

'Where Are the Refugees?'

The Paradox of Asylum in Everyday
Institutional Life in the Modern Academy
and the Space-Time Banalities of Exception

KOLAR APARNA, OLIVIER THOMAS KRAMSCH AND OUMAR KANDE

Exiles stand outside the law and their fate thus depends exclusively on the disposition of the colonial rulers. We are therefore never troubled by the need to refer to laws or other general regulations. Justice . . . does not apply to us.

—Sultan Sjahrir, *Out of Exile*, 1949

The reflection to which we are subject is known by all: it is the phenomenon of clandestine immigration.

—Oumar Kande, 2019¹

Where are the refugees? A spectre is haunting (university life in) Europe: the refugee, the migrant, the exile. Cutting-edge object of contemporary desire in what has become a flourishing migration-research-industrial-complex, she is at once sought after for valuable 'experience', while her body is denied entry onto university premises for lack of legal papers. Yet the bodily absence of refugees at university generates its own crisis of legitimacy and authority. In our hyper-reflexive times, the strange presence-absence of the 'missing refugee' on conference panels and in scientific fora produces a *malaise* that is summed up by the ever-more insistent query: '*Where are the refugees?*' The 'where' in the question points to an underlying anxiety within the scholarly community as to the proper 'place' of refugees in the research process, and marks the fissure whereby refugees are both desired and denied entry at university. Additionally, the place of refugees, we aver, cannot be analytically separated from the 'time' of the university, one which evac-

uates ‘different’ bodies both at the very upper and lower tiers of the campus power structure, for different reasons, as shall be elaborated. By way of three short vignettes, we seek to illuminate the contradictory dynamics of this space-time fissure, while considering the practical as well as theoretical stakes involved in its reproduction.

In doing so, we adopt an assertively auto-ethnographic approach, each speaking from our experience as thinking, exilic subjects active in university reform movements and refugee-support in locations extending from Nijmegen/Kleve (The Netherlands/Germany) to Bolzano (Italy) to the fraught political moment the editors of this volume are experiencing in their struggle to maintain academic freedoms in an increasingly authoritarian Hungary (Cantat et al., this volume). Within the framework of an informal initiative co-founded by two of the authors under the rubric ‘Asylum University’, we have found ways to question, if not fully challenge, the political-economic inequalities shaping academic knowledge production at our university. These criteria are largely driven by friendships that are dedicated to formalising (through access to classroom, partial remuneration, co-authorship, co-teaching) and legitimising the work done by comrades outside academic status and contracts. A large part of the texts that make up this chapter was typed over WhatsApp, since the luxury of laptops and/or full-time contracts were not a condition available to all the authors.

However, in co-producing this narrative, we establish a continuum of affective solidarity between migrants and refugees, and precarious and marginalised university staff. Affective solidarity emerges from experiences of discomfort that serve as a productive basis from which to seek solidarity rather than solidarity based on assumptions of how the Other feels or from shared identity (Hemmings 2012). Although the experiences of precarious academic staff speak from a far more privileged vantage point (see Cook, this volume), each experiences the sharp end of exclusionary practices. It is perhaps from this perspective of evacuation and containment that throughout our narrative we are shadowed by the prison writings of Soetan Sjahrir – the first prime minister of Indonesia, but also an Indonesian student activist in the Netherlands, and key intellectual of mid-twentieth-century decolonisation (1949). Sjahrir’s meditations on space, time, knowledge and struggle are apposite for our project of thinking the place of refugees and marginalised staff in the transformation of universities today because they speak uncannily to the reigning atmosphere of contemporary university life in Europe.

'Where Are the Refugees in Bolzano/Nijmegen?'

