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Exile and the Academy: Contrapuntal Reflections on the Displaced Scholar

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Abstract: This critical review explores the postcolonial geographies of scholarly exiles in Europe and North America. Drawing on postcolonial, decolonial, and migration regime scholarship, I argue that scholarly exile is not a humanitarian exception to the contemporary global academic order but a structural expression of it. The analysis foregrounds the disruption of identity, barriers to reintegration, and the legal entrapment of displaced scholars within postcolonial migration regimes that systematically devalue credentials, constrain mobility, and marginalize non-Western knowledge. While recognizing the vital protective role of initiatives such as Scholars at Risk, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, and similar programs, the essay focuses on the enduring structural and epistemic exclusions that persist beyond temporary fellowships. Through historical precedents and cases from geographies of protracted conflict and authoritarian transition, it demonstrates how these regimes sustain downward mobility, credential misrecognition, cultural bereavement, and liminality. The essay then examines how exiled scholars resist erasure through autonomous networks, reflexive theorizing, and decolonial practices of intellectual renewal. It concludes by arguing that addressing scholarly exile requires not incremental reform but a fundamental delinking from the epistemic hierarchies that make such marginalization structurally inevitable.
Keywords: Scholarly exile, migration regimes, epistemic violence, contrapuntal awareness, postcolonial geographies

The displacement of academics constitutes one of the most critical and multifaceted manifestations of forced mobility in the contemporary world. Today, geopolitical conflict, authoritarian consolidation, and protracted crises intersect with the structural inequalities embedded in the global knowledge production and academic labor markets. Far from representing isolated instances of individual misfortune, these displacements expose the enduring postcolonial legacies that continue to shape regimes of migration, belonging, and professional recognition in Europe and North America. Displaced scholars, fleeing war, persecution, or systemic repression, encounter not only the rupture of physical relocation but also profound disruptions to their scholarly identities, professional trajectories, and sense of self (Akkad, 2026; Beeckmans et al., 2022). The condition of exile, in this context, is characterized by persistent barriers to reintegration into academic and broader labor markets, the frequent entrapment within asylum-seeker or refugee status, and the attendant risks of losing status, credential devaluation, and cultural bereavement (Beaney, 2024).

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In this critical review, I focus on these lived experiences, foregrounding the systemic challenges that displaced scholars face long after initial humanitarian support has been extended. While programs such as Scholars at Risk (SAR), the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (PSI), the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), and the New University in Exile Consortium provide an indispensable lifeline by offering temporary placements, financial stipends, professional networks, and advocacy that sustain intellectual continuity and personal safety, they do not solve the long-term problems and systematic challenges the exiled scholars face (Beaney, 2024). Therefore, I focus on the broader structural and postcolonial conditions that persist beyond these initiatives as they often operate within constrained resources and political environments, serve as vital bridges. However, the deeper challenges of exile demand focused scholarly attention in their own right.

I draw on several theoretical frameworks to analyze the experiences of displaced scholars. First, I employ Edward W. Said's (2000b) foundational definition of the exilic condition: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 173). This condition generates what Said calls "contrapuntal awareness" which is a sharpened, simultaneous perception of multiple, often irreconcilable realities. This includes the persistent tension between a scholar's prior professional identity and his or her precarious, frequently misrecognized position in host societies. This contrapuntal lens is then complemented by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) critique of epistemic violence and subalternity. This helps to expose how displaced voices are routinely mediated, distorted, or silenced within dominant humanitarian and integration discourses. To situate these dynamics within broader postcolonial migration regimes, I incorporate Walter Mignolo's (2011) decolonial option, which critiques the enduring colonial matrix of power that hierarchizes knowledge production and human mobility. This is further enriched by Achille Mbembe's (2003, 2021) concept of necropolitics, which frames displacement as a biopolitical extension. In the framework of necropolitics, lives and intellects from the Global South or other racialized peripheries are often rendered provisional, disposable, or subject to calculated abandonment. Finally, scholarship on migration regimes (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Rosenberg, 2022; Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021) illuminates how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary controls over mobility, labor access, and identity recognition. The colonial legacies often perpetuate racialized and epistemic exclusions even within ostensibly liberal-democratic contexts (Jazeel, 2016).

Threats to scholars and academic freedom have been mounting over the last decade due to rising cases of civil wars, political prosecution, discrimination, and censorship. Scholars at Risk's Free to Think 2025 report documents 395 verified attacks on higher education across 49 countries and territories between July 2024 and June 2025 (Scholars at Risk, 2025). By December 2025, the Philipp Schwartz Initiative had hosted 674 fellows from more than 30 countries at 147 German institutions, with up to 37 additional fellowships expected to commence in July 2026 (Humboldt Foundation, 2025–2026). The IIE–Scholars Rescue Fund reports cumulative support for 1,185 scholars from 62 countries, including 87 active fellows in 27 countries as of December 16, 2025 (IIE-SRF, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) reports that approximately 350 at-risk academics are in placements or receiving assistance at any given time (Council for At-Risk Academics [CARA], 2025). Applications to CARA fellowship programs have exceeded 2,000 since 2021, reflecting unprecedented global demand (Hubbard, 2024). These figures represent only documented cases captured by a limited number of international programs and should be understood as a conservative lower bound. The true number of displaced or threatened scholars globally is almost certainly far higher. UNHCR projections indicate escalating global displacement, with 2.5 million refugees requiring resettlement in 2026 amid persistent barriers to self-reliance and

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durable solutions (UNHCR, 2026). These figures underscore not only the volume of displacement but also the protracted nature of exile for many scholars.

