


On reading non-participation as refusal

KAHINA MEZIAN T



Meziant, K. (2023) On reading non-participation as refusal. *Fennia* 201(2) 243–252. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.126844>

 Within the UK (the United Kingdom) charity sector, challenges persist in involving asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees in shaping services aimed at supporting and facilitating their everyday experiences. In that context, the study reframes non-participation as refusals of two kinds: noncompliance and departure. It challenges traditional participation models by exposing non-participation as a form of non-explicit agency for marginalised people. Looking at refusals through the lens of a two-year immersive study involving institutional ethnography and participatory research, it emphasises nuanced micropolitical dynamics in a charity supporting migrants and refugees' 'integration' in a city of Northeast England. By examining and reinterpreting what stands behind people's non-participation, the paper argues that the charity's engagement with its internal politics and social dynamics is essential if it wants to foster active participation. It suggests these insights can uncover participation paradoxes and offer alternative engagement approaches. Ultimately, the research illuminates the gap between organizational intent and outcomes, contributing to debates on migration, critical humanitarianism and charity, as well as participation.

Keywords: (non)participation, refusal, migration, charity, micropolitics

Kahina Meziant (<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4161-4753>), The Graduate Center, CUNY. E-mail: kmeziant@gc.cuny.edu

I asked Abel¹ if he knew any of the new guys as they are all Iranians, and he said he didn't. I showed how enthusiastic I was to see so many people here and Abel said he knows how this goes. They all come and are very motivated at first and then when one stops coming, all of them will stop as well. Marie said the same thing, or rather that she was afraid that might happen. It suddenly felt like a pressure. We have to keep the momentum going otherwise people will stop coming. (Field notes, 02.12.2019)

Introduction

This study draws from nearly two years of immersive research involving active participation and institutional ethnography (Billo & Mountz 2016) at a charity situated in Northeast England. The charitable organisation² focuses on helping migrants and refugees with their 'integration' into local

society. Departing from prevalent narratives in the so-called 'migrant charity sector', this work seeks to transcend surface-level interpretations of participation barriers, which fail to engage with the intricate social dynamics and micropolitics of the sector. While there is growing awareness of representation practices in organisations, merely including people with lived experiences in decision-making processes falls short of addressing and enhancing service conditions. This piece delves into the nuances of retention and participation, drawing attention to aspects of a charity's micropolitical dynamics and across aspiring 'democratic' spaces (Young 2001; Su 2017; Su 2018).

The above field note illustrates three characteristics of the charity: the fleeting character of a weekly drop-in event in the lives of those in the asylum system; a hint at a potential social reason behind disengagement; and lastly, the pressure arising from the anticipated decline in participants attending the charity's weekly drop-ins. This paper aims to question the non-participation of this cultural charity's target group by examining the micropolitical dynamics at play in the charity. This examination is based on my own first-hand observations and interactions with people on both sides of the charity's service.

Participation's multifaceted nature can make it elusive. Engaging or abstaining from engagement carries multiple implications and interpretations across various contexts. Here, in the case of a UK-based charity, when it comes to the involvement, or lack thereof, of migrants and individuals navigating the asylum system, the reasons are often attributed or linked to structural disadvantages they face, such as a lack of resources or language barriers. However, through my engagement, it became apparent that this is not the end of the story. Neglecting to delve deeper into the underlying reasons behind migrants', refugees' and asylum seekers' non-participation in services and activities designed for them, or in decision-making that affect them, leaves non-profit³ organisations unaware of how they contribute to this apparent passivity, impacting their service delivery and containing their ethical aspirations.

Within the UK's charity sector, which focuses on supporting the 'integration' of people navigating the asylum system and serves as the backdrop for this reflection, the question of their role in shaping the 'services' offered is a recurrent theme. Strategies to encourage such participation in the charity I call 'Segue' have been mostly ineffective. This prompted me to explore asylum seekers' non-participation from their perspectives. I draw for this on illustrative moments captured during my volunteering work with the charity, where reading non-participation as forms of refusals, instead of apathy, justified by limited resourcefulness, language barriers, or indifference, could support the designing of more effective consultation processes. As part of my double-role of volunteer and PhD researcher, I have undertaken various responsibilities for the charity. These have ranged from crafting grant proposals and arranging refreshments for our weekly drop-in sessions. I also took the lead on organising a special session in a local pub, as well as simply acting as a participant. Drawing from my personal experiences with immigration, I have developed a heightened interest in aspects of my fieldwork that defy conventional understandings of 'integration', services, and resistance.

