

Academic time theft: stealing time, producing racialized inclusion in Dutch academia

Z. Essanhaji

*Department of Organization Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, Netherlands*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines how universities reproduce ethnic-racial inequality through the temporal organization of academic life. Drawing on critical race theory and decolonial scholarship on chronopolitics and white time, it introduces the concept of academic time theft to theorize how universities extract, fragment and defer the time of academics of colour through racialized institutional processes. The study asks how Dutch universities enact racialized temporal regimes of inclusion and belonging.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a qualitative organizational study conducted across two Dutch universities. Fifteen in-depth interviews with academics of colour were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis informed by critical race theory and decolonial thought. Counter-storytelling was employed to foreground lived experiences and examine how institutional temporalities reproduce racialized hierarchies within academic careers.

Findings – The analysis identifies three mechanisms of academic time theft. First, prolonged uncertainty operates through racialized precariousness that keeps academics of colour in a condition of academic probation through insecure contracts and housing precarity. Second, ongoing disruption emerges through everyday racism that fragments attention, diverts emotional and intellectual labour, and interrupts academic continuity. Third, recursive evaluation operates through the continual resetting of inclusion and promotion criteria, producing perpetual states of “not yet” recognition and deferred academic futures. Together, these mechanisms sustain racialized temporal regimes in which academics of colour are positioned as perpetually “almost there” while white institutional time remains uninterrupted.

Research limitations/implications – The study focuses on two Dutch universities and primarily reflects the experiences of women of colour. Future research could further examine how academics of colour collectively resist institutional temporal regimes and generate alternative temporalities of care, relationality and refusal within academia.

Practical implications – The findings demonstrate that academic inequality is not only spatially or materially organized but also temporally structured. Universities should therefore treat temporality as an equity issue by addressing how evaluation systems, precarious employment and institutional practices unevenly distribute uninterrupted academic time and delay recognition for academics of colour.

Originality/value – By theorizing academic time theft, this paper contributes to critical organization studies and higher education scholarship by showing how universities sustain racial inequality through the temporal regulation of academic progression, belonging and recognition.

Keywords Academia, Racial inequality, Time theft, Racialized time, Temporal regime, White time

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Ethnic-racial inequalities persist across access to positions, resources, networks and career advancement in academia (Arday and Mirza, 2018). While diversity policies aim to address these disparities, they often reinforce the inequalities they claim to resolve (Ahmed, 2012). A growing body of research has begun to highlight the temporal dimension of these

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inequalities (Ramirez, 2024; Essanhaji, 2023; Essanhaji and Van Reekum, 2023). Previous research shows that navigating, resisting and transforming institutional racism and whiteness leads to the extraction of additional labour and time from people of colour (Melaku, 2022; Bhopal, 2022). This paper builds on this scholarship by introducing the concept of academic time theft to capture how institutions extract time from racialized academics through precarious employment conditions, institutional distractions such as racism, and ever-shifting racialized expectations for career progression. Drawing on critical race and decolonial insights on racialized time (Essanhaji and Van Reekum, 2023; Mills, 2020; Vazquez, 2009), I show how universities impose racialized timelines of progress that trap academics of colour in a cycle of proving, delaying and deferring. To that end, I ask: *“How do universities enact racialized temporal regimes of inclusion through practices of academic time theft?”*

Drawing on 15 interviews with academics of colour in two Dutch universities, I identify three mechanisms of academic time theft: (1) racialized academic precariousness as academic probation, where inclusion is made deeply conditional through insecure contracts, unequal access to resources and additional administrative burdens; (2) racism as a distraction, where racism consumes time and energy that could otherwise be spent on research and career development; and (3) the resetting of criteria for inclusion, keeping academics of colour in a perpetual state of proving themselves while deferring their academic futures. Academics of colour resist such time theft by caring otherwise and inhibiting another temporality of slowing down that resists the competitive individualistic ethos of academia.

As such, this study makes two contributions. First, by theorizing academic time theft, it extends debates in critical organization studies and critical race studies on the temporalities of exclusion, illustrating how institutions enact and reinforce racial inequality through racialized timelines of progress (Mandalaki and Prasad, 2024; Dar et al., 2021; Bourabain, 2024). Second, it applies insights from chronopolitics (Mills, 2020) and white time (Essanhaji, 2023; Essanhaji and Van Reekum, 2023) to universities, revealing how universities function as agents of the Euro-chronometer, structuring inclusion through white temporalities that privilege continuity for white academics while imposing delays and disruptions on academics of colour.

This paper is organized as follows: First, I develop the theoretical framework of white time in academic contexts. Second, I explain the research context and how the interviews were conducted and analysed. Third, I describe the practices of academic time theft through which racialized temporal regimes of inclusion are produced. Finally, I conclude with implications for future research and policy.

