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EXCELLENCE REGIMES IN PRECARIOUS TIMES: EXHAUSTION, EXCLUSION, AND STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION IN EARLY-CAREER ACADEMIC LIVES

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This article reflects on how structural precarisation, institutional hierarchies, administrative discriminations and a pervasive culture of self-exploitation shape both the production of knowledge and the material conditions of young academic lives. As precarious early-career researchers within a European project labelled as an "excellence program", we analyze the tensions involved in sustaining research experiences that face legal challenges, resort to affective ties and informal strategies of survival, and are rooted in political commitments while embedded in scholarly environments that prioritise competitiveness, profitability and bibliometric productivity. The different experiences collected in this paper present challenges that affect how we live, eat, conduct fieldwork, how and where we write, what we can publish, and what we are compelled to withhold. We navigate these contradictions from situated bodies – some of which are gendered, racialised, and/or illegalised – sustained by informal and invisible networks of care, and by reconciliation efforts that rarely find recognition within the official frameworks of authorised knowledge production. Dissent does not always take explicit forms; it often appears in fractures, alliances and everyday gestures of defiance. In the era of the "marketisation of education" (Fisher 2009), "audit cultures" (Strathern 2000), and

“unrealistic expectations” (Polese 2018), we ask how we can sustain a collective ethics of academic labour that does not dissociate the human and relational dimensions of research from the political, economic and precarious conditions under which it is produced.

Keywords: excellence regimes, academic precarity, informal survival strategies, networks of care, audit cultures

International Women’s Rights Day, March 8th, 2024, Dublin, Ireland. Photograph: Asankojo Isaev.

1. INTRODUCTION

To write collectively about precarity is itself a precarious undertaking. It entails exposing vulnerabilities, risking reputational damage and navigating the ambivalent, liminal space between critique and complicity. When this article first started to take shape, five colleagues had agreed to join. Two eventually withdrew. One feared that speaking openly about institutional violence would brand them as "difficult", threatening already fragile employment prospects. The other initially wished to contribute to "inequality in knowledge production, passport power, decoloniality and also just transitions for precarious workers." Yet, in their own words, "it might not be a very good time for me to participate, as I really can't focus on doing something valuable like writing" (personal communication, 2025). Their withdrawal was a matter of exhaustion and overwhelming bureaucratic burdens. We start with their absence, as it is evidence of how structural exclusion silences certain voices and forces others to speak only in fragments. This absence forms part of the ethnographic material we put forward: dissent is curtailed before it even finds spaces of enunciation and possibilities of expression.

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of scholarship on academic precarity (Gill 2009; Shore and Wright 2015; Ivancheva et al. 2019). Yet, it is often addressed in the abstract terms of structural reforms or audit regimes. Gill's (2009) foundational essay exposing the "hidden injuries" of the neoliberal university, Strathern's (2000) analysis of audit cultures and Fisher's (2009) diagnosis of "capitalist realism" have become canonical references, with a deep genealogy from Marx's "alienation" (1964 [1844]). What began as managerial tools has evolved into a pervasive regime that dictates what counts as valuable knowledge, how it should be measured and who is authorised to produce it. For early-career researchers, these regimes amplify precarity, as employment contracts become shorter, mobility is implicitly mandatory, and funding is tied to measurable outputs – often an ephemeral mirage or arbitrary quest for unattainable standards. To survive, one must internalise the logic of constant evaluation: producing "excellence" at all times, often at the cost of health, relationships and a sense of intellectual autonomy, normalising stress and self-reliance as the price of academic success.

Yet as a new generation of scholars has shown, these earlier accounts – often written from relatively privileged positions within Northern universities – can be extended and challenged through ethnographic attention to the specific mechanisms that produce precarity for differently situated bodies. A rich body of work now documents, through first-hand experience and empirical research, how precarity is racialised (Chakraborty and Gaynor 2025; Vatansever 2023), gendered (Ivancheva et al. 2019; O'Keefe and Courtois 2021) and structured by global hierarchies of citizenship and mobility (Gülel 2025; Puzo 2022; Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023). European excellence programmes epitomise this paradox. They provide apparently generous funding, international networks and prestigious credentials, while simultaneously entrenching hierarchies and exclusions. Scholars from

the Global South are invited symbolically as part of diversity initiatives, but almost immediately find themselves tokenised, facing systematic barriers to structural integration (Vatansever 2021; Ferreira 2022)., as well as disproportionate bureaucratic hurdles, visa precarity and structural disadvantages (Connell 2007; Chakraborty and Gaynor 2025). Their knowledge is valued primarily when reframed through "Northern theory" (Connell 2007), while local epistemologies are dismissed as mere "data". Isaev's trajectory and analysis speak to this phenomenon as a form of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), that is, the silencing or distortion of subaltern knowledges within dominant frameworks. It reveals how the biopolitics of migration regimes and project frameworks function as technologies of control, defining who may legally exist, under what conditions, and at what cost. These contributions have moved the debate from abstract critique to grounded, embodied analysis.

Precarity not only structures material conditions; it also shapes epistemologies. Militant ethnography prioritises affective, solidarity ties and political commitments, challenging the myth of detached neutrality. Within neoliberal universities, such approaches are treated with suspicion, framed as "biased" or "unprofessional". The demand for neutrality becomes a mechanism of epistemic surveillance, disciplining what can be said and silencing unsettling critiques. Critical voices are either dismissed as disruptive or absorbed into bureaucratic diversity agendas, where dissent is measured, audited and neutralised. To insist on uncomfortable ethnography is to resist this domestication, foregrounding the frictions and conflicts that neoliberal frameworks seek to erase. Methodologically, we frame this article as collective autoethnography, using first-person experience as ethnographic data and situating personal narratives within broader structural analysis (Ellis et al. 2011; Haraway 1988).