This essay is organized into three main sections. The first part examines the postcolonial condition of scholarly exile by tracing both historical precedents and contemporary trajectories. Particular attention is given to disruptions of identity, experiences of cultural loss, and the intersecting effects of ethnicity, gender, and class among exiled scholars. The second section analyzes structural and institutional barriers to integration. Such barriers include exclusion from academic labor markets, employment precarity, and the bureaucratic as well as symbolic constraints associated with refugee status. The third section explores practices of resistance and re-existence by focusing on how displaced scholars negotiate these conditions through transnational networks, alternative academic platforms, and decolonial modes of knowledge production. Throughout, the analysis adopts a reflexive stance that seeks to foreground subaltern agency while critically acknowledging the epistemic limits of representation within postcolonial knowledge hierarchies.

The Postcolonial Condition of Scholarly Exile

The postcolonial condition of scholarly exile emerges as a deeply layered and historically sedimented phenomenon. The forced displacement of intellectuals not only severs ties to familiar cultural and professional landscapes but also inaugurates a protracted struggle for identity reconstruction amid the asymmetrical power relations inherited from colonial modernity (Andrews and Aydin, 2024). As a geographical and existential rift, exile disrupts the continuity of scholarly selfhood. It compels individuals to negotiate between the traces of their pre-displacement professional authority and the diminished, often racialized positions they occupy in host societies. Drawing on postcolonial critiques, this condition can be understood as an extension of what Ramon Grosfoguel (2008) terms the "coloniality of being". Displaced scholars from conflict-affected regions are subjected to ongoing epistemic and ontological marginalization. Their knowledge repertoires are devalued within Eurocentric academic hierarchies, even as their bodies are regulated through migration regimes rooted in imperial histories of control and extraction (Rosenberg, 2022). This rupture manifests in multifaceted ways. These include the erosion of professional identity through credential misrecognition, the psychological toll of cultural bereavement as articulated by Michael Eisenbruch (1991), and the intersectional vulnerabilities amplified by ethnicity, gender, and class. Yet, amid these disruptions, exile harbors potential for “academic re-existence” (Akkad, 2026). This is a decolonial praxis through which scholars reclaim agency by forging hybrid intellectual spaces that challenge the binaries of home/host and refugee/intellectual.

At its core, the postcolonial condition of exile engenders a contrapuntal awareness, as Edward W. Said (2000) elucidates. This awareness enables displaced scholars to perceive the dissonant melodies of their fragmented existences. They recognize the idealized intellectual ecosystems of origin juxtaposed against the provisional, often hostile terrains of reception. This awareness extends beyond the perceptual to become profoundly embodied, incorporating what Akkad (2026) terms “academic poverty” and “academic death.” In this framework, “academic poverty” describes the material and symbolic losses stemming from severed academic networks, lost resources, and reduced opportunities. “Academic death,” in turn, captures the symbolic end of one’s scholarly persona through prolonged disconnection from meaningful professional engagement. Postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1963) and Homi K. Bhabha (2012) have long highlighted how colonial encounters produce hybrid identities marked by ambivalence and mimicry. In the context of contemporary exile, this hybridity becomes a site of contestation, where scholars must navigate the "third space" of cultural translation while contending with the necropolitical logics that render their lives expendable in both origin and host contexts (Mbembe, 2003). Migration regimes, as analyzed by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett

Neilson (2013), further exacerbate this condition by operating as postcolonial apparatuses that differentially valorize mobilities. Skilled migrants from privileged backgrounds may gain access to pathways of integration, whereas those categorized as “refugees” or “asylum seekers” are channeled into liminal statuses that perpetuate dependency and misrecognition.

The intersectional dimensions of this condition warrant particular emphasis, as ethnicity, gender, and class inflect the experience of exile in ways that reproduce colonial hierarchies. For instance, racialized stereotypes, echoing Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism, often position scholars from Arab, African, or South Asian backgrounds as exotic "others." Their expertise is tokenized for diversity optics rather than fully integrated into host academic discourses. Gender intersects with race and refugee status to produce compounding barriers that the humanitarian framework consistently undertheorizes. Women scholars from conflict zones encounter additional layers of structural vulnerability uniquely tied to their gendered position within social and institutional hierarchies. In asylum processes across Europe and North America, women scholars are frequently classified as accompanying family members rather than primary applicants, rendering their professional identities institutionally invisible from the point of registration. Afghan women academics following the 2021 Taliban takeover have documented experiences of double displacement: first by the regime that expelled them, and then by receiving institutions that struggle to accommodate scholars whose fields, including gender studies, law, and political science, are precisely the fields most threatening to the authoritarian logic that drove them out (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The pressure to perform gratitude, to present oneself as a beneficiary of Western liberal protection rather than as a peer, falls disproportionately on women scholars and constitutes an ongoing form of epistemic subordination within the very structures that claim to offer refuge. Class dynamics further complicate reintegration. Even scholars from elite research universities, including Damascus University and Kabul University, arrive with substantial academic capital that host systems nonetheless refuse to recognize. Those from regional or less internationally visible institutions face a compounded disadvantage: their refugee status marks them as precarious, while their institutional origin is read as evidence of insufficient academic quality, effectively excluding them from mentorship networks and grant protocols before individual merit is ever assessed (Akkad, 2026; Beaney, 2024; Bourdieu, 1990). Together, these intersecting axes reveal that scholarly exile is not a uniform condition but a deeply stratified experience in which women, racialized minorities, and scholars from resource-poor institutional origins bear a disproportionate weight of structural exclusion. As Walter Mignolo (2011) argues, a genuinely decolonial response requires not merely adding diversity to existing structures but fundamentally delinking from the epistemic hierarchies that make such stratification structurally inevitable.