For critical researchers interested in 'studying up' (Bowman 2009; Billo & Mountz 2016) as well as in participatory research (Kindon *et al.* 2007; Askins & Pain 2011), this paper makes a point that a more engaged type of research approach can unveil far more agency on the part of those often described as having none. This view contrasts with Roger Hart's ladder of participation for whom non-participation entails manipulation, decoration, and tokenism⁴ (see Figure 2 in Pridmore 2000). The implications of this could help expand understandings of participatory processes in institutional contexts by exposing paradoxes that may prevent genuine participation (Cooke & Kothari 2001), and possibly pointing to alternative methods to foster it. Thus, I consider the particular social contract at play in Segue and argue that the concept of refusal is valuable for thinking about migration and/in charities, and more largely in non-profits, thanks to its ability to illuminate the role of unattended micropolitics (Su 2018) in reifying an existing, asymmetrical order. In doing so, the absence of participation and assumed apathy or indifference must be reconstructed in light of a discrepancy between the organisation's intentions and the outcomes⁵.

The remainder of this paper delves into the space of asylum and migration charities and their politics of participation before providing insight into the politics of Segue, the charity I volunteered with for just under two years. I then use two examples to elicit a more careful reading of non-participation, as well as an invitation to recast it as refusals of two types: noncompliance and departure.

I conclude by arguing that if the social contract is explicitly (re)negotiated and power is shared, it has the potential to '(re)enfranchise' (Su 2017) asylum seekers and migrants, and push the reflection on practices of 'integration' further.

Researcher-researched: dynamic explorations

Insights into that discrepancy were brought to light through my continuous engagement and participation, as well as the use and development of reflexive interviews with several members of staff or volunteers. Pessoa and others (2019, 2) describe it as "the engagement of the interviewer and interviewee in the process of elaboration and collective understanding of the subjective contents exposed by the interviewer" and tailored the technique to suit the subject and research area. The most similar model to my own conception is a two-part interview consisting of a *preliminary analysis* – during which all topics that will be addressed in the next part of the interview are mentioned – and a *reflective interview* – during which all topics raised during the preliminary analysis are delved into (see Figure 1 in Pessoa *et al.* 2019). My interviews were conducted in two distinct phases. In the initial phase, I engaged in conversations lasting around 30 minutes to an hour. During these discussions, I elucidated the objectives of my research project and expounded upon the various concepts I had been delving into⁶. Additionally, I invited the interviewees to think about questions they may have regarding their work in the charity, or more broadly, about the themes I had touched upon, such as citizenship, activism, and resistance. The premise of this invitation was the awareness that my interviewees (almost) all knew the charity since much longer than I did. It seemed logical that their inquiries would be grounded in a more profound comprehension of the organisation's inner workings. I believed that these queries held the potential to highlight areas I might have overlooked. Additionally, for each interviewee, taking stock of their experience with the charity and the implications of what they have learned over the years for their work, is what constitute the practice of reflexivity that is central to this participatory research process. By fostering a reciprocal dynamic, where we collectively pondered over their questions alongside my own, I discovered that the interview process was remarkably fertile ground for generating novel ideas and approaches to our collaborative efforts as members of the Segue community.

Although this is beyond this paper's scope, I also delved into applying refusals within my research practice. A deliberate decision on my part was to abstain from conducting formal interviews with individuals seeking asylum. Here too my personal experience of migration reminds me that being the subject of inquiry and curiosity of intellectuals sometimes carries an implicit assumption of entitlement to the knowledge possessed by those being studied, without a corresponding sense of reciprocity (Huisman 2008; Chowdhury *et al.* 2016; Coddington 2017). With the individuals seeking asylum granting their consent, I interacted with them in alternative capacities as a researcher. This took the form of facilitating creative workshops, exchanging voice notes via WhatsApp, and partaking in walks together. The outcomes of these interactions manifested in diverse ways, primarily through the documentation of field notes and voice recordings. These resources, in turn, became highly valuable for informing my thinking process and written work.

