

The Double-Edged Swords of Hope and Hopelessness: Ethnographic Insights Among Deportable Refugees in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interplay between hope and hopelessness among refugees in Sweden who have been denied asylum and live under the threat of deportation. Based on ethnographic research conducted in a rural municipality in central Sweden (2017–2018), it examines how individuals oscillate between hope and hopelessness under conditions of social and legal precarity, shaping both their thoughts and actions. While hope is often associated with agency and resilience, this study highlights its ambivalent nature—it can sustain individuals in difficult situations but also trap them in cycles of waiting and vulnerability. Hope can be painful when repeatedly dashed, and even used as a means of manipulation. Conversely, hopelessness is not merely a state of passivity or resignation but can foster decisive action and drive change at both personal and societal levels. Recognizing the dual nature of both hope and hopelessness, as well as their interconnection, is essential for understanding the lived experiences of deportable refugees and for developing more humane approaches to migration governance and reception. Building on the findings, the article contributes to the affective turn within the social sciences by proposing a complement to Miyazaki's *method of hope* (2004) by acknowledging the productive aspects of *hopelessness*.

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Hope is the last thing that dies in man, and though it be exceedingly deceitful, yet it is of good use to us as it eases our journey through life
 (François de La Rochefoucauld, date unknown).

In accordance with this quote from Rochefoucauld (1613–1680), people tend to think of hope as something that gives direction and meaning to life. Without hope, life is often considered meaningless. This view is echoed in much of the scholarly literature on people in vulnerable situations, where hope is interpreted as a sign of agency and resilience (Brun 2015; Lucht 2017; Miyazaki 2004; Muñoz 2009; Ong et al. 2006; Pedersen 2012; Vammen 2017; Vigh 2009; Zigon 2009).

During ethnographic fieldwork among refugees in Sweden, I have come to realize the need for a more nuanced understanding of hope. Several of the individuals I encountered were in situations they deemed hopeless, for example, their asylum application had been rejected but they nonetheless remained in the country. These individuals were living in a state of ‘deportability’—a condition that, following De Genova (2002), refers not simply to the risk of deportation but rather to a mode of everyday life shaped by the constant possibility of removal, conditioning their social, economic, and affective dimensions of existence even in the absence of actual deportation. Even in such conditions, however, people clung to hopes of a better future. Some of these hopes are generated by state authorities, as Swedish immigration laws and practices offer several exceptions and second chances, providing ‘glimmers of hope’ (Fontanari 2017: 35). Such glimmers might reinforce expectations for a brighter future while simultaneously deepening a fundamental vulnerability that intensifies when hopes are thwarted, manipulated, or exploited.

Rochefoucauld acknowledges hope’s deceptive side, but only in passing—a tendency seen in both scholarly and mundane discourse. This article examines the deceptive dimension of hope more thoroughly while also emphasizing the need to consider its relationship to hopelessness. It contributes to Hirokazu Miyazaki’s *method of hope*, which conceptualizes hope not only as a mobilizing force, but also as a way of apprehending the world epistemologically: a method employed by vulnerable groups to ‘gain knowledge about themselves’ (Miyazaki 2004: 26). Moreover, it argues for the need to complement this approach by acknowledging the productive dimensions of hopelessness and the intimate entanglement between hope and hopelessness. Rather than viewing hopelessness as the mere lack of agency, the article explores how it may prompt a reevaluation of one’s situation and a reorientation of attention, which can, in turn, generate movement and action. The concluding section reflects on the ethical implications of this perspective in encounters with individuals in vulnerable situations. It proposes that a method attentive to both hope and hopelessness can serve as a valuable analytical lens in scholarly engagement with pressing contemporary issues across disciplines.

By treating hope and hopelessness as intertwined, the article aims to contribute to the recent affective turn in the field of migration and mobility studies (Barglowski & Bonfert 2022; Barone 2025; Fassin 2009; Hjalmarsen 2025; Mahar 2025; Pajnik & Ribač 2025; Strasser & Sökefeld 2025; Tecca 2025). What forms does hope take for refugees in social and legal precarity? How do these refugees describe and navigate experiences they perceive as hopeless?

This article draws on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a small municipality in Sweden that, in the wake of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, received a relatively large number of protection-seeking immigrants given its small population (Engblom 2023). The fieldwork formed part of a larger project examining local reception initiatives and refugee experiences in rural Sweden. It was conducted in 2017 and 2018, with follow-up visits in 2019.

Fieldwork included informal conversations and observations in homes, public areas, and initiatives organized by civil society. I also conducted 39 interviews with refugees: 17 with individuals whose asylum applications were still being processed, 17 with individuals who had received temporary residence permits in the past two years, and 5 with individuals whose asylum applications had been rejected yet chose to remain in Sweden.

The material was transcribed and thematically coded using NVivo software (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA). Hope and hopelessness were among several themes identified. Guided by a growing scholarly interest in theoretical engagements with affective dimensions of social life, this article delves deeper into these themes. More specifically, it focuses on ethnographic engagement with two individuals residing without residence permits in Sweden. These cases were chosen because they reveal a complex entanglement of hope and hopelessness that is rendered especially palpable under conditions of deportability. While the generalizability of the material is limited, its ethnographic depth allows for a nuanced qualitative analysis of how legal, bureaucratic, and social structures shape everyday and existential life under such conditions.

