

Social reproduction against administrative bordering: Struggles to reproduce legal legibility among temporary student-migrants in Finland

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Abstract

Migrants in a temporary legal status are subject to heterogeneous techniques of bordering accompanied by assumptions of migratory intention and behaviour. This article analyses migrants' struggles around administrative bordering among non-EU/EEA migrants who hold one-year student residence permits in Finland. I focus on the ongoing labour of reproducing a 'legally legible self' as a perspective for approaching the subjective encounters with the border regime. Rather than merely analysing the impacts of the residence permit on social life, the article centres on the efforts of student permit holders to maintain the right to a continued legally regularized stay in Finland, addressed through a social reproduction lens. The argument is that viewing migrants' efforts of reproducing a legally legible self through the perspective of social reproduction, and thus analysing the labour of attention and care that goes into reproducing one's legal status, we can acquire a more nuanced understanding of the everyday struggles around administrative bordering. The article contributes first to the theorization of social reproduction beyond the walls of the home, by demonstrating how bordering processes intimately shape migrants' opportunities for reproducing their lives, and secondly, by emphasizing life-making as a battlefield, the article adds to the research on administrative border struggles.

Keywords: borders; life-making; reproduction; residence permits; student migration

1. Introduction

An increase in precarious temporary migration status has occurred in the European Union (EU) in the 2000s. Consequently, the subjective pressure to extend such time-limited status has amplified. In Finland, a substantial portion of the temporary residence permits issued has been student permits. Thus, while student-migrants from outside the European Union (EU) or the European Economic Area (EEA) (hereafter non-EU/EEA student-migrants) often desire a good education, decent work, and global mobility, their visioned futures encounter the border regime that fragments and punctuates the migrants' lived time and the options for stabilizing their residence through conditional and temporary residence permits (Maury 2021). This article addresses the issue of non-EU student-migrants' efforts at maintaining the sheer right to a continued stay in Finland, demonstrating how this plays out as a struggle over social reproduction.

Student-migrants are active subjects who negotiate life and liveability in the tensions between subjective aspirations and the political architecture of migration categories and imaginaries surrounding such categories. To grasp the tensions between the border regime and the student-migrants' desires, the ongoing labour of reproducing a 'legally legible self' (Reeves 2020) in relation to the EU-border regime that produces immediate asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships between individuals and institutions must be centred. Placing such everyday struggles and strategies for presenting reliable supporting documents—most often by demonstrating work income of at least €6,720 per year, or by simply refusing to hold on to the temporary student status—in a social reproduction framework advances a combined analytic perspective on migration and social reproduction.

I argue that by viewing migrants' efforts to reproduce a legally legible self through a social reproduction lens, we can acquire a more nuanced understanding of administrative bordering (Könönen 2018) and migrants' efforts to reduce the effects of bordering mechanisms in their everyday lives. This permits us to grasp the instances of struggle that allow for constituting a life in the field of tension between bordering and capital, which often has been 'naturalized into nonexistence' (Bhattacharya 2017: 2), similar to other forms of reproductive work. Hence, the article offers a contribution to the theorization of social reproduction beyond the walls of the 'home' and the immediate relations of care (Mezzadri 2019), by demonstrating how bordering processes intimately shape migrants' opportunities for reproducing their lives. Thereby analysis transcends the constructed division of spheres between production and reproduction, by pointing to how reproduction of the socially and politically constituted migrant subject consists of the reproduction of the social relation to the border regime that hinges on filling economic conditions. Thus, there is no fixed sphere in which living labour is reproduced (O'Laughlin 2022) but rather a vast array of everyday struggles to manage life-making in Finland. From the perspective of social reproduction then, the article points to the intertwining of border regimes and migratory practices (Scheel 2019) and ways in which being a migrant includes being involved in a field of tensions and struggles because of bordering practices (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The article begins with a theoretical introduction to social reproduction as everyday life-making conditioned by the border regime, followed by a contextualization of the student-migrant case. The three analytical subsections address the labour of becoming legally legible, the required agency in relation to administrative bordering, and the student-migrants' efforts of not being approached with suspicion, brought together in a discussion on the intricate relationship between social reproduction, borders, and labour power.

2. Administrative bordering and social reproduction

To examine border struggles in the context of migration necessitates a notion that captures the dynamic relationship to the state and bordering institutions, rather than static and de-historicized definitions of the migrant. I align with Scheel and Tazzioli (2022: 3) who define the 'migrant' as 'a person who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary-making that are implicated by the national order of things'. For holders of student permits, the administrative practices of residence permit applications—administrative bordering (Könönen 2018)—are central, as these practices affect the process of extending their temporary residence permit and their efforts to secure a continued presence in Finland. This article foregrounds migrants' battles with holding on to their legal status, while making efforts to reduce the effects of the bordering practices. Thus, the article emphasizes migrant agency and negotiation (e.g. Mainwaring 2016), which unfolds with migrants' options for reproducing their life in Finland.

