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# Tense times for young migrants: temporality, life-course and immigration status

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection between immigration status, life-course and the experience of time. It looks at how time and life-course transitions are experienced by young people who are in constant encounter with the immigration regime in the UK. The encounters at this intersection produce a complex landscape for young people to navigate during their transitions to adulthood. What emerges from unpicking the relations of this messy and complex temporal-immigration status matrix, are distinct experiences of time and life-course transitions for young migrants. First, in dealing with the immigration regime young people are confined to a passive role of waiting that results in a sense of feeling stuck. Secondly, pre-18 young people experience a growing up too early and upon turning 18 and gaining legal independence, their situation paradoxically leads to practical dependence. And thirdly, the immigration status renewal system produces long-term uncertainty for young people's futures.

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Immigration status; time; life-course; bordering mechanisms; young migrants

## Introduction

Time and life-course transitions are profoundly impacted for young people in precarious immigration situations by their constant encounter with the immigration regime. Despite this, time and temporalities remain little explored in the migration literature (Cwerner 2001; Griffiths 2014). The emerging themes of this literature, as Griffiths, Anderson and Rogers found in their review paper, cluster around 'the strong relationship between power, the state and management of time' on the one hand, and migrant subjectivity on the other (2013). The encounters at this intersection between immigration status and time produce a complex landscape for young people to navigate during their transitions to adulthood. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this article will start to unpick this messy and complex temporal matrix interacting with the immigration regime, and how young migrants navigate them, thus contributing to this growing literature that considers time, temporalities and migration.

For young migrants growing up in the UK, their immigration status and migrancy impact their subjective experience of time, which often contradicts bureaucratic and

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cultural expectations of time, their life-course transitions from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, and produces certain conditions as their lives unfold. Securing immigration status and its renewal involves significant waiting and young people's lives become dominated by a state of waiting and a sense of being stuck. This affects how time comes to be experienced. While waiting to get status, time moves too slowly for young people and leaves them feeling stuck as they cannot participate in life with peers. Waiting on their immigration application decision also affects how young people feel about becoming an adult. Dealing with the immigration regime throughout adolescence meant many felt they grew up too early as they took on adult responsibilities earlier in life. Finally, receiving immigration status gave only temporary relief. While able to move on with aspects of their lives such as work and education, the renewal system pushed young people into long-term uncertainty over their future through 'permanent temporariness', effectively living life on probation until they can obtain British Citizenship.

Many young migrants come to the UK as children with their families or to join family members already in the UK. The young people in this research were all ten years old or younger when they migrated to the UK. They often came from former British colonies and had pre-existing links to the UK. At the time of the research the young people were in their early twenties and had lived in the UK between 10 and 15 years – the majority of their life – yet still had no long-term secure future in the country they consider home. For many young migrants in the UK, it is difficult to secure long-term security, as they are only eligible to apply for 'leave outside the immigration rules', or 'limited leave to remain' (LLR). This is a legal status that entitles a person to live and work in the UK for 30 months after which it has to be renewed. The application fees together with the Immigration Health Surcharge cost £2593 at the time of writing. Securing this legal status for the first time took young people between 5 and 10 years. After four successful 'limited leave to remain' applications young people become eligible to apply for the settlement status 'indefinite leave to remain' (ILR) at a cost of £2389. After a further 12 months of ILR they can apply for British Citizenship at the cost of £1330 in application fees. This means that at the current cost, young people's journeys to citizenship last a minimum of 11 years and costs a minimum of £14,091 in fees. This does not include time spent waiting for application decisions, other delays, or costs for legal fees. None of the young people in this research were asylum seekers or refugees.

The article begins with an outline of relevant theoretical debates in relation to time, life-course and migration, and an explanation of the study and its methodology. It will then explore in-depth how encounters with the immigration regime shape young people's experiences of time and life-course transitions, structured in three time-sensitive sections: the first section explores waiting and feeling stuck before getting status; the second section examines the present in which young people are experiencing paradoxical adulthood transitions; and the final section looks to the future and the long-term uncertainty that is produced as a result of the immigration regime for the young migrants in this research.