Refusals, in their various manifestations, took on distinct contours contingent upon the vantage point – whether positioned on one side or the other of (the metaphorical or literal) border. An evident observation thus becomes that the prospects for engaging in acts of refusal are not uniformly distributed in border contexts. People identified as 'in need' of humanitarian assistance on one side; civil society actors frequently described as 'saviours' on the other (Pallister-Wilkins 2022a; Pallister-Wilkins 2022b). Narratives of the former's expectation to express gratitude (Nayeri 2017) for the latter's 'life-saving' act by suppressing one's agency demonstrate how contingent such refusals are. In the UK charity, the border is enacted interpersonally, in the everyday (Meier 2018; Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2018; Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2019), via a state-sanctioned legal framework and body that regulates its governance and deliberative processes (GOV.UK 2011): the National Asylum Support Service (or NASS) with a rather implicit social contract⁷. In light of such uneven circumstances, do refusals have to be declared in order to be counted as such? What do we make of more oblique refusals? And how can we navigate the sensitive issue of intentionality in this context, given the risks of classifying everything as (infra)political? (Cohen 2004)

Contextualising the UK asylum system and theoretical moorings

While migrants generally have restricted rights in many locations, the extent of the status they are granted determines their varying degrees of access and involvement in society, the polity, and the economy. The distinction between Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and citizenship holders is particularly notable. While both statuses allow people to live and work in the country permanently, ILR does not grant the democratic rights to vote, hold public office, or apply for a British passport (GOV.UK 2019). The process of 'citizenisation' is not linear, nor does it confer genuine democratic power on those who participate in it (Meier *et al.* 2020; Fortier 2021). So, what can be refused when the right to participate in political life is denied? Turner (2016, 146) uses the autonomy of migration literature to address the issue of (de)enfranchisement for people on the margins arguing for an alternative reading to the narrative of passivity ascribed to them, by suggesting that marginality be seen as an "escape [that] can be read as a distinctly political 'act', in that it is far from passive, it is a refusal to align with the existing co-ordinates of contemporary order and representation".

On a similar trajectory, Kallio, Wood and Häkli's (2020) conceptualisation of 'lived citizenship', as well as Isin's (2009) work on 'acts of citizenship' decentre the focus on right claims that traditional liberal citizenship is built upon. By suggesting that we focus on the performance of acts, they contend that we can reclaim a sense of agency, and collective history. "Those acts," Isin says, "that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political [...]" (Isin 2009, 381). This literature is important for this reflection because it arms us with an analytical lens that can see beyond the binary of exclusion/inclusion that comes with a citizenship and democratic participation regime. In the case of borders and migrants' belonging particularly (Fortier 2000), it enables us to see that even when they are not formally or informally – as per the expectation of unquestionable gratefulness – given the right to participate (and thus may be seen as non-participating actors), people who are in the proverbial 'waiting room' (the asylum process) (Bagelman 2013; Fortier 2021), still do participate, albeit in modes and forms that exceed institutional deliberative circles.

The broader economic context of austerity in the UK and the political climate of hostility towards migrants and other marginalised groups have a converging effect on the limited resources available to charities working in this field (Clayton *et al.* 2015; Clayton *et al.* 2016). This "reliance on goodwill as a form of benevolence" (Clayton *et al.* 2015, 26) is a common practice in the UK charity sector, which in turn indicates how socio-economic crises are dealt with. Nevertheless, in the context of Northern England described here, benevolence and volunteerism does not mean evenly shared power, as I will develop in the next section. Besides the formal governance structure in place, there is a more implicit social contract which in a paradoxical interplay enables and disables informal participation.

