Refugees enacting (digital) citizenship through placemaking and care practices near and far

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how refugees enact (digital) citizenship through placemaking and care practices, when geographically close or at a distance. It is based on ethnographic research in Vienna, and it uses participant observation, narrative interviews, and digital diaries as key research methods. In this article, I argue that digital infrastructure is crucial for refugees’ care and placemaking practices that in turn shape political subjectivities and hold the creative potential to enact citizenship from below. Through these transnational care and placemaking practices, which are closely connected to new information and communication technologies, refugees navigate care and border regimes and build belonging and citizenry, ultimately enacting citizenship from below. This article thereby brings together discussions from the field of care and migration studies, and in particular from digital migration studies, generating a dialogue around citizenship across these fields.

KEYWORDS
Citizenship; care; digital migration studies; refugees; digital infrastructures; placemaking

When I visited the family of a young Syrian woman, Mariam, who lived on the outskirts of Vienna, I was surprised to find the parents and two of their adult children all communicating by sending messages via the family WhatsApp group while sitting together in their living room, each on their mobile phone. I understood the reason for this practice only when I learned that they did so to involve the other siblings, who were not in Vienna, in their conversation. My research shows how refugees who reach Europe find themselves caring for family elsewhere, including by staying connected, sending remittances, and providing emotional support. The specific practice that I observed in Mariam’s living room, captured in this ethnographic vignette, created several overlapping co-presences, physical and virtual. It moreover shows how relations and belonging for refugees are mediated by digital media and communication technologies that integrate geographically distant family members into everyday routines, so they can, as in the case described here, eventually ‘join’ the family living room in Vienna.

Only in very rare cases are refugee families physically united in Europe, due to strict family reunion regulations; often, family members are scattered across different countries and even continents. This article discusses how, against all the odds, informal care relations are maintained over vast distances and are mediated by various information and communication technologies (ICTs). I explore not only how digital infrastructure
facilitates refugees’ caring connections, locally and transnationally, but also how refugees negotiate citizenship through transnational caring relations and digital infrastructure. The following questions are therefore central: how do refugees’ care and placemaking practices, which are tightly entangled with digital infrastructure, form political subjectivities (Krause and Schramm 2011) and ways of belonging and thus hold the potential to enact citizenship from below (Isin and Nielsen 2008)? These questions are based on an understanding that care is not necessarily always private. Rather, it is also political, and digital infrastructure plays a profound role in refugees’ efforts to enact citizenship from below.

Shifting refugee policies: the case of Austria

In 2015 many Austrians were welcoming towards refugees and spontaneously organized support. In Austria as in Germany this was referred to by the media and activists as a ‘welcome culture’. The Austrian government itself also initially displayed an unusual openness towards asylum seekers. Austria was the fourth largest receiver of asylum seekers in the EU, processing about 90,000 (about one per cent of its population size) of the approximately 1.27 million asylum applications in the EU (Buber-Ennser et al. 2018). The majority of asylum seekers were from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They were distributed to the different municipalities according to a quota system. A significant number of refugees, however, remained in the capital city of Vienna.

Refugee policy quickly shifted from relatively liberal (in 2015) to more restrictive (from 2016 onwards), not least because of a new conservative-right government at that time (see Triandafyllidou 2018). As early as February 2016, Austria imposed a daily quota on asylum claims, accepting no more than eighty asylum applications per day (Rheindorf and Wodak 2018). The policies changed and when asylum was granted, Austria only offered a three-year residence permit and had introduced restrictions on family reunification. Family reunion is granted only for minors and married couples. The Austrian state does not permit adult children, siblings, or grandparents to join the rest of a family who have found refuge in Austria. For families this often means that they have to live apart from one another. Many of my interlocutors had family living in precarious situations, sometimes in war zones, sometimes in states where they had no access to social security. Ultimately, the question of who counts as a dependant and as part of a nuclear family, and thus as legitimate for reunification, is decided by the state authorities. Often, this deviates from the refugees’ families’ understanding of who they perceive as part of their nuclear family and who they wish to live with or close to. This also means for many that because of these border and care regimes (Rygiel 2010; Stevenson 2014; Ticktin 2011; Tronto 1993), care relations need to be maintained over vast geographical distances and over an indefinite period, as was the case for Mariam and her family. Most importantly for the discussion here, refugees often have to maintain intimate relationships with family and friends over geographical distances when separated for unknown lengths of time and in situations where border and care regimes make reunification impossible, in most cases not even for a short period. The refugees with whom I spoke had no guarantee of when they would see their family again, and they did not know if they would ever have the opportunity to live with family members, for example their parents and grandparents or their siblings, in the same place again.
Care amid forced migration

