Introduction to the Special Issue: New Anthropological Perspectives on Children and Youth on the Move

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Nataliya Tchermalykh and Elisa Floristán Millán

This special issue of *Anthropology in Action* focuses on the intersection of two equally important, and yet unequally researched, areas of anthropological inquiry: migration and childhood. In recent years, the mediatic attention to migration has led to an increased visibility of children and youth moving through transnational contexts, often with limited access to social and economic resources. Undoubtedly, the transnational movement of young people is far from a recent phenomenon. On the contrary, historically these individuals had more chances to successfully travel long distances in search of a more fulfilled life than their older counterparts. Migration – a movement of people, associated with hopes and prospects for a better life, but also driven by fears of violence and poverty – has always had a young face.

However, it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century that the identities and itineraries of young people, especially those travelling alone, have emerged as a separate object of multidisciplinary attention (Ensor and Goździak 2010; Lems, Oester and Strasser 2019). These have increasingly been identified and debated in academic discourses, as well as in children-oriented law, public policy, humanitarian actions and international advocacy. These discourses have grown exponentially due to the institutionalisation of the children's rights regime on the global scale after the near-universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) in 1989. This was supposed to signify protection, self-determination and equality of treatment for all underage human beings, including those involved in transnational migration. It should be noted that Article 20 of the CRC expressly requires states to give unaccompanied children 'special protection and assistance', while Article 22 guarantees equal access to welfare for underaged citizens and refugees alike – as far as they are recognised as children (UNCRC 1989). These international developments influenced European law, and

have significantly increased the mobility of children compared to their adult counterparts. Non-citizens under 18 years old are not subject to the Dublin regulations that oblige asylum seekers to claim asylum in the country of first entry, and therefore have more control over their itineraries and final destinations. As a result, being below the age of majority became not only a source of vulnerability, but also a *resource* for increased mobility and legality of status, as well as for institutional support, at least until the threshold of legally defined adulthood is reached.

One can see these legislative developments in the area of children's rights as an attempt to envision a progressive, post-national and inclusive citizenship, not bound to the concept of the nation state, that is often referred to as cosmopolitan, transnational or global citizenship (Beck and Sznaider 2006). Cosmopolitan citizenship implies that all humans should have the possibility to enjoy their rights independently of their location, whether they are in their states or outside them, and seeks to extend democracy beyond the nation state (Chandler 2003). When transposed to the system of children's rights, such a universal ideal positions underaged humans, including non-citizens, as global citizens of an imaginary 'supra-state' of childhood, where all individuals enjoy their rights freely and equally, regardless of their status. In practice, even though this policy guarantees an extension of welfare citizenship (rights to social protection) to migrant children, this inclusionary 'state of childhood' appears to be temporally bound to the subject's chronological age, and reaffirms the Eurocentric, quantifiable model of childhood.

As these young people transition to adulthood, they are affected by a radical change in legal regime: they experience the 'evaporation' of rights previously accorded to them as children, becoming undocumented and deportable young adults. What emerges is a puzzle, in which the exceptional but supposedly

universal provisions allocate to children only a fragile and transient inscription of citizenship and legal personhood. As Benhabib (2005) has noted, transnational migration brings to the fore the constitutive dilemma at the heart of liberal democracies between sovereign self-determination claims on the one hand and adherence to universal human rights principles on the other, and between the inclusionary (social and political rights) and exclusionary (the rights to remain on the territory) facets of citizenship. This statement can be applied to the domain of young people's migration, too. As long as the allocation of citizenship or nationality creates and consolidates unequal life opportunities and unequal mobility in space, cosmopolitan citizenship for all, even when *all* are children, will remain a utopia.

