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# MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY  
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# 17. A Smart Hot Russian Girl From Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia

*Olga Burlyuk*

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To a mildly informed western European, a comfortable image of a woman from our region is the proverbial ‘nanny—house maid—mandarins gatherer’. Or a chick with lips, eyelashes and hair (all fake) who came to Europe ‘for work’. And when you are an IT specialist, a diplomat, a writer, a scholar, a lawyer—to many, you know, this is outright offensive... For it doesn’t fit the available stereotype. [auth. translation]

Irena Karpa, *How to Marry as Many Times as You Want* (2020), p. 81

Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight... I remember each of these occasions... as a sensory event that was too overwhelming to process at the time.

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), p. 23

My future husband and I met at a student conference in the days before smartphones, when Skype was a novelty and it cost a fortune to call a fixed number. So we wrote letters, lots of letters. Well, emails. And before long, my Dutch husband (then boyfriend) started getting endless internet commercials for ‘hot Russian girls from Odessa’ and ‘best escort girls in Kiev’—as every other male foreigner spotted in any type of online interaction with the country. Offensive and annoying as these are (including the sheer formulation: if you must, at least have the decency to advertise U-k-r-a-i-n-i-a-n girls from ode-S-a and k-Y-I-v), the idea of Ukrainian women as a highly sexualized local product perseveres,

and is regularly fanned at the highest political levels. In 2009, US Vice-President Joe Biden remarked to President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko that there were 'so many beautiful women here [in Ukraine].' In 2011, President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich famously invited participants of the World Economic Forum in Davos to visit Ukraine in spring 'when it starts to get hot in the cities of Ukraine and the women begin to undress.' And in 2019, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy proudly spoke during his European tour of Ukrainian women as a good tourism 'brand' for the country.

But what becomes of this when a Ukrainian woman leaves Ukraine to orbit the academic circles? In this essay, I walk down memory lane and recollect my professional interactions at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, spanning 15 years (2006–2020) and offering a sketch of everyday sexism and gendered racism in academia.

### April 2006

I am participating in a student conference on public international law at the Moscow State Law Academy. We are given hard copies of the latest book by one of the Academy's professors. I don't remember how it got to that—perhaps, it was a joke?—but Sergei, a student from Saint Petersburg, inscribes the book for me. He writes, 'To a lovely Ukrainian girl' (*zamechatelnoy khokhlushke*), using the Russian pejorative word for a female Ukrainian. Reduced to a lovely-Ukrainian-girl-in-the-pejorative, I am suddenly not the delegate with one of the best presentations at the conference (it is the very end, so we can tell) or the person who performed better in the Ukrainian national championship of the Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition than he did in the Russian one (we compared our 'credentials' first thing, of course). I am extremely annoyed, but also significantly outnumbered (by men and by Russians), so I let it slide.

I donate this book to the library of my alma mater one day.

### July 2006

I am at The European International Model United Nations (TEIMUN) conference in the Hague, my very first trip to 'the West.' The plenary welcome meeting has just ended, and I find myself in a large crowd,

being squeezed slowly through a narrow door opening. It's extremely hot, and I say just that: 'I am so hot, it's crazy!' Several male students around me (seemingly Dutch, but I can't tell) start laughing and mocking, 'Are you, now?!' Blissfully ignorant of the double-meaning of the word at the time, I have no idea what they are alluding to and don't see what's so funny about me feeling overheated.

It is much later that I learn all the sexual undertones of the words in English (countless, really) and carefully, self-consciously select and ration my words.

### August 2006

As the public international law junkie that I've become, I am on my way to Salzburg for the Salzburg Law School on International Criminal Law. The summer school is pretty expensive, so I travel by bus to reduce costs. As I board the bus Kyiv-Munich, my parents ask cautiously whether I am *absolutely* sure this school *actually* exists and is not part of an elaborate human trafficking scheme. I brush off the remark as ridiculous: I am 19 and know it all; and besides, I am the most internet-literate in the family and have done my due diligence.

At the Polish-Ukrainian border, however, as I enter the ladies' restroom covered wall-to-wall in *La Strada International* posters listing 'Signs your trip is a human trafficking scam,' I catch myself going carefully through the proposed checklist. I am further reassured in knowing that my cousin will pick me up in Germany and drop me off in Salzburg: an extra pair of eyes 'on location.' I hold my passport close to heart (literally) for the remainder of the bus ride.

