

Of Love and Frustration as Post-Yugoslav Women Scholars: Learning and Unlearning the Coloniality of IR in the Context of Global North Academia

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This collective discussion brings together six women scholars of and from the post-Yugoslav space, who, using personal experiences, analyze the dynamics of knowledge production in international relations (IR), especially regarding the post-Yugoslav space. Working in Global North academia but with lived experiences in the region we study, our research is often subjected to a particular gaze, seeped in assumptions about “ulterior” motives and expectations about writing and representation. Can those expected to be objects of knowledge ever become epistemic subjects? We argue that the rendering of the post-Yugoslav space as conflict-prone and as Europe’s liminal semi-periphery in the discipline of IR cannot be decoupled from the rendering of the region and those seen as related to it as unable to produce knowledge that, in mainstream discussions, is seen as valuable and “objective.” The post-Yugoslav region and those seen as related to it being simultaneously postcolonial, postsocialist, and postwar, and characterized by marginalization, complicity, and privilege in global racialized hierarchies at the same time, can make visible specific forms of multiple colonialities, potentially creating space for anti- and/or decolonial alternatives. We further make the case for embracing a radical reflexivity that

* The authors form the Yugoslawomen+ Collective, which is a group of six women scholars of and from the post-Yugoslav space, currently working in Global North academia. This discussion and the ideas presented in it are a product of collective labor, engagement, and thinking. The names appear in an order based on authors’ contributions to bringing the final version of this collective text to light.

is active, collaborative, and rooted in feminist epistemologies and political commitments.

Cette discussion collective rassemble six chercheuses issues ou originaires de l'ex-Yougoslavie. À l'aide de notre expérience personnelle, nous analysons la dynamique de production de connaissances en relations internationales, notamment au sujet de l'ex-Yougoslavie. Nous travaillons dans des universités du Nord économique, mais nous avons vécu dans la région que nous étudions. Aussi, notre recherche fait souvent l'objet d'une attention particulière, empreinte de suppositions de raisons cachées et d'attentes quant à l'écriture et la représentation faite. Les objets de connaissance peuvent-ils un jour devenir des sujets épistémiques ? Selon nous, la représentation de l'ex-Yougoslavie tel un espace sujet aux conflits ou une semi-périphérie liminaire de l'Europe dans la discipline des RI n'est pas sans conséquence. En effet, elle est intrinsèquement liée à l'incapacité présumée de cette région ou des régions qui y seraient associées de produire des connaissances généralement considérées précieuses et « objectives ». À la fois postcoloniales, postsocialistes et d'après-guerre, ces régions sont aussi caractérisées par un mélange de marginalisation, complicité et privilèges au sein des hiérarchies racialisées mondiales. Ainsi, elles peuvent mettre en lumière des formes spécifiques de colonialités, et donc permettre l'avènement d'alternatives anticoloniales et/ou décoloniales. En outre, nous plaidons en faveur de l'adoption d'une réflexivité radicale qui serait active, collaborative et ancrée dans les épistémologies féministes et les engagements politiques.

Este debate colectivo reúne a seis académicas procedentes del espacio posyugoslavo que, a partir de experiencias personales, analizan la dinámica de la producción de conocimiento en las Relaciones Internacionales, especialmente en lo que se refiere al espacio posyugoslavo. Al trabajar en el mundo académico del Norte Global, pero con experiencias vividas en la región que estudiamos, nuestra investigación suele estar sujeta a una mirada particular, impregnada de suposiciones sobre motivos «ocultos» y expectativas sobre la escritura y la representación. ¿Se puede esperar que quienes se espera que sean objetos de conocimiento puedan llegar a ser sujetos epistémicos? Argumentamos que la representación del espacio posyugoslavo como propenso al conflicto y como semiperiferia liminal de Europa en la disciplina de las RRII no puede dissociarse de la representación de la región, y de quienes se consideran relacionados con la misma, como incapaces de producir conocimientos que, en los debates de la corriente dominante, se consideren valiosos y «objetivos». La región posyugoslava y las que se consideran relacionadas con la misma por ser simultáneamente poscoloniales, postsocialistas y posbélicas, así como por caracterizarse al mismo tiempo por la marginación, la complicidad y el privilegio en las jerarquías racializadas globales, pueden hacer visibles formas específicas de colonialidades múltiples, creando potencialmente un espacio para alternativas anticoloniales y/o decoloniales. Además, abogamos por la adopción de una reflexividad radical que sea activa, colaborativa y arraigada en epistemologías y compromisos políticos feministas.

Introduction

This collective discussion is a product of frustration and love. It was the love toward the research and region itself, along with frustration over the pattern in struggles over knowledge production that brought this post-Yugoslav women scholars collective together. Through our connections to the post-Yugoslav region, by having been born, lived, or been displaced from the region, we all noticed that at some

point during our academic careers, we were repeatedly requested to declare our positionalities in relation to it. These were qualified by comments that our “stakes” there might affect our research more than those without lived experience of the region. Each of us has faced similar challenges in terms of positioning ourselves during “fieldwork,”¹ in our writing, and in Global North academia,² the latter of which we unpack here.

Our work has also been motivated by the love and dedication to knowledge, education, and a region presented as backward and not-quite-European in hegemonic academic, political, and popular narratives (see [Todorova 1997](#); [Baker 2018](#)). Not only do we all have family members who live there, but critically, each of us has had protracted engagement with the region and its peoples, through scholarly work, teaching, policy, activism, and civil society. Our work as a Collective additionally challenges the dominant views on the region and the assumed impossibility of cooperation among scholars connected to different parts of the post-Yugoslav space and classified as belonging to different groups, views (re)produced through hierarchical knowledge production practices both inside and outside the region.

In having this collective discussion, we have not only excavated experiences that we have (un)purposefully left out of our memories and writing, but also helped each other make sense of them and of the love and frustration that accompanied them. We use those experiences to highlight the complexities of international relations’ (IR) long-standing, often unreflexive use of “the Balkans” and the post-Yugoslav space³ as a case study, being approached nearly singularly through the prism of coloniality, violence, and needing to “catch up.” Continually rendering the post-Yugoslav context into an object of international intervention that is at times openly and uncritically labeled as “a laboratory for peacebuilding” ([Emmerson and Gross 2007](#)) conjoins portraits of the region and those seen as related to it both as “objects of knowledge,” those whose lived realities can be theorized about by someone else, and, simultaneously, as unable to produce knowledge that could be trusted as “valuable” and “objective enough” for the standards of Western mainstream⁴ academic discussions and requirements of IR and other related disciplines. This extends to how scholars from and of the region are imagined in Western universities, with those of us who study and work abroad being perceived as closer to *expertise* and to whiteness, understood as EUropeanness, as long as we conform to the disciplinary expectations of the neoliberal university and of IR’s imaginings of the post-Yugoslav space. The requests to declare and reflect upon our *positionalities in relation to the region*, thus, have served as the discipline’s disciplinary and self-legitimizing enforcement of these rules and narratives ensuring our conduct aligns.

