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Independent refugee youth in waiting

Social navigations while in transit in Indonesia

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Summary

This dissertation focuses on the social navigations of independent refugee youth as they maneuver uncertainties while waiting in transit in Indonesia. Discussions of young people's social navigations, particularly in asylum seeker or refugee communities, are essential to challenge the reproduction of the image of young asylum seekers as being in a state of "double limbo": between the status of refugee and undocumented migrant as "asylum seekers," and between childhood and adulthood as "young people" (see Galli 2017, 1656). This study attempt to locate young people as both in the stages of "becoming and being" (Uprichard 2008) as they fully experience their current condition and are capable of making choices for themselves. I argue that despite the daily precarity and uncertainty they face while waiting in transit in Indonesia, the young people are able to navigate these unstable arenas and are able to negotiate with multi-layered actors.

This study aims to answer the question of how independent refugee youth exercise active waiting while transiting in Indonesia. The discussion of young people's social navigations occurs against the backdrop of the discourse of protracted waiting (and multiplicity of waiting) in a transit country. Here, I attempt to illustrate that the meaning of waiting for the youth is shifted from "the method of transit" to "the agonizing context." Nevertheless, I argue that the independent refugee youth still perform active waiting in Indonesia: as their movements demonstrate that they do not merely perform tactics to counteract a suffocating system or social environment; but also create premeditated strategies that would invite the system, or powerful actors in the system – in this case, the migration management regime in Indonesia – to respond.

In this dissertation, the concept of social navigation is employed to underline the fact that young people's agency is always in constant negotiation with structural conditions and social circumstances. Social navigation defines a specific form of movement, namely "the way we move in a moving environment," the "motion within motion" (Vigh 2006; 2009). Social navigation explains how agents "seek to move within the social terrain and are moved by the social terrain" (2006, 238). Social navigation serves as a useful concept, because it helps us to analyze the constant changes in young people's agency, as well as to investigate the interface – which is always in flux – between individual agency and multi-layered social environments (Vigh 2006, 16). This concept is crucial in the study of a group of people in an environment that is characterized by constant processes of fluctuation rather than solidified structures.

In regard to the case of independent refugee youth in Indonesia, the social navigation concept is highly suitable, as the young people must deal with an unstable legal situation that leads to constant changes in their conditions. Furthermore, different from the European or US context, where non-European migrants are perceived as a needy and powerless population trying to get social and political protection from rich white nations, refugees transiting in Indonesia is a different phenomenon. The social environment in Indonesia is more fluid and maneuverable for transiting refugees, where both groups – independent refugee youth and locals – see diverse potential for how they can gain something from and cooperate with one another.

The independent refugee youth are active and dynamic population that can "create knowledge about and give meaning to their own situation" (Horst 2006, 144). Among other social environments in Indonesia, the youth decide there are four arenas that are the most important to deal with. First, all independent youth agree that refugee status determination and humanitarian assistance is the first and ultimate arena to navigate, as it is very crucial for their asylum protection. Afterward, youth argue that negotiating with the arena of livelihood provision and economic opportunities is important, particularly when they do not succeed in accessing humanitarian assistance. Not all youth decide to maneuver this arena, but in general it is considered crucial to fulfill

their basic daily needs; this arena is thus listed second. While they navigate these two arenas, the youth also simultaneously deal with the third arena of social network connections, given that building good relations as well as networks with local people will facilitate their navigations in other arenas, specially the economic and self-actualization arena. Lastly, more independent youth engage in the dynamics in the arena of self-actualization in the context of global youth culture.

I argue that young people manage to keep exercising agency, not only by performing single linear maneuvers but also by engaging in multidirectional movements in multi-layered arenas and social environments. The multidirectional nature of young people's navigations is illustrated as they constantly slide through the interconnected and layered arenas, while continuously changing the map and the direction of their movements. These multidirectional movements are performed not only to secure wellbeing in the waiting period, but also to prepare paths to and networks in the young people's eventual country of resettlement (cf. Vigh 2010).

In this dissertation, I also attempt to advance the academic debate on the agency-vulnerability spectrum of many forms of social navigations. Thus, I highlight a particular aspect of the social navigations of independent refugee youth, namely the "production of vulnerability," a term that I employ to show how youth centralize their minority or vulnerable status as victims (in terms of age, gender, health, sexuality), mostly to meet the expectations and preferences of aid providers and decision-makers. In doing so, I answer the related question of why vulnerability is important for young people's social navigations in transit.