### May 2007

Luckier with the Hungarians than with the Croatians the year before, our team gets visas to participate in the Central and Eastern European Law Moot Competition, hosted in Budapest this time. Given our past experience—and seeing as our team consists of five young female students who are neither married, nor employed, nor have substantial savings in the bank, nor own real estate (read: major migration risk category)—we are tense throughout the application process and exhale only as we collect our passports with visas glued in them.

And so we are on our way to Budapest. Having arrived at the Ukrainian-Hungarian border by train, we swap to a Hungarian mini-van for the final leg of the trip. The composition of our group—one 30-something-year-old male coach and five 20-year-old female students—makes us wonder, semi-jokingly and semi-concernedly, whether border patrols will take us for a pimp and his girls, ‘travelling on business.’ Tell a cat it’s a dog a sufficient number of times, and it will start questioning itself.

On this occasion, we are spared the interrogation.

### April 2008

As a MATRA/MTEC scholarship holder, I am at a designated training session on communication in an international context, alongside other scholarship students from Central and Eastern Europe (I wonder whether the Dutch-German majority of students in our MA program have received training like this earlier, or are simply not considered to need it). We have a captivating session by a business coach, who, it turns out, is a Dutch man married to a Belarusian woman. The fact comes up during a coffee break, and one of the girls asks him in what way Eastern European women differ from Western European, in his opinion. He pauses for a moment and replies, ‘In the elegant combination of professionalism and femininity. It is not one or the other: it can be both.’ The girls nod approvingly, flattered. I have a flashback to the poster for the International Women’s Day, reading ‘Zeg NEE tegen schoonheid!’ (Say NO to beauty!), which I saw earlier in the streets of Maastricht. I was perplexed in that moment as to what a woman’s beauty or lack thereof had got to do with women’s rights (I know better today...).

### July 2009

I am granted a three-year full doctoral scholarship by the University of Kent, Brussels campus, starting in September. The scholarship is very generous: it covers your tuition fees (already set at sky-high rates by UK universities back then) and a monthly allowance. Hooray! Only... you need to teach under the conditions of the scholarship (which eats away precious time from the short three years you’ve got), and the

allowance is so low that you can barely live off it (in fact, it is set at the legally required minimum for being allowed residence in Belgium; yes, I checked).

If I were to live alone or if I had a family to support, I would have to decline. Luckily, my soon-to-be husband is there to support me financially, and I am willing to accept his support without feeling too bad about it, seeing as I am giving up my ‘mergers and acquisitions career’ in Ukraine (and the solid income that comes with it) for love. We joke that I am an Eastern European gold-digger *ad absurdum*: while I did marry a Westerner and end up as his dependent (partially, temporarily, and by mutual agreement, but still), ironically, I’ve been making much more money back home and, unlike my husband, have no outstanding student debt.

2010

‘Do you miss home?’—‘Of course I do! Thanks for asking.’ [I am so grateful for this expression of empathy and solidarity...]

September 2010

From the second year of my PhD onwards, I continuously do fieldwork in Brussels; it is rather convenient to be based in the field. Besides attending numerous policy events, I interview officials, politicians, policy experts, and occasionally other scholars—and I systematically try to ‘intercept’ those individuals who are based elsewhere and come to Brussels on business. Often, they (who are, in the vast majority, men) suggest we meet in the lobby of their hotel: a highly practical and rather innocent logistical solution. Except, it puts me (now 24) in an awkward position of the proverbial ‘Eastern European woman waiting for someone in a hotel lobby.’ I hate it. It’s an ordeal to be eye-scanned by hotel staff and residents passing by. I can read the dilemma off their faces: ‘She looks Slavic, but she is dressed formally and holds a notepad. What’s that now?’

After several instances like this, I schedule these interviews at coffee places nearby, accepting background noise as collateral damage.



