Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe

Edited By
Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari

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3. Unlearning

Mihnea Tănăsescu

I left home when I was 16. At the time, home was Bucharest, Romania. I'd be lying if I said that I had any trouble leaving—I was ready and willing. True, I loved the summer rain storms and the specific sense of humor of the place, but I was also choked by the aggressiveness of a society unravelling in a contradictory vise: one side totalitarian, the other capitalist consumerist. I wanted to leave. Today, most of my friends from that period no longer live in the country of their birth. Mine was a shared feeling.

Looking back, I was a child when I left. Then, it felt like I had already lived a lifetime, and was ready for another one. What I didn't know, couldn't know, was the vastness of the world and the tantalizing possibility of belonging to many places, many people, many ways of knowing. I also didn't know that this possibility would be both a benefit and a drawback. I did not know that, after learning so much, I would have to unlearn as well.

My first adoptive home was Italy. I had received a scholarship to attend the United World College of the Adriatic for the last two years of high school—an international school dedicated to building peace through education. I almost didn't make it there, because the visa officer at the Italian consulate refused to issue a visa. Following my mom's lead, we simply changed tellers and found a public servant that was willing to issue a visa. My whole trajectory of being an authorized migrant started with a bureaucratic happenstance.

My second adoptive country was the United States, where I spent seven years studying and doing odd jobs to survive (I learned at least as much from these as from formal schooling). After that period, I decided to move yet again, this time to Belgium, where my sister had a

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free couch that I could sleep on. Because Romania had recently joined the European Union, this was the first time that I had traveled without advanced planning that required humiliating prostrations before consulate officials that held my fate in their hands. After years of having to periodically reauthorize my status as a migrant (an 'alien' in the US), I had become a 'European citizen'. Personally, it was a welcome change, as it would allow frictionless travel—a tremendous luxury. More generally, it exposed the facade of equal treatment; nothing at all had changed in who I was or what I did, and yet I was now free to go unquestioned to where I couldn't go before without very lengthy questioning.

Moving to Belgium meant restarting everything again: learning new languages, making new friends, finding a new job. I didn't mind any of it. By chance, I found a PhD position in political science (a subject I had never studied before) and began, without knowing it, my 'career' in academia. I settled in Brussels, where I have lived ever since. Twelve years later, I am writing these words as an eternal post-doc pushing 40.

My time 'away from my country' has come to seem like a contradictory experience of acceptance and rejection. This is not a strictly personal experience; it seems to be common among people with a 'migrant background'. Paradoxically, I never really thought of myself as a migrant because I had always been privileged enough to penetrate the unmarked centers of power that allowed me to live a decent life. My privilege didn't come from wealth or status, but from youth and skin color: I was a voluble white man, and this allowed me to slip through spaces that may have been much tighter had I been perceived as more exotic.

Mind you, I *was* exotic for many people. In the United States, for example, people routinely had no idea where Romania was, or what Romanian sounded like, and were generally very interested in me, in the way of a museum exhibit that enlivens the day and gives a jolt of momentary excitement. I benefited from this position that I couldn't but inhabit, a ledge between being not exotic enough, and being too much so. I had very little to do with the history of racism and classism in the US and could therefore afford to be safely detached from the violence that that history generates. I was therefore white and not white at the same time, and that worked, for a while. In other words, I used my exoticism for my own benefit, and I have no doubt that part of the reason

I received a US scholarship in the first place was for my catalogue value as an asset to diversity.

In Italy and Belgium, the experience of being 'other' also existed, but in completely different ways. Because of the stigma that had accompanied Romanian migrations since the beginning of the 1990s, people were routinely surprised that I was Romanian, that I was camouflaged so well. I cannot count the number of times I heard that I don't *seem* Romanian, which was always said as a kind of compliment, as if my perceived distance from my stereotypical co-nationals was a badge of honor. I never knowingly distanced myself from a 'Romanian identity', but in fact reveled in the contradictions that my nationality provoked.

This meant that I never lost an opportunity to state my origins. It helps that I have had many such opportunities, because people routinely asked me where I was from, a question that became less and less intelligible the more I switched and traveled and learned. But I always said 'I'm Romanian', precisely because I knew that most of the time the—'but you don't seem Romanian'—would follow, even if not actually said. I always naïvely hoped that people would realize the absurdity of that statement, and perhaps unlearn the habits of mind that led to it.