Historical Legacies

The postcolonial condition of scholarly exile is rooted in historical legacies of colonial displacement, where empires systematically uprooted intellectuals to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and extract knowledge labor. As early as the 19th century, colonial regimes orchestrated the migration of dissident scholars from colonized territories to metropolitan centers. They did so often under the guise of "civilizing" missions that masked epistemic violence. For instance, Ottoman intellectuals exiled to Europe during the Tanzimat reforms navigated Orientalist stereotypes that exoticized their contributions while denying them full agency, prefiguring modern patterns of tokenization (Said, 1978). The 20th century amplified these dynamics through mass displacements tied to decolonization and Cold War geopolitics. Post-1917 Russian émigrés, fleeing Bolshevik purges, established intellectual enclaves in Prague and Paris. However, they endured credential devaluation and cultural isolation that eroded their scholarly identities (Raeff, 1990). Similarly, the Nazi-era exodus of over 2,000

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predominantly Jewish scholars from Germany and Austria in the 1930s and 1940s entailed profound trauma and ambivalence. Figures such as Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno reshaped fields like philosophy and critical theory from positions of marginality, yet faced antisemitic quotas, professional downgrading, and internalized "jealousy" toward native scholars' rootedness (Coser, 1984; Leff, 2019). Arendt's (1951) The Origins of Totalitarianism was born from this exilic vantage and exemplifies contrapuntal insight. It analyzes fascism through the lens of displacement. Arendt's position can be read as downplaying or suppressing certain aspects of Jewish identity in favor of a universalist political framework.

These historical episodes illuminate the colonial roots of identity disruption in exile. Postcolonial theorists like Fanon (1963) argue that such displacements replicate the "wretched of the earth" condition, where colonized subjects internalize inferiority amid forced mobility. In the Nazi context, ethnic targeting racialized intellectualism as "degenerate." This is exemplified by Walter Benjamin's suicide while on the way to escaping, and it echoes colonial categorizations of indigenous knowledge as inferior (Mbembe, 2021). Britain's Academic Assistance Council aided over 2,500 scholars, yet economic depression and xenophobia relegated many to menial labor, highlighting migration regimes' selective permeability (Bentwich, 2012). Sadiq and Tsourapas (2021) demonstrate that such migration regimes embody inherited apparatuses of the colonial migration state, which continue to stratify mobility through racialized hierarchies and reproduce symbolic violence in the form of misrecognition of exiles' capital (Bourdieu, 1990). The ambivalence of exile, offering critical distance while at the same time enforcing silence, finds strong echoes in postcolonial literature. For example, in Out of Place (2000a), Edward Said grapples with his identity crisis as a Palestinian American intellectual, weaving together his personal sense of dispossession with wider critiques of imperialism.

Extending to mid-20th-century decolonization, African and Asian scholars displaced by independence struggles or neocolonial interventions faced similar disruptions. Congolese intellectuals exiled during the Lumumba era navigated European universities despite significant barriers to credential recognition, their work systematically reframed through primitivist lenses that portrayed it as inferior or exotic rather than as theoretical knowledge capable of standing alongside European scholarship (Grosfoguel, 2008). This reframing was not incidental but structural: it reproduced the colonial epistemological hierarchy in which European institutions positioned themselves as the universal standard against which all other knowledge systems required evaluation and, invariably, remediation. The pattern repeated across the postcolonial world, from Algerian scholars navigating French universities to South Asian intellectuals whose publications in regional languages were discounted in favor of Anglophone outputs. These legacies demonstrate that the condition of exile is neither ahistorical nor disconnected from the past; rather, it constitutes a continuing line of coloniality whose mechanisms recur across time and geography (Jazeel, 2016). Identity fragmentation caused by family separations, economic insecurity, and cultural erasure gives rise to what Schwartz et al. (2025) call "crisis migration and identity disruption." This is a compelling conceptualization as it brings together psychological trauma and deep structural inequalities. In sum, historical precedents reveal exile as a postcolonial inheritance, setting the stage for contemporary struggles where past disruptions echo in present liminalities.

