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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Border Work as socio-legal activist research

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Abstract
This article develops Border Work (BW) as a theoretical concept and methodological approach, underexplored in socio-legal scholar-activism, through analysing two distinct examples: Noor, who applied for protection, and her individual and collective struggle for residency and the making of a manifesto against borders. While both examples depart from feminist methodology, the differences are stark: Noor, excluded from democratic processes, faced deportation risks, while we, with institutional support, engaged in public mobilisations without such threats. Despite these differences, we use BW to understand and analyse both examples, highlighting their commonalities. The analysis of the manifesto work and Noor's efforts shows how transgressive work creates new subject positions. BW provides a deeper understanding and a common analytical framework for scholarly work interlinked with activism. Through BW, Noor transformed from being seen as an object of the law to becoming a creator of legal knowledge. In the manifesto exercise, the boundaries are both collective and political: participants jointly challenge the national order and advocate for a transnational political identity. Both Noor and we, as part of the collective, engaged in the making of the manifesto and engaged at the intersection of personal experiences and powerful institutions and ideologies, with the aim of contributing to the struggles within and against restrictive migration regimes. Socio-legal scholars are experienced when thinking critically about the role and rule of law in society; BW can be understood to put this knowledge into action and apply it in broader struggles for justice.

Keywords: Border Work; socio-legal scholar-activism; restrictive migration regime; Sweden; transgressive political subjectivity

1. Introduction

As the editors of this special issue note, alongside the role of activist research in social change, there is a growing recognition of the value of knowledge co-production between academics, communities and movements (Hale 2008; Nagar 2014; Naples 2003; Lisahunter et al. 2013). Socio-legal scholars are increasingly embracing these ideas, moving from studying social movements as outsiders to engaging from within. While activist scholarship is well researched in fields such as anthropology and feminist studies, the law and society field still faces the challenge of defining such work within its commitment to social justice and change. To explore both the tensions and the potential of this engagement, we analyse two different yet interlinked examples of Border Work (BW). This work is 'a creative process that opens new potential pathways and generates new emergent practices [such as new ways to produce and circulate knowledge] . . . [and that] may be

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productive of new forms of identity and agency, including the constitution of forms of political subjectivity' (Newman 2012, p. 147).

We draw on the work of social policy scholar Janet Newman (2012, 2016) as well as our previous experiences of being in and moving across various spheres and roles – as researchers and teachers within Swedish academia, in the asylum rights movement, as educators and as local community members. In 2012, Newman introduced the concept of BW as a way of making sense of and visualising previously silenced or absent experiences and perspectives of work across and between public institutions, NGOs, political parties and grass-roots movements. She is particularly interested in the relationship between political activism and neoliberal governance as well as in how gendered labour mediates this relationship. She asks how 'far the politics that many women [research participants] carried into their working lives had really been eradicated, how far the energies of social movements had been co-opted and how emerging struggles were being accommodated and contained' (Newman 2012, p. 2).

In this article, we aim to analyse activism from the position of scholars and activists in the field of migration law, by using and developing Newman's work. BW is an approach we have adopted as university teachers, which affects how we initiate projects and conduct research empirically, as well as the kind of knowledge production that comes out of our work and activism. The engagement we will draw on in this article took place in Sweden through a collaboration between researchers, civil society actors and welfare workers called the Asylum Commission. This initiative, as well as its broader context, was marked by increasingly repressive migration regulations and cutbacks to exclude migrants from basic welfare (Lundberg 2024; Lundberg and Kjellbom 2021). Being involved in the Commission, we employed BW as a methodological approach by actively participating in and thereby facilitating the creation of new forms of agency. This also involved our own embodied movements across various spaces, as well as the collaborative efforts with civil society actors and welfare workers. Through BW and the present article, we not only observe but also strive to contribute to formations of political subjectivities and new modes of knowledge production that can help move beyond academic detachment and foster processes of co-producing knowledge rooted in lived experience.

At the time of writing, the Swedish government is taking several measures in the restrictive turn initiated a decade ago by the previous government. For example, they have introduced a procedure to withdraw permanent residence permits in more cases, due to 'system threatening statements and activities' such as sit-ins and demonstrations, etc. (Swedish Government 2025), combined with an 'upgrading of Swedish citizenship' (Swedish Government 2023a) and several legislative proposals enabling increased information exchange between authorities to identify and deport individuals whose residence permits have expired (Swedish Government 2023b). All in all, in addition to those whose asylum applications have been rejected, significantly more people are subject to restrictive legal developments in Sweden. A central starting point for our research and this article is that to understand and analyse migration law and its consequences, it is essential to start from the experiences of those who are directly subjected to this law. This argument also implies that, in order to carry out scholarly activism in the context of migration law, researchers need to seek contacts and collaborations with those who are subject to the law and place their experiences at the centre (Lundberg 2024; Söderman 2019).

