

MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



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10. On Being a ‘Migrant Academic’: Precarious Passports and Invisible Struggles

Tara Asgarilaleh

Speaking of institutionalized and systemic inequality, I have definitely spent more time on visa applications and appointments and completely pointless and humiliating procedures than on university and grants applications together.

Not a long time ago, I read these words by a friend,¹ and it made me think of my own experiences and of so many other colleagues and friends whose stories of movements, crossing borders, visa applications, and permit requirements reflect inequalities that are unfamiliar to some, but which have become part of the lived experiences of those who carry what I call ‘precarious passports’. In the beginning, I used to think (naïvely) there was something wrong with me, as I faced troubles in almost all my visa applications—in particular, in those aimed at Europe and North America. It did not take too long before I noticed that I share these struggles with many fellow students and researchers in a similar position to mine.

Being an academic can be a highly precarious position in itself, in a context of hyper-competition, insecure contracts, and all the uncertainties that come with them. The precarity, however, varies enormously depending on where one is based, including which country

1 I would like to thank my friend who kindly allowed me to refer to their words in this piece. I do not mention their name as they preferred to remain anonymous.

or which institute. Being a 'migrant academic' and holding a precarious passport adds another layer of precarity to the livelihoods of academics who carry these passports, such as myself. By 'precarious passports', I mean passports that have been rendered invaluable, inferior, or even a security threat due to broader geopolitical forces embedded in neoliberal and neocolonial globalization processes. Passports are mere objects. However, they gain or lose value and meaning in accordance with societal and geopolitical relations. This is not to deny certain privileges that come with being part of academia, which allows for access to spaces and things that I could not have been part of without having such membership. For instance, being a member of a prestigious university gives me access to various institutional resources, activities, and events. These are just some examples of privileges, material and non-material, that come with institutional memberships. Being a part of the academic environment has enabled me to navigate certain institutional structures that I could perhaps not otherwise afford—for example, endless bureaucratic paperwork procedures, various applications (such as long- and short-term jobs), and visa and grant applications. However, by acknowledging my privileges I do not undermine the struggles that I and other 'migrant academics' encounter as a result of having precarious passports—in my case, an Iranian one.

I shared my visa struggles once with a professor at a university, hoping to receive some support in what I was going through. In reply, they said: 'But you are not alone; many other people are experiencing this, and you should not let this distract you from your project.' I felt paralyzed that day. My visa could have been withdrawn at any time, which would have affected my entire study program. I was told to just focus on my project because I was not the only one going through the experience. I wondered whether this would have been any different, for instance, if I had a different nationality. Whether I would have received a different kind of support. Through time, I have found out how my experience could have been different, when I heard about other students' experiences with their professors—those who carry privileged passports—for whom my story of visa complications was an unfamiliar one. Privileges tend to become invisible easily, especially when we do not make an effort to be aware of them.

Albeit unemphatic, my professor was correct in one thing: many people carry precarious passports. And not all of them can focus on

their academic work or studies, distracted as they are by continuous visa hassles and systematic border inequalities. That is why my story matters. While it is a difficult story to tell, I have decided to share it, because it reflects such great yet invisible inequalities that exist in our institutions, that keep reproducing themselves, and disrupt a more just path in which academic knowledge can be produced, accessed, and exchanged, sometimes simply by creating walls of silence or negligence, or through the lack of any form of empathy.

I first moved from my home country, Iran, to the Netherlands in 2015. Due to a major administrative delay, I was informed later than expected about my funding. I faced a one-month delay to my arrival to the Netherlands. My visa process at the Dutch Embassy under the student visa procedure went quicker than I imagined. Having been granted a full scholarship by my university, along with family support—including (but not limited to) financial support for my visa application, and my own savings from a part-time teaching job during my bachelor's—definitely played an important role in facilitating the expensive process. However, the entire visa process application was still at least as lengthy and time- and energy-consuming as my admission and application process, and possibly more complicated. I faced a similar, even longer delay of three months—and a much more complicated process—while moving to the UK in 2019 for my PhD, despite having been granted full funding for the entire project, the absence of which could have made an even more serious barrier to the visa process. I noticed this considerable difference in how things could have gone with my moves to the Netherlands and the UK when I began to chat about this with some other international students at my institution, the majority of whom were from Europe and North America and experienced much smoother processes.

Visa hassles often do not stop when you are granted initial approval for your visa status. They continue affecting you in various ways. Firstly, it is about when you want to arrive at a place for the first time and receive a first-time entry visa. For instance, for a person carrying a precarious passport, the amount of work and visa requirements is enormous compared to when you carry a privileged passport. Yet despite this extra work, the possibility of rejection or a considerable delay for a visa is much higher. If granted first-time entry, it is about navigating regulations on how best to ensure that your visa stays valid. In this way, the anxieties involved in taking care of your visa become

an important part of your decision-making processes in conducting research, constantly counting how much time you must spend in each place so that your visa(s) stay valid. Secondly, there are mobility-related issues when you want to cross further borders as part of your academic path, because having been granted entry or temporary residence in one region does not grant you access to other locations.

Due to the delay in my Dutch visa and my late arrival to the Netherlands, I missed all the introductory events and activities that could have helped me familiarize myself with the new environment. Thanks to some of my great fellow students and teachers, I did not feel as lost or lonely as I had expected during my arrival in Amsterdam, considering that this was such a big change for me, from the very mundane everyday life to the educational system I was not familiar with, including the English language (in which I had never studied previously). The delay in my arrival to the Netherlands was only the beginning of all my visa struggles. In fact, crossing borders as part of my academic life has been anything but a smooth process. I have always paid what Bathsheba Okwenje (2019) calls 'emotional tax', on top of other costs, material and otherwise, which often result in great exhaustion and frustration, distracting me from the work I wish I could enjoy.