Segue's micropolitical dynamics

Most charities active in migration support work are formed and governed in a comparable way. The main regulating entity is a Board of Trustees, and while advisers are welcome to attend meetings, only trustees have decision-making authority. While people seeking asylum can act as trustees under the law, those who are destitute (have had their asylum claim denied) cannot. Furthermore, as one of my interviewees noted, the formal right to participate in the governance of the charity resembles that of the state (she referred to Segue as a "mini state"), insofar as modes of deliberation operate on a representative politics basis. Beyond the legal framework, there is a social contract, or as Su (2018, 80) defines it, 'micropolitics' "that is not embodied in authority but in social relations". In previous work (Meziant 2023a; Meziant 2023b), I drew on Nayak's (2012, 460) description of how internal politics in Black and Minoritized Ethnic organisations are constrained to adapt and respond to what he refers to as "an agenda premised on white governmentality". This type of contract promotes identity politics (securing funding frequently relies on asserting protected characteristics such as ethnicity and 'race'), which further polarises and increases the sense of marginalisation of Black and Brown people. Furthermore, Nayak (2012) claims that these organisations are not given adequate support in providing the services or consultations that the authorities require of them (in matters of healthcare

or education for instance). Instead, they end up being 'added in' through consultation that has little impact on how public services operate (*ibid.*).

One of my missions as a volunteer was to figure out why people with lived experience of the asylum system did not take part in the governance of the charity. Several assumptions were made, ranging from a lack of resources needed to support their engagement, to a lack of interest. Alongside Ella⁸ and other volunteers, I attempted to design activities that would both foster active engagement and facilitate our funding search. For example, we created media material in the form of a charity presentation video that featured a call for donations at the end. The videomaking process was (relatively) participatory in the sense that it featured the voices of people who have been an important part of Segue's membership for several years, and that their suggestions were sought after during the editing process. During an interview, Ella, key member of the organising committee and music teacher at Segue, reflects on the issue of engaging people with lived experience:

[I]t may be that just a lot of the people who come to Segue don't want to take part in the organisation of it, that's fine, I wouldn't want to say to somebody you know, you must be the Secretary because you are a migrant and you have to be one, but again, it's maybe not being so proactive about finding that out. (Reflexive interview with Ella, music tutor, 30.04.2020)

Her overall account conveys resignation and a sense of helplessness in understanding the barriers to participation. This emotional burden is commonplace in the charity sector, as is the limited resourcefulness described by Clayton, Donovan and Merchant (2015, 2016). For example, Segue's workforce counted no more than ten active people to handle all tasks, from fundraising to securing venues, purchasing food, setting up, managing accounts and so on. Nevertheless, in light of the charity's unquestioned and layered dynamics⁹, I came to wonder whether better resources alone would have resolved the problem of participation. In my time with the charity, I have attended over 27 hours of meetings and 50 hours of weekly drop-in sessions. Throughout, I have witnessed problems relating to accessibility, lack of sensitivity that betrayed harmful power asymmetries and an important lack of accountability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have also been informed that certain behaviours caused people to turn away from the charity. Consistent with Turner's (2016) interpretation of politics at the margins, I contend that this 'turning away' constitutes a refusal in its own right. The politics of such refusals must be considered if we are to understand what participation means for people at the border and what critical engagement needs to take place for meaningful change to happen.

At the time of the research, the only mechanism for consultation in Segue was a suggestion box. A cardboard box placed on the table next to the sign-in sheet at the entrance of the room. Mary, the chair who attended most of the weekly sessions, occasionally invited participants to write on a piece of paper what activities or other suggestions they would like Segue to provide. The suggestion box was almost never used. There was, however, one instance where it was used that I witnessed. At the end of the music class, a participant who regularly attended the guitar tuition and who was not comfortable writing in English approached me to express the demand for guitar cases. At the time, people who committed to attending the sessions weekly either did not take guitars back home or carried them in a plastic bag after each session. The participant asked me if I could suggest purchasing cases so the instrument would not get damaged and would not draw attention on the street. I wrote this down and placed it in the suggestion box. Stood at the bar right next to Jack, the guitar teacher, Mary picked up the box as people were leaving. After she read the content of the piece of paper aloud, Jack asked, "who wrote this?" with a tone that betrayed disbelief. Intimidated, I did not dare admitting that I was asked to write this down on behalf of someone else, and simply said that it was one of the people sitting on his class. With a great deal of suspicion, he smirked before retorting that this ask would lead to people stealing the instruments and/or the cases.

