Sociology

Enduring Borders: Precarity, Swift Falls and Stretched Time in the Lives of Migrants Experiencing Homelessness in the UK

Simon Stewart iD
University of Portsmouth, UK

Charlotte Sanders iD
SOAS University of London, UK

Abstract

In this article, we draw attention to the border and border governance as key mechanisms of class and 'race-making' in the context of an increasingly hostile immigration environment. Focusing on the life story narratives of migrants experiencing homelessness, we extend the reach of analysis beyond the experiences of asylum seekers to gain a stronger understanding of migrant experiences more broadly. In our analysis, we reveal the temporal continuum of suffering endured, ranging from the 'slow violence' of the everyday, rooted in precarity and restricted access to the labour market and support services, to moments of rupture where there is a swift decline in circumstances, leading to homelessness. When, at last, the tempo of suffering slows again, these individuals are increasingly excluded from meaningful calendars of activity as they spend their time waiting, often in vain, for an outcome of a Home Office application or for the possibility of some longer-term accommodation.

Keywords
borders, homelessness, migrant, precarity, time

Corresponding author:
Simon Stewart, Centre for European and International Studies Research, University of Portsmouth, Park Building, King Henry 1 Street, Portsmouth, PO1 2DZ, UK.
Email: simon.stewart@port.ac.uk

On one evening in 2022, the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) recorded 8329 people sleeping rough on the streets of Greater London.[1] Of these, almost half were 'non-UK nationals', despite the fact that only 9% of the UK population hold non-UK nationality.[2] In addition, we know from data gathered by homelessness organisations that of 320,000 people experiencing homelessness in the UK only 20,000 of these are rough sleeping, with migrants of various immigration statuses far more likely to be experiencing other inadequate, overcrowded, temporary and insecure housing situations.[3] The research project from which the following is drawn uses a life story narrative approach to understand how migrants, or non-UK nationals, are made so disproportionately vulnerable to homelessness; caught as they are between the involution of the 'left hand' of the (social) state – with (among other things) cuts to social housing, legal aid and access to benefits – and the increasing punitiveness of the 'right hand' of the state, an expression of which can be found in the contemporary UK border regime (Bourdieu, 1998; de Noronha, 2020; Mayblin et al., 2020). The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic during which we were able to gain access to our interlocutors as a consequence of Everyone In, an initiative that required local authorities in England to house all individuals experiencing homelessness in their area regardless of their immigration status (see Stewart et al., 2023).

   This article makes a novel contribution to sociological debates through its analysis of the workings of the border in structuring inequalities along the lines of race and class, focusing in particular on the temporal dimension of the suffering endured by migrants experiencing homelessness. In our analysis of migrants' life-stories, we draw attention to enduring precarity as an effect of the border regime, and as experienced through time on a continuum of suffering that ranges from everyday 'slow wounding' to moments of swift and precipitous decline into homelessness, followed again by periods of prolonged waiting. We show that precarity is fostered through (lack of) access to the labour market, lack of access to immigration advice and support services, and the instability of visa statuses. As we elaborate, the policies, practices and technologies of UK immigration control are fundamental to the structuring of precarious life (Butler, 2009) among migrants in the UK, in ways that differ across, but also cut across, varying immigration statuses. We contribute to sociological debates through our identification of how the border endures in the lives of migrants experiencing homelessness who have been bestowed with 'inferior' socio-legal statuses (Hodkinson et al., 2021: 73) and how their suffering is experienced over time.

   Through this research we advance scholarship that brings together two bodies of enquiry, on homelessness and migration. As others have elaborated, there is a clear connection in the UK context between the immigration policies that have shaped the 'hostile environment'[4] (Sanders, 2020) and vulnerability to destitution, particularly for those seeking asylum (see Allsopp et al., 2014; Dwyer and Brown, 2008). By focusing on the life story narratives of four individuals with different immigration statuses – spousal visa; European Economic Area (EEA) migrant status; refugee status; and asylum seeker – we aim to extend the reach of analysis beyond the experiences of asylum seekers in order to gain a stronger understanding of migrant experiences more broadly. In doing so, we also show how for many of our interlocutors the decline into destitution occurred after years, sometimes decades, of relatively stable lives in the UK, raising the question

of when – or indeed whether – the border is actually 'crossed', or the extent to which it instead endures over the course of a life (and, indeed, beyond, see Kovras and Robins (2016)). Moreover, our attention to the temporal dimension of suffering reveals how protracted vulnerability lays the foundations for moments of swift decline in circumstances; a more rapid experience of violence that reveals the less visible, and sometimes invisible, slow violence that characterises migrant life in the UK.

