

# The centre cannot hold: Arrival, margins, and the politics of ambivalence introduction to 'arrival at the margins', a special issue of migration studies

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## Abstract

This special issue calls on scholars to simultaneously centre and unsettle the margin: to recognise the multiplicity of margins as politically generative spaces, frequently contoured by sustained and varied forms of mobility. Taken together, the studies collected in this volume are a call to view margins as vital socio-political spaces and objects of study. They are created, transformed, or maintained through interactions among the multiple ethnic, political, or religious groups within it but also through connections to allies, families, and interlocutors elsewhere that people in the margins draw in. Powerful states, corporations, and other play a role, but the contributors do not presume they are the most significant force at play. To be sure, margins can reflect liminality and suspension, but they are also sites of contentious politics. As space–time compression, multi-localism, economic precarity, and political fragmentation continue apace, margins are decreasingly discrete spaces between, but are instead spaces where lives are made. As sites that help structure engagements among groups—and sometimes within the groups themselves—appear and fade, margins take on varied levels of significance as contestations and convivialities take shape and transform. They are multiple, often intersecting, sometimes geographic and formally demarcated, sometimes largely invisible or unspoken but no less powerful. And they can be anywhere.

**Keywords:** urban studies; sociology; anthropology; political science; geography

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## 1. Introduction

Migration scholarship rests on a foundational, conceptual divide. Under many names and guises, it partitions people into locals and newcomers; nationals and aliens; residents and migrants; and the sedentary and the mobile. Applied from neighbourhood to nation-state, this dichotomy categorises and contrasts those holding political membership and rights with outsiders not yet part of the geographically bound social, economic, or political community in question.

Migration studies needs an object and scholars have long considered how migrants in all their varieties (e.g. refugees, displaced people, labourers) are distinguished from those around them. This means vigorous scholarship on how divides are constructed, defended, and enforced. Research on migration patterns has detailed how insider–outsider distinctions fuel national iconography and rhetoric, inform migration management technologies and integration policies, and drive the militarisation of borders, deportation sweeps, detention centres, and reterritorialisation of state space and action (Gamlen 2008; Mountz and Hiemstra 2014; Andersson 2021). It shows how this divide has produced burial grounds in the Mediterranean, in the deserts of the US southwest, and in spaces beyond national territory on islands (Mountz 2017; Dempsey 2020). Other analyses have scaled down to the municipal level, exploring divides in local responses to new arrivals: xenophobia, obstacles to accessing services and accommodation, varied forms of political exclusion and anti-immigrant mobilisation (Whitehouse 2012; Knowles 2014; Harms 2016; Mancina 2019; Misago 2019). The field has also explored resistance to this divide: social mobilisation; trans-localism and transnational solidarities; cosmopolitan ethics; hybridisation, convivialities, and utopian imaginaries (Hall 2015; Bakewell and Landau 2018; Déano Alonso and Mylonas 2019; Moutselos 2020). In almost all cases, the insider–outsider divide—social and geographic distinctions between centre and margin—motivate or frame the analysis. It is now time to reconsider.

Underlying the analytical divide between insider and outsider—or centre and margin—that so defines the field, there is an implicit directional thrust across a reified boundary. Movements across the divide are almost always from the outside–in. The push is inward across borders or political structures into an exclusive geographic territory or social space; the desire is to get in, to access what is beyond the boundary, to join or at the least participate with what is inside. People may experience exclusion and alienation before departure, but the focus of study is on margins encountered on arrival. Movement, in other words, is across these margins: towards the centre and towards the possibilities of inclusion, recognition, and membership.

A centre-margin logic means studying migration is necessarily the study of how margins are produced. Research that hinges on an insider–outsider divide has to wrestle with how societies demarcate their edges and delineate gradations of membership. The margins themselves, however, are rarely the main locus of political analysis and critique and their presence and the divides they signify are often taken for granted. When they are considered, the focus is generally on how ‘the centre’—people, institutions, technologies of knowledge and control—construct and maintain space beyond the margins through politics of exclusion. Whether it is labourers in the gulf states (Kathiravelu 2016; Iskander 2021); refugees on

Nauru (Morris 2021), or generational exclusion from higher education (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), the emphasis is on the centre's actions and varied means of exclusion.