### **Messy times and life-course transitions**

Contrary to expectations, time, temporality, and life-course transitions become complex, non-linear and contradictory concepts in young migrants' lives through their encounter

with the British immigration regime. The lives of young migrants unfold at these intersections of simultaneous and competing temporalities, or temporal zones. As Gray points out, 'time is complex and multidimensional, involving factors such as tempo (speed and pace) and duration (extent and horizon)' (2011, 420). While scholars on the anthropology of time (e.g. Gell 2001) and life-course sociologists (e.g. Thomson et al. 2004; Hockey and James 2017) have developed complex understandings on the relationship between the experience of time, culture, structures and individuals, migration literature often considers time as more discrete areas or states (Cwerner 2001; Anderson 2018). These include the decision to migrate, the journey, the arrival, and social, cultural, and economic integration imagined as unfolding in a coherent, linear, and forward-moving manner. Time is crucial in who is considered a migrant and who is not. For instance, the UN Statistics Division considers a person a long-term migrant if they have lived outside of their country of usual residence for at least 12 months (United Nations 2017). Over time migrants accumulate rights which have implications for their legal status. It matters at what age you migrate in terms of your work, career or starting a family. Time is also inextricably implicated in the bureaucracy and administration of how the state manages and controls migration by deciding when and which immigration status to give to people. It matters to a person and their unfolding life whether they have to wait 3 months or 3 years to receive a decision on their application. And it also matters whether somebody receives a short-term temporary immigration status or one that gives them indefinite security in their country of residence. However, time matters in many ways in the process of migration and has many rhythms and cycles not always synchronised with the rhythms of time around them. Rather experiences of time are diverse, as Gray argues, and experiences of time are often in disharmony with hegemonic clock time (2011, 420). Griffiths, Anderson, and Rogers (2013) have argued that during migration different types and scales of time can stand in tension with each other, such as natural and cultural times, time in relation to life-course and employment, or social time versus bureaucratic or industrial times. Various temporal aspects of migration intersect to create a messy experience and unfolding of time and life.

This article examines the varying degrees of control or power young migrants in a precarious immigration situation have over these different temporal zones. For example, they can influence their school results, but cannot speed up a decision on their immigration application. Waiting on a decision can be debilitating and suspends people in a limbo. In relation to the asylum system, Griffiths has called this a 'precarious, quasi-legal space' (2014, 1993). Back and Sinha describe being in this condition as a 'temporal straightjacket' where people are trapped in the present (2018, 96). They are unable to move forward to the future while the clock is ticking and people around them move on. Conlon helpfully distinguishes between waiting as socially produced space and waiting as actively encountered in everyday space (2011). Consequently, waiting plays different roles at different moments in young migrants' lives and along their journey towards citizenship.

Young adulthood is also often theorised as an in between and liminal space (Gray 2011). Transitions to adulthood are conventionally marked by greater personal responsibilities and a changing role in the family, economic independence, educational and occupational attainment, marriage, renting or buying a house and starting a family. Although scholars have deconstructed such a standardised view of life-course transitions

since the 1990s, linear timelines still hold power, for instance through bureaucratic practices or cultural expectations, especially between generations. In the UK, we can observe a slowing down of transition into adulthood and an extension of what is understood as adolescence over recent years (Thomson et al. 2004). This is due to extended education and increasing housing costs in contrast to wages (Sawyer et al. 2018). However, little is known about the impact of immigration status on this life-course transition (for an exception see Sirriyeh 2013). In the context of the asylum system, Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh found that unaccompanied refugee minors in care experienced accelerated transitions to adulthood while simultaneously being in a state of 'waithood' due to the uncertainty surrounding their asylum claims (2018). In the United States, Gonzales found that young 'undocumented' migrants transitioned into 'illegality' as they turned 18 and thus became more invisible to state institutions and more independent (2016) and that upon turning 18 their immigration status came to dominate all areas of their lives.

### Tense times

There are then three key time-life-course-migration tensions that emerge in relation to this research and that I discuss in this article. The first tension relates to the misalignment between bureaucratic time and individually experienced time as shaped through the encounter with the immigration regime. Here, control over the passing of time and waiting can be a form of state governance and power, and the passing of time can feel slow or fast in relation to bureaucratic processes (Griffiths 2014; Back and Sinha 2018).

The second tension is how young people's transitions from childhood to adulthood are complicated and shaped by their migrancy, immigration status and the British immigration regime. While young migrants often took on adult responsibilities before their 18th birthday because of their and their families immigration situation, they found their adulthood curtailed upon turning 18 due to their immigration status (Sirriyeh 2013; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018).

The third and final tension in relation to time and life-course examined in this article relates to long-term uncertainty that is produced through the immigration regime by multiple short-term and costly immigration statuses on the path to citizenship. This affects young people's ability to imagine their own future and denies them agency in the process of creating their own future.

### Methodology

This article draws on one of two research sites in my doctoral research with young migrants in London. The project examined the everyday lives of young undocumented migrants and the impacts of precarious immigration status on young people's lives. Researching the lives of young 'undocumented' migrants who are illegalised by the state and subject to state surveillance poses a plethora of challenges and requires careful ethical consideration. This project employed an ethnographic approach that used multiple qualitative methods incorporating elements of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Sinha and Back 2014), decolonising methods (Smith 2012; Bhabra 2014), and feminist and critical race methodologies (Alcoff 1991; Crenshaw 1991;

Skeggs 2002; Gunaratnam 2013). The intention of this was to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex issues outlined above from the perspectives of those living them, carry out research ethically and produce knowledge that is not exploitative of participants. Choosing these methods intends to make the connections between the past and the present visible; connecting the lived experience to specific intersectional and structural positions; to invite genuine dialogue and listening between myself and participants in a collaborative approach to knowledge production; and to make reflexivity an integral part of the research process. Finally, methods were also chosen to avoid a replication of interrogation techniques used by the state which participants in this research are likely to have been subjected to.

