

The Chronopolitics of Migrant Temporalities: Understanding Migrant Experiences of Time, Journey, and Precarity

Gavin Kierulf

Gavin Kierulf is an independent interdisciplinary researcher based in Victoria, Canada. He is interested in intra-actions and intersections between identity, experience, and materiality, interrogating identity and ways of being alongside the spaces, places, and times through which they are lived. Gavin can be reached by email at gavinkierulf@gmail.com and @GavinKierulf on X.

I. INTRODUCTION: CHRONOPOLITICS OF MIGRANT TEMPORALITIES

The treacherous and protracted journeys irregular migrants take force them into situations of unique precarity. These conditions are characterized by the different violences that are perpetrated against them by border regimes, state personnel, and non-state actors. In this state of affairs, border regimes are constituted by “governance through death”, defined as a type of “biophysical violence whereby people are abandoned to the physical forces of deserts and seas, which directly operate on bodily functions with [...] devastating consequences”.¹ This enforced precarity ensures that migrants’ journeys are fractured and disjointed series of events with migrants’ im/mobility and waiting as defining characteristics.²

To better understand the complexities of these journeys, this brief survey of the relevant literature will look at the temporal or *chronopolitical* aspects of irregular migration.³ It thereby concerns itself with the relationship between time and constructions of “irregular” migrants, that is, not migration as an independent social phenomenon, but as a socio-political and legal category.⁴ The irregular migrants with whom this project is concerned are understood

as migrants *made irregular through exception*, through processes of the legal and political mechanisms of a State and its border regime(s). This project seeks to understand the relationship of time to the irregular migratory experience not focusing on any one specific diaspora. By analyzing migrants’ journeys as non-linear, and their subjection to the temporal aspects of im/mobility, the migrant experience becomes one of interrelated temporal moments.⁵ To foreground this analysis further, the contemporary border regime can be characterized by the specific and purposeful obstruction and bifurcation of migration by the State using physical and non-physical barriers (e.g. fences and bureaucratic procedures), direct and indirect violence, and media pressures.

The two questions I aim to answer through this paper are: First, in what ways is a chronopolitical “migrant temporality” constructed through migrants’ unique marginality? And second, how do irregular migrants’ relationships to time serve to (re)victimize and perpetrate multivarious (e.g. emotional, social, economic, and physical) violences against them?

II. CONSTRUCTING MIGRANT CHRONOPOLITICS: FROM QUEER THEORY TO MATRYOSHKA JOURNEYS

To understand the relationship between migrants’ journeys and time, it is vital to understand how time exists as a *political* phenomenon. To facilitate this problematization, this paper draws on the ideas of temporality developed in queer theory and sexuality

studies.⁶ This figuration of “political time” relates to the idea of a “heterotemporality” – time as experienced by non-queer folks – set opposite the specifically queer experiences of “homotemporality”. In contrast to heterotemporality homotemporality is often fraught with delay, absence, and difference as a result of both sociocultural and structural marginalizations.

Migrant temporality is understood through the events, periods, tempi, and rhythms of their journeys.⁷ In much the same way as homotemporality figures in queer lives, irregular migrants’ temporalities are constructed through delays, absences, and difference. These moments of temporal experience, which make up migrant experiences of time, are commonly characterized by advancement – often rushed and frenzied – or they are characterized by deceleration and waiting.⁸

By excavating the spatiotemporalities of migration in this way, it becomes easier to problematize how time, and more specifically *waiting*, is used as a biopolitical tool against migrant bodies.⁹ As Philipson Issac points out, exhaustion, mobilization, and control are all characteristics of mobility as an “indirect tool of governance” which must be understood as a *biopolitical* tool used by the state to regulate migrant bodies through “pushing migrants to relocate, redirecting their routes, and keeping them in a perpetual state of movement”.¹⁰ Additionally, for modern cross-border im/mobility, movement is predicated on the availability of one’s biometric data and its documentation by the relevant border regime. For example, to be entered into EuroDAC (the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database) one’s bio-graphical information is taken and tied to a category of il/legality and thus politico-legal control and surveillance. Just as one’s physical body may be held immobile by border bureaucracy, one’s identifying biometric data (e.g. fingerprints, iris scans, racial/ethnic info etc.) are not tied “to a living and embodied person but to their representation” flowing frictionless through datastreams.¹¹

To better outline the chronopolitical continuities of migrant’s journeys, this paper takes on Brigden and Mainwaring’s concept of “matryoshka journeys”, understood as nested, yet fragmented, moments of

temporal experience.¹² Like nesting matryoshka dolls, these interrelated moments are understood as interlocking instances of frenzied movement and agonizing immobility. The concept captures how migrants rapidly negotiate their mobility and immobility, navigating moments which change rapidly between stalled confinement and frenzied transit. It is in this figuration that we can uncover the complex and interrelated layers of migrants’ negotiations of risk, agency, and time. By referencing these nested and interrelated moments of im/mobility through a chronopolitical lens, we find that a similar relationality between im/mobility and moments of waiting/advancing appears along migrant journeys.

