

## Zombies, Miracles, and Memory:

### Towards a Research Agenda on Mobility, Temporality, and Political Possibility

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About 25 kilometres north of Johannesburg lies Diepsloot. Thirty years ago, it was largely unused grassland. Today 150,000 people live there and it continues to grow (Ahmad and Pienaar 2014; Harber 2011; Myers 2021). Crime is plentiful; services are not. The place has little intrinsic appeal other than proximity to more prosperous locales which serve as hubs of aspiration and calculated speculation. Diepsloot exists almost entirely as a conduit to a better life elsewhere - in Johannesburg or further afield (see Parker 2022). Diepsloot is a perennial counterpoint to elite, global 'nowherevilles' (Bauman 2002) and 'non-places' (Augé 1995) where mobility and transience are coveted privileges and resources. It too is a nowhereville, but one that almost no one is from and no one wants to be in. It is also a site of transitional, reluctant, and uncertain becoming. Movement to and from Diepsloot is experienced as necessity and futures remain unseen beyond its boundaries. For many moving through or stuck in Diepsloot, it is unclear how to achieve the life to which one aspires or if such a life remains in reach at all.

Diepsloot might be understood as a place out of time. It is comprised of lives largely without connection to localised pasts or futures. Staying put – building a place-based future – is less an aspiration than an obstacle: a burden tethering people to a spatio-temporal trajectory different from that which brought them to Diepsloot. People are waiting, but not in the way described by Auyero (2012) or Oldfield and Greyling (2015). In Diepsloot, there is no state authored plan to exclude and no obvious solidarity forged by a struggle for inclusion or citizenship. Many have little desire for inclusion or representation. More fundamentally, for those passing through, they are not expecting public services or protections. Aspiration, imagination, and resignation enter into the prospect of lives lived *en route*.

Diepsloot's emerging politics do not share the empirical or ethical foundations of progressive accounts of citizenship made and claimed in place. Yet such framing remains a common means of assessing the success of people in flight or actively seeking more abundant lives (e.g., Bauder 2016; Holston and Appadurai 1996; Holston 2019). Tonkiss and Bloom (2015) speak of a citizenship of non-belonging, of disconnection from place. This resonates with Diepsloot residents' spatial alienation, but also elides. Defined in the negative, non-belonging and disconnection remain anchored to norms where belonging, connection, and incorporation are core to a particular sense of what politics, polities and political subjectivity ought to imply. From each of these perspectives, gradations of belonging remain mapped onto a spectrum of subjectivity from migrant to citizen, in which one moves or seeks to move – literally and figuratively – from one to the other.

If mobilities in and through Diepsloot do not normatively or empirically map onto a politics of placed based incorporation, what kind of politics is at stake? What forms of politics are possible in such a place, via mobilities, and how might such politics differ from what scholars of citizenship, migration, and international relations have come to expect? We suggest answering these questions require a new research agenda more attuned to the intersecting temporalities at work in places like Diepsloot. Although not our key focus in this article, such sites inspire a set

of questions for which we have not found ready answers within existing scholarship. We open with Diepsloot to illustrate the kinds of sites, movements, and trajectories that exceed the analytical and normative frames typically engaged in considering the politics of migration and mobility. We suspect a broad range of political possibilities are emerging in places like Diepsloot that deserve recognition as something other than deviances or disappointments.

As scholars long concerned with the humane governance of people's mobility, we find it increasingly important to turn our attention to questions of temporality. Diepsloot provides an example of a place combining multiple geographic and temporal trajectories. Futures are projected at varied places and paces; there is spatial proximity in one sense, and distance in another; there are short term strategies and distant temporal horizons. This spatio-temporal heterogeneity generates potentially conflicting metrics of justice, progress, and political value. Yet these different metrics and the varied temporalities that inspire them are often hidden by analysts' ideological projects or presumptions. Some of those projects presume or seek to generate alignment of diverse temporal orientations: to the workplace, to shared legitimising histories, or to forms of liberation. Some project utopian eschatologies —religious and secular—promising progress or history's end. Whether progressive or authoritarian, these projects rely on familiar lines of membership and solidarity including, *inter alia*, race, culture, gender, class, nationality and legal status. But in an era of widespread mobility and institutional fragmentation, the binding power of these projects cannot be assumed. Solidarities fragment or emerge in new forms and the temporal and geographic infrastructures in and through which futures are built may well generate political alternatives for which we have limited conceptual *and temporal* vocabulary.

