

**The Ambivalence of Belonging: The Impact of Illegality on the Social Belonging of Undocumented Youth**

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**Abstract**

How do undocumented young people establish a sense of belonging when they are afraid to disclose their migratory status? And when they could be separated from the persons they care for? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Canada, this article explores how illegality shapes youth's belonging. It argues that the experiences of undocumented youth, as well as the attitudes of the state towards them, must be understood as forms of structural ambivalence. On the one hand, I show how marginality is reproduced not only through explicit policies of exclusion (e.g. deportation, surveillance or immigration documents), but also through "institutional invisibility:" laws and practices that are often silent and opaque, rendering people non-existent. On the other, I analyze how youth negotiate such discourses of invisibility by forming a revocable sense of belonging. I suggest that ambivalence is not only produced by the social exclusion of young people. It is also a form of agency which enables youth to endure the risk of deportation, and to detach themselves from the disempowering conditions they are caught in.

**Keywords:** migration; illegality; undocumented; youth; children; belonging; agency; Canada

Every night, over the years that she had been without legal status, Elizabeth<sup>1</sup> had a recurring nightmare. “In my dreams, I always *ran, ran, ran* from Immigration. I was naked, cold, and vulnerable,” she recounted to me during one of our conversations. As she ran through the streets, she heard Immigration officers shooting at her back - their dogs barking in the distance. Elizabeth frantically tried to hide in the bushes and in the woods. Yet, night after night, officers found and arrested her.

Elizabeth spent several years of her life continuously on the run, escaping from her home country when she was a child, and then living without legal status in the United States and Canada. Her vivid and frightening nightmares may resonate with what many anthropologists have defined as “embodied, experiential consequences of being illegal” (Willen 2007, 10). Drawing on the different readings of the notion of biopolitics by Foucault (2003) and Agamben (1998), scholars have demonstrated how illegality becomes an experience of “abject life:” a life stripped of rights, a life cast out from the political community (see, for instance, Ticktin 2011). In this article, I take a different and complementary route, exploring the dimension of illegality through two lenses. Firstly, while much literature focuses on adults, less attention has been given to the perspectives of young people, who are placed in a unique position in relation to illegality and membership (Abu El-Haj 2007). As I will explain later, young people’s social status as minors makes their citizenship and illegality different to that of adults, and further complicates the notion of abjectivity. Minors have been historically considered as both “semi-citizens” dependent on their parents, and as vulnerable subjects in need of protection (Bhabha 2004). This complex social position of dependency and vulnerability

mark youth's illegality with experiences of exclusion, but also with partial access to social services and practices of home-making (Allerton 2017).

Secondly, rather than merely focusing on the detrimental consequences of illegality, I interrogate its impact on social belonging, using the analytical lens of structural ambivalence to shed light on a more ambiguous array of experiences. My focus is on horizontal forms of (mis)recognition which do not strictly rely on migratory status and vertical structures of power but, most importantly, on affects and social relationships. While many scholars have highlighted how migrants are transformed into agency-less and depoliticized subjects produced by sovereign power (Yarris and Castañeda 2015, Fassin 2001), I instead turn the attention to experiences of both membership and exclusion which are imbued with ambivalent ways of being. I am interested in practices and failures of recognition which are intrinsic to social relationships, and which are *acted* rather than unilaterally imposed. I ask, for instance: how do youth navigate their everyday social relationships when they have to hide themselves and their legal status – in other words, when they have to conceal a significant part of their daily struggle? How do they begin to relate to their social environment when they might be separated from their friends at any moment? Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted with youth<sup>2</sup> living in Montreal without legal status, I examine how young subjects come to occupy and negotiate a paradoxical space: while policies deny their existence, young people *ambivalently* create, within national boundaries, the very forms of sociality that are jeopardized by their lack of status.

If we analyze Elizabeth's artwork – the beautiful photographs in which she reinterpreted her nightmares – we may better understand such paradoxes. In these images,

Elizabeth transferred her experience to the body of a close friend, someone she was deeply attached to, and from whom she could be separated at any time. In some pictures, her friend is naked – bent down with his arms over his head as if to protect himself. The vulnerability of his nude body is exposed in rundown urban places: a railway station, an abandoned building, a broken window. Yet, in other images, the young man is standing firmly, or he is opening his arms to embrace wide natural spaces – the sea, a wheat field.

Elizabeth's photographs, a refraction of her own nightmares, represent her condition of illegality not only as an abject and individual experience, but also as embedded within ties that are established amidst, and beyond, spaces of non-existence. While the friendships she built "here" were constantly threatened by a latent *vulnerability* (abandoned urban corners, where friends might be separated), they also promised openings of *potentiality* (a sea, a wheat field, where new possibilities of life still exist). As with many of the youth I met, Elizabeth's relationships were caught in a double bind, vacillating between intense constraints (*vulnerability*) and desires (*potentiality*) that negated one another, posing a dilemma, and preventing any possible resolution (Bateson et al. 1963).<sup>3</sup>

This article ethnographically explores how such double binds are central to the subjectivities of young people without legal status – how they are generated, and how they are negotiated. Closely following the narratives of five young persons, I show how conflicting experiences produce moments of structural ambivalence, frictions of enduring uncertainty and contradiction – ways of longing and belonging, being and not being. In this article, I conceive of social belonging as an intersubjective process related to the co-existence and tensions of three spheres: the state that denies these youth membership and

therefore access to its services and territory; family networks based on transnational ties and solidarity; and the networks of peers with whom these youth establish friendships. In examining these different layers, I ask: how do youth, in the midst of illegality, establish affective relationships across conflicting spaces? And what happens if the conditions for their belonging are ill-fitting? What if they cannot be anchored completely, but only ambivalently?

In what follows, I contextualize my analytical framework, exploring how notions of ambivalence can be understood in relation to undocumented youth's subjectivities. I then outline the Canadian sociopolitical context, describing how the policies and practices of what I term "institutional invisibility" both exclude and include youth within the education system. Lastly, by following the narratives of five persons, I show how institutional invisibility shapes youth's ways of belonging, and how, in turn, youth come to be part of conflicting affective communities.