Care, as I understand it here, is both a resource and an affective relation, i.e. it ranges from taking ‘charge of the physical and psychological well-being of others up to feeling concern for others’ well-being’ (Pratesi 2017, 25; see also Palmberger 2019). These two prime aspects have been discussed in the literature as ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ (Grant 2004). ‘Caring for’ refers to specific labour or services provided, while ‘caring about’ refers to the relational and emotional aspects of care. This article focuses primarily on the latter. For refugees, while physical presence and thus ‘caring for’ are not possible or are only possible with the help of others, caring relationships with family but also friends in the sense of ‘caring about’ (in the form of ‘informal care’) remain. All the refugees I spoke to engaged in both informal care work with family and friends who had remained in their home country or who had fled elsewhere and informal care work in their new place of residence, primarily caring for other family members but also for friends and other refugees. In this article, however, I will focus primarily on familial care relations. This said, my interlocutors maintained close friendships across distances, often understanding these as important sources of emotional support. Moreover, many of the refugees I spoke to were active as volunteers in refugee organizations or privately helped other refugees – either those who had arrived in Vienna later or who had fewer resources (e.g. in terms of language). Nevertheless, while these relationships and their maintenance deserve attention in their own right, they take us beyond the scope of this article.

Several studies have shown that migration does not diminish caregiving relationships and practices but rather transforms them (see Ahlin 2017; Hromadžić and Palmberger 2018; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020). Moreover, they reveal how digital infrastructure – especially media and communication technologies – allows migrants to remain in relationships and to create support networks when physical co-presence is not feasible: ‘Whereas previously geographic distance was a significant barrier to taking part in the lives of those who live at a distance, ICTs enable shared social fields to be constructed across vast distances’ (Wilding 2006, 138; see also Palmberger 2022b). To facilitate communication over long distances, ICTs reproduce the social fields in which family members are connected, and they allow them to call each other for support. They have thus become essential tools for families separated due to flight (Wilding 2006, 138). ‘Doing family’ (Madianou 2017) occurs through frequent interactions via phone and video calls, text messages, and social media (see Acedera and Yeoh 2021; Baldassar et al. 2016; Costa and Menin 2016; Madianou 2017; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). While caring relations continue, new relations, responsibilities and expectations are likely to emerge (see also Ahlin 2017; Baldassar et al. 2016; Drothoehm and Alber 2015; Lutz 2010; Palmberger 2016; Palmberger 2018).

Care work across the scales of social life and global developments has a significant bearing on relationships (Buch 2015; see also Lamb 2009). Feminist scholars have shown how negotiating care relations is not only an internal process within families, but also an external one that involves local and state bureaucracies (Graham 1991; Thelen 2015). For refugees this also means that they must negotiate policies that create border and care regimes. These policies concern families whose wish to be reunited remains unfulfilled. All this has a major impact on refugees’ role as ‘care providers’ for their family and friends and thus greatly affects their informal care relations.
The care–digital infrastructure–citizenship triad: theoretical contextualization

Care environments are sites of continuous processes of inclusion and exclusion, where belonging and citizenship are negotiated (Pratesi 2017). Thus, the study of care provides deep insights into questions of rights, responsibilities, and ethics, as addressed in citizenship studies (Held 2006; Power and Hall 2018). Scholarship on ‘care transnationalization’ illuminates structural global power relations, showing how inequality is entangled with care (Aulenbacher, Lutz, and Riegraf 2018). Building on this connection, I am interested in studying not only how digital infrastructure facilitates refugees’ caring connections, locally and transnationally, but also how refugees negotiate citizenship through transnational caring relations and digital infrastructure.

I understand digital infrastructure as a complex socio-technical system that incorporates a ‘functional dimension (access, connectivity, use of technologies) and a performative dimension (engagement with technology for seeing and representing one’s self and others and enacting citizenship digitally)’ (Georgiou 2019, 602). Digital infrastructure is a vital tool for refugees, though it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, digital infrastructure – especially various ICTs – is crucial for refugees’ journeys to safer countries, for orienting themselves in their new country, and for remaining connected to family members in their home country and elsewhere (see Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018; Graf 2018; Kaufmann 2018; Neves and Casimiro 2018; Palmberger 2023; Parreñas 2005; Wilding and Gifford 2013). Yet, on the other hand, digital infrastructure also poses new risks, both for those who flee and for those who stay behind, by leaving digital traces that make refugees vulnerable to surveillance by state and non-state actors. My interlocutors, especially those who fled Syria, stressed the importance of using code words or avoiding political topics related to Syria altogether when communicating with family and friends through different channels (e.g. a WhatsApp call, Facebook etc.). They were afraid that the conversations would be overheard by the regime and that this could endanger those close to them who remained in Syria (see Suerbaum 2020). Furthermore, geographic information systems, global positioning systems, and biometric databases have become key technologies of surveillance and containment for refugees themselves (see Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman et al. 2018; Latonero and Kift 2018; Leurs and Smets 2018; Ponzanesi 2019; Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek 2017). Thus, Nedelcu and Soysüren (2020) describe digital infrastructure in the context of (forced) migration as being at the ‘nexus of empowerment and control’.