This article outlines an agenda to place temporal fissures and frictions at the centre of critical analysis of mobility and political imagination. At the article's core are three very different illustrations of political possibilities arising at the intersection of specific kinds of human mobility and non-linear temporalities. We call these sketches, playfully, *zombies*, *miracles*, and *memories*. They stem from our differently situated work spanning the Gulf states, sub-Saharan Africa, Australia and the Pacific. *Zombies* refer to long-term residents in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) caught in a fragmented temporality in which they are effectively written out of a national historiography. Occupying a liminal zone in which the extraterritorial citizenship imposed on them cultivates their exclusion from any national terrain, their situation is so counter-intuitive as to suggest a form of citizenship that is neither living nor dead. *Miracles* relate to the abandonment of linear notions of progress, in favour of the miraculous claims of preachers and profits. Specifically, we sketch the cultivation of miraculous futures that promise to alleviate the 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009) felt by many en route in intra-urban, rural to urban and international migration in sub-Saharan Africa. *Memories* refer to non-linear conceptions of time articulated by Australian indigenous scholars and activists concerned to challenge the particular conception of sovereignty defended by successive Australian governments in order to expel asylum seekers. Memories in which there is no siloed and sequential movement from past, to present and future, offer a more recursive approach to the politics of human mobility in which the co-presence of now and then inspires alternative readings of history and future possibilities.

These are no more than sketches, and by no means exhaustive or even indicative of politics emergent across so many diverse mobility contexts. We do not intend to be comprehensive, but rather deploy these sketches heuristically to inspire a more expansive imagination about what politics is and could become in conjunction with human mobility – whether in partial, incipient, recursive, or organized forms. The politics we speculate on are not necessarily those we endorse or desire. They are precisely those overlooked or miscategorised by analytical and ideological frames typically used to categorize political types. As such, our approach is in keeping with work that unsettles metanarratives of justice and political action rooted in linear, singular, or teleological conceptions of development, liberation, citizenship, and justice.

We situate our agenda within the field of Migration Studies, a loose amalgam of social science approaches explicitly oriented towards investigating human mobility, its regulation, and consequences. Before turning to the three sketches introduced above, we briefly address the spatial orientation that has long preoccupied scholars of migration, and then identify limitations of the field's recent 'temporal turn.' While welcome, we argue that the temporal turn within Migration Studies remains beholden to a similar kind of linear, incorporative logic characterising much of the field's spatially oriented interventions. We go on to outline a more critical agenda for inquiry into dynamic forms of human mobility from the perspective of multiple temporalities.

Our approach emerges from a virtual workshop we convened over the course of 2021 intended to overcome our frustration with how temporality surfaced in research on migration and politics. The workshop itself resulted from an exceptional constellation of time, mobility, and politics: Covid-19. This interrupted scholarly circulation that would normally bring scholars together in delimited space and time. Instead, we assembled an interdisciplinary group across five continents and multiple time zones for a series of meetings over nine months.<sup>1</sup> Such 'slow' research is rare but, we found, remarkably generative. This article attempts to articulate perspectives engendered by the rich discussions amongst this group.

### **The temporal turn in Migration Studies: beyond an incorporative agenda**

Migration Studies typically frames its subject in spatial terms. Conventionally, the field rests on geographic assumptions of a world checkered with sovereign territories or sub-national administrative divisions. Citizens are those situated within a border, migrants move across them. If states define themselves through territorial claims, migration politics, in this view, occurs at the intersection of state claims and people's movements (or lack thereof). Even for those not-explicitly concerned with the *politics* of migration, categorising people in national terms naturalises these divisions (van Reekum and Schinkel 2017). Indeed, part of the reason that 'externalized' border-policing strategies attract so much criticism within Migration Studies is because they break with territorial norms clearly demarcating one state's territory from another (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2015; Shachar 2019; Zaiotti 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Names of participants removed to preserve anonymity/

Critical scholars of migration have turned their attention to proliferating ‘operational spaces’ crafted by states in the very process of border policing (Sassen 2018:7). Critical scholars have also examined how migrants and others resist and reappropriate these morphing spaces in order to pursue their own migration trajectories (Cuttitta 2025; Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2017; Neumann 2021). Scaling up and down across spatial dimensions, such work explores how various spatial strategies and claims shape novel social, material, and political phenomena. This moves discussions of migration politics beyond state-centric approaches and challenges the given nature of socio-spatial categorisation. Migration, borders and citizenship are examined in relation to morphing socio-spatial forms including cities, regions, corridors, maritime routes, and, in one example, places shaped by ‘naturally’ occurring borders such as water catchment areas (Ochoa Espejo 2020). Nevertheless, the emphasis remains on *spatial* innovation and the evolution and contestation of political attachments in spatial terms.

The more recent ‘temporal turn’ in migration studies complements the field’s longstanding geographical curiosity and reflects broader attention to time and temporality within the social sciences and humanities.<sup>2</sup> Temporally inflected studies of migration typically consider how states use time as a migration management technique. Such studies surface the differential pace of immigration and border control: slowness, waiting, stoppage, and delay on one hand; acceleration on the other. Focus on delay and waiting is well illustrated in discussions of precarity and permanent temporariness in refugee camps where people may be marooned for decades before they can return, settle locally, or continue their journeys (e.g. Akram and Syring 2014; Hyndman and Giles 2017). A similar focus is taken up in accounts of towns, border zones, or environmentally threatened countries where migrants and would-be migrants live in limbo while seeking final destinations (e.g. Iranzo 2021; Turner 2015; Vanyoro 2022) or endure prolonged periods of legal precarity or enforced immobility (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2000; Menjívar 2006). Extended delays in granting documentation, passage, or pathways to citizenship have also become tools states use to manage the pace of immigration or prevent its initiation. Elaborate and instantly interconnected knowledge infrastructures – particularly artificial intelligence – both enable these endeavours and shroud their operations (Damianos 2023; Amore 2018).