During fieldwork, I developed close relationships with several participants and became actively engaged in their situations. For example, I assisted with interpreting decisions from the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) and other authorities and, in some cases, accompanied individuals to meetings with lawyers or officials. I also provided support with various practical and emotional concerns. This level of involvement called for reflexivity throughout the research process, as my personal and professional presence inevitably shaped the social dynamics I sought to understand. Long-term engagement enabled more trusting relationships and access to information that would likely not have emerged in isolated interviews. However, these circumstances raise ethical considerations, as participants may share personal details not intended for public dissemination. Throughout the process, I have striven to be transparent and to ensure that participants consent to the use of their stories. Anonymization has been applied with care, including the alteration of names and other identifying details such as age and place of birth.

To enhance readability and ensure an empathetic representation, quotes from research participants have been lightly edited for clarity, including the removal of filler words that might distract or unintentionally portray speakers as inarticulate. The research received clearance from the regional ethical review board (Etikprövningsnämnden i Uppsala, dnr 2017/158) and has adhered to established research norms and local laws concerning consent, data gathering, and storage.

The main themes of the article are hope and hopelessness. Studying such experiences empirically is not possible, as we cannot gain first-hand access to people’s inner thoughts or emotions. What can be done, however, is to examine how individuals talk about emotions and analyze how affective orientations are shaped by surrounding

circumstances (Ahmed 2013; Jackson 2002). To capture the essence of experiences, the best we can do is to circulate around them, assembling and interpreting their fragments (Ewing 1990). This will allow for a richer understanding of the role of hope and its evil twin, hopelessness, in the lives of people in extreme precarity.

HOPE IN RESEARCH

Building on insights from research associated with the ‘affective turn’ (Barglowski & Bonfert 2022; Barone 2025; Mahar 2025; Pajnik & Ribač 2025; Strasser & Sökefeld 2025; Tecca 2025), I understand hope, hopelessness, and related emotions as social phenomena—produced, reproduced, and circulated within ‘affective economies’ (Ahmed 2004; Fassin 2009; Hjalmarson 2025). From this view, neither hope nor hopelessness is seen as emerging from within the individual. Rather, they are shaped in response to events, processes, and structures external to the individual body and mind. Moreover, emotions are crafted and rendered meaningful through narratives, tropes, concepts, and imaginaries encountered in the social and symbolic realms (Ahmed 2004).

As noted earlier, in research on vulnerable groups, hope is often celebrated as a force that helps people endure otherwise hopeless situations and struggle toward a brighter future (Brun 2015; Lucht 2017; Miyazaki 2004; Muñoz 2009; Pedersen 2012; Vammen 2017; Vigh 2009; Zigon 2009). One scholar whose work has had a lasting impact is Miyazaki (2004). Focusing on the indigenous Suvavou community in Fiji, he explored how hope shapes their identity and actions, particularly in their efforts to reclaim land. Drawing on Ernst Bloch’s Marxist philosophy (Bloch 1995), Miyazaki emphasizes the future as a driving force, demanding a deepened focus on hope’s broader societal impact.

Miyazaki views hope as a method with implications not only for those studied but also for the scientific enterprise and production of knowledge itself. Put simply, the role of social scientists is not only to critically investigate past and present events but also to engage with and ‘replicate’ the future-oriented hope maintained by communities, such as the Suvavouans, in order to produce knowledge that is aligned with their aspirations and transformative potential (Miyazaki 2004: 6). Doubtlessly, Miyazaki has a fundamentally optimistic view of hope and its potential to shape both social communities and knowledge.

To problematize this optimistic view, one can turn to psychoanalytic reasoning. Drawing on Lacan (1973), Žižek (1989, 2018) argues that hopes are *ideological fantasies* which act as screens that enable the status quo to be maintained. Similarly, Berlant (2011) suggests that clinging to hopes for a better future may serve to manipulate and exploit people in vulnerable situations. Through the concept of ‘cruel optimism,’ she highlights how attachments to unattainable aspirations can keep individuals stuck in harmful circumstances, preventing escape from the very relations or systems that oppress them.

Herz, Lalander, and Elsrud (2022) draw on such critical reasoning in a study of the situation of migrants denied asylum in Sweden. In their view, the hopeful orientation toward obtaining a residence permit also implies an orientation away from demands for change and social justice. Such hopes are therefore ‘connected to a neoliberal economic system and ideology to maintain control and status quo by producing docile bodies or individual subjects that do not threaten the overall system,’ they write

(Herz et al. 2022: 226, see Elsrud (2023) for a further analysis of bureaucratic cruelty against asylum-seekers in Sweden).

In this context, it is useful to distinguish between social hope—horizontally reproduced within communities—and societal hope—vertically generated and disseminated through narratives and practices institutionalized by actors like the SMA in a manner often serving to maintain complacency (Hage 2003; Kleist 2017b).

