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Pressing times, losing voice: Critique and transformative spaces in higher education

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Pressing times, losing voice: Critique and transformative spaces in higher education

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Abstract

In this article we examine our own doctoral supervisory dialogue as it has been institutionally interrupted due to Ahmad's application for asylum in the UK. As we find ourselves lacking the conditions of recognisability required for our actions to be institutionally understood (or made intelligible) as part of a doctoral supervisory relationship, we are left with a sense of futility of how scholarly work preoccupied with social justice may confront, let alone transform, the larger socio-political realities that we aim to engage with. In light of calls to turn precarity into a productive pedagogical space for ethical action – often regarded as a “pedagogy for precarity” – we draw from Blommaert's sociolinguistic theory of *voice* to account for how we attempted to become recognisable to each other throughout the course of one of our supervisory meetings. In so doing, we reflect on the implications of our analysis for politically-engaged academic research while linking with wider language scholarship on the possibility and imaginability of social transformation in higher education spaces.

Keywords: Voice; pedagogy for precarity; critique; social transformation; higher education

1. Introduction

The coinciding of the Institute of Education (IOE)'s 120th anniversary and our tragic loss of Jan Blommaert (1961-2021) seems an appropriate moment for stocktaking. The significance of Blommaert's passing away lies not only in his thriving in academia and social life – including the IOE where he had also worked – but also in his indelible departure from them. His last autobiographical accounts, particularly on the implications of “losing voice” (2020) and “What was important?” in doing scholarship (2020a), point to the importance of a *pedagogy for precarity*, one in which personal, academic and social voices are intrinsically connected. In such accounts, Blommaert uses his positionality – in precarious times – as a pedagogical resource to comment on general phenomena. He reflects on his experience of undergoing windpipe tumour surgery and the temporary loss of the faculty to speak vis-à-vis his earlier sociolinguistic work on *losing voice* (Blommaert, 2008), whereby he had focused on social actors who cannot speak, act and write in ways that make them institutionally heard and read – i.e. *recognised*.

This is of a particular relevance to our current position due to Ahmad's entanglement in the United Kingdom's asylum-seeking system, which has refused his claim for sanctuary and thwarted his PhD career at the IOE. Just before commencing his MA studies at the IOE in 2019-2020, Ahmad had to apply for asylum, because his scholarship and political expression in solidarity with his suppressed, stateless Bidoon community in Kuwait resulted in him being politically targeted by the authorities in his homeland (Benswait, 2021a; 2021b). The change of his immigration status from an international student to asylum seeker was about to sabotage his MA study, but the matter was resolved when the UK Home Office, which has regulatory authority over the records of international students, confirmed that they had no

objection to his enrolment in the IOE, as long as he would not benefit from public funds. Left in limbo throughout the course of his MA studies, Ahmad developed a particular interest in exploring the doings of time, and he proposed to Miguel a PhD project titled “Time as a lens on the infrastructure of the stateless Bidoon diaspora in the UK”. Even so, the project has been disrupted as the IOE PhD’s application system does not have “asylum seeker” as a recognised category.

At the time of writing this manuscript, the situation has become more intricate. Ahmad’s asylum claim has been deemed inadmissible by the Home Office on the grounds that he is ‘highly educated’ and would not be at risk if moved back to Kuwait. His solicitor has, however, stopped the clock by applying for an appeal which has to be scheduled in the near future. The intricacy of this situation offers us a lens to further develop Ahmad’s PhD project on the implications of temporality. But it also leaves us perplexed. On the one hand, we inhabit our scholarly spaces as terrains for self-rediscovery, critique of social injustice and inequality, and for social change. On the other hand, however, we witness these spaces as inseparable from, and dominated by, State-based bureaucratic conditions undermining Ahmad’s endeavours to study and contribute to rebuilding his family and community’s lives, and simultaneously affecting Miguel in his institutional capacity to act as Ahmad’s supervisor.

Against this background, we find ourselves losing voice as we lack the conditions of recognisability required for our actions to be institutionally understood (or made intelligible) as part of a doctoral supervisory dialogue. This engenders in us a sense of futility at how scholarly work preoccupied with social justice may confront, let alone transform, the larger socio-political realities that we aim to engage with. Simply put, our situation raises questions about the marginality and vulnerability of the scholarly voice in times of socio-political precarity: what are the spaces for us to exercise transformative critique from within universities given the historical role that the institutions that we work for play in the active (re)production of inequality? In line with such questions, and while acknowledging that 120 years have now witnessed the emergence of IOE’s eventful history (Aldrich & Woodin, 2021), we believe that it may be about time to try to reconcile the focus on development and growth in a place like the IOE with an appreciation of precarity as strategic point of departure toward transformative change. Precarity is by no means a barren land. Rather, our position is that it can be epistemologically and pedagogically generative.

In this paper, we discuss the possibility of transformative action under such conditions of precarity in higher education spaces. We first engage with literature that has approached universities as an increasingly contested terrain driven by radical visions of a fairer world but which has nonetheless focused mainly on sharp instances of rupture involving student movements or staff unions calling for decommodification and decolonisation of higher education (Section 2). As a result, and in light of calls to turn precarity into a productive pedagogical space for ethical action – often regarded as a “pedagogy for precarity” – we argue that less attention has been devoted to the apparently less spectacular, low-key, mundane meaning-making practices and social relations upon which universities are (dis)enabled in daily life. With this in mind, we revisit the sociolinguistic notion of *voice* (Section 3), and with this we then bring ourselves and our own precarious supervisory dialogue under the spotlight by describing how we attempted to “gain voice” throughout the course of one of our supervisory meetings (Section 4). Based on this, we conclude by reflecting on the (theoretical and otherwise) implications that this has for politically engaged

academic research on higher education that grapples with questions of social justice and social transformation (Section 5).