Temporal techniques of migration management are not only designed to dissuade and deter. Ever more precisely calibrated increments of time combined with the spatial concentration and dispersal of migrants have effectively created a global system of labour reserves. Designed to deliver workers when and where they are needed and return them just as quickly, migrants become entangled in the temporal vagaries of late-stage capitalism (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013). For wealthy investors or those with skills and profiles valued by states, states increasingly offer accelerated paths to residential and citizenship rights (Džankić 2019; Shachar 2021; Shachar and Hirshl 2014). As Bauman noted years ago, differential access to movement at differing speeds has created a spectrum of tourists and vagabonds, cosmopolitan and contingent citizenships (1996). Temporal tactics thus generate both taxes and rewards that

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<sup>2</sup> A non-exhaustive set of examples includes: Baas and Yeoh 2018; Bilgin 2016; Cohen 2018; Conlon 2011; Cwerner 2004; Drangslund 2020; Griffiths 2014; Lori 2019; McNevin and Missbach 2018; Stronks 2022; Tazzioli 2018. For the ‘temporal turn’ in international relations see Hom 2018; Hutchings 2008.

maintain hierarchies and gradations of status among and between states, citizens, and migrants.

We value this first iteration of the temporal turn within Migration Studies, and locate some of our own work within it. Yet we also feel there is more to be done. First, extant scholarship focuses on time's role in controlling, inhibiting, and exploiting migrants in the service of state and capital. This has produced something akin to an 'almanac of the miserable:' numerous accounts of frustrated futures and socio-political marginalisation. Yet those on the move may also resist, repurpose or simply evade the temporal restrictions placed on them. Fewer scholars make these more autonomous temporal interventions the focus of their inquiries (but see Vanyoro 2024; Franck and Vigneswaran 2021).

Second, scholars within the temporal turn risk unduly centring formal regulations. This reflects a tendency among governance scholars more broadly to present regulatory systems as coherent, formal, and consciously created or maintained. For many across the Global South, waiting is due less to immigration or citizenship policies than to horizontal regulation: challenges presented by residents, social movements, employers, or other social institutions. These can work at multiple scales, sometimes embracing international migrants while marginalizing those moving domestically. Recognizing the multi-scalar honeycomb of regulations –formal and informal, fragmented and interlocking – can provide a more nuanced understanding of temporal regulation and mobility governance more generally.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the ideological and imperial dimensions of temporal strategies require greater attention. Scholars increasingly draw attention to the interconnected histories of border control, migration regulation and imperial rule (El-Enany 2020; Mayblin 2017; Mongia 2018; Turner 2020; McNevin 2020; Landau 2018). This work shows how control over the movement of people has long been conditioned by narrative frameworks that position whole peoples in time – as backwards or advanced, primitive or modern – for instance. The racist and culturally chauvinist underpinnings of such practices have been rightfully challenged. But few have considered how the designation of undesired others as backwards in time might be reappropriated as acts of refusal or assertions of difference in the same way that exile status can sometimes be read as resistance (Said 2014). And, in an echo of our second point above, might ideologically inflected temporal exclusion be occurring horizontally as different groups compete for futures in space?

Fourth, as long as citizenship and inclusion – spatial, social and temporal – remain the focus of contention and analysis, citizenship and inclusion continue to be taken as universal aspirations. This is the incorporative dimension of the temporal turn that we wish to engage more critically. Citizenship undoubtedly remains a focal point for struggles around migration and mobility, yet its allure cannot be assumed. For us, this incorporative problem is not overcome by calls to redistribute first world citizenship to third world migrants (Achieme 2019), however much such a project aims to alleviate some of the more blatant inequalities at stake. A politics of

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<sup>3</sup> For work addressing these concerns, see Misago 2019; Çağlar 2016; Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2009; Holston and Appadurai 1996.

redistribution fails to tackle the thornier questions of whether and how the citizenship ‘pie’ might be transforming such that a more equal piece of it no longer represents the telos towards which politics and people can be assumed to move.

We are concerned with the underestimation of a wider range of possible political futures ignored or devalued by temporal blinders. Because so much of the temporal literature within Migration Studies focuses on the trajectories of migrants to and within the Global North, the temporalities at stake elsewhere and the forms of politics they engender are frequently overlooked. A perspective attuned to contending temporalities across a wider geopolitical field opens onto a wider range of possibilities for politics and mobility. Our hunch is that something is shifting within this political milieu – not because the collision and overlaying of multiple temporalities is unique to our era, but because its facticity has surfaced in new ways connected to mobility and immobility, becoming harder to ignore.