It is not that I have the conviction that all this knowledge will be necessary in practice, but rather that I have an increasingly strong feeling that the world is presently governed by words. To me, all this fashionable glib wisdom that currently provides the keynote of power is only quasi knowledge and pseudo knowledge conscripted into the service of politics and propaganda. It is, moreover, not difficult to find in this new and modern wisdom platitudes and long outdated axioms. As an end result of mass production and of over standardization, the spiritual level of the facile slogan has been glorified to meet the needs of the new wisdom of emotionalism, of antirationalism, of fanatical irrationalism, and of conscious emphasis on race, blood, and state. (Sjahirir 1949: 12–13)

At a session with students training to become high school teachers in Bolzano, one of the authors, along with a colleague, has been invited to share our research processes of producing a public tool – an audio-guide – to have conversations on ‘hospitality, citizenship and borders’ in Bolzano. We share some processes of a collective condition of impotence, ones that are experienced unequally at different levels between the actors subjected to bureaucracies of asylum procedures. This is because not everyone involved in the asylum procedure is subjected to the same kinds of legal consequences of a negative decision (such as deportation under forced conditions for those ‘seeking asylum’). For instance, the conversations we had with people involved in manufacturing the ‘biography’ of a potential ‘asylum-seeker’ (i.e. the biography-writer/volunteer, the person providing the story needing (asylum) citizenship papers, the lawyer and the person interviewing) and what such procedures *do* to one’s sense of being human. However, when the floor was open for questions, the teacher leading the group asked, ‘But, where are the refugees?’

This question is not new to us anymore, since it constantly seems to be a concern of people to *see* ‘real’ refugees whenever the topic of borders and asylum citizenship is discussed in the EU, especially after 2015. While it is legitimate to demand accountability and responsibility of research processes that talk *about* actors and often speak on behalf of actors who are themselves often absent, this question came from another place. A place that wanted to hear the stories of refugees from the ‘horse’s mouth’. My colleague and I were not ‘real’ refugees. While one of our main collaborators for the same project was a ‘refugee’ (legally),

he was first and foremost a ‘geographer’ for us, and he was not present with us that day because of other engagements.

This, however, raises many important issues relevant for our discussion on ‘opening up the university’. This question, ‘Where are the refugees?’, has been so besieging in our work over the last years that it has come to represent the paradoxes and hypocrisies of modern academic life in Western Europe. As an institution and as employees of a geography department in the Netherlands, we and our colleagues work on topics of borders, citizenship and migration, producing relations with students that are often involved in doing fieldwork with actors in the ‘terrain of asylum’. This terrain inevitably involves students contacting asylum-seekers, volunteers, organisations active in refugee support and other policy-related organisations. The irony of relying on actors who are invisible to the state (and therefore also invisible in the eyes of the university) as passive members of knowledge production while actively being ‘sought after’ by students and researchers became evident in a conversation I (Kolar Aparna) recently had with a university officer responsible for student diversity and inclusion.

Among other tasks, this officer was appointed recently to initiate a programmed transition year (*schakeljaar*) for refugees. This ‘*schakeljaar*’ is meant to allow people with a ‘refugee background’ (those already possessing legal documents) to study at bachelor level, provided they have some bridging skills. The said officer contacted me through a colleague to find out more about our informal initiative to enable access to courses for refugees. She told me that she would like to map the needs of the people, rather than depart from the projects conceived by volunteers for initiatives and reforms on refugee education at our university. She said that she senses a huge gap between the ‘desires’ of the volunteers² and the needs of people with ‘refugee’ status living in Nijmegen and around. I told her about my recent meeting with the coordinator of the night shelter³ in Nijmegen who put forward the idea of submitting a proposal to facilitate specific forms of access to the main educational institutions in Nijmegen based on the needs of people waiting for their asylum documents, along with some other local organisations. She said that she was enthusiastic to meet him. However, I also noticed her hold her enthusiasm back immediately. She asked, ‘But does the night shelter involve people “out of procedure”? This can be tricky because then I have to be accountable to people in the university who might find this problematic. This would be illegal. I would have to check what the implications are if we involve people who are “out of procedure”’. She and I got into a deeper discussion after she raised

this concern. Is it appropriate for us as an institution to send students to conduct research in the night shelter or other local support organisations, constantly relying on the stories of the people living there to produce theses and articles and other forms of 'scientific production', and at the same time deny access to the same people contributing to this knowledge?