What time is it? Chronopolitics and white time

Considering how time influences our understanding of our location in the past, present and future leads us to explore how we perceive, remember and forget it. Zerubavel (2003) highlights the social life of time, emphasizing that time is socially constructed through what he calls “time maps.” These maps are collective narratives that structure our understanding of the past, present and future, creating shared meanings. These narratives are shaped by a “social scalpel” that actively (re)organizes history, generates useable histories and erases events that disrupt prevailing narratives. Therefore, any categorization of historical periods is not neutral but reflects social interests and dominant power structures. Hence, Mills (2020) uses the concept of chronopolitics to describe how time functions as a tool of power that perpetuates hegemonic structures of domination. Chronopolitics involves struggles over whose time is deemed significant, whose timelines gain legitimacy and hegemony and who is positioned as “ahead” or “behind” in narratives of progress. Colonialism is a clear illustration of chronopolitical domination. European empires imposed their temporal frameworks, what Mills refers to as the “Euro-chronometer”, on colonized peoples, portraying themselves as temporally advanced while relegating non-European societies to the status of primitive, static

or backward. According to Mills, we must therefore speak of racial time, particularly white time.

White time is not simply the time of the privileged, but the power to define temporality and progress itself. It is the colonization of time, known as the system of modernity/coloniality. As [Vazquez \(2009\)](#) argues, this system is maintained by erasing cyclical or relational understandings of time, ensuring that time is perceived as racing towards unattainable, more modern futures. In that sense, white time is both prescriptive and pre-emptive, foreclosing alternative futures and experiences of the past by delegitimizing other temporalities. In academia, white time structures who belong in the present and future and who are rendered as out of sync with institutional time, a theme explored next.

In, but always out of time: on ethnic-racial lag in institutional white time

Universities are deeply entangled with histories of colonialism and whiteness, which continue to shape their practices, policies and norms ([Grosfoguel, 2013](#)). [Ramirez \(2024\)](#) describes these legacies as colonial hauntings: the spectral presence of colonial histories that linger in the present, structuring institutions in ways that marginalize, exclude and harm academics of colour. These hauntings manifest in academic spaces, where epistemologies, leadership and norms remain overwhelmingly white, masculine and Eurocentric ([Essed, 2000](#); [Bhopal, 2022](#); [Bourabain, 2020](#)). Similar dynamics have also been documented in postcolonial Global South contexts, where formal transformation has not dismantled racialized academic hierarchies. In South Africa, scholars argue that Eurocentric canons, whiteness and colonial epistemic norms continue to shape universities despite institutional commitments to transformation ([Heleta, 2022](#); [Hlatshwayo, 2015](#)).

In the Dutch context, however, race is rarely articulated explicitly. Instead, it is refracted through the language of culture, ethnicity and migration background. This is reflected in what [Wekker \(2016\)](#) conceptualizes as “white innocence,” a dominant self-understanding that disavows race and racism while normalizing whiteness as the unmarked standard. White innocence obscures how racial hierarchies continue to organize social and institutional life ([Essed, 1991](#)). One of the clearest institutional expressions of these hierarchies has been the now-discontinued policy distinction between “autochtonen” (those considered native to the Netherlands) and “allochtonen” (those marked as originating from elsewhere). Although officially abandoned, these classificatory logics continue to structure how belonging and difference are understood, rendering non-European, non-white individuals and their descendants as persistently “not quite” Dutch ([Weiner, 2014](#)).

These hierarchies are historically rooted in the Netherlands’ colonial dominance of Indonesia, Suriname, Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Sint-Maarten, Saba and Sint Eustatius, as well as in postwar labour migration from Turkey and Morocco. Central to this ordering is what [Geschiere \(2009\)](#) describes as the politics of autochthony, referring to the idea that those “born from the soil” possess a primordial and self-evident right to belong, which simultaneously produces an implicit justification for excluding those marked as “not from this soil.” Such claims to first occupancy naturalize distinctions between those seen as rightful insiders and those whose presence remains conditional, regardless of formal citizenship or generational connection. Within this order, a hierarchical distinction persists between those considered “native” and those marked as (perpetual) outsiders. At the top are white, native-born Dutch subjects, below them are migrants and their descendants from other European or “Western” countries and further down are those categorized as “non-Western,” particularly people racialized as non-white, who are more persistently constructed as culturally and temporally “out of place” ([Wekker, 2016](#)). Dutch universities reproduce this broader racial order by embedding these distinctions in everyday academic practices, expectations and evaluations, thereby shaping who is recognized as a legitimate academic subject.

Scholars have extensively documented how such colonial hauntings produce social, material and affective inequalities. Social inequalities encompass exclusion from professional

networks, social gatherings, a lack of representation, mentorship, sponsorship and barriers to academic socialization (Ardy, 2022). Material inequalities manifest as precarious contracts, salary disparities and a lack of funding and resources (Bhopal *et al.*, 2016). Affective inequalities, such as microaggressions, identity or inclusion taxes (Meluku, 2022; Hirshfield and Joseph, 2012), and the emotional toll of being exposed to racism, further marginalize academics of colour (Bourabain, 2020; Mandalaki and Prasad, 2024).