### **Mobilities, temporalities, politics: some conceptual starting points**

How might a wider field of vision be encouraged in order to gain greater insight into the political possibilities at stake at the intersection of time and mobility? Our first step is to draw a distinction between counting time in quantitative terms (e.g., days and years; pace and delay) and socio-politically constructed temporalities. Drawing on classic and more recently published literature on time (Adam 1994; Greenhouse 1996; Zerubavel 2003; Little 2022), we conceive of clock time and linear time as particular temporalities. Clock time and linear time are ways of knowing and ordering time that are inter-subjectively meaningful; they allow for chronologies that are demarcated in consistent, measurable units aligning sequentially from past to present and future. They inform Newtonian and Kantian perspectives in which time, like space, is a neutral and universal tableau in and on which events unfold. Even if physicists increasingly question linear time as a ‘natural’ constant, this is the mode of temporal thinking that informs political theory rooted in modernist, universal, or utopian ideals (Cohen 2018). Other temporalities reveal the past as part of the here and now, challenging given distinctions between tenses and times in the first place. Karen Barad (2017) illustrates, for example, what might be called the enduring immediacy of nuclear events as radioactive fallout persists and morphs in bodies, landscapes, and histories. Eschatologies leading to an ‘end of history’ versus endless rebirth or stasis also illustrate different orientations to time and different temporalities.

Attending to contending temporalities opens up a larger set of questions about the space-time parameters according to which mobilities are governed and futures are imagined and desired (or not). This starting point shifts the focus of inquiry from how specific counts of time are calculated differentially to how time itself, much like and in conjunction with space, is a site of experiential difference and political contestation. This starting point thus removes the possibility of time as a constant, taking it instead as something that morphs in and through collective encounters with difference (Massey 2005). Starting from such a perspective demands a more robust engagement with specific temporalities implicated in spatial controls, migration regulation, citizenship regimes and autonomous movements. We ask, for example, about the temporalities explicitly invoked or implicitly assumed in historical narrations of nation and

nationals that sure up certain kinds of borders – formal and political along with social and implicit – as natural and authoritative. How and which histories are narrated as part of the present (as opposed to ‘finished’ episodes of the past) may affect the rationalization for border controls on one hand, and on the other, the impulse felt by different people to be on the move or to stay put. It may also affect how people conceptualize and experience their own or others’ mobilities, for example, as part of diasporic traditions, sacred rituals, or legacies of slavery or colonialism. The section below on *memories* engages some of these themes.

We are also concerned with the ways in which temporalities informing life-course transitions (what one *ought* to have done by when) shape how (im)mobility related factors contribute to people’s subjective sense of progress or delay.<sup>4</sup> The section below on *miracles* touches on these themes. From varied perspectives on life-course transitions, notions of waiting as taxation and punishment may look considerably different. Is waiting only punitive if it interrupts the incorporative direction in which time on the move is expected to flow? In what ways might waiting also be understood, as Sarah Sharma (2014) has suggested, as a rite of passage, a time for reflection, strategizing, and transition? Varied temporal orientations render a period of immobility (or mobility to nowhere-elses, such as Diepsloot) subjectively different for those confronted with the same ‘obstacle’ or living under similar material conditions. For those with less progressive understandings of time, might waiting have little positive or negative value and simply generate an alternative, if fragmented set of social and political trajectories? How then do affects such as hope and anticipation work to sustain the promise of progress despite the non-anomalous experience of waiting and disappointment? Conversely, what kinds of politics become possible or prohibitive once waiting and disappointment are dislodged from an expectation of progress and a horizon of citizenship? As Lisa Baraitser (2017) suggests, might waiting and disappointment be potentially generative affects in their own right and in relation to other temporalities?

Coming to terms with multiple temporalities means conceiving politics as something irreducible to programmatic direction towards shared futures in place. Without shared space-bound futures or solidarities, the scope of action we might call political may take divergent forms. Attending to multiple temporalities gives us a better vantage point on those unencumbered by the underlying temporal scripts informing state policy and prevailing social norms. It also allows insight into the forms of power and transgression at stake in matters of mobility and the kinds of lives that people on the move envisage for themselves, or understand as their reality, beyond a telos of progressive integration with a global citizenship regime.

In sum, then, our agenda offers a way to address enduring political questions about subjectivity, collective action, transgression, endurance and transition in ways that take better account of the multiple temporalities shaping the experience and governance of human mobility. What subjects emerge at these points of temporal intersection and disjuncture? How might those very points operate as forms of intentional or de facto resistance, making governing more difficult? How does the friction induced by contending temporalities open or curtail the

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, we have been inspired by queer theorists, writing about diverse temporalities vis-à-vis hetero-normative life-course transitions (e.g. Freeman 2010; Munoz 2009; Pyne 2021).

possibility of collective action and towards what end? What histories might inform our awareness of and capacity to interpret this spatio-temporal plurality? What kinds of time maps might illustrate the intersection of space, time and mobility imagined and experienced in ways diverging from standard geopolitical forms? These are the stakes of what we propose as a new research agenda.

We are trying to attune ourselves to alternative political imaginaries that may rub uncomfortably against the moral premises underlying much of what progressive scholars wish to see in the world. This makes our approach somewhat different to those, on one hand, who buy into redemptive futures – liberal, Marxist or otherwise – and to those, on the other, who see only dystopian elements of the possible, either in terms of prevailing calculative logics or forms of existential despair. We contend that a spectrum of utopian-dystopian potential is itself a manifestation of linear temporal thinking that we are trying to dislodge as the only frame for imagining what politics might be and become.