This dissertation elaborates on how a "vulnerability discourse" is employed by young refugees in transit in order to ease their troubles. Although the "production of vulnerability" is not a completely new insight, this dissertation comprehensively discusses the acts that are performed by young people in diverse arenas. The production of vulnerability is not only performed to conform to criteria set by international frameworks for refugee protection, but often also to criteria set by social and cultural norms in broader society. In the thesis, I discuss four different aspects of young people's production of vulnerability: (1) centralizing

their risk or minority status and/or vulnerable condition; (2) engaging in “victimcy” by creating a social and bodily condition of being vulnerable; (3) performing a representational strategy by mimicking the condition of vulnerable people; and (4) utilizing their stigmatized identity to raise a sense of solidarity from the broader society. I argue that youth do not only have vulnerability, but also have the capacity to produce vulnerability, an essential strategy when maneuvering a situation in which there are no other options or sufficient resources. Furthermore, I go beyond the position that vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive (see Ensor 2010; O’Higgins 2012), to emphasize that vulnerability may even strengthen young people’s agentic actions by capitalizing and producing vulnerability.

The first empirical chapter is **chapter 2: “Transit in Indonesia: An Enabling Waiting Spot.”** This chapter discusses Indonesia’s attraction as a transit country from the perspective of independent refugee youth. In this chapter, I focus on the conditions in Indonesia that independent refugee youth – and in some cases their supporting families – expect to encounter when they decide to transit there while waiting for relocation to a resettlement country. I present the Indonesian context not only by assessing the formal framework of refugee management in the country, but also by including young refugees’ imaginations and points of view. Indonesia’s deliberate practices of non-recording is discussed as a contributing factor to creating a fluid and flexible social terrain that offers an enabling space for independent refugee youth to exercise a certain degree of freedom of movement while in transit. I argue that Indonesia, with all of these characteristics, offers a pleasant, safe, and enabling space for asylum seekers, particularly independent youth.

Chapter 3, “Age, Solitary Movement, and Narratives,” focuses on the discussion of the categorizations and stigmas around independent refugee youth and their conditions of travel. I attempt to debunk the over-generalizing logics of institutional categorizations by demonstrating the variety of conditions and motivations of different youths who are all labeled under one institutional category. Among those within similar institutional categorizations (unaccompanied minors, single men, single women), there are significant differences that need to be understood

and taken into account. Independent youth who are seeking asylum in Indonesia vary widely in terms of age, they come from diverse cultural backgrounds, they are of different genders, they are from varying social classes and religions, and they bring with them and develop along the way different experiences, logics, motivations, and dreams. It is important to avoid generalizations and take this wide variation into consideration. In many cases, using age as the basis for protection has been proven to be unfitting.

I also elaborate on two kinds of narratives employed by youths: “refugee narratives” and “youthful narratives.” I illustrate that while both narratives are prevalent in the migration context, the two are not respected equally. Understanding both narratives are important as it highlights the agency of the youth, which they implement via multidirectional moves (encompassing bodies and ideas) and exercise all along their journey, starting in their country of origin. Their decision to travel, often alone, is influenced by the combination of fear and difficult, unstable situations in their home countries on the one hand, and the hope of achieving a better future in a safe place on the other. I argue, therefore, that the victimizing overtones used when independent refugee children and young people are discussed must be minimized, so that the agency of both refugee children and migrant children can be equally recognized.

Chapter 4, “Disbelieving and Playing Roles,” focuses on how independent refugee youth navigate the outsourced refugee system in Indonesia, which consists of the conventional international refugee regime and the domestic humanitarian aid regime. In navigating the refugee system, independent refugee youth basically aim to achieve refugee status and access humanitarian aid. In order to achieve these two goals, they have to perform separate – yet interrelated – social navigations. This chapter is divided into two main sections: the first focuses on young people’s maneuvers while navigating the refugee determination process, particularly by performing “narrative strategies”; while the second focuses on young people’s tactics when navigating access to humanitarian aid, mainly by depicting their vulnerability. In the first section, I will discuss how independent youth deal with the conventional definition of a “refugee,” as well as with a general “culture of disbelief” among UNHCR officers. The second section elaborates a discussion concerning the production

of vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of age and gender. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that neither strategy is exclusive to a particular goal. The maneuvering to obtain refugee status and to access humanitarian aid may also affect young people's navigations to secure an allowance or be resettled. By demonstrating diverse approaches, this chapter argues that youths' social navigations while maneuvering the arena of the refugee management system in Indonesia in turn influences the implementation of rules and regulations concerning refugees within the system.