This article delves into processes of precarisation of academic labour within one of the European Union's flagship "excellence" programmes. We write as three early-career researchers from Kyrgyzstan, Papua New Guinea and Italy respectively, whose trajectories converge in a MSCA Doctoral Network designed to study informality in the so-called "Global South". Our position is paradoxical: we are beneficiaries of a programme that grants us prestigious credentials and (relative) funding, yet our lives have been marked by visa precarity, bureaucratic exclusion, gendered exhaustion and epistemic silencing. This paradox is structural and widely shared beyond our specific context. We address these tensions by examining how prestige economies coexist with existential insecurity, how inclusion is celebrated rhetorically but undermined in practice, and how survival depends less on institutional protections than on informal networks of solidarity.

As many other forms of labour under capitalism, the affective and domestic labour that sustains academic careers remains invisibilised and feminised (Lynch 2007; Fotaki and Kenny 2024). This emphasises how social reproduction remains unrecognised yet essential to capitalist economies (Federici 2012). In academia, this manifests itself as spouses handling bureaucracies, colleagues lending money, friends offering housing and parents

absorbing child-care duties. Recent scholarship has deepened this analysis, showing how the gendered division of academic labour systematically extracts value from women's unpaid work (Ivancheva et al. 2019; Lynch 2007; Fotaki and Kenny 2024). Andrias and Gambardella both demonstrate how such hidden economies of care are indispensable to academic survival while remaining invisible in official project reports, where "excellence" is attributed to programme design and the ability to meet milestones rather than to the unpaid labour of care networks. This highlights the gendered dimension of precarity: women, and especially mothers, shoulder a double workload, being pressured to produce competitive academic outputs while sustaining the hidden labour that institutions displace onto private lives. This extraction of unpaid labour exemplifies what Polese (2018; 2022) pragmatically describes as strategies to navigate "the (il)logics of academic survival", echoing broader patterns of informalisation, as well as what Federici (2012) already named as part of broader processes of accumulation.

Our article builds on and extends this conversation, offering a collective, multi-voiced polyphonic account that preserves the distinct cadences of three situated experiences while tracing shared structural conditions. We focus on a site that is rarely subjected to ethnographic scrutiny: an EU "excellence" programme that presents itself as the solution to precarity while reproducing its mechanisms. By documenting how visa regimes and bureaucratic loops operate within this programme, intersecting with forms of epistemic surveillance, we show that prestige and precarity are not opposites but co-constitutive. Finally, we develop a conceptual framework that weaves together three analytical threads: epistemic violence (Spivak 1988; Dotson 2011) as it operates through administrative and disciplinary mechanisms; social reproduction theory (Federici 2012; Lynch 2007) as it illuminates the hidden labour that sustains academic production; and "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) as a lens for understanding what keeps us attached to a system that exhausts us.

In Section 2, Isaev traces his trajectory from Bishkek to Dublin to Prague, analysing how visa regimes and bureaucratic delays function as technologies of exclusion, and how his research on Kyrgyz informality illuminates his own precarious position. In Section 3, Andrias narrates her arrival in Spain from Papua New Guinea, showing how the "gap" between fellowship award and contract activation displaced survival costs onto informal networks of care. In Section 4, Gambardella reflects on the contradictions of militant ethnography within a neoliberal programme, examining how epistemic surveillance polices the boundaries of acceptable critique and how invisibilised economies of care sustain precarious academic lives. The conclusion draws these threads together to ask: what keeps us in this system? What forms of attachment and compromise make us stay? And what might a collective ethics of academic labour look like that refuses to separate care from critique, survival from solidarity?

A COLLECTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRECARITY

Across our trajectories, precarity emerges far beyond a mere temporary stage or unfortunate accident, being a structural condition of contemporary academia. It is produced by visa regimes, short-term contracts, audit cultures and prestige economies. It is racialised, gendered and classed, disproportionately burdening scholars from the Global South, women and caregivers. It is sustained ideologically by what Fisher (2009) terms "capitalist realism": the belief that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal logics, that academic precarity is natural and unavoidable. Yet, as our collective writing shows, survival is possible only through informal acts of generosity and moral economies of care (Adloff and Mau 2006). These forms of solidarity are fragile, feminised often unacknowledged, but they are also political: everyday gestures of dissent that resist the atomising logic of neoliberal academia (Gill 2009).

This article, then, is both an ethnography and an intervention. It documents the material and affective dimensions of early-career academic precarisation while also enacting a collective methodology: writing together across differences and from situated bodies. It exposes the silences produced by structural exclusion that conforms to our experiences and in the absence of colleagues who could not participate. Their silence is part of our data. By weaving together narratives from Kyrgyzstan, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, Ireland, Spain, Czechia and beyond, we aim to unsettle the Eurocentric fiction of a level playing field in international academia. We expose how "excellence regimes" extract value from precarious labour while masking the hidden infrastructures of care that sustain research itself. We ask how ethnographic work can sustain a collective ethics of academic labour that refuses to separate the relational from the political, the personal from the structural, that is, the production of knowledge from the precarious conditions under which it is produced.

2. PRESTIGE WITHOUT SECURITY: PRECARITY, EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND THE COLONIALITY OF ACADEMIA

ASANKOJO ISAEV

When the initiator of this collection of articles, Miria, who is a colleague of mine in the same research consortium, first suggested writing something collectively about the precarity of academic life, my immediate thought was how this could further complicate my academic existence, who would be thinking that I might be "difficult and hard-to-work-with" and for how long, thus lowering my already shaky chances of employment in the EU or EU-funded projects. This was the main argument brought up by other colleagues, who did not want to complicate their already overwhelmingly difficult academic lives any further. My second

thought was: what was the point of a critique of a system that comes from someone who is tightly bound by the very same system? The following section is an attempt to reflect critically on these questions.

