

# Taking their Word(s)

## Biographical Violence and Dilemmas of Collecting Narratives from Young People on the Move

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**Abstract:** Various adults seeking migratory testimonies actively pressure young people 'on the move' to Europe, categorised as 'unaccompanied minors' (UAMs), to 'open up' and share their stories. The suspicion that hangs over their minority and over the credibility of their stories can cause the adolescents to modify their biographies, to conceal, alter or invent elements. How can the researcher bond with them and produce reliable qualitative data without reproducing forms of 'biographical violence'? Based on a multisited ethnography 'on the move' in Morocco, Spain and France, this article invites exploration of young people's shifting biographies throughout their journey to Europe. It supports the idea that the scientific and ethical challenges of collecting the voices of young people can also constitute levers of scientific knowledge.

**Keywords:** age, children on the move, Europe, institutional norms, Morocco, multisited ethnography, narratives, sensitive fields

### Introduction: A Snatched Voice

In one of his latest novels, Emmanuel Carrère (2020) recounts his encounters with young asylum seekers during a workshop in 'creative writing' that he co-organised with Erica, a retired woman, volunteering in a 'hotspot' in Greece. Sitting at the terrace of a café, Atiq, a 17-year-old Afghan teenager, recalls his long journey to Greece, while answering Carrère's questions. Atiq shares his own concerns:

As we rest [...] after three hours of debriefing, Atiq asks me what I plan to do with it. [...] The answer is: I don't know. [...] Atiq is under the impression that he is being fooled. Erica, for her part, is worried about an email she has just received from a humanitarian association concerned about her methods: shouldn't she take the advice of a psychologist for her writing workshop? [...] The fact is that the kind of wild therapy we subject these boys to is disturbing them. [...] we have the greatest difficulty in getting them to come [...]. As for Atiq, [...] he says he doesn't want to talk about the past anymore because it hurts too much. (ibid.: 344–345)

This excerpt highlights the many complexities involved in collecting the accounts of young people on the move. First, a multiplicity of adults compete to access these juvenile stories – researchers, administrative agents, childcare professionals, humanitarians, psychologists, writers, journalists, activists, volunteers – and their obsession with the past of these young people and their 'experiences of departure and loss' (ibid.: 348). Then, the unequal power dynamics and social positions intersecting class, gender, race and age at play in such interactions, the pain that the reactivation of these memories provokes in the young respondents and their reluctance to share their stories. Ultimately, it raises another painful question: how can we differentiate between a privileged, wealthy adult who seeks to utilise for the sake of his art the biographical material of vulnerable and marginalised adolescents, and the approach taken by social scientists 'rushing to the field to "hear the voices" of refugee children' (Kaukko et al. 2017: 20)?

This article explores the scientific and ethical challenges of collecting the voices of young people on the



move. Its contributions are threefold. First, I argue that researchers can contribute, in many respects, to what I propose to read as a biographical violence to which these young people are invasively and repeatedly exposed throughout their journey to Europe. Second, I call for further recognition of shifting juvenile biographies. I defend the idea that it is not the role of the researcher to disentangle the 'real' from the 'transformed real' in juvenile biographical accounts. Rather, the researcher may try to understand what leads these young people to feel the need to adjust their narratives in the context of their migratory, administrative and institutional experiences. Third, to avoid forms of data extractivism and imagine caring ways of conducting research with young people 'on the move', I advocate for research 'on the move', anchored in multisited ethnography and combined and alternative biographical methods, to be as close as possible to their daily social experiences, tactics and aspirations.