On the one hand, institutions such as universities are complicit in denying access to education and, therefore, to tools of representing their own stories to people whose stories are analysed and *about* whom much is written. And at the same time, the question of 'Where are the refugees?' continues to drive conversations on asylum citizenship in academic discussions, as revealed previously. This desire to see the Other at arm's length while operating within institutions that deny relations of knowledge production on an equal footing produces a partial inclusion (i.e. we want to see you and hear you as different and therefore cannot accept you as Us (those who study you)), what Edward Said has called 'Orientalism' – Orientalist exception, that is normalised in the everyday institutional life of the modern academy. Joining the broader call to acknowledge the 'Eurocentric epistemologies and pedagogies that ignore imperial colonial histories and patriarchal occlusions' in the modern, Western academy (see Cantat et al., this volume), in what follows, we delineate the contours of an alternative space-time future for university life that harbours the potential to break through the misery of the present.

What Time Is the University?

I notice that I have unconsciously become accustomed to thinking as little as possible within a context of time. In fact, I sometimes have trouble in remembering whether a visitor has been here the same day or several weeks ago. This is due probably to the fact that so little has happened and that the various periods of time are so empty and void, as it were, that you can hardly distinguish between them. . . .

I think furthermore that there is still another cause of this lack of realization or appreciation of time: the fact that my term of imprisonment has not been fixed. . . .

. . . For me, time has a meaning only in so far as it tells me that I have now been in prison so long, or in connection with the few happenings, and consequently the less often they take place, the less notion I have of time. My interest is wholly fixed on what happened; that is, on the event itself.

I have thus learned that time is tied to the thinking subject and is more or less dependent on him; and that it is merely a thought-form [*denk-vorm*], which has no existence apart from the thinker. . . . (Sjahrir 1949: 10–11)

More interesting – in my focus – is the historical question: How does the spirit of the time have its own influence into the debates in universities about any political topic? (Jurgen Hasse, personal communication, November 2019)

The spatiality of the university today is mediated unevenly by temporality and historicity. Indeed, what ‘time’ is the contemporary Dutch university? As Sjahrir makes clear that time loses meaning in the context of his own confinement, for those labouring on the lower echelons of the university’s institutional ladder, time is also differentially experienced depending on one’s status, (im)permanence of contract and *taaklast* load (‘assigned duties’, a spreadsheet prominently showing which hours are assigned for various duties: teaching, thesis supervision, administrative duties, research). Each task is implicitly assigned a value, with a gradient moving upwards starting from the lowest esteemed, teaching – bachelor-level at the very bottom – up through MA-level courses, then on to higher and higher valued activities: research, and, ultimately, managerial coordination, preferably involving projects involving large sums of externally secured funding. Staff involved in lower-level functions are made to feel as if they are ‘stuck’ in time, merely involved in the department’s core, reproductive, largely invisible functions. Not by accident, such staff are mostly junior, and female. On the other hand, staff working at the upper levels of the value chain are made to feel at the ‘cutting edge’ of departmental and faculty happenings. They are invited to ‘high level’ meetings with deans and vice-deans. In short, they are *seen*, and thus partake in the real ‘historical’ time of the university. Lower-level staff do not enter this rarefied temporal tier, but they are aware of it via the ghostly exchange of unseen higher echelons, whose emails they occasionally intercept via group-wide lists. Privilege and power are thereby attributed to those who are so busy they simply ‘have no time’. Not by accident, such staff are largely senior, and male. This is the time of the relatively privileged faculty with permanent contracts.