Aim of this Special Issue

In this special issue, we argue that the destinies of children and young people moving through transnational contexts embody the multiple paradoxes of reasoning underlying the international regimes of human and children's rights. Specifically, these young people present a living antithesis to the aspirational horizon of cosmopolitan citizenship and enhanced mobility for all underaged human beings beyond the control of nation states. Therefore, their trajectories and narratives are worthy of particular anthropological attention, as they literally embody the dramatic clashes between protracted conflict and democracy, wealth and poverty, and North and South, as well as the perpetually concealed but no less violent opposition between international discourses and national policies, between the promises of human rights rhetoric and the reality of sovereign claims over territories and subjects, consolidated into the politically rigid system of *global apartheid* (Köhler 1995; Van Houtum 2010). Overall, the aim of this special issue is to introduce the theoretical developments, coming from critical childhood and children's rights studies, that place under scrutiny categories used to describe hypermobile and itinerant models of childhood and adolescence – such as children's vulnerability, agency and citizenship – and incorporate them into the anthropological framework, informed by the interdisciplinary studies of human migration and borders.

Developments in Anthropological Theory

In the past decade, the growing body of empirical research, including in-depth ethnographic inquiries (Coe et al. 2011; Heidbrink 2016; Oliveira 2018; Orellana 2015; Terrio 2015; Galli 2023), dedicated to children and youth migration, started to point towards a paradox: despite the global articulation of children's rights aimed at providing protection, autonomy and self-determination to all children, the condition of children and youths on the move is, perhaps more than ever, full of disillusion, political inconsistencies and traumatic events, including high rates of suicide (Bhabha 2009, 2016). Anthropologists, too, have been part of these debates. Whereas anthropological interventions have been mostly critical, arguing against the Western-inspired universality of childhood experiences (Liebel 2020) and decentring hegemonic representations of childhood (Cannella and Viruru 2004) promoted in international arenas, with time anthropologists have begun to address the complexity of the effects of globalisation on childhood, and the rhetorical strength and attractiveness of the universal rights regimes for children and adolescents themselves.

Moving away from the localised identities of 'children of isles, jungles and deserts' studied by pioneer anthropologists (Malinowski 2013; Mead 1928), and transcending the bounded realms of slums and streets inhabited by disadvantaged youth in remote and mostly rural areas (Scheper-Hughes 2001; Willis 1978), increased ethnographic attention has been paid to groups of children representing *transnational models* of childhood and adolescence (Derr and Corona 2020; Tyrrell et al. 2013). Transnational childhoods are experienced by young people who grow up as itinerant and hypermobile subjects, creating meaningful ties with multiple national contexts, as well as with the very process of being on the move (Gardner 2012). Thus far, anthropological research has conceptualised these children and adolescents as complex beings with multiple social belongings, both to the system they originate from and to the system they arrive in (Jiménez 2011). In this issue, we explore how age and citizenship, as well as the geographic trajectories of these youths, are dynamic rather than restrictive characteristics that evolve in time and space, following the development of the subjects.

Among these individuals, young people crossing borders autonomously, most often referred to as 'unaccompanied minors', are of particular salience. The reasons that these adolescents migrate to Europe are diverse, ranging from such macro-factors as armed conflict and ethnic persecution, the total absence of social guarantees and poor chances for the future in their home countries to micro-factors such as local situations of injustice, abuse and neglect. Moreover,

the conditions imposed by global capitalism on local contexts have modified the everyday practices and shaped the desires and dreams of these young people, producing yet another form of social suffering in a globalised world, which they tend to act upon by migrating to another sociopolitical context.

In their journeys, they are often driven by utopian visions of justice, promoted by the European states that self-represent as a democratically governed supranational political entity, providing fair redistribution of resources and equal recognition of identities, associated with a better life and a fuller enjoyment of rights. What they find instead are age-related suspicions, an incapacity of the state to understand and fulfil their interests, institutional confinement and mistreatment inside protection facilities, and risks of exploitation or deportation outside them. In short, they find a system of global apartheid that they were unaware of before crossing the borders.