### **In between?**

Illegality can place and displace individual identity, confining subjects to an endless state of limbo or "liminal legality:" a border zone where people hold certain rights yet are excluded from full citizenship (Menjívar 2000, Mountz et al. 2002, Striffler 2007). This condition of being in-between is even more acute for young people. Youth, in fact, as Durham has argued, "figure centrally in debates and transformations in membership, and the hybridization of identities" (Durham 2000, 114). Migrant young people have been often portrayed as torn between two (or more) cultures and histories which are intimately entangled and diametrically opposed (see: Watters 2007). From this perspective, illegality

is seen as an additional layer of instability: it makes children “betwixt and between”, as they no longer belong to the group they are leaving and yet do not fully belong to their new social sphere (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011, Abrego 2014, Boehm 2012).

This in-between condition has been particularly examined in relation to the transition into adulthood of 1.5 generation undocumented youth in the United States. For instance, Gonzales and Chavez (2012) argue that undocumented children are able to gain a secure sense of belonging as American citizens, thanks to their parents’ support and to full access to elementary and high school. However, when they enter into adulthood and they are asked for the legal documents that they lack, young people “awaken to a nightmare.” Illegality then becomes their master status (Gonzales 2015).

However, the analysis of illegality in other country contexts, different than the U.S., has started to scrutinize the variegated impact of illegality on people’s lives (Allerton 2014, 2017, Sigona 2012, Ellis and Stam 2017, Bernhard et al. 2007). In this line, my aim is to shed light onto the complex and ambiguous array of experiences of illegality, deportability, and schooling in the Canadian context. In Canada, where even access to primary education is denied, young people have to learn quickly to become invisible students, and to deal with the paradoxes of their social position. The illusion of a childhood as normal citizens is not even available to them. School, then, becomes not a safe place but an environment that contributes to the invisible production of illegality. And childhood - rather than the transition into adulthood - is the dimension where individuals first experience, and come to terms with the consequences of their status.

In the study of illegality, it is then fundamental to attend to the specificities of different sociopolitical contexts, and to the complex ways youth establish their sense of membership (Allerton 2017). Through an examination of the Canadian case - which differs greatly from the United States with respect to the very important exclusion from K-12 schools - I aim to explore how ambiguous policies of illegality and access to education have significant implications for issues of identity development and belonging. The concept of structural ambivalence can help us to consider how illegality can subtly shape youth's social relationships and belonging - beyond the too simplistic representations of subjects as either dominated by regimes of power, or as actively resisting these regimes. The ethnographic task that is urgently needed is to analyze how ambivalent forms of belonging are structurally reproduced in youth's lives, within the tensions between structural constraints and resistance to those constraints.

In taking into account youth's experiences, it might be tempting to describe these subjects as people who have "no place to belong" (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013). However, many authors have pointed to the ways migrants can often belong to different places at one time, without necessarily resolving their in-between condition (Firmat 2012, Zavella 2011). The question, then, is not whether such youth belong or do not belong - as if there are two clear alternatives and defined states of being. This perspective reproduces, even if unintentionally, mythical fantasies of the sovereign state: that national boundaries are rigid, citizenship singular and complete (Berlant 1991). As Beck puts it, nationalism operates "on the either-or principle, excluding the possibility of both-and. But these oppositions - either 'us' or 'them', either 'in' or 'out' - do not capture the reality of blurring boundaries between political, moral, and social

communities” (2003, 455). This article is an effort to explore how *either* and *or* may coexist, conflictingly and simultaneously, in the lives of young people. A focus on the production of structural ambivalence is particularly relevant in order to examine how structures of power and governance subtly enter affective relationships and subjectivities – something that can hardly be explained by Foucauldian biopolitical frameworks of life and death.

My analytical approach builds on the reflections of many anthropologists and sociologists who have examined the essential role of ambivalence – enduring conflicts, insoluble contradictions, and cultural paradoxes – in shaping subjectivities, social patterns, and knowledge (see: Levine 1988). Freud was one of the first to introduce this concept to describe the mixed experiences of unconscious thought. All affective relationships, he argued, produce some degree of ambivalence that emerges from the inner tension between desires and constraints (Freud 2005 ). According to postcolonial scholars, ambivalent feelings become even more acute in contexts of domination and cultural difference. Bhabha reminds us that the colonizer is like a snake in the grass who speaks in “a tongue that is forked,” and who defines the relation with the subaltern “from *mimicry* – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to *menace* – a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha 1984, 132). Among those who are subject to regimes of power, the close link between “self” and “other” leads to uncertainty and disillusionment as it is always defined in terms of difference.

In thinking about how these dimensions impact the ways that undocumented youth establish their affective ties and imagine themselves, it is also helpful to refer to recent critiques that conceive of belonging not as an ontologically solid state of being, or



a rigid distinction between political membership and affective belonging, but rather as a dynamic process of place-making, dialectically determined by both the state and its subjects (Gibson-Graham 2011, Lobo and Ghosh 2013, Ifekwunigwe 1999). As Olwig (2003) suggests, this process involves the creation of different sites of belonging, across physical and symbolic spaces that coexist at the same time.

As I will describe in more ethnographic detail, the paradoxical conditions that youth face are also closely linked to the ways illegality is socially reproduced. Not only through explicit policies of exclusion (e.g. deportation, surveillance or immigration documents), but also through “institutional invisibility:” laws and practices that are often silent and ambiguous, making individuals socially and legally non-existent. In the next section, I explain how contradictory immigration policies simultaneously receive and reject young people, and ultimately refuse to see them.

### **Pathways to institutional invisibility**

In Canada, it is not unauthorized land entry but the institutionalization of immigration precariousness – at the social, administrative, legal and political levels – that has made migrants “illegal” (Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009). In recent decades various policies to secure Canadian borders have limited the number of people accepted for refugee claims and family reunification and increased the number of temporary resident categories (Kaushal and Dauvergne 2011).<sup>4</sup> This means that, more and more often, failed refugee claimants face the impossibility of obtaining a regular visa entitling them to social and political rights. Indeed, as was the case for many failed refugees I met during

my fieldwork, if families decide to remain without legal permit, they must do so through pathways of invisibility.

