

Ambiguous Ages, Ambivalent Youths: How Asylum Seekers in Germany Navigate Age Categorization

Ulrike Bialas

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity

bialas@mmg.mpg.de

Abstract

Many of the unaccompanied young migrants who have sought asylum in Germany since 2015 do not own documentation of their birth dates or even know their exact ages. Yet asylum and youth welfare laws distinguish precisely between minors and adults, down to the day, thus making it necessary for the German state to estimate the birth dates of young migrants and compelling some of the migrants to claim to be minors. In this article, drawing on years of ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin, I examine four features of the German state's age categorization regime that make it so powerful: the discretion of street-level bureaucrats; the weight of written records; a prioritization of precision over accuracy; and—most important—the ability of bureaucrats to switch between the previous three features at will. I analyze the strategies young migrants employ against this regime to influence the outcomes of their own age categorization as well as the challenges inherent in living as a minor or within liminal, uncertain age categories. The latter include widespread distrust and fear of being found out as well as feelings of infantilization and emasculation. I use age categorization as a context in which to reflect on the agency of migrants vis-à-vis state bureaucracies and conclude that young migrants can try to affect only the determination of their own birth dates but have little impact on the prevailing definitions of age and youth. This article thus contributes to the study of categorization processes in international migration, the possibilities for migrants' resistance, and the politics of time.



Copyright U. Bialas.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons
[Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Published by the SciPost Foundation.

Received 27-06-2022



Accepted 16-03-2023

Published 05-09-2023

updates
doi:[10.21468/MigPol.2.1.003](https://doi.org/10.21468/MigPol.2.1.003)

Contents

1. [Introduction](#)

2

2. Categorizing Migrants: False Binaries, Possibilities for Resistance, and Durable Transformations	4
3. The Advantages of Minority Age	8
4. Becoming a Minor	8
5. Living as Minors	13
6. Conclusion: Contested Determinations, Incontestable Definitions	17
References	20
Endnotes	24

1. Introduction

When Idris’s boat—carrying about two hundred Egyptian and East African men, and some women and children—finally reached Italian waters, one of its three captains called the Italian coast guard, who assured them they would reach the boat within the hour.

“What did you do in that last hour on the boat?” I asked Idris. After eight days on an overcrowded, understocked timber fishing boat, with pants turned colorless and stiff from constant submersion in salt water, limbs weak from sitting and fasting, a mind numb from prayer, and a throat sore from vomiting, what did a person do when rescue was suddenly near?

Idris said, “Someone opened a plastic bag of disposable razors and handed them out, and most of the men—maybe 150 men—started shaving. I didn’t understand why at first, but someone handed me a razor and said that we needed to look as young as possible when we got to Europe.”

Most asylum seekers in Germany do not submit personal documents with their asylum applications, and thus cannot prove their birth dates.ⁱ Many do not even know their birth dates, as exact age often had little legal or cultural importance in their countries of origin. In Germany, however, a date of birth is crucial. Legal distinctions between unaccompanied minors and adult asylum seekers determine the applicability of asylum and residence laws; access to housing, health care, education, and youth welfare; and the assignment of legal guardians and caseworkers. This has led to a bizarre situation in which, though many young asylum seekers intend for their migration to Europe to be a rite of passage to adulthood,ⁱⁱ they find that it is minority age that can help them attain the security and freedom for which they have risked their lives. Some, therefore, try to pass as minors. The German state, for its part, is generally suspicious of asylum seekers who claim to be minors and attempts to verify their claims with techniques that include forensic and visual age determination exams, document authentication tests, and biographical interviews. This explains why, at the end of a perilous and exhausting journey, migrants like Idris muster their last energies to shave in order to look young.

Minority age is evidently a currency so valuable, and a bureaucratic category so powerful, that it holds sway over migrants who have not yet even gone ashore.

Like Michel Foucault (2011), Saba Mahmood (2005), Vicki Squire (2017), and others whose work I draw on, I believe that power and resistance are co-constitutive, and therefore analytically inseparable. I do not disentangle my main lines of inquiry, but present them here in an integrated narrative and analytical style, to reflect their interwoven nature. This includes the strategies employed in Germany by young asylum seekers wanting to be categorized as minors; the challenges inherent in living as a minor or with liminal, uncertain age categories; and the strategies German bureaucrats use to verify young migrants' ages or even to force them into age categories less costly for the German state.

The article is structured in the following way. I will first provide a brief overview of the role that categorization and identification have historically played in the governance of migrants. I argue that many category systems, including that of age, are based on crude and even damaging oversimplifications and that migrants' attempts to claim membership in certain state categories they perceive as beneficial often have profound effects on their senses of self and on their lives. Next, I briefly describe the legal advantages of minority age before moving to an in-depth analysis of how young migrants try to be officially classified as minors and how they subsequently struggle with life as minors or with liminal, uncertain age categories. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the power *and* imitability of the bureaucratic category of age, stemming from three specific features of state bureaucracy: the enormous weight of written records, the discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats, and a prioritization of precision over accuracy.ⁱⁱⁱ I ultimately argue that migrants can try to shape the outcome of their age categorization, but have virtually no influence over prevailing definitions of age, youth, and minority.

I base my arguments on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork. In 2016, I began shadowing forensic medical examiners at a German hospital to learn about the age exams they were conducting on young unaccompanied asylum seekers to comply with the orders of youth welfare offices and family courts. Soon after that, I also started volunteering with an organization for unaccompanied minors to learn more about the legal context of their reception. Here, I met mostly male asylum seekers whom I initially accompanied to appointments at the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, or BAMF), the Foreigner Registration Office, the Youth Welfare Office, and other public agencies. Although all the asylum seekers had issues with age—most claimed to be minors, but had been determined to be older—I did not know how old they “really” were, nor did I press them about it. I was not interested in their ages as chronological fact, but in their motivations and strategies for seeking classification as minors and in the consequences of age in their lives. As I spent more time with them—and as they presumably realized that I was unconcerned with how old they were—several told me that they were actually young adults. In 2018, I stopped volunteering with the organization for unaccompanied minors but continued to spend time with some of the young men I had come to know. Until spring 2020, I continued to accompany them for official appointments and also increasingly spent their free time with them. Over the course of three years, I recorded two thousand pages of typed field notes as well as several notebooks of handwritten notes. Although I include the experiences of one young woman in this article, I mostly focused my research on young men. The majority of young unaccompanied asylum seekers in Germany are

male. Moreover, young men's claims of being minors are often met with more suspicion than are those of young women and, given the affinity between masculinity and adulthood, infantilization in youth welfare is perhaps felt more acutely by young men than by young women.

2. Categorizing Migrants: False Binaries, Possibilities for Resistance, and Durable Transformations

Receiving states have tried to identify and categorize immigrants for a long time regarding numerous different characteristics. Valentin Groebner details the methods through which even medieval states tried to identify the people crossing their borders, the classification schemes they applied, the danger they faced of creating an “illusory world of self-confirming registration systems and files” (2007, 193), and the public anxieties over impostors, impersonators, proxy persons, and doppelgänger who used “their appearances, testimonies, and particularly their papers to substantiate their claims” (ibid., 214). From the mid-fifteenth century on, most social groups in Europe were obliged to carry personal identity papers while traveling (ibid., 218), and in the late eighteenth century, France prohibited a person's use of names other than the one registered at their birth (ibid., 228). In the twentieth century, despite deep ambiguity and uncertainty about the definitions of “race” and “ethnicity,” the United States still used these categories to classify immigrants—often equating these classifications with the migrants' supposed assimilability or economic usefulness (Perlmann 2020). Although explicit references to “race” were largely taboo in postwar Germany, West German governments nonetheless used the nonsensical term “Afro-Asians” to classify groups of immigrants they imagined as having particular characteristics that impeded their integration into the German labor market (Schönwälder 2004). In contemporary Germany, among many other markers, asylum seekers are classified with regard to their age and nationality, using medical exams, linguistic evaluations, cell phone readouts, and interviews, among other methods. Migrant classification thus has a long global history. Its goal has been to unambiguously classify “undecidable” strangers (Bauman 1990) in order to aid the legibility efforts of modern bureaucracies (Scott 1998) and the distribution of benefits in welfare states.

