of entire medical and psychological treatment centers devoted to their care is perhaps unsurprising. That refugees and asylum seekers do not necessarily view themselves in these terms has also been discussed in the scholarly literature, particularly among anthropologists and some transcultural psychiatrists (Pupavac 2001; Zarowsky 2000, 2004). This chapter has explored the interaction between participants and a specific treatment center, THP, by focusing particularly on the disjuncture between these asylum seekers’ perceptions of suffering and the notions of suffering inherent in the psychological medical model used by THP. However, my arguments in this chapter are not intended to be read as only a critique of the medicalization of suffering (in which anthropological writing has been prolific). Rather, I have illustrated here the ways in which my study participants interacted with and engaged in therapeutic interventions in highly ambivalent and varied ways. While I do see the psychological medical model as involving a potentially baneful ‘translation’ of social or political expressions of suffering into clinical pathology, my data also reveal that there is another side to this. By insisting on seeing my study participants as creative social actors, even within their current context of perceived limited power and myriad life

constraints, this chapter highlights their maneuvering within these therapeutic interventions by resisting, adopting, or transforming institutionally-imposed categories of therapeutic personhood.

Ong (1995, 2003) has discussed how Khmer refugees in the U.S. are subject to the disciplining of state institutions that aim to regulate their bodies and behaviors. While she underscores the force with which these institutions often wield their power, Ong simultaneously highlights her refugee subjects as actively negotiating and “working around” these institutions. Like my study participants discussed in this chapter, the refugees of whom Ong writes do not take up their institutionally-imposed identities wholesale. Writing specifically about refugee medical clinics, Ong (1995) asserts: “Although doctors and health workers are in a sense socializing agents, the refugees are not ‘normalized’ in quite the ways intended: as better patients. Instead, through their own perception of their limited rights and security in America, Khmer patients are negotiating with and through their health providers, for resources that will ensure their survival in this country” (1254). Here, Ong is referring namely to resources such as medicine, access to the welfare system, and referrals to other sources of social support. And while Ong is not referring specifically to psychological care, similar arguments have been made about the ways in which psychiatric categories, in particular PTSD, are strategically deployed as a way to mobilize resources (Breslau 2004; Watters 2001; Gross 2004; James 2004, 2010).

Likewise, I have shown over the course of this chapter, myriad ways in which my study participants both resisted and negotiated psychological/psychiatric categories and various therapeutic interventions. I have also noted how study participants often sought

out THP because of promise of material – not psychological – benefits. In this way, the asylum seekers with whom I worked may have seen becoming a “patient” who participates in various therapeutic interventions as a way to also gain access to such resources. However, I depart from Ong (1995, 2003) and other scholars who focus primarily -- or even solely (e.g., Pupavac 2002) -- on the regulatory or governing powers of medical regimes, including the agentic response to these regimes. While I give attention to the disciplining effects of psychological medicine (and, to be sure, these are powerful and warrant careful consideration), my interest is also in understanding how my study participants engaged with institutions such as THP not only in their attempts at material survival, but also in their attempts to make meaning of their suffering, both past and present.

This does not negate the fact that the psychological medical model seemed so often at odds with how study participants themselves understood their suffering. Indeed, this is why I argue that for my study participants, therapeutic interventions, when used, were primarily viewed as a temporary necessity or aid during what was (or what they hoped was) a liminal period of profound insecurity, anxiety, and fear. It is because my participants viewed their suffering as a political, moral and social ‘problem,’ and not, as the psychological medical model would have it, an enduring disorder of the psyche, that therapeutic interventions held such limited promise of “real help.” Yet, even though therapeutic interventions were seen by some study participants as ambivalently efficacious at best and an effacement of self-determination at worst, many were able to cull from their interactions with THP a sense of hope, a sense of recognition, or social connection that became important to participants’ very sense of existence. It is in this

way that therapeutic interventions are simultaneously productive and deleterious of forms of subjectivity; are both a form of governing and a form of help; a potential form of ‘social defeat’ or ‘social death’ as well as a way to envision new kinds of “possible selves” (Parish 2008).

If this chapter can be seen as attending to the ways in which asylum seekers’ suffering was translated into psychiatric nosology and/or psychological categories within the therapeutic context, the following chapter addresses how participants’ experiences and articulations of suffering were subjected to yet another form of ‘translation:’ the transformation of life stories of personal and collective suffering into legally-recognized testimonies of ‘well-founded’ persecution.

CHAPTER 7 PERFORMING AND ASSESSING FEAR, PERSECUTION, AND TRUTHFULNESS

You just never know if you've ever made the right decision.
— Senior asylum officer

Every time I go to court, it's never been a good experience. You are just always thinking 'oh, I'm going to get in trouble. They're going to sentence me. You know, there's a judgment coming. There's a ruling that decides my fate, you know.'
— Eric, Cameroonian asylum seeker

INTRODUCTION

As noted in the beginning of the dissertation, by legal definition, to be granted political asylum in the United States, one must prove that he or she is unable or unwilling to return to his/her country of nationality because of past persecution or because of a “well-founded fear” of future persecution. The burden of proof is on asylum applicants to “present credible, direct, and specific evidence that persecution occurred” (US Dept of State). Or, for those asylum applicants whose claim is based on the fear of future persecution, he or she must demonstrate that this fear is both “subjectively genuine and objectively reasonable.” (US Dept of State)

Taking this legal framework as my point of departure, this chapter looks at how concepts such as ‘credibility’ and ‘fear’ – both ‘genuine’ and ‘reasonable’– are interpreted and assessed during the asylum process. I look at what counts as ‘evidence’ of persecution, fear, and truthfulness in the adjudication of asylum claims. In addition to narrative and participant observation data among asylum seekers, this chapter draws on

data collected from institutional settings: from interviews conducted with asylum officers, immigration attorneys, CHR staff, observation of court hearings and CHR staff meetings.

At the heart of the asylum process—and of this chapter—is the stark fact that it is an institutional actor and not the asylum seeker him/herself that decides if his or her story of suffering is truthful or evidence enough of fear to be considered ‘deserving’ of asylum status. As Nyers (2006) has noted: “it is invariably an agent of the sovereign state, and not the asylum seeker, who gets to determine whether the refugee’s fear of persecution is ‘well-founded’” (39).

In the beginning chapters of this dissertation, I argued that the asylum process is undergirded by a tension between humanitarian obligations, on the one hand, and national security/border control issues, on the other hand. This chapter begins by examining how this tension is engaged and negotiated locally, in the context of asylum adjudication in my field site. In this, I argue that adjudicators envision their roles as ‘moral gatekeepers,’ charged with the task of granting asylum to deserving migrants and denying those who are undeserving. While legally this is understood to be a politically neutral and straightforward process whereby applicants are assessed as meeting established legal criteria or not, this chapter will examine how, in practice, the process is much more subjective and fluid.

After investigating the discourse engaged by asylum adjudicators, this chapter moves on to ethnographically consider two larger questions: a) how do asylum officials/adjudicators actually assess who is deserving of legal status? and b) how do asylum seekers and their representatives navigate this process? Within this larger

discussion, the issue of credibility emerges as paramount. This chapter examines what asylum adjudicators use as evidence of credibility. In particular, this chapter will give attention to the role that trauma, as a category, plays in this assessment. I show that while the highlighting of the ‘traumatized’ subject may help to mobilize chances of gaining asylum, this is not without slippages and not without consequences.

This chapter then addresses how asylum seekers learn to perform their stories in ways that are privileged in the legal arena. Here, I suggest that the ‘translation’ of personal stories of suffering into testimonies that conform to legal criteria and frameworks, while perhaps better positioned to be granted asylum, nonetheless result in the alienation of asylum seekers from their own personal histories and stories of suffering. Thus, I look at what gets silenced in these acts of ‘translation.’ I next move on to exposing the disjunctures between asylum seekers’ logic of deservingness and participants’ understandings of themselves as “authentic” refugees, on the one hand, and the logic and grammar of the legal process, on the other. Specifically, I provide an ethnographic discussion of the disparate understandings of what constitutes ‘evidence’ or ‘proof’ of deservingness.

In closing this chapter, I underscore the fluid and intersubjective nature of the asylum adjudication process. While testimonies in court and in asylum interviews are co-created, this occurs in a context of profound power inequities. Here, I investigate how adjudicators express ambivalence regarding their positions of power. I also examine asylum seekers’ subjective experiences of being denied asylum, whether due to adverse credibility decisions or due to decisions that their testimonies did not amount to a “well-founded” or “reasonable” fear of persecution.

ASYLUM AS ‘BENEFIT’: REWARDING THE DESERVING, DETERRING THE FRAUDULENT

The institutional tension between the moral imperative to support human rights, on the one hand, and the ethical duty to securitize the nation, on the other, is particularly palpable in a post-9/11 political climate. Asylum adjudicators (USCIS asylum officers, immigration judges) negotiate and enact these larger discourses of humanitarianism and national security during their assessment of asylum claims. The difficulty in straddling these concerns is evident in the following narrative excerpts from asylum officers:

You know, you just never know if you get it right and you’d hope that you do- do right by the applicant. And you hope you do right by your country. Because, you know, the- we were hired by the- the, you know, the country to protect the citizens of the United States. And so, at the same time we want to be humanitarian and extend the helping hand of the country to the people that deserve it. You ‘re just constantly doing a balancing act and you’re hoping you’re getting it right (AO3)⁵

Certainly don’t want to make a decision where you’re sending someone into harms’ way but at the same time you don’t want to disrupt the integrity of the program and just kind of find everybody eligible that may not need the same kind of protection as somebody else. So it’s just kind of hard balance sometimes (AO9)

(Y)ou obviously want to give it [grant asylum] to the people who deserve it, but at the same time you don’t want to open the floodgates (AO1)

These quotes also illustrate the centrality of notions of ‘deservingness’ and how concepts of deservingness get mapped on to the tension between humanitarianism and national security/border control. The idea of ‘deservingness’ underlined much of asylum officers’

⁵ Throughout this chapter, for purposes of confidentiality, I identify asylum officers (AO) by the identification codes/numbers that I assigned to each of them (AO1, AO2, AO3, etc.).

practice and institutional discourse. Asylum officers would often frame asylum as a “benefit” to which one must prove his or her “entitlement,” as the following narratives from asylum officers illustrate:

[Asylum] is a program that is designed to provide a benefit to individuals who demonstrate that they qualify for the benefit that they seek ... It's not a charity. Um, this is not a hand-out, okay? ... so it's not like giving somebody-it's not like dispensing charity. (AO2)

That's the hard part, you feel bad for these people ... but it's our job also not to bestow a benefit on somebody that's not deserving. (A11)

So...it's [asylum] a huge benefit ... So there's a lot of people trying their darndest to get it and...a lot of them will go to, you know, long lengths to make sure that they get the benefit. So...I try to- you know when we start to see [fraud] patterns, we try to weed 'em out. To bring it to the attention of the investigations unit. (AO8)

A senior asylum officer summed it up in this way:

You know, in the final analysis, my take is, um, there's a community that we work for. Yeah, we work for the applicants, okay, but they're just applicants. Until they've demonstrated they're true refugees then we will accord them the benefits they seek. Until then, they're coming to us and they want something from us. When they demonstrate they deserve it, then they become, from my point of view, a customer ... they're an applicant until they become a customer ... I will extend every courtesy and cordiality and all the rights that they're entitled to. But I don't believe that I'm dealing with customers. I mean ... we are a *service* but we provide the service to those who have demonstrated they are *entitled* to that service. So my biggest challenge has always been granting somebody who ought not to be granted and referring or denying somebody who should be granted. (emphasis added) (AO4)

I observed this language of “benefits” and “customers” to be institutionally-grounded. To be sure, as a head supervisor in the asylum office emphasized to me, “our goal is to get

the right benefit to the right person.” And while I did not conduct interviews with immigration judges, attorneys and advocates with whom I talked indicated that IJs were similarly wary of bestowing the “benefit” of asylum onto an applicant who may not be wholly deserving. As a local human rights advocate and immigration attorney observed: “I think there’s really a resistance [to granting asylum]—‘cause I think for some reason judges oddly enough seem more scared of, like, admitting somebody who turns out to be fraudulent than of having somebody deported or overturned on appeal. I mean honestly, I almost get that feeling because it’s like they really aren’t willing to extend much of the benefit of the doubt.”

A central question, then, becomes who—or, what kind of applicant—is, in fact, “deserving” of asylum? As discussed in Chapter 3, much of the concern surrounding migrants’ deservingness to stay within U.S. borders has to do with the (constructed) distinction between economic migrants (so-called voluntary migrants) and humanitarian migrants (so-called forced migrants). The former category is often seen in popular and policy discourses as morally suspect and a drain on the material resources of the country. The latter category, humanitarian migrants, conversely, are constructed as a “morally legitimate suffering body” whose inclusion in U.S. borders is legitimate and, therefore, deserving of recognition (Ticktin 2011: 11).

While concerns over terrorism and threats to national security were a significant impetus for increasingly restrictive immigration measures (particularly post-September 11th) (see Chapter 3), the asylum officers with whom I spoke seemed confident that the numerous screening measures to which asylum applicants were subjected would prevent terrorists or other persons who posed a national security threat from getting through the

system. In other words, once asylum officers ran the necessary background checks on applicants (conducted by other branches of DHS, namely ICE), officers did not feel the need to probe within interviews for these kinds of concerns or potential threats. Hence, the threat of granting asylum to “economic migrants” – here, construed as ‘bogus’ asylum seekers – thus emerged as the key concern for asylum officers. This category of migrants became symbolic of “undeservingness,” as reflected in asylum officers’ narratives:

Well, you know, um, the first few years I was doing this job my biggest concern was, you know, that I was referring or denying somebody who was a true refugee because they didn’t-you know, did I give them every opportunity to demonstrate that they’re a true refugee? You know, did I do my job right that way. Likewise, I was very concerned that I was granting somebody who was getting over on me. You know what I mean? Because I don’t like the system being abused. I really don’t. (AO7)

We do get the embellishers. We get the liars. We get the people with fraudulent intent. (B: Mmhmm). Um, we have a -we’re very generous and um, we try to be very fair and, and, timely, as best we can. But, um, the reality is we deal with a lot of economic refugees ... and that separates them from other refugees as a group. So, we get a lot of people that, um, in my opinion, are without a doubt, economic refugees who are trying to convert that into a claim that will pass muster with-in terms of immigration substitution. (A12)

Here, asylum applicants who are not “true refugees” but rather “economic migrants” trying to “get one over” on officers are framed as a kind of cancer on the system; morally suspect individuals who need to be identified and labeled as such. In her recent work on conceptions of deservingness related to healthcare access, Willen (2012) identifies “conceptions of deservingness” as distinct from “formal assertions of *entitlement*, which are typically anchored in legal or policy commitments” (805). She instead urges attention to “the subtler moral positions that undergird them – identified here as local ways of

reckoning health-related deservingness” (ibid). While I am not presently addressing deservingness as it relates to health care, I find Willen (2012) nonetheless instructive here. That is, following Willen (2012), I find it fruitful to ask how ‘deservingness’— here, deservingness of legal recognition – is informed by subtle moral concepts and cues and is “locally reckoned.” Thus, it becomes necessary to ask how ‘deservingness’ is actually interpreted and assessed in the legal context. What conceptions – subtle or overt – do adjudicators bring to bear on their assessments of claimants’ testimonies? In posing these questions, I wish to emphasize the slippery and often messy nature of asylum adjudication. Thus, while the legal definition of refugee defines the specific criteria for recognizing someone as a refugee, and thus granting him or her asylum, in practice this process is highly interpretive and subjective. This is perhaps most clear with regard to issues of credibility. I turn now towards examining how credibility was conceptualized, assessed and determined by adjudicators.

CREDIBILITY AS KEY: DID THIS *REALLY* HAPPEN?

To a large extent, “deservingness” within the asylum process is predicated on perceived credibility – the idea that an asylum claimant’s story of suffering is authentic – that it *really* happened to him or her. As prominent legal scholar Kagan (2003) argues: “Credibility is not one of the explicit criteria for refugee protection in international law. But in practice, being deemed credible may be the single biggest substantive hurdle before applicants” (368). Indeed, many scholars have increasingly argued that credibility is “the core of the asylum process” (Thomas 2006: 79; see also Coffey 2003; Rempell 2008).