2. (Re)imagining higher education through a pedagogy for precarity

The University has recently become an epitome of critical scholarship aiming to de-commodify and decolonise space, time and subjectivity through better understanding of the relationship between past, present and future. This tradition urges us to participate in the making of a more equitable and safer future through examining how ideas about the social world (e.g. ideas about people, territory, culture, language) have unfolded over time and place contributing to the (re)making of social difference and social inequality (see Williams, 1989; Wynter & McKittick, 2015; Heller & McElhinny, 2017). It invites us to interrupt these unequal histories into the present by acquiring a different understanding of the past, one that exposes the injustices produced by such ideas and which acts as a strategy to then begin reimagining a better alternative future. In the University, this has led to numerous calls for rethinking well-established assumptions about its role, the knowledge it produces and the social relations it normalises (see, for instance, Choudry & Vally, 2020). For the purpose of this article, we find the calls by Bill Readings (1996) and Lange, Reddy & Kumalo (2021) of particular relevance.

Readings (1996) offers a foundational treatise on the question of the University by historicising a contemporary change of its role. While tracing back the origins of higher education as an institution of modernity historically invested in the (re)production of national cultures and the socioeconomic interests of those groups who sought to establish them, he focuses on the emergence of the idea of “excellence”. In particular, he refers to the experience of those universities based in global centres of capitalism, and discusses how the logics of competition that come with this idea have changed their function since in these contexts the University “no longer has to safeguard and propagate national culture, because the nation-state is no longer the major site at which capital reproduces itself” (p. 13). Readings emphasises that this shift in the contemporary university’s character and behaviour, often regarded in relation to widespread forms of neoliberal governance and their negative impact on staff members and students (see also Tuchman, 2009; Holborow, 2015; Martín Rojo, 2021; Urciuoli, 2022), is irreversible because the (re)production of imagined national cultures through legitimisation of associated canons of thought and citizenship does not seem to be the main purpose of education in the globalising economy.

Most importantly, he argues that under these circumstances the university is “in ruins” and has (to) become a space for rethinking the questions of community and the impossibility of an ideal society. Driven by a form of institutional pragmatism that aims to replace either Enlightenment faith or Romantic nostalgia, he proposes rethinking the modernist claim that the University provides a model of the rational community or a pure form of the public sphere. In this regard, the University becomes “no longer a model of the ideal society but rather a place where the impossibility of such models can be thought – practically thought, rather than thought under ideal conditions” (Readings, 1996: 20). Against this background, Readings invites us to participate in the unmaking of notions of unity, consensus, and communication that have historically underpinned our understanding of the role of the University, and instead engage in the building of alternative ways of *being-together* via reimagining it as a “community of dissensus”:

“A community of dissensus that presupposes nothing in common would not be dedicated either to the project of a full self-understanding (autonomy) or to a communicational consensus as to the nature of its unity. Rather, it would seek to make its heteronomy, its differences, more complex. To put this another way, such a community would have to be understood on the model of dependency rather than emancipation. We are, bluntly speaking, addicted to others, and no amount of twelve-stepping will allow us to overcome that dependency, to make it the object of a fully autonomous subjective consciousness” (p. 190).

Lange, Reddy & Kumalo’s (2021) follow a similar historicising path, though they draw our attention to the demands for decolonisation of knowledge from a student-led protest movement that took place at South African public universities during 2015-2016. In particular, they take as their point of departure the idea that “Western modernity” constituted an imposition of the “European grid of intelligibility” on Africa in order to highlight the role of higher education as a terrain of confrontation between the European grid of rationality and the subjects that are excluded by this rationality in the Global South. Thus, the University is not just an idea anchored in the making of European modern nationalism but also in the production and normalisation of colonial territories and subjectivities – i.e. the irrational Other who needs to acquire forms of knowledge generated by the centres of the Empire in order to be institutionally recognised as civilised and modernised. Lange, Reddy & Kumalo go further and encapsulate this decolonial disruption in the figure of “the university on the border” for which they draw on Praeg’s (2019) *Philosophy on the Border* that, alongside *University on the Border*, foregrounds disruptive moments of history whereby the call for decolonisation takes disciplines and subjectivities into an aporetic space:

“*Philosophy on the Border* and *University on the Border* represent insights from disruptive moments of history and hold the view that the call for decolonisation brings about an engagement (as well as confrontation) which takes Subjects [i.e. disciplines] and subjects [i.e. subjectivities] into an aporetic space. This space is what we refer to as one of being ‘on the border’ (...) [These two texts] share an interest in exploring the intellectual, political, moral and affective implications of the idea of what being on the border entails for disciplines, individuals and institutions” (Lange, Reddy & Kumalo 2021: 3).

The figure of the “university on the border” is therefore used to foreground a crisis of authority. Even so, Lange, Reddy & Kumalo (2021) don’t see this crisis as freezing the University in a state of paralysis with no option for moving beyond the border; rather, they frame it as having the potential to propel further attempts for renewal, repair and change. This is illustrated in their own call for other people to take advantage of this situation to reimagine the university’s future through the principles of “academic freedom and deliberative democracy” whereby academic freedom is primarily a matter of freedom from interference, while deliberative democracy involves creating in the University a collegial environment where those inhabiting it participate in decision-making and are represented in the larger structures of power (p. 193).