By defining margins primarily through their relationship to the centre, the field implicitly remains tethered to the representation of migration as a dynamic in which outsiders enter cohesive national polities and where powerful or wealthy, destination countries and communities structure migration outcomes. It takes the centre for granted as something defined, coherent, and able to mobilise to shape its future. It may not always succeed, but it is reified and its boundaries are often taken for granted. Carefully considering how people move across varied social, geographic, and political borders to make new lives gives cause to question the centre's monopoly, or even primacy, in defining the margins. Indeed, it gives cause to question the notion of an identifiable, discrete centre.

This special issue calls on scholars to simultaneously centre and unsettle the margin: to recognise the multiplicity of margins as politically generative spaces, frequently contoured by sustained and varied forms of mobility. Taken together, the studies collected in this volume are a call to view margins as vital socio-political spaces and objects of study. They are created, transformed, or maintained through interactions among the multiple ethnic, political, or religious groups within it but also through connections to allies, families, and interlocutors elsewhere that people in the margins draw in. Powerful states, corporations, and other play a role, but the contributors do not presume they are the most significant force at play. To be sure, margins can reflect liminality and suspension, but they are also sites of contentious politics. As space–time compression, multi-localism, economic precarity, and political fragmentation continue apace, margins are decreasingly discrete space between, but are instead spaces where lives are made. As sites that help structure engagements among groups—and sometimes within the groups themselves—appear and fade, margins take on varied levels of significance as contestations, and convivialities take shape and transform. They are multiple, often intersecting, sometimes geographic and formally demarcated, sometimes largely invisible or unspoken but no less powerful. And they can be anywhere.

The articles included here illustrate how margins continually emerge and become much like the social configurations and lives within them. Biehl and Thomaz both demonstrate how informal settlements and poor neighbourhoods at the periphery of large metropolises—themselves on one set of economic and political margins—become destinations for arrivals from new regions transforming newly urbanised migrants and minorities into hosts (see also Landau 2014). In the immigrant rich neighbourhoods of Paris, London, and New York, the labour camps of the gulf or in any number of cities across the global south, long-established migrant workers find themselves negotiating more recent arrivals with whom they may not share a language, identity, or even legal status. Political battles at various levels reverberate through neighbourhoods and communities, generating margins between two groups with imbricated lives as one group's allochthonous status takes on new significance. Such has been the case in Cote d'Ivoire; the Democratic Republic of Congo or in the account of conflicts over land and belonging Mary Setrana describes in small town Ghana. In these marginal spaces, immigration controls, often applied heavy-handedly, are sometimes marshalled as resources in intra-community conflict. Sometimes these margins are policed beyond states, by gangsters, social stigma, or symbolic markers. However, these marginal spaces can also become the foundation for novel solidarities, membership, and imaginaries that foresee futures that unsettle the centre.

Margins, in other words, are more than a transitory space on the edges of power that contain and frustrate personal or collective trajectories. They may serve this role, but they are also sites of contestation, membership claiming, identity formation, and boundary production. They are places where the political and institutional practices that define centre and periphery are taken up, adapted, recast, and reinvented. It is where conceptual categories of insider and outsider are forged with, or without, reference to material or institutional opportunities and endowments. They are places where new margins are drawn, sometimes creating spaces of exclusion and incorporation within the periphery. As people retain orientations to sites elsewhere, what was a community's centre becomes the margin of another. They are also places where new solidarities are forged. They are places where people develop new practices to break down divisions, but also new practices to mark out and enforce new divides. As people move, mix, and merge, the margins can become new loci of action and contestation. Economic and political fragmentation means multiple centres and margins with each space potentially serving as both. For our purposes, they are sites providing unique perspectives on the formations and reformation of political community across multiple scales.