By the same token, for us, those requests have been a source of frustration as they could neither allow us to eclipse this Western gaze of the post-Yugoslav space as lagging behind nor to holistically and meaningfully reflect upon *materiality and the politics of location* from within which we have been trying to make knowledge claims and tell stories. Instead, we argue, the reflexivity we have often been called to perform, even by the more critical streams in IR, has often been merely a ritualistic self-legitimation of the disciplinary assumptions about, as [Rutazibwa \(2019\)](#)

¹We use quotation marks when referring to “fieldwork” as a way to problematize the assumed distance between the researcher and the “researched” and between our offices and “the field,” cognitively and materially. Due to space constraints, we are postponing that discussion for a future article.

²We use “Global North academia” and “Western academia” to refer to academic institutions based in the countries of the Global North, understood not as a geographical term, but as a hemisphere of power, embedded in a certain thought tradition and historically uneven power relations.

³In IR literature, “the Balkans” and “post/former Yugoslav space” are oftentimes used interchangeably. While the two overlap, using them interchangeably erases and silences a number of non-Yugoslav peoples, both within and outside Yugoslavia, and at the same time, it marginalizes the agency and experiences of non-Yugoslav groups and communities.

⁴More recently, there has been a multifaceted critique of this phenomenon in knowledge production; see, for instance, [Duriesmith \(2020\)](#).

and [Shah \(2021\)](#) have separately explained, what knowledge and expertise are and who can claim them. These practices further normalize epistemic and ontological inclinations of IR that contribute to coloniality, academic Euro- and Anglocentrism, and expectations of separation between being and knowing.

As scholars from the postsocialist, postcolonial, and postwar post-Yugoslav space working in Global North academia, and IR in particular, we argue that materiality and politics of our locations are indicative of the impossibility and counterproductivity of separating our being and knowing. We suggest that moving beyond the performative, to a radical, collective, and uncomfortable self-reflection, is the only way to get to a space of genuine intellectual engagement and a position from which we can, eventually, produce knowledge otherwise. These discussions have been problematized in the realm of international political sociology, too. For example, [Tucker \(2018\)](#) suggests that the dominant modes of decolonial critique in IR ought to be supplemented by projects that disrupt and contest racialized power and knowledge relations as they play out across multiple political, economic, and epistemic sites. In our work, we strive to negotiate power by changing and cultivating caring relations between us and our research participants, and to bring in the voices from the margins to the center. In this direction, in dialogue with Global South feminist theories, we suggest a need for radical reflexivity that is active, collaborative, and rooted in feminist epistemologies and political commitments and that embraces dynamism of social positioning and humility ([Fujii 2009, 2017](#)). This kind of radical reflexivity brings in questions of ethics of relation and accountability ([Icaza 2022](#)), especially in the context of the academic industrial complex, aiming to unlearn while working toward kinder, more loving, and less extractive futures.

At the same time, in order to avoid using this radical reflexivity and postcolonial theory as tools for yet another reproduction of racial and colonial exceptionalism of the post-Yugoslav region ([Kušić 2021](#)) and its scholars, we also need to address the complacency and participation in reproduction of structures of coloniality globally. In like manner, as a post-Yugoslav collective, radical reflexivity demands of us to acknowledge the workings of coloniality through hierarchies and exclusion both within the region ([Kuperberg 2021](#)) and toward spaces elsewhere ([Subotić and Vučetić 2019](#)). Our aim is not to dissect others' work on former Yugoslavia, but to point to how radical reflexivity can inform knowledge production and uncover concealed authority behind the text (see [Smith 1999](#); [Ozkaleli and Ozkaleli 2021](#)).

With that in mind, this discussion's contribution is three-fold. First, we contribute to postcolonial thinking by highlighting particularities about existing colonialities and hierarchies of knowledge that our specific experiences as post-Yugoslav women scholars in Global North academia reveal. Through reflections on IR imaginaries of the region and its scholars, we add nuance to post- and decolonial critiques (with) in the discipline that have called for pluralization and rethinking of the "methods, methodologies, concepts, actors and narratives we deploy in order to make sense of global politics" ([Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018](#), 1). Bringing in the post-Yugoslav example, as a space that has both been subjected to imperial rulings and perpetuated internal and global racialized hierarchies, indicates the need to actively pluralize our understanding of colonialities of IR. We also further contextualize and complicate the calls for provincializing IR from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) ([Alejandro 2021a](#); [Kušić 2021](#); [Mälksoo 2021](#)). These calls point to how thinking in Global North–Global South binaries renders the Global East erased from the notion of globality ([Müller 2018](#)) and paints it as "unworthy of knowledge production" ([Alejandro 2021a](#), 1004). The post-Yugoslav space, however, shows that one can be deemed as worthy of knowledge production but in a way that renders them objectified and void of agency.

Second, we contribute to the discussions about geopolitics of knowledge production by showing practices and processes through which the discipline and the

academic community can contribute to further marginalization and impose complacency under the guise of scholarly scrutiny. This disciplining of whose and what kind of knowledge is deemed valuable (Vlavonou 2021) and who gets to be considered an expert (Rutazibwa 2019) is problematic not solely in terms of geopolitics of knowledge production, but also the everyday materiality thereof. In that sense, and in line with earlier international political sociology scholarship, we keep “the international/political/sociological *in tension* in order to reveal and contest formations of power, authority, exclusion, and violence” (Lisle, Squire, and Doty 2017) within the discipline itself.

Finally, by having this discussion as a collective, we contribute to the expansion of the academic imaginary beyond the current dominant mode of individualistic and atomized neoliberal knowledge production and competition. We use vignettes, vulnerably and honestly, as a way of empirically analyzing the position(s) from which we are writing, as this potentially echoes the experiences of a much wider group of people. This discussion is, therefore, a result of collective work around the proverbial dinner table that uncovers (suppressed and disciplined) knowledges in joint conversations. However, ours still remains an academic and intellectual endeavor from a certain (privileged) position. While we write this text in English, rooting ourselves in the literature and conversations taking place in Western Anglo-saxon academia in a manner that deems this discussion worthy of being published in an international disciplinary journal, we nonetheless hope that it propels critical thinking and stirs up feelings of discomfort among readers.