False Binaries

Since 2015, widely publicized cases of asylum seekers falsely claiming identities have increasingly led the German public and policymakers to place migrants, particularly young men claiming to be minors, under a sweeping suspicion of lying. This suspicion provides the political backdrop against which the German state has tried to solve what Donald Moynihan et al. (2022) call the “matching problem” of public administrations: states must not only define a category, but match individuals to it. Scholars of migration, for their part, have criticized rigid, binary categorization as unrealistic and harmful. Milena Belloni (2019), for instance, shows that her Eritrean interlocutors—despite fleeing an oppressive state and nearly always receiving asylum in Europe—are not merely driven from their country of origin by the untenability of life there, but are also lured by the promise of life elsewhere. Rebecca Hamlin (2021) similarly argues that the idea that the vulnerability of refugees is categorically distinct from that of so-called economic migrants is little more than a “legal fiction.” The equation of native language and citizenship is another fiction; in Germany, linguistic tests help determine where an

applicant is “really” from. But many migrants, for complex biographical and geopolitical reasons, speak native languages different from the official languages of their countries of citizenship (Blommaert 2009). Western immigration authorities and courts rarely engage with the complicated political realities in regions like the Horn of Africa that would explain why a person’s native language is not necessarily evidence of their citizenship (Campbell 2011).

One might argue that categorizations regarding persecution, citizenship, native language, and legal status are unique to migrants. However, categories that have become more fluid for nonmigrant Western populations, socially and even sometimes legally, have also remained remarkably rigid in evaluations of asylum applications. For instance, despite recent liberalizations in Western democracies regarding the classification of gender and sexuality (Brubaker 2016), asylum decisions are still based on binary notions of migrants as either queer or not (Akin 2017), rather than allowing for the kind of fluidity increasingly accepted for native populations. Religious affiliation and religiosity, similarly, are often treated as categorical and immutable in asylum claims based on religious persecution (Madziva 2018) despite their nuances in everyday life and volatility over the course of a life. Analogously, DNA testing requirements for family reunification promote biological definitions of relatedness that are at odds with recent liberalizations for European citizens of what constitutes a family, and with the migrants’ own diverse practices. The state’s “endorsement of a biological concept of the family” (Heinemann and Lemke 2014, 498) corresponds to an emphasis on a biological concept of age, yet migrants themselves may harbor alternative definitions of both family and age. Adolescence, too, has expanded for many Western youths, often into their twenties (Sawyer et al. 2018), while unaccompanied migrants still largely face an abrupt change from being viewed as vulnerable minors to being seen as threatening adults after they turn eighteen.^{iv}

In fact, we have long known that understandings of childhood differ across time and place, and that states are among the actors in a position to provide authoritative definitions. Philippe Ariès (1973) argues that the main change towards “modern” notions of childhood, youth, and adolescence in Europe took place only in the seventeenth century, when youth became associated with weakness (thus deserving of support) and innocence (thus deserving of forgiveness). These sentiments are the implicit basis of asylum laws that provide minors with legal guardians and do not punish their border crossing. Adolescence, similarly, was only coined as a term in 1904 to acknowledge trends that “extended dependency beyond childhood and delayed entry into adult roles” (Crosnoe and Kirkpatrick 2011, 440). Age-related norms—both informal and legal—vary considerably even within societies that are otherwise similar to each other (Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Juárez and Gayet 2014).

While the public and policy discourse on *all* unauthorized migrants tends to bifurcate into two extremes—portraying them either as victims without agency or as villains with an excess of dangerous or immoral agency (Mainwaring 2016, 289)—unaccompanied minors tend to be viewed as particularly ambiguous, as they epitomize the image of refugees as both vulnerable and fraudulent (Lems et al. 2020). Jacob Lind argues that, rather than being inherently vulnerable, young migrants are “vulnerabilized” by states, and these manufactured vulnerabilities are then “mobilized by states for agendas that aim to control and govern certain groups of migrant children” (2019, 338). That is, states sometimes define certain conditions and circumstances as vulnerabilities only to then protect youths from those same previously defined vulnerabilities. This practice

demonstrates that categories can be strategically constructed, that the state is in a privileged position to do so, and that categories impose control just as they offer protection.

Possibilities for Resistance

Unsurprisingly, migrants have sought to escape the categories meant to confine them, to adopt categories that might offer protection, or to evade categorization altogether. The “autonomy of migration” school is one approach to interpreting such resistance, even if it is not necessarily about categorization but takes migrants’ mobility despite borders as evidence of their “autonomy.” Çetta Mainwaring, for instance, argues that the mere presence of unauthorized migrants in Europe demonstrates that “in this albeit limited sense, their agency has proved more powerful than that of the state” (2016, 303). Some “autonomy of migration” scholars even view unauthorized migration “as a ‘social movement’ that has the capacity to enact change” (Squire 2017, 263).

The “autonomy of migration” approach has in turn been criticized for romanticizing migration as well as for downplaying the brutality of migration control and the suffering of migrants (Scheel 2013). On the other hand, scholarly approaches to unauthorized migration that emphasize migrant suffering, such as those inspired by Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) notion of “sovereign power and bare life,” have a tendency to overlook migrants’ agency altogether. Squire therefore rightly suggests that bringing the social sciences’ everlasting structure/agency debate to the field of unauthorized migration risks being “overly simplistic” (2017, 257) and “analytically reductive” (269). As noted earlier, I share the skepticism of Squire and other scholars toward even just the theoretical possibility of analytically separating power and resistance, or structure and agency.

A way out of the structure/agency impasse might be the concept of ambivalence, which Anne McNevin proposes as a “useful starting point for coming to terms with the transformative potential of claims that both resist and reinscribe the power relations associated with contemporary hierarchies of mobility” (2013, 183). Migrants are ambivalent toward the strategies they employ—to regularize their status, or to be classified a certain way—because those strategies may have unintended consequences, have a complex relation to truth, and entail personal and political compromises. Ambivalence, a feeling, cannot be chosen quite in the way that an ambiguous age, for instance, can be cultivated—though Arlie Hochschild argues that people *can* engage in “deep acting,” in “trying to feel” (1979, 569). Ambivalence can, in any case, be a “political resource, rather than a strategic handicap” (McNevin 2013, 185) in negotiations and contestations with the state. After all, feelings of ambivalence allow migrants to respond to imperfect situations and options more flexibly.

Given how consequential categorization is for migrants but how poorly the available categories often represent their reality, it is hardly surprising that they would try to use state categorization to their advantage. Moreover, we know from other contexts that scrutiny compels people to lie. Kamal Sadiq (2008), for instance, shows how migrants from the Global South, in the absence of legitimate papers, obtain fake citizenship documents of countries whose “paper citizens” they consequently become. Young asylum seekers in Germany are under constant scrutiny by the state, whether during repeated interviews regarding their asylum cases or during biannual investigations by the Youth Welfare Office. Such frequent scrutiny not only makes one more vulnerable

but also more likely to provide false information, intentionally or otherwise. Moreover, just as “the intensification of border enforcement is often met with a growing sophistication and professionalization of border crossing strategies and practices,” inspiring “higher levels of ingenuity and agency from migrants and smugglers” (Mainwaring 2016, 303), it is often the arbitrariness of official documents that makes these documents “vulnerable to false reporting, fabrication, and impersonation” (Kim 2011, 763). Rules imposed to prevent fraud may actually intensify it.

