



# Challenging Un-Belonging and Undesirability: How Acts of Autonomy Transform Everyday Realities of Living with Precarious Immigration Status in Toronto, Canada

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## Abstract

Increasing processing times for immigration applications, increasing numbers of people admitted on temporary visas, and delays processing refugee claims mean that more newcomers spend longer periods of time living in Canada with precarious immigration status. This paper uses qualitative research to examine how people with precarious immigration status exercise agency in the face of restrictions to their rights and risk of deportability, as well as the extent to which agency is able to transform people's everyday realities. The research shows that regimes of immigration control construct people with precarious immigration status as un-belonging and undesirable as members of Canadian society. The research identifies two ways that research participants exert autonomy over their lives: persistent presence and critiquing their construction as un-belonging and undesirable. Both forms of agency involve the creation of counterpublics to build networks for practical support and recognition of the legitimacy of their presence in Canada. While agency made it easier for participants to sustain themselves, the research shows that participants internalized discourses hostile to people with precarious immigration status, suggesting that agency is both necessary but also limited in its capacity to mitigate the harm caused by the construction of them as un-belonging and undesirable.

## Keywords

precarious immigration status; agency; Canada; belonging; counterpublics; narrative redefinition

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## Introduction

*[Immigration status] affects your entire life! But you just try to fight [that]... But I'm positive about life. And I know that things change. And also, you can't let the whole situation control you because if it does control you, you really are losing it—Yves*

*[Faced with years of insecure status in Canada] I get depressed. I just get depressed. It's an experience that most people here cannot identify with, and they cannot possibly imagine the effect it might have on you, this build up over the years and over experiences and over incidents. It makes me feel more isolated, it makes me feel more depressed—Asmaa*

Yves and Asmaa are racialized newcomers who live in Toronto with precarious immigration status in a position of liminal belonging—always already belonging (Korteweg 2017), but denied recognition of that belonging in the form of secure immigration status. Precarious immigration status is associated with deportability, uncertainty about the future, restricted rights, and limited access to social supports (De Genova 2002; Goldring and Landolt 2013). Yves and Asmaa have each been engaged in a years-long bureaucratic process in the hopes of being granted permanent residence in Canada, and therewith, formal recognition of belonging. Throughout this process, Yves and Asmaa, like many people with precarious immigration status who wish to remain, have struggled with isolation, frustration, and feelings of unworthiness as the state fails to grant permanent residence. At the same time, they have discovered and embraced unforeseen capacities, developed new political subjectivities, and created a network of ties to people, places, and institutions. The responses to living with precarious immigration status exemplify the subjection, pain, and the devaluation of self that encroach, as well as people's capacities to persist, to act, and to resist. In other words, people do not passively accept their relegation to the margins of Canadian society on the basis of their formal immigration status. Yet that relegation remains a powerful driver in remaking their subjectivities (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

This paper demonstrates how hegemonic discourses that construct certain migrants as unworthy of rights, dignified treatment, and formal membership in the nation (Huot et al. 2016; Mountz 2010; Omidvar and Richmond 2003) interfere with the ability of people to forge what Judith Butler calls “a livable life” (2004). People with precarious immigration status push back against these discourses by making claims of belonging and seeking to have their claims recognized. These acts of autonomy make it more possible to live lives beyond those sanctioned by regimes of immigration control.

There is a substantial body of literature on how people with precarious immigration status assert their belonging in Canada and other countries in the Global North by laying claim to public space (Butler and Spivak 2007; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Sigvardsdotter 2013; Sziarto and Leitner 2010; Wong et al. 2012; Wright 2003). Less has been written on everyday practices that people with precarious immigration status use to contest discourses of un-belonging, particularly within intimate spaces. Yet by virtue of being everyday, such acts of autonomy are more common than demonstrations. People use tactics such as persistent presence and the creation of counterpublics that are receptive to alternative narratives about belonging and desirability. These acts of autonomy transform people's everyday lives by maintaining their access to Canadian territory, as well as the rights and communities associated therewith. At the same time, they also expand the spaces in which people with precarious immigration status can enjoy a sense of belonging. However, evidence that people internalize discourses of undesirability suggest the limited efficacy of persistent presence and creation of counterpublics in undoing the harm created by hegemonic discourses.

The paper opens by analyzing autonomy within the context of regimes of immigration control. In the next section, I discuss the research methods. Then I show how discourses of un-belonging and

undesirability are (re)produced in Toronto, Canada. Finally, I analyze two acts of autonomy that support the efforts of people with precarious immigration status to meet their needs, and I evaluate their transformative potential.

