



Arrested Refugee Mobilities Author(s): Gerhard Hoffstaedter

Source: *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (November 2019), pp. 521-546

Published by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26798883>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26798883?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*

JSTOR

Arrested Refugee Mobilities: Optics as Bordering Techniques in Malaysia

Gerhard Hoffstaedter

The concepts of mobility and optics have become important tropes for our understanding of how human movement across borders and within countries is increasingly shaped by bordering techniques. Focusing on three ethnographic case studies, I argue that refugees in Malaysia have their mobility arrested through a range of optics acting upon them. Depending on socio-economic background, ethnicity and religion, they find varying self-protection methods to make life in the present bearable and the future imaginable and viable. Refugees face an array of bordering techniques in Malaysia, such as surveillance by the state, in some cases by their home country, by their own refugee community and self-surveillance.

Keywords: mobilities, refugees, Malaysia, asylum, protection, surveillance, Rohingya, Chin.

Mobilities, Migration and Bordering Techniques

Some social scientists have identified a ‘mobilities turn’ (Urry 2007), whilst noting the rejection of a “‘sedentarist metaphysics’ (Malkki 1992) in favour of a ‘nomadic metaphysics’ (Cresswell 2006)” (Salazar and Smart 2011, p. ii). The concepts of mobility/mobilities and optics have become important tropes for our understanding of how human movement across borders and within countries is increasingly shaped by bordering techniques. Literature on the movement of irregular migrants/asylum seekers/refugees often—but not always—focus on an examination of borders and bordering techniques (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019). They ask how borders are experienced

and investigate border crossings as essential or defining elements of migration journeys. The approaches to such border studies can be split into two categories. The first sees borders examined as spaces defined by individual mobilities and the processes that enable or constrain them, and which reflect broader geopolitical dynamics. The second is the exploration of the individual embodied processes through which such spaces are negotiated and constituted. To address the first category, there is a body of literature that explores how architectures of mobility control at borders are reflective and part of explorations of broader geopolitical issues—state and sovereignty, identity and citizenship, et cetera (for example, see Ashutosh and Mountz 2012). Within this literature, borders are increasingly seen not as places that exist in isolation but as sites constituted through processes that constrain or enable the movement of people, information and capital (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, p. 295; Hyndman and Walton-Roberts 2000, p. 249). This can perhaps be seen as a reflection of a growing recognition of the inadequacy of “the dichotomous border (us-them, inside-outside)” (Rumford 2010, p. 953). For Kalir, Sur and van Schendel (2012, p. 16), the inadequacies of such categories are systemic and inherent to migration processes and state responses—the fluidity with and friction through which people move between borders represents “ongoing practical negotiations to establish social order”. Studies of migration therefore become the study of “millions of mobile people who live in the dim interface between legality and illegality” (Kalir, Sur and van Schendel 2012, p. 18). Gill, Caletrío and Mason further echo this by exploring how borders, constituted by mobility processes, are increasingly “spaces of uncertainty” (2011, p. 313). Wong and Tan (2012, p. 75) broaden the experience or act of ‘border-crossing’ to transnational spaces, drawing on discursively constituted “transnational Islamic space or zone of migration governed by the practices of illiberal state and shared Muslim hospitality”. In drawing on similar post-structural or ‘non-textual’ approaches to space construction, Vigh (2009, p. 420) offers the concept of ‘navigation’ as a means of understanding individual practice within such shifting or uncertain social settings;

that is that “we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move as we move along”. For Vigh, social navigation

emphasizes the fact that our lives are set in moving environments and the image of immobility or petrifyingly slow processes of change that generally flaw our ideas of social formations and space needs to be replaced by ‘an image of complex mobilities’ and ‘convergence of waves and currents’ (Lefebvre 1991, pp. 91–92) (2009, p. 434).

This metaphor is powerful as it draws our attention to not just the mobility of persons but also to the mobilities of environments, that is the spaces we inhabit. And for Lefebvre (1991), this includes the conceived space that is planned by policymakers and technicians, built and modified accordingly, and which presents us with ever-changing scenarios, shifting contexts and new conditions. Refugees and asylum seekers inhabit such a precarious space in which they are subjected to moving goalposts and to changes to promises made by politicians and to policies that directly and indirectly affect their lives. The environment changes around them, and they must adapt and move to align with the new conditions. Sometimes they are forced to literally move their bodies and belongings; sometimes they must move their expectations, hopes and dreams.

There is also an extensive literature that explores the subjectivities and personal aspects of migration experiences—Burrell (2008, p. 353), drawing on the new mobilities paradigm argues for borders as sites for analysing human mobility by seeing the political in the personal by examining “implications of large-scale political constructions for individual mobilities”, but also the inverse, how personal experiences of mobility can be transgressive or challenging of authorities that order mobilities. Feminist approaches in particular view the body as a scale of analysis through which border crossings may be highly gendered (Silvey 2005, p. 142), and they examine how individual mobilities “both reflect and reinforce power ... the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine

the power of others” (Massey 1994, p. 150). As Salazar and Smart (2011, p. iv) note, ‘border crossings’ as a form of mobility are the exception rather than the norm and that for much of the world’s population, borders are sites of constraint and waiting rather than movement or hypermobility. Within the new mobilities approach, increasing attention has been given to stillness (Bissell 2007) and borders as key sites of ‘waiting’ (Cresswell 2012, p. 648). Martin (2011, p. 199) suggests that the embodied journeys of asylum seekers are punctuated by periods of ‘turbulent stillness’—moments or periods of waiting, “divest of its cosmopolitan connotations of respite and calm” and characterized by uncertainty and instability. He draws particular attention to the waiting bodies of asylum seekers who transit (and may die) in shipping containers—but notes that such periods of turbulent stillness also often occur at the border, in a refugee camp or even within destination countries as asylum seekers engage with the bureaucratic mechanisms of security, citizenship and the ‘politics of filtration’. McNevin and Missbach (2018) draw attention to the confluence of spatial and temporal dimensions of border control in Indonesia, where refugees are made to wait ‘in luxury’ indefinitely. This is also a reality in Malaysia, where some refugee communities and individuals have been waiting for several decades, not always in stillness, but certainly without a voice that can punctuate international, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or Malaysian government policy towards refugees. This article chronicles how refugees are subject to and are often ill-informed about the processes, such as UNHCR registration or Malaysian government policies, acting upon them.