While these restrictive policies have contributed to what De Genova calls “the legal production of illegality” (De Genova 2004), the issue of undocumented migrants is not presented as a priority, and sometimes not even as a problem, by public authorities (Monforte and Dufour 2011). This is not to say that illegality never enters the public debate, but that it is much less visible, especially compared to other national contexts such as the United States, where the image of a “Latino threat” is constantly perpetuated by media and pundits (Chavez 2013).

Practices in Canada become even more opaque with regards to undocumented children, due to the state duty to protect minors (Meloni et al. 2014, Kronick and Rousseau 2015). The case of access to education in Québec is an example. Although access to school is both a right and an obligation for everyone under the age of 18, free education is only provided to residents. Specific categories of migrants, such as asylum seekers, are classified as residents. Yet, the law fails to mention undocumented children *at all*. For such children, the issue of access rests on the silence and the discretion of teachers, school administrators, and families. These gray practices constitute an institutional invisibility: they have the effect of making youth disappear, in a social, legal and political sense (Meloni et al. 2017). Many young people I met were accepted into schools yet were asked to pay high tuition fees which their families often struggled to afford. Moreover, their education was not formally recognized: they could not obtain a valid registration code issued by the Ministry of Education, which would allow them to receive a final diploma.

Undocumented children and youth were thus situated in an impossible space: while the law failed to acknowledge their existence, youth were often unofficially accepted into schools and established relationships with their peers. Young people occupied spaces of non-existence and yet they existed (Coutin 2003). As Negrón-Gonzales has observed regarding the U.S. context, there was a profound disjuncture between youth's "*juridical* identities as undocumented migrants, and their *subjective* identities" (Negrón-Gonzales 2014, 260) as young people growing up in Canadian society. These practices of invisibility – which both rejected and included – reinforced fear in undocumented families. All the young people that I met during my fieldwork told me that they never disclosed their status to anyone in their school – not to their teachers and nor to their schoolmates, even if they were close friends. Moreover, in order to disappear from the eyes of institutional authorities, families often changed their residence and workplace or removed their children from school.

In this context of invisibility, gaining access to young people was difficult at best and, at times, entirely impossible. The few community organizations that were in contact with youth tended to protect them, considering them doubly vulnerable (as undocumented and minors). Over the months, thanks to relationships established with a community organization working with women, I met many undocumented mothers who shared with me their concerns about their children's limited access to school.<sup>5</sup> With colleagues and community organizations who had similar worries, we created a working group on access to education for undocumented young people, with the aim to discuss the issue with institutional stakeholders and move towards policy change (Meloni et al. 2017). It was through this double role – as researcher and coordinator of this working group – that my

fieldwork with youth became possible. I slowly entered into contact with young people through those they trusted – families, community organizers, and teachers concerned by access to education and who started to contact me (Meloni, Vanthuyne, and Rousseau 2015). I met youth at their homes and in community settings, I ate with them, I attended parties, public demonstrations and community events. I recognized these young people within their wider social networks, and they recognized me as someone close to their communities.

In the following sections, I describe in ethnographic detail how practices of illegality shape the discourses of institutional subjects, and how they impacted the ways youth established a sense of belonging. As I will explain, the opacity of policies created the impression among teachers that undocumented children did not exist at all in their school. At other times, it prompted those who befriended undocumented families to attempt to blend in, mimicking their invisibility.

### **Hidden traces**

It was late in the evening, in a small church in the suburbs of Montreal. The pastor agreed to meet me after all the afternoon activities had ended. We sat down in a corner. It was silent all around us, the rooms were dark and empty. At the time, I was coordinating a working group on access to education, and I asked the pastor if he knew of any undocumented children who faced difficulties accessing school. At my question, the pastor's voice lowered, becoming a whisper in the shadows – even more of a whisper because we were alone in the room and nobody could possibly have heard us. He looked at me for a moment, brought his face close to mine, and said: “Yes, I see what you are

saying. We know these situations.” Reflecting later on that encounter, I realized that the pastor’s whispering was not simply an instinctive gesture to protect the families he had befriended. His whisper – an intimate way of speaking and not speaking – was the counterpart of youth invisibility, ways of being and not being.

The fragile yet powerful relationships that undocumented people establish with others entail a sense of unspoken uncertainty. Connections with subjects who were considered too institutional could be revoked at any moment, if families felt that they were in danger of being deported. Many community organizers, teachers and social workers completely lost track of undocumented families, once they had fallen out of status.<sup>6</sup> As a social worker told me, with a sense of frustration: “They just disappear. They change telephone number, they change address! They don’t come to see us anymore. They live underground.”

But most of the time, the recognition of young people without legal status was situated within “shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence” (Berlant 2000, 6). For one, many subjects (community organizers; teachers; students) rarely asked young people about their situations; secondly, youth seldom disclosed their situation to others. I recall the surprise of a teacher when I asked her if any of her students were without legal status. She replied: “of course not, undocumented children cannot go to school!” I decided to rephrase my question, asking her, with some hesitation, if she would perhaps know of any children who had fuzzy migratory status (*un statut flou*). She paused for a moment, and said: “Oh, yes, I know some.” This contradictory statement reveals not just a failure of recognition, it highlights the confusion surrounding access to education. The ambiguity of policies produced, in the relationships between young people and

institutional subjects, what Spivak calls a “secret encounter:” an ethical engagement characterized on both sides by “the sense that something has not got across” (Spivak 1999 384), and by the insistent yet impossible desire to reveal that “secret.” To a certain extent, their lack of status prevented youth from revealing that secret, from entirely disclosing “who” they were. Different people that they met in their everyday lives failed to listen for their voices – and, perhaps more importantly, their silences and whispers. They failed to account for what these youth could not possibly say; they failed to recognize that illegality was a part of their social world.