In **chapter 5, "Making the Ends Meet,"** I discuss livelihood strategies and other navigations to generate income. According to young people, the economic arena is the second most important field to navigate in Indonesia, particularly in order to survive immediate precarity. I will elaborate on how youths maneuver the definition of "working", and negotiate as well as interpret Indonesia's employment regulations regarding what is lawful and what is not. In this chapter, I show how youth navigate the economic intersectionality between state and international governance, between formal and informal sectors, and between national and transnational economy (Betts et al. 2017, 9) by discussing their three maneuvers: doing money management; broadening social connections; and engaging in income generating activities, including transnational business. Here, I problematize the juxtaposition of "self-reliance" and "dependence" as polar opposites. This chapter has shown that when young refugees do not rely on humanitarian assistance, they often have to depend on their peers, their community, or their lovers. Thus, it is important to remember that the notion of self-settled or self-reliant refugees does not necessarily imply total independence.

The discussion of young people's tactics and strategies in **chapter 6, "Being Good to Acquaintances, Opening the Heart to Friends,"** focuses on their attempts to have a harmonious relationship with regular citizens in transit in Indonesia. In this chapter, I discuss local social and cultural norms from young people's perspectives, placing several aspects under consideration, such as personal relationships, language skills, and religious practices. In this chapter, I demonstrate youths' navigations by emphasizing their representational strategies that focus on their similarity to locals and mimic an "acceptable identity" in Indonesia. I argue

that harmonious relationships between locals and independent refugee youth are a two-way process; they are not only the result of local people's willingness to welcome refugees, but are also the outcome of young people's determination to have such good relationships. Moreover, young people's social navigations reflect their understanding of Indonesian social norms and culture

In **chapter 7, "Keep Moving Forward,"** I shed light on independent young refugees' multidirectional movements when navigating their social position in the context of "global youth culture," focusing on the activities they engage in to actualize their potential. This chapter discusses three main aspects of young people's navigations: 1) engaging in individual self-empowerment; 2) challenging gendered norms to participate in agentic self-actualization; and 3) using virtual media to accelerate self-representation. By locating youth as "both being and becoming" (Uprichard 2008), this chapter will show that independent refugee youth in Indonesia, as "complete beings," experience their lives in transit to the full, and are actively engaged in co-constructing their condition. On the other hand, they are also "becoming," as they are constantly preparing for their future. And as I will illustrate, this future – youths' "becoming" – is not merely directed towards adulthood, but also concerns other forms of desired youthfulness that they have not yet had or been. If young people's navigations in previous arenas can be considered a part of the "politics of waiting," then this chapter speaks of the "poetics of waiting" (Bandak and Janeja 2018).

By looking at the social navigations of the independent young men and women while maneuvering precarity and uncertainty during a long period of waiting, this dissertation illustrates how their agency is always in conversation and in constant negotiation with their social environment and structural conditions. Through rich ethnographic data, the study contributes to two pivotal yet overlooked discourses: *first*, it contributes to the discussion of young refugees in transit in Indonesia, in a way that does not locate them as victims but instead highlights their agentic capacities and actions while negotiating their social environment; *second*, it contributes to the study of Indonesia as a transit country – the independent youths' social environment – in a way that does not

only focus on the legal and formal structures, but also highlights its social characteristics and flexibility, which in many ways facilitate youths' social navigations. In a global context where refugees face reduced chances for resettlement and longer waiting periods in transit, in-depth understanding of if and how young refugees are able to implement their ideas and perform agentic actions while waiting is crucial. By employing various research methods, this study illustrates the complex and comprehensive movements of young refugee men and women as they try to survive and make the best of the restricted conditions in which they find themselves.