Taken together, we see in these two examples the advent of precarity as intrinsic to higher education institutions, a condition that is anchored in specific political economic conditions and which inevitably affects everyone involved in the daily life of universities. However, we believe that any attempt to engage with discussions of (re)imagining the University should acknowledge and systematically deal with inevitable vulnerabilities, beyond just self-

reflection and/or intellectual critique. This is in line with Butler (2012) for whom precarity constitutes an entry point to rethinking vulnerability as the basis for the formation of ethical responsiveness to one another and as the point of departure for new political collectivities:

“Our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. So as soon as the existential claim is articulated in its specificity, it ceases to be existential. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from the dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.” (p. 148)

The implications of this are vast, for it brings university teachers and students’ social relations at the centre of the (un)making of larger political economic (re)configurations. From this perspective, the experience of precarity can be turned into a productive pedagogical space for ethical action (Zembylas, 2019). This is not without complications, though, since “[t]he pedagogical challenge in this case is exactly what, if anything, might be done by students and teachers to enable or encourage ethical action, when the actual prospects for ethical responsiveness appear to be foreclosed” (ibid, p. 102).

In Zembylas’ view this is enabled by two pervasive trends, namely: a) an emphasis on precarity as a universal human condition that does not pay sufficient attention to its unequal distribution in society and may be exploited to rationalise violence against particular social actors, rendering less visible arbitrary determination of humanness; and b) the assumption that identification with the suffering of others will necessarily lead to empathy and ethical responsiveness. While recognising these challenges, we find inspiration in Zembylas’ call for a *pedagogy for precarity* that draws on both shared and differential experiences of vulnerability to go against the normalisation of normative meanings and social relations. This, in fact, aligns well with Blommaert’s latest autobiographic accounts on losing voice under conditions of vulnerability and precarity with which we opened this article.

As our doctoral supervisory dialogue was rendered institutionally unintelligible due to Ahmad not fulfilling the migration status that is required by the State and the University, we were left with no option but to reconsider the future of our relationship. Ahmad was asked by our university to wait for his situation to be sorted out before proceeding with his doctoral studies, which left him in a limbo situation that jeopardised, among other things, his chances to further develop his social network in the UK while making progress with the research activities that he had already initiated. By the same token, Miguel’s supervisory activities with Ahmad could not be counted towards his workload, thus making it more difficult for him to handle the various tasks and expectations that come with his responsibilities as a university staff member committed to both teaching and research. Despite these struggles, we decided to continue our supervisory dialogue and turn the situation into a pedagogical moment.

Yet, this broad-brushed description of choices and decisions is not enough to account for how we made the pedagogical process of “gaining voice” sustainable as we tried to challenge normative meanings and social relations in the context of our ongoing inter-action, and for this reason we now turn to a sociolinguistic approach informed by Blommaert’s early work on the topic.

3. Voice in/through a pedagogy for precarity: A sociolinguistic approach

Blommaert devoted a significant part of his work to studying asylum-seeking application processes. He did so with a focus on interviews routinely conducted by administrations of the State seeking to determine the veracity of applicants' claims of who they are and why they have come to the country where they apply for asylum (cf. Blommaert, 2001). But these interviews are not transparent windows to meaning, as Blommaert denounced. Often focused on the applicants' motives for seeking asylum, they involve a number of administrative text-making procedures, including: transcriptions, case reports, quotations of fragments in notes and letters exchanged between the administration and lawyers or welfare workers, official interpretations and summaries in verdicts from the asylum authorities.

Most importantly, these procedures are underpinned by a key assumption (i.e. ideology) about language use according to which what applicants say in the course of such interviews can be directly linked to legal verdicts of truth or falseness. Based on forensic criteria of coherence and consistency, the authorities are then allowed to reject cases on the grounds of the applicants' accounts being deemed as "unreliable" or "contradictory". In attempting to problematise these procedures and related assumptions, Blommaert drew on Hymes' (1996) foundational work in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, which treats the organisation of linguistic features in social interactions not as revealing the ontological and epistemological worlds of physical relationships but rather worlds of social relationships. In Hymes' own words: "What are disclosed are not orientations toward space, time, vibratory phenomena, and the like, but orientations towards persons, roles, statuses and duties, deference and demeanor" (idem, pp. 44-45).

Following this line of inquiry, Blommaert advocated a language-based theory of voice in which the traditional emphasis on competence is displaced in favour of performance (cf. Blommaert 2005). And not only that, his theory of voice also called for an approach to meaning that foregrounds contextual embeddedness (i.e. situatedness), difference (i.e. variability in language use) and inequality (i.e. unequal value assigned to different types of speaking subjects and ways of communicating). He put it like this, in relation to his research on African asylum seekers' narratives in the Belgian asylum application procedure:

"we found that the particular kind of anecdotal sub-narratives performed by asylum seekers and which we called 'home narratives'[i.e., detailed and complex digressions on the home country] were easily dismissed by Belgian officials as anecdotes that did not matter, whereas for asylum seekers such home narratives contained crucial contextualising information without which their story could be easily misunderstood. Whenever discourses travel across the globe, what is carried with them is their shape, but their value, meaning, or function do not often travel along. Value, meaning, and function are a matter of uptake, they have to be *granted* by others (ibid., p. 72).

If voice is a concept that offers avenues to account for how "people use language and other semiotic means in attempts to make themselves understood by others" (Blommaert, 2008: 427), then this is far from a straightforward process that can be achieved dialogically without struggle. Instead, it is one embedded in social structure, history, culture and power, as Blommaert highlighted when he reacted against "Bakhtin-lite" interpretations of voice:

"Voice is a social product, and it is therefore not unified but subject to processes of selection and exclusion that have their feet firmly in social structure (...) The dialogue to

which Bakhtin referred is thus not just a meeting of different voices on neutral ground: it is a social and political diagnostic that is played out in a field which is never neutral but always someone's home turf. The rules of the dialogue are rarely democratically established; they are more often imposed either by force or by consensus. It is at this latter point that history, culture and ideology enter the picture: every social context is normative, and most contexts are normative because the norms are seen as 'normal' (...) Thus whenever we open our mouths, we not only use and re-use the words of others, but we also place ourselves firmly in a recognizable social context from which and to which all kinds of messages flow - indexical aspects of meaning, conventional (i.e. social, cultural, historical, etc.) links established between communication and the social context in which it takes place" (ibid, p. 427-428).