Borders, Race-Making and Time

While all of our interlocutors were experiencing the sharpest end of precarity at the point at which we met them, having been homeless for at least months but often years, it is also the case that their differing immigration statuses structured varying routes to and experiences of destitution, as well as opportunities for overcoming their situation (and, ultimately, avoiding deportation). Here, insights from the study of racial capitalism go some way to clarifying the logics that drive the labyrinthine system of immigration control in 'multi-status Britain' (de Noronha, 2020). As Bhattacharyya (2018: 127) notes, border control is 'not, in the main, a machinery that is designed to prevent all mobility' but, rather, is one most concerned with surveilling, disciplining and differentiating access to movement among populations. In this sense, border control becomes a central technology in (late) capitalism as the multiplication of immigration statuses, which also shift and slide over time, allows states to manage the entry of racialised populations into particular forms of economic activity within its borders, while restricting others from working (Anderson, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). As our four vignettes illustrate, the differing immigration statuses of our interlocutors directed different entries, or lack thereof, into the labour force, and between formal and informal economies.

Indeed, this is not only about the management of populations as existing a priori to the border, but involves the (re)production of populations *through* border control. Border policies, practices and technologies – not least immigration statuses and the differing access to work and welfare that they extend – are generative of 'class' and 'race' not only as abstract structures of domination but also as material conditions experienced in everyday life. As de Noronha (2021) explains, understanding bordering practices in this way underscores that they 'do not merely reflect racial hierarchies . . . they (re)make them'. The production of classed and racialised subject positions through the border most plainly operates through the ways that immigration status mediates the access of non-citizens to work and welfare support, directly shaping economic, physical, mental and social well-being. Regarding welfare support, in the years since the 'hostile environment' was officially announced as a ramping up and extension of already racialised and punitive immigration control in the UK (see Vickers, 2020), the condition of 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) has been embedded into an increasing range of immigration statuses. Having no recourse to public funds blocks access not only to welfare support in the form of benefits, but also to other vital services such as housing and homelessness assistance, and secondary and community healthcare. In addition, prior to Brexit, proof of 'meaningful' work was integral to EU migrants' eligibility for welfare support; a requirement hindered by entrenchment in the informal economy. Crucially, permission to work is also linked to immigration status and (for example) the vast

majority of asylum seekers and 'undocumented' migrants are not eligible to work, thus encouraging either destitution or illegalised and exploitative forms of labour participation.

'EU migrants', 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' as legal categories engender socio-economic conditions that are productive of 'race' as an everyday social reality. We argue that attending to the life-stories of migrants across immigration statuses allows us to apprehend how border regimes make race (and class) meaningful (de Noronha, 2020) in their shaping of unequal everyday lived experiences and (dis)similar proximities to precarity, exploitation and premature death. Our four vignettes demonstrate not only how individuals and populations are racialised as 'migrants' more broadly through border policies and practices, but also elaborate the processes that (re)produce different experiences of race and class across migrant populations, in line with the rights and restrictions attached to their immigration statuses. Through the vignettes presented below, we see how these categories come to be lived and experienced in the everyday through both intersecting and contrasting experiences of work and welfare, health and homelessness, and time and temporality across our research participants. While all of our participants' lives have been impacted by the state's immigration control measures, in each instance it has occurred by different means, with different effects and along different cycles of time, in each case structuring divergent experiences of race and class.

As we illustrate below through Thomas's story, it has been normalised for asylum seekers to live in poor housing conditions, subsisting on a modicum of financial support and unable to work in order to support themselves. As a consequence, Mayblin et al. (2020) argue that asylum seekers are looked after only in terms of the state's minimal obligations for those seeking asylum, meaning that they are subjected to a form of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011) whereby 'they are merely prevented from physically dying, though often with long-lasting consequences' (Mayblin et al., 2020: 111). The stories presented below highlight this slow violence but also register something else on the temporal dimension: the four individuals' weak structural positions, through which a number of factors build on each other and work together to trigger a swift, precipitous decline in circumstances, leading from a seemingly stable situation to sudden homelessness and destitution. Within our broader project on migrant homelessness during COVID-19, we were concerned with the ways that the discursive construction of COVID-19 as a 'crisis' invisibilised the presence of multiple crises already occurring, which, while exacerbated by the pandemic, were not necessarily produced by it (Sanders, 2020). Here, along similar lines, we argue that attending to the life story narratives of migrants experiencing homelessness refocuses attention from homelessness itself as the moment of crisis, and of abrupt violence and suffering, to the enduring conditions of precarity that engender it. Therefore, we consider violence and suffering as a continuum, and we highlight the utility of a temporal analysis in doing so. This assertion also recognises, importantly, the politics of recognition that shapes understandings of (slow) violence and its presence or absence across privileged and marginalised standpoints (Davies, 2022).

