

# Fragmented Life: Being a Precarious Academic between Two Continents

## Vida fragmentada: vivir como académica precaria entre dos continentes

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### SUMMARY

A concatenation of short autobiographic fragments vividly portrays the experience of contemporary precarious academic life led between different continents. While the author's relentless journey enables her to learn, research, write, publish, give talks and network with colleagues from different parts of the world, she also experiences the distress that comes with precarity, financial insecurity and the impossibility of planning a future, either in terms of career or personal relationships. One of the main obstacles is finding stable housing to facilitate work and improve personal morale. The fragments illustrate how dependency on people with more resources can create humiliating situations and subservience. The everyday life of a precarious academic is characterised by complexities derived from a lack of the institutional anchorage and material support with which universities provide their permanent staff. As a floating affiliate of academic institutions, the author struggles to secure the interest of permanent staff members and to be treated with professional respect and recognition. The fragments presented demonstrate how little academic institutions and their bureaucracies are prepared to accommodate and support precarious academics appropriately.

**Keywords:** Precarity; Transnationalism; Ethnographic Research; Identity; Relationality; Academia.

### RESUMEN

La concatenación de breves fragmentos autobiográficos proporciona una imagen vívida de la experiencia de la vida académica precaria contemporánea que transcurre entre continentes. Si bien la trayectoria sin pausa de la autora le permite aprender, investigar, escribir, publicar, dar charlas y relacionarse con colegas de diferentes partes del mundo, esta también experimenta la angustia

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que entraña la precariedad, la inseguridad financiera y la imposibilidad de planificar un futuro, tanto en lo que respecta a su carrera como a sus relaciones personales. Especialmente asegurar una vivienda que sea tanto propicia para el trabajo como para la moral personal presenta un gran obstáculo; los fragmentos ilustran cómo la dependencia de personas con más recursos puede venir acompañada de situaciones que implican humillación y servilismo. La vida cotidiana de una académica precaria se caracteriza por las complejidades que acompañan a la falta de anclaje institucional y apoyo material que las universidades sí brindan a su personal permanente. Como afiliada flotante a instituciones académicas, la autora lucha por ganarse el interés de los miembros permanentes del personal y por recibir respeto y reconocimiento como profesional. Los fragmentos presentados demuestran cuán poco las instituciones académicas y sus burocracias están preparadas para acomodar y apoyar adecuadamente a los académicos precarios.

**Palabras clave:** Precariedad; Transnacionalismo; Investigación etnográfica; Identidad; Relacionalidad; Academia.

I began my career as a German graduate of Social Anthropology and Latin American Studies and have worked in universities in the UK, Mexico, Brazil and Germany over many years, researching and teaching students at all levels. I wanted to become an academic because I love reading, researching and writing, and longed to become part of the exciting world of knowledge production. However, during my years of precarious academic work, floating through different academic institutions, it has sometimes been hard to keep on believing in my career. Am I still an academic? I research, read, write, give talks, supervise students, review books and journal articles and attend academic conferences even when I am not on a contract. So what is my professional identity?

The following autobiographic fragments provide insights into the fast-paced staccato life of a precarious academic: no break, no holidays, reapplying, relocating, connecting, disconnecting, leaving, leaving behind, moments of intimacy, disruption and reconnection again. Attempting to grow, build, learn, overcome difficulties and take care of myself in the meantime. There is no safety net to catch me if I fall.

## I. PRECARIETY AND HOUSING

#ACCOMMODATION #INFORMALITY #EXIT

Being a precarious academic has led me to multiple complicated housing situations, many of which I would have done well to get out of. However, as an economically precarious person who relies on informal rental arrangements (as formal tenancy agreements require a permanent work contract), the chances of obtaining a better living arrangement were often low.

#ACCOMMODATION #WHITEPRIVILEGE #LUXURY #LOSSOFDIGNITY #NOAUTONOMY

In Latin America, white privilege has occasionally allowed me to benefit from free accommodation in the spacious apartments of local colleagues, enjoying luxuries such as cleaning services, a lush green yard, an outdoor pool, and the tranquility and security of middle-class neighbourhoods. Coming from Western Europe, nobody guessed

my situation of relative poverty compared to their living standards, or worried that I could steal the expensive electronic gadgets they left lying around. By contrast, back in Europe my living arrangements have often not been adequate for home working, and sometimes pushed the limits of my dignity and personal autonomy. In one of the places I lived in, for example, my landlady did not allow lodgers or their guests to use the toilet after she was in bed. This meant that I had to use a chamber pot after 10 pm (being a late-night worker!) and ask visitors to wee in the garden. Working as a lecturer at the time, I felt humiliated and demoralised about the lack of power I experienced at home.