In the following analysis, we explore two distinct yet interconnected examples of BW during a significant shift in migration policy. The first example is a collective effort in writing a manifesto, involving both of us. Our second example is an individual instance of BW from a marginalised perspective, illustrated through two interviews with Noor who participated in the Asylum Commission. These examples, both part of the Commission's work, highlight different experiences of BW. We selected Noor's encounter to vividly depict BW from a marginalised viewpoint, and a segment of our own BW to showcase collective efforts during a paradigm shift in

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migration policy. Before proceeding, to watch the outcome of the manifesto exercise, we invite readers to take out their smartphones and scan the QR code[1]:



This will give you access to one of the empirical materials we have worked with for this article: the manifesto exercise. While this will be described in detail in Section 5, it is important to see the outcome of the exercise by watching the video linked to the QR code.

Below we begin with a note on previous research and methods, then move on to the epistemological premises, and conclude with an analysis of the two examples of BW. In the concluding discussion, we tie the arguments together and consider why BW remains an underexplored method in scholar-activism and how this can be changed.

2. A note on previous research and methods

This article explores experiences and material developed in the Asylum Commission, in which we were both involved. The initiative involved around fifty researchers, civil society actors and welfare workers. Together, we co-created knowledge about the rapid changes in Swedish asylum politics after 2015 and their consequences. The work was based on the experiences of refugees who had sought asylum in Sweden. In addition to mapping and highlighting changes in legislation, one of the Commission's objectives was to counteract repressive developments.

Legal changes adopted in Sweden in the field of migration after 2015 have been described in previous research as a 'crisis of solidarity' (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019), a U-turn (Scarpa and Schierup 2018), a system leaving people in 'deportation limbo' (Lindberg 2023), an expression of 'penal nationalism' (Barker 2017, 2021) and the 'bitter end of Swedish exceptionalism' (Elsrud et al. 2023, p. 3630). Protests at both the individual and group level against these restrictive developments have been conceptualised as 'transversal sanctuary enactments' (Elsrud et al. 2023), anti-racism (Elsrud et al. 2023; Lundberg and Söderman 2024) and solidarity mobilisation (Kleres 2018).

How should activist scholars like ourselves approach and respond to these kinds of societal developments? In methodological discussions within the field of migration studies, it is argued that collaborative and creative methods are well suited for intervening 'into the contested politics of knowledge production in migration research' (Kaptani et al. 2021, p. 71). Such methods may serve to create a 'space for convivial modes of sociality', allowing 'the participants and research team to reflect together' (Kaptani et al. 2021, p. 71). Located in feminist and participatory epistemology, our research process cannot be separated and neatly categorised into methods, data analysis and dissemination of results. There is no simple distinction between research design, detailed selection techniques and research implementation. We work organically, strive for responsiveness and consider the fact that marginalised groups are most often denied a voice and an opportunity to influence discourse. However, neither intentions nor practices that centre experiences of the subaltern – in this case, people marginalised and silenced in the asylum

[1]We are grateful to our colleague Hedvig Obenius for the idea of the QR code.

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bureaucracy – should be regarded as a definite safeguard for 'giving voice' (Spivak 1988; for in-depth discussion on dilemmas in the work of the Asylum Commission, see Lundberg 2024). Rather, collaborative creative methods seek to create convivial processes that lead to convivial outcomes throughout the research (The Critical Methodologies Collective 2022; Kaptani et al. 2021). An important element in this research context is that it often involves research participants who, as Hannah Arendt famously has explained, lack a right to have rights, due to their migratory status. In this context, researchers have also argued for collaborative and activist methodologies as an ethical point of departure, since research must aim, in more concrete terms, to give something 'back' to those communities they do research with. To determine how to give back in a meaningful way, collaborative methods are presented as essential, though not a guarantee, for creating reciprocal relationships with individuals and groups participating (Huisman 2008; Hugman et al. 2011; Janes 2016).

With the present article, we wish to contribute to discussions about socio-legal activist scholarship by expanding on the notion of BW and offering reflections on how BW could be adapted as an analytical tool in different contexts. This is an approach, we argue, through which scholarly and activist work may be placed in a common analytical framework. In previous research, Paula Mulinari et al. (2020) have made use of the concept of BW to understand decolonial social work in Sweden's urban peripheries. The authors emphasise the importance of border workers' engagement with local anti-racist organisations, their deep connection to the areas they serve and their role in reopening public spaces for collective mobilisation. In the following we draw inspiration from Mulinari and colleagues (2020) and focus on ways through which our two empirical examples try to delink from dominant views on how 'objective knowledge' is produced. When we write about borders here, we do not mean nation-state borders. Border crossing in this article is when Noor 'crossed the border' and became her own and other protection seekers' legal representative, despite being caught up in the asylum bureaucracy. Or when we, as academics, 'crossed the border' of activism/traditional scientific work through collaborative exercises where political subjectivities and new modes of knowledge production took shape.

The two examples analysed below are from the Asylum Commission's work. Both we argue help us to develop BW as a methodology and theoretical approach. While the whole purpose and most activities in the Commission may be understood as BW, for the present article we focus on conversations with a woman we call Noor, who testified about her experiences of seeking asylum in Sweden and her activism/solidarity work with others in a similar situation (what we understand as one form of BW), and work with a manifesto that we carried out during the final conference of the Asylum Commission in 2022 (another form of BW).