In her study of immigration detention in the UK, Griffiths (2014) elaborates the lived experience of immigration control as shaped both by periods of protracted waiting and moments of rapid change in circumstance when Home Office decisions are finally made. In our analysis, we extend this discussion of time beyond the detention centre to the

realm of everyday life, and beyond immigration detainees to migrants across a range of immigration statuses. In addition, we are interested in the ways that precarity endures beneath the temporal rhythms of a seemingly 'normal' life for those with regular immigration statuses but who are nevertheless maintained as 'non-citizens'. It is not uncommon for people in the UK and elsewhere to experience job loss or to experience the breakup of a relationship, or to miss deadlines in submitting documents. For those with citizenship, such single life events, or even the combination of several at once, rarely have such calamitous consequences. Excluded from the formal economy, whether because legally prohibited from working or because of low levels of linguistic or cultural capital, we see examples in the life-stories below of how the lack of participation in paid work, and increasing exposure to unregulated work in the informal economy, increases the risk of illegalisation and deportation. Furthermore, once destitute, new experiences of time come to shape the life-stories we present. Indeed, the anticipation of a meaningful future, what Bourdieu (2000: 223) terms 'the practical relation to the forth-coming', depends on the possession of the various forms of capital, that is, economic and cultural, in the present, accumulated in the past (Bourdieu, 2000, 2020). In fact, taking this temporal dimension into account, we can see that there is a continuum of suffering with slow violence followed by swift falls and then long periods of stretched out waiting and everyday wounding. Those facing destitution have 'a deficit of goods and an excess of time' (Bourdieu, 2000: 226), which becomes dead time, stretched time spent waiting for a decision from the Home Office or government department, or time that needs to be killed because there is no meaningful schedule or calendar of activities to follow (Auyero, 2010; Bourdieu, 2000).

Methodology: Life story Narratives and/as Sites of Knowledge

This research theorises the border and its enduring production of classed and racialised precarity through the life story narratives of four men: Thomas, Ahmad, Vali and Arian. Life-stories offer possibilities for (re)understanding the world from the personal standpoints of narrators. Life story narration as a method provides space for alternative diagnoses of systems of domination from the perspective of those they most impact. As such, life story narration has been central to multiple fields of critical enquiry, most notably in feminist, particularly Black and postcolonial feminist, and Indigenous studies (Nadar, 2014; Ranco and Haverkamp, 2022; Srigley et al., 2018). As becomes clear in the life-stories that follow, the border intervenes in the lives of each narrator in different moments and in divergent ways, intersecting with the personal troubles that shape their lives as individuals and further weakening their social position (Mills, 2000).

We have chosen these four vignettes because the continuities and discontinuities across the stories that follow sharpen our understanding of the multiple and intricate ways in which immigration controls, class, race and(/as) precarity intersect in the contemporary moment, and the proliferating means through which borders endure in the everyday lives of 'migrants'. In addition, life-stories provide an opportunity to not only understand the border's enduring force, but how individuals themselves endure. At the same time, it is important to recognise that life story interview methods intersect in

potentially problematic ways with the methods of questioning employed by states in assessing, for example, the validity of asylum claims. Our research aims required that we raise questions about how our interlocutors had entered the UK; when and how they had moved between immigration statuses; and their sometimes illegalised involvement in the labour market. In order to avoid replicating harmful modes of questioning, we took our cues from individual participants as to how we structured the interview process. This included deferring questions that appeared to make our participants uncomfortable; ensuring easy access to (the same) interpreters; and conducting interviews across the course of weeks to build trust, as well as to allow time for the clarification or withdrawal of previously disclosed information.

The four narratives explored in this article derive from a broader ESRC/UKRI-funded research project entitled 'Homelessness during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Homeless Migrants in a Global Crisis' (see also Stewart and Sanders, 2023). Researching migrant homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic provided an exceptional opportunity to meet with and learn from migrants experiencing homelessness, as the government's Everyone In initiative extended unprecedented homelessness support to all individuals irrespective of their immigration status. We examined the contradictory effects of the pandemic: on the one hand, we gained greater insight into the crisis of migrant homelessness and forms of suffering that pre-date COVID-19 and are likely to continue afterwards. On the other hand, we noted how Everyone In provided many benefits for those experiencing homelessness including access to food, shelter and healthcare and immigration advice. The fieldwork for the project spanned 18 months of research in partnership with staff from nine homelessness organisations across three cities in the South of England, and with non-UK national clients engaged by these services throughout the pandemic. In phase one, we conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with staff in the sector; in phase two, we conducted life story narrative interviews with 43 migrants. We use the term 'migrants' with continuing hesitancy, recognising it to be a category produced by immigration control itself. For the purposes of our project, we defined both 'homeless' and 'migrant' in the broadest possible senses, considering 'homeless migrants' to include any individuals who are non-UK nationals (including those who now hold British citizenship) and who define themselves as homeless (including those rough sleeping, sofa surfing and in insecure accommodation). All of our respondents were born outside of the UK.

