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Article

The Borders of Everyday Artistic Expression: Young Migrants' Life Courses and Agentic Capabilities

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Abstract

Despite the expectation that young people will exercise their agency as they transition into adulthood, young forced migrants encounter administrative, legal and normative borders that impede their ability to shape their life courses. The present article aims to explore these borders, their consequences, and the ways in which young migrants can surmount these obstacles. Based on interviews and observations conducted in Rennes (France), we outline the disruption of young migrants' life courses. The findings highlight a porous border of adulthood that seems specific to young migrants' experiences. Whether they arrived in France feeling as adults or not, they either feel that they were brought back to a state akin to that of a child or that their transition to adulthood was accelerated and their childhood robbed. Notably, this paper shows that some markers of adulthood may not be as irreversible as previously considered: having a child, for example, is a step can be reversed for some young migrants – leaving them feeling stripped of their adulthood. Nevertheless, an exploration through artistic practices revealed different individual strategies that can be leveraged to regain a sense of control over their life trajectories. Thus, the present study offers an interesting approach in youth and migration studies by intersecting the two fields of research, and by providing novel insights to explore agency through arts.

Keywords: agency; forced migration; youth; adulthood; art

1. Introduction

This paper will study the intersection of youth and migration, two domains of sociology that have been extensively discussed but scarcely mobilised conjointly in an exploration of the transition to adulthood of migrants. Its main objective is to understand the experience of young forced migrants' transition to adulthood, and the strategies at their disposal to regain a sense of control on their life courses.

Since the end of the 20th century, the life course is no longer conceptualised as a linear path [1]. Rather, it is seen as a complex arrangement of successive periods that are not marked by immutable boundaries. Individuals experience the characteristic events of each period in a subjective way, with the possibility of moving back and forth between certain periods [2]. Different concepts describe the process towards adulthood, such as 'emerging adulthood' [3] which is "characterised by the deferral of obligations," whereby "commitments are not completely absent but not felt as urgent either" [4]. While this concept allows to explore the way in which individuals deal with identity crises [5], this paper's objective is to analyse the normative frameworks that bound young people as they transition to adulthood. Indeed, during this period, young people are supposed to gain autonomy and independence [6] through several important steps, such as leaving the family home, entering the labour market or getting married [7]. The transition to adulthood is subject to destandardisation and deritualisation [8], which means that it is "longer and more complex, diversified, uncertain, reversible, and dissociated" [9] (p. 51). Yet, this does not mean that "traditional social markers of transition are abandoned" [8] (p. 23), which is why we will consider the aforementioned institutional

steps as essential in the transition to adulthood – while acknowledging they can happen at different times in different contexts.

The border between youth and ‘solidified’ adulthood [10] is therefore blurred, and becoming an adult requires a display of agency as “individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance” [11] (p. 11). Crossing this border implies that individuals’ life courses are set on a particular path by constraints and choices, and that some opportunities are therefore unavailable. Thus, it is essential to consider the ways in which young people exert their agency to shape their life courses according to their own aspirations.

In parallel, the question of agency is also essential to a study of migrants and their installation in host countries, in our case France. Indeed, forced migration, which is our focus here, implies an experience of crisis that undermines the agency of individuals. Migrants experience crisis at several points in their migratory experience. Crisis can be defined as a “radically disturbing event that is unpredictable and threatens or brings down institutionalised routines” [12] (p. 4). The whole series of stages that make up exile can thus be understood as a series of crises: the events leading up to departure are disruptive and unpredictable, followed by an irreversible departure, and then a journey that is hardly controlled or guided by those involved. The culmination of these stages is the arrival in France, which typically leads to a situation of precariousness, vulnerability and the absence of previously acquired institutionalised routines. The ability of individuals to make the choices that matter to them, according to available opportunities and despite constraints, can be understood as the display of agency which is required of young people [11]; but which is also constrained for migrants [13].

This situation is the result of overlapping legal, administrative and normative borders that prevent migrants from accessing a stable status that would allow them to earn a secure income, have access to decent and stable accommodation or, in general, to live according to their needs and desires. At this point, migrants’ life courses have completely diverged and all their trajectories have been redirected in unpredictable and irreversible ways. The experience of such a multidimensional crisis has a direct impact on the subjectivity of migrants, who have to face a series of unprecedented situations while finding the necessary resources to adapt. Here we can see how migration affects individuals’ identity and undermines their agency, as they are left with few means to regain control over their life courses. These consequences have been documented with regards to young migrants transitioning into adulthood. Firstly, France along with other European Union countries face an increase in immigration of unaccompanied minors [14]. This means that many young individuals experience their transition into adulthood after the traumatic events of their migration [15]. Through policy discourses, they are often presented both as vulnerable, and as undesirable [14,16].

The tension around agency, and young migrants’ ability to transition into adulthood on their own terms, is evident here. Indeed, they aspire for control over their past, current and future lives [17], with a strong sense of optimism that they can better their situations [18]. However, increasingly repressive migration laws at all levels of governance [19] heighten a sense of uncertainty and social and economic inequalities that jeopardise the aforementioned display of agency required of young people [17]. This is particularly relevant in the context of criminalisation of migration [20–22], and with regard to the politics of suspicion [23] towards young and unaccompanied migrants [24].

This is the central question of this paper: while young people are expected to exercise agency and make the ‘right’ choices in order to orient their life courses towards the normative expectations of adulthood, the agency of migrants is denied and undermined. Thus, young migrants are subject to the overlapping difficulties of being young and being a migrant. How do young migrants experience their transition to adulthood and their installation in France? How can they cross the borders of adulthood and migration, act on their aspirations and regain a sense of control over their lives – in short, how can they exercise their agency?