To document these issues and the lives of undocumented refugees in Malaysia, I conducted extensive fieldwork in Malaysia over the past ten years, with a prolonged one-year-fieldwork period from 2015 to 2016. Research assistants and interpreters from the refugee communities were utilized to facilitate interviews in the preferred language (many Chin speak several community languages as well as Burmese and English). Participant observation included living with refugees and taking part in their private lives by staying with and

visiting several communities, families and individuals. Interviews and field notes were transcribed and I undertook a thematic analysis to identify and detail themes. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, many of whom remain in legal limbo in Malaysia, I created composite identities—identities based on real interview data but not directly attributable to one interlocutor (Lipson 1997). I did so to protect the identities and identifiable attributes of refugees, as some continue to be in danger in Malaysia from persecution by their home governments or local interested parties. In what follows, I focus on urban refugees based on fieldwork conducted in Peninsular Malaysia with a range of refugee communities—namely, Iranian, Chin and Rohingya who mostly inhabit localized areas in and around Kuala Lumpur. I chose these three refugee communities as they represent three distinct refugee experiences based on their class, religious and ethnic backgrounds, which have profound impacts on their mobilities and, as we will see, the optics they are subject to. Next, I engage the literature on optics to explain how these refugees in Malaysia are subject to and subject themselves to increasingly complex optics to capture and account for their presence.

New Optics: Bordering Techniques Controlling Human Movement

The use and study of optics has received renewed interest, in part as a result of large irregular migration to Northern Europe, North America and Australia in the political West, as well as other irregular migration streams through or to transit countries in those regions. Drawing on Foucault, Urry (2007, p. 49) notes that the movement of populations has always been a concern to modern nation states as they seek to govern populations “in, across and beyond” territory and that this governing requires “a form of surveillance control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods” (Foucault 1991, p. 92, cited in Urry 2007, p. 49). Foucault has been a critical influence on research in this area based on his exploration of the panopticon as a disciplinary mechanism (Haggerty 2006). However, the panopticon model of “securing and

perpetuating social order” ended with the demise of the factory and the mass army (Boyne 2000, p. 286). For, as Bauman argues, modern states do not discipline through indoctrination or policing, but increasingly create social integration through seduction and advertising (Bauman 1998, p. 23). Broeders further challenges the utility of the panopticon as a metaphor for examining state control of human movement noting that:

(1) the objects of surveillance are mobile and not bound to classical panoptic institutions, (2) surveillance is used for social sorting, rather than control of the ‘socially sorted’ and (3) the aim of surveillance is exclusion rather than correction (Broeders 2009, p. 34).

Thus, the border becomes the focus for the state to restrict entry into the body politic. Modern Europe, according to Engbersen (2001, p. 242) has placed the panopticon (‘of exclusion’, rather than discipline) at the borders, where passports and, increasingly, biometric data frame entry (Amoore 2006; Amoore and Hall 2009). Yet, borders remain permeable, even if they are rearmed and fortified, such as along the Mexico-US border and along the Eastern verges of the European Union. As a result, the state increasingly surveils the internal borders of public institutions to exclude illegal migrants from public services (Van der Leun 2003).

In light of these critiques, post-panopticalist explorations of optics take the central metaphor of the panopticon—sight—as the point of departure, but move on from statist and sedentary optics. In recognizing the gaze of the state as incomplete, fractured and contested, optics has become a study of how power operates through and within the interplay of visibility and invisibility (Whyte 2011, p. 19) or the politics of in/visibility (Borren 2008, p. 231). In their discussion of invisibility, Polzer and Hammond (2008, p. 417) explore this dynamic by asking the essential questions: “invisible to whom, in what ways and why”. They have questioned the notion of the panoptic state in regard to controlling the movement of asylum seekers, refugees and irregular or undocumented migrants—this has involved a recognition of the multiple and recursive gazes beyond a

binary and linear ‘watcher and watched’ dichotomy. ‘Social optics’, as Amster (2008, p. 181) notes in his study of the Malaysian-Indonesian border, are often layered and multiple at sites of control.

Recent research that uses optics or the metaphor of sight as a framework has explored the ways in which states render asylum seekers, refugees and irregular or illegal migrants visible or invisible to different actors (the public, other parts of the state, the international community, the media, or researchers) by design or neglect. Some of this research has also examined how these marginalized groups respond to their (in)visibility through specific strategies. Broeders (2009) has shown that states seek to render ‘irregular migrants’ in Europe both visible *and* invisible according to two different and contradictory logics of exclusion. Borren (2008, p. 231) articulates this in terms of ‘regimes of obscuring’ and ‘regimes of exposing’—in which refugees are, respectively, publicly rendered invisible while their ‘natural’ (or private lives) are increasingly more visible to the state through a wide array of technologies and strategies.