Vignettes: Thomas, Ahmad, Vali and Arian

Now, we turn to presenting four vignettes, introducing Thomas, Ahmad, Vali and Arian. First, we introduce Thomas, an 'asylum seeker' housed in Home Office accommodation. Second, we meet Ahmad, a 'refugee' formerly with humanitarian protection but now with 'indefinite leave to remain'. Third, we turn to Vali, an 'EEA migrant' worker. Fourth, we end with Arian, formerly residing in the UK with a 'spousal visa' but who we meet illegalised and sleeping rough. In stating their immigration statuses, we do not intend to reduce them to those statuses, but rather to illustrate the different routes to destitution and possibilities for overcoming homelessness in the contemporary and 'multistatus' (de Noronha, 2020) UK context.

Thomas

Having built a successful career in Nigeria working in a bank, Thomas, a 60-year-old man, had obtained a two-year multiple entry visa allowing him to visit the UK multiple times between 2005 and 2007. During this period, Thomas did not anticipate living anywhere outside of Nigeria in the long term and yet his situation – having his sexuality 'outed' – meant that he needed to flee. Thomas defines himself as bisexual, but largely lived as if heterosexual due to difficulties associated with being 'openly gay' in Nigeria. Thomas was a husband and a father by the age of 20, and for decades kept his sexuality a secret to all but those closest to him. Sometime during 2005 and 2007, however, problems began to occur in Thomas's family, mostly related to disagreements with his siblings over inheritance. This dispute became so toxic that members of Thomas's family decided to reveal the 'truth' of his sexuality to both the wider community and the authorities. Thomas was arrested, but managed to escape, and immediately boarded a plane to the UK, telling no one that he was leaving.

Unaware at first that persecution on the grounds of sexuality could make him eligible for asylum, Thomas remained in the UK undocumented. As an illegal(ised) resident, Thomas was unable to access work, housing or any statutory support services. This left him reliant on informal work, often in exchange for a place to stay. Already, Thomas's immigration status had structured his life as extremely precarious, and marked by an enduring lack of stability particularly in his housing situation. Despite this, and despite the extreme circumstances that brought him to the UK, Thomas now recalls his first six or seven years in the UK as an enjoyable time in his life: 'When I came into the country, I just lived my life. I was living my life the way I want to live it. I was just a free person to do just what I wanted to, you understand?' It is interesting to consider these more positive recollections in relation to Thomas's experiences in the years since. In 2014, he met a woman with whom he quickly developed a close bond, and the following year the couple decided to marry. Unaware of his eligibility for asylum in the UK, this was the first time that Thomas sensed an opportunity to regularise his status, and he applied for a spousal visa. When the application for a spousal visa was rejected by the Home Office, Thomas was arrested and held in a detention centre for 90 days, a swift decline in his circumstances. Today, Thomas reflects upon his choice to, in his own words, 'come out' to the Home Office as close to his experiences of 'coming out' as bisexual, both leading to periods of immense risk, oppression and mental health deterioration in his life.

It was during his time in detention that Thomas learnt that he was eligible for asylum. Once released by the Home Office, and with an asylum application underway, Thomas returned to 'sofa surfing' as his means of accommodation. As an asylum seeker, he was not eligible to work and therefore had limited resources. When a friend threw him out due to concerns that his sexuality would have a 'corrupting' influence on the children of the household, Thomas was forced into rough sleeping for a number of days. At his lowest ebb, he reflects that:

> Every morning you wonder how are you going to eat? If you're homeless, you wonder how the weather is going to treat you because you sleep outside or you sleep in the buses, and the driver comes and chases you out of the bus, you know? . . . If you haven't got anything in place, you are a wanderer, and that is the word.

As Thomas's rough sleeping occurred during the Everyone In initiative, he was directed to emergency accommodation in a local hostel. As an asylum seeker, Thomas was then housed in National Asylum Support Service (NASS)-provided Home Office accommodation. While this alleviated his situation, it provoked the fresh rupture of separation from the city and community that Thomas had inhabited since his arrival in the UK. In the 'dispersal' accommodation, Thomas was sent over 70 miles away from London and with the additional proviso that he could be redispersed at any time. Both Thomas's experiences in Nigeria and the long-term instability of his life in the UK had resulted in depression and psychosis, but since diagnosis Thomas had been able to get his symptoms under control. Upon dispersal, Thomas noticed an abrupt decline in his mental health. After successfully coming off medication, Thomas soon relied once more upon stronger and stronger doses of his medication as his mental health continued to spiral out of control. In addition to the stress of dispersal, relocation had also removed Thomas from a trusted medical team, and his local church community. Moving into his NASS-provided room, Thomas considered it his 'graveyard' and describes his everyday life since as a 'hell' of uncertainty, fear and alienation. At the time of meeting Thomas, he was almost a year into an asylum process that appeared to have no end in sight. Still experiencing an endless cycle of being interviewed, interrogated and disbelieved by the Home Office, as well as being unable to work (due to his asylum seeker status), Thomas described his present moment as a limbo state that felt to him like a living death.