Migration is not simply constructed as an object of control but is an intrinsic part of the capitalist system in which the drive to make mobility productive characterizes the history

of capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). To enable endless valorization and accumulation (Marx 1990: 711, 873), various forms of regulation of mobility, for instance, those that contribute to forming the specific tie to paid work developed by economic prerequisites to allow legal residence are developed. However, borders do not solely have a limiting function but also channel and filter mobility for the aims of capital (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). For example, migration for the purpose of studying occupies a particular position signifying a desired future for highly skilled migration yet filtered via bordering mechanisms in the EU. Consequently, approaching student migration from the perspective of reproducing a legal status allows for observing how the excess of the administrative category of the student-migrant, in the form of migrant labour, can be subsumed within the value-producing circuits of capital, thereby responding not merely to governmental visions of the recruitment of 'international talent' but also to the global quest for precarious flexible labour.

I address the contestation over the space and time of administrative bordering through the perspective of social reproduction. As a concept, social reproduction has a long history stretching from bourgeois economists such as Quesnay (1694–1774) signifying the reproduction of social systems, via Marx' critique of the capitalist system, and to the 1970s feminist campaigns about wages for housework (Federici 2019) as well as the framing of home-based work as *housewifization* (Mies 1986). Some of the Marxist feminist writers in the 1970s emphasized 'unmasking the socio-economic function of the creation of a fictional private sphere, and thereby re-politicising family life, sexuality, and procreation' (Federici 2019: 55). Within the vast contemporary literature on social reproduction, approaches to reproduction and care through a perspective of the domestic space, such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare, continue to be prevalent (e.g. Duffy 2007). With regards to migration, migrant workers in domestic and care work, transnational care chains, and the gendered inequalities of migrant care work have been emphasized (e.g. Williams 2010; Lutz 2017). However, Mezzadri (2019: 37) notes that care and social reproduction are not synonymous, as the concept of social reproduction seeks to encapsulate 'both the reproduction of life and capitalist relations *at once*', while Katz (2001: 709) argues that social reproduction entails 'the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed'. From this perspective, the constructed separation between production and reproduction appears capital-driven, which serves to cheapen labour in gendered and racialized ways (Mezzadri, Newman, and Stevano 2022; O'Laughlin 2022).

The analysis of social reproduction I put forth exceeds the kin-based domesticized space as the primary site of social reproduction. Rather, spaces outside those which are considered to be domestic provide grounds for analysing social reproduction such as cross-border migration, which contributes to the reproduction of labour power by numerically increasing the number of people in the labour force (Vogel 2000: 158). Moreover, critical emphasis is placed the relationship between reproducing labour power, both legally and socially, and the role of borders in structuring these forms of social reproduction, thereby mediating the encounter between labour and capital. Thus, by social reproduction, I refer to everyday life-producing labour (Mies 1986: 47), that is, the labour and effort required to reproduce one's own and others' lives as legally residing migrants as well as the structural conditions of such reproduction. This focus permits me to address persistence and repetition involved in 'reproduction', pointing to the relation generating the 'consistency of each subsequent occurrence' (Balibar 2002 in Weiss 2021) in relation to administrative bordering.

Studies that address social reproduction precisely in relation to the border and migration regime are scarce. However, in an early essay, Burawoy (1976) discusses the reproduction of a system of migrant labour in South Africa and California, arguing that the system is often based on the separation between maintenance and renewal achieved through controlling and passing laws, racialized hierarchy, and limited power and rights in the state of

employment. Within more recent scholarship, [Bhagat \(2023: 3\)](#) examines queer (forced) migration in relation to the violence ingrained in bordering and security. Being caught in situations of waiting in camps, detention centres, and in low-income areas in cities of relocation constitute forms of ‘organised abandonment’, which forecloses the social reproduction of queer refugees in the cities of Nairobi, Cape Town, and Paris.

Similar focus on migrants’ being disjoined from the realm of social reproduction exists in studies by [Apostolova \(2021\)](#) and [Apostolova and Hirstova \(2021\)](#). [Apostolova \(2021\)](#) discusses the social-reproductivist approach in relation to the Schengen freedom of movement as a tool for governing Bulgarian EU-migrants and shaping their errant movements across borders. ‘Restless migration’ appears as a strategy to actualize the possibilities for social reproduction in conditions in which social protection is inaccessible, while ‘restless bodies’ reflects the contemporary socio-economic and political conditions of life-renewal and the tendency to push labour in continuous transnational movement ([Apostolova 2021](#)). Moreover, [Apostolova and Hirstova \(2021\)](#) discuss the rift between production and reproduction in the case of Eastern European posted workers, arguing that there is an imagined ‘economic sphere’ through which work hours, health and safety *at work* are considered. Delineating labour migration as an economic affair results in migrant labour being included in the institutions of social reproduction only as commodified reproductive workers in fields such as care work and housekeeping ([Apostolova and Hirstova 2021: 149](#)). In a similar vein, [Näre and Wide \(2022\)](#) examine the social reproductive struggles of Filipino migrant workers, emphasizing their need to organise their own reproductive labour tasks as transnational parents as well as to reproduce their labour power, that is, as workers in the country of residence. Thus, they demonstrate how labour and family migration policies demanding compliance with employer demands, bar and endanger the social reproduction of migrants as workers and parents locally. While the previously mentioned studies centre on social reproduction as the ability to survive and reproduce, the perspective put forth by [Tkach \(2021\)](#) comes even closer to that of this article. [Tkach \(2021\)](#) addresses the constitution of one’s life in relation to the border regime in terms of care and demonstrates how residents from Northwest Russia who hold Schengen multiple-entry C-visas view it as a resource that requires constant effort in terms of balancing trips to the Schengen Area and negotiating the opaque rules that govern such balancing. Proper ‘care for the visa’ may result in a successful ‘visa career’, in which the initial single short-term entry visa can at best be issued as a two-year multi-entry visa ([Tkach 2021](#)).