Importantly, these hierarchies are not only spatial, demarcating who belongs inside or outside the institutional community, but also temporal. They position racialized subjects as belated arrivals to modernity and, by extension, to the normative timelines of academic development and success. For instance, Essanhaji and Van Reekum (2023) uncover how diversity policies often frame diversity and inclusion as future-oriented goals that remain elusive for people of colour while it is made the present for white women. They highlight how this difference in action emerges from how diversity policies enact institutional white time by imagining people of colour as “behind” their white peers. This defers structural change while requiring people of colour to continuously prove their worth.

Similarly, Bourabain (2024) examines how academic managers employ (non) crisis speech to define and address (or not) persistent gender and ethnic-racial inequalities. She shows how academic managers render persistent gender and ethnic-racial inequalities into merely peripheral, individual concerns, relegating them to the background instead of urgent crises that require immediate action. However, when several #MeToo cases received public attention that may harm the institutions’ image, academic managers swiftly switched to crisis speech and took immediate action. These scholars demonstrate how time is discursively enacted to normalize specific inequalities and (in)actions.

In this regard, Sadeghi *et al.* (2025) examine the power of temporality within organizations through the practice of periodization, which they define as “an intersubjective expression of temporality involving the division of time” (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2025 pp. 1-2). They explain that time is divided into temporal categories to establish specific periods of importance and a distance from others, justifying, motivating or obscuring organizational phenomena using episodic or systematic power. Episodic power utilizes temporal markers, such as project deadlines or crises, to lend institutional significance to specific practices and behaviours. Systematic power lies in the taken-for-granted periodizations embedded in organizational norms, such as career trajectories and norms of professionalism (Essed, 2005). Although these practices seem neutral, they privilege dominant groups in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, class and body-ability while rendering marginalized groups out of sync with institutional time. Hence, this study aims to unfold how universities enact racialized temporal regimes of inclusion through practices of academic time theft.

(Hi)stories of (en)countering institutional white time

Research context and background

This study explores the reproduction of persistent ethnic-racial inequalities in Dutch academia, shaped by historical and structural exclusions. Dutch universities have initiated programs to address these issues, such as the Mosaic Program (2003–2012, reintroduced 2021–2024) to increase the number of ethnic minority doctoral students. However, significant change remains elusive, prompting the creation of a National Action Plan on Diversity and Inclusion in 2020 to enhance institutional efforts. The study focuses on two universities, located in cities where ethnic-racial minorities comprise more than half of the population, creating a unique context in which to examine racialized temporal regimes.

Research design

I depart from a critical race perspective, employing counter-storytelling to construct (counter) narratives grounded in the lived experiences of people of colour (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000). This

method recognizes the connections between the historical impacts of colonialism and contemporary exclusions within organizations. By highlighting the experiences of people of colour navigating the university's racism, I seek to provide rich accounts that reflect on how time is racialized and experienced in Dutch universities.

This qualitative interpretative study explores how racialized time reproduces ethnic-racial inequalities through 15 interviews with academics from two universities. I designed the project, developed the interview protocol and led the data collection. A colleague assisted with conducting five interviews, while I conducted most interviews, the analysis and did the writing.

Interviews and participants

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling of non-white academics, defined as those or their (grand)parents from the Global South (Africa, Latin America, West and South Asia), including current and former faculty members. Participants were recruited via our professional networks, snowball sampling and university websites. They received consent documents outlining confidentiality, data protection and the right to withdraw. Of the 15 participants, 13 identified as women and 2 as men. This imbalance may impact the findings as they potentially more strongly capture feminine experiences of academic labour, such as service burdens, emotional labour and heightened exposure to microaggressions (Essanhaji and Müftügil-Yalcin, 2026). While this study does not undertake a systematic intersectional analysis, the findings should therefore be read as primarily reflecting the experiences of women of colour, with potential differences in how men of colour navigate these dynamics remaining underexplored. Among the participants were PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, assistant and associate professors from diverse ethnic and migration backgrounds, such as Surinamese, Moroccan, Turkish and Filipino. While international and Dutch-born academics of colour reported racialized exclusions, their accounts pointed to partially different struggles. International academics more frequently described structural temporal constraints tied to visa regimes, housing precarity and short-term contracts, while Dutch-born academics more often emphasized struggles over recognition. These patterns indicate that ethnic-racial hierarchies intersect with migration histories to produce distinct configurations of delay, precarity and conditional belonging.