How does the care–digital infrastructure nexus relate to present debates on citizenship, especially on citizenship from below? I refer here to ‘citizenship from below’ as an umbrella term for a field of citizenship studies that emphasizes non-citizens’ political subjectivity rather than describing them as passive victims (Rygiel 2010; Shinozaki 2015). Here, the work by Isin and Nielsen on ‘acts of citizenship’ stands out. By understanding citizenship not as a status but as a practice, Isin and Nielsen argue that through acts of citizenship subjects constitute themselves as citizens regardless of their status or legal rights. Citizenship, in their understanding, is thus enacted through struggles for rights; it is not simply a status bestowed on the basis of national identity and territorial belonging. However, acts of citizenship as introduced by Isin and Nielsen (2008) link closely to rights claims that are explicitly articulated or enacted upon through, for example,
protests – but also the internet (Isin and Ruppert 2015). The acts of citizenship (and citizenship from below) discussed more broadly in the ethnographic material here, however, are less explicit and much more subtle. They thus invite a further reconceptualization of ‘acts of citizenship’ to include the everyday, mundane, and ‘private’ as has been suggested in discussions on ‘everyday citizenship’ (Dickinson et al. 2008), ‘lived citizenship’ (Kirsi Pauliina, ElisabethWood, and Häkli 2020) and ‘intimate citizenship’ (Bonjour and de Hart 2021) focusing on people’s experiences and practices in everyday life. I will show how such acts can be found in refugees’ transnational informal caring relations, which are closely linked to digital infrastructure and are tightly entangled with what I refer to as placemaking.

There is a growing body of research on how refugees act online to make claims for data and digital rights and justice. This work has shown how ‘civic activity and agency are increasingly shaped digitally’ (Georgiou 2019, 602). It has also shown how digital infrastructure intersects with modes of citizenship that allow refugees to acquire a voice and self-representation in the form of everyday political activism (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2017; Rae, Holman, and Nethery 2018; Schattle 2008) and communication rights (Leurs 2018). While in these discussions, the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ is a fertile one, there is a limit to it in that the concept as introduced by Isin and Nielsen (2008) focuses almost exclusively on publicly visible acts of citizenship. First attempts to broaden the understanding of ‘acts of citizenship’ have been made, for example in Stavinoha’s work. Stavinoha (2019) has shown how refugees in camps on Greek islands use digital infrastructure to gain voice and visibility and thus engage in claim-making practices, albeit in more subtle ways than those suggested by Isin and Nielsen (2008). The distinguishing feature of this article’s empirical focus is that the practices I examine are rarely communicated publicly. They are not public claim-making practices enacted through digital media (e.g. via Facebook, Twitter and other social media) as are most often discussed in the literature on acts of citizenship and citizenship from below. Thus, when studying the care–digital infrastructure–citizenship triad, my aim is to move the discussion on citizenship from below and particularly that on acts of citizenship a step further.

Here, I build on recent work that has initiated a discussion of acts of citizenship and citizenship from below in private homes, which are analysed not as private but as political spaces (Merikoski 2021, 91). I also draw on feminist work on home, care, and citizenship (Ahmed et al. 2003; Lister 2007; Herd and Harrington 2002) and on everyday practices of citizenship that counter border regimes (Deanna, Grazioli, and Martínez 2019; Stavinoha 2019). Ruth Lister, in her book Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives, argued as early as in the 1990s that the concept of citizenship is strongly gendered (Lister 1997). Furthermore, Lister stressed the importance of viewing citizenship as a process (rather than an outcome) in order to foreground women’s agency. Another body of literature is defined in terms of the ‘autonomy of migration’ approach (Deanna, Grazioli, and Martinez 2019). This approach shifts the focus ‘from migration as a marginal reaction to the centrality of political and economic structures, to conceptualize it as a constituent force that actively defines political and social structures’ (Deanna, Grazioli, and Martinez 2019, 527; see also Çağlar 2016). Here, the border is seen as ‘an analytical lens that uncovers the multifarious fields of tensions, processes of subjectivation and politics unravelling in the act of contesting and crossing borders’ (Deanna, Grazioli, and Martínez 2019, 528). The autonomy of migration approach shifts away from citizenship-
related rights to a focus on ‘strategies and tactics that groups of migrants mobilize in their everyday encounters’ (Deanna, Grazioli, and Martinez 2019, 528) when confronted with border regimes. Tactics of placemaking that are tightly entangled with care practices and digital infrastructure are particularly important for my argument here.