Ahmad

Unlike Thomas, Ahmad had lodged a successful asylum claim instantly upon arrival in the UK. In recognition of the horrors that Ahmad had suffered both as a Kurdish man in Iraq and as an asylum seeker who had experienced trafficking, Ahmad was one of the 'fortunate' one-third of asylum seekers whose applications are granted at first attempt. At this time, Ahmad had been dispersed by the Home Office to a city outside of London and upon receiving his refugee status Ahmad stayed in this city for a number of years, enrolling in a local college, learning how to read and write for the first time, and finding work and income. Recalling that time, Ahmad looked back fondly on the help, access to college study, and a 'little room' that formed the foundations of his new life in the UK.

Despite this access to education, Ahmad lived for the most part unaware of the rights that accompanied his refugee status. Alongside a lack of awareness that he was now entitled to statutory support – both benefits and job seeking – he also began his new life in the UK with no knowledge of his rights as a worker. Indeed, in the UK context, success in obtaining refugee status is considered the end of the remit of Home Office 'support', and successful applicants are given only 28 days to vacate their accommodation and achieve self-sufficiency. Despite these challenges, Ahmad was soon able to secure work in the area he had been dispersed to. While work was fairly easy to secure, the hours and wages on offer were never enough for Ahmad to secure a stable space of his own in which to live, leaving him reliant on precarious and overcrowded arrangements in multiple occupancy housing.

Without knowledge of his eligibility for Income Support, Ahmad began to search for new opportunities. He had heard about various Facebook groups where jobs across the

country were advertised by and for members of the Kurdish community. One job stood out: it promised regular work in a thriving barbershop, but more importantly for him, private accommodation. Furthermore, the potential employer had said 'once you move to this accommodation, you can actually put the contract, the lease, in your name'. Ahmad was delighted that this opportunity had presented itself, and the employer even organised someone to pick up and drive Ahmad several hundred miles south. However, while the job in the barbershop did offer Ahmad consistent and well-paid work, the promised tenancy of his own never materialised. Instead, he arrived at another shared house, with no knowledge of his landlord's identity or means of contact, and no formal tenancy agreement.

What Ahmad did not understand, having never been told, was that this work (like much of his work prior to this) was uncontracted, informal and below the radar of HM Revenue & Customs, meaning that it did not afford him any employment rights or protections and put him in the vulnerable position of dependency upon his employer to meet his basic needs. The precarity of his informal employment became most apparent when the coronavirus pandemic began in March 2020. Lockdown forced the business to close and Ahmad's employer offered him no support or advice. The situation with his employer finally came to a head in January 2021, when he and his housemates received a text to notify them that they had one week to leave their accommodation or they would be forcibly evicted. Once more, without a formal contract or any knowledge of his rights as a tenant, Ahmad had no choice but to leave, even as the pandemic had temporarily suspended the usual rights of landlords to evict their tenants.

Ahmad was now without anywhere to live and still without a job. The only source of relief was that, finally, he discovered that due to his refugee status he was entitled to Universal Credit. Nevertheless, in common with many others dependent on Universal Credit, Ahmad still struggled to meet the requirements for securing his own tenancy – with landlords increasingly unwilling to take on tenants in receipt of benefits. As relayed to us by numerous homelessness support workers, the hostile environment's criminalisation of renting properties to 'illegal immigrants' has also made it far more difficult for anyone racialised as *potentially* illegal to secure a tenancy. These factors combined left Ahmad extremely vulnerable, and wandering aimlessly around town in search of somewhere to go. At one stage, he was convinced by someone to pay £300 per week to sleep on their floor.

Luckily for Ahmad, his Universal Credit gave him a connection with a work coach, who on hearing about his situation signposted him to the homeless day service. As someone with refugee status, Ahmad had the right to statutory homelessness support that many non-citizens do not. While he had to continue sofa surfing – and some days sleeping rough – for some weeks to come, he eventually received a text from his work coach instructing him to take up his room at the accommodation block run by a homelessness organisation.

While we might understand his initial eviction as the starting point of Ahmad's homelessness, Ahmad has arguably been homeless since the moment he arrived in the UK. Whether in NASS accommodation, unofficial tenancies, accommodation tied to his landlord, sleeping on a floor or staying in rooms provided by a local homelessness organisation, Ahmad has never had a secure place to call his own, a fact that has also disrupted

his ability to gain crucial knowledge as to his rights as a refugee, tenant and worker. For now, Ahmad's housing insecurity continues. In addition, the protracted instability that has marked Ahmad's life in the UK has left him with a chronic stomach pain, which doctors have thus far been unable to diagnose.

Vali

Despite the fact that Ahmad and Vali held quite different immigration statuses, Ahmad a 'refugee' and Vali an 'EEA migrant', there are marked similarities in their experiences of the informal economy, and the enduring precarity it engenders. Vali arrived in the UK in 2016 from Romania. Prior to his departure, the company Vali worked for went bankrupt and ceased honouring the pension payments it had promised. Work in Romania at this time was scarce and, when available, did not provide a sufficient income for Vali to support himself and his family. Vali's situation took a further plunge because he could not keep up the repayments on the bank loan that he had obtained for an extension to his house. All of these factors contributed to Vali's decision to leave Romania, and he found a company that arranged his journey, and connected him to work in the UK's informal economy.

