



Article

Coming of Age While Challenging Borders: Networks of Solidarity and Resistance of Swedish-Afghan Youths on the Move in Europe

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Abstract: This article examines the strategies of resistance enacted by an informal network of solidarity comprised of Afghan youths on the move in Europe and their Swedish allies. In 2015, thousands of Afghan children fleeing from the Taliban regime arrived in Europe as unaccompanied minors. Many have been hosted in Sweden and lived there for several years, until coming of age. Reaching 18 years prompted a series of consecutive losses, as the Swedish state limited their opportunities to remain in the country or even illegalized them. Subjected to threats of detention, deportation, and ill treatment, many Afghan youths re-escaped into other European countries, crafting networks of informal solidarity to help them resist border violence. This article is based on an ethnographic study that delves into the lived experiences of four Afghan youths who lived in Lisbon between February 2019 and February 2020, particularly focusing on the journey of Ahmed, a young man of Hazara ethnicity. The empirical data shed light on the solidarity enactments that enhanced the youths' resistance in hostile environments, inviting reflection on the impacts of the European border regime and the importance of agency, care, and political contestation.

Keywords: Afghan youths; agency; border violence; resistance; networks of solidarity



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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the lived experiences of Afghan youths who became ‘people on the move’ in Europe, centering the analysis on the journey of Ahmed, a young man of Hazara minority who left Afghanistan at 14 years old. Welcomed in Sweden as ‘unaccompanied minors’, many Afghan youths were integrated in local communities, attended school, learned the Swedish language, and had plans for the future when they turned eighteen and were suddenly made illegal—i.e., illegalized—by the Swedish state. This decision prompted political contestation, particularly among former foster families of Afghan children (Elsrud 2020, 2023; Elsrud et al. 2023; Elsrud and Lalander 2022). The ethnographic study presented in this article delves into a network of informal solidarity that emerged as a result of the relationships of care and political resistance established between Swedish citizens and young Afghans who were made illegal. These relationships shape a collective countermovement imbued with care and informal solidarity, built with the purpose of resisting and protesting border violence (Rebelo 2020). The article explores both the solidarity enactments and the relationships of care that contributed to create an *Afghan–Swedish* belonging. Ahmed’s journey, detailed in the results section, further illustrates the role of agency and the strategies of resistance that have been utilized to manage hostile environments in Europe. The article is organized as follows: First, I will present the background and context of the study, describing the origin of the analyzed network of solidarity and the *Afghan–Swedish* bonds created among its members. Next, I will engage with the literature on critical border studies, autonomy of migration, and networks of solidarity to highlight recent theoretical findings on the blurred lines between solidarity and resistance with (and by) people on the move in today’s Europe. Then, I will describe the ethnographic

study, its methods and participants, as well as my positionality as an engaged researcher. In the results section, the voices of three core participants (Ahmed, Thelma, and Nora) demonstrate some of the enactments of solidarity, agency, and resistance that sustained the youths' complex journeys of migration, particularly focusing on Ahmed's lived experiences. In the discussion, insights from the study are linked with relevant scholarship to offer some contributions to further academic research on networks of solidarity and resistance to border violence. I argue that the trajectories of collective resistance described in this article unveil the messiness of solidarity in action, its intersubjectivities and political significances. Furthermore, the resistance enacted by Afghan youths represents a new relation of force placed into the European political terrain, nuanced by relationships of care and collective political contestation of the border regime.

2. Background and Context

The number of people seeking asylum in Sweden went from an average of 30,000 per year to more than 160,000 applicants in just one trimester in 2015 (Migrationsverket 2018). In the same year, approximately 35,000 asylum seekers fleeing countries where violence and persecution have escalated in recent decades, e.g., Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, and Iraq, registered as unaccompanied minors (Migrationsverket 2018; Human Rights Watch 2016). Swedish civil society responded to this increased demand by partnering with the state to build a collective strategy for refugee reception (Bevelander and Hellström 2019). Drawing on a long tradition of national sanctuary making (Elsrud et al. 2023) and following a logic of geographical dispersal that relied heavily on citizen-led accommodation, most unaccompanied minors were received in home-like safe environments (Elsrud 2020; Elsrud et al. 2023). Many were provided with sponsored housing in family homes, while others were received in collective facilities run by progressive social services (Elsrud 2020). Until adulthood, unaccompanied minors were thus raised by Swedish foster families and provided with a legal guardian, a basic stipend to cover their expenses, such as clothing and transportation, and free tuition to attend Swedish schools (Elsrud 2020; Elsrud et al. 2023; Söderqvist et al. 2016). The level of support and emotional connection during this crucially important period in the youths' lives (most were 15 years old or older) contributed to the development of bonds and a symbolic Swedish belonging, building their self-worth as legitimate citizens (Elsrud 2020; Söderqvist et al. 2016). These youths had access to a safe environment that provided them with a sense of social support and emotional connection to local culture, traditional customs, and family life (Elsrud 2020).