Contemporary Trajectories

In the contemporary era, the postcolonial condition of scholarly exile has scaled dramatically, driven by protracted conflicts, authoritarian crackdowns, and climate-induced displacements. Europe and North America have served as primary reception sites for waves of displacements from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe (Beaney, 2024). The Syrian civil war erupted in 2011 has displaced over 6.8 million externally (Akkad, 2022; Aydin

& Avincan, 2023; UNHCR 2026). As a result, thousands of academics have been thrust into trajectories defined by entrapment and tentative re-existence. Scholars from institutions such as Damascus University arrive with substantial cultural capital in medicine, engineering, and social sciences (Beaney, 2024). Yet they face sharp contrapuntal dislocations: the devastation of Syrian academia (over 2,000 faculty killed or fled, universities bombed) contrasts with host environments that enforce provisionally through stringent integration requirements (Akkad, 2022; Ghazzoul, 2022). Ethnographic studies reveal language barriers, particularly German proficiency mandates, and credential non-recognition that confine many to "guest" roles, auditing courses without autonomous teaching or research (Avincan et al., 2023; Yarar, 2025). Ethnically, Syrian exiles navigate Arab stereotypes idealized as bearers of ancient heritage yet racialized in Islamophobic contexts (Akkad, 2022). This leads to tokenized knowledge integration and profound identity crises, neither fully Syrian nor assimilated (Ghazal Aswad, 2019; Said, 1978).

Following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, authorities dismissed more than 6,500 academics in a very short period of time. Many continue to face sustained repression, including passport revocations and threats against family members (Özdemir, 2021). In exile in the United States and Germany, these scholars encounter “guest worker” precarity: short-term contracts, exclusion from institutional governance, and pressure to depoliticize research on democracy and minority rights (Vatansever, 2018). Ethnic positioning complicates their experience further. Turkish scholars must navigate the tension between romanticized Ottoman historical legacies and contemporary Western perceptions of an “Islamist threat.” This contradiction intensifies misrecognition. The “dissident” label tends to exoticize rather than empower their work and identity (Yarar & Karakaşoğlu, 2023).

Ukrainian academics displaced by Russia’s 2022 invasion often maintain dual professional lives through remote teaching from Poland or Germany. However, they face significant brain drain risks, with estimates suggesting that 20–30% may not return, as well as confinement to narrow “Slavic studies” silos. These patterns reveal the limits of Western solidarity (Kiselyova & Ivashchenko, 2024, 2025). Afghan scholars, particularly women following the Taliban’s 2021 takeover, confront outright gender-specific bans on education and employment. This has compelled many to seek exile in the United States and Canada, where credential non-recognition and trauma continue to hinder integration and reinforce their subaltern status (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Expanding to Global South contexts, Sudan’s ongoing civil conflict has displaced millions, including a significant proportion of its academic community (Krause, 2020). Academics fleeing the violence enter conditions of highly precarious refuge in neighboring countries where institutional infrastructure is limited and international fellowship programs have minimal reach (Makonye, 2023). Their trajectories underscore the necropolitical logic of displacement: sovereign power determines not only who may live but whose intellectual life is permitted to continue (Mbembe, 2003). In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup dismantled university governance structures, forcing academics into clandestine teaching arrangements and digital exile. Spring University Myanmar, founded in direct response to the coup, delivers online courses and research collaborations that evade junta censorship while sustaining scholarly community across borders (Spring University Myanmar, 2025). By 2025, it had served over 17,000 students and established cross-border partnerships that embody what Mignolo (2011) terms border thinking: knowledge produced from geopolitical margins that refuses subordination to centralized epistemic authority. These cases reveal the postcolonial underpinnings of migration regimes. Restrictive policies continue to privilege Western-aligned habitus and thereby sustain downward mobility and cultural bereavement (Rosenberg, 2022; Eisenbruch, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2025). Gender and ethnic dimensions intersect to reproduce hierarchies as many women and ethnic groups face compounded forms of violence and discrimination. Identities such as Arab, Turkic, Slavic, and Pashtun remain positioned within

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enduring racial and cultural orders. Nevertheless, practices of re-existence persist. Syrian networks engage in heritage preservation and contest dominant narratives from exile (Ghazal Aswad, 2019). Iranian feminist scholar Fatemeh Shams describes exile as a dual condition of profound loss and renewed intellectual voice (CBC Radio, 2026; Shams, 2023).

Postcolonialism and Migration Regimes

The postcolonial condition of scholarly exile demands a robust theoretical framework that integrates identity disruption with the structural violence embedded in contemporary migration regimes. Within postcolonial theory, exile is understood not as an isolated biographical rupture but as part of the enduring afterlife of coloniality. As Sadiq and Tsourapas (2021) argue, migration regimes reproduce inherited imperial mechanisms of control by governing mobility differentially through racialized and epistemic hierarchies. From this perspective, Spivak's (1988) concept of epistemic violence is particularly instructive in revealing how displaced subjects are constituted within dominant discourses. As she notes, "the clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (p. 281). Applied to the contemporary academy, this insight illuminates how humanitarian and academic representations often mediate (and effectively silence) the voices of displaced scholars while obscuring the complicity of host institutions in their marginalization. By constituting the displaced scholar as a perpetual "Other" or a "subject of rescue," the academy risks reinforcing the very exclusions it claims to alleviate.

Complementing this critique, Walter Mignolo (2011) asserts that "decolonial projects imply border thinking. Border thinking is a particular version of diatopical thinking (or pluritopic, if you see problems in being dia-)" (p. 274). For the exiled academic, this points to a mode of delinking from Eurocentric epistemic architectures in order to cultivate knowledge from exilic peripheries. Mbembe's (2021) concept of necropolitics offers a biopolitical lens on displacement grounded in the premise that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p. 66). When these logics are extended to academic career trajectories under conditions of displacement, the result is a professional "fading away" that exceeds mere unemployment. Akkad (2026) formalizes this condition as "academic death," defined as "an extended and entrenched phase of academic poverty, resulting in the cessation of formal scholarly productivity and the erosion of professional identity" (p. 748). Read together, these perspectives expose how Global South intellectuals are simultaneously securitized and rendered provisional, their lives and forms of knowledge governed by sovereign logics of expendability. Together, they provide a cohesive analytical scaffold for understanding the intersecting epistemic, structural, and existential dimensions of scholarly exile in the postcolonial present.

