# THE NEW YORKER IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

# How Undocumented Immigrant Students Pursue a College Education

In the May 22, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in "American Studies" (p. 40), **Jonathan Blitzer** reports from Freedom University, an underground college in Georgia, where undocumented immigrants—refused admission by public universities and unable to get funding from private ones—find another way. Each year, about three thousand undocumented students graduate from high school in Georgia. In 2010, the Georgia Board of Regents instituted a policy barring undocumented students from the state's top five public schools; at the remaining public universities, they must pay out-of-state tuition. To matriculate at private colleges, undocumented students must apply as international students, and often that doesn't allow them to qualify for financial aid.

Blitzer speaks with Melissa and Ashley, identical twins who, along with their family, moved from Mexico to the suburbs of Atlanta when they were six years old. In 2011, the twins started filling out the online application to the University of Georgia, their top choice, but couldn't get beyond the first page. It asked if the applicant was a United States citizen, which the girls were not. (The family had applied for permanent residency, and they were ultimately denied.) That August, instead of matriculating at a four-year institution, Melissa and Ashley arrived for their first day at Freedom University. The school, founded in 2011, offers undocumented students free college-level instruction once a week. Its location is secret, because in the past Ku Klux Klansmen had threatened to break up classes and alert immigration authorities. The founders, four humanities professors at the University of Georgia, modelled their system on work done during the civil-rights era. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, civil-rights activists throughout the South created informal institutions, called freedom schools, to educate students in desperate need of academic support at the height of segregation. Freedom University carried on this tradition. There were classes on racial identity in America and on semiotics and literature. From the earliest days of Freedom University, a group of students has held protests, called "actions," at public universities and at the offices of the Board of Regents. "Once you have a greater knowledge of injustices happening in the world, it feels neglectful not to do anything about it," Melissa said. Last year, six of the school's twenty-six students received full scholarships—to Dartmouth, Eastern Connecticut State University, Hampshire, Berea, and Tougaloo.

In 2013, Melissa and Ashley were accepted at Syracuse University, but, as undocumented applicants, they did not qualify for full financial aid, and couldn't afford the tuition. Melissa said, "As each year passes, you feel less qualified. I'm still presenting this profile of me as a high-school student." After applying to thirty-two schools altogether for 2014 and 2015, the twins each applied to only one school for the 2016 academic year. Both were initially rejected until last spring, when Ashley received word that, after further consideration, she'd been accepted to Emory. In 2015, after months of talks between student activists and the administration, Emory made undocumented students with DACA eligible for full financial aid. "If it weren't for Freedom University, that never would have happened so quickly," John Latting, the dean of admissions, told Blitzer. Last fall, when Melissa was working as an usher at a theme park, she admitted that she

was thinking about abandoning the idea of college. Still, she told Blitzer, "I talk to all my friends who are currently in college, and I know it's the place for me. I can't have the conversations I want to have in my home town."

### A Gay Couple, an Adoption Plan, and a Brutal Custody Battle

In "Are You My Mother?" (p. 46), **Ian Parker** reports on a custody case between two women that raises questions about what counts as a family—and could redefine who has the legal right to rear a child in New York. Circe Hamilton and Kelly Gunn were romantic partners for several years, during which time they began to apply for an overseas adoption. But after they separated Hamilton continued to pursue the process on her own. She adopted a toddler, named Abush, from Ethiopia, in August, 2011. Hamilton and Gunn remained in close contact, and Gunn became Abush's godmother. Hamilton had always wanted to move back to the U.K., where she's from, and late last summer she was preparing do so. A few days before she and Abush were to leave for London, however, she got a call from Nancy Chemtob, a family and matrimonial lawyer representing Gunn. Gunn, a wealthy businesswoman, had asked a New York court to recognize her as one of Abush's parents and award her joint legal and physical custody. As an interim measure, Gunn was seeking a restraining order that would stop Hamilton from taking the boy out of the country. Hamilton told Parker, "It's as if you gave me the keys to your apartment and, suddenly, I'm saying, 'The apartment is mine.'" Gunn v. Hamilton—an inquiry into whether Abush had two parents or one—began the following week.