Durable Transformations

Dishonesty, in other words, is not exceptional. What is perhaps more interesting than the fact that refugees do not always speak the truth, or the question of whether this dishonesty constitutes a submission to structure or an exercise of agency, is that fabrications which at first are purely instrumental can over time have profound effects on refugees’ personal lives and senses of self. Even when migrants successfully “appropriate” (Scheel 2017) categories, they must then reconcile their daily lives, inner selves, and a persistently suspicious outside world with their official category membership. As Jaeun Kim emphasizes, it matters whether “the identity craft requires a fleeting or an enduring performance” (Kim 2022, 327)—whether, for example, a migrant has to show a bank account statement once or live indefinitely as a Christian or with a certain date of birth. From literature on racial passing, we know how cumbersome living with a false identity or constantly switching between identities can be (see, for instance, Anthony 1995; Albuja et al. 2018; and Lukate and Foster 2022).

Not only does the asylum system produce the paradoxical effect of silencing identities while necessitating identity *performances*, as Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman (2007, 606) point out, but identity performances also at times become identities, thus hinting at the mutual constitution of category and self that Ian Hacking (2006) has called “dynamic nominalism.” Cecilia Menjívar and Sarah M. Lakhani (2016) have indeed shown that personal transformations immigrants undertake in the hope of improving their legal status—such as volunteering, joining the army, or getting married—can eventually have genuine and long-term effects on their behaviors, outlooks, and selves that far outlast any need for residence papers. Kim, similarly, shows how marriages that are initially “fake” can eventually become “real” (Kim 2011), and that religious conversion to secure one’s legal status does not preclude “genuine” religiosity (Kim 2022). As I will demonstrate, this is also the case with minority age—an initially instrumental performance that may eventually have more consequential effects on a person’s sense of self.

Like other people who interact with public administrations, migrants thus “attempt to match themselves to state-created categories” (Moynihan et al. 2022, 1). It is therefore important to examine the features of state categorization that make bureaucratic categories so powerful *alongside* migrants’ strategies for being categorized in certain ways as well as their experiences during and after categorization. Before I describe how my interlocutors experienced age categorization, however, I will first provide a brief overview of the asylum process in Germany and the many points at which an applicant’s age makes a difference. This will help to explain why young asylum seekers want to be classified as minors.

3. The Advantages of Minority Age

Various international agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1990), declare minority age a protected status and mandate the special reception and treatment of unaccompanied minors. In Germany, minors do not have to file for asylum until they turn eighteen, as they cannot be deported and the Dublin III Regulation does not apply to them.^v With time to settle down, and with the support of caseworkers and guardians, minors are usually better prepared for the asylum interview than are adults. Even the rejection of an asylum application is more easily navigated by those who have entered Germany as minors. They usually speak better German, have perhaps graduated high school, and thus are more likely to get apprenticeships, which can secure their residence in accordance with section 60c of German residence law. Moreover, asylum seekers who are under the age of twenty-one, have been in Germany for at least four years, and meet certain integration requirements may apply for residence permits under section 25a of German residence law.^{vi}

Not only do residence laws distinguish resolutely between minors and adults, but day-to-day life also differs greatly for asylum seekers of various ages in Germany. Adults are segregated into uninspiring language and integration courses, while minors can enroll in regular schools. Adults live in camps with little privacy or comfort, while minors live in apartments provided by the Youth Welfare Office, often into their twenties. There, they can socialize with German teenagers, have free-time activities and tutoring, and are assigned individual caseworkers as well as legal guardians.

The advantages enjoyed by those who were once minors in Germany—better education, networks of helpers, well-prepared asylum interviews, and legal alternatives to asylum—last into adulthood. Such sharp legal distinctions and the divergence between the realities of minors and adults lead many young asylum seekers to believe that being classified as minors is their only chance for a secure and fulfilling life in Europe. Those who initially deem themselves lucky to be recognized as minors soon find out, however, that minority age is not a panacea and actually comes with its own distinctive challenges. I will now describe how my interlocutors navigated this age categorization regime, including the challenges of trying to be classified as a minor and the challenges of living as one.

4. Becoming a Minor

Young migrants in Germany are usually assigned their official ages by means of an age exam,^{vii} or through lengthy and taxing negotiations with state offices. In these exams and negotiations, the young migrants and German bureaucrats each mobilize various kinds of “identity tags”—including biometric measurements, official documents, narratives, and performances—“to evaluate or establish the authenticity of [their claims] amid profound uncertainty and mutual distrust” (Kim 2011, 761). As Kim argues, when bureaucrats and migrants “struggle over which kind of identification should be given primacy, they act on, espouse, or dismiss particular understandings of personhood, belonging, and entitlement” (ibid.). I will now describe how Paul from Guinea, Samir from Sudan, and Idris from Ethiopia became minors, and how Zeinab from Afghanistan and Leandre from Cameroon were unable to settle their ages^{viii}. Their experiences demonstrate the contested mobilizations of various “identity tags,” as well as three characteristics of state categorization that make categories at once powerful

and pursuable: the weight of written records, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats, and the prioritization of precision and consistency over truth.

4.1. Paul: The Weight of Written Records

Paul, from Guinea, had been classified as sixteen years old in a visual age exam in one city, then classified as eighteen in another city a few months later. As a consequence, he had been relocated to Berlin. A social worker at Paul's Berlin camp noticed the quiet, withdrawn young man, who looked younger than the other residents. She spoke French and began talking to him, eventually learning of his two age exams and the minority age upon which he insisted. She called the organization I was volunteering with, and reported that someone needed help fixing their age.

With the help of volunteers and social workers, Paul asked BAMF to give him the benefit of the doubt—given his two conflicting age exam results—and to end his Dublin period, to which they agreed. Paul then went to family court with the written confirmation that he no longer “had Dublin,” to quote the jargon used by asylum seekers, and that accordingly, even BAMF had doubts about his majority age. The family court accepted his argument and assigned a legal guardian to him. Paul returned to BAMF and informed them that the court had appointed a legal guardian and must therefore be convinced of his minority age. BAMF accepted his minority age, and Paul was now able to cast his asylum application anew and move to a youth welfare apartment. Different agencies—such as the family court, the Youth Welfare Office, BAMF, and the Foreigner Registration Office—often have different identities on file for asylum seekers, and playing these off against each other—that is, approaching one agency with the identity recognized by another—is one way asylum seekers pursue identities. “Instead of openly contesting the rules and regulations of border regimes, practices of appropriation simulate compliance with these rules and regulations, but only to clandestinely subvert them” (Scheel 2017, 393). Paul had ostensibly complied with the system of age categorization, but actually resisted his place within it. He had “appropriated” not only the state's categories but even its administrative structure. He took full advantage of his new supportive environment, building close relationships with caseworkers, eagerly learning German at school, and joining a youth soccer team. As a Guinean, his chances of getting asylum were slim, but his official age could secure his future in Germany in other ways. First, living in a youth welfare apartment, he was not deportable; second, a better education could enable him to get a residence permit through an apprenticeship; and finally, as someone who would have lived in Germany for four years before turning twenty-one, he might eventually qualify for a residence permit. Although Paul's victory partially speaks to his sheer persistence and luck, his case also illustrates the enormous weight of written records. As in a game of dominoes, setting in motion a document produced by one agency was enough to cause a chain reaction across multiple agencies, each bureaucratic surrender automatically causing the next.