While a number of works have explored the enactment of agency and the empowerment of individuals through ‘important’ actions, choices and bifurcations (such as buying a home [25,26]; or

through work and the workplace [27,28]; or at the time of resolving a major life crisis [29]), we believe that a significant display of agency can be seen through everyday, ordinary actions. Indeed, the inherent subjectivity of agency [30,31] requires us to shift our focus from the pivotal moments in an individual's life course to the seemingly banal events that occur at the scale of lived experience or within the everyday temporal framework of their life. The frequency of these events and their continuous occurrence in the lives of individuals – as opposed to occasional major turning points – may more accurately reveal how individuals construct their social reality through their aspirations and the choices they make to pursue them. Thus, we believe it is necessary to approach this topic by “paying attention to ordinary, everyday events [...], just as sociology does with extraordinary events” [32] (p. 26).

Against this backdrop, a central hypothesis of this paper is that ordinary artistic practices can be central to the development of young migrants' agentic capabilities. Here, ordinary artistic practices are not to be understood as part of the artistic process that results in a creation being qualified as aesthetically valuable or as a 'work of art' [33]. That is to say that we move away from Art as an institutionally and professionally recognised activity [34] and turn to the unnoticed creative act [35]. We do not wish to study Artists who have “incorporated the specific artistic interest” to make Art their livelihood or main activity [36] (p. 157), as their life courses would already be somehow structured by their artistic practices. Rather, our interest lies in purely amateur and ordinary artistic expression, which can take place in everyday life and go unnoticed – and which may at first seem trivial, such as someone drawing, painting, writing or singing without being aware of the significance of this act. However, the pregnancy of such artistic expression through times and places leads us to consider this as a total social fact [37,38] that results in emancipation [39]. As such, we believe it bears the potential to reveal individual mechanisms of identity construction and reconstruction, as well as reflective and subjectivation capabilities [40–42] – all of which are essential factors in the enactment of agency.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper is informed by two previous pieces of research and our current PhD thesis, with a particular focus on the resilience of migrants during the COVID pandemic and the agency of undocumented migrants in Rennes, France. Building on these earlier works, our current PhD research focuses on aspects of youth studies and artistic expression. The present study utilizes a range of qualitative materials, including 30 biographical interviews with young migrants in which their past life trajectories (mainly studies, work, home, family and parenthood), their present situations and their aspirations (before migrating and at present) were discussed. These biographical interviews were the opportunity to explore the lives of the research participants, through a focus on bifurcations and transitions. Additionally, 17 semi-directive interviews were conducted with various local actors involved in NGOs, social services and local authorities and who provide support for young migrants. During these interviews, participants provided additional information regarding the way institutional norms frame the transition into adulthood of young migrants. Finally, materials include over 80 hours of participant observation in NGOs providing support to migrants, mainly during administrative support, collective meetings where migrants were present, and other informal moments – such as artistic workshops. All the data mobilised in this paper was collected in Rennes, France. Arts and artistic expression play an important role in this research, as it was both an object of the research and a methodological tool. Indeed, biographical interviews included a type of intervention where participants were asked to draw on four different items, one by one (*yourself, your life, a memory, home*). This was done in order to explore the ways in which artistic expression could be a tool to reveal elements of participants' lives that were not worded during the interview.

The selection of groups of interest (18-30 years old; forced migrants) was informed by our review of existing literature. The age interval was selected based on the recognition that the concept of youth is now a broad period that is significantly detached from certain normative brackets (primarily 18-25) [43]. The selection of individuals was made by evaluating qualitatively their experiences of

migration. In this paper, forced migrants are those whose migration was not planned as part of their aspirations prior to migrating. This means that their migration represents a bifurcation [44] within their life courses. Such an unplanned and irreversible event [44] implies consequences on young forced migrants' transition to adulthood which this paper aims at describing.

Participants to this research were identified and contacted through local actors within NGOs. The research, its aims and methods were explained to potential participants by the actors before obtaining their clear consent to share their contact details with us. When they agreed to the research, we reached out to them and explained further the research. Interviews were recorded after written and oral consent from participants, who were notified at the start and during interviews that they could refuse answering questions, and that the interviews could be paused or stopped at any point. These steps were taken in order to minimise harm which could be induced to participants by evoking potentially traumatic events. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed then deleted. Directly identifiable information within transcripts were modified or redacted when unnecessary to the analysis (ie: names were pseudonymised, neighbourhoods of residence were redacted, countries of origin were kept).

Furthermore, the drawing section during the interviews could induce harm to participants by recalling traumatic memories, thus this section was highlighted as being optional – which was recalled after introducing each item. Such method can be questioned when exploring individuals' agency, as this artistic practice does not result from their own choice. However, some participants did have an artistic practice prior, and this method was utilised in an effort to explore participants' subjectivity within temporal and spatial contexts.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. An Accelerated Transition Into Adulthood

3.1.1. An Unexpected Severance

In this research, 30 young forced migrants living in Rennes were met for biographical interviews. Various aspects of their life courses were covered, including current circumstances and aspirations. This methodological approach allows us to adopt a multitemporal perspective in our analysis of the fractured life trajectories of these young migrants. Our analysis encompasses a comparison of their past and present circumstances, as well as an examination of their aspirations, the manner in which these aspirations were formed and subsequently modified, or relinquished. A recurrent phenomenon observed was that of individuals who did not consider themselves as adults prior to migrating, and for whom transitioning to a new society led them to experience a forced and accelerated transition into adulthood.

For those who were still living with their families, the severance from the family household is the first element that emerges as a particularly salient and challenging experience.