Global Apartheid and Hypermobile Young Subjects

Despite the absence of legal segregation between the first and third world, first-world governments set conditions for citizenship, creating discrimination in movement. The rights and protections to which migrants are entitled are inevitably limited by these conditions, disproportionately affecting racialised and impoverished individuals. The articles in this special issue demonstrate how *global apartheid* appears regarding the mobility and protection of children through intrusive regulatory mechanisms, including border control, biographical interviews, court hearings, birth certificates and medical procedures of age determination. These mechanisms are deployed against the backdrop of a global proliferation of children's rights rhetoric and a trend towards more inclusive models of citizenship, such as European citizenship, on one hand, and increasingly strict migration control on the other. The study of the transnational trajectories of unaccompanied minors provides new insights for analysing the border device and understanding the effects of global apartheid as a totalising macro-phenomenon, or a 'total social fact' (Mauss).

In the face of these structural constraints imposed on them by new cultural contexts, these young individuals are left with no choice but to find a satisfactory way to become adult human beings with enough agency to act in the global world, or to develop strat-

egies to cope with negative or unexpected outcomes of migration.

Becoming Adults While Migrating

The process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood in the context of autonomous transnational migration can be linked with the common theme of coming of age in anthropological literature, which is, conversely, entirely absent from legal texts and discourses. Historically, anthropologists have researched the symbolic processes by which an individual (or a group) is formally recognised as an adult member of a community, through rights of passage and initiation that involve three stages: separation, liminality or so-called limbo, and incorporation. During these stages the individual faces numerous trials and ordeals, leading to their inner transformation, acquisition of the new status and incorporation into the community of adults.

Some anthropologists have used this framework to interpret the role of migratory experiences in the process of coming of age, such as the journey of young Afghans to Iran as a phase of separation, the stay there as a period of liminality and the return to Afghanistan as a reincorporation, described by Monsutti (2007). However, autonomous migration of unaccompanied minors to Europe differs in that they seek inclusion in another society according to cosmopolitan and transnational logic. The prolonged stages of waiting for regularisation have been described as *liminality* and a state of *limbo*, that is, an uncertain period between childhood and adulthood, and between legality and illegality. In the classical understanding, *limbo* is the stage during which the transformative potential of the ritual is revealed, and the social status of the individual is modified, which is not the case in prolonged and alienating waiting in institutional facilities that more often than not leads nowhere. In fact, whereas even the most intrusive initiatory rites were part of a system of *inclusion* of underaged individuals into the community, what these young migrants face is a sophisticated system of unspoken *exclusion*, carried out in accordance with democratic principles of no harm. Chiara Galli (2023), writing about the judicial treatment of non-citizen minors from Latin America in the United States, calls it, metaphorically, a rite of *reverse passage*. She points out that the arguments put forward to be legitimately recognised as a child involve an infantilising narrative that erases any form of agency,

isolating a person in the form of everlasting, power-less childhood.

Not all anthropologists agree with such a negative interpretation. As the ethnographies in this special issue demonstrate, in order to pursue what they consider to be successful life itineraries, which do not always coincide with institutional expectations, these young people often freely mix formal (institutionalised or legal) and informal (extra-institutional or illegal) means to achieve more mobility and social inclusion, according to their life circumstances. As opposed to the easily quantifiable models of childhood and adulthood developed by modern states in accordance with demographic logic, the protagonists of this special issue associate their coming of age or emancipation with levels of autonomy (Wihstutz), roles they play within family structures (Sabouni), transnational mobility (Floristán Millán) and access to employment or citizenship (Marzola). It is worth noting that during their transnational journeys to the Global North, their conception of adulthood also changes; from a marriable member of society who can support a household, a more individualistic and atomised conception of the adult self emerges, associated with legal status, a new set of social obligations, independence and economic self-sufficiency (see Sabouni, Marzola).