Herz et al. (2022) not only ask for a critical view on the role of societal hope but also call for a need to examine situations in which hopelessness may contribute to transformative change. Here, they distinguish between ‘convergent’ and ‘radical’ change, where the former pertains to changes *within* a social system, while the latter refers to the transformation of the social system itself (Herz et al. 2022: 234). They argue that, to achieve radical change, it is necessary to let go of hope for convergent change. As they write: ‘Only when hope for change inside an existing social system is abandoned—or, alternatively, when critical hope is articulated and overcomes injustices by building on past and present experiences—can changing the system be considered to solve the issue at hand’ (Herz et al. 2022: 234). According to their view, hopelessness may prompt a sobering reassessment of one’s situation, which in turn can motivate efforts toward radical change. In other words, seemingly negative feelings like hopelessness may also carry a clear sense of agency.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that prolonged hopelessness may also contribute to depression and suicidality (see Gambaro et al. 2020; Johnson & Tomren 1999). Moreover, it can be cultivated for destructive purposes. In millenarian movements such as Aum Shinrikyo—whose members killed 13 people and injured thousands in the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attack—the belief in an imminent apocalypse, combined with profound hopelessness, can serve as a powerful motivator for extreme acts of violence. This underscores the need for a nuanced approach not only to hope but also to its counterpart, hopelessness.

Rather than embracing *either* hope *or* hopelessness, I therefore argue that the two are both productive and destructive. Moreover, I find it analytically useful to treat them as intricately interconnected, often amplifying one another. In a critical reading of Žižek’s *The Courage of Hopelessness* (2018), Boucher argues that recognizing the productivity of hopelessness does not necessarily constitute an argument against hope (Boucher 2020). Boucher suggests that Žižek’s point that hopelessness is productive is right insofar as moments of hopelessness have the potential to replace one form of hope with another—one that is potentially more enabling—and, if ‘successfully resolved,’ it characteristically results in a burst of energy as their entire lives are transformed,’ writes Boucher (2020: 4).

A similar point has been developed by Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) in a comparative ethnographic analysis of Egyptians aspiring to migrate to Europe and Egyptians who have succeeded in doing so. They find that individuals in both groups are generally dissatisfied with their current situation due respectively to the significant decline in job opportunities for those in Egypt and experiences of structural racism for those in Europe. The authors demonstrate how their informants ‘oscillate’ between hope and despair, with these seemingly contradictory emotions reinforcing one another (Pettit & Ruijtenberg 2019: 739).

Building on these insights, I argue that examining the interwoven nature of hope and hopelessness offers a lens through which to gain deeper insights into experiences of

vulnerable groups and the human condition more generally. This prompts a need to complement Miyazaki's method of hope with special attention to the role and function of hopelessness in the context of refugees living under legally precarious conditions in Sweden.

BACKGROUND

Prior to 2015, Sweden was renowned for its relatively liberal and open immigration policies, exemplified by open borders that allowed free entry and high acceptance rates for asylum applications (Andersson & Nilsson 2011; Borevi 2015). During the mid-2010s, a significant surge in people seeking refuge in Europe, largely driven by the conflicts in Syria, culminated in a peak in 2015. In Sweden, more than 162,000 asylum applications were submitted (Migrationsverket 2017).

In 2015, amid increasing European border restrictions, Sweden's political leadership, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, abandoned its relatively open immigration policy in response to a substantial influx of asylum-seekers, right-wing opposition, and shortages in housing and reception capacity (Engblom 2023).

The turning point arrived on November 24th that year, when Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven announced a series of measures aimed at restricting immigration, intended to provide 'breathing space' for Sweden's refugee reception system (Statsrådsberedningen 2015). As part of the 2015 legal reforms, three pivotal changes were introduced. First, the longstanding practice of granting permanent residence permits was replaced with granting only temporary permits, marking a departure from the historical norm. Second, the criteria for allowing family reunification with relatives residing abroad became notably more stringent. Third, the revisions imposed stricter limitations on opportunities for seeking asylum in Sweden, resulting in many being denied asylum.

There are no official records regarding undocumented migrants in Sweden, which makes it difficult to determine the size of the group. One study from 2010, based on extrapolations from estimated numbers in 15 EU member states, proposed that between 40,000 and 75,000 undocumented migrants were residing in the country (Alexander et al. 2010). A more recent inquiry estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 'unauthorized' migrants were residing clandestinely in Sweden in 2017 (Ljungqvist et al. 2017: 63). Both figures should be treated with caution, however, as they rely on indirect methods and assumptions rather than systematic data. Moreover, it is unclear whether the figures also include individuals who have been denied asylum in Sweden but are legally tolerated to remain, due to the authorities' current inability to carry out deportation. What is evident, however, is that the group of migrants living under a threat of deportation constitutes a significant segment of Swedish society that warrants greater scholarly and political attention.

