

‘WHEN THEY’RE LYING, AND THEY SAY YOU’RE LYING, THEN THERE’S NO HOPE’: ASYLUM SEEKING, TRAUMA, AND THE ABUSIVE STATE

ABSTRACT

This article explores the story of Sanwar, who fled Bangladesh following persecution for his sexuality, and spent five years struggling for asylum in the UK. Analysing our conversations together with his asylum paperwork, I show how trauma was apprehended in the asylum process, and how the process itself produced more trauma. Taking this trauma as diagnostic of state violence, I advance the notion of ‘the abusive state’: the disbelief Sanwar faced constituted gaslighting, echoing childhood abuse from his father, while the pressure to ‘change his story’, to perform as someone he was not, further figured as the impossible demand of a capricious, false authority. In the final section, I reflect on the moments when things fell apart and Sanwar attempted suicide, pointing to the ways in which suicidal subjectivities emerge in the asylum system. What might it mean to put suicide at the heart of our thinking, and feeling, about asylum?

Keywords: asylum seeking; trauma; abuse; the state; suicide; immigration law

INTRODUCTION

I first met Sanwar¹ in 2017, via a forum in Manchester bringing together third-sector workers and people who had experienced destitution. Shy and deferent, over time Sanwar shared his story: how he had fled Bangladesh after persecution for his sexuality; how upon claiming asylum he had been detained; how he had become street homeless when his asylum claim was refused; how the process made him suicidal; and how he was committed to supporting others in the same situation. Eventually, in summer 2019, Sanwar was granted asylum. Before that,

he spent six years in the system, with no right to work, putting in fresh claims for asylum that were repeatedly knocked back, slipping between periods of destitution and periods of living on Home Office support totalling just over £35 per week. He attempted suicide several times. Just before he was granted refugee status, Sanwar agreed to participate in my research project examining the lived experiences of the asylum system. He was now completely open about everything, and wanted to share his story in the hope of making a difference.

This article examines Sanwar’s life story through its entanglement with the legal

processes to which he was subjected. This is a story of bureaucratic violence, embedded within the wider picture of violent borders (Jones 2016). Anatomising the violence Sanwar faced in the asylum process, and the trauma it inflicted, this article advances the notion of the abusive state.

Such stories are all too common across the global North. Amidst racialised moral panics, where asylum seekers are scapegoated for deep-seated societal ills, people fleeing war and persecution face what activists and scholars call a ‘culture of disbelief’ within decision-making bureaucracies, and punitive policies that exclude them from the right to work and from mainstream welfare. A growing body of literature explores everyday life within the British asylum system as being subjected to violence: enforced poverty, as well as confinement and restricted autonomy in poor-quality, isolated accommodation, subject to the whims of Home Office contractors (Canning 2017; 2020). This is ‘slow violence’, a violence that is attritional and debilitating (Mayblin 2019; Darling 2022). Meanwhile, others draw attention to the violence of immigration law. As Nadine El Enany (2020) argues, this violence is twofold, both excluding racialised persons from the spoils of imperial plunder, and trapping them in regimes of recognition. As a ‘failed asylum seeker’, Sanwar was forced into destitution, excluded from participating in British society—but his only way out of his predicament was to go on engaging in a legal process of recognition that repeatedly failed to recognise his right to asylum.

This article brings both sets of insight together to explore the impact on Sanwar’s life story of repeated refusals, repeated fresh asylum claims, and cycling between the poverty of asylum support and destitution. How, the article asks, might we anatomise the violence of this process? Addressing this question through

the traumas Sanwar experienced, the article characterises this violence as abusive. After outlining Sanwar’s traumatic upbringing and the events that led him to flee to the UK, I explore in detail how he was disbelieved in the asylum process—and how the process discredited him, establishing him in moralised terms as a ‘failed asylum seeker’. I draw on ethnographies that examine the culture of disbelief from the inside, which variously emphasise the difficulties of establishing facts about events in distant lands, often with minimal evidence, and the intensely politicised atmosphere of decision-making (Campbell 2017; Gill and Good 2019; Good 2007, 2015; Kelly 2011).

As Roberto Beneduce (2015) stresses, asylum seekers’ struggles over truth and falsehood are embedded within colonial histories of suspicion. The epistemological difficulties of ‘proving’ asylum stories leaves a space of uncertainty—a space which is populated with racialised assumptions about the devious migrant. As a result, bureaucratic disbelief is not an abstract identification of an untruth: it is a deeply moralised process of discrediting. If people are refused asylum, it is because, as the Home Office phrases it, they have ‘failed’ to establish a well-founded fear of persecution.²

As later sections of this article explore, Sanwar was traumatised by these processes, and this trauma offers insight into the nature of the violence he faced, as a specifically abusive form of violence. In his case studies from his work as a psychiatric doctor during the colonial war in Algeria, Frantz Fanon (2004) shows how colonial violence, amidst a total absence of trust on both sides, variously scarred psychic landscapes on both sides of the conflict.³ Of course, the slow bureaucratic violence within the asylum system cannot be equated with the armed violence Fanon witnessed. Nevertheless,

amidst the colonial and racialised atmosphere of mistrust surrounding asylum, we can trace how his encounter with the asylum bureaucracy traumatically ruptured Sanwar's inner world.

That aspects of the asylum process can compound or repeat traumas from countries of origin is widely recognised (Canning 2021; McKenzie 2019). If trauma is characterised by its intrusion into the present, a past that is never really passed, it is unsurprising that the criminalised environment of seeking asylum should trigger traumatic memories. With Sanwar, however, this went beyond triggering past traumas: the trauma also lay in the present. What made the past traumas reverberate so devastatingly was the resonance between the childhood abuse he had experienced in Bangladesh and what he faced in the asylum system.

Indeed, the extended encounter with the asylum bureaucracy, this article argues, amounted to entrapment in abusive patterns of power. Beneduce (2015), exploring the moral economy of lying in a context where asylum seekers' stories are routinely disbelieved, poses two questions: What are the psychological effects of telling a true story and being disbelieved; or, conversely, of telling and embodying an untrue story to fit the bureaucratic category of a deserving refugee? As we see below, both questions are relevant to Sanwar. Being disbelieved entailed a manipulation of reality, or gaslighting, which resonated with experiences of abuse from his childhood. In terms of the second question, while Sanwar did not change his story, or who he was, when faced with refusal after refusal, he felt intense pressure to do so. This pressure to be someone he was not constituted another dimension of the abuse, the impossible demands of a capricious authority that also echoed his childhood experiences.