2011

'Are all Ukrainian women as beautiful as you?'—'Eh...' [smile awkwardly]

February 2011

I am heading for fieldwork in Ukraine and, in preparation for expert interviews, I buy myself high-heeled elegant winter boots (yes, those exist) and a laptop-size patent leather handbag (I cannot afford real leather on my PhD scholarship); I have a coat and formal dresses already. I also get a haircut and devote an evening to a proper manicure (nail polish and all). I do this because I know that if I am to 'look decent' and 'be taken seriously' in professional circles in Kyiv—and not be too noticeable—flat shoes, a backpack, and a ponytail (my 'European look') won't do. It's bad enough that I am a young female.

All this gearing-up undeniably helps, but it does not preclude me from being addressed with an 'Olichka,' which is a diminutive for 'Olga' and is utterly inappropriate at my age and in a professional context, or from men acting excessively gallantly and kissing my hand when I'd only extended it for shaking, etc. The quickly forgotten (general tolerance for) open sexism in Ukraine repeatedly startles me, although I suspect I should feel 'treated like a woman for once' and grow a pair of wings... On this occasion, I choose to conform and pretend to ignore the whole thing: conducting interviews is my main objective, and my trip is but a few weeks anyway. To get on, I get along.

2012

'Do you miss home?'—'Of course I do!' [And now I am sad and homesick and off my game; thank you very much...]

August 2012

My three-year PhD scholarship is about to end, but my dissertation is not ready for submission, so I decide to take the fourth, 'extension' year. I have the luxury to consider this option: I am married to an EU citizen who, moreover, is willing and able to support me financially—which

gives me a legal right to reside in Belgium (rather than having to pack up and leave the day my scholarship ends), as well as the precious time to focus on completing my PhD (rather than looking frantically for a job, any job, to justify residence and make ends meet).

It will take a year to finish my PhD and almost another year to score a full-time paid post-doc position. Fast-forward eight years, and I find myself facing a similar situation yet again, as my second post-doc is running out.

## September 2012

I am at the annual UACES conference in Passau. I am on the panel, presenting the latest of my doctoral research; I am in the write-up year, so this is my opportunity to run findings by the community. In the hour and a half that it lasts, and especially during my own talk, I look around the room for eye contact with the audience and exchange occasional glances with the few familiar faces and those people—men and women—who seem particularly attentive to the discussion. My talk goes great. I feel ‘young and fabulous.’

As the panel ends and I leave the room; a man from the audience who I haven’t met before approaches me to ask if I’d like to grab a drink. Still very much absorbed by the panel, I take that for a wish to continue the discussion and reply that I am actually going straight to welcome drinks now, so we can talk there. ‘No, I mean grab a drink just the two of us, later tonight,’ he says. Oh, that kind of a drink. ‘No, sorry, I wouldn’t be up for that. But we can still chat at welcome drinks,’ I reply in a tone as friendly as I can: there is no need to attack a guy simply for finding you interesting (my mom has taught me to reject suitors respectfully); and besides, since I don’t know who he is, I don’t know how bad of an enemy I’d be making. ‘Oh. You looked me in the eyes during the panel, so I took that as an invitation.’ Say what now?... ‘Well, that was just me keeping eye contact with the audience, nothing beyond that, really.’ To which he says, ‘Oh no. You *did* look me in the eyes.’ What I reply in my mind is this: ‘Hey, back off! I am not interested. See a wedding ring on my finger, right here?! N-o-t-a-v-a-i-l-a-b-l-e. And anyways, you are what, 15–20 years older than me?!’ (Better yet: married and with a baby, as will appear later!). What I reply with my mouth is this: ‘Well, you

must have misunderstood. I am going to welcome drinks now. See you around.'

'See you around'—that's its own problem. It is day one of a four-day conference, and our professional community is tiny, so I am sure to see him around at this conference and future ones too. After he approaches me again during the conference dinner the next evening (which is on a boat, of all places!) and inquires if I have a nice hotel room, I decide to play the part of an insecure PhD student and cling on to Tom, my supervisor, for the remainder of the conference, just to be safe. Luckily, Tom and I are on such good terms that I can tell him openly what the deal is.

Days and weeks after, I revisit the episode and scrutinize my behavior: did I look him in the eyes beyond the respectable? Did I do that to other people? How long is respectable for a woman, by the way? For an attractive woman? For an attractive Eastern European woman? Are these all set at different times: three seconds for a man, two for a woman, one for an attractive woman, zero for an attractive Eastern European woman? How do I keep eye contact in the future, or do I do without? Was I being too friendly? Am I that naïve? One lesson is clear: I need to keep bigger distance from people, especially from men.