THE ASYLUM MAZE: A JOURNEY THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

In 2008, Semret left his native Eritrea. After crossing the Saharan desert and spending nearly two years in Libya, carefully saving money and awaiting the opportune moment to embark on the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossing, he eventually reached Italy in

2010. In Italy, Semret was granted a temporary residence permit. Yet, he was far from happy with his situation, as Italian authorities offered no housing or allowances for refugees holding temporary permits (Dotsey & Lumley-Sapanski 2021). He sustained himself by squatting in an occupied house on the outskirts of Rome. During this time, he caught wind of rumors that countries further north in Europe, particularly Sweden, offered more favorable conditions for immigrants. Driven by the larger aspiration of a life in safety, he left Italy with his sights set on Sweden.

Semret reached Sweden in 2012. In an interview with me, he shared that, when initially applying for asylum, the staff at the SMA provided encouraging words such as 'you're safe now' and 'don't worry, everything will work out.' These were the similar comforting sentiments echoed by many participants in my study, reflecting a broader pattern where empathetic social workers, officials, and civilians routinely nurture refugees' hopes of finding safety and stability in the country.

However, Semret's hopes of obtaining a residence permit in Sweden were abruptly dashed when, just a few months later, his asylum application was rejected in accordance with the Dublin Regulation, an EU regulation which stipulates that asylum-seekers must have their application processed in the first member state they are registered in. Fearing deportation, Semret made the difficult decision to remain in Sweden by staying under the radar of the authorities. In practice, this meant a transient existence, alternating between staying with acquaintances and sleeping on the streets when no other options were available.

After enduring this situation for 16 months, Semret decided to reapply at the SMA. His residence permit in Italy had expired, and he thought that this new attempt would yield a different outcome than the first. The growing number of asylum-seekers during this time led him to hope that perhaps the authorities would expedite the process given the surging demand and be less meticulous than before. Unfortunately, the authorities did not accelerate the process. Rather, one tangible consequence of the influx of asylum-seekers in 2014 and 2015 was a significant increase in waiting times. For Semret, this meant he had to endure nearly two more years of waiting before receiving a decision from the SMA, which, once again, resulted in a rejection.

Fed up with his situation in Sweden, Semret decided to accept deportation. Although responsibility for transfer typically expires after 18 months if the person has absconded, Semret was placed in detention in Mårsta to wait for deportation to Italy. After 10 days, he was informed that Italy did not accept the transfer.

This account is based on Semret's personal recollection, and certain parts remain uncertain. As is often the case for asylum-seeking migrants, Semret had limited access to legal information and support, and the complexity of the asylum system made it difficult for him to fully understand the decisions affecting his situation.

After the failed attempt to deport Semret, the SMA 'inhibited' (*inhibera*) his case, a legal status which meant that he remained on the list of individuals awaiting deportation but that he was tolerated to stay in Sweden for the time being. He was allocated an apartment, along with an allowance of approximately 7 USD per day. Semret noted that the funds were 'just enough to survive, but not sufficient to actually live.' As a rejected asylum-seeker, Semret was not allowed to enroll in formal education or seek employment. With few activities to occupy his time, his daily life was filled with waiting, although he occasionally visited an immigrant-led community center that offered free Swedish language classes five days a week. Despite feeling too 'tired' and

‘stressed’ to engage in studying, he found solace in attending the community center, as it provided him with an opportunity to get out of his apartment.

It was during one of these visits that I first met Semret. In a bare room within the confines of the old dairy building housing the community center, I turned on the recorder, inviting Semret to recount his life journey. During the interview, Semret paints a vivid picture of the dire circumstances in which he finds himself. He expresses a profound sense of feeling ‘imprisoned,’ trapped in a monotonous routine of ‘eating and sleeping, having no friends.’ Semret’s characterization of his situation as ‘prison-like’ not only reflects his material and juridical constraints, but also signals a moment of existential stagnation.

THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF HOPE

Nonetheless, even within the confines of this seemingly hopeless situation, Semret still clings to hope. Three distinct facets of hope emerge in the interview. The first of these relates to his homeland:

‘I’ve traversed countless hardships in my life. But one day, it will be okay, *I hope*. I will reunite with my family, and everything will be all right, when—if—things improve in my country.’

It is worth noting the ambivalent role that hope plays in this context. Initially, Semret appears convinced that things will improve, that it will one day be okay. However, he then shifts his tone and adds ‘I hope,’ a change that is echoed in the second part when he switches from ‘when’ to ‘if.’ His hopes for the future of Eritrea, his beloved homeland, are far from certain. In this context, hope seems to take on a character of hesitation, serving as a disclaimer that acknowledges the inherent uncertainty of the future.

The second type of hope that emerges in the interview is religious. While he was not particularly religious before arriving in Sweden, Semret recounts how, in recent years of social and legal limbo, his faith has deepened. He sometimes attends sermons at an ecumenical church led by an Orthodox Eritrean priest:

‘I go to church to find solace. Yes. And I can hope for the next life, not this life, but the afterlife.’

Essentially, the belief that his struggles may be rewarded not in this life but in the next provides comfort and a wellspring of dignity. Furthermore, by attending church, participating in services, conversing with the priest, and forming connections with fellow congregants, Semret says he feels less isolated. These activities briefly divert his attention from the enduring anxiety surrounding his present life.