The contribution of this article to the emerging research thematic combining social reproduction and migration consists in approaching migrants’ required labour, agency, and partaking in bordering practices as pivotal in managing to reproduce one’s and near standing person’s lives. Thus, ‘the feature of border regimes to capitalise on the agency of those whose mobility they seek to govern’ ([Scheel 2019: 78–79](#)) demand that migrants’ actively prove their applicability for a residence permit. Consequently, to manage, plan and successfully renew one’s legal status in Finland involves administrative bordering within the state ([Könönen 2018](#)) that requires the labour of reproducing a legally legible and non-deportable self ([Reeves 2020](#)) in a repeated encounter with the temporal border regime ([Maury 2021](#)). This means that the migratory subject must reproduce the social relations that constitute the temporarily residing migrant, that is, social relations dependent on the existence of a persistently transforming border regime. Moreover, it underscores institutional practices, such as administrative bordering shaped in relation to the intersection of social relations of race, gender, and class, which impact social reproduction.

Further, acknowledging the labour required to socially reproduce the conditions for making oneself legally legible is helpful for constructing the theoretical joint between social reproduction, borders, and capital. Managing to maintain one’s legal status implies the reproduction of ‘that special kind of commodity, labour-power’ ([Dalla Costa and James 1972: 29](#)), and the ability to sell it. This is the result of a legal construct that does not assign

rights to migrants present in the territory, but in practice requires them to work for the rights to be granted (Rigo 2009: 66). Such is often the case for non-EU student-migrants who need to work to be able to demonstrate that they fill the financial requirements to extend their temporary residence permit (Maury 2021). Thus, I maintain that reproducing a legally legible self is part of shaping the ‘condition of existence of labour power’ (Federici 2020: 78).

To sum up, the labour invested in renewing time-limited residence permits and meeting the associated immigration requirements must be approached as an important aspect of the wider everyday life-making project among migrants’ whose legal residence depends on having a residence permit, coupled with the EU border regime that hierarchically reduces migrants’ subjective opportunities to choose where and how to work, study, live, and settle. Thus, the concept of social reproduction enables an analysis of the relation filled with friction between the capitalist logic of accumulation and the liveability of the people subject to it (Weiss 2021). In this purview, social reproduction appears as a terrain of struggle in which migrants may employ their creative capacities to minimize certain forms of governing through the border regime which limits their space of action, while simultaneously aiming to secure a legal status and to thereby shape a life more in accordance with one’s desires.

3. Student-migrants within the global border regime

The simplistic representations of student-migrants as highly skilled and easily moving subjects are rooted in the politically and sociologically uncontested classification and categorization of migrants (Robertson 2019). The public discourse of attracting and retaining international students to increase the stock of skilled labour (Jokila, Kallo, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2019) contributes to associating students with a constructed economic sphere, thus disentangling them from the issues of social reproduction in Finland. By law, holders of student permits do not have access to public social security or health services, instead the everyday struggles of reproducing life in Finland are reduced to an individual concern. Consequently, the labour of meeting deadlines, meeting the preconditions of the residence permit, and obtaining the right documents is constantly present in the students’ quotidian lives but is seldom recognized as reproductive labour occupying substantial amounts of time and effort. Reproducing a legally legible self is particularly important in Finland—a ‘highly regulated welfare state’ (Düvell 2010) in the Nordics—where living as an undocumented migrant is comparatively difficult (Leppäkorpi 2022: 40). It is therefore crucial to examine the subjective efforts among holders of one-year student permits to switch between and extend the validity of their legal status as part of their life-making process.