In the first logic or regime, irregular migrants are to be rendered invisible to public institutions (and often the public) in order to deny them access to the benefits of the welfare system and ultimately to limit their stay within particular countries. Amongst some refugee and asylum scholars, the denial of media and researcher access to refugees through specific strategies, such as the externalization of detention centres and confidentiality agreements, render these populations invisible for policy purposes. In turn, this sustains existing mechanisms of exclusion (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2007; Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007). Mountz (2011, p. 319)—drawing explicitly on Urry’s notions of mobilities and moorings—examines how states move detention centres and manipulate borders themselves to ‘shrink’ the spaces of asylum and to conceal refugees from sight. However, in the second logic or regime, states seek to cast a firm gaze on these immigrants and come to know their ‘true identities’—the identity, nationality and migration history of irregular migrants are necessary to effectively control their movement by excluding them from territories and institutions and returning them to their point of

origin (Broeders and Engbersen 2007, p. 1596). Only once mobile populations are counted, coded and classified into various “types, systems, groups and families” can they be separated into governable units (Gill, Caletrío and Mason 2011, p. 306).

These optics may, however, shift through time according to state imperatives or priorities. As Puggioni (2005, p. 321) notes, the initial ‘institutional invisibility’ of Kurdish refugees in Italy has recently been unveiled to prompt an ‘emergency’ of sudden visibility. In Malaysia, such optical explosions, where the invisible becomes suddenly visible, usually pertain to media reports of regular immigration raids. These raids suddenly bring to light the people already living and working in the midst of Malaysian society, but such a spotlight quickly fades and refugees return to a largely invisible existence. Such invisibilities, however, are not necessarily intentionally orchestrated by states as part of control strategies, and can instead be the result of neglect and inaction—as Gale’s (2008) study of ‘residual’ refugees in Guinea demonstrates. In Malaysia these optics operate on a range of levels oscillating between invisibility and visibility depending on political and social imperatives. For instance, refugees are used as scapegoats for all sorts of social issues, and crackdowns are periodically staged to appease citizens’ worries about immigration into Malaysia (Hoffstaedter 2014b, p. 881). Malaysia is able to police refugees in this way because it continues to deny them any legal status to enter, reside in, work or simply *be* in Malaysia. Thus, Malaysia recreates and inverts the border and deploys optics and bordering techniques such as immigration raids, checking identity documents, residency status and work permits. This now happens everywhere: in cities, on building sites and in suburbs known to house refugees and migrant workers. These bordering techniques target undocumented and vulnerable populations, making refugees’ invisibility a matter of survival.

The novelist China Miéville captures the seeing and unseeing of the ‘other’ in our midst in his novel *The City & the City*, where two cities occupy the same physical space but each part is manifested by ‘unseeing’ the other (Miéville 2009). Both communities are

made to unsee the other, actively ignoring and overlooking the other residents. This process of unseeing people in our midst is evident in central Kuala Lumpur, where Malaysians and tourists readily ignore the large presence of refugees, undocumented workers and others and acknowledge them only in the roles they play in their direct interactions: as waiter, street sweeper, cook or cleaner. Refugees, meanwhile, attempt to live and work in neighbourhoods where their presence raises as little attention as possible. In the Malaysian context, refugees often seek to blend in as follows: Chin tend to live in Chinese neighbourhoods, Rohingya in Malay neighbourhoods and Iranians in multicultural or expat areas. Thus, two or multiple communities can live side by side without interacting with the other as 'other'.

This complicates the notion of a monolithic panopticon of the state's gaze upon irregular migrants or refugees, making it often fractured and incomplete; indeed, those under the gaze of authorities have the opportunity to develop specific strategies to counter their alternating visibility and invisibility. Irregular migrants in the Netherlands obscure their identities through the use of fraudulent or manipulated documentation to move unimpeded by authorities, or they strategically prefer areas of relative anonymity or safety such as busy public spaces or existing ethnic enclaves, where the gaze of the state is less certain (Engbersen 2001, pp. 235–37; Van der Leun and Kloosterman 2006). Engbersen (2001) draws on the work of James Scott (1985) to articulate everyday acts of invisibility employed by irregular migrants as 'weapons of the weak'. This is evident for refugee populations who blend into the Malaysian multicultural ethnic landscape. Sri Lankan, Rohingya and Chin refugees find it easier to 'blend' in, whereas African refugees are often subject to exclusion and racism, especially in finding employment (Hoffstaedter 2014a, pp. 123–24). Asylum seekers and refugees can also be rendered invisible from the public gaze in detention centres, which physically obscure the view from the public, researchers and the media (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007, p. 284). There, even when asylum seekers and refugees protest to make themselves seen, as in

Australia's detention centres for example, the state manages to keep them hidden from view (Dennis 2008, p. 158). This also occurs in Malaysia, where refugees, especially those not yet recognized by the UNHCR, are subject to arrest and detention in immigration detention facilities. Human rights reports on Malaysia have created some awareness of this issue, especially the role RELA (Malaysia Volunteers Corps—a large auxiliary police force that often assists with raids on illegal immigrants) plays in providing volunteer and cheap policing of refugees and illegal immigrants in Malaysia (SUARAM 2009). This is spearheaded by a few civil society NGOs that work with migrants and refugees, but their penetration into mainstream media is complicated as the media are largely owned by a few mainstream political parties. As a result, national awareness as a whole remains low.