### **Three Sketches: Zombies, Miracles, and Memories**

This section builds on the conceptual foundations laid above with three sketches drawn from different regions and regime types. Like the Diepsloot example, these are necessarily truncated – illustrative rather than indicative. They are not intended as archetypes but as examples of a complex set of social phenomena to which we have applied evocative labels. The approach is intended to distil abstract dynamics into relatable and vivid imagery, allowing us to grasp multidimensional issues in ways that purely technical language might obscure (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Zombies reveal temporal loops and suspensions; miracles demonstrate abrupt ruptures and reversals; and memories collapse the temporal distance between past, present and future. Together, these empirical-conceptual anchors reveal the limitations of understanding time as a neutral, linear backdrop for political and social processes. They are suggestive instead of time and temporality as dynamic, manipulatable forces that shape and are shaped by power relations. In each case, emergent forms of politics map poorly on to conventional framings of time, migration, and citizenship. In each case, we observe temporal realignments that deserve critical attention on account of the political (im)possibilities they potentially announce. Our hope is that these three sketches can stimulate what must ultimately be a more in-depth collective conversation, informed by a much wider range of empirical examples that speak in different ways to the questions raised above.

#### *Zombies: from linear incorporation to a time-loop of non-incorporation*

In 2008, the UAE government worked through a private company (the Comoros Gulf Holding), to facilitate a bilateral agreement with the Presidency of the Union of Comoros to fund infrastructural development in the Comoros Islands. In exchange for that investment, the Comoros Islands issued passports to some 80,000-120,000 ethnic minorities and bidūn (stateless persons) resident in the UAE. Many of the recipients of these passports were Emirati citizens whose Emirati passports were subsequently revoked. Others were applicants for

naturalization in the UAE who had been waiting for citizenship for decades. This passport outsourcing agreement enabled the UAE government to effectively extraterritorialize claims to naturalization. All of this took place while the individuals concerned never actually moved or applied for Comoros citizenship (Lori 2019). They experienced the forced revocation of their nationality by one state and the forced attribution of nationality from another. The passports are suggestive of citizenship, but are not in fact equivalent to citizenship status because they do not confer membership or residency rights in the Comoros. They represent a liminal and counter-intuitive form of legal status.

The UAE-Comoros scheme took its inspiration from ‘citizenship-by-investment’ (CBI) programs that create legal pathways for high-net-worth individuals to attain citizenship in exchange for investment without necessarily residing in the passport-issuing state. However, the UAE-Comoros passport deal was novel in several ways. First, and most important, is the question of consent. Under other CBI programs, individual applicants choose to apply for a new citizenship status, typically to attain more powerful passports to increase their global mobility or lessen taxation (Džankić 2019). In the UAE-Comoros arrangement, however, the UAE outsourced the citizenship cases of its own residents, *en masse*, without their consent. Instead of increasing their global mobility or income, this new legal status did the opposite. For those who had previously held Emirati passports, the Comoros passports have prevented their access to gainful employment, healthcare, education, welfare benefits and other membership rights in the UAE. These recipients also experienced challenges crossing international borders. Second, while citizenship-by-investment often enables individuals to attain dual or multiple nationalities, this case perpetuated *de facto* statelessness. These special passports did not confer membership rights in either the Comoros Islands or UAE. Recipients were explicitly banned from residing in the Comoros and could only remain in the UAE as ‘guest workers’ on temporary visas.

Collectively, the UAE, Union of Comoros, and Comoros Gulf Holding engineered a form of ‘zombie citizenship.’ Although citizenship typically denotes a set of rights and responsibilities that establish a political, social, and cultural relationship between the individual and the state, this particular legal status has been so thoroughly hollowed out that it no longer functions as meaningful membership and is more akin to what Jain calls “zombie citizenship” (2023). Like the zombie which has the façade of a human shape without the insides that make it fully human, this form of status looks confusingly like something approaching citizenship but has been gutted of its core.

The metaphor of zombies has been widely employed in cultural, social and political studies. Zombies embody themes of contagion, decay, fear, and the breakdown of order, making them particularly resonant for analysing issues like capitalism, war, societal collapse, pandemics, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment (*e.g.* Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Fojas 2017; Gonzaga 2021; Crofts and Vogl 2019; Tyerman and van Isacker 2024). As mythological figures occupying a liminal zone between life and death, the power of Zombies lies in their challenge to conventional understandings of progress and temporality; their existence embodies temporal dislocation, stagnation, and disruption. Zombies are humans who have died and come back to life, staggering about, unable to obtain a peaceful death or a full human life. The zombie’s

‘time-loop’ introduces a different kind of temporality, disrupting a narrative of a life characterized by ‘individual will or teleological progression’ (Yazell and Hsu, 2020: 24).