Migration regimes scholarship conceptualizes these systems as colonial migration states: assemblages of state, market, and humanitarian actors that regulate population flows through colonial binaries of deserving versus undesirable migrants (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). These binaries do not merely reflect political preferences; they encode the colonial logic by which some bodies and some knowledge systems are valued as mobile, productive, and integrable while others are rendered provisional, contingent, and in need of remediation. Identity disruption theory complements this structural analysis by addressing the psychological dimensions of exile, including trauma from family separation, economic stressors, and survivor guilt, dimensions that postcolonial frameworks illuminate structurally but do not always address experientially (Schwartz et al., 2025). Akkad's (2026) concepts of academic poverty, academic death, and re-existence serve as descriptive shorthand for a cycle that these intersecting frameworks collectively explain: material impoverishment and symbolic erasure that, under conditions of decolonial agency, can catalyze intellectual resurgence. Ethnic studies

perspectives further highlight how hybrid identities formed in exile become undervalued sites of cultural translation, capable of generating new theoretical possibilities that dominant academic canons have yet to recognize (Hall, 2015).

This integrated theoretical scaffolding illuminates the multifaceted nature of scholarly exile in the contemporary global order. By foregrounding these intersections, the framework not only unmasks the enduring colonial logics that sustain epistemic injustice, downward mobility, and provisional belonging for displaced intellectuals but also reveals exile's latent transformative potential. It calls for concrete shifts in academic institutions and policy. Among them are equitable recognition of qualifications, dedicated support structures that prioritize inclusion over securitization, transnational collaborations that amplify Southern voices, and alternative knowledge platforms that challenge Eurocentric dominance. Ultimately, such an approach moves beyond diagnostic critique toward active decolonial praxis. It positions scholarly exile not merely as a site of loss but as a catalyst for reshaping global higher education into a more pluralistic, just, and epistemically inclusive space.

Barriers to Integration: Labor Markets, Academic Jobs, and Refugee Status

The integration of displaced scholars into the academic and broader labor markets of Europe and North America constitutes one of the most enduring and structurally embedded challenges of contemporary exile (Akkad, 2026; Beaney, 2024). This difficulty is deeply entrenched within institutional and policy frameworks. Initial humanitarian interventions furnish essential support, which encompass temporary fellowships, relocation assistance, and targeted professional development programs. While such measures afford vital entry points and temporary respite, they seldom prove sufficient to surmount the more profound, systemic impediments. These impediments sustain long-term precarity well beyond the immediate crisis phase of displacement (Beaney, 2024).

These barriers are not incidental but structurally embedded in postcolonial migration regimes that sustain imperial hierarchies of mobility, recognition, and belonging. Displaced scholars routinely encounter credential devaluation, discriminatory hiring, bureaucratic entrapment in refugee or asylum-seeker status, and cumulative downward occupational mobility. Akkad (2026) designates this condition “academic poverty” and “academic death,” highlighting material impoverishment and the symbolic erasure of scholarly identity.

This section examines these obstacles in detail. It draws upon ethnographic, sociological, and postcolonial scholarship to provide a deeper analysis. The primary aim is to illuminate the complex ways in which migration regimes, labor market structures, and institutional cultures intersect and reinforce one another. These intersecting elements sustain patterns of exclusion and marginalization for displaced scholars. This exclusion persists even in environments that outwardly project openness, solidarity, and support for integration.

The labor market integration of displaced scholars is profoundly shaped by migration regimes that differentially value bodies and credentials according to colonial legacies and neoliberal criteria of “employability” (Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022). In both Europe and North America, formal recognition of foreign qualifications remains a major bottleneck. In Germany, the equivalence assessment process (Anerkennung) for academic degrees requires displaced scholars to demonstrate equivalence with German academic standards through additional coursework, examinations, or Habilitation-equivalent procedures, even for scholars holding internationally respected PhDs from institutions such as Damascus or Kabul Universities (Akkad, 2026; Beaney, 2024). Rarely analyzed as an exercise of epistemic power, this administrative barrier represents a significant mechanism for devaluing non-Western knowledge. Analyzed through Spivak’s (1988) framework of epistemic violence, the Anerkennung process reveals itself as a bureaucratic enactment of the colonial logic by which Western epistemic standards are constituted as the universal measure against which all other

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knowledge systems must be evaluated and found to require remediation. The Syrian physician who must retake clinical examinations, the Afghan legal scholar who must demonstrate equivalence with German jurisprudence, the Turkish political scientist whose publications in Turkish journals are assessed as non-equivalent to Anglophone outlets: each enacts the constitution of the displaced scholar as Other, not through overt exclusion but through the apparently neutral application of standards that encode the hierarchy they claim merely to measure. The displaced scholar is not told that her knowledge is worthless; she is told, with bureaucratic courtesy, that it requires verification. The effect, as ethnographic accounts consistently document, is that many Syrian and Afghan fellows with advanced degrees are directed toward low-skilled employment or prolonged retraining, occupying spaces of academic poverty where prior expertise is rendered structurally invisible (Akkad, 2022; Avincan et al., 2023; Beaney, 2024; Yarar, 2025).