Arrested Refugee Mobilities in Malaysia

Refugee life in Malaysia remains marked by legal limbo. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention or protocol, making all refugees illegal in the eyes of the Malaysian immigration law. Thus, the UNHCR is the only agency tasked with registering and documenting refugees in Malaysia formally. The UNHCR has three durable solutions for refugees: return to their homeland, integration in the host society or resettlement. The latter becomes a reality for only a select minority, as global resettlement places are limited, and even at their peak amounted to only about five per cent of refugees in need of resettlement and, “typically, less than one per cent of the 19.9 million refugees worldwide under UNHCR’s mandate are ever resettled” (UNHCR 2019a). In 2019 the UNHCR is responsible for 170,460 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia (UNHCR 2019b). To administer such a large contingent, the UNHCR has relied on refugee community organizations that are organized along ethnic and national lines to assist with registration and documentation. This form of enforced community optics has been operationalized most for the refugee communities from Myanmar,

because they form the largest groups; but with the support from the UNHCR (and on occasion upon the insistence of the agency), other refugee populations have set up their own national and ethnically based refugee community organizations to facilitate more streamlined communication between refugees and the UNHCR. As a result, these optics have been extended into the communities themselves, with registration processes, issuance of ethnic refugee group identity cards and the maintenance of lists of members formalizing a mimicking of the state and UNHCR optics within refugee communities. Ethnic refugees from Myanmar have most efficiently implemented this, as will be detailed in the case study of Chin. Other groups are less organized, and some defy organization, as will be explored in the Iranian and Rohingya case studies—be it for political reasons or because of leadership tussles—which means that refugees have varied forms of surveillance and visibility based on which organization they join or associate with.

These registration processes make refugees both appear, by registering and verifying their existence, and disappear, by resettling, repatriating or sometimes unregistering them (Lego 2018). However, even if they are registered, the procedures of the UNHCR and the international community, in particular the wishes or preferences of resettlement countries, can stymie mobility. In some cases refugees are not put up for resettlement in third countries by the UNHCR, often because resettlement countries do not want to accept them. These people become vulnerable to people-smuggling operations and traffickers that offer faster movement and defined destination countries. Based on anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted in a range of refugee communities in Malaysia, the refugees and asylum seekers most affected by these procedural limitations are Rohingya, Iranians, Afghans and Sri Lankans.¹

With such a large caseload, the UNHCR has explored alternatives to the few global resettlement places. Some refugee populations have been promised local integration in the host society, in this case Malaysia, as a path towards regularization and legal residency. Hence, resettlement has not been an option for most Rohingya, who have

been led to believe by the Malaysian government and subsequently the UNHCR that their future is grounded in Malaysia. However, this process has stalled after promises were made that Rohingyas were to receive IMM13 visas that would allow residency and work rights. The government rescinded the offer in 2006 after it alleged corruption was taking place in the allocation of the visas within the Rohingya community. Rohingya, and the UNHCR, have advocated reinstating the process and providing work rights for Rohingya, but so far to no avail.²

This has situated Rohingya refugees especially, and most refugees in general, in a holding pattern where they wait for the UNHCR to determine whether they qualify for resettlement or for some form of local integration. Being caught in such a limbo—legally and temporally—makes it difficult or impossible to plan for or even imagine the future:

In the case of refugees (and other kinds of ‘irregular’ migrants such as asylum seekers or undocumented migrants), specifically, that incommensurable temporality is one that situates them perpetually in crisis, indefinite indeterminacy, unable to project themselves into a certain or stable future. (Ramsay 2019, p. 3)

This crisis and the state of indeterminacy are created by the nation states’ denial of legal status, and they begin at the states’ borders. There, modern nation states have enacted a range of instruments to stop movements across their national borders as detailed above. This has happened in most cases against a history and tradition of cross-border mobility. Southeast Asia as a region was built on the movement of people between the hills and valleys of a greater Zomia (Scott 2009), between the ports and islands of Nusantara (Glover and Bellwood 2004) as well as both across the region and beyond (Amrith 2011). Malaysia has a long history as an entrepôt, strategically located along major trade routes that saw people moving across the Malay world and beyond. However, Malaysia has largely forgotten this history of regional mobility and cosmopolitanism (Kahn 2006; Hoffstaedter 2011, pp. 189–97). National borders continue to be acts

of fiction rather than a material delineation of the state's authority and sovereignty, especially on Borneo. Even on the Peninsula, people move, smuggle and are trafficked daily, often through locally licit and illicit routes rather than legal avenues (Kalir and Sur 2012). Thus, control over the border and control of who enters was lost a long time ago, and, as I have argued elsewhere, the government has inverted the border into everyday life and on to the city's streets through increased policing and immigration raids in urban centres, where most refugees and other undocumented migrants live—making refugees' invisibility a matter of survival (Hoffstaedter 2014b; cf. Miéville 2009). This control is also associated with rent-seeking, this time by police and other authorities who extort refugees for bribes. In a recent study, the police and immigration department were singled out as having a high probability of corruption in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor state (Duasa 2010).

These kinds of bordering techniques physically detain and arrest refugee mobility in a city like Kuala Lumpur. Many refugees are too scared to venture outside their residence unless they have to. To draw out some specific differences of how these bordering techniques affect refugees, I now examine three ethnographic case studies of different refugee communities from different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity and religion.