4.2. Samir: The Discretion of Street-Level Bureaucrats

Becoming a minor and using the legal advantages of minority age, however, is not always as smooth as in Paul's case, as Samir's odyssey illustrates. Samir first arrived in Hamburg and stayed there with older friends from Sudan. They said that to live with them, he needed to be an adult. He also believed—mistakenly—that adults received more money from the state. Given his young looks, he even claimed to be married to

make his majority age seem more credible. His plan backfired. As an adult, he was relocated to Berlin and placed in a former school gym with hundreds of others. Samir soon understood the advantages of being a minor, but had little hope that he could secure this official designation. I accompanied him to his asylum interview, where he mentioned to the interviewer that he was actually seventeen. To our amazement, the man changed Samir's date of birth in the Central Register of Foreign Nationals, and instructed him to get a new ID card from the Foreigner Registration Office.

We first sat in the Foreigner Registration Office's notoriously slow-moving waiting rooms, then decided to wait outside by the canal. Samir took his sneakers off and wiggled his toes, telling me he had worn them for two days and two nights straight because he had not been home. If only he could be seventeen, he swore, he would turn his life around. If he didn't have to live in a camp, he would stop dealing drugs, enroll in school, and go to bed each night by eleven. He would buy a TV set and spend the evenings indoors, watching shows to improve his German. Maybe he would even get a gym membership.

The clerk at the Foreigner Registration Office corrected the date of birth on Samir's ID card with a ballpoint pen, and accidentally recorded a different birth month from the one Samir had given BAMF, making him even three months younger. Samir barely made it out of the clerk's office before jumping up and down: "Seventeen! Seventeen!" He insisted we immediately go to the office that assigns schools, determined to make good on his promise to change his life, if the Foreigner Registration Office changed his age. Only a few weeks later, however, Samir declared, "Fuck seventeen!" He had indeed enrolled in school, but his patchy German had made him difficult to place. He spoke the language quite well; but without formal education, he was barely literate and only knew "street German," as he called it. Being in a beginners' class was frustrating and humiliating. The Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten (State Office for Refugees, or LAF), from which adult asylum seekers receive their money, had stopped paying him because they were no longer in charge of his case. Samir's camp had kicked him out because they weren't allowed to house unaccompanied minors, and this had forced him to move into a shelter for youth in crisis, with 24/7 supervision. We went to the Youth Welfare Office, repeatedly reminding them of their obligation to provide housing, but its employees were weary of asylum seekers suddenly being years younger. They claimed to be short of suitable apartments, while making no secret of the fact that they did not believe Samir was really seventeen. The day before his eighteenth birthday, the youth crisis apartment forced Samir to move out because they were not allowed to house adults. We went to a youth homeless shelter, hoping he could spend the night there, but they explained they would have to kick him out at midnight, when he turned eighteen. The adult homeless shelter also refused to take him because he would only be an adult after midnight and their intakes ended at 10 p.m. Broke, homeless, and humiliated, Samir realized that so far, turning seventeen had solved nothing. He had lost the only advantage of being an adult—his freedom—and had gained little in return. The power of bureaucratic discretion had enabled him to change his date of birth, but also excluded him from the benefits of his new age. Motivated by their own professional goals and incentives, the street-level bureaucrats Samir had encountered had either used their discretion to the greatest extent possible or, by contrast, rigidly stuck to "the rules."

4.3. Idris: Precision over Truth

One of Idris's childhood friends from Ethiopia had come to Germany a year before him, and advised him to say he was sixteen. Idris was about twenty-two years old at the time and thought that sixteen was too much of a stretch, but he did want the benefits of being classified as a minor, so he went to the clearing office for unaccompanied minors in Berlin and said he was seventeen. A visual age exam confirmed his claim. He was assigned to a former hostel that had been turned into a shelter for unaccompanied minors, and was later able to move to an apartment provided by the Youth Welfare Office.

Although Idris had officially been a minor for his entire time in Germany, in summer 2019 Germany passed a new law—the *Geordnete-Rückkehr-Gesetz* or Law of Orderly Return—that obligated an asylum seeker to prove their identity with a passport. In order to apply for a passport from the Ethiopian embassy, Idris asked his brother in Ethiopia to obtain a birth certificate for him. His brother went to a local citizen center where he was issued the document without his having provided proof of the information to which he had asked them to attest. Idris's brother sent the birth certificate to Berlin; but when it arrived, we saw that Idris had made a mistake. He had given his brother his German date of birth, but Ethiopia does not use the Gregorian calendar, so on paper Idris was now eleven years old. He was very upset—not only, as he explained to me, because of the additional hassle, but because the birth certificate that identified him as being eleven was an unwelcome reminder of the deception that had caused this mess.

Idris used an online converter to calculate the Ethiopian equivalent of his European date of birth, and his brother obtained a new birth certificate in Ethiopia. This time, everything worked out. Idris showed the birth certificate to the Ethiopian embassy in Berlin, and was issued a passport that matched his official German date of birth. A few days later I wondered aloud whether BAMF would be suspicious of an Ethiopian minor without formal education being able to convert his date of birth from the Ethiopian to the Gregorian calendar. A social worker who was with us agreed with my reasoning, but said that BAMF demanded precision even when it was highly improbable, ultimately choosing precision over accuracy.

Just like Paul, Idris had thus “appropriated” Germany's age categorization system, responding to its unrealistic demand for a precise date of birth in its own language—with an unrealistically precise date of birth. By actively seeking out particular positions within stratification systems, asylum seekers thus conform to the rules while not resigning themselves to their predeterminations. The rules themselves had provided Idris with the opportunity to outwit them. As Kim argues, “The more inspectors rely on certain ‘identity tags,’” such as birth certificates, “the more they become susceptible to those intent on using them as props for passing” (Kim 2011, 781).

4.4. Zeinab and Leandre: Living with Contested Ages

While Paul had successfully been able to play various state agencies against one another, the circumstance that different agencies recognize different identities can also lead to much trouble and biographical paralysis. When you are neither a child nor an

adult, neither the agencies for adults nor those for minors are responsible, and this leaves you in a liminal space of total ineligibility.

Zeinab's sister had fled to Germany in 2014 after her husband tried to kill her. When this man also made threats against Zeinab, her brother organized a fake visa with the birth year 1992 for her to use in leaving Afghanistan. Zeinab first traveled to India, where she then applied for a Schengen visa. In the Schengen visa issued by the German embassy in New Delhi, however, the birth year was accidentally recorded as 1993. Zeinab arrived in Berlin in 2016. She went to the Afghan embassy and received a passport bearing the birth year 2000—her self-stated age. This is also the year of birth her high school in Berlin recognized after she arrived in that city. The Berlin Senate Administration, however, ordered a forensic age exam because it considers passports from Afghanistan unreliable. Zeinab's exam determined 1997 as the year of her birth, which the Youth Welfare Office then used. An employee at the Foreigner Registration Office recorded yet another year of birth, 1995, after learning from Zeinab's sister that she had been three years old when their mother died while giving birth to Zeinab. Finally, two different employees of the Youth Welfare Office had visually estimated Zeinab's year of birth: one 2001, the other 2002. She now had seven different years of birth.

The family court accepted Zeinab's minority age, so she continued to have a legal guardian even though her official ID identified her as an adult. Zeinab's health insurance listed her as a minor, so her guardian had to agree to medical procedures. Her school listed her as being eighteen, but she was not allowed to go on school field trips because according to her ID, she was too old for youth hostels. After the forensic age exam, the Youth Welfare Office would no longer house her; but the LAF also refused her, pointing to her minority age. So Zeinab had to move in with her sister. When people have uncertain ages, they often fall between the spheres of responsibility of various agencies. An uncertain identity also prevents a person from participating in other things that are perhaps smaller but no less important to a sense of belonging and a quality of life. Young men with multiple dates of birth, for example, could not join sports teams, since coaches needed clarity about whether to admit them to a youth team or a men's team. When Paul was "between ages," he was unable to start psychotherapy because neither adult nor youth therapists were comfortable seeing him.