Observing the evident skepticism towards a participant's request highlights the significant influence held by certain individuals within the charity. By questioning the legitimacy of this request, Jack positions himself as the authority who can either fulfill or dismiss people's desires. It also illustrates the potential shortcomings of the suggestion box when implemented in this manner, as it runs the risk of being influenced by the biases of those in positions of power. This specific incident,

among others, further emphasises why the suggestion box or any avenue for expressing opinions within the charity may not effectively encourage greater involvement. On the contrary, such mechanisms can serve as additional barriers to participation, turning the process of voicing one's opinion into an opaque 'black box' where the inner workings leading to the realisation or dismissal of requests remain concealed.

Noncompliance and departures: two forms of refusals

Noncompliance

On a warm day in June 2020, long-time Segue member Abel and I went for a stroll along the quayside. He laughed when I asked him how he felt about Segue. Even though he described it as a home, he did not hesitate to point out the imbalances of power he noticed in the organisation. Since 2009, Segue has given free music classes to migrants from all over the world in a relaxed setting with snacks, drinks, and a chance to meet new people. It never turned anyone away based on their immigration status and welcomed British people as well. Even though music was a big part of this program, most people did not come to improve their musical skills. Instead, they wanted a break from the deep isolation caused by the asylum system and a rare (if not the only) chance to meet new people and to see more of the city than just their neighbourhood. The Covid-19 pandemic and series of lockdowns placed Segue's regular attendees in a tough spot. Many of them lived in close proximity to other people in asylum hotels or were on their own, which made them feel even more alone. Segue's governance team decided to set up WhatsApp groups for each tuition (violin guitar, song writing) so that people could stay in touch. Several attempts of remote classes also took place, but the WhatsApp group chats were repurposed into morale support space used to share news, rumours, questions about the pandemic, personal updates, and culinary creations. One day, on the guitar group chat, the following conversation took place:

[12:52, 13/05/2020] Ziyad: [Shares a video of Trump]

[13:19, 13/05/2020] Abel: [Laughing, clapping emojis] I like him!

[14:17, 13/05/2020] Ziyad: [Shares a funny edited image with two giraffes]

[16:22, 13/05/2020] Jack (guitar Tutor): Can we keep this group's posts for guitar only please?

[16:35, 13/05/2020] Miray: What's the problem Jack?

[17:10, 13/05/2020] Abel: No.

(WhatsApp chat, 13.05.2020)

While there was no formal appointment of a group moderator, Jack assumed the role by default as the primary tutor. The arbitrary rule to talk or not talk about certain topics was explicitly challenged here by at least two of the members. I read this noncompliance with the reactionary rule of the lead tutor as a form of refusal which exposes the non-consensual and context-insensitive nature of the order. This exchange can also be interpreted as a refusal to comply with the expectation of being grateful for the opportunity to be in a room and be taught how to play the guitar. On our walk, Abel brought up the subject again, telling me how upset he was by Jack's reaction. "This isn't his group; this is our group", he said. Indeed, who would Jack teach if Ziyad, Abel, Miray, and so many others were not present? Here, I read noncompliance as a form of rejection of the dignity-robbing effect of power asymmetry and managed participation of people with lived experience. This noncompliance signals that failing to comply with the rules and hierarchies implicit to the charity's micropolitics is a way of asserting agency by refusing the imposed order. While there were instances where Jack actively stood for people seeking asylum's rights in the charity, my overall experience at Segue suggests that more often than not, a dominating voice of self-proclaimed authority would deter people from actively engaging.

Departures

Departures are another type of refusal that, if taken seriously, has the potential to improve decision-making and consultation in charities working with migrants. Such exits, while frequently attributed to people not having time, living complex/unstable lives, being interested in other things, and so on, can also be read as an explicit distancing from a form of white governmentality that does not say its name (Nayak 2012). This would imply, as Nayak puts it, that the presence of racially or ethnically marginalised people is an asset for the maintenance of a liberal democratic agenda – a sort of tokenistic (knowingly or unknowingly) act that expresses a desire to centre these voices but does not follow through on adjusting its consultation mechanisms to meet the needs of the people it seeks to centre.