The research was carried out for 18 months between September 2016 and March 2018. The research site that this article is based on was a London-based youth-led campaign group for young migrants aged between 18 and 25. I attended their regular campaign meetings, which had between eight and 15 members, and monthly gatherings, which were open to anyone and were usually attended by between twenty and forty young people. I also accompanied members of the group on campaign activities, such as giving assemblies in schools, attending college fairs or political actions. In addition, I carried out in-depth one-to-one unstructured interviews, or conversations, with nine young people. Eight of these young people were undocumented in the past and now on the renewal pathway, while one was still undocumented. I also organised two theatre-based workshops with four young people. The one-to-one conversations and theatre workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed. In total, 14 individual stories of young people were collected, in addition to the ethnographic fieldwork. Of these, ten were female and four were male. Most young people in the campaign group were also female. The young people had diverse immigration situations and pathways into 'illegality', with hardly any of them passing through the asylum system. Most had entered the UK on short-term visas or non-settled stay. The majority of the young people were born in Nigeria (9), two in Jamaica, one in Ghana, one in the Gambia, and one in Pakistan. All of them came to the UK under the age of 18 and most under the age of ten. They therefore completed the majority of their education in the UK. They usually came to the UK with their families to join a family member already in the UK. At the time of the interview, they were all in their early twenties.

I also collated their published materials for my analysis. In October 2017, they participated in a conference at Goldsmiths College, University of London. The data were thematically analysed and presented to participants at a feedback session.

Consent was obtained from all participants. I was DBS checked and acquired institutional ethical approval from Goldsmiths University, and the campaign group. All information was treated confidentially, and names and locations have been anonymised to protect individuals' identities.

### **Before status: waiting and being stuck**

This section examines how *waiting* on immigration status effects and is experienced by young people. How does it feel to be fixed in an eternal present by the immigration regime? The clock keeps ticking, days get struck off the calendar and birthdays keep coming, yet young people do not feel like they are able to move forward. How does

time pass when waiting on a decision that is extremely high-stake and life changing, when the outcome can mean you either stay living in the country you call home or you are deported to the country of your birth, an otherwise unknown place?

As for many young people, Leila's life has been and is in Britain and the process of getting immigration status has had profound implications for how Leila experienced the passing of time. While there were some aspects over which she and her family could have influence, for the large part she was consigned to the more passive role of waiting. She reflected: 'And ... now that I've sort of reached that point in life where things are finally settling down for me, I feel like, those nights that were really hard for me like, I had sleeping problems, I could not sleep because there was too much going on up here. And sometimes 4am, 5am I'm awake for no reason. And I'd have to distract myself with other things because I felt as though time was just passing by and there was nothing I could do to slow it down.' Leila experienced acute powerlessness and vulnerability produced through her condition of waiting on her papers. Waiting, as Conlon points out, is 'a crucial feature of migrant (im)mobility' (2011, 355), and is also a 'common experience for the less powerful groups in society' such as the poor and the unemployed for instance when waiting on benefit applications (Khosravi 2014). Waiting here becomes an integral experience for applicants in relation to bureaucracies that engage with time as a tool of governance.

The state of waiting often starts for young migrants before even submitting their immigration applications. Initially, it is waiting to get enough money together for the legal fees and for the application. Given that it is often already a struggle for many to make ends meet, saving the needed money can take a long time. Trying to get status also meant waiting on lawyers. Finding a good and reliable lawyer proved difficult for young people and their families, and many had negative experiences before finding a lawyer that eventually helped them get their status. This was particularly problematic if this delayed an application beyond a young person's 18th birthday. Until 18, young people apply on a joint application together with their parents, but once 18 young people have to submit their own applications. This can often lead to different outcomes for family members and mixed-status families. These periods of waiting to save money and on lawyers could be described as a more active experience of waiting (Bissell 2007). This contrasts with inactive waiting experienced once an application has been submitted to the Home Office.