Gunn happened to file her petition just after New York's highest court made a ruling expanding the notion of parenthood. On September 8, 2016, when she and Hamilton appeared in front of Judge Frank Nervo, it was clear that Gunn v. Hamilton might further define that expansion. If Gunn were to win, "her supporters would laud the court for having restrained a woman who, with blithe unilateralism, had attempted to put an ocean between a small boy and one of his mothers. Supporters of Hamilton would see presumption rewarded; to them, a Gunn victory would suggest that legal chutzpah, and the funds to pay for it, could convert the desire to be a parent into the fact of being one," Parker writes. In New York City, where improvised extended families are commonplace, a ruling in favor of Gunn would risk emboldening people who, having been invited into the lives of single parents, then object to being asked to leave: neighbors, nannies, childless friends, siblings, flings. New York's statutes describe the obligations and entitlements of a parent, but they don't define what a parent is, leaving this to the courts. " 'Parent' is a word no different—and I hate to say it, Your Honor—than a word like 'God,' or a word like 'love,'" Chemtob argued to Judge Nervo. "It's a word that you can't really define." Bonnie Rabin, Hamilton's lead attorney, countered: "You can encourage a loving relationship. You can encourage time together. You can encourage someone to support you, and I mean emotionally. That doesn't encourage them to be a parent." Though Hamilton had valued Gunn as a godmother, Rabin continued, "Ms. Gunn wanted more. Ms. Gunn doesn't get to have more. That's not the way the world works."

Years of correspondence between the two women, an accounting of school pickups and time spent with Abush, and even Gunn's offer to buy an apartment for him and Hamilton were presented as evidence that Gunn was something more than a godmother—she was Abush's parent. Parker writes, "Hamilton sometimes seemed to be on trial for insulting two contrasting sets of assumptions about how a modern Manhattan family should look: she'd failed to gain full access to high-bourgeois comforts; and, by resisting Gunn, she was showing bias against new family configurations, and the gay culture that had helped to create them."

In November, 2016, Chemtob rested her case. Rabin submitted a motion to dismiss, and said, in court, "Love doesn't make a parent." Judge Nervo replied, "It just might." On January 5th, the judge rejected Rabin's motion—a preliminary one—and allowed Gunn's petition to proceed. But then, on April 14th, after further testimony, he ruled against Gunn's request to be recognized as a parent. In the court's view, although Hamilton and Gunn had started the adoption as a couple, their plan had not continued "unabated," therefore severing Gunn's parental claim. Gunn and her lawyer have not given up, and are filing an appeal, a process that will take months. She is certain of the justness of her cause, and dismissive of Hamilton and Judge Nervo. Gunn told Parker, "This guy doesn't get to tell me I'm not Abush's parent."

# The Printer the World's Best Photographers Trust Most

In "The Book Monk" (p. 60), **Rebecca Mead** profiles Gerhard Steidl, a printer and publisher of photography books known for fanatical attention to detail, for superlative craftsmanship, and for embracing the best that technology has to offer. His name appears on the spine of more than two hundred photography books a year, and he oversees the production of all of them personally, at his printing press, in Göttingen, Germany. The photographer Edward Burtynsky said of Steidl's operation, "It is like the haute couture of printing. He takes it to the nth degree." Artists who work with Steidl wait, sometimes for years, to be summoned to Göttingen, and are expected to drop everything when he calls. "It is like going to kiss the Pope's ring," Mary Ellen Carroll, the conceptual artist, said. The artist Dayanita Singh told Mead, "Everything is done to keep you focussed on whatever you are doing. There is this utter concentration—nothing else that is going on in your life is relevant. . . . He might call you down at five in the morning and you could be stark naked, and he wouldn't notice." Steidl prints only one book at a time. "When you're on press, it's like you're a couple," Steidl said. "If there is another lover, it does not work at all."

Steidl wants his creations to satisfy all the senses. Mead writes, "When he first opens a book, he holds it up close to his nose and smells it, like a sommelier assessing a glass of wine." He seeks out the best inks, and pioneers new techniques for achieving exquisite reproductions. "It's like good cuisine," Steidl told Mead. "If you use better product, the results are better." Steidl's biggest client, by far, is Chanel. He executes much of the fashion house's printing and stages all of Karl Lagerfeld's exhibitions. He suggested that he could still function without it, but added, "Let's say that what I earn from the fashion business makes life more comfortable." Steidl has only one working press, and never allows his staff count to rise above fifty. He knows how to run the machines with the same skill and delicacy as his employees, many of whom have been working with him for decades. Steidl also serves as his own janitor: he empties the trash cans every night. He is aggressively modest, insisting that, as a printer, he is a technician, not an artist. He abandoned his own aspiration to become a photographer as a young man. "But it helps me a lot that I have all this knowledge about photographer processes— what kind of lens, what is the perspective, contrast, the darkroom work," he said. "I meet the artist on the same level—not intellectual, but on the same level of realization of the art piece."