In the first part of this discussion, we engage with the notion of the “post-Yugoslav” space and, relatedly, the notion of “home.” We outline what they mean to us individually, through personal vignettes, and collectively, as an understanding present throughout this discussion and our work. Second, we then build upon the arguments that many before us have made about the coloniality of Westernized university, its disciplinary and disciplining canons, and discuss how those have been manifested in IR’s imaginings of the post-Yugoslav space. We then outline some of our experiences disseminating knowledge about and from the region within Global North academia. We combine vignettes of love, frustration, and personal reflections with theoretical discussions because these “mixed forms” speak to both our bodies and our minds, and allow us to ground ourselves in our experiences. The mixed forms also speak to the discomfort, vulnerabilities, and the quest for words and understandings, respite, and relearning as we confront disciplinary hierarchies and assumptions about who provides “raw data” and who can theorize. Through reflections on our experiences of privileges and marginalization, we also discuss how we found ourselves complicit in maintenance and reproduction of the hierarchies that have been imposed on us, and how we face the limits of reflexivity to alter materiality of marginalization.

The Post-Yugoslav Space and “Home”

The Yugoslav project in academic discourse remains largely contested, subject to revisionist views, neglected within broader debates, centered within nationalist myths, sometimes romanticized, sometimes orientalized, while also driving and reinforcing violence and marginalization. Throughout this discussion, we use the term “post-Yugoslav” in reference not only to the aftermath of Yugoslavia and the area of the former Yugoslavia, but also to the temporal-spatial constellations informed by the Yugoslav experiences. We thus follow Krasniqi and Petrović (2019) who argue that the post-Yugoslav space does not only represent a geographical, but also a political space, a social signifier of possible shifts toward consensual perceptions of plural meanings of the antagonized politics of belonging instrumental in building a common historical knowledge. The post-Yugoslav space is complex and fluid; it is a “geopolitical space of discomfort” (Krasniqi and Petrović 2019, 19). In this section,

we discuss what it means for us, especially in relation to the idea of “home.” We were all born in the region, but wars and migration mean that we are all living in diaspora. With that, there also comes an assumption of there being a “back home” and, to some degree, a desire to return to that home. The post-Yugoslav space can be described broadly in terms of what [Krasniqi and Petrović \(2019, 19\)](#) call “the zone of anxiety, induced by geopolitics and a constant struggle between nationalist myths and nostalgic past, impossible history and crises.” We are learning to respond to these sites through radical reflexivity in our scholarship, while balancing our notions of “home” and understandings of the “(post-)Yugoslav” on a personal level, informed by our different experiences and backgrounds.

A popular story of Yugoslavia was one of “brotherhood and unity.” Jelena remembers that one of the first things her class did in primary school was to create cardboard cutouts of Yugoslavia, which were used frequently in lessons as templates for filling in maps of “famous battles,” “important roads,” and “important rivers” of Yugoslavia, all reinforcing the idea of connectivity and Yugoslavia as a single country. An artifact of that time, Jelena’s school notebook from September 1991 shows how the founding myths of Yugoslavia, with “our people” and “our flags,” were parts of mandatory schoolwork and went some way to reinforce the idea of Yugoslavia as home.

Elena similarly grew up with the notion of Yugoslavia as home, even though her schooling started after the breakup of the federation had begun. This notion, in her case, was informed by the experiences of her family. “My mother, who grew up in Macedonia, and my father, who grew up in Serbia, met at university, which as the first generation to go to high school in each respective family none of them could afford to attend without state support. I remember them saying that had it not been for Yugoslavia, they might have never met. We then lived in Serbia, Kosovo, and ultimately in Macedonia throughout the dissolution and after. So my childhood memories of the taste of ajvar made by one of my grandmothers and the smell of sarma made by the other grandmother stretched across multiple geographies of the former country. This is why for me, self-identifying as post-Yugoslav, while being aware of the promise and the violence of the Yugoslav project, is a way of living with the discomfort and the tension, and acknowledging the multiple experiences that shaped my original ‘home home’.”

Sladjana, who started schooling in parallel to the wars and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, has no specific personal memory of that country, but the response to the “where are you from” question still is “Yugoslavia.” “This represents my own wicked queer refusal. This reply immediately raises the retort “that country does not exist” and being from a country that does not exist comes closer to the truth than claiming to “belong” to any of the past or the present state and national formations, neither of which included me as queer into their “imagined communities.” Saying that I am from Yugoslavia also acknowledges that without that particular historical formation, my parents would have probably never met, and that I am partly formed by all the messiness of the post-Yugoslav condition that still presents “home-home.”

Julija also highlights some of the contradictions and ambiguities of “belonging,” especially in light of the nationalist narratives that emerged in most of the post-Yugoslav states: “coming from a mixed Slovenian-Croatian family but spending most of my childhood in Slovenia, I have had ambivalent feelings both to the Yugoslav narrative of home in the 80s and the Slovenian nationalist narrative of home in the 90s, when Slovenian nationalist discourse distanced itself from the Yugoslav past and categorised everything Yugoslav as foreign. Given my Croatian last name, I was never recognised as fully Slovenian despite spending most of my formative years there.”

What the above foundational narratives leave out is that the idea of Yugoslavia as home was created through violence against Kosovo Albanians, Roma, and other populations. Vjosa says that “having grown up in the early 1990s, as a Kosovo

Albanian I am at a discomfort with everything Yugoslavia entails and represents. Though self-perpetuated as an inclusive and egalitarian federation forged around brotherhood and unity, the country of the ‘Southern Slavs’ was exclusionary and alienating to the rest - the non-Slavs. The whole concept of ‘home’ is seemingly naturally imbued with a sense of security, warmth and protection. However, cast as second-hand citizens, for an Albanian, Yugoslavia never felt like home. If anything, that home was primarily associated with repression, fear and structural violence. This in turn complicated my politics of home and home-making. Homes are not always spaces of love, protection and security. Homes are also places of trauma, violence and subjugation.”

For Dženeta, the earliest memories of Yugoslavia are those associated with its dissolution and the violence that left her family as refugees. She remembers being photographed for a Yugoslav passport that would inevitably become invalid within a year of being issued. While Yugoslavia loomed large in the background in family narratives, objects, and memories, it was subsequently discounted throughout her education in Western Europe and the United States that centered the Cold War and its aftermath as unrelated to what was happening in the Balkans. Only later, as an adult, has she reconnected the post-Yugoslav space with notions of “home,” centering its significance and meaning through personal experiences and relationships.

The post-Yugoslav space remains contested within our memories and experiences, snippets of past lives we might barely remember or have vivid memories and associations of the kind of “familiarity and affection” that we have a hard time associating with in the countries in which we live today (Musliu 2017, 55). Memories of the violence of Yugoslavia’s dissolution are intertwined with moments of youthful joy that we can only appreciate with the distance of time today. We have intertwined the frustrations we have with “home” and channeled them into love, much like Shah (2021) has done in an effort to decenter the discipline. Love is not static. It undergoes changes, as its weight in our lives permeates, recedes, and matures. Home for us is not geographically bound, but remembered and practiced through shared rituals, memories, food, smells, and conversations, and perhaps most significantly reiterated and regenerated by frustration about loss, erasure, and violence experienced.