Methodological contextualization

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 in Vienna, Austria, with refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, who at that period represented the three main refugee groups in Vienna.³ My research participants included men and women, the youngest of whom were in their early twenties and the oldest in their sixties. They entered Europe between 2014 and 2018, and they were thus all still settling in Vienna and (re)arranging their lives and those of their dependants who accompanied them. Except for two Afghans, all my interlocutors had been granted legal status as recognized refugees. However, their futures in Austria were still uncertain, especially in regard to employment, but in many cases also in regard to family reunion.

I started my fieldwork in 2019, but it was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. While physical presence was not possible for many months, I kept in contact virtually with several refugees and their families with whom I had established a trustful and friendly relationship. We communicated mainly via WhatsApp messages and exchanged information and photos (like my research participants did with their distant family members, even though our communication was less frequent). Many refugees with whom I was in contact had limited information about the health situation and the related new government regulations, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. I sensed that being in contact with a ‘local’, a person from Vienna such as myself, had a reassuring affect. Moreover, the pandemic – especially the lockdowns and the lack of information – reminded some of my interlocutors of war experiences or of situations they experienced during their flight. Due to the pandemic, I continued the fieldwork until the end of 2021, and I took the opportunity to meet up with research participants when measures against the spread of the pandemic and the contact restrictions were loosened.

This research takes a digital ethnographic approach that is ‘non-digital-media-centric’ in its outlook (Pink et al. 20162016). I draw on digital diaries (Palmberger 2021; Palmberger 2023), participant observation (O’Reilly 2005), and semi-structured narrative interviews (Elliott 2005). The interviews lasted between one and two hours and took place in interviewees’ homes or at a quiet meeting room at my department. The interviews were conducted either in English, German, or Arabic. For interviews in Arabic, I received support from research assistants who also acted as interpreters. While I was worried at first that the presence of another person may be disruptive, the presence of research assistants who themselves had a refugee experience contributed to a trustful research environment and to a pleasant interview setting. All interviews were fully transcribed and those in Arabic were entirely translated into English.

Besides the formal and recorded interviews, participant observation – when spending time together with research participants – facilitated numerous informal conversations and observations. When I was invited to their homes, I was able to meet and speak to
family members. Conversely, I also invited several of my interviewees and their families to my home, while reflecting on the power hierarchies inherent in our different situations.

Digital diaries, a method I specifically designed for this research (Palmberger 2021), were also used. I asked only those interlocutors whom I had known for a longer period and with whom I had already conducted an in-depth interview to complete digital diaries. Through these interviews, I had already developed a good understanding of my interviewees’ life situation, more specifically of their care relations and how these were entangled in the digital infrastructure. This also means that a trusting relationship had been built up before I asked about their interest in and willingness to create a digital diary (since this task was relatively time consuming). More specifically, this entailed them observing their media and care practices with friends and family over a one-week period and keeping these observations as diary entries on their smartphones. They were free to record them as written entries, voice recordings, or visually, including e.g. screenshots, text excerpts, photos, or small maps of the care relations. The majority opted to capture their digitally mediated care practices with screenshots, mainly from WhatsApp communication and social media. Diaries were shared with me when we scheduled a separate meeting to reflect on them. This reflection process was crucial and turned out to be illuminating not only for me but often also for the diary author. In many cases this was the first time they had reflected on the specificities of their communication with individual family members and on the different communication media they used for upholding particular care relations. The role of images and photos that were shared was also reflected upon in this setting. Moreover, digital diaries prompted new themes that had not come up before in informal conversations or interviews, and these themes provided additional insights into life contexts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

‘I would be nothing without my smartphone’: placemaking between the embodied and the digital

A Syrian woman who fled to Austria with her three children while her husband remained in Dubai told me in an interview half-jokingly, ‘I would be nothing without my smartphone. Even with it I am lost, without it, it would be a true catastrophe’. Witteborn has stressed that in the context of displacement, smartphones become ‘tools for overcoming information precarity and for mastering challenging tasks, such as orienting in a physical place’ (Witteborn 2021, 4). This was certainly true for many of the refugees I talked to, who all acknowledged the importance of digital infrastructure in finding their way around the new city, literally and metaphorically. But digital infrastructure allowed for more than that; it was also skilfully used for placemaking practices. Such practices include transnational caring relations that create shared transnational spaces and ways of belonging, as I will elaborate in Yezan’s case.