Despite everything, Sanwar pulled through the trauma—and ultimately won his case. This article also attends to the tissues of relations that kept his life liveable, in which he actively invested care and his aspirations 'to dwell in the world fully and intimately' (Willen 2019, 15). However, in the final section, I stay with the darkness, dwelling on the moments when things did not hold, when life became unliveable and Sanwar attempted suicide. After all, as Sanwar emphasised, there are many others in the asylum system whose suicide attempts are successful. How, then, do 'suicidal subjects' (Marsh 2013; Münster and Broz 2015) emerge through and in response to these abusive processes? And what might it mean to put suicidal subjects at the heart of our thinking, and feeling, about the politics of asylum?

TRUST AND CO-PRODUCTION IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

At the start of the research process, a strong level of trust between me and Sanwar had already developed over our time in the destitution forum. In contrast to the mistrust characterising his encounter with the Home Office, this trust was key to shaping the knowledge co-produced between us. Over five informal, unstructured interviews, Sanwar and I explored his life story. Early on, he brought the file of his immigration paperwork and talked me through it. During later, loosely structured, conversations, I used some of these papers as prompts to explore his experiences and understandings of the legal processes in which he had been entangled. During the final conversations, I tested out some of my interpretations with Sanwar, which helped hone the key arguments around abuse.

Some of it, including traumatic events back in Bangladesh, he never talked about

directly, as if handing over the paperwork was a way of communicating some of the horror without reliving it. However, he told me clearly that he was happy for me to write about papers that we had not specifically discussed. Indeed, he maintains total openness about his story. He presents his story as one that needs to be heard, and stresses that he has entrusted it to me in order to make a difference. This feels, of course, like a huge responsibility, which I feel insecure in fulfilling—the more Sanwar insists that the story is entrusted to me, the more care it is incumbent upon me to take with it. I hope that I have remained true to the knowledge co-produced between us.

Within this process, I myself have not stood still. My own life events have informed my readings of some of what Sanwar shared. In closing with a discussion of suicides within the asylum system, I have been prompted by highly personal reasons. In autumn 2021, I lost a close family friend who killed himself. Alongside (and somewhat displacing) my grief, I have been left with an inchoate rage at the multiple failures of care that drove him to that point. And, in some sense, I envisaged this article as some kind of meaning-making in dealing with that loss, and that impossible tension between wanting to take the suicide as diagnostic of societal ills, and wanting to recognise the act as a decisive act that my friend could own—‘the tension of agency’ (Münster and Broz 2015).

At the same time, my loss attuned me to listen more carefully to the enormity of what Sanwar, during darker moments, imparted about suicides in the asylum system. There are political and ethical imperatives to foregrounding suicides in this context. Globally, borders and bordering processes enact a violence that is often deadly (Jones 2016). The tracing and documenting of migrant deaths afford a measure of human dignity to the

dead and their loved ones, testifying to ‘one of the great political failures of modern times’ (Missing Migrants Project 2022). Suicides in the British asylum system are further casualties of violent borders—but amidst a dearth of data, this is a violence that remains hidden, elusive in its form.⁴ Even when such suicides become publicly known, they rarely make waves. In some small way, Sanwar’s story hints at how we might begin to apprehend, and mourn, these deaths. Documenting this story allows us to diagnose the abusive violence in which he and other suicidal subjects are entangled.

ASYLUM PAPERWORK

Sanwar called the night before our meeting to say that he had been granted refugee status. Usually quiet and reserved, he was brimming with joy. The next day, dressed in a black jacket and tie, hair gelled down, he proudly showed me his newly received biometric residence permit. He had already had one job interview, with another lined up.

Sanwar had brought all of his paperwork to this meeting. He laid it all out, talking me through his time in the UK: his detention in 2013 when he claimed asylum; his move to Home Office accommodation in Manchester following his release; the failure of his asylum claim; paperwork about his period of destitution in 2016; his fresh asylum claims and refusals; medical evidence from 2017 about his mental health and suicide risk. With some documents he chuckled: ‘I didn’t know I still had that!’ For some papers, he made no comment. Handing me the court ruling on his asylum appeal, he simply told me to go and read the findings to understand everything the judge had found wrong with him. Other papers elicited more narrative, like the 2017 letter summoning him to Liverpool for a travel document—which

would make it possible to deport him. ‘They make you more torture’, he commented.

Finally, he laid before me an 11-page, typed document from 2019, an account of his life story, which he included with his final, successful, asylum claim. He was now much more stable. He had been advised by an LGBT support group to write about his feelings, the full account of why he was claiming asylum. Sanwar told me, ‘And when I was writing this, halfway through, the post-traumatic stress came through...’ He had to pause for three weeks before resuming.

SANWAR’S FINAL STATEMENT

I took the papers with me. I started by reading the long 2019 statement, plunging into the turbulent story of growing up gay in a relatively wealthy family in rural Bangladesh. The narrative had some linear progression—from the little boy’s enjoyment when wearing his sister’s clothes, through his confused adolescent realisation that he was not attracted to women, to his understanding that he was gay and that, this was, as he learned from his brother, a punishment from God. But the narrative was marked by false starts and doubling backs: periods of guilt; moments of clarity and acceptance; moments of sadness, revulsion at not being ‘normal’; varying forms and degrees of concealment; respite in lyrically described relationships with gay friends and lovers, but relationships that remained fragile, always on the brink; an early atheism lapsing into praying in the mosque first weekly, then daily; hopes of a ‘cure’ followed by despair.