When I graduated from my Master's in Amsterdam, my access to conferences was disrupted several times due to my nationality. I could not present and participate in a major conference held in the US at the time, despite my abstract being accepted, due to the so-called 'Muslim Travel Ban.' Although a letter criticizing this ban was written by the conference organizers, the fact that the conference was held in the US in the first place—where the ban prevented nationals of seven countries from going—was upsetting to scholars and researchers like myself. We also experienced a lack of actual support or empathy from the conference organizers, and no appropriate alternative means of attending was provided, despite it being among the major conferences in the field. I was even charged the full registration fee, regardless of my absence being out of my hands. In the beginning, following my own inquiry, I was told that I could present my work through alternative online means. However, this did not materialize. At the time of my presentation, the panel organizer wrote me at the very last minute that they could not host me due to technical problems, and hence, I was not able to join the panel after all. Although technical issues happen

during online events, the conference organizers' lack of appropriate communication and accountability following what happened was highly disappointing. When I wrote to request a refund, I was told that it was my problem that I could not join the panel. Refunds were only possible in cases of medical emergencies. The lack of recognition of why I could not join in the first place, due to the so-called 'Muslim Travel Ban,' and later, due to the technical issues—neither of which was in my hands—was highly disturbing.

I decided to make a complaint about the lack of refund to the conference organizers. I received a refund in the end. However, this was not a smooth procedure. During the entire process, I often felt lonely, as it was primarily me reaching out for support without receiving any expressions of solidarity from my colleagues. I decided to make a complaint anyway—to commit myself, my time, and energy—despite it keeping me away from the work I wanted to do instead, hoping that doing this would reduce the chance of it happening again in the future (Ahmed, 2021). I must note that, during the complaint process, a good friend—who is a senior researcher based in a different institute but in a similar field to mine—brainstormed with me. He had gone through a similar path regarding the consequences of the so-called 'Muslim Travel Ban.' He knew other researchers with similar visa struggles wanting to attend the conferences held in the US at the time. It was heart-warming to think it through together and to navigate such a disconcerting process not entirely alone. Having this support from a friend was especially precious because we lacked any form of solidarity from any department in our institutes, and from our colleagues, who traveled to the US and participated in various conferences in our unwanted absence. In a sense, as much as we can imagine complaints as non-reproductive labor, as Sarah Ahmed puts it, 'it can also be a hope, an aspiration, it can be what you have to do to breathe. Sometimes you complain to survive. However, this does not mean that you get through' (ibid.). For me, it was both. However, sometimes one simply cannot afford to complain, as what has happened to you is already burdening and exhausting. One might not always have enough resources and capacities to afford to do so, or might actively not want to make a complaint in order to avoid encountering any further painful experiences.

After graduating from my Master's program, while I was applying for post-graduate positions, I was rejected for a vacancy in a big project.

I was alerted to the call for this position by a colleague/friend who knew I was looking for a position and told me that the vacancy fitted my profile perfectly and that I should apply. I wrote to the primary investigator requesting feedback. In reply, she wrote that she was really sorry and mentioned my nationality as a main concern in not inviting me for an interview, despite me being a potentially good candidate. I wrote back and expressed my enthusiasm for the project. I wrote that I reckoned it would be a pity that I would not be able to be considered a candidate due to my nationality, especially if I was considered a strong candidate. I never got a reply to this last email. I was devastated. This was similar to other reactions to my nationality and hence, was not really a surprise. But nonetheless, it was shocking and upsetting. Each time there is damage, an emotional tax to pay, and scars that accumulate. Following this, some advised me to complain; some advised me not to, saying that complaining may endanger my academic career as an early career researcher. Among those with whom I shared my story—including senior professors who suggested I should make a complaint—no one ever supported me or referred me to any departments that could support me in making my complaint. I did not complain or follow up in any form after all, primarily because I could not afford to do so emotionally and materially at that point.

When I was applying for different vacancies, including PhD positions, I often received a series of responses beginning with phrases like 'I am afraid' or 'I am sorry,' but I often did not hear any further than that, a pitying voice. An unconditional apology often does not work because it does not offer any explanation—all I can say is: 'I apologize.' Or 'I am sorry.' In not saying what I am sorry for, the address fails to reach another (Ahmed, 2013). Thus, it is at best an empty gesture, and at worst, an act of violence through complicity.

As these similar reactions continued repeating themselves over time, I noticed the existence of certain voices of pity for me in almost all of them: voices that lacked any form of empathy. An empathic reaction is one that would be willing to imagine what sort of emotional burden one is going through and what could possibly be done to help. Things do not always go through in an empathic reaction. Empathy is not measured by a checklist, but by how thoroughly an experience has been imagined. In other words, 'empathy is not just remembering to say, that must be

really hard; it's figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so that it can be seen at all' (Jamison, 2011: 4).

Stories of precarious passports are stories of struggles to cross borders and access being denied, and they are emotionally taxing, as much as they are stories of unjust knowledge production and exchange processes. Bathsheba Okwenje puts it very well: manifestations of privilege, precarity, and power should be considered when thinking about any form of collaboration and knowledge exchange across borders and institutions. Struggles of precarious passports reflect the institutionalized and systemic inequalities that develop in our very institutions and can keep reproducing themselves in the absence of any form of truly collective care, systemic empathy, and solidarity. I came to learn how all this could potentially be different thanks to colleagues, employees, fellows, and teachers who truly empathize, care, and take any opportunity to stand in solidarity with colleagues carrying precarious passports, even though they may never have experienced such inequalities themselves. I would hope that imagining a more just path in the academic community would be possible with more solidarity and systemic empathy in practice.

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