Staff on part-time or short-term contracts feel time as fragmented, precarious, dependent on the will of others, in short, vulnerable. This is particularly experienced at the level of PhD students. Those considered as ‘internal PhDs’ are granted all the privileges of full staff, offered

office space and opportunities to develop themselves professionally by acquiring valuable teaching experience. So-called 'external PhDs' – usually funded under the auspices of foreign ministries and governments – are not afforded such privileges. A large majority of such students often hail from 'the Global South', in our case mostly Indonesia and China. The 'time' of Indonesian and Chinese PhD students is that of impermanent migrancy, labouring in a class that is subaltern to that of their peers. Their 'visibility' is arbitrary, at the whim of a supervisor who may call them to account at any moment. Despite the fact that the border between being an 'internal' or 'external' PhD gets played out as simply what one gives value to rather than constituting a fixed hierarchy, it is precisely the invisibility of external PhD students that enables prejudices and stereotypes of 'intelligent versus subaltern bodies' to get mapped onto everyday interactions. 'I feel this border every day', says a colleague to one of the authors (Kolar Aparna) at the coffee corner.⁴

Monthly staff meetings constitute the spectacular 'event' during which both temporalities at university collide. A collision occurred during one such staff meeting when all the PhDs in our department organised a discussion with their supervisors to demand better working conditions.⁵ During this meeting a number of issues came to the fore. Referring to the unwritten rules of supervisory relations and the ambiguities of what was expected of her while being overworked, a fellow PhD student from China confessed, 'I feel afraid'. It took considerable courage for her to make herself vulnerable in such a way, especially in front of members of the department present during this meeting. At the same time, this confrontation also exposed the less spoken about high-tension atmosphere of our work environment that is often suppressed because of the dominance of so-called informality at all levels of workspace interactions among staff. Another major concern raised was that migrant PhDs felt 'left on their own' in dealing with issues such as housing, as well as administrative barriers to moving to the Netherlands with family. This led to a defence by some staff in charge of supervising PhDs, who argued for separating supervision processes from other administrative functions. Such a response not only ignored the emotional labour of living in a foreign country (which may spill over to producing a PhD thesis), but also silenced the voices that had dared to speak for the first time in such a pan-departmental setting.

As we write, the racialised contexts of finding housing in Nijmegen and Bolzano (from where the authors speak and write) collide into each other as well. In Nijmegen, a fellow PhD from Mexico has been asked to leave his room on very short notice with the excuse that the

owner needs the house for family reasons. Our colleague has heard this excuse before from previous landowners, while he has witnessed new Dutch-speaking tenants moving into the same houses from which he has been chased out. ‘I think I will just move into one of our office rooms in the Faculty building if I don’t find a place soon! How am I expected to work under these conditions?’, he remarks, while working on reviewer comments for an article submission deadline.

This condition of a colleague connects to one of the authors leading a (non-white) refugee/asylum-seeker-led committee in Bolzano fighting for the rights (legal help, housing, work, education, among others) of both newly arriving asylum-seekers and long-staying migrant communities without Italian citizenship in Bolzano.

Finding gold in Tambacounda (Senegal) is easier than finding a house for rent in Bolzano. Yet this city of one hundred thousand inhabitants is among the Italian cities that offer a better quality of life. The ‘population’ lives in good conditions. Foreigners are the people who suffer more for this lack of housing, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa. The difficulty is explained away by some homeowners as a lack of confidence and fear that ‘There is no guarantee and we are afraid that our houses will be destroyed’. To have a house here, you need months or even years. The waiting time is very long. A lot of people live in unacceptable situations. There are plenty of people working on an indefinite contract and making quite decent money at the end of the month but they cannot find a rental. There are more than sixty people sleeping on the streets in the winter cold, and others in their cars. This number is only increasing. The mayor of Bolzano thinks he can solve this problem by building several houses. (Kande, diary notes, October 2019)

We argue that what is at stake is more than the physical availability of housing, and has a more deep-rooted basis in who is seen as deserving of living in Europe. If indeed, as Sjahrir suggests, time is but a ‘thought-form’ (*denk-vorm*), with ‘no existence apart from the thinker’ – hence conferring a fully embodied dimension to the experience of time – how can precarious and ‘exilic’ bodies and/or staff produce counter-temporalities that bring them more fully into the ‘lived time’ of the city/university? Better yet, how can a temporality be crafted that reconfigures the time of the city/university as we know it? Reconnecting to older, late twentieth-century debates in our field, we might hazard to say that what may be required is the production of a new kind of *space*, one which assertively foregrounds difference as a central axis of being-in-the-world (Soja 1989; Jameson 2005; Aparna et al. 2020).⁶