Through several iterations since its inception in 2009, Segue won, then lost funding, was formally registered as a charity, then operated as an informal group. Throughout my volunteering experience, I heard various accounts of how the organisation used to be run. While some recalled a time when people navigating the asylum system were more actively involved in shaping the weekly music sessions, others expressed relief that the tacit male-dominated hierarchy that had developed was no longer a reality. Migrants' involvement in running the charity was still desired, as Ella previously stated. But under whose terms?

During my walk with Abel, I asked him why he was not attending the meetings. He tried, he said, before admitting that it is better for him to see Segue as only a 'soothing' space. As such, he no longer saw taking a more active role in shaping Segue as good for him. I asked what led him to this conclusion. What seemed frustrating to him, was how the presence of asylum seekers around the meeting table seemed but a mere token, which he illustrated by telling me, laughing, "all we get is free coffee." "I used to come, but after sitting there for an hour or two and listening to people talk, we have a cup of coffee, and then I'd leave and think, 'what am I doing here?'" (Field notes, 01.12.2020).

In Abel's tone, I do not hear apathy or indifference. Instead, I hear a refusal to be shamed by a strategy of governance that makes him feel useless and does not try harder to 'meet him where he is'. It also reinforces a sense of implicit hierarchy that gives him the impression that his opinions matter, yet never fulfilling the conditions necessary for his voice to count. Several other people, including me, refused to further engage with Segue. I have wondered if charities (and 'grassroots' non-profits more broadly) doing this kind of work are necessary at all, and if negotiating the terms of participation is enough for the voices of people with lived experience to be centred. Leaving seemed to me to be the appropriate response to a project that I feel does not fulfill the conditions for true emancipatory politics.

Further work

To recast non-participation as refusals for people at the border means to shed light on patterns of managed participation (Su 2018) and on the issue of 'good intentions' that serve as smokescreen for concrete recognition and redistribution of power, particularly salient in non-profits¹⁰. At the border, unquestioned gratefulness from migrants is what is expected; it exists within a larger picture of humanitarian assistance that portrays migrants as desperate and helpless. This is a common narrative among academics and journalists that should be rejected (Cabot 2016; Coddington 2017). We can subvert the notion of "the (im)possible agency of non-citizen (migrants)" (Turner 2016, 143) and account for forms of participation that do not limit it to patterns of white governmentality by reading the illustrative moments above as forms of refusal. We could look at marginality "with an eye toward recognising and understanding its possible subversive potential, [and] reorient our respective fields to focus on the potential liberatory aspects of deviance", as Cohen (2004, 38) puts it. Examining instances in which members did not comply with charity leaders' expectations, either by quitting, not participating, or not adhering to arbitrary rules, I propose that this assumed passivity reveals a paradox in Segue and many charities aiming to centre the voices of people with lived experience: while the challenges of limited resourcefulness combined with austerity are real for many, 'good intentions' alone are insufficient if organisation leaders are not explicitly reflecting on and addressing the internal micropolitics (Su 2018) that are to blame for the failure to encourage participation.

In the context of research on migration, the refusal to 'study down' and choose instead to 'study up' (Bowman 2009; Billo & Mountz 2016) can help identify implications and ways to (re)enfranchise those who academics often assume an entitlement to objectify (Chowdhury *et al.* 2016; Nagar & Shirazi 2019). Further work could explore in greater detail whose and what rules are reified through the assumed inaction of migrants and asylum seekers, and methodological implications and limitations for 'studying up' in the context of borders. To begin sketching the contours of a more equitable social contract to work at the border, we need to take Cohen's (2004, 38) call forward and examine "the conditions under which transgressive behaviour becomes transformative and deviant practice is transformed into politicized resistance". Such a call, then, must include a thorough engagement with the potential of refusing to establish such non-profits and conduct such academic work in the first place.

Notes

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

² Many authors have argued for a critical understanding of humanitarian and charitable help as forms of support inherited from colonial dynamics (Fassin 2012; Mitchell 2017; Pallister-Wilkins 2022b; Bird & Schmid 2023), further entrenched by a liberal and neoliberal economy. The so-called 'non-profit industrial complex' (INCITE! 2007), also conceptualised by Gilmore (2022) as the 'anti-state state', is opposed along ethical lines to practices of solidarity (see Spade 2020; Meziant 2023a).