Downward mobility compounds these exclusions. Schwartz et al. (2025) document how crisis migration disrupts occupational trajectories, leading to economic collapse, loss of professional networks, and eroded self-esteem. For Turkish purged academics, the transition from tenured university positions to temporary adjunct roles or non-academic work represents not only material decline but also a profound ontological shift. This shift consists of the loss of the institutional scaffolding that once affirmed their identity as authoritative knowers (Vatansever, 2018). In the United States and Canada, similar exclusionary patterns emerge for displaced scholars. Visa restrictions severely limit access to academic or research positions. The lack of work authorization during lengthy asylum processing periods creates additional barriers. Employers are often reluctant to hire individuals whose legal status remains uncertain. These combined factors restrict opportunities, even at entry-level academic or research roles. Postcolonial analyses highlight the racialized dimension of these exclusions. Scholars racialized as Arab, Pashtun, or Black African are disproportionately directed into low-wage service sectors or contingent labor arrangements. This channeling mirrors colonial-era labor hierarchies. Those historical hierarchies systematically positioned colonized subjects as manual workers rather than intellectual producers (Grosfoguel, 2008; Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021).

The neoliberalization of academic labor markets further intensifies these dynamics. The casualization of teaching and research positions has become widespread including adjunctification, fixed-term contracts, and grant-dependent precarity (Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022). Such trends foster a climate of structural disincentive, where institutions lack the necessary motivation to fund sustainable integration pathways for displaced scholars. Even when host universities benefit from hosting "at-risk" fellows, the gains remain largely symbolic. Temporary placements contribute to diversity metrics and internationalization rankings. Yet institutions rarely convert these roles into tenure-track positions and thus displaced scholars are left in a state of managed provisionality (Yarar, 2025).

Extending beyond mere financial instability, this precarity is existential in nature, as prolonged exclusion from the scholarly community inevitably accelerates "academic death." This process involves the symbolic extinguishing of one's professional self, which occurs through enforced idleness or forced adaptation to roles that bear little resemblance to prior expertise (Akkad, 2026). The academic job market presents particularly critical barriers, rooted in both structural constraints and subtle forms of epistemic and cultural gatekeeping. Tenure-track positions remain scarce across Europe and North America; with competition intensified by the casualization of academic labor and the prioritization of candidates whose habits align closely with dominant Western academic doxa. This doxa includes publication records in high-impact English-language journals, familiarity with grant-writing protocols, and mastery of disciplinary conventions shaped by Northern epistemes (Matin et al., 2021). Displaced scholars, whose prior work may have been published in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, or Ukrainian outlets, or whose research agendas were shaped by local political urgencies, frequently find their CVs

misrecognized or pathologized as "non-equivalent" or "underdeveloped" (Yarar & Karakaşoğlu, 2023).

Institutional gatekeeping operates through multiple channels. Peer-review processes, editorial boards, and hiring committees remain overwhelmingly dominated by scholars trained in Western institutions (Jazeel, 2016). This reproduces citation cartographies that marginalize non-English scholarship and area-specific expertise unless framed through Northern theoretical lenses (Mignolo, 2011). Language requirements, particularly the demand for near-native proficiency in the host-country language for teaching positions, further exclude otherwise qualified candidates. For Ukrainian scholars in Germany or Poland, the expectation of rapid German or Polish acquisition compounds the trauma of displacement, while Afghan women scholars report gendered barriers, including skepticism about their ability to teach in male-dominated departments or assumptions about cultural incompatibility (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Mental health consequences are also significant. Prolonged job precarity exacerbates survivor guilt, isolation, and identity fragmentation, as scholars internalize failure as personal rather than structural (Schwartz et al., 2025). The pressure to perform resilience, which is common in humanitarian narrative, further silences expressions of distress. This very much aligns with Spivak's (1988) critique of how subaltern subjects are compelled to speak within the terms of dominant discourses. Yet some scholars succeed in securing permanent positions through targeted fellowships that transition to lectureships or through advocacy networks that challenge hiring biases. These exceptions, however, remain rare and do not alter the broader pattern of exclusion.

The bureaucratic and symbolic entrapment of refugee or asylum-seeker status constitutes perhaps the most enduring barrier to integration. While refugee status confers certain protections under international law, it also imposes liminality. Prolonged asylum processing delays access to full labor rights, family reunification, and citizenship pathways. In Germany, for example, many Philipp Schwartz fellows remain on temporary residence permits tied to fellowship duration, creating uncertainty about long-term stability (Yarar, 2025). Refugee scholars granted international protection are barred from participating in international exchange programs, since any change of residence would lead to the revocation of their refugee status under current legal provisions. This restriction applies to schemes such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), whose mobility rules typically require researchers to relocate to a new host country. The same limitation prevents them from accessing the labor market in neighboring countries. In the United States, asylum backlogs can extend for years, during which scholars are barred from federal funding or certain academic roles requiring permanent residency.