STRUCTURAL PRECARITY AND ADMINISTRATIVE VIOLENCE

My trajectory in this research consortium, first based in Dublin and later seconded to an "industrial partner" in Prague, has been defined by structural precarisation. Although formally recruited through one of the EU's "excellence" programmes, my life and work have been marked by uncertainty, bureaucratic delays and financial strain. Within the first eighteen months of the project, I spent thousands of euros on visas, residence permits, insurance, relocation expenses and translations, amounts that far exceeded my savings and placed my family in significant hardship. Relocation to Ireland was relatively easy document-wise, since DCU, as a public body, provided me and my spouse with a Hosting Agreement that did not require an additional work permit application. However, since it was only processed in August 2023, the timeframe was really tight for purchasing a flight and searching for accommodation, which proved extremely costly and time-consuming. Even this relative ease meant having to apply for an Irish residence permit three times: first an initial twelve months permit, a second one for the six months of the remainder of my contract, and a third one for my continuing doctoral studies. Moreover, every procedure had to be multiplied by two, as my spouse had to undergo the same processes, but with many more significant delays and refusals. It was those eighteen months of my initial contract that did not allow me to apply in Ireland for a Czech work permit (this privilege becomes available only after 24 months of continuous residence in an EU country). Instead Euraxess (the so-called "mobility experts") were insisting that I must relocate from Dublin to Astana, Kazakhstan, and just stay there awaiting the issuance of my permit, which in reality took seven months of waiting (from application in December 2024 to issuance in June 2025) instead of their own Czech legal deadline of ninety days. They simply could not comprehend that a Kyrgyz national cannot just stay in another country for such a long period of time without justification; maybe all the "-stans" just seemed the same to them. It took a month longer for my spouse to receive her family reunification permit, and in the meantime she practically became a specialist in the EU and Czech immigration laws. This excludes the period of just initiating my Czech visa and work permit inquiries through all possible formal and informal diplomatic channels, which began in September 2024, and a contract embargo, as the job had to be publicly listed for Czech nationals only. Most of this on the Czech side of things was going through just one overworked person, who went above and beyond to make it all happen. So what seemed in 2023 like an exciting opportunity to join a doctoral programme in Ireland and then to have a secondment in Prague became a harrowing story of some random migrant trying to secure a job position in a country that did not want him nor his family.

PRECARITY FROM BISHKEK TO DUBLIN AND THEN PRAGUE

Importantly, this precarity did not begin in Europe. Before joining the EU-funded project, I held a position as Assistant Professor of Sociology at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek for several years until the summer of 2023. My role became contested when the department head sought to dismiss me, alleging that I was, quote, "indoctrinating students with profeminist and decolonial ideologies" and teaching "too much Marx and Foucault". This sounds truly bizarre, given that it was in my job description to teach that and to extend the epistemological frames in which our Eurocentric and patriarchal curriculum was confined. The conflict escalated when I refused to abandon a supervisee whose thesis focused on contemporary Kyrgyz decolonial discourse used by indigenous activists and scholars. Senior professors accused her of "russophobia", a fabricated charge used routinely by Kremlin-affiliated propagandists and officials that barely veiled their outrage with a critique of coloniality. This smear campaign and targeted harassment triggered massive student protests against academic harassment and sexualised and racist abuse, revealing the (neo-)colonial nature of the university's curriculum, the silencing of dissent and an institutional disregard for both mental health and, in some cases, the physical safety of students and staff.

Although the scandal eventually subsided and my three-year contract was renewed, the fear of reprisals never disappeared, since the same department head remained in her position, and the appointed "situation monitors" just left to the US for, apparently, better positions. The experience revealed how deeply cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971) operates even in "liberal" or "Western-oriented (and funded)" institutions in the Global South, where curricula often reproduce Eurocentric logics and punish decolonial critiques. This environment of epistemic violence and professional insecurity made pursuing a doctorate in the EU seem logical, even necessary, as a way of advancing my career. Yet, as my subsequent experiences have shown, precarity merely shifted locations: it was not resolved.

Foucault's concepts of biopolitics (2008) and disciplinary power (2003) provide a framework for understanding my and other fellow migrant scholars' situations. Various national EU immigration systems, the threatening opaqueness of the processing authorities and an over-complicated legal web of work permits operate as technologies of rigid labelling, categorisation and hence control, deciding who may legally exist and under what conditions. In my case, me and my spouse ended up counting our remaining "legal" days of stay on a Schengen visa after we dropped everything in Ireland and moved, while the Czech authorities ignored legal deadlines, delayed our permits and dismissed inquiries, leaving me without salary for more than two months, stranded.

INTERNATIONALISATION, COLONIAL CONTINUITIES AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY

The EU frames internationalisation as both necessity and virtue. Universities increasingly depend on scholars and students from the Global South to sustain research, rankings and revenue. Ireland, for instance, saw international student numbers rise by 45% between 2013 and 2017, making them the largest cohort of non-EU migrants arriving annually (ESRI 2019). Yet, as Chakraborty and Gaynor (2025) argue, universities remain "colonial strongholds of white, male, middle-class privilege", where internationalisation rhetoric masks recolonisation and racialised exclusions. This echoes what Schmidt and Pikirayi (2018) identify as "intellectual apartheid": knowledge extracted from the Global South is recognised only when mediated by "Northern theory" (Connell 2007), while original Southern epistemologies are marginalised. All those involved in the project were told very explicitly and on multiple occasions that there are many EU laws (especially, the GDPR frameworks) that preclude us from sharing any personal and research data back to the non-EU country where it was obtained in the first place. This negates any "dialogical or multivocal" construction of knowledge, in Bakhtin's terms (Wells et al. 2020), as the places of knowledge-extraction may only receive already processed and approved-for-release data, in most cases in the form of final products of Western peer-reviewed publications. To note the irony: Kyrgyzstan has only one Scopus-indexed journal, and it is called the *European Journal of Business and Economics* (EJBE).

The normalisation of precarity functions ideologically as part of Western cultural hegemony. By internalising precarity as "normal", scholars are discouraged from criticism, fearing they will be seen as unprofessional or ungrateful (Gill 2009). The result is a subtle silencing, where dissent is perceived as self-sabotage. Unsurprisingly, the very idea of internationalisation, equality and diversity has become part of what Strathern (2000) calls "audit culture". Ahmed (2017, 2020) goes even further, referring to the fact that heterogeneous and intersectional migrant narratives are treated as something measurable and universally calculable, thus in turn reinforcing the Eurocentric notion that all migrants have a "single story" (Adichie 2009).