By the end of 2015, Swedish politicians from the right to the left began referring to the increased number of asylum seekers in the country as a 'system collapse' (Elsrud 2020), prompting a series of policy changes. Several researchers (e.g., Elsrud 2020; Djampour 2018; Khosravi 2009, 2016) describe an increasing negativity in the public opinion towards asylum seekers and refugees, reinforcing and legitimizing a growing number of deterrence practices to migration and residence permits. To be fair, the Swedish migration system had already been criticized in earlier academic studies (e.g., Brekke 2004; Joormann 2018; Noll 2005; Khosravi 2009, 2016; Skodo 2020; Abdelhady et al. 2020). Based on the negative experiences reported by adult asylum seekers in Sweden, researchers described the painfully lengthy administrative procedures (Brekke 2004) and the inhumane conditions endured in Swedish detention centers (Khosravi 2009). However, since 2005, these narratives had only been circulating in academic circles, with little impact on the citizens' overall positive perception of the country's stance on asylum. In fact, until 2016, there was a consensual image of Swedish exceptionalism (Bevelander and Hellström 2019), which was only broken when civil society's views of the state became fragmented by the shortcomings and perceived injustices towards young asylum seekers (Elsrud 2020). The pathway towards social inclusion changed rapidly for young asylum seekers from Afghanistan who were coming of age after 2016. When officially becoming adults, they were obliged by the Swedish state to re-claim asylum. Yet, by 2018, Sweden granted residency to only 30% of asylum applicants according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE 2018). These

circumstances forced thousands of youths who were previously welcomed as refugees into a sequence of repeated rejections, loss of financial support, and loss of sponsored accommodation (Elsrud 2020). Despite the shift in circumstances, many Afghan youths kept their bonds and close relationship with Swedish foster families, friends, and other civil society allies that opposed the State's decision to illegalize them (Elsrud 2020, 2023).

Swedish citizens who had initially focused on the provision of emergency humanitarian support to cover the basic needs of the illegalized youths (e.g., food, clothing, etc.), soon became politicized (Rebelo 2020). Once the state threatened an increasing number of Afghan youths with deportation, many citizens who had created close relationships and affective bonds with them became politically engaged, contributing in various ways to the youth's resistance. For instance, some allies studied asylum and migration law to help prepare court appeals to asylum rejections. When these efforts were frustrated, other allies researched international asylum policies in an attempt to recommend European countries that would be safe for illegalized youths to relocate to. Others focused on building social networks beyond borders, e.g., by contacting Swedish citizens in the diaspora, searching for safe accommodation abroad and travelling pathways 'below the radar', e.g., using night trains between European cities, accompanying youths through borders, etc. These and other strategies of resistance were employed by the participants presented in Section 4.2.

3. Literature Review

The literature on critical border studies (e.g., Agier 2014; Balibar 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Jones 2019; Stierl 2019; Sharma 2020; Walia 2021; Eldridge and Reinke 2018; Näre 2020) has been pointing out that borders are reproduced by uneven power relations in a wider system of structural violence that manifests itself through visible and less visible actions, such as the lengthy and arduous bureaucratic processes associated with claiming asylum. These bureaucratic violences (Eldridge and Reinke 2018) are "administered through processes of decision-making, paperwork, knowledge production, inaction, and exclusion" (p. 95). Some of its most invisible consequences could be defined as 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011), that is, "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space (...) typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). In order to circumvent the effects produced by border violence, in its most obvious and subtle forms, in this article, I use the term 'people on the move' to refer to Afghan youths who were made illegal by the Swedish state. I am aware that the concept 'on the move' has sometimes been instrumentalized by political discourses aiming to simplify the complexity and diversity of migration (e.g., López and Ryan 2023). However, I find it problematic to acritically utilize terms such as 'migrants' and 'refugees', which represent hierarchies of deservingness (Ravn et al. 2020; Paynter 2022) that have been utilized by states to divide people through fabricated criteria of 'worthiness', misrepresenting their realities and the fact that they are, in fact, forced to be 'on the move'. I chose, instead, to underline the process through which my interlocutors have been exposed, as 'people on the move', to a condition of 'deportability' (De Genova 2002) that made them vulnerable to exploitation, abandonment, and detention. The phenomena of intentionally exposing people to a condition of illegalization and deportability has been widely documented in previous scholarship (e.g., Elsrud 2020; Cacho 2012; De Genova 2002; Jones 2019). Since 2015, as border enforcements in Europe intensified, countries developed policies of migration deterrence, in many cases illegalizing youths fleeing from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan (Collyer and Shahani 2023; Elsrud 2020). Young people who became illegalized sought manifold strategies of resistance to deal with the threat of deportation and detention (Elsrud 2020; Rebelo 2020). This article engages with the enactments of resistance and solidarity that sustained the survival of my interlocutors in hostile environments. Their lived experiences and embodied resistances, crafted within networks of solidarity and relationships of care and mutual support, highlight youth's agency and the collective contestation of border violence (Stierl 2019; Stierl and Tazzioli 2022).