Institutions are particularly significant when examining voice and norms: they have the tendency to 'freeze' the conditions for voice by imposing specific orders of normativity that require people to speak, act and write in particular ways for them to be institutionally heard and read. And when they can't act accordingly, they then become vulnerable subjects involved in a process of "losing voice" that prevents them from being understood "on their own terms" (ibid, p. 428). While taking stock of these considerations on asylum seeking, voice and normativity, we, however, shift the attention away from asylum-seeking procedures *per se*, towards a closer look at the conditions of social recognisability that such procedures may (dis)enable in higher education settings. We aim to shed light on the meaning-making practices involved in the process of building a joint voice as we were caught in, but also informed by, struggles with bureaucratic constraints that did not provide the necessary "felicity conditions" (Austin, 1962) for our pedagogical dialogue to be officially considered as "doing PhD supervision".

Throughout our interactions for the last 14 months we have continued undertaking the ordinary tasks that candidates and supervisors are expected to carry out in the process of doing a PhD. These involve, among other things, the following milestones: 1) developing a research proposal; 2) submitting the proposal to the doctoral programme in question for acceptance; 3) doing fieldwork; 4) generating data for analysis; 5) building research networks; 6) participating in academic events of relevance to the chosen area of research; 7) writing up a doctoral thesis; and 8) taking part at a PhD viva exam for final recommendation of a doctoral degree award. At the time of publication of this manuscript, we have already completed actions related to 1) and 2), and Ahmad is fully involved in activities concerned with 3), 4), 5) and 6). During the process, we have also built a corpus data of our dialogues, including: 3:40 hours of video-recordings of our online meetings; 27 instances of email communication; 565 text and voice messages in various social media platform (WhatsApp and Messenger); and 12 digital PDF files of annotated academic texts (journal articles and book chapters) that we exchanged and commented on..

Although we have documented these dialogues in hopes of turning our precarious situation as supervisor and supervisee into a framework of action/interpretation, making ourselves understood to each other is far from straightforward. As in Blommaert's analysis of voice in other settings, each of our interactions cannot be bracketed off from a larger web of events, actors, categories and circulating forms of knowledge, for all of these contribute to make certain meanings and social relations more or less intelligible to us. Far from constituting an empty space to exchange meanings freely, our pedagogical dialogues are heavily freighted with pre-established normative expectations about what constitutes "proper" academic work which we have to make sense of (and relate to) for our actions to become meaningful and

relatable to each other. We illustrate this in the following section with reference to one of our first supervision meetings. Through a *stance-taking* lens (Jaffe, 2009), we describe how “regaining voice” is mediated by meaning-making practices that allow us to jointly perform the social persona of a “good” academic researcher by (re)orienting ourselves in specific ways towards such normative expectations.

4. Ahmad and Miguel’s supervisory meeting

On 12 January 2021, we met online for over 90 minutes to discuss a first draft of Ahmad’s doctoral research proposal that he sent to Miguel for feedback. At the time of the meeting, Miguel had already inserted comments in the document before sending it back to Ahmad, and so the purpose of the encounter was for both of us to go over the proposal and feedback in order to agree on a way forward. Although the supervisory meeting hinged around a number of topics coordinatively developed through numerous actions initiated either by Ahmad or Miguel (see Table 1, for an overview to the structure of the meeting), the University’s conventional separation of personal, social and political realms stood out as a dominant framework of action/interpretation.

Table 1. The supervisory meeting

Segments	Collaborative actions
1. The value of Ahmad’s research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exchanging greetings. - Miguel recaps previous conversations - Ahmad recounts his state in the asylum-seeking process. - Miguel appreciates Ahmad’s contribution to the Department as his project is based on his own experience in applying for asylum in the UK.
2. The significance of the focus on time in Ahmad’s project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Miguel asks Ahmad to explain why a focus on time. - Ahmad narrates his experience with mental health services provided by Migrant Help which psychologised his struggles. - Ahmad refers to an anthropologically-based book titled “patients of the State” which focuses on the politics of time. - Miguel suggests a small group meeting with other PhD researchers to discuss the book mentioned by Ahmad. - Ahmad narrates an event from his childhood deemed as “too activist” for a public exhibition he tried to arrange at another University in the UK. - Miguel advises Ahmad to be strategic about keeping those other networks of collaboration outside Miguel’s university. - Ahmad narrates a self-immolation by a Bidoon activist that was framed in psychological terms by the government in Kuwait with no subsequent challenge from academics and human rights organisations. - Miguel refers to critical sociolinguistic work on human rights discourses.
3. The comments inserted by Miguel in Ahmad’s proposal document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Miguel comments on Ahmad’s research rationale, its connections with academic literature, and the need of a language/communication angle. - Ahmad responds to Miguel’s comments. - Miguel adds on the need for Ahmad to clarify his participants selection. - Ahmad addresses Miguel’s point by referring to his experiences in the hotel where the UK Home Office has placed him. - Miguel reframes the comment on participants selection as one concerned with Ahmad’s research questions.