### **The Paradoxes of an Inaudible, Unspeakable and Over-Solicited Voice**

#### *Navigating the Labyrinth of Shifting Biographies*

In the spring of 2022, I interviewed Salim, a young Moroccan I met a few months previously, on a terrace in Madrid. Salim arrived in Spain three years ago without any family reference or legal guardian, which made him fall under the administrative category of 'unaccompanied minor' (UAM) due to his threefold condition of minority, foreign status and lack of parental guardianship. When I asked him why he agreed to tell me his story, he replied: 'Because I knew you could understand me, you had spoken to me in Arabic, you know the "risky", you know what Morocco is like, you were in Melilla, I know that you can understand everything I tell you, that you can imagine, that you won't judge me.' What counted for him, therefore, was ultimately my circulation between the places he himself had crossed, my knowledge of migratory vocabulary, actors, places and practices – in short, a form of 'transnational knowledge' that allowed for a common universe of reference.

At the beginning of our interview, he told me he was 18 years old. During the interview, he put out his cigarette with a sudden gesture and interrupted himself: 'Well, I'll tell you the truth. I haven't told anyone here. The truth is that I'm 16, but I didn't want to stay too long in a child protection centre ... It's tough there, you know ... When I arrived in Spain, I said I

was 15, but in reality, I was 13. But now, in my mind and heart, I'm 18. It's become my real age, forever. I don't even think about it any more.'

Salim transformed some of his biographical data in order to adapt to the administrative environments in which he would have to evolve. These changes of the presentation of self (Goffman 1959) were so strongly internalised by Salim that they ended up 'melting' into his personal history. What kind of story could I have collected if I hadn't met him outside of the institutions he attends in his daily life and if I hadn't been able to reassure him of my familiarity with the places and thus the contradictory administrative universes he had travelled through? Probably the institutional version of his story, with poor scientific value, and no basis to understand the biographical tactics that young people on the move are compelled to invent. But even so, his will to re-establish his 'biographical truth' is the result of a sudden decision on his part over which the researcher has little or no control. And where is a hypothetical 'truth' to be found, now that his new age has now become, in his eyes and according to the administration, his new and irreversible truth? Salim's tactic shows how age is above all a social artefact, arbitrary, unstable and fabricated: it is less a biological reality than an administrative recognition and registration. In the face of those young people travelling without official documentation, the instability and fragility of Western age identification systems are exposed. Moreover, the struggles to determine age and to legitimate the access to or exclusion from social categories such as 'children' or 'minors' are far from new. From the colonial empires where racialised juvenile bodies were subjected to public surveillance and medical and social expertise (Stoler 2002; Saada 2012) to the aftermath of the Second World War when resettlement was conditioned by age determination of young refugees (Burgard 2021), from French adolescents lying about their age and crossing the Spanish border in secret to fight against Franco's forces (Sill 2011) to 'indigenous' adolescents leaving their families in Algeria to reach the French metropole alone before the war of independence (Gardet and Mokrane 2010), the embarrassment of adults and nation states in the face of the 'unchildlike children' (Zahra 2009: 53) is a historical constant. These struggles are part of a long genealogy of juvenile tactics for navigating childhood and adulthood and negotiating age norms and, simultaneously, of administrative suspicion about the age claimed and the extension of techniques to reduce age-related uncertainty.

In France, I met up with Madi, whom I had followed on his journey from Morocco to Spain and then to France for months. ‘So how are you doing?’, ‘How was Spain?’, ‘How’s your work going?’, ‘What about Otmane, have you got any news?’, ‘How’s your injury?’ We caught up quickly as he had to attend a school support course. After exchanging memories and giving each other news, we took a photo together, and he left on his bike. The next day, I received a message: ‘Please don’t use my photo if you are going to use everything I told you about my life.’ It turned out that at this time, Madi was going through a minority assessment procedure at the Aide Sociale à l’Enfance (ASE). The story he gave to the institution is slightly different from the journey I know: he smoothed, polished and transformed certain elements. The complex and opaque bureaucratic machinery of child protection and migration control in France has made him unsure of what to say and when to keep silent, and he got lost in the labyrinth of his biographical transformations. Distressed by the contradictory advice he received from friends and associations, he feared being excluded from the status of ‘UAM’ and developed a narrative that would not be prejudicial to him. I met him a week later and tried then to conduct an in-depth interview with him. He told me contradictory things that did not match with the events I had witnessed in Marrakesh. I realised that he did not remember what he had told me back in the past, and I could see in his eyes and his anxious and sudden gestures that he was under high stress levels because of my questions. I then decided to interrupt the interview and return to a more banal and ‘harmless’ discussion to soothe him. If in Morocco he was willing to share his story with me, it turned out that since he has had to face European administrative obstacles, he experiences my questions as microaggressions to the energy he has put into recreating a biographical coherence in line with his history and the institutional expectations he is now facing.

