

Editorial

Vocalizations in the Midst

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In a recent speech at a London rally that took place on a warm May Saturday, the director of Makan and chair of British Palestinian Committee, Aimee Shalan, spoke about the “monumental limits of language in this moment”.

It is indeed a seemingly impossible task to find a way with words in these times of ongoing violence and harm, and yet, to echo Aimee Shalan again, “we have no right to give up.” In the spirit of persistent hope and commitment to shared intersectional struggles and solidarities, we write this editorial holding on to the belief that *writing* “in dark times” (Cole 2021) is an imperfect but vital intervention as well as an extension of what any scholarly and indeed learning environment can do best: enable forms of care, community, and collective resistance. This can sometimes take place above ground and find structures of support across the formal administrative arms of our institutional spaces. We also recognize, as we have seen across university campuses worldwide undergoing different kinds of political and financial pressures, that intellectual and activist spaces can be the first to be censored, silenced, policed, and expelled (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2024). In this case, vital forms of fugitivity take place below ground, in the *undercommons* (Moten and Harney 2013). As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write, “it is teaching that brings us in” to the university (2013: 27), but the undercommons open up spaces to rethink, reassemble, and refuse—to resist being “taught” and instead break away from all that wishes to professionalize and capture. As Julietta Singh argues, “mastery” is in itself a premise entangled with colonial connotations, so to “unthink mastery” becomes a project that “gazes toward a future it still cannot see” (2018: 21). Perhaps it is precisely in the undercommons where a refusal for any attempt or presumed imperative to “master” particular subjects lies. Student-led occupations of university campuses and across globalized digital youth-led “networks of outrage” (Castells 2012) have exactly created spaces for unthinking, reassembling, refusal, and reimagining, and have defiantly and courageously insisted on holding institutions to account for their silence and complicity in the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Al-Shihabi and Cowen 2024).

At the time of writing this editorial, the task seems not to be whether we navigate above or below ground, but rather how we navigate across these grounds, especially when “the ground is giving way” (Latour 2019: 9). We are in a kind of waiting space, on constant edge, because the violence and harm that pervades the everyday lives of so many colleagues, kin and odd-kin (Haraway 2016) at the moment, seems unbearably incessant. When Yael Navaro wrote “The Aftermath of Mass Violence: A Negative Methodology” in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* in 2020, the question was how to contend with the obligation to produce some kind of “evidence” when writing about our research. The piece, importantly, called out the perverse logics of requiring some sort of “evidentiary presence” in the field, in particular in contexts of the “aftermath” of mass violence. This was an ethical question as much as one that recognized the



inevitable gaps and “black holes” that reside in field sites where the witnesses and co-locutors and colleagues are either displaced, killed, or paralyzed by trauma. So Navaro called for a “negative methodology” that would recognize the necessary stance in contexts of the aftermath to work with “traces” and the “gaps, voids, and hollows” (2020:170).

We have done this in our own work in various ways, including: through co-research and co-writing that challenges the silencing and unhearing of people seeking asylum (Berg et al. 2023); through tracing, narrating and making visible local histories of sanctuary (Berg 2024; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020); through mobilizing the practice of sketching—as a deliberate alternative to photography and as a complement to writing—as a way of *seeing* and “deep noticing” while acknowledging the “right to opacity” (Glissant 1997) the limits to what we can know (Thieme 2025a, 2025b); through “co-seeing and co-writing displacements of the self and other through an explicitly relational, South-South process” (Qasmiyeh et al. 2024) as well as explicitly “center[ing] the words and worlds of Palestinians in Gaza” to “make obvious, visible, audible, perceptible” not only Palestinians’ “right to life, safety, and security [but also] the rights to joy, beauty, happiness, to the more-than-basic elements that make life worth living, as Palestinians in Gaza have repeatedly shown us in the midst of this ongoing genocidal violence” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2024). Indeed, here and now, as we write, there is no aftermath—yet. We are still in the midst of the horrors—some of us witnesses to them, others closely adjacent, and others still in the trenches of them. And yet, “we have no right to give up”, and we must try to “gaze toward a future that we still cannot see” because to do so means to keep going (see also, Qasmiyeh 2024).

And so, what does *not* giving up mean in this conjuncture? Perhaps we can start with modest claims—seeing the significance, more than ever, in the interpersonal relations that make up seemingly ordinary social, work, and personal life. It means recognizing that despite politics of fear and division in these simultaneously conservative and radical times, there are still abundant examples of micro and major forms of mutual aid, friendship and conviviality, even ephemeral civilities and support within and across affinity groups (Hall 2021). This journal has consistently published work that traces, narrates, and engages with exactly such forms of solidarity, conviviality, and friendship (these include, inter alia, Abdo and Craven 2018; Moffette and Ridgley 2018; Western 2020; Azar 2020; Barone 2021; Lauterbach 2021; Fitzpatrick 2022; Mbatha and Koskimaki 2023; Ramírez 2023; Bakić Hayden 2024; Qasmiyeh 2024).

With Alexandra Délano Alonso (in this issue), we recognize the importance of “small formations”, creating “islands of hope” (Back 2021: 16) that defy hate and violence. Islands of hope manifest in spaces of care and intellectual communities in the undercommons of our institutions and beyond, whether in ad hoc reading and writing groups that form at the margins of the visible timetabled teaching and committee meetings, the collaborative networks and informal gatherings that bring together staff and students to form relational spaces of learning and exchange, or organizing for more sustainable and equitable universities because despite all the growing hurdles, “higher education still matters” (Back 2016). We have found that the labors and temporalities of preparation that go into journal issues are, in themselves, often ephemeral, invisible, virtual, but vital spaces of care. They enable collective reflection and collaborative work between the journal editorial team, guest editors of special themed sections, peer reviewers, and a diversity of authors including those who may be at the starting stages of their academic careers seeking more personalized support. These labors traverse the institutional spheres and the undercommons and sit with the imperative to “unthink mastery”. A journal issue offers a modest formation that strives to make an intervention without claiming completion.

