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Special issue: *IOE@120: critical engagement with educational and social thought, practice and development*

Research article

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

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Submission date: 21 February 2022; Acceptance date: 13 May 2022; Publication date: 31 August 2022

### How to cite

Jaber, A. and Pérez-Milans, M. (2022) 'Pressing times, losing voice: critique and transformative spaces in higher education'. *London Review of Education*, 20 (1), 30.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.30>.

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.20.1.30>.

### Open access

*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

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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 sociopolitical realities with which we aim to engage. In the 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 (2005) sociolinguistic theory of *voice* to account for how we attempted to become recognisable to each other throughout the course 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 for, and imaginability of, social transformation in higher education spaces.

**Keywords** voice; pedagogy for precarity; social transformation; higher education; sociolinguistics

## Introduction

The coinciding of the 120th anniversary of the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK), 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 thrive in academia and social life – including the IOE, where he had also worked – but also in his indelible departure from them. His latest autobiographic accounts, particularly on the implications of 'voice' (Blommaert, 2020a) and 'What was important?' in doing scholarship (Blommaert, 2020b), 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 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 – that is, *recognised*.

This is of particular relevance to our current position due to Ahmad's entanglement in the UK's asylum-seeking system, which has refused his claim for sanctuary and thwarted his PhD career at the IOE. Right before commencing his MA studies at the IOE in 2019/20, Ahmad had to apply for asylum, as 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. However, the matter was then resolved, as the UK Home Office, who 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 to the infrastructure of the stateless Bidoon diaspora in the UK'. Even so, the project has been disrupted, as the IOE PhD application system does not have 'asylum seeker' as a recognised category. (In response to our formal request, and with the help of specific individuals within the institution, UCL is nonetheless considering making a formal offer for Ahmad to conduct his PhD studies at the IOE, as an exception, as this manuscript moves into press.)

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 he 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. It also leaves us perplexed, though. On the one hand, we inhabit our scholarly spaces as terrains for self-rediscovery, for critique of social injustice and inequality, and for social change. On the other, 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's and community's lives, and simultaneously affecting Miguel's 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 of how scholarly work preoccupied with social justice may confront, let alone transform, the larger sociopolitical realities with which we aim to engage. Simply put, our situation raises questions about the marginality and vulnerability of the scholarly voice in times of sociopolitical precarity: what are the spaces for us to exercise transformative critique from within universities, given the historical role that the institutions for which we work play in the active

(re)production of inequality? In line with such questions, and while acknowledging 120 years of IOE's eventful history (Aldrich and Woodin, 2021), we believe that it may be about time to try to reconcile the focus on development and growth in a place such as the IOE with an appreciation of precarity as a 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 article, 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. As a result, and in the 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 apparently less spectacular, low-key, mundane, meaning-making practices and social relations on which universities are (dis)enabled in daily life. With this in mind, we revisit the sociolinguistic notion of *voice*, with which 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 our supervisory meetings. Based on this, we conclude by way of 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.

## **(Re)imagining higher education through a pedagogy for precarity**

The university has more 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 (for example, 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 and McKittrick, 2015; Heller and 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 and Vally, 2020). For the purpose of this article, we find the calls by Bill Readings (1996) and Lange et al. (2021) to be 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 socio-economic 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' (Readings, 1996: 13). Readings (1996) 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, Readings (1996) 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' based on a model of dependency rather than emancipation, and which seeks to make its heteronomy and differences more complex (Readings, 1996: 190).

Lange et al. (2021) follow a similar historicising path, although 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 2015/16. 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 an idea anchored not only in the making of European modern nationalism, but also in the production and normalisation of colonial territories and subjectivities – that is, 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 et al. (2021) 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*, which, alongside Lange et al.'s *University on the Border*, foregrounds disruptive moments of history whereby the call for decolonisation takes disciplines and subjectivities into an aporetic space.

The figure of the 'university on the border' is therefore used to foreground a crisis of authority. Even so, Lange et al. (2021) do not 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 (Lange et al., 2021: 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 affects inevitably 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. The implications of this are vast, for it brings university teachers' and students' social relations to 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 'The 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' (Zembylas, 2019: 102). In Zembylas's (2019) view, this is enabled by two pervasive trends: (1) an emphasis on precarity as a universal human condition that does not pay sufficient attention to its unequal distribution in society, and that may be exploited to rationalise violence against particular social actors, rendering less visible arbitrary determination of humanness; and (2) 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's (2019) call for a *pedagogy for precarity* that draws on both shared and differential experiences of vulnerability to go against normalisation of normative meanings and social relations. This, in fact, aligns well with Blommaert's (2020a) 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, making it more difficult for him to handle the various tasks and expectations that come with his responsibilities as a university

staff member devoted 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-brush 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 our context of inter-action, and for this reason, we now turn to a sociolinguistic approach informed by Blommaert's early work on the topic.