Solicited by a plurality of adults in search of narratives, young people on the move are caught in an injunction to ‘open up’ and ‘tell’ themselves. The suspicion that hangs over their minority and the narrative credibility of their journey (Bricaud 2006; Sigona 2014; Kumin 2014) can provoke a tendency among young interviewees to modify their stories, to evade or invent elements, which weakens the validity of the data collected. Inaudible because they are confined to the closed worlds of migration control and child protection, unspeakable because they are full of violence and distressing memories, the words of young

people on the move have become a legal and political issue in determining the legitimacy of their access to protection. At the heart of the institutional biographical injunction (Duvoux 2009) to ‘recount’ themselves and to transform an intimate narrative into a civil one (Astier 1995), a test of narrative credibility (Kobelnisky 2007) is played out for young people, giving rise to a social sanction and selection that operates a logic of sorting out ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ young people (Perrot 2019; Paté 2023). It is therefore a matter of the young person mastering their narrative, transforming it and making it, sometimes artificially, ‘coherent’ in order to correspond to the tacit expectations of adults (Carayon et al. 2018). This is precisely what happened to Madi, and what made him suddenly regret confiding in a researcher for fear of possible institutional sanctions.

## Enjoyment and Pride in Being Researched

### *Facing Solitude, Building Trust: Insights from Youth Crossing Borders in Morocco*

Bashir, a teenager of Guinean origin, vigorously cuts his chocolate pancake; it’s all over his mouth, and he bursts out laughing as he wipes it with a tissue. He leans over my phone: ‘Is it recording, are you sure? No, check it, check it, what if it’s not recording?’ Once reassured, he takes a deep breath: ‘Let’s go!’ His undisguised enjoyment, his excitement at granting me an interview, draws my attention, whereas the surveying of young people involved in transnational migration journeys generally comes up against silences, mistrust and ellipses (Kohli 2006).

To my question of why he agreed to grant me such a ‘formal’ interview, he replies, amused: ‘Because you already know almost everything! I’m so happy to help you with your thesis, so happy really, you can ask me anything you want, you’re going to do the best thesis!’ Bashir’s enthusiasm highlights the complicity that unites us and the confidence he has in my understanding of his experiences, built over several months of repeated meetings. He feels valued in his role as an interviewee and is enthusiastic about the idea of participating in my research, partly because he sees it as a way of thanking me for the support I have given him in moments of loneliness. Additionally, since he left Guinea, he has had very few opportunities to tell his story – the ‘real one’ as he says: ‘I know I can tell you my real story, I know you are on my side.’ To Becker’s (1967) famous question about social scientists’ commitment, ‘whose side are we on?’, Bashir gave his own answer.

We are joined by Kyle, an adolescent from Cameroon, whom I met a year earlier in the north of Morocco and who now also lives in Rabat.

When I met you, phewwww [amused]. It wasn't a good time for me, it was too hard. I agreed to meet you because it was Aimé who told me I could trust you, and Aimé is like a big brother to me, if he says something I believe it. I explained everything to you, how it was going for me. Afterwards when I left, it was strange, I felt a bit lighter, I don't know how to say, I had no one to tell all that to [...] the others I was staying with, who were trying to cross [the Straits of Gibraltar], all that we live, how we suffer and everything, they already know it, they live it too, I'm not going to tell them again! And after telling you, I don't know how to say it, I felt a bit lighter.