When I left Guinea, I was a child. I didn't know how long it would take to arrive to France. And I felt like an adult when I arrived, because I know nobody here. I don't have my parents here. So you have to manage. – Male, 26 years old

This young man left his home country at 21 years old and highlights that he had not reached adulthood at that time because he was still living with his parents who stayed in Guinea. His transition to adulthood feels rushed, and he underscores the difficulty of rapidly becoming responsible for himself. This was also mentioned by another participant:

When you leave your mom and dad, we can neglect some things. We think 'mom is here, dad is here'. Then, bam, you end up in a place like in a dream. You fall asleep, you wake up, you're in another world. And you're told 'here, it's like that, you have to learn that and that'. [...] And that made me feel really responsible of myself. If I trip, I don't have my mom to call. I have to fight, myself and I. – Male, 24 years old

In this case transition to adulthood is also described as a sudden event that is not chosen. The importance of being severed from his family is highlighted: he, not unlike several other participants,

considers childhood as being under the parental care and responsibility – adulthood being achieved the moment one can “fight” on one’s own. Therefore, the present excerpts reveal a sense of dislocation from familial roots. Those young people, who described themselves as still being dependent from their families before leaving – be it in financial and material terms, or in more abstract ways such as taking life decisions – now highlight the abrupt transition to self-sufficiency, and therefore taking up responsibilities suddenly.

3.1.2. A Denied Phase of Exploration

A recurrent theme was that of now undergoing the consequences of their own choices. The literature and the interviewees portray youth as a period of exploration and experimentation with diverse pathways and opportunities, « doing dumb things but knowing you’re not alone to fix it afterwards » – **Female, 21 years old**. This phase of experimentation is pivotal in determining one’s future path, as young people experiment with their agentic capabilities. For those who have already chosen a direction, particularly in the context of studies, migration signifies a deviation from this path.

After High School, I went to do economics to work in a bank. But I didn’t have time... I didn’t finish university because I left everything. [...] Now if I study, it’s for a job and I already chose. I’ll do electricity, or mechanic. [- It’s quite different from economics and banking!] It’s not banking but here, when I left my country, I had to change my project. Someone in banking in Afghanistan, it’s... it’s not difficult. But here, things need a lot of time to be learnt. And I have a problem with the language. [...] I am sad because in Afghanistan, I didn’t choose any other career. Banking is the first thing I chose, but here I was changed, I am sad. – Male, 26 years old

This young man expresses frustration and sadness regarding the forced path that his professional trajectory is taking. In France, he “chose” electricity or mechanics – even though the dimension of choice can be questioned here. Indeed, he had already set his aspirations on banking and he did not change in France: he *was changed*, pointing to the difficulty to display agency in such a context. While this shows that individuals may accept the change in their trajectories and aspirations, the interruption of studies upon arrival in France is indicative of the necessity for migrants to establish economic and living stability, whether temporarily or permanently. Their aspirations are significantly impacted by the transition to a state of uncertainty. They are no longer in control of who they are, or who they want to be. In fact, young migrants who arrive in France between the ages of 16 and 18 years old often suffer significantly from this forced replacement of their aspirations. All of the participants who arrived in France after the age of 16 and enrolled in upper secondary education were involuntarily enrolled in vocational training programmes, which were selected for them following a brief evaluation. The imposition of specific orientations for young migrants is heightened by certain rules for obtaining a residency permit. Indeed, work is an essential factor in being granted such permits. However, strict employment laws in France facilitate the hiring of migrants in professional domains that experience shortages in employment. This means that young migrants are often oriented towards difficult, low-paid and low-valued jobs.

I arrived... I wasn’t enrolled yet. I went to the orientation centre, I did the test and everything... So I did the test, and then they told me I should start school and they put me in the first year of vocational in electricity. I’d never done electricity. In Congo, I’ve never done that. – Male, 20 years old

The participant in this excerpt explains the process through which he went to enroll in school upon his arrival at 17 years old. Because upper secondary education is divided between general education and vocational training, and because places in general secondary education is scarcer than in vocational training, the choice had to be made by his orientation counsellor. Had he arrived before 16 years old, he could have enrolled in lower secondary school – which could have given him more room for maneuver to choose his preferred educational path. This young man’s experience is shared by many other young migrants, and additionally reveals the important part that local actors play in shaping the aspirations and life trajectories of young migrants, and fostering – or not – their agentic capabilities.

3.1.3. Becoming Mature at a Faster Pace Than Others

One salient example is that of unaccompanied minors. Indeed, these minors are accommodated in designated centres that include socioeducational support. According to several social workers and unit managers, the primary objective of this support is to facilitate the timely entry of these individuals into the workforce upon reaching the age of 18.

When they arrive at 16, we're so happy because we have more time; when they're 17, it's a rush. We have to get them papers as fast as possible, and for that they have to check very precise boxes. They have to be integrated through school, work, social life, culture, as fast as possible, with concrete proofs. The major part of our support is to help this integration. – **Unit manager, NGO managing an unaccompanied minors centre**

Here, we're convinced they should be able to change paths if they want, we try to defend that with the Department Council. The Department for them, they want the fastest way out. You have work placement, you have an income, you don't take the risk to change. – **Unit manager, NGO managing an unaccompanied minors centre**

These two unit managers have integrated the norms for young migrants regarding their adulthood. While they might not agree with this normative framework, the rules are set legally and by the local authorities in charge of unaccompanied minors. These young people are not allowed to follow the path that they wish, neither are they able to experience their transition to adulthood in the same way as other 18-year-olds. Upon reaching the age of 18, they are expected to depart the centre, unless they have not secured a stable situation. In such cases, they are permitted to remain in the centre until their 21st birthday, provided they are engaged in a professional project that is showing tangible progress. Consequently, social workers themselves impose considerable pressure on young migrants to become independent and secure employment by the age of 18, a goal they recognize as being distinct from the expectations typically faced by 'other' 18-year-olds.