In seeking to understand my interlocutors' resistance through their complex, diverse, and personal journeys, shaped by political, social, and personal engagements, I draw inspiration from previous studies on the autonomy of migration (e.g., Mezzadra 2010), which understand resistance to illegalization as a way to create autonomy and open new possibilities and spaces of freedom within hostile environments (Hess and Kasperek 2017). I also engage with scholarship on networks of solidarity (e.g., Dadusc 2019) to highlight the creation of new spatialities, relationships, and alliances that are made possible through the evolving bonds between citizens and people on the move (Ataç et al. 2016). Interestingly, the networks of solidarity crafted by my interlocutors did not only oppose the illegalization of Afghan youths on the move but reclaimed their symbolic belonging—their *Afghan–Swedishness*—as a legitimate form of citizenship. In addressing these solidarity presentations, it is therefore important to underline the relationships of care that weaved them together, creating political and affective commons (Ticktin 2021). Academic activists in Sweden (e.g., Elsrud et al. 2023) coined the term 'transversal sanctuary enactments' to describe the alliances between civil society and youths resisting deportation. Such strategies of both care and resistance have a political significance that highlights the blurred lines between solidarity and contentious politics (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2021). This dynamic interplay of individual agency and inter-personal relationality through solidarity networks that grow beyond borders challenges the often simplistic and passive depiction of people on the move (López and Ryan 2023).

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. A Preliminary Note on Positionality and Ethics

My positionality is in line with the work of critical anthropologists (e.g., Manning 2016; Powell 2022; Harrison 2010) and community psychologists (Watkins 2015), who have utilized allyship and accompaniment in their engaged research. I engaged with my interlocutors as an ally to their struggle and offered them pragmatic support through small acts of solidarity that were requested or perceived as useful by the youths themselves. This included accompanying my interlocutors to appointments with Portuguese institutions, searching for suitable accommodation and other needed resources, and participating in daily interactions, informal meetings, and conversations concerning their lives in Portugal. Accompaniment and allyship require a critical understanding of the researcher so that (s)he can stand alongside others with an ethics of mutual respect and understanding, solidarity, and empowerment (Watkins 2015). My positionality is also intended as a contribution to the efforts being made to decolonize community-based research and bring more reflexivity into the role of researchers that study communities struggling for social justice (Watkins 2015; Harrison 2010).

My situated speech ('lugar de fala'¹) is inspired by professional experiences (I am a mental health professional with more than a decade of experience alongside displaced populations and a recent researcher in Anthropology); social context (I am the youngest daughter of a white working-class Portuguese family, the first to be born after the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship, and I was raised between a small village and the capital of Lisbon); and political engagement (I am an activist researcher involved in initiatives of solidarity and migrant justice). My positionality combined with my personal background certainly created subjectivities that may have impacted the analysis presented in this article. In order to preserve the ethical standards of the study, all information used for research purposes was discussed with and authorized by my interlocutors. I used pseudonyms and removed institutional names and locations that could be easily identifiable to preserve the confidentiality of everyone involved.

4.2. Methods and Participants

The research presented in this section is part of a broader PhD study (Rebelo 2020) that examines informal solidarity networks of people on the move in Europe. I conducted an ethnographic study in Lisbon, Brussels, and Paris between 2018 and 2020, alongside people

on the move and civil society allies who were organized in collectives of activism and solidarity. The aim of the research was to investigate the crafting of networks of informal solidarity, namely how do they cultivate commons (Ticktin 2021), that is, human bonds of care and political purpose that reflect aspirations of social transformation (Rebello 2020). I understand ethnography as a research method that aims at enmeshing the ethnographer into the ordinary day-to-day realities of people and their lived experiences in specific contexts (Beach 2006). Ethnographies have been constantly upsetting our assumptions and claims to understand the actual meanings and intentions of others. Rethinking our place of speech, the right to speak, and the right to actively use silence is a necessary exercise, not only conceptually, but as a demonstration of concern with the powers that validate both speech and silence. With this in mind, I chose ethnography as a research method to accompany people whose voices, within a political, social, and cultural sense, have not been sufficiently heard. By engaging in ethnographic work, I can begin by acknowledging the power and political inequalities that create distance between my interlocutors and academia and begin to build knowledge from a space of honesty, mutual understanding, and clear positionality.

The study began in February 2019 and lasted until February 2020. The four young participants are Ahmed, 19 years old at the time; Mubarak, 18; Mohamed, 20; and Said, 18. Ahmed was the first to arrive in Portugal, in December 2018, and therefore the one with whom I established a longer-lasting relationship, and the only one with whom I conducted an in-depth interview. Interviewing Ahmed involved ethical concerns to avoid revictimizing questions, clarifying at all times the purpose of the questions and respecting his own terms as to when and what to disclose of his journey, thoughts, and feelings. Furthermore, to complement the ethnographic data, two other in-depth interviews were conducted, with Nora and Thelma, both Swedish allies. All interviews were fully transcribed and anonymized. The empirical data were collected through audio recordings, fieldnotes, and digital media interactions concerning the everyday lives of the four participants in Lisbon.