Although much research offers a negative and oppressive view of borders, there is a growing body of work that demonstrates the creativity of migrant children within these spaces (Sur 2021; Campbell 2009; Floristán Millán, this issue). For young people located on the periphery of states, borders can offer alternative forms of life, movement and opportunities for the fulfilment of their interests. Moreover, the hypermobility of these children disrupts traditional understandings of migration as a unidirectional movement. Instead, unaccompanied migrant children provide a transnational perspective on borders, inhabited by children in a productive way. The concept of *zigzagging* – discovering multiple European countries during the migratory journey – challenges the victimising portrayal of young migrants that prevails in the humanitarian sector, which frames young mobility as solely driven by negative factors. In contrast, for these young people, migration could include positive aspects including experiencing new realities, accessing new job opportunities and exploring different places.

Broadening the Terminology, Deconstructing the Category

In view of the above, in this special issue we consciously opt for a broader terminology – that of *children and youth on the move* – in order to avoid legally entrenched categories and abbreviations, such as unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs or UAMs), young asylum seekers, separated children or children refugees, and so on. On the one hand, all these terms represent, at least partially, the realities of migrating youth. On the other hand, none of them stand the test of generalisation: not all young migrants seek asylum, not all are recognised as minors, not all are granted refugee status, or are able to keep it after reaching majority. Not all of them agree on being called 'migrant children', and not all authors agree on the reference to passive-sounding 'unaccompanied and separated' minors, since for most of these young people their itinerary was a matter of choice.

Moreover, the notion of children and youth on the move does not include – in this special issue, at least – the transnational movement of privileged children studying in boarding schools, flying internationally without parental accompaniment, or sailing across continents without structural constraints, as in Greta Thunberg's UN-endorsed transatlantic journey. How different such journeys are from the multiple attempts to cross the Mediterranean made by Afghan or Moroccan adolescents, often under the effect of fear-reducing amphetamines, described by Floristán Millán.

In this collection, we move away from homogenisation and 'methodological nationalism' with its naturalised containers of bounded nationhood and age (Heymas 2017; Vélez-Ibañez 2017) from which academic research is not exempt, wishing instead to reflect a picture of the diversity of trajectories, desires and knowledge of these children.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the heavily legalised bureaucratic and humanitarian category of 'the unaccompanied minor' cannot be entirely disregarded. The model of disadvantaged and itinerant childhood and adolescence that this category describes is overly *juridicised*, that is regulated and shaped by law. In Western liberal democracies law is one of the systems that mediates and preserves the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and plays a formative role in identity formation. For example, the legal configurations enabling facilitated transborder mobility for underaged individuals played a formative role in the constitution of *harraga* culture – a youth subculture of 'border burners' mov-

ing from the Maghreb to Southern and Western Europe, described by Floristán Millán and Marmié (this issue). In a way, the transnational trajectories, life strategies and subjective experiences of these young individuals are co-produced by the legal frameworks for the protection of children in the European Union and its member states, as well as those regulating migration flows from South to North.

As the authors of this collection demonstrate, migrant children do not constitute a determined social group outside of the biopolitical category of chronological age that seems to be of essential importance for states and border agencies. At the same time, age is often disregarded, or treated with liberty, by the subjects themselves. For example, in his ethnography of the quarantine ship for migrants arriving during the COVID-19 pandemic, Marzola describes how different groups of young migrants repeatedly modify their birth dates, following external advice, in order to be considered employable 'adults' or protectable 'children' (Marzola, this issue). Similarly, in her research article exploring the challenges of collecting the life narratives of young migrants, Marmié describes how young individuals tend to modify their stories, making them more coherent or conforming to adult expectations, as a way to accommodate themselves and simultaneously resist the 'biographical injunction' imposed on them by the hosting institutions to certify their belonging to 'childhood' and deservingness of protection (Marmié, this issue).