Rather than having the staff meeting 'event' around a conference table with pre-structured agenda marking a 'timeless time' of managerial 'efficiency', the semi-autonomous 'flash mob' tactics of a reading group devoted to postcolonial themes, operating from an on-campus bookstore lounge. In lieu of a fixed office space, a roving, nomadic *praxis* hovering just below the threshold of visibility, emerging in and out of classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, google-group lists, off-campus venues and WhatsApp chatrooms. When bodies do meet under these ephemeral conditions, 'face-time' takes on a nearly incandescent power, as one face, smiling at another says: 'I am here with you and not elsewhere'. This face-time takes on a whole other dimension in light of the current exilic conditions of the coronavirus pandemic during which we rework our text. We have just rounded off (in early March 2020) a Zoom-run classroom session connecting students in Nijmegen and Glasgow on the theme of 'encampment' under conditions of the university strikes in the UK and the coronavirus pandemic. Italy was at the time blocked and one of the authors who was supposed to travel to Nijmegen Zoomed-in from Bolzano. The rest of the authors facilitated discussions in Nijmegen with a colleague and an anti-deportation activist from Berlin/Istanbul/Lesvos. Precisely because of these mostly empty classroom sites of strikes and virus, the stories shared in the semi-virtual classroom produced an unprecedented intimacy in revealing the anxieties, fragilities, prejudices and hierarchical violence of our times. A condition in which being elsewhere became the norm without planning for it to be this way.

Moreover, rather than perceiving the act of writing as an act meant merely to fulfil a task load/*taaklast*, performed solely by academic staff, and as this chapter performatively reveals, writing for us emerges as a process of making space for forms of expressions and exchange that otherwise do not exist at university – a space for shared conversations beyond legal statuses of citizenship. For us, writing, then, is largely driven by shared existential conditions and spontaneous exchanges which in turn trigger questions otherwise impossible to be raised within the sanitised spaces of classrooms and research hotspots that follow from 'strategic' visions. Writing becomes a way of cutting through the hopelessness of asylum procedures. This is something one of the authors has been going through during the time of writing this chapter, and has moved from being in (legal) waiting to gaining (temporary, legal refuge). Additionally, the exclusionary temporalities of 'the city' can be questioned by claiming academic space, while claiming legitimacy for one's thinking body and thinking from one's gut (Jones

2006). At the same time, this allows for bringing the body fully back into discussions that are otherwise driven by assumptions of academic staff as mere ‘floating brains’. This is the affective solidarity that is also built in the course of writing this piece, in which all the authors start from their experiences of discomfort and from there search for shared intellectual grounds.

Clandestinely Secreted Ink

I have . . . kept myself occupied with other things: with my family, with everything that I had to leave behind, and above all, and recently, with study. I can now see the whole field that I must still study, and it is very large. (Sjahrir 1949: 12)

Around 1960, Africa experienced a wave of decolonisation.⁷ This era of independence led to a process of reconstruction for several independent African countries, accompanied by political, financial and economic instability, followed by an impoverishment of natural resources. All of these internal factors resulted in numerous young people leaving their regions of birth to gain a living and satisfy the needs of their parents by reaching the European continent, through the phenomenon called clandestine immigration.

And be aware that we cannot speak of this topic without addressing the factors lying at the origins of this phenomenon. Be aware that in the text that lies before you I (Oumar Kande) shall be in the position of bringing light to bear on all questions relating to immigration. For I am African. Yes! I come from West Africa. I take pride in this assertion of being African, for numerous are those Europeans, when speaking of Africa, who [only] think of poverty. And yet, Africa overflows with an enormity of natural and human resources.

But in our day, the greatest concern of the African continent is that it is emptying itself out of its youth due to wars, poverty and bad governance. Myriad are those young people who leave this continent in search of gain, so as to satisfy their needs and to acquire better living conditions. Indeed, in African society, when one does not find gainful employment or does not take part in pecuniary activities, one is often confronted with oppressions or even ridicule. This is what gives young people the propulsive desire to undertake journeys to reach what they believe to be El Dorado. [My] conversations with young migrants from the University of Bolzano (Free University of Bozen) are a perfect illustration thereof. In what follows I tell the story of a comrade who

has successfully undertaken such a journey, and then go on to tell my own.