## 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 in order to determine the veracity of applicants' claims about who they are and why they have come to the country where they apply for asylum (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 (that is, 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 to be 'unreliable' or 'contradictory'. In attempting to problematise these procedures and related assumptions, Blommaert drew on Hymes's (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's (1996: 44–5) 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.'

Following this line of inquiry, Blommaert (2005) advocated for a language-based theory of voice in which the traditional emphasis on competence is displaced in favour of performance. And not only that, his theory of voice also called for an approach to meaning that foregrounds contextual embeddedness (that is, situatedness), difference (that is, language use variability) and inequality (that is, 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' [that is, 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.

(Blommaert, 2005: 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 (2008: 427–8) highlighted, reacting 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.

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 cannot act accordingly, they then become vulnerable subjects involved in a process of 'losing voice' that prevents them from being understood 'on their own terms' (Blommaert, 2008: 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 past 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 in a PhD viva examination 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 of data of our dialogues, including: 03:40 hours of video-recordings of our online meetings; 27 instances of email communication; 565 text and voice messages in various social media platforms (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* (Jaffe, 2009) lens, 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.

## 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 had 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, the university's conventional separation

of personal, social and political realms stood out as a dominant framework of action and interpretation. From the initial framing of Ahmad's project as valuable, to justification of the significance of his focus on time, to clarification of the comments made on his proposal by Miguel, 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 at the beginning of the meeting, when he positively valued Ahmad's participation at a doctoral seminar series in the department where Ahmad had previously shared his project idea with other doctoral students, given its connection with his experiences as an asylum applicant in the UK:

I'm not concerned about the [research proposal] document, so this is about thinking of your research ... I think it was really useful for everyone ... to have someone making explicit that this is a personal thing, whether you like it or not ... doing research 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, which we brought into being in our dialogue, and which turned academic spaces into a discursive battleground. We will 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 became articulated around storytelling, an often-regarded privileged discursive genre for the study of stance-taking practices and the normative reordering of daily life (Bamberg, 2004; De Fina, 2015; Patiño-Santos, 2018). Figure 1, from the opening of the second segment, offers a view of this.

Prompted by Miguel's question on the origin of his project idea (lines 2–5), Ahmad discounts the suggestion that his interaction with an anthropologist at another major university in the UK was key in bringing him closer to an interest in time. Instead, Ahmad draws Miguel's attention to his experience in making use of the mental health therapy services provided to asylum-seeking applicants in the UK (lines 6–12). 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 11), 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 erase the sociopolitical causes of the struggles faced by social actors like him by narrowing down the attention to cognition only (lines 12–18).

Most crucially, and following Miguel's non-verbal acceptance of this claim (lines 15, 18), Ahmad shifts into a narrative style (lines 19–44) to illustrate his point through storytelling, 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 30, 33, 44) – in which he presents himself as a sociolinguist interested in the politics of the asylum-seeking system in the UK by means of switching between the positions of the narrator and narrated, the latter including himself as a resilient victim of the asylum-seeking system. In the first story (lines 19–29), Ahmad animates the words of a mental health therapist and his own words as an 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 through 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.

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**Figure 1. 'What brought me to this topic'**

- |   |                |   |
|---|----------------|---|
| 1 | <b>Miguel:</b> | ... It makes a lot of sense but                   |
| 2 |                | I want to know more about the behind the scenes.  |
| 3 |                | How did you get into that? Is that connected with |
| 4 |                | these dialogues that you are having               |
| 5 |                | with this person at [name of university]?         |
| 6 | <b>Ahmad:</b>  | No, actually he was intrigued when I told him     |
| 7 |                | 'I want to write something about time'.           |
-

Figure 1. *Continued.*

- 8 Because he likes to learn about sociolinguistics  
 9 and all these things ... but actually what brought me  
 10 to this topic is my experience with the mental health therapy.
- 11 **Miguel:** (Nods his head yes)
- 12 **Ahmad:** Whenever I went to them, I explained my circumstances.  
 13 And this is the problem, the ethical problem,  
 14 in psychological practice and maybe research.
- 15 **Miguel:** (Nods his head yes)
- 16 **Ahmad:** They want to reduce the problem to your cognitive dimension,  
 17 they don't want to engage with the politics.
- 18 **Miguel:** (Nods his head yes)
- 19 **Ahmad:** They told me, 'Oh Ahmad! sorry, we cannot involve  
 20 in what the Home Office is doing to you,  
 21 but we can give you a medicine to make you feel better'.  
 22 I said, 'But you want to change my physiology,  
 23 you want to give me medication,  
 24 and it becomes a physical problem instead of being a social problem,  
 25 I don't accept taking medication,  
 26 you should do something!'  
 27 Then I explained, 'I'm a sociolinguist,  
 28 there is something wrong, I will write about it,  
 29 and this writing kind of challenges the politics!'
- 30 **Miguel:** Hmm.
- 31 **Ahmad:** Then I was talking to a legal person in [name of university],  
 32 I knew her since I was in Kuwait, she's in Boston.
- 33 **Miguel:** Hmm.
- 34 **Ahmad:** I told her, 'is there any legal resort for me to say:  
 35 "Why are you delaying me?",  
 36 because even my son started to say 'I hate time, I hate waiting',  
 37 so I've got all this experience'.  
 38 So I told her, she said,  
 39 'No, in legal studies there is only an aspect of time  
 40 when a crime could be dismissed'.  
 41 You know, if someone kills someone, maybe after 10 or 13 years,  
 42 there is no case for someone to sue them,  
 43 there is ... time limit.
- 44 **Miguel:** Hmm