In this chronopolitical analysis of migrants’ matryoshka journeys waiting is both an essential component and a unique characterization of the more subversive biopolitical violences that border regimes enact against migrants.¹³ In migrant temporality, waiting is not a singular span of time. It is instead a contingent temporality, a “persistent present”, in which the “journey” is a social process managed by systems of control and contingent on structural factors and the intersections of identity (e.g. gender, race, class, and sexuality), and the marginalizations that follow.¹⁴ McMahon and Sigona shift focus from border regimes’ control to *resistance*, that is resistances of migrants to the biopolitical control of border regimes and even *death itself*.¹⁵ Importantly, these locales of control/resistance are mediated through the mobilization of time by border regimes against migrants. In this chronopolitical figuration, waiting must not be understood simply as a by-product of a given border regime’s actions, but instead as “a tactic, [and] a management technique to control the inclusion and exclusion of migrants in a territory” (Reneman and Stronks 2021, 306).¹⁶ It should also be noted that the biopolitical control of migrants through time is not limited to waiting. Advancement is also an important factor of this dichotomy of temporal control. Just as time can grind to a halt in detention centers or refugee camps, so too can it be frenzied periods of advancement – for example,

deportations, relocations or ‘fast-track’ asylum processes.¹⁷

Reneman and Stronks’ findings of the (de)prioritization of asylum seeker’s documentation based on probability of success outlines how border regimes’ control of migrant bodies through the regulation of time is a kind of ‘temporal governance’ – that is, “...a governmental strategy to control and discipline migrants by means of time”.¹⁸ Moreover, despite European migration law’s attempts to prevent protracted immigration processes, understanding this temporal governance in terms of ‘governmentality’ uncovers how border regimes use the law not as a set of delimitations, but instead as a set of boundaries around which to form extralegal, and yet not illegal, practices.

Griffiths outlines the temporal control of migrants by bureaucratic process in the UK context.¹⁹ While in the UK there are temporal safeguards in place, such as removal notice periods and granting “timespace” through successful visas, there are also temporal punishments and “time hurdles”. These imposed barriers take on bureaucratic and monetary forms (e.g. processing periods and associated fees), and they can be carceral in nature. The rules of British immigration are purposefully laden with “complex and changing temporal stipulations and deadlines” amounting to a system of temporal governance wherein time is used as a tool to delay and punish just as it can ‘give temporal gifts’ and incentives for “lawful access”.²⁰ It is in border regimes’ dubious “legal” exertion of control over temporal processes of migration that waiting emerges not only as a temporal situation, but also as a phenomenon of violence and (re)victimization. Out of these processes, the temporal governance of migrant-time makes waiting a critical fixture along migrants’ matryoshka journeys, and moreover, within these journeys, waiting can manifest as an almost infinitely elastic phenomenon experienced across different individual and collective strata of migrant life.

III. CHRONOPOLITICS AND THE MULTIVARIOUS VIOLENCES OF WAITING: EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND PHYSICAL

So, with this chronopolitical grounding, how do moments of waiting materialize as violence and serve to (re)victimize migrants? As mentioned above, the waiting that is experienced along migrants’ journeys is a phenomenon that spans multiple experiential strata, occurs on individual and collective spatiotemporal scales, and has a multivarious range of mental/emotional, physical, and economic effects. The emotional toll of waiting, of course, varies widely across contexts and people, its effects being that of uncertainty, anxiety, boredom, dread, desire, or even shame and apathy.²¹ The contexts of age and race can draw out further details of these variations. For example, the (en)forced incarceration and familial separation of child migrants under recent US border policy has and continues to have severe psychological ramifications for young children, however, the *temporal* causes (time away from family, time incarcerated) and effects (the long-term effects of PTSD on child development and socialization) of these policies are less well understood and more research must explore these interactions.²²

In line with the emotional violences of waiting enforced by border regimes are the forms of social violence which occur. Looking at examples from the lives of queer migrants demonstrates the acute social isolation they often experience. This social alienation only becomes more exacerbated by long protracted stays in unwelcoming environments. For genderqueer migrants, protracted processes of waiting can force them into scenarios of criminalization due to the lack of support networks, discrimination, and precarious employment they face. In this way, waiting forces more acute precarity on their already marginal identities. Through the social violences of waiting, queer migrants’ precariousness is layered with a range of other vulnerabilities, such as a lack of access to healthcare, housing, and employment, culminating in further isolation and even (preventable) deaths.²³