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by five themes. First, I asked about their current position, including recruitment procedures, contract negotiations and navigating academic hierarchies. We then discussed the academic environment and collegial relations, which revealed experiences of microaggressions, racism and sexism. The third theme addressed disparities in academic workloads, including service obligations, teaching responsibilities, mentorship, diversity tasks and salary differences. Thereafter, we asked participants to reflect on how institutional exclusions influenced their career advancement and well-being and the strategies that helped them persist in academia. Finally, participants reflected on how diversity policies could address ethnic-racial inequalities. All interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between 1 and 2.5 h, and were transcribed.

Data analysis

The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), following an iterative and inductive approach to theme development. Initial open coding focused on participants' descriptions of inequality across social, material and affective dimensions, including social, material and affective inequalities. While time was not predefined as an analytical category, it emerged inductively through participants' recurring temporal framings of inequality. In this initial phase, participants frequently described repeated cycles of delay and justification, using phrases such as "having to prove oneself repeatedly" or "the same reason [for rejection] kept returning." These expressions were coded using temporal categories such as "delay," "deferral," "suspension" and "slowing down,"

capturing how participants articulated experiences of waiting, interruption and repetition as integral to their academic trajectories.

In the second stage, these temporal codes were compared across interviews and clustered in relation to the contexts in which they appeared. Three distinct but interrelated configurations emerged: (1) accounts of being “on hold” linked to contractual and housing precarity; (2) descriptions of interruption and distraction associated with everyday racism and (3) expressions of repeated justification and evaluation clustered around shifting criteria of inclusion. Participants consistently framed these processes not simply as inequality but as active loss of time through institutional practices that required them to wait, adjust and repeatedly catch up to standards implicitly defined by whiteness. I conceptualize this process as “academic time theft”: the institutional taking of time from academics of colour through bureaucratic inefficiencies, precarious labour conditions, everyday racist interactions and shifting criteria of inclusion. I deliberately chose the metaphor of “theft”. While terms like extraction, appropriation or exploitation capture the unequal organization of labour, they do not fully convey the dispossessive and non-consensual character described in participants’ accounts. Theft foregrounds how time is taken in ways that are experienced as illegitimate, unrecognized and structurally normalized. Participants did not simply describe working more under unequal conditions, they described being made to wait, repeat and re-prove themselves in ways that diverted time away from their own academic development. Situating this within colonial logics further grounds the concept. Colonial regimes were not only organized around the extraction of labour and resources but also around the appropriation and regulation of time through enforced waiting, imposed rhythms of work and the systematic devaluation of colonized subjects’ temporalities (Vazquez, 2009). Academic time theft builds on this literature by highlighting how contemporary universities continue to steal the time of racialized academics while simultaneously obscuring this stealing.

These three configurations of time as prolonged uncertainty (racialized precarity that places scholars of colour in a prolonged probationary state), ongoing disruption (everyday racism that disrupts focus and diverts temporal and affective energy) and recursive evaluation (shifting inclusion criteria that defer the academic futures of academics of colour) provide the analytical basis for the mechanisms of academic time theft examined in the findings below.

Positionality

As a Moroccan female researcher from the Global North, I recognized how my identity shaped my interactions and revealed stark differences in racialized experiences between myself and my Global South participants. While I was aware of visa temporality, I was naïve regarding institutions’ inadequate provisions and reluctance to aid with housing, alongside the severe underpayment of Global South scholars. This naivety appeared during interviews as shock and surprise and made me aware of how global racial hierarchies find their way into academia, even when we hold similar academic roles and share comparable bodies and histories. This led me to inquire further about the academic inequalities exacerbated by housing, visas and health issues.

Time theft in the university

Universities enact academic time theft through three interrelated mechanisms: (1) prolonged uncertainty, in which academics of colour are kept in a state of academic probation through conditional and unstable inclusion; (2) ongoing disruption, in which everyday racism repeatedly interrupts academic work and diverts time and energy and (3) recursive evaluation, where criteria for recognition and progression are continuously shift. Together, these mechanisms position academics of colour perpetually as “almost there” while their academic futures remain deferred.

On racialized precarity as academic probation

Many academics described disillusionment upon entering Dutch academia, where inclusion for academics of colour was deeply conditional and shaped by racialized precariousness that was disproportionately experienced by academics from the Global South. Racialized precariousness appeared in contracts, salaries and housing that, while seemingly offering a “place inside,” kept academics of colour perpetually outside academia. A junior woman academic described how she had a fierce wish to pursue research but did not find any openings fitting her topic until she was approached via social media by a professor:

A professor contacted me on LinkedIn completely out of the blue and asked if I wanted to pursue a PhD. (. . .). I shared my research interests with him and mentioned that I was planning to write a book about it without pursuing a PhD. He suggested that if I was going to invest all that effort, I might as well pursue a PhD, since I had the necessary background and capabilities. That’s how he convinced me a bit. However, I wondered where the money would come from as there were no vacancies. He did have the capacity to supervise me, but there were no openings. By that point, I had already decided I would pursue this research. So, I decided I would fund it myself. – woca12