Ahmed, whose journey is the primary focus of this article, is a young man from the Hazara minority who fled Afghanistan at the age of 14 after the death of both his parents and the occupation of his home in Kabul by the Taliban. He first fled into Iran with his uncle and siblings, and later to Greece as an unaccompanied minor. In 2015, he travelled to Turkey, crossed over to Greece, and from there to the Republic of North Macedonia. As an unaccompanied minor, he was supported by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) to apply for international protection in Sweden, where he lived as a refugee for three years. During this time, he was placed with a foster family, learned the language, and had plans to become a bus driver and own a restaurant. In 2018, he was denied asylum and forced to flee the country after a few months of living homeless and on the run. At the end of 2018, after formally requesting asylum in Portugal, he was offered accommodation sponsored by the SEF (then the Portuguese Border Agency). He first lived in a collective reception center for refugees, on the outskirts of Lisbon, and later moved to a series of overcrowded and substandard hostels in the city center. He was forced to move three times due to the poor conditions of the hosting facilities (e.g., mold in the walls, insufficient beds, bed bugs, etc.). By July 2019, having reached the limit of the sponsored accommodation, he was at risk of becoming homeless again. In Portugal, asylum seekers are only granted six months of sponsored accommodation, which is the estimated time it takes to process asylum applications. However, this time is rarely enough for the border agency to make a final decision, leaving Ahmed in a vulnerable situation. As Lisbon was (and still is) affected by an unprecedented housing crisis, renting a room with roughly EUR 300 per month (Social Security's grant for social emergencies) was practically impossible.

Mubarak and Mohamed, ages 20 and 18, participated in the study beginning in July 2019. Mohamed did not speak English, so my relationship with him was mediated by the Swedish allies, whom I will introduce next. Both Mubarak and Mohamed had been living together in a rented room in Lisbon since February 2019, with a social security stipend and some additional financial support from their former foster families in Sweden. Like

Ahmed, both Mubarak and Mohamed fled Afghanistan in 2015 and arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors. They lived in the country from 2015 to 2019, until coming of age and being made illegal. Mohamed suffered a great deal of violence in Sweden, having been detained and accused of deceiving the migration authorities about his 'real age' (Swedish migration services often make this kind of accusation as part of the process of illegalizing young asylum seekers). I accompanied both Mubarak and Mohamed as they fought to appeal their denial of asylum in Portugal (which they both received in July 2019). Mubarak was the older participant in the study and a very independent and self-sufficient young man. He took Portuguese classes and had a part-time job distributing publicity flyers. Mohamed was particularly shy and withdrawn, which limited any direct interaction. However, I learned from his allies and friends that he was still recovering from extremely stressful experiences in Sweden. Finally, Said (the only one of the four participants still living in Portugal) was 18 years old in August 2019, when Ahmed introduced him to me. They later became roommates, until February 2020, when Ahmed decided to leave Portugal and re-escape to France. Said did not speak fluent Swedish or English, so communication with him was mediated by Ahmed and the Swedish allies involved in the study. He came to Europe as an unaccompanied minor in 2015, leaving his mother and sister in Kabul, where they remain to this day. He lived in Sweden, with an assigned foster family, for three years. Having lost all his appeals to stay in the country, he was threatened with deportation and decided to join Ahmed and the others in Lisbon to avoid it. Like Mohamed, Said was a very shy young man, often withdrawn and isolated. He enjoyed going to the gym every day and was very helpful to Ahmed and their landlady, often cooking and cleaning the house. He still lives in Portugal today, waiting for permanent residency and working on a rural tourism project.

Thelma is one of the two Swedish allies interviewed during the study. She is a white Swedish woman in her 50s, married, with two teenage children, working as a university teacher in Sweden. She decided to become more deeply involved in solidarity and activism in 2016, when she understood that Afghan youths were being harmed by the Swedish state's asylum policies. She was herself the legal guardian of an Afghan teenage girl at this time and was involved in activist collectives struggling for migrant justice.

"We feel responsible for these youngsters. We do not agree with the way the Swedish Government is handling them and we saw how these policies completely destroyed their lives. They were almost integrated in our communities, they learned the language, they were studying and working, helping their Swedish families (some of which were elders). They were active and contributing members of Swedish society before they were violently tossed out of the system. This is so wrong! (. . .) And so, I began to create close relationships, and in some cases I became an activist, I began to support with concrete actions, in their legal processes" (Thelma, in-depth interview, May 2020).

Nora, the second Swedish ally who participated in the study, began her solidarity journey by joining the Church of Sweden (a Swedish Christian organization with more than 5 million members). For more than fifty years, the Church of Sweden has been a sanctuary for refugees and has developed local social inclusion projects (Bevelander and Hellström 2019). According to a recent report (Hellqvist and Sandberg 2017), an estimated 37,000 people participated in solidarity activities organized by the charity between 2015 and 2016. As opinions about refugees became increasingly polarized, some volunteers, like Nora, became politicized and created their own independent solidarity initiatives outside of the charity. Nora is originally Dutch but has lived in Sweden for two decades with her husband and two teenage children. They live in a rural area, where they run a short-term rental accommodation business. At the beginning of the so-called 'refugee crisis', Nora employed several asylum seekers. By developing close relationships of trust and affection with Afghan nationals, she said she began to 'rebel' against the state.