The number of foreign students in Finland has more than tripled since the beginning of the 2000s mounting to nearly 21,000 in 2020 (EDUFI 2020), of which 75 per cent arrived from non-EU/EEA countries. A non-EU/EEA citizen must apply for a residence permit for studying at the closest Finnish embassy or consulate, and make sure they meet the requirements of demonstrating savings, grants, or payment receipts of €6,720 each year at the disposal of the applicant, private health insurance, a study place and forty-five study credits per academic year (Finnish Immigration Service 2024). The holder of a student permit has the right to work 25 hours a week, and fulltime during holidays.¹ Due to the strict requirements of the student residence permit in Finland, many non-EU/EEA student-migrants become dependent on paid work in Finland to fulfil the economic requirements that need to be demonstrated each year when the one-year permit is extended. The student-migrants often experience a need to engage in paid work, primarily accessed in the low-paid service sector, to renew their residence permits and continue residing in Finland. In this way, holders of a student permit are placed in a legal position in which they are flexible enough to

accept insecure short-time contracts in comparison to migrants holding work permits who must work full-time (Maury 2022a).

The article draws on in-depth interviews with forty-one people holding student permits (2015, 2017–2018), and follow-up interviews (2019–20) with twelve of the student permit holders a couple of years later. Approximately half of the research participants were men and half were women, and they were aged between 21 and 35 years. They came from North and South America (3), Eastern Europe (7), South-East Asia (11), South-West Asia (7), North Asia (3) and East Africa (2), West Africa (5) and Central Africa (3). Their fields of study included law (2), political and social sciences (7), international business (10), various fields of technology (15), hotel, restaurant, and catering services (2), and social and health care (5).

The research participants had diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, ethnicity, age, class, and gender, and each had come to Finland with various motives. Thus, the spectrum of privilege varied among the research participants. Several had experienced unfair treatment, racism, sexism, and legal violence when dealing with the migration administration, when accessing jobs, and in everyday situations. Since some of the participants had sought asylum status before receiving a student permit, their social relations tended to involve more the precarity of finding refuge, obtaining legal status, and periods of undocumented residency. Others were clearly oriented towards obtaining a degree, while enjoying the economic security provided by parents. While encompassing broadly heterogeneous places of origin, class backgrounds, and fields of study, the common nominator for the research participants was their engagement in the continuous need to work and manage the migration bureaucracy to ensure the legal right to stay in Finland.

Qualitative content analysis allowed for systematic analysis of the data (Schreier 2010). I coded the interviews under the main themes of background, work, visas, borders, and subjectivity, reflecting my research interest, while adding subcodes which included discrimination, precarity, temporality, and exploitation, all of which were repeatedly discussed in the interviews. The analysis of the data proceeded in close exchange with theoretical reflections deriving primarily from critical migration studies and Marxian feminist theory. The 3-fold thematic divide of the article—concern about the permit, agency within the migration system, and conducting one's life in accordance with the border regime—were derived from my aim to analyse the migratory subject's time and effort consumed to renew their residence permits.

4. The social reproduction of a legally legible self

The following analytical subchapters delineate how administrative bordering practices are closely intertwined with the social reproduction of the student-migrants' lives; how they conduct themselves, how they struggle to shape their life fit the requirements of the residence permits, and how these processes simultaneously shape certain types of legally residing migrant labour.

4.1 Concern about the permit

Despite international students being framed as sought-after talent imagined to be enjoying frictionless mobility, they are not disconnected from the hindrances of the global border regime. To the contrary, their legal status is temporary, and the students need to extend their permit annually. Thus, living in Finland on a student permit implies being attentive of the boundaries and limitations of the residence permit while studying. Therefore, migrants holding temporary student permits must 'care' (Tkach 2021) for their permit to reproduce 'juridical and socio-political legal legibility' (Reeves 2020: 25).

When deciding to come to Finland to study most of the research participants had great ambitions and hopes for their future. However, many were confronted with difficulties

along their study path. A widespread problem was the need to earn enough money to extend their residence permit that led the student-migrants into several types of precarious part-time work. In most cases, the part-time jobs did not reflect their study area but were situated in the low-paid service sector in which migrant workers were overrepresented. Moreover, several students perceived the limit on work (25 hours per week) induced by the residence permit as a constraint to making enough money within the boundaries set. In the longer run, work in the low-paid sector was experienced as discouraging for many, since they saw already-graduated students continuing in service jobs without finding work in their own field.

Ceyda was 25 years old, came from a Western Asian country and studied media and communication. She worked in customer service and in a clothing shop and had been residing in Finland for four years. Despite the initial time-consuming process of applying for a residence permit and gathering the documents needed for legally crossing the geographical borders to Finland, Ceyda found the process of having to extend the one-year permit each year as even more laborious. She commented sarcastically on the need to show the statement of sufficient economic funds as a student: ‘oh let me grab those 7000 euros from my bank account—yeah, the struggle is real’. In addition to being a struggle, the concern of gathering the required amount of money was experienced as a source of anxiety among several student-migrants:

I was very anxious with the money; I cannot spend much time studying. [...] For the visa renewal it's only the money that troubles me, Migri [Finnish Immigration Service] does not consider if you stay in someone's place even if you don't spend for the rent, they don't subtract that money from the money required. – Arvin, 24, Southeast Asia