Leandre's identity was especially problematic. His mother had left Cameroon for Germany when he was a preteen, had married a German woman, who she was not in a relationship with, to obtain residence papers, and had eventually brought Leandre over on a fake visa. Leandre told me he was seventeen when he came to Germany, but the visa he had traveled with stated that he was a twelve-year-old, and his fingerprints were now permanently linked to that identity. Leandre was an exceptionally smart, motivated young man who had taught himself intermediate German within just a few months. He wanted to study medicine or at least do an apprenticeship in nursing. Yet, though he was visibly not twelve, he was not allowed to study, start an apprenticeship, or even work or do an internship as a twelve-year-old. Several apprenticeship interviews had gone well, but as soon as each firm asked to make a copy of his ID, it retracted its work offer, as it was not allowed to employ children. Leandre also could not enroll in a regular school, because as a twelve-year-old he would have to be enrolled in sixth grade, but no sixth-grade teacher would allow a grown man in her class. Leandre could not live with his mother, because she lived in a community project exclusively for women, which allowed boys but not men on its premises. But he also was "too young" for youth welfare (which starts at age fourteen), let alone a room at a camp for adults. He could not file for asylum, because as a twelve-year-old he needed a guardian to do so for him. He

also wanted to avoid alerting the family court to the fact that his mother was not officially his guardian, so as not to jeopardize her residence papers.

The cases of Leandre and Zeinab show the legal precariousness of those who are classified as both minor and adult—and who, therefore, are neither. Ambiguity, if self-chosen and used strategically, has the potential to be a resource to migrants, to shield them from the disadvantages of membership in certain categories. When the ambiguity is imposed upon them, however, it may disqualify them from the benefits and protections afforded by those same categories.

5. Living as Minors

Even when migrants succeed in being classified as minors, they then face the challenge of living as minors. If their minority ages are merely fabrications, they live in fear of being found out. Distrust and suspicion taint their relationships with German volunteers and caseworkers, and even with their peers. They also often feel infantilized by the restrictions placed on minors and the rules in youth welfare facilities—feelings exacerbated by the fact that they often have come to Europe precisely to become men. Their intended “rite of passage” (Turner 1967) has become a “rite of reverse passage,” as Chiara Galli (2018) elegantly puts it.

5.1 Fear and Distrust

Many asylum seekers who have given false information feel guilty. Idris, especially, struggled to maintain his image of himself as a good and honest person, despite having given a false age. He would shudder with embarrassment when telling me that his caseworker affectionately called him and his best friend, Yakob, “my children.” He also suspected that some people knew he was not a teenager. His German teacher, herself only in her mid-twenties, treated him and another student more strictly than she did their classmates, and he was sure this was because she had correctly guessed they were older than they claimed. Idris also advised me not to congratulate asylum seekers on their birthdays because, he insisted, most of them would only feel ashamed, or would think I was mocking them. Idris himself avoided seeing people on the day of his official birthday who might congratulate him or give him presents.

As a devout Muslim, Idris wondered whether lying about his age had violated the Islamic dictate to tell the truth, or whether it fell under the exemption that breaking rules was permissible when the believer’s life was at stake. He asked a mufti for advice; and when the man informed him that he had committed a great sin, he was very upset and even considered correcting his age. But then he thought about the implications. He would have to tell people the truth, might not be able to continue high school, and perhaps would have to repay his youth welfare money. He went back and forth, imagining in horror that he would be stuck with a false date of birth for the rest of his life, but eventually decided that the consequences of trying to correct it were too severe.

Idris developed two strategies for assuaging his feelings of guilt and reestablishing his identity as essentially good: he suspected everyone else of also having lied, and established a hierarchy of more and less acceptable lies. He seemed to relish speculation about others’ identities, and came up with ever more hyperbolic descriptions of the deceit around him. When I showed him official statistics about asylum seekers’ origin

countries, he laughed and said, “The Iraqis are from Iran, the Afghans from Pakistan, the Eritreans from Ethiopia, and the Syrians from Lebanon. Take my word for it.” It seemed that he wanted to convince me that lying was not a personal shortcoming, but something almost inevitable. Idris also explained to me that lying about one’s age was less objectionable than lying about one’s nationality because he had once been seventeen, but had never been Somali or Eritrean. Kim has similarly shown that migrants develop “alternative moral parameters” (2011, 761) to justify and legitimize actions that are deemed fraudulent by the immigration state. Because of alternative normative orderings in their origin country or the unjust exclusions experienced in the receiving country, “misrepresenting their identity [...] is seen as at minimum inevitable, sometimes recommendable, perhaps illicit, but neither illegitimate nor morally reprehensible” (ibid., 765). Hochschild even argues that people in all kinds of situations engage in “emotion work,” trying to change the degree or quality of a feeling, in this case guilt. Although Hochschild focuses on societal “feeling rules,” which direct “how we want to try to feel” (1979, 563) and push us to try to overcome the discrepancy between our actual feelings and the feelings we have been taught are appropriate in a given situation, it is also conceivable that people strive for feelings that are not only appropriate but personally convenient and useful.

The fear of being found out significantly shaped the relations of my interlocutors with German social service workers. Yakob was invited to spend Christmas with Marie, also a volunteer at the organization for unaccompanied minors where I worked. Marie, who suspected Yakob’s real age but did not explicitly tell him so, recounted that her sister—who was younger than Yakob’s real age, but older than his official age—said over Christmas dinner: “Yakob, you don’t look your age at all. You look much older.” Yakob seemed uncomfortable and responded, “Yeah, flight really ages you.” I interpreted his canny riposte not simply as an attempt to distract from the subliminal allegation possibly hidden in the young woman’s remark, but as a wry critique of the arbitrariness and artificiality of young migrants’ “aging” in Germany, in contrast to the genuine hardship of clandestine youth migration.

Fear and distrust not only shaped relations between asylum seekers and German helpers, but even permeated intimate relationships. I would sometimes hear the young men speculate as to whether friends or girlfriends they had argued with would seek revenge by disclosing their identities to other people or even the public authorities. I also noticed that asylum seekers often did not know the identities of even their closest friends, and avoided giving them personal information, which they might accidentally reveal to others or deliberately use against them if the friendship turned sour. Samir had sleepovers with his friend “Whizz” several times a week, during which they would pool their money to buy cannabis and then hang out at the park before going home to doze off to Netflix. After months of hanging out, Samir left Whizz and me alone one evening to get soda. While he was away, I said something to Whizz about Samir, and Whizz quizzically replied, “Who?” It took me a few seconds to realize that Whizz and Samir did not know each other’s names. The next day, I asked Samir about Whizz—his real name, his age, his country of origin—but Samir said he had no idea, and that it was none of his business. Samir saved all his friends’ numbers, including mine, on his mobile phone under invented names or even just emojis. When he lost touch with a friend and pondered how to find him, I suggested that we call various camps to see where he was living, or ask the citizen center for information. Samir grinned at my naïveté: “You think I know his European name or birthday or anything?” Samir and many other young asylum seekers I knew thus cultivated ambiguity to such an extreme that they did not settle into concrete identities even around their closest friends. While this mitigated

their risk of being exposed and, perhaps, the cognitive dissonance that can come from living with multiple identities, it also frequently undermined potentially meaningful relationships and the kind of solidarity that might have made life with an insecure legal status easier in a new country.

5.2 Infantilization and Emasculation

Minority age not only creates feelings of guilt and distrust, but is also at odds with the desire for independence and self-actualization—the hope for migration to be a rite of passage to adulthood. Therefore, it was often experienced as infantilizing and emasculating. When Samir exclaimed, “Fuck seventeen!” just weeks after finally becoming a minor, I was reminded of an age examiner conference I had attended two years earlier, where a speaker had quipped that asylum seekers wanted to be “forever seventeen.” Yes, Samir had desperately wanted to be seventeen, thinking of minority age as a panacea. But after years of self-determination, he had found that being a minor was hard.