The centrality of credibility to asylum claims was emphasized by immigration attorneys and legal advocates with whom I spoke throughout my fieldwork. As one attorney declared: “Bottom line is that asylum cases are all about being believable.” Another attorney told me that “really, [asylum] hearings are often about [ICE attorneys] trying to impeach the credibility of your client.” To be sure, when I attended a panel on preparing asylum cases at an annual regional immigration conference, the speaker opened by presenting a power point slide with the word “CREDIBILITY” in large, bold red letters. “Credibility is the most important aspect of the interview or the asylum procedure,” she emphatically declared to the audience. “If your client is not believable, then the whole case goes down.”

While credibility has long been a central concern in asylum cases, the passage of the REAL ID Act in 2005 resulted in numerous changes regarding credibility determinations, effectively making it much easier for adjudicators to make adverse credibility determinations (Pepper and Mateen 2006; Melloy 2007; Fink 2008; Rempell 2008, 2011; Conroy 2009). Key changes involved the consideration of demeanor in credibility determinations, as well the reversal of the “heart of the matter” rule outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act. The latter rule, which guided credibility determinations until the passage of the REAL ID Act, stated that adverse credibility determinations may be made only if the cited inconsistencies pertain to the “heart of the asylum claim.” The REAL ID Act effectively restructured how credibility determinations may be made, by arguing that the following be used to assess credibility:

Considering the totality of the circumstances, and all relevant factors, a trier of fact **may base a credibility determination on the demeanor,**

candor, or responsiveness of the applicant or witness, the inherent plausibility of the applicant's or witness's account, the consistency between the applicant's or witness's written and oral statements (whenever made and whether or not under oath, and considering the circumstances under which the statements were made), the internal consistency of each such statement, the consistency of such statements with other evidence of record (including the reports of the Department of State on country conditions), and **any inaccuracies or falsehoods in such statements, without regard to whether an inconsistency, inaccuracy, or falsehood goes to the heart of the applicant's claim**, or any other relevant factor (REAL ID Act § 101(a)(3); emphasis added)

Thus, the REAL ID Act codified significant changes in credibility assessments, allowing unprecedented latitude for adjudicators to make adverse credibility determinations based on both minor inconsistencies and applicants' demeanor. By disavowing the "heart of the matter" tenet of the INA, the REAL ID Act has allowed adjudicators to make an adverse credibility determination based on minor inconsistencies that may not be relevant to the core of the applicant's claim. Furthermore, the REAL ID Act granted adjudicators permission to find applicants not credible based on "questionable" demeanor, which has proven to be a highly subjective and contested domain (Floss 2006). As Pepper and Mateen (2006) have detailed in their examination of post-REAL ID legal decisions, if an aspect of an applicant's testimony is found not to be not credible, the whole of testimony "may be either disregarded or sharply discounted, depending on the circumstances," or that an adverse credibility finding effectively "disposes of [an applicant's] claim of past persecution" (12). The overall message behind the REAL ID Act, as Rempell (2008) has argued, is that "an applicant's credibility cannot nor should not be presumed" (194). In fact, it can be argued that the asylum process is characterized by a "culture of disbelief" (Rousseau et al. 2002: 66).

Adverse Credibility Denial: Case Study: Solange

As way of anchoring this discussion on credibility, I will briefly sketch out the circumstances of one participant, Solange, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, who, like many other study participants, was denied asylum at the court (IJ) level based on adverse credibility findings. Solange appealed, unsuccessfully, to the BIA and, by the end of my fieldwork, she had left the country when she was granted “voluntary departure” after the BIA upheld the IJ’s decision.

Solange had been denied at the level of asylum interview due to myriad inconsistencies in her written testimony and inconsistencies between her written testimony and her oral testimony during the asylum interview. Solange had paid a meager sum to a man who had advertised legal services in a nearby community to prepare her asylum application. Solange, trusting this man, had not reviewed the application before sending it in and only found out later that he had recorded events erroneously or had misconstrued information that she had reported to him. As the director of CHR had told me, such a situation was not unique to Solange. In fact, the director told me, many of the cases that they handle that have already been referred to an IJ were due to inconsistencies in applications prepared by hack or fraudulent lawyers who exploited naïve and vulnerable asylum seekers. Solange had secured the assistance of CHR to help her prepare for her asylum hearing after being referred to the IJ by the asylum office.

The IJ denied asylum, citing an adverse credibility determination based primarily on minor inconsistencies in her testimony surrounding her reported rape by gendarmes after a SCNC rally. Solange, at different times, had indicated that there were four or five soldiers who had attacked her, while other places in her testimony she recalled only two

or three. While she had fairly consistently maintained that the attack took place in the afternoon, at one point in the testimony, she claimed it was evening. The IJ also found her SCNC membership card suspect, particularly the use of a photograph on it that showed her at age eighteen or nineteen, rather than her current age of early thirties. The IJ had questioned if this was actually she in the photo and pressed Solange as to why such an older photo would be used if she was an active member of the SCNC. Solange had explained to the judge – obviously, unconvincingly – that in Cameroon photos are costly, so it is not uncommon to use older photographs that one already has on hand. Taken together, the IJ found Solange’s credibility to be questionable, thereby casting doubt on the testimony as a whole.

Credibility Assessments: Necessary and “Impossible”

While asylum officers emphasized the non-adversarial nature of the interview process, and insisted that they are not trying to ‘catch’ people in lies, there is nonetheless a cultivated (hyper)awareness of deception at the institutional level. For example, there are routine trainings on “fraud trends” and the asylum officer training manuals contain several units on detecting lies during the interview process. In the asylum interviews, an implicit stance that officers take is that ‘underserving’ and ‘inauthentic’ migrants are lurking in ‘the system.’ This is not to say that asylum officers begin an interview with the presumption that the claimant is lying. Yet, while they expressed the desire to “take people at their word,” asylum officers also did not presume credibility. A significant part of their job, as they described it, was to “look for implausibility” or seek out “red flags” that would indicate someone is not telling the truth. Again, the notion that a fraudulent

and therefore ‘undeserving’ migrant would be granted status was likened to “opening the floodgates” or “failing to protect the country.”

Credibility assessments were both a major aspect of asylum officers’ jobs and also the aspect of their job that they disliked and with which they struggled the most. Without exception, all asylum officers with whom I spoke brought up – without prompting – the challenges of assessing credibility. Asylum officers only grant approximately 15% of cases that they hear. Of course, these are not all due ‘adverse credibility’ findings; yet in many, if not the majority of cases, the issue of credibility is key. The following interview passages highlight both the centrality and the challenge of credibility determinations for adjudicators:

A big challenge is I’m not particularly a fan of probing for credibility just because you kind of just want to take people at their word and assume it’s all truthful. But the reality is it’s not, so ... ‘cause clearly it’s a way to get a benefit and there will be some level of fraud there or non-truth-telling. So I’m not the biggest fan of the fact that you have to, like, kind of take that stance to some degree. (AO6)

Probably-well, the most difficult thing is most likely credibility just because it is one of the easier benefits to get in terms of burden of proof, like what the applicant has to show to get it. Basically we can go off their testimony to grant them if we find them a credible person. But on the flip side of that is that people can make up their stories just to gain the benefit. So that is probably the most difficult just because none of us are necessarily psychologists or being able to have that background where you can just look at someone and know they’re lying or things like that, so ... um, that would probably be the most challenging of the interviewing process, just being able to ascertain whether or not this person has a valid claim and if they warrant the benefit. (AO5)

Um ... credibility determinations are horrible. They’re just impossible to tell if someone’s telling the truth. And, um, we all-I think I can say all asylum officers want to believe the person talking. Or know for sure

they're lying. You know, and you can't ever really know. In rare times, you can know for sure that someone's lying and it's like 'yeah!' (laughs). 'cause I have proof. I got them!' But most of the time you might just have a feeling they're lying but you can't catch 'em on anything and so therefore they are credible and you have to grant them. And that's probably the way it should be but I think a lot of us have this problem of falling in this trap of wanting to believe the person. So we don't want to grant them until we believe them. And then we don't believe them so we don't want to grant them. (AO10)

The above excerpts make clear the critical link that adjudicators made between credibility and deservingness. Lying, from the perspectives of asylum officials, is a manipulative strategy employed by asylum applicants to gain access to a benefit to which they, as liars, should not have the right to claim. And while research has shown that what may be identified as lying or withholding of information, particularly among refugees, is culturally and socially variable (Bohmer and Shuman 2008), for asylum adjudicators “non truth-telling” is often unquestionably linked to fraudulence and undeservingness. In this way, credibility is often reified in the asylum process as the primary mechanism for ascertaining deserving candidates.

The asylum officers' excerpts presented above also underscore the highly subjective nature of credibility assessments: an aspect of credibility determinations that have been highly criticized in the literature (Coffey 2003; Vedsted-Hansen 2005; Floss 2006; Thomas 2006; White 2006-2007; Rempell 2008). More specifically, this body of literature has emphasized adjudicators' abuse of credibility assessments, wide discrepancies in adverse credibility decisions among judges, and the interference of cultural bias with credibility determinations. Indeed, as the narrative passages above illustrate, officials found credibility determinations to be the major challenge of

adjudicating claims precisely because of what several asylum officers described as a necessary but often “impossible” task: to definitely discern whether or not an applicant was being truthful.

Yet because asylum applicants can, in theory, be granted asylum based on testimony alone and because asylum seekers often do not have documentation or other ‘evidence’ to support their claims, the importance of credibility in establishing deservingness becomes paramount despite its highly problematic nature. Noll (2006) sees credibility assessments in contemporary asylum as “a secularized form of confession, absolution and reconciliation,” arguing that these assessments are analogous to the auricular confession of Roman Catholicism (498). He elaborates:

The modern state inherited the personal and moral control devices of the Roman Catholic Church, and operates it in a number of settings. Just as the church exercised personal and moral sovereignty through auricular confession, the modern state does so to a large extent through the asylum procedure. And just as the Roman Catholic Church has defended its moral codes through auricular confession, the asylum procedure seeks to establish the moral code of cultural identity—both with the individual confessor and its membership at large. Finally, the asylum procedure reconciles the applicant with the system of nation states— either by admitting her to the state of asylum, or by returning her as an impostor to the state of origin (Noll 2006: 498).

Here, we again see the asylum process as a moral process that constructs categories of personhood. Credibility assessments, as Noll (2006) posits, are critical to this process in that the determination of credibility creates a new category of person: a truthful, and thus morally deserving applicant. Because credibility is not presumed in asylum cases, the asylum seeker, like the Roman Catholic confessor, is initially cast as “a sinner or suspect” (Noll 2006:499). Throughout the asylum process, “the asylum seeker is treated as if she

were a sinner-perpetrator, up until the very moment where general credibility is established. Only from then on, she is a victim—the victim of future, perhaps also of past, human rights violations” (ibid). Noll and Beard (2009) cite Asad (1983:287) in arguing that the process of testing for credibility within the adjudication process is both “part of a broader ‘genealogy of disciplining-the-body-for-getting-at-the-truth’” and also a “means of constructing what the Truth is” (Noll and Beard 2009: 457). Indeed, the asylum process constructs not just categories of migrants, but also constitutes asylum officers as a category of experts with certain power (see Ticktin 2011: 107). As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) argue, the ability of asylum officers-as-experts to confirm or validate claimants’ testimonies represents “a new regime of truth” (236). How adjudicators attempt to ascertain credibility (and, consequently, construct ‘deservingness’) is the subject of the next sections.

(Attempts at) Identifying Credibility

Asylum officers told me that they relied on factors such as detailed descriptions of events, consistency between the written application and oral testimony, and the perceived plausibility or logic of past events or experiences. These are all aspects of credibility determinations that are outlined in their training manuals and disseminated through initial and ongoing asylum officer training. For example, the below responses to my question “how do you assess credibility?” are highly representative of the officers that I interviewed:

Details help. Help me feel comfortable that they’re telling the truth and I can say that they’re credible because they gave me a lot of detail. (AO1)

Um, well, there are verbal indicators. There are-well, a lot of people will put a lot of information in their application so you might get conflicting stories. So I look for conflicting information, inconsistencies. (AO8)

Inconsistencies between written and oral testimony can be a big red flag. And vagueness. I don't like it-don't tell me 'well, they arrested me and I'm scared to go back.' Well, uh-huh. Tell me-give me some specifics. (AO11)

If you're vague, that makes me wonder right from the beginning if you're telling the truth. (AO12)

While the asylum training manuals outline these factors – consistency, detail, and plausibility– as a sort of straightforward checklist, my interviews with asylum officers suggest that, in practice, interpreting – and performing – these domains are rife with paradoxes. For example, officers claimed that vagueness or lack of detail could be read as a lack of credibility, but too much detail was often viewed as suspect. Consistency was understood as a sign of truthfulness, but if a testimony appeared memorized this served as a “red flag” for inauthenticity. Vagueness or inconsistencies, moreover, could be a sign of memory loss due to trauma or an indicator of deceit – a topic that I will return to shortly.

Corroborating Credibility

Throughout my conversations with asylum officers, they attempted to frame credibility assessments as an objective and analytical process. They stressed the need to “verify” a claimant’s testimony with “factual evidence” provided by external documents such as state department reports on country conditions. Given adjudicators’ perception of oral and written testimony as too subjective, they often searched for external ways to

discern credibility. While the use of resources such as State Department reports on country conditions could be seen as a way to triangulate data, officers instead framed this as the need to affirm or negate a claimant's *subjective* testimony of suffering and persecution with a putatively *objective* source. This echoes arguments made by both Ticktin (2011) and Fassin and Rechtman (2009), who have traced the historical and cultural trajectory by which asylum seekers' own testimonies carry increasingly less legitimacy in the legal and political arenas, and are increasingly subordinated to forms of other 'expertise' or evidence.

In my interviews with asylum officers, all of them stressed the importance of country conditions research for testing and establishing an applicant's credibility. While many officers relied on a range of sources for this, all of them highlighted U.S. State Department reports as a key source in this. As one asylum officer told me, reflecting the sentiments of many other officers:

Generally, the best tool [for assessing credibility] is obviously country condition research. If someone said something's happening to their particular race or ethnicity or something like that but then you look at State reports and research online and you find that those particular populations aren't really being targeted or not being targeted to the extent that they would need to be in order to constitute persecution, then you can tell they aren't telling the truth. (AO1)

Recent legal scholarship, however, has pointed to the "wildly varying degrees of deference" given to State Department country reports by immigration judges (Walker 2007:4). Critics of the overuse of State Department reports argue that these are often "used as a crutch" in the legal arena (Floss 2006: 250) and that these reports have been problematically used "as dispositive rejections of the asylum applicant's admittedly

credible personal testimony” (Walker 2007: 4).

Another source of (putatively) “objective” data used to corroborate credibility by adjudicators was external documentation that could constitute “evidence,” such as political membership cards, affidavits from other witnesses or family members attesting to the applicant’s persecution, police records, and so forth. As noted earlier, aside from presenting required identity documents (thus proving that an applicant is who he or she says she is), in theory asylum may be granted based solely on a claimant’s testimony. In practice, however, both asylum officials and lawyers and legal advocates told me that this is rarely the case. Indeed, as one asylum officer told me: “anything that corroborates a story will help.” Lawyers were well aware of this as well. The same speaker at the immigration conference noted earlier addressed the issue of documentation and evidence, pointing the audience to another power point slide reading: “Corroborating evidence: Get it or die trying!”

Furthermore, the REAL ID Act made changes to rules regarding the presentation of corroborating evidence in asylum cases. The Act authorized immigration judges to require corroborating evidence for otherwise credible testimony provided the applicant can “reasonably obtain the evidence.” (REAL ID Act section 101 (a) (3)). I will return later in this chapter to a discussion of the disjunctures between applicants and judges regarding what evidence can be “reasonably obtained.” What I want to emphasize here is the reality of the importance that documentation plays in asylum cases, despite it not being legally required. As an immigration attorney concluded: “I think in practice you need a *really* good explanation for why you don’t have any documentation. Um, I mean, I think that the reality is—well, I think at the asylum office level testimony only can

potentially get you there with, you know, some modicum of corroborating evidence. But I think in court, it just gets a whole lot harder.”

