

MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY
OLGA BURLYUK AND LADAN RAHBARI



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331>

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>.

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331#resources>.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-923-1

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-924-8

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-925-5

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-926-2

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 978-1-80064-927-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-928-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-929-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0331

Cover image: Filip Kominik, 'Before the Czech' (2017),

<https://unsplash.com/photos/IHtVbLRjTZU>. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Afterword: Reflections on Migrant Academics' Narratives

Umut Erel

This collection of essays on the experience of being a migrant academic in Europe is an important piece of writing that comes at a time when there is more open and visible debate and reflection about the inequalities of gender and racialization within academia. There is an important body of research and campaigning work on the power relations subjecting racialized, women, queer and trans academics, and on their strategies for challenging them and creating alternative visions or practices of producing and sharing knowledge (e.g., Bacchetta et al., 2018; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2016; Rollock, 2019; Tate and Page, 2018). Yet this work is uneven, and there is little work on European academia; this book is welcome in shedding light on the migrant academics' experiences in European countries. This volume could be a step towards building wider solidarities and strategies to challenge power relations subjecting migratized, racialized, women, queer and trans academics.

Reading the contributions to this book has felt at times eye-opening, at times shocking, and at times has triggered recognition. The experiences of migrant academics collected and shared here testify to the wide range of positions and positionalities in terms of migration status, migration trajectories, experiences of racialization, and gendered, racialized, and migratized working conditions.

Yet, in their wide range, each contribution also testifies to the entrenched and powerful mechanisms of migration regimes and working conditions, as well as migratized, racialized, and gendered professional hierarchies that are reflected in these accounts. Immigration legislation

often renders migrant academics more exploitable by institutions and individuals within them. Coupled with the widespread precarious working conditions that affect in particular early-career academics, this can create steep hierarchies which enable other forms of violence. Contributors to this book show how these structural inequalities have contributed to making them more vulnerable to racist and sexual harassment, and violence at the same time as silencing them. In this sense, this book is an important intervention into these power relations by creating a public space where these experiences can be recorded and made visible.

Some of the contributions speak of the conversations that migrant academics have amongst themselves, perhaps at the peripheries of conferences, perhaps in hushed tones. Unfortunately, these experiences are part of long-established structures and habits of discrimination and racism against migrant academics. Migrant academics often face the devaluation of their work. On the one hand, this is because they are seen as members of a minoritized group, who are also rendered as 'minors in tutelage' (Brah, 1997) and therefore not recognized as producing authorized or authoritative knowledge. On the other hand, migrant academics' own social positioning as at the margins of academia and of the national societies they live in can mean that their approaches to research prioritize critical, marginalized approaches to knowledge, which in turn challenge common-sense understandings of race, migration, and national culture—including national educational cultures—prevalent in academia and wider society. This combination of marginalized subject positions and epistemological approaches to knowledge production in the person of migrant academics can expose them to multi-pronged attacks on their credibility as persons, as well as the authoritativeness of their work.

Migration is often couched in terms of problems. One version of this problem approach to migration is that migrants are seen as *constituting* a problem for the societies in which they live and work—and this includes the institutions in which they work, the places in which they live, and the social and professional networks they are part of. Another version of this problem approach to migration is to posit that migrants *experience* problems—while it is clear that migrant academics experience problems, such as insecure, temporary, precarious employment, precarity due to immigration status, as well as a host of other issues related to gendered

and racialized positioning, this problem paradigm itself can also have detrimental effects on migrant academics' professional lives and beyond. Thus, a number of contributions to the book recount experiences where migrant academics' expertise was questioned, challenged, or undermined, either because they were seen as too close to their subject of study, or because their academic and intellectual trajectory was devalued, especially for those from the Global South. While this points to the ways in which institutions and academic networks produce and reproduce hierarchies of what counts as authoritative knowledge and who is seen to legitimately embody it, racialized scholars and those from the Global South, as well as those from outside or the 'margins' of the EU, are only conditionally admitted to this group.

The chapters in this book also highlight the important role that gender plays in constructing hierarchies between academics and the knowledges they produce. A shocking (though sadly unsurprising) element in this is the way in which women scholars' work is delegitimized, and they are met with disbelief about their qualifications, skills, expertise. They are seen as sexually exploitable. There is a stigma that is attached to them when undertaking research, forcing them to find strategies that clearly highlight the professional context of research encounters, to protect themselves from the idea that their research is just another way of soliciting sex. However, they also encounter similar treatment by other academics at conferences or in the workplace, where they should be treated as peers. Instead, migrant women academics recount experiences of sexual harassment and violence in such contexts. This type of behavior builds on and exploits the privileges of white national male academics for building their own careers. But it is also a form of violence that actively builds and reinforces the gendered, racialized hierarchies between 'migrant' and national academics.

