

Mathematics DisAppearance in Cultures, Spaces, Times: *Thinking about life and reason for the (non)citizen at times of crisis*

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In the early 1960s, Ursula Le Guin wrote ‘The Masters’, a short novel where mathematics becomes banned by law and, as such, disappears from all cultural practices. The law requires people to abstain from science, to live a common life and to experience a different spacetime in their everyday without the temptation of violent risks in using mathematics and inventing scientific products. This speculative narrative offers a sharp contrast to the pressures of a ‘maths for all’ discourse fully present in contemporary mathematics education reforms as a matter of social justice and equity. But, is it only that? Le Guin writes of a dystopic world – Edun – where ‘mathematical prohibition’ is law. The use of mathematical artefacts, tools, ideas, language, logic and reason is banned for all by the Priests of Edun and conditions the norm of citizenship in the polis. Failure to obey is punishable by death. Despite the threat of ‘thanatopolitics’ in this totalitarian anti-math regime, or, exactly, because of it, some citizens escape and create a collective heterotopia to practice mathematics in secrecy and relive their mathematical culture as a chronotope of clandestineness. As such, they risk to lose not only the right to citizenship in Edun, but life itself. Le Guin’s story is an opportunity to conduct a thought experiment: ‘what if maths became forbidden?’ that, even, allows us to think that maybe ‘mathematical culture is already forbidden’ when the focus is teaching for limitless success in national and international competitive testing. This ‘what if’ experiment becomes a speculative spacetime where statements such as ‘maths for all’ or ‘no to maths’ are grounded in rationalisations that construe mathematical subjectivity as a determined actor for the citizen (or the noncitizen, the missing other) grounded in western ideals of development and progress for self and society. This lecture suggests that we need to move beyond a ‘maths for all’ or a ‘no to maths’ binary where the poles operate as distinct ‘states of exception’ and serve to re/produce in/exclusions in politics of ‘fear’. Instead, we need to interrogate the space ‘in-between’ them, to explore ways that disrupt diverse forms of essentialism and to work toward democratizing knowledge as action and in action.

References

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