Alongside his hopes for a better future in Eritrea and in the afterlife, Semret continued to nurture his aspiration to obtain a residence permit in Sweden. As he said, a residence permit in Sweden represents the gateway to a new life:

‘Throughout my entire life, I’ve dreamt of having a job to go to—and of beginning to live.’

For Semret, a job was not merely a necessary means to make ends meet; it served as a vehicle for realizing a grander dream of independence. This independence would allow him to build and enjoy his own life, while also providing support to his family back in Eritrea.

A decade had passed since Semret left Eritrea—10 years marked by uncertainty, prolonged waiting, and dashed hopes. Nevertheless, Semret was not completely bereft of hope regarding his situation. Rather, it seems that his hopeless condition gave rise to and reinforced various forms of hope—such as his longing to return to his homeland and his yearning for peace of mind in the afterlife. Clearly, these varied hopes were vital for him to endure the oppressive weight of the present, enabling him to envision an improved and different life in the future, whether it was in Eritrea, the afterlife, or Sweden. These examples underscore the importance of not underestimating the value of hope for people in destitute situations. In this regard, [Miyazaki's \(2004\)](#) concept of *the method of hope* offers a compelling framework for understanding how future-oriented aspirations can sustain individuals in precarious conditions. Semret's hopes mirror the kind of transformative orientation Miyazaki describes, where hope becomes a method for navigating uncertainty and imagining alternative futures. However, as the following sections will show, such hopes are not always liberating. They can also be deceptive, cruel, or immobilizing.

CRUEL HOPES

What makes hope intriguing is not merely whether or not people possess it (most individuals tend to hold onto hope even in the direst circumstances) but rather the object of their hope, the underlying motivations behind it, and the different effects of various types of hope on individuals. In the forthcoming sections, I focus on Semret's aspiration for a stable life in Europe, a hope intricately intertwined with a broader vision of what constitutes the fulfillment of a 'good life.'

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that Western countries are often idealized across contemporary Africa, serving as strong motivators for migration, particularly in regions characterized by stark inequality ([Drotbohm 2017](#); [Kleist 2017b](#); [Piot 2010](#)).

It is useful here to recall the distinction between *social* and *societal hope* ([Hage 2003](#); [Kleist 2017a](#); [Kleist 2017b](#)). Underlying Semret's migration, along with that of many others, is the dream of attaining a settled life in safety. This represents a social form of hope that circulates among peers, inspiring some to embark on perilous journeys toward the Global North.

However, upon reaching the North, these broader social hopes often narrow to the hope of obtaining a residence permit, as was the case for Semret. These hopes are strongly influenced by prevailing norms and political discourse, reinforced by bureaucratic structures that prioritize those who can demonstrate their deservingness through gainful employment ([Gustafsson & Engblom 2024](#)). This underscores the argument that societal or vertical hopes reinforce social hierarchies ([Hage 2003](#)).

As argued by [Herz \(2022\)](#), state governance in contexts marked by legal precarity often operates through a combination of incentives and deterrents. Rather than offering stable support, authorities may provide sporadic assistance that fosters 'glimmers of hope' ([Fontanari 2017](#)).

Swedish authorities also offered Semret glimmers of hope. One contributing factor was his awareness that, after four years of waiting, he would be eligible to submit a new asylum application. This possibility stems from a statutory time limit in the Swedish Aliens Act: if the authorities fail to enforce the decision within that time frame, the order lapses, allowing the individual to submit a new application and

have their asylum claims reassessed (see Government Bill 2024/25:92). This time limit was extended to five years in 2025, and now applies only if the individual leaves Sweden.

Semret had already completed two of those four years and faced two more years of waiting before he could apply again. Although he was aware that the chances of the SMA making a different decision were slim, this small opening was enough to keep alive his hope for asylum and a better life in Sweden. Amid this deadlock, the faint glimmer of hope for a different outcome, together with access to housing and state subsidies, has helped him maintain his composure. It made him accept his current situation, even though he felt imprisoned and socially isolated, illustrating the passivizing effects hope sometimes has.

Beyond functioning as a mechanism for maintaining compliance, an unmistakable cruelty is inherent in the circumstances faced by Semret and his counterparts (Elsrud 2023). This cruelty derives partly from the fact that hope for residency in Sweden also serves to keep them contained in a social and juridical impasse. This resonates with Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011).

'[O]ptimism is cruel,' writes Berlant, 'when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving' (Berlant 2011: 2).

A classic example of cruel optimism occurs when individuals remain in relationships with partners who mistreat, abuse, or harm them, all the while sustaining the hope that their partners will one day change. In cruel optimism, it is one's desires that sustain the connection to the threat (Berlant 2011).

By hoping for another cycle of asylum assessments, Semret stayed aligned with the authorities, ironically remaining close to the very threat of deportation. His yearning for a residence permit made him willing to subject himself to what he described as a 'prison-like existence,' keeping him within the confines of the apartment provided by the SMA. This enabled the authorities to monitor his whereabouts and be ready to apprehend him if, at some point, either Italian or Eritrean authorities agreed to accept his return.

