



Book Review

Marijke Caroline Van Buggenhout (2024) *Paper Borders. Children and Young People Inside the Belgian Asylum Procedure. A Multi-Voiced and Performative Study*. Brussels: VUB Press

Valeria Ferraris

University of Turin, Italy

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In *Paper Borders, Children and Young People Inside the Belgian Asylum Procedure. A Multi-Voiced and Performative Study*, Marijke Caroline Van Buggenhout offers a moving and methodologically innovative, yet rigorous, exploration of how children experience asylum procedures in Belgium. Combining critical criminology and children's rights studies, Van Buggenhout shows the dissonance between the promise of international protection and the declared child-sensitive procedures and the bureaucratic practices that young asylum seekers must navigate. Van Buggenhout's expertise in migration studies and her profound ethical reflexivity enable her to craft a compelling critique that reaches beyond academia to resonate with practitioners and the broader public.

The book's thesis is clear: although legal frameworks declare children's rights to be paramount, in practice, these rights are systematically undermined by a migration system driven by suspicion, proceduralism, and an obsession with managing borders rather than protecting lives. Van Buggenhout sets out not just to describe but to understand and expose this contradiction, and her work succeeds in making visible how on-paper procedural justice results in real-world structural injustice.

The contribution of *Paper Borders* is significant and multidimensional. The book challenges the assumption that child-specific procedural safeguards translate automatically into fair treatment. It offers a fresh analysis of the asylum system as a performance space, where children are compelled to narrate trauma in bureaucratically acceptable forms, often to the detriment of their dignity and truth.

Moreover, Van Buggenhout adopts a participatory and visual ethnographic method, reimagining how migration research can be conducted—an approach that culminates in what could be considered a *collaborative* endeavour: *Paper Borders*. Her project not only collects information and advances knowledge about young migrants, but it also creates space for their self-representation; in doing so, Van Buggenhout avoids reducing them to passive subjects. Consent is treated not as a one-time signature but as an ongoing, dialogical process, leading to an insightful reflection on the ethics of working with young people, especially in contexts of trauma and legal vulnerability. *Paper Borders* thus makes a vital intervention at the intersection of children's rights, critical migration studies, and empirical legal research, broadening both theoretical debates and methodological practices.



In *Paper Borders*, Van Buggenhout deftly weaves together children's rights theory, crimmigration scholarship, and procedural justice frameworks. Building on foundational critiques by Didier Fassin and Hannah Arendt, among others, Van Buggenhout employs an innovative methodology that focuses on children's experiences rather than adults'. Van Buggenhout's work grounds its analysis in the lived realities of those most affected, making it a unique and necessary addition to the literature. In particular, her focus on the notion of "the right to have rights" situates young asylum seekers' struggles within a larger political narrative about exclusion and statelessness—and her book, *Paper Borders*, situates itself within, yet also pushes beyond, existing scholarship.

The book's methodological creativity and the author's remarkable reflexivity are key elements that merit close consideration. Coming from a country where researchers often encounter significant obstacles to undertaking field research, I found her reaction to denied access to observation of asylum hearings particularly interesting and a compelling feature of the book. By interviewing protection officers, guardians, and legal representatives—and by creating co-constructed spaces with young newcomers themselves—the author produces a polyphonic narrative that reveals the complex layers of the asylum experience. The participatory production of *Paper Borders* thus stands out as an example of truly collaborative, ethical research. It also points toward the potential of visual storytelling to capture emotional and experiential truths that academic writing often cannot convey. As such, the book's methodological creativity should inspire emerging researchers who may face access limitations. Moreover, Van Buggenhout's open and honest discussion of her positionality and the ethical tensions inherent in knowledge production reveal a full understanding of the asymmetries between herself and her participants, reflecting critically on who ultimately benefits from academic research. This level of reflexive honesty strengthens the credibility of her findings.

Two aspects, in particular, stand out in Van Buggenhout's reflection on asylum hearings. The first is the notion of *stolen time*: the chronic and often indefinite waiting imposed by asylum procedures. This prolonged period of uncertainty—before young asylum seekers can even begin to glimpse what their future might hold—exposes a dimension of structural harm that is too often overlooked in migration studies. Time, itself, becomes a form of violence, regardless of whether the final decision is positive or negative. It is not only the outcome of the procedure that defines the experience, but the very act of being held in suspension, deprived of agency and progression, that leaves a lasting wound.

Beyond the theft of time, the second violent aspect of the system is that it demands that children perform their narratives in a manner that aligns precisely with the language and expectations of the procedure. In order to be judged credible, young people must adapt their stories to institutional templates of coherence, emotional resonance, and plausibility. The asylum hearing thus becomes a performance of credibility—a high-stakes test where children's rights, dignity, and aspirations for justice are subordinated to bureaucratic logics and procedural formalism. The hearing is less a genuine search for truth than a ritualized performance in which survival depends on mastering the invisible rules of credibility.

Throughout *Paper Borders*—and consistent with the author's idea about giving children a voice—Van Buggenhout's depict young asylum seekers not as victims but as active, resilient agents capable of creativity, humour, and resistance. This approach avoids the pitfalls of victimization narratives and offers a more nuanced, respectful representation of marginalized youth.

In sum, *Paper Borders* is a profound and necessary intervention into contemporary debates on migration, children's rights, and state power. By exposing the bureaucratic and moral contradictions at the heart of asylum procedures and offering creative alternatives to traditional research practices, Van Buggenhout challenges us to rethink what justice could—and *should*—mean for young people on the move. Moreover, despite its theoretical depth and methodological complexity, *Paper Borders* is an engaging and accessible book, reaffirming a principle in which I always believed: good scholarship is, above all, accessible to all.

Correspondence: Valeria Ferraris, University of Turin, Italy. valeria.ferraris@unito.it