“A woman from Church asked me if I could host a boy, I., in exchange for his work in my park. He was at that moment living in a collective shelter, shared with many people with drug addiction and alcoholism, and he was suffering so much. I welcomed him into my park and he was incredible, we became very good friends. Also, through him, I discovered a whole new world that was completely unknown to me. I was appalled at the viciousness of the Swedish immigration system. The rules were not fair at all. I am a very objective person, not emotional. I like to get into the bottom of things, so I started doing some research to look at facts and figures. The more I found out, the more I was upset at the politics and the money that was involved. You know, in the end it’s all about the money! They pay extra money to Afghanistan, to make it ok for these deportations to happen. That’s how Sweden is getting rid of all this people” (Nora, in-depth interview, May 2019).

Nora’s and Thelma’s involvement quickly escalated to becoming allies, helping young Afghans avoid deportation by researching alternative safe havens in other European countries. I first spoke to Thelma through a Portuguese activist who knew I was conducting research with people on the move. We first met through Messenger, and she wanted me to meet Ahmed right away. She had recently been to Lisbon and was very concerned about his wellbeing. Ahmed, in turn, introduced me to Nora, who was helping him navigate the Lisbon asylum system from afar. Since then, Nora, Thelma, and I spoke regularly and participated in several solidarity actions and strategies of resistance enacted by Ahmed and later Mohamed, Mubarak, and Said. Nora and Thelma were always available on Messenger and were extremely proactive in responding to and acting on immediate requests (e.g., translations, information exchanges, finding evidence and documents for legal proceedings, finding relevant resources for healthcare and social services). Through social media, allies and youths on the move participated in a wide range of virtual solidarity platforms, where questions and advice were sought and exchanged. These virtual platforms included people living in Italy, Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Spain, and Portugal.

4.3. Limitations

Given my language barriers, the ethnographic data were often collected through inter-mediation, that is, through the translation of Ahmed, Nora, and Thelma, with whom I developed a longer relationship. The exchanges with them were the most frequent during the research, and therefore, fieldnotes are strongly based on these core interactions. This means that there is an inevitable component of subjective interpretation, shaped by third-party understandings of lived experiences, words, and emotions. Nevertheless, the fieldnotes include several transcriptions of informal conversations in order to convey, as much as possible, my interlocutors’ own views and perspectives.

4.4. Analysis

In order to make sense of the empirical data, I first read all of the fieldnotes, skimming for meaningful interactions that reflected strategies of resistance and solidarity enacted by my interlocutors. A first round of excerpts from the fieldnotes was selected and coded with candidate topics that helped make sense of the aggregated data. I then proceeded to triangulate the ethnographic data with the analysis of the three in-depth interviews. More than a pragmatic combination of data sources, I used triangulation as a way to incorporate diverse perspectives on the key topics of the study. The interpretation of the triangulated data will be detailed in the results section. I identified two main themes that emerged from the data and are relevant to the key points of this paper. The first theme details Ahmed’s journey in Portugal, in order to better understand his agency and the strategies of resistance that he employed to cope with adversity. The second theme focuses on the clashes between the solidarity network crafted by the youths and their allies and the asylum system in Portugal, where youths were subjected to bureaucratic and slow violence. The two themes

are illustrated with interview excerpts and fieldnotes and discussed through analytical insights from the literature.

5. Findings

5.1. *Coming of Age While Challenging Borders: The Disentanglement and Remaking of Belongings*

Ahmed did not like to speak about his earlier life, in Afghanistan, which included many difficult events, culminating in the loss of his parents and the occupation of the family home by the Taliban. It was always painful to repeat these difficult experiences to lawyers and immigration officials. He often discussed his current worries with his two siblings, who still live in Iran and face economic hardship. At only 19 years of age, Ahmed was making his third attempt to rebuild his life from scratch in Portugal and realize his dream of owning a restaurant and having economic stability to help his loved ones. In contrast, when I first met Ahmed, he often talked about his life in Sweden. He was very nostalgic about the years he spent in a small multicultural community, and he missed being there. A lively and sociable person, he enjoyed sharing his experiences at school, where he proudly learned how to read and write; at the local gym, where he practiced martial arts; and in his neighborhood, where he made plenty of friends and had a girlfriend.

Ahmed: “Sweden is good. Life there is very good. I stayed with my Swedish family for a long time, I helped them in the garden, I cooked for them. They gave me a house, so I helped them every day. I learned Swedish very well. I did not know how to read or write before, so in Sweden I learned to read and write in Swedish. I even had my own computer, in school. I learned everything very well and I made many friends. I even had a Syrian girlfriend. Life was very good for me there, until they made me homeless” (Ahmed, in-depth interview, July 2019)