“Westernized Universal University” and IR’s Imaginings of the Post-Yugoslav Space

The imaginings of the post-Yugoslav space in IR are deeply rooted in the discipline’s coloniality, Western-centeredness, and Western-centricism. Grosfoguel (2013) and Santos (2010) have separately interrogated the canonical establishment of social sciences, including IR, questioning how it is possible that the canon of thought in all the social sciences and humanities in the Westernized university is based on knowledge produced by a few men from five countries in Western Europe and North America. What they essentially have deconstructed is how a handful of male authors have managed to achieve such an epistemic universality that their knowledge today is considered not only *the* legitimate knowledge, but also superior to the rest of the world.

Even though it has the word *international* in it, the coloniality of IR has been a point of debate for decades. Scholars have argued that coloniality is co-constitutive of IR (Mignolo and Walsh 2018), including its rendering of non-Western subjects and knowledges silent (D’Costa 2021), and its imperial and Eurocentric genealogies (Capasso 2021). Those who have grappled with the coloniality of IR have showcased the persistence of coloniality in feminist IR (Lugones 2008; Espinosa, Gomez, and Ochoa 2014), peacebuilding (Simangan 2021), and international statebuilding (Visoka and Musliu 2019), as well as its ethnocentrism and the tendency to view

world politics through the prism of one's own national block experience (Acharya 2000). While even in critical literature coloniality of IR is frequently referred to as a unitary system of thought and domination, we acknowledge that such an approach not only “[flattens] centuries of colonial rule by diverse colonial powers and [homogenises] their legacies, but it also does little to prompt the close, detailed analysis required to identify the dispersed practices that produce racialized hierarchies and erasures” (Tucker 2018, 222).

Our discussion contributes to the active pluralization of understanding of colonialities of IR, considering the particular position from and for which we write. The post-Yugoslav region has been subject to imperial rule, but has also benefited from global racialized hierarchies and further perpetuated them internally. In that sense, the example of the post-Yugoslav space points to the necessity of plural understanding in undoing erasure of multiple experiences and in building solidarities across contexts. Two aspects of the above discussion are of relevance to our paper. The first one regards the *subjecthood* in IR and the second one *epistemic violence*.

First, a key point we raise in our attempt to pluralize understanding of colonialities that lies at the core of the *subjecthood* debate is the question who gets to talk about IR. For instance, Tickner and Weaver (2009) suggest that North American approaches to IR tend to dominate national academies in most of the world. However, arguing that this is constitutive to the discipline of IR alone overlooks a much broader phenomenon that is structural to the canons of knowledge in social sciences. Grosfoguel (2009) argues that university curricula in IR, political theory, and the like are uniform in the Westernized university, being both periodized and legitimized according to the Western European viewpoint. At the same time, the rendering of an epistemic experience from a fraction of the world as universal across space and time goes hand in hand with rendering of other, non-Western knowledges and experiences as unworthy of being included in the canons of science or be considered scientific.

In fact, an aspect of colonial IR—and one particularly relevant for our discussion—can be traced in how non-Western thought for IR is still considered a legitimate object of inquiry but not a source of legitimate knowledge of subjecthood (Shilliam 2010). The dominant subject opposition in IR is in many ways still reserved for the Western author, ensuring that the Western subject remains intact and concealed in worlding IR theorizing (Ozkaleli and Ozkaleli 2021). Even the critique of and within IR has predominantly been Eurocentric (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). In that sense, as Manion (2021, 18) notes, even when we are the embodied sites of knowledge, those experiences are expected to belong to someone else, to an omnipresent, but on paper invisible, “objective,” and distant, usually male “expert.” And while the expertise of “local voices” is framed as knowledge delimited to context (Shepherd 2017), one can easily get the impression that there are no “locals” in the Global North as Shuayb (2022) reminds us. This sort of knowledge production has severe implications not only for how we understand IR, but also for the researched communities. A lot of the “damage-centered research,” for example, not only documents “the effects of oppression on [the] communities,” but also has “long-term repercussions of [the communities] thinking of [themselves] as broken” (Tuck 2009, 409).

The question of subjecthood in IR often goes hand in hand with what is considered legitimate knowledge worth theorizing and informing our understanding of IR. Feminist IR scholars (Steans 2003; Smith 2018), for instance, have long pointed to the problem of “gender” being framed as “niche” and particularistic, especially considering the importance and the impact of the world being both gendered and gendering. Additionally, in unlearning the multiple colonialities of the discipline, it is critical to “move beyond an instrumental, formalistic, fixed, and narrow scientific logic that imposes a historical parochialism [...] for an ahistorical universal (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, 21). In such a move, we embrace and learn from

scholars who have reimaged IR as if people mattered (*Journal of Narrative Politics* 8[1], 2021) and those who have highlighted the value of stories and poems (Edkins et al. 2021), political novels and emotions (Hartnett 2022), and in our case—love and frustration, in understanding worldmaking.

A second related aspect of coloniality of IR has to do with *epistemic violence* (Spivak 1988; Quijano 2000; Grosfoguel 2009). That is, the Western model of knowledge production embedded in the positivist inquiry is self-perpetuated as the only objective, neutral, and universal form of knowledge (see Lopes 2021). IR in this sense, Rojas (2016) reminds us, crafts an understanding of a world that has Europe as its geo-cultural center, and where power, wealth, and military capabilities of countries are naturally foregrounded. This way, IR renders small countries (Vlavourou 2021) and big countries outside the West (de Oliveira 2021) as unimportant. Other, non-Western knowledges are labeled particularistic, not objective and therefore unable to claim universality. To that end, the rendering of non-Western knowledges as unworthy of being included in the canons of science is not merely a failure to live up to the *internationality* in IR; rather, it is an act of epistemic violence. Encounters of epistemic violence have been so pervasive and consistent that scholars have repeatedly asked whether the subaltern can speak (Spivak 1988), the non-European can think (Dabashi 2015), and the African can write (Asante 2012). IR scholars have themselves problematized the entanglements of knowledge and violence in IR as a quintessential element of its coloniality (Mudimbe 1994; Grosfoguel 2009; Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018). Scholars from the post-Yugoslav region have also analyzed IR scholarship from the region more critically and the ways in which it echoes, questions, and reflects on the field more broadly (Ejdus and Kovačević 2021). These debates are increasingly more relevant as IR expands its study inquiries and actively embraces the plurality of approaches (Van der Ree 2014), interrogating questions about who embodies the thinking corpus in IR (Shah 2021) and whose language and knowledge ought to be listened to (Vlavourou 2021).