Unexpectedly, keeping distance and avoiding eye contact at the time of writing is as easy as ever: one Zoom-Webex-Teams-you-name-it online meeting + two screens = look away from the camera the entire time.

[Fun fact: I note down this episode as the very first when I start writing this essay, and I write it up as the very last.]

2013

'Where are you from?'—'Ukraine.'—'Oh yeah, now I see it!'—'Eh...'  
[awkwardly]

June 2013

I have successfully defended my PhD and started the active search for an academic job. While I am trying my luck with any and all Belgian universities (a madman's undertaking, given I did my PhD at a non-Belgian university), people are generously forwarding me academic vacancies in random countries, encouraging me to apply—and evidently

assuming I should-could-would be willing to move anywhere, really, nomad and outsider that I am. I know they do this with good intentions and a realistic understanding of the academic job market. But I can't help but feel a mounting frustration at everyone's expectation that I move again and with ease, leaving behind the life that I'd built for myself in the past four years, dragging along my husband (or leaving him behind too?) and unavoidably delaying any plans the two of us might have for starting a family. At this point, I am firmly set at 'exhausting domestic remedies' first and deciding later whether I would rather leave Belgium or leave academia.

## 2014

'Do you miss home?'—'Of course I do!' [Wait, are you subtly suggesting my home country might not be worthy of being missed?..]

## July 2014

I collect my PhD diploma at the graduation ceremony in the magnificent Canterbury Cathedral, marking the beginning of my history (*her-story*, really) of not being addressed with my proper title, 'Doctor,' in a professional context: not by fellow academics, not by students. One day, eager to use the title at least somehow, I tick 'Dr' when booking a flight; it's a German airline, and they honor hierarchies and titles that signify them. My husband warns me it is medical doctors they are after and 'you really don't want to be called upon when someone gets a heart attack during the flight,' so I diligently switch to 'Ms' instead.

Years later, when a dear friend of mine gets her assistant professor appointment, I hurry to send her a postcard addressed to 'Prof. Dr. Name Surname,' hoping this will be the first piece of mail she gets in the new status.

A year later, when I get mine, she returns the favor.

## December 2014

I inform Jan, my supervisor, of my pregnancy. I am excited to share the good news and a little anxious about his reaction: I've only worked here for half a year, you see. He is genuinely happy for me and does not so

much as hint at this being inappropriate. I am relieved. He promises all the support there can be and says he will contact the HR department to inquire straightaway: it appears I am the first academic staff member in the department to get pregnant in the 'unforgotten past,' so there is no institutional memory on what maternity leave regulations actually are. Not that there have been no female staff of childbearing age in the department; it's just that no one has gone for it, for reasons we can't know but can imagine, or no one has managed to stay in academia long enough to reach that stage in their private lives. I find this new knowledge unexpected and rather discomfoting.

2015

'Where are you from?'—'Ukraine.'—'Oh really? You don't look it!'—'Eh...' [awkwardly]

April 2015

I've been dispatched to represent my department in the organization committee of 'The EU and Emerging Powers,' a high-level biannual conference organized jointly by several Belgian universities. The final meeting before the conference has ended, and I am packing up my things to leave. The chair of the meeting approaches me and without any prelude declares elatedly: 'Oh, what's happening in Crimea! It's just like Kosovo and Alsace-Lorraine!' (not in those exact words but to that effect). I am astonished by this sudden fling of the topic at me (we've been talking about the EU, Brazil, and China for the past few hours and nothing alerted me to raise the thorns), by the indelicately light tone of the remark seeing as I am from Ukraine (he knows; that's precisely why he's raised the topic) and, most of all, by the comparison so dramatically false that I am shocked to hear it from a professor of political science. Caught totally off guard, I stand there, struggling to formulate a response that would simultaneously do justice to his severely misplaced statement, besit the discrepancy in status and otherwise perfectly amicable relationship between us, and not be too taxing on me emotionally. Or, in other words: how on Earth do I set him straight without exposing him, offending him, and getting too involved in this conversation?! To my own surprise, I reply detachedly,

'I am sorry, but your comparison is wrong on so many levels that I don't even know where to start and how not to offend you along the way. So let's not even go there.' Which, in turn, startles him. And—but of course!—he instantly retorts, 'Oh, I see you are very emotional about this. This must be a very emotional subject for you.' Yes, indeed, I get very emotional—that is: irritated, frustrated, outraged—by senior male professors flaunting incorrect statements, especially when it happens to be in my field of research! What was it again? 'Let me interrupt your expertise with my confidence.' There.