The individual stories, chosen by the authors as embodiments of the trends that were observed in the field, all deconstruct the rigidity of the UAM category from different standpoints:

Gianmarco Marzola's article recounts the coming-of-age story of Bilal – a Senegalese youth who arrived in Italy through Libya while underaged, but presented himself as an adult to evade institutional alienation and passivity, and to gain immediate access to the market of informal employment. He later found out that his chances to find a regular job were higher in Portugal, to which he travelled by crossing multiple European countries. In Lisbon, he ended up receiving a valid residence permit and even applied for citizenship – 'finally becoming a real man', in his own words. This research provides a fine-grained ethnography of a young person actively acting upon the similarly rigid yet still malleable boundaries between adulthood and childhood, unravelling the way that they are chronologically and discursively constructed, in order to achieve what he perceives as emancipation under the restrictive conditions of the migration regime.

In her article, Floristán Millán describes a drawing workshop conducted on a seashore in Melilla (Spain) with young individuals from Morocco trying to cross the border in order to reach Europe. Among them, some have reclaimed their minority, and have been accommodated in children-oriented facilities, but decided to exit the system of child protection consciously, while others have not even tried. All of them, despite age and gender differences, form an autonomous community of young people with similarly violent border experiences and transnational hopes and interests. They are a community in which a creative form of intra-group solidarity at the margins of the state and institutional control is being forged.

Wihstutz tells the story of Spiderman, a 6-year-old child living in a facility, whose story deconstructs the exceptionalism of the category of unaccompanied minors. She argues that accompanied minors – migrating with their families – should be researched on equal footing with their unaccompanied counterparts as subjects of global children's migration. Spiderman, whose family's request for asylum was rejected, affirms his claims to membership in German society and his right to stay through transgressive interactions that are often interpreted as antisocial behaviour. Wihstutz uses this example to reflect on the spatial and relational aspects of citizenship, developing a model of 'lived citizenship' (Fahnøe and Warming 2017) that permits the reconciliation of the contradictory aspects of citizenship (as social practices and as belonging to a state) of children and youth on the move.

Also anchored in a German context, Sabouni's article describes the complexity of family and kin relationships in transnational families of Syrian refugees. Through the detailed portrait of T., whose migratory experience is multiple, as he has been both an unaccompanied minor in a German institutional facility, and later a son in a traditional family of refugees, Sabouni provides an analysis of conflictual family dynamics. This perspective erodes the child–adult dichotomy, and emphasises the emotional cost of the multidimensional adaptations that Sabouni's subject of study was exposed to.

In her methodological article, arguing for a greater ethnographic mobility and sensitivity, while being as close as possible to the subjects being researched, Marmié delves into the process of collecting testimonies of those who, by producing different sets of narratives oriented towards different actors, influence their migratory trajectory and status. Reflecting on the reasons for these adaptations, Marmié writes, 'there are two factors guiding and shaping the juvenile nar-

ratives: the stages of their migration pathway (within or outside Europe) and, more importantly, the degree of socialisation to institutional intervention', calling for an extra-institutional ethnography that she terms 'research on the move, from and with young people'.

Methodology

Overall, this compendium considers ethnography as a broad methodology that facilitates reflections that connect concrete observations with macro-social issues. As these youth traverse borders and constantly move across various locations, both spatially and in their desires and interests, the unidirectional view of migration and the methodological nationalism that prevails in research on borders and border-crossers must be disrupted to give space to ethnographic innovation. The authors ground their theoretical frameworks in thick ethnographic descriptions of the lifeworlds of young people, highlighting understudied aspects of the condition of youths on the move to Europe. Through an intuitive approach that prioritises extra-institutional ethnography (Marmié) with hypermobile research subjects over the immobility of institutional control, the authors conduct longitudinal studies over several years, in repeated contact with their subjects under different migratory circumstances and through different means. While collaborative ethnographies are no longer considered a panacea, and have been in turn criticised for reproducing field-related inequalities, the authors in this special issue advocate for a renewed set of research tools, developed in response to the needs of their interlocutors, such as multimodal ethnography. An example of this approach are five drawings created by Floristán Millán's interlocutors that provide a visual and synthetic depiction of their condition, as well as a form of ethnographic co-authorship.