From the initial framing of Ahmad’s project as valuable (Segment 1) to the justification of the significance of his focus on time (Segment 2) to the clarification of the comments made to his proposal by Miguel (3), the differentiation of the personal, the social and the political was central to how we made sense of normative orders and enacted our (dis)alignments with them. Indeed, this differentiation was made relevant by Miguel in the beginning of the meeting when he positively valued Ahmad’s participation at a departmental doctoral seminar series where Ahmad had previously shared his project idea with other doctoral students given its connection with his experiences as asylum applicant in the UK (see transcription conventions in Appendix):

“I’m not concerned about the [research proposal] document (...) / uh? / so this is about thinking of your research / so when I was reading it / I think uh / yeah / it goes very well- it was very useful to have you speaking the other day / uh / for the group / I mean / I think it was really useful / for everyone / uh / not only for you but for all of us / it was really / yeah it was very important to have someone there speaking about something / em / and ma- and making explicit that this is a personal thing / whatever you like it or not / em / for all of us / I mean / doing research- it should be personal”.

But such explicit statements do not yet allow us to see stance-taking dynamics in action, and below we explore this more closely with attention to how such dynamics were enabled by competing views on what counts as legitimate research that we brought into being in our dialogue and which turned academic spaces into a discursive battle ground. We shall show this by zooming in on two examples from the part of the supervisory meeting in which we attempted to make sense of the significance of Ahmad’s research focus on time. After Miguel opened the sequence by asking Ahmad how he became interested in time, our actions soon got articulated around story-telling, a discursive genre often regarded as privileged for the study of stance-taking practices and the normative re-ordering of daily life (Bamberg, 2004; De Fina, 2015; Patiño-Santos, 2018). Extract 1, from the opening of the second segment, offers a view of this.

Extract 1. “What brought me to this topic”

- 1 **Miguel:** ... it makes a lot of sense / but- but /
2 I want to know more about the behind the scenes /
3 how- how did you get into that /
4 it’s that connected with these dialogues that you are having with this person at
5 {name of university}? or- or with some- or something else?
6 **Ahmad:** no actually- actually the person at {name of University} /
7 he- he was like / uh / he as like- I think he was intrigued / when I told him /
8 *I want to write so- something about to- about time /*
9 because he likes to learn (()) /
10 he likes to learn something about sociolinguistics and all these things (...) /
11 but actually what- what brought me to this /
12 uh / topic / is my experience with the mental health therapy
13 **Miguel:** {nods his head yes}
14 **Ahmad:** you know when mental health therapy /
15 whenever I went to them I explained them my circumstances and-
16 this is- this is the problem / the ethical problem / in /
17 psychological practice and maybe and- and research
18 **Miguel:** {nods his head yes}
19 **Ahmad:** they want to reduce the problem to your cognitive dimension //
20 they want to- they don’t want to engage with the- with the /

21 po- politics | / [with the]
 22 **Miguel:** [{nods his head yes}]
 23 **Ahmad:** so I explained- the first they told me / *oh Ahmed! / sorry /*
 24 *we cannot involve in what the Home Office is doing to you but we can give you a*
 25 *medicine to make you feel me- make you better /*
 26 *I said / but you are- you want to change my physiology /*
 27 *you want to give me medication /*
 28 *and it becomes a physical problem instead of being a social problem /*
 29 *you know / I don't accept taking medication //*
 30 *you should do something! //*
 31 *you should do so- I said I- then I explained /*
 32 *I'm a sociolinguist / there is something wrong /*
 33 *I will write about it / and this writing kind of challenges / you know / the politics!*
 34 **Miguel:** hmm &
 35 **Ahmad:** & *what is your position? /*
 36 *what can you do to change the injustices that are around me /*
 37 *so then I was talking to a legal person in Boston University /*
 38 *I knew her since I was in Kuwait / {name} /*
 39 *she's from Bulgaria | / [and she's in Boston] /*
 40 **Miguel:** [hmm]
 41 **Ahmad:** and we're talking / I told her /
 42 *is there any legal resort for me to say 'why are you delaying me?' /*
 43 *because this time is- because even my children /*
 44 *my son starts- started to say 'I hate time' / I ha- I hate waiting /*
 45 *so I've got all this / experience / so I told her / she said no /*
 46 *in- in legal studies there is only an aspect of time when a crime could be dismissed /*
 47 *you know / if someone kills someone maybe after 10 or 13 years /*
 48 *there is no case for someone to sue them /*
 49 *there is / you know / the time limit / they call it /*
 50 *or something [like it]*
 51 **Miguel:** [hmm]

Prompted by Miguel's question on the origin of his project idea (lines 3-5), Ahmad discounts the suggestion that his interaction with an anthropologist at another major UK university was key in bringing him closer to an interest in time. Instead, Ahmad draws Miguel's attention to his experience of the mental health therapy services provided to asylum-seeking applicants in the UK (lines 6-15). In doing so, however, Ahmad goes further than just referring to this institutional service as the key reason why he chose to embark on a research project on time. Once Miguel signals understanding of the proposed alternative frame (line 13), Ahmad goes on to qualify it in ethical terms (an "ethical problem"), claiming that psychological practice and research, as a professional field of knowledge, contributes to erasing the socio-political causes of the struggles faced by social actors like him by narrowing down the attention to cognition only (lines 14-22).

Most crucially, and following Miguel's non-verbal acceptance of this claim (lines 18, 22), Ahmad shifts into a narrative style (lines 23-51) to illustrate his point through story-telling which, apart from conveying credibility, intimacy and realism, also provides him with further affordances to perform a coherent self through staging (dis)alignments with relevant normative discourses as he takes on the participant positions of the storyteller and the characters involved in the story. This is seen in the two stories that Ahmad narrates – with Miguel's support (lines 34, 40, 51) – in which he presents himself as a sociolinguist interested in the politics of the UK asylum-seeking system by switching between the positions of the narrator and narrated, the latter including himself as a resilient victim of the system. In the first story (lines 23-36), Ahmad animates the words of a mental health therapist and his own words as asylum seeker in a way that stages a clash of points of view.