Amidst all the vicissitudes, there was a constant: the abuse from his father. The statement opens with his mother’s death. Advised to have an abortion, she died two weeks after Sanwar’s birth. His father blamed

him for her death. Sanwar, too, he wrote, for a time wished she had had the abortion. His father beat him daily. This abuse was echoed in the bullying, the ‘torture’, he faced at school for being effeminate. Beyond the sheer physical and mental suffering, this punishment for existing was a form of ‘developmental trauma’, the consequences of which would be long-lasting. As Stolorow (2011) explains, without emotional attunement from the caregiver, the child represses parts of their emotional world. The distorted external reality ruptures the inner world, as the child internalises failure, resulting in ‘isolation, shame, and self-loathing’ (Stolorow 2011: 28). In his writing, Sanwar highlighted a further result of this developmental trauma: a lack of trust, stemming from the acute disjuncture between his inner emotional world and the world into which he was thrown. This early experience would reverberate through his experiences with the Home Office.

After his first romantic encounter with another boy, he provoked his father into beating him. He wrote:

After a couple of minutes he stopped and went to the other room, kept shouting... ‘why you are still living, why you aren’t dying, why you are having my food’ etc. Then it hit me, that’s right if I die, everything will go away.

Sanwar swallowed pesticides, his first suicide attempt. His sister found him vomiting and took him to hospital.

And, yet, he describes gradually accepting that he was gay. After some time, however, he was rocked by the suicides of three close friends. The first left him heartbroken. The second, who had gone to a shaman for a cure, left Sanwar devastated by guilt. The third left him angry: ‘To me, He did not commit suicide, He was killed by so called religion, family prestige, fake honor.’

Sanwar too considered suicide. But he picked himself up, immersing himself in his

education, which promised escape from the community. Although he did not believe in God, he sought forgiveness, finding prayer therapeutic. After a year or so, things were a bit better. He was studying in college and had a new circle of friends. This period of respite ended catastrophically when they found out about his sexuality on his 18th birthday. Things deteriorated again. Here, the narrative breaks down: ‘After got beaten, fight with my brother, Stupid police incident I lost everything in One night.’ Evidently, this was the moment where Sanwar had to stop writing. Without going further into the details of that beating, he writes of fleeing his village, injured, following a *fatwa* from his brother, but with a substantial sum of money from his father—who was desperate to get rid of him.

Drifting from place to place, losing contact even with his sisters, he contemplated suicide. But seeing an ad for a student visa, he decided to apply, using the money his father had given him. Having got the visa, he returned to the village to say goodbye to his eldest sister and seek his father’s forgiveness: ‘From my birth, Desperate for a Father’s love or approval.’ The trip failed on both counts.

The rest of the statement details Sanwar’s life in the UK. Unsure whether homosexuality was legal when he arrived in 2011, he was afraid to go outside. He knew nothing about asylum. Gradually, however, he emerged into a new life. His mental health prevented him from studying, but he found accommodation with other South Asian men where he was accommodated for several years in return for doing housework. He picked up some catering work, and earned enough to buy a smartphone. He started experimenting with dating apps. Entering a relationship with a Slovak man, Jan, he felt for the first time that he was treated ‘like a respectful human being’. After a few months

together, Jan told him that he could claim asylum because of his sexuality.

So, in December 2013, he claimed asylum. He was immediately detained. While he was in detention, the relationship broke down because Jan ‘felt used’: he felt that Sanwar was exploiting their relationship for his asylum case. After Sanwar’s release and move to Manchester, he started attending an LGBT support group. He met someone there—but, realising that this man wanted to sleep with him just to claim asylum, ‘I felt betrayed’. It was impossible to enter any relationship as an asylum seeker: ‘It likes people hate us. Because we are living with their tax money. (...) I can’t pay for anything on a date, I don’t have a job. It’s like Home office asking me swim without using my limbs.’

The statement concludes:

When I started writing this letter, I went through every single self-loathing moment. I tried to be brief but I really tried to explain. I had to stopped for this traumatic shocks. So if there is any discrepancy with Dates, I asked forgiveness. After all these years everything faded away, but my traumatic scenes still live within. If I had other motives, I could change my story. But I am fighting for a truth, not fiction. This is my last statement and last further submission. I struggled my whole life for a peaceful life, please show me mercy.

This last paragraph marks a striking shift. For most of the statement, there is no obvious addressee. The narrative reads as a working through of past traumas, building on the therapy he had received. Here, however, the text is obviously addressed to the Home Office. The explanation about trauma and discrepancy with dates speaks, as we see below, to the previous refusals of asylum. Most striking is the call for forgiveness and mercy. In earlier moments, he describes seeking the mercy of a God in whom he did not believe. And he had sought

the forgiveness of the abusive figure he calls ‘my so-called father’, another false figure of authority imposing unfulfillable demands. That he should address the Home Office in a similar way is deeply suggestive.

DISBELIEVED

Drafting this statement would have been unthinkable without the years of therapy and support Sanwar received from the LGBT support group. Previous iterations of the story had lacked the benefit of that therapy; some had emerged in intensely stressful contexts. I next turned to the asylum interview transcript, conducted in detention, where narrative fragments emerged in response to the Home Office interviewer’s often hostile questions. Here, the traumatic beating at the hands of villagers, which would cause the narrative in the long statement to break down, was dealt with in painstaking detail. He was also asked about his life in the UK, about Jan, and about his knowledge of gay bars in London. Despite hours of questioning, when asked if he had described all of his problems in Bangladesh, Sanwar responded that there was much more to say. Indeed, his father’s abuse was wholly absent.

Sanwar did not show me the Home Office refusal that came five months later, so I next turned to the tribunal ruling from March 2015, where his appeal against that refusal was dismissed. This document offers insight into the culture of disbelief, and its implications for those disbelieved within it. By now, there had been further iterations of the story: two statements prepared with his lawyer; his interview with a medical professional for a medico-legal report; and the account he gave when cross-examined by the judge. The statements prepared with the lawyer were consistent with the later, long statement. Nevertheless, the narratives were

crafted to engage the relevant area of refugee law. His father’s abuse, not directly relevant to his asylum claim, was omitted.

The judge found that Sanwar was neither gay nor had he been persecuted for it. Hanging over the case was his delay in claiming asylum. According to legislation, not claiming asylum immediately damages the claimant’s credibility.⁵ The judge was dismissive of Sanwar’s attempts to explain that he knew nothing about asylum, remarking caustically that he was an ‘educated and resourceful’ man. She concluded that he had only claimed asylum because he had been unable to extend his stay as a student.