Once in the UK, the company that had organised Vali's travel moved him through various sites of employment, mostly in the construction industry, where he worked as a plumber. The pay was consistently poor and the roles were linked to various forms of inadequate accommodation. In one place, there were 28 people in a house and just two bathrooms; at another, they were sleeping four or five to a room. Vali was driven to work, along with others, at 4 a.m. every morning by a driver who did not have a driving licence. Vali did not receive any paperwork for these jobs, meaning that he was unable to evidence his employment history. As his accommodation was tied to his work, Vali did not hold a tenancy of his own or any housing rights throughout the course of his time in the UK. Furthermore, his dependency on his employer meant that Vali had no knowledge of his entitlement to any rights in the UK.

In 2017, just one year after Vali's arrival in the UK, research by the global risk consultancy Verisk Maplecroft (2017) reported that Romania had risen 56 places in the 'modern slavery index', becoming the only EU country to be classified as 'high risk'. While the UK government passed the country's first Modern Slavery Act in 2015, one year before Vali's arrival, the act has been critiqued extensively both for the binary assumptions that undergird it (particularly in relation to the gendered and racialised politics of who is considered a 'victim' of modern slavery) and also in its reliance on immigration control measures as its means of combating modern slavery (Hodkinson et al., 2021). While Vali's work situation fell outside the official framework of 'modern slavery', he was exposed to unregulated, exploitative and dangerous working conditions, taking on roles considered increasingly undesirable for UK citizens.

Despite his experiences, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Vali had always managed to find work in order to send money back to his family. He later described this as a period of relative stability; he was also able to visit his family for a few weeks every year and started to envisage a time when he might bring his wife and grown-up children to the UK to join him. However, when the pandemic began, Vali was made redundant when the

owner of the company sought to reduce staffing costs. Having lost his job, Vali also lost his accommodation when he could no longer afford the rent. On the balcony, there was a sofa that was outdoors, and the owner let him sleep there and rented out Vali's room to someone else. He slept on the sofa – where there was little protection from the rain – for two weeks before he started sleeping in a Tesco car park, using water from a public tap in order to wash. During this period, his dental health suffered and he was later advised to have all of his teeth removed.

Vali reached his lowest point during the pandemic. Without evidence to corroborate his employment history in the UK, Vali had been ineligible for homelessness or benefits support, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, his encounter with an outreach worker ensured that he was given a place to stay in the emergency hotels during the Everyone In initiative and through his contact with immigration advisors, he had the chance to apply for settled status as part of the post-Brexit settlement. Until this point, Vali had been entirely unaware of the impact of Brexit on the legality of his status in the UK. Indeed, without the immigration support he later received, Vali would have been rendered deportable at the end of the transitional period.

While Vali endures the seemingly interminable wait for the outcome of his application, the value of his debt in Romania has increased massively because Vali borrowed the money for his house in Swiss francs and that currency has gone up relative to Romanian leu. Reflecting on his financial situation, he laments that 'it is extremely difficult to have no money whatsoever'. Vali envisages a future during which he can bring his family to the UK, work until retirement age and spend holidays visiting his extended family in Romania. However, he is uncertain about what the future holds and is worried that he will end up back on the streets.

Arian

Precarity was less apparent in Arian's life than it was for our other interlocutors. He came to the UK from Albania and had been living here for almost two decades. For most of this time, he was happily married to a woman (and British citizen) that he had met while doing agency work. Together they had lived in a stable home, Arian had enjoyed a career in train presentation and through his work had developed a social life that he found fulfilling. Arian noted that for a long time he had lived a very 'British' life, and did not consider at the time that his life would ever be otherwise.

While Arian had held various visa statuses over the years, since getting married he had switched to a spousal visa that he had to renew at 30-month intervals. At the last point of renewal, Arian missed his application deadline by two days. This fairly minor error set in motion a series of events that would unravel every aspect of the life Arian had built for himself over the course of decades. Immediately, Arian became without immigration status and under severe restrictions. He no longer had the right to work, and hostile environment policies meant that his employer was liable for a £10,000 fine if he kept him on. While his manager felt terrible about the situation, he had no way to intervene and Arian was fired on the spot. As Arian and his wife lived in social housing, the local authority evicted him as without having a resolved status or, more importantly, any documentation, he no longer had the right to tenancy. Unable to afford living alone,

Arian's wife moved north to stay with family. Some months later the relationship began to break down, as the long-term impossibility of living together again became overwhelming.