The corporeal and physical violences waiting enacts against migrants can be seen in the interrelated aspects of migrants' temporal immobility and physical immobility. Along their (dis)continuous and nested matryoshka journeys, migrants can experience situations of temporal im/mobility such as in protracted stays in so-called "safe-houses" along smuggling routes. Stays in safe houses can last from hours to months with no indication of what the duration will be.²⁴ Time can also stretch and compress unexpectedly along with the physical space one is forced into, as when a four-hour trip in an over-full car suddenly becomes a treacherous day-and-a-half hike on foot through a smuggler's change of plans.²⁵ Migrants' journeys can paradoxically be at once mobile and *immobilized*, being crammed in tiny hidden chambers in moving vehicles, packed tightly with other migrants, forced to wait immobilized while still *in transit* (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016).²⁶

The last aspect this review will explore of waiting's multivarious violences enacted against migrants along their complex journeys is that of economic precarity. Migrants who spend months or years seized by the carceral structures of border regimes may be unable to carry out the work they might have done or hoped to do in a host country. After deportation, returning to the economic situations they left to finding meaningful work may be impossible due to advanced age or trauma suffered along their journeys. Because of their protracted experiences of time, being caught within the recursive loops of border regimes, many migrants are rendered unemployable – at home and abroad.²⁷ Additionally, the precarity of waiting for legal status – or waiting in hopes their lack of status is never discovered – makes many migrants an easily exploitable pool of labor. In this way the structures of capital work in concert with border regimes through the easy extraction of different forms of surplus value from the conditions of temporal and legal precarity which migrants are forced into. Waiting can also have economic spillover effects for the families of migrants undertaking these journeys. Family members often rely on remittances sent from migrant relatives for things such as food, rent,

schooling, and other subsistence activities.²⁸ These conditions of waiting can therefore transfer across borders and across bodies to those socioeconomically tied to the migrant subject. As border regimes force migrants to wait, so too are those who rely on them waiting for material or non-material remittances.²⁹ When understanding migrants' journeys through a chronopolitical lens, the ways in which border regimes engage in temporal governance can be uncovered. This chronopolitical perspective better elucidates the instrumentalization of waiting on the part of border regimes as a biopolitical strategy and its effects on migrants in socioeconomic, physical, and psychological ways. Moreover, these impacts expand beyond migrant bodies to those around them – to those who rely on them and love them.