More specifically, he appears to challenge the therapy proposed to alleviate his state of depression by refusing to take the medication suggested by the therapist and indicating his intention to write about it as a sociolinguist in order to expose the unrecognised social struggles behind his depression.

In the second story (lines 37-51), Ahmad brings to life two new characters in addition to himself – his son and a friend who specialises in legal studies, this time to foreground the lack of a legal basis for him to sue the State for the trauma that his waiting time has caused his son during the asylum-seeking application process. Nevertheless, Ahmad’s personal experiences with the UK asylum seeker therapy services did not feature at our supervisory meeting as the only reason for him to focus on time. The separation of personal, social and political realms also emerged in relation to the university, thus paving the way for further stance-taking work mediated by story-telling practices. This is illustrated in Extract 2 where Ahmad pedals back to the anthropologist from the other university that Miguel had previously referred to.

Extract 2. “The straw that broke the camel’s back”

- 1 **Ahmad:** and then the / you know / uh /
2 the straw that broke the camel’s back was /
3 when I learned that at {name of university} there are certain topics I cannot talk about/
4 like I cannot challenge the idea of the nation-state | /
5 and this was told- I was told straightforward | /
6 I was told by [this guy]
7 **Miguel:** [why?] /
8 **Ahmad:** yeah
9 **Miguel:** really? {raises his eyebrows}
10 **Ahmad:** yeah! / he is- he is the organiser / of the museum /
11 he is from the museum / and I was explaining /
12 *we want to- we want to narrate // it’s very interesting /*
13 I remember as a child / I used to go to a pier- a beach /
14 in- in- in Kuwait / with my friend // after- after a few years /
15 and this was- this was part of the nature /
16 it is- we went to- used to go there / swim / catch some fish / and bring home /
17 you know / very natural interaction with- with nature //
18 so what happened- what would happen later /
19 here is a hotel / you know uh / Hilton? Hilton&
20 **Miguel:** &yeah&
21 **Ahmad:** &resort?
22 **Miguel:** yeah yeah
23 **Ahmad:** they took franchise in Kuwait / they dominated this land /
24 they put barriers / closed the area / started construction /
25 and we us children didn’t understand what was going on /
26 we tried to go / penetrate / you know / the- the- the fences | /
27 and Miguel / several times we were pu- punished /
28 and there was a lot of – a lot of going and coming /
29 like Peter Rabbit / you know {smiles}
30 **Miguel:** {smiles}
31 **Ahmad:** Peter Rabbit / the literature / so we used to / go inside and challenge them /
32 one day we came up with an idea /
33 we dyed our- our faces with black / you know / coal or something | /
34 we pretended to be / labour / you know /
35 the- the labour who go / do the construction /
36 we put the helmet and all these things /
37 we were like 15 years old? / or something like this? /
38 and when they caught us they called the police /

39 I was using this story to write / you know / a sketch /
40 maybe for article or something /
41 how this very little story represents what happened to our- our- our- com- our- our
42 people / the indigenous people / who were in the dessert /
43 and then the British oil company came / and displaced them /
44 and started excavation for oil and everything /
45 so it's- it's the- the coming of capitalism / on /
46 people's land and everything / so this- this very small story /
47 and how I understand it now / before / because / when I was young /
48 when I was challenging this capitalist (()) franchise / from / uh /
49 I was thinking I was doing something wrong /
50 I thought / I was thinking I was stealing access to that land /
51 you know?&
52 **Miguel:** &hm&
53 **Ahmad:** &whereas now I think it's the other way around! / em-
54 **Miguel:** yeah
55 **Ahmad:** I used to go to that land as / a person as a human being / to catch fish and eat it
56 **Miguel:** [yeah yeah]
57 **Ahmad:** [(())] and he's using it to generate more money and take more political power-
58 **Miguel:** that's enclosure- that's enco- en-
59 how is it called in the literature on capitalism and land? /
60 em / en- enclosure right? (...) / there is a Marxist notion for that right? /
61 which is this / the appropriation of land and all of the natural resources within it right?/
62 by- by corporations and then / it no longer become-
63 it no longer- it is no longer part of the commons (...) but please! /
64 how- how was the- so tell me specifically about this /
65 so who tell- who told you that you can't talk about-
66 you can't challenge the- the nation-state?
67 **Ahmad:** yeah / so when I was- when I was telling this guy that- the adviser /
68 so now / {name} / my Swedish friend /
69 he is the person with whom I work /
70 on the research / we called / on the process of organising the exhibition /
71 we called an ad- an adviser /
72 a PhD student who works in the museum / who became our advisor /
73 and who has the experiences / so I told him / *we want* /
74 because we want to create an interest for the audience /
75 the audience might not care about the Bidoon /
76 we want to capture a socio-political / any phenomenon /
77 and use the Bidoon as a representation of that phenomenon /
78 so what we- what we were doing / I said /
79 *ok / why don't talk about this /*
80 *how / capitalism and nation-state took over our land*
81 **Miguel:** yeah
82 **Ahmad:** and one of the things that struck me / he said / *uh / you know /*
83 *I- I recommend not to engage in this because we have- uh we are told that //*
84 *exhibitions should not involve activist activities |*
85 **Miguel:** what the hell! / [no!]
86 **Ahmad:** [yeah] / and then&
87 **Miguel:** &no!&
88 **Ahmad:** &should not be politicised because (...) a lot of funding from / [oil (())]
89 **Miguel:** [of course!] /
90 [of course]=
91 **Ahmad:** [you know?]
92 **Miguel:** =of course / that's interesting / that is super interesting / [uh]
93 **Ahmad:** [yeah]