The conversations with Noor were part of a larger empirical study we did in a research-activist group in the Commission, where almost ninety people – welfare workers, volunteers and thirty people who themselves had sought asylum in Sweden – testified about their experiences of encountering the asylum bureaucracy between 2015 and 2017.[2] The research participants encountered us for conversations about their experiences and the recruitment of participants to the Commission developed organically. Several people contacted the Commission's initiators themselves to give testimonies. Besides talking about the asylum bureaucracy, several participants with personal experiences of seeking asylum, also told of their support and solidarity work with others in similar situations as themselves. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to focus our analysis on two conversations with one woman, Noor, who shared an emergence of new practices and new identities and agency, as well as complex and often conflicting ways through

[2]Formas funded this research initiative under grant no. 2019/01872. The research has been approved by the ethical review board (Etikprövningsmyndigheten), decision no. 2019–05363. All interviews were conducted by one civil society worker and one scholar. Anonymised transcripts were saved in a public archive, accessible in Swedish at: The Asylum Archive. Available at: asylkommissionen.se.

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which knowledge of migration law may be produced. Previous published academic work regarding the Asylum Commission (Elsrud et al. 2023; Lundberg 2024) has not focused on the stories of asylum seekers. Although conversations with more participants could have been included in this article, we chose to focus on the conversations with Noor to be able to provide context and details to her particular experiences (conversations in Swedish with all participants are published online open access in the Asylum Archive 2022).[3] Noor furthermore stands out in the way she combined, in our conversations, self-reflections (how the asylum process and her activism had changed her), detailed accounts of the asylum process, her and her family's struggles and solidarity work with others in similar situations. In the conversations with Noor as well as in the Asylum Commission as a whole, the ambition was to enable reciprocal relationships and to create an environment where we could interact in a friendly and co-operative way (Lundberg 2024). All persons involved had one thing in common: we found strong justifications for halting the new refugee policy and wanted to expose the arbitrariness of the asylum bureaucracy.

We use the term 'conversation' rather than 'interview' here, as the interaction extended beyond an exchange of questions and answers between individuals. According to Newman, whose work inspired the present article, the dialogue in such interactions often becomes more collective, involving shared memories, references to others not present and a broader context. The goal of shifting from a rigid question–response format to a more fluid and inclusive discussion reflects the collective significance of the Asylum Commission (Newman 2012, p. 11).

The two conversations lasted between one and a half to two hours each and were conducted by one scholar-activist and one civil society activist. The analysis of these conversations enables us to visualise how BW may be conducted from a marginalised and silenced position, and shows how reflections on experiences may provide a strong ground for making resistance within and against the system.

The second source of data for this article comes from the Asylum Commission's final conference, 'Contesting violent border regimes', held in 2022. During an evening and two days, the conference included presentations setting out from the above conversations with Noor and other testimonies gathered in a comprehensive public archive (Asylum archive 2022), short lectures with activists, including scholar-activists, about their work in different border regions in Europe and a performance by a theatre group. The conference also included a collective manifesto-writing and film-making exercise (hereinafter the manifesto). This manifesto serves as our example of BW, in which we ourselves took part. We planned and implemented the exercise, drawing on our previous experiences related to the broader migrant rights struggle. Although we, as permanent university employees and Swedish citizens, have not been directly impacted by the repressive legislation, many of our friends and collaborators have. Being active in the broader migrant rights movement for over two decades, focusing on legal support and awareness-raising (Lundberg and Söderman 2024), and having conducted research in collaboration with protection seekers (Lundberg and Söderman 2015; Söderman 2019), this work links to our analysis of the manifesto.

3. Epistemological foundations and analytical approach: Border Work as guiding principle

3.1 Feminist epistemologies

Being positioned at the intersection of research and activism and trying to cross and challenge the boundaries of both academia and activism at the same time involves difficulties, vulnerabilities and unsolvable dilemmas (Nagar 2014). With the ambition of continuing to strive for alliances of solidarity to bring about change despite inherent messiness and complexity, Nagar (2014, p. 163) emphasises 'acknowledging the importance of knowledges that rely on experience, memory work, and truth claims' (see also Harding 2004; Collins 1986). Hence, our starting point is that

[3]https://asylkommissionen.se/arkivet/ (accessed 5 June 2025).

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experiences generated from the margins of society contribute to developing new understandings of and perspectives on the world. Newman (2012) in a similar vein reflects on how new knowledge and perspectives may be formed from spaces *in between* or *across* different spheres, and that alternatives to hierarchies and exclusion may be found. She describes how the women she has interviewed:

> 'All worked the spaces of power generated through contradictions in the ruling relations of their time, mobilizing new spaces of agency, prefiguring alternative rationalities and opening out spaces for those that followed. Their work did not just 'reflect' the profound social and political transformations of their day but were generative of them' (Newman 2012, p. 3).