My direct response does make an impression, however: I get an email from him later that day apologizing and inviting me to talk about the situation in Ukraine in proper detail over lunch. He later invites me to contribute a chapter on the subject in his prospective book (which doesn't happen, but it's the thought that counts). We make peace.

## 2016

'Do you miss home?'—'Of course I do!' [Wait, are you subtly suggesting that this, here and now, is not my home, cannot be my home?..]

## July 2017

I arrive in Chengdu to teach in the University Immersion Program at Sichuan University. Bonnie, my assistant and savior for the two weeks of the summer school, glows with joy (and dare I suspect, pride) for being assigned, in her words, 'the youngest and the most beautiful Western professor.' One of the nights, she invites me to dine with her and her best friend, and as they sit opposite me, they repeatedly say how they admire my 'pretty narrow Western face with low cheekbones.' After a decade of being complemented in the West for my 'pretty round Eastern face with high cheekbones,' I find this remark simultaneously surprising and amusing. The thing is: in Ukraine, there are all sorts of faces, anywhere on the slim-to-round scale, and mine is just a face. My face.

One day after class, I am approached by Dmitri, a lecturer from Ekaterinburg who heard I was Ukrainian and is eager to discuss Russian atrocities in Crimea and in the East of Ukraine. ('How odd', I remember thinking then, 'for me to have to go all the way to China to meet—at last—a living Russian who admits we have a 'situation' and wants to

talk about it!'). We agree to converse over dinner that evening, once the unbearable heat settles a little. At the end of the dinner, he insists on paying—even though we are roughly same age, same seniority, I am probably better off financially (seeing as I am based in Belgium, while he is based in Russia, and my trip will be fully reimbursed too), this meeting was our joint initiative and is *most certainly not* a date (and nothing in our conduct or conversation could have been taken to hint at one). Besides toxic Eastern European (or is it post-Soviet?) gender roles that require the man always pay—which he shares and I don't—there is absolutely no reason for him to pay. I protest, and we argue about it, balancing between politeness and firmness. It goes on and on, and, writing this now, I honestly don't remember who paid in the end.

### September 2017

I attend the Gender Mainstreaming Training (*sic*) for academic staff at our Faculty. There are exactly two men in the room and about 20 women, with me as the one foreigner. (Mind you: the gender ratio of permanent academic staff at the faculty is roughly the reverse, with not one female professor in my department at the time, and I am typically the only foreigner in the room). One of the two men has to be there due to his post within the Faculty and seizes the first opportunity to leave. The other one is genuinely interested in the subject and involved in the discussion, which he animates with honest questions 'from the other side,' unintimidated by being the only man in the training. Eventually, he admits that he only ever recruits male PhD students for considerations of doing fieldwork (when travel and sleep happen under imperfect conditions, so it is 'easier to be among guys') and also bonding (because 'you would not go for a beer after work with a female PhD student'—and what other ways to bond are there, really?!). He asks for our advice on whether and how he can get out of this pattern, and, besides the collective toned-down-furious 'just do it!', I remember one of the suggestions being trying out bonding over lunch or coffee-and-cake.

For the female participants, who could each deliver similar training themselves, it resembles a lousy group therapy session for frustrated women in academia.

## October 2017

Natalka, Kateryna, and I are finalizing the program for the closing conference of our *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine* project in Kyiv next month, with the special issue coming out in December. Only now does it strike us that ours unintentionally became an all-female project: we did select several contributions by male scholars following an open call for papers, but these dropped out along the way, and at this final stage it's only women on board. As we pause to reflect on this observation, three thoughts spring to my mind. An all-female project (with the majority based in or coming from the country)—'and yet' the outcome is a perfectly coherent, high-quality, timely product. Turns out there *are* women scholars out there, and *local* scholars on top of that! An all-female project—'and yet' we produced a