Our discussion of the post-Yugoslav space is situated within broader calls to problematize whose knowledge counts in IR and the calls to provincialize IR from CEE (Manolova, Kusic, and Lottholz 2019; Alejandro 2021a; Kušić 2021; Mälksoo 2021). These calls have pointed out how binary thinking in macro-categories of Global North and Global South, or West and the Rest—categories that are in themselves layered and heterogeneous but whose inner contradictions are glanced over to ease theorization—contributes to those who are neither North nor South, falling through the cracks and being excluded from the notion of globality (Müller 2018; Alejandro 2021a). This exclusion has made the CEE appear insignificant as an agent of global politics (Mälksoo 2021), “unworthy” of knowledge production (Müller 2018; Alejandro 2021a) or worthy only insofar as they internalize and co-opt the liberal interventionist narrative (see Visoka and Musliu 2019). However, the notion of CEE in IR is complicated further when we shift our focus to the Balkans and the post-Yugoslav space in particular (Kušić 2021). Then, it becomes clear that the problem is not that IR treated the post-Yugoslav space and its people as uninteresting or undeserving of scholarly attention, but rather *how* it made this space into *the* object of study within particular subdisciplines of IR.

The post-Yugoslav space specifically is an example of a region that in IR has mainly been imagined through violence and colonialism, and approached as a subject and space of intervention, rather than as an agent and knowledge producer in its own right. As a result, Kušić (2021, 912) argues for a more complex understanding of coloniality in South East Europe, which links back to the active pluralization of our understanding of colonialities of IR. This includes interrogating not just “the Balkans”—moving away from the idea of finding a “real” or more “truthful” version of the region—but also “Europe,” and, relatedly, research positioned within its “political economies which reward specific types of knowledge in IR and discount others” (Kušić 2021, 913). Relatedly, as our vignettes below illustrate, “to be

considered a subject, one has to be situated in Europe and remain apolitical” (Kušić 2021, 916).

We go a step further and argue that this contributes to scholars of and from the post-Yugoslav space simultaneously experiencing two types of what Bacevic (2021, 5) has called epistemic positioning in academic contexts, defined as “informal practices of judgement or evaluation that link the identity of ‘knower’ with the value of the knowledge they produce” (Bacevic 2021, 2). These two types are *bounding* and *domaining*, which are “forms of epistemic reduction: they acknowledge the positioned party as a knower (epistemic subject), but substantially limit or reduce the value of their knowledge claim” (Bacevic 2021, 5). The first is a type of positioning whereby the knowledge claims made by a person are viewed by others as “bounded” by their perceived background, identity, and/or lived experiences (Bacevic 2021, 5). The second, on the other hand, is a positioning that entails limiting one’s knowledge claim to solely a particular domain of knowledge (Bacevic 2021, 7).

We argue that scholars of and from the post-Yugoslav space in IR are subject to *bounding*, by continuously being questioned about their biases due to the perceived proximity to the region, and *domaining*, by certain expectations about the knowledge we produce and our knowledge claims being at best perceived as particularistic. This positioning further manifests itself in particular ways for those of us from the post-Yugoslav region, who do research in the region and work in Global North academia, which we explain in the next section.

Tangled and Transient Positionalities

Time and again, we have found defining our positionality to be a difficult task as the very name of it, *position*, seems to suggest an originary, fixed, and somewhat stable point of origin. To the contrary, our positionalities are not stable or fixed (Fujii 2009, 2017) but created through negotiations and contestations of our gender, sexual, ethnic, cultural, and national identities, among others. In our experiences in universities of the Global North, we have observed that our (cultural) identities are prescribed as scholars coming from different and “foreign” academic and cultural traditions. At the same time, we observed that while traveling to/in the region, all six of us were referred to as “ours.” In both cases, we observed a tendency of a constant retract to a supposedly fixed originary point of our identity. Unlike other layers of our identities, our regional and/or ethnic identity emerged as more robust and stable—in Global North academia, we are more often retracted into “Balkan-ism” as our originary point, whereas in “the field” we are retracted to our (perceived) ethnicities. As such, our non-fixed positionalities are neither self-evident nor do they emerge in a vacuum. These experiences show that assigning and claiming a particular positionality is contingent on power and privilege. Our radical reflexivity as a future orientation, as explained in a subsequent section, is not only about how we make sense of ourselves and research participants “in the field”; it is also about understanding the encounter between ourselves as inhabiting multiple and transient positions and the retract to an originary stable point seen from many of our interlocutors (“ours”) as well as colleagues in Global North academia.

The trap of retraction to (or creation of) a supposedly fixed, monolithic, unison position and identity lurks as an imposition not only from our participants in “the field” and from the Global North academia, but also from (within) us as a collective opposing those retractions, ascriptions, and essentialism. Our challenge with this discussion (and the work of this Collective more generally) is how to talk, rebel, and act in acknowledgment of similarities of our multiple “post-Yugoslav women-plus” experiences and positionalities, without reifying, simplifying, (violently) homogenizing, and/or silencing the complexities and mutabilities among us, within the region, and in relations with people from other geographies with whom we

strive to act in solidarity and with what [Krystalli \(2021\)](#) has called a register of care.

Similarly, we have found that our positionalities do not exempt us from opportunities and pitfalls of knowledge production or knowledge extraction (see for more [Rutazibwa 2020](#)). For instance, even though we are presumably familiar with our research sites “back home,” this does not directly translate into our research engaging in knowledge cultivation. Scholars working in decolonial IR (see [Shilliam 2015](#); [Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018](#)) nuance that whereas knowledge production is a sort of manufacturing knowledge from already existing components or raw materials, knowledge cultivation, in contrast, is directly connected to the preparation of the soil to grow and maintain a particular culture or knowledge. To produce knowledge is to lengthen, prolong, or extend, while to cultivate knowledge is to turn matter around and to encourage growth ([Shilliam 2015](#), 16). At earlier stages of our careers, in order for us to be competitive in the Global North universities and overcome the innate disadvantage of our positionalities, we were advised to (in)advertently play the game as required from the neoliberal university, wherein a higher quantity of publications was the determining factor for us to secure “entry” as scholars in these universities. In doing so, we have time and again used theories and methodologies that are quintessentially associated with knowledge extraction, have been complicit in our own erasure ([Shah 2021](#)), and have exempted ourselves from engaging more fundamentally with knowledge cultivation. To that end, even though our individual academic work at universities in the Global North has often-times been characterized as challenging epistemic foundations in our disciplines, this has not and does not directly exempt any of us from engaging in knowledge extraction.

More often than not, a research trajectory based on premises of knowledge extraction is the starting point of many researchers (“foreign” or not) in the academic ladder and is oftentimes a precondition to become a “legitimate” and “competitive” scholar in the discipline. Becoming cognizant and reflexive about differences between knowledge extraction, production, and cultivation is frequently contingent on having more experience in academia and/or being part of research communities and networks actively engaged in these discussions. Only now, after years of experience, are we beginning to unlearn these practices.