As Arvin described, the Immigration Service only considers the amount of money, not the students' ability to organize their life-making such as affordable housing, nor do they take into consideration the importance of finding time for studying in the application process. Further, the arbitrary process of extending the student permit was described as a ‘trial-and-error process’ by some of the research participants as it is impossible to know beforehand when the permit would be issued and for how long one will be left waiting for the new permit. This underscores the temporality of the border regime which engenders experiences of a punctuated temporality, pointing to the way in which the student-migrants' lived time is shaped in relation to the intervals between the points at which the one-year permit must be extended (Maury 2022a) and how the border regime is in constant flux in relation to migrants' movements and struggles (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

Most student permit holders take on any job, often in cleaning, in restaurants, or in delivery and logistics, only for the sake of money. Hence, paid work is directly tied to the social reproduction of their life as temporary residents in Finland due to the financial requirement of the residence permit, thus creating a relation of dependency to the workplace (Anderson 2010). Nina, 24, from Eastern Europe and studying social sciences, highlighted how the low-paid precarious work materially sustaining one's legal status was seldom discussed with non-migrant peers: ‘When you have just started [studying], I think that's not the information you want to tell, like “Hi, we're sharing a course, I'm working as a dish washer, what about you?”’. Silencing the efforts of socially reproducing the student status assist in evening out the contrasts between one the one hand the source of income and on the other hand, the field of study, hence contributing to the process through which the effort of securing a residence permit is made nonvisible and faded out into ‘nonexistence’ (Bhattacharya 2017: 2). Moreover, the student-migrants' paid work in the service sector allow other groups to outsource reproductive activities such as eating or cleaning, which reproduces global class hierarchies because of the structural link between service work and the border regime (see also Wide 2023).

Moreover, the struggle of appearing legally legible before the eyes of the Finnish migration officials is foundationally shaped by the legal differentiation between students with Finnish citizenship or EU citizenship and non-EU students as this differentiation impacts student-migrants' opportunities to find and change jobs. According to Ceyda: 'In a way that's discrimination, because EU students don't have to think about that stuff, they come here and study they find amazing jobs and they just start. For us [non-EU students], we have to think twice about everything'. From the perspective of labour, the legal distinction between Finnish, EU and non-EU citizenship suggests that the objective of governing subjects through the border regime shapes labour power configured as the general capacities of the living being. Thus, the ability to find a decent job partly depends on privilege associated with citizenship. However, the student-migrants' legally differentiated labour power is also closely entangled with the racialization of labour as employers tend to channel migrants towards certain low-skilled branches and tasks, supposedly fit for migrants and other 'non-Finnish speakers' (Krivonos 2020; Näre 2013), gesturing towards the implication of the legal and social production of difference, such as race and gender, for sustaining the capitalist system (Maury 2021; Lowe 1996).

The analysis demonstrates that being a non-EU student in Finland requires caution and carefulness—to *think twice about everything*, as Ceyda pointed out. Thinking twice expresses the need to 'care' for the permit and plan one's life in relation to the material and the temporal requirements of the border regime, which also requires orienting oneself in a context of administrative bordering, moulded around hierarchical legal categories and saturated by institutional racism. Moreover, it implies being careful not to breach the permitted hours of work, taking care to complete enough study credits and rethinking one's decisions from the perspective of the migration officials. Such labour of attention constitutes a core feature of the social reproduction required to produce a legally legible self, as someone who can be allowed extension to the residence permit and thus continue living in Finland. The social reproductive labour of repeatedly reconstituting oneself as a legally residing subject also crucially contributes to reproducing a precarious but legally resident migrant labour force. This highlights the way in which the conditions of existence of labour power (Federici 2020) are shaped in relation to the border regime which demands significant effort and copious amounts of paid work in the service sector to be granted rights (Rigo 2009: 66), concealed behind discourses of students as future highly skilled migrants.

4.2 Agency in and against administrative bordering

While holders of student permits devote labour, energy, and time to make sure they will be able to continue legally residing in the country they also invent strategies for enlarging their room for manoeuvre within the legally and socially constrained context. Hence, they are not reduced to simply being subjected to the structures of migration management but embody a subjective drive to form a liveable life, which includes stretching the boundaries of the legal framework and attempts to refuse certain forms of governing. The attempts to extend, or switch permits, denotes how these endeavours emerge as struggles over social reproduction, thus pointing to the tension between bordered liveability and capitalist productivity.

'It was always talked about, everyone sharing tips and tricks and secrets', Ceyda said concerning the efforts made to extend the permit discussed among her student-migrant acquaintances. The shared tips and tricks often explicitly or implicitly revolve around work and income. 'There are tips and tricks of not getting tired so easily, but it comes with experience. It is not like we're going to have a training of "how not to die at work"', Nina, an Eastern European young woman working in housekeeping expressed. A South Asian woman, Mai, working in a warehouse, asserted that a strategy among the student-migrants was to not lose the job.