### **Autonomy in the Context of Immigration Control**

State categories such as formal immigration status are the product of bureaucratic processes to make visible selective characteristics for the purposes of governance (Scott 1998). Immigration status is nested within other systems of government and practices of statecraft, such that formal immigration status has wide-reaching implications for physical and mental health, education, employment, housing, intranational mobility, placemaking, and even intimate relationships (Campbell et al. 2014; Simich 2006; Simich, Wu, and Nerad 2007; Stuesse and Coleman 2014; F. Villegas 2013; P. Villegas 2014). Yet people with precarious immigration status are not merely a bundle of rights and restrictions, nor a set of qualities that render them in/eligible for those rights. They have desires, capacities, identities, and life stories beyond those that the state considers when making decisions on immigration applications, and beyond those that are enabled or disabled through the act of categorization (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Kyriakides et al. 2018; Scheel 2018; Turton 2003). While recognizing people's agency and autonomy, we must also acknowledge that regimes of immigration control can be very dominating, even among non-detained migrants and even in Canada, a country with a reputation for welcoming migration. Scholarly literature on the agency of migrants therefore strives to achieve a balance between recognizing moments of autonomy and resistance while simultaneously accounting for attempts by a wide variety of actors, operating with conflicting motivations, to regulate mobility and the practices of migrants (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Jones 2012; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Rodríguez 1996; Scheel 2018). In this paper, I hold in tension the contradictions between people's capacities and subjectification, examining what Sparke identifies as "the messy middle grounds where control and opposition, structure and agency, hegemony and counter-hegemonic action, are all variously mediated" (2008, 423) in the context of Canadian immigration policies.

The forms of autonomy analyzed here—persistent presence and creation of counterpublics in which migrants' claims to belonging can be recognized—are examples of what Chris Kyriakides et al. (2018) call self-rescue, in which people assert "the authority to act and the eligibility to exist." Self-rescue entails the authority to live as multi-faceted people and to exercise autonomy over the conditions of that existence. These actions—at times quiet, small, and not very visible—make it more possible for people with precarious immigration status to sustain themselves. Such acts of autonomy reveal the limits of the sovereign ability to determine who remains in Canada and who belongs to the national community. They have the capacity to transform individuals' lives as people maintain presence in Canada and expand spaces where they can gain support.

These acts of autonomy also transform spaces, institutions, and social relations. In a lecture entitled "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," Butler argues that when bodies come together and act in concert, spaces are produced and re-configured. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Butler calls attention to the importance of relations between people to create spaces of action. One form of re-configuring space through social relations is the creation of counterpublics, in which people from marginalized groups circulate counter-discourses that undermine structural inequalities (Fraser 1990; Sziarto and Leitner 2010). Counterpublics offer opportunities for migrants to engage in narrative redefinition, recasting specific practices of immigration control as un-just and recasting themselves as worthy of membership in Canadian society.

In spite of the ways people benefit from asserting autonomy over their own lives and drawing others into their claims of belonging, there are limits to the transformational capacity of the acts of autonomy analyzed here. Discourses of un-belonging continue to persist, disrupting people's sense of

belonging. Even as people push back against discourses of un-belonging, they simultaneously internalize them. Internalization suggests that hegemonic discourses of un-belonging and undesirability remain powerful.

### **Methodology and Ethics**

The data analyzed in this paper derives from qualitative research with 19 people living with precarious immigration status and 15 practitioners who work on issues related to precarious immigration status or provide services to people with precarious immigration status. This research was conducted as part of a larger project studying the effects of deportability and uncertainty on people's everyday lives. I had originally planned to use focus groups as a primary methodology, using dynamic discussions to explore the complexities of people's experiences and to observe people's embodied reactions to each other's narratives. During fieldwork, I found it practically difficult to organize focus groups, and I began conducting semi-structured interviews that addressed the same themes as the focus group guide. The interviews offered an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of individual migration and settlement trajectories. As elaborated further below, I was ultimately able to conduct one focus group. Thus, the data presented here results from interviews with 11 adults and one focus group with eight adults. Interviews and the focus group included questions about everyday life, goals and concerns about the future, the effect of immigration status, and contact with officials from Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). I interviewed practitioners, including policymakers, policy analysts, service providers and grassroots organizers, to better understand the landscape of policy, service provision, and how these are implemented in Toronto.

I recruited individuals who held various forms of precarious immigration status to draw attention to how certain conditions are shared across formal immigration status (Goldring and Landolt 2013). I sought to conduct research with adults who had lived in Canada for two or more years and self-identified as worried about their ability to stay in Canada. The sample includes people who held temporary visas, people whose visas have expired or were not complying with the terms of their visa, people who had applied for permanent residence, and people who were claiming refugee status. All members of the focus group were Filipina women who had all initially entered Canada through the live-in caregiver program (LCP), although several had since changed immigration status. Many participants had held more than one formal immigration status since their arrival to Canada, and some had previously been immigrants in other countries. All participants were in contact with IRCC. Interviewees were young people in their 20s and 30s, whereas focus group participants were more diverse in terms of age, ranging from early 20s to mid-50s. The study is based on a small sample that may not be representative of the population of Torontonians with precarious immigration status. Therefore, the results suggest ways that migrants may exercise autonomy within a field of asymmetrical power relations, as well as the limits of that autonomy. However, the results are not indicative of the frequency of practices analyzed here.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, I used an oral consent procedure and did not keep a record of names or contact information. I avoided collecting data that could be of interest to CBSA, such as information that might contradict what is contained in immigration applications (Bernhard and Young 2009; Düvell, Triandafyllidou, and Vollmer 2010). I refer to everyone by pseudonyms. Those interviewed about their personal experience with precarity have been assigned first names, and practitioners have been assigned initials to allow the reader to easily distinguish between the two groups. Although many practitioners agreed to have their names used, a few did not. Anonymizing all practitioners helps ensure the anonymity of those who wanted it, since some services are only provided by a small number of agencies in Toronto. In the paper, I use terms such as 'participants' or 'people' to mean those who were interviewed about their personal experiences with precarity. I occasionally refer to participants as 'migrants' when required for clarity but prefer the former terms to avoid reifying people's history of migration as the most important part of their identity. I refer to practitioners by their