As is common, the judge just found much of his story implausible. Why, for example, would his father have given him all that money if he was so angry with him? Moreover, the judge highlighted inconsistencies between different versions of his story, especially the descriptions of the attack. Here, the lawyer drew heavily on the medico-legal report. Medical evidence seems to promise certainty where hard evidence is lacking (Fassin and d’Hallouin 2005; 2007; Kelly 2011). However, while it is obvious that suffering can leave both bodily and psychic scars, certainty about what caused those scars is elusive. Despite the increasing codification of medico-legal expertise, decisions about whether, say, a scar is ‘consistent with’ or ‘highly consistent with’ a particular injury remain, ultimately, arbitrary (Kelly 2011). In Sanwar’s case, there was a further problem: the scars *did* tell a story consistent with *a* beating, but it was not, said the judge, consistent with the beating Sanwar described. The scars simply multiplied the narratives before the court. Moreover, the judge had a transcript of the doctor’s interview with Sanwar, and she trawled through this to reveal still more inconsistencies.

The medico-legal report also included a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD). While a PTSD diagnosis implies a statement about causation—exposure to trauma—it does not say what the trauma was nor whether it amounted to persecution as defined in the Refugee Convention (Kelly 2011). Moreover, when trauma does not stem from a discrete event, it is even harder for clinicians to ascribe causation. In Sanwar’s case, the doctor was faced with picking apart the developmental trauma of his father’s abuse, the loss of his friends to suicide, his beating, *and* his isolation in the UK, his detention, and his break-up with Jan.

Even so, Sanwar’s lawyer relied heavily on the PTSD diagnosis, arguing that PTSD’s effect on recall explained the inconsistencies between narratives. The judge ignored this argument. She addressed the diagnosis only in relation to the lawyer’s mention of suicide risk. The judge observed that Sanwar had only mentioned suicide, self-harm, and memory problems to the doctor. Because he had not talked about them in other accounts, his account to the doctor could not be ‘plausible or credible’.

Evidently, there is a conflict in the authority between different sorts of expertise. Judges can be sensitive about clinicians making assessments of the truthfulness of the account—although they could hardly write the medico-legal report without doing so (Kelly 2011). Similar issues arise in religious conversion cases, where ministers are tasked with testifying to the sincerity of the asylum seeker’s religious belief (Wheeler 2021). Although the case law on medical evidence has evolved, with strict guidelines developed,⁶ decisions remain arbitrary: some judges are well-disposed to medical expertise; others are not.⁷ Case law exists to justify either approach. In Sanwar’s case, the judge simply used the medico-legal report to multiply the narratives before her, and thus reveal more inconsistencies.

Despite the judge’s seemingly comprehensive dismissal of Sanwar’s story, his lawyer saw grounds for appeal: the judge had ignored the substance of the medical evidence, which constituted an error of law.⁸ However, in a further hearing in the Upper Tribunal ten months later, the judge sided with the First-Tier Tribunal judge, reiterating that the medico-legal report was based mostly on Sanwar’s verbal account to the doctor, which was unreliable. Sanwar was not present at this hearing, which delved into arcane areas of case law about the treatment of medical evidence. He became ‘appeal rights exhausted’—meaning that he had no further right to appeal the decision. He was now officially categorised as a ‘failed asylum seeker’.

The dismissal of Sanwar’s case corroborates arguments about the inherent uncertainty of medical evidence in asylum determination proceedings (Fassin and d’Hallouin 2005; 2007; Kelly 2011). To push this point further, when the burden of proof is on the asylum seeker, this uncertainty produces a grey area, a space for judicial discretion—a space which is all too susceptible to being filled with unspoken racialised assumptions about asylum seekers. For all her scepticism about the medical expert’s excessive trust in Sanwar’s account, the judge did not reflect on the assumptions underlying her own judgements about his untrustworthiness. The failure of the medical evidence went further than failing to prove his story: it was deployed to discredit him, establishing him as a figure not to be trusted. This would have violent implications that were both material—rendering him destitute—and psychic—inflicting further trauma.

‘FAILED ASYLUM SEEKER’

By the time he became appeal rights exhausted in May 2016, it was more than two years since he had first claimed asylum. No longer entitled to Home Office support, he was evicted. The slow violence of life on asylum support (Darling 2022; Mayblin 2019) intensified as he was forced into destitution. He had no friends with whom to stay, and slept on the streets around Manchester. He described the impossibility of fitting in with other homeless individuals, most of them white British, almost all, he said, with addiction problems. ‘Just one thing positive—I felt... free! I felt like there’s nothing can be worse. It can be better, but it can’t be worse.’

Advised by his lawyer, who stood by Sanwar throughout, he rapidly sought evidence for a fresh asylum claim. Sanwar was in a worse position than when he began: all of the reasons the judge had found to dismiss his appeal would now be held against him. He had to present new evidence, which, had the original judge seen it, would lead them to a different conclusion. Fortunately, Sanwar managed to acquire a witness statement from a close friend from Bangladesh, now a refugee in France. Because of the urgency, the fresh asylum claim was submitted quickly.

Having submitted a fresh asylum claim, he was now again entitled to Home Office support, ‘section 4 support’. However, the Home Office did not believe that he was destitute. Since the culture of disbelief extends to decisions about asylum support applications, extensive evidence is required to document destitution. Sanwar, sleeping on the streets, had no such evidence. Moreover, when he had applied for a student visa five years previously, he had the substantial sum his father had given him. He had not accounted for where that money had gone.

So, he had to appeal against the refusal of his section 4 application. Sanwar travelled down to the Asylum Support Tribunal in London, where, he said, the Home Office Presenting Officer shouted about him making things up and getting money from back home. The judge sided with Sanwar, remarking that he had obviously been sleeping rough. His support was reinstated.

Returning to the same room, he found it had been unoccupied while he had been on the streets.