Paranoia in the Small Iranian Refugee Community

The Iranian refugee community in Malaysia is small, perhaps numbering only three hundred people. Many Iranian refugees are relatively privileged, as they enjoy international mobility that enabled them to fly to Malaysia in the first place. Some arrive on student visas; others come as tourists. I met a community representative on a hot and humid day at a high-end shopping mall near the Tropicana Resort in Kuala Lumpur. When I set the meeting, I said I was happy to travel to his location, and he said he lived in Tropicana, an expat enclave on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. I believed he had selected that location as a landmark familiar to expats, but it

turned out that he lived there with his family. He told me that he is a political refugee from Iran, critical of the government, and had to flee its persecution. He now lives here with his small family, working as a real estate agent for Iranian clients. Business was a little slow at that time but had been good to him so far. Nonetheless, he was saddened by the situation in which he found himself in Malaysia: without a valid visa, he was forced to work and live illegally. He was lucky that he had found a job and made enough money to look after his family and help out members of the community when needed. But the way of life in Malaysia was a hassle, as little everyday occurrences he described demonstrated. In his car he had a stash of money (several RM50 bills—worth around US\$17 each) for the express purpose of bribing police officers who may stop his car asking for a driver's licence (as an undocumented resident, he has no valid driving licence and no way of getting one) or other papers to prove his status. The best document he can provide them with is his UNHCR card, which provides some legitimization, but the police rarely care, nor would it be advisable for him to protest, as many refugees I have interviewed report of officers discarding UNHCR papers and other forms of harassment. Thus, he chooses to appease the police officers' rent-seeking by paying a small 'fee' to ease his commute to work or clients, but it adds up and it reinforces his view of a cruel and discriminating environment, one in which his every move is potentially taxed. Nevertheless, his status and income allow him to move relatively freely through the city. Not everyone is able to pay bribes as easily or as confidently as that. However, whilst he may be relatively mobile within Kuala Lumpur and is able to work and deal with the authorities, his everyday mobility remains limited by rent-seeking and the constant threat of detection and possible arrest. More worrying is the surveillance he and others in the community fear from other Iranians. He told me that creating a community organization was very difficult, as everyone is worried about spies from the Iranian embassy who could infiltrate an organization and channel information about political refugees back to Tehran. This has created anxiety and paranoia about

meetings or communal activities with people who are not personally known. Thus, Iranian refugees actively seek not to associate with nor to be part of a community organization, but to interact with the UNHCR directly, for example.

Chin Refugee Mobilities

Chin refugees have been one of the largest refugee populations in Malaysia over the last decade. They have fled their homeland of Chin state in West Myanmar, often via India, to come to Malaysia and seek asylum. Stories of refugee journeys to Malaysia tell of long times spent in transit, in holding patterns waiting for others to join a smuggler's group before moving across borders, and of the physical hardship of being smuggled in concealed compartments in cars and vans, for instance. Mobility here is not a decision taken lightly. Many do not like talking about the journey, as it only represents a stepping stone for getting to safety. For example, many have travelled from Myanmar to Thailand, from where they traverse the porous jungle border between Thailand and Malaysia with the help of smugglers. The entire journey tends to be pre-paid and pre-arranged from Myanmar. Once they arrive in Malaysia, kin, personal and family networks are activated to secure an initial place to stay and the relevant lodgings with their respective refugee community organization. In Malaysia the refugee communities from Myanmar are arguably the best organized, especially those of ethnic minority groups. In this section I want to focus on how this well-organized community deploys social optics to protect, surveil and administer itself.

Refugees in Malaysia have grouped themselves ethnically and nationally (Hoffstaedter 2015, p. 196). Refugees from Myanmar can register with the Burmese Refugee Organisation (BRO), which is fairly ecumenical and open to a range of ethnic groups and/or with specific ethnic representations, such as the Kachin, Karen or Chin. The Chin, since their numbers are so large, have a range of organizations that can be joined in addition to or instead of the larger ones. These

include smaller congregational and township-based Chin refugee organizations. Members are drawn from Chin who share a church affiliation, sub-regional language group (there is no Chin language, but a series of distinct dialects usually based on townships in Chin state, e.g., Falam, Hakha) and their kin. In order to be permitted into these groups, one must provide evidence of one's belonging to the specific ethnic group, which can include speaking the language or knowing or being related to existing members.

Thus, Chin refugees in particular have reimagined their homeland and themselves in Malaysia according to an ethnolinguistic and spatial sense of belonging that harks back to their homeland. This mimicking of place-based social ordering structures produces stronger and more cohesive communities, certainly when compared to most other refugee communities in Malaysia. Joining such a tight-knit community also means that members police each other through community activities, such as at church attendance, support for community events or fundraisers. The community will also keep an eye on members who get into trouble with authorities or local gangs. Many refugee community organizations maintain some form of community security that could entail members going out to actively police specific members, for instance in domestic violence cases. In other instances the community organization may sponsor or work with service providers to place drug addicts in rudimentary rehabilitation facilities run by a refugee church group, for instance. Each of these examples demonstrates the community cohesion and surveillance at work in administering such interventions.

These refugee community organizations mimic the state or at least the UNHCR to capture 'their people' for protection, intervention and in lists to make them legible (Scott 1998) and report this data to the UNHCR for registration purposes. They also maintain strong relationships with law enforcement agencies in order to intervene when members are arrested by police. Most refugees very quickly realize or are told the procedures for interacting with immigration, police or RELA. The most common interaction for Chin is with the police. Since the UNHCR does not provide any material support to

refugees in Malaysia, refugees have to find work to survive. Most Chin work and therefore have to travel to their workplace every day, a process that often involves traversing the city from the cheap flats they share in down-at-heel neighbourhoods to their workplaces. This leaves them open to arrest and detention if they are stopped by the police, although the more likely outcome is payment in the form of bribes. Legally, UNHCR-registered refugees should be allowed to move freely around Malaysia, and some have the cultural and social capital to demand to be treated with respect and dignity by the police.