job title, rather than as ‘participants’ or ‘migrants,’ even though some practitioners have also migrated to Canada.

### **Multiscalar Construction of Un/Belonging in Toronto, Canada**

Although Canada’s immigration system is not as punitive as those of other countries in the Global North, it nonetheless operates upon the same fundamental logic—the desire to manage migration to the perceived benefit of Canadian society (Hari 2014; Macklin 2014; Simmons 2010). As currently practiced, managed migration involves attracting migrants deemed desirable, usually due to recognition of their qualifications that is likely to result in a high-paying job, and granting them privileged visas, while simultaneously admitting ‘less desirable’ migrants to fill essential jobs who are subjected to more restrictive visas and greater surveillance (Alboim 2009; Henneby 2012; McLaughlin and Henneby 2013; Macklin 2014; Simmons 2010). Distinctions between migrants and their rights create “varying degrees of national belonging” (Mountz 2010, 101), whereby fewer rights are granted to those who are seen as less worthy of full membership in the nation. Since 2002, Canada has admitted growing numbers of people with temporary visas rather than permanent residence, thereby increasing the production of precarious immigration status in Canada. The trend to produce precarity also holds true in refugee policy. Successive legislative changes and the passage of the Safe Third Country Agreement limit access to the refugee determination system and appeal rights (Atak, Hudson, and Nakache 2017; Atak 2018; Macklin 2005; Mountz 2010). Importantly, the outcomes of current immigration policies are stratified by race (Fuller and Vosko 2007; Henneby 2012), meaning that people racialized as black or brown are more likely to be in Canada with fewer rights.

Implicit in immigration control are discourses about worth and desirability. In the context of applications for naturalization in the UK, Bridget Anderson et al. have written: “Those who fail to satisfy the requirements of naturalisation are not only reminded that they lack what it takes to be a citizen, the common principles or requirements of political community – the standards of the citizenry as an exclusive and valued body – are simultaneously affirmed” (2011, 554). As with naturalization, eligibility criteria for visas and the conditions associated with specific immigration statuses engage discourses of who can be a valued member of Canadian society. When people are treated poorly on the basis of their immigration status, or when opportunities to hold a more privileged immigration status are withheld, it reminds them that they considered to be un-belonging.

Participants identified the contradiction between their admission to Canada and the treatment they receive in Canada as a source of confusion and frustration. Asmaa described a disconnect between discourses of welcoming migrants and the unwelcoming policies she has experienced. “Because the society and people here are like, ‘Welcome to Canada! This is your home! Enjoy it to the max. These are your rights.’ But the government is not telling you that [you are welcome and have rights].” Rather, by virtue of her immigration status, Asmaa has lived in Canada with limited rights and limited opportunities to be granted permanent residence. Nico echoed Asmaa’s sentiments about the contradictions between Canada’s self-image as welcoming of immigrants and the practices that exclude him from permanent residence: “It’s obviously, yeah we hate you and we don’t want you here...it’s like, ‘Oh but you can! But we want you!’ [Then quieter:] But we don’t. ‘But we want you!’ [Again quieter:] But we don’t.”

Several participants interpreted long processing times and lack of reliable information about what stage their case was in, coupled with the restricted rights during these periods, as evidence of un-belonging. Nico had been waiting for his applications for a work permit and permanent residence to be processed. At the time of the interview, both applications had far exceeded expected processing time. Nico came to the conclusion that delays and ever-increasing processing times are a sign that the government prefers to withhold formal belonging from people like him. Nico explained,

I come from a country where things happen because of sheer inefficiency... but this is the First World. And it's the First World for a reason. So when things in the First World appear similar or just as inefficient as they do in the Third World, to me, it's deliberate. It's not an oversight.

Therefore, Nico understood the processing delays he had experienced, and the disadvantages he had faced as a result of those delays, as a sign that he was considered an undesirable migrant, in spite of his high level of education and ability to speak English and French, among other languages, in addition to his native Spanish. Many scholars and migrant justice organizations have pointed out that contemporary policies increasingly privilege the immigration trajectories of people who enter on visas based on high qualifications and earnings potential at the expense of resourcing units that decide humanitarian or family reunification applications (Canadian Council for Refugees 2016; Macklin 2014; Simmons 2010).