Next, the Home Office rejected his fresh asylum claim without right of appeal, because the witness statement was not deemed credible. He again faced homelessness. Like many others, he was now stuck in a cycle of submitting fresh asylum claims just to keep his accommodation. The only evidence possible now was from his life in the UK: letters from the support group, photographs of him at Gay Pride. The response was always the same: the evidence was self-serving. The lawyer continued to raise mental health issues and the risk of suicide, but the Home Office responded, ‘This would be adequately managed by the UK authorities’. Indeed, the threshold for leave to remain based on suicide risk is almost impossibly high.⁹

Although the repeated fresh asylum claims helped secure accommodation for him, it took time to prepare them each time, and there were still times when Sanwar faced eviction. Here, in a dark twist, his deteriorating mental health served as evidence to oppose eviction. In 2017, a mental health practitioner wrote a medical declaration detailing dissociative episodes, disorientation, a loss of appetite, insomnia, panic attacks, a ‘marked lack of protective factors against suicide’ and a recent attempt at self-harm. Without a pending fresh asylum claim, the threshold for section 4 support on medical grounds is extremely high, requiring

confirmation that the asylum seeker's health is too bad to travel to their country of origin. Understanding this legal requirement, Sanwar's doctor crafted the evidence appropriately: suffering panic attacks in confined spaces, he was unfit to fly. Even so, the Home Office stopped his support. But, Sanwar again won the appeal: 'Luckily,' he laughed, 'my medication was really high then, so I kept my section 4.' Despite representing insufficient evidence for leave to remain, mental ill-health, packaged up appropriately as evidence, was enough to keep him off the streets.

SANWAR'S INNER WORLD

As should be clear, multiple aspects of the asylum process proved traumatising. Sanwar told me how being taken to detention in a blacked-out minibus triggered memories of a horrific bus accident he had witnessed as a child. He became claustrophobic. Even after release from detention, seeing a bus left him afraid of deportation. By 2017, the repeated refusals and ongoing fear of homelessness, detention, and deportation had led him to a crisis point. He would awake in a sweat, suffering flashbacks and the sensation of being dragged to the airport. Eventually, he was committed to hospital after attempting suicide.

These traumatic effects offer insight into the abusive violence Sanwar faced within the asylum system. Beyond the sheer precariousness of his situation, two aspects of the process replayed the abuse he faced as a child, amplifying the developmental trauma he carried with him. First, there was the disbelief, which always referred back to the First-Tier Tribunal judge's findings about his credibility. If he read the refusal letters, Sanwar said, he would end up hospitalised with an overdose. If

a healthy relationship to traumatic memories depends upon voicing them and receiving social validation (Kirmayer 1996), the bureaucratic refusal to recognise the traumatic memories Sanwar voiced evidently compounded the shame and repression he experienced. Some people, Sanwar emphasised, *can* read the letters. For him, however, 'I feel like I'm something criminal, I'm lying.' This, after all, had been established in the First-Tier Tribunal judge's demolition of his credibility, reiterated in all of the subsequent refusal letters. While he knew this punishment was false, on another level it was all too real because it structured his reality as a 'failed asylum seeker'. In the language of abuse, he was being gaslit, forced to inhabit a manipulated reality. As he told me, 'It would be ok if it was the trust. But when they're lying, and they're saying you're lying, then there's no hope.' His experience of the state resonated painfully with his premigration history of abuse, of being criminalised for who he was. As in his childhood, without trust in the shared parameters of reality, he was left hopeless.

Second, without further evidence to reopen the case about his persecution in Bangladesh, he felt pressured to 'change my story'. Sanwar told me confidently that with sexuality cases, 'the Home Office expect you to be sleeping around'. But, his status as an asylum seeker prevented any intimate relationships. The meagre section 4 support, not provided in cash, made it impossible to pay for dates. Moreover, Jan's sense of betrayal hung heavily over him, as did his own experience of feeling used for someone else's asylum claim. The pressure of the case creates material advantages from activities where sincerity is highly valued. It demands that you do something 'sincerely'—but fulfilling that demand necessarily introduces an 'insincere' motive. As I have explored elsewhere, similar

dilemmas face religious converts who must perform and document the sincerity of their beliefs (Wheeler 2021).

Sanwar was also advised to behave flamboyantly. Indeed, analyses of sexuality-based asylum claims demonstrate that the gay identity recognisable to the judicial-bureaucratic apparatus is emphatically white and middle class (Bennett and Thomas 2013; Held 2017; dos Ventos Lopes Heimer 2020; cf. Fassin and Salcedo 2015).¹⁰ As Sanwar said, ‘But I can’t do this, I can’t lie, because of my obsessive disorder. If I lie, I can’t sleep, I get cranky.’ The case placed pressure on him to perform an identity that was anathema to Sanwar. Growing up, facing impossible demands to be ‘normal’, he had learnt to embody concealment, to perform a masculinity that gave no hint of his sexuality. He had, he said, become a ‘prude’. Now, he faced pressure to be ‘out and proud’. The Home Office reflected back, in a mirror image, the impossible demands of his childhood. Sanwar could not unlearn his bodily hexis without betraying who he had become. Comparing his experiences from the Home Office and in Bangladesh, he stated, ‘Different, but almost feeling the same, like there is nothing whatever I can do... I can’t make society happy, or anyone. I’m a failure, something. It doesn’t matter how much *truth* I tell (...) but, nobody, like, believes me, or treats me right.’ Falsely produced as a liar, he felt that he had no option but to lie. Sanwar did not lie. But, the pressure to do so weighed heavily upon him. His encounter with the abusive state repeated and amplified past traumas.

In Beneduce’s (2015: 562) analysis of the moral economy of lying among asylum seekers, ‘a space where truth and falsehood become de facto indiscernible’, he cites Frantz Fanon and Raymond Lacaton’s (2018) explanation of Algerians’ refusal to confess to crimes in colonial courts. Fanon and Lacaton (2018) argued that a

confession, as the price for reintegration, would imply compliance with the social contract, an acceptance of the imposed hierarchies of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong. Sanwar’s remark about the absence of trust, and his refusal to ‘change his story’, similarly highlights the intolerability of complying with a social contract that established a reality at odds with his own inner experience.

RECOVERY

Against the odds, Sanwar pulled through and found a way out. Some of the psychological damage, exacerbated by the asylum process, gradually healed—and this healing in turn helped him eventually win his case. Therapy played a major role in his recovery. Although he was aware of the PTSD diagnosis in the medico-legal report, for years he rejected therapy. However, hospitalised following a suicide attempt in 2017, he was forced to talk about his past, and gradually began to feel a ‘little bit lighter’. In opposition, perhaps even resistance, to the asylum process that was turning Sanwar into a liar, therapy provided a space where his past experiences *were* granted recognition, giving Sanwar the chance to actively remake socially endorsed meanings.