After being denied asylum in Sweden, Ahmed lost all his appeals in court and was declared illegal in a country he had grown to love and belong to. This was perceived as a cruel injustice that took the 17-year-old Ahmed completely by surprise. As it happened with Mohamed, Ahmed was effectively declared to have lied to the Swedish state, which officially re-aged him as an adult in 2018. The age of asylum seekers in Sweden has become increasingly controversial (Elsrud 2020). The Swedish Migration Agency uses a series of controversial tests to question the trustworthiness of minors (Elsrud 2020). Ahmed was re-aged based on the argument that he had not provided proof of his age, such as a valid passport. He did present a birth certificate, but the document was deemed ‘forged’ by the Swedish migration authorities. When young people are re-aged as adults, their world turns upside down (Elsrud 2020). Migration and Social Services evicted Ahmed from his sponsored accommodation, giving him only a few hours to pack and leave (or else the police would be called). Ahmed spent several months on the run in the Swedish countryside, hiding from the Swedish Migration Agency, the Social Services, and the police. He improvised shelters in the woods, and during the cold winter days, he slept in a borrowed caravan, where a Swedish collective provided him with food and clothing. Ahmed described this moment in his life as ‘rock bottom’. “It made me feel like I was dependent on charity” (Fieldnotes, conversation with Ahmed, July 2019). The painful severing of his Swedish ties and the imminent threat of deportation to a country where he no longer had family ties led to Ahmed’s decision to flee again and create new belongings. Challenging European borders was a strategy of resistance and a way to avoid ‘social death’ (Cacho 2012; Vigh 2006; Elsrud 2020).

At first, Ahmed took several night trains to get into Paris, where he spent a couple of months connecting with local informal networks of solidarity. His plan was to remain in France, re-apply for asylum, and find a job whilst waiting for the decision on his application. His allies in Sweden provided him with survival money through a debit card and he kept close contact with them through social media.

Ahmed: “I wanted to stay in Paris, I didn’t care if they refused me. We can find a job in Paris, my friends were able to find ways to survive there. But my

friends in Sweden told me I should come to Portugal, because I would have better chances to be accepted as a refugee here” (Fieldnotes, conversation with Ahmed, November 2019)

The decision to leave Paris was made and organized by Ahmed’s trusted allies, based on their analysis of the asylum policies in Portugal. The country had received positive reviews in the media for its overall welcoming attitude towards refugees and migrants. As of 2015, Portugal had shown political willingness to accept incoming asylum seekers and refugees who were stranded in Greece and Italy (Rebelo 2020). However, the implementation of the new refugee reception program was fraught with many complications and shortcomings (Rebelo et al. 2020). Ahmed faced an objective lack of resources to survive in Lisbon, and these difficulties had serious implications for his wellbeing and social inclusion, as they affected his agency and sense of control over his future.

I first met Ahmed in a café, across the street from where he lived at the time. He was extremely unhappy and disturbed by his precarious living conditions in Lisbon. I joined his informal solidarity collective in order to accompany him in the process of resisting the terrible circumstances. Our collective actions included finding Ahmed a new pro bono lawyer, translating documents from Swedish to English, helping him register at the nearest health center, finding resources for free daily meals and monthly food bank packages, enrolling him in Portuguese and English classes, etc. Throughout the summer of 2019, Ahmed showed signs of feeling a little more confident in himself and in his future, as his situation improved. However, he was dissatisfied with the general socioeconomic conditions in Portugal and felt that his life in the country would never match the expectations he had begun to build in Sweden.

Thelma: “When they arrived in Sweden, they arrived at a ‘better time’, when all refugees were provided with rooms, schools and good social networks. The Sweden that they left has mistreated them very badly, throwing them out on the streets, giving them hope one day, only to take it away in the next. However, since many had time to make friends with people in Sweden they have been ‘rescued’, in a sense, by civil society. That was the situation they left I think, yet I find that they compare Portugal to what Sweden was like when they arrived there and to the networks that took them 4 years to build. This Sweden does not exist anymore, and the networks are soon worn out. Yet, I think that this is what they miss when they arrive to Lisbon. They had hopes to find that again, but now they are losing it” (Fieldnotes, conversation with Thelma, July 2019).

Ahmed expected a similar prospect of independence and economic autonomy in Portugal but remained dependent on distant economic support from his allies in Sweden. For months, Swedish solidarity networks ‘covered’ the shortcomings of the Portuguese social services, especially after Ahmed was evicted from his sponsored housing. The added realization that he might remain in legal limbo for a longer time than expected (as informed by his new lawyer) led to a period of emotional exhaustion. His first lawyer (randomly assigned by the Portuguese services) missed the deadline for his first appeal, so Ahmed had to file a new asylum application, which would prolong his bureaucratic process.

Thelma: “I sometimes get so sick of my own voice. I can hear myself saying ‘hang in there’, ‘breathe’, ‘one day at a time’, through their ears and feel really dumb. I may be right that the best thing is to wait, but that is all they have been doing—for four years now (. . .) I don’t think this issue will grow very much further. The rumor has spread that Portugal is tough (for some reason living in the street in Paris is starting to look like a safer route!). As far as I know Swedish-Afghans are all leaving Lisbon, only Mubarak, Mohamed and Said seem to be on the right track. I think Ahmed has the trickiest situation of them all” (Fieldnotes, conversation with Thelma, November 2019).