This resonates strongly with the temporal dimensions of this passport scheme. Like the legal status conjured by the passports, zombie citizenship disrupts conventional narratives of incorporation and exclusion, which rely on linear progression: a journey from statelessness to citizenship, from foreignness to national inclusion. Citizenship within our current international system is the recognition of personhood, signifying being ‘fully human’ or ‘worthy’ of fundamental human rights (Kingston 2024: 6). The UAE-Comoros agreement disrupts the possibility of a progressive integration within a global citizenship regime, in which states are understood to make their inhabitants ‘legible’ (Scott 1999) by issuing national identity documents and ‘embracing’ (Torpey 2000) them as citizens by connecting those documents to rights and responsibilities. In this example, the forces putting these particular people into categories make it impossible for them to fit anywhere. Rather than incorporating or explicitly excluding, these states made people illegible, turning ‘temporary foreign residency’ into a permanent legal status that forecloses access to membership anywhere and mobility rights everywhere. Zombies also challenge the assumption that time operates uniformly or equitably across populations. The temporality of “zombie citizenship” reveals how time itself is manipulated by states and other actors to produce uneven outcomes.

This metaphor is not without its limitations. Fictional zombies are often devoid of agency—a characterization that is wholly inapplicable to the realities of human experience. In the case at hand, the passports also created unexpected temporal and political possibilities. While foreclosing traditional pathways of incorporation, the scheme simultaneously created new arrangements that are unavailable for other groups in either in UAE or Comoros Islands. On paper, the recipients of these Comoros passports in UAE are no different from the ‘temporary foreign workers’ that make up 90 percent of the UAE’s population. However, since they cannot reside in the Comoros Islands, they have no state to be deported to, and in practice they are able to continue residing in the UAE even if they are not employed and have no national sponsor that is required of other foreign residents. While the UAE-Comoros passport agreement imposed significant structural constraints on recipients, recipients also utilize informal networks and much resourcefulness to resist, assert rights claims, and sustain their livelihoods.

If we tie legal status and citizenship to an incorporative logic of progressive time, then we may account for how a given state strategically hastens or delays the incorporation of non-citizens (Lori 2019). Such a framing, retains exclusion and inclusion as both dichotomous and the only strategies and outcomes available. But this is not the full story in the case sketched above, where those affected were cast into a liminal zombie zone. Incorporative logic also assumes that state actions have both the intention and effect of categorizing people to make them “fit” into a particular legal status and nation-state system. This understanding of states as vehicles of incorporation cannot account for how states, firms, organizations and individuals fragment time in ways that can fundamentally rupture pathways of incorporation and legibility in the world system altogether. Conversely, it may be possible to imagine *and investigate* unlikely forms of autonomy, subjectivity, and solidarity emergent in the liminal zombie zone – even as a matter

of necessity – precisely because of the passport recipients’ non-incorporation within traditional bounds of state-based citizenship and official historiography.

*Miracles: temporal nomadism and Pentecostalism*

The economic and political uncertainty characterizing people’s movements within and through many ‘southern cities’ has given rise to conditions where it is difficult to envision pathways to planned futures. More specifically, material realities – few jobs, mass urbanization, physical insecurity and absent institutions – render planning potentially fruitless and frustrating. Such superfluity robs people of economic value (see Mbembe 2004) and with this, possibilities for social mobility. People occupy spaces where education rarely translates into employment, let alone wealth. Self-interested politicians or local authorities divert investments and physical insecurity and disease renders lifespan a lottery. Such uncertainty hinders the sense of a linear path from the present to a different future, even if imagination is fuelled by the circulation of global images of wealth, success, and security. These are not sites of incorporation into that future or of belonging and development.

Into the breach between desire and practical possibility steps the Pentecostal churches. Preachers and prophets offer promises of different futures in ways remarkably effective at aggregating material wealth, transforming landscapes, and reorienting parishioners to forms of prosperity beyond the earth and beyond their time on earth (see Gukurume 2024). They range from the corporate scale investments of Redemption Camp and TB Joshua in Lagos to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in the Favelas of Brazil, to micro-level churches convened in sitting rooms, shipping containers, and repurposed shop fronts. These institutions capitalize on and seek to bridge the widening gap between personal and familiar aspiration and ever more elusive practical possibilities (Katsaura 2020). Capturing desire for social and material status, these churches offer promises for those otherwise living amidst economic and institutional uncertainty. They promise the miraculous. They offer status and recognition in registers that span territories beyond the national, existing in a virtual world created on-line or evoked in song, music, and across multiple media platforms.

Religious institutions have long recruited among the disenfranchised, including migrants and exiles. Yet the spatio-temporal element of these initiatives amongst those moving across and between cities, towns, and states in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, deserves renewed attention for the political possibilities they present. Unlike the state endorsed churches operating in industrializing Europe, these are completely private – often for profit – enterprises. Few are overtly political in directly seeking to win office, but they offer sanction and succour for politicians, in ways that may align their message with church teachings. Perhaps more importantly, they often create visions of futures beyond or outside the state. As Stella, a Ugandan immigrant in Nairobi, confidently proclaims, ‘God owns everywhere, so even if you break the law here, he will forgive you’ (in Landau 2014: 301). The multiplicity of these religious bodies, each offering similar but competing temporal trajectories, presents a form of politics that is rife with possibilities but eludes ready description.