His hope for asylum was also cruel, as it impeded his prospects of achieving a better life. He expressed concerns about his age, as he was approaching his 40s, which he considered too old to embark on studies, as he shared with me. Additionally, he sometimes expressed an urgent desire to find a partner and build a family, a challenging task given the marginalized and depressive state he was in. He believed that no woman would be interested in a man who was not even permitted to work or earn his own living. Essentially, the optimism fueled by the limited opportunities within asylum legislation left Semret in a state of perpetual waiting that adversely affected the trajectory of his life. His desire for a residence permit in Sweden also meant that his life was slipping away from him before he had the chance to fully live it.

Semret's story illustrates how hope, far from being inherently liberating, can function as a mechanism of containment—sustaining compliance and prolonging vulnerability. This empirical insight underscores the need to critically expand Miyazaki's method of hope, acknowledging that, in certain contexts, hope may not guide individuals toward transformation but instead reinforce systems of control.

Farzhad is an Afghan youth who was 16 years old when he arrived in Sweden unaccompanied. After a grueling escape journey that involved crossing the mountains of northern Iran, traversing the Mediterranean Sea in an inflatable boat, enduring captivity in Bulgaria, and walking 220 kilometers from Budapest to Vienna, Farzhad finally arrived at the train station in Gothenburg, Sweden, in October 2015. Exhausted, emaciated and with frostbite on his feet, he approached a police officer who drove him to a hospital, where staff took care of his injuries.

He was then taken to a care home for unaccompanied minors (*Hem för Vård och Boende*). This made him feel relieved and optimistic about his future, as he told me.

‘The first day I arrived, the staff were hugging me, comforting me, looking after me’ he said, and, during the time in the care home, he felt safe. However, everything changed when, one and a half years after his arrival, he received the rejection of his asylum application, shattering the hopes he had built for a future in Sweden. After two failed attempts to appeal, the decision became legally binding, and he was no longer allowed to remain in Sweden.

‘The day I was kicked out [from the care home], nobody came. No one helped me carry my bags.’ Feeling both abandoned and vengeful, he decided to text the head of the care home:

‘I wrote an SMS to the boss of the place, saying “I thought that you Swedes were nice, but I believe I was wrong.”’ Farzhad’s shattered hope not only wounded his own sense of security but also left a deep mark on his perception of Swedish society and its people.

‘People in Sweden are liars,’ he said to me, ‘not everyone, but it is difficult to know who is not.’

Farzhad was allowed to stay with a friend who had a pending case with the SMA. During this time, Farzhad’s spirits were at an all-time low. He struggled with sleep, constantly fearing discovery by Swedish authorities. He seldom left the apartment, exacerbating the severe anxiety he was already experiencing.

Farzhad was a principled individual who took great pride in adhering to legal and social norms. During a meal of stew and flatbread that he had prepared according to his mother’s recipe, Farzhad shared the story of his father’s murder by Taliban terrorists after he refused to participate in their criminal activities. Now, Farzhad saw it as his duty to uphold his father’s high moral standards, particularly his commitment to follow the law. The fact that the Swedish authorities now had ‘illegalized’ ([De Genova 2002](#)) Farzhad likely contributed to his frustration, since it made it impossible for him to prove that he was ‘a good person, not a bad one,’ as he phrased it. At the same time, he was convinced that it was the migration authorities who had made a faulty decision by not granting him asylum.

Farzhad described how he isolated himself, stayed indoors, slept poorly, and felt mentally broken. He said the situation made him feel ‘like a zombie’—not only due to his psychological state but also because he sensed that people in Sweden were avoiding him. He also spoke of traumatic experiences from earlier in life that haunted him at night. Although he did not explicitly use the term ‘hopelessness’ in this interview, I interpret these expressions as indicative of a deeply hopeless condition. This example underlines the immobilizing effects of hopelessness, marked by emotional withdrawal

and, in Farzhad's case, a growing sense of resentment. As we will see below, however, passing through such an affective zero-point can sometimes also elicit a reassessment of one's situation and open space for action.

PRODUCTIVE HOPELESSNESS

As noted earlier, [Herz et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that hopelessness signifies a potential avenue for radical change, suggesting that moments of hopelessness can prompt individuals to reassess their situation—including an awareness of the relationships, obstacles, and forces that hold them back, as well as the possibilities for bringing about lasting change (see also [Žižek, 2018](#)). Farzhad's story contains several moments that testify to this productive dimension of hopelessness.

Overwhelmed by despair, Farzhad eventually decided to leave Sweden. In 2017 and 2018, during a period when thousands of young Afghans faced asylum rejections in Sweden, many sought opportunities in France ([Rosengren 2021](#)). Farzhad had heard of many young Afghans who, after being rejected asylum in Sweden, had ventured to France. Most of his acquaintances were unsuccessful, though, with only one managing to secure residency.

In that situation, the singular success of one individual provided a glimmer of hope, which was enough to prompt Farzhad to shift his focus toward obtaining a residence permit in France. In other words, it was upon realizing the hopelessness of his situation that he reoriented himself toward a new hope, underlining the interconnectedness of hope and hopelessness.