It was at the point of Arian's eviction that he became homeless, an event that led to a remapping of the city he had known for so long, the landmarks of which now became the safest places (relatively speaking) to sleep: behind the local swimming baths, in the garden that surrounded the city museum. At this time, Arian also began to notice the steady decline in his physical health, leading to a diagnosis of diabetes, and to his mental health, as the rhythms and relationships that had formed his everyday life appeared to collapse around him:

> Because when you're homeless and you've got no one to talk to, it makes you worse. Because you've got no one to talk to, and you're like you're nobody, you feel like you don't exist. And that's why you get so many suicidals and stuff because you think there's nothing left to live on; what for, what's the purpose of living?

For Arian, the affective afterlife of the restrictions imposed upon him was experienced as feelings of rupture, disorientation and, often, despair. Indeed, it was not only Arian's romantic relationship that had been devastated by his loss of regular status; his once abundant social life also became impossible as Arian lost his home, his job and his income. This was also worsened by the sense of shame that Arian carried at having lost everything so rapidly, from his wife, to his fitness, to his smart clothes. If he did bump into old friends in the town centre Arian learnt to make excuses when they suggested coffee, 'like, I've got to be somewhere, or something like that'.

Arian's experiences reveal the impact of the border regime on his life: in a relatively short space of time, Arian had lost not only material resources, but social resources too. His experiences highlight how lives are made peripheral through immigration control. At the point of our meeting, Arian had been experiencing homelessness for three years and his health had declined dramatically during that period. Rough sleeping had led Arian to develop diabetes, which largely went untreated, with nowhere to store his insulin and no ability to manage his diet, 'because you only eat when the churches are open, or when the van is in [the town centre] for breakfast and stuff'. He was on anti-depressants and had survived a number of suicide attempts. Indeed, Arian was so afraid of the negative consequences of approaching any support services, lest doing so would affect his immigration appeal, that he intentionally avoided the Everyone In emergency accommodation that he was legally entitled to access during the pandemic. Arian had grown so fatigued by the process of appealing the decision to render him 'illegal' that he had instead recently travelled to an Immigration Removal Centre to request his own detention and removal. Arian described the response with a look of incredulity: just as he was 'too illegal' for support, he was also 'not illegal enough' for removal, as he still had an appeal in process. The consequences of submitting his spousal visa renewal application two days late revealed the enduring precarity that had structured Arian's life all along. Arian did not realise the extent of his precarity until he lost his status. Now, he has to endure the seemingly interminable wait for the outcome of his Home Office application.

Discussion: Swift Falls and Stretched Time

We offer four key insights from our analysis of the life stories introduced above: first, we maintain that precarity structures the lives of non-citizens in the UK in ways that cut across varying immigration statuses and situations. Second, our analysis reveals the temporal continuum of suffering endured. This encompasses experiences of slow violence in the everyday, moments of swift and abrupt decline, and periods of stretched time awaiting outcomes. Third, our research demonstrates that access to and experiences of work, as well as the welfare state, are integral to the production of precarity in the everyday lives of our interlocutors. Fourth, and more broadly, our findings highlight the intersections of class and race in the production of uneven capacities to survive and thrive among non-citizens in 'multi-status Britain'. Here, we see the role that immigration controls play in shaping access to labour markets and the means of subsistence. For Mbembe (2019: 11), it is the 'disentanglement of life' from what he referred to as 'discounted bodies' that is a core feature of contemporary border regimes. In this sense, border controls operate in ways that unevenly distribute the means to life and well-being, and access to welfare and healthcare.

Importantly, while the swift decline in individuals' circumstances is acutely felt and expressed in their life stories, slow violence is often invisibilised in their discourse. In fact, in each case, we see that the respondents relate that they have experienced a period of life in the UK when they seemed to be in a relatively good position. 'I was just a free person to do just what I wanted to', Thomas explained, and he lived a relatively comfortable life, working informally. Vali too relates a period of stability, earning money and going to and from Romania to see his family. Arian draws attention to a relatively comfortable life with a good job, accommodation and a happy marriage. Ahmad experienced a long period during which he was able to study and then work as a barber. However, the swift fall experienced by all four men highlights the underlying objective precariousness of their structural position and the enduring presence of the border in their lives. Arian's situation declined after submitting a late application to renew his spousal visa. Thomas's situation worsened after 'coming out' to the Home Office. Ahmad and Vali have different backgrounds, with Ahmad escaping persecution in Iraq and Vali seeking economic opportunities in the UK in order to pay back debts in Romania. However, both of them relied on work in the informal economy and when the COVID-19 pandemic brought job losses, Ahmad and Vali found themselves sleeping rough very soon after losing their jobs. All four men endured acute health problems (e.g. diabetes, stomach problems) while Arian and Thomas suffered mental health problems (e.g. suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression).