As noted, Newman draws on interviews, and the experiences of the women interviewed form the basis for her analysis. While feminist epistemology in general emphasises the importance of the notion of experience for feminist theory-building, and how experiences from social movements are important to put at the centre of analyses (Mulinari and Sandell 1999; Naples 2003), experiences cannot be collected and serve as the sole 'evidence' for analytical points. How experiences emerge, change over time as they become memories and are transmitted, needs to be put in their historical and political context (Mohanty 1988; Scott 1991). To set out from the concept of experience therefore assumes a critical ontological and epistemological engagement with questions of whose perspectives valid knowledge about a phenomenon can be created. From whose position is a phenomenon explored, who has the interpretative precedence to formulate a problem and how it can best be solved, who is silenced and why? The concept of *epistemic violence* (Mignolo 2009) captures how experiences are racialised and place-bound, and how science has been involved/is involved in violent processes of colonisation that place people in hierarchies based on place of birth and skin colour. What is at stake here is how a person of brown or black skin colour is always 'formed by the gaze of the white' (Mignolo 2009, p. 175).

To us, epistemic violence highlights the importance of critically looking into who counts as a knowing subject, and whose experiences can be made speakable and hearable, as the basis for generating valid information and knowledge. Through the Asylum Commission we have put the experiences of people going through the asylum process in Sweden at the centre of the analysis, and let these experiences guide the research questions and methods. This was pivotal in challenging the dominant public discourse following the post-2015 reversal in asylum regulations (Scarpa and Schierup 2018). During this period, refugee experiences were overshadowed by narratives emphasising the strain on welfare institutions due to asylum immigration and the perceived necessity of border protection (Ekström et al. 2020). However, there were, of course, limits to how epistemic violence could be contested, not least with regard to risks of a one-sided focus on testimonies of pain and suffering (Tuck and Yang 2014; Gross et al. 2023). In this article, we worked through this risk by choosing to focus only on one interlocutor, Noor. This was done in order to provide space to include an analysis of her experiences of pain and suffering as sources of knowledge and wisdom (Tuck and Yang 2014), to give fuller context and greater focus to her acts of resistance and to contest a colonial perspective on knowledge generation that includes the other only through stories of pain and suffering.

However, similar to other collaborative research initiatives, the methods underpinning the Commission were not straightforward or without dilemmas. For example, members in the Commission had different expectations of what it meant to be a researcher, and what it means to do research (see Lundberg 2024 for an analysis of these dilemmas). Although several hearings, collective legal aid sessions and other activities were arranged to include the voices of those with personal experiences of the asylum process, it was difficult to challenge the perception of researchers as *the* knowing subject. However, this did not mean that common ground could not be found – for example, in the shared effort to acknowledge experiences of people seeking asylum as central to the Commission's review. The manifesto writing and film-making may be viewed as an

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ambition to conduct BW and, in the words of Mignolo (2009), to delink from dominant ways and views of being in and knowing the world.

3.2 Border Work

Analysing the experiences of fifty women who had taken on activist commitments into their working lives, Newman (2012) explores some of the paradoxes that arise when personal and political commitments encounter dominant ruling relations, particularly during periods of neoliberal political dominance and reform. For Newman, BW captures the labour carried out by the women across and within different institutions, outside as well as within formal employment, across and within the academy and on different scales, on the level of a small grass-roots organisation, in local government, transnationally or nationally. Importantly, these sectors, the women's different roles in them and the various scales, are not exclusive and stable in the accounts of the women in Newman's analysis. BW captures how women, through their labour, move between these different sectors and scales – between paid and unpaid work – bringing with them experiences and knowledges from different kinds of labour. Newman emphasises the function of BW to destabilise neat dichotomous categories such as inside/outside, autonomous/incorporated, personal/political and shows 'a multiplicity of spaces [roles and identities] that intersect, and are sometimes in relationships of alignment and sometimes of antagonism' (Newman 2012, p. 146).

Besides channelling commitment and making visible previously silenced experiences, the women Newman encountered generated public conversations *as a way* to push for policy reforms, but also to support broader struggles for cultural and political change. Moreover, BW makes possible alternative ways of living, working and practising politics, as well as imagining the world and social relations (Newman 2012).

Like Newman's interviewees, rather than striving to produce neutral or objective knowledge, we have integrated our activist commitments into our research. This approach has led us to 'a broader engagement with "knowledge-work" as a form of political practice in the professions [including at universities]' (Newman 2012, p. 107). Newman also argues that BW is not a case of 'individual heroism but of collective endeavour, and of living out of contradictions, uncertainties and personal dilemmas through different forms of collective practice' (Newman 2012, p. 106). As we analyse the conversations with Noor and revisit our notes on the manifesto and the conference, the collective dimension of knowledge creation, which includes a transformative potential – that things could be otherwise – is central (see also De los Reyes and Mulinari 2020). Furthermore, in the analysis, we illuminate a creative dimension involved in BW, a dimension we argue could be further explored in socio-legal research (Section 5).

4. Border Work from a marginalised and silenced position

We encountered Noor through the Asylum Commission, as she was one of the strong voices at the time in Sweden, involved in the mobilisation and sit-ins for the right to asylum for Afghan refugees. Noor knew that the Asylum Commission was committed to conducting a critical review of changes in asylum regulations on the basis of asylum seekers' own experiences and to disseminate the findings of the review. Through her activities – including the networking, relationship-building and collective knowledge-sharing these entailed – Noor successively came to a point where she challenged her marginalised and silenced position and performed what we conceptualise as BW. Before we embark on analysing her BW, we will briefly outline Noor's background, focusing on her experiences upon arrival to Sweden.