In what follows, I illustrate how these failures influenced, and limited, the ways young people could imagine themselves and their belonging in Canada. In order to do so, I have singled out five life stories which exemplify different ways in which double binds shape youth’s social belonging and subjectivities. In anthropology, life stories have been used as an expression of the subject’s psychological dynamics (Mohia 2000, Linde 1993). In this respect, narratives become a window into each personal account and “narratable self” (Cavarero 2000). They open the possibility, and the aspiration, that one’s story can be told – that who you are may be disclosed. The histories that I present here are part of conversations and interviews I had with the young people who shared with me the scattered sequences of their lives. I chose five narratives which I believe are representative of larger trends in my field research, while also pertaining to individual singularities and particular ways of living with illegality. In analyzing youth’s narratives, I was struck by how the production of double binds was central to their subjective existence, and how this production happened through the frequency, force, and stretching that these double binds generated. In what follows, I will show the mixed feelings that

shaped youth's realities and sense of belonging which they recounted me over many conversations.

### **Getting used to here**

Roberto came to Montreal four years ago, at the age of 11. His family migrated from Mexico and made a refugee claim which, after two years, was rejected. Roberto's migration profoundly hinged on his parents' decisions. He could not choose to remain in Mexico, as his parents had decided to leave, and now he could not refuse to return as his family had received a deportation order.

Although Roberto could not escape from this relationship of dependence, he held a very precise idea about his sense of belonging "here," and was deeply sad to leave Montreal. Two months before being deported, he told me:

*We came back here and it was too hard for me. It was a new phase of my life and I was sad I was leaving my country, Mexico. But now, I am happy to be here in Canada and the only thing I don't want is to come back to my country because I'm used to here, with my friends and my girlfriend and I don't really want to leave. I want to stay here.*

*I am used to here (je suis habitué ici).*<sup>7</sup> His words resonate with those used by many other young people I met during fieldwork. They sometimes pronounced these words with tears in their eyes when they thought about the possibility of being deported. Other times, they were simply reflecting about their everyday relationship with "here," to the ways they adapted to a place. The words "I am used to here" do not entail a discursive

claim of possession, but rather a continuous process of being and longing for a place, that Roberto firmly repeated in his thoughts – *here, here, here*.

To be sure, place is not only constituted by a physical setting, but by the meanings attached to it (Relph 1976). A sense of place, Basso argues, is an idea of home: “local landscapes where groups of men and women have invested themselves (their thoughts, their values, their collective sensibilities) and to which they feel they belong” (Basso 1996, 13). Yet, as Sack reminds us, “a place requires human agency, is something that may take time to know, and a home especially so”. (Sack 1997, 16). It takes time – time to stay, time to imagine yourself staying in one place – to call a place home. The sentence “I am used to here” points to the *revocable* and precarious ways young people can make sense of being in habit, of occupying everyday spaces. These youth came to relate, in powerful ways, to unfamiliar landscapes. And yet, for many youth who could suddenly be deported, place – as a material and emotional space – was haunted by their past experiences of displacement, and by the possibility of being dislocated again. It was unsettled by the constant gesture of hiding their status, of being misrecognized by others. Their sense of place was thus both dislocated and embedded – it was a process of adaptation to their family’s choice to migrate, and to their desire to recreate new communities of belonging, and signify them with new meanings.

To be sure, this process drew a line between Roberto’s social world, and his family life. In contrast to his parents, Roberto did not keep in close contact with his relatives in Mexico. At first, when he came to Montreal, he did not understand French, and spent a lot of time with his Mexican peers. He went with his parents to a church attended by many undocumented Latin American immigrants. However, he later met



people from other countries, and learnt to speak French. During his years in Canada, Roberto gradually rooted his social network outside his family and the Mexican community. Reflecting on his process of adaptation, he told me once:<sup>8</sup>

*I said to myself: why should I have Mexican friends since I am here in Canada? I would like to meet people from other countries and to learn French! Then I decided to try a little bit, and now I don't have any Mexican friends anymore. I speak only with Québécois<sup>9</sup> and people from other countries. And all Mexicans are gone anyways, and I am alone now.*

*Francesca: They went back to Mexico?*

*Roberto: (brief silence) Yes.*

Roberto was caught between two worlds. There were his Mexican peers, and the church that his family and many Mexican migrants attended. This was a world of departure and uncertainty, where loss was an everyday issue. As Roberto told me, in a quiet, sad voice: “All the Mexicans are gone *anyways*, and I am alone now.” Perhaps, this “anyways” denotes a fracture that occurred (and could happen to him at any moment) despite his wish, while at the same time demonstrating the need to resume his own life after this interruption. There was, *anyways*, still another social world he created here: intimate bonds with people he loved, who did not belong to the Mexican community. This environment was secured by daily activities, and physical places around his neighborhood: he played on a hockey team three times a week; he went to the park with his friends; his Québécois girlfriend lived just a ten minute walk from his apartment. He

felt like he belonged here, and yet this feeling was fragile due to his family's deportability.

Roberto occupied an indeterminate space in between. Belonging was always incomplete due to his legal status and his family circumstances. But also, it was inextricably tied to feelings of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility. In his everyday life at school, Roberto could not openly disclose his situation to his peers, being afraid that they would make fun of him. He explained to me:

*When I feel sad I don't speak of this with my friends. I take my time. I don't have to talk of this because I am afraid.*

*Francesca: What are you afraid of?*

*Roberto: That they will say that I have to leave and that they will say that it would be good if I left. Things like that. I'm afraid they are going to laugh at me. That they're not going to understand my situation.*

Roberto's presence in Canada was complicated by what Sayad (2004) calls a "double absence:" on the one hand, he was estranged from his parents and his society of origin and, on the other, from the host society. This double absence was also a double, and partial, belonging, constituted by ties which could only be conditional and revocable. His existence "here" was always undermined by both his deportability and his fear of being misrecognized by others. Roberto was afraid that, if he revealed his situation, people would laugh at him, and would not recognize him as a member of their community.