[Agathangelou and Ling \(2009\)](#) have previously argued that the extraction-based expertise is quintessentially tied to the neoliberal approach to IR enamored with violence, power, and alienation. In the case of the post-Yugoslav space, this extractivism has been enabled by the proximity of this space to the “core” of knowledge production in IR—Europe and North America—where policy experiments (in policy circles) and knowledge production (in academia and technical expertise) were co-constituting one another. In other words, the post-Yugoslav was the perfect pretext and context to test certain political, social, and economic interventions. At the same time, it rendered the space as a “fieldwork” site where knowledge producers from the “core” would come to analyze and study those interventions ([Asotić 2022](#)). Furthermore, having rendered the region and its populations as white-passing and/or European-passing, in addition to the relative geographical proximity, made the post-Yugoslav space comparatively easy to navigate, study, and analyze.

By looking at our positionalities in Global North academia, we want to foreground a discussion as to *who can do IR* and *how*. When doing so, we build on the emerging literature that examines the intersections and dialogues between postcolonial and postsocialist ([Tlostanova 2015](#); [Tlostanova, Thapar-Björket, and Koobak 2019](#)), pluriversality ([Rojas 2016](#)), and worldism ([Agathangelou and Ling 2009](#)) as well as post-Yugoslav and postcolonial ([Baker 2018](#)) epistemologies and ontologies, thereby expanding on work that engages with postcolonial theory to explain the region’s marginalization vis- à-vis Europe

(Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997). We argue that it is precisely the existing and producing knowledge at these intersections that allows us to shed light on certain oversights within current postcolonial debates in IR and meaningfully contribute to them. We suggest that utilizing radical reflexivity as a collective endeavor can make visible specific forms of coloniality and indeed the plurality of colonialities within IR, potentially creating space for anti- or decolonial alternatives.

Navigating Bias, Reflexivity, and Critique

Even though some of our research is not connected to postwar developments, most of us have done research and written about such and related processes in the post-Yugoslav region. These processes have by and large been framed by mainstream approaches through developmentalist lenses that imply “catching up with Europe” and “transitioning” from “nationalistic backwardness” and “ethnic animosities” to European modernity and Western-style liberal democracy. Building on Bacevic (2021), we argue that our work in Global North academia has been continuously scrutinized on two grounds: (1) the ability of us as post-Yugoslav researchers to conduct “neutral and objective research” about the region and (2) the necessity to translate our research *in* and *through* liberal epistemologies. In Global North academia, we have all had encounters with colleagues who have suggested a retraction to a supposedly fixed originary point of our identity. These experiences, too, have been a source of frustration and reflection, and through this Collective, love.

First, the issues of bias, neutrality, and objectivity have come up throughout our careers. One aspect of bias, methodological–epistemological, based on the assumption that the researcher and the researched are separable, relates to questions about supposed lack of distance or even detachment from the studied topic. The other aspect is linked to the orientalization of the Balkans and “Balkan scholars” as prone to bias. Todorova (1997) has shown how in the Western gaze, the Balkans is portrayed as lagging behind the civilizational threshold. Similarly, Baker (2018, 108) notes, the Balkans as a region is

[...] perceived in the Western discourses of modernity as European and not-European simultaneously; on territory formerly subject to one empire centred in central Europe and another centred in west Asia; where members of majority ethnonational groups (including their diasporas) were usually racialised as white but whose whiteness has still been conditional, or “white, but not quite” (Alcoff 1998, 9) to northern European and North American gazes [...]

In turn, such notions stretch out to how scholars from the region are imagined in Western universities, regardless of their location, creating a hierarchy whereby knowledges by scholars from/of the region are less valid, conditioning them to having to constantly prove themselves to those who sustain these epistemic assumptions.⁵

In other words, we, as researchers from the region, are subjected to the Global North gazes in a way that reproduces colonial and imperial ideas of the (post-)Yugoslav space. While all scholars ought to be subject to scrutiny, the scrutiny often directed at us is based on assumptions in which we are ascribed as having a “side” in the Yugoslav wars or are given unsolicited advice on how to navigate “ethnic differences” in our research in the region.⁶ For instance, throughout most of Jelena’s research career, her positionality has often been assigned by others. “When I first started my PhD, in the early 2000s, it was very common for me to hear things

⁵We are grateful to Dr Marcos S. Scauso for this comment.

⁶It is noteworthy that scholars at research institutions in the region are largely ignored and their research often discounted. By association, our scholarly engagement and citation of these scholars have also been questioned throughout our careers.

like, ‘this paper is very balanced for a Serb’ or ‘I am surprised your work is not that biased towards Serbia.’ I am not even from Serbia, nor do I identify as a Serb, but these sorts of assumptions were often repeated.” Assumptions about researchers from places such as the post-Yugoslav space exist because the idea of neutral Global North knowledge still exists, intertwined with political, popular, and policy narratives of “the Balkans” as a space of disorder and volatility (see [Baker 2018](#)).

Most “bias”-related comments directed at us have asked for a narrow, performative reflexivity, while the same demands were rarely, if at all, directed toward our colleagues from the Global North. Vjosa, as a researcher from Kosovo working on international statebuilding in Kosovo, explains how in presenting her research, the opportunity would be taken by Belgian and international colleagues to discuss the (implicit) bias, neutrality, and objectivity of her research—all three understood in the positivist sense, as a reality that is “out there” and it takes a researcher with sound detachment and impersonality to make sense of it. “I noticed how my work, much like the work of my Ukrainian or Lebanese colleagues, would be praised at international conferences as objective and neutral, *despite* me being associated with the region. Sometimes, I would get unsolicited advice on how to deal with my biases – these were considered inherent due to my origin, even though they were not always clear to the commenters themselves. In contrast, Flemish colleagues researching language conflicts in Belgium or German colleagues researching Germany’s development aid to sub-Saharan Africa were rarely, if ever, susceptible to biases.” She observes how questions over bias have progressively faded after years of experience in universities in Western Europe.

Similarly, Sladjana observes how, as a Serbian national, she was advised on several occasions to ponder how she would navigate ethno-religious differences between herself and her interlocutors—Bosniaks and Muslims in Serbian Sandžak—and how she would resolve potential identity contestations invoked by her presence “in the field.” “These suggestions kept coming despite me acknowledging that I, too, ‘squirm uncomfortably under this essentializing tag’ ([Narayan 1993](#)). While I do have Serbian citizenship, I do not subscribe to any particular ethno-religious identity, and instead feel familiarity with the cultural heritage of the region as a whole.”