In the second story (lines 31–44), 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 based on the trauma that his waiting time has caused to his son during the asylum-seeking application process. Nevertheless, Ahmad's personal experiences with the therapy services for asylum seekers in the UK 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 emerged too in relation to the university, thus paving the way for further stance-taking work mediated by storytelling practices. This is illustrated in Figure 2, where Ahmad pedals back to the anthropologist from the other university, to whom Miguel had previously referred.

In this case, we engage collaboratively in the performing of commitment to academic research that addresses sociopolitical struggles, although 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 – 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 – a researcher at the other university discouraging



Ahmad from challenging the idea of the nation state. But more importantly, this practice of embedded storytelling 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 (not being allowed to challenge the idea of the nation state), setting (university museum) and characters (himself and the researcher at the other university with whom he had been interacting) (lines 1–10).

**Figure 2. 'The straw that broke the camel's back'.**

1       **Ahmad:** ... and then the straw that broke the camel's back ...  
 2               when I learned that at [name of university]  
 3               there are certain topics I cannot talk about,  
 4               like I cannot challenge the idea of the nation state.  
 5               I was told by this guy  
 6       **Miguel:** Why?  
 7       **Ahmad:** Yeah  
 8       **Miguel:** Really?  
 9       **Ahmad:** He is the organiser, of the museum,  
 10               I was explaining, 'We want to narrate'.  
 11               I remember as a child, I used to go to a beach in Kuwait, with my friend.  
 12               We used to go there, swim, catch some fish, and bring home, you know?  
 13               Very natural interaction with nature.  
 14               So what would happen later, here is a hotel, you know? Hilton?  
 15       **Miguel:** Yeah.  
 16       **Ahmad:** A resort?  
 17       **Miguel:** Yeah yeah.  
 18       **Ahmad:** They took franchise in Kuwait, they dominated this land,  
 19               put barriers, closed the area, started construction,  
 20               and we, us children, didn't understood what was going on,  
 21               we tried to go, penetrate, you know, the fences.  
 22               And, Miguel, several times we were punished.  
 23               And there was a lot of going and coming,  
 24               like Peter Rabbit, you know? (smiles)  
 25       **Miguel:** (smiles)  
 26       **Ahmad:** Peter Rabbit, the literature?  
 27               So we used to go inside and challenge them,  
 28               One day we came up with an idea.  
 29               We dyed our faces with black, you know? Coal or something?  
 30               We pretended to be, labour, you know?  
 31               The labour who go, do the construction.  
 32               We put the helmet and all these things.  
 33               We were like 15 years old? Or something like this?  
 34               And when they caught us, they called the police.  
 35               I was using this story to write, you know, a sketch,  
 36               maybe for article or something,  
 37               how this very little story represents what happened to our,  
 38               people, the Indigenous people, who were in the desert,  
 39               and then the British oil company came, and displaced them,  
 40               and started excavation for oil and everything,  
 41               so it's the coming of capitalism,  
 42               on people's land and everything, so this very small story,