Yet, Roberto often insistently told me “my life is here now.” As soon as he received the news that he was going to be deported with his family, Roberto started to behave disrespectfully towards his classmates and his teachers. When I asked why, he said: “I started to act up at school because I have to leave. I said to myself: If I am going to leave... well, then I am going to act up!” While Roberto did not decide to explicitly come out about his legal status, he partially broke the invisibility he had had to maintain before.

His imminent departure thus resulted in a double bind: a tension between the constraints of illegality (as both not being seen by others, and not wanting to be seen), and a moment of respite (as an impossible desire for recognition). His actions constituted a way for him to subtly resist both the government’s decision to deport his family, and his parents’ decision to leave Canada. Misbehaving – an action to attest that he was physically there, and that he no longer respected state authorities (his teachers) – could indeed be read as a way of interrupting, even if only for a moment, his social invisibility, and of rearticulating, even if impossibly, his claim of belonging to Canadian society. It was a small act of resistance, what Scott calls a “hidden transcript:” a subtle way of pressing against the limit, of conveying one’s anger and “signaling a public breaking of the ritual of subordination” (Scott 1990, 196). In making visible his unsettling presence, Roberto voiced his fractured desire for an everyday normalcy: “a wish not to have to push so hard in order to have a life” (Berlant 1998, 285). And yet, despite his wish, a few months later, Roberto was deported to Mexico with his family.

### **Transitions into illegality**

Immigration policies also denied everyday normalcy to Julia, a young girl from Jamaica. She contacted me through a community organization, explaining in a brief, enthusiastic email that she was glad that someone was working on the issue of access to education, and that she wanted to give her perspective. Yet, when I met her for the first time in a café in Montreal, I discovered to my surprise that she had always had legal (though precarious) status. When she migrated aged twelve with her mother and younger sister it was as a refugee claimant and, within six years, everyone in her family had been granted asylum. So why did she see herself as undocumented? What was at stake when she presented herself as undocumented – the most excluded social status? What can we learn from her about the materiality of belonging?

One reason is her in-between position, determined by both her precarious status and her age. Rather than within binary notions of legality/illegality, we can understand Julia's reality within precarious forms of less-than-full immigration status, which is accompanied by limited access to public services (Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard 2009). Julia was 18 years old, and no longer had free access to education, as she had had as a refugee claimant and a minor.<sup>10</sup> The social roles of her family members were less ambiguous: her mother, as the sole caregiver, found a job; her sister, who was seven years old, went to primary school. But Julia was caught in uncertainty. She had always been a good student, she had ambitions to become a doctor, and she had laid out a clear trajectory for herself – she was getting on track. But now that she was no longer a child, things were backfiring: it was difficult to reconcile her aspirations of pursuing postsecondary studies, the pressure from her mother to financially contribute to the

household, and the attitudes of her peers to whom she could not openly reveal her anxieties.

There were specific moments when her predicament was translated into a feeling of being literally “undocumented,” in the sense of not holding any legal documents. She explained:

*When I was 18 years old, I started going to bars and clubs.<sup>11</sup> And then, I did not have any documents to get in as my friends did. I was undocumented in the sense that I did not have any ID from my... from my country. I did not have any ID here, because when you're a refugee claimant, they take your passport. I did not have any documents with me aside from my brown refugee claimant papers. But that paper... if you show it to people, it's looked down upon. You can't do anything with it.*

Julia held a brown refugee claimant paper, but this document placed her outside of full Jamaican or Canadian national membership. The way she referred to not “having an ID” reveals how (a lack of) documents conditioned her identity as a member of a community. Her entitlement to fully belong was doubly negated by the absence of either Jamaican or Canadian full membership. Her citizenship was denied and, with it, the legal conditions for securely establishing forms of sociality and belonging within national boundaries.

Her ambiguous position was evident not only when she went out with her friends, but also when she had to approach the school bureaucracy. “They just don’t know what a refugee claimant is!” she exclaimed once, with resentment. As an example, the school

administration charged her for health insurance which was supposed to be covered by the provincial government. However, this feeling of exclusion was produced not only by the attitude of the school administration, but also because she responded by deliberately concealing her legal status. She said: “the teachers don’t know, many of my friends don’t know. Nobody, except for a few people in my close circle, know. It is not something that you’re going to tell!”

The perception of herself as undocumented was shaped by this paradox. On the one hand, she was invisible: her existence was ignored by the bureaucratic state and, in response, she masked her identity. On the other, however, Julia carved out everyday spaces of visibility by establishing relationships with her peers who had legal status. These relationships were imbued with ambivalence: a significant part of herself remained hidden.

Over the months I came to know Julia and her friends (many of whom were without legal status), I realized that her ambivalence, as well as her sense of being undocumented, was also defined by her entanglement with different communities of belonging. On several later occasions I noticed that she often spoke not only as an individual self, with autonomous projects and personal dreams for the future, but often referred to an indefinite “you,” “they,” or “people.” For instance, she once said: “I know a lot of undocumented *people* who are not motivated enough to study, and *they* just drop out of school. Or *they*’re going to be deported back to their country, and then *you*’re going to start studying from scratch.”

This shift in personal pronouns points to the affective ties between Julia and other subjects who inhabited her. Her sense of self was, in fact, marked outside a clearly

defined *me*. It was extended into the pathways of other intimate subjects: close friends who were rejected refugee claimants, and undocumented women who attended church with her mother. Julia could have been one of them to a certain extent: her family's asylum claim could have been refused, as happened with many other migrants from her country. She could have dropped out of school, she told me many times, if only she wasn't determined enough to pursue her studies. This change in personal pronouns, then, indicates the fact that Julia was not simply telling me her own story, but also the story of many people she loved and cared for. These other people profoundly shaped the ways she told her story as undocumented, and they complicated her sense of belonging. Her relationships with friends living without legal status, and with her mother's social network, often conflicted with her desire to belong to other communities – mostly, her friends at school to whom she never disclosed her situation. When I once asked her if she felt that “here” was her home (*est-ce que tu te sens un peu comme chez toi ici*), she made this clear to me, by elusively replying:

