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Dr. Olga Burlyuk in conversation with Dr. Vjosa Musliu

Vjosa Musliu: This below was a discussion of what it means to be a researcher from the Global South (Eastern Europe in this case) in Western Academia. In her piece, [Fending off a triple inferiority complex in academia: an autoethnography](#), Olya walks us through her academic journey from Kyiv to Ghent (last stop). As she explains her academic

encounters and day-to-day work, Olya walks us in a funny, yet brutally confronting way through matters of core-periphery; East-West signifiers; racist and orientalist micro-aggressions; academic oblivion and the problematic notion of “critique” in academia. The themes deployed are multiple, yet the article focuses on two: love and frustration, and auto-ethnographic writing.

LOVE AND FRUSTRATION

Vjosa Musliu (VM): *To start with, Olya, what is this piece really all about?*

Olga Burlyuk (OB): I would like to reply with a quote from Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*: “I liked that Gallop was onto something and letting us in on it before she fully understood it. She was hanging her shit out to dry: a start.” This was very much the case with my autoethnography: when I started, I did not fully realize the impact this work would have on me and others and the many ways in which it could – and would – be read. I intentionally left the analysis to the reader, offering just raw stories, so to say, and it looks like the essay has become a kaleidoscope in which everyone sees what resonates with

them most at this moment in time and space. My driving thought in writing this piece was that, while the details of our individual journeys differ, the contours are much the same. This is how I understood the method/genre of autoethnography: through the personal, I exposed the institutional.

VM: *So, where are you from? How do you respond to this question now? And how can it be so stubbornly unchanged among fellow academics?...*

OB: To clarify: it isn't so much the "where are you from?" question that I find bizarre, but the "which part?" that follows it. I chose to write this up as a recurring theme to showcase all the different answers I'd give to the question as my attitude changed. The value of the where-are-you-from thread to me is in this personal evolution. Now, if you ask me which question I'd rather be asked, I'd say "where in Ukraine are you from?" or better yet: "what brings you here?".

VM: *I would like to turn to the episode from December 2017, where you burst into tears amidst the crowds of Catalan protestors on your commute to work. Where do emotions, emotional labour we put to work fit in/disappear/have to be forsaken in our day-to-day work?*

OB: The theme behind this episode for me is the unprocessed trauma that you carry around. And the odd about it is that it is very much out-of-context in which you find yourself. It is out of context because you live abroad: they have other issues on the agenda here (and specifically in Belgium, there is a note of nonchalance in the culture that makes it awkward if not impossible to talk about sensitive issues). And it is out of context in the specific professional environment – academia – where one is supposed to be driven by rational curiosity rather than emotion and maintain a sense of detachment from real-life events to remain objective-read-authoritative.

VM: *For me, one of the most striking parts in your essay is the episode from October 2014, where the janitor expresses his condolences on the situation in Ukraine, which makes you realize he is the first one in your work place to do so. Am I stretching too much when I assume that there is a sense of oblivion towards human experience and lack of compassion in our workplaces, also among "critical" scholars of international politics?*

OB: You are right to point out that my essay is about a specific population: international studies scholars. I believe we should be held to a higher standard – because it is our job (and for many, our professional identity as critical scholars) to be aware and sensitive to these sort of things. Now, on emotional intelligence in our workplaces. What I personally find perplexing is that we do "critical studies", advocate for action research, really do care about multiple causes in the world – but then overlook people and situations in our immediate vicinity. It's like we are so forward-looking and far-sighted that we don't see what's right under our noses.

VM: *The gender aspect is rather muted in the paper, and I find that very interesting. Was that a conscious choice?*

OB: In a way, gender is in the essay, because you cannot eliminate the fact that I am a woman. But you are right to notice that I have tried – deliberately, yes – to keep it down, if not out. Partly so, because I feared the essay would otherwise cover too much ground and end up being a book. [laugh] Partly so, because I saw with earlier drafts – with a more prominent gender line – that the positioning point got diffused, confusing the readers as to what the “three inferiority complexes” mentioned in the title were. And partly so, because I thought this would somehow keep my point relatable to men and women. I am saving my thoughts on being a woman, a wife and a mother in academia for another essay, fear not! [laugh] But you know, I am fully aware that – for the rest – I am pretty mainstream: I am white, heterosexual, married, Christian, without disabilities... There are plenty of people who have it much harder yet.