Yezan fled Syria together with his uncle and one of his cousins in 2015 at the age of twenty-two to escape military service. He first stayed in Turkey for a couple of years, where he worked hard for very low pay. Seeing no future for himself there, he continued his journey to join his siblings who had already left Syria and settled in Germany and Sweden. The man he paid to bring him to Germany by car, at some point stopped driving and told him to get off. Yezan left the car without knowing where he was, standing at the side of the
road when an older woman approached him. The woman seemed sympathetic and trustworthy, and so Yezan asked her where in Europe he was. She told him to just wait a little while and she disappeared. She did not return, but in the meantime she had called the police who came and took Yezan into custody. In custody, he still did not know where he was. Finally, he learned from an official that he was in Austria and Yezan told me:

The first thing I did was to look up Austria on Google Maps. I wanted to see a map. The second thing I did was to search on Wikipedia and there I found a lot of information about Austria and the language there, how many inhabitants the country has, information about the education system and so on.4

With his smartphone Yezan was able to ‘place’ himself in the truest sense of the word. Also, after locating himself in Austria, placemaking for Yezan, near and far, continued to rely on digital infrastructure and applications such as Google Maps, Google Translate, instant messaging platforms and various social media platforms. Digital infrastructure was crucial for Yezan when orienting himself in his new environment, especially when he was accommodated in Austria’s largest refugee camp in Traiskirchen near Vienna. Although his family pressed him to leave the camp and to follow his siblings, Yezan knew that this was no longer possible because he was already registered as an asylum seeker in Austria. He realized that he would have to sort out this situation and in aiming to make the best of it, digital infrastructure was essential here. He used his smartphone and the various social media platforms to expand his radius of action and his power to act. During the time when he was physically confined to the refugee camp, he was able to connect with volunteers who provided support and practical advice on how to best deal with bureaucratic hurdles and other pressing issues. In this way, Yezan was able to build up support structures that the refugee camp did not provide, and thus he was able to slowly disentangle himself from the camp and gain more political subjectivity. Digital infrastructure also allowed Yezan to study German on various YouTube channels, to translate pieces of information in German that he could not otherwise understand (including about his legal status, rights, and duties), and to search for practical information that would allow him to eventually leave the refugee camp and to settle in Vienna.

While digital infrastructure was certainly crucial for Yezan to orient himself geographically at the time of his arrival, Yezan’s placemaking practices were not place-bound and can be rather understood as relational. Accordingly, placemaking is understood here as a relational practice enacted in virtual and physical proximity. Witteborn discusses refugees’ placemaking at the intersections between embodied and digital placemaking practices by focusing primarily on the digital data practices of state and supra-state actors. In my research I also explore placemaking between the embodied and the digital – especially regarding transnational caring relations – but from the refugees’ perspective. Nevertheless, I find Witteborn’s definition of digital placemaking very useful as a physical, social, and symbolic location that encompasses various forms of locating and positioning oneself, including within transnational networks and relations as in the case of refugees’ informal care relations (Witteborn 2021, 3). Here too, I see the digital and the embodied where they intersect. Now, I will discuss different forms of placemaking that are grounded in daily practices (Lems 2016) present in forced migrations, which are closely interwoven with digital infrastructure and transnational relations of care.
These placemaking and care practices build forms of belonging and citizenship in subtle ways. They highlight the importance of including the everyday and the mundane in debates on citizenship, particularly in discussions of citizenship from below.

**Transnational caring relations mediated by digital infrastructure**

Returning to Yezan, three years after his arrival in Vienna, he was able to enrol at university. He had already been a student in Syria and experienced the regaining of a student status, this time in Vienna, as liberating. He described this to me as a transition from the restrictive category of ‘refugee’, which he had experienced for years, to his new identity as a student. This said, Yezan – like the majority of my interlocutors – never fully identified with the category ‘refugee’, and he experienced it as imposed on him from the outside (see Cabot and Ramsey 2021). When he received a student scholarship and found a side job and a place in a student dormitory, he finally felt he could escape the ascribed refugee label, and the city gained a new quality for him. Yezan, a very determined young man, promised himself that he would work hard, build a life for himself in Vienna, and eventually seek Austrian legal citizenship. Like other students, digital infrastructure remained important to him during his studies, and it also remained vital for maintaining informal caring relationships with family despite the distance and the many years without a physical co-presence. Digital infrastructure thus was not only important for Yezan to orient himself in the new environment – it was also crucial for staying in touch and maintaining emotional bonds and ‘creating an affective place of emotional safety’ (Witteborn 2021, 4) in the form of caring relationships with friends and family members who had stayed in Syria or fled elsewhere.