*I am not in an environment where there are many immigrants because almost all my friends are Québécois. So I have become used to here. But I see the other side with my mother: her social environment is made up only of immigrants. Sometimes she is depressed because she cannot get used to here. She always meets people whose migratory status is fuzzy and uncertain. So she cannot escape from this kind of social group. She cannot escape from exclusion because she is always with people who are excluded.*

Again, *I have become used to here*: a precarious, conditional process. But also, most importantly, her words defied my question. They eluded it. This was not the right question: to belong or not belong, to feel home or not. As Hall points out, once we migrate, “there’s no home to come back to. There never was” (Hall 1987, 355). Instead of directly addressing the issue of belonging, Julia used “communicative strategies that cultivate ambiguity and uncertainty” (Argenti-Pillen 2013, 104). She explicitly avoided certain words (home; belonging) that were perhaps troubling, perhaps too confining, or that simply did not reflect her reality. Instead, she made space for her contrasting desires and identities to coexist. She reminded me that to belong was an ambivalent matter of interdependence. The ways she established affective relationships across different communities were always ill-fitting. She could not anchor them entirely, but only in a partial way. Even if she could get used to here, unlike her mother, she could not consider herself completely apart from her family. Neither could she imagine herself as entirely part of her Québécois peers’ environment. In this sense, by representing herself as undocumented, Julia voiced the concerns of a community of excluded people to which she was intimately related. And she defied, in important ways, essentialized notions of what being undocumented, as well as belonging to someone and to somewhere, might actually mean.

### **There are many things we forgot**

Similarly to Julia, Ellen and Ryan’s story defies common notions of undocumentedness and belonging. Ellen and Ryan are two siblings from Jamaica who had left their country six years earlier, when they were 11 and 14 years old. When they came to Canada, their



mother had already been living there for one year without legal status. After another four years of illegality, all the family was finally granted refugee status. Like Roberto, their experiences were significantly influenced by the fact of being dependent children. Sitting together in the living room – their mother simmering chicken on the stove – Ellen reflected on their lives without legal status, saying:

*If you wanna go live somewhere, you have to deal always with the change. The new way of life here, it's not gonna be the same as you had before. Totally different. (...) I would say it's best to have someone that's here, someone that you know when you come. So that you're gonna be staying with this person, and that you're gonna be ok at school. If you don't have nothing of that, that would be really difficult for you. Someone that's here, you know, someone to stick to. My mom was already here, she was here about one year before we came. You know, she was here and she prepared everything, so we relied on our mom. She's who we had here. So it's easier for us because she did everything, everything we needed.*

The fact that their mother was already in Canada and “prepared everything” – the fact that they were dependent children – eased the burden of being undocumented as well as the difficulties of adaptation. For instance, the barrier in accessing education was a problem for their mother, but Ellen and Ryan did not experience it as an issue. As they arrived, their mother enrolled them in a private English-speaking school connected to their church, which accepted many children without status. The two siblings knew it was

difficult for undocumented kids to access school but, as they put it, they didn't know "how hard it is."

*She provided everything, you know... so we don't know for school, to get into school we don't really know. We know it's hard but we don't know how hard it is. She can tell you how hard it was to get us into a school.*

In the years they were without legal status, Ellen and Ryan's social life was closely tied to the Caribbean community and to their church which organized many social activities for undocumented children. As Ryan talked about his church, his eyes sparkled: "At church, you see all the kids your age, you have your own class age, and you will get to know everybody in the church because it's like... It's one thing, it's like your family!" The church was thus their close-knit community, the place where they belonged: one thing, like family. It was also the only space where they could participate in social activities and, as Ellen also added, "have fun." Every day, after class, they would go to play with friends in the church, they would sing in a choir and go on picnics when the weather was nice.

To a certain extent, not only the dependence on their mother, but also the marginal space of their community had a protective function. Invisibility and marginality buffered the hurdles of illegality. As Wacquant notes, the ghetto is a Janus-faced institution (Wacquant 2011). For the dominant group, it excludes subordinated people from sight. For those within the ghetto, it has a shielding function insofar as it relieves its members from contact with institutions and fosters community-building. Their small church in the

suburbs of Montreal - where many undocumented friends from Caribbean countries lived, hidden from the eyes of most - was the place where Ellen and Ryan most felt as home.

Yet, the fears of illegality often surfaced in the closed spaces of their everyday life. Wacquant reminds us that “the ghetto is home, but it remains an inferior home, built under duress, that exists at the order and sufferance of the dominant. Its residents know that, as it were, in their bones” (Wacquant 2011, 12). In those years without legal status, Ellen and Ryan considered very few spaces as safe: their social life revolved around their private school and church.

On a cold winter afternoon, Ellen and Ryan showed me their school which lay a few minutes from their church. A high fence surrounded the school building; behind the fence, two children were quietly playing basketball. Ellen said: “Back then, I felt that school was a prison. You know, whatever you do, everything is blocked off. You can’t walk to certain places. Even at lunch breaks you have to stay in the compound, you can’t leave. They also have more security staff and so on.” The fact of being obliged not to leave the school compound, as well as the feeling that school is like a prison, may be common among teenagers, but the feeling of having physical limits and only a few safe places was also influenced by illegality. Adults protected children from the outside space which was not safe enough, and the outside space,<sup>12</sup> in turn, was not accessible to them due to their lack of status.

Now that they had regularized their status and were in their early twenties – their childhoods behind them – Ellen and Ryan’s belonging to a community became more complicated. As many other youth from Caribbean English-speaking countries told me, their social and political entitlement was undermined by the fact that they did not speak

French. They complained that the French they learnt at school was not enough for them to be able to speak it fluently. As a consequence, it was harder for them to enter the job market, and they felt they were excluded from the Québec community.<sup>13</sup> Ryan, who was now 20 years old, was afraid that he would not be able to find a job. Moreover, the church no longer constituted a site of belonging. As Ellen explained: “The more you grow older, and you see things and you get more experienced and stuff ... church becomes boring!” New difficulties and anxieties occupied their minds now. More importantly, Ellen and Ryan decided to recount to me what mattered to them so their present worries were recognized. They challenged, in a sense, my assumption that to be an undocumented child was a difficult experience. On the contrary, they pointed out that, when they did not have legal status and were dependent children, they felt like they belonged to a community, since their mother had partially relieved them from the burden of illegality. However, now that they had become Canadian citizens and were leaving childhood behind, their social belonging and entitlement were significantly constrained.