Trying to get status meant waiting on the Home Office, possibly the most debilitating aspect in the condition of waiting. Here young people are confronted with what Anderson calls the 'bureaucratic temporalities of immigration applications' (2018), which is something migrants have no control over at all. At least in the case of financial difficulties, people can try to raise more funds and if they have been let down by a lawyer, they can find a new one. However, in the case of the Home Office, applicants can do nothing once the application has been submitted. As Leila explains: 'I'm the kind of person that likes to be in control of [the] things that I'm doing. And I had literally no control over what was happening.' Known to the Home Office but without legal status, migrants can do no more than endure this 'quasi-legal space' (Griffiths 2014). Leila's first application was rejected because the Home Office took so long to make a decision that she had turned 18 in the meantime and therefore was required to submit a fresh application on her own. Through no fault of her own and her inability to hold the Home Office accountable



for the time they took to make a decision, she was placed back into ‘illegality’ and liminality. This suggests time being used as a tool in immigration governance. If the Home Office lets enough time elapse, then the decision on an immigration application is made automatically through a change in age rather than based on due consideration of the application. As a result, Leila had to start the process all over again. This was the darkest time she experienced: ‘I was in limbo. And it wasn’t like a normal limbo ... I was in the deepest stage of limbo you could possibly be [in] and I had just given up ...’ As long as Leila does not have status she cannot fully participate in life, her social interactions are curtailed and, as Khosravi argues, her time is manipulated (2014). This is a clear example of the applicant’s powerlessness and the Home Office’s power over the situation where waiting is used as a technique to regulate the applicants’ life.

The long waits on Home Office decisions and not knowing where your future will go was a common theme in interviews. Tobi, who arrived in the UK from Nigeria aged nine with his brother to join their mother who was already here, had to wait 2 years for a decision on his application as it got caught up in the Home Office backlog in 2011/2012. Sarah was seventeen when she finally got her status and she arrived when she was four. Daisy arrived in the UK when she was 8 years old and got her status when she was twenty-one. Also aged eight, Victoria came from Jamaica to join her mother in the UK and received her status 10 years later aged eighteen. It is the same story over and over again for young people who have been in a precarious immigration situation.

For young people, waiting on status was often deeply intertwined with waiting to continue their education and extended beyond getting status. Not having status when applying for university usually means being classified as overseas students, meaning higher fees they could not afford. Even after getting status, they have to wait another 3 years before being eligible for a student loan. This waiting on continuing their lives felt like wasting time for young people. As Khosravi points out, ‘Waiting symbolises waste, emptiness and uselessness’ (2014). While waiting young people cannot work, cannot go to university, which feels like not having a purpose. Leila explains her thought process like this: ‘I’m still gonna classify as an international student, d’you know what I mean? I have to wait for the three-year legal residence thing ... even when you get the status, there’s still another hurdle you have to jump over. And it’s just, it’s a hassle.’ Sarah who found herself in a similar situation described this period as a ‘forced gap year’. Leila, Sarah, and thousands of other young people in the UK were unable to go to university when they finished their A-levels because of their immigration status, despite having offers for university places, being legally resident and having lived in the UK since a young age. Sarah had to wait 2 years before she could go to university. Two years of her life that felt entirely wasted. Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh, drawing on the work of Honwana, similarly found that unaccompanied refugee minors in their study were suspended in a ‘state of “waithood”’ while they were waiting on the outcomes of their asylum claims as ‘they cannot work legally and have limited post-18 education entitlements’ during this time (2018, 89).

As Conlon points out, if we attend to the ‘nuances of waiting’ then we can also examine waiting as ‘resisted across a range of migrant spaces’ (2011). Over time, young people spoke of becoming desensitised to the waiting and the bad news. Like



Leila said, 'we're used to it'. Most young people who participated in this research said they expected bad news, not good news. Negative decisions, not positive ones. That way there is no disappointment. One could argue, that in this attitude towards waiting young people were reclaiming some agency over the process and resisting the condition of waiting enforced on them through the immigration regime.

The bureaucracy of immigration and the immigration regime significantly impacted the real and subjective experience of time for the young people who participated in this research. While young people try to obtain status and navigate the landscape of costs, lawyers and the Home Office, they are suspended in a condition of waiting. During this waiting young people are largely consigned to a passive role with little control or influence over their situation and are dependent either on lawyers or the Home Office. Largely unable to move on with their own lives young people feel stuck in an eternal present as they watch their peers make plans for the future and follow their dreams. Following Bissell's understanding of time as relational (2007), for young migrants time has stopped and feels like it is passing agonisingly slowly in relation to their peers' faster passing of time. Except the clock keeps ticking, the years keep passing and they get older. These periods become interspersed with moments of activity when young people and their families have meetings with their lawyers, when they complete the application or when the letter from the Home Office finally arrives. Time then suddenly speeds up, sometimes too much, as time runs out and young people turn eighteen. No longer eligible to apply with their families and rejected by the immigration regime they are pushed deeper into 'illegality'.