However, the process of recovery, or ‘retethering’ (Lester 2013), went beyond therapy. Amidst widening social networks, he was becoming increasingly open about his sexuality. While the LGBT support group was evidently deeply important, what he talked about most with me was the context where we’d met: volunteering, which he began soon after arriving in Manchester. Amongst other roles, he spent several years at a homeless charity, working predominantly with British homeless. He described teaching managers about software, helping with accounting, applying for benefits

and housing. 'I start my job at 8.30, and some days I never see the sun, I go out in the evening! When my manager was off for two weeks, I handle everything, my god, I'm doing my job and her job!' Here, too, he developed a deep friendship with one of the staff, who would act as a witness in his final asylum claim. For Sanwar, volunteering resembled an 'inhabitable space of welcome' (Willen 2019): a space where he could not just survive but flourish, recover his dignity. It was a space where he could 'retether' himself or, in Sarah Willen's (2019: 15) words, 'ground [himself] by cultivating relations of care'. After a life of being criminalised for existing, it was, he said, the 'real human beings' he encountered in the charity that 'gave me hope that we are here for each other'. Overcoming the developmental trauma he had grown up with, he was at last finding himself able to trust others—and find validation, and credibility, as a human being.

In June 2019, Sanwar made yet another fresh claim. His lawyer urged restraint, but Sanwar decided to give everything he had. 'Living on £35,' he told me, 'on someone else's money, I want to do something for myself... so I didn't listen to my lawyer.' In addition to the long statement described above, he included eight witness statements from British friends who could testify about his sexuality, including from the LGBT support group, and a letter from a long-term doctor. When Sanwar was granted asylum just a couple of months later, the Home Office, as usual, did not explain their decision, but the statements from witnesses willing to testify in court evidently played a pivotal role. Indeed, within the racialised atmosphere of mistrust, having *British* witnesses who obviously trusted him was likely key to re-establishing his 'credibility' in the eyes of the Home Office.

SUICIDALITY AND ASYLUM

In short, that Sanwar pulled through after multiple suicide attempts, that he came to terms with his past sufficiently to write that 11-page story, speaks of something gone right, of the multiple sites of care and maintenance that kept his lifeworld liveable. But, the linear narratives of recovery that Sanwar, in cheerful moods, presented to me, elided the moments when things did not hold, when the narrative might have taken another turn. In this final section, I want to linger on those moments, when there was no inhabitable space of welcome, when life became unliveable, and when, in 2017, he again attempted to kill himself. In doing so, I am prompted by a gloomy conversation some months after Sanwar received his status, when he was facing eviction from his asylum accommodation and was again uncertain about his housing. He told me two stories about former housemates. One, who had been stuck in the system for 16 years, was an alcoholic. He disappeared one day. Two weeks later, he was found dead in his room. The second was a young man, a Christian convert, good-looking, but, according to Sanwar, devoid of hope. When he did not answer his door, Sanwar called the housing officer. But, it was a weekend and Sanwar's call was not treated as an emergency. Two days later, the housing officer came to find that the housemate had killed himself. Sanwar closed this story by remarking that suicide rates among asylum seekers were the highest in British society.

As I look back on that conversation, it feels as though Sanwar was asking me to take these narratives of suicide as revealing some inner truth about the asylum system. To linger on these darkest moments is not to downplay his story of recovery, his extraordinary resilience. Nevertheless, I am troubled by how the

existing literature on asylum often glides over suicidality. For example, Fiona Cuthill (2017) presents a rich and nuanced exploration of sources of resilience among asylum seekers. Her informants describe *others* who, not managing to stay strong, killed themselves. Those stories act as a foil for Cuthill's own informants' narratives of recovery. Cuthill remains silent about those others, and we are left with an implicit sense that if you are not resilient, you have somehow failed.

Of course, if suicidality has not always been taken seriously in the literature, this relates to the epistemological and ethical issues around researching it. As Freedom from Torture doctor Juliet Cohen (2008) highlighted 15 years ago, because coroners' reports do not include ethnicity, let alone immigration status, data remain lacking. We might critique how statistical data produce sociological facts. But here there are no data, no facts—and no issue. Further difficulties arise in exploring the inner world of the suicidé. I did not know Sanwar when he was suicidal nor have I observed his medical encounters. In our conversations, I have shied away from asking directly about his suicide attempts. When the conversation approached them, he steered away from the issue or closed it down. 'I lost control', he told me once. In this narrative interaction, he spoke as a recovered subject, formed in part through the medicalised discourses of recovery, reconstructing a past self who had failed, not dissimilar to Cuthill's informants' talk of 'others' who could not cope.

How, then, to respond to Sanwar's call to take suicide seriously? And how to avoid reducing the suicidal asylum seeker again to the victim of Home Office violence? How to tread the fine line between taking suicidality as 'diagnostic' of societal ills and structural violence, and acknowledging the complex emergence of 'suicidal subjectivities' that cannot be reduced

to the workings of power (Münster and Broz 2015)?

Annika Lems (2019) explores the suicidal talk of three Eritrean teenagers in Switzerland. The young men had not been granted asylum. Even so, they were cared for in a well-provisioned educational institution, and the social workers and psychologists working with them were shocked at their talk of suicide, and sought explanations in their traumatic journeys to Europe. By contrast, Lems (2019) focuses on the existential boredom they faced in limbo in Switzerland, their foreclosed futures and stasis. She approaches their suicidal talk as commentary, or meaning-making, that itself helped them reassert agency, and thus move forward.

Lems's (2019) account is a persuasive corrective to the pathologising approach of the psychologists. And, yet, I am troubled, not least by the unsettling resonance with another story, in the UK, widely reported in the media, of four Eritrean teenagers, close friends, who, one after another, killed themselves (Taylor 2019a). Admittedly, even the limited findings of the inquests into those deaths revealed, compounding their precarious immigration status, catastrophic failures of care from social services and the National Health Service (Gentleman 2022; Taylor 2019b; 2021). This was not the case with Lems's (2019) interlocutors. Nevertheless, given the fine line between suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, I would query Lems's (2019) avoidance of the language of trauma. For Lems (2019), the psychologists' focus on the young men's traumatic journeys *to* Europe occluded the violence they faced *in* Europe. However, if trauma reverberates across time and space, how might it be amplified by the violence of European asylum regimes?