It took me a long time to realize that I also continued being *too Romanian*. In academia, the latest fashion is for outward acceptance of diversity. Paradoxically, this has reinforced the notion that a person has a primary identity, either white, or black, or queer, or what have you. Of course, everyone is free to identify as they wish. But what often escapes the consideration of the most educated of society is that a person may be multiple things, at once.

There are several ways of illustrating this. Let's start with language: in Dutch, there is a famous (and infamous) distinction between allochthon and autochthon. The latter means a true local, one that traces their genealogy back an unspecified amount of time, but especially one that can be unproblematically counted as a member of the Dutch-speaking community, given outwardly visible traits. An allochthon, on the other hand, is someone of dubious belonging, not because of birth (this term is routinely applied to third generation citizens), but because they may harbor multiple belongings. Usually, this is indicated by outward signs, like looking different.

In my case, being able to pass as white in the general definition that the West has constructed, the allochthon status is confirmed by the origin question: where are you from? This ties my being to my place of birth, even though I have become multiple, multiple times over. I have traces of and allegiances to many places, reflected through the languages I speak and the abiding interest in the environments that hosted me and have become home. Being tied to a place of birth in effect denies the multiplicity of the person; it corrals the many-dimensional person into a stereotype.

This happens in academia as much as elsewhere, but it is mostly unacknowledged and, many times, unconscious. Let's illustrate it another way. As an academic, you are expected to belong to a discipline. Universities are busy outdoing each other in proclaiming their commitment to interdisciplinarity, though in my experience having multiple roots in multiple ways of seeing and thinking is a definite career drawback. You become unplaceable, just as someone with no place of birth: you cannot be from nowhere! If you are academically multiple, and therefore from nowhere, you become a museum exhibit once again, someone that looks good on the catalogue but whose ability to teach Political Science 101 is constantly doubted and practically denied.

Because of the disciplinary and conservative structure of most academic institutions, interdisciplinary scholars are forced to apply for positions in departments run by monodisciplinary people. In my academic background, I have studied human ecology, philosophy, and political science, and have done recognized work in all these fields plus environmental social science, critical jurisprudence, and human geography. I routinely draw on ecology, biology, and cartography. Perhaps my tolerance for academic multiplicity is tied to my tolerance for the cultural kind, I don't know. What I do know is that these professional abilities, supposedly sought after by everyone, quickly become a drawback when, for example, I apply for a job in a sociology department. Or a human geography one. Or political science. Judged on the merits of the discipline itself, I will never be able to compete with traditional careers.

It is as if one must have the courage to be interdisciplinary. I hate that word, 'interdisciplinary'; it means nothing since it has become a marketing ploy. What I mean is that scholars that are passionate about

problems, and therefore reach wherever necessary to understand them, need more time to learn all of the different salient points of view; their work will take longer to publish because most journal and book reviewers are not versed in multiple disciplines; and they will therefore have to take the risks associated with a career choice that is ostensibly supported but practically not.

More and more young scholars are multiple in their belonging, but must function within institutions that, at least subliminally, want them to conform to a pre-given idea. I suspect that, to most autochthons in Flemish academia, where I currently work, there would rarely be someone *partly* Flemish. To be clear: the academic environment I know is politically progressive and consistently critical of nativist discourse. In practice, however, the institution itself requires a level of belonging to the Flemish identity (itself constructed, of course) that de facto excludes multiplicity. You can be from Antwerp and live in Brussels (though even that is a stretch!), but it is hard to imagine that one may feel just as home in Italy, Romania, the United States, and Belgium. The multiple feeling of home is an unadulterated good. It is also an untapped asset for academic institutions that fail to recognize it as such.

A last illustration of the persistent denial of multiplicity: academics are indoctrinated in a toxic publishing culture that demands constant quantity. This is summed up by the famous (at least in academic circles) saying, 'publish or perish'. There is a strict hierarchy of what counts as worthy publications as well, and every academic in the social sciences must go through the process of learning this unstated order of things. Articles are more valuable than books, edited volumes less valuable than monographs (single-authored books), and so on. At the same time, the venue of publication is also implicitly ranked, feeding into a predatory publication industry that thrives on academic dogmatism and insecurity. Being multiple in your publication choices is not a smart career move.