Fisher's (2009) concept of "capitalist realism", an imposed belief that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism, captures the atmosphere of academic life under EU excellence regimes in 2026 and resonates with Foucault's analysis back in the 1970s. The bureaucratic cruelty we have been experiencing was presented as unavoidable, a "natural" part of mobility and thus rational and humanised, where it was easier to replace a doctoral fellow than to modify, correct or adapt the project framework. Thus, the project, which studies resilience in the Global South, failed to acknowledge how its design structurally undermined the resilience of its own Global South fellows.

INVISIBLE INFORMAL ECONOMIES OF CARE, GENDERED SURVIVAL AND COLLEGIAL SOLIDARITY

Throughout this ordeal, the most crucial support came not from institutions but from my spouse. For the last two years, she has been providing what Federici (2012) terms the hidden labour of social reproduction: the emotional reassurance, bureaucratic assistance and financial sacrifice that held our precarious lives together. Without her invisible (by the institutions, obviously) care, my mental health struggles, which were caused by the years-long protracted institutional violence, could easily have culminated in withdrawal from the project altogether. Research shows that international and minority students deprived of strong support systems are at the greatest risk of mental health breakdowns and withdrawals (Hefner and Eisenberg 2009; Chakraborty and Gaynor 2025). My partner's labour thus became the silent infrastructure of my academic survival, a form of unpaid care work that remains absent from institutional reports, yet is indispensable for the continuity of research, which makes me, as a cishet presenting male scholar, incredibly privileged and just lucky in this regard.

In parallel, colleagues and supervisors formed a moral economy of care (Adloff and Mau 2006), stepping in when institutions failed. They provided not only emotional support but also concrete material aid, lending substantial sums of money without obligation, checking in regularly and reassuring us through uncertainty. These acts of generosity recall Granovetter's (1973, 2018) insights into social embeddedness: survival under precarity depends on interpersonal ties, not formal structures. Polese (2018, 2022) similarly highlights the necessity of improvisation and informal strategies in academic survival. This underscores a central paradox: EU internationalisation depends on the unpaid, invisible labour of spouses and the informal solidarity of colleagues, even though universities and funding schemes deny recognition to these forms of support, insisting that it is the "excellence" of the project design that covers it all. The reality of survival in Europe for Global South scholars is thus not structured by institutional care but by precarious, feminised and informal networks of reciprocity, as both of my colleagues, Brenda and Miria, mention elsewhere in the article.

PRESTIGE ECONOMIES AND PRECARITY: LESSONS FROM THE *TOI* (FEAST) ECONOMY

My research on the Kyrgyz "*toi* (feast) economy" (Rubinov 2010 2014) also reflects back on my own position as an academic migrant. In Kyrgyzstan, MCs (masters of ceremonies) occupy a paradoxical position: they earn incomes far above the national average and enjoy public prestige, yet their futures remain insecure. Their reputations depend on their successfully navigating shifting political landscapes, managing networks of influence and

maintaining symbolic capital in a context where no formal protections exist. Prestige, in this sense, is inseparable from precarity. My own trajectory in European academia echoes this paradox. Like the MCs, I operate within a prestige economy: I am obliged to win fellowships, publish in international outlets, and convene panels, which grants recognition, though none of it guarantees stability, legal security, or a future career. This resonance between the MC's informal navigation and my own survival underscores how precarity is not the opposite of prestige but its hidden condition in both the Kyrgyz informal economy and the neoliberal academy. These corrections and remarks are being written after my 2025 fieldwork in Bishkek, which made me observe and realise how much closer my situation is to the MCs'. They are perceived as re/producers of tradition and culture, but most of their time is dedicated instead to pondering on the strategy of economic survival, coordinating solidarity networks, maintaining regimes of image-making and of word-of-mouth, and a reputation of being able to produce unique intangible commodities, experiences of "singularities" (Karpik 2010). How much is it really structurally different from our collective experience of precarity in academia, where we are supposed to produce unique artifacts of knowledge and move the human capacity for learning forward, while most of our time we are forced to worry about the next paycheck and are be preoccupied by the same thoughts as a dedicated Kyrgyz MC?

CONCLUSION: PRECARITY AS STRUCTURE, NOT ACCIDENT

The tug-of-war between precarity and prestige produced the widening gap between the intellectual purpose of the doctorate and the actual labour required simply to remain legible to the institutions that employed me. During the months when the Czech authorities ignored their own legal deadlines, our days were no longer organised around reading, writing, or fieldwork, but around counting the remaining legal days, collecting translations, forwarding documents, visa files, residence permits, reimbursement rules, insurance disputes, and waiting for replies that did not come. On paper, I was a recruited doctoral researcher in one of the EU's "excellence" schemes. In practice, I experienced myself as an indifferently governed migrant body suspended between jurisdictions, repeatedly compelled to prove that I had the right to stay, the right to work and, indirectly, the right to think.

This situation of being powerless constantly led to a nagging feeling of being useless. It reminded me of Graeber's concept of "bullshit jobs" (2018), which was useful, but only up to a point. The problem was not that my research on Kyrgyz informality was socially useless; rather, the injury lay in the "bullshitisation" (ibid.) of the conditions under which meaningful work had to be carried out. As empirical research suggests (Soffia et al. 2022) the experience of work becoming intolerable is often better understood through alienation and "toxic workplace environments" than through claims of objective uselessness. The kafkaesque absurdity was not in the research, but in the institutional machinery surrounding it, a machinery so detached from any recognisable human logic that it colonised the

time, attention and dignity required for intellectual work. In this sense, the experience was not one of uselessness, but of being forced to conduct meaningful scholarship through conditions that made it increasingly feel pointless.