Kyle's testimony shows that he was pleased, and even relieved, to be able to confide in someone. It also highlights the isolation that often characterises the experiences of young people attempting to cross borders in Morocco, and the strength and importance of individuals who act as guarantors of trust.

### *Beyond Biographical Violence*

What is the difference between Bashir and Kyle, who are enthusiastic and confident in their desire to confide in researchers and tell their stories, and Salim and Madi, whose more chaotic accounts are marked by the fear of revealing themselves and by the confusion between their 'official' and 'intimate' biographies? One of the possible explanations is that Bashir and Kyle are still far from aid institutions, whereas Salim and Madi are already entrenched in institutional work and its biographical issues. I suggest that young people on the move gradually learn institutional norms and their biographical injunctions as they are socialised into humanitarian and social intervention, and that the situation of investigation is radically affected by this. Those who have been exposed to the organisations of international cooperation in Morocco are already familiar with institutional work, the expectations of adults and the 'vulnerability criteria' that are central for the 'UAM' status. Once they arrive in Europe, they are confronted with the European administrative regimes of migration control and child protection, which radically alter their narratives. Therefore, there are two factors guiding and shaping the juvenile narratives: the stages of their migration pathway (within or outside Europe) and, more importantly, the degree of socialisation to institutional intervention. These factors have decisive implications for social science surveys

and must be considered by researchers operating in so-called 'sensitive' fields.

'Sensitive' fields can be defined as fields that deal with 'illegal or informal practices, individuals who are subject to strong stigmatisation and situations marked by violence, danger and/or suffering' (Bouillon et al. 2005: 13–14). These characteristics 'imply abandoning an excessively canonical survey protocol, as the ethnographer must put his methods to the test in order to invent new ways of doing things, with a constant concern for rigour' (ibid.: 14–15). The difficulty of accessing migration fields, in a context of increasing politicisation of migration issues, is notably linked to specific spatiotemporal and statutory configurations (social, residential and legal-administrative precariousness, hypermobility and informal networks) that contribute to weakening the survey relationship. Child and youth care facilities are also 'closed-door' environments, isolated from public life, with strict access restrictions justified by the legal minority status of those in care.

Furthermore, investigative relations in 'sensitive' fields tend to have to accommodate the recurrent interference of third parties. One of the major challenges of surveying young people in mobility is thus 'the lengthy and time-consuming process of negotiating access to young people categorised as under-age through gatekeepers' (Chase et al. 2019: 459). These gatekeepers (Broadhead et al. 1976) are the adults who, evolving around the young people, control, allow or block the researcher's access according to their own definitions of the young person's 'best interest' (Hanson et al. 2012). The research is thus often marked by the impossibility of engaging in direct contact without the mediation of an adult through whom the conditions of the survey must be negotiated. Indeed, 'gaining the trust of children means managing to create a relationship with them "despite" the other adults who would like to organise the interaction, and "despite" the researcher's adult status' (Danic et al. 2006 105).

Ethics in research with young people on the move is receiving more and more specific attention, offering reflective scholarly work (Hopkins 2008; Vervliet et al. 2015; Kaukko et al. 2017; Chase et al. 2019; Senovilla-Hernández 2021; Lønning et al. 2022; Shahrokh 2023). When faced with the young people's refusal or reluctance to collaborate, researchers try to elaborate new ways of meeting them, for instance by proposing co-creation workshops or legal information sessions to defend a retributive stance and participatory methodologies. But meeting young people through