### **Growing a community**

Like Ellen and Ryan, Elizabeth – the young girl who dreamt of running – was now in her early twenties. Her experience with illegality began when she left her home country, Colombia, as a child. This was the beginning of a long journey alone: she crossed Central America and then Mexico before arriving in the United States. She lived in Arizona for a few years, working illegally in a factory, before ultimately coming to Canada, where she continued to work without legal status. As she explained to me: “I was a kid, and I did

not have money: the only way I could survive was by working. There was no way for me to become legal, so for me it was difficult to live like everybody else living there.”

For a long time, her life was permeated by the constant movements of hiding and running. There were no safe places, there was nowhere to stay, only sites to run from. As she told me:

*I never felt safe. Every time I ran, every time I hid, I was afraid of being killed because of being illegal in these countries. By being illegal, you are a target, so you are easily hurt. Anything can happen to you when you are not allowed to live in a country, and you do not have ID. You do not have the same rights as everybody else so you live a life where you do not feel like you are in charge of your life. So you feel obliged to hide or to run because that is the way it is. You feel alone, naked, confused.*

Elizabeth's experiences – her migration journey, her fear of deportation, and her illegal work life – resonates with the experiences of many undocumented adults. Yet, unlike an adult, she was particularly vulnerable: the impossibility of returning to her home country, the violence she lived as a child, as well as the lack of family support, exposed her to a life of daily uncertainties and emotional pain. Running as a child is a different matter. You are “alone, naked, confused,” and you “do not feel like you are in charge of your life.” Expressing a loss of control over her life here refers not only to the general condition of illegality, but also to the fact that she was a child. And yet, her social position as a minor in need of protection was negated by her migratory status: since she was illegal, nobody related to her story as a child.

This is exemplified by Elizabeth's recounting of the asylum application that she made while she was in a youth detention center in the United States. To be sure, it was difficult for her to assemble the incoherence of her life in an ordered way and to express the unspeakable experiences that she had suffered. As she explained, "I was confused and, at the same time, it was very hard for me to talk about all that trauma." The immigration officer who judged her asylum claim considered her story to lack credibility because, as Elizabeth told me, "it was not believable that at ten years old I could have done what I did." Her agency was thus negated by both her status as a child, and as undocumented. The officer considered her on the basis of her illegal presence in the national territory, urging her to leave the country. Elizabeth remembered the harsh words of that officer: "You must leave and I will make sure that you leave. This is not only you. Every other kid has to leave because there is a law, and the government does not want just anybody to be in this country."

The function (and the violence) of judgment, as Johnson suggests, is "to convert an ambiguous situation into a decidable one" (Johnson 1979, 596). More precisely, Johnson argues, the law translates the ambiguity of the difference *within* one subject, in which two conflicting entities problematize the very idea of an entity, into a predictable difference *between* two different subjects, in which two opposing forces presuppose that all entities are definite and knowable. In the case of Elizabeth, she embodied, as an undocumented child, two simultaneous and conflicting representations as "the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, and as security risk" (Uehling 2008, 837). The ambiguity of her status was misread by the immigration officer, as an opposition between her illegal presence and national security. She was not recognized as who she said she was: a child

who had lost the intelligibility of her life, and yet had the ability to face the hurdles of a migration journey alone. Forms of vulnerability and agency were considered, by the immigration officer, incapable of co-existing simultaneously in one subject.

Yet, despite the adversity arising from this misrecognition, Elizabeth found ways to survive, endure, and even to flourish. She told me once, remembering her past traumatic experiences: “You don’t forget. But you have to live with it, you have to survive.” The possibility of coping amidst constant loss was facilitated through the crafting of an affective community across national boundaries – her family back in her country, and her community engagement in Canada:

*What kept me alive was my family, my brothers, my sisters, my aunts; but also I chose life. I saw myself in different people. When I saw people on the street or people with no rights, people living illegally, I saw myself in those people. So I gained the strength, I gained the inspiration to live, to be a good person, but to also find ways to help people like that. I grew up a community in so many ways. I built a community, by engaging myself in an organization that helps people and cases like mine, so that they can have some justice.*

The act of “growing up a community,” as Elizabeth phrased it, was a process similar to the one experienced by many other young people I met. Through seeing herself in other people, through helping others, through becoming actively engaged in her surroundings, and “through *making-room* for herself and her community, she was able to invest the place she had come to with meaning.” (Lems 2014, 18). This was also an

essential way to make herself socially and politically recognized as an entitled member of the polis. When her refugee claim was also refused in Canada, her friends and peers organized a series of public demonstrations, asking the government if she could be granted protection on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Such media pressures and public support ultimately contributed to a positive decision: after several months, Elizabeth received refugee status.

## **Conclusion**

Although distinct, youth's narratives all demonstrate that "immigration categories are both deadly and fleeting, both powerful and irrelevant" (Coutin 2007, 6). Ambiguous forms of misrecognition and invisibility – which both include and exclude from society – produced interstitial spaces of belonging. While institutions often represented youth within rigid categories, as differences *between* (legal vs. illegal; child vs. adult), youth inhabited these representations as differences *within* themselves (being vs. not being; saying vs. not saying). The social worlds and the relationships of these young people were constantly shaped by constraints that defined, in ambivalent terms, their subjectivity and materiality of belonging. To pay close attention to the sources and effects of this structural ambivalence has important implications for our understanding of structure and agency, as well as of processes of sociality, domination and resistance.