³ In this text, I employ the term 'nonprofit' to encompass the broader category of not-for-profit organisations that offer services geared toward migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Additionally, I utilise the term 'charity' to refer to a specific subtype of nonprofit. Segue, which holds central importance in this paper, is a charity.

⁴ It is important to note that Roger Hart's work focuses on children and youth's participation. Extrapolating from this demographic, who are also often seen as less agentic, can indicate that seeing non-participation through the lens proposed in this paper offers an opportunity to re-enfranchise people who are often chosen as subjects of study (see Bowman 2009).

⁵ This, of course, applies to non-profits that explicitly position themselves as 'grassroots' or 'community-led' with little to no vertical hierarchy. Not all non-profits are made equal in their structure, and in the form of leadership they take.

⁶ I also offered to share readings such as academic papers that had been fundamental to my thinking of the project, which one participant engaged with in the reflexive interview.

⁷ While the reader unfamiliar with the UK system may wish for further information on this, this paper is meant to be a short reflection on practices of refusal for refugees and migrants encountering the UK charity system. For a deeper look at NASS and its interconnectedness with the UK charity sector, refer to chapters 1 and 2 in Meziant (2023a).

⁸ All names of people, organisations and some biographical elements have been modified to preserve the anonymity of the people represented in the research project.

⁹ Such as who holds decision making power (micro-level), who is providing the funding to keep the charity running (macro-level) and who is accountable to whom (across micro and macro-levels).

¹⁰ Though also present in more informal forms of organising (see Freeman 2013).

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the participants and organisation who made this work possible. My gratitude to the guest editors of the Special Issue, Isabel Meier and Aila Spathopoulou for their support throughout the process, to reviewers Aura Lounasmaa and Matthew Benwell, and to Celina Su and John Clayton for their feedback and support.

References

- Askins, K. & Pain, R. (2011) Contact zones: participation, materiality, and the messiness of interaction. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29(5) 803–821. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d11109>
- Bagelman, J. (2013) Sanctuary: a politics of ease? *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 38(1) 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375412469314>
- Billo, E. & Mountz, A. (2016) For institutional ethnography: geographical approaches to institutions and the everyday. *Progress in Human Geography* 40(2) 199–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515572269>
- Bird, G. & Schmid, D. (2023) Humanitarianism and the ‘Migration Fix’: on the implication of NGOs in racial capitalism and the management of relative surplus populations. *Geopolitics* 28(3) 1235–1261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.2008361>
- Bowman, D. (2009) Studying up, down, sideways and through: situated research and policy networks. In Stewart L., David B., Alastair G., Maria H., David M., Larry S., Joanna S. & Dan W. Canberra (eds.) *The Future of Sociology*. Canberra: Australia: The Australian Sociological Association.
- Cabot, H. (2016) “Refugee Voices”: tragedy, ghosts, and the anthropology of not knowing. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 45(6) 645–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615625567>
- Chowdhury, E. H., Pulido, L., Heynen, N., Rini, L., Wainwright, J., Inayatullah, N. & Nagar, R. (2016) Muddying the waters: coauthoring feminisms across scholarship and activism. *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(12) 1800–1812. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1221880>
- Clayton, J., Donovan, C. & Merchant, J. (2015) Emotions of austerity: care and commitment in public service delivery in the North East of England. *Emotion, Space and Society* 14 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2014.11.004>
- Clayton, J., Donovan, C. & Merchant, J. (2016) Distancing and limited resourcefulness: third sector service provision under austerity localism in the north east of England. *Urban Studies* 53(4) 723–740. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014566369>
- Coddington, K. (2017) Voice under scrutiny: feminist methods, anticolonial responses, and new methodological tools. *The Professional Geographer* 69(2) 314–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2016.1208512>
- Cohen, C. J. (2004) Deviance as resistance: a new research agenda for the study of black politics. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1(1) 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X04040044>
- Cooke, B. & Kothari, U. (2001) Power, knowledge and social control in participatory development. In Cooke, B. & Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* 139–152. Zed Books: London.
- Fassin, D. (2012) *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Fortier, A.-M. (2000) *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity*. Routledge, London.
- Fortier, A.-M. (2021) *Uncertain Citizenship: Life in the Waiting Room*. Manchester University Press, Manchester. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526139092>
- Freeman, J. (2013) The Tyranny of Structurelessness. *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 41(3–4) 231–246. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqs.2013.0072>
- Gilmore, R. W. (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*. Verso Books, London.
- GOV.UK. (2011) Charities Act 2011. <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/25/section/1>>. 17.05.2022.
- GOV.UK. (2019) Indefinite leave to remain in the UK: your rights and status. <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/indefinite-leave-to-remain-in-the-uk>>. 14.01.2023.
- Huisman, K. (2008) Does this mean you’re not going to come visit me anymore? An inquiry into an ethics of reciprocity and positionality in feminist ethnographic research. *Sociological Inquiry* 78(3) 372–396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2008.00244.x>
- INCITE! (2007) *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Isin, E. F. (2009) Citizenship in flux: the figure of the activist citizen. *Subjectivity* 29(1) 367–388. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2009.25>
- Kallio, K. P., Wood, B. E. & Häkli, J. (2020) Lived citizenship: conceptualising an emerging field. *Citizenship Studies* 24(6) 713–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1739227>
- Kindon, S., Pain, R. & Kesby, M. (2007) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. Routledge, Milton Park. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203933671>
- Meier, I. (2018) *Re-Locating Asylum Activism: Asylum Seekers’ Negotiations of Political Possibilities, Affective Borders and the Everyday*. Doctoral thesis, University of East London. <https://doi.org/10.15123/ucl.86y3w>
- Meier, I., Kallio, K. & Häkli, J. (2020) Radical Hope in asylum seeking: political agency beyond linear temporality. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(17) 4006–4022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1764344>