In youth welfare, to which he was eventually admitted, Samir lived in a shared apartment. Social workers were present on weekday afternoons but also occasionally checked in unannounced, and Samir was expected to participate in a weekly group dinner, meetings with his caseworkers, and a weeklong group trip in the summer. He had a 10 p.m. curfew on school nights, and could only have sleepovers on non-school days, with the caseworkers’ permission. His caseworkers were in close contact with his teachers and doctors. Samir was paid his youth welfare money in small weekly installments, and was expected to save fifty euros a month and contribute to communal expenses.

Samir was highly motivated at first, and saw these rules as a chance for starting over. Soon, however, his motivation yielded to old habits. He narrowly escaped expulsion from youth welfare numerous times, and after ten months, he left. He was tired of the supervision, the scolding, and the small installments of pocket money. He returned to the camp, where he would again have to share a room but there would be no curfews or check-ins, and he would receive his monthly state allowance all at once. Despite placing great hope in minority age and youth welfare, in the end Samir was unable to overcome the behaviors he had adopted throughout his years of being an adult.

Samir’s dilemma was not unique to him. Idris thought about leaving youth welfare many times, usually after something happened that he viewed as an infringement on his privacy. Once, his caseworker told him that neighbors had filed a nighttime noise complaint, and when Idris told the caseworker that he hadn’t even been home, she said he was required to let her know when he slept elsewhere. Another time, Idris was ill, and his caseworker called his doctor and asked for an explanation of Idris’s condition. Idris was very upset about this because he was not a minor at the time and his caseworker was not legally responsible for him. Similarly, as an eighteen-year-old, Paul had received large quantities of antidepressants from his doctors, and often took more than the recommended dose; but when he was deemed seventeen, his caseworkers held onto the pills and only handed them out in small portions, despite Paul’s protests.

Even entering youth welfare necessitates belittling oneself. In the written application and during the interview, one must argue that one is developmentally delayed and unable to care for oneself. This self-debasement stands in stark contrast to the self-

sufficiency young asylum seekers need in order to survive the journey to Europe. The behaviors and personality traits that are advantageous to making it to Germany are thus in some ways a liability to making it in Germany. Employees of the Youth Welfare Office even argued that the young men surely did not need help since they had made it to Europe all on their own. As Lind points out, there is a general tendency for unaccompanied youths to be governed “through arguments around their (problematic) agency” (2019, 348).

Idris and Paul often told me about friends in their home countries who had gotten married, built homes, and become fathers. As they showed me baby pictures, they speculated as to how many children they might have if they hadn’t left home. Their regression into boyhood was even more stark relative to their former peers who were launching adult lives. One cost of portraying oneself as younger is that of being emasculated in a time of life when masculinity is a primary source of self-esteem. While other young men accentuate every physical sign of impending manhood and try to behave in ways that make them seem older, young asylum seekers regress into boyhood in search of protection. Importantly, this regression not only entails emotional hardship but stymies the kind of citizenly life that could later help them secure their residence. After all, being economically self-sufficient and starting a family are integral both to scholarly theories of citizenship and to legal prerequisites for residence—and minors are unable to do such citizenly things.

Given the struggle of reconciling one’s desire to be an adult with the perks of being a minor and the profound challenge of experiencing life in a permanent state of ambivalence, some young asylum seekers try to internalize their official ages. One cannot continuously perform a self, but must also live with that self—to live with oneself, as it were. A few months after Samir’s age change, he started referring to himself as seventeen, even when the two of us were alone in conversation. He also told me about a woman who had shown romantic interest in him, but said that at age twenty-three she was too old for him. I assumed he was joking, and I laughed. But he added matter-of-factly that he was seventeen now and was no longer dating women over twenty.

Asylum seekers are not the only ones who often begin treating arbitrary dates of birth as biographical fact. Despite their initial suspicions one way or the other, once a date of birth had been officially recorded, caseworkers, volunteers, and legal guardians also often began to treat it as natural and real, irrespective of its genesis. For instance, when Samir and I had a chance encounter with his caseworker soon after he had changed his date of birth and moved into a youth welfare apartment, she began reading his horoscope to him in all earnestness, explaining, “I just looked up what Sagittarius is like because you were born on November 24 now, and it fits you perfectly.” Reminiscent of the collective willful ignorance parodied in Hans Christian Andersen’s folktale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” this attitude was common among German “helpers,” and perhaps contributed to the migrants’ own internalization of birth dates that originally were merely instrumental or arbitrary. The power of age categorization almost seems to lie within the birth date itself. It is a “productive power” that creates its own subjects and has reached “perfection” when it “render[s] its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault 2011, 315). Neatly printed on a piece of paper—or even just sloppily scribbled with a ballpoint pen—a date of birth determines someone’s treatment by others and even their sense of self.

6. Conclusion: Contested Determinations, Incontestable Definitions

In Germany, unaccompanied minors are afforded more rights and protections than are young adults. Many asylum seekers from the Global South, however, do not own identity documents, and some do not even know their exact ages, thus making it necessary for the German state to estimate young asylum seekers' dates of birth. In this article I have shown the consequences of this age categorization regime, which range from tedious negotiations between migrants and state officials over who will be considered a minor, to the difficult unintended consequences that confront migrants classified as minors. My descriptions of migrants' attempts to be deemed minors and of their lives as minors show that the power and imitability of age are analytically inseparable, and that migrants' experiences are therefore telling about the state's category of age in at least three ways.

First, the discretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats greatly affects both the categorization of migrants and the actual impact that the categories have on their lives. Recall how Samir only became a minor because of a sympathetic asylum interviewer, and how he became even younger when the clerk who issued his new ID accidentally recorded a birth month different from the one Samir had given. Later, Samir was unable to use the date of birth he had attained through the discretion of street-level bureaucrats, since youth welfare employees simply refused him. Michael Lipsky (1980) defines street-level bureaucrats as public workers with discretion over the dispensation of benefits—that is, the ability to use their professional judgment when making decisions. On the one hand, discretion gives power to the state and its bureaucrats, who may even see it as an opportunity to showcase their dominance. On the other hand, it gives some power to migrants, who may simply try their luck again and again on different days with different clerks.

Second, the weight of written records promotes an adherence to previous determinations. Paul was able to be accepted as a minor by presenting documentation of having been treated as one by other agencies, as when he was considered exempt from the Dublin III Regulation and was assigned a legal guardian. A document issued by one agency had such power that it could undermine and even erase the documentary uncertainty of another. In Paul's case, this was to his advantage. But it can also do harm. For instance, an administrator at a Youth Welfare Office in Berlin explained to me that she always treated clients in accordance with the birth dates listed on their asylum seeker IDs. Albeit likely exaggerating, she made her point by insisting, "If I see a young man before me, but his official date of birth makes him three years old, he is a toddler to me." Leandre's continued treatment as a child even when he was obviously a young man attests to this. In such cases, just as in Paul's situation, the goal is not to verify the truth—which in any case is simply not possible in this context—but to maintain consistency and consolidate the power of bureaucratic truth.

Third, state agencies privilege a certain form of knowledge over its content. It was unlikely that Idris could convert dates perfectly between various calendars. Yet his birth certificate was accepted unquestioningly, because it fit the mold of bureaucratic evidence. By contrast, a birth certificate Paul eventually submitted raised some doubts. It listed a first name slightly different from the one he had given in Germany, but he insisted it was his genuine birth certificate and that certain first names were considered the same in Guinea. (The similarity of his two names was comparable to that of James

and its diminutive Jim in English.) To give a final example, in Afghanistan it is common for parents to make a note of their child's birth in a copy of the Quran, and some Afghans I knew tried to prove their ages by submitting pictures of such notes. Tellingly, such authentic evidence met with more state suspicion than did mere fabrications, which even in their falsehood paralleled Germany's precision when it comes to age. An inauthentic document that adhered to the acceptable form had more weight than a note in a copy of the Quran that was far closer to the truth.