This case illustrates how entry into academia for some participants depended on informal recruitment routes and self-financed research trajectories rather than the standard salaried PhD model in Dutch academia. She further explained how the professor had noticed this and developed an initiative to include people of colour in academia:

That professor had an institute called the PhD room, where he supervised external PhD candidates. Apparently, he had found a market of people who work full-time but want to pursue a PhD. So those who want to do that in addition to their work. (. . .). However, he also has his own business or revenue model in mind. (. . .) The goal of his foundation was to give people of colour a place in academia. – woca12

The professor’s initiative, described as a “revenue model,” highlights how the neoliberal university treats inclusion as a transactional opportunity that generates symbolic capital without redistributing material resources. In this configuration, academics of colour are positioned as “not yet” fully legitimate academics who are temporarily admitted into academic space but without secure institutional grounding. This deferral of recognition is central to academic time theft, where time is taken through prolonged uncertainty about status, funding and permanence. This temporal instability is further intensified by conditions of arrival and settlement that shape early academic experience. A junior woman academic pursuing a PhD expressed how, due to the lack of institutional arrangements, she was left homeless upon her arrival in the Netherlands:

If you’re going to be taking foreign students, you know in advance, you know how the Dutch are, so calendar driven. They plan everything accordingly, but when you must come here. They tell you that you don’t have a place to stay. (. . .). If it weren’t for my supervisor, I would be homeless. (. . .). So, you want my intellectual capacity? You want to put me in your books. You want me, but you don’t care. Because this, for me, is the politics of care. Accommodation and the funding thing. Why are you going to give me funds that will not allow me to thrive because you are saying Mama is black, I must always be grateful? – woca6

Institutions provide access to opportunities but lack accommodation, planning and housing support, leaving her reliant on individuals’ goodwill to escape homelessness. For her, this precariousness is not incidental (“you know in advance, you know how the Dutch are so calendar-driven) but tied to her racial identity (“mama is black, I must always be grateful”). As such, she recognizes it as part of broader patterns of institutional racism and the devaluation of Black academics across academic contexts (Bhopal, 2022). Another junior migrant woman of colour academic described how she was moved between student housing, temporary accommodation and informal arrangements during her first months in the Netherlands, which prevented her from establishing a sense of belonging:

It was difficult at first because the accommodation crisis that you have as an international student has been going on for quite a while. So, when I first came here for the first few months, I didn't have a stable place to stay. But at the same time, you must be registered with the municipality, which is a condition of your visa for your stay. It was nerve-wracking to do that. (. . .). The university helped me stay at a student hotel at first and then they put me in temporary accommodation. The date of the student hotel accommodation did not coincide with the date of my coming to the Netherlands. There were three weeks in between when they said we cannot help you. There's nothing we can do. And in those three weeks, my supervisor arranged for me to stay at the house of another PhD student. I really did not feel like I was living here for the first 3–4 months. I felt like a visitor, and I was really stressed out because I had no sense of a home. – woca11

Her experience illustrates how institutional onboarding practices produce a temporal and spatial suspension in which academics of colour are physically present but not fully situated within the university. Despite formal inclusion, her experience of “feeling like a visitor” reflects how belonging is deferred through administrative fragmentation and housing insecurity. This cycle of insecurity places academics of colour in perpetual academic probation, where institutions benefit from their labour without providing the resources needed to thrive. While academic time theft begins through prolonged precarity that places academics of colour in a condition of academic probation, this temporal instability does not end once a position is secured. Instead, as I show next, it continues through everyday practices that repeatedly interrupt and fragment academic work.

Everyday racism as academic distraction

Beyond conditions of academic probation, academic time theft operates through ongoing disruption caused by everyday racism that is subtle and explicit (Sian, 2019) and repeatedly interrupts academic work, fragmenting attention, relations and intellectual continuity. Such racism serves as an academic distraction to keep academics of colour “lagging behind”. A senior woman academic expressed how she was taken aback the first time a colleague made a racist remark:

There was only one moment where a colleague was telling a story, from my perspective, an extremely racist story about something that happened to him. It was like I was in a cab, and the person ripped me off, and *of course*, that happened because that's what *they* always do, and it happened to be someone with my ethnic background. Because you don't expect these extremely open racist comments within the office, I was kind of taken aback. (. . .). That was one of the first moments where I was like, oh people really think this, and they are my colleagues. – woca1

The function of the racist remark is to take the senior woman academic aback, as racism is not expected to appear at a university where she is told racism has disappeared (Ahmed, 2012). The senior woman of colour academic expressed how the racist comment “really resulted in a sort of clash between me and my colleague, which was difficult because we had to work together. (. . .) It took years before I could talk to him in a normal way. So that was, I think, the worst experience and maybe also the moment I decided not to talk about it or avoid these moments. Because it was so upsetting.” Racism does not remain momentary but extends temporally, reorganizing professional relations and academic engagement over time. A junior woman academic expresses how this shaped her ways of being in academia:

