

## **Stories too big for a case file:**

### **Unaccompanied young people confront the hostile environment in pandemic times**

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It is never easy nor comfortable to turn rich and textured research conversations about people's lives into a brief article or a short film. In putting together our contribution for this special issue, we asked ourselves: What imagery best evokes the violence unaccompanied children and young people<sup>2</sup> feel when asked, or made, to tell their story over and over – to the Home Office, solicitors, social workers, and more, as well as the violence of not being asked nor being heard? How can we show both strength and struggle in difficult times (a global pandemic) and often uncaring places (the UK's hostile migration regime)? In what follows we discuss our ethical, political, and intellectual responses to these questions in relation to the film this text accompanies: *Stories too big for a case file*.

#### **Stories**

Our film begins with multiple overlapping voices. In this soundscape, single words or phrases emerge, their meaning fleetingly coming into view and then fading into the clamour. 'Overspeaking' is what this layering of voices is labelled in the written transcripts of our research interviews. This happens a lot as we learn to wait out the time delays, static and even disconnections of online communication. These are symptomatic of having to shift our participatory research online because of the COVID pandemic. But this 'overspeaking', which we transpose from research to film, is not simply mistakes that happen because of inadequate wifi, old phones, or limited data plans which unaccompanied young people have to contend with, including while in the 'care' of the state.

In this mix of voices, overlaid on introductory text which deconstructs in the crackling of static like a bad videocall connection, a feeling of pressure and multitude is evoked and experienced, rather than simply told. The sounds and imagery are suggestive of the collective stories and common problems unaccompanied young people face in the UK's hostile environment in pandemic times. They convey what it is like for so many young people to navigate 'the system', a tangled web of legal, social, and political institutions, rules and individuals who are meant to care, but often do not feel like they do (Rosen et al., 2021; Crafter et al., 2021).

Our film speaks to the substance of our research with unaccompanied young people and how we are collectively analysing the conditions of their lives. 'We' are the co-authors of this text and the co-creators of the film it accompanies, alongside artist/filmmaker Louis Brown. For almost two years, we have been working together as Young Researchers with migration experiences and university-based researchers on the Children Caring on the Move (CCOM) project.<sup>3</sup> We are investigating the

experiences of children and young people who have come to England without parents or carers. We are particularly interested in unaccompanied young people's experiences of care: what care means to them, who cares – including young people themselves, and how the hostile environment shapes care.

### **Stories too big for a case file**

In our film, individual voices emerge from the cacophony. They show that everyone is unique despite facing similar challenges: 'Because I can't walk in your shoes, remember?' is how one of the Young Researchers puts it in a zoom interview with a participant one day. The individual voices speak back to the violence that unaccompanied young people feel when they are reduced to a case file in the hands of the Home Office or social services, especially when such files are riddled with mistakes and suspicions. As one participant insists in the film, 15 minutes for the Home Office to read a case file is not enough: 'That's your life in there.'

The surfacing of unique voices in the film reflects our effort to hear what unaccompanied young people want to say about themselves and their experiences, and to depict this in our film. Our mantra since the start has been 'this is not a Home Office interview', in reference to young people's experience of facing disbelieving questioning and their limited rights to set the pace, flow, or content of asylum interviews. We hope, and like to think, that conversations with our research team help to punctuate the moments of prolonged and anxious waitness (Rosen, 2021) that participants speak about so eloquently in the film. Building on the participatory model of research we have been developing together,<sup>4</sup> this text and film represent our collective efforts to 'listen with respect' (see discussion about the sociability and solidarity across difference that is implied here in Rosen, forthcoming 2022) to each other and the participants we work with.

We began the process of making our film by discussing: What creative form do we want to use? What stories are we hearing and what stories do we want to tell? Who do we want to speak to? We agreed that a film would be a compelling way to reach a wide-ranging audience. For us, film can offer textured understandings and affective engagements with how hard 'the system' is, depicting its impact on the most banal moments as much as life changing events. As Young Researchers and university-based researchers, we reflected on the themes we had been hearing about in our joint interviews with unaccompanied young people: indeterminate periods of waiting, having identities stolen or demeaned, being subject to control and surveillance, precarity, and a desire to care and be cared for regardless of age or status. We spoke about the ways that the UK's exclusionary immigration regime (Rosen et al., 2021) limits or denies legal routes to entry for young people on the move, restricts social support and subjects them to a climate of suspicion and nativist racism (Rosen and Crafter, 2018).

At the same time, we wanted the film to speak to young people's efforts to confront the hostile environment's destructive effects, which have been exacerbated by a global pandemic. The film conveys the everyday ways unaccompanied young people refuse to be ground down, mistreated and dehumanised: through exercise, study, affirmations, prayer, helping others, and making new families with friends. As one of the participants says in the film, it is also about continuing to 'fight', often for years, for the right to asylum and to prove the basic fact that 'this is me'.