These three features of bureaucratic categorization have significant consequences in the lives of young migrants. In Zeinab's case, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats ultimately led to multiple contradictory dates of birth. State workers could then point to whichever date would justify their action or inaction. Unlike Paul, Zeinab was unable to play agencies against one another. Instead, the weight of written records entrapped her. Similarly, in Leandre's case, a written record turned out to be so weighty that the blatant truth—that he was not a child—was powerless against it. His experiences showcase the weight of written records, the state's preference for consistency over truth, and the ability of street-level bureaucrats not to exercise discretion. This was also evident when seventeen-year-old Samir wanted to move into a youth welfare apartment, and the youth welfare employees used their discretion to keep him out. They insisted that when he turned eighteen at midnight, they would need to follow the rules and expel him—when surely they could have exercised discretion in his favor. It is largely up to the state bureaucrats when to use their discretion and when to cite written records or bureaucratic demands for precision. The state's power thus comes not from any specific strategy—as migrants also sometimes “appropriate” (Scheel 2017) them for their own ends—but from the ability to jump between strategies at will: privileging consistency over truth in one instance, permitting street-level bureaucrats to exercise discretion in another, or rigidly adhering to previous determinations or stringent rules in still other instances.

To be fair, migrants also sometimes switch between different strategies to affect the outcome of their categorization. Moving back and forth between knowledge and ignorance, between proof and ambiguity, is made easier by what McNevin (2013) calls ambivalence: migrants' sense that every choice they make is practically and morally fraught and will have drawbacks and unintended consequences. Moreover, as Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, strangers may draw power from not being easily integrable into bureaucratic category systems: “Their underdetermination is their potency: because they are nothing, they may be all” (1990, 146). Bauman is right to note that the stranger can seek out a place in existing category systems—as Idris, Samir, and Paul did. And yet, not only may those “be all” who “are nothing”; to be all is also to be nothing. Zeinab's seven dates of birth, after all, robbed her of a functional age altogether.

Moreover, migrants have little power over the category system itself. Even when they traverse spatial or temporal borders, they have no influence over which borders exist in the first place, or what it is like to live in the various unequal slots of the grids they draw. The categories stand—their walls perhaps penetrable, but nonetheless unbudging. This is, inversely, another important point about bureaucratic categorization: the state's power lies not just in determining age but in defining it. Migrants may escape a specific determination—by shaving or by foregrounding their assistance needs—but they have little say over the fact that it is a certain kind of appearance and dependency that formally defines youth. As Elizabeth F. Cohen argues, we often use quantitative measures of time because they shroud underlying disagreement. Following Cass R.

Sunstein, she calls such measures “incompletely theorized agreements”: proxies that “ease the path toward agreement on practices in the face of disagreement about principles” (2018, 132). The number seventeen is important only in its capacity to be a proxy for the idea of minority age—itsself a *mélange* of diverse and contested characteristics. Without commensuration—the representation of “something that is qualitative, and possibly intangible” through a quantitative measure (*ibid.*, 128)—we would have to make qualitative judgments every time we decide who should be protected on account of their youth, and we would be unlikely to reach “compromise” in the face of the “deep normative disagreement” (*ibid.*, 14) such debates would likely unearth. There is, after all, no agreement over why youth matters. One person might argue for minors’ special treatment on the basis of their presumed innocence, another on the basis of their vulnerability, and a third on the basis of their malleability. Using a number to encompass all minors—whether innocent, vulnerable, malleable, or all or none of these things—allows us to govern minority age without having to solve disagreement over what it is a proxy for in the first place.

Many young migrants insisted to me that they felt young because they had lacked the kind of childhood and youth that could have prepared them for adulthood in the Global North. They may have worked to support their families, cared for younger siblings, or even married at a young age. But, they contended, they had not learned how to think and act independently, or how to organize and plan their own lives—crucial skills for adults in the Global North. Unable to challenge official definitions of youth as being born before a certain date, lacking facial hair, or being unable to cook, they had to feign these traits in order to find support for their actual vulnerabilities, which are largely irrelevant to the agencies that protect youths in the Global North. The state’s power to determine a person’s age, which is sometimes undermined by a migrant’s successful effort to affect the result of such a determination, is thus accompanied by a power to define, which is virtually absolute.

Returning to Idris’s last hour on the boat, what does it finally mean when migrants shave their faces in order to look young? They can try to escape a particular category, but they cannot escape categorization. They can try to affect their own classification, but they have minimal influence over the official definition of youth. They can succeed in their pursuit of minority age, but the struggle of living with a fabricated identity never ends. If young asylum seekers succeed in internalizing their new birth dates, they have lost a piece of themselves. If their birth dates continue to feel foreign, their lives become a perpetual state of exception. In each instance, the age categorization regime inhibits a healthy, unencumbered coming of age and complicates a young migrant’s emerging adulthood—a stage of life already challenging enough as it is.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Saskia Bonjour, Elizabeth F. Cohen, Evelyn Ersanilli, Radhika Mongia, Salah Punathil, Stephen Scheel, Jagat Sohail, and Darshan Vigneswaran for their extremely thorough engagement with earlier drafts of this article. The article has also benefitted from the comments of three external reviewers – Rebecca Hamlin, Anne McNevin, and one reviewer who selected to remain anonymous.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998), *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Akin, D. (2017), *Queer Asylum Seekers: Translating Sexuality in Norway*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* **43**, 3, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2016.1243050.
- Albuja, A. F., D. T. Sanchez, and S. E. Gaither. (2018), *Fluid Racial Presentation: Perceptions of Contextual "Passing" among Biracial People*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* **77**, doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2018.04.010.
- Ali, S. (2007), "Go West Young Man": *The Culture of Migration among Muslims in Hyderabad, India*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* **33**, 1: doi: 10.1080/13691830601043489.
- Anthony, A. A. (1995), "Lost Boundaries": *Racial Passing and Poverty in Segregated New Orleans*, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* **36**, 3.
- Ariès, P. (1973), *Centuries of Childhood*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Bauman, Z. (1990), *Modernity and Ambivalence*, *Theory, Culture & Society* **7**, doi: 10.1177/026327690007002010.
- Belloni, M. (2019), *The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Bialas, U. (2023), *Forthcoming. Forever 17: Coming of Age in the German Asylum System*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2009), *Language, Asylum, and the National Order*, *Current Anthropology* **50**, 4: 415, doi: 10.1086/600131.
- Bohmer, C., and A. Shuman. (2007), *Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st Century*, London: Routledge.
- Brubaker, R. (2016), *trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Buchmann, M. C., and I. Kriesi. (2011), *Transition to Adulthood in Europe*, *Annual Review of Sociology* **37**, doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150212.
- Campbell, J. R. (2011), *The Enduring Problem of Statelessness in the Horn of Africa: How Nation-States and Western Courts (Re)Define Nationality*, *International Journal of Refugee Law* **23**, 4, doi: 10.1093/ijrl/eer024.