Despite officers attempts at framing external documentation as “objective,” in practice the assessment of documentation, like the assessment of written and oral testimony, was imbued with paradoxes and grey areas that made this a much more slippery domain for adjudicators:

It’s more challenging to be from a country where fake documents are readily accessible. ‘cause you just can’t believe them. And they might have perfectly nice documents and we’re gonna be like ‘yeah, but you’re from Cameroon.’ You know. It’s more suspect. So I think they have a harder time proving their case. (AO12)

I mean sometimes the more documents you have the less likely it might be to believe a story. I mean if someone says that the militia came and set fire to her house but then you have all these documents. Well, how’d you get these documents if your house was on fire and it was this really quick thing that was happening. Oh, I ran back in just to get my passport. Well, I don’t know how-sometimes that’s likely but other times not, just depending on the applicant and the story. So I can’t really say with certainty that documents always make that much of a difference. But it is something that helps establish someone’s identity. You have to do that before any interview. And it helps when you have a passport that says that they’re from a country. (AO8)

Realistically, documentation is helpful but on some level that can be fake, too. I mean that can be somebody else’s documents or you could have just made it up. (AO7)

Of course, the above sentiments expressed by asylum officers above also pose significant challenges for asylum applicants, who must learn how to navigate these various paradoxes and learn how to present oneself as a credible and authentic asylum seeker. I will take up the issue of asylum seekers’ ‘performance’ later in this chapter. I now look

specifically at trauma and psychiatric diagnoses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, as potential ‘evidence’ in credibility assessments.

TRAUMA, CREDIBILITY, AND ELIGIBILITY

As noted in the Introduction of this dissertation, psychological and psychiatric literature has pointed to the high incidence of trauma-related symptoms and diagnoses among refugees and asylum seekers. The Introduction also highlighted literature, some of this grounded in medical anthropology, which critiqued the use of a trauma framework or psychiatric nosology in interpreting refugee suffering. My aim in this section is not to evaluate the veracity or appropriateness of the trauma label or related psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder). Rather, I examine the social and political life, as it were, of trauma and psychiatric diagnoses within the asylum context. More specifically, I first address, from the standpoint of institutional actors, how trauma may – or may not – bolster asylum claims, particularly with regard to credibility assessments. I then investigate how both symptoms of violence and trauma as well as the inequitable and highly charged space of the court come to inform asylum seekers’ ‘performance’ in the legal context.

Slipperiness of ‘trauma’ in legal context

Fassin and colleagues (2005, 2007, 2009) have examined the devaluation of asylum seekers’ personal testimonies within the political asylum process in France. In the French asylum context, Fassin and Rechtman (2009) argue, the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), marks “an end to suspicion” and a medical

certificate attesting to an asylum seeker's past trauma constitutes "proof" of persecution (77). The concept of trauma and its related diagnosis of PTSD were certainly salient themes in my interviews with asylum officers. However, in contrast to Fassin and Rechtman's (2009) argument, trauma and PTSD emerged as much more contentious and ambivalent issues in my research site.

Attorneys whom I interviewed during fieldwork expressed ambivalence about the weight that psychological or psychiatric evaluations played in asylum claimants' cases. Because THP had a significant presence in the region where I carried out field work and because THP shared many clients with CHR (as well as some private immigration attorneys), it was fairly common for psychological evaluations prepared by THP to be submitted with asylum applications. And yet, lawyers and even CHR staff felt such evaluations had a limited effects:

She [the IJ] was really the one that was like 'oh, of course [THP] thought that the person had PTSD. They think everybody does!' or something to that effect. But I generally find that having any medical documentation or documentation of conditions that clients have is vastly more helpful than a client who hasn't gone to the doctor or never sought any treatment trying to testify on their own. Here's what's wrong with me but no I haven't seen a doctor about it. It's, I mean I would always rather have the written documentation. From an appeal standpoint, it is very helpful to have the documentation to say 'here's the documentation of what happened to the person' and the judge just decided to disregard that. (Immigration attorney/legal advocate)

Well, I always have [THP] submit an affidavit but is it helpful? I guess that depends on the judge. Overall I don't think it's very helpful because traditionally judges tend to disregard these. The Circuit court gives them more weight, though. (Immigration attorney)

I think the psychological stuff has weight but I think that there may be some level of PTSD fatigue (Immigration lawyer/advocate)

Other lawyers and advocates told me that THP's psychological evaluations have been overused and that as a result they "begin to seem subjective." Others concluded that a psychiatric/psychological evaluation "doesn't hold much weight" in court.

One attorney told me that she uses THP's evaluations with caution because these evaluations have sometimes contradicted other aspects of applicants' testimony. Indeed, I observed this to be the case on a number of occasions during fieldwork. For example, when Daniel, a twenty-year old asylum seeker from Liberia, had his asylum hearing in court, he testified that soldiers had forcibly entered the house he shared with his family. He was twelve years old at the time. As he testified in court, consistent with his prepared written statement, soldiers forced him into a closet while his family members were murdered in the main room of the house. THP's psychiatric evaluation – submitted with the intent of supporting the credibility and authenticity of his case by outlining Daniel's high levels of PTSD due to the trauma of this incident among others – had been largely consistent with Daniel's testimony except for the claim that Daniel "hid" in the closet, rather than was forced in the closet. In court, the IJ quite pointedly pressed Daniel on this issue. "[THP] says that you hid. But you are saying that you were forced into the closet? Which is it?" the IJ demanded. Daniel insisted that he was forced into the closet and that THP must have written down the wrong information.

Also in THP's evaluation of Daniel was the claim that Daniel had been detained and beaten in Senegal, the country to which he first fled from Liberia. THP thus labeled Daniel as a "victim of torture." Daniel had not mentioned this in his written or oral

testimony, though he did not deny it when the IJ raised the issue in court. “Why didn’t you tell me that? Why wasn’t that in your application?” the IJ pressed Daniel. “I don’t know,” Daniel repeated in response. While Daniel later told me that he didn’t bring it up to his lawyers because they never asked about it and Daniel didn’t think that this incident was pertinent to his claim of persecution in Liberia, which was what he was instructed by his lawyers to focus on. Yet, because applicants’ omissions in information are considered, in the legal context, to be a form of lying or interpreted as deliberate withholding of information, Daniel’s failure to report his detention in Senegal – though not central to his asylum claim – was understood by the IJ to render his credibility suspect.

Again, as noted in the literature review of the Introduction of the dissertation, the subjectification of asylum seekers and refugees as particular kind of subjects – namely, as a “victim” of violence or persecution – may help to mobilize political resources and garner support for gaining legal status. However, in Daniel’s case, the result, though unintended, was the opposite. THP’s identification of Daniel as a “victim of torture” became a point of contention – in fact, a way for the IJ to challenge his credibility and call his ‘deservingness’ into question.

Medical records and bodily evidence

Both asylum officers and immigration lawyers and advocates suggested that medical (non-psychiatric) records or evaluations that claimed that bodily evidence was consistent with, for example, particular methods of torture, forms of physical or sexual abuse, or conditions of detention, were much more persuasive than psychological or

psychiatric evaluations. In this regard, “wounds are accepted as objective evidence, as more reliable sources of knowledge than the words of people on whose bodies those wounds were found” (Malkki 1996: 384; see also Coutin 2001). To be sure, Lustig et al. (2008), in their analysis of grant rates for those applicants who had submitted medical evaluations from Physicians for Human Rights, found a higher grant rate for those with medical evaluations, suggesting that such evaluations may be critical to asylum cases. An important caveat to this, however, is that torture does not always leave physical traces.

When Susan, an immigration lawyer and legal advocate expressed her view that psychological evaluations, including the ones from THP, are “not really helpful” and “too subjective,” I asked about the use of non-psychiatric medical evaluations. “Are these helpful?” I asked her. She emphatically replied: “Absolutely! Judges are much more swayed by this because it’s science. It’s provable. It’s concrete.” Many other lawyers and advocates expressed similar views regarding the submission of medical records, though this seemed to be done much less often than the submission of psychological evaluations prepared by THP. In the absence of medical evaluations, many attorneys found photographs of applicant’s scars a compelling source of evidence (see Park and Oomen 2010 regarding the lure of such photographs in asylum claims). As one advocate/attorney told me “I definitely think pictures of scarring are great to submit—you know, when clients can show you that—I mean, it’s partially just the power of the photo. I mean, a photo is worth a lot. When a client can say ‘and I was stabbed in the leg here’ and then show that.” Yet, while photos of scarring and medical evaluations may be ways to compellingly show trauma within the legal arena, psychological/psychiatric diagnoses and evaluations emerged as a much more contested area.

“You don’t know what’s real and what’s not:” Adjudicators’ ambivalence regarding ‘trauma’ and psychiatric diagnoses

Like the attorneys and advocates with whom I spoke, asylum officers seemed to reflect a similar ambivalence about the use of psychiatric and psychological evaluations and their ability – or not – to bolster claims of credibility. Some officers articulated giving more weight to these evaluations, as the following excerpts suggest:

It’s almost sickening that the more trauma the better in a weird sense, the more obvious their eligibility. (AO10)

I find it [psychiatric/psychological evaluations] very helpful. ‘Cause it gives me something to kind of hang my hat on. I mean it gives me one more legal tool that I can say look here, you know, they may be telling me the truth even though they can’t tell me the story. (AO4)

[Psychological/psychiatric evaluations] are helpful for showing how much injury they’ve suffered, how bad the harm has been to them. Also, kind of, it bolsters credibility in that, you know, they’re telling a psychologist the same thing they’re telling me. (AO9)

While these narratives suggest that some officers made a connection between psychiatric/psychological evaluations and diagnoses and both credibility and eligibility, they do so for various reasons. The idea that “the more trauma the better” allows eligibility to become more evident echoes Fassin (2005, 2007, 2008) and Ticktin (2006, 2011) in suggesting the subjectification of a suffering and traumatized body as an authentic, legitimate, and hence deserving body. The officer who suggested that psychiatric/psychological evaluations give her “something to kind of hang [her] hat on”

does not necessarily link trauma with credibility. Rather, this officer frames the evaluation as “one more tool” in which to interpret demeanor within the asylum interview. Other officers reiterated this aspect of the evaluations, arguing that while the evaluations may not bolster credibility, being aware of trauma or PTSD allows them, as adjudicators to adjust their style of interviewing, including taking more time, being sure to have extra tissues available, speaking in a softer voice, or, as one officer put it, “trying to have a little bit more sensitivity.”

Finally, the asylum officer who claimed that a psychological evaluation helps to bolster credibility (AO9) points to the ways in which an evaluation may be approached as ‘evidence’ in which to compare and test for inconsistencies or omissions of information. In other words, this officer did not claim that the trauma diagnosis bolsters their credibility per se, but rather that possibility of finding consistent testimony between the evaluation and what he hears in court is helpful in credibility determinations. As with Daniel, however, there can be detrimental unintended consequences from the submission of these evaluations: a psychological/psychiatric evaluation can also be source of inconsistencies and thus used as a way to weaken or even disprove credibility.

Overall asylum officers expressed ambivalence about how to address issues of trauma during their interviews and had mixed feelings about how much weight to accord to trauma and psychiatric diagnoses in assessing applicants’ eligibility and credibility.

The following narratives illustrate this ambivalence:

- AO8: I don’t know, it seems like everybody says they have PTSD and depression.
 BH: That’s common?
 AO8: That’s common. So, it’s kind of like ‘meh.’ You don’t

know what's real, what's not.

I think it's [submission of psychological evaluations] helpful to some extent. Like in Minnesota, we'll get things from [THP]. I think it's helpful to know, too, that a lot of times at least with those types of organizations there's a level of vetting that goes on, too. So like that could be helpful or not helpful. Cause either like the person has been vetted and is clearly credible to these people the whole time or they've gotten more time to practice their story. So it's kind of a mix. (AO7)

Well, um, if I have read their statement if they have one and it's not too long or too short, I can compare what they're telling me now to what they've written before and most of the time people stay consistent but sometimes it's like you say here you're arrested three times and you're telling me it was only twice. And they'll go (in exaggerated voice) 'oh, yeah, I forgot' or something like that. And you're like 'hmmmm. Why did you forget?' And they say (in a sarcastic voice) 'the trauma' and I'm like 'Oh, ok' (speaking in sarcastic, skeptical tone; rolling eyes) (AO3)

The first exchange related above (with AO8), in which the asylum officer wonders whether or not an applicant's claim to PTSD or depression was "real," perhaps reflects the "PTSD fatigue" suggested by the attorney and advocate quoted earlier. Again, in contrast to data from the French asylum context (Fassin 2005, 2007, 2008), a PTSD diagnosis here is approached more dubiously. And through the frequency with which asylum seekers report PTSD and depression is reported psychological and psychiatric literature, in practice the perceived ubiquity of such diagnoses actually seems to lessen the importance of these categories within the asylum interview.

While some officers, as noted previously (AO4), consider psychological evaluations as a way to "bolster credibility," the second narrative presented above (AO7) demonstrates that this is a contested stance. As this officer claims, "vetting" by psychological organizations can either support credibility claims or can be indicative of a

rehearsed (i.e., fraudulent) testimony. The final narrative presented above (AO3), while not speaking directly to the issue of submitted psychological evaluations, nonetheless reflects an overall skepticism or ambivalence on the part of asylum officers regarding the veracity of the concept of “trauma” as it is employed – here by an asylum claimant herself – within the asylum interview. What this officer hints at, with her sarcastic and skeptical tone, is that the assertions of or claims to trauma may be a tool to be manipulated by asylum claimants in justifying inconsistencies. Thus, implicit in this officer’s narrative is the same ambiguity regarding the “real”-ness of claims to trauma and trauma-related diagnoses.

Even for those adjudicators who did not deny the veracity of trauma-related psychiatric-related disorders, evaluations and psychiatric records attesting to this did not represent an unquestioned form of “proof” of an applicant’s eligibility or credibility. Ruth’s case, presented earlier in the dissertation, highlights this. During Ruth’s court hearing, her lawyers presented psychological and psychiatric evaluations attesting to the enduring trauma she suffered. The evaluations attributed her PTSD, depression, and anxiety, as well as her traumatic brain injury (TBI) to Ruth’s reports of detention and torture in Cameroon, claiming that such injuries and disorders were consistent with Ruth’s testimony. The IJ denied Ruth asylum based on negative credibility findings, primarily based on inconsistencies regarding dates of her injuries as well as an allegedly altered SCNC membership card. Upon appeal to the BIA, Ruth’s legal representatives at CHR drew attention to the fact that, according to medical records, Ruth suffered from “cognitive deficits, including memory loss, secondary to TBI,” as well as her PTSD diagnosis – both factor that could significantly contribute to inconsistencies in testimony.

Ruth's lawyers also stressed that her application included alternative evidence regarding Ruth's political party membership (the central aspect of her claim), including an affidavit from the SCNC chairperson in her hometown in Cameroon and receipts from membership dues. The BIA was not persuaded and upheld the IJ's claim that "the fact that [Ruth's] SCNC card is not believable casts major doubt on the whole of her claim." With regard to the psychiatric diagnoses and TBI, the BIA stated: "[T]he fact that the respondent has suffered a traumatic brain injury does not establish that she was credible about the source of that injury, or her alleged political affiliations."

Ruth's case suggests two important factors regarding how concepts of trauma and credibility are 'read' and assessed within the legal process. First, Ruth's case demonstrates that PTSD – or even a TBI – do not represent "the end of suspicion" in asylum cases (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 77). Even if the veracity of 'trauma' or psychiatric diagnoses were not questioned, these categories were viewed by many adjudicators as nonetheless too subjective or slippery, precisely because the source of trauma or disorder was, to some extent, open to interpretation. Lustig (2008) has argued this point, positing that the difficulty in discerning the source of trauma for adjudicators (e.g., does PTSD result from political persecution or the act of flight and/or culture shock?) leads to less of a reliance on psychological or psychiatric evidence.

Second, because of the perceived subjective nature of psychological and psychiatric evaluations offered as 'evidence,' inconsistencies in asylum seekers' interviews or hearings (either inconsistencies within oral/written testimony or inconsistencies between testimony and country conditions documents) seemed to trump psychological/psychiatric 'evidence.' That is, inconsistencies in testimony appeared to

serve as greater evidence of ‘undeservingness’ than did trauma and trauma-related disorders in indicating ‘deservingness.’