We have been fortunate to work with thoughtful and generous guest editors, Tricia Redeker Hepner and Magnus Treiber, whose intellectual vision for the special themed section was eerily clairvoyant in describing our current dystopian predicament. As its title indicates, this special

themed section also serves as a timely homage to the late anthropologist James Ferguson, whose sudden passing in February 2025 saddened so many. He was one of the most inspiring scholars whose commitment to calling out social, economic, and political injustice was unwavering and always incisive. Often grounded in Southern African studies and ethnographic encounters, his scholarship continues to inspire so much writing, teaching, and activism across the social sciences and geographies. It seems poignant and appropriate that this special issue echoes his intellectual arguments made over thirty years ago in *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990). Ferguson's landmark monograph was the inspiration for the central animating concept of the themed section, "The Anti-Refugee Machine", which we present in this issue.

The section starts with Redeker Hepner and Treiber's introduction to the concept of the anti-refugee machine, adopted from Ferguson's "anti-politics machine" and adapted to "the profoundly pressing problems of contemporary forced migration" and the multiple forces that seek to "control, steer, manage, and profit from it". The introduction is followed by eight ethnographic articles from across the world that explore and illustrate the workings of the anti-refugee machine in different settings. The first of these focuses on "humanitarian-development-security partnerships" in the Middle East and Northeast Africa (Hera Jay Brown, Malay Firoz, Nathalie Peutz, and Jennifer Riggan). The following article (Anja Simonsen) examines the human consequences of Europe's approach to irregular migration focusing on Somali migration. Fiori Berhane's contribution focuses on the racialization of the refugee category and the exclusionary effects thereof in the Italian context. Abby Wheatley examines the Mediterranean as a "deadly seascape" based on fieldwork in Lampedusa, Italy. Gambia is the setting for Nora Leichtle's contribution in which she analyzes the experiences of returnees. Two articles are set in the US-Mexico borderlands. Roberto Barrios's article offers a historical counter-narrative of the US-Central American historical entanglements. Meanwhile, Lupe Flores examines the CBP One™ border patrol app, which determines access to the US asylum system for Central Americans. Rano Turaeva completes the section with an article about Russia's brutal anti-refugee machine and the process of "overdocumentation".

We encourage readers to consider these articles as an ensemble provocation that each speaks to the ongoing, multi-sited, crescendo violence of bordering regimes that manifest across geographies. At the same time, we suggest that it is more than ever vital to resist paralyzing fatalism in the face of the anti-refugee machine. The *work* that readers might wish to consider is sitting with the contradictions at play, ones that echo the work of Ferguson and other post-development and anti-colonial scholars (e.g., Escobar 1995; Kothari 2019) who have helped us rethink the development apparatus and re-imagine its alternatives. At the same time, post-development arguments could productively be set alongside the practical urgency to make existing development practices "better"—more inclusive and participatory, with mechanisms for also critically evaluating the effects of "better" development (cf. Mosse 2005). In this moment, 2025, it seems crucial to call out the anti-refugee machine as an academic critique and hold space for imagining *otherwise* and equally vital to engage in advocacy for the expansion of *existing* protections and to hold governments to account (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2021).

In our research article section, Alexandra Délano Alonso's article reflects on the scales of translocal solidarity between Mexico and the United States, returning to questions of solidarity and hope explored in earlier issues of *Migration and Society* (see, e.g., Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2023; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2024). Resonating with the articles in the themed section, Camilla Alberti and Lisa Marie Borrelli's article examines the disciplining of people in the Swiss asylum system via everyday power effects. Erna Bodström's article exposes the epistemic simplification entailed in asylum decision-making in Finland. Jesper Bjarnesen, Cristiano Lanzano, and Gabriella Körling's article introduces the notion of "soft infrastructures", to under-

stand mobilities between secondary cities in West Africa. Cita Wetterich examines masculinities among refugee men who have traveled along the central Mediterranean route to Switzerland. Diana Mata-Codesal and Silvia Bofill-Poch's article engages with the struggles of migrant care workers in Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic and the hyper-exploitation they were subject to. Finally, Suzan Ilcan, Seçil Dağtaş, and Lana Gonzalez Balyk reflect on transversal community-building among different groups and organizations led by women in Cyprus. Read together, these research articles point to some of the insidious forms of slow violence that become all too ordinary in their manifestation (Das 2007), and yet in each of these ethnographic pieces of writing, there is a refusal to normalize such forms of violence. A refusal, again, to "give up".

During the preparation of this issue, our editorial board member and distinguished anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen sadly passed away. Hylland Eriksen's contribution to scholarship is immense. His commitment to grappling with complex and difficult issues and reaching out to readers beyond academia resonate strongly with the ethos of this journal; we will miss his voice. We have welcomed the contributions of the *Migration and Society* team, and in particular wish to express our gratitude to our colleague Hend Aly, who joined us in 2024, for her invaluable editorial assistance. Each issue is a new opportunity for intellectual community-building, and though it may be modest, as we write this editorial ahead of the issue's publication, even this feels like a small "island of hope", albeit entangled with grief, loss, and a profound recognition (again to echo the words of Aimee Shalan) of the "limits of language" in this moment. We refer to this moment as the midst, and this editorial is thus a modest and melancholic vocalization in the midst.

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■ NOTE

1. <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7330545687639584770/>, accessed 17 June 2025.

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