In the moments of existential abstraction, where I could gain a third-person perspective and, with varying degrees of success, even a historical one, towards where it all had started – with Marx's "alienation" (Marx 1964 [1844]) – it was becoming clearer that it started to increasingly dominate and frame my very existence. In my case, the more I accumulated the recognised markers of academic value, the more my everyday life was absorbed by processes that estranged me from the intellectual purpose that had brought me into academia in the first place. This is why "prestige without security" is not simply a paradox but a mode of alienation, a formulation that resonates sharply with the experience of academic mobility from the so-called "Global South". I did not enter European academia because I believed scholarship was empty: I entered it because I believed it could offer intellectual community, recognition and a more secure future than the epistemically violent environment I had left behind. Yet the prestige of the programme did not deliver structural integration. Instead, it demanded that my household absorb the costs of "excellence" through unpaid care, savings, anxiety and bureaucratic labour. My spouse's invisibilised work, our financial sacrifices and our uncertainties became hidden subsidies to a system that publicly celebrates diversity while quietly externalising its burdens.

Beyond material conditions, precarity also shaped the epistemic terrain of my work and the colonial hierarchies of knowledge. As Spivak (1988) reminds us, epistemic violence not only silences voices, it also structures the conditions under which certain knowledges are considered legitimate. My focus on the Kyrgyz *toi* economy could be simply reduced to "raw local data" or "third country case-study" through a Eurocentric lens, rather than recognised as a contribution to theory. Meanwhile, dissenting critiques of mobility regimes or institutional indifference are often excluded from "serious scholarship". My journey demonstrates that precarity in European academia is not a temporary stage or an individual misfortune, but rather a structural condition, produced and reproduced by systems of immigration, funding and evaluation. When researchers from the Global South are forced into existential precarity, their intellectual contributions are diminished, distorted, or erased. To criticise this system is not to be "difficult", but to make visible the "hidden injuries" that sustain the neoliberal university (Gill 2009). The challenge ahead is to transform precarious survival into collective resistance. Only by recognising precarity as structural and by rejecting the intellectual apartheid that legitimises it can we begin to imagine alternatives beyond capitalist realism.

3. BETWEEN THE GAPS: SURVIVING PRECARIOUS WORK AS AN EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER IN EUROPE

BRENDA ANDRIAS

In 2023, I left a secure, tenured role in the Solomon Islands for a prestigious doctoral fellowship in Europe. The programme was regarded as a revolutionary initiative to include scholars from the Global South in research about their own regions. Yet this move uncovered a stark paradox: while the fellowship offered elite academic recognition, the actual process of relocation exposed the harsh realities faced by "Third Country" nationals navigating European bureaucracies. This article uses autoethnography to bridge the gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the lived reality of "Third Country" researchers. By juxtaposing my journey with my research on Papua New Guinea's (PNG) informal economy, I argue that international mobility for the peripheral scholar is often a process of value extraction that ignores the material and emotional costs of displacement.

THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION

Moving to Spain to study Papua New Guinea's informal economy felt like the natural next step for my career. The informal economy supports 80% of Papua New Guinea's population and is the backbone of the economy (Department of Community Development 2019). Having spent over a decade as a development practitioner collaborating with women entrepreneurs in that sector, I believed a doctorate degree would formalise my practical expertise. Encouraged by long-time colleagues, I felt I was a good fit for the programme. I was also eager to see Europe's industrialised agriculture sector first-hand and was inspired by the fellowship's stated commitment to the diversity and inclusion of scholars from countries in the so-called "Global South".[1] However, the challenges started long before I reached Europe. Securing a visa was a privilege in itself. I went through an expensive and tiring process in Australia, relying solely on personal contacts to send my documents to the Spanish embassy in Australia since Papua New Guinea had no Spanish Consulate. This vital step depended entirely on those specific contacts. The second indication of the gap in support for non-EU scholars came when I discovered that my travel from Papua New Guinea to Spain was not covered by the scholarship. While a self-funded ticket might be feasible for a student travelling within Europe, it poses a significant financial challenge for someone travelling across three countries, paying for accommodation in transit in what was a very poorly ranked currency.[2]

[1] I prefer not to use the phrase "Global South" but rather to use the term "Third Country", based on the legal phrase used in EU employment and labour regulations. I do not see the relevance of lumping all countries in different geographical locations under the banner of the Global South.

[2] 1 Papua New Guinea Kina equals 0.23 USD.

Nevertheless, I arrived in Europe with a three-month temporary visa in October 2023. This visa did not permit me to open a bank account or secure my own accommodation, a situation that appears to be all too familiar to other scholars from countries outside of Europe or the West (De Lange and Falkenhain 2024). Burton and Bowman (2022) argue that the precariousness experienced by academics from third countries is normalised and expected. It is seen as the norm for workers to move from one transitional role to another, without long-term job security or the peace of mind to settle into their work environment. In most cases, these roles are also less valued and dispensable. They describe precarity as a "contract type" connected to systemic social inequalities related to race, gender and social class that tend to affect citizens from third countries (Burton and Bowman 2022: 500).

Upon arriving in Spain, I received no formal support during my transition, so I stayed with a colleague and co-author of this article, who kindly let me stay without any payment. Her goodwill provided me with a place to go, without which I would not have enrolled in the programme or could have ended up homeless in Spain. Ironically, the precarity I set out to study in the informal economy became my own lived experience within the European academic system during my initial months.

SURVIVING THROUGH INFORMAL NETWORKS

These experiences are not new to students from non-EU countries (specifically, third-country nationals). Ivancheva and Keating (2020) describes this as a global and historical norm that has long been the case and is widely accepted in academia. Other scholars have also discussed the struggles to obtain a visa, irregular contracts and uncertainties surrounding work contracts for non-EU academics (Burton and Bowman 2022; O'Keefe and Courtois 2019). These authors have shown that the rhetoric of inclusion and the meaningful engagement of students and academics from third countries has been exactly that: "a rhetoric", without the structural changes that address these long-standing challenges.