Having thus far examined how the concept of trauma and psychiatric diagnoses are approached in the asylum arena, particularly as these relate to ‘evidence’ of credibility or eligibility, I now turn toward attention toward how manifestations of trauma informed applicants’ ‘performance’ in interviews and in court.

Effects of Trauma on ‘Performance’

Recent scholarship posits the asylum or refugee status determination process as a site of potential retraumatization (Aron 1992; Herlihy, Scragg, and Turner 2002; White 2006-2007; Lustig 2008; Herlihy and Turner 2009; Meffert et al. 2010; Redman et al. 2006; Shuman and Bohmer 2004; Bohmer and Shuman 2007, 2008). My data resonate with this. Study participants reported having nightmares, trouble sleeping or eating, and feeling sad or scared after recounting their stories to lawyers, asylum officers, or judges. It was not uncommon for participants to tell me “everything comes back to me when I go into that [court]room” or “you live it all over again” during the asylum interview.

Furthermore, this same body of literature has highlighted a critical paradox regarding the intersection of trauma, credibility and eligibility (or ‘deservingness’) in the determination of asylum or refugee status: While trauma may be a central aspect of an asylum claim, that very trauma may result in an applicant’s inability to present his or her claim. This literature casts light on the manifestations of trauma that can be – and many times are – mistaken by adjudicators as forms of deceit or evasiveness, resulting in adverse credibility determinations. These manifestations include problems with memory

recall, flat affect, nervous demeanor, confusion, and comprehension issues. Many of the asylum officers I interviewed were keenly aware of the potential manifestations of trauma and tried to remain sensitive to this. Yet a main theme emerging from my interviews with asylum officers was that trauma, and both its related diagnoses and manifestations, were understood not as evidence of credibility or eligibility but as a hindrance to an officer's ability to properly assess and adjudicate the case. As one asylum officer told me: "I guess in conclusion there's a tension between finding someone credible and dealing with the trauma, someone who can't remember very well. It's a problem." Evidence of trauma (even when accepted as "real" or authentic), in many instances, thus problematizes an asylum case rather than supports it. This was acutely evident in the following narrative of an asylum officer:

We get a couple of trainings about dealing with trauma survivors. Um, it's tricky for credibility because if we want to get people who are detailed and consistent and then you have somebody who's, um, doesn't remember well. Sometimes that makes them more credible. I go 'oh, this really happened,' 'cause she can tell me everything up until that door or something like that and then it's kind of like bluhhhhh. (B: Mmhhh). And one time I had a man, this poor guy, he was getting his dates all confused and he was, like, just all over the place and it was very-and I was, like, gosh this guy is sooo making up this story on the fly, whatever. And then he described going to jail and I asked what they do to you and he said 'they hooked me up to some wires.' And I said 'then what happened?' And then he said 'then I got really hot.' And I was like oh, my god, you were electrocuted.' Your brain's scrambled eggs, you can't, you can't give me dates, whatever. But unfortunately 'cause the guy was not represented and had no medical evidence at all I couldn't say he was credible 'cause his dates were a mess. So, there's some conflict there with trauma survivors. (AO5)

This narrative excerpt illustrates the asylum officer's knowledge and recognition of the links between trauma and cognitive impairments such as memory recall deficits and

incoherence. However, this passage highlights that rather than bolster his claim that he was imprisoned and tortured, these manifestations of trauma interfere with the officer's ability to grant him asylum due to his inconsistencies in other areas of his testimonies, such as the reporting of dates.

Psychotherapy as tool for performance

During the same conference panel on preparing asylum applications to which I've alluded several times already, another speaker stood up to talk about asylum and mental health. "Trauma," this speaker asserted, "prohibits communication and the asylum application is all about communicating a story." As he continued, I realized that his aim was not to disseminate information on the mental health impact of persecution or of the asylum process itself. Rather, his main concern was, in essence, how to deal with an asylum client's mental health problems. For this, he urged those working with asylum applicants to refer their clients for psychological help, which would, he assured the audience, help lawyers and legal advocates an easier time. "If your client gets his mental health needs taken care of then he will be easier to work with," adding "and then you don't have to be the client's therapist as well." Just as asylum officers found the manifestations of applicant's trauma to be a threat to their ability to successfully adjudicate claims, lawyers often expressed to me – with compassion, I should add – that clients who exhibit erratic emotion, reticence, memory loss, and general incoherence as a result of past trauma made preparing their cases a challenge.

As a sort of triage, then, lawyers would often refer clients who seemed to manifest symptoms of trauma, to get psychological counseling, often at THP. This is not to say

that lawyers were not genuinely concerned about the welfare of their clients. Yet, the main impetus for referring clients for psychological or psychiatric help was often that clients' perceived mental health problems were making the preparation of the asylum application difficult. And, as an immigration attorney told me: "Court is not a good place to have a breakdown." Indeed, lawyers would tell me that clients who went to THP often had a much better time recounting their stories of persecution and experiences of violence. Thus psychotherapy emerged as having the (unintended) consequence of aiding the preparation of study participants' asylum cases. This was not just an observation of lawyers and advocates, but also of study participants themselves, as the following excerpts make clear:

Without [THP] I wouldn't have been able to go back and tell my story during my case, you know, what happened in prison and things like that. (Emmanuel, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

I don't think I could have talked about it in my interview if I hadn't started going through counseling because it was so hard. I couldn't say anything about my abuse without breaking down. (Rose, asylum seeker from Kenya)

Immigration Court: Retraumatization or New kind of threat?

In closing this section on trauma, I want to call attention to a salient aspect of my data regarding what may be identified as trauma symptoms within the asylum process. Specifically, my data show that while study participants did speak about the asylum process as entailing some form of retraumatization (recalling/reliving past violence), what study participants emphasized more were the ways in which the acts of participating in an asylum interview or court hearing were constitutive of new forms of fear and

anxiety. Thus, I argue that we need to critically consider not just the ways in which past trauma informs asylum applicants' behavior and performance throughout this process, but also acknowledge the profound ways in which the asylum process itself evokes affective states that shape applicants' performance. Study participants often spoke to the ways in which the sites of asylum adjudication provoked novel kinds of fear and anxiety:

Ahmed: I have never seen a judge in my whole life. Going there [to court] makes me so nervous. She [IJ] is judging my life, whether I will stay or not. When I'm in the courtroom, I'm a different person.

BH: What do you mean, a different person?

Ahmed: I, I, I am so overwhelmed. I become so nervous and my communication, how I talk, it becomes different ... like, strained. I don't know what kind of power she has over me, but I get so nervous. I just hope she understands my story.

I don't know the rule of America. I don't know how, how to talk to a judge. Maybe the judge will not like me, like the way I talk to him, or maybe the way I'm looking, the way I'm sitting. There's many things that—we are two different worlds, America and Africa. And even when I was in my country, I have never been in a court. (Princewill, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

I was nervous, I was nervous. I was afraid, I was—because sitting in the court first time with a judge and the-the and the you know the whole environment is just scary and it's very nerve-wracking. (Solange, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

Hassan: I—when I go there [to Immigration Court] I see other people sitting there in the court. It's so hard to see what they're going through, but I know, I can imagine. You know maybe they might not show them their stress. Maybe they're dressed up good. They look good, but inside it's a third world war. Inside there's a war going on. Inside there's a fear that's eating them alive. Inside there are those voices killing them, torturing them every second. Inside there is this..demon, which is telling you oh, all the things

that you don't want to hear. And you trying to be strong and there's so much more than just being there and dressed up and this courtroom. It's so much more than that. It's inside that—that—nobody see it. Like, nobody can see it, it's inside people that they're there. It's unbelievable. If we can—if I can draw a picture, or if I can bring that thing out, it would be the most ugliest thing you can ever seen.

BH: And the things that you said—these things inside them. Like, what kind of things?

Hassan: Well, it's kind of things like you know ... what if this doesn't work out? What if she [IJ] denies me? What is going to happen to me? What am I gonna do? Am I—how am I gonna go back and live again like –in—like uh place that was bad. Or will I be released? It's just those back and forth back and forth. And you're trying to be brave. No no no it's gonna be good, it's gotta be good. But what if it's not.

Almost all of these narrative passages emphasize the novelty of being in court or being in front of a judge and the fear that this evokes for study participants. The association of judges and courts with criminality was evident in asylum seekers' narratives about the asylum process. Again and again, participants emphasized to me that they had never been in a court, as if to stress their distance from such a context of criminality. The quote I included from Eric to begin this chapter also reflects the concepts of criminality (“They’re going to sentence me,” “there’s a judgment coming”) that, as I have argued, underlies the asylum process. This may be indicative of Eric’s internalization of imposed categories of ‘undeservingness’ (see Larchanche 2012). Yet, whether Eric or other study participants have internalized criminalizing concepts of Other-ness generated via the ethos of the political asylum process, these narrative excerpts bring into sharp relief the power that the institutions associated with asylum have in shaping the affective and subjective experience of study participants.

My claims here are consistent with my argument in this dissertation that the asylum process is productive of novel forms of suffering, thus recasting the locus of refugee and asylum seekers' suffering from the past to the present. In constructing the asylum claimant – initially, at least – as a “sinner-perpetrator,” the asylum process, in effect, has predetermined a space from which the claimant is allowed to speak (Noll 2006: 499). Jacquemet (2009) has provided a textual analysis of asylum hearings, bringing attention to how asylum claimants' speech is shaped by power differentials within court, “where officials possess all the textual resources to impose their version of events as the legitimate one” (277). In the next section, I will address how certain privileged narratives are legitimated in court while others are denied. Here, what Jacquemet's observation allows us to consider is how the power differentials involved in the asylum process, as well as the symbolic threat that being in court represents, informs not only what stories can be articulated and how, but also profoundly shapes subjective experience and performance in this context. Ahmed was not alone in his sentiment that in court he “becomes a different person,” someone who is overcome with nervousness and whose speech is compromised. The very power differentials embedded in the asylum process – whether at the interview or court level – ensure an inequitable exchange. I turn now to an examination of how asylum seekers' histories and stories of suffering are translated (or attempted to be translated) into narrative forms that are privileged and legitimated in political and legal arenas, and consider the consequences of such ‘translation.’

TRANSLATION OF HISTORIES AND THE MAKING OF A “GOOD WITNESS”

A refrain repeated by asylum officers was that asylum claimants need only to “just tell [their] story.” As one asylum officer told me: “They [applicants] just really have to be honest. I mean that’s gonna be the biggest thing.” And another officer claimed: “Just tell me the truth. That’s all I need from you [applicants].” Yet this appeal to “just tell your story” or “just be honest” obscures the crucial fact that an asylum seeker’s story needs to be performed in a specific way in order to be recognized as deserving and legitimate. So, it’s really not just “telling your story” but needing to tell it in a way that aligns with the narrative culture of immigration institutions (Coutin 2001, 2003b; Coffey 2003; Kagan 2003; Bohmer and Shuman 2007, 2008; Shuman and Bohmer 2008; Giordano 2008). That is, presenting detailed, chronological, individual-focused, fixed narratives. This form of narrating persecution and fear, however, often contrasts with asylum seekers’ own personal and cultural ways of articulating suffering.

Asylum claimants must therefore learn what constitutes a good performance or “good speech” in this context (McKinnon 2009: 209). For my study participants, like many other asylum seekers, lessons on what constitutes a privileged and legitimate performance was the focus of much of participants’ interactions with their legal representatives. In addition to helping to craft affidavits and prepare the asylum application, lawyers also spent much time and effort “prepping” clients for their asylum interviews and/or court hearings. While asylum claimants need to make clear their eligibility (i.e., that they have a history of persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution based on one of the five protected grounds), to a large extent, this “prepping” was focused on an applicant’s performance of credibility. Thus, learning how to present

oneself as a believable (read: good/deserving) witness required applicants to “convey and thereby uphold the law’s interpretation of the Truth” (Beard and Noll 2009: 457). I argue here that the crafting of an asylum seeker’s story of violence and suffering into a credible and deserving narrative of persecution as recognized by the law entailed a process of translation that, while conforming to privileged legal standards, nonetheless resulted in a level of asylum applicants’ alienation from their own testimonies. Before ethnographically considering these processes of translation, I first address how both adjudicators and lawyers conceived of a “good witness.”

Privileged narratives in the asylum interview

Despite insisting that asylum applicants only have to be honest during their interviews or “just tell their story,” asylum officers detailed what kinds of narratives made it “easier to see their story,” as one officer put it:

It helps-I’ve noticed a better educated asylum seeker has a much easier time telling me what happened than someone who’s not. And I’m still kind of confused about it, but it seems like people who aren’t well educated have a hard time telling a story from, you know, in order of what happened. They’re like all over the place. Where someone who’s been, like, through high school, can. And I don’t know why that is how it is. But people who can tell me the story in the order, of course, have a lot easier time. Or I have an easier time understanding them than someone who’s all over the place. And it might be education. It might be some cultures, too. They tell the story all over the place. But if they, I guess, can go A, B, C, D, E, then that’s really nice. (AO1)

AO9: People who don’t talk much have a harder time. Um, and either they just don’t have the words, or they’re shy or they think they should only answer yes or no.

BH: Do you ever have the inverse problem, like people that talk too much?

AO9: Ohhhh, yes! Yes. Yes, some people talk too much and you-I'm trying to focus on this one little thing and I'm like 'my grandfather he was a freedom fighter' and dadaddaadaa, and I'm just like 'no, no, no, no. You-it's you.' Or they'll try to explain the political situation or the situation in the country. You know, Sadaam Hussein came and (laughs) I'm like I don't need-just you. You. Or some people are talking and I'm listening and I'm thinking is this going somewhere? Are they gonna get to what's happened to them? ... That can be very frustrating. Also there's some people who don't listen to my question. And surprisingly, there's a lot of people who don't. They want to tell me what they want to tell me.

I don't think there's much you can do about whether or not you've got a good story. Now there are ways that make it easier to see that story. And certainly those are appreciated but if somebody comes in here and they're able to tell me, even if they're bad with dates and bad with names but they can come in here and convince me that this happened to them, then they're in. (A04)

I think what makes something convincing is if someone can tell the story without it feeling like I'm just re-reading my affidavit all over again. So I think when somebody's just able to tell it to you, like, a story and they can jump around in the story, like this happened later and like, that to me is more convincing, 'cause honestly, anybody can write an affidavit for you and say I, under penalty of perjury, but you're living like in the Congo, so are you really concerned about the penalty of perjury in the United States? Probably not. I mean, so for me, I think that's what's more convincing. Somebody's ability to tell the story. (A12)

If asylum applicants were in a better position to gain legal access if they could adeptly and convincingly recount their stories, then this entailed a certain level of performativity. Coherent, chronological, and consistent narratives were rewarded in the asylum interview and in immigration court. This posed a challenge for asylum claimants and their legal representatives, however, because although 'telling a good story' necessitated practice and a honed performance, it needed to appear unrehearsed and natural.