### 1.1 What is a margin?

In migration scholarship, as well as in the broader sociology and political geography literature, the concept of the margin has been used to illustrate the exclusion that produced it. However, the term is rarely explicitly defined. The meanings people invest in the term are often broad, displaying a kind of conceptual slippage about whether the margin is a term describing exclusion or the political dynamics that produce it. The margin is sometimes invoked as an empirical descriptor with observable geographic or cultural markers. Sometimes it is as an explanatory framework. In many cases it is a residual: simply not the centre. In all cases, it is most influential in its function as a metaphor often steeped in normative critique about economic, social, or political disempowerment. Indeed, the margin maps power and exclusion onto spatial imagery.

Migration scholarship typically situates the margin—sometimes literally, sometimes symbolically—at the fringes of a territory generally delimited by administrative or communal borders: the edge of a city, a country, or a region. Entering this margin becomes an *act of ingress*: of crossing into a territory. It also, implicitly, reflects the desire or need to enter it. The margin becomes the metaphorical way station or threshold where migrants languish until they can access the array of political, economic, and social resources and rights available to full members of the polity. The widespread presumption is that mobility precipitates marginality: migrants are moving in and the centre resists, generating margins and the forms of exclusion that define it. The margin becomes the literal and symbolic place where people experience various forms of denudation and denigration as they seek to continue mission from territory's edge toward its political and social centre.

Excavating the lineage of meanings attached to the concept of marginality reveals that these spatial equivalences are only recent ones. The focus on the directionality of migration that the spatial metaphor implies is an overlay onto early sociological definitions of the margin. The concern with ingress inseparable from the spatial metaphor that emerged from the imbrication of scholarship on marginality with the political project of

controlling mobility and migrant sociality. Instead of a grounded and fulsome exploration of social practices, meaning-making, and power relations on the margin, along with the possibilities for new forms of sociality and solidarity that they can create, scholarship that anchored its examination of marginality in spatiality has ended up privileging and often reifying the centre.

In its early articulations, the margin was viewed as being produced by migration, but not necessarily by ingress. Robert Park, one of the original members of the Chicago school of sociology, first established the margin as a sociological concept in an influential 1928 essay entitled, 'Human Migration and the Marginal Man', Park described marginality as the product of social orders being brought into contact and characterised it as a transitional phase during which those cultural life-worlds were reconciled and reinvented. Marginality, in Park's view, was the highest expression of migration's generative potential. He wrote that:

Migrations, with all the incidental collision, conflicts, and fusions of peoples and of cultures which they occasion, have been accounted among the decisive forces in history . . . Every advance in culture commences with a new period of migration and movement of populations. . . (1928: 882)

For him, margins reflected a space and condition in which the stale 'cake of custom' was broken and 'the individual is freed for new enterprises and for new associations' (1928: 881). Those liberated by my virtue of migration, whether their own or others, were 'marginal men'. He goes on to describe the marginal man as someone striving to fuse two distinct cultures, embodying 'a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples' (1928: 892) but belonging fully to neither. As marginal man struggles to fuse and integrate the cultural worlds he spans, he may suffer from restlessness and malaise, noted Park, but he will also discover new possibilities for identity, solidarity, and action, all of which move civilisation forward. He wrote:

It is in the mind of the marginal man that the moral turmoil which new cultural contacts occasion manifests itself in the most obvious forms. It is in the mind of the marginal man –where the changes and fusions of culture are going on—that we can best study the processes of civilization and of progress. (1928: 893)

Thus, marginality, in Park's original characterisation, was an ongoing emancipatory and imaginative process, one that unfolded, albeit tumultuously, in people's internal worlds. In more contemporary language, a process of becoming. While Park described individual transformation, it led to collective social change. 'The effect of mobility and migration is to secularize relations which were formerly sacred. . . The migration of a people', he added, brings 'about the destruction of an earlier civilization and liberate[s] the peoples involved for the creation of a later, more secular, and freer society.' Marginality precipitated by the movement of people across space had the potential to remould societies, but it did not have spatial connotation. The margin was not a place, not even metaphorically, and it did not exist at the periphery of any centre.