Contact with IRCC generated high levels of anxiety for many participants, but this anxiety was compounded by the role Islamophobia and racialization play in shaping immigration policy and decisions. I had the following exchange with KH, director of an agency that supports and counsels racialized women, and FZ, one of the counselors:

FZ: One thing I've seen, in my understanding, South Asian [people] have more problems compared to other people. They're [IRCC] giving a hard time to South Asians.

KH: I think we've been profiled.

FZ: It's so sad. They're really, really giving them back and forth, you know, asking so many questions...

KH: Especially the Muslim community...

FZ: [Working on immigration paperwork for members of the] Muslim community is a *disaster*. Because I am dealing with them. And I know for the little small things [details on applications], they make it so huge... [P]eople are coming [to me in counseling sessions to talk about it], it's really miserable. But the same thing I am dealing with the other community, it just goes fast [snaps fingers].

KD: So it's a lot more, they need more evidence?

KH: A lot more scrutiny. Particularly Muslim South Asians. And it's very unfair... I think there are double standards.

FZ: We go the extra mile because we know [to expect extra scrutiny]. This is coming back and haunting us because we are South Asian. So we just attach extra extra extra papers [to applications] so there is no question. But still they question.

The concerns about discriminatory treatment raised by FZ and KH were echoed in a later interview with Asmaa. Otherized on the basis of her nationality and religion, she told me that the Canadian government treated her like a cheater. About a recent request for additional information, Asmaa said, "For me, it means they don't trust me. 'Prove this, prove this.' While I was completely true and transparent and did everything to the best of my truthful knowledge." Although Asmaa attributed it in part to racialization of people from the Middle East and negative perceptions about Islam, she believed that holding a Canadian passport would mean being treated better. Asked why citizenship, rather than permanent residence, held such significance to her, Asmaa provided several reasons, including this: "Having had to be randomly searched at every single airport that I've ever been to, 'randomly.' Just flashing your passport and walking to the gate, that's a dream for me." Additional scrutiny and poor treatment on the basis of race, nationality, and religion heightened people's sense of un-belonging related to their precarious immigration status. It showed people that their qualifications and suitability to become permanent residents were in doubt.

Discourses of un/belonging constructed at the national scale have echoes at the local scale. Although Toronto City Council declared Toronto a sanctuary city in 2013, it remains a place where

people with precarious immigration status experience both inclusion and exclusion, safety and risk (Hudson et al. 2017; Moffette and Gardner 2015; Perez-Doherty 2015). Participants encountered un-belonging in specific places across the city, interrupting belonging they may experience within their neighbourhoods or communities. Yves' experiences at Service Ontario, the provincial government office that issues documents such as health cards and driving licenses, demonstrate how immigration status translates to an uneven landscape of belonging locally. Yves visited a Service Ontario location to apply for an identification document because he did not have an original document from his country of citizenship. Without proof of identification, Yves says, "I felt, like a stranger, like an outsider." He was assured by a service provider that people with his immigration status had the right to request and receive an identification card. But his experience applying for one reinforced his un-belonging:

The first day they *yelled* at me so loud that everybody heard it, and it was *so* embarrassing... So I go [to Service Ontario], and they're like [pretend shouts in imitation]: "You want to get a photo ID but you're a refugee claimant!" [Yves indicates through his facial expressions and body language he feels awkward because everyone in Service Ontario is now watching]. And I was like [now imitates himself whispering, as he did that day, to keep things private], "I'm sorry. Can I get it?" He said [mock shouting in imitation of Service Ontario employee], "No! You can't!" I'm like, "But I was told, [Again imitating a forceful voice:] "No! You weren't!" I was like, I couldn't even finish [my sentence]! And then I see his co-workers laughing and I'm just like, "Okay, thank you." And then I left... [Later] I went back. You know, it's like, maybe it will fall to a different person, and it will be different. I went back. *Same* scenario! They're like, "No! You can't get an Ontario ID!" Loud, and a lot of gestures, and you know. And [they made] faces [at me]! And I'm just like, "Can you just check please because I was really told that you can get Ontario ID with your work permit." And they're like, "No! I'm positive!" "Can you please double check? Because I was really assured by people who knows, and I know someone who got it in this process. So I just want to be sure." She was like, "Okay!" She went around, I see her talking with her co-workers, they talk for a good three minutes. She comes back, she's like, "Next!" I was like, "Why? Why?" When I went to a different location, I got it like that [gestures to indicate, with no difficulties]. It's just, different location. Different people. Same rules, just one is not willing.

Yves summed up this encounter by concluding, "The whole [immigration] process is really bad, I cannot expect anything else, really." He thereby tied his treatment by provincial employees to national discourses that prioritize immigration control at the expense of welcoming newcomers. As more people are drawn into the work of gatekeeping, blocking certain migrants from accessing goods and services, more spaces in Toronto operate in ways that rupture belonging.