When family members are geographically divided over unforeseeably long periods of time – digital infrastructure is crucial in establishing what Diminescu (2008) refers to as ‘connected presence’. Establishing a co-presence formed the basis for transnational informal care relations within a family, and it was most often achieved via permanent accessibility through various media and communication technologies (see Kaufmann 2018). Communication media were carefully chosen for certain means of communication and for the different relationships that were maintained, as captured in the idea of polymedia introduced by Madianou and Miller (2013). Different means of communication, e.g. text messaging, voice messages, and video calls, seemed appropriate for certain matters while for others they were not. The addressee’s preferences were also taken into account, including their level of literacy. In cases of weak literacy, for example, audio messages were preferred over text messages. This was also the favoured mode of communication between Yezan and his grandmother.

The digital diaries demonstrated that WhatsApp was the most popular application for communication between individuals, but also for groups of friends and for family. WhatsApp groups turned out to be the most important; most often these included a nuclear family group (parents and children) and an extended family group (parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins) as well as one or several with friends. Visual features sent by text, especially photos and emojis, were crucial as they included an emotional dimension and helped to prevent misunderstandings. A family WhatsApp group was also the main means of communication between Yezan, his parents, and his three siblings. It was used daily to keep in touch, to hear how others were doing, and to share practical advice and emotional support. When looking through Yezan’s digital
diary together, he showed me several screenshots from his very active family WhatsApp group. Once again, not only emojis but also photos and other images were important means of communication. The screenshots included a good morning greeting from his mother (see Figure 1). Above the WhatsApp communication there was a picture of a large bouquet of red roses and a woman’s hand picking one of the roses (as if she wanted to hand them to someone). Below the picture there were good morning greetings from the mother and her children as well as emojis of red hearts and flowers. This is how a typical day for Yezan begins.

Since 2015, Yezan’s mother has sent a greeting with a selected flower picture every morning to her four children who live in different countries, to which all the children then replied each day. This way, the parents in Syria and their children know that everyone is doing well. But this daily practice means more than simply checking up on each other: it is also a placemaking practice, an act of establishing co-presence across geographical distances in order to maintain the basis for informal caring relationships. It is not just a simple ‘good morning’ but rather the careful selection of a flower picture, a new one each day, that expresses emotional connection and care. Refugees in Vienna seek out different forms of remaining connected and of being present despite distance. This creates emotional ties and spaces that transcend national borders. These practices of placemaking were tightly entangled with care practices and digital infrastructure. These practices can be discussed as acts of citizenship. Acts that are not necessarily publicly expressed or visible but that make claims of transnational belonging and citizenship by undermining border and care regimes (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006).

**Defying border and care regimes: seeking ways to maintain care relations**

Digital infrastructure gains a particular momentum when family events, such as the birth of a grandchild, a wedding, or the funeral of a close family member, cannot be shared. It is at these special events – when family and friends come together to celebrate or mourn – that the impermeability of geographical boundaries becomes particularly poignant. Again, digital infrastructure remains central, and my interviewees told me of weddings of close family members and friends, which they had attended via video call or were following closely through other channels. Sara, a twenty-four-year old woman showed me a screenshot from a WhatsApp communication that shows one such communication during a Syrian wedding. It was filled with short messages and numerous emojis. During the wedding, Sara received constant updates from friends and family via WhatsApp chats. In this way she took part in this wedding while being physically present in Vienna.

Another of my interviewees, Esma, could only attend her father’s funeral in Syria via a WhatsApp call. Esma said that it was not easy to convince her family in Syria that this would be a good idea, but it was important for her because her refugee status did not allow her to return to Syria, and she wanted to be present, if not physically, then at least via video call. Esma also told me how important it is to her to maintain a close relationship with her daughter who lives in Syria with her husband and their two children, the eldest of whom Esma had only seen as a newborn while the youngest she has not had the chance to meet in person. They would write to each other each morning and tell each other about their plans for the day. During the day they often did video calls, so that the grandmother in Vienna could interact and play with her grandchildren in Syria. In the evening Esma and her
daughter would then talk on the phone, often for a couple of hours. They told each other about their day and talked about issues such as child-rearing, with Esma providing as much advice as she could. Besides her daughter in Syria, Esma has three other grown-up children. Her other daughter and one son live in Vienna, while the second son lives in Dubai. During the global pandemic and after he lost his job, they hoped that he could join them in Vienna, but the plan did not work out. Esma’s example is only one of many examples of refugee strategies for navigating care and border regimes through digital infrastructure, while hoping that her family would be able to reunite one day.