#ACCOMMODATION #GOINGOUT #NOTREALWORK #NOVALUE #BECOMINGASERVANT

In another flat, where I was sharing with an academic acquaintance with a full-time, permanent university post, I experienced constant non-recognition of my status as a precarious academic. Time and again he insisted on going out to eat or to the cinema, travelling and staying in expensive hotels (my suggestion to go camping was not appealing for someone wanting to enjoy the benefits of a good income). In this housing arrangement, where I was a tenant, I was not allowed to bring guests, a circumstance which would have made it easier for me to socialise whilst avoiding the high costs derived from going out. Perhaps the most striking issue in our relationship had to do with how he undermined my independent research work. For him it was not “real work”, because I had no boss, no supporting institutions, and no funding—it was therefore neither important nor valuable. Consequently, my (self-imposed) time constraints were not taken seriously, and my landlord constantly asked me to run errands for him, such as hanging up his washing, or taking his parcels to the post office.

#THEPRICEOPRECARITY #ULTRAMOBILITY #NOCHEAPDEALS

My ultramobility prevents me from gaining access to cheap housing deals. For instance, I cannot join local housing cooperatives, because it requires a long-term commitment and an application process that can last many months. Nor can I access social housing, sometimes because my short-term monthly income is too high, at other times because the time spent in my new location is too short to be eligible for it (for example, in Germany, one needs to have been a resident for at least six months).

## II. BEING AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

#DOCUMENTATION #UNFUNDEDRESEARCH #ETHICALAPPROVAL #BUSINESSCARDS #STAFFPROFILE  
#EMAILADDRESS

Independent researchers often lack official documentation, which can complicate the research process enormously. Over the past three years I have interviewed numerous civil servants, policy makers, NGO workers and representatives of international organisations. These people are generally well aware of the international standards

for research procedures and requirements, and I have been asked to provide proof of ethical approval, research funding and institutional affiliation. My status has alternated between being temporarily affiliated with an institution and being an independent researcher, and sometimes I could not provide an official business card, despite still having an ongoing affiliation with an institution. I could also not refer interlocutors to an online university staff profile or provide an institutional email address. In some situations I felt that this lack of explicit status made me seem untrustworthy.

#ACCESS #INFRASTRUCTURE #VIRUS

During several of my temporary appointments I have had no access to an infrastructure supplying me with a desktop computer, software, data backup services or computer facilities. If I get a computer virus, for instance, I cannot rely on university IT staff to sort it out for me for free, but have to hire someone privately. I depend on getting these services cheaply, risking being ripped off or having to ask friends. A virus at a time when I have low funds can get me into serious trouble: If I don't manage to rescue teaching materials or student related data, I risk being fired or not being employed again. Borrowing money from friends or family is the only way out of such a situation.

### III. PRECARIETY AND AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

#LOVE #CATS

I love cats. These divine creatures. I've come to realise, however, that most likely I will never be able to live with one. They are territorial animals, a feature that does not go well with constant relocation. Nor is it likely that I will ever be able to afford a house with a garden, and offer them a suitable environment in which they can freely roam and enjoy nature.

#LOVE #INTIMACY

Intimacy in the context of precarity is a hurtful topic. My partner and I have lived together on different continents, sometimes sleeping on the floor, squeezed into my little room in a shared house. At other times we have lived in a spacious, luxurious flat of a university mansion with desks for both of us and access to a beautiful garden. Whenever we are not living on the same continent, we still speak via Skype almost every day, exchanging news and gossip, discussing politics in the different regions, laughing and encouraging each other to carry on when obstacles arise at work or in the family. *Ánimo!*

We do think that despite having had periods of physical distance, we still share an intimate connection. I have had sedentary, full-time academics approach me with prying interest, inquiring about my intimate life as a transnational, ultramobile precarious academic. Wouldn't I want to live with my partner? Don't I miss physical contact? Sure. However, at present I still prefer precarious academic work to more stable

or secure nonacademic work. I may be a fool. My current cost-benefit calculation might change in the future, or opportunities might arise that allow me and my partner to live intimacy differently. For now, this is what we've got, and we're trying to make the best of it living in the most fulfilling way possible.