In her article *Out of Time*, Griffiths discusses this as 'temporal angst [that] relates to the perceived disjuncture between the temporalities of themselves [migrants] and those around them, and between their expectations of progress and efficiency, and the machinations of the immigration and judicial systems in practice' (2014, 1994). In this, she distinguishes between 'sticky' time, 'a long, slowing time of waiting', suspended time, 'one that can decelerate into complete stagnation', and frenzied time, 'a fast time rushing out of control' (2014, 1994–2000). Separating the various subjective experiences of time in relation to dealing with the immigration regime is helpful. The young people in this research experienced all these temporal tensions in relation to their immigration status, at times slow and 'sticky', at other times fast and frenzied – all while their daily lives continued.

Throughout the process, young people are powerless to influence the decision of the Home Office. As they gather as much evidence as possible to prove that they 'deserve' the right to remain in the UK, exposing themselves, their relationships and entanglements with the country they call home, the Home Office remains faceless and unaccountable. They cannot even be called to find out progress about the application. In this process, the immigration regime becomes an immaterial arm of the state that cannot be seen, heard, touched or smelt which uses waiting as a form of control over the young people as they are suspended in uncertainty, instability and vulnerability. Young people are stuck in multiple gap years somewhere between adolescence and adulthood. While waiting they are unable to move their life towards their future and when it can start remains unknown. During the condition of waiting, time seems to move unbearably slow for young people like Leila, until it suddenly runs out – either with a positive

decision or a refusal of their leave to remain application. Or, as in Leila's case both: first the refusal, then some years later status.

### Present: growing up too early

The long and indefinite process of immigration applications and status insecurity affected the life-course transitions of the young people in this research. As Griffiths, Anderson and Rogers noted 'life-course is ... directly experienced by migrants, as time. The life-course is the passage of time, marked personally and collectively' (2013, 12). Many young people in this research found their personal life-course transitions from childhood to adolescence to adulthood diverged from the collective one. An overwhelming experience for young migrants was that of moving from childhood straight to adulthood in their teens due to their immigration situation provoking feelings of growing up too early. Their role in the family changed as they took on adult responsibilities and became more aware of their immigration situation and its consequences such as deportation. When celebrating their eighteenth birthday many young people already *felt* like adults and so turning eighteen did not seem like a major milestone. However, legally turning eighteen had significant consequences bureaucratically, and paradoxically in conjunction with their immigration status curtailed their progression into adulthood as it impeded their transitions to economic independence and higher educational attainment. For young people whose application for immigration status is still being processed or who are in the renewal process, economic independence becomes restricted either because they are unable to work or because of the significant financial burden of immigration applications. The continuation of their education is often halted because their immigration status excluded them from student loans. So, while migrancy and the encounter with the immigration regime make young people *feel* they grow up too early during their adolescence, once they *legally* turn eighteen their transition to adulthood becomes curtailed by the immigration regime.

Furthermore, their experiences were often incongruent with the normalised, cultural expectations of an imagined linear life development in the UK and at odds with the experiences of their peers. As Khosravi states '[P]rolonged waiting, for papers or deportation, means "not being in-time with others"' (2014). While sociological writing on the life-course has challenged the idea that transitions are linear and aligned with institutional pathways (Hockey and James 2017), especially in the case of young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), the impact of the immigration regime on transitioning into adulthood has been less scrutinised and largely focused on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Knight, Chase, and Statham 2008; Gonzales 2016; Meloni and Chase 2017; Sirriyeh and Ní Raghallaigh 2018). The life-course transition that has received more attention from some anthropologists and sociologists is that into old age and death (Gardner 2002; Gunaratnam 2013; Lulle 2018).

The young people in this study were between 20 and 25 years old at the time of the research. The age-range of when they applied for and received their status varied hugely. It is especially hard to say when young people started their process as mostly it was their parents who applied. However, they usually became more aware of their immigration situation or took an active role in the application from about 16 years of age and most got their status in their late teens or early twenties. Almost all participants

had obtained their status before we met. The life stage that was then most affected by their encounter with the immigration regime was adolescence and their transition to adulthood.

By the time Leila turned eighteen, she had long felt like an adult and been more than simply a dependent on her mum (in bureaucratic immigration speak). Since the family's move from Nigeria to London, she had increasingly been taking on adult roles and responsibilities in the family. Growing up in London she quickly learned about being different, racism and struggle. She was her brother's and sister's main carer while her mother was working, and their dad stayed in Nigeria. Her mother always worked in at least one job, often two in order to cover the rent and living costs for the family. Her mother's long working hours meant that Leila would often have to drop things she had planned for herself to go and pick up her younger brother and sister from school. As a result, Leila missed out on after-school activities, time for homework and hanging out with her friends due to caring responsibilities towards her siblings. She also supported her mother through the Home Office applications, dealing with lawyers, finances, several moves, social services, a volatile relationship, giving birth and co-parenting her sister. Throughout her adolescence, she constantly felt out of sync with the perceived norms for her age and her peers' transitions through life. While her friends were carefreely exploring their journey to adulthood, Leila felt she was already living an adult life. Circumstances meant she had to grow up and mature earlier.