Symbolically, the refugee label reduces complex scholarly identities to a singular narrative of vulnerability, reinforcing what Liisa Malkki (1995) termed the "speechlessness" of refugees in humanitarian discourse. This reductionism intersects with postcolonial racialization. Scholars from Muslim-majority or conflict-affected regions are often framed as perpetual "guests" whose gratitude is demanded in exchange for protection. Moreover, their critiques of host foreign policies or migration regimes are muted (Spivak, 1988). Cultural bereavement such as grief over lost homeland, language, and community, further entrenches liminality. Scholars struggle to reconcile their intellectual selves with the bureaucratic category of "refugee" (Eisenbruch, 1991).

These barriers are not insurmountable in every case. Humanitarian programs can facilitate pathways to integration; for example, SAR placements often include career advising and PSI stipends that support language training. However, their temporary nature and limited scale mean that many scholars remain trapped in cycles of precarity. The cumulative effect is a prolonged state of in-betweenness: scholars are neither fully integrated as colleagues nor

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abandoned as mere refugees but are held in a condition of managed provisionality that aligns with neoliberal governance and postcolonial control.

Resistance, Re-Existence, and Pathways to Renewal

Despite the formidable structural barriers delineated above, displaced scholars are neither passive objects of migration regimes nor mere recipients of humanitarian benevolence. Rather, they actively negotiate, subvert, and reconfigure their positionalities through sustained practices of resistance and solidarity-building. Akkad (2026) conceptualizes this as "academic re-existence," a decolonial modality of being that refuses complete assimilation into the normative terms of host institutions. At the same time, it reclaims scholarly agency in spaces that lie outside or in tension with dominant academic structures. These practices move beyond romanticized ideas of heroic individualism or simple pragmatic survival. They represent deliberate epistemic and spatial interventions that challenge the postcolonial logics of provisionality, compulsory gratitude, and subaltern silencing. This section examines the main modalities of such resistance, including autonomous intellectual networks, digital counter-spaces, collective advocacy, and reflexive theorizing of displacement. It then turns to the institutional and regime-level transformations needed to move beyond managed liminality toward genuine epistemic parity and pluriversal knowledge production in European and North American academies.

Among the most enduring forms of resistance has been the emergence of autonomous intellectual networks and digital platforms initiated and sustained by displaced scholars themselves. These initiatives often operate in parallel to, or in explicit tension with, humanitarian fellowship structures. As a result, they enable continued knowledge production, pedagogy, and critical debate that remain free from the short-term limits of grants and the performative demands of gratitude narratives. The Off-University project, established in 2017 by purged Turkish academics in collaboration with international partners, stands as a paradigmatic example. As an open-access, anonymous online platform, Off-University delivers interdisciplinary courses on critical theory, gender studies, minority rights, authoritarianism, and neoliberal precarity (Çekiç, 2024). This approach serves as a deliberate strategy to circumvent institutional gatekeeping, state censorship, and neoliberal performance metrics (Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022). In doing so, it repositions displaced intellectuals as autonomous thinkers rather than indebted beneficiaries (Vatansever, 2018). As of early 2026, Off-University continues to convene regular seminars that explicitly connect Turkish exile experiences to broader global critiques of repression and academic casualization. Through these efforts, it generates transnational solidarities that disrupt conventional host–periphery binaries and sustain intellectual life beyond the confines of provisional inclusion.

A parallel initiative is the Invisible University for Ukraine (IUFU), coordinated by Central European University and a consortium of partners (Sereda et al., 2024). IUFU creates intensive transnational learning environments that centre key questions of pluralism, war, democracy, and the public sphere. Its fourth Winter School was held in Budapest from 11 to 17 January 2026 under the theme "Coping with Difference: Unity, Plurality, and the Public Sphere in Wartime." The event convened fifty selected participants from the IUFU student cohort, together with exiled Ukrainian scholars and international peers. They came together to reflect critically on wartime experiences and to contribute meaningfully to postwar cultural and societal reconstruction (Sereda et al., 2024; Central European University, 2026). Such efforts embody Foucault's (2007) notion of counter-conduct: practices that refuse the governmental rationality of pastoral rescue and assert alternative modes of self-governance, including the right to produce and disseminate knowledge beyond the temporal and institutional confines of fellowship programs.

Digital counter-spaces have proliferated across other contexts. Spring University Myanmar (SUM), founded in response to the 2021 military coup, continues to deliver online courses and research collaborations that evade junta censorship while linking exiled Burmese scholars with regional and global networks (Lall et al., 2025). By 2025–2026, SUM has expanded its virtual schools, faculty, and partnerships, serving over 17,000 students and supporting cross-border solidarity amid ongoing conflict (Spring University Myanmar, 2025).

Informal networks among Syria, Afghan, and Sudanese academics similarly sustain research agendas on heritage preservation, human rights, and social justice, frequently generating scholarship that directly interrogates Western complicity in regional conflicts and epistemic hierarchies (Akkad, 2022; Axyonova et al., 2022; Ghazal Aswad, 2019; Makonye, 2023). While these platforms remain resource-constrained, vulnerable to digital surveillance, funding volatility, and unequal access, they nonetheless disrupt the moral economy of academic humanitarianism by insisting that exiled scholars are not passive recipients of aid but active theorists capable of challenging the field's doxa from its margins.