#GENDER #PRECARIOUSACADEMIC #SEXUALECONOMICSTRATEGIES #BEINGAWIFE #SURVIVE

Browsing through the study programme of a German university recently, it struck me firstly that I knew many of the staff. Secondly, that a considerable number of them were in precarious positions; and thirdly, that some of them could not survive from their academic work, but relied on a better-paid (male) partner who had access to a more stable job. Numerous female precarious academics only survive and maintain their jobs through attaching themselves intimately to a better-off man. It seems that precarious academics rely on sexual-economic strategies of survival just as many other women on low incomes. Should we advise our female students to better search for their *príncipe azul* (prince charming) alongside their studies? To make sure to find with a lawyer, engineer or doctor to secure their future academic careers?

#### IV. PRECARIETY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

#RESEARCH #ETHICS #BEINGAGOODPERSON #EXPLOITER #SHENTEH

Recently, I had the chance to accompany a young anthropologist from a top-ranking United States university during part of her fieldwork. Observing her interactions with locals and meeting them again on my own, I realised how well-known, respected and appreciated she was. Clearly, this had to do with her lovely character and genuine friendliness and helpfulness, but also with something else: the material resources she had access to. After finishing her PhD, she had returned several times to her field site, sometimes bringing small presents from the United States. In conversations with people, it became clear how being perceived as a “good person” was closely linked to frequent visits, continuous engagement with the field site and bringing material goods; whereas long absences, interrupted communication and lack of gifts were perceived as “exploitative”. I usually leave the field telling people that I have no idea when I'll get the chance to come back. There have often been many months, occasionally years, between visits, because I had not managed to save enough money to return to Latin America. If being perceived as a “good person” in the field site implies having the means to return frequently, this requires not only financial means, but also a contractual arrangement that enables longer absences from one's home institution. However, only well-funded research universities allow campus absences in lecture-free periods, and fixed-term fellows are busy applying for new posts between terms anyway. A person who is constantly being uprooted and busy planning the next move whilst coping with an extensive workload has a very small chance to be “good” or ethical in the above sense. Just as Berthold Brecht's (2014: 105) character Shen Teh suggests: it is difficult “to be good while yet surviving” in this world.

#INDEPENDENTRESEARCHER #PRECARIOUSETHNOGRAPHER #OXYMORON #GHOST

The longer I am an independent researcher, the more difficult it has become for me to define the status of my work (is it a postdoctoral project?) and the outputs from it (will I manage to get enough material for a book<sup>2</sup> or only for a few unrelated articles?). When funding enables only short-term stays in different Latin American countries, the original research idea may gradually turn into a series of small research projects, scattered over time and regions. How can a precarious academic produce coherent anthropological work with these funding and time limitations? Ethnography and precarity are incompatible. As ethnographers, we rely on building relationships of mutual trust with people. This is not an easy task, and it requires time, especially in the context of my research on migration and commercial sex, in which actors are being criminalised. The precarious ethnographer is an oxymoron. An impossibility. Not quite human. A ghost whose nature is slippery, evasive, volatile. When she appears, she is almost gone. Always on the move.

#ACCOMMODATION #IDENTITY #NETWORKING #EXCLUSION

When I am doing fieldwork, I can often only afford the very cheapest accommodation in my field sites. This exposes me sometimes to unsafe or inconvenient settings which are not conducive to work. In a recent field site, a small Amazonian town, I had booked a room in a hostel, in which different groups of international students stayed before entering the tropical rain forest for their research projects. The place was safe and central; two positive factors that drew me to it. But the large and constantly changing student groups were extremely noisy, socialising in the common areas until late at night and interrupting my sleep for weeks. However, noise was not the only discomfort. Simple chats over breakfast exposed the ambivalence of my status. As a university lecturer, why was I staying at such a cheap hostel? My mere presence in this place made myself and the narrative of my professional life implausible. While interviewing actors from NGOs, international organisations and foreign universities for my research project, I was repeatedly invited to the same luxurious city centre hotel, a hub for professionals who required comfortable accommodation during their sojourn in the city. The cheapest room there was more than five times the price of my hostel. Staying there was not an option. Because of financial precarity I came across as an awkward and unintelligible figure in my field site, and was excluded from socialising and networking with people at my professional level.