institutions and administrations makes it difficult to evacuate the researchers' proximity to social and administrative agents, with whom they may share certain social properties, such as class, race, age or gender – always with the risk of collecting an institutionally oriented account. Moreover, sometimes some of these investigative strategies, when carried out inside institutions and when they seek to explore the migratory pathways of the adolescents, ultimately aim to 'crack the varnish', to break down the resistance of young people, whose silence is nevertheless a protection of the territory of the self (Paté 2023: 220). Of course, intra-institutional approaches are often the only possible way in and enable passionate and important research about a wide range of subjects, especially about their current experiences and future aspirations. But I would like to go further and stress their limitations when they seek to explore these young people's pasts and the depth of their juvenile migratory journeys. Biographical transformations are intertwined like threads in a tapestry: one lie implies another to preserve the overall coherence, and revealing one implies revealing others, threatening to undermine the fragile biographical architecture that can fissure and within which young people can get lost when they are subjected to contradictory injunctions or invasive and repeated solicitations. Indeed, I support the idea that the obsession with the pasts of these adolescents, whether from researchers, journalists or social workers, even varnished with goodwill and active listening, can be analysed as a biographical violence against the energy deployed by young people to create meaning and coherence between an often painful intimate history and a civil narrative whose destabilisation could entail irreversible institutional sanctions. The repeated solicitations reactivate anxieties and plunge the adolescents into a permanent state of *qui vive*. Researchers have to avoid reproducing those forms of biographical violence, either by collecting the stories in spaces and times where this speech is possible or, when the intra-institutional approach is the only entry possible or when the adolescent is caught in a narrative vice, by giving up access to this past, dislocated by a specific and excluding administrative regime, in order to invest other research themes by detaching themselves from obsession with biographical stories and migratory journeys. This is all the more necessary as this obsession with the pasts of young people contributes to reifying their identity on the basis of their migratory stigma and to reproducing institutional classifications and relegations (Payet 2020), while

many research topics about youth experiences remain blind spots in the social sciences.

#### *Towards Extra-Institutional Ethnography 'on the Move': Being at Their Side, Being on Their Side*

After spending several months following adolescents' journeys from Morocco to Spain and France, journeys that they managed to carry out despite sophisticated migration control and the (im)mobility effects of the health crisis (Gazzotti 2023), I thus advocate for research 'on the move' as one of the ways to establish an early relationship of trust and follow adolescents intimately in their pathways to and through Europe. This approach is reminiscent of Marcus's (1995, 1998, 2008) multisited ethnography that aims to embrace a social phenomenon from a multiplicity of spaces, following connections and associations among these dislocated sites. It implies a conceptualisation of mobility that is perceived not only as a method or a factor to be studied, but as a constitutive element of the field itself. This mobility should be anchored in an ethnography as close as possible to the adolescents' daily lives, allowing a more empathetic and contextually grounded understanding of young people's experiences (Cantwell and Luby 1994; Lewis Aptekar 1994). By systematically meeting the adolescents outside institutions (on the street and/or through links and pledges of trust) and accompanying them actively throughout their journeys, the researcher avoids having to 'convince' them of their trustworthiness by being *at their side* and, as Bashir highlights, by being *on their side* – which implies engaging both physically and emotionally in the field, sharing the emotions of fear and joy, celebrating the victories and supporting in the trials and, most importantly, suspending judgments derived from the hegemonic norms of childhood and transnational (im)mobility. The careful and respectful positioning of the researcher, whose trust and reliability are never taken for granted and could be revoked at any moment by the adolescents, is then an ethical and ethnographic responsibility in a universe of constraint, hostility and criminalisation of mobility.

To that extent, the use of social networks enables researchers to establish and maintain long-term relationships of trust with adolescents, thanks to repeated contact and virtual 'small talk' despite geographical distance. These exchanges open up a level of intimacy with the young people, allowing for a certain degree of reciprocity within the multiple and ever-present asymmetries of the investigative rela-

tionship. This allows the researchers to capture everyday practices of meaning-making and to meet the adolescents where they are after they have travelled or crossed a frontier. It also allows them to be situated outside of the pressing but short-lived requests of humanitarians, institutional agents and journalists and to avoid reproducing the symbolic violence of institutional interviews (Mekdjian 2016: 156). The fieldwork situation extends beyond the moment of the interview, expanding in space and time. And the interview itself can take many biographical forms to avoid registers that break away from 'ordinary communication' (Althabe 1990). It can take the form of traditional in-depth interviews and life stories (Bertaux 1997) when the context and the trust bond allow it, but also conversational interviews, remote interviews, phone and video calls or even voice notes... These alternative biographical methods provide young people with greater control over the interaction and take account of the variability of contexts and constraints they experience, but constitute above all, in the end, a myriad of 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou 2006) that are particularly valuable for investigating 'youth in vulnerable situations' (Lavaud 2017).