**Figure 2. Continued.**

- 43 and how I understand it now ... because when I was young,  
 44 when I was challenging this capitalist franchise,  
 45 I was thinking I was doing something wrong, I thought.  
 46 I was thinking I was stealing access to that land,  
 47 you know?  
 48 **Miguel:** Hmm.  
 49 **Ahmad:** Whereas now I think it's the other way around!  
 50 **Miguel:** Yeah.  
 51 **Ahmad:** I used to go to that land as a person,  
 52 as a human being, to catch fish and eat it.  
 53 **Miguel:** Yeah yeah.  
 54 **Ahmad:** And he's using it to generate more money and take more political power.  
 55 **Miguel:** That's enclosure.  
 56 How is it called in the literature on capitalism and land?  
 57 Enclosure, right? There is a Marxist notion for that, right?  
 58 Which is this,  
 59 the appropriation of land and all of the natural resources within it, right?  
 60 By corporations and then, it is no longer part of the commons.  
 61 But please, tell me specifically about this!  
 62 So who told you that you can't challenge the nation state?  
 63 **Ahmad:** Yeah, so when I was telling the adviser,  
 64 [name], my Swedish friend, he is the person with whom I work, on the research,  
 65 we called, on the process of organising the exhibition,  
 66 we called an adviser, a PhD student who works in the museum,  
 67 who became our advisor, and who has the experiences.  
 68 So I told him, 'We want',  
 69 because we want to create an interest for the audience,  
 70 the audience might not care about the Bidoon,  
 71 we want to capture a sociopolitical, any phenomenon,  
 72 and use the Bidoon as a representation of that phenomenon.  
 73 So what we were doing, I said,  
 74 'OK, why don't talk about this?'  
 75 How capitalism and nation state took over our land?'  
 76 **Miguel:** Yeah.  
 77 **Ahmad:** And one of the things that struck me, he said,  
 78 'Uh, you know, I recommend not to engage in this  
 79 because we have, uh,  
 80 we are told that exhibitions should not involve activist activities'.  
 81 **Miguel:** [... ] No!  
 82 **Ahmad:** Yeah, and then should not be politicised because a lot of funding from oil.  
 83 **Miguel:** Of course!  
 84 **Ahmad:** You know?  
 85 **Miguel:** Of course, that's interesting, that is super interesting.  
 86 **Ahmad:** Yeah.

This initiation already provides a platform for the enactment of a joint alignment, triggered by Miguel's reaction of surprise to the outer story, and seconded by Ahmad (lines 5–9), although 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 11–34). Once the inner story is established with Miguel's support and encouragement (lines 15, 17, 25), the return to the outer story (lines 35–82) 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: (1) 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 35–54); (2) Miguel draws connections with existing academic literature (lines 55–60); (3) Ahmad establishes a contrast between the points of view of himself (lines 76–7) and a researcher at the other university, who acted as an adviser for their planned exhibition (lines 80–2), as the two narrated characters of the outer story by way of taking their participant positions; and (4) 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 83–8).

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 (treating depression and organising an exhibition), disciplinary expertise (psychology, sociolinguistics, law), institutions (universities and governments) and people (academic researchers, therapists and minoritised Indigenous groups). Against the background of this hegemonic separation of realms, our storytelling practices sought to rebuild a moral order in which ideas of 'good' and 'bad' research were associated with, respectively, politicised and depoliticised 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.

## On the possibility for, and imaginability of, social transformation in higher education

In this article, 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 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 sociopolitical state-based logics of exclusion and indignity. It also illustrates, however, 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 and Del Percio, 2019). This, in our view, provides scope for further interdisciplinary engagement with sociological studies of higher education and educational research of pedagogy, as these bodies of literature embark on theoretical attempts to reimagine 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 – that is, 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 (for example, Dlaske et al., 2016; Lorente, 2017; Del Percio, 2018; Sunyol and Codó, 2020; Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau, 2020; Pérez-Milans and Guo, 2020; Hight, 2022).

In the case of the pedagogical dialogue offered in this article, 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 mediate a pedagogical dialogue that challenges the normative separation of the personal, social and academic; they also have the potential to interrupt the very

institutional framework that dis-encourages our supervisory dialogue in the first place. But we are not naive. In line with Cushing-Leubner et al. (2021: 204, emphasis in original), 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*.

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. (2021: 203) draw from Sara Ahmed's (2006, 2007) concept of 'straightening devices' in order to recognise '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'. Cushing-Leubner et al. (2021: 205) also extend 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)'. 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 legitimised knowledge, and therefore legitimised to control peoples and lands and their relations' (Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021: 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 UK, we acknowledge that we contribute 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 on 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 regain 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 (for example, Docherty, 2015; La Paperson, 2017; see also Pérez-Milans et al., 2021). While refusing to accept the institutional conditions of unrecognisability, 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 reorient ourselves towards what La Paperson (2017) terms 'the third university'. In other words, and returning to Cushing-Leubner et al. (2021: 224), 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'.

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 Rampton and Cooke, 2021). Although never free 'from its toxic relationship with empire and empire's colonizing efforts' (Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021: 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 and 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 marketisation rather than problematisation and refinement of knowledge (for example, Erdocia and Soler, 2021). These scholarly presentations of authoritative selves are indeed illustrative of what Blommaert (2020b) 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.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to colleagues who have read and commented on earlier drafts of this manuscript. These are (in alphabetical order): Peter Browning, Yunpeng (Dery) Du, Paloma Elvira Ruiz, Maher Ben Moussa, Ben Rampton, Fahad Rashed Al-Mutairi, Yu (Aimee) Shi, Carlos Soto, Andrea Sunyol, Sudha Vepa and Gabriela Wale Soto. We also thank the anonymous reviewers. All the remaining shortcomings are ours.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with BAAL standards.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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