- Cohen, E. F. (2018), *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Crosnoe, R., and M. Kirkpatrick Johnson. (2011), *Research on Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century*. Annual Review of Sociology **37**, doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150008.
- Deutscher Bundestag. (2021), Drucksache 19/28109 [Printed Matter 19/28109], Accessed May 26, 2021, at <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/281/1928109.pdf>.
- Foucault, M. (2011), *Discipline and Punish*, In Contemporary Sociological Theory, edited by C. J. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, and I. Virk, 314–21, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Galli, C. (2018), *A Rite of Reverse Passage: The Construction of Youth Migration in the US Asylum Process*, Ethnic and Racial Studies **41**, 9, doi: 10.1080/01419870.2017.1310389.
- Groebner, V. (2007), *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hacking, I. (2006), *Making Up People*, London Review of Books **28**, 16.
- Hamlin, R. (2021), *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Heinemann, T., and T. Lemke. (2014), *Biological Citizenship Reconsidered: The Use of DNA Analysis by Immigration Authorities in Germany*. Science, Technology & Human Values **39**, 4, doi: 10.1177/0162243913509414.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979), *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, American Journal of Sociology **85**, 3, doi: 10.1086/227049.
- Juárez, F., and C. Gayet. (2014), *Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*, Annual Review of Sociology **40**, doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-052914-085540.
- Kim, J. (2011), *Establishing Identity: Documents, Performance, and Biometric Information in Immigration Proceedings*, Law & Social Inquiry **36**, 3, doi: 10.1111/j.1747-4469.2011.01249.x.
- Kim, J. (2022), *Between Sacred Gift and Profane Exchange: Identity Craft and Relational Work in Asylum Claims-Making on Religious Grounds*, Theory and Society **51**, 2, doi: 10.1007/s11186-021-09468-8.
- Lems, A., K. Oester, and S. Strasser. (2020), *Children of the Crisis: Ethnographic Perspectives on Unaccompanied Refugee Youth in and en Route to Europe*, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies **46**, 2, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2019.1584697.
- Lind, J. (2019), *Governing Vulnerabilised Migrant Childhoods through Children's Rights*, Childhood **26**, 3, doi: 10.1177/0907568219847269.

- Lipsky, M. (1980), *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, New York: Russell Sage.
- Lukate, J. M., and J. L. Foster. (2022), “Depending on Where I Am . . .”: Hair, Travelling and the Performance of Identity among Black and Mixed-Race Women, *British Journal of Social Psychology* **62**, 1, doi: 10.1111/bjso.12584.
- Madziva, R. (2018), “Your Name Does Not Tick the Box”: The Intertwining of Names, Bodies, Religion and Nationality in the Construction of Identity within the UK Asylum System, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* **41**, 5, doi: 10.1080/01419870.2017.1318215.
- Mahmood, S. (2001), *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*, *Cultural Anthropology* **16**, 2, doi: 10.1525/can.2001.16.2.202.
- Mahmood, S. (2005), *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mainwaring, Ć. (2016), *Migrant Agency: Negotiating Borders and Migration Controls*, *Migration Studies* **4**, 3, doi: 10.1093/migration/mnw013.
- McNevin, A. (2013), *Ambivalence and Citizenship: Theorising the Political Claims of Irregular Migrants*, *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* **41**, 2, doi: 10.1177/0305829812463473.
- Menjívar, C., and S. M. Lakhani. (2016), *Transformative Effects of Immigration Law: Immigrants’ Personal and Social Metamorphoses through Regularization*, *American Journal of Sociology* **121**, 6, doi: 10.1086/685103.
- Monsutti, A. (2007), *Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran*, *Iranian Studies* **40**, 2, doi: 10.1080/00210860701276183.
- Moynihan, D., E. Giannella, P. Herd, and J. Sutherland. (2022), *Matching to Categories: Learning and Compliance Costs in Administrative Processes*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* **32**, 4, doi: 10.1093/jopart/muac002.
- Perlmann, J. (2020), *America Classifies the Immigrants: From Ellis Island to the 2020 Census*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sadiq, K. (2008), *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Immigrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sawyer, S. M., P. S. Azzopardi, D. Wickremarathne, and G. C. Patton. (2018), *The Age of Adolescence*, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* **2**, 3, doi: 10.1016/S2352-4642(18)30022-1.
- Scheel, S. (2013), *Autonomy of Migration despite Its Securitisation? Facing the Terms and Conditions of Biometric Rebordering*, *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* **41**, 3, doi: 10.1177/0305829813484186.

- Scheel, S. (2017), *Appropriating Mobility and Bordering Europe through Romantic Love: Unearthing the Intricate Intertwinement of Border Regimes and Migratory Practices*. *Migration Studies* 5, 3, doi: 10.1093/migration/mnx047.
- Schönwälder, K. (2004), *Why Germany's Guestworkers Were Largely Europeans: The Selective Principles of Post-War Labour Recruitment Policy*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, 2, doi: 10.1080/0141987042000177324.
- Scott, J. C. (1998), *Seeing Like a State*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Squire, V. (2017), *Unauthorised Migration beyond Structure/Agency? Acts, Interventions, Effects*, *Politics* 37, 3, doi: 10.1177/0263395716679674.
- Turner, V. (1967), *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- UN. (1990), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Accessed December 21, 2020, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

ⁱ There are several reasons for asylum applications being submitted without documents. Some migrants come from countries without extensive civil registration systems, and have never owned documents. Others have lost their documents to traffickers while en route to Europe, or have deliberately got rid of them so as to conceal their own identities. Asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Guinea—the most common countries of origin of unaccompanied minors arriving in Germany—almost never show documents (Deutscher Bundestag 2021, 26).

ⁱⁱ The fact that young men from the Global South often see migration as a rite of passage to adulthood—a matter that is well documented in a range of regional contexts (see, for example, Ali 2007 and Monsutti 2007)—does not refute hardships in their countries of origin, which of course also shape their decision to migrate. For a critique of the “legal fiction” that only forced migrants are vulnerable, see Hamlin 2021; and for the converse critique of our tendency to overlook the desires of forced migrants, see Belloni 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ In line with the terms’ common use in statistics, I understand precision and accuracy (or truth) as two distinct concepts. While “precision” refers to how close a measurement, in this case a date of birth, is to other measurements like it (a kind of internal validity), “accuracy” refers to how close a measurement like an estimated date of birth is to someone’s actual birth date.

^{iv} The Eighth Book of the German Social Code (SGB VIII) does in fact hold the possibility for young adults to remain in youth welfare. Simply put, the state has to prove that someone between the ages of eighteen and twenty does not need youth welfare, while the onus lies with the applicant between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six. In practice, however, it is often difficult to use these age brackets to capacity, and nearly impossible to newly enter youth welfare after one’s eighteenth birthday.

^v The Dublin III Regulation stipulates that the country through which an asylum seeker enters the European Union (EU) is responsible for their asylum case. Germany has six months—in some cases more—to forcibly return an asylum seeker to their EU country of first entry.

^{vi} The particulars of some of these laws have changed since the time of my fieldwork.

^{vii} Although in this paper I focus on the negotiations undergone by most of my interlocutors, I want to provide at least a synoptic account of the visual and forensic age exams I studied ethnographically for a year. In visual age exams, social workers estimate an asylum seeker’s birth date on the basis of information gleaned in a biographical interview, their character and conduct as observed during the interview, and physical features such as hair growth, skin, and overall physique. Many German cities also commission forensic age exams, particularly when social workers cannot agree on a date of birth, or when another agency or the asylum seeker contests it. Most forensic age examiners evaluate three radiological images: an X-ray of the left hand, a panoramic X-ray of the jaw area, and a thin-layer CT scan of the clavicle. These images are compared to atlases of skeletal development, which show typical images of hands, jaws, and clavicles at various chronological ages, as well as distributions among the reference population. Medical examiners suggest a minimum age (the age of the youngest study participant with the same skeletal development) and a probable age (the average age of study participants with the same skeletal development). A judge then assigns a new date of birth. I found age examiners—both social workers and forensic medical examiners—to be quite conflicted by the ambiguities inherent in their politically highly controversial work. The uncertainties, even arbitrariness, of age determination also stood in stark contrast to the matter-of-factness that dates determined in this way later assumed in bureaucratic practice. For more on age exams, see Bialas (forthcoming 2023, chapter 3).

^{viii} The names used in this article are all pseudonyms.