Unlike Yves, who persisted by making multiple visits to Service Ontario until his rights were recognized, Nico did not believe it would be possible to achieve recognition of his rights. He had not taken any action about his outstanding application for a work permit. I asked him about steps he had taken to resolve the issue, and we had the following exchange:

KD: Have you tried going to your MP to see if they can make enquiries about your work permit?

Nico [a bit aggressively]: *My* MP? Whose MP?

KD [Momentarily uncertain what he means; I decide he means that as non-voters, immigrants don't have MPs]: I know. I hear you.

Nico: I'm sorry, was I too aggressive with the answer?

Nico was sceptical that the system that constructed him as un-belonging could be used to reduce the barriers associated with his un-belonging, even though he was entitled to both a work permit and the help of 'his' MP to assist with problems relating to immigration applications.

As the remainder of the paper shows, participants resisted the exclusionary politics of belonging in Canada by persisting with strategies to maintain their presence and forging new capacities and subjectivities to open possibilities for systemic change. However, despite the forms of belonging participants enjoyed, many also internalized the value judgments made about them that led to being excluded from formal belonging.

### **Persistent Presence**

Among study participants, the most prevalent way people exercised autonomy was through what I call persistent presence. It can be understood as a counterpart of autonomous migration (Rodríguez 1996), the crossing of international borders outside of migration organized and regulated by states. Persistent presence refers to decisions to remain in Canada, to settle and build a life, even as the state renders people formally un-belonging through the withholding of secure immigration status. It also includes the practices people adopt to make their stay possible in spite of state restrictions to settlement services, health care, labour market access, and other rights. Nicholas De Genova (2009) writes about "insurgent presence" in the context of undocumented migrants in the US, calling attention to their presence and deportability. The persistent presence of participants, however, differs from this insurgent presence in two ways. Firstly, no study participants were defying deportation orders or living underground. However, they interpreted processing delays, withholding of rights, and increased scrutiny as ambivalence towards their presence. Secondly, participants did not use their presence as a direct and visible challenge to regimes of immigration control, but rather an indirect and quiet challenge to the authority of the state to define them as un-belonging. The value that people place upon persistent presence shows that it can significantly transform the everyday lives and futures of migrants. Persistent presence opens up possibilities for formal recognition of belonging in the future, and it secures access to valued opportunities and ways of life that are tied to Canada.

Presence is foundational to accessing territorially-based rights (Allon 2013; Bauder 2015; Carens 2008; Coutin 2010; Sawyer and Turpin 2005; Varsanyi 2006). The refugee determination system can only be accessed by entering and remaining in Canada. Time spent in Canada, especially when that time is spent working or studying, can be used to open pathways for permanent residence. This can take the form of pre-removal risk assessments, applications for permanent residence on the basis of humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and some of the new pathways to permanent residence that have been created following the increase in admission of people on temporary visas. Joseph Carens (2005; 2010) uses examples like these to show that presence and strong ties already are a basis upon which to make claims to secure immigration status, and he argues that this logic should be expanded to allow for regularization from within a country among people with dense connections in the country of settlement.

Participants holding work or student visas used their presence in Canada to accrue education, job experience, and time that would make them eligible for permanent residence. Mei, a recent graduate, was looking for a job that would qualify her for permanent residence. Asmaa and Emil, both of whom had applied for permanent residence, reflected during their interviews that the need to stay in Canada put extra pressure on their job search after they received their degrees. Leveraging persistent presence as a strategy to gain permanent residence received the most attention in the focus group, which was conducted with a group of Filipina women who had come to Canada to work as caregivers through the live-in caregiver program (LCP). Throughout the meeting, it was a topic the participants returned to repeatedly, and one the participants said they frequently discussed among themselves.

KD: So let's say you're in a group of Filipinas at a party, do people complain a lot about live-in caregiver and PR? Changes to the program?

Pearl: Oh, yeah!

Mary: Every corner, every day, every Facebook wall. You will see.

Lina: If you're in a subway, sometimes you just start talking, and the conversation will go. You get asked, "Oh, are you still...?" "Yeah." And suddenly it's going to go, and then you'll find a lot of stories.

The issue was so important because frequent tinkering with the rules of the LCP, along with processing delays, made the system confusing and difficult to navigate. A few women were struggling with changes to the program that nullified some of their work experience for the purposes of qualifying for permanent residence.