We had this very big PhD Room. (. . .). There were 6–7 Ph.D. students. All Dutch white guys. They were always making stupid jokes. (. . .). At some point, one of them started to joke using the N-word. Then I thought, okay, this is it. I can't take it anymore, so I confronted them and said this is not a joke. You should stop saying this kind of bullshit. It was draining. Up until that point, I had been very annoyed, but it was my first year. I didn't really know the people or the relationships in the room. So, I didn't want to be *that* person immediately. That was already draining, like this self-doubt. When do you speak up? (. . .). When you wake up, you think I must sit with these people again. So, you start avoiding them, and you know I went to the library to study, which is less than optimal. (. . .). You know

these are subtle ways you do extra labour, and then after speaking out, you know people will treat you differently. – woca8

Racism interrupts academic time, forcing the junior woman academic into a racist past the institution claims to have transcended. That reliving requires time to emotionally process, manage and navigate racist encounters, taking time away from research tasks and effectively slowing down her academic progression. The junior woman academic therefore avoided working at the university to limit that reliving. Yet she recognizes how that avoidance is extra labour that not only disrupts (how she performs) her academic work but also keeps her up at night, as she explained:

I think maybe when we talk about inequality, that's also part of the inequality because then I can't sleep at night. I don't think my white colleagues have that problem. Some of them, maybe. But if you don't care about this issue [racism], then you don't. – woca8

Unlike their white counterparts, who can move through academic spaces unburdened by racism (Puwar, 2004), academics of colour must divert time and mental energy towards defending their presence in these spaces. Avoidance is not a choice but a survival strategy that extracts additional labour in the form of emotional self-regulation, spatial navigation and preemptive self-censorship of what, when and how (not) to say things. Racism is an academic distraction precisely because it steals academic time from academics of colour in the present and relegates them to a past believed to no longer exist, while rendering invisible how colonial pasts linger in the present (Ramirez, 2024). Such exclusion is also embedded in institutional infrastructures that appear neutral but structure participation unevenly. A junior migrant woman of colour academic described how language expectations shaped her ability to engage in academic spaces:

I even have a feeling that when Dutch people accept you for a PhD in these programs, they are not doing it for you. (. . .). They do it for themselves so they're doing diversity. I went to the IT desk. I don't know what to pick. Everything is in Dutch and it's an international university. When I came here, I thought everything was going to be in English or duality. Then the first time I went to a defense. (. . .) All my friends went. I looked at my friend, and she was like oh it's in Dutch. And I was just like no, I'm stuck. I can't go home. (. . .). I wanted to see what it was like and listen to academics. I ended up just being there, taking pictures on my phone. – woca6

This excerpt shows how the university's exclusionary mode of operating is only visible to those whom it seeks to exclude despite its apparent inclusion of them. Only *after* the junior migrant woman of colour academic looks surprised at her Dutch white colleague does her colleague notice the Dutchness that went unnoticed. This recentring of Dutchness fundamentally limits the capacity of migrant academics of colour to academically engage and build academic capital. These experiences show how everyday racism operates through multiple modalities of both interpersonal rupture and infrastructural exclusion that collectively disrupt academic time. It is not only that racism must be processed emotionally and socially but it also requires continuous adaptation to institutional environments that are not designed for full participation of bodies of colour. The junior woman academic describes how this accumulates into temporal loss:

That's why it's very difficult with racism because it's really subtle, but it gets to you. And it just disorients your whole day. Can you imagine that you're supposed to be studying, but your whole day is just messed up, and you've lost time because you've been triggered? And you constantly have to straddle between work, and the amount of time I spend fixing things that were not even caused by me is amazing. – woca6

Racist orientations disorientate academics of colour who need *time* to reorientate themselves in light of racist orientations. Racism is embedded in the university's temporal structures, ensuring that white academics move linearly through project deadlines and publications while maintaining an uninterrupted academic pace. Academics of colour, however, are not afforded

that uninterrupted time and must move through cycles of disorientation, sleeplessness, recovery and recalibration. The university thus sustains racial hierarchies not only spatially but through the uneven distribution of uninterrupted time. As I show next, the very institutional conditions that create this distraction are used to justify their delayed promotions and opportunities. Academics of colour continue to tick off the necessary steps for their advancement, only to learn that the criteria for progression and inclusion have changed.