Subsequent sociological explorations of the concept of the margin and marginality were typically less sanguine about migration's generative potential. They instead focused

on marginal man's exclusion from the social order and cultural world he was seeking to enter. Through the mid-1960s and beyond, these studies methodically documented the supposed social and psychological pathologies that cultural exclusion produced in marginal men and in marginal communities. Reflecting many of their Durkheimian orientations, they predictably listed 'delinquency, crime, suicide, and mental instability' as symptoms of the internal anguish that the 'state of limbo' between two social orders caused (Weisberger 1992). The literature retained the insight that margins were produced by social categories and defined marginality as an affliction of social processes or persons that refused to be assimilated or simply failed at it (Dunne 2005). But in these later descriptions of the margin and marginality, the centre was emphatically superior and more advanced than the social setting the migrant was leaving (Autonovsky 1956; Merton 1957; Gordon 1964). With the hierarchical valuation of social orders, analyses of the margins focused on acceptance and rejection by the dominant social order, belonging and isolation, and in-group and out-group sorting (Billson 1988).

The redefinition of marginality as exclusion from the dominant social group enabled scholars to draw the concept into analyses of economic development in what was then called the Third World. The largely prescriptive scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s stressed the dualism of economies of the Global South, describing them as split into a modern sector, urban and capitalist, and a traditional sector, rural and unorganised. The challenge of development was to integrate the 'great pool of labour waiting, unemployed or underemployed, in the peasant countryside' (Peattie 1980: 3) into the modern capitalist economy and into the burgeoning cities where industrial growth was accelerating. Marginality in this context referred to people or social practices that had not managed to join formally defined social and economic processes of the modern sector: squatter settlements on the outskirts of formally planned cities; informal sector workers excluded from formal—and Fordist—economic production; rural migrants excluded from formal political rights and cultural belonging or unable to adapt to the social norms of the modern sector. Marginality was viewed as 'the antithesis of integration', and margins were tracts of 'no-man's land' at the edges of cities, settled by people who were unable to join the economic and social life of the urban centre (cf. Perlman 1979).

It was the attempt to understand, govern and ultimately dominate peripheral urban spaces in the Global South (Latin America in particular) that transformed marginality from a concept with a primarily social referent to one that was definitively spatial and normative (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). As development scholars and practitioners of the 1960s onwards used the concepts of margin and marginality to address rural-to-urban migration, they mapped marginality onto the informal settlements that accreted to cities and plotted the political processes that produced exclusion onto specific neighbourhoods and urban partitions (Peattie 1980).

In the 1980s and 1990s, North American and European scholarship on both migration and cities took up the spatial language of development sociology to describe marginality, merging the locational mapping of social and economic exclusion with the social symbolic isolation of marginalised people. After a decade of suburban growth, white flight and urban decline, scholars in North America in particular relocated the margins and mapped them onto economically depressed urban centres. Produced in the wake of the Reagan revolution and the global neoliberal turn that followed, many of these studies

pathologised the margins, describing them less as places that experiences the effects of policies of exclusion but rather as sites where social dysfunction was spatially concentrated. Loic Wacquant's influential analyses of urban poverty are emblematic of this stance: 'Advanced marginality', he wrote in a 1996 essay comparing Paris and Chicago, 'tends to concentrate in well-identified, bounded, and increasingly isolated territories viewed by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, urban hellholes where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell' (1996: 125). Wacquant describes the state response to the social dissolution at the margins, where economic and social exclusion was so thorough, it stripped even people of a language through which to conceive a collective destiny, as a policy of punitive containment, deployed to prevent the ingress of marginals into elite socio-economic spaces (Wacquant 2008).