In 2015, Noor came to Sweden together with her husband and their newborn. Upon arrival in Sweden, and during the asylum process, her family, like many others, was confronted with a messy, hostile and misinforming reception (see Khosravi 2009, 2017 for research on reception in Sweden). During the lengthy asylum process, Noor received wrong or insufficient information,

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from lawyers as well as from case officers at the Migration Agency. One key impetus in her support work was to provide information to other asylum seekers. She recounts how being misinformed made her take decisions that she later regretted. One of the decisions Noor regrets was agreeing to move her family to a so-called removal facility (*utreseboende*). The background was that they had not been properly informed that a family with children could not, by law, be deported back to Afghanistan. Therefore, Noor's family could have stayed in their accommodation. Instead, they moved into the disastrous environment of the removal facility and ended up staying there for eight months. They experienced economic destitution, isolation due to the facility's remote location, overcrowding, a lack of safety from living alongside people with alcohol, health and drug problems, and food that made the children sick.

When referring to her experiences, Noor was upset about her treatment by the migration authorities and, at the same time, determined to make us aware of the system's deficits. While the hardships were in focus in her account, she also explained how she and the other residents came together in a struggle to find creative ways to improve their situation. Through some of the other residents, Noor and her family encountered an organisation that distributed bus passes and offered language lessons, daily meals and child activities. Noor and her husband also collected cans and recycled them for a deposit, allowing them to buy some snacks and food for the children. A woman also gave her a small stove, which allowed them to boil rice and potatoes for their children. Noor described how they 'actually managed to create some beauty during this ... in the middle of this hell'.

Noor's struggle and mobilisation were shaped by a series of pivotal moments. One such instance occurred when her husband was denied a daily allowance for a period of five months, which led Noor to conclude that the Migration Agency had made an erroneous decision. Eventually, after months of repeatedly visiting and arguing with a case-worker at the Agency, Noor succeeded in getting the right to the daily allowance reinstated, as they were a family with children and therefore entitled to economic support.[4] It was an exhausting process, Noor explained, but it was important for her future work. In the end, she managed to get the case-worker to realise that he had done wrong. He then provided her husband with the daily allowance, also retroactively. Noor asked: 'Why must one explain to them [the case workers] in this way?' At the same time, Noor also stated that it was 'interesting that I know more than they do at this stage'.

While Noor, on one hand, was tired and frustrated that the case-workers were not doing their work and were not knowledgeable about the formal rights and regulations applying to people seeking asylum, on the other hand – and this is what makes the experience so important – Noor said that she now knew more about the regulations than the case-worker. She further described how she, for example during the protests, spread this knowledge to other people in a similar situation.

> '[...] I have tried to help a great deal with the other refugees who are still here and don't know the language ... I became much stronger after that because I managed to endure it [the asylum reception]. You do become stronger when ... well, it's been an intense training for me at times, I think. In a way, it could be seen as positive; now I understand ... or rather, now I know a great deal about the asylum process, how the rules and laws work, and what rights you do and do not have.'

[4]The situation was related to the legal amendment in 2016 of the Act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers (SFS 1994:137). From the time the change was put into force, adults not living with children in Sweden were refused the limited financial support previously provided between the removal decision in an asylum case and their departure. This was just one of several extensive regulatory changes during the period, and in the frantically swift pace of legislative amendments, it later emerged that the law had been applied incorrectly.

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Noor also spoke about how she continued to stay in contact with, and visit, residents still staying at the removal facility. She became an important agent within the larger network of activists struggling for the rights of people in the asylum process:

> 'At the same time, we were participating in the sit-in protest at Norra Bantorget in Stockholm, and I actually wanted to continue protesting with the other families with children. I felt that this was the most important thing I should do, even if I would be leaving for Germany or France in two months [due to rejection of the family's asylum claim]. But I wanted to be here [at the protest], and I thought it was so important.'

The picture below is from a chronicle in a Swedish news magazine. It shows some of the demonstrators participating in the sit-in that Noor reflected on. They stand in front of a statue of a historically famous Swedish labour rights activist surrounded by people from the labour rights movement. The choice of location for the sit-ins, in front of this statue, was symbolic. The demonstrators can be understood as claiming to be part of Sweden's history of popular movements, while at the same time not being seen as belonging to 'the people'.

When talking about her experiences of demonstrations and struggles in retrospect, Noor also emphasised how these had transformed her. The reflections below highlight how she created a political subjectivity marked by experiential knowledge gained from going through the asylum bureaucracy, and a striving to change the very same system.

> 'Above all, I became stronger, much stronger. I became a different person after that. I'm not afraid anymore. I became much braver. And ... I worked a lot on myself: "Now it's time for me to take action; I can't just keep looking for someone to help me. Or trust someone blindly, really. I need to keep my eyes open, I need to listen, I need to hear, I need to gain knowledge. And I must, in order to help myself and others who are in the same situation as me." I truly became a completely different person after that.'

People seeking asylum have almost no influence over the decisions adopted by the Migration Agency regarding residency, nor over the material conditions of their everyday life. Nor do they have the right to formally participate in legislative processes or in the legal application of such laws, even though this directly applies to their situation (this is commonly referred to as a democratic deficit in the system of asylum, see Spång 2008). Furthermore, it is the applicants who need to make their asylum claim credible, as the burden of proof is placed upon them.