Despite all these issues, I was able to withstand and persevere in Europe through my personal and social networks. This is the invisible structure that facilitated my transition into the European academic community and that has sustained me during my journey as an early-career researcher. My ability to stay in the programme did not come from the scholarship programme or the University, but from the invisible support of personal friendships and private kindnesses. This reliance on "informal care" highlights a major design flaw of these programmes. As Ivancheva and Keating (2020) argue, programmes and institutions often take credit for "diversity" while letting individuals, like my colleague who housed me, bear the actual costs and risks of that diversity.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN THE GAPS

Beyond financial issues, the move took an emotional toll that is rarely acknowledged in "excellence" metrics. These issues led to feelings of helplessness and a sense of being "lost" in a foreign country without family, along with despair at failing those who depend on me back home. This trauma cost me months of productive research time. As Ivancheva and Keating (2020) stated understanding precarity requires recognition of "affective relational security". My experience wasn't just about the lack of a contract; it deeply damaged my sense of identity. Although my situation has improved, the memory of that hopelessness remains a lasting part of my academic journey.

Looking back, the acts of kindness that held my life together, the friends who translated my forms and the colleagues who opened their homes to me show the pacts we are forced to make because formal systems cannot accommodate us. We often trade our stability for the "prestige" of a European degree. However, true inclusion is not just about inviting people from different countries to participate in projects; it is about building the actual infrastructure to support them. Ultimately, until the academy moves past the rhetoric of "meaningful engagement" and addresses these structural barriers, the promise of inclusion will remain an illusion for scholars from the non-EU or the West.

4. MILITANT ANTHROPOLOGY UNDER SURVEILLANCE: GENDERED PRECARITY, DISSENT, AND UNCOMFORTABLE ETHNOGRAPHY

MIRIA GAMBARDELLA

I write from a position of both privilege and precarity. I am a white woman who grew up in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. I am also a single mother who, when my son was three years old, decided to resign from a patiently acquired fixed job to pursue an academic path in anthropology. From the beginning, I was acutely aware that it would entail years of employment precarity and abundant travelling, and therefore important challenges in terms of financial and reconciliation efforts. When I discovered that I had been awarded one of the most prestigious fellowships in Europe, my first reaction was a sense of relief, rather than achievement. Relief that I would not need to juggle two jobs to survive. Relief that I could afford to move to another country, paying the rent for an apartment in Barcelona, and cover my son's school fees. Yet this relief did not translate into security. Instead, it revealed the paradox of an academic system in which survival is framed as privilege and where the promise of "excellence" is inseparable from the lived realities of dislocation and hidden economies of care. The fellowship delivered a more refined, more intimate form of precarity in which exhaustion was reframed as excellence and survival as privilege. The cruelty here lies in the attachment to a fantasy and in the willingness to keep committing oneself, despite mounting evidence that hope will be deferred.

HIDDEN ECONOMIES OF CARE AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ACADEMIC SURVIVAL

To inhabit this contradiction is to experience precarity as a structural condition, but also as a conscious choice. On the one hand, it is imposed by institutional frameworks that subject early-career researchers to temporary contracts, competitive assessments and the imperative of mobility. On the other hand, it is tied to the conscious decision to engage in an academic project that is also an ethical and political commitment. Leaving a stable job and relocating with a child blurred the line between autonomy and vulnerability, freedom and exposure. Being a single mother sharpens these tensions as I cannot afford the "luxury" of sharing a flat with strangers, as if I were still a student in her twenties. Nor should I: I am a doctoral researcher with responsibilities that demand professional recognition and domestic stability. Yet the economic reality of academic precarity makes even the most basic housing arrangements a constant source of anxiety. In this context, precarity is reconfigured into new forms of dependence on institutional categories and bureaucratic allowances.

Under the EU's celebratory slogans of "improving working conditions", institutions are compelled by the MSCA network to grant us formal employment contracts. In theory, this entails rights to paid holidays, sick leave and pensions – important achievements that distinguish us from ECRs living on stipends. In practice, however, these rights are almost impossible to exercise. Academia runs on a calendar that disregards any notion of rest. I still remember an important deadline set for 5th January, one day before the official end of the holiday break: writing while preparing Christmas presents and juggling fieldwork responsibilities in Chiapas. Writing, for me, often takes place early in the morning, late at night, on planes, taking audio notes while driving or at the grocery store – always in the interstices between maternal responsibilities and institutional deadlines. Daily academic survival hinges less on these formal entitlements than on informal strategies and invisible infrastructures of care. This includes hidden economies of solidarity that never appear in official reports but are indispensable to precarious researchers' lives. When my colleague Brenda (co-author of this paper and doctoral student in the same programme) arrived in Barcelona from Papua New Guinea, she had to wait months to obtain a work permit, sign a contract and get her salary. She stayed with me and my son for two months. For her, this arrangement meant having a roof and a supportive environment in a new city where rents are prohibitive. For me, it meant the relief of sharing domestic tasks and the joy of having another woman at home. Her presence allowed me to carve out small fragments of personal and social life. Shared economies of care, though precarious themselves, make academic survival a collective and negotiated experience in the shadows of institutional neglect. These solidarities resist the atomising logic of neoliberal academia, even as they remain unacknowledged within the official narratives of "excellence". They are feminised, affective and informal, often dismissed as private arrangements rather than recognised as the very conditions that enable research to happen.

Affective solidarity (Lynch 2007) denotes the mutual provisioning of care that sustains life under conditions of institutional neglect. Such economies are feminised through the offloading of social reproduction onto gendered subjects (Federici 2012; Ivancheva et al. 2019) who absorb responsibilities that we stop seeing as public and common. This double workload is also emblematic of what Fisher (2009) calls the "marketisation of education", where academic labour is increasingly indistinguishable from entrepreneurial self-management. For women, and particularly for mothers, this is compounded by gendered expectations of care and invisibilised social reproduction. Precarity thus becomes a regime that extracts value from our exhaustion and from the unpaid and unrecognised work that sustains life, while simultaneously devaluing it (Federici 2012). Precarious academic lives under capitalism produce a debt that is never fully paid, only managed, at best. The result is a form of affective labour that remains invisible to institutions, yet is essential to the functioning of the academy itself. Dissent, in this sense, does not always manifest itself in spectacular gestures as it emerges in the cracks of everyday life: in alliances and shared frustrations, and in the refusal to dissociate care from scholarship. These small acts of endurance and solidarity insist on the relational dimensions of knowledge against the commodifying logics of productivity.