In response to these representations of margins as sites of profound social pathology and disorder, some scholars pushed back entirely at the concept of margins and marginality. Lisa Peattie, an urban anthropologist, asked in an essay on Caracas, 'what sense did it make to treat as 'marginal' the people and neighbourhoods which constituted a major part of the city, whose tiny commercial enterprises moved the city's goods, and whose underpaid casual labour rendered more profitable corporate production?' (1992: 25). Peattie challenged the representation of marginality as spatialised, rejecting the notion that informal settlements were meaningfully separate, either locationally or economically, from the centre: a margin was merely 'geographically delimited slice of a whole urban economy' (1980: 27). Frances Fox Piven, in a critique focused on analyses of North America and Europe, likewise bemoaned the 'endless scrutiny of the marginals' (2008: 7) and called instead for a wholesale examination of the entire edifice of institutional arrangements that produced the inequitable distribution of resources and political rights. She and others called for a shift from an attention on marginals and marginal spaces as excluded from the centre to the mechanisms through which the dominant social order hardened social exclusion and engineered spatial segregation (Piven 2008).

Others challenged degrading representations of marginality by identifying governance practices that produced and sustained spatialised exclusion (Roy 2011; Trudeau and McMorran 2011). They looked at how the metaphor was made real. Scholars who examined state inventions to restrict migration and mobility, in particular, considered the role of the militarisation of border and immigration control in defining both the boundaries and the centre that enforced them. These studies shifted their emphasis from the sociality of marginality to the violent materiality of borders in walls, police, and detention centres to ask how the partition of space produced social exclusion and created geographies of marginalisation. Migration scholarship took the border as a physical line of departure to look at the role of state in producing marginality, with analyses moving inward from the border to examine how the state carried enforcement at its edge into its territory through deportation sweeps and policing practices and by narrowing, often drastically, access to services, employment, and rights. Others stayed at the border to look at border spaces and borderlands as contested zones at the margins of state control and national imagination where marginality was both experienced and resisted (Harris 2013; Laurie et al. 2015). The birth of border studies is in some ways a result of this fascination but also presages the focus on margins and productive spaces that informs this special issue (see Nugent 2018).

Both these lines of critique grew out an analysis of how the centre's governance and social practices produce the margin. But, even in their celebratory versions, with accounts that valorise the strategies resistance that people on the margins develop against exclusion, the margins they describe are relationally defined. They exist in relation to the centre and depend on the centre; they are negative spaces, characterised by the lack of access the people, process, and places have to the centre, its resources and its categories. As result, the margin function as a space where the practices of the centre are revealed (Asad 2004; Das and Poole 2004; Yiftachel 2009): as Cons and Sanyal affirm, 'such spaces are privileged zones for understanding processes unfolding in 'centres' and that, indeed, the very notion of centres is fundamentally predicated on the relational production of margins, borders, and zones of exclusion' (2013: 7). Even in the reclamation of the margin as a useful analytical lens for relational thinking about place and power, the centre remains centred.

## 1.2 Arrival at the margins

This collection works to shrug off the spatial and directional metaphors that have been so tightly bound up with the margins and the implicit concern with ingress. It seeks to reclaim an older, more generative and even hopeful definition of the margins. If they are manifestations of social practices that fit uncomfortably in dominant social categories and rarely comply with their dictates, then margins can be anywhere and, within constraints, can generate novel politics and communal mobilisations. As Susanne Wessendorf and Sealing Cheng's accounts in this volume suggest, this can be deep within the geographic centres of metropolitan power: London and Hong Kong. They are also, at the edges of work practices; at the fringes of social policies; at the far ends of cultural norms; or amidst previously sedentary and privileged populations who are unsettled by shifting discursive or material conditions. These may be an urban edge or border zone as in the account of seemingly interminable Palestinian displacements that informs Elena Feldman's contribution, but they need not be. Indeed, one may arrive at the margins without taking a step. We want to return to the Park's more conceptual understanding of margins and marginalisation, and create the possibility that margins could rest on new metaphors. In place of margins and core, social life becomes a set of interconnected, interconstitutive margins and boundaries working at multiple geographic and temporal scales. As Nicole Constable's paper so clearly demonstrates, it is not only migrants adapting to space, but their activities and orientations which help shape space around them.