I have heard many different stories of the way students talk to each other; the best way is to have a working visa as soon as you can. Some of them say that: try to have a job. You graduate and after graduation [...] the migration office can give you the A working visa for one year, and [you] try to be good at work during that year and come back to Migri [Immigration Service] the second time and they will give 4 years [work permit], but just don't lose that job during the time. [...] You try to work hard and show that you are to benefit for the company before that day comes. Then they can renew your contract, but it still depends on how good you are, if the company needs you. You have to show you are a really necessary person. – Mai, 28, South Asia

Several student permit holders expressed a need for collectively sharing tips and tricks of how to extend or change one's residence permit and how to manage their workload in the labour market. Mai delineated the strategy of changing the student permit into a work permit 'as soon as you can'. In her description of the path from the temporary one-year student permit via a one-year work permit and then to a four-year extension of the work permit, she repeatedly emphasized the need to be seen as a good worker for it to be a viable strategy. Hence, through restricting residence by making it contingent on gainful employment, migrants are kept at distance from being fully included in the local social fabric making the potential of having to turn 'home' dependent on being a good worker (cf Burawoy 1976: 1060). This results in a form of differential inclusion in which dispersed borders function as tools to control and exploit labour (Rigo 2009; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), and from a temporal standpoint, generate heterogeneous spatiotemporal experiences that emphasize the flexible and nonlinear functioning of contemporary capitalism (Maury 2021). Thus, the social reproduction of student-migrants' mere presence in Finland often hinges on arduous work, the capacity for careful planning and emotional effort of being viewed as a good and necessary worker.

In the temporal border regime, the end date of residence permits and work contracts as well as the work hours agreed upon shape migrants' everyday lives and their ability of performing the good worker. Although both the employer and the employee should be attentive of the law and its temporal measurements, the labour of attention is primarily put on the migrant's shoulder, a view Nina expressed concerning her work as a cleaner on a zero-hour contract.

I was told I'm allowed to work only 25 hours per week, so I tried to keep to this limit, but actually it was not that like interesting for the employer, so they didn't really care if I work more, it was kind of my problem. – Nina, 24, Eastern Europe

Nina's concern with the work hour limit suggests that the effort of being attentive to not breach the law appears as an individualized problem that must be shouldered by the migratory subject. Thus, in a socio-political context in which migrant labour is framed as a purely economic affair (Apostolova and Hirstova 2021), the excess of matters beyond the formal work tasks, such as being attentive to the law, are disregarded by the employer, thereby fragmenting the ensemble of life-producing labour into distinct pieces pertaining to different spheres.

On the other hand, acting as the controller of one's work hours is not only an obligation that needs to be taken care of to avoid failing to gain an extension of the residence permit. It may also provide a space for distorting migration control. Some of the research participants explained that one way of meeting the challenging situation of gaining enough income without exceeding the officially permitted number of workhours was simply to manage to make it 'look good on paper' (Scheel 2019) through various informal means (Maury 2022b). Thus, as migrants comply with the formal requirements of the border regime, informal agreements may work to meet this requirement hence functioning as a way

of enlarging one's capacity to act and resisting the methods and effects of control (see [Scheel 2019](#): 147). Moreover, it demonstrates that paid work not only serves to lever income but is a central feature of reproducing a legally legible self.

In addition to striving to be a 'good worker' and a legally complying migratory subject, migrants confront administrative bordering practices by making use of collective accumulated knowledge about the migration system. The 'different stories' told by migrants who had gone through similar processes before, as explained by Mai, and the experience-based knowledge of how to take the situation into one's own hands may increase the confidence of claiming rights in the administrative process. Chris, a West African citizen of 35 years had a degree in electric engineering from his country of birth and studied in Finland to obtain a degree in the restaurant and hotel sector. Alongside his studies he had worked in restaurants and as a news deliverer. He had decided to try to switch to a work permit issued on a continuous (A) basis instead of the temporary (B) student permit. In his free time, Chris had been reading up on the law and laid out his counter arguments against the proposed negative decision on his application. After the screening of the supporting documents for switching to a permanent work permit, at the time handled by the Police, Chris described the following incident:

I said, if you check the document, you will see my permanent contract. I put the temporary job there because I was to apply for my wife the [family] reunion. So, when the senior colleague saw it, she said "give him his A-status", and she gave me the A-status. – Chris, 35, West Africa

The misunderstanding concerning the supporting documents in Chris' permit application was a result of Chris trying to demonstrate both his pertinence for a continuous (A) work permit, and a potential future family reunification, the reason he also added proof of a temporary job to demonstrate his ability to comply with the high-income level required for family reunification. To Chris' astonishment, arguing at the Police, resulted in him receiving a residence permit. Chris, however, commented that he experienced that certain migrants were dealt with more harshly than others and asked for the reason for the existence of 'a law if it is not implemented but instead one must argue one is right'. This statement reflects earlier research pointing to decisions on residence permit applications being made 'on a case by case' basis where the 'aspect of interpretation' of migration officials plays a significant role ([Maury 2022b](#); [Spire 2009](#)). These shifting interpretations often occur with discriminatory presumptions of an applicant's nationality, race, gender, age, and family situation ([Leinonen and Pellander 2014](#)). Additionally, in Finland administrative bordering practices appear stricter and more laborious towards African migrants than for migrants from other parts of the world ([Könönen 2018](#)).