Let us start with the case of Michael Treasure, a student of economics and a refugee from Nigeria, born in 1992 in Lagos. She began her elementary school studies in her native city. But unfortunately, she was not able to complete her secondary school cycle due to problems of insecurity and persecution that forced her in 2015 to flee her country and find refuge in Italy. Thanks to the project 'Unitedbz', she could attend university two years after her arrival, an opportunity to continue her studies and realise her dreams. She found a job in a restaurant in order to pay her small bills, eat, buy books and documents. . . Despite the early challenges and difficulties with the Italian language, she has not abandoned her pursuits for one second. Today, she remains very optimistic on the chances of her success. Her dream is to become an expert in accounting.

I, Oumar Kande, arrived in Italy in March 2015. For a long time now, I have worked in an asylum reception centre. In 2017, I studied economics and management at the University of Bolzano. It was an opportunity for me to attend courses at this university. In my classes there were students of African origin and those from Europe. Some were nice and others not. But at any rate this experience has given me the opportunity to practise the Italian language and to learn German, which is useful in this region (South Tyrol).

And yet, I also must remember a racist episode experienced by an African student at the entrance of the university, where a security guard offended the young man by telling him to go out in the rain so that at least he could wash himself due to his bad odour. How sad this is! And now, the last message the ink of my pen will secrete: the world would be better off if Blacks and Whites agree to share the earth in harmony, cohesion and peace.

We Are Here

Homogenising practices in academia through exclusion – be it in the indirect signals within supervisory processes towards migrant PhDs or blatant racism against black bodies seen as 'smelly', and the increasing desire to quantify knowledge production – continue to dominate the affective space of the university today. However, the repulsive desire to undertake exilic journeys, the hidden sensorialities of informal face-to-face collective meetings of reading groups, the urgent need to claim intellectual thinking to overcome the dreadfulness of imposed 'wasted

times' of the waiting part of asylum procedures, all have and are and will be producing their own novel space. Seen from such spaces, the present is always past-future (Cusicanqui 2012). The optimism-yet-sharpness of voices of those yet to gain access to university entangle contrastingly with the pessimism-yet-hopefulness of those working to actively transform the university. 'Where are the refugees?' *We are here.*

Kolar Aparna is a mother of a four-year-old.

Olivier Thomas Kramsch is professor of geography and border studies within the Department of Human Geography, Radboud Universiteit, and a core member of the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research.

Oumar Kande is a cultural mediator and leading member of a self-represented refugee committee in Bolzano.

Notes

1. Original: La réflexion, à laquelle nous sommes soumis, est connue de tous : c'est le phénomène de l'immigration clandestine.
2. Volunteers who conceived this project as an outcome of the efforts that emerged spontaneously with the coming and disassembling of the largest refugee camp close to our campus recently (between September 2015 and April 2016).
3. The night shelter is reserved especially for people waiting for their asylum documents.
4. This quotation stems from the conversation of one of the authors with a doctoral student.
5. This collective action itself came as a response to the case of a fellow PhD who was abruptly informed that her contract would be terminated, in a manner that was under unsafe conditions in a public space where she fainted and did not have access to support of peers or friends. This action had implications for her residency in the Netherlands, given that she would be forced to return to her home country outside the EU against her will.
6. Sultan Sjahrir's prison meditations on 'time' and the 'event' may help to qualify in important ways the supposedly European origins of the so-called 'ontological distortion' at the heart of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century 'spatial turn' in the social sciences, whereby temporal categories have been seen to predominate at the expense of spatial ones for much of the modern period (see Soja 1989). This calls for a much more global appreciation of the role intellectuals in the so-called peripheries of the modern world-system have played in the generation of cutting-edge socio-spatial theory than has until now been acknowledged, a project in which two of the authors are currently engaged.

7. Note: All text that follows in this section is translated by the authors from the original French.

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