In this case, we engage collaboratively in the performing of commitment to academic research that addresses socio-political struggles, though this work involves multiple events, characters and institutions intertwined in complex ways within an embedded narrative. This

joint stance emerges out of a story-within-a-story-telling practice whereby the inner story – i.e., Ahmad as a stateless/Bidoon minority child being negatively affected by State-supported capitalist projects of land appropriation in Kuwait – is involved in the action of the plot of the outer story – i.e., a researcher at the other university discouraging Ahmad from challenging the idea of the nation-state. But more importantly, this practice of embedded story-telling allows us to morally position ourselves in alignment with each other and in opposition to main characters and institutions of the outer story who are satirised during the narration of the inner story. The inner story is initiated by Ahmad who introduces a metaphorical expression (“the straw that broke the camel’s back”), followed by a foreshadowing of the main elements in the outer story, namely: theme (i.e. not being allowed to challenge the idea of the nation-state), setting (i.e. university museum) and characters (i.e. himself and the researcher at the other university with whom he had been interacting) (lines 1-12).

This initiation already provides a platform for the enactment of a joint alignment, triggered by Miguel’s reaction in surprise to the outer story and seconded by Ahmad (lines 6-10), though the subsequent shifts between the outer and the inner story consolidate it further. Ahmad first embeds the inner story by narrating the event from his childhood in Kuwait for which he takes the positions of both the narrator and the narrated character of a young person who can no longer enjoy the land because of the construction of the local franchise of a globally-operating hotel that is fiercely guarded by the police (lines 13-38). Once the inner story is established with Miguel’s support and encouragement (lines 20, 22, 30), the return to the outer story (lines 39-84) then enables a collaborative display of an academic standpoint from which we make sense of a “we versus them” evaluative framework of reference. This is achieved in four stages whereby: (i) Ahmad frames the inner story as a case in point for writing a journal article on capitalism and the displacement of the Bidoon indigenous people in Kuwait (lines 39-57); (ii) Miguel draws connections with existing academic literature (lines 58-66); (iii) Ahmad establishes a contrast between the points of view of himself (lines 79-80) and a researcher at the other university who acted as an adviser for their planned exhibition (lines 82-84) as the two narrated characters of the outer story by way of taking their participant positions; and iv) Miguel and Ahmad agree with each other on their dis-alignment with the position held by the other researcher as he warned Ahmad of the other university’s potential resistance against ‘activist’ work (lines 85-93).

In sum, the analysis of the two examples above illustrates how “gaining voice” during our supervisory dialogue required more than just meeting and talking about “research-related stuff”. It also entailed stance-taking work in which we diverged from the normative academic separation of the personal, social and political realms but still made ourselves recognisable to each other as doctoral supervisor-supervisee by communicatively re-arranging events (i.e. treating depression and organising an exhibition), disciplinary expertise (i.e. psychology, sociolinguistics, law), institutions (i.e. universities and governments) and people (academic researchers, therapists and minoritized indigenous groups). Against the background of this hegemonic separation of realms, our story-telling practices sought to re-build a moral order in which ideas of “good” and “bad” research were associated with, respectively, politicized and depoliticized ways of *doing* scholarship and *being* a scholar. This, we believe, takes us back to the possibility and imaginability of social transformation in higher education spaces, which we address next in our last section with recourse to language research.

5. On the possibility and imaginability of social transformation in higher education

In this paper, we have explored voice and normativity in the context of doing scholarship under precarious circumstances. We have done so by focusing on the conditions of social (un)recognisability that institutional practices bring about in higher education settings. Against the background of Ahmad's struggles with the bureaucratic conditions disrupting his PhD scholarship under Miguel's supervision while his case is being adjudicated by the UK Home Office, the analysis of our entanglement showcases how access to knowledge production in the University is intertwined with socio-political State-based logics of exclusion and indignity. On the other hand, however, it illustrates how it may be possible to gain recognisability by enacting joint stances and using narrative to morally reorder the restrictions that prevented Ahmed from reconciling personal, social and academic spheres of his life.

Although we have shown this by closely drawing on Blommaert's sociolinguistic work, as part of our contribution to the IOE's 120th anniversary in this Special Issue, our research approach is also anchored in wider language scholarship that is preoccupied with the entanglement of meaning-making activities, selfhood and institutional (re)orderings of social life (Heller, 1999; Rampton, 2006; Codó, 2008; Martín-Rojo, 2010, Pérez-Milans, 2013; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019). This, in our view, provides scope for further interdisciplinary engagement with sociological studies of higher education and educational research on pedagogy as these bodies of literature embark on theoretical attempts to re-imagine alternative pasts and futures by rethinking the role of the University and the social relations among those who inhabit it. Indeed, language scholarship driven by anti-capitalist and decolonial agendas has for some time now centred on how the embodiment of semiotic activities that turn communicative practices into recognisable models of personhood – i.e. ways of being and doing – within the daily life of individuals, groups and institutions constitutes a key locus for potentially (dis)enabling larger structures of inequality (e.g., Dlaske *et al.*, 2016; Lorente, 2017; Del Percio, 2018; Sunyol & Codó, 2020; Garrido & Sabaté, 2020; Pérez-Milans & Guo, 2020; Highet & Del Percio, 2021).