Consequently, in the summer of 2018, he left Sweden. However, his asylum request in France was denied after eight months, due to the Dublin Regulation.

His time in France proved challenging, as he had to reside in a tent pitched in a park in a housing project on the outskirts of Paris, both before his case was opened and after it was concluded.

In an interview, Farzhad described an extremely challenging and violent situation. The park where he stayed was populated by people experiencing homelessness, many of whom struggled with issues related to alcohol and drugs. The presence of criminal gangs in the area contributed to an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, leading to frequent confrontations with law enforcement, which, in Farzhad's view, often responded with excessive force. His hopes of asylum in France had led him into yet another hopeless situation.

So, one day, Farzhad, along with another Afghan Swede he had encountered in Paris, grew tired of the situation and made the decision to return to Sweden, a task that was easier said than done, as border controls in Northern Europe had become significantly stricter, posing immense obstacles for those without necessary travel documents.

They spent approximately a week trying to find a way to evade the border guards.

'There were plenty of soldiers with large weapons. They were patrolling the border. We didn't dare try to get past them. After a few days, we gave up hope. We thought we would never make it across. We feared that this was the end.'

Amid the hopeless situation, Farzhad decided to contact Jenny, a Swedish Human Rights activist he had met in Paris.

'I called her and told her it was impossible to get back into Sweden. She said: "do not lose your hope, I will do everything I can to bring you back to Sweden."' After a few days of waiting, Jenny eventually sent Farzhad instructions on how to cross the border discreetly.

When Farzhad finally returned to Sweden, he found a place to stay in a suburban housing area outside of Stockholm. A few weeks later, an Afghan contact offered him work at a construction site. Despite enduring long, exhausting shifts often stretching from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., and receiving a wage far below what he would earn under formal labor market conditions, Farzhad expressed pride in his current job during a follow-up interview in June 2019, just over a year after he had left Sweden. Even though he remained in an illegalized condition—now both in terms of residency and employment—he seemed less anxious than he had before leaving Sweden. Moreover, with the money he had saved, he had already hired a competent lawyer who could assist him in finding a legal pathway to settle in Sweden. It is important to note, however, that Farzhad experienced considerable anguish and that he would have preferred to work under normal circumstances as a legal resident of Sweden. His decision to work 'illegally' must be seen in light of his severely limited opportunities.

Farzhad had clearly experienced several episodes of hopelessness: in Sweden following the rejection of his asylum claim; in France, after another denial; and again at the French–German border. What is striking is that each of these moments was followed by action, motivated by renewed hope. Farzhad's ability to adapt to his circumstances and pursue new aspirations—despite the absence of institutional support—reveals a form of agency forged in hopelessness. This suggests that hopelessness, rather than negating agency, can reconfigure agency in ways that contest dominant narratives portraying migrants as passive subjects.

Moreover, it is evident that these journeys through hopelessness had prompted crucial personal changes. Before his journey to France, Farzhad attached great importance to following social norms and laws, influenced both by his father's insistence on lawful conduct and by his awareness that any illegal actions in Sweden could jeopardize his asylum prospects. Upon his return, he appeared to have reconsidered his situation, and came to accept the risks of working 'illegally.' A series of moments marked by hopelessness led him to reassess his circumstances, shifting his orientation away from strict legal compliance, in turn opening a new space for action. This included seeking to improve his personal prospects within the constraints of the system in which he found himself. These findings lend support to the arguments of Žižek (2018) and Herz et al. (2022) that hopelessness can be a productive phenomenon with potential to ignite change.

Importantly, Farzhad continued to hope for a residence permit and a better life in Sweden. The key distinction now was that Farzhad was no longer relying solely on the hope that the Swedish state would act justly. Instead, with the assistance of a lawyer he could now afford, he aimed to eventually persuade the court that the denial of his asylum claims constituted an act of injustice.

Following Boucher (2020), a productive dimension of hopelessness lies in its capacity to generate new hopes, although one can never rule out that such hope may also prove deceptive and result in renewed hopelessness. In this context, it is crucial to highlight that, for marginalized individuals like Farzhad, even convergent changes, such as securing employment—changes that do not challenge the social system—can profoundly reshape their lifeworld.

The example of Farzhad reveals the intricate entanglement between hope and hopelessness. This aligns with the findings of [Pettit and Ruijtenberg \(2019\)](#) that the oscillation between hope and hopelessness is heightened under conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty.

A METHOD OF HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

This article has delved into the intricate and interwoven nature of hope and hopelessness, emphasizing the need to critically examine how these affect individuals in vulnerable circumstances. While hope can serve as a powerful motivator, preserving dignity—as exemplified by Semret’s wavering hopes for a return to Eritrea—it can also deceive. For instance, hope may function as a tool of governance, incentivizing compliance, thus blurring the boundary between resilience and passivity. We have also witnessed how hope can become cruel, as [Berlant \(2011\)](#) argues, when it renders individuals subservient to harmful conditions, and how it can be painful when repeatedly thwarted.