Persistent presence also provides people access to communities, places, and activities that are specific to their lives in Canada. For Paul, persistent presence meant being able to remain connected to place-based ties and living out the life he had built with his husband. Doing so with permanent residence would mean the couple would enjoy security in their life together, along with more flexibility for Paul to change jobs without needing to apply for a new visa. Although Paul held a temporary visa at the time of the interview, he has other forms of privilege in Canada. He is racialized as white, speaks English as a first language, has qualifications that are recognized in Canada, and could safely return to the country where he holds formal citizenship. Throughout his interview, Paul acknowledged his privilege compared to what he imagined others with precarious immigration status might feel. In spite of this privilege, Paul identified worries related to his status. Paul is from an EU country that recognizes gay marriage and allows for sponsorship of same sex partners for the purpose of immigration. However, Paul's family was not accepting when they found out he was gay. Their negative response to his coming out strained his relationship with his family. In the time he has spent living in Canada, he has lost contact with most of his former friends. In contrast, Paul has a thriving professional, family, and social life in Toronto. Paul places a high value on continuing to live with his husband in Toronto, as opposed to in the EU. Paul explained,

At this point, I've got a life here. I've got a lot invested in Toronto specifically... My life in [country] doesn't exist in the same way that it did three years ago or six years ago. Whereas my life here is pretty great! I have a church I go to, I teach Sunday School as well... I have a house. I know my neighbours, I like them all. They like me. This [new] job that I got, a lot of it is because of [professional] relationships I've been building.

The combination of time away from his home country and the falling out with his family has diminished his attachments there. In contrast, Paul has fashioned a dense web of ties to relationships, communities, and activities based in Toronto, all of which are sustained through regular face-to-face contact. For Paul, persistent presence connects him to the things that are important to him, and those things are located in Canada.

Because people with precarious immigration status face limitations on rights to claim forms of government support, participants relied upon their communities and informal support networks to help them with difficulties they faced—providing information about their rights, supporting them when they experienced stress related to family separation or other immigration-related challenges, helping to mitigate against homelessness or poverty, or helping them develop a feeling of belonging. Those connections, counterpublics that acknowledge the legitimacy of their existence, are what make it possible for people to persist in spite of restrictions they face in meeting their emotional and material well-being. Yves, Siva, Catalina, and Mei were in contact with family members living in the Toronto area and talked about advice or support they had received from their families. For example, Catalina lived with her brother upon arrival, and Siva visited regularly with his parents and siblings.

Participants who came to Canada without pre-existing support networks sought them out. The following exchange during the focus group shows how Filipina women working as caregivers quickly formed ties to the local Filipina community:

KD: Are there opportunities to make friends and to get to know other people, or do you feel quite isolated?

All: No. No.

Pearl: If you see someone, the good thing about the Philippines is, if you see some Filipino [in Canada], you are like, “Oh, we are friends already.” Because we are Filipinos. [All begin to chuckle and chime in with agreement: “Yeah. You’re Filipino.” “You’re friends. “And they introduce you to *their* other friends!”]

Lina: So it’s like networking!

Mary: And one thing that is different from the Filipino community compared to Canadians is that if you have party—

Pearl: You have to have appointment [invitation]!

Mary: If you invited me, I can’t bring [someone with me]. With Filipinos [all begin to chuckle] if I invited you and you bring 10 more, and you’re the one invited and bring also others, that’s fine with us.

KD: So that party gets big very quickly.

Mary: That’s what we call invited by the invited by the invited. And then you come, you don’t feel like you’re not welcome. They welcome you.

Pearl: Yeah, so be careful! [All laughing]

Their jokes about being “invited by the invited” reflect the joy that participants derived from their community. But the rest of the focus group discussion made clear that these ties to fellow Filipinas in the LCP were not only fun, but essential to sustaining persistent presence. Work in the LCP often involves long hours performing jobs that are emotionally and physically taxing, in some cases for employers who exploited them. Furthermore, many women were doing so while enduring prolonged family separation (Pratt 2004; 2012). Ties to others helped the women navigate the requirements for permanent residence and issues that arose with a pending immigration case. Throughout the focus group, the women talked about problems they had encountered or the problems of others, and how they got help from one another with those problems. They used the experiences of fellow Filipinas as a resource to guide them and asked one another what organizations might be able to advise them on their individual circumstances.

The women also struggled against ignorant comments made to them by white Canadians based on racist stereotypes about their education and skill level. Although the visa program, now closed, required LCPs to arrive with higher education, the women described being questioned about their English language ability, their living conditions at home, and their suitability for work in other sectors. For example, Jessa related how one woman reacted when the woman found out Jessa was Filipina:

I told her I came from Philippines and she said, “Oh, this is the lady that’s doing all the vacuuming and cleaning and cleaning the washroom” [other women are laughing, some good-naturedly, but others derisively]. So it’s like, you’re not even asking me what’s my profession. It’s just generalized. If you come from the Philippines, you’re doing this.

Friendships with other Filipinas and other people in the LCP therefore provided counterpublics in which such discourses were not circulated or accepted. These counterpublics helped the women combat isolation and offered shelter from such comments.

Persistent presence represents an important, but at times overlooked, evidence of migrants as active agents steering the course and conditions of their life. Rather than giving up on their lives in Canada, participants actively created conditions that allowed them to sustain persistent presence both

practically and emotionally. Participants' determination to stay in Canada shows that they valued their presence. They understood presence as transforming their everyday lives and opening up futures unavailable to them elsewhere. However, while persistent presence gave participants continued access to Canadian territory and the benefits offered by presence, its success at transforming the conditions of that presence was limited. Moments of un-belonging accumulate, as does the harm caused by un-belonging. One manifestation of this harm, participants' internalization of immigration status as a symbol of their unworthiness, is explored further below.