In the case of the pedagogical dialogue offered in this paper, our attempts to “gain voice” under conditions of institutional precarity are mediated communicatively by stance-taking practices that not only allow us to reconcile personal, social and academic spheres but also to recognise such practices as emblematic of *doing doctoral research* and *becoming doctoral supervisor/supervisee*. That is, such stance-taking practices do more than just mediating a pedagogical dialogue that challenges the normative separation of the personal, social and academic; they too have the potential to interrupt the very institutional framework that discourages our supervisory dialogue in the first place. But we are not naïve. In line with Cushing-Leubner *et al.* (2021), we are fully aware that

“As language researchers whose work (research, scholarship, and teaching) is funded through our employment with the state and academia, as well as through public-private partnered grants and philanthropic structures, our engagements with knowledge production are in undeniable relationship to the expansion and maintenance of the *imperial or colonial archive*” (p. 204)

Following Lin's (2015) and Rambukwella's (2019) questioning of the possibilities of engaging in “a defiant research imagination” within the confines of what is allowable in research itself, Cushing-Leubner *et al.* draw from Sara Ahmed's (2006, 2007) concept of “straightening devices” in order to recognize “how what we identify to be researcher choices exist within a terrain of options that persistently orient research in critical language studies

towards empire entrenchments, white-Euro racial framing, and racial-linguistic capitalism” (p. 203). Cushing-Leubner *et al.* also elaborate on Gopinath (2018) to consider the ways in which “disciplinary straightening devices are used (and taken up) to straighten scholarship that may move outside of or against the imperial archive in ways that re-shape resistive, fugitive and sovereign scholarship as intelligible to the academy (and thus the archive and its singular aims)” (p. 205). This straightening, they argue, “reconstitutes normative modes of being language researchers and scholars, as is determined by what is legitimate and beneficial to the security and maintenance of the empire’s control of legitimized knowledge, and therefore legitimized to control peoples and lands and their relations” (p. 205).

These reminders speak volumes to us. By writing about our precarious research experience in an academic journal’s Special Issue that celebrates the history of a major higher education institution in the United Kingdom, we acknowledge that we are contributing to the formation and reconstitution of our University’s archive while at the same time preventing it from taking any specific responsibility for Ahmad’s inability to formally enrol in academic research. In fact, the quest for voice under our disrupted supervisory relationship reflects the modern university’s moral predicament, whereby the lack of democratic participation implicates the university in a contradiction of preaching (social justice) that it cannot effectively practice. Here is where we see the need for a critical pedagogy for precarity, one in which inabilities or dilemmas are not ignored, or ‘suspended’, but rather turned into explicit objects of attention upon which alternative ways of doing and being can be enacted. But what is then the real possibility for our dialogue to interrupt the institutional framework under which we engage with each other? Or in Cushing-Leubner *et al.*’s (2021) terms, to what extent do we move against empire when we are also engaging in knowledge production in relation to its archive?

We claim that our attempts to re-gain voice align with recent calls for collective action that seek to generate productive forms of change via reimagining academia while inhabiting it, beyond just critiquing universities for the sake of it (e.g. Docherty, 2015; la paperson, 2017; see also Pérez-Milans, Baquedano-López, Del Percio & Vigouroux, 2021). While refusing to accept the institutional conditions of unrecognizability, our attempts to continue our dialogue against all the odds aim to interrupt aspirational desires that only orient to the University’s archive. Instead, we re-orient ourselves towards what La Paperson (2017) terms “the university of the otherwise world”. In other words, and returning to Cushing-Leubner *et al.* (2021), we think of our attempts to regain voice as an instance of refusal “to fit into a binary of ‘possible’ vs. ‘impossible’ and instead stubbornly assemble as hopeful and yet always problematic spaces within a colonizing enterprise, humanizing threads in an imperial web that we keep weaving” (p. 224).

In so doing, we also believe that it is essential to keep a view of the University as an infrastructure of networks of *people*, social and institutional forces whose (inter)actions, institutionally and publicly, determine the survival of this space, and its role in society and the world (see also Rampton & Cooke, 2021). Though never free “from its toxic relationship with empire and empire’s colonizing efforts” (Cushing-Leubner *et al.* 2021, p. 224), this network-based approach challenges modes of knowledge production, circulation and dissemination that alienate and are alienated from the publics. But we should not forget that the university is by no means free of ideological conflicts, rivalry and intellectual brutality (see Wæver & Buzan, 2020). Similarly, we should not ignore how the public domain often becomes a battlefield for epistemological tensions and disciplinary contestations where presentations of authoritative selves are vividly emblematic of marketization rather than

problematisation and refinement of knowledge (e.g., Erdocia & Soler, 2021). These scholarly presentations of authoritative selves are indeed illustrative of what Blommaert (2020) condemned in his latest accounts as “the not important” of his academic career.

Even so, our struggles for gaining voice continue. Ahmad has sometimes been accused by Kuwaiti Government loyalists, and some Bidoon critics, of “politicising unpolitical topics” and of ‘exploiting his community’s cause for his own research interests’. On the other hand, Miguel also has to navigate research evaluation processes whereby his research outputs, including this article, can potentially be deemed as “not scientific enough”, an example of the institutional pressures that shape scholarship into objects intelligible to the archive. As of today, both of us are still waiting for the outcome of Ahmad’s pending appeal for asylum.

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APPENDIX – Transcription conventions

CR	(Capital letters) loud talking
()*	low talking / murmuring
<i>cr</i>	(italics letters) reading
ee	vowel lengthening
Ss	consonant lengthening
/	short pause (0.5 seconds)
//	long pause (0.5 – 1.5 seconds)
(n'')	n seconds pause
[]	turn overlapping with similarly marked turn
=	continuation of utterance after overlapping
(())	non-understandable fragment
{ }	researcher's comments
-	self interruption
&	latched utterances