Resetting inclusion criteria as deferral of academic futures

Even when academics of colour meet formal requirements for progression, many describe how recognition is continually deferred through shifting and informal criteria that reappear once previous expectations have been fulfilled. Rather than operating as a stable pathway of advancement, academic progression is experienced as a recursive process in which completion of one set of requirements triggers the emergence of new and often implicit conditions. This produces what I conceptualize as academic time theft through recursive evaluation. Time is extracted not only through delay but through the perpetual re-evaluation of what counts as sufficient achievement. A junior man academic shared how he spent years gaining research experiences after being rejected for PhD positions due to a perceived lack of experience, only to be rejected again, as he explained:

They said we are looking for an experienced person with writing experience (. . .), and you should gain more experience. You still must prove yourself a little more. That was the underlying message: you still must prove yourself. In my eyes, I had already proven myself. I have been working there as a researcher for two years now. How long do you have to prove yourself? I also worked at another institution for a year (. . .). I had co-written the reports. I have already conducted dozens of interviews. Let me put it this way: they told me at [name institution] that you have no experience yet. I have now gained more experience than the candidates then. Two years of full-time employment. What do you mean: no experience? – moca5

This excerpt illustrates how academics of colour are kept in a constant state of “almost there”. The junior man of colour academic went along with this narrative of “almost there”: “I went along with those stories and those promises and that carrot dangled in front of your nose.” His account shows how experience is not accumulated in a linear way but perpetually reinterpreted. Each attempt to meet institutional expectations produces a renewed postponement of eligibility. Rather than functioning as neutral criterion, experience becomes a moving threshold that repositions him as perpetually not yet ready. This recursive deferral is also visible in how formal promotion criteria are accompanied by informal and shifting expectations. A senior woman academic said, “the more I am trapped in this assistant professor position, the more clearly things start to become”. She describes how institutional vagueness around promotion criteria shaped her entrapment:

You must meet several criteria. I fulfilled everything long before my eventual promotion, except that I had to supervise a PhD candidate. Well, I had one that stopped. Now, there is a kind of vagueness: so, what now? Am I not checking the box? So, I’ll stay here until I find a new PhD candidate? (. . .) So, things like that make me wonder if I had been a man now. But I don’t dare to say anything because I always think they will say you want to go too fast. HR said that years ago when I got a permanent contract. There is confusion about this, and then you ask: can I fill in the forms with the check marks? I published this. I applied for this project. Why exactly is it that I am not being promoted? And then I don’t get an answer. And some people succeed. Then I wonder: why and how? – woca10

While there are clear orientations for academically advancing on paper, the senior woman academic finds herself disoriented when following them. Such disorientation is produced by the institutional vagueness surrounding the criteria for her promotion. The shifting of promotion criteria can be understood as a form of academic allochronism (Duncan, 2005), where academics are subjected to an endless deferral of recognition and academic suspension. Despite meeting formal requirements, they remain positioned in a “preparatory” phase,

expected to demonstrate more qualifications before being included. To escape such a suspension, the senior woman academic demands clarity, only to be met with the response that she is too demanding. It is a gendered design, she realizes, to delay certain bodies and not others. A reality she is aware of as she wonders what would happen if she were a man.

For Global South academics, the resetting of criteria was tied to the racist degradation of their credentials. A senior man academic shared that the university did not recognize his academic credentials from the Global South as “academically valid”. They required him to acquire new credentials from a Western university, setting him back in time. Nonetheless, he was determined to “catch up” by pursuing another PhD, multiple postdocs, writing multiple peer-reviewed articles, grants and teaching: “I did all that in order to say I can be as good as you and I even beat you in your own game.” When he is up for promotion, the criteria suddenly shifted as he explains:

I was applying for a tenure-track position. I meet all the conditions. They asked for money: €160,000 or maybe a little less. I got €250,000. They wanted six peer-reviewed articles. I had 12 to 13. They wanted Ph.D. supervision. One or two. I had seven, and one was about to graduate. They wanted a teaching qualification. They wanted junior management. I had that done for a long while. All the conditions, the committee says, you have been compliant. One part says that because of this, you are not compliant and won't get promoted. What is it? Team science. – moca3

The introduction of new, undefined criteria like “team science” exemplifies how white time constantly recalibrates to preserve advantage. Inclusion never stabilizes. Each moment of apparent completion is undone as new criteria emerge, shifting the terms of recognition after they have been met. What looks like progression becomes repetition taking shape of the continual re-evaluation of adequacy. Academic time theft works through this recursive deferral, where time is not only delayed but repeatedly taken back through the constant redefinition of what counts as enough. As such, academic belonging remains permanently unfinished.

Conclusion and discussion

Despite inclusion speech, universities continue to (re)produce racialized inequalities (Arday and Mirza, 2018). Recent research has increasingly foregrounded the role of institutional time in sustaining ethnic-racial inequality in academia and other organizations (Ramirez, 2024; Essanhaji and Van Reekum, 2023; Sadeghi *et al.*, 2025). Building on these insights, this article theorizes academic time theft as a mechanism through which universities extract, fragment and continually reorganize the temporal conditions under which academics of colour can progress.