Resistance further manifests through collective advocacy and reflexive theorizing of displacement. Edited volumes, such as Babo and Akhlaq's (2025) Exiled Scholars in Western Academia: Refugees or Intellectuals, compile first-person narratives which expose the paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Relocated Ukrainian university initiatives have produced detailed spatial-temporal mappings of displacement trajectories, covering multiple waves since 2014 (Kiselyova & Ivashchenko, 2024, 2025). These efforts transcend documentation to theorize exile as a critical vantage point from which to interrogate neoliberal academia, geopolitical complicity, and the paternalistic limits of humanitarian discourse.

Iranian feminist scholar Fatemeh Shams has articulated exile's ambivalent character: a site of profound loss that simultaneously enables renewed political voice and feminist critique of both origin and host regimes (CBC Radio, 2026; Shams, 2023). Tunisian fellows supported by SAR have likewise leveraged their positions to examine democratic backsliding at home while reflecting critically on silencing mechanisms within Western institutions (Scholars at Risk, 2026). Such reflexive interventions align with Spivak's (1988) strategic deployment of subaltern positionality, not to speak univocally "for" the subaltern but to create conditions in which subaltern critiques become legible within dominant discursive fields.

Solidarity Academies, the Exile Academy, and other informal collectives further amplify these voices through webinars, reading groups, and co-authored publications that position displaced scholars as lead authors rather than mere informants (Özcan, & Coşar, 2024). These practices subvert the conventional international division of intellectual labor, in which exiled scholars supply "local" empirical data while host academics furnish "universal" theory (Axyonova et al., 2022). By demanding epistemic parity, they actively perform Mignolo's (2011) "border thinking," which consists of knowledge generated from geopolitical and existential margins that refuses subordination to Eurocentric canons.

Autonomous digital platforms, transnational networks, and reflexive theorizing enable exiled scholars to preserve intellectual agencies and challenge exclusionary regimes, yet these efforts remain fragile due to funding instability, surveillance risks, uneven digital access, and reliance on volunteer labor. True epistemic justice requires fundamental structural reform rather than mere temporary inclusion. Such reform involves shifting from short-term fellowships to stable, long-term academic positions which must be supported by streamlined credential recognition, transitional funding, and accelerated procedures for citizenship and family reunification. Only through these measures can the condition of managed liminality be ended. Curricula, hiring, and peer review require decolonization, integrating displaced scholars' insights on authoritarianism, postcolonial state formation, and feminist resistance into core canons rather than confining them to area studies or token diversity. The symbolic violence of refugee status and gratitude norms must be dismantled through expedited asylum, culturally sensitive mental health support for bereavement and survivor guilt, and open reckoning with

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Western complicity without demanding silence. Host institutions should redistribute capital by involving exiled scholars in governance, curriculum design, and funding decisions, making their contrapuntal border thinking a central driver of reform. In an era of rising forced displacement and threats to academic freedom, epistemic justice envisions a pluriversal academy where diverse knowledge coexists without hierarchy. Exiled scholars' contrapuntal geographies diagnose the crisis and chart renewal, transforming exile's unhealable rift into the foundation of a just, inclusive intellectual commons that rejects both assimilation and abandonment.

Conclusions

The postcolonial condition of scholarly exile in Europe and North America exposes a constitutive tension within contemporary academic regimes. Displaced scholars occupy a liminal position. They are physically relocated yet epistemically and professionally suspended. Humanitarian discourse symbolically welcomes them, while material conditions confine them to temporariness and conditional belonging. Through contrapuntal consciousness, they perceive a disjunction between Western academia's universalist claims and lived realities of exclusion and misrecognition. This disjunction reflects the ongoing operation of postcolonial migration and knowledge regimes that structure mobility, recognition, and intellectual value through colonial hierarchies of race, epistemology, and life.

This liminal condition is not merely a passive state of suspension; it generates the very contrapuntal awareness that displaced scholars mobilize to challenge the disjunction they perceive. Protection programs, while vital in sustaining intellectual continuity and personal safety, often reinforce the temporariness and conditional belongings described above, managing rather than resolving the underlying tension. Exile thus becomes neither domination nor mere loss, but a site from which scholars assert the legitimacy of their in-between position, refusing full assimilation into dominant norms and passive marginalization within host structures.

The contrapuntal consciousness that emerges from this liminal position is not simply a psychological response to the trauma of dislocation; it functions as a rigorous intellectual methodology that allows the displaced scholar to critique both the lost home and the new host environment simultaneously. The same conditions that produce marginalization generate the conditions for its contestation: exclusion produces contrapuntal vantage, the contrapuntal vantage produces the critique, and the critique produces the counterinstitution that reveals the contingency of the arrangements that exclusion sought to naturalize. Off-University, Spring University Myanmar, the Invisible University for Ukraine: these are not acts of survival alone but acts of theory, demonstrating that academic community is not contingent on state recognition or territorial stability. Addressing scholarly exile therefore requires not incremental reform but a fundamental reconfiguration of academic geographies and migration infrastructures. This includes durable pathways from short-term fellowships to permanent academic positions, fair and automatic credential recognition, faster access to legal security and citizenship, decolonized approaches to curricula, hiring and peer review, and genuine redistribution of institutional power that makes exiled scholars' participants in governance rather than objects of administration. Said's formulation of exile as an unhealable rift need not be the final word. This rift should not be managed as a deficit; instead, it must be viewed as a generative condition for new knowledge and academic visions. Consequently, the exiled scholar is not a problem for the academy to solve, but a resource it has yet to possess the structural humility to acknowledge.

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