[Miyazaki’s \(2004\)](#) concept of ‘the method of hope’ offers a fruitful framework for exploring the power of hope in people affected by colonialism and other forms of structural discrimination while also reorienting social scientific inquiry toward acknowledging the transformative potential of future-oriented aspirations in shaping knowledge production. Miyazaki’s method is not merely about studying the hopes of others but also about ‘replicating’ those hopes within the epistemic practices of social science ([Miyazaki 2004: 7](#)). It productively encourages researchers to move beyond a detached, critical gaze and instead recognize the transformative potential of academic work to actively engage with and contribute to the ‘affective economies’ ([Ahmed 2004](#)) that shape people’s perceptions and relations to the world around them.

While Miyazaki’s approach presents a compelling framework for hope-centered research, my findings indicate the need to complement this approach by attending to the role of hopelessness as well. Hopelessness can also be productive—not as a negation of hope but as a force that prompts reevaluation and reorientation. This is not to romanticize despair but rather to trace how moments of hopelessness can function as epistemic ruptures that interrupt dominant affective economies and enabling new orientations, actions, and critiques. In this sense, hopelessness emerges not only as an object of analysis but also as a methodological lens through which agency under precarity can be understood.

Moments of hopelessness are productive, for instance, when they prompt individuals to realize that the hopes and aspirations they had previously held have been unrealistic or illusory. This was the case of Farzhad, who realized he would not be able to receive a residence permit in Sweden, a hope previously nurtured by encouraging teachers, social workers, and other professionals he met in Sweden. The hopelessness experienced by Farzhad made him reevaluate his position in Sweden and the way others related to him. His case also illustrates that such moments can spur action, as when he decided to travel to France and try his luck there instead.

While acknowledging the productive dimensions of hopelessness, it is nevertheless crucial not to overlook its potentially harmful effects. In extreme cases, the absence of hope may lead to despair so profound that it may become life-threatening. Any methodological engagement with hope and hopelessness must therefore be ethically attuned to how hopelessness might also give rise to destructive patterns.

A deeper engagement with hope and hopelessness calls for an ethical reconsideration on multiple levels. The impulse to offer hope to those in difficult situations is a deeply human and empathetic response, yet it can be counterproductive if it prevents individuals from realistically exploring their circumstances and alternative possibilities. In such cases, active listening and recognition of a full spectrum of emotions—including sadness, rage, longing, loneliness, and hopelessness—without necessarily offering hope may in fact be more therapeutic.

Furthermore, an ethics grounded in both hope and hopelessness encourages researchers and professionals to be more attentive to expressions of hopelessness and to offer meaningful and practical support in such moments.

Common expressions of empathy, such as ‘don’t give up,’ ‘it will work out,’ or ‘everything will be fine,’ may provide temporary comfort and a sense of recognition—crucial in moments of distress. However, such words may in retrospect appear hollow or even misleading if not accompanied by concrete action, as was the case for Farzhad when he reflected on the warm welcome he received upon arriving in Sweden. In contrast, the engagement of Jenny, the human rights activist, exemplifies an ethics in which motivational language is paired with practical support that tangibly helped Farzhad and his friend navigate the circumstances that had produced their hopelessness.

An approach that considers both hope and hopelessness is not only relevant in examining and responding to the experiences of individuals in vulnerable situations—it can also be applied at broader, systemic, and global levels. Contemporary society faces multiple global challenges that threaten social, economic, and ecological sustainability, including climate change, armed conflicts, massive displacements, political polarization, financial crises, pandemics, food and water insecurity, and the spread of misinformation. Although there is widespread awareness of the urgency and harm these challenges already inflict on humans, many act as if these challenges are not real. A contributing factor is the belief that small-scale individual actions—such as recycling household waste or purchasing ‘climate-compensated’ goods—are sufficient to counteract threats like climate change.

From Žižek’s (2018) perspective, such minor acts often serve primarily as a way for people to assuage their guilt for not doing enough. Moreover, these behaviors create a kind of hope that obscures the reality that vast portions of the global population would need to radically change their way of life to truly combat challenges like climate change. A method of hope and hopelessness, in this context, helps us see beyond these illusions. The role of researchers, professionals, and political representatives is not to gloss over the severity of the situation by highlighting a few positive signs or ‘good examples’ but rather to use as much detail and evidence as possible to reveal to the public the full scale of the problems.

At the same time, we must guard against a nihilistic stance in which all action is dismissed as futile. The point is not to reject hope altogether but to recognize that hopelessness can function as a critical lens—one that disrupts complacency and opens space for a different kind of hope—a hope that does not necessarily cling to the preservation of the status quo but rather acknowledges the possibility that meaningful change may require radical shifts in behavior, values, and orientation.

The material presented in this article underscores the entanglement of hope and hopelessness, lending support to Pettit and Ruijtenberg’s argument that the oscillation

between these emotional modes intensify for individuals caught in what they term “cruel” migratory regimes’ (Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019: 730).

Hope and hopelessness are entwined forces, each double-edged—harboring both productive and destructive potential. Acknowledging this complexity deepens our understanding of the role emotions and desires play in human life. By recognizing their interplay, we can move beyond cycles of false hope and envision a dignified future for those enduring fundamental vulnerability and uncertainty.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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