The vignettes reveal 'stretched time and indefinite waiting' (Mbembe, 2019: 11) experienced by our interlocutors. This experience of stretched time is an expression of a lack of control over the present that enables the anticipation of a future (Bourdieu, 2000). As Schwartz (1974: 867) observes, 'the distribution of waiting time coincides with the distribution of power'. The extent to which one is forced to wait – whether for an immediate solution to destitution, or for the longer-term dream of a stable and secure status in the UK – is indicative of an individual's position in the social system. Making others wait is an expression of power whereas the act of prolonged waiting is linked to

powerlessness. Those at the mercy of the Home Office – such as Thomas and Arian – are forced to confront stretched time as they await the decision on their applications. The same is true for Vali as he awaits the outcome of his application for settled status, and Ahmad as he seeks permanent housing. The Home Office remains in control of their schedules. The sense of indeterminacy in relation to the time spent waiting renders, in its subjects, a sense of vulnerability, dependency, precarity and powerlessness, as they experience stretched time. Indeed, the Home Office, and Government departments that take on the function of the 'left hand' of the state in granting access to benefits and healthcare, become the source of life-giving news and thus potentially attain a form of mystification in the minds of their subjects through the relation of extreme dependency that they create. In the meantime, these subjects are left to await outcomes and decisions. They are, in turn, patient, frustrated, disillusioned, angry and despondent. Arian sums up this complex range of feelings:

> So, they can't give you an answer until they decide. But I said, where's the decision maker? . . . speak to the MP. Same thing, you're waiting, waiting, waiting, we write to them . . . all three years, and then I say, no, I had enough, I'm going home. And last year, it was after the COVID laid off a bit, I went to Croydon and said, I'm going home . . . [but they said] we can't detain you because you're not illegal, and you're not legal . . . you can't go home because you're not illegal . . . because you're in the process of applying.

The pandemic made visible the crisis of migrant homelessness and enabled unique insights into the lives of our participants but it did so at a time when the political context of the hostile environment was ramping up further: begging and rough sleeping themselves were criminal acts and the stories we heard made it apparent that the removal of the means to sustain life clearly pushed individuals into exploitative labour and illegal activity, including clandestine work. This makes apparent the link between destitution and deportation. Indeed, De Genova's (2002) account of 'deportability' clarifies that deportation as a 'border spectacle' is in large part about rendering non-citizens pliable in serving the needs of the country for cheap and/or unregulated labour. The vignettes we have presented indicate the multiple ways in which non-citizens come to occupy 'fragmented spaces' in the context of the contemporary UK border regime (Kundnani, 2020). Precarity, then, is underscored, as in the words of Butler (2009: ii), as a 'politically induced condition' that shapes experiences of space and time for populations 'differentially exposed to injury, violence and death'.

Conclusion

This article contributes to sociological debates through its analysis of border governance as a key mechanism of class and race-making in the context of an increasingly hostile immigration environment. Focusing on the temporal dimension of the suffering endured by migrants experiencing homelessness, the life stories that we have presented highlight the long-term impact of the 'slow violence' endured by migrants experiencing homelessness, but they also illustrate how this slow violence plays out over time, lurking in the

background, not always directly perceptible, ranging from periods when Thomas, Ahmad, Vali and Arian have experienced a degree of stability to when the precariousness of their structural position (e.g. lack of capital possession, unresolved immigration status and the extent of their illegalisation in the informal economy), is revealed in a swift decline in circumstance into destitution and homelessness. Indeed, the moment of swift decline is frequently that which reveals the slow violence that has characterised life in the UK. At this moment in a continuum of suffering, a combination of circumstances speeds up the tempo and the intensity of experiences of decline. Thereafter, these individuals are back to confronting stretched time, as they await the outcomes of decisions relating to immigration status and housing, perhaps all too aware that, as Schwartz (1974: 867) observes, in the distribution of time, delay is longest 'when the client is more dependent on the relationship than the server'.

Ethics Information

University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee Reference Number: FHSS 2020-053.
The data have been anonymised and the names used in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the respondents.

ORCID iDs

Simon Stewart (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9876-9982
Charlotte Sanders (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6525-7646

Notes

1. https://www.mungos.org/news/st-mungos-welcomes-latest-rough-sleeping-figures-for-london/.
2. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/.
3. https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/320,000_people_in_britain_are_now_homeless,_as_numbers_keep_rising.
4. See our blog about the hostile environment: https://www.port.ac.uk/news-events-and-blogs/blogs/democratic-citizenship/what-is-the-hostile-environment.

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Simon Stewart is Professor of Sociology at University of Portsmouth where he is also the Director of the Centre for European and International Studies Research. Simon is a cultural sociologist with research interests that include migrant homelessness and the sociology of evaluative judgements and taste. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* and is the author of two single-authored monographs, the most recent being *A Sociology of Culture, Taste and Value*.

Charlotte Sanders is Lecturer in Anthropology at SOAS University of London. Charlotte is an anthropologist of migration whose research is interested in the entanglements of gender, racialisation, racial capitalism and coloniality in the re/production and experiences of border regimes, particularly in the context of the UK's 'hostile environment'. Charlotte has previously published in the *Journal of International Women's Studies* and the *Journal of Cultural Analysis & Social Change*.