Most importantly, this transnational long-term relation allows the researchers to truly accompany the adolescents and to conduct observations at different administrative or geographical stages of their journeys. Researchers can thus witness *in situ* the 'biographical transformations' that occur progressively, by documenting the repetitions, ellipses and modifications that are made as the adolescents interact with institutional agents and penetrate heterogeneous administrative universes.

However, these methodologies should not result in romanticising fieldwork that is saturated with violence and characterised by extreme asymmetries of privilege and vulnerability, and the biographical violence researchers may contribute to produce and reproduce is never definitively resolved, as Madi's concern pointed out. It is also noteworthy that researchers themselves are not exempt from institutional control. The social sciences now operate in a context where research is subject to institutionalised ethical regulations and bureaucratic requirements, which Johanna Siméant-Germanos (2022) refers to as the 'bureaucratisation of scientific virtue'. It should be noted that these rules – established to protect the respondents in the first place – can be difficult, if not impossible, to guarantee when working with these adolescents categorised as 'UAMs'. How can we work within the legal framework of age and mi-

nority when chronological, civil and biological age frontiers are blurred and porous? Sometimes, the adolescents do not even know their exact date of birth. As Slow, a Guinean adolescent crossing from Morocco, arrived in the Canary Islands and was bombarded with questions about his civil status and his age, he called me on WhatsApp: 'I don't know what to tell them, I don't know, it has never been important before', he explained anxiously. Besides, many of them are often not in contact with their parents or legal guardians. Obtaining parental authorisation or signed informed consent forms can be, by definition, especially challenging for young 'UAMs'. And how can the researcher obtain signed consent when signing a document is also perceived as a breach of trust and can reignite the symbolic violence of the survey relationship, especially with those who may have low literacy skills? In Rabat in March 2022, some young people who had previously received donated food and clothing packages turned against the volunteers when asked to sign against the withdrawal of the baskets. 'They want us to sign, what does that mean? The European Union gives them money, they make it look like they're giving it to us because they show our signatures, but look at our bags, they don't give anything. The signature is proof that they're lying to us.' Additionally, administrative norms that constrain researchers may clash with the scientific imperatives of the study: how can the researcher plan the coming months in detail or request mission orders from attached institutions when the specificity of the multisited approach is to be able to follow the unpredictability of juvenile trajectories? The researcher must therefore continually negotiate these ethical, legal and administrative constraints and move between heterogeneous and sometimes competing scientific and legal imperatives.

### **Conclusions: From and with Young People, for a Research 'on the Move'**

This article highlighted how scientific solicitations about juvenile migratory journeys can, despite the good will, precautions and enthusiasm of researchers, contribute to forms of biographical violence. I have reflected on my own fieldwork in Morocco, Spain and France to understand how border regimes (and specifically here the enclosure of Europe) intertwine with children rights norms. These norms establish age as a threshold that divide the social world and as a criterion of vulnerability, compelling young people to develop biographical tactics to navigate