The ethnographic cases presented show that in the context of forced migration, placemaking is linked to various geographical localities and digital technologies that mediate between these places. These practices and tactics, which weave together different places and homes in order to transcend borders and unite families in every possible way, can be understood as acts of citizenship in the sense of citizenship from below. In her research with irregular migrants from the Philippines working in private homes in Germany, Shinozaki introduced the term ‘migrant citizenship from below’. In her conceptualization of this, Shinozaki highlighted the transnational dimension of migrants’ citizenship and showed how migrants’ lives and belongings span different locations and multiple nation states (Shinozaki 2015, 23). In line with Shinozaki, I understand political activity and struggles for citizenship not in a narrow sense, but rather in terms of how migrants ‘live out and negotiate locally and transnationally embedded everyday lives’ (Shinozaki 2015, 34). Family reunion was not possible for many of my interlocutors, such as for Yezan who could not follow his siblings, nor could he bring his parents to Austria because he was no longer a minor. It was also not possible for Esma who came to Vienna only with two of her four adult children and had to leave her parents behind too. Thus, caring for children, parents, and siblings elsewhere defined my research participants’ everyday life and constituted transnational placemaking and claims of belonging.

In 2019, during a visit to the home of one of my research participants, Adil, and his family, I learned from Adil that his Syrian hometown was under bombardment at the time. His brother was hit by a bomb and died. Afterwards, only one other brother remained in his hometown and took care of their parents. While Adil was not able to take care of them himself, he did try to give them moral support as best he could. During this visit, he played me a WhatsApp voice message from his mother in which she asked how he was and expressed her blessing for more than a minute. His mother was worried about the well-being of her son, who was so far away, and so she sent him voice messages on an almost daily basis, which he always answered. Every other day they chatted on the phone to hear how they were getting on and to reassure each other. Later, after we had had breakfast together, Adil’s wife, Sumaya, sat down next to me and showed me eyewitness videos from war atrocities she had learned about that had taken place in the area where she used to live. She also told me of close friends of hers whose children died during bomb attacks. While she was telling me this, Sumaya started crying. Through these videos that Sumaya had found online, the war in Syria had become very present in the living room where Adil, Sumaya, their three children, and I spent the day together. When I left in the afternoon, they gave me the handmade falafel we had prepared together (Adil and Sumaya’s attempt to teach me how to make falafel) and Sumaya also gave me a little pink box of sweets. On the box it said in Arabic, ‘It’s a girl’. Sumaya told me that her sister had wished for a child for a long time, and she had finally become pregnant. The sister asked Sumaya to distribute the
sweets, as this was a local tradition. I found it quite remarkable that this tradition of Sumaya welcoming a new (as yet unborn) family member was now also shared across borders. In this case, Sumaya had bought the candy box for her sister in a shop in Vienna and then given it to her acquaintances in Vienna. Although Sumaya had almost daily exchanges with her sister in Syria via digital media, the transnational caring relationship in this case – in the form of pink gift boxes – was manifest materially, bringing the physical presence of the absentee somewhat closer.

Here we can see that placemaking linked to transnational care employs embodied and digital placemaking practices. Through digital infrastructure, multiple co-presences are established that span different geographical locales and co-exist at varying physical and virtual proximities. While digital infrastructure is crucial for retaining close care relations, sharing both daily concerns and bigger life events (such as the birth of a child), transnational bonds and ways of belonging may also become manifest in materialized forms. Despite border regimes, Sumaya and her sister found ways to create shared transnational spaces, to support each other, and to remain part of each others’ everyday life and finally to keep up rituals for special life events. By no means do I wish to romanticize refugees’ transnational caring relations or to downplay the strains and pain they face in their efforts to maintain close kin relationships in the face of large geographical distances and border regimes. Refugees gain political subjectivity through their care and placemaking strategies. This is opposed to assuming a role as passive victims, which is how they are often presented in humanitarian discourses. Ultimately, refugees’ care and placemaking practices across borders can be understood as resistance to the denial of family reunion, and as an attempt to defy border and care regimes.