# Cécile McLorin Salvant Gives Old Songs a Fresh Voice

In "Kind of New" (p. 34), **Fred Kaplan** writes about Cécile McLorin Salvant, the twenty-seven-year-old jazz singer who, virtually unknown two years ago, has built an avid following and won a Grammy for her album "For One to Love." Wynton Marsalis, who has twice hired Salvant to tour with his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, told Kaplan, "You get a singer like this once in a generation or two." At eighteen, Salvant moved from New York to France, where she enrolled at the Darius Milhaud Conservatory and auditioned for a class in jazz singing. "I figured the jazz department would be like a good hobby—a place to make friends, like going to a community-theatre class," she said. By 2010, she was singing throughout Europe. The same year, Salvant competed in the Thelonious Monk competition, in Washington, D.C. Rodney Whitaker, the bassist who accompanied contestants, tells Kaplan, "I'd never met anyone that young who'd figured out how to channel the whole history of jazz singing and who had her own thing, too." After a second round of competition, Salvant was declared the winner. Al Pryor, the A. & R. chief at Mack Avenue Records, offered her a contract, as did Ed Arrendell, a prominent talent manager. In 2012, Salvant moved to Manhattan. "My concern was: How can I deal with the solitude of a creative life style?" she recalls. "I'd been used to being a good student—get good grades, follow whatever structure I'm in. Now it was the idea of letting all that go, working from home—what a nightmare!"

Salvant tells Kaplan, "To me, performance is acting as a character on the stage.... Trying to get inside a world for other people and getting them to join in—that's thrilling." This impulse to dramatize a song "sets Salvant apart from other jazz singers, even from many of the great ones," Kaplan writes. Salvant says, "I want to sing songs that have this timeless quality. I'm interested in history—how things differ, how they're still the same. I love it when a song is a hundred years old but still connects." Of her haunting, subversive rendition of Burt Bacharach's "Wives and Lovers," Salvant explains that "it's hard to find feminist jazz songs. But I thought about it, and I wondered if there were sexist songs that I could make fun of. I went online, looked up the ten most sexist songs in American pop history." Later, she said, "The songs that I sing and kind of make fun of—they have some kind of power over me. By making fun of them, I weaken that power."

**Plus:** In Comment, **Jeffrey Toobin** reflects on Donald Trump's firing of James Comey, the F.B.I. director, which he calls "a grave abuse of Presidential power" (p. 27); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Susanna Fogel** imagines a letter from a woman's frozen egg (p. 39); **Emily Nussbaum** reviews Hulu's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" (p. 78); **Thomas Mallon** reads two new books about John F. Kennedy, on the eve of his centenary (p. 81); **Laura Miller** reads Kei Miller's new novel, "Augustown" (p. 88); Alex Ross visits two new concert halls in Germany (p. 90); **Hua Hsu** listens to Jlin's new dance album, "Black Origami" (p. 92); a sketchbook by **Edward Steed** depicts the Mets 2017 injury schedule (p. 65); poetry by **Carrie Fountain** (p. 54) and **Stephen Burt** (p. 72); and new fiction by **Samantha Hunt** (p. 70).

**Podcasts: David Remnick** and Michael Anton, of the National Security Council, discuss the view of the world from the White House; **Robin Wright** and **David Remnick** discuss how Donald Trump's first trip abroad reflects his understanding of international affairs; **Dorothy Wickenden** speaks with **Evan Osnos** about James Comey's dismissal and the future of the Trump Presidency; **Tom Sleigh** reads **Seamus Haney's** poem "In the Attic," and his own poem "The Fox," and discusses them with **Paul Muldoon**; and **Samantha Hunt** reads her short story "A Love Story."

Digital Extras: Photographs taken at Gerhard Steidl's factory; a video of Freedom University; Carrie Fountain and Stephen Burt read their poems; and Richard Brody comments on scenes from Albert Brooks's "Mother," from 1996.

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