In general, the experience of migration for young migrants represents an accelerated transition into adulthood. The profound crisis of migration, and the set of circumstances once in France create a situation whereby young migrants are forcibly taken out of their childhood to become adults at a faster pace than what would be expected of non-migrants.

When I was in Afghanistan I was like a child. But now I went through all those problems, bad things; now I think I'm... an adult. [...] Before, when I was with my family I was not an adult. Now I help my family. I went through a lot of problems, so I'm an adult because it's not easy for someone to spend four months, everyday through problems, through forests, through mountains, that's not something that children do, it's not normal. I changed a lot. – **Male, 26 years old**

This young man pinpoints an accelerated transition to adulthood caused by his migration. The challenges that it represents, notably in terms of physical and psychological hardships, are "not something that children do." In his case, childhood is clearly identified as a moment of being protected of such hardships by family – but through migration this was taken from him, forcing him to be an adult.

Being an adult, you know how to make decisions. The challenges I went through, they allow me to anticipate a lot of things, to make thoughtthrough decisions. I didn't have this level of maturity before leaving Benin. The challenges I experienced, in Europe, they allowed me to become mature. – **Male, 29 years old**

Here, adulthood is directly linked to maturity which the participant describes as being able to anticipate what might happen to him and take thoughtthrough decisions. This is not something that he learnt at a "normal" pace, but in an accelerated manner due to his migration. This phenomenon is contingent on different factors. Firstly, as previously mentioned, they are severed from the experimentation and 'dumb' phase of youth [9] and are compelled to make decisions that are often of life-or-death nature.

3.1.4. Parentification and Its Effects on Transitioning to Adulthood

In addition to these sudden responsibilities, they may also assume financial responsibility for their families, thereby inverting the family roles of parent and child. This inversion of roles has been

documented in the youth and migration literature and was coined as parentification [45]. This can also be observed in young persons who have migrated with their families and who, as a result of their faster adaptation – whether perceived or real – may assume an adult role by taking on administrative duties and generally managing daily lives.

I feel like an adult since I'm in France, because as soon as I learnt French, I'm the one who brought my parents to appointments. I translate, I explain the emails, the mail. I make appointments, I... our roles are swapped. Now they speak French, A2 or B1. So with the doctors, with anything administrative, it's complicated. I don't know, it's a very different relationship with your parents. – Female, 26 years old

This excerpt illustrates parentification, and the subsequent frustration experienced by the interviewee. While this does not transpire explicitly in the quote, the participant expresses frustration in her voice and facial expressions. Being a young person, in her case, means adapting and learning faster than her parents. This results in her having to take care of tasks that she feels she shouldn't have had to take care of at her age. The repercussions of this phenomenon have been extensively documented in the literature in psychology, highlighting its profound impact on the development of young people into adulthood and their mental wellbeing [46]. Young people often liken their experience to 'being robbed of their childhood,' due to the expectation that they should assume the responsibilities typically associated with adulthood.

The findings so far highlight the acceleration of transition to adulthood that young forced migrants experience. Compared to non-migrant individuals, they are not given the same opportunities and room to live their youth. However, the qualitative materials collected for this research also show that the border of adulthood is porous in both ways: not only are young migrants forced to cross it and become adult, they may also experience a backward crossing of this border.

3.2. A Backward Crossing of the Normative Border of Adulthood

3.2.1. Broken Professional Trajectories

Several participants to this research had effectively entered a state of solidified adulthood prior to migrating. For these individuals, reinstallation means discarding preexisting life trajectories and regressing on markers of adulthood.

I finished High School, I have all the diplomas. I started two years of University, but I stopped because I had my wife and my son. I chose to work because we didn't have money. Here, I want to get the papers because... the years go on, I've been here for five years and I lost five years here in France – Male, 28 years old

For this young man, the interruption of his professional trajectory is seen as time that has been lost. He links working to caring for his wife and son – a responsibility he cannot have anymore as he is not allowed to work because he was refused to right to remain in France. Similarly, in the following excerpt the participant feels stripped of her life and of her knowledge – leaving her in a state akin to a child, as adults are considered to be the ones holding the knowledge necessary to make choices and take on responsibilities.

I left my village to go to Kinshasa. [...] I stayed there a while. I wanted to leave the village to make my life. I worked in a restaurant, I did hair for women. Then, there was a problem so I left. [...] I don't work here in France, I've never worked here in France. [...] Life has no balance, we're just here, we stay here like people who know nothing – Female, 23 years old

It is evident that a considerable number of young adults encounter a disruption in their professional trajectories, not being able to display agency in choosing to go back to their original domains. At the time of the interviews, very few of the forced migrants were in a domain for which they had studied or in which they had worked previously. Furthermore, they rarely considered returning to their original domains. While some expressed a desire to do so, they recognised the likelihood of this being unlikely, and others had simply given up – unable to enact their agency and act upon their desires. This phenomenon can be attributed to various administrative and legal borders, one of which is the cumbersome process of diploma/degree recognition. A number of interviewees required diplomas in their domains, such as healthcare. This was often impossible due

to the perception of their credentials as inferior to those obtained in France by administrations or employers. The only option for these individuals would be to repeat their entire courses in France, but their precarious economic circumstances often rendered this possibility non-viable. Additionally, this population is often discriminated against during employment processes. Indeed, several studies in France show the difficulties migrants face regarding employment, due to racial discrimination or due to prejudices about the diplomas and past experiences of migrants in their home countries [47]. Their sudden independence, coupled with high rent and only being able to access low-paid jobs would limit their ability to save or cease working to study. Their economic situation is further worsened by the need to send remittances to family members who remained in their country of origin in order to pay back the cost of migration or simply to ensure their survival. Because professional choices are explored by young people before being consolidated as they become adults, the break in their professional trajectories equals to leaving behind the lives they had built. This participates in a backward crossing of the border of adulthood as their professional trajectories are curtailed, forcing them to start anew their exploration of possible opportunities.