Through her solidarity work and her struggle for her own family, Noor contested these marginalising, exclusionary and anti-democratic conditions. Possibly, this work also liberated her, in some sense, from refugeehood. Through what we understand as BW, she took a different position from that of the asylum seeker, becoming her own lawyer, a legal counsellor for others and an activist in the broader migrant rights struggle. Noor managed to take a bit of control of her life, including supporting others to do the same.

We argue that Noor's work may be conceptualised as BW, as she moved from one sphere – that of a marginalised and silenced position of being categorised as an asylum seeker – to a sphere of mobilisation and protest. In this liberating and participatorty sphere, she was furthermore not only gaining knowledge that could help her and her family, but also that could help others. In this process, Noor has gone through a transformation that both re-shaped her political subjectivity and required her to learn new skills. By testifying to the Asylum Commission, Noor devoted herself to circulating important experiential knowledge to a wider audience. In line with previous research on BW (Mulinari et al. 2020), Noor's experiences also highlight how the personal life of BWs is intertwined with, and inseparable from, their outreach political work. In this context, a further point that Noor addressed several times during the conversations was that the knowledge arising from personal experience of the asylum process is important and needs to be circulated. Noor

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Published in *Internationalen*. Photographer unknown (for more information about the initiative see https://www.stoppautvisningarna.se/ [*stop deportations to Afghanistan*]).

talked about how people may think that they know what it means to be an asylum seeker, but that they don't. Therefore, Noor emphasised, everyone needs to listen to asylum seekers themselves. Her political subjectivity and acquired skills motivated her not only to struggle for her own sake but also to move from individual to collective agency through collective work to contest the Swedish asylum bureaucracy.

Although the difficult experiences during the asylum process in Sweden will always remain with her, she also says that she will continue to struggle, and that she is now stronger and more aware of her own wishes, strivings, beliefs and future career:

> 'I couldn't accept it because I still have so much trust in the idea that one can feel safe in Sweden if you're a child, a woman, or a vulnerable person. I couldn't accept it within myself. I was deeply saddened by this, and through these events in my life, I found a purpose for the future. I am going to become a lawyer.'

In times of repressive migration control, Noor's persistent BW is both inspiring and necessary. Through her engagement and in her thoughts of what the future may entail, she remains hopeful that Sweden may be a place of safety for her and her family. She also seems confident that she will become a lawyer herself, to continue her struggle for the rights of others. To conceptualise Noor's work as BW broadens the empirical base for the concept as it has been more focused on actors that have a privileged position in terms of formal discretion and legal residency, although also including transnational work and belongings. In a sense, Noor becomes an extraordinary creative border worker, as she manages to work across different sectors without 'belonging', formally speaking, in any of them. In an Arendtian analysis, one can say that by struggling for her rights, Noor also constitutes herself as a rights bearer who could claim these rights, at least to some extent. By analysing Noor's struggles as BW, we wish to highlight a double meaning of the term border – Noor is working across sectoral borders, and simultaneously she contests the regime of the nation-state that excludes her. In fact, her actions deconstruct and contest the border infrastructure constituted by racialised hierarchies (Achiume 2021). By this analysis, we wish to make a modest claim that BW is further developed by setting out not only to contest and the cross sectoral borders, but also national and racialised ones. We turn in the next section to the example

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of the manifesto, where we tried both to contest the national order of things and to circulate knowledge about it transnationally.

5. Border Work: sharing experiences and creating a manifesto

As with some of the women Newman discusses, and as Noor described her own experience, the manifesto process enabled us as scholar-activists to connect our personal commitments with public action (Newman 2012, p. 89). This was not new to us. For the past two decades, we have been working in various configurations and collaborations through forms of BW within the local and nationwide asylum rights movement. This work has been continuous through local legal counselling over time and has been connected with grass-roots initiatives that we have encountered in our hometown. In the final conference of the Asylum Commission, we drew on these previous experiences of working with migrant rights mobilisation. We sought to disseminate the knowledge generated at the conference about migration control and its consequences beyond academic environments and beyond the Swedish context.

To the conference, we invited local activist networks and scholar-activists to participate, as well as presenters from various EU border regions. To invite activists from other countries was a way to try to put the work of the Asylum Commission, that had focused on experiences of Swedish regulations, in a transnational context. A broader ambition with the conference was to create a transnational platform for exchange and mutual learning in the struggles for migrant rights. We, the authors, were in the final stages of the work of the Commission, which had been a process marked by unsuccessful advocacy efforts. This was not new to us either. We have participated in many lost battles. However, in the Swedish context, we have observed a development toward more rights, including for undocumented persons, during the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century. In the most recent decade, developments in Sweden has rapidly moved in the opposite direction. None of us, nor most other engaged scholars we know, were prepared for such a strong backlash regarding the respect and protection of human rights.