Because much of asylum seekers' performance in this domain surrounded the

demonstration of credibility, applicants were confronted with similar challenges: providing enough detail but not too much detail; being neither reticent nor verbose; telling a linear story but being able to “jump around” if asked. While asylum officers, for the most part, did not explicitly cite demeanor as a factor in preferred narrative structure, asylum officers often alluded to an intangible quality that accompanied compelling accounts of a story. Thus, part of an applicant’s ability to “convince [the officer] that this happened to them,” rested on his or her ability to evoke from the officer an empathic understanding, to make an affective connection. In this sense, asylum seekers’ jobs were to “elicit compassion” and engage in the act of “*selling* one’s suffering” (Ticktin 2011: 139, 127). Yet, emotional display can be tricky to negotiate, too, as the following excerpts from asylum officers illustrate:

You have people that breakdown when they’re talking about traumatic stuff, but sometimes it’s like the opposite, like they’re crying and you’re talking about their birthdate. And you’re like where is that coming from? That to me is sometimes actually stranger than somebody not even crying about anything. Cause I can understand the trauma of not wanting to talk about it and the only way to deal with it is to, like, separate yourself from telling the story, to like shut down completely. So I actually understand that more than somebody who cries at absolutely nothing. Like, you haven’t even started the interview and they start crying. And you’re like that’s kind of weird. Where is that coming from? But I try not to take any of that into account. Like it’s something like where I find somebody’s not credible for other reasons. Like they’ve been totally off their story the whole time and then they start crying, then I’m kind of like oh that looks a little strange ‘cause I kind of caught you in something, I think. (AO2)

It’s kind of hard. ‘cause you don’t know when somebody’s crying why are they crying. They could be crying ‘cause their mom just passed away and they didn’t get to go to the funeral. Which, or they could be crying because they’re recounting something bad or they left their kid, so it’s kind of hard because you **can see the emotion but you don’t know the source**. And it could be anything realistically. I think relocating in and of

itself would be hard if you don't have family and you don't know anybody. (AO5)

Here, just as the reality of Ruth's traumatic brain injury was not questioned by immigration judges but the source of the TBI remained suspect, this asylum officer (AO5) did not discount the veracity of emotional display, yet this display (crying) was not necessarily effective in establishing credibility because the source of the sadness could not be identified. As Floss (2006) has argued, "demeanor is a highly cultural phenomenon and is a highly subjective determination" (236). Moreover, Spijkerboer (2005), in his examination of Dutch refugee credibility assessments, posits a highly problematic connection between credibility determinations and emotional display that corresponds to expected performances of gender and ethnicity.

While asylum seekers must learn how to navigate this difficult terrain of performance of credibility and authentic fear/suffering, asylum officers viewed the issue of legal "prepping" and practice with mixed feelings. While, as the officer quoted earlier noted, prepping helps an officer better see the applicant's story, officers were nonetheless aware that such prepping could allow for the memorization of lies or false information that could then be convincingly presented as true within the asylum interview. Because credibility assessments were an important aspect of asylum officers' jobs, then this required them to 'read' both content and performance for clues regarding the veracity of what they were hearing and seeing. If, as Fred Myers (1979) has argued, emotion talk can be a genuine reflection of inner states *and/or* strategic assertions of what is emotionally expected in a particular context, asylum officers were charged with discerning whether or

not a claimant's expressions of fear were "real" or strategic forms of self-objectification -- and, of course, they could be both.

"Prepping" and 'Translation': The crafting of a privileged narrative

Having sketched out the narrative forms that were privileged in the legal arena from the perspective of adjudicators, a question that follows is how asylum seekers and their legal representatives worked to align their stories with these privileged narratives structures. Legal representatives were, in the lawyer-asylum claimant relationship, in positions of authority. Though their expertise was highly welcomed and appreciated by asylum seekers, the power dynamics that informed the relationships that asylum applicants had with their lawyers needs to be recognized. Legal representatives saw their duty as one of translation – of converting their clients' stories into narratives that could be recognized as credibility and legitimated, and thereby deserving of legal status. Coutin (2003) refers to what I describe here as 'translation' and 'prepping' as part of a process of "procedural subjugation" (107). By this, Coutin calls attention to "the ways that legal personnel and legal proceedings discipline their subjects" (ibid). Within this legal context, histories and personal stories must be crafted to conform to "prototypes of deservingness" whereby life histories and personal experiences are coherently presented and neatly fit legal criteria" (Coutin 2003: 107; see also Ordonez 2008, Bohmer and Shuman 2008).

Furthermore, recent scholarship on the politics and moral economies of humanitarianism (Fassin 2008, James 2004, Ticktin 2006, Willen 2010) has shown that certain forms of suffering become recognized and legitimated over others. Consequently,

appeals to humanitarian organizations or politico-legal bodies may be crafted to conform to privileged categories, and much of this literature explores the category of ‘trauma victim’ as a legitimated identity. While I have previously argued in this chapter that in my research site the category of ‘trauma’ or ‘trauma victim’ is a contested one, asylum applicants nonetheless are required to assert aspects of their experiences and identities that may be legitimated in the legal arena, even if these aspects of their experiences or identities are not salient to their own understandings of self. As Nyers (2006) has emphasized, refugees and asylum seekers are required, by definition, to present themselves as fearful subjects. Whether this fear is subjectively genuine and objectively reasonable is up to adjudicators to decide.

A large part of prepping clients for interviews or court and translating stories into legally privileged narratives surrounded the mobilization of certain aspects of applicants’ stories and life histories that lawyers – not necessarily asylum seekers themselves – deemed relevant or important. For example, Cathy, an immigration attorney, recounted to me a time when her client, who was initially seeking asylum based on political opinion, had mentioned to Cathy in passing that she, the client, had been circumcised against her wishes in her home country of Somalia. Cathy had been aware that “FGM [female genital mutilation] cases had a better shot” at being granted, so Cathy crafted her client’s narrative to make this, not her client’s political activity, the central aspect of the claim. As Cathy concluded to me: “If I can find something like this [FGM], even if it’s not *their* reason for claiming asylum, it’s going to become the case.” I present this story here not because these specific circumstances arose among my study participants, but because it

keenly illustrates the power that legal personnel have in transforming clients' stories and exposes the power inequities in these relationships.

Clients' stories as raw material

As Cathy's story about her client whose case became centered on FGM rather than political opinion brings into relief, asylum applicants' stories were largely viewed as the raw material for the legal crafting of asylum narratives. At a training I attended for volunteer attorneys for CHR, the trainer reminded lawyers in attendance (almost all of whom had no experience in immigration law) to "never submit a client's own statement. View this as a starting point!" He clarified, adding that there will inevitably be details that an asylum applicant includes in his or her testimony that lawyers will want to omit or amend. Ultimately, he concluded: "If you have a role in preparing the affidavit, then you have more control over the application."

Overall, the lawyers and legal advocates with whom I spoke over the course of my fieldwork emphasized both the importance of crafting a coherent and concise written testimony, as well as preparing clients to ensure that they "testify well." One lawyer summed up his role as "preventing my client from hanging himself." Lawyers were careful to avoid literally putting their clients' stories into "my own words," but they noted that their job required a fair amount of "guiding" clients on what and how to say things. A relatively new immigration attorney said he tells clients "'here's what are the bullet points of the case' so that they [clients] can be sure to address and talk about those points." A seasoned immigration lawyer told me: "I don't tell them [asylum applicants] to bury things, but I'll direct them to talk about certain things and not others. I guess my job

there is to get them to focus on stuff that really matters. Time goes by extremely fast [in court] and it's important to present things quickly and in a focused manner." Many other attorneys echoed the problem of time and time management. As another lawyer who dealt with many asylum cases noted: "Even if it's a good claim, if the judge can't fit the case into the legal criteria quickly, then the case can be rejected."

Thus, a successful asylum case depends on both a well-crafted written testimony as well as on an applicant's credible and effective performance in the asylum interview or court hearing. The latter aspect of asylum cases (applicant's performance) was the area in which lawyers, aside from practice sessions and coaching, had the least amount of control. Lawyers and advocates, either implicitly or explicitly, categorized clients regarding their performative abilities. One experienced attorney and legal advocate spoke to this: "Some clients are like natural witnesses and you don't—I don't really like to tell clients what to say, um, although there are some clients, they tend to be people who are really verbose and I'm like 'okay, we *are* going to tell you what to say.' And with people like that, I spend more time, you know, trying to tailor what they are going to say." Ostensibly this tailoring of verbose clients was in the interest of the client. As this attorney continued to tell me: "If the judge gets annoyed early on in the testimony you can't take that back. And so I also try to avoid a sort of situation where the judge is annoyed or frustrated because even if they ultimately wind up thinking you have a meritorious case it's a lot easier if they like your client and think they're an easy witness."

Other lawyers referred to challenging, "high maintenance" clients who called their office often, wanted "to be really engaged in the case," and expected that the

attorney was going to complete the case within weeks. Lionel, an asylum seeker from Liberia, was one of my study participants who lawyers would have placed in this category. He described frustration with his lawyers:

The lawyers say I talk too much. They want straight- straight answers. And you can't just give straight answers. You ask me, you say, 'Okay, did they harm you?' I said, 'No. But, deep down, psychologically I'm – I'm hurt. I'm harmed.' So if I say, 'Oh, yeah I was harmed but this is how I is harmed.' And my lawyers sayin' 'Look man, you beating around the bush. You gotta be, you gotta be—give straight headed answers. And all the – I told them, 'I don't have any straight headed answers. I have explanations. And we have to put these things into perspective.

Lionel's narrative here calls attention to a tension that existed between some asylum applicants and their lawyers with regard to ferreting out what information was relevant or important to a case as well as the proper way to perform in the legal arena. Much legal coaching surrounded lawyers getting clients "to just answer the question" and to "leave out extraneous things like information about their country's political situation." As a lawyer quoted above emphasized and whose sentiments were reflected by many other lawyers with whom I spoke: "my job is to get [applicants] to focus on stuff that really matters." But a key question here is: what stuff does really matter? And to whom does it matter? My data reveal that the translation of asylum seekers' stories into legally recognized narratives privileged lawyers' and advocates' conceptions of what really mattered. Thus, "what really matters" means "what really matters to institutional actors."

Coutin (2003b) argues: "Despite the seeming cultural and political hegemony involved in the producing asylum narratives, to not render clients' life stories as instances of a prototype would be to do clients a disservice, because it is only as 'prototypes' that these people can obtain political asylum" (99). Certainly this is supported by the fact that

in immigration courts nationally, asylum applicants without legal representation have a denial rate of almost 90% (TRAC 2012). My study participants expressed immense gratitude for the *pro bono* legal services they received through CHR and were keenly aware that such representation greatly increased their chances of being granted asylum. Yet, the translation of asylum applicants' stories into legal prototypes was not without consequences, even if these consequences were unintended. I argue that the translation of narratives into legal prototypes resulted in some level of applicants' alienation from their stories. The following section explores this argument.

Alienation of testimony: Who and what get silenced in the 'translation' of narratives?

In interviews with Patrick and Daniel following their asylum interviews and court hearings, respectively, these study participants expressed a sense of deep sense of frustration about how the legal proceedings unfolded. Both Patrick and Daniel felt that they were unable to express themselves in a way that they would have liked. Thus, in the legal translation of their stories, elements that they deemed important were silenced or effaced.

Exchange with Patrick following his asylum interview (the asylum officer decided not to grant asylum and referred Patrick to an Immigration Judge):

Patrick: Yeah. I mean, she [asylum officer] wanted, like, the question, like I can say closed questions, you know, that can go 'yes' or 'no.' But I couldn't just say 'no,' there was more ... And she asked me how I know my professor was arrested and I explained and ... so it was those types of questions and I wasn't given a chance to explain ... I know

she could ask me more questions, what she wants and maybe it's the job that you have to keep going, you have more people coming and, you know ... it was ... bad for me ... my feeling was that it wasn't fair.

BH: It wasn't fair?

Patrick: Yeah, I didn't get a chance to tell what I wanted. I didn't. I should say more. I should say more and explain and say this is how it is. But I didn't get the chance to say a lot of things. Yeah, I didn't have a good experience. And I wish I could have said I still have more to say. I have more to say.

Excerpt with Daniel after his court hearing (at this point IJ decision was pending):

BH: Was there anything that you wished you could have said, or added, that...that didn't come up?

Daniel: Um...I mean, you know it was just what was on the paper [written application]. That's only what they were asking me, you know.

BH: So it was just about what went in the application?

Daniel: Yeah. But, you know, it- it wasn't- I just have a lot to say. You know...a lot, you know.

BH: You- you had a lot to say?

Daniel: Yeah. You know like, all the hard time while--during Senegal [the country to which Daniel fled from Liberia]. And I just wanna just say everything out there. But it just...went through the paper. What was on the paper, that it. That's what they asked me. And, I mean I just went through a lot. You know? At the age of twelve to...I just mean my whole teenage...you know? But there wasn't chances for me to say any of that. Nothing. I mean, the- it wasn't made for that long [time period] so...maybe that's why the judge just said, 'Well, that's it.' And that was it. I couldn't say anything else.

These narrative passages reveal the unintended consequences of translation, whereby asylum seekers are alienated from their testimony. Patrick and Daniel found themselves unable to lay claim to the meaning of their stories and experiences. The “stuff that really matters” to Patrick and Daniel, in other words, was rendered silent, having been predetermined to be “extraneous” or irrelevant.

As Lionel had lamented, the legal focus of concise, “quick,” yes-or-no questions often preempted asylum seekers from putting into perspective the meaning and understanding they brought to their own experiences. These examples also highlight the power inequities that inform the asylum process. Though the interview and the court hearing are theoretically spaces in which claimant’s can “tell their story,” the very parameters of what can be told and how it can be told are dictated by institutional actors other than asylum seekers. Thus, while a story that fits a legal narrative may be more easily ‘read’ by adjudicators, the meaning asylum applicants make of their stories may be severed in the process.

A recurring theme across participants’ narratives concerning their experiences with the asylum process surrounded the discomfort with what asylum seekers saw as an untenable distinction between the personal and the political that their lawyers often made. Lawyers often urged asylum applicant’s to focus on their personal stories and exclude information about country conditions or political situations, as this information would be submitted as supplemental evidence with the asylum application (via country conditions reports or journalistic articles). Thus, an implicit (and sometimes explicit) distinction is made between personal and political information, with the former being the most relevant and important to present, in the eyes of legal personnel. This, however, often contradicted how study participants conceived of their personal stories (see Coutin 2001). The narrative data presented throughout this dissertation with my Cameroonian participants, for example, has highlighted the ways in which political identity was central to personal identity and experience. This was true not just in the legal arena, but in my daily conversations with study participants, who would often refer to historical political events

or timelines as a way of presenting their personal stories. Collective political histories, then, were central to many study participants ways of making meaning of their lives and their identities. By partitioning the political from the personal in the asylum process, asylum seekers were emotionally distanced from their stories, as they were recast in ways that held less meaning for them.

DISJUNCTURES IN LOGIC AND CONCEPTIONS OF DESERVINGNESS

“If I am credible then how do they deny me?”: Case example, Miriam

Miriam, a Kenyan woman who was claiming asylum on the basis of persecution due to her HIV positive status and her HIV/AIDS activism in Kenya, had her case referred to an immigration judge after her USCIS asylum interview. She had preferred not to have any visitors accompany her to the asylum hearing, but met with me afterwards to discuss the hearing in detail. The IJ had denied her asylum and Miriam and her lawyers were beginning the process of filing an appeal with the BIA. Miriam and I sat in her small, dimly lit living room over tea and she told me that she was “shocked” and “disgusted” that she had been denied asylum. “I just really felt in my heart that I was going to get asylum, you know. I had given her [IJ] all the facts. What else does she need from me!?”

After years of dealing with verbal abuse, insults, and threats against her life from both civilians and government officials in Kenya, Miriam was accosted and severely beaten one evening while doing HIV/AIDS outreach and advocacy work in rural areas surrounding Nairobi. When she went to the police, instead of them taking her criminal report, she was detained without food and without access to her medication for days. She

was verbally and physically abused by police while in prison, ridiculed and spit upon because of her HIV status. When she left prison, she fled to her sister's home where she stayed for months, afraid to go out for fear of more abuse or imprisonment. She was finally able to secure a temporary visa and a plane ticket to the U.S. with the help of her family, who urged her to flee the country.

According to the written decision issued by the IJ, Miriam's testimony was credible but the IJ determined that Miriam had failed to establish that she had been persecuted or that she demonstrated a well-founded fear of future persecution. In her written decision, the IJ noted that "brief periods of detention, ethnic conflict, or isolated violence do not necessarily constitute persecution." "What is persecution to her then!?" Miriam cried during our interview. "What is being locked up without food and medication? Does she not know what being beaten means!?" The IJ also suggested that internal relocation (moving to another location within Kenya) would have been possible—a suggestion that Miriam adamantly refuted. To this end, Miriam showed me a newspaper article that her lawyers had submitted as evidence with the asylum application arguing that 80-90% of persons with HIV are abused countrywide). The IJ also suggested that Miriam could have gone to the Kenyan government with her complaints, emphasizing that the police should not be considered government agents. Miriam countered this: "well, she [IJ] has most certainly never been to my country because they [police] absolutely are [government agents]!"