Most refugees, however, have fled persecution by authorities such as the police, and being stopped by Malaysian authorities can bring up memories and trauma that leave them unable or unwilling to respond forcefully to police intimidation in Malaysia, and such instances can further traumatize them. Refugees are deemed illegal immigrants by the Malaysian authorities, and they therefore face arrest, detention and repatriation if they do not pay for their freedom on the spot. The police have devised ever-changing ways to receive these illegal payments, such as making the refugees walk away and drop an agreed amount of money further up the road, with the police officer following at some distance to pick up the bribe. This happens routinely, and many refugees try to find new ways of evading the dragnet of the police, but invariably the cat and mouse game continues. If someone is unwilling or unable to pay, he may end up at the police station. Many police officers know the refugee communities and know who to call to enact a mutually beneficial outcome in the form of a bribe for the release. Many refugee organizations print a contact number on the refugee community member cards (that usually mimic the UNHCR card format). This makes it easy for the police to call them to negotiate a release of their members. At this stage, however, the cost is much higher as more people are now involved, and in some cases it may no longer be possible—in the case that the refugee is already processed for immigration detention, for example. An often-quoted figure was within the region of RM500–1000 (US\$120–240) for the release of

one person. If this was unsuccessful the arrested individual would be handed over to immigration for removal to an immigration detention facility, where long incarceration times and often extremely poor living conditions awaited.

Thus, social optics and bordering techniques such as registering with refugee community organizations make Chin refugees visible to the UNHCR for registration and provide limited community protection to them. However, it also entails an added cost for the refugees and compels them to abide by community standards and expectations.

Rohingya Refugee Mobilities

Whilst the majority of Rohingya refugees arrived in Malaysia within the last seven years following the increasing escalation of violence in Rakhine state in Myanmar, some have been in Malaysia for a very long time and have had a very different experience from most other refugee communities in Malaysia. Many began coming to Malaysia in the mid-1980s after the Burma Citizenship Law in 1982 began to exclude many Rohingya from citizenship as they could not establish their Burmese ancestry from or before 1823. Ongoing communal violence pitted Muslims against Buddhists and more recent immigrants against so-called national races along Myanmar's border regions. As a result of the coup in 1962 and subsequent military rule, Rohingya have been at the receiving end of many state-sponsored attacks that have resulted in mass displacement and refugee movements across the border to both Bangladesh and Thailand. Many started coming to Malaysia around two decades ago, and the Malaysian government has at different times intoned that their presence would be tolerated and that there was a chance of integration into the host society for Rohingya refugees. To the UNHCR, this is preferred over resettlement, which is more limited and can take several years if not decades to process. However, the Malaysian government did not follow through on its promises and, as a result, entire extended families have been stuck in limbo in Malaysia for over two decades. Even though most of them are

Muslim and by now speak fluent Malay, they often remain outcasts in the towns and villages in which they dwell, living on the margins and in the shadow of an ambivalent state.

For the more recent arrivals, the Malaysian attitude towards them has been marked by boat pushbacks and threats of tighter border patrols with Thailand. These are classic bordering techniques, supported by the Australian government under the Bali Process, to stop trafficking across borders. However, it has had the opposite effect, with more Rohingya relying on smugglers and traffickers to get them to Malaysia and out of harm's way in Myanmar. The smugglers and traffickers routinely dispose of any travel or identity documents refugees have on them. When refugees arrive in Malaysia and want to register with the UNHCR they face a difficult task proving that they are indeed Rohingya and are therefore part of a persecuted minority. Many Malaysians mistake Rohingya for Bangladeshis, as there exists a large Bangladeshi migrant worker community. Rohingya are routinely called 'Bangla', a derogatory term used to discriminate. Beyond the classificatory slight, it means the UNHCR finds it difficult to adequately define and ascertain Rohingya identity as part of its registration process. Many Rohingya, after years in refugee camps in Bangladesh or living in Malaysia, do not speak the Rohingya language anymore; they have taken on Bangladeshi and Malaysian languages and customs, and therefore identity. This complicates the way identification works, especially in the absence of identity papers. Thus, for many Rohingya, bordering techniques that excluded them from citizenship in Myanmar are directly affecting their registration process in Malaysia. The UNHCR is thus in a difficult bind, because if it loosens the registration process for Rohingya it will inevitably be open to the charge that it could be registering Bangladeshi citizens, not just Rohingya. As a result, the UNHCR has implemented biometric screening and biometric identifiers in all new registration cards.

Rohingya have attempted to become more visible and recognizable as a national diaspora through the creation of a *de facto* national football team, by having the Rohingya script accredited as Unicode

and by creating a nationality database using block chain (Abraham and Jaehn 2019). These attempts at becoming visible and recognizable internationally as well as in Malaysia run alongside efforts to fit in and belong. Most Rohingya give up their language, customs and identity out of necessity, and they have little connection to the international diaspora's attempts at creating a Rohingya national identity. For most, the immediate need is to prove to the UNHCR that they are Rohingya to attain refugee status, whilst at the same time remaining invisible in everyday life to evade police attention. Thus, the oscillating demands and needs of a small elite and a large refugee population can seem contradictory. Governmental optics can capture and evade, make visible and invisible—sometimes at will—populations who live on the margins and who remain without legal status that would allow them to make demands of the state and its agents.

