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# MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



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# 13. ‘A Small Plot of New Land at All Times’: A Narrative of a Vulnerability Mortified

*Bojan Savić*

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This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013), p. 161.

Perhaps my zeal for places and geographies different from those of my childhood and adolescence can explain why I have rarely experienced life beyond the reassuring promise of progress. My thirst to go and be somewhere else, to move ostensibly forward, has somehow always been quenched. That has probably allowed me to disregard questions about the personal cost, toil, or unsteadiness of the forward motion—or the cost of choosing academia as the vehicle for it. Clearly, I have only ever lived my own life, but I have witnessed the denial of one’s own vulnerability in many of my colleagues. I have not researched this frail subjectivity enough to say anything of broader value, but I can poke and prod my own formation as a forward-looking scholarly ascetic and my reflection may resonate with the reader. So, iterative spatial movement toward the Other as a bulwark against felt risk and instability—a paradox and a strange little equation.

It was not until years after I had left Belgrade to study and live abroad that I realized the ‘where’ of why my life had always been about

finding 'a small plot of new land at all times' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013, 161); moving from places I had methodically molded into homes, only to find new spaces and create new hearths. And leave them again. Looking back at years of fretful motion and geographic angst, I have lived in dislocated space over two decades of both joyful and sorrowful deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). Skeptical of localism and the 'poetics of place' (Prieto, 2012), I have likewise resented their patronizing rejections (e.g., 'cosmopolitanism'). Instead, I have found myself viscerally in love with space *as spacing*, with space as a distancing motion rather than a finite expanse. Perhaps that is because every motion of dissociation has set me up for new proximities. Each spacing has come with new routines; with every distance I have sought new familiarity. I have fortified my love for social space through its critique rather than, say, bittersweet wanderlust. In fact, I have nourished this love through Other spaces, Other struggles, and Other aesthetics. At once consumed by seeing antagonisms everywhere and enchanted with spatial difference, I have pursued homes through unmooring and dislocation.

That has been my experience of space. And what of my time? Clearly, time is in the passage of difference, in the reversals and disruptions of movement across beloved towns and rooms, in the intimate upheavals of abandoned and treasured familiarities. I have come to understand my intimate spatiality as a sentimental 'line of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013), an unrelenting possibility of makeovers. Sutured into it, my temporality has been a never-ending event of change, aspiration, and hope.

Moreover, for as long as I can remember, I have only known how to hope, at times hoping against hope, as the famous Pauline maxim goes. Defeats have had to be merely transient trials, and humiliations have been calls to step up to the plate and defend what has always been dearest to me—work, the sheer physics of effort. I have seen none of this as particularly virtuous, related to ethics, or even as useful or 'smart'. Instead, my emotional investments in hope and work have merely been the facts of my identity, habits that have made me feel anchored, even when I understood little about myself or the social world around me—as a preschool boy, a teenager, or more recently as an adult. Either way, the ecstasy of labor has outshone all, including eating popcorn

or really nothing for dinner, impossible financial choices, being called 'Serbian' where being Serbian was scarcely a good thing, being called 'pretty white for a Syrian' (oh, the layers of irony), enduring casual toxicity because sleeping on the street would have been worse, etc. The will to improve compelled me to see tests (more so than 'difficulties') as mere mechanics of life, stripped of any need for deeper reflection, immersion, affect, or even memory. Moreover, I ignored my loved ones' own memories and accounts of my experiences that could have easily felt like pain and vulnerability.

Creating a home, tearing it down, and reinventing intimacy elsewhere, in a new place of trials, meant so much only because it was part of this labor and physicality. I had no time or patience for my own story while I was pushing myself to seek out the stories of Others. Seeing Others in the way I never even considered I would need to see myself was exhilarating. In that gaze, I found the same force that had propelled my deterritorialization. In other words, the interest I felt for the Other stood alongside the hope I felt for my lifepath. And yet, it took me years to connect the dots and begin to understand myself the way I had worked to understand Others; years to carve out a liminal space and become my Other. Not only did I have to move towns, countries, houses, and continents; I had to deterritorialize and displace my sense of merit and normality and re-envision my life and body as *perhaps* subject to wider relations of power—classed, raced, sexed, or otherwise.

Writing and rereading this, I return to a question that has troubled me for years. What does my neglect of my own experiences of vulnerability as a junior working-class academic from the European periphery convey? It feels like an intimate genealogy of something I have recognized while living and working *elsewhere*—in Western Afghanistan, Eastern Poland, small-town North Carolina, Istanbul's gentrifying neighborhoods, Virginian DC suburbs, the post-colonial immigrant neighborhoods of Brussels, my native Serbia, etc. But I still cannot quite define it. While I cannot think them apart, I also cannot grasp my subjectivity of hope and work in relation to my disregard for the possibility of personal precarity. Is my conundrum an expression of capitalist 'personal responsibility' or am I articulating a proletarian 'master of self' ethics (Polanyi, 2018, 20), especially given my research interest in the post-colonial politics of vulnerability? Where do my investments in 'work' and 'hope' belong?

I am skeptical of both 'capitalist' and 'proletarian' ethics as drivers of my desires, especially since I cannot quite frame my familial childhood space, my family friends and close relatives, or the school environment in terms of either. After all, my research interests animate my passion for academia, and they have shifted, teetered, and morphed over time, so why would my values remain stable or even entirely clear? Moreover, how 'proletarian' is it to be oblivious to personal vulnerability? If anything, I sound like a regrettable example of Engels' musings on 'false (class) consciousness' (Eagleton, 1994). I remember once believing in merit as a personal code of conduct, but even then (over a decade ago), I never associated it with social order or a philosophy of ethics. I have always seen my investment in work as just about the only strategy available to me, the only tool I (have) had to gratify my compulsion for movement.