Subjective vs. Objective Fear

In Miriam's case, her ability to demonstrate credibility was not enough to be granted asylum. Similarly, Bereket, an asylum seeker from Ethiopia who had been repeatedly harassed and threatened by government officials after he wrote a journal article criticizing the ruling government, had also been found to be credible but was denied asylum because the IJ determined that he had not convincingly established past persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution. The IJ noted that Bereket had not been imprisoned or tortured, thus casting doubt that his fear was "objectively reasonable." But, as Bereket insisted to be several times "what I've been through, it was psychological torture."

These cases illustrate the power that adjudicators have not only in determining the authenticity of a story, but also in determining whether an applicant's fear – a highly personal affective state – is also "reasonable." These cases further reveal profound disjunctures in the logic and grammar of legal institutions, on the one hand, and asylum seekers' own understandings of their stories, on the other. Specifically, these examples illustrate disparate understandings of what constitutes evidence of "persecution" or "reasonable fear."

"How it really is:" External country reports vs. everyday experience

Part of the frustration that Miriam expressed concerned what Miriam saw as the IJ's over-reliance on external documents in discerning whether or not Miriam's claims of persecution and fear of further persecution were "objectively reasonable" in the eyes of the law. The IJ and the ICE attorney, throughout the hearing and in the IJ's written decision, referred to country conditions reports, including U.S. State Department reports

as “evidence” that contradicted the concerns or fears that Miriam expressed. For example, the IJ indicated that country conditions reports indicated that there were laws protecting the abuse of HIV positive individuals in Kenya. “Well, then, they need better research,” Miriam exclaimed to me. “She [IJ] needs to research [about Kenya] to see how it really is, to really come up with the truth, to see that the laws are not enforced. The judge says that there are laws to protect, but she doesn’t know that nothing is enforced. It’s the law of the jungle. Laws are on paper only, they don’t have any meaning there.”

The ICE attorney arguing the case against Miriam had also seemed to rely on a notion of “laws on paper.” He had emphasized to the IJ that there were no police records to corroborate Miriam’s testimony that she had been targeted and abused because of her HIV status and activism or that she had been arrested and detained. Miriam found this incredulous, as she had stated all along that in the past police had failed to file any of her grievances and that, indeed, during the time she was detained, the police were the actual perpetrators of abuse. So why would they ever report that!?” Miriam wondered to me, shaking her head in dismay.

Miriam was not unique in positing immigration officials’ perceived ignorance of “real” or “true” country conditions. Cameroonian study participants often decried that the U.S. views Cameroon as a “friendly” country, and that asylum adjudicators don’t seem to have a real sense of what life is like for Anglophone Cameroonians. As Princewill, a Cameroonian study participant, had told me: “If these people [immigration officials] would just go there, go to Bamenda not Yaounde [the capital city] they could see what is happening with their own eyes! But they only listen to the lies that Biya tells. The only go to Yaounde and think everything is peaceful.”

Documentation and corroborating evidence

Documentation and other material evidence was another area in which disjunctures between the institutional logic of asylum and participants' own understanding of their cases were exposed. In addition to country conditions reports used by adjudicators and officials, study participants were often confused over questions about or demands for documentation or other material evidence.

As the cases of Solange and Ruth revealed, adjudicators' suspicion of photographic evidence on their SCNC membership cards was, in part, responsible for their adverse credibility determinations. The IJ had dismissed Solange's explanation that her SCNC membership card included a photograph from her teenage years (before she had joined the SCNC) simply because she had no current photos of herself and that neither she nor her family had money to pay for a new photograph.

This example demonstrates a rift in logic regarding the use of photographs as evidence that was echoed by other participants as well. For example, the ICE attorney had initially raised issues regarding the authenticity of Eric's SCNC membership card during the court hearing and requested time for an overseas investigation to confirm or disprove its authenticity. The overseas investigation conducted by DHS lasted over 18 months, during which time Eric's case was put on hold. In the end, the investigation concluded that the authenticity of the card could be neither confirmed nor disproved, indicating that the research of the DHS team concluded that fraudulent membership cards are easily manufactured and sold throughout Cameroon. "Well, thank you very much. I could have told you that. Without two years overseas investigation," Eric said angrily

when recounting the details of the investigation to me. He added: “So I’m being punished because my country is corrupt? That doesn’t make sense.” Because the authenticity of the card could not be verified, this was not used to discredit Eric’s credibility. However, the protracted delays in his case exacerbated Eric’s sense of limbo and insecurity.

Another Cameroonian participant, Maurice, told me that judges need to have a better understanding of how photographs are used outside of the U.S. He argued that photos are “risky” in Cameroon, especially if one is involved in opposition politics, like him. “Many cards don’t even have pictures on them,” he elaborated, “because that picture identifies you. Pictures connect to a person. And they can search for you with pictures, so some people will have the membership card, they will pay their dues. They have their name on it, but no picture or even their date of birth.”

Similar to Solange, an IJ had rejected Ruth’s claim that she had originally had no photograph on her SCNC membership card and only retrospectively placed a photograph on the card after coming to the United States, per the advice of an acquaintance and fellow SCNC member. The adjudicator’s focus on her SCNC card – and the resultant denial of credibility -- was highly troublesome for Ruth. This was something she wrestled frequently and could not find a way to make sense of it:

What has a picture got to do with the whole case!? Because it seems very unfair because the judge says that you took a new picture and put it on an old card. And so you are refusing all what she [referring to herself now in third person] has been through and hang the whole case on this card just because she put a new picture on it. It just doesn’t make sense. Because of a picture! So they are saying that I have not been through all this [torture, detention] just because I put a new picture on an old card. It doesn’t make sense. Does that make my medical problems or being in prison a fraud or lies? They didn’t say I’m inconsistent. All the problems that I laid as my— that made me leave my county, none of those things were found to be a

problem [lacking in credibility]. Then why can't they give me asylum? So it's just the picture. But what importance is that picture to all of the persecution that I've gone through!?

While Ruth viewed the alteration of her card as an isolated aspect of her claim, adjudicators highlighted this as symbolic of Ruth's overall believability. The IJs read Ruth's adulteration of material evidence as the submission of fraudulent evidence. And per asylum law, such suspect behavior can be deemed to cast suspicion over the whole of testimony. In this way, a putatively fraudulent act was extended to impute fraudulent and, hence, undeserving personhood.

In addition to confusion over photographs, study participants were often confronted with questions regarding evidence or proof of births or deaths of loved ones. It was not uncommon, for example, for study participants who recounted the deaths of their spouses, mothers, or fathers to be immediately asked if they had proof of these deaths. The importance that some adjudicators put on death certificates was puzzling to many asylum seekers, for whom death and birth certificates were a novel concept. Furthermore, study participants interpreted the request for death certificates following their often emotional testimonies of these deaths as a painful discount of their personal narratives of loss.

One particularly painful example of this occurred during Daniel's court hearing, which I observed. Choking back tears and having to pause numerous times, Daniel recounted to the court the details of his family being killed while he was locked in a closet. He described hearing gunshots and screams. When the soldiers left his home and he exited the closet, he reported seeing the blood-soaked bodies of his mother and

siblings under blankets. After a long pause, Daniel sat back in the witness chair where he sat, exhaling deeply as if feeling some relief that this part of his testimony was over. The ICE attorney stood up for cross-examination and asked if Daniel has the death certificates of his family members. When Daniel, looking confused, replied that he did not, the ICE attorney proceeded with a line of questioning seemingly aimed at evoking some sort of proof of his family members' deaths. He pressed Daniel: "Did you actually see the faces of the bodies under the blankets?" "How did you know they were the bodies of your family?" Daniel struggled to explain that they were the only ones in the house prior to soldiers entering "who else would be under them [blankets]?" Daniel had retorted. Daniel described seeing "hands and legs sticking out." "But no faces?" the ICE attorney asked again, confirming that Daniel – a twelve year old boy at the time -- had not seen the faces of the freshly murdered bodies strewn about his home. The ICE attorney concluded this line of questioning by asking again if Daniel had ever attempted to get a death certificate for his mother or other family members. Daniel, almost inaudibly at this point, replied: "No."

In an interview I had with Daniel the week following his court hearing, Daniel brought up this line of questioning during the hearing:

I mean, it was just...too many questions and then...that questions what the government lawyer asked me you know, he shouldn't have asked me that question 'Why I didn't have death certificate.' You know, why would he ask that? I guess, I think maybe he wanted proof. But, um, Africans don't know about that. There isn't- there's no one know about death certificate. Maybe...someone- I don't know. But no one knows about death certificate. They don't even have a birth certificate unless they're traveling. Most of them don't even know their ages.

Daniel then added that even if death certificates existed for his mother and siblings, it would be highly unlikely that he could retrieve them:

You know, I was twelve when I left my country so...I don't know how I'm gonna get a death certificate for that. So, even if, um, if I need a death certificate, you know...maybe they're [the Liberian government] gonna ask me how my family got killed. It's government stuff so I don't wanna, you know, go that far. So that's why I can't get a death certificate.

The request for documentation is not unusual in asylum cases, despite the fact, as I emphasized earlier, that asylum cases in theory can be adjudicated based only on a claimant's testimony. The REAL ID Act made changes to documentation requirements, allowing adjudicators to require that asylum applicants submit certain documentation or material evidence if the judge decides that such evidence can be "reasonably obtained." A key issue here – an issue unaddressed by the REAL ID Act – is what constitutes "reasonable obtainable." Indeed, legal scholars have recently pointed to the fact that discerning what kind of evidence can be reasonably obtained is subjective and open to abuse by adjudicators (Coffey 2003; Cianciarulo 2006). Thus, we see another disjuncture between legal rules regarding material evidence and asylum seekers' logic regarding the matter. An immigration attorney and advocate working with CHR recounted one example of this to me:

I had a Rwandan client last summer and he's like 'look, my family's in danger, like he's been getting these emails from kids and he's like that's why I couldn't get documents. They're like 'well maybe you should try.' You know, and it just feels like they're sooo—there's definitely moments during the hearing where it feels like everyone just kind of puts on their, like, tough adjudicator hat and nobody's really willing to give much leeway or understanding when clients make what I consider to be really, you know the client's testifying about this, we have the emails and you're saying

‘well, you know, you should be able to get that anyway.’ (voice raises) Really!? I mean—and those are times—and I’m a relatively timid attorney I would say just because I’m not, as a person, I’m not super aggressive, so I just kind of sit there and boil and then politely, like, ‘your honor, the respondent testified that his family has been threatened multiple times in the last three weeks and that’s why he doesn’t feel comfortable sending documents out of the country. And then in that case the judge was like ‘well, would you like more time to try to see if he can get those documents?’ [The IJ said it] in a way that very clearly, but without anybody saying it, implied to me ‘well you’re not getting granted asylum if you don’t.’ I mean that was the tone, but nobody will actually come out and say that to you which is, to me, also sort of the frustrating passive aggression of immigration court is that you are never totally sure what is going to become important to the judge.

Indeed, as the above narrative passage illustrates, getting documentation could be risky business for asylum applicants, many of whom had fled their countries due to persecution by their home governments. Study participants were frustrated by requests for material evidence to corroborate aspects of their testimony and it was not uncommon for cases to be put on hold while applicants attempted to gather materials from their home countries – a task that was often emotionally and logistically challenging. It was rare, at least among my study participants, that asylum seekers would arrive in the U.S. with documents or evidence other than their passports and temporary visas (if they had the latter). Lionel expressed his frustration about this after his lawyers told him that he would likely need evidence of the numerous threats against his life that he reported in his written and oral testimony. His thoughts here are representative of many study participants who were charged with a similar task:

First of all, when I left Liberia, I was not thinking about anything like that [about evidence/documentation]. Otherwise, I would take the bundle of newspapers of threats against me all over the place and I’d (claps hands) pound them in a bag. And I’d say, ‘Here are the documents. Here are the

newspapers. All the threats.’ But I don’t bring one paper with me. Because I wasn’t thinking about that at the time.

And yet, those asylum seekers that did come with documentation and/or corroborating evidence were met with the paradoxical and seemingly arbitrary nature of asylum adjudication: while evidence is often required to ‘prove’ one’s case and thus receive asylum status, fleeing the country with this evidence may be interpreted by adjudicators as a lack of authenticity. Indeed, documentation “can become either positive or negative evidence” (Ordonez 2008: 52). Recall asylum officers’ thoughts regarding documentation recounted earlier in this chapter. Not only could documents be fake, they asserted, but if an asylum applicant appears to have had time or opportunity to gather documentation, he or she may be viewed as not having a credible or reasonable fear of immediate persecution.

To be sure, consider the following taken from the IJ’s written decision in Ruth’s case: “Considering that [Ruth] was able to get a passport in her own name, with her own photo and leave Cameroon with exit permission diminishes any claim that [Ruth] suffered past persecution in Cameroon or had any fears of future persecution in Cameroon.” This sweeping statement by the IJ failed to take into account the aspects of Ruth’s testimony that outlined the level of bribery that was need for Ruth to obtain a passport, as well as her reported fear while traveling, primarily at night to avoid the *gendarmes*, first to Yaounde, the capital city, to get the passport, and then to Duala to catch her flight to the U.S. This statement also highlights just one of many dilemmas or paradoxes that asylum seekers must confront during the legal process. If proof of identity is required of asylum applicants but that same proof of identity already presumes Ruth’s

lack of eligibility or credibility, then what options are left? Finally, the IJ's statement here reflects institutional assumptions about social behavior and cultural contexts that often conflict with asylum seekers' own interpretations and actions in various circumstances. It is, ultimately, the adjudicator who has the authority to claim the legitimacy, authenticity, and believability of asylum seekers' personal stories. Adjudicators rely not just on evidence/documentation, but also about assessments regarding what kind of behavior is "reasonable" in a particular situation. This extends beyond the larger charge of discerning whether fear – a central tenet of asylum seekers' claims – is reasonable. Adjudicators make assessments throughout court hearings or interviews regarding what is reasonable and appropriate behavior, although the situations that have confronted asylum applicants are often far beyond the experiences or imaginations of adjudicators (c.f. Kirmayer 2003).

“Why else would I be here?”: Asylum seekers' logic of deservingness

This chapter has elucidated how, from an institutional perspective, asylum seekers' 'deservingness' was assessed and determined. Because asylum officers and immigration judges held the power to determine the worthiness of asylum claimants and thereby produce them as particular categories of persons, asylum seekers worked hard to learn the codes and cues of 'deservingness' as defined by asylum institutions. Yet this remained a formidable challenge for study participants. The very system of logic that necessitated learning new codes and cues for deservingness – a system that places the burden of proof on the applicant -- at its core deeply contradicted study participants' understandings of themselves as already deserving of protection. As one advocate put it:

“I think most asylum seekers have the fundamental belief that what happened to me is really terrible and they’re gonna’ grant me asylum.”

Participants’ sense of themselves as authentic refugees, then, was put through a series of painful tests for which he or she was largely unprepared, both practically and emotionally. The asylum process took an emotional toll on study participants, and not just in the profound ways that I have described in other chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 3-5). Having a figure of authority doubt and delegitimize one’s story (Solange, Ruth) or deem one’s fear and/or experiences of persecution as not “enough” to warrant protection (Bereket, Miriam) were experienced not as practical inconveniences but rather a kind of “ontological assault” (Garro 1992: 104).

For my study participants, the very act of leaving their countries – of fleeing the only land they had ever known, of abandoning children and spouses and livelihoods – this act, in their eyes, authenticated them and served as proof that they were ‘true refugees.’ The following narrative excerpts illustrate how study participants often pointed to their present suffering as ‘evidence:’

Why would I leave my family to come here? ... I’m trying to change corruption in my own government. Why would I come here and take care of the government here? (Ruth, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

Look at me! At my age! Why would a mother like me leave my children and come and live here!? I don’t see anybody. I don’t talk to anybody. I cook sometimes, but meanwhile my children are dying hungry in Cameroon. Why else would I come here except to have safety? (Louise, asylum seeker from Cameroon)

Why would I come and sit here with this dirty carpet, in this dark room and I can’t see my daughter or my granddaughter. Would I be here—

would this happen if I was free [in Kenya]? (Miriam, asylum seeker from Kenya)

However, the logic of deservingness that asylum seekers reflected above could not be easily translated into the grammar and logic of the legal process, which relied on a different set of rules about evidence and self-presentation. Indeed, articulations of suffering in the present had no place in the asylum process, which focused instead on past persecution or potential future persecution.