Promises of future prosperity frequently legitimize the pastoral power of scientific experts, church leaders, and politicians. But the flip side of Pentecostal and millenarian utopianism is an even less well understood, but equally potent force: the rejection of linear temporal orientation – at least for one’s time on earth. How do politics work when significant portions of the population begin living, by necessity or choice, in a mode of short-term survivalism or presumptions of uncertainty? Perhaps more importantly, these highly individualising institutions create registers of recognition not only out of time, but also out of space. They promise futures and status that travel or are deterritorialised. Promises of this kind have uncertain and poorly understood implications for collective mobilization and for people’s alienation from both the times and spaces they materially occupy. This may ultimately manifest as nihilism or as a form of anti-politics, but it is nonetheless political. And with tens of millions of people living in cities and spaces where futures remain remarkably uncertain, the political possibilities at stake deserve consideration.

*Memories: histories of mobility and sovereignty*

In settler-colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples have long questioned the time maps of official histories that begin on a purported day of discovery. Histories of this kind work to erase from collective memory the political significance of native peoples’ longer-standing relations to ‘newly discovered’ lands, reducing prior presence to a token fact rather than the substance of a valid political claim. In the Australian context, struggles of this kind manifest crudely in an annually rehearsed debate in the lead up to a national holiday commemorating the landing of the first British fleet in Sydney Cove on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1788 and the start of European settlement. Whether one celebrates ‘Australia Day’ or mourns ‘Invasion Day’ depends on how the 18<sup>th</sup> century movement of people from Britain to Australia is interpolated and memorialized and on what elements of the dispossession and displacements that occurred are remembered or forgotten. Framing Indigenous histories in terms of a distant past makes it easier to position colonial violence as a completed event, rather than an ongoing process with contemporary effects (Wolfe 2006). And yet, too often, the ensuing debate is reduced to a polarizing choice for or against the struggles of Indigenous Australians, which are of course more varied than this binary would suggest. Reductive debates also obscure more complicated parts of the story with respect to the various mobilities involved.

A different way of approaching these debates is signalled by scholarship that reflects on the connections between Indigenous struggles in the Australian context and struggles for migrant rights and mobility justice (Coddington 2017; Dehm 2021; Giannacopoulos 2013; Nethery 2012; Perera and Publiese 2021). Studies of this kind link past injustices to present conditions, including strategies of surveillance, exile and detention with respect to people on the move that reflect colonial technologies of displacement and encampment. Much of what such literature reveals arises on account of approaches to inquiry that suspend linear temporalities. As a result, such studies can reveal how the past surfaces as part of the present, without repeating, as such, shaping the potential for all kinds of futures that are unformed as yet, but never wholly new. This approach to histories of the present are sometimes called ‘recursive’ (Stoler 2016; 26). Recursive histories bear some relation to the articulation of Indigenous temporalities, by a

range of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, including some who have critically engaged with successive Australian governments' treatment of migrants and asylum seekers (Bawaka Country et al 2019; Kwaymullina 2010; Langton and Corn 2018).

Precisely this kind of historical narration linking past, present and future in recursive rather than sequential ways was expressed in 2001, at the height of the then Australian government's cultivated panic over rising numbers of asylum seekers in waters surrounding Australia. A group of artists and activists projected an image of an 18<sup>th</sup> century 'tall ship,' resembling those amongst the First British Fleet onto the iconic Sydney Opera House alongside the words 'boat people.'<sup>5</sup> The image brought together two very different kinds of 'illicit' migration, juxtaposing the condemnation of one with the celebration of another. More subtly, the image also signalled connections and continuities between very different histories of exile and captivity that complicate polarized narratives of native versus settler. On this view, the image captured not only the dispossession of Australian Indigenous people or the decades long journeys of 'boat people' from South East Asia to Australia, but also the 'forced migration' of convicts transported by ship from Britain on the first and subsequent fleets. It was their hard labour under penal servitude that was exploited to establish the colonies.

Connections of this kind which draw attention to exile, dispossession, incarceration and deportation as common strategies pursued against a range of diverse populations, historically and in the present, are now inspiring creative solidarities amongst migrants, Indigenous people and racialized minorities across borders and in contexts well beyond Australia. Solidarities of this kind have been forged, for example, in transnational struggles for prison abolition, conceived broadly as the abolition of all carceral institutions, including immigration detention. The struggle for prison abolition is explicitly articulated as a recursive reconfiguration of the struggle for slavery abolition (Davis 2005; Gilmore 2017), and has, in turn, more recently inspired a discourse and practice of border abolition (Paik 2017; Bradley and De Noronha 2022; Tazzioli and De Genova 2023). In all of these cases, an enduring past informs a future that is premised upon the possibility of creating conditions in which institutions widely considered unavoidable necessities (once slavery and now, prisons and borders) that have disproportionately violent effects on specific populations (migrants, Indigenous and racialized people) are rendered obsolete. This possibility arises on account of cross-coalitional political organizing that acknowledges and takes inspiration from non-linear temporalities.