Unlike their peers, when Leila and other young people like her, turn eighteen and are legally considered an adult, they were not able to move out, go to university or work and live an independent life because they still did not have her status. The only thing that changed was how they were viewed by the Home Office: as an independent adult. Instead of being independent, they felt more dependent than ever. Without status they were unable to work. Without work they were unable to raise the money for their immigration application and lawyer's fees. They were dependent on the help of others, especially their families who were themselves struggling. Instead of building their own relationships with friends, young people were often at home caring for their younger siblings and supporting their parents.

To Victoria not being able to go to university was a huge shock and major barrier on her road to becoming an adult. To her going to university meant becoming independent and moving out of home. Although she was very excited to join her mum in the UK at age eight after living with her grandparents in Jamaica, their relationship did not flourish. Victoria and her mum struggled to bond and instead, she threw herself into schoolwork. She worked extremely hard so that she could go to university and through that forge an independent life for herself. As she applied for her student loan, Victoria found out that she was 'undocumented'. She realised that before she could do anything else, she had to sort out her immigration situation and put her dream of going to university and moving into the future on hold. When she got her status, she encountered the next hurdle: she was still ineligible for student finance. Seeing all her friends go off to university was tough. She set up a campaign group around the issue and through her hard work she was eventually offered a scholarship by the London School of Economics to study law. Finally, she was back on her pathway towards her future. However, she remained out

of time with others around her. By the time she started university most of her friends from school were finishing their courses and starting their working lives.

In the United States, Gonzales also found profound impacts of immigration status on young people's transitions to adulthood (2016). In his research with young 'undocumented' migrants, young people became separated from their peers upon turning 18 where instead of transitioning into adulthood they transitioned into 'illegality'. Until the age of 18 young 'undocumented' migrants are relatively protected from formal exclusions, such as education. However, upon turning 18 their legal status becomes a 'master status' in their life, enforcing multiple exclusions especially in education. In the UK, the 'Becoming Adult' project looked at transitions to adulthood among young unaccompanied asylum seekers (Meloni and Chase 2017). They found that young people in local authority care faced more difficulties than non-migrant young people when turning 18 because institutional support was often abruptly ended. Young people whose status was unresolved and had been protected from deportation until the age of 18 often disengaged or withdrew from statutory services out of fear of being forcibly removed and returned to their country of origin. As a consequence many experienced homelessness, destitution and poor health (Meloni and Chase 2017). Being known to the bureaucracy is then not always a good thing and sometimes a lack of visibility can be protective.

Leila also found this when her immigration application was rejected because she had turned 18, which was also when she was effectively made homeless – also because she was 18. When her mother, brother and sister were put up in emergency housing by the council after her sister's father had thrown them out, Leila was not allowed to stay with them because she was 20 years old and therefore was no longer eligible for local authority housing with her family. If she stayed with her family, they would breach the agreement with social service and risk the whole family being made homeless.

The consequence of her visibility to the social worker at that moment meant that Leila was being separated from her family that she had given her childhood and adolescence up for. After putting her life on hold to care for her siblings and to support her mother, she was on her own. How could she suddenly be considered an adult in isolation when what had made her an adult before her time was her caring responsibility for her family? During this time, the fact that her immigration status had just been rejected meant that she was unable to work or rent anywhere on her own, which made her more dependent on her mother. Because she could not work and her mother's job had to provide living costs for four people and savings towards a deposit for new housing, she would not be able to raise the fees for Leila's immigration application and legal support. Leila was stuck in a paradoxical situation where in her adulthood transition the bureaucracy had made her simultaneously *practically* dependent and *legally* independent. On their eighteenth birthday, every young person in the UK is legally considered an adult. This means that they acquire both rights and responsibilities. They can vote, legally rent or own their own home, have a credit card, or get married without their parents' consent. It also means that different rules apply to them in terms of immigration and the welfare state from their eighteenth birthday. Legally Leila was therefore considered independent from her mother and was expected to submit her own immigration application. She was also expected to provide for herself and could not be considered as part of her mother's social services support package. However, the fact that she still did not have her legal status meant that she had no means by which to provide for herself and so in

practical terms it was precisely at the point of turning eighteen that she became more dependent on her mother for her housing and everyday living expenses.

Turning 18 here had immediate and significant consequences for Leila's and Victoria's lives because in the eyes of the bureaucracy they were legal adults. At the same time that they were expected to look after themselves without support, that very bureaucracy curtailed their ability to pursue an adult life and adult responsibilities to provide for themselves. Their immigration status stopped them from going to university the same way their peers did. While young people's circumstances did not change overnight, their eighteenth birthday provided the grounds for the immigration regime to reject their application or enforce restrictions in relation to their immigration status and so curtail their transition to adulthood. In addition to understanding borders and immigration controls as orders of time as Back and Sinha, and Anderson and colleagues argue (2018, 2013), the age of young migrants becomes another border through which the immigration regime is enforced.