UNCOMFORTABLE ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD AND POLITICAL CHOICE

My research focuses on transnational activist networks between European radical-left collectives and Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. The field itself is politically charged and, from the outset, my involvement has been explicit: a militant ethnographic approach rooted in affective ties and shared political commitments, which challenges the (imagined) detached neutrality that is often idealised but still demanded for academic standards. Militant ethnography is inevitably and profoundly uneasy and uncomfortable when transposed into the neoliberal university (Gill 2009). Academic institutions today valorise measurable outputs and impact factors normalised by a permanent quest competitive positioning. Within such logics, ethnographic practices that prioritise dissent and collective commitments appear suspicious, being systematically framed as biased, open to high levels of scrutiny and constantly needing to legitimise their own existence. Forms of epistemic surveillance shape subtle but pervasive mechanisms that constrain what we can write, what we can publish and where, and what must remain silenced. In the era of normalised self-exploitation, hyper-productivity and "unrealistic expectations" (Polese 2018), and from a militant ethnographic positioning, we cannot help but expose the "hidden injuries" (Gill 2009) of a neoliberal machinery of knowledge (and power) production.

In this sense, epistemic surveillance also operates as an internalised form of self-regulation. I censor myself daily: rephrasing or toning down, at times omitting reflections that could be perceived as too political, too critical, or too uncomfortable for mainstream

academic consumption. When I don't, I often end up being openly censored or dismissed as the ingenuous young scholar who will eventually mature and settle for a more moderate view. "Can we afford to be completely radical?" my supervisor once asked me, suggesting that "We critique academia, but over time, and with the comfort of a fixed salary, we all stop being quite as radical and subversive. The system silences and dulls us." I replied that I still strongly believe in the urgency of being radical, both as an anthropologist and as a political subject. I also believe in the need for radicality as an analytical necessity. Without it, we risk reproducing forms of knowledge that are equally biased, precisely for pretending not to take sides. The paradox is that, while universities increasingly promote discourses of "engagement" and "impact", they simultaneously police the boundaries of acceptable criticism. Epistemic surveillance is also temporal, located in the promise that security will dull dissent. It can be offered as care, in the form of a warning against expending energy on battles that cannot be won, ultimately functioning as a reminder that the system rewards those who learn to modulate their critiques. Subtle forms of "contributory injustice" (Dotson 2011) are structurally produced within the very frameworks that we are allowed to apply to make sense of experience.

It is within these cracks that I locate uncomfortable ethnography. This concept signifies a methodological as well as an ethical and political stance. To claim an uncomfortable ethnography is to embrace conflict, to render silences visible and to acknowledge the frictions between militant commitments and institutional demands. It is to accept that ethnography is never a smooth narrative but a terrain of negotiation, compromise, complicity and conflict.

CONCLUSION: CRAFTING DISSENT IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

My decision to engage in militant ethnography, to write from a situated body as a mother and precarious scholar, challenges the dominant norms of neutrality that continue to underpin much of academic knowledge production. Yet, it would be reductive to consider my positioning as a form of defiance in itself. Precarisation is entangled simultaneously in the margins of agency and in conscious political choices. The challenge, however, is to sustain such a stance within environments that continually erode the conditions for its possibility. Audit cultures (Strathern 2000), bibliometric survival strategies (Polese 2018) and the corporatisation of universities create pressures that push scholars towards conformity and clientelism. To sustain doing uncomfortable ethnography is to insist on the relational and the political in academic labour as inseparable from the creation of spaces for a radically critical thought that is urgent and necessary.

Reflecting on my own trajectory, I am reminded that survival in academia is always a collective effort that is sustained by networks of care that remain unspoken unless we find creative ways to make them visible. It is also deeply political, shaped by the commitments

we carry into our research and the forms of critical knowledge we refuse to abandon, even when they make us vulnerable. The contradictions of my life as a precarious academic – at once privileged and vulnerable, recognised and infantilised – mirror broader structural contradictions within neoliberal universities today. In such contexts, the question is how to cope while crafting spaces of dissent, however fragile, within the cracks of institutional frameworks. Uncomfortable ethnography, for me, is one such space: a refusal to dissociate the human and relational dimensions of research from the precarious conditions under which it is produced. It means recognising that, even within surveillance and precarity, it remains possible to inhabit scholarship differently.

5. CONCLUSIONS

> I argue that visa regimes operate as political tools that determine not just who can travel but who can participate in knowledge production, whose expertise is valued and, ultimately, whose voice matters in global academic discourse. Rather than a neutral administrative procedure, visa systems function as gatekeeping mechanisms based on geopolitical hierarchies designed to maintain global power distribution within academic spaces. (Gülel 2025: 3)

Writing this article together has been an act of survival as much as of scholarship. Our stories differ, but they converge on a central insight: precarity is not marginal, it is the infrastructure of contemporary academia. Across our trajectories, three common threads emerge. Exhaustion: the constant juggling of deadlines, relocations, bureaucratic demands and hidden care responsibilities. Exclusion: structural barriers that disproportionately burden scholars from the Global South, women, caregivers and engaged researchers, rendering their contributions conditional or even silencing them. Informal networks of survival: the reliance on hidden economies of care, acts of generosity and fragile solidarities that absorb the costs institutions ignore and displace. These dynamics show that the neoliberal university operates through contracts and metrics as much as through what it refuses to acknowledge: the unpaid labour that sustains its functioning. Survival is offloaded on to private lives and feminised care, inextricably embedded in precarious solidarities, which remain invisible to audit cultures and excellence regimes.