Dženeta has similarly been scrutinized about underlying assumptions and potential biases vis-à-vis her research. Her ability to balance her “American” behavior, refugee experience, and practice of Islam to some degree has elicited confusion. She has had to demonstrate that she could communicate with interlocutors of various ethnic backgrounds, and to detail how exactly she could gain access to a variety of communities both in diaspora and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Upon presenting her research in Global North academic circles, she has had to repeatedly respond to essentializing questions on diaspora communities and her reflexivity regarding her “fieldwork.”

Sladjana notes that such experiences led to feeling “a mounting dis-ease” with reflexivity ([Kobayashi 2003](#), 348) and to recalling [Kobayashi’s \(2003, 348\)](#) comment whether “some of us have a greater moral need or, conversely, a greater social obligation than others” to be reflexive, or whether one’s person’s reflexivity is more relevant than that of the others. She continues, “it takes a lot of emotional labour to repeatedly exercise rather narrow reflexivity, along only one possible category of one’s social positioning and identification. It flattens out my social positionings, while ascription of (ethnic) identity denies me agency in how I choose to interact with structures and reproduces certain understanding/framing of the conflict(s). Additionally, it depoliticises my presence in academia (and ‘the field’) as it renders irrelevant all other (self)identifications besides the (ascribed) ethnic one.”

Another element we share in our work relates to perceptions on what we should study (pedagogical politics) and the type of knowledge we should produce. Elena recalls how when starting her PhD, she was advised on two separate occasions by

two different senior male scholars from the Global North that she should both “research conflict processes in the Balkans, given the familiarity” and “not be obsessed with the Balkans and the wars, like most people from the region.” She reflects that “juxtaposing these two experiences highlights the between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place position many researchers perceived as coming from places exoticized in the Global North find themselves in: for our knowledge to be seen of any academic value, we are both expected to be detached ‘enough’ and to have some sort of an insider, ground-breaking knowledge, but only in the narrow domain in which they recognise the region.”

Second, we have been expected to legitimize our research *in* and *through* liberal epistemologies and positivist-like methodologies. Most of our research at the beginning of our careers would inadvertently further reinforce Western liberal notions about the post-Yugoslav region. Global efforts to rebuild conflict-affected societies are to a large extent influenced by the type of knowledge produced for and about these societies. Thus, the politics of knowledge are quintessentially linked to power, intervention, and domination in world politics (Musliu and Visoka 2019). To subsume our “particularistic” contributions to the epistemic regime of Western modernity, we are repeatedly called to comply with demands of performative reflexivity and to bargain for acceptance through disembodiment of our knowledge and experiences. Aside from preventing us from eclipsing the Western gaze, this push toward stark separation of being and knowing created both a sense of frustration and personal and epistemic marginalization. In the global division of academic labor, we are those who provide “raw data” upon which someone else, with a distance to the region and the “objective” (pre)view of our lived realities, can theorize about and “do IR.”

The question of whose knowledges need translating and who gets to theorize others’ lived experiences is a matter of broader core—semi-periphery—periphery dynamics, which are present and continuously renegotiated even within the region itself. This points to a related, albeit separate, phenomenon of “nested Orientalism” (Bakić-Hayden 1995) through which countries and peoples of the Balkans are put in a gradation of more European—less Balkan. Julija did most of her studies in Slovenia before working in Western academia. “Slovenia positioned itself quickly as a ‘bridge’ between Europe and ‘the Balkans’ (Petrović 2009; Velikonja 2009). And the media started referring to people from other former Yugoslav republics as “beings with half a diacritic” (Kuzmanić 1999). Given my Croatian surname, I first felt this in academia in Slovenia when another student told me that they were against racism, but it was true, as some politicians said, that “you Croats are like cattle in the border dispute.”

She further remarks, “when I started to work in Western academia, I was careful not to reproduce similar discourses on the divide between Europe and ‘the Balkans’ and the marginalisation and discrimination of Roma in former Yugoslavia as ‘just another by-product’ of war and ‘ethnic’ conflicts. Instead, I have tried to emphasise that it is also the responsibility of EU policies towards the ‘Western Balkans’, for example, with forced returns of Roma to the post-Yugoslav region. The discriminatory politics towards Roma is deeply embedded in the EU member states” (Sardelić 2021).

Finally, and equally related to the issue of having to translate our research *in* and *through* liberal epistemologies, we notice perceptions and expectations on the type of *critique* we employ in our work and the *intensity* with which we engage with it without risking becoming “too ideological.” Sladjana explains how presenting in certain circles of both Western and “regional” academia, and some policy and think-tank environments, narrows down the possible forms of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009) when it comes to those perceived as “natives” to the region. “This expresses itself as ‘a conundrum’ towards whom, what kind of projects, and in what way I could be critical without being labelled as not progressive or illiberal. For

example, could we question EU integration as the best way of ‘modernising the Balkans’ or criticise work of human rights NGOs without being checked against a ‘nationalist barometer’?” Our decisions about how and when we engage critically are thus also scrutinized on multiple levels and further complicated by the materiality of our precarious existence and experiences as early career researchers in neoliberal academia.

Curiously, while we have been constantly called to account for our relationships to the region, we have never been asked to reflect upon our relationship to Western neoliberal academia and our stakes and strains (with)in it. That is largely based on the premise that academia in the Global North and neoliberal academia are the perspective “from nowhere,” supposedly not rooted in layers of identifications or ideologies. Researchers and knowledge coming from these universities are thus authorized as objective and their positions within ruling relations are concealed (Smith 1999), whereas researchers and knowledge outside of the Global North are rendered as innately, if not permanently, not objective and therefore having to prove themselves to these epistemic assumptions. Through our experiences and by having this discussion, we reaffirm that accounting for one’s positionality within academic systems of knowledge production and how it affects our knowledge claims should, and indeed must, be a part and parcel of radical, generative self- and collective reflection, in order to ensure a genuine intellectual engagement. Otherwise, we would continue creating disembodied knowledge and perpetuate artificial separation of being and knowing that leads to overwhelming frustration.

Toward Radical Reflexivity

Feminist scholars have argued for a stronger reflexive social science that reorganizes social relations of knowledge creation. They have broadened and deepened theorization and expectations of reflexivity by bringing in and validating the everyday, and moving subjugated and silenced knowledges from the margins to the center (hooks 1984; Harding 1986; Smith 1987; Min-ha 1989; Collins 2000). Through invocation of the politics of location, feminists from the Global South have shown and problematized deep imperial and colonial entanglements of theory-building and knowledge production with the heteropatriarchal, racist, and capitalist geopolitics (Mohanty 1991; Smith 1999; Lugones 2003; Wynter 2003; Cusicanqui 2012).