With the support of the local parish, Ahmed found an old room in the center of Lisbon where he and Said paid EUR 150 each and were able to attend free language classes and

social activities in the new neighborhood. This situation continued through the fall and winter of 2019, but Ahmed felt restless. Waiting so long for a legal decision on his right to remain in Portugal and facing the added pressure of his siblings' dire conditions in Iran made him look for new strategies of resistance to take back control over his life. He discussed the possibility of returning to Paris in January 2020 with his allies and lawyer. They all advised him to wait a while longer, as he had more chances of obtaining legal status in Portugal than in France. But Ahmed could not bear his situation any longer. In February 2020, Ahmed managed to raise enough money to take an overnight night train to Spain and then walk to the French border. He arranged all the logistical details of the escape with Nora, and the day before he left, he informed everyone else. I kept in touch to check in on him and learned that Ahmed arrived in Paris a few days later, at about the same time that the COVID-19 lockdown was implemented. He was immediately placed in the home of a French family through an arrangement made by an informal Swedish solidarity network based in Paris. He applied for asylum again and, fortunately, his application was accepted a few months later. Soon after, he received his residence permit and was finally able to rebuild his life, settling in the outskirts of Paris. At the age of 24, he now speaks fluent French, has a job in a local restaurant, and has resumed his martial arts training.

5.2. 'Please Talk to the Swedes!': The Clashing of Solidarities in Portugal

While engaging with young Afghans trying to settle in Portugal, I noticed some interesting intercultural particularities and subjectivities that conveyed their symbolic *Afghan–Swedish* belonging. The fact that the young people I met had spent at least three crucial years of their development in Sweden led them to expect, to some extent, that Portugal would offer similar opportunities. For example, in the communication between Swedish allies and young people, there were shared notions of hospitality that did not match the practices observed in Portugal. The Portuguese asylum system had a much heavier bureaucracy and used relational distance in the formality of its institutional practices, generating an experience of slow violence (Nixon 2011). The dissonance between expectations and reality quickly took an emotional toll on both the youths and their allies.

Nora: "Everything was so weird to me. It was the first time that I could not talk directly to people, like we do here in Sweden. All the bureaucratic procedures, and the difficulty to access the responsible people inside the institutions, even to get their emails and phone numbers, it is all so formal, makes you feel like you're in a maze" (Nora, in-depth interview, May 2020).

Throughout the ethnographic study, I observed interactions between representatives of Portuguese institutions and young Afghans that were often permeated by complaints about the unintentional 'intrusions' of the Swedish allies. Nora and Thelma sometimes wrote lengthy messages to the young people's pro bono Portuguese lawyers, detailing the aspects that they considered relevant to their legal processes, such as updates on Afghanistan and the Swedish asylum injustices. The pro bono lawyers in Portugal, on the other hand, were dealing with a heavy caseload and on several occasions stated that they felt overwhelmed by such emails and responded briefly and harshly in an attempt to reduce communication. I was often asked by the lawyers of Ahmed, Mohamed, and Mubarak to "*Please, talk to the Swedes!*", meaning that they wanted me to mediate and explain how the 'Portuguese system' worked.

Thelma: "It's such a mess. Everyone is either upset, angry or in panic. I'm getting worried messages from Ahmed, angry messages from L. no messages from F. and panicky messages from Mubarak's family, who is angry that his documents were translated but not certified. Nora and other helper try to pressure F. to respond, but all he does is getting angry at everyone, and does not provide any concrete answers. Everyone is so stressed out. It is so bad. I am so worried over the boys. I'm so glad you will be back soon".

Nora: “F. sent me two emails this whole time, both no longer than two sentences with no answers to my questions on how I can help. And the latter very angry. What the hell is going on? Why are people offended with simple questions?” (Fieldnotes, messenger exchanges with Thelma and Nora, October 2019).

There were frequent clashes with the rigidity of the Portuguese institutions and difficult communication with institutional actors, which often frustrated the informal network of solidarity, despite their constant attempts to contextualize and adapt to the situation. From Nora’s perspective, there is a very subtle, undeclared kind of racism in Portuguese institutions. Having been to Lisbon twice herself, and speaking regularly with young people living in Portugal, Nora believes that racism manifests itself in interactions with public services.

Nora: “I think there is no serious problem with racism there, like in Sweden, where there is open violence and physical attacks to refugees. But I found this system very violent and discriminatory, in the little things. The language barriers, the negligence, the lack of respect for people as human beings, the difficulty to just talk to people in a simple, transparent way, and ask them questions. . . everything seems so closed” (Nora, in-depth interview, March 2020).

Both the youth and their allies increasingly responded to the difficult interactions with the Portuguese asylum system with confusion, anxiety, and concern. In order to strengthen their resistance to these institutional barriers, the youth sought to build strong relationships with Portuguese civil society allies. However, the Portuguese model of grassroots solidarity is pervaded by underfunded associations and charities that offer limited support, which at times increased their levels of frustration. For these reasons, the four participants found Portugal a particularly difficult and complicated country in which to resettle and build solidarities that resembled their experiences in Sweden. Their initial reception—*the fact that there was a system in place to provide state-sponsored accommodation and keep asylum seekers out of the streets—was a good start* (Nora, in-depth interview, March 2020). However, *“the conditions of the accommodation are far from being the most appropriate”* (Ahmed, in-depth interview, July 2019). In addition, the lack of Dari interpreters and the absence of an interconnected system of institutional support left Ahmed, Mubarak, Said, and Mohamed in a vulnerable and precarious situation, perceiving their future in the country as extremely difficult. The lack of engaged solidarity and activism was evident to the youth and their allies.