Consider too, the possibilities beyond zero-sum sovereign claims ensuing from articulations of Indigenous sovereign law, including with respect to mobility. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars emphasise that what it means to be sovereign from Australian Indigenous perspectives stems from non-linear temporalities informing different relations to land or 'Country' that are not reducible to simple assertions of 'original' right on the part of any party (Indigenous or state), nor equivalent to the 'possessive logics' of state territorial claims (Moreton-Robinson 2015: 49; see also Langton and Corn 2023: 18; and Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 2010). They insist that being sovereign is contingent on the enduring exercise of care and responsibility, *including for planned and unexpected arrivals*. Accordingly, Indigenous

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<sup>5</sup> For footage of the intervention, see <https://www.acmi.net.au/works/109231--boat-people/>

activists have questioned the state's authority to govern migration, on account of the irresponsible and abusive way it has done so with respect to the offshore incarceration of refugees and asylum seekers (Jackson 2011; Birch 2018). Some have called for refugees detained offshore at the hands of the Australian government to be part of a collective process of political re-founding that grapples in substantive ways with the multiple forms of alienation in and through which Australian citizenship has taken form (Grievés 2017). Engaging such proposals as real possibilities requires a critical lens on the temporal dimensions of mobility – one that is far more closely attuned to the politics of memory, the time-span of relevant histories of mobility, and the collision of contending temporalities.

How we remember and how we forget different kinds of mobilities are part of the 'time maps' that shape political possibilities in the present (Zerubavel 2003:2). Related to the examples above and in an increasing number of contexts, there is growing attention to large-scale movements of people associated with trans-Atlantic slavery, penal transportation, and (settler)colonization, figured as specific forms of migration that have until now been largely absent from standard histories of 'forced' migration (in the case of slavery and convicts) and from populist and governmental histories of 'illegal' or 'irregular' migration (in the case of colonists and settlers). Politicising categories and histories of migration in this way challenges claims about the relative novelty and unprecedented volume of contemporary migration, understood variously, as forced, illegal, uninvited, and beyond the capacities of reluctant hosts. It also introduces new ways of imagining politics, polities and political subjectivities that extend, recursively, into the present and potentially the future. How might relations forged in struggles for abolition, for example, generate identities and solidarities beyond citizens and migrants that signal political forms beyond hard-edged states? How might more considered attention to enduring Indigenous polities generate an appreciation for what the state form and citizenship status has not, in fact, subsumed? And how might a history of international-relations that includes Indigenous inter-polity relations over thousands of years, reveal very different approaches to 'managing' cross-border movements of people beyond the current impasse between state and human rights? These types of questions signal some of the more optimistic components of our research agenda.

### **Towards deeper inquiry into multiple temporalities and political possibilities**

Ours is an era of evolving forms of mobility and increasingly complex and sophisticated strategies to govern human mobilities. Whether at borders, in urban centres, oceans, or transit zones, multiple spatio-temporal orientations foreclose and open possibilities for diverse forms of politics. We do not deny that shared relations to space and time – particularly those that align with the goal of incorporation into national territories - serve as the bases for many political practices, including violent border controls and autonomous mobilities. However, we suggest that the presumption of this goal and of the solidarities to which it gives rise (their presence and desirability) limits our analysis and raises specific ethico-political problems.

We recognize the power of linear time and state-based citizenship trajectories as forms of practical and scholarly discipline. We also recognize the ways in which increasingly authoritarian

regimes and anti-immigrant parties across the global north and south have consolidated power by giving the appearance of doubling down on this linear temporality, attempting to 'restore' glorious national pasts as inevitable outcomes, and in the process, drawing sharp lines of inclusion and exclusion, citizenship and alienage. The power to shape perspectives on political possibilities that linear temporal orientations exhibit is precisely what drives us to examine cases where that power is not absolute and to ask what else is in play. When a singular orientation to time and politics is taken in all cases as the only or even the predominant one, the diversity of extant temporalities and political forms is obscured, including those we have drawn attention to in Dubai, Diepsloot, and Sydney.

Our sketches – of zombies, miracles and memories - show how non-linear temporalities intersect with diverse forms of human mobility, giving rise to emergent, if not wholly new, political phenomena. Rather than assess temporal diversity according to existing standards of solidarity, freedom and belonging, our account instead suggests the need to question the linear, temporal presumptions that underly so much normative political theory in relation to migration and mobility. Without celebrating or condemning what is emergent in the examples we pursue, the article challenges scholars of migration to consider how mobility, informality, historical retellings, and transnational action by migrants and states (including states conducting increasingly violent forms of border control whose temporal rhetoric often misrepresents their actual practice) enable and necessitate political forms not yet named. Our agenda calls for a normative and epistemological recalibration that allows for the recognition of different kinds of political claims, different forms of necessity and desire, and different political possibilities. Multiple temporalities reflect the mental and institutional architectures of space-time that shape and are shaped by human mobility. Some of these emerge by design – as is the Zombie case – or through a mix of state and social actions that come to be historicised and spatialized in ways that are contingent, indeterminate and demand our critical attention.

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