It would be easy, then, to say that I have never quite thought of myself as a vulnerable subject because I have always inhabited a space-time of aspirant movement or because I have been stirred by some inner compulsion, a fire to keep finding new places that will feel like an old home. 'You're a dreamer,' my paternal grandma once told me, only to contrast that with a heartfelt recommendation to 'instead, become a priest' and 'put dreams to good use.' All this would be a neat little summary of the life of an academic who has moved between something that is gently called 'multiple Europes' (Whitehead et al., 2019) of ethnic, linguistic, artistic, religious, class, and political diversities and something else decried as 'American hegemony' (Agnew, 2005). This neat account would not be altogether wrong. I have indeed spent years casually mortifying any thoughts or confessions of personal vulnerability in favor of an intense subjectivity of pursuit and hope. But each of my quests for 'a small plot of new land' drew up new boundaries, separating me from the familiar, from the beloved and unloved. Each unmooring and berthing edified a Self attached to lonely and elusive attempts to understand the vulnerabilities of Others. Of Others—meaning not of myself.

Therefore, I want to reframe the ethical dichotomy I have mentioned above. More than an internalized struggle of capitalist and proletarian ethics, or the pursuit of movement to 'keep busy,' my aspirational asceticism and its mortification of a different socioeconomic subjectivity

has more chaotic sources. It is also a very bodily sentiment cultivated through parental care, a device that has enabled me to endure long waits for job, scholarship, and graduate school interviews, empty fridges, uncertain funding or employment contract renewals, worn-out mattresses, and an unrelenting sense of relative deprivation that haunted me for years from Belgrade to Maastricht, Istanbul, and elsewhere across Europe and the United States. (It is hilariously strange to be so privileged to experience crippling want in so many different corners of the world.) Since parental care has partially underwritten my aspirational experience of time and space, I have always appreciated hope as an artefact of my parents' love and have, therefore, always clung to it. Beyond that, hoping against hope has at times been a galvanizing force that has yielded exactly that which I needed desperately—the ability to 'pick myself up off the floor.' No other fuel, no other nudge. Just the redemptive work of inner compulsion.

Finally, I was born (and grew up) in a place that seemed unconcerned with what others have described as 'self-love' (Knox, 2018; Neuhouser, 2008; Force, 1997) and 'self-care' (Squire and Nicolazzo, 2019; Michaeli, 2017), or attitudes attributed to mixtures of religious, economic, political, familial, and other social ethics. Growing up, I was conditioned to see any purposeful focus on self (and particularly Self) as narcissism, egocentricity, and greed. In an environment of protracted political and socioeconomic collapse during the long 1990s, the familial and communal sharing of food, stories, clothes, emotions, and housing were matters of survival across the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, any centering of self (unless it came from pop-culture celebrities) used to cause something of bewilderment. In my family, it felt vaguely inappropriate and, to me, in that context, it seemed unthinkable. Not so much explicitly undesirable (although I may have felt that as well), but aporetic (Derrida, 1993). To seek good for Self, to care for Self as distinct from the Other felt impossible in the sense of being self-defeating, illogical, and personally unhelpful. For the Other (the neighbor, the relative, the workplace supervisor, etc.) was one's own best guarantee for survival. To sideline mutual reliance in favor of Self and 'independence' seemed foolhardy. (And yet, the more privileged Other did just that routinely.) Once, after my dad's impatience with a nosy neighbor resulted in a minor squabble between them, my mom called his attitude 'abnormal'. (Yes, Serbian



expressions may sound odd to a foreign ear.) 'We need everyone,' she said. 'So what if they stop by our apartment unannounced and ask what I cooked for lunch? Who cares?' I vigorously agreed with my mom. It did not occur to me to think that our lives were so precarious that we could not even afford privacy. A decade later, in college, I intuitively understood private/public and inside/outside hierarchies as boundaries of power and as particularly bourgeois values, privileges, and spacings (Ellison, 1983; Arendt, 1961). Therefore, juxtaposed with the ethics of self-elision as a prudent strategy for survival that was only ostensibly paradoxical, self-care and self-centered thought seemed superfluous, rude, and even self-destructive. It was an attitude I took for granted, much like the sentiments of hope my parents instilled in me. Coupled with a life of scholarly wariness of capitalism, communism, and other 'metanarratives,' such circumstances conditioned me to readily ignore any need to situate myself where I have embedded everything else—in pervasive and permeating relations of power.

Therefore, when I speak about space-as-spacing, about my various journeys, and my vulnerabilities, I speak of them in terms of dislocation. They can be merely deterritorialized and reterritorialized rather than alleviated or improved. I can only mortify their unsettling effects; not deny or erase them but continue to move them around so that they can yield new sites and moments of hope.

I apologize to the reader if my correlation of dislocation, aspiration, work, and vulnerability is less than clear. It is not as straightforward as saying 'I have to keep working so that I can afford to keep moving; therefore, I have no time to think about precarity,' but it also need not be as convoluted as this text suggests. Dislocation, aspiration, work, and precarity are correlated in my inability to think about them separately. They are correlated in my awareness that my life of academic asceticism and nomadism is a precarious one, but one beyond which I do not exist, because beyond it, I have nothing conceivable to aspire to. Perhaps the bond between dislocation and work that I have been trying to describe is akin to what Charteris, Nye, and Jones (2017) refer to as the 'scope for freedom' (ibid., 53), as resistance to the elusive space of 'the academy' (ibid., 49–64) and to the underpaid and precarious work it offers its members.

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