It is through this lens, then, that the impact of an asylum denial, whether due to an adverse credibility determination or a perceived lack of a well-founded fear of persecution, needs to be fully appreciated. My data reveal that study participants experienced asylum denials as profound acts of delegitimation of their suffering, past and present. An asylum denial changed not only participants' material circumstances, but these denials resulted in a partial erasure of personhood. When Solange received the IJ's decision that she was denied based on a lack of credibility, including a lack of credibility on the details surrounding her rape, she was devastated:

It's hard for me to understand why she said that. I don't know why she said that. I don't know—why would she say something like that? I, I, I would have been ten times happier if she just said 'I'm not going to grant you asylum.' You know, I'll take that, you know. Okay, you don't want to grant me asylum. 'Yeah, you were beaten and your head was broken. Still, I'm not gonna give it to you. Go back and heal your pain. Or go back and be raped again. Tell me no, but to give me a reason that, that breaks my heart, my soul. You know that just really deepens my wounds.

ASYLUM ADJUDICATION AS (INTER)SUBJECTIVE MILIEU

Lawyers and advocates often pointed out to me that asylum adjudication was ultimately a subjective process. As one immigration lawyer grumbled to me one

afternoon, “it seems like they [IJs] often judge from the heart and not the mind.” Lawyers would provide me with legal details regarding the asylum process – “the objective criteria” – but usually followed this by stressing the subjective elements: “judges make value judgments. They just do,” or “yeah, there’s objective criteria, but it’s still a gut reaction.” Indeed, “[p]erhaps the most intractable issue in the assessment of credibility arises from the decision-makers’ own presence of self, the values which they inevitably bring to the task of deciding whether the claimant’s story is credible” (Thomas 2006: 84).

Asylum officers also conceded, either explicitly or implicitly, that assessing credibility and adjudicating claims were fluid, subjective, and fallible procedures, despite attempts to make it as “objective” a process as possible. As asylum officers suggested:

You’re constantly probing and testing, um, to determine did this really happen to them. You know, what happened. It’s just-it’s a very active and interactive kind of process.... So, it’s more of an art. It’s not a process designed by engineers. It’s, it’s an art that has—in the art, a rigor and a structure. (AO4)

You know what? There- you just never know if you’ve ever made the right decision. I mean, a lot of times, you just- you get like a gut feeling. And, you just have to, you know, go with your instincts. And kinda pursue that. (A12)

Well, I mean you have-I mean, it comes down to a judgment call always, of course. And reasonable minds may differ. Both in terms of whether the person’s demonstrated that they’re credible or whether they’ve demonstrated on the merits that they suffered past persecution or have demonstrated a well founded fear of future persecution. (A03)

One asylum officer described the job that he and other asylum officers had as simply “an impossible job.” He continued:

You know, I've come to realize, that I don't really know, bottom line. Bottom line, I don't *really* know. I believe I'm a perceptive person and I'm intuitive, but, you know ... I can't read a person's mind—I can't—I'm not infallible. So I live with it. And, um, well ... I live with it. (A12)

Adjudicators' ambivalent positions of power

So how do asylum officers “live with it?” Here, I can briefly highlight some ways in which I observed asylum officers responding to the challenges – or, perhaps the impossibility – of confidently evaluating stories of profound suffering and pain. In my interviews with these asylum officers, I noted that they readily owned their decisions to grant asylum, especially to those who they felt were ‘genuinely deserving.’ Declarations of “saving somebody’s life” or “helping somebody in a very real sense” were common when officers described their jobs. However, they would often distance themselves from cases that they denied, thus demonstrating an ambivalent relationship to their own authority and power. For example, asylum officers emphasized repeatedly that claimants get “two bites of the apple,” Here, they are referring to the fact that most asylum seekers can have their case heard by an Immigration Judge if an asylum officer denies them. While highlighting the power of immigration judges may have served to undermine asylum officers’ authority as decision-makers, it simultaneously abdicated them from the ultimate responsibility of denying someone legal status.

The framework discussed earlier, of asylum as a ‘benefit’ for ‘deserving’ migrants also facilitated a distancing between adjudicators and asylum seekers. The following quote from an asylum officer demonstrates how the asylum-as-benefit framework was invoked in light of the emotionally-charged exchanges with asylum claimants:

They [applicants] beg-they're begging you, please, please. I want to be like 'I'm not the queen' you know, I have to follow the rules and whatever. It's not *me* giving it to you. It's *you* qualifying. (AO8)

Here, emphasizing that the burden is on asylum claimants to prove their case shifts responsibility of a denial from the adjudicator to the claimant, who was purportedly unable to convince the officer of his or her 'deservingness' or 'qualification' of status. The following, final quote from a senior asylum officer illustrates the struggle officers engage in to distance themselves from claimants while acknowledging that the reality of their decisions are, truly, matters of life and death:

A lot of times I'll tell the new officers when they get here it's like you have to be able to divorce yourself if you want to be able to sleep at night. Um...you make a decision. The best decision you can based on the information you have at hand. And you let it- let it lie. You know, our job is to try to help the people. But we're not the ones who are harming them. So, you know ... they still have a burden to make their case. And if we decide against them...alright, you can't sit there and second guess yourself that they're gonna be deported and go back and be killed. Because certainly that may happen. Um...but you're still not the one killing them. You're not the one doing this to them. Somebody else is. And you can only do the best you can do. So, you've gotta be- you've got to come to grips with that and be at peace with that. (AO7)

Cecile Rousseau and colleagues (2004) have examined the refugee determination process in Canada and suggested that adjudicators suffer from "vicarious traumatization," a process parallel to countertransference in the therapeutic setting, where denial of refugees' testimonies is one response. Adjudicators' vicarious traumatization contributes to a collective "culture of disbelief" in which refugee claimants are denied at high rates because of a perceived lack of credibility. While I am not arguing here that asylum

officers in my research site suffer from such vicarious traumatization (though they may), Rousseau et al.'s work (2002, 2004) is instructive here in underscoring the thoroughly intersubjective nature of asylum interviews and the impact that such encounters have at an institutional level.

I follow Jenkins and Barrett (2004) in recognizing “the irrepressibility of subjectivity as embedded in intersubjectively created realms of meaning and significance” (9). The asylum interview is an intersubjective activity in which both asylum officers and asylum claimants attempt to make meaning of narratives of suffering and pain. Asylum claimants must struggle to be understood as worthy and legitimate subjects. Meaning here is co-created, though in a highly inequitable exchange. To be sure, asylum officers wield a tremendous amount of power and my research data show that a denial of asylum status (re)shaped not only the material circumstances of an asylum seekers’ lives, but also profoundly mediates their experiences of self and social world.

The language of ‘benefits’, ‘customers’, and ‘entitlements’ may serve to ‘divorce’ asylum officers from the visceral pain of asylum claimants and the powerful impact that their decisions have on claimants’ lives. Yet, as someone interested in asylum seekers’ experiences of suffering, I think it necessary to consider the consequences of such distancing. When asylum seekers become ‘customers’ and the asylum interview a transaction, there are various aspects of asylum seekers’ experiences and identities that become muted or effaced. Within the performance and evaluation of asylum claims at stake is the power to define the very contours of claimant’s identities and social realities.

CONCLUSION

When I sat with Miriam discusses her asylum denial, on the table in front of us were two documents. One was the IJ's written decision, outlining the reasons for Miriam's denial of asylum. The other document was an affidavit that Miriam had written about her experiences of persecution and fear in Kenya, which was to be submitted as part of her appeal to the BIA, along with a legal rebuttal prepared by her lawyers. After we had been talking for some time, Miriam grabbed the two documents and waved them in the air. "This," she said, shaking the IJ's written decision, "is denial. This is the judge's words forced in my mouth." She tossed it on the table and then smoothed out her written affidavit on her lap: "But this, this is my experience. This is the truth."

With this, Miriam captured the deep divisions between asylum seekers' conceptions of themselves as authentic and deserving refugees and the institutional grammar and logic that requires that 'deservingness' be performed and proved in ways that were often experienced as punitive, arbitrary, or simply confusing or illogical. This chapter has elucidated these divisions.

Underlying adjudicators' approach to assessing asylum claims was the belief – produced and reproduced via institutional discourses and practices – that asylum status was a "benefit" to be earned; a privilege rather than a right. In discerning who is a 'deserving' asylum claimant and who is not, adjudicators make judgments regarding what constitutes not only "fear" and "persecution," but also truthfulness. Credibility emerged as a key aspect of adjudication. Asylum seekers, then, had to learn how to convincingly perform their testimonies and personal stories in ways that align with the culture and structure of the legal arena. In this discussion, I highlighted the slippery nature of trauma,

both as a sociopolitical concept/category and as a condition that informs behavior and demeanor.

This chapter explored how legal representatives ‘translated’ asylum seekers’ personal stories as part of a process of preparing a “good case.” While this ‘translation’ greatly improved the chances of being granted asylum, this chapter investigated the consequences of this, namely the resulting alienation of asylum seekers from their testimonies. In highlighting asylum adjudication as a (inter)subjective, interactive process, I argued that though asylum claimant’s cases are co-constructed in the legal arena, this occurs in highly inequitable ways. This is perhaps most evident in the cases where asylum is denied:

When an asylum seeker who is in fact a Convention refugee is disbelieved there is a failure on a number of levels. There is a miscarriage of justice and a betrayal of the principle of asylum. There is also a failure to offer protection when it is needed and owed. There is also a failure to bear witness to the asylum seeker’s experience of persecution, and consequently an unwitting completion of the persecutor’s project – to render the victim of persecution discredited and silent (Coffey 2003: 417).

Here, Coffey (2003) eloquently addresses the impact of asylum denials and aptly captures the deeply painful ways in which these decisions mediated study participants’ very being-in-the-world.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

Several months after completing fieldwork and leaving my research site, I wrote the below fieldnotes. I had been keeping in touch with my study participants and was closely following Ruth's situation. Ruth, as I noted in Chapter 4, had been told of her imminent deportation and likely detention, though she was given no specifics and was often given conflicting information from CHR, attorneys, and ISAP officials. I had talked to Ruth the morning I wrote these notes and our conversation focused on a recent, troubling incident:

Yesterday, I received the faxed police report that Ruth had asked [her former CHR lawyer] to send to me. About a week ago, ICE agents had taken Ruth from jail to the airport, with the intent of deporting her. The police report was brief, stating that Ruth had become "agitated" and "attempted to physically assault" the ICE agent who was there to accompany her on the several flights overseas and across the Cameroon border. When I talked to Ruth this morning -- very briefly and with that scratchy phone connection from jail -- she told me that she was on the jet way about to board the plane when she refused to go any further. She panicked, she told me, her whole body feeling "on fire," and she attempted to return to the airport. Ruth told me she was thrown face-down on the ground, right on the jet way, handcuffed, and taken into custody at the airport; then taken to another, new jail about 100 miles away. The thought of Ruth, embattled and scared, lying handcuffed on the ground on the jet way made me angry and sad. Hasn't she been through enough? I asked Ruth why she refused to board the plane, why she thought she was feeling the bodily heat. She responded: I can't go back there [Cameroon]! If they want to take me there, then they should just put me in a body bag. I'm not supposed to be deported, Bridget! I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not at fault. This shouldn't be happening. (Ruth, fieldnotes)

These fieldnotes seemed appropriate to include in a conclusion to this dissertation, throughout which Ruth's voice has reverberated. I include this fieldnote excerpt not just

because it adds for the reader another piece of Ruth's story, but also because it crystallizes many of the main arguments that I have presented in the dissertation.

Ethos of Asylum, Techniques of Governing, and Experiential Dimensions of the Political Asylum Process

The fieldnote excerpt offered here underscores what has been the larger aim of this dissertation: to ethnographically elucidate the embodied, affective, and experiential dimensions of being an asylum seeker in the U.S., particularly in terms of being subjected to the disciplinary procedures that characterize the "political ethos" of asylum in the U.S. (Jenkins 1991) (Chapter 3). By lodging an asylum claim with the U.S. government, asylum seekers become (hyper)visible subjects who are 'managed,' and policed through a variety of techniques. A key effect of the "political ethos" of asylum is what I have termed "the paradox of visibility" in this context: asylum seekers' visibility was at once a promise of security and a powerful source of *insecurity*. The cruel irony here is that asylum seekers, who were legally defined by their transnational movement, found themselves profoundly immobilized by the political asylum process.

This incident of Ruth's attempted deportation and altercation with ICE clearly illustrates the powerful institutional and governmental techniques of policing and criminalization to which many asylum seekers are subjected. I have argued in the dissertation that these forms of 'management,' surveillance, and policing can be understood as forms of structural violence that result in social suffering. Though not all study participants were subjected to ankle-monitoring procedures, detention or deportation, I have argued that there exists a continuum of violence(s) that confronts

asylum seekers during the asylum-seeking period. These violences range from subtler forms of symbolic or “technocratic violence” (Rousseau et al. 2002), such as protracted period of waiting in states of potential ‘deportability,’ the illegibility and lack of transparency concerning asylum cases and procedures, and the institutional labeling of migrants as suspect or fraudulent; to more overt forms of violence, such as policies that economically marginalize asylum seekers, detention, electronic monitoring, police harassment, and deportation.

As I have illustrated, these techniques of policing and disciplining become justified and normalized through the discourses of national security and border control, on the one hand, and humanitarianism, on the other. Indeed, this tension undergirds the asylum process overall. There is a critical link between the discourses of humanitarianism and security. Both sets of discourses are deployed in the aim of discerning ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ asylum seekers. The central goal of the political asylum process is to assess who is the “right” kind of migrant (an ‘authentic’ humanitarian refugee) and who is the “wrong” kind of migrant (‘bogus’ asylum seeker/economic migrant). Techniques of ‘management’ and policing become routinized as part of this process, suggesting humanitarianism’s tendency to be complicit with anti-immigration policies (Ticktin 2011). As Ticktin (2011) argues in her work with undocumented migrants in France, “regimes of care” and humanitarian measures were “accompanied by a form of policing and surveillance – harsher security measures were pushed through under humanitarian pretexts, and victims moved all too easily from endangered to dangerous, innocent to delinquent” (5). Here, it is not just that migrants deemed to be ‘undeserving’ of asylum status -- “not worthy of compassion” -- are ignored, but rather they are subjected to an

increased regime of policing and surveillance (Ticktin 2011: 184). These asylum seekers, like Ruth, are “perceived as having failed in some important moral way” (ibid).

Political Asylum and the Production of Moral Categories of Personhood

Indeed, another main argument of this dissertation is that the political asylum process is not just a politico-legal one but also a moral one. That is, the political asylum process not only constructs legal categories, but also produces categories of moral personhood. The asylum process must be understood as a struggle to be seen, a struggle for recognition. This dissertation has shown that legal recognition was experienced simultaneously as moral recognition. That is, asylum seekers experienced the conferring of legal status as a moral legitimation of their suffering and sacrifice. The opposite was true as well: participants experienced the denial of status – denial of recognition -- as a profound *de*-legitimation of their pain and suffering.

Yet, this dissertation has also emphasized the disjunctures in logic about deservingness that emerge in this context. While the asylum process produced some study participants as deserving/legitimate and undeserving/illegitimate, *all* study participants understood themselves as “authentic” refugees; however, they found themselves confronted (quite unexpectedly) by a process that often questioned – or denied – their claims to authenticity. Within the legal context, asylum seekers must learn to ‘perform’ deservingness: to present themselves in ways that are legitimated and privileged by legal actors, in ways that align with the institutional culture of legal bodies. Asylum seekers must learn to narrate their suffering and present themselves in ways that can be institutionally identified as “authentic.” While the translation of asylum seekers’

experiences of suffering into legal categories and narratives may assist in the construction of them as a “morally legitimate suffering body,” this translation was not without consequences: often, alternative ways of understanding self and experience are effaced or rendered mute (Ticktin 2011: 11).

Asylum Seeking as Mediating Experience of Self, Others, and Social World

Elaborating this central argument concerning the construction of (moral) personhood, I have illustrated that how one is constructed (“illegal”/undeserving or “legal”/deserving) not only shapes the material aspects of everyday life but also transfigures subjectivity and identity, often posing a threat to sense of self and personhood. Moreover, I have ethnographically explored the ways in which asylum seeking mediates not only self processes, but also social ones (Chapter 5). Specifically, the ethnographic analyses I presented in this dissertation bring into relief the ways in which both the existential limbo or stuckness that characterized asylum seeking articulated with other forms of structural violence or vulnerability, producing novel forms of suffering and prompting a reconfiguration of social and transnational family relations.