Alongside these interpersonal forms of discrimination and gendered racism, the contributors also outline the structural and institutional factors that shape their experiences of gendered and racialized working lives. This often starts before they enter the country with the difficulties of obtaining visas, then continues with the problems of getting residence and work permits. This is rarely a one-off process, but instead becomes a part of their working lives, as these permits need to be regularly renewed. The tediousness of this repetitive process is often accompanied by anxieties and insecurities. This process alone can be dispiriting and

frustrating, yet it is often compounded by the insecurities of academic working contracts. Especially for early-career researchers, these are increasingly short-term and depend on external funding, which is hard to predict. These insecurities of working contracts and migration status further render migrant academics exploitable in a very competitive work context, where getting (or failing to get) a job, a publication, or a grant can depend on the strength of interpersonal networks or the good will of senior academics. Academic work requires considerable investment of time, energy, money, and commitment. Yet all this investment can feel like a gamble when there are few job opportunities, and those that exist often offer insecure working conditions. Much of this is part of the wider picture of neoliberal developments in academia, yet this book shows that this wider picture is clearly racialized, gendered, and migratized.

As some contributions point out, some of these experiences have been shared before, but this sharing mainly took place in the margins of conferences or intimate moments in the corridors of institutions. This edited book, in collecting and validating these experiences, makes an important intervention by challenging the exclusions, hierarchies, and power relations of migration status, racialization, and gender pervading academia. Such an intervention contributes to creating a wider public for these debates and hopefully seeds urgently needed solidarities to challenge these academic working conditions.

Reading the chapters' vivid autobiographical reflections brought back memories of my own. One of them is about working in a department whose ethos, proudly proclaimed on websites and conference proceedings, was one of social justice. Yet, when my colleague needed an extension of his contract to be able to extend his visa, it proved somehow impossible, even though the department was flourishing and attracting steady research income. My colleague, fortunately, was able to secure a permanent job elsewhere.

Another memory is of sitting through research presentations by colleagues who—without any irony or self-reflexivity—spoke of the participants in their research project as 'my migrants.' When challenged about the patronizing connotations of such wording, my colleague laughed. Well, I began to understand how engrained into the common sense of researchers such understandings of migrants as being childlike, needy, and dependent were when I heard her senior colleague's presentation. This senior colleague explained how difficult

the economic position of some of the migrants she encountered in her research project was. Then she went on to spend half the time allocated to her presentation to sharing how she had bought a gift basket of foodstuff for her research participants and how grateful they had been.

Such framings of migrants as without agency, gratefully receiving researchers' attention and benefiting from their goodwill had been among the things propelling me to do research to challenge this narrative. Yet, years of study and training later, these framings continued. My professional positioning had changed, from being a student to being a researcher—yet, as a migrant woman, committed to challenging racist, sexist, nationalist, homophobic, and anti-trans, cisnormative knowledge production—I also realized that in the eyes of many colleagues I continued not only to be disruptive and challenging through my work, but also in my person. Many colleagues were heavily invested through their research in a narrative that presents migrant women as in need of rescuing, be it from migrant and racialized men, or from anti-migrant policies. They have carved out their own identities as speaking for these migrants through their research. So, to be faced with a migrant woman academic colleague can be a challenge. How could they relate to someone who combines these two identities of migrant woman and academic, when their own research and professional identity is built around viewing them as epistemologically irreconcilable: one is the knowing subject, the other the topic under study? The burden of making this contradiction bearable for our colleagues mostly falls onto migrant academics themselves, and the contributions in this book eloquently speak to this.

Another memory triggered by reading the contributions to this book is of a train journey with some academic colleagues. We were all in good spirits, chatting about work and other things. As the ticket inspector arrived someone from our group was joking that we might not have the correct tickets. I mentioned that I'd been on a bus recently that was stopped, with the doors locked, while police checked the residence permits. My colleagues looked at me in amazement, so I said 'yes, that was really shocking.' But instead of joining me in condemning such immigration controls in everyday places, targeting racialized people, my colleagues did not believe me. 'You must have made this up, they couldn't possibly check residence papers on public transport!' Other jokes followed about how I was perhaps a bit paranoid. I was stunned and

tried to gather my thoughts to explain and 'evidence' that, indeed, such immigration checks were common. But as I was still thinking, I realized that my colleagues, all accomplished scholars who were well-versed in critical thinking, were averting their eyes from me in embarrassment and had quickly moved on to discussing another topic.

Years later, while reading Sara Ahmed's work on feminist killjoys (2016), I made more sense of this encounter. Ahmed analyzes how it is often those who name and make visible incidents, events, and structures that emanate from power relations and oppressions such as racism and sexism who then become seen as the source of the problem. They are seen as disrupting a convivial, happy atmosphere and, rather than engage with the issues these killjoys raise, colleagues and institutions often instead identify that killjoy with the problem, and they often experience being scapegoated and isolated in the institution. The migrant academics' stories assembled in this book are a powerful testimony to the necessity to continue this killjoy work of making visible and challenging the power relations affecting migratized academics.

Works cited

- Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373377>
- Paola Bacchetta, Fatima El-Tayeb, Jin Haritaworn, Jillian Hernandez, S. A. Smythe, Vanessa E. Thompson, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, 'Queer of color space-making in and beyond the academic industrial complex', *Critical Ethnic Studies* 4/1 (2018): 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.4.1.0044>
- Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 'Sensing dispossession: Women and gender studies between institutional racism and migration control policies in the neoliberal university', *Women's Studies International Forum* 54/January-February (2016): 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.06.013>
- Nicola Rollock, *Staying Power: The Career Experiences and Strategies of UK Black Female Professors* (University College London, 2019).
- Shirley Anne Tate and Damien Page, 'Whiteness and institutional racism: Hiding behind (un)conscious bias', *Ethics and Education* 13/1 (2018): 141–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1428718>