The acute precarity which migrants face across their journeys is therefore only exacerbated by this use of waiting as a tool through the 'temporal governance' of modern border regimes. These instances of waiting are congruous with the matryoshka nature of migrants' journeys overall, being non-linear, nested, and elastic series of interrelated temporal moments. Moreover, these moments can become intertwined with notions of im/mobility, and form a dichotomous relationship with moments of advancement along these journeys as well. Waiting, as a temporal phenomenon enacted against migrant bodies by border regimes, also produces unique and acute violences against them – psychologically, socioeconomically, and physically. Temporal governance is a chronopolitical process made possible by border regimes maintaining the separations between "settled" and "migrant" temporalities which, through cycles of deportation, (de)prioritization, and carcerality, sustains waiting as a fixture of migrants' journeys, and their (re)victimization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Shirin Shahrokni for her invaluable guidance through the initial stages of this project, without whom it would never have left my hard-drive.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. 514 in Squire, V. 2017. Governing Migration through Death in Europe and the US: Identification, Burial and the Crisis of Modern Humanism. *European Journal of International Relations*, 23 (3): 513–32. See also McMahon, S. & Sigona, N. 2021. Death and Migration: Migrant Journeys and the Governance of Migration during Europe's 'Migration Crisis'. *International Migration Review*, 55 (2): 605–628.
- [2] Khosravi, S. 2011. *Illegal Traveller : An Auto-Ethnography of Borders*. Palgrave Macmillan; Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016. Matryoshka Journeys: Im/Mobility during Migration. *Geopolitics*, 21 (2): 407–34; Hassan, A. & Björklund, L. 2016. The Journey to Dreamland never Ends: A Refugee's Journey from Somalia to Sweden. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35 (2): 116–36.
- [3] Cwerner, S. B. 2000. The Chronopolitan Ideal: Time, Belonging and Globalization. *Time & Society*, 9 (2-3): 331–345; Jacobsen, C.M. & Karlsen, M. 2021. Introduction: Unpacking the Temporalities of Irregular Migration. Pp. 1 – 19 In Jacobsen, C.M., Karlsen, M. & Khosravi, S. (eds.). *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. Routledge.
- [4] Düvell, F. 2011. Paths into Irregularity: The Legal and Political Construction of Irregular Migration. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 13 (3): 275–95.
- [5] Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016; Hassan, A. & Björklund, L. 2016.
- [6] Halberstam, J. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Bodies*. New York University Press; Ahmed, S. 2011. Happy Futures, Perhaps. Pp. 159 – 182 In McCallum, E.L. & Tuhkanen, M. (eds.). *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*. State University of New York Press; Fabbre, V. D. 2014. Gender Transitions in Later Life: A Queer Perspective on Successful Aging. *The Gerontologist*, 55 (1): 144–53.
- [7] Jacobsen, C.M. & Karlsen, M. 2021.
- [8] Khosravi, S. 2011; Reneman, M. & Stronks, M. 2021. What Are They Waiting For? The Use of Acceleration and Deceleration in Asylum Procedures by the Dutch Government. *Time & Society*, 30 (3): 302–31.
- [9] Awan, N. 2020. Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime. *Media Theory*, 4 (2): 139–58.
- [10] P. 316 in Philipson Isaac, S. 2024. *Temporal Dispossession: The Politics of Asylum and the Remaking of Racial Capitalism in and beyond the Borders of the Swedish Welfare State*. University of Gothenburg.
- [11] P. 144 in Awan, N. 2020.
- [12] P. 11 in Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016.
- [13] Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016; Awan, N. 2020.
- [14] Awan, N. 2020. Khosravi, S. 2021. Waiting, a state of consciousness. Pp. 202–207 in Jacobsen, C.M., Karlsen, M. & Khosravi, S. (eds.). *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. Routledge.
- [15] P. 622 in McMahon, S. & Sigona, N. 2021.
- [16] P. 306 in Reneman, M. & Stronks, M. 2021.
- [17] Griffiths, M. 2013. Living with Uncertainty: Indefinite Immigration Detention. *Journal of Legal Anthropology*, 1 (3): 263–86. Griffiths, M. 2014. Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40 (12): 1991–2009; Andersson, R. 2014. Time and the Migrant Other: European Border Controls and the Temporal Economics of Illegality. *American Anthropologist*, 116 (4): 795–809; Khosravi, S. 2014. Waiting: Keeping Time. Pp. 52 – 72 In Anderson, B. and Keith, M. (eds.). *Migration: A COMPAS Anthology*, COMPAS; Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016
- [18] P.32 in Reneman, M. & Stronks, M. 2021.
- [19] Griffiths, M. 2017. The Changing Politics in the UK's Immigration System. Pp. 48–60 In Mavroudi, E., Page, B. & Christou, A. (eds.). *Timespace and International Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [20] Pp. 56–57 in Griffiths, M. 2017.
- [21] Jacobsen, C.M. & Karlsen, M. 2021.
- [22] Mattingly, T. J., Kiser, L., Hill, S., Briggs, E.C., Purbeck, C., Zafar Zafari, T. & Betancourt, T. 2020. Unseen Costs: The Direct and Indirect Impact of U.S. Immigration Policies on Child and Adolescent Health and Well-Being. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 33; Hampton, K., Raker, E., Habbach, H., Camaj Deda, L., Heisler, M. & Mishori, R. 2021. The Psychological Effects of Forced Family Separation on Asylum-Seeking Children and Parents at the US-Mexico Border: A Qualitative Analysis of Medico-Legal Documents. *Plos One* 16 (11).
- [23] Shakhari S. 2014. The Queer Time of Death: Temporality, Geopolitics, and Refugee Rights. *Sexualities*, 17 (8): 998–1015; Nakamura, N. & Morales, A. 2016. Criminalization of Transgender Immigrants: The Case of Scarlett. Pp. 48–61 In Furman, R., Lamphear, G. & Epps, D (eds.). *The Immigrant Other: Lived Experiences in a Transnational World*. Columbia University Press.
- [24] Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016.
- [25] Hassan, A. & Björklund, L. 2016.
- [26] Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016.
- [27] Awan, N. 2020.
- [28] Jacobsen, C.M. 2021. 'They said wait, wait – and I waited': The power chronographies of waiting for asylum in Marseille, France. Pp. 40–56 in Jacobsen, C.M., Karlsen, M. & Khosravi, S. (eds.). *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. Routledge.
- [29] Brigden, N. & Mainwaring, C. 2016. Khosravi, S. 2021.

© 2024 Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.