Chris' way of handling the situation consisted in having read the law, which provided him with the right vocabulary and the knowledge of how his application should be treated. Additionally, he had several years' experience of handling encounters with migration officials infused by racism. This accumulated bundle of knowledge allowed him to contextualize his social experience in light of past experiences and future projects ([Mainwaring 2016](#): 298) including the socially reproductive project of planning a life in which his family would be reunited.

In sum, the student-migrants' encounters with the administrative borders result in different strategies to become eligible for a residence permit by reproducing the individual relation to the border regime, through arranging one's work and income in various ways to suit the requirements. The migrants' capacity of manoeuvre registers the migration knowledge stemming from the structural position of migrancy in relation to the border regime ([Näre and Maury 2024](#)) and the required agency in bordering practices ([Scheel 2019](#)) as an intricate part of managing to reproduce one's and near standing person's lives.

Consequently, the migrants' ability to socially reproduce a life in Finland, is shaped by the situated knowledge acquired through the life-making process in relation to the contemporary border regime.

4.3 Shaping the everyday conduct

The contemporary migration and border system with its constraining legal framework, pushes migrants to make use of the residence permit system to remain in the country (Maury 2022b). In this last section, I bring forth the subjective attempts of reducing the everyday impact of the border regime as a way of socially reproducing a liveable life. These desires materialize in the efforts of escaping the temporary legal condition and at the same time, avoiding suspicion directed towards certain migrant subjects in processes of administrative bordering.

The lives of migrants with a temporary legal status are characterized by being provisional. Hence, they become subject to suspicion, because from the perspective of the state, temporary migrants might violate the accord of temporary stay and their provisional presence might conflict with the ideal integration into the social fabric (Latham 2010). A research participant from East Africa, 21-year-old Maya, described that because of the exhaustive processes of attempting to extend her permit she could not visit other public and private offices such as banks or the National Pension Fund (Kela) without a valid residence permit since they would 'suspect you being illegal'. Tanya, a West African citizen of 23 years, spoke of her complicated legal in-between position when she assured me: 'I am no illegal immigrant'.

The worry of potentially being viewed as 'illegal' points to what (Sayad 1999: 8) suggests concerning the 'immigrant' as a figure always subject to suspicion because of 'state thinking' according to which immigration in itself is a sign of deviance, incompleteness and misplaced presence. Hence the migrant is entangled between the accusing attitude of the state, and the migrants' subjective need to aspire to correctness of conduct. The potential to be expelled from the state, is then the prime expression of state thinking (Sayad 1999: 13). The difficulties and anxieties brought about by the occasional suspicion of 'illegality' points to the ways in which migrants in a temporary legal status perceive administrative bordering as intimately shaping their lives. Because of state thinking, those configured as migrants need to conduct themselves in specific ways to escape suspicion. Consequently, the socially reproductive labour partly consists of forming one's life in certain ways to avoid being read as suspicious.

Moreover, some of the research participants articulated with affect how their lives and subjectivities become affected by administrative bordering. 'What I hate it that you devote everything of yourself', Arvin, 24, from Southeast Asia commented concerning the yearly permit renewal, while a West African national, Michel, 40, contended that 'the life of a foreign student here [in Finland] is hell' and based his assertion in the combination between the constraining migration regulations and subjective experiences of racism. Suggesting that bordering processes affect *life* points to the link between life-producing labour (Mies 1986) and the border regime, as well as the role of borders in 'synthetizing life into labour force' (Rigo 2009; Foucault 2013 in Tazzioli 2016: 188). Moreover, it appears that the labour of attention in relation to administrative bordering and the efforts of shaping one's ways of conduct to not appear suspicious in institutional encounters, fall unequally upon the shoulders of legally othered subjects who encounter multiple processes of racialization, reflecting a historically specific feature of social reproductive labour (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010). Thus, reflecting racialized and gendered assumptions, some subjects are purported as more intimately under the radar of migration control than others. Nevertheless, Revel (2008) argues that it is only from within the materiality of life, entangled in the meshes of power, that resistance is possible. Hence, the attempts to minimize the effects of migration governance play out in the form of shaping one's life in the interstice of social reproduction

and administrative bordering practices, as it is by shaping one's everyday conduct that the student-migrants both can comply with and challenge the border regime.