For many young people, ways of disrupting the constraints of illegality were not to be found in the grandeur of resistance.<sup>14</sup> Instead, at the core of the strength of many of the youth I met, and of their capacity to survive the uncertainty of their condition, lay the possibility of creating *revocable* affects and belonging. Gilles Deleuze holds that affects



are based on a representation: “there is the idea of the loved thing, to be sure, there is an idea of something hoped for” (Deleuze 1978, n.p.). Affects are something that is not yet definite, not yet accomplished. They are based on desires, even if unclear, we long and exist for. They are a force of existing, “a space of potentiality where new forms of life can emerge” (Povinelli 2011, 9). Through the illusion and potentiality of their desires, youth are able to invest places with new meanings and projects which could be, or could simply not be. In this sense, youth’s affective relationships constitute a desire for social and political existence. They open up a space of possibility which can transcend their everyday condition of invisibility. These spaces show that subjection to power is always “ill-fitting – never so complete as to preclude conflict and struggle, instantiating both the illusion and the reality of agency” (Crapanzano 2011, 6).

The youth whom I befriended “grew up” communities, as Elizabeth put it, and spaces of desire in many different and sometimes paradoxical ways – within webs of interdependence with family, peers, and transnational ties. They put down roots in Canadian society faster than their adult counterparts did, and yet these roots remained uncertain due to the uncertainty of legal status. To be sure, most of the time, young people were situated in a double bind. They vacillated between the desire to belong and the impossibility of fully belonging – they were, and they were not here. I argue that there are two possible reasons for this ambivalence. First, youth cannot fully belong because others (immigration policies; teachers; school administration; peers) fail to recognize them as entitled members of a community, or fail to recognize them at all (Butler 1997). But second, ambivalence protects youth from the terrifying risks of a “wounded attachment” (Brown 1995) – especially when these failures of recognition become

unlivable. That is, youth distance themselves from the harmful ways others define them as excluded, or partially excluded. As Stevenson argues, “we become part of the human community (and thus legible as human) through being named, through being called” (Stevenson 2012, 650), through being recognized for who we are. People living without legal status are not being called, but they are only ambiguously recognized by others. Yet, the lack of a call results not in social death or in bare life, but rather in a contested space of (non) existence that youth inhabit.

And by occupying – ambivalently – this space, youth detach themselves from the disempowering conditions they are caught in. Ambivalence thus protects from being wounded by the constant possibility of deportation, and with it, the likelihood of being removed from the social world they have built in Canada and separated from the people they love. Youth are unsure whether the forms of social life they hope for, however tenuous and indefinite these might be, will ever be realized. Perhaps they will come to nothing.

It is crucial to ask ourselves questions about these new possibilities of life youth hope for. How will they be recognized? Will they become something? Will they become anything? To be sure, young people’s ways of establishing affective relationships defy the boundaries of national membership, even if silently, and even if the social worlds they interact with still fail to recognize them. If we take youth’s claim of belonging seriously, “we may have to develop (or rediscover?) analytical tools and concepts not colored by the self-evidence of a world ordered into nation-state” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 325). That is perhaps one of the major tasks laying ahead us: to understand and re-

conceptualize the shifting contours of youth's belonging as a field, as a materiality, as a claim to parts of world which aren't entirely theirs.

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<sup>1</sup> Names and certain identifying details have been changed in order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

<sup>2</sup> The youth that I met ranged in age from 12 to 22 years old, and came from Latin American and Caribbean countries.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Bateson used the term “double bind” to describe the relationships of schizophrenic patients. Bateson observed that these patients were trapped in an ongoing system which produced conflicting definitions of their relationships, with consequent subjective distress. I am here using the notion of double bind to describe the dilemmas in which undocumented youth are often caught.

<sup>4</sup> To give an example of such restrictive policies, in 2013, the government designated countries such as Mexico as “safe” countries of origin. Refugee claimants from those “safe” countries must now go through a streamlined process to prove they have a genuine need for asylum; they are not given the opportunity to appeal a negative decision; and they are not eligible for emergency health care (CARL 2014).

<sup>5</sup> My field research was part of a wider research project on access to health care for undocumented migrants, “The migratory status of the child and limited access to health care: Equity and ethical challenges”, funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). Ethical approval was obtained from multisite ethics review boards and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

<sup>6</sup> Others perceived as less threatening (e.g. churches and a few NGOs) sometimes kept contact with undocumented families. The majority of these helped to sustain families’ invisibility in order to protect them. More militant organizations promoted a rhetoric of coming out of invisibility and encouraged migrants to publicly speak about their situation. However, many families that I met were reluctant to publicly expose themselves and their status as they were afraid of the repercussions.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews and conversations with Roberto, as with many other young people, were conducted in French. “I am used to here” is my translation for his words *je suis habitué ici*. Other young people, especially from Caribbean countries, used the expression “I am used to here” or “I got used to here” to describe their process of adaptation and place-making in Québec.

<sup>8</sup> The ways in which Roberto remembers his process of adaptation are partially influenced by retrospective reflection. While some of the young people I met were in the process of falling out of status, others had received their legal status and reflected on their past experiences of illegality. All of them, however, experienced a present of uncertainty, even after obtaining legal status.

<sup>9</sup> Québécois refers to French-speaking natives of the province of Québec.

<sup>10</sup> In Québec, primary and secondary education is free for Québec residents and refugee claimants, while post-secondary education is not. Refugee claimants must pay tuition fees as international students and non-Québec residents if they want to access post-secondary education. Unlike Julia, Canadian citizens from other Canadian provinces can apply for Québec resident tuition status.

<sup>11</sup> In the province of Québec the legal age is 18. This means that people need to be 18 years or older to enter pubs.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, any sport or social activity organized by public organizations was not accessible to them, due to their lack of status.

<sup>13</sup> Québec has a strong national identity constructed on the basis of belonging to the national territory of Québec, and based on the French language which is permeated with symbolic value.

<sup>14</sup> In Québec and Canada, undocumented migrants have rarely engaged in large political movements as has been seen in the United States with the DREAMers. In Canada the main political movement is called “No One is Illegal.” It is particularly active in Toronto and promotes public campaigns to allow undocumented migrants to regularize their status (see Nyers 2011).