Conclusions

Human mobility is now so multifaceted that it requires the plural 'mobilities' to denote its diversification and intensification over time and in volume of people. This excess of mobilities is countervailed by state policies that aim to capture, limit and regulate what it deems irregular and 'illegal' migration through the advance of a variety of optics. Thus, mobilities in Malaysia are contained by the state apparatus, based on its laws and policing authorities, and individuals are arrested if they are deemed illegal or irregular. Refugees in Malaysia are always deemed to be outsiders by the state, and their mobility poses a threat to the state fantasy of delineated and policed borders and a contained national body politic. However, the Malaysian state is not the only disciplining power. Refugees submit themselves to the surveillance of the UNHCR and of their community organizations, and they also self-police their actions and movements. This is usually done as a means of self-protection, where stronger community cohesion means stronger protection as well as surveillance. The optics the Chin community organizations

have developed mimic bordering techniques used by states and social optics to create and maintain strong community cohesion and protection. The Iranian experience is fraught with suspicion and an active avoidance of any surveillance or community social optics, as these pose dangers. Rohingya, meanwhile, are desperate to belong and they seek recognition and validation of any community, even if it means a loss of their own identity. Some activists are fighting for more recognition and for being seen as a nation in the making.

These three case studies demonstrate the diversity in refugee optics and mobilities based on socio-economic background, ethnicity and religion, as well as some of the commonalities shared across the refugee community: first and foremost, most refugees lack valid travel documents, which hinders their cross-border travel. Thus, they become dependent on smuggling rings or traffickers to bring them to Malaysia. Second, the rent-seeking by Malaysian authorities limits everyday mobility and adds a significant cost, in the form of bribes, to those who have to move about on a daily basis. Here, the optics of a refugee presence becomes crucial to determine whether refugees can be ‘unseen’ and hide or whether they are always visible as outsiders, marked by their difference and therefore more vulnerable to Malaysian authorities. Third, refugees experience a diverse future orientation—the sense of when, where and how their lives will be in the future. Many dream of resettlement, an option reserved for the few, or improved legal status and work rights in Malaysia, an equally contested and difficult proposition. This leaves their mobilities arrested in Malaysia—for now.

Acknowledgments

I was the grateful recipient of an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Award (DE140100052) to document the lives of refugees in Malaysia. I would like to thank the numerous refugees who participated in this research project, gave their time and shared their stories with me, as well as Dr Will Smith for his research assistance in preparing a literature review. I also thank the

editor and anonymous reviewers for their comments, which provided sound counsel and improvements for this paper.

Gerhard Hoffstaedter is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, School of Social Science, University of Queensland, St Lucia, 4072, Queensland, Australia; email: g.hoffstaedter@uq.edu.au.

NOTES

1. There are no official statistics that identify ethnic identity for resettlement.
2. A recent small pilot project was deemed unsuccessful, as the quota of three hundred workers could not be filled and Rohingya were unwilling to participate in the pilot project on oil palm plantations.

REFERENCES

- Abraham, Itty, and Miriam Jaehn. 2019. "Immanent Nation: The Rohingya Quest for International Recognition". *Nations and Nationalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12560> (accessed 5 September 2019).
- Amoore, Louise. 2006. "Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror". *Political Geography* 25: 336–51.
- Amoore, Louise, and Alexandra Hall. 2009. "Taking People Apart: Digitized Dissection and the Body at the Border". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27: 444–64.
- Amrith, Sunil S. 2011. *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Amster, Mathew H. 2008. "The Social Optics of Space: Visibility and Invisibility in the Borderlands of Borneo". *Space and Culture* 11: 176–95.
- Ashutosh, Ishan, and Alison Mountz. 2012. "The Geopolitics of Migrant Mobility: Tracing State Relations through Refugee Claims, Boats, and Discourses". *Geopolitics* 17, no. 2: 335–54.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. "On Postmodern Uses of Sex". *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 3: 19–33.
- Bissell, David. 2007. "Animating Suspension: Waiting for Mobilities". *Mobilities* 2, no. 2: 277–98.
- Borren, Marieke. 2008. "Towards an Arendtian Politics of In/visibility: On Stateless Refugees and Undocumented Aliens". *Journal of the European Ethics Network* 15, no. 2: 213–37.
- Boyne, Roy. 2000. "Post-Panopticism". *Economy and Society* 29, no. 2: 285–307.

- Broeders, Dennis. 2007. "The New Digital Borders of Europe". *International Sociology* 22, no. 1: 71–92.
- . 2009. *Breaking Down Anonymity: Digital Surveillance of Irregular Migrants in Germany and the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Broeders, Dennis, and Godfried Engbersen. 2007. "The Fight against Illegal Migration". *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 12: 1592–609.
- Burrell, Kathy. 2008. "Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland". *Mobilities* 3, no. 3: 353–73.
- Correa-Velez, Ignacio, and Sandra Gifford. 2007. "When the Right to be Counted Doesn't Count: The Politics and Challenges of Researching the Health of Asylum Seekers". *Critical Public Health* 17, no. 3: 273–81.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2012. "Mobilities II: Still". *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 5: 645–53.
- Cunningham, Hilary, and Josiah Heyman. 2004. "Introduction: Mobilities and Enclosures at Borders". *Identities* 11, no. 3: 289–302.
- Dennis, Simone. 2008. *Christmas Island: An Anthropological Study*. New York: Cambria Press.
- Duasa, Jarita. 2010. "Tendency of Corruption and its Determinants among Public Servants: A Case Study of Malaysia". *Indian Development Review* 8, no. 1: 279–92.
- Engbersen, Godfried. 2001. "The Unanticipated Consequences of Panopticon in Europe: Residence Strategies of Illegal Immigration". In *Controlling a New Migration World*, edited by Virginie Guiraudon and Christian Joppke, pp. 222–46. London: Routledge.
- Gale, Lacey Andrews. 2008. "The Invisible Refugee Camp: Durable Solutions for Boreah 'Residuals' in Guinea". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4: 537–52.
- Gill, Nicholas, Javier Caletrio, and Victoria Mason. 2011. "Introduction: Mobilities and Forced Migration". *Mobilities* 6, no. 3: 301–16.
- Glover, Ian, and Peter S. Bellwood. 2004. *Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Haggerty, Kevin D. 2006. "Tear Down the Walls: On Demolishing the Panopticon". In *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond*, edited by David Lyon, pp. 23–45. Devon: Wilan.
- Harrell-Bond, Barbara, and Eftihia Voutira. 2007. "In Search of 'Invisible' Actors: Barriers to Access in Refugee Research". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2: 281–98.
- Hoffstaedter, Gerhard. 2011. *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia*. Copenhagen: NIAS.