this singular and restrictive context. Shifting biographies constitute then a way to protect their intimacy as well as their social and administrative survival. In synergy with Thea Shahrokh invitation to imagine caring methodologies while conducting research with young people on the move (Shahrokh 2023), I proposed some paths for reflection to explore. The methodological and ethical stance that I defended aims to resist both the pathologisation of youth mobility and the confinement of these young people in passive and victimising roles, which are recurrent in scientific literature as well as in institutional and humanitarian actions carried out with them. These paradigms, emphasising the intrinsic vulnerability of these young people and the social anomaly of juvenile transnational journeys, tend to reaffirm hegemonic and globalised norms of childhood (Nieuwenhuys 1998) by which children and adolescents are assigned to social and geographical immobility and to parental and/or institutional guardianship. These norms thus imply regimes of ‘captivity’ of childhood, as well as the adult and institutional ‘appropriation’ of children and adolescents and their infantilisation (Gardet and Nigget 2012; Liebel 2019; Bonnardel 2015). By situating juvenile mobility within the broader context of children’s circulation (Lallemand 1993; Leinawever 2008; Roux 2015) and considering that sedentariness is a situated norm of childhood, my aim is to show that the risks and dangers of juvenile migration are not consubstantial with the transnationalisation of their paths (which is socially valued when it comes to privileged young people), but rather with the effects and consequences of migration policies and the necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) of borders, which criminalise the social existence of these young people.

Breaking away from methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), the multisited approach helps to dismantle the territorialisation of child protection, a common focus in social science research that analyses a specific national or local protection universe. This ‘overflow’ also provides an opportunity to denaturalise the ‘UAM’ category in the social sciences, which is still frequently used as a socio-anthropological category, reproducing normative regulation logics of ‘normal’ and therefore ‘desirable’ childhood (e.g. a sedentary childhood, under parental and/or institutional guardianship) (Peraldi 2013). Detaching ourselves from the normative implications of this administrative category allows us to document the extent to which minority is above all a Western and Eurocentric obsession and how it affects youth experiences, leading to more

and more sophisticated administrative investigations. The risk of contributing to biographical violence, which is often dismissed by various adults in search of juvenile migratory testimonials, as shown in the extract from the novel by Carrère, should, on the contrary, be at the heart of social scientists’ preoccupations. The researcher can thus take ‘side roads’ to explore the complexity of juvenile migration experiences and their institutional and humanitarian treatment, considering these methodological challenges not only as obstacles but also as opportunities for knowledge production.

Given the power dynamics at play in collecting the perspectives of young people on the move, effective and caring fieldwork requires long-term ethnographic immersion that closely follows the social experiences of young people at different stages of their transnational journeys, while also being attuned to the constraints that shape their biographical narratives. Without such a deep temporal, emotional, reflexive and ethical commitment from researchers, the research risks resorting to forms of ‘extractivism’ that strip young people’s words of their context, collect data of poor scientific value and/or reproduce the symbolic violence of administrative procedures. I advocate moving away from intra-institutional ethnography and from Eurocentric norms about childhood and transnational mobility to be able to analyse the evolution of young people’s narratives (in space and time) through an approach as close as possible to their daily and transnational social experiences. This means in particular taking into account the unspeakable parts of their migratory journeys and the universe of specific constraints in which they evolve. This also means, sometimes, waiving the collection of certain data for ethical reasons and never forcing the adolescents to ‘open up’. Ethnography ‘on the move’ and the extended and committed presence of the researcher ‘at’ their side and ‘on’ their side thus allow exploration of how young people perceive and understand the institutions and their institutional experiences, rather than trying to understand them from the institutions’ standpoint.

This longitudinal approach also enables researchers to follow adolescents through different stages of their journeys and observe patterns, shifts and ellipses in the narrative. This methodological reversal does not aim to ‘produce’ or ‘encourage’ the narrative (and even less to ‘crack the varnish’) but to be present if and when they express the desire to share it. By following the thread of the young people’s narrative elaboration, questioning its specificities and conditions of production, and accepting the impossibility

of controlling what is said and what is not said, researchers no longer have to reproduce the logics of institutional investigation and disentangle the true from the false. Instead, they must question the bundle of conditions that lead young people to shape and protect the thickness of their biographical paths and bifurcations – without exacerbating, as researchers, the constant state of alert and *qui-vive* produced by the interlacing of restrictive border regimes and hegemonic norms of childhood.

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