Functioning within a hyper-competitive environment that requires allegiance through conformity to a set of practices (e.g. constantly publishing your work) is a kind of education. As I have progressed in my career, though all of it was precarious from a contractual point of view, I too have internalized the norms of uniformity that go against my multiple belongings, as well as my moral compass. By any reasonable

measure, I have published too much; by current academic standards, I have published too little. I have also internalized the ranking of form and venue, and have routinely lost more time on meeting those standards than on developing the ideas themselves.

Ostensibly, I am all about ethical publishing, slow science, open access, and so on. Practically, I have done very little to live by those principles. And so, last year, as I was contemplating unemployment (and eventually experiencing it for the first time), the whole cycle of temporary contract—application—rejection—application—publication—publication—application—end—restart had gotten a bit too much. I realized that I couldn't go on living by those standards when I noticed that, upon receiving good news, I felt no joy. This was a devastating observation. After all, joy is one of those feelings that punctuates life in a way that outlives its momentary nature; without joy, what else is there? My gradual education in monotony had imperiled this life-giving feeling.

That observation imposed a distance between what I had learned I had to do to be an academic, and what I wanted to continue doing. This opened up the space for unlearning, painful and slow and anything but linear. It started with accepting unemployment benefits—thankfully available in Belgium—as the well-earned social safety net that generations of labor struggles had secured. It was admittedly hard to get there, but it eventually worked. Instead of writing the same article yet another time, I saw that this was the ideal time to write those books that had been brewing within, but never had the space to come out. Career-wise, in my disciplinary circles, not a good move; it would have made more 'sense' to break the ideas up into articles, which in political science, for example, are counted as more important than books.

Regardless, I wrote. For the first time in my academic life, I wrote like I wanted to, without compromises on form or content. It all came pouring out, in what could be called a joyful process.

Then came another really hard part of unlearning: where do I choose to publish? I had been trained for years to think that University Presses are superior to Commercial Publishers that are superior to Open Access publishers committed to changing the publication system altogether. I instinctively followed this model, though I knew all too well how untenable and unfair and frankly ridiculous it was. It is well known

that University Presses often prefer insiders over outsides, and that Commercial Publishers are little more than multinational conglomerates skimming off public research money to make a hefty profit. Most academics know this, but most academics have also internalized a hierarchical, uniform structure that keeps the prestige of certain presses intact.

Within the various categories of publishers, there is also an internal hierarchy. For example, in the for-profit commercial camp, there is a clear preference for the largest conglomerates, which a Google search would suffice to reveal (for non-academics, as academics know them all too well). Deciding that, given my precarious status, I did not want to write my manuscripts without knowing that they would be published, I approached the usual suspects that my miseducation had inculcated. I was offered a contract by one big corporate player and accepted it. Admittedly, I barely read the contract. My training rendered that unnecessary; I had made it.

I then spent months writing. Eventually, I had a draft, the best work I had ever done, born out of passion and the gradual unlearning of dependency on acceptance. A new post-doc contract unexpectedly made things financially better, which further freed me to write as I pleased. I sent the draft to the publisher. Their quick response, though positive—they liked it—also made me realize that they hadn't really read it. Commercial presses of this size live on quantity and unpaid labor, so of course they didn't carefully read it! I also realized that my book was going to be placed in a series that had nothing to do with it, and that it would cost 120 UK pounds.

This is very familiar to anyone that has published an academic book, and regrettably common practice. In many different discussions with peers, we complained about this model and the exorbitant prices charged for books that the public had already paid for. I therefore wrote to my editor to ask if the series could be changed, and if they would consider simultaneously releasing a paperback edition at a reasonable price. They declined, over and over again. Their bottom line was that they needed to sell X number of copies to libraries, and putting out a paperback would of course make the expensive version unattractive.

This bottom-line thinking makes no sense from an author's point of view. I am not in it to sell to a hundred libraries and line the pockets

of predatory publishers. Given the fundamental disagreement between us, I started contemplating terminating the contract. After (finally) carefully reading it, I learned that there was no way for me as an author to terminate it; only the publisher had this right. So, I got in touch with my editor and, citing irreconcilable differences, I asked to be released. Half an hour later, they let me go, no questions asked.

I felt liberated and confused. Did they care this little about me? Was it really nothing else than a business transaction? My own naïveté was shocking; what was I thinking? Hadn't it always been clear that these publishers don't give a shit? It had, but… Really?