These dynamics reveal something that audit cultures (Strathern 2000) are designed to obscure: the neoliberal university operates through contracts and metrics as well as through what it refuses to acknowledge. The unpaid labour of spouses, the generosity of colleagues and the emotional work of sustaining hope under precarity are the systemic conditions of possibility behind academic production. As Federici (2012) and Lynch (2007) remind us, capitalism has always depended on the invisibilised work of social reproduction: the “excellence regime” is no exception.

BEYOND COPING: ABSENCE AS EVIDENCE

The absence of our two intended co-authors speaks and is itself a finding. One feared institutional repercussions; the other was too overwhelmed by financial and bureaucratic exclusion to participate. Feminist methodologies teach us to attend to what is made to disappear (Ahmed 2017), to the voices that cannot speak because the conditions for speech have been systematically eroded. Their silence is structural, as it reflects the very dynamics we analyse: how fear, exhaustion and exclusion shape who can speak, when, and under what conditions. In acknowledging their absence, we expose and contest the sanitisation of scholarly narratives that erase those who cannot participate.

Yet we must also ask a more uncomfortable question: what keeps us here? If the system extracts so much, if it exhausts and excludes, why do we stay? The prestige of an "excellence" programme functions as a form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), a promise systematically deferred, dangling the possibility of inclusion while reproducing conditions of exclusion. The compromises we make with ourselves – between self-silencing and the hope that next time will be different – are the intimate textures of structural precarity. Beyond moralising frameworks, we recognise that criticism must also turn inward and that survival under capitalism is inevitably an incomplete, strenuous negotiation. If precarious survival depends on invisible solidarities, what possibilities exist for resistance? Our experiences suggest that dissent is rarely spectacular as it appears in alliances, in shared frustrations and, ultimately, in the systematic refusal to separate care from scholarship. These everyday acts of defiance openly subvert the neoliberal demand for atomised, self-managing subjects. They insist on the relational dimensions of knowledge, on the inseparability of intellectual work from the precarious conditions of its production. Yet we recognise the limits of individual coping strategies. To transform precarious survival into collective organisation requires structural change: visa policies that do not exclude scholars from the Global South, contracts that provide genuine security, recognition of care labour as integral to research, and evaluation frameworks that value relational and critical scholarship.

FOR A COLLECTIVE ETHICS OF ACADEMIC LABOUR

The challenge is epistemic even before it is institutional. As long as "excellence" is defined through metrics, rankings and Western-centred theories, epistemic violence will persist (Connell 2019; Ndlovu 2018). Isaev's knowledge of Kyrgyz informality is treated as "raw data" for Northern theory; Andrias' expertise on Papua New Guinean economies is rendered invisible by bureaucratic systems that cannot process her existence; and Gambardella's militant ethnography is framed as "biased" and in need of constant legitimation. Alternative, collective ethics of academic labour must begin by recognising knowledge as

situated and sustained by invisible infrastructures of care. It must acknowledge dissent as a disruptive force, essential to the generative critique that makes knowledge production possible. It must reject capitalist realism's insistence that there is no alternative. And it must reckon honestly with our own attachments, with the "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) that keeps us hoping, as well as with the compromises we strike with ourselves. To conclude, we return to our starting point: the paradox of prestige without security. We write as recipients of the EU's most prestigious scheme for early-career researchers, yet our lives have been marked by exhaustion, exclusion and precarious survival. Our stories reveal how excellence regimes extract value from precarious labour while disavowing the hidden infrastructures that make research possible. By making these contradictions visible, we hope to contribute to broader efforts to rethink academic labour beyond (and against) neoliberal logics. Beyond a reductive testimonial, self-serving account of precarity, our collective piece is a call to sustain spaces of dissent, solidarity and uncomfortable ethnography. Even in precarious times, it testifies to the possibility of inhabiting academia differently, through alliances, acts of care and resistance, and a collective commitment to critical thought that refuses to separate the political from the personal.

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REŽIMI IZVRSNOSTI U PREKARNIM VREMENIMA: ISCRPLJENOST, ISKLJUČENOST I STRUKTURNA DISKRIMINACIJA U ŽIVOTIMA ISTRAŽIVAČA NA POČETKU KARIJERE

U ovome se članku razmatra kako strukturna prekarizacija, institucijske hijerarhije, administrativna diskriminacija i sveprisutna kultura samoeksploatacija oblikuju proizvodnju znanja, ali i materijalne uvjete u životima mladih istraživača. Kao prekarni istraživači na početku karijere u okviru europskog istraživačkog projekta u sklopu tzv. "programa izvrsnosti", analiziramo napetosti povezane s potrebom za održavanjem istraživačkog iskustva unatoč pravnim izazovima. Pritom često pribjegavamo afektivnim vezama i neformalnim strategijama preživljavanja, a sve to uz postojanje političkih obveza i u znanstvenom okruženju u kojem prioritet imaju konkurentnost, profitabilnost i bibliometrijska produktivnost. Različita iskustva prikupljena u ovom radu prikazuju izazove koji utječu na to kako živimo, jedemo, provodimo terenska istraživanja, kao i na to kako i gdje pišemo, što smijemo objaviti, a što smo prisiljeni sakriti. S tim se proturječjima nosimo kao situirana tijela – od kojih su neka rodno obilježena, rasizirana i/ili ilegalizirana – koja održavaju neformalne i nevidljive mreže skrbi te težnje k pomirenju, što se rijetko priznaje u službenim okvirima "legitimne" proizvodnje znanja. Neslaganje nije uvijek eksplicitno, nego se često uočava u razdorima, savezima i svakodnevnim iskazima prkosa. U eri "marketizacije obrazovanja" (Fisher 2009), "kulture revizije" (Strathern 2000) i "nerealnih očekivanja" (Polese 2018), pitamo se kako možemo sačuvati kolektivnu etiku akademskog rada koja neće odvajati ljudske i relacijske dimenzije istraživanja od političkih, ekonomskih i prekarnih uvjeta pod kojima se ono proizvodi.

Ključne riječi: režimi izvrsnosti, akademska prekarnost, neformalne strategije preživljavanja, mreže skrbi, kulture revizije