### **Research Participation as a Site to Circulate Counter-Discourses**

Throughout their time living with precarious immigration status, participants developed critiques about the ways they were characterized and treated as undesirable and un-belonging, as well as about the immigration system in Canada more generally. In a few cases, participants cultivated the capacity to use their experiences to drive change through forms of oppositional politics, either through public speaking or planning careers relating to social justice. More often, however, participants reserved their critiques for smaller settings, in which they could create or reinforce counterpublics. Research participation served as one example of a site in which to circulate such alternative discourses about regimes of immigration control and participants' desirability.

Research participation as a form of creating counterpublics was most apparent in the case of the focus group with Filipinas who worked or had worked in the live-in caregiver program (LCP). Although I had struggled to organize a focus group during fieldwork, the importance of the issues I was researching moved a woman, Mary, to draw on her own networks to organize a focus group so she and her friends could talk about their experience. Mary heard about my study through a mutual acquaintance. She took it upon herself to get in touch with me and to bring together a group of women to participate. Mary booked a venue, an immigrant-serving agency that supported many people working as live-in caregivers, and she spread the word about the date and location of the focus group. The focus group was made possible by formal and informal networks of support that women in the live-in caregiver program had developed to support their persistent presence. It also reflected a desire on behalf of Mary and the other participants to bring people together—to create a counterpublic in which the grievances of Mary and members of her community could be heard.

Participants in interviews were also very motivated to discuss their critiques of Canadian policies, even without being prompted to do so. When, at the end of the interview, I asked Siva if there was anything else he wanted to say, he returned to the issue of processing delays. "Why don't they try to go a little fast or efficient?... That's my question." He felt that delays in processing were wasting his time and thwarting his potential to contribute to Canadian society. In contrast to Siva's mild critique, Asmaa spent much of her interview denouncing her experience with the Canadian immigration regime. She had carefully researched the pathway to citizenship before coming because gaining citizenship was Asmaa's primary criteria in choosing where to immigrate. Asmaa said it was "horrible" to witness changes to immigration rules that lengthened the time to become eligible for citizenship. She characterized herself as depressed about her situation and afraid of what would happen to her immigration application. Asmaa felt upset that she had been deceived into expecting Canada to welcome immigrants, when in practice she was treated as un-belonging and with a high degree of mistrust. Interviews, therefore, functioned as a space in which participants could use their lived experience to dispute hegemonic discourses about Canada's regime of immigration control as efficient or welcoming.

Interviews and focus groups also served as spaces in which participants could use counterpublics to engage in narrative redefinition—recasting themselves as desirable and worthy members of Canadian society. Narrative redefinition is an important site of struggle and resistance (Caraccioli and Wright 2015; Smith 2015). Many participants described their hard work, good qualities, and potential to contribute to

Canada. Siva detailed some of his business ideas, importing or designing various of products, and delivering them. He already knew people both in Canada and abroad whose services he could contract, and he had set up agreements with those people. But it was more difficult and expensive to act upon these plans because he was precluded by his immigration status from getting bank loans.

So try to use me. That's my question. I am not doing anything bad for this country. I didn't do any illegal work...I have knowledge. So I can give my knowledge and my skills to contribute to this country's development in all the ways...If I try to do some business, I can create jobs for somebody. That's what they need, right?

Siva emphasized himself as knowledgeable, law-abiding, and capable of running a business that would contribute to the Canadian economy. He struggled to grasp why he would be prevented from opening a business. Although he wanted to contribute to the Canadian economy in ways that may otherwise have been seen as desirable, Siva's categorization as a refugee claimant rendered his potential contributions unintelligible. Thus, the interview served as a space in which he could re-work discourses of undesirability and draw me into a counterpublic that recognizes the value he brings to Canada.

Participants' desire to use counterpublics to assert themselves as worthy members of Canadian society demonstrates the power of discourses that tell them otherwise. Some scholarly literature discusses how constructions of un-belonging have powerful impacts on ways people understand and value themselves. Laura Simich observes that

non-status migrants resist being characterised as 'illicit' or in the wrong. They contrast their own moral sense of doing what is right and necessary with perceived negative public attitudes. This may be a psychologically defining act for migrants, whose personal motivations, self-image and resolve are heightened through the experience of being non-status (2006, 24).

Khaled Koser writes about the impact of criminalization on people's identities. One of Koser's participants told him, "[S]ometimes it seems that no one else thinks I am a refugee. They treat me as something different, as a criminal. And there have been times over the past year when I have wondered whether they're right" (2000, 101). These passages resonate with my findings, which show that participants reject discourses of un-belonging, and yet they also internalize those discourses. Such internalization exemplifies the struggle to exercise autonomy when one is dependent upon others for recognition. Butler describes such struggles thusly: "[T]he 'I' that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them" (2004, 3). These contradictory processes of asserting belonging and internalizing un-belonging are emotionally exhausting, and they undermine the quality of participants' persistent presence.