One recent development that has affected our BW and prompted us to consider new strategies in mobilising against injustices is the changing perception of international commitments. The Swedish government, which previously prided itself on leading the way in establishing these commitments and whose civil servants often cited them when criticising other governments, now views them differently. These commitments are no longer regarded as important to uphold. Instead, the rhetoric from politicians has shifted to assert that only Swedish citizens should have unconditional rights. 'Foreigners', especially if they protest in the public sphere, risk losing their residence permits, according to a new legislative proposal (Swedish Government 2025).

Observing these broader trends in Sweden and the Western world, the repressive and violent control of migration has been steadily increasing for a decade. Therefore, we argued, there was a great need to make visible and exchange knowledge of resistance, and of visions of alternative futures and another world. To us, the manifesto could be understood as a way to simultaneously make visible harmful structures *and* resistance. Furthermore, the exercise facilitated the constitution of a collective entity, albeit provisional, wherein the participants could envisage an alternative reality devoid of violent migration controls.

The majority of the other participants at the conference were scholars and/or activists who, like us, had been engaged in the broader migrant rights movement, either through support networks or by providing individual support. Additionally, several individuals who were present at the conference had undergone the asylum process in Sweden.[5]

As preparation before the conference, we had been part of a small writing group that drafted a manifesto text. We had also asked those participants who wished to present during the conference

[5]Noor was not one of the participants at the conference.

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to consider three questions: *Have you had any victories in your struggles you can share to encourage others? What are the main issues you are working with in the area where you live currently? What does your work to promote solidarity look like in practice and what is your vision for future regulations of migration?* On the first evening of the conference, together with professional filmmakers in *RÅfilm*, (RAW film), which also is a small community that consistently works with BW in various forms, including support for young refugees who want to make films about their experiences[6], we filmed the participants' answers to these questions. Also, the presentations made during the conference were recorded. The point was to provide documentation that could be used to spread the knowledge beyond the conference itself.[7] From the conference participants, we learnt about dire conditions for those in need of safety and protection, as well as about the little space for resistance that was available. Furthermore, to do something together, that is, to make films, could be understood as a contestation of the individualisation of knowledge creation, and, at best, the competitive mindset that characterises academic contexts, as well as facilitating the creation of a temporary collective political subject.

The conference participants consistently emphasised the complex challenges faced by migrants and activists in their struggle against violent migration policies. This underscored the ongoing necessity for solidarity and advocacy. They expressed interest in discussions concerning visions of a more equitable future and the ways in which such visions are already being implemented. Examples of activities that were raised included shouting outside detention centres in Denmark so that those detained could hear (while not seeing) the protests, and in Turkey to form alliances between migrant and Turkish workers in order to organise strikes, and several participants told about supporting individuals in gaining access to protection. These practices, although often small in scale, served to demonstrate the endurance of resistance despite harsher and more violent control of migration.

Furthermore, we aspired to produce a joint material product during the conference – the dissemination of which would be extended to the broader public. It was our intention to draw attention to the issues currently facing us, while also providing a clear indication of what the future may hold should we succeed in our resistance work. One entire day of the conference was dedicated to collaborative work. The initial phase involved a joint discussion and the formulation of the core text, while the subsequent phase entailed the translation of the text into various languages and the recording of readings in those languages. The film team, *RÅfilm,* later put together the film with English subtitles.

As seen, the manifesto is structured into three parts. *First*, the writers of the manifesto were presented. As stated, we came from different regions and had varied experiences of migration, activism and research. This section ended 'While diverse, we form a collective'. *Second*, we tried to describe the different forms of activism represented in the group, as well as trying to name 'the problem' we were struggling against, such as 'The border regimes in Europe are intertwined with colonial histories and affect places elsewhere in the world'. In this part of the manifesto, we tried not to romanticise resistance against borders: 'Our solidarity work takes different forms. This work across differences and privileges are not straightforward. They are fractured by the border violence'. *Third*, we tried to look beyond the present and envision something beyond the current harmful system. Here we appealed to existing human rights documents to be implemented for all, regardless of status. This part also included a wording beyond present frameworks: 'we want just resource distribution of the resources that we share as humans, collectives, animals, and other species on earth'.

The decision to record the manifesto in seventeen different languages was a deliberate attempt to highlight the diversity of voices and experiences that had been involved in its creation. Furthermore, the inclusion of a diverse range of languages was intended to challenge the

[6]https://rafilm.se/en/about.

[7]https://asylkommissionen.se/conference–videos/.

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dominance of English as the hegemonic language and to promote the use of other languages as a decolonial practice. The objective was to develop decolonial knowledge in a way that enabled experiences that had been silenced to be brought to the fore. Our exercise with the manifesto can be seen as an attempt to destabilise the state as the primary authority in determining who is eligible for asylum. This was achieved by making visible the individuals who are migrating as knowledgeable subjects. It was crucial to utilise not only English and Swedish but also additional languages. We hope that the use of different languages in the film also contributed to its aesthetic appeal.

Rooted in first-hand experiences of migration law, mainly through activism and scholar-activism, but also through being subject to migration laws, the manifesto supported our endeavour to collectively insert silenced experiences into the public sphere, combined with resistance and imagining political visions of a world where freedom of movement applies to all. We view the manifesto in the context of the Asylum Commission as an ambition to delink from the dominant way of being and thinking of knowledge production and knowledge circulation. Furthermore, the discussions of the text in the manifesto, and translating and recording it, are of paramount importance in facilitating the formation of a transnational collective political subject, however ephemeral. With the manifesto we tried to highlight experiences of violent migration control as experiences generating important knowledge, as well as a fruitful point of departure to imagine and act as if it were otherwise.