Our exploration of the margins as self-constitutive spaces began with a workshop to bring together scholars who study different expressions of migration and marginality all around the world. The workshop deliberately emphasised regions of the Global South and other spaces and processes underrepresented in migration scholarship. Recognising that theoretical reference points often echo sites of global economic and academic influence, we sought a means to theorise from the outside in: to generatively challenge while offering alternative framings and perspectives that would resonate strongly with the lived experiences of millions of people touched by human migration. Fatefully, the meeting was scheduled for the third week of March 2020, in Accra, Ghana—a half-way point between our respective institutions in New York and Johannesburg. Days before the meeting, as the world teetered on a global shutdown and Ghana was hinting at quarantines for



international travellers, we were swept up in cancelling flights and hotel reservations instead of packing for our trip. In a move now familiar to scholars around the world, we moved the workshop online. Rather than extended, fluid conversation, we had to deconstruct it, splitting it into a series of smaller sessions stretched over May and June. Sessions were shoehorned around work obligations and to accommodate responsibilities that weighed heavily and unexpectedly on so many of us. We had to find slots that enabled conversations across a dozen time zones. Many of us installed zoom and joined calls illuminated by the thin light of desk lamps or of the rising sun. Fittingly, our arrival at the margins workshop landed on the margins of this new online world.

Even if the deconstructed workshop meant surrendering the sociality of an in-person event, it allowed for conversations that were as extended and as iterative as the social processes we were considering. We discovered how dynamics identified in one place, ran through many of the margins we were engaging. Nicole Constable's study, for example, draws on a study of migrant workers in Hong Kong to wrestle with the idea of emplacement. She grapples with how we need to reframe emplacement, with all of its connotations of finality and durability, when considering the situation of 'temporary migrants' who live under conditions of ongoing arrival, contingency, and temporariness and have no expectation of remaining permanently. She argues that emplacement is better understood as a form of collective and ongoing activism to claim a right to presence in the moment rather than as a push to claim permanent membership. She asks readers to reconsider the widespread discussion of waiting seen in the literature. Much of that literature is premised on Turner's famous work on liminality—being kept in a state of suspension before one can be fully let in or self-realised. The material she presents demonstrates that these periods of uncertainty are not only rites of passage, but (for some) are states of being. Not a state of exception, but the ordinary: the expected. Even while aware of exclusion and sometimes angered by it, people build and become. In so doing, they become part of the place and shape it around them.

May Al Dabbagh's study on middle class mothers who are 'serial migrants' currently living in Dubai extends this exploration of permanent temporariness to a different setting and social class. She finds that the mothers she studies develop a set of coping strategies to turn impermanence into a resource. These strategies are woven into their parenting practices: through their relationship with their children, they foster a sense of invented connection to place across multiple spaces and they adopt practices to create a sense of home and belonging that also enable to prepare for a future that is likely to take them elsewhere.

The study that Susanne Wessendorf contributes builds on the insight that belonging—especially temporary belonging—requires strategy, and she explores how newcomers access information about how to settle. She draws our attention to the vital role played by physical and social spaces within the margins—spaces like shops, religious sites, language classes, hairdressers, and libraries. The arrival infrastructures allow transfer of knowledge about to arrive between long-established migrants and more recent newcomers. Ilana Feldman echoes this emphasis on places within the margins through her study of the repeated arrival of Palestinians in Lebanon. Through a historical analysis that starts in 1948 and spans five decades, she approaches the question of presence and belonging through the lens of the built environment and shows that the political knowledge and strategy of claiming presence is layered into the structures that arrivals construct and

inhabit. Kristen Biehl takes us to Istanbul and continues this exploration of the political strategies involved in arrival. She describes the margins as places of intense calculation, where people are always negotiating the boundary between formality and informality, legality and illegality, doing so with such regularity that they transform these categories into processual interdependencies—the categories emerge as changing and contextual responses to the law that create dynamics of in/formalities and il/legality.