In Bangladesh and in the UK, Sanwar was punished just for being there. He faced

moments where he had no choice, or highly restricted choices, and where death seemed the only way out. As we have seen, both his father and the Home Office placed impossible demands that chiselled away at his hope. With the future closed off, Sanwar was consumed by a fear of deportation. This was a process more violent than the term ‘existential stasis’ would imply, bodily manifested in panic attacks, choking sensations, sweating, and insomnia. It was in this context that he emerged as a suicidal subject. Sanwar’s suicidality was intensely diagnostic of the structures of power within which he was interpellated.

Yet, at the same time, I leave open the possibility that his suicide attempts were also an active bid for freedom. Recall the very first suicide attempt, when, faced with the beating from his father, Sanwar declared, ‘if I die, everything will go away.’ Like his father, the Home Office made it abundantly clear that his presence was not welcome—but perhaps both figures also at some level needed him. Rather than abandoning him, they needed to punish him, through unfulfillable demands, impossible choices. Might Sanwar’s suicide attempts, profoundly decisive actions, paradoxically be thought of as a negation of the constricted possibilities for agency that were open to him?

Lems proposes that her informants’ suicidal talk was a means of asserting agency in a world they had been ‘thrown’ into, a world that, in Heidegger’s terms, ‘is not of their making’ (Lems 2019: 62). This is the tension that lies at the heart of existentialist thought. However, for Sanwar, it was not just that the world he was thrown into was ‘not of his making’: it was a false, distorted world, ruptured from and rupturing his inner world. Even were he to exert control over the world he was thrown into—say, by performing a flamboyant gay identity—this very assertion of agency might imply

compliance with the intolerable social contract that established this warped reality. In such a context, might that third option, negation, be read as a bid for radical freedom—freedom as ‘the limits of power’ (Jaworski 2015)?

CONCLUSIONS

In *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Ghassan Hage (2003) explores the twin imaginaries of nation-state as motherland and fatherland. The maternal, nurturing space of belonging is maintained, Hage argues, through the fatherly authority of border management. When the nurturing functions of the state that foster societal hope are in decline, there is an increasing turn to the defensive functions of order and security. Anxiety about the failure of the state to care for ‘our own’ is displaced onto anyone deemed as not belonging. This framework helps us understand how Sanwar’s experiences of the Home Office might so painfully echo his experiences of his father. When he turned to the British state hoping for protection, he faced abuse, crushing his hopes. Echoing his relationship with his father, he was left with the sense that he should not exist.

Of course, the texture of Sanwar’s traumatic experiences depended on the previous traumas he carried with him. For others, with different life histories, the violence may resonate differently, amplifying different past traumas. Yet, Sanwar’s experiences throw into sharp relief the contours of this violence. The notion of the abusive state builds on Darling’s (2022) idea of ‘distributed violence’—a violence that is slow, attritional, exhausting; a violence that is dispersed across the Home Office and its subcontractors, where it is all but impossible to ascribe accountability. The violence Sanwar experienced was dispersed across different branches of the Home Office, private housing

providers, immigration courts, and so on. What the framework of abuse adds is that this distributed violence can *also* be experienced as intimate, as intensely personal.

Two dimensions of the abusive state emerge in Sanwar's story: coercive control and gaslighting. As El-Enany (2020) argues, immigration law is violent not only because it excludes, but also because it offers the tantalising possibility of recognition. Trapping people in complex, opaque processes, immigration law thus coercively shapes subjectivities, 'what people desire, consider themselves as entitled to and understand themselves to be' (El-Enany 2020: 28). It is not just that hope is withheld: it is offered, within set parameters, and *then* crushed. Emphasising the relationship between the asylum claim and access to Home Office support draws out still further how immigration law coercively controls its subjects. Until his final asylum claim, Sanwar was trapped into submitting weak asylum claims to ensure he maintained access to his accommodation and support. He was fortunate that his lawyer ensured that these claims remained consistent with his story; for others, rushed fresh asylum claims—although necessary for escaping or avoiding destitution—can damage the long-term prospects of gaining asylum. The capricious authority of the law exerts coercive control not only over actions, movements, and finances, but also over hopes, desires, and dreams.

Meanwhile, as a 'failed asylum seeker', Sanwar was gaslit, made to take on the responsibility for his own failure. He had no trust in the authority of the law that produced him as a 'failed asylum seeker'—but it had devastating real-world consequences. In this distorted reality, his truths became falsehoods that excluded him not only from refugee status, but from the most basic means of subsistence. The sense of hopelessness that drove him to

attempt suicide lay both in the exclusionary power of the state, and in failures that he internalised and came to own.

For all the specificity of the politics of asylum, these insights have broader relevance. The capacity of bureaucracies for traumatising violence is not restricted to the asylum system. We could trace cognate cases of manipulated reality in the way austerity-driven welfare regimes produce benefits claimants as scroungers. More fundamentally, any institution that holds a duty of care—from hospitals to families to universities—also holds the capacity for abuse.

Before closing, I return to my very personal reasons for writing this article. I am prompted by the unsettling sense that the friend we lost fitted the demographic that the abusive politics of asylum is performed for—elderly, white, working class. He himself, I should state clearly, had no truck with that politics, those so-called 'legitimate concerns about immigration'. But he did have plenty of legitimate concerns regarding institutional failures of care. As the politics of asylum takes ever-darker turns, I am anguished by how the politics we are living through seek to displace such intimate concerns towards fear, resentment, and hostility. Since the onset of austerity measures in 2010, it has increasingly felt that the UK is at a breaking point, with the nurturing functions of the state in terminal decline. If care is about 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40), we are evidently living through multiple systemic failures of care—and my friend's suicide speaks, in no small part, to that. But those failures, that breakdown, plays out in the miserable intimacy of a private lifeworld that has become unliveable. They do not easily translate into public anger. Instead, those failures are buried under, and any latent energy from them is channelled into, the

performance of a much more spectacular failure—the failure of ‘our’ borders to keep ‘us’ whole and bounded. That spectacular failure of the border does mobilise; it is intensely public. This is what sustains the abusive politics that greet Sanwar and others like him, that seems designed to strip them of hope, and turn them into the ultimate failure, the failed asylum seeker.