3.2.2. “You’re Not an Adult, Because Here, Every Time, You’re Helped”

Furthermore, those who left considering themselves as adults now find themselves stripped of their autonomy and the capacity to make independent decisions.

People around me see me like a child, because I don’t have the language. They don’t look at my body, at what’s inside my head, they just look at my... speaking. And so it’s the child who speaks, because he doesn’t know how to speak French. You’re not an adult, an old person, because here, every time, you’re helped. – Male, 24 years old

The backward crossing of the border of adulthood is directly expressed by this participant. He feels that he is no longer considered for who he is and that his identity has been lessened. This is the consequence of others perceiving him as a child since he is still learning French. He raises another point, which is being helped. As mentioned above, he cannot consider himself as an adult because he is dependent on others for several aspects of his life. Individual and associative solidarities are essential for young migrants to survive in France [23], as they usually struggle to access legal and stable employment for some time after their installation [48–50]. As asylum-seekers, they receive a very low income and are not allowed to work while their asylum application is under review; and as irregular migrants they may receive (next to) nothing – in Rennes, lone irregular migrant adults can receive 60€ from local authorities. Therefore, NGOs and noninstitutional solidarities are necessary to access food, clothing, hygiene products, health services and administrative/legal support [51–53]. In material terms, young migrants’ lives no longer depend on themselves which participates in a feeling of having regressed to a state reminiscent of childhood, as they are stripped of their agentic capabilities. The reestablishment of adult status is challenging, resulting from difficulties in securing employment or accessing adequate accommodation. Furthermore, their state of dependency may persist for an indeterminate period. This has also been covered in youth studies, regarding other vulnerable young groups – such as young homeless people, for example [54].

3.2.3. Parenthood as a Reversible Marker of Adulthood

However, young migrants seem to experience a regression on the markers of adulthood that is unique to their circumstances. Indeed, the excerpts above show individuals who had created their own households. This is an important marker of having transitioned into adulthood. Creating a household is usually strongly correlated to being an adult: one leaves the parental household, gets married, becomes a parent. It has been shown in the past that some elements of this are reversible, especially as today’s transition into adulthood is recognised as a longer process made of back-and-forth [2]. Yet, parenthood is particularly significant here as it is generally considered irreversible. While in itself becoming a parent does not appear to be a mandatory step to become an adulthood [55], having become a parent is associated with one’s perception of being an adult. To our knowledge, there are very few cases where adults experience fluctuations in this status in the same

way they might when leaving the parental household or even getting married [1,44]. This irreversibility of the status of 'parent' seems to persist even in the case of child loss: such an event does not erase one's identity as a parent [56,57]. The apparent absence of a term analogous to 'orphan' or 'widow' in many languages to describe a bereaved parent suggests a perception of parenthood as an irreversible state. In the study at hand, several interviewees had started families in their home countries, until they were forced to migrate. They left their children behind, sometimes with no way of being in contact with them. While they describe being a parent as an essential part of being an adult – "I was a child myself until I had my first child, it's responsibilities that you don't even think about before", **Female, 26 years old** – they also express the void they feel from not being a parent anymore. This affects their core identity as adults.

Over there in Tchad, I lived with my family. When I arrived here, I know nobody. I have to make my choices on my own. – **Male, 27 years old**

This is apparent in this participant's testimony. Taking decisions and making choices has already been highlighted as being essential to the feeling of having reached adulthood. This young man considered himself an adult in Tchad because he used to take decisions collectively with his family – mainly his wife and children. Without this, he has to make choices on his own: while findings above suggest that this is a marker of adulthood, this has to be nuanced by the removal of responsibility that this represents. Indeed, the sudden absence of previously dependent individuals makes him feel less like an adult. This is also reflected in the life choices individuals consider. A 29-years-old female participant expressed her sadness as she had to leave her only child back in Nigeria. She doesn't know when she would be able to bring him over, and although she has a degree and experience as a journalist she now aspires to work in childcare. She explains that this is what she wants to do because she has a child, and she feels the need to act like a mother to someone. This observation is essential in our discussion of youth studies and life course studies, as it questions the irreversibility of some markers of adulthood. As mentioned, some elements have been recognised as reversible yet parenthood hasn't been discussed in this way. Here, it is possible to consider that parenthood is reversible for young migrants. This means that they regress on all the markers of adulthood, as for them the border between adult and child is a lot more porous than for other groups – even those that are considered vulnerable and thus prone to differentiated experiences of transition to adulthood compared to nonvulnerable youth.

In this context, it is relatively easy to assume that the crisis that migration represents as well as the circumstances of being a young migrant in France render these individuals incapable of making choices that matter to them. However, the individuals met for this research do not seem to adhere to a fatalist view of their life courses. They do recognise being forced into choices that were not theirs, and their experience of adulthood is undeniably altered. Yet, they seem to accept these changes and integrate them within the narrative of their life courses. For instance, the Congolese participant above has adapted his aspirations and wishes to do well in electricity; while the young Afghan participant feels he has "chosen" the new path his professional trajectory is taking. Therefore, it seems necessary to explore the components behind individuals' feelings of control over their lives. To do so, this paper will highlight how artistic practices can reveal levers of agency.