**Conclusion: broadening the understanding of ‘acts of citizenship’**

Amid forced migration and refugee experiences, placemaking is linked to various geographical localities and digital technologies that mediate between these places. The ethnographic examples discussed in this article show that digital infrastructure is essential for refugees in order to stay connected with family who remain in the country of origin or who have fled to other places, but also for navigating unfamiliar territory and more generally for orienting oneself in a new society. For refugees who have recently settled in Austria, placemaking is closely connected to the presence of the people they care for, who are often geographically far away. Transnational informal care relationships play an important part in refugees’ placemaking tactics. Placemaking linked to transnational care employs embodied and digital placemaking practices and includes specific places (see Palmberger 2022a) and transnational and virtual spaces. The examples discussed in this article show how placemaking and care tactics are characterized by the interweaving of online and offline spaces that connect different geographical locations.

The Syrian family in Vienna who communicated with each other in their living room via WhatsApp to involve other family members who were physically far away in their family communication is but one example. In this and the other cases, several – physical and virtual – overlapping co-presences ensured that distant family members could be integrated to join discussions, events, and decision-making processes and to eventually ‘join’ the family living room in Vienna. This overlapping is grounded in the understanding that
physical and virtual spaces are not demarcated and set off from each other. In fact, in everyday life these mobile online and offline spaces are deeply interwoven in manifold ways (Kaufmann and Palmberger 2022). This research therefore moves away from the concept of bifocality, which has concentrated primarily on the communication between the country of origin and the ‘host’ country. Diminescu describes this new focus as ‘neither here nor there but here and there at the same time’ (Diminescu 2008, 578). In response, Rigoni and Saitta state, ‘The idea of “not here, not there, but here and there at the same time” can be used to describe those who belong to – or who feel an affinity with – several geographical and social spaces rather than being situated “in-between”’ (Rigoni and Saitta 2012, 6). These social spaces are created by transnational placemaking and care practices that shape refugees’ political subject formation.

I have suggested that digital infrastructure is an important site for studying ‘citizenship from below’. Digital infrastructure is crucial for refugees’ placemaking and care practices that in turn shape political subjectivities and hold the creative potential to enact citizenship from below. By paying attention to placemaking and care, the concept of acts of citizenship here focuses on everyday forms of resistance and understands refugees as political actors (Stavinoha 2019). In exercising citizenship from below, refugees become political subjects and challenge traditional notions of citizenship tied to national or territorial belonging. This occurs even though the practices described in this article are not explicit claims to rights and citizenship as a legal category. However, they are still acts of citizenship that, while not always explicit and outspoken, resist and subvert borders and can be seen as subtle attempts to undermine border and care regimes. Rygiel has argued that acts of resistance can be interpreted as acts of citizenship and that ‘even in the most desperate of moments, resistance is possible’ (Rygiel 2010, 196). In this vein, Rygiel opens up a discussion into broadening our understanding of political activity. The refugees I have worked with have claimed their right to family life by defying care and border regulations, thus demonstrating political activity and strategies of resistance, however subtle they may be.

Ultimately, connecting care to debates on citizenship, particularly to questions of citizenship from below, is particularly rewarding because it widens the focus of such debates and questions the public–private division that often characterizes debates on citizenship (Lister 2007; Lonergan 2018). As explained at the beginning of the article, care is not seen as solely private, and so refugees’ informal caring and kinship practices are understood as agentive and political, constituting acts of citizenship. These acts of citizenship are closely connected with refugees’ struggles and everyday strategies to navigate care and border regimes. The examples discussed show how refugees have integrated digital media and communication technologies – with their possibilities and limitations – into their ongoing informal care relations and means of emotional support. They show how placemaking and care practices, while greatly affected by the use of ICTs, counteract the care and border regimes by maintaining care relationships and attempts at family reunification. Thus, refugees not only navigate care and border regimes but also build forms of belonging and citizenry.
Notes

1. I use the term ‘refugee’ not in a legal sense but as a category based on the experience of forced migration, thus including asylum seekers, those granted asylum who have the legal status of refugees, and those granted subsidiary protection (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014).
2. https://www.asyl.at/de/themen/familienzusammenfuehrung/
3. This study is based on a research project entitled REFUGEeICT: Multi-local Care and the Use of Information and Communication Technologies among Refugees, which has been funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF V681 (2018–2022). This study has investigated the internet alongside the mobile phone and how these new communication technologies are adopted for continued informal care relations and emotional support across distances, but also to meet one’s care responsibilities in the new country of residence. This includes volunteer work and solidarity arrangements among refugees.
4. This is a transcript of the original interview with Yezan, which was held in English.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all the people who shared their time and stories with me. I am also grateful for the valuable support of my research assistants. Moreover, I wish to thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF V681) for their generous financial support. I also wish to thank the University of Vienna who hosted this research project and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna for their support. Lastly, I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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