Thelma: “In other countries it is easier to find civil society initiatives that establish horizontal relationships of proximity and activism, that provide asylum seekers with a sense of protection and freedom” (Fieldnotes, conversation with Thelma, January 2020).

Having experienced a different reality in Sweden, France, and Italy, Thelma and Nora became concerned about the difficulties of the young people in Lisbon and encouraged their decision to look for alternative countries to settle in, especially France, where Ahmed, Mubarak, and Mohamed currently reside.

Nora: “In Sweden a lot of families opened their homes completely to these kids. And they became friends for life. That is why you see all these engaged families around Ahmed and Mubarak. They are old people who won’t forget how the boys helped them around in the garden or whatever, and how they made them company, or how they gave a new meaning to their isolated lives. But it has taken years to develop this kind of relationships, so I don’t think this is even feasible now, in Portugal. I think there have not been enough refugees there for your society to see their precarious situation and the win-win situation of inviting them into their homes” (Fieldnotes, messenger exchange with Nora, October 2019).

Contrasting these lived experiences with previous research on solidarity with people on the move in Europe (e.g., [Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017](#); [Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2017](#); [Artero 2019](#)), it seems that the intersubjectivity created between Swedish allies and

young Afghans influenced the way that they understood solidarity. Their experiences led them to create a shared ethos of hospitality which could not be replicated in Portugal. In the absence of spaces of activism and contentious politics, there were limited opportunities to create alternative forms of sanctuary (Elsrud et al. 2023) and to enact resistance to the hostility of the Portuguese asylum system.

Nora: “Mubarak is losing his motivation and I think I understand him. He does not feel like doing anything at all. All the youths living in Portugal are sad, at least that’s what he says to me, after looking at their faces. It must be the hard living conditions in Portugal, he said to me. If nothing happens, Mubarak will take the train somewhere else. Like all the other boys are now thinking to do” (Fieldnotes, messenger exchange with Nora, January 2020).

By 2020, three participants decided to leave for France, all except Said. They had to make difficult decisions about the best ways to resist and how to rebuild their belongings.

6. Discussion

In this article, I sought to illustrate the strategies of solidarity and resistance used by a solidarity network that contested the illegalization of Afghan youth by the Swedish state and accompanied them as they became people on the move in Europe. I began by showing the constitution of a symbolic *Afghan–Swedish belonging*, forged through meaningful bonds between Swedish citizens and Afghan youth. The subsequent ruptures and losses, produced by the youth’s illegalization, only served to reinforce this symbolic belonging, creating a network of informal solidarity that has turned into a movement of contentious politics and resistance to border violence, beyond Sweden’s borders. In an attempt to repair the damage caused by the system, allies accompanied the youth on their journeys, including their attempt to resettle in Portugal. These relationships were a powerful tool for coping with adversity and building safety in a hostile environment, enhancing the youths’ agency to regain control over their lives.

Ahmed’s 10-year journey from Afghanistan to Europe involved three attempts at resettlement, in Sweden, Portugal, and France, clearly demonstrating the role of his agency in resisting ‘social death’ (Cacho 2012; Elsrud 2020). His journey also reveals the innovative forms of solidarity that opened up spaces of belonging and resistance in the face of hardship and adversity in Portugal. The relationships established with Swedish allies were a resource to smooth the clashes with the slow violence of the border regime (Esposito et al. 2023).

The ethnographic data presented in this paper illustrate the manifold roles of collective resistance, showing both the solidity (of values and political positions) and the fluidity (of relationships and bonds) that help to challenge border violence in contemporary Europe. The network of informal solidarity was nuanced by both relationships of care and firm political convictions. Agustí and Jørgensen (2016) argued that informal solidarity must be analyzed beyond its geographical, personal, physical, and social aspects to consider its transgressions. Peter Wynn Kirby (2009) suggested that mobility challenges the political structures and borders that aim to pacify and control the bodies of those crossing them. The solidarity of the Swedish allies produced political relationalities of contestation of the border regime, influenced by the intersubjectivities and lived experiences of the youths’ journeys. By sustaining a symbolic *Afghan–Swedish belonging* as a legitimate, albeit informal citizenship, the allies in the study demonstrated that collective resistance can be a form of subversive citizenship. I argue that these collective resistances reveal interesting possibilities for contestation and radical solidarity, inspired by the genuine bonds created between people who are affected by border violence and host communities. Furthermore, the resistance and agency enacted by Afghan youth configures an important relation of power in the contemporary European political terrain, withstanding an active contestation of the border regime.

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Note

- ¹ This concept was coined by the Brazilian feminist and philosopher Djamila Ribeiro, in 2017 (Ribeiro 2017), to reflect the intersectionality of our identities in the social spaces that we inhabit and from which we produce knowledge: https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0104-71832019000200361 (accessed on 30 May 2024).

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