- . 2014a. “Working for (Bare) Life: Refugees in the Concrete Jungle”. *Griffith Review* 45: 117–24.
- . 2014b. “Place-Making: Chin Refugees, Citizenship and the State in Malaysia”. *Citizenship Studies* 18, no. 8: 871–84.
- . 2015. “Urban Refugees and the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur: Dependency, Assistance and Survival”. In *Urban Refugees: Challenges in Protection, Services and Policy*, edited by Gerhard Hoffstaedter and Koichi Koizumi, pp. 187–205. London: Routledge.
- Hyndman, Jennifer, and Margaret Walton-Roberts. 2000. “Interrogating Borders: A Transnational Approach to Refugee Research in Vancouver”. *Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 44, no. 3: 244–58.
- Kahn, Joel S. 2006. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Kalir, Barak, and Malini Sur, eds. 2012. *Transnational Flows and Permissive Polities: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Kalir, Barak, Malini Sur, and Willem van Schendel. 2012. “Introduction: Mobile Practices and Regimes of Permissiveness”. In *Transnational Flows and Permissive Polities: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia*, edited by Barak Kalir and Malini Sur, pp. 11–26. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lego, Jera. 2018. “Making Refugees (Dis)appear: Identifying Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Thailand and Malaysia”. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2: 183–98.
- Lipson, Juliene G. 1997. “The Politics of Publishing: Protecting Participants’ Confidentiality”. In *Completing a Qualitative Project: Details and Dialogue*, edited by Janice M. Morse, pp. 39–58. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Martin, Craig. 2011. “Turbulent Stillness: The Politics of Uncertainty and the Undocumented Migrant”. In *Stillness in a Mobile World*, edited by David Bissell and Gillian Fuller, pp. 192–208. London: Routledge.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McNevin, Anne, and Antje Missbach. 2018. “Luxury Limbo: Temporal Techniques of Border Control and the Humanitarianisation of Waiting”. *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 4, nos. 1/2: 12–34.
- Miéville, China. 2009. *The City & the City*. New York: Del Rey Ballantine Books.

- Mountz, Alison. 2011. "Specters at the Port of Entry: Understanding State Mobilities through an Ontology of Exclusion". *Mobilities* 6, no. 3: 317–34.
- Polzer, Tara, and Laura Hammond. 2008. "Invisible Displacement". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4: 417–31.
- Puggioni, Raffaella. 2005. "Refugees, Institutional Invisibility, and Self-Help Strategies: Evaluating Kurdish Experience in Rome". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 3: 319–39.
- Ramsay, Georgina. 2019. "Time and the Other in Crisis: How Anthropology Makes Its Displaced Object". *Anthropological Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499619840464> (accessed 5 September 2019).
- Rumford, Chris. 2010. "Global Borders: An Introduction to the Special Issue". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 951–56.
- Salazar, Noel B., and Alan Smart. 2011. "Anthropological Takes on (Im) mobility". *Identities* 18, no. 6: pp. i–ix.
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Silvey, Rachel. 2005. "Borders, Embodiment, and Mobility: Feminist Migration Studies in Geography". In *A Companion to Feminist Geography*, edited by Lise Nelson and Joni Seager, pp. 138–49. London: Blackwell.
- SUARAM. 2009. *Malaysian Human Rights Report 2008: Civil and Political Rights*. Petaling Jaya: SUARAM Komunikasi.
- UNHCR. 2019a. "Less Than 5 per cent of Global Refugee Resettlement Needs Met Last Year". 19 February 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/briefing/2019/2/5c6bc9704/5-cent-global-refugee-resettlement-needs-met-year.html> (accessed 28 May 2019).
- . 2019b. "Figures at a Glance in Malaysia". <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance-in-malaysia.html> (accessed 28 May 2019).
- Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Van der Leun, Joanne. 2003. *Looking for Loopholes: Processes of Incorporation of Illegal Immigrants in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Van der Leun, Joanne, and Robert Kloosterman. 2006. "Going Underground: Immigration Policy Changes and Shifts in Modes of Provision of Undocumented Immigrants in the Netherlands". *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 97, no. 1: 59–68.

- Vigh, Henrik. 2009. "Motion Squared: A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation". *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 4: 419–38.
- Whyte, Zachary. 2011. "Enter the Myopticon: Uncertain Surveillance in the Danish Asylum System". *Anthropology Today* 27, no. 3: 18–21.
- Wong, Diana, and Tan Pok Suan. 2012. "'Looking for a Life': Rohingya Refugee Migration in the Post-Imperial Age". In *Transnational Flows and Permissive Politics: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia*, edited by Barak Kalir and Malini Sur, pp. 75–90. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira, Georgie Wemyss, and Kathryn Cassidy. 2019. *Bordering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.