3.3. Artistic Practices and the Levers of Reclaiming Control on the Transition to Adulthood

3.3.1. The Everyday Enactment of Agency

An important result of this study is the feeling of control over their life courses that all participants expressed. Surprisingly, despite the strong constraints that they describe, and despite the denial of agency that they experience due to legal, administrative and normative borders, when asked whether they feel in control of their lives they all reply positively. Participants express that the original act of migrating was of their own choosing, and several individuals mentioned the way they can make choices at a daily level. This prompts us to explore this everyday enactment of agency, as well as the individual mechanisms that can support this feeling of control.

Agency constitutes a fundamental element of the life course paradigm [11], with individuals acting as the primary agents of their own life trajectories. It manifests during pivotal moments of the life course, such as the transition to adulthood, when young people make decisions that will most likely define their future. Yet, agency can be constrained by structural obstacles, as is the case of young migrants. However, it would be erroneous to state that this agency is entirely denied to young migrants; there are instances where they demonstrate the enactment of their agency, thereby illustrating how a life course can be constructed and aspirations pursued while agency is bounded [58].

It is crucial to emphasise a term we have used previously: the ‘enactment’ of agency, or its ‘exercise.’ Agency is frequently regarded as a type of resource that needs to be ‘developed.’ Elder and Hitlin [31] mention a dilemma that is not always answered clearly in the literature: “is it a differential property that some—whether through structural advantage or individual attributes—possess more than others?” (p. 173). The assertion that agency is not a differential property but a shared characteristic of individuals is made by speaking of its ‘exercise.’ As individuals navigate life, its opportunities and constraints, they make choices in diverse spheres and to varying degrees. Thereby, their agency may be ‘bounded.’ Yet, despite the salience of environments and structures, this ability to make choices that matter to individuals at varying scales [58] demonstrates that agency should not be regarded as a ‘stock’ or a finite resource, but as a potential for action inherent in each individual. Consequently, in order to understand the ways in which young migrants enact their agency, it is necessary to examine both the pivotal moments in their life courses – the points of bifurcation [59] – and the everyday displays of choice-making. Indeed, Bidart’s concept of ‘routines’ [60] is instrumental to these bifurcations: they refer to recurrent choices that are made without full awareness and that can contribute to the long-term shaping of turning points in the life course.

This phenomenon is of particular relevance in the context of this research, as it was shown that these pivotal moments are often not the result of young migrants’ own will. Structural pressures may compel them to pursue a professional trajectory that does not align with their original aspirations. However, despite the denial of their agency in these critical junctures, they may still exercise it at the level of their daily lives. Situations that initially appear anecdotal may unveil crucial social mechanisms [61]. One such example is that of food – is there anything more routine? During an observation at an asylum seekers’ accommodation centre, the unit manager took us to visit the centre. We entered through a corridor with a wall of letter boxes – on top of them, several unopened cans of food. The manager explained that people go to different food banks, usually one a day, organising their schedules around the distributions. He then gestures dismissively towards the abandoned cans, remarking on the residents’ alleged ingratitude. They’re very picky, and they won’t eat what they don’t know – one of the cans is *choucroute*, a dish of fermented cabbage, potatoes, sausage and other meats. The manager interprets this as evidence of the residents’ pickiness and lack of integration. However, this also demonstrates that the migrants receiving this food make the assertive choice of throwing away food that they need – resisting, in a way, what is imposed on them through charity. The same phenomenon can be observed in many food distributions in Rennes, where migrants usually receive food parcels. While this can be considered as marginal or anecdotal, the recurrence of this phenomenon gives it an important interpretative weight. In refusing food that they do not want, although they need it, young migrants resist the denial of their desires – thus, the denial of their agency. The inability of food distribution NGOs to cater for young migrants’ desires – not by unwillingness, but by lack of resources – is not merely and defeatedly accepted by them. Instead of accepting to discard their desires, they discard what they don’t desire – risking hunger, but enacting their agency.

Another observation provided a complementary insight to this minor act of resistance. We shadowed a social worker at an NGO tasked with distributing financial support to undocumented migrants – who are not allowed to any state social welfare receipts. While waiting for her next appointment, the social worker tells us about the way their beneficiaries receive the financial support, which consists of a book of checks amounting to 60€ per month. These checks are exclusively utilised

within a designated list of partner retailers, and the beneficiaries decide whether to allocate the checks to food, clothing, hygiene, or leisure. The social worker recounts regularly asking beneficiaries how they spend their checks. They would typically use the money to purchase spices from an African shop, or to buy phone credit to keep in touch with relatives back home. After recounting this anecdote, the social worker made a confused face and laughed. Once again, this shows the way in which young migrants do not let their desires and aspirations be curbed by normative injunctions. While it is expected of them to use these checks on 'essential' goods, they desire more than what is deemed acceptable by social workers – and in acting on their desires, it is an act of resistance and a display of agency.

These two examples demonstrate a significant display of agency: in situations of strong financial constraints, people go out of their way to carefully choose what they eat; something that is both an important tie to their origins and thus a source of comfort, but also a way of resisting a situation that would make them accept what they do not want in the first place. In doing so, the administrative, legal and normative borders of youth and migration are crossed; moving from a place of constraints and denied agency, to the possibility of choosing for oneself, be it in the most intimate sphere. This phenomenon is underpinned by the concept of 'self-efficacy', defined as the "perception of oneself as a causal agent in one's environment, having some control over one's circumstances, and being capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects" [62] (p. 370). Given that "self-efficacy is a key factor in life course construction" [62] (p. 371), the everyday displays of choice and agency are essential in fostering the ability to make other important choices at pivotal points in life trajectories. Faced with greater structural constraints, these appear as a sort of an everyday form of resistance from migrants, similar to what has been described with dominated groups resisting class or colonial oppression [63m64]. As the border of adulthood is a lot more porous for young migrants, these acts of resistance may play a role in reclaiming the border of adulthood in order to be, or become, an adult on one's own terms.