Even though in IR and international political sociology, reflexivity has moved from the margins of the field to being one of the ontological pillars and core concepts of the discipline (Bigo and Walker 2007, 5; Alejandro 2021b, 151), it has also still remained terminologically ambiguous (Amoureux and Steele 2016), almost a buzzword (Tickner 2013). Feminist IR has asked important questions about ethics of knowledge claims (Ackerly and True 2008) and responsibility for and of scholarship (Tickner 2006), and correctly diagnosed problems in the discipline(s). However, this self-reflexivity has been limited as it has come short of moving from a meta discourse and diagnosis to suggesting “what to do next, and how to do it” (Icaza 2022, 3), or offering actual methodological and pedagogical steps to implement reflexivity (Alejandro 2021b).

Our vignettes show the limits of this kind of feminist self-reflexivity as well. In our work, we strive to negotiate power by changing and cultivating caring relations between us and our research participants, and to “bring in the voices from the margins to the centre,” but we also remain structurally implicated with(in) the system of knowledge production rooted in extractive logic and consumption (Icaza 2022). By interrogating our own positionalities as post-Yugoslav scholars in Global North academia, and in a dialogue with Global South feminist theories, particularly as recently elaborated by Icaza (2022), we suggest a need for radical reflexivity, which we intend to further develop in our future work.

This reflexivity is collaborative and rooted in feminist epistemologies and political commitments. It is an active reflexivity that embraces dynamism of social positioning and humility (Fujii 2009, 2017; Glass and Soedirgo 2018) and brings in the radical question of ethics of relation and accountability (Icaza 2022). We came to this notion of radical reflexivity through the very process of (re)writing this text and realizing the limits of the reflexive turn to transform the ways in which we create knowledge. Writing has served the purpose of our own resocialization to do things differently through juxtaposition of an alternative discourse of love (Alejandro 2021b). That has also left us longing for ways to create knowledge differently and asking about the (im)possibility of undoing coloniality within academia. The radicality of this reflexivity lies in bringing into the discussion the questions of relationships and accountability, and asking, as Icaza (2022, 5–6) has done, “to whom we are accountable” and what kind of “praxical thinking” that demands. Are we accountable to the academic industrial complex of knowledge production or to the people, places, and relations with whom and through which we unlearn and work toward different—kinder, more loving, and less extractive—horizons? This radical reflexivity is thus collective—conceived in relation to each other, the region, and the texts we have been writing—and it strives to be coalitional through praxical thinking (Icaza 2022).

By thinking with Lugones, Icaza (2022, 6) explains that “praxical thinking basically means that one doesn’t think what one doesn’t do.” Thus, radical reflexivity becomes praxical thinking through one’s own positionalities and entanglements (with)in the broader grids of power of how contemporary neoliberal universities in Global North academia operate, and in light of accountability to our most important relationships. This radical reflexivity also entails discomfort as it brings to the fore the question of balancing revelation and protection/concealment—asking how much of ourselves, people, places, and events that made us (and cared for us) we want to share with the extractive academic industrial complex and for what reason(s), thus reinforcing once again the importance of Cusicanqui’s “gestures”—keeping in mind our motivational “why-s” and commitments and modestly inserting our voices along with “a recognition of authorial effects of listening” (Gago 2020, xvii). It is only through such movements and all the tensions that arise with them that we stand a chance at genuinely engaging in unlearning and working toward more caring and less extractive futures. To that end, our work as a collective and the discussion here serve as but a beginning of our praxical thinking on radical reflexivity, the unpacking of its multilayeredness, and the continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning that come with it.

Conclusion

The initial impetus for writing this article as a collective came out of frustration about knowledge production in IR about our “home” region—the post-Yugoslav space. We traced the frustration in the way the post-Yugoslav space is (re)produced and reified as innately problematic in the IR discipline, and in how we, as women scholars from the region, are almost naturally assumed to be more susceptible to bias in knowledge production. As a result, we have been given “benevolent,” yet disciplining advice from scholars in Global North academia that, given our positionalities, we require a performative reflexivity to our work. Such reflexivity would at best legitimize the existing disciplinary “gaze” toward the region with the analysis of the 1990s wars, the post-socialist transitions, “democratization” and “europeanisation” processes at the forefront. We argue that this questioning, advising, and epistemic positioning of scholars of and from the Balkans relates closely to the coloniality of knowledge in IR regarding the region. Unlike many other spaces in the Global East (Müller 2018; Alejandro 2021a; Mälksoo 2021), the post-Yugoslav space in particular has been a prominent object of IR inquiry in a way that has rendered the region

and its peoples devoid of agency and/or capacity to produce knowledge, much less universal knowledge.

Our work continued because of love: our love for the region and our love for pluralistic and non-extractivist knowledge. First, by problematizing our relation to “home” and its place in IR, we were able to interrogate what this “home” means to us individually and as a collective. Our vignettes show that our “home”—the post-Yugoslav space—is not an idyllic representation of home you would find in realist fiction. Perhaps no home is such. Our “home” as well as our relations with our “home(s)” are riddled with discomfort and peace, smells of gunpowder and peppers, contradictions of what happened and what could have happened, good memories and nightmares, longing and oblivion. We are aware that we have only tangentially exposed these riddles here and will continue to do this in our further projects.

Second, we have channeled some of this frustration from the malestream IR into a love for a discipline that needs further pluralization and challenging of boundaries. Building on the work of many other colleagues (e.g., “International Relations as If People Matter” issue of *Journal of Narrative Politics*), we have modestly shown that love, reflexivity, and vulnerability are not only compatible with IR, but imperative lenses to a truly *international* discipline.

Third and relatedly, understanding and verbalizing our frustration with the current setup of the neoliberal university in the Global North enables us to nurture the love for collective work. In the face of distorted academic competition, precarity, and severe austerity in higher education and individual hyperproduction, our slow research and writing—attentive to care and friendship—has become a language of love and radicality. The radical reflexivity we propose as a future orientation in dialogue with existing feminist literature on reflexivity is also demanding of us. It holds us accountable for our own positionalities within academic systems of political and material power and knowledge production. Through our collaborative effort, practiced not only through collectives such as ours, but also through academic knowledge exchange, radical reflexivity also acts as a check and prevention from slipping into racial and colonial exceptionalism (Kušić 2021) and keeps us aware of the workings of coloniality within the region and from the region toward elsewhere.

With that, our discussion’s contribution has been three-fold: we have highlighted the particularities of existing multiple colonialities in IR that are visible from our location(s) and how the post-Yugoslav example invites us to pluralize our understanding; we have sketched out tentative glimpses of a generative, radical, honest, unsettling, and vulnerable self- and collective reflexivity and the value this can have for our relations and for broadening the understanding of reflexivity; and, finally, by having this discussion as a collective, we hope to have continued to expand the existing academic imaginary of knowledge production.

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