The emergence of suicidal subjects within this abusive politics is no accident. Yet, amidst the moral outrage and activism around asylum, suicide remains a marginal issue. With any suicide, knowledge is partial. Knowledge is even more partial regarding suicides that occur within the isolation of the asylum system—which is why, perhaps, they fail to make waves. What would it mean to consider these deaths by suicide in the loneliness of asylum accommodation alongside those drowned at sea, suffocated in container lorries, or dying of thirst in the desert?

Putting suicide at the centre of the politics of asylum means going beyond criticising the hypocritical failure of the British state—or any other state in the global North—to afford protection from violence elsewhere, including in its former colonies. Rather than, or in addition to, the traumatic after-effects of past violence elsewhere, suicides in the asylum system offer a damning indictment of the violence *here*, which, repeating and amplifying past traumas, can render lives unbearable. As indictment, suicides within the asylum system may be read as political acts. As decisive actions that reject the impossibly constricted parameters of agency imposed on these subjects, they might—perhaps—be read as bids for radical freedom, a final wresting back of control from the coercively controlling state. Any such reading, however, must remain provisional, open, and speculative. After all, there is a tension between freedom from the effects of power and

freedom from representation (Jaworski 2015). For persons who in life were labelled as ‘bogus’ or ‘failed’—or alternatively as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘victim’—after death the question of freedom from representation becomes still more pressing.

I, therefore, close with the triad of emotions that Sanwar faced when three close friends killed themselves: heartbreak, guilt, and anger. The same emotions swirl in me as I reflect on what Sanwar imparted to me about the suicides contemplated, attempted or completed within the asylum system. First, there is the grief, at the lives lost, and at all that was lost while they were living—the loss of hope and aspiration within the unbearably constricted lifeworld from which suicidal subjects in the asylum system seek to escape. It is grief at the loss of the persons not allowed to be. Second, the guilt. The silences around these suicides speak of lives deemed not worth grieving (Butler 2004)—silenced by the double stigma of asylum seeker and suicidé. If I feel guilt, then, this guilt is not only at our complicity in this bordered world that violently sifts human bodies, but also at our failure to mourn these lives and to truly recognise what is lost within them. Finally, there is the anger—anger at the lost lives, at the petty cruelties and needless misery, at the cynical divide and rule that channels the pain of some into the abuse of others; anger at the constrictions on lifeworlds so intense that freedom is sought in death.

To this triad, we might add hope—given that Sanwar, against everything, found, in himself and in the networks he developed, the strength to pull through, to recover, and to escape the abusive power relations in which he was caught. Dwelling on such emotions might help mobilise imaginaries of how asylum might be different—both through radical change for the future and through creating spaces of welcome within, and of sanctuary from, the violence of the here and now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my heartfelt thanks in the first instance to Sanwar, for entrusting me with this material and sharing the depths of his experiences and insights. I would also like to thank all my other research participants who, though not mentioned here, have shared experiences that inform the writing here.

The research this paper is based on was conducted as part of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. The paper was first presented as a seminar paper in the Social Anthropology Department at the University of Manchester. My thanks to everyone who participated in that seminar for their thoughtful and stimulating comments, and subsequent readers of the paper. Particular thanks go to Séb Bachelet, Jonathan Darling, Hannah Skoda and Madeleine Reeves. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers.

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NOTES

- 1 Sanwar's name and key dates in his story have been changed to protect his anonymity.
- 2 While the standard of proof is, in theory, lower than in criminal or civil proceedings, the burden of proof lies on the asylum claimant.
- 3 By contrast, Western PTSD-dominated models of trauma have been critiqued for depoliticising violence, reducing all survivors to victims (Fassin 2012; Fassin and Rechtman 2009).
- 4 My thanks to Jonathan Darling for pointing out this connection to me.
- 5 Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act 2004, section 8.
- 6 See JL (medical reports—credibility) China vs SSHD 2013 UKUT 00145 (IAC).
- 7 A report by Freedom from Torture (2011), one of the two leading charities producing MLRs, highlights the arbitrariness of outcomes. More recently, a Sri Lankan survivor of torture had his appeal dismissed by the FTT, UT, and Court of Appeal, on the basis that the MLR had failed to consider the possibility the torture was self-inflicted by proxy (SIBP). The appeal was only granted by the Supreme Court, on the basis that there is no evidence for SIBP happening in this context, and that the MLR *had* in fact ruled it out (KV (Sri Lanka) v SSHD [2019] UKSC 10).
- 8 Appeals against FTT decisions cannot address findings of fact, but must be rooted in an error of law, such as ignoring evidence or misapplying legislation. There is no automatic right of appeal against the FTT decision: permission must be sought first from another FTT judge, and, then, if they refuse, from an Upper Tribunal judge.
- 9 See J vs SSHD [2005] EWCA Civ 629 and Y (Sri Lanka) vs SSHD [2009] EWCA 362. Suicide risk must stem from an objective fear or one with some 'independent basis', *relating to the country of origin*: there is no space to talk about suicidal ideation emerging within the asylum process itself. Recently, case law has evolved slightly in MY (Suicide risk after Paposhvili) Occupied Palestinian Authority [2021] UKUT 232 (IAC), although this would have been unlikely to have helped Sanwar.
- 10 Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer analyses the seminal case of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) vs SSHD [2010] UKSC 31, where Lord Rodger declared, 'In short, what is protected is the applicant's right to live freely and openly as a gay man. That involves a wide spectrum of conduct, going well beyond conduct designed to attract sexual partners and maintain relationships with them. To illustrate the point with trivial stereotypical examples from British society: just as male heterosexuals are free to enjoy themselves playing rugby, drinking beer, and talking about girls with their mates, so male homosexuals are to be free to enjoy themselves going to Kylie concerts, drinking exotically coloured cocktails, and talking about boys with their straight female mates.'

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