3.3.2. Exploration and Expression of the Self

Given the challenges of observing these quotidian acts of resistance outside of in-depth ethnological and nano-sociological research, we have opted to turn our PhD research on artistic practices as an entry point into the intimate displays of agency. Here, the focus is on artistic practices as a methodological tool and how it reveals individual mechanisms of reclaiming control on one's life course. Through discussions about artistic and cultural hobbies, and through a drawing exercise, participants were able to delve into how they perceive their everyday lives.

None of the interviewees had pursued a career in the arts professionally, nor had they constructed their life courses around it. Some had engaged in artistic activities as a hobby in France or in their countries of origin, while others had little to no experience with creative pursuits. However, for those who had experimented with art in a seemingly insignificant way, the narratives around their practices gave way to significant unconscious mechanisms of reclaiming a sense of control on their life courses.

Painting, it's something you do in discussion, in interaction. It's only by interacting with yourself that... it's a communication. The canvas speaks, if you do not converse you... you have to be in symbiosis with it. The proof being sometimes when you paint, you want to bring the canvas somewhere but if it doesn't want, you're blocked and you feel a void of creativity, of passion. You need that, this contact. – Male, 29 years old

For this participant, painting is not only a way of expressing himself but a *dialogue* involving himself and his canvas. His canvas is a reflection of himself, as he mentions both an interaction with oneself and conversing with the canvas. Therefore, it becomes a materialisation of a process of exploring and understanding himself: the symbiosis he describes is an introspection that allows him to align his artistic expression with his self-perception. Not only does art give way to this introspection, but it can also be used as a transformative act.

It's true that with art, I feel like we can express, we can say things. Art changed so much through time, the look on art changes every year. It's something that changes and people change as well. Art changes me as

well, I think we use art to change ourselves. It's a relationship between art and myself, art and us. – Female, 19 years old

This young woman also highlights a *relationship* with art and her practice. She mainly draws, her favorite drawings are shown on the walls of her room where the interview was conducted; and she writes. She considers it as something that changed her – or, at least, allows her to express how she has changed. Indeed, the way art has changed her is not clear, but she does insist on expression: for her, it is both a way to explore how she has evolved, and to express who she is, perhaps who she wants to be.

In these excerpts, artistic practice is an important medium to express and discover oneself. This practice requires introspection and an understanding of one's identity, followed by the determination to express it. It bridges the immaterial and the material realms, utilizing a language that solidifies both the actual and the aspirational identity. It is further argued that artistic expression holds transformative power by facilitating an exploration of one's desired future self. This introspection is a critical component of the transition to adulthood, a period of experimentation and of mistakes. Art reveals the process of choosing a path, as it provides a tangible representation of one's journey and aspirations. Moreover, artistic practice can serve as a means to reflect on past decisions and experiences, offering a framework for understanding one's present circumstances and the choices available to them.

Sometimes I go back to what I drew before, and I see... my thought before and my thoughts now. How I had these problems before, how I tried to deal with them... I see that the problems that were very difficult then, now it's the past. They're over, they seem easy. I wrote about my problems, but then when I managed, I reread what I wrote and I saw that they were actually very easy. Now I went through all this to succeed after. It helps me a lot, it gives me courage to continue. – Female, 19 years old

In this case, the young woman consults her previous drawings and writings, which are tinted by her prevailing mood at the time of creation. This process serves as a means of reflecting on memories and the emotions attached to them that have been crystallised on paper, thereby reinforcing her feeling of self-efficacy. Remembering her migration path, what she went through, and seeing a snapshot of herself at this moment, making choices that matter to her becomes easier. Interrogating her artistic practices was essential in order to understand a critical component of agency, and thus of reclaiming control on her life courses: it showed how challenges, and negatively-perceived life transitions, can serve as comparison points in future challenges and choices. Nonetheless, artistic practices also reveal mechanisms of self-projection, that is to say of imagining and materialising one's aspirations.

3.3.3. Projection of the Self and Aspirations

For individuals with no prior experience in artistic pursuits, our methodological approach was devised to encourage the exploration of drawing during interviews. We provided each interviewee with paper and pencils, and invited them to draw the first thing that came to mind for four ideas: yourself; your life; a memory; home, with no clarification or further instruction. Surprisingly, only two respondents rejected this request. We highlight two results from this experiment here, allowing us to gain an understanding of individual levers of the sense of control. The act of drawing themselves prompted our respondents to display a variety of interpretations of the self. Several of them expressed a lack of self-awareness prior to commencing the drawing, yet their drawings encapsulated elements of their past, present and future self. This reveals that, unsettled by the task of drawing themselves, they reached deeper than their physical traits, choosing to portray an identity that is complex and multilayered.



Figure 1. Male, 19 years old, prompted to *draw himself*.



Figure 2. Female, 23 years old, prompted to *draw herself* (adjusted for sharpness).