In this study, three interrelated mechanisms of academic time theft were identified. First, prolonged uncertainty produces a condition of academic probation in which inclusion remains conditional and unstable, particularly for academics from the Global South who are positioned as perpetually “not yet” legitimate. Second, ongoing disruption operates through everyday racism that is both subtle and explicit (Sian, 2019), repeatedly interrupting academic work and producing temporal disorientation that diverts attention, energy and labour away from research. Third, recursive evaluation refers to the continual shifting of inclusion criteria, in which formal requirements are met but recognition is deferred through the emergence of new, often implicit expectations. Together, these mechanisms sustain a racialized temporal regime in which academics of colour are continually positioned as “almost there” while their academic futures remain structurally deferred (Essanhaji and Van Reekum, 2023).

These mechanisms show that academic inequality is not only a matter of access, distribution or representation, but of temporal organization itself. In this sense, academic time theft operates through distinct but interlocking temporal violences. Prolonged uncertainty produces a condition of being not yet inside time, as academics of colour are kept in a state of permanent academic probation. Ongoing disruption produces a condition of being unable to remain in linear academic time, as everyday racism repeatedly interrupts continuity and

requires emotional and cognitive reorientation ([Ahmed, 2012](#)). Recursive evaluation produces a condition of never being able to complete time, as recognition is perpetually delayed through the shifting recalibration of criteria even after formal requirements are met. As [Mills \(2020\)](#) reminds us, racialized subjects are frequently denied coevalness; here, that denial is not only spatial but deeply temporal, structured through the organization of academic life itself.

The first contribution of this article is therefore conceptual. While previous scholarship has examined minority taxation and the additional labour required of academics of colour within institutions ([Melaku, 2022](#); [Hirshfield and Joseph, 2012](#); [Bird *et al.*, 2004](#)), this study extends these debates by showing that inequality also operates through the extraction of time itself. Academic time theft is not an incidental by-product of exclusion but a structural mechanism through which universities sustain white institutional time. It works by continuously delaying, interrupting and recalibrating what counts as academic legitimacy, ensuring that the labour of academics of colour remains productive for the institution while their progression is indefinitely postponed. Prior research has shown that opportunities and resources are unevenly distributed along racial lines ([Bhopal, 2022](#); [Bourabain, 2020](#)). This study adds that such inequality is also temporal. It is produced through the organization of waiting, interruption and recalibration. Through insecure employment, everyday racism and shifting inclusion criteria, universities ensure that academics of colour remain in a state of what [Bosanquet *et al.* \(2020\)](#) call “deferred time,” in which academic futures are continually anticipated but never fully realized. Academic time theft is thus not only about slowing down careers but about structuring the conditions under which academic progression can always be redefined after it has been achieved.

Second, this study also highlights how academic time theft is differentially experienced across racialized and migrant positions. As [Duncan \(2005\)](#) argues, racialized populations are often denied coevalness. In Dutch academia, this denial takes multiple forms that also point to important hierarchies within the category of “academics of colour” itself. Migrant and refugee academics are particularly subjected to prolonged uncertainty through administrative and material precarity, while Dutch-born academics of colour more often encounter ongoing disruption and recursive evaluation within institutional careers. These differentiated temporal positions illustrate how academic time theft intersects with migration status, language regimes and institutional belonging ([Essed and Trienekens, 2008](#); [Burlyuk and Rahbari, 2023](#)), producing uneven experiences of academic time across racialized groups.

To ensure that people of colour have academic futures, researchers and policymakers must break with the white temporality of academic work within which progress for some is enabled and for others is ongoingly deferred. This entails refusing a language that labels academics of colour as those who are more likely to “drop out”, “lag behind” or “achieve less” ([Ayala and Contreras, 2019](#)) that remains complicit with a white temporality in which white (wo)men remain the unnamed standard against which academic achievements are compared. Such a refusal recognizes how academics of colour are always already embracing other temporalities to remain in academia otherwise. Hence, this article up avenues for future research on how racialized academics navigate, resist and rework these temporal regimes. One important direction concerns the role of collective practices of care, relationality and refusal within academia. While this study has focused on how academic time is extracted and reorganized, further research could examine how academics of colour collectively generate alternative temporalities that disrupt institutional logics of speed, delay and recalibration ([Fillingim *et al.*, 2023](#)). This would allow for a deeper understanding of how temporal resistance might move beyond individual endurance towards collective transformation of academic time itself.

To conclude, academic time theft reveals that inequality in academia is not only spatially distributed or structurally reproduced but temporally engineered. Universities do not simply determine who belongs, but they regulate when belonging can arrive, how long it must wait and whether it can ever be completed. In doing so, they sustain a racialized academic regime in

which arrival is not explicitly denied but constantly rewritten and progress is not achieved but endlessly redefined.

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Corresponding author

Z. Essanhaji can be contacted at: z.essanhaji@vu.nl

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