FRONTIERS OF BELONGING
The Education of Unaccompanied Refugee Youth

Lems, Annika. 2022. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Based on seventeen months close-up, immersive ethnographic research with unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Switzerland, conducted between 2015 and 2017 in the cantons of Bern and Zurich, this book looks at what makes up the ordinary of young people struggling to find a way to cope with the conditions of existence imposed by Swiss institutions. More specifically, Lems has taken an active part in the educational options available to them, having notably participated in a pilot integration class project and a radio show, which was part of a state-run educational program. These were special school classes created specifically for unaccompanied minors, with the aim of adapting the curriculum and content to their levels. Annika Lems took part on a daily basis as a teaching assistant. She was particularly involved in the radio program, which gave a voice to young people. By rubbing shoulders in class, in the yards, in the streets, and in the homes, they have come to know and trust each other. She has forged quality, and sometimes intimate, relationships with some of the boys and girls whose stories, fragmentary and so different from each other, are told to us in the six chapters. They come from Guinea, Eritrea, or Somalia, and they're called Thierno, Jamila, Meron, Samuel, Yusuf, Omar, or Abel. A great achievement of this book is that Annika Lems manages to make their voices heard, not only in the form of indirect speech, but also in the form of direct quotes. She acts as a powerful relay of their deep concerns. Listen to Abel's words written on a Post-it: "I am not alive. Maybe dead. I am in heaven. Do I still live on this earth?" (3). Or Jamila: "I just want to be normal, but here I am not." (51) Or Samuel: "I am interested in how the world came to the level it is now." (87) Or Thierno: "they didn't listen to me." (141)

In the general field of migration studies, it is rare to find such a sensitive and tactful book. The pervasiveness of dominant tropes and standardized language often prevents talented researchers from providing detailed, complex, and alternative pictures of what life is like for children and adolescents, not only when they're on the move, but also once they've "arrived," so to say. Annika Lems avoids the trap of conformity. What's more, she beautifully renders the complex existential textures of the lives she has encountered by making us hear and see the young people's own perspectives on their experiences. This is no mean feat, as it is precisely what is lacking in this field. Her meticulous attention to particulars, minor modes of communication, murmurs, and silences, is of immense value: it reveals the way in which exclusionary politics disguised as integration seeps into every nook and cranny of everyday life.

At the heart of her book lies the paradox of asylum policies in Switzerland: young people are ostracized by the very policies designed to integrate them. While, on the one hand, public institutions (especially school) use and promote a humanitarian language of inclusion, deservingness, and hope, in practice these policies have the effect of excluding, segregating, and hindering the young asylum seekers. Annika Lems masterfully demonstrates the detailed mechanisms and moralities that, at every level, produce what she calls "inclusive exclusion." Excluded from what? From going to school with other Swiss and non-Swiss children, from

DOI 10.36950/sjsca.2025.31.11732

sharing the same playground, from studying, from entering the wider job market, from social mobility, from sharing a civic life with others; all this while, at the same time, they are told that they're being integrated precisely by these means. This contradiction, which borders on a form of madness, is further reinforced by more general contradictory injunctions: while to obtain asylum they are expected to overplay their vulnerability as victims (usually by having to prove that they have been tortured and by theatricalizing their suffering), for successful integration they are asked to be exceptionally resilient, strong, and robust. So, in everyday life, these teenagers are expected to learn German in a couple of years (whereas some don't even know the alphabet), catch up on their schooling, and find a job, all the while having to behave well, stay quiet, adopt the local culture, and overcome their traumas. Yet, still having to demonstrate their victim status, they must dramatize their fragility, prove the persecution they have suffered, and display the symptoms of their trauma. Hence, "within these settings it becomes close to impossible for the young people to make the move into mainstream education. If they display too much autonomy, they run the risk of losing their status as vulnerable/deserving child refugees, but if they display too little autonomy, they are deemed not fit for public schooling because of their vulnerability." (25) Annika Lems thus shows the deleterious, alienating, and pathogenic effects of this structural inequality—call it violence—which discreetly imposes itself by making young people believe in a future full of promise, while they are held back and trapped in a system that banishes them. The education system itself then appears as an impassable stumbling block: "From the sixteen people I accompanied," writes Lems, "nobody managed to transition from the separated refugee-only classes to secondary schooling, and only a handful were able to gain access to regular apprenticeship." (22) The vast majority is channeled into the lowest-skilled segment of the job market. Abel once asked: "What is this here, a prison?"

While these are the imposed living conditions from which young asylum seekers cannot escape, they are, of course, not passive. This is one of the great merits of this book: it shows us how each of these young people, in his or her own way, responds to what happens to them, and still finds ways to make sense of it all. Meron, an Eritrean refugee, for example, was not only able to learn German, but he learned it well enough to retain jokes, habitual phrases, and behavior patterns that enabled him to appear more "included" than others. He put an enormous amount of work into it. He thus demonstrated great diligence and adaptability, qualities recognized and valued by the institutions. But also, it allowed him to make us of irony and discreetly be critical of the schooling system. This way, he preserved some kind of dignity while he managed to secure a full, four-year apprenticeship in plastics engineering. Others, like Thierno from Guinea, end up crushed by the anxious wait for an asylum decision, plagued by nagging doubts and the fear of being deported once they reach the age of 18. His dreams, hopes, and aspirations had vanished, making it impossible to look forward to a future in Switzerland. He stagnated, caught in a quagmire from which it seemed impossible to escape. In a state of deep exhaustion, "he had entirely lost trust in himself." (122) He retreated into seclusion, wearing heavy headphones day and night. Feelings of humiliation and disavowal took over as an invisible divide began to emerge between the lucky ones (those who had been granted refugee status) and the unlucky ones (those still waiting). "What can I say?" he asks (132) And yet, the pain that accompanies Thierno's feeling of being undesir-

able did not determine everything; he was able to resist actively and reassess in his own way the worth of his life. While Annika Lems "became heavily involved in Thierno's struggles for a dignified existence," he too became an actor again: he asked for legal advice by building links with refugee law activists and appealed to the Federal Administrative Court against the rejection of his asylum application. He also started a relationship with Binta, a young Fulani woman. "Bit by bit, Thierno managed to gather himself and cautiously recreate a sense of stability and hope." (144) His first child was born in Paris, while he waited for the decision, which soon came: his appeal was rejected and he was summoned to leave the country, which he did. He then went to France to live with Binta and their son.

One can hear through the book that these stories, like so many others, are "riddled with layers of concessions, self-denials, and disappointments." (79) They reveal what it takes to navigate such existential balancing, shifting from active attempts to make the world one's own to abandonment. This book is important because it clarifies what happens when these young people come up against the reality of an asylum system that harms them more than it protects them, notably by drastically reducing educational opportunities and the chances of advancing in their lives. "It shows that the prolonged waiting and hopelessness refugee youth are exposed to in Switzerland can be experienced as a form of violence surpassing the violence and chronic uncertainty that led them to leave their home countries in the first place." (29). That should give us something to think about.

Marco Motta, senior researcher at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Neuchâtel