Suffering as Present-Focused

Another central finding of this dissertation pertains to the interrelationship between power, temporality, and subjectivity (Chapter 4). In the legal arena, asylum seekers must present themselves and their stories in terms of past persecution or likely future persecution (Chapter 7). In therapeutic settings, asylum seekers are reified as victims of past trauma and attention is on *post*-traumatic symptoms (Chapter 6). In

contrast to these constructed temporal orientations, however, this dissertation has ethnographically illustrated that asylum seekers in my study located their suffering not in the past or the future, but rather in the *present*. In other words, the very system – the political asylum process – that participants assumed would alleviate suffering and provide security was, in fact, evocative of novel forms of suffering and a profound sense of insecurity. Asylum seekers saw the protracted uncertainty, the sense of powerlessness, and the techniques of policing and criminalization associated with the asylum process as productive of new affective and subjective ways of being in the world. Namely, as I argue in Chapter 4, study participants articulated a sense of ‘existential limbo,’ or ‘existential stuckness,’ in which life and meaning-making were experienced in terms of immobility: life was “on hold” or “frozen.”

Given that study participants saw the asylum process itself as the locus of suffering, I argued that treatment modalities that conceptualize suffering as a phenomenon generated in the *past* (e.g., psychotherapy) held on partial possibility for participants to alleviate their suffering. Rather, asylum seekers understood asylum/legal status to be the ‘real’ solution to their suffering.

Within the ethnographic discussion of the temporal category of waiting, I emphasized that although asylum seeking resulted in a sense of stuckness, immobility, or limbo, asylum seekers nonetheless exercised agency within this context. Yet, given the circumstances of profound fear and existential insecurity, I posited the necessity of recasting or rethinking “agency” in this context. Many asylum seekers, as I illustrated, found ways to exercise agency within the often oppressive environment of the political asylum process through acts such as the assertion of alternative narratives (e.g., self as

“freedom fighter” or “man/woman of God”), tactics of “keeping busy,” and the practice of religion. I specifically considered hope as form of practice in this context (Zigon 2009; Mattingly 2011). Ultimately, I underscored in this dissertation that although the forms of Othering and processes of governing and disciplining to which asylum seekers were subjected powerfully shaped their lives, these forms and processes were not wholly determinate of experience in this context.

Study Limitations

The limitations of my study sample must be considered (see also Chapter 2). As I argued at the outset of this dissertation, I do not view asylum seekers as a monolithic category and am not purporting in this dissertation to posit a portrait of “the asylum seeker experience.” Rather, my intent has been to document the experiential dimensions of going through the political asylum process. Because my sample was recruited via an organization that aids asylum seekers (CHR), this sample is a biased sample in two particular ways. First, because study participants have been “vetted” by CHR, the asylum seekers in my study have claims that were deemed to be meritorious by legal professionals. That is, CHR staff members, upon reviewing the initial intake information of participants had determined that, in their view, these asylum seekers meet the criteria of legal status. Thus, such a study sample would then eliminate those asylum seekers whose claims would be considered not to meet legal criteria (as is the case with many unrepresented asylum seekers). Whether or not this bias would be confirmed is yet to be seen. Whether or not “vetting” by CHR makes this a sample more likely to be granted asylum than a truly representative sample of asylum seekers (i.e., those with legal

representation and those without) remains difficult to discern given that the majority of study participants' cases have yet to be resolved. Worth noting, too, is the fact that several of my study participants were denied asylum at the asylum interview or IJ level, or were even deported.

A second aspect of bias in my study sample surrounds the level of vulnerability of my participants (see Chapter 2). My study participants, as CHR clients, had expressed a need for *pro bono* assistance, having neither the financial means for paid legal representation nor a community connection to a lawyer. There are, of course, many asylum seekers who come to the U.S. who are financially secure and/or who have local family and community support. These asylum seekers would not be included as clients of CHR and thus were not represented in this research. Thus, the economic and social marginalization, for example, that characterized many of my study participants' lives cannot be confidently extrapolated to all asylum seekers generally. However, given the subjective, isolating effects of the political asylum process documented in this dissertation, along with policy measures that exclude or delay asylum seekers from entering the workforce, my argument that forms of economic and social marginalization are associated with this the asylum process remains a compelling one.

An additional limitation of this study concerns not the study sample but the research location. In Chapter 2, I presented a strong case for conducting research in the Twin Cities, MN. Presently, however, I wish to address how this same geographic site may also limit the study. Namely, several of the factors that made my research site appealing also point to limitations. First, the active ISAP program in the Twin Cities allowed me to examine particular techniques of criminalization and policing and their

subjective effects. Yet, not all cities implement this program, so its presence and effects are not ubiquitous among asylum seekers. Second, the immigration court in MN has a higher asylum denial rate than the national average (see Chapter 2). While this may be helpful in examining an institutional “culture of disbelief” (Rousseau et al. 2002), it may well be the case that asylum seekers in different geographic regions have different experiences of the legal proceedings of political asylum. This is anecdotally supported by several participants who told me of friends in other locations (namely Washington, D.C. and San Jose, CA) whose asylum cases were adjudicated much more quickly. Yet, I would also note that the national average waiting time of an asylum case remains significant (see Chapter 2).

Future Directions

Though in some ways Ruth’s deportation served as an end to a story – the story of her struggle for legal recognition in the U.S., in many ways it is also a beginning. Surely, for Ruth, her deportation begins another story, another chapter in her life, so to speak. Ruth was deported a week after I wrote the above fieldnotes and I have since been in contact with her up until the present. She lives in the capital city, Yaounde, roughly 230 miles from her hometown of Bamenda. She tells me she is suffering, that she is living in fear, alone in a small room where she stays with a friend of a friend. She has no money, no identification card or passport and is unable to travel to see her family for fear of being caught by the *gendarmes*. Her life continues. It seems, though, that she continues to live a partial existence, marked by absences, voids, and immobility – things that characterized her life in the U.S.

If Ruth's (and other study participants') deportation (or, conversely, the conferring of legal status) marks either a new story or, perhaps, a continuation of one, then this also points to potential future research directions. If, as I have argued in this dissertation, asylum seeking provokes transformations in self and social relations, an important question for future research is: What happens when the temporal period of asylum seeking is over? More specifically, how do "failed asylum seekers" make sense of this period in their lives once they have left the U.S.? How are transfigured social and familial ties repaired or reconfigured yet again? I can start to trace this by documenting Ruth's experiences in Cameroon since (forcibly) returning. Yet a full examination of these questions would necessitate ethnographic research among deported 'failed asylum seekers' in their countries of origin or countries of relocation. Such work would be in line with recent calls for "an anthropology of removal" (Peutz 2006).

The questions I pose above would be applicable as well to those asylum seekers who gain legal status and remain in the U.S., many of who immediately file paperwork to have family members join them in the U.S. In this regard, key questions growing out of this dissertation research would be: a) Does the idea of asylum as "the most powerful medicine" bear out long-term? and b) How are family relations challenged and reconfigured (again and, likely, in new ways) during processes of family reunification (Rousseau et al. 2004)? The sets of questions I present here regarding both 'failed' and 'successful' asylum seekers would continue the theoretical project of this dissertation work by extending the trajectory of the inquiry into how asylum seeking mediates self and social processes.

In closing this section on potential directions for future research, I identify two domains of theoretical analysis that have emerged from my dissertation and which would be enriched by further ethnographic research, particularly comparative work: the domain of waiting and the domain of hope. First, with regard to waiting, this dissertation has expanded ethnographic investigation into waiting as a particular category of analysis. In particular, this dissertation has argued that waiting – as with any form of temporality – must be understood and appreciated in terms of its relationship to power and its impact on the shaping of subjectivity. A future ethnographic project that expands the discussion and arguments of Chapter 4 would be fruitful, especially in terms of how social and structural positionality shapes how waiting is experienced and understood.

Finally, with regard to hope, this dissertation has considered hope in terms of both its active and passive nature (Chapter 4). I also drew on Mattingly's (2011) idea of "hope as practice" to analyze how asylum seekers engaged in (small) acts of (re)envisioning their futures and surviving on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, "hope" was a word that recurred over and over again in my interviews and daily conversations with study participants. A fuller engagement with the concept of hope would, I think, reveal a more nuanced understanding of this domain in the context of asylum seeking. In particular, I would be interested in understanding when hope becomes 'false hope' or a form of denial. This issue was raised in my fieldwork when Eric, a Cameroonian asylum seeker and friend of Ruth's, told me on numerous occasions that Ruth was "in denial" and that "everyone is getting her hopes up for nothing." While I understood Ruth's acts of hoping as an important survival strategy, Eric's declarations have stuck with me. An important question for future research stemming from this dissertation would involve the

consideration of what Lauren Berlant (2006) has termed “cruel optimism”: “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (21). Thus, future research may consider hope not just as an act of practice or a passive stance, but also explore its possible complicity in asylum seekers’ suffering. Indeed, Ruth’s repeated declaration that “God parted the Red Sea. He will find a way for me to stay in America,” seemed at once to allay and exacerbate her emotional pain.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Studies of asylum seekers in the United States are sorely lacking. And while asylum seekers in the U.S. comprise a significantly small percentage of the world’s refugees, their experiences shed light on and have significance to broader anthropological and interdisciplinary interests. As a “critical phenomenological” study of asylum seeking in the U.S. (Desjarlais 1997, Willen 2007), this dissertation builds on and advances several theoretical domains: theorizing on suffering and subjectivity; theorizing on the limits and capacities of human agency; and human rights and sociolegal studies.

First, this project contributes to anthropological theorizing on suffering and subjectivity. By closely attending to the messiness and complexities of everyday life for asylum seekers, this dissertation grounds suffering in phenomenological experience; it explicates how suffering is lived on a daily basis. In other words, “suffering” in this project is not merely an analytic gloss or interpretive category unproblematically attached to subjects living in marginal positions. What I have done in this dissertation, rather, with regard to suffering, is trace the specific structural and institutional forces and mechanisms that shape marginality and evoke suffering in this context. Thus, I have illustrated how

myriad factors converge, or “conjugate,” within the context of seeking asylum to produce novel forms of being-in-the-world. These factors include techniques of institutional/governmental policing, disciplining, and criminalization (Chapter 3); the reconfiguration of temporality, power, and subjectivity (Chapter 4); and distinct forms of economic and social marginalization or exclusion (Chapter 5).

Here, I follow Jenkins (2010: 4) in insisting that the acting subject must have a central place in theoretical analyses if we are to fully grasp the contours of social life. To be sure, as this dissertation has demonstrated, a fine-grained ethnographic analysis of asylum seekers’ lived experiences provides important insights into both the intended and unintended consequences of larger, national and transnational laws, policies, and discourses. Indeed, the critical phenomenological framework that I use in this dissertation is particularly important and significant with regard to migration studies: a field dominated by policy, legal, and economic analyses. Such an approach contributes not only to a much needed ethnographic base to refugee studies (Wise 2006: 9), but also allows for critically new ways of thinking about and considering the impact of economic, social, political, and legal policies and discourses that act on immigrants, generally, and asylum seekers, specifically.

This assertion regarding the importance of the acting subject brings me to the second domain of theorizing advanced by this dissertation research: theorizing on the capacities and limits of human agency. As I have discussed, a significant ethnographic challenge emerged for me when conducting and analyzing this research: how to understand and represent asylum seekers as agentic and creative subjects amidst such powerful narratives and articulations of darkness, despair, and, often, a crushing sense of

powerlessness. This ethnographic and analytic challenge required, I found, the need to rethink notions of ‘agency,’ and it was from fine-grained and close ethnographic attention to the everyday lived experiences of asylum seekers that such considerations could emerge. Carpenter-Song (2011) has described the homeless families with whom she works as “enduring at the margins” and highlights the small daily rituals in which these families engage in order to maintain a sense of existential security and structure. In a similar way, I have described how asylum seekers’ acts of agency are often also located in the mundane, the everyday. These are not large acts of resistance, but rather, as I have suggested, emerge as everyday tactics of survival. Thus, building on and contributing to this kind of recasting of agency, my data has shown how agency is constrained, often in ways that are painful and evoke suffering, but also simultaneously illustrates the everyday, subtle or less visible ways in which agency is exercised: in walking the streets, in “keeping busy,” or “not thinking too much.” In this theorizing on agency, I have also considered hope as a form of practice (Mattingly 2011) and shown how narratives of hope were often seen as necessary for surviving the context of asylum seeking, as a necessary counterpoint, even if tenuous, to narratives of suffering and darkness.

Finally, this dissertation research advances theorizing on human rights and sociolegal notions justice. More specifically, this research has shown that the discourses and practices of ‘humanitarianism’ or ‘human rights’ run the risk of reproducing the same inequities that they seek to dismantle or critique. With regard to asylum seekers in the U.S., political asylum, although posited as a “humanitarian” enterprise, nonetheless deploys tactics of policing, surveillance, and disciplining that my study illustrates are experienced by asylum claimants as criminalizing and *dehumanizing*. Within the legal

arena, undoubtedly well-intentioned human rights and legal advocates also enact forms of disciplining and ‘translation’ that are aimed at increasing the chances of a successful asylum case, but simultaneously result in the alienation of asylum seekers from their own articulations and understandings of their self-identities, stories and life histories.

In terms of notions of justice, a significant finding of this study concerns the problems with “objectivity” as an embedded, and unquestioned aspect of the American legal arena. As Chapter 7 elaborated, the legal adjudication of asylum claims demands – especially since the passage of recent immigration policies that I outlined – that asylum claimants align their stories not only with the privileged narrative culture of the legal arena (i.e., linear, consistent, and chronological narratives), but also conform to legally-dictated norms about what constitutes ‘proof’ and ‘evidence’ of experience.

The idea, or ideal, of “objectivity” governs the legal arena in two main aspects. First, as I have shown, adjudicators seek to verify or disprove asylum seekers’ putative “subjective” testimonies with so-called ‘objective’ evidence, primarily in the form of material evidence, such as country conditions/State Department reports, birth and death certificates, and other material documentation such as police and hospital reports. Second, adjudicators approach credibility determinations as having an ‘objective’ base, namely by relying on – and rewarding – consistent, clear, and detailed accounts of persecution, especially with regard to the recalling of such ‘objectively’ crucial data such as names and dates. Recall, for example, the asylum officer who was convinced that her interviewee had indeed suffered torture, including electrocution, but consequently could not recount specific dates of when those incidents occurred and she (the asylum officer) was, according to legal mandates, forced to deny him asylum based on inconsistencies

that could, legally-speaking, ‘objectively’ indicate a lack of credibility. Yet, as this dissertation has argued, both the experience of past persecution and the expression of those experiences are thoroughly subjective (and intersubjective). Thus, the institutional insistence that asylum adjudication, and credibility assessments, in particular – a main aspect of adjudicators’ jobs – have an “objective” basis is not only an untenable position, but also emerges as a form of injustice, as the above example illustrates.

In sum, the contributions and advancements that this study makes, as outlined in the pages above, are rooted in the strength of a critical phenomenological approach that attends to both the political and the phenomenological. By collecting data within both institutional and social settings – with institutional actors and asylum seekers, my study exposes disjunctures between institutional grammars, logic systems, and discourses and the lived experiences of asylum seekers who are embedded within and disciplined by these institutional forces. Myriad institutional practices and discourses are deployed within the political-legal context of asylum: those of national security; humanitarianism and human rights, and legal notions objectivity and credibility. Together, the deployment of these discourses and practices are critically reconfiguring who is understood as a ‘deserving’ refugee, and thus worthy of inclusion within national borders and who is understood as an ‘undeserving’ migrant who warrants exclusion – often forcibly or violently – from these same borders. This dissertation has revealed new and crucial insights into how the constellations of power embedded in contemporary immigration politics are reshaping (trans)national forms of belonging and exclusion *and* how those forms of belonging and exclusion are subjectively experienced, navigated, and made meaningful in the intimate domains of asylum seekers’ social and intrapersonal lives.

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