THE WRITING ITSELF: THE GENRE AND THE WRITING PROCESS

VM: *After you wrote this, the reaction was overwhelming. As I was going through some of the comments, I noticed words like “courageous”, “brave”, “audacious”, “voice of a generation”. What can you make of all of this?*

OB: I was definitely writing to make a general point, not just “to ventilate”, and it did feel daring to publish this, absolutely. In the logic of “when you define the problem, you risk becoming the problem”, I could clearly see myself ending up as the problem here. But I didn’t see myself for a “speaker of a generation”, if that’s what you are asking. [laugh] Now, I was really overwhelmed by the reactions I received once the essay came out. The diapason has been huge: from “ooff, this is confronting...” and “ha-ha, I recognised so much in the story that it could have been mine!” to “oh, how did you recollect all this?! I went to my own memory, and it is blank!” to “gosh, I’ve really got to sort my own shit now”. But mind you: I also received reactions like “Olya, I had no idea you were suffering from the inferiority complexes so much!” and “Oh, I have none of these issues myself”. So yes, everyone reads it through their own experience and level of acceptance.

VM: *The (auto)ethnography genre is not exactly popular in IR, even less so in EU studies. Can you tell us what the writing process was like for you, also compared to your previous works?*

OB: Autoethnography is definitely not a thing in IR. I’ve even met anthropologists who frowned upon it. Also some people would say, “Oh, an autoethnography?! Isn’t that something for people at the end of their careers?” I very much disagree, clearly. [laugh] You either have a point to make or you don’t. Now,

with background in law and international relations, I have never written or been trained to write such kind of thing; I haven't read many, to be honest. I wrote it largely intuitively, and it was a huge relief to hear back from the reviewers that it did make sense. The writing experience has been fantastic overall: never before had it felt like I was a writer. It was very empowering to write something not "classically academic" and discover that I can.

VM: *I imagine a different emotional labour goes into this type of work and writing. Can you elaborate on that?*

OB: Definitely different. It was exhausting and fulfilling all at once. I am afraid it became an obsession at some stage. [laugh] And it brought huge satisfaction at the end.

VM: *Many of your episodes have names of real people, institutions and subjects that are easily traceable. Has there been some self-censorship in your story-telling?*

OB: At the very start, I decided that using names would make the story more realistic, more humane. So I used real names whenever I considered it unproblematic. Generally, I included information about others strictly on the need-to-know-basis, as they did not ask to be in the story. As for self-censorship: yes, undeniably. On the one hand, I went for radical transparency. But in doing so, I aimed to phrase all stories so as to emphasize the episode, not the people in it, the universal over the individual – in keeping with the genre. "It happened to me, but it could have happened to anyone like me." Reviewers were very helpful in this, too, pointing out instances when I might have been attributing words or thoughts to others. On the other hand, I did self-censor and exclude some "piquant" stories: it was not my intention to offend anyone or take revenge.

VM: *The stories in the essay are written chronologically spread over some 15 years. I wonder, how much of this is fiction and, maybe even more importantly, how much of this is written from today's vantage point?*

OB: Diaries are also fiction, you know! [laugh] To answer your question, I tried to write the episodes as I experienced them then – even at the expense of having myself appear silly and naïve. But of course the essay is written by me now, we can't deny that. A friend who read the piece suggested I repeat the exercise in 10 years from now starting from the beginning without consulting the original essay: to see how different my recollections become. I think this is a fantastic idea!

This post is based on the conversation that took place on 19 February 2020 in the context of an [EDGE Talk](#) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).

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