Really. And so, I plunged into looking for another publisher. At first, I wrote to one at a time, waiting for weeks for a reply. Graduating from this alienating experience, I wrote to many at once, waiting for replies that mostly never arrived, or getting immediate rejections with no feedback. Throughout this process, I had my eye on several Open Access Presses with explicit political agendas and transparent, ethical standards. I knew their work and knew that they published books that were at least as good as what more prestigious presses published. They also took risks, accepted truly interdisciplinary work, and had things like explicit anti-slavery policies and a commitment to acknowledging authors and moving the review and publication process along briskly. Because these presses are not for profit, they don't have a quantity target per year, and so they publish whatever they see as good work (always rigorously peer-reviewed) on a rolling basis. This makes so much sense. But I still couldn't get myself to submit my manuscript to them, fearing it deep inside. I thought that I wasn't yet in a position to choose the publisher that had the best practices, because I still needed to prove myself (seven years after my PhD! That's precarity for you). Academic forums and threads confirmed that the publisher matters, that if your book is not with a 'top' press, nobody will consider it worthy.

Given the price that my initial publisher would have charged people for my work, I intuited that it just could not be that having the book in open access would have it travel *less*. If nothing else, I would have been ashamed to promote a book that cost that much, even if it was mine. And yet I couldn't submit to Open Access Publishers. The unlearning was ongoing; I wasn't far enough.

Eventually, I grew so exhausted of the long-established publication model that I sent it to an Open Access Publisher. To my complete astonishment, I had an acknowledgement of my submission *the next day*. I couldn't believe it. Years of getting used to the inhumane academic publishing model made me incredulous. Here was someone that took the time to acknowledge the time that I had taken to make this work happen, and it felt overwhelming, like an unexpected act of kindness that I was not quite ready to receive. The editor liked the project and offered to start the review process. She then announced a clear date by when the review would be done. A clear date! If it passed the review process, mere months after submitting my final draft, the book would be published in all e-book formats, would be free to download across a variety of platforms, and could also be bought—for a reasonable price—in paperback and hardback editions. It would carry a creative commons license, and I could choose among the different ones available.

This news—and the radically more humane way of treating people—couldn't sink in. Once again, I felt no joy. I couldn't believe it was happening, and not just because I wasn't used to it. It's because submitting my book to a new and radical press went against my training, and the anxiety of doing 'the wrong thing' swelled up and drowned the joy. After some time, I began to see that I had done the right thing. My book would be free to circulate, which is what I wanted, and I would be actively supporting a publication model that I strongly believe in. Will my book therefore not be recognized by my peers, by committees, by academic institutions? Have I jumped the line, doing something that only older academics with secure jobs are allowed to do? I have no idea, and I am working hard on not caring.

Since then, I have continued publishing chapters in edited collections that are invariably published with big, prestigious, ethically dubious presses. I am not above this and will probably never be. The process of unlearning is long, perhaps lasting a lifetime.

The 16-year-old that left Romania on a night train would probably look at me now and be astonished. So many experiences, so many places, people, ways of knowing, so much ignorance that I finally know I will never extinguish. He would be of course right. The migrant and academic life that I have so far led has been a privileged one, avoiding

by sheer luck so many of the tragic detours that often sabotage the possibility of a good life.

I have become multiple, multiple times over, and by now I am committed to it. But this commitment, whether as a migrant, an academic, or a migrant academic, requires constant vigilance. There is a low-level force that pushes against multiplicity, be it in the form of personal belonging, academic allegiances, or ways of communicating with the wider world. It is like a slow waterway, seemingly tame, soft even, but with the tenacity to carve stone. Resisting being carved into one groove is the constant task of unlearning.

The forces working against multiplicity are not only tied to the migrant experience. They are part and parcel of academic institutional structures today. Perhaps migrant academics are a bit better placed to notice the process of flattening that these institutions tend to unconsciously engage in, because of their need to adapt, and the pressure to assimilate.

What I have written here is a personal thing, something that surely varies from person to person regardless of 'where they are from'. It would be absurd to claim that I speak for some universal category, like 'the migrant academic'! Far from it. Instead, I find it good to pause and identify some processes that are at play for everyone, but that become more easily seen when one is looking askance, by default. The process of learning how to be one thing needs to be called out, first and foremost for oneself, so that the unlearning can begin. Calling it out may also be one way of finally erasing the distinction between migrant and local; it offers a way to build solidarity, the most elusive thing in the academic environment today.