### Future: life on probation

'It feels like ... I don't wanna say like I'm in jail but ... on probation'. This is how Maria described the immigration renewal process that she and others like her have to endure for at least ten years once they received their first 30-month 'limited leave to remain' immigration status. Back and Sinha found a similar sentiment amongst their participants in their book *Migrant City* where 'for migrants and asylum seekers the whole city becomes an open prison and they live in a shadow of time' (2018). Through waiting, uncertainty and temporariness young migrants are unable to move forward into their future (Knight, Chase, and Statham 2008). During this time activities, they engage in occupy their time but often do not feel meaningful in a way that supports their future journey. For example, when Serena, another participant, was waiting for time to pass so that she was eligible for her student loan and able to go to university, she worked as a carer to earn money. The work was tough and gruelling and brought in necessary money for her and the family, however, this was in no way related to her future trajectory. The initial relief of getting status is often short lived as young people realise that they need to wait longer before they become eligible for student loans and to go to university and that they have to go through the same process again after 30 months. Leila's solicitor told her as much when she went to collect her paperwork: 'he said ... I should save money for the renewal ... . And I'm just like, it's just one thing after another.'

The immigration regime then suspends young people in what Anderson calls both a 'renewable temporariness' and a 'permanent temporariness' (2018).<sup>1</sup> They are in 'renewable temporariness' as their stay is timebound to 30 months and must be renewed regularly, and in 'permanent temporariness' as they have no long-term security until citizenship. What does feel permanent is the experience of temporariness which at least for the near future enforces a sense of contingency on young people, where life is not about living but merely about surviving. The high and constantly increasing fees are an especially tough hurdle for young people. Not only are the amounts substantial for them to raise, but the unknown, annually increasing<sup>2</sup> costs provoke significant anxieties. As Leila says: 'You spend your entire life saving towards a goal that is constantly moving forward.' The constant immigration renewal process causes total

uncertainty over young people's short, medium and long-term futures. And as Bauman noted in his book *Strangers at our Doors* quoting Wittgenstein, 'uncertainty is the mother of all fears' (Bauman 2016, 113).

Instead of a long-term, secure status such as 'indefinite leave to remain' or citizenship, the only option for many young people is a 30-month temporarily secure future and a long and costly pathway towards citizenship. This reflects developments in the immigration regime over recent decades to create a plethora of short-term and insecure statuses (De Noronha 2019) and making even citizenship status more insecure with a drastic increase of citizenship deprivations since 2012 (Yeo 2018). Getting and maintaining status then almost becomes like a carrot and stick game, where the Home Office offers the reward of status if young people comply with certain stipulations, but then the Home Office does not follow through – at least not immediately. This system continues unchanged because the power is firmly rooted with the Home Office and young people need status to get on with their lives; the Home Office has what the young people want so they have no choice but to go along with Home Office demands as best they can.

This power imbalance also means a lack of accountability of the Home Office in the process whereby they can neglect showing up to tribunal hearings, as was the case for Sarah and her family, or not adhere to guidance response times as we saw in Leila's situation, without consequences for the Home Office. Instead the consequences are borne by the young migrants as they face life on hold during long periods of waiting and delays or as their claims get rejected.

The power imbalance is further maintained by applicants' fear of potential deportation, nearly absent complaint mechanisms<sup>3</sup>, limited appeal rights and cuts to legal aid that restrict access to justice for most migrant groups except for asylum seekers and refugees. Fear of deportation is actively and intentionally promoted by the Home Office through its communication campaigns and part and parcel of the 'hostile environment' policy laid out by then Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012. It includes an active Twitter feed that broadcasts violent immigration raids, dawn removals and the public display of increasing use of charter flights for deportations (Penny 2017; De Noronha 2018). One of the Home Office's most controversial communications campaign was the Go Home vans that drove around six of London's most diverse boroughs with the slogan 'here illegally? Go home or face arrest' in the summer of 2013 (Jones et al. 2017). And although the 'Go Home Vans' campaign was quickly shut down after the work of campaign groups and a public outcry, there was no known consequence to the Home Office or their staff. The stakes of those at the receiving end of such campaigns are then significantly higher – i.e. deportation – than those of the Home Office.

