

BOOK REVIEWS

MELONI, FRANCESCA. *Ways of Belonging. Undocumented Youth in the Shadow of Illegality*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 2023. pp. 178.

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Francesca Meloni completed a remarkable five-year ethnographic study among undocumented¹ children and their families as well as with community organisations and school boards in Canada. She started her fieldwork as part of a research team concentrating on the health issues of undocumented families, but during her fieldwork she noticed that participating mothers were more concerned and wanted to talk about their children's education—or, in this case, the lack of it. Although undocumented families live in the high-risk position of deportability, they still try to figure out ways their children can obtain an education and have a future in Canada. Recognising this pushed Meloni's research focus to children, schools, and a feeling of belonging. Thus, *Ways of Belonging* is a tribute to the children who participated in Meloni's research.

The main argument of the book is that the situation of these children as well as the state's attitude towards them are ambivalent. When trying to understand the lived realities of undocumented children, we must follow the unfolding dynamics of this ambivalence, both at the individual and institutional level. At the individual level, this ambivalence means that children develop an ambivalent sense of belonging to cope with a situation where the risk of deportation, which involves the risk of breaking affective ties, is always present. As Meloni (p. 11) states, 'they are caught between the desire to belong and the impossibility to fully belong'. At the institutional level, the

ambivalence comes from the two intersecting positions of these children: their age, which makes them vulnerable and in need of protection, and their undocumented status, which makes them underserving and rejected.

Meloni introduces the concept of *structural invisibility*, the erasure of individuals at the social, legal, and political levels through norms and practices. This conceptualisation of structural invisibility is one of the contributions of this book; it can be utilised in the research on global migration which focuses on the everyday lives and experiences of migrants with insecure residence statuses. The everyday practices and norms carried out in institutional settings are neither inevitable nor accidental—the invisibility of certain marginalised groups stemming from these norms and practices is the outcome of a deliberate state strategy.

After the introductory chapter (pp. 1–17), where Meloni sets the scene by briefly presenting the situation in Canada and outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches, she moves to the empirical chapters. Chapters 1 and 3 examine the macro level, showing how state actors are involved in constructing the illegality and invisibility of these undocumented children. Chapters 4–6 zoom in on the micro level, focusing on the effects of the illegality and invisibility on the lived experiences of individual children.

In chapter 1, *Removable Children* (pp. 18–34), Meloni brings to the forefront four juridical cases involving family deportation. By

analysing the discourses used in these cases, Meloni shows how children are constructed as deportable non-citizens. The ambivalence between ‘the best interest of the child’ and deportability is well demonstrated.

Chapter 2, *Hidden Traces* (pp. 35–41), is more of an ethical and methodological chapter in which Meloni reflects the choices she made when deciding to do research with this marginalised group of children. The main questions are: Is it ethical to document the undocumented, and how can the researcher protect participants from the state apparatuses’ gaze? Finding individuals willing and able to participate and gaining acceptance as a trustworthy person to enter the ethnographic field are always challenging. Meloni openly discusses various aspects of her involvement, including gaining trust and assuming different roles in the field.

In the third chapter, *Failing To Be Called* (pp. 42–60), Meloni explores the laws surrounding the school system. In some regions like Quebec, these laws are failing undocumented children. The law states that education is the right of a child, that it is obligatory to children under 18 years of age, and free to residents, including migrants such as asylum seekers. The failure of the law stems from its inability to recognise undocumented children as a specific group of residents and as children in need of education—the law does not mention them at all. Schools, which are important social environments for children, and places that could safeguard their futures via education (see, for example, Horsti and Khademi 2022), are also places with a high risk of denunciations. Meloni explores the ways teachers and school boards react in situations where there are pupils with an unstable residence status. This chapter also brings to the fore the voices of mothers, community organisers, and state agents.

Chapter 4, *Getting Used to Here* (pp. 61–79), is dedicated to the children and their ambivalent feelings of belonging. Analysing the stories of and interviews with Roberto, Julia, and Alicia, Meloni concludes that this ambivalence is a survival strategy, making it possible for the children to both connect to their social environment and simultaneously protect themselves in case of a possible rejection or deportation.

Double Binds (chapter 5, pp. 80–95) tells the story of Elizabeth and introduces some of her photographs. Through Elizabeth’s story, the effects of the ambivalence of these children, as both minors and undocumented migrants, become inevitable. Elizabeth’s asylum claim is seen as not coherent enough. Thus, she is evaluated as a person who should be capable of producing a coherent life story in a harsh situation. At the same time, the credibility of her story is questioned; the immigration officer finds it hard to believe that a child could have crossed state borders and survived the dangerous route alone. The traumatising burden of both a history of family violence and the presence of bureaucratic violence unravels in the photographs Elizabeth has taken. Meloni analyses the photographs, Elizabeth’s dreams, and Ursula Le Guin’s story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* in a novel way, portraying both the vulnerability and the agency of an undocumented child.

In the final empirical chapter, *Hopes and Departures* (chapter 6, pp. 96–108), Meloni turns to the stories of Elizabeth, Luis, and Roberto. The detailed narrative style is the soul of this chapter, and the children, with their somewhat familiar ponderings, come close to the reader.

In the concluding chapter (pp. 109–119), Meloni brings the reader closer to the present moment by introducing some legislation enacted after her fieldwork period ended. She also

returns to some of the children, describing their new situations. She then turns to highlighting the gaps in the laws, recommending new legislation that could secure the lives of undocumented children. In the final section, she reflects on the theoretical construction she offers through the concept of *belonging*.

One main contribution of this book is the nuanced exploration of both the concept of belonging and the picture of migrant children. In both cases, Meloni moves from dichotomies (belonging–not belonging, victimhood–resistance) to more diverse understandings. This is enabled by the rich ethnographic data she gathered and her empathetic way of writing about the children she met. Another contribution is the focus on children, their experiences, and their agency. That chosen focus and approach both enrich the literature on undocumented lives (see Gonzales 2015) and the active negotiations of belonging (see Korjonen-Kuusipuro, Kuusisto, and Tuominen 2019).

A more detailed description of the differing legislative systems in Canada's regions could have helped the non-Canadian reader of this book to grasp the overall situation, and the meanings of the laws and practices introduced. From time to time, it was challenging to follow an argument given the ambiguity of whether the case in question pertained to national or regional legislation. On the other hand, the rich empirical data and the thoughtful style of writing about these children, their dreams, and their struggles all compensate for the above-mentioned gap and made for a captivating reading experience.

Meloni used interview data as the primary resource for this book, and this choice works well with her argumentation by giving a direct and intimate perspective on the children's experiences. But, from an anthropological

standpoint, this leaves a gap in relation to the sounds, smells and, feelings experienced in the field. The ambition for future research could involve crafting a 'thick description', which captures the nuanced everyday realities of these children, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of their lived experiences.

I highly recommend this book to all interested in the lived experiences of migrant children—whether documented or not. The unfolding of the institutional and individual level ambivalence is presented in a touching way, allowing the reader to relate to the struggles of these children and their families.

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NOTES

- 1 The concept of 'undocumented' is problematic, and I use it here only because the author also uses it.

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- Korjonen-Kuusipuro, Kristiina, Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto, and Jaakko Tuominen** 2019. Everyday Negotiations of Belonging: Making Mexican Masks Together with Unaccompanied Minors in Finland. *Journal of Youth Studies* 22 (4): 551–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1523539>