Asmaa struggled with social exclusion on multiple fronts. She was used to deeper levels of friendship and told me that people in Canada keep friendships more superficial. She did not feel a strong sense of belonging either through her relationships or through formal status. Asmaa hoped that being productive and being seen as productive, would help strengthen both her immigration case and her feelings of belonging:

But it's good. I feel productive...I feel in the Canadian culture there's a high emphasis on productivity. Your value is somehow synonymous with your productivity. Even when people greet each other, "Have a productive day!" Or, "I had a productive day." So it's a very important evaluation, measure. Previously I was not feeling productive, so I felt that I could not really earn my place in society here. Now that I have that, I can say that I'm productive, hopefully I'll feel better. I can tell people, "I'm a productive member of society!"... I don't really associate my value with my constant productivity. But down

time here is not something people are necessarily happy about. I feel it might be a key or an access for people to better see me. But I hope it won't be the only way of defining myself.

Her new perspective on work shows that Asmaa internalized, while also interrogating, the need to be productive. Additionally, she internalized suspicion that arises from racist discourses which are building blocks of immigration control. When 'randomly' selected for extra checks while traveling, Asmaa told me that she finds herself thinking, "Oh my God, *am* I carrying a missile? I don't know! Am I? Why are they searching me?' They make you doubt yourself."

In spite of efforts to position themselves as belonging and desirable migrants in interviews, everyday life, and immigration applications, several participants did so while struggling against an internalized sense of themselves as unbelonging. Antoine described precarious immigration status as a big barrier. When asked to clarify, Antoine went on to say,

I feel like, I'm hanging out with someone who is a citizen or permanent resident, I just, you know, automatically I already feel less. I would feel, you know, status-wise lower than that person... I pretend a lot. I pretend a lot. When I come out, I know people, no one thinks. But when I go back and am by myself, yeah, I think about it a lot. I think about it a lot. It causes a lot of sleepless nights, too.

Several service providers also voiced concerns about the way people internalize their immigration status as a symbol of their lesser value. AG described how holding a marginalized immigration status affects people.

It affects how you feel about yourself and think of yourself. You start blaming yourself, internalizing that, as if there is something wrong with you. And so your self-esteem goes down. You start feeling guilty. [People believe that] Because of you, your family suffers. You're nobody. You're a worthless person.

AG continued, "My clients tell me, people feel like they're inferior. People feel inferior. Someone even said to me, 'I feel inferior to you. Because you're here and you have status and I don't, so I am a less valuable person.'" Another service provider, RM, worried not only about the material conditions people experience associated with immigration status, but also the way it affects sense of self. RM said, "it creates this self-sense of second-class citizen, or second-class human being. And my biggest problem is people are interiorizing that, they are accepting that." Participants' efforts to convince me of their desirability shows that the exclusionary politics of belonging has influenced the ways they view themselves and the ways they expect to be seen by others.

Participants' appearances before me, critiquing the ways they are characterized and the treatment they have received, help create spaces in which their narratives can be heard and validated. However, the internalization of immigration status also shows that in spite of exercising autonomy and building lives beyond those envisioned by regimes of immigration control, narratives hostile to people with precarious immigration status remain powerful in influencing those lives.

## Conclusion

Precarious immigration status is associated with limited access to social support systems and access to the labour market. In this paper, I show that, like limited rights and access, discourses that construct certain migrants as un-belonging and undesirable also interfere with their ability to meet their needs and sustain themselves, materially, emotionally, and socially. While negotiations over belonging occur within a field of unequal power, people with precarious immigration status find ways to assert belonging and to exercise autonomy, acting beyond the ways envisioned and sanctioned by immigration

law. Such everyday acts of autonomy push back steadily against sovereign narratives of belonging, and they create spaces in which migrants' belonging and value can be recognized. These acts of autonomy serve as forms of self-rescue, in that people create the conditions in which they can flourish. By persisting in their presence in Canada in spite of a withholding of secure immigration status, people with precarious immigration status can maintain access to relationships, jobs, and activities that are place-specific. At the same time, persistent presence increases the possibilities to be granted permanent residence and citizenship in the future. By circulating counter-discourses about belonging and regimes of immigration control, people with precarious immigration status push back against hegemonic discourses of undesirability. Both persistent presence and circulating counter-discourses are enhanced by participants' creation of counterpublics—a coming together of people to create a space in which people can receive support and gain increased recognition of their belonging.

However, the internalization of immigration status as a sign of undesirability shows the limited capacity of acts of autonomy to sufficiently transform participants' everyday lives. While participants were able to assert belonging within particular spaces, sense of belonging was disrupted frequently enough that people internalized hegemonic discourses of un-belonging and undesirability even as people challenged those discourses. The endurance of a sense of unworthiness suggests that acts of autonomy cannot supplant structural change in ensuring the well-being of newcomers.

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