Tobi had just submitted his first immigration status renewal application when we spoke and was waiting for a decision. He had been told that he and his family would hear about their application in 3–6 months. Three months had just passed, and they had not heard anything from the Home Office yet. Tobi said they were expecting the renewal process to take about a year 'because mostly other people we know, it's taken them a year to get their renewal'. The time it takes the Home Office to process the renewal application is not counted towards the 10 years needed for people to become eligible for ILR. The only thing that is counted are the four 30-month periods of when somebody has legal status. This means that if the Home Office takes one year to process every renewal then it will actually take a young person four times 30 months



plus 3 years, i.e. 13 years, from the date they were first granted status until they become eligible for ILR. Even in an ideal scenario, another year of application processing time would be added to the so-called ten-year route. The long decision times for renewal applications are difficult to comprehend, as Tobi explains: 'if it's a renewal you've already looked at our case before, so what's taking you up to a year to ... say yes or no. But that's what we're waiting for at the moment ... and hopefully I can progress with my life ... like going to uni ... going to college ...'.

The long wait is making him feel like a first-time applicant again and while the Home Office is processing his application, his life is in many respects on hold again. The Home Office has his passport which means he cannot leave the country. He holds a US visa which is likely to run out while his renewal is being processed and before he will be able to use it. Luckily, he has a provisional driving license, so he has a form of ID. His brother temporarily got fired from his job during his renewal process because he could not show his passport and Tobi may not be able to enrol in his college course because of that. Tobi, his brother and his mother also want to travel to Nigeria to see their father, sibling and family whom they have not seen in 11 years. Something else they cannot plan until they get their passports back from the Home Office and their renewal application approved.

This stop-and-start process also has more long-term implications for Tobi and others like him. It is not just that his life is on hold while his renewal is being processed because he does not have the necessary paperwork to do a lot of things. He is also unable to plan his future, neither for the next years as his renewal might not be approved and he is in 'renewal temporariness', nor in the long term because even if his renewal gets approved and he gets another 30 months legal stay he might be rejected next time as he is in 'permanent temporariness'. Tobi explained it like this to me: 'you can't really plan your future ... And that's also another thing is ... let's say you do erm three two-and-a-half years they can still like decline it in your fourth one, and you've done like close to 8 years ... that's also the uncertainty of like even though you have got status you don't have status, it can just get taken away from you just like that.'

## Conclusion

The intersections between the immigration regime, time and life-course produced very specific experiences for the young migrants in this research. A condition of waiting, feeling stuck and unable to move into their future amplified difficult adulthood transitions produced by migrancy and immigration status struggles. Hage describes the feeling of being stuck in the present as 'stuckedness' (2009). For the young people in this research, their 'stuckedness' is produced by a sticky immigration regime, and as a result they experience 'out of control' waiting, immobility, and uncertainty. Uncertainty is produced by the immigration system by forcing a sense of 'permanent temporariness' onto young migrants and thereby hindering their transition to adulthood. In this process, young people often grew up too early as they took on greater roles within the family and adult responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings. Status insecurities amplified feelings of increased responsibility as young people feared being detained or deported. Instead of spending time with their friends in their adolescence they often spent time at home. While their subjective experience of adolescence was defined more by adult



responsibilities and being sensible than youthfulness, once they turn eighteen and become legally considered an adult their immigration status curtails their transition to full independence. Whether their status restricts them from further educational attainment or becoming economically independent, the immigration regime restricts young people's progression into adulthood and creates uncertainty over their futures.

Most immigrants now are given some type of temporary status to stay in the UK. Whether a refugee from Syria, a student from Australia, a high-skilled worker from India or joining a family member, your right of stay in the UK will be limited over time and restricted in terms of access to entitlements, while being subject to continuous scrutiny to prove your value and contribution to the British state and society. A system that sorts people into deserving and undeserving, desirable and undesirable subjects, poor and wealthy, the good and the bad migrant. As part of this system of sorting, or ordering, we need to also account for time and life-course as bordering mechanisms enforcing immigration controls, as Griffiths, Anderson, and Rogers (2013), and Back and Sinha argue, where hierarchies of belonging are 'also accompanied by an ordering of migrants' relationship to time' (2018). The British citizen becomes considered in terms of their future potential contribution to Britain but must first prove this deservingness to permanent residence through exemplary behaviour assessed through multiple short-term immigration applications. Throughout the process migrants must pay high, profit-making sums, pass the 'good character' test and endure years of uncertainty. A scrutiny that most British-born citizens escape through the privilege of being born with 'the right' passport, or 'the little red book' as one of the young people in my research called it.

## Notes

1. Although far more restrictive, migrants' permanent temporariness was recognised in the case *RA (Iraq) [2019] EWCA Civ 850* where Judge Haddon-Cave LJ drew a distinction between 'prospective limbo' and 'actual limbo'. As Carver argues, for migrants' themselves this distinction often does not feel as clear cut and many statuses can feel as if life is on hold, (2019).
2. Since 2003 with the exception of 2019.
3. Exceptions are judicial procedures and the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. However, they have few powers to enforce any judgements or recommendations on the Home Office to change practice.

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