Diana Zacca Thomaz's inquiries into squatters in central Sao Paulo, and Mary Setrana, with her study on the forest transitional zone of Ghana, remind us that margins, for all their resilience and aspiration, are also sites of conflict and division. Through an account of the tensions between militant Brazilian housing advocates and migrants who live together in squats, Thomaz shows that social hierarchies and nationalist exclusion are reinscribed in activist mobilisation at the margin. Brazilian squatters pursuing full urban citizenship nevertheless relegate the migrants they organise with to a degraded form of belonging, even as the migrants in the movement appropriate as a means to develop resources to migrate again and create better futures elsewhere. Setrana directs our attention to the tensions that have emerged in marginal areas of Agogo, Ghana, as sedentary and nomadic communities engage in contests over place and resources. These tensions have given rise to new forms of self-categorisation and othering, with the new distinctions between insider and outsider, and even migrant and citizen, created as a means to back claims to authority, space and residential superiority.

Junjia Ye (to be published separately) and Sealing Cheng turn to the politics of care at the margins. Through a study of migrant arrival and place-making in Singapore, Ye shows us how pastoral discourses and policies of care and control deployed by the state shape urban spatialities. She documents how new arrivals navigate different levels of everyday surveillance in public spaces. These forms of monitoring are construed by the state as forms of care, but the surveillance technologies, explicit rules on signboards, auxiliary police officers, inform how migrants encounter one another and construct belonging. Ye points to the fact that this state intervention defines hierarchies at the margin, stratifying new arrivals and determining which users of the margin can actually shape its urban sociality. Cheng finds a counterposing story in Hong Kong, where she documents the ways in which relations of mutual care allow migrants at the margin to override divisiveness in their social interactions and to develop a grassroots politics of 'togetherness' to challenge their political and legal status as excluded, delegitimised, and deportable.

Taken together, these studies move margins to the centre of analysis. They problematise the definition of the margins as a negative space defined by exclusionary politics and they highlight them instead as heterotopias that offer new avenues for political mobilisation and new pathways for the governance of migration and community integration.

This approach leads to the somewhat startling position that the centre does not in fact exist. While it is preserved as ideal and potentially as social fact, centres as cohesive spaces occupied by a secure, relatively unified population with defined boundaries are rare if almost non-existent. As Barth (1969) notes in his work on ethnicity, it is the act of identifying the other that defines the self. In this way the margins become what matter: The centre and margins are relational, emerging together in a form of dialogical co-authorship. Rather than centre defining margin through exclusion, it is margins that define the centre. It is at the margins that people define the centre, through the ways in

which they identify, struggle against, co-opt, strive for, and reject it (McNevin 2011; Khalili 2016).

Against this backdrop, the centre emerges as a heuristic device to talk about inadequate resources (material and social) and the power structures that shape their allocation. So while Hooks (1989) is right that people at the margins are far more aware of them, what they know of the centre is as much (or more) imagined than real. The margins are everywhere and everything, and they have differential and changing access to resources and power which, as Das' (2004) discussion of the state suggests, gives the centre power through its mystery and reification more than its institutional or economic coherence. But there are also margins with the margins, and the margins themselves create dynamics and categories that centre some and marginalise others. The centre cannot hold because the centre never was.

Within this provocation, the project of exploring arrival at the margins has two purposes. The first is to document and analyse the social processes involved in arriving in geographical, political, and social spaces that are necessarily marginal: an analytic ethnographic review of arrival explored on its own terms, not primarily in relation to the centre, to spaces that are not defined primarily through their exclusion from the centre. What does it look like, how do we understand it, how do we make sense of things like state power that emanate from the centre but also in some important respects are also marginal?

The second and perhaps more provocative task is to redefine migration. As outlined in our opening paragraphs, migration typically attracts scholarly attention when tied to spanning clearly defined—typically administrative—boundaries. Such perspectives implicitly define migration as deviant or transgressive—both in the strict sense of being different than the norm and in the sense of being problematic, challenging, and even threatening to the state and the nation—and thus something that needs to be managed and controlled. To some extent, mobility, and especially border-crossing, is construed as a push towards, and implicitly, an assault on the centre. A project that explores arrival at the margins interrogates this perspective, especially if it is based on the premise that the margins are everything. It shows that no one is in fact storming the citadel, but it also reveals the citadel—the centre with its resources and categories—is often an illusion that is sustained by claims that migration is a threat.