As illustrated by Mai and Chris in the previous section, most of the research participants aimed to strive away from the temporary student permit, which due to its short period of validity punctuates their lived time, limits the ability to plan their life for more than one year and restricts the possibility to work and move across borders (Maury 2022a). Temporary legal status resonates with the generalized conditions of precarity of employment, such as short-term and task-based forms of work, and the aims to synchronize migration in relation to fragmentary capitalist production. Moreover, the temporary legal status generates social and temporal 'differential inclusion', highlighting the way the border regime filters migration. Hence, approaching the intertwinement of social reproduction and migration allows for analysing the filtering function of social reproduction: those who do not manage to reproduce life (personal or the lives of those legally dependent on you such as children or a spouse) in accordance with the border regime become largely legally excluded from welfare state rights. To be able to get some rest from the repetitive and time-consuming labour of reproducing the relation to the border regime was also the reason for Janina expressing her defiance towards the temporary status:

I know many people who work on the student visa and then they finally get the working visa for 2-3 years and they just terminate their contracts immediately to get some rest, cause they're like 'whooh', now I have some time. – Janina, 23, Eastern Europe

Janina, in concert with other holders of student permits, described how the aim of changing status into one based on work is to escape the constrained temporary legal status, towards having greater leeway and to distance oneself from the repeated encounters with administrative bordering practices. Thus, the ultimate way to combat the precarious conditions produced through the border regime, few job opportunities and multiple oppressive structures, is to refuse the student status altogether. Conclusively, the student-migrants' efforts to distance themselves from the everyday governing of their lives by the border regime signifies an attempt to reproduce one's life in a different way, here and now, from within the existing materiality of power.

5. Conclusion

This article has approached student-migrants' efforts to reproduce legally legible selves in Finland while simultaneously aiming to shape their lives in a desired direction. Analytically, I have approached the labour of handling processes of administrative bordering through a perspective of social reproduction and suggested that this labour has been made invisible despite it usurping considerable amounts of time, effort, and attention among the holders of one-year temporary student permits. The focus on social reproduction has allowed for an analysis of the way student-migrants' life-making in Finland is conditional on the border regime and imbued with the repetitive and individualized relationship with the institutions of migration administration. From this perspective then, the analytic of social reproduction exceeds a realm of feminized domestic work, opening an avenue for analysing the varying struggles by all subjects to reproduce life under capital.

A central aspect of being able to extend the temporary permit is having sufficient economic resources, which often channels student-migrants into accepting almost any job which is offered, usually in the low-paid service sector. I have demonstrated that reproducing a legally legible self simultaneously designates reproducing oneself as a subject selling legally and socially differentiated labour power to manage to reproduce a life in Finland. In other words, the social reproduction lens has allowed the intricate relation between capital, the border regime, and the reproduction of living labour to be teased out by demonstrating

how the socially and politically constituted migrant subject consists of the reproduction of the social relationship with the border regime, which hinges on meeting economic conditions. Thereby, I have methodologically articulated a refusal to reiterate the abstract discourse of international students as unanimously future highly skilled labour without attending to the material foundations of migration, including the production of a low-paid labour force, and without acknowledging the struggles and desires of these subjects as well as the inequalities produced between them. Ultimately the analysis brings forth the way in which the migrants in a temporary status find themselves confined within a limited space between liveability and the capitalist logic of accumulation.

To reproduce a legal status implies not an undisputed subjection to the border regime but incorporates strategizing and attempts to minimize the everyday effects of border governance. Such administrative border struggles include strategies for appearing reliable on paper, familiarizing with the law to argue against administrative decisions and ultimately abandoning the temporary permit, all of which constitute facets in the complexity of border struggles, as efforts to get by beyond heroic attempts to remake the world (Reeves 2020). Consequently, these strategies appear pragmatic as they are based on the experience of a punctuated temporality and contribute to orienting life among the multiple preliminary decisions taken due to the tight entanglement with the temporal border regime (Maury 2022b). Nevertheless, while the essay has revolved around student-migrants' efforts to make themselves legally legible, the force of defying legibility, to remain statistically non-countable, might also present itself as a viable option—as agency in a bordered world (Papadopulos and Tsianos 2007).

Theoretically, the article has advanced an approach beyond the capital-driven division between productive and reproductive spheres towards an integrative view of 'the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001: 711) that constitute social reproduction. Drawing on the insight that the border regime constructs migrant subjects as being tightly bound to paid work, demands that we analyse the rift between production and reproduction not as separate spheres but identify the ways in which capital 'refuses responsibility for the reproduction of living labour it consumes in the process of production' (O'Laughlin 2022: 1843). Such refusal of responsibility is materialized by placing the burden of reproducing legal legibility on the individual migratory subject, often divorcing social relations such as family and friendships from the whole, and by legally limiting recourse to state-based institutions of social reproduction.

Finally, the article has demonstrated how temporary permits become a burden to handle, while these function as the legal enabler for the students to reside in Finland. The social reproduction perspective has allowed for an understanding of the increased labour of attention required of migrants in a temporary status, which is asymmetrically distributed depending on racializing processes occurring in administrative bordering and in the labour markets. Following the increased amount of socially reproductive labour, the student-migrants' opportunities for realizing their potential as knowledgeable subjects, or as indented in policy discourse, as 'international talents', becomes reduced. Rather than becoming experts of their field of studies, they acquire embodied knowledge and become experts of administrative bordering processes. Reading the student-migrants' strategies of legal residence and cross-border movement beyond a simplified discourse of smooth highly skilled mobility lends theoretical ground for understanding the struggles of distinct types of migration rendered temporary through contemporary border and migration policies.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

Notes

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