- Meziant, K. (2023a) *Forced Migration and Anticolonial Geographies of Regrounding: An Ethnography of the Voluntary and Community Sector in North East England*. Doctoral thesis in Geography, Northumbria University. <https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/51326/>
- Meziant, K. (2023b) 'Unleashing the beast': emergent resistance in white charity. In Hughes, S. M. (ed.) *Critical Geographies of Resistance*, 199–216. Edward Elgar Publishing, London. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800882881.00022>
- Mitchell, K. (2017) Education, race and empire: a genealogy of humanitarian governance in the United States. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42(3) 349–362. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12180>
- Nagar, R. & Shirazi, R. (2019) Radical vulnerability. In Antipode Editorial Collective (eds.) *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, 236–242. John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119558071.ch44>
- Nayak, A. (2012) Race, religion and British multiculturalism: the political responses of Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary organisations to multicultural cohesion. *Political Geography* 31(7) 454–463. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.08.005>
- Nayeri, D. (2017) The ungrateful refugee: 'We have no debt to repay'. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/dina-nayeri-ungrateful-refugee>>. 24.05.2022.
- Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2022a) Ep. 19 – humanitarian borders with Polly Pallister-Wilkins. <<https://open.spotify.com/show/2rGvPiNTetWjlmQT39sT2X>>. 21.05.2022.
- Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2022b) HuManitarianism: race and the overrepresentation of 'Man'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47(3) 695–708. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12531>
- Pessoa, A. S. G., Harper, E., Santos, I. S. & Gracino, M. C. da S. (2019) Using reflexive interviewing to foster deep understanding of research participants' perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918825026>
- Pridmore, P. (2000) Children's participation in development for school health. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education* 30 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030579200109888>
- Spade, D. (2020) *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books, London.
- Su, C. (2017) Beyond inclusion: critical race theory and participatory budgeting. *New Political Science* 39(1) 126–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1278858>
- Su, C. (2018) Managed participation: city agencies and micropolitics in participatory budgeting. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 47(4) 765–965. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764018757029>
- Turner, J. (2016) (En)gendering the political: citizenship from marginal spaces. *Citizenship Studies* 20(2) 141–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1132569>
- Young, I. M. (2001) Activist challenges to deliberative democracy. *Political Theory* 29(5) 670–690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591701029005004>
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G. & Cassidy, K. (2018) Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of British Immigration Legislation. *Sociology* 52(2) 228–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702599>
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G. & Cassidy, K. (2019) *Bordering*. Polity Press: Cambridge.