## V. IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

#DESKILLING #NOEXPERT #PROFESSIONALIDENTITY #TRANSNATIONALISM #KNOWLEDGEPATCHWORK

Now, I am a transnational scholar. An expert in being in permanent transit. I em-

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<sup>2</sup> In the German academic context, for instance, a second monograph is essential to obtain a professorship, and thereby a permanent and secure academic position.

body a knowledge patchwork. In my first teaching jobs I was excited and proud to have acquired knowledge from diverse intellectual fields at an incredible speed, and was able to get contracts in five different academic disciplines. Yet in academia breadth is no good — it is depth that counts. Depth is expertise, and expertise is what gets you jobs. Particularly good, permanent jobs. Depth — a lot of knowledge about a few topics — is what is appreciated and paid for on the academic market. I learned and learned, yet continuously devalued myself through my work. Moreover, in practice, academia is not as transcultural and interdisciplinary as one might think. Knowledge canons are still largely composed regionally and in isolation from others, and certain ones are hegemonic. Whenever I work in another country, I learn the contemporary local canon, as anything else would be disrespectful and threaten my status. Rapidly, I absorb huge numbers of articles and books. Sometimes this has been overwhelming. I begin to doubt whether this effort will ever be professionally appreciated.

#ISOLATION #LONELINESS

Happy to have landed a new job, I began my appointment very excited to be in an interesting intellectual environment, surrounded by new people. Eagerly initiating conversations, I soon realised, however, that staff members were fairly unresponsive to my efforts. Over a beer, I recounted this experience to a friend who has had a permanent university position for years. To my bewilderment, she told me that she fully understood the behaviour of my current colleagues. She was herself tired of all the ever-changing temps around her department. Work stress left her with little capacity to keep meeting new colleagues. And what was the point of getting to know a person who only stayed for one trimester? There could be fifteen temps floating through her department over the academic year. Why waste one's energies?

#IDENTITY #DIFFERENCE #JEALOUSY

Whilst enjoying academic life in Latin America greatly, I also felt very different from my local colleagues. Many lived in well-secured *condominios*, had domestic staff to clean their homes, cook delicious meals and bake amazing cakes, freeing up hours for their intellectual work. In their university departments they also had an astonishing number of assistants at their disposal, who could be assigned to do all kinds of administrative work, such as translations, transcriptions and event organising. I remember my amazement at discovering that Brazilian academics (at state universities) had civil servant status, were unsackable and could retire after 30 years of service with full benefits. Certainly nothing comparable would appear on my horizon soon or ever, with United Kingdom universities downgrading more and more “lecturer” positions to “teaching fellows”; with “non-stipendiary research fellowships” popping up on employment websites, and the spectre of the hourly-paid lecturer looming in the near distance.<sup>3</sup> Something

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<sup>3</sup> It is increasingly common for permanent full-time, lectureship positions to be (re)advertised as teaching fellowships, which are generally fixed-term posts downgraded in status, salary and labour conditions, and exclude a research allowance.

we precarious academics are trying to avoid like the plague. The lowest of the low. A dead-end road.

#RESPECT #PROFESSIONALISM

My precarious jobs always force me to start from scratch. I must learn about a new university's standards, administrative procedures, seminar formats, semester schedules, plagiarism rules and tribunal proceedings, internal communication standards, bureaucratic terminology, marking systems, and the knowledge and skill level of students and their preferred ways of learning, while having to prepare new teaching. All of this is totally different in Mexican, Brazilian, German and United Kingdom universities. For instance, a seminar in Brazil lasts up to four hours, filled with intense student debate, with everybody wanting to have a say. In the United Kingdom, a seminar is over in just 55 minutes with students loving swiftly changing short inputs in video and audio formats with little debate in between. Whilst getting more experienced and knowledgeable, I never stop being a beginner. I am always just a step ahead of students. For instance, I get to see the supervision handbook just before my first session with a student. Students notice that I am a newcomer, hence I never experience the benefits and status of someone who knows how it all works, nor am I afforded the respect that is given to more consolidated staff.

#BUREAUCRACY #PRECARITY #HOME

Recently, while completing the paperwork to accept a new university appointment, I realised that bureaucracies have not caught up with the precarious reality of many workers. The concepts of "home" or "permanent address" are taken for granted. Beyond that, one needs to list ALL past appointments, including exact start dates, which is a near impossible task for someone who has been precariously employed for an extended period. All those short-term and parallel jobs impossibly fit into the five lines provided on the form.

## REFERENCES CITED

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