Conclusions

Whereas the authors of this issue fully acknowledge that children's transborder mobility highlights the tension between structural oppression and the agentive capacity of a human subject, we distance ourselves from the victimisation–emancipation dichotomy. Instead, we emphasise that the figure of the 'unaccompanied minor' is much more complex than yet another 'icon of stolen childhood' (Poretti et al.), victimised and instrumentalised to justify the field of humanitarian interventions, relief and philanthropy.

Political and mediatic representations of unaccompanied migrant minors occupy only a small portion of the visual representation of migration, in which the central roles are still played by more visually appealing young children, who are associated with vulnerability and distress. In contrast, mostly male and mostly non-white teenagers are used to exemplify the rampant dangers of illegal migration, informal networks of human traffickers, petty crime and substance abuse.

In academic literature, however, there is an abundance of descriptions and analyses of the journeys of isolated adolescents, with an average of 10 articles per week, and this number is continually increasing. The images of autonomous youth courageously moving across borders, as illustrated in Emmanuel Carrère's novel 'Yoga' mentioned by Marmié, seem to have a significant narrative potential for social scientists, activists and social workers.

On the one hand, this fascination can be interpreted as a performative attempt carried out by responsible citizens, an attempt to seek justice and represent, at least discursively, the most marginalised individuals who do not have access to effective democratic and legal tools. On the other hand, it may signify an inextricable cultural interest in coming-of-age narratives that prevail despite the marginalisation of ritualistic aspects of social life. These frameworks – like the 'Hero's Journey', popularised by Joseph Campbell (1949), or the emancipatory narrative arc in folk tales, revealed by Vladimir Propp (1928) – are centred around an individual who embarks on a journey of self-discovery, facing trials and challenges, ultimately emerging transformed and empowered. As opposed to the 'victimisation' narrative that previously prevailed, a new trope – that of empowerment and social inclusion – seems to emerge and develop in academic, international and humanitarian discourses.

Within interdisciplinary studies of childhood, there seems to be a silent injunction to provide an optimistic interpretation of life conditions, to avoid children's 'victimisation', which would prevent the emancipatory perspective on a given subject. While it is imperative not to represent children and young people as mere victims, it is not enough to rhetorically emphasise their 'thin' or 'ambiguous' agency under structural constraints. Rather, it is crucial to realistically portray the tragedies that these young individuals encounter during their migration, as well as the failures of their allies to support them. We, anthropologists, must avoid using the imperative of 'giving voice' as a way to exonerate ourselves from responsibility.

While acknowledging the agency of young migrants, it is essential to recognise their marginalised position. Although they may be perceived as 'victims of violence', and portrayed as such by international NGOs, these discourses tend to omit that this violence is primarily perpetrated by wealthy Western states. There is sufficient evidence that European liberal democracies deploy significant controlling efforts, including bureaucratic and legal measures, as well as medical and social interventions, to question, exclude, dispossess and ultimately deport these children back to the areas they were seeking to escape. This systemic violence is infrequently challenged and often reinforced by the current children's rights regime, which is at times too ambiguous or too restrictive, such as in the strictly temporal definition of childhood. Therefore, while it is crucial to listen to the voices of these young people and represent their perspective – which is a fundamental principle of children's rights studies, but also its uncritically reproduced 'mantra' – this should not impede a critical assessment of the underlying structures and macro-factors that affect young lives. We cannot presume that non-citizen youth can achieve significant social change through their political will and agency alone. It is imperative to emphasise that non-citizen children cannot attain the ideal-typical independence and autonomy necessary for political action that the neoliberal ideal of a free subject promotes. The echo of this powerful ideal still resonates in the UN CRC, and yet we must recognise its failures.

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