6. Final discussion

In the present article, we have sought to develop BW as a methodological approach that we argue is underexplored in socio-legal scholar-activism. We have done so through an analysis of two different examples of such work. The differences between our examples are evident: in terms of power dynamics, Noor herself was part of the voices that were excluded from the democratic system, legislative processes and dominant public debate. We were, on the other hand, able to arrange conferences (including searching for funding, using the university's infrastructure, book travels etc.), contact politicians and engage in mobilisations in the streets with no risk of deportation. Noor's struggle, however, took place from a marginalised position of 'deportability'; it was spontaneous and very specific – her focus was on the fight to remain in Sweden. For her, and those she supported and organised together with, this was a matter of life and death. Through BW, Noor transformed from being seen as an object of the law to becoming a creator of legal knowledge. In the manifesto exercise, the boundaries are both collective and political: participants jointly challenge the national order and advocate for a transnational political identity.

Notwithstanding the apparent and significant dissimilarities, we employ the same analytical framework, BW, to comprehend both examples. This is not to downplay their differences, but to suggest they share commonalities when viewed from the perspective of BW. The analysis of the work with the manifesto and of Noor's work demonstrates how transgressive work through boundary crossings may take shape and be executed, and how novel subject positions emerge as a result of these crossings. Noor, both as an individual and through the collectives she established and contributed to, demonstrates novel subject positions. Our own roles in the manifesto exercise represent an initiative to create a collective, transnational agency that, at least temporarily, transcends the national order of things and its consequences. This experimental creative knowledge production aimed to bring forth experiences that had been excluded from public discourse and to act in solidarity with those who had been impacted by migration controls. It was based on the conviction that a better future could be created. This conviction is also a strong one for Noor, who still has confidence that children, women and vulnerable people will be able to feel safe in Sweden. The conversations with Noor are also a reminder that although people are subjected to violence and repression, their resistance and critical thinking are persistent and

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present, something we all can learn from. Furthermore, both we and Noor share a common approach: we operate at the intersection of personal experiences and powerful institutions and ideologies. We give voice to individuals at the margins of residency and citizenship (though this effort is incomplete, see methodology discussion). Together with allies, we also aim to contribute to the struggles within and against restrictive migration regimes.

The layers of BW that we have highlighted in this article provide a deeper understanding of this notion. We have also shown how BW may constitute a common analytical framework for scholarly and activist work. The manifesto exercise (and the Asylum Commission as a whole) aimed to delink academic knowledge production from its ivory tower. Noor, as an asylum seeker testifying to the Asylum Commission, reflected in our conversation on how knowledge about migration law emerges through listening to those directly subject to it. Noor refused to internalise the white gaze, and she fought for her rights in different arenas – on the street, in the Migration Agency's office and at the removal centre. This is work that has since become perilous in Sweden: the current government recently proposed that such activism be considered an indication of 'bad character' (*vandel*), which might lead to a loss of residence permit in the country. The knowledge generated through our manifesto work also emerges from the refusal to stay within the expected category as academics, combined with a commitment to resist epistemic violence (Mignolo 2009).

An important factor in understanding BW, including its topicality and its potential to contribute new methods for knowledge development and circulation that strive for progressive politics in a broader sense (though not fully developed in this contribution), is BW's creative dimension. Not least in the conversation with Noor it was clear that from her difficult situation, a great deal of creativity was needed to resist and to create a life worth living. As for the manifesto-writing and film-making during the conference, these exercises enabled creative thinking about how to circulate knowledge in ways beyond academic texts and presentations, in ways that contest the racialised border infrastructure. This infrastructure excludes, subordinates and immobilises non-whiteness while facilitating mobility and privileges with regard to whiteness. In Sweden, non-whiteness, including the racialisation of Muslims, is often equated with illegality or outsider status. Combating these strong and established narratives with knowledge transfer requires a high degree of creative thinking.

Creativity here is to be understood in a broad sense, both creativities to navigate through a hostile bureaucracy, as a 'trick of the trade', and creativity in terms of methods for knowledge generation and circulation. When submitting this article to the journal after revisions, we experience new dimensions of creative BW, as we try to adopt a stance in favour of the Palestinian cause and provide support for student solidarity initiatives. Considering how universities, in Sweden and other countries, have repressively handled the student movement, BW approaches that diverge significantly from conventional methods, have become even more important. It is a matter of the role of the university in society, and about defending fundamental human rights.

Finally, creativity is needed in order to perform BW that is progressive and forward looking – that is, a work that 'fruitfully articulate academic knowledge with a political vision' (De los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, p. 185). We argue that the notion of BW as a methodological approach for contesting and navigating across and between activism for social rights, and hegemonic institutions where we work, can be further used in the field of socio-legal scholar activism. Socio-legal scholars are experienced when thinking critically about the role and rule of law in society. BW can be understood to put this knowledge in action and to use it in broader struggles for justice.

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