The first drawing portrays the participant in a seated position, a choice influenced by his sentiment of finally being able to take some time for himself after his migration trajectory. The belongings that matter to him are on his lap, and he is looking in a mirror. His reflection reveals a

ladder leading to a door, which he interprets as a visualization of his past and future self. When discussing his drawing and his choices, he describes struggling with making sense of who he was, who he is and who he will be. In the second drawing, the participant opted to depict an event from her past, namely her arrival in France with her first child and her unborn second child. As she was about to board the metro, another woman struggled with her stroller, and the participant offered to assist despite the physical strain. She instructed her child to wait, and proceeded to climb the stairs with the stroller. It is noteworthy that during the interview, this particular detail was not recalled, likely due to its irrelevance to the questions. However, when invited to draw herself the memory resurfaced, serving as a representation of her identity and aspirations: she then explains considering herself kind and helpful and aspires to helping others. This exploration of the self through drawing emerged as a significant element in the interview, particularly when questioning interviewees' post-drawing reflections. The majority of them reported feelings of calm and expressed satisfaction at having had the opportunity to reflect on different aspects of their lives and identities.

It's like... you're taking a minute, you're looking inside and you look back. It helps. – **Male, 19 years old**

'Looking back', here, means seeing yourself. This notion is of particular significance when making decisions in life as engaging in introspection enables the envisioning of one's future trajectory. This projection of the self is a pivotal result of this experiment. It is evident when individuals are requested to illustrate the concept of 'home.' Given the other drawings clearly inviting reflection on the past and the present, we hypothesised that the ambiguity of this last instruction could lead to different interpretations (home as in home country, their house now, or what makes them feel 'at home'). However, most of the respondents drew what they wanted as their future home.

In the case of Figure 3, the participant explained that she had drawn the house she would like to have in Rennes with her girlfriend – she was single at the time of the interview. She would have two cats and a garden, and she added a motto that she follows in life: "simply be happy." The last participant's depiction was of a home that she wants to construct later in life – but not directly for herself, as it is an orphanage that she would like to open in her home country. In the depiction, she is seated in her office within the orphanage, envisioning herself at home in this long-cherished dream. The respondents' drawings and explanations all contained very clear ideas of their aspirations, encapsulating the type of accommodation, its location, the fact they would own it, who they would share it with. Although during the interview we had asked them, 'where do you see yourself in the future?', the act of drawing prompted respondents to give greater details of the intimate and concrete future they aspired to. In doing so, they projected themselves as a self that is neither present nor future; rather, they expressed how they imagined themselves, thereby setting the conditions necessary for the exercise of their agency by materialising their objectives, giving structure to the actions they should take and the choices they should make.



Figure 3. Female, 19 years old, prompted to *draw home*.



Figure 4. Female, 21 years old, prompted to *draw home*.

These examples are pivotal in understanding the exercise of agency. Doing so requires a form of multitemporal self-reflection, putting the individual at the intersection of their past, present and future selves. This introspection entails a projection into a future that is not only nonexistent but potentially unattainable outside the realm of one’s aspirations and dreams, thereby creating an imagination of self that is inextricable from the concept of agency. Finally, the enactment of agency requires the ability to voice, or to express in language, this imagined and aspired self. The act of making a choice, regardless of its perceived significance, necessitates the verbal or physical expression of that decision. By approaching insignificant artistic practices as banal acts, that can reveal significant individual mechanisms due to their banality, we can see how they reveal different aspects of the enactment of agency, surpassing administrative, legal, and normative borders in order to reclaim control on transitions to adulthood.

4. Conclusions

This article has proposed to study the transition to adulthood of young forced migrants, intersecting both youth and migration studies. A principal finding is that the border of adulthood is a lot more porous for young migrants than for other vulnerable groups. While they experience an accelerated transition to adulthood as has been described for vulnerable youth, they also fluctuate from adult to a status akin to that of a child. This is because previously solidified trajectories in the educational, professional or familial spheres are disrupted. More specifically, we find that young adult migrants are particularly affected by the latter when it comes to parenthood. This finding highlights a phenomenon that has been scarcely described in the literature regarding the reversibility of parenthood as a marker of adulthood. While it is no longer required to be a parent in order to be an adult, individuals who have become parents underline this event as an integral part of their transition to adulthood. For young forced migrants who had created families in their countries of origin, the uprootal from their familial units and more specifically from their children represents a regression and a loss of responsibilities that constituted their adult identities. In a broader sense, young adult migrants regress on all markers of adulthood due to forced migration.

However, the present study has also shown that different strategies and tactics are available to young migrants in order to reclaim a sense of control on their life courses. That is to say that they can leverage different acts of resistance in order to affirm their identities, their aspirations and their choices. These acts of resistance can be said to be particularly significant when they are displayed at a daily level. While *a priori* anecdotal, certain behaviours at this scale can reveal attempts at enacting one's agency. This paper shows that artistic practices can be leveraged as an exploration tool of the individual mechanisms behind the reclaiming of a sense of control – and, therefore, of agency. Indeed, for young migrants drawing revealed the way they explore their identities, express them, and project themselves – all essential ingredients in their feeling of control.

While this paper does explore a crossing of youth and migration studies that is scarcely present in the literature, several limits must be highlighted. As mentioned, the process of an accelerated transition to adulthood and of parentification have already been covered in details. The reverse phenomenon is less covered, and therefore requires a greater body of work to understand its implications. One consideration is that other vulnerable groups might experience this backward crossing of adulthood. Another is that parenthood may also be reversible in other cases than for forced migrants, but this is not yet apparent in the literature. Furthermore, it has been essential in this article to focus on the micro scale but broader structures and local systems must be integrated in order to capture a fuller picture of the process of transitioning to adulthood in young forced migrants. Indeed, structures of constraints shape the opportunities available to young migrants in their transition to adulthood, while local actors may play an integral part in hindering or fostering the agentic capabilities of young migrants. Integrating this second point here would render this article too broad, but the understanding of the processes described here would benefit from integrating the macro and meso angles.

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