Such conceptual destabilising raises additional questions about the conceptual and normative positions informing both scholarship and advocacy. First, it means confronting the ethics of 'inclusion' so often associated with centre-margins distinctions. These include presumptions made by those in the centre about migrants' desire for recognition, belonging, representation, stability. Such desires may exist or emerge, but as Thomaz' piece clearly illustrates, migrants may experience inclusion as a form of control that they seek to evade. Moreover, integration into the centre ceases to be possible when one recognises that the centre itself is a changing thing, marbled by its margins. If the centre ceases to exist, so too does the language of hosts on which debates about inclusion and assimilation rely (see Landau 2014).

If the centre does not exist as a coherent political and spatial place, then we also need to look at the role of scholarship in manufacturing the illusion of the centre. Applying a core-margins lens to migration may unhelpfully elevate perspectives associated with the centre while rendering invisible other social and political processes. Doing so implicitly devalues scholarship on forms of solidarity, conflict, intention, mobilisation, and political

value that rub against the core-margins construct. This not only weakens collective understanding, but means scholars unduly valorise a subset of values and organisation forms adopted by migrants and those with whom they interact. Given the close relationship between migration scholarship and activism, this focus on the margin in relation to core only undercuts, representationally and politically, those negotiating the uncertainties and ambivalences—material and existential—with which they live.

Many of the articles evoke uncertain futures or processes of perennial arrival with uncertain (if any) endpoints. These recognise the precarity and ‘liminality’ and constant state of becoming described by authors working on migration, urbanism, and socio-political life across the world. Biehl’s piece, echoed by many others in this volume, highlights how uncertainty among new arrivals and long-term residents creates frictions and limits the consolidation of socialities both within and across groups. Yet, this does not freeze relations or life projects. Such question of becoming and belonging amidst uncertainty furthers efforts to temporalise migration studies. It suggests that the study of migration becomes more contextual, genealogical, and longitudinal (cf. Çağlar 2016). This means avoiding predefined categories in defining marginalisation, exclusion, or incorporation. Similarly, it means putting aside presumptions of linear processes of inclusion or the normative values founded on the desire for such incorporation. Rather, it must start from a position that objectives and categories are historically informed and dialogical. In this vein, acts of arrival must be reframed as an act of becoming without a clear end point, without the clear destination that the focus on ingress implies. Rather, it is a process that can last a lifetime, sometimes without a defined destination or where destinations are abandoned and reimagined. Even where one’s geographic ‘target’ remains the same, the meaning and desirability of that site is open to continual redefinition, robbing it of the kind of conceptual solidity so often seen in migration studies. Similarly, marginalisation is not a state that can be measured universally in concrete terms but must be understood *in situ* as something constructed across multiple time and spatial horizons.

The politics of the margin—with all their generative directions—refuse to stay in the margin. They inevitably spill out over the social and political divides set up to contain them. Because of the mobilities that shape them, the alternative forms of social organisation they allow, and the new meanings and new identities they support, the margins may ultimately shape the politics of the centre. There is a need to examine how boundaries and margins engage with migration processes on their own terms. This special issue is a call is not just for detailed, descriptive case studies of neighbourhoods, countries, or regions. Rather, it asks scholars to consider an approach that recognises local contingencies as they operate within global circulations of ideas and political forms. It means unsettling the categories we employ in ways that allow us to see in new ways. To recognise that the multiple uncertainties of the moment—economic, environmental, political, and epidemiological—are generating forms of politics that remain unrecognisable without a novel approach. Recognising scholars’ roles in shaping political interventions and understandings, it is our collective responsibility to open ourselves to these possibilities. Rather than abandoning the possibility of aggregation and theory building, our approach allows for comparison across multiple temporal and spatial scales without presuming the primary actors, incentives, or outcomes. It exposes multiple meanings of justice, the fabrication of communities and its exclusive boundaries, and more fully surfaces the diverse

political agency of incentives of the people and places—formal and informal, powerful, and subversive—the field is dedicated to understanding.

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