Following our early discussions, the university-based researchers in our team combed through our interview transcripts searching for quotes from young people. We looked for those that had been specifically mentioned in our group discussions, as well as others which spoke to the themes we had identified. Each Young Researcher then chose a selection of participants' quotes they wanted to 're-voice'. In some cases, Young Researcher chose quotes from interviews they had conducted and felt intimately connected to; in others, they chose quotes that spoke to their own experiences.

Social distancing rules meant we were unable to be physically together to record and produce the material. As we continued discussing the film, we realised that need not be a barrier. Instead, we sought to make experiences of the pandemic and research in the time of the pandemic visible and audible. We agreed the team would record still and moving images on our smart phones, just as our communication with our team, participants, and others in our lives had become framed by rectangular screens and the vagaries of digital connectivity.

Heeding Tuck and Yang's (2014) critique of pain and suffering narratives, familiar in depictions of individual children gazing mournfully up at the camera (Ruddick, 2003) or alone in hardship or even horrifying deaths, like that of the Syrian-Kurdish toddler Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach, our cameras turn the other way. We seek to avoid tropes which reduce unaccompanied young people to 'vulnerable victims' and tragedy (Duffy-Syedi and Haleem Najibi, forthcoming). Instead, our gaze focuses on the places which young people spend their time, the structures that entrap and harm, as well as spaces of strength, care, hope and solidarity. Our smart phones recreate the bedrooms, streets, and parks young people have spoken to us from, as well as the imagery they have narrativized in their interviews. The gaze of the cameras focuses on what unaccompanied young people might see, an effort at situating them as protagonists of the film at the same time as recognising that we have become a part of their stories through our research encounters and film production.

The unique voices which emerge from the cacophony are words spoken, and lives narrated, during our research. Interview transcripts can be troubling, a flattening of complex lives, difficult to understand as they are devoid of context, tone, and interaction. Just as we have learned that the moments that are marked in the cold language of transcription as 'inaudible' or 'cuts off' do not have to be brutal end points for our online dialogues, we have found that the medium of the film allows us to breathe new life into truncated words and phrases on paper. No person is ever just one sentence or a single story,<sup>5</sup>

an insight we seek to capture in the film through young people's re-voiced words in combination with dynamic, fractured, and overlapping images. The complex layering of voicing, listening, and re-voicing; scenes witnessed, imagery regenerated, and images made; and multiple interpretative layers are an effort to convey the textured and relational lives that people lead. We do this to assert that people's stories are always *too big for a case file* and to speak back to the ways that labels of 'migrant', 'asylum-seeker', 'unaccompanied minor', and 'child' mask people's complexity and richness.

Throughout this process, the artist/filmmaker Louis Brown, from East London Cable,<sup>6</sup> has been pivotal in helping us develop our rough ideas and analytic vision, and turning our lo-fi visuals and recorded testimonies, into a powerful visual and auditory response.

### **Unaccompanied young people confront the hostile environment in pandemic times**

We see our film as part of our larger commitment to critical, change-oriented research. It speaks to the public, as well as the Home Office, social workers, and solicitors. The voices and imagery which set out the complexities of unaccompanied lives invites efforts to understand how young people feel and what they think by asking the viewer to walk alongside unaccompanied young people. Our hope is that the film will reach a broader audience than text alone. More, we hope that the film's provocative visual, auditory, and emotive languages will serve as a catalyst for dialogue, urging representatives of 'the system' to analyse the injustices of their approach and to change how they treat unaccompanied young people.

Our film also speaks to other unaccompanied young people. We hope that they recognise their experiences in this film. We hope that the cinematic form, layered imagery, and complex soundscape helps the film speak across differences of language, immigration status and age. Perhaps most importantly of all, we hope that when they see this film, they know that we are not just doing this research for ourselves but for others too. We do it because we care about them, and we want them to know they are not alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Each author has chosen their preferred way of being named. We agree on the importance of crediting every team member as a matter of respect, equity, and decolonising social inquiry (Bejarano et al, 2019). We have ongoing discussions about balancing these principles with the potential risks of exposure, especially for people with insecure immigration status and in the care of the state. Research participants have self-chosen pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘unaccompanied young people’ broadly and colloquially, in reference to those who may have been separated from parents/primary carers at some point on migration journeys. When used in policy contexts, ‘unaccompanied’ refers to migrating without adult relatives; however, many young people maintain transnational relationships or reunite with parents/primary carers and are often accompanied by other kin and non-kin adults and children. While the majority of our participants have applied for asylum, not all unaccompanied young people do so. We recognise that many of these young people may be age contested or not view themselves as ‘children’ from a social standpoint, while recognising the importance of legal recognition for being under 18-years-old.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ccomstudy.com/>

<sup>4</sup> We trialled different approaches to data generation and, together, we selected, refined, and practiced our methods. These draw on material cultures research, as well as photo and video elicitation. Our aim with these methods is to stimulate research conversations and add material texture to interview talk, especially about topics that are time and space sensitive (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010) or difficult to introduce verbally (Croghan et al., 2008), in ways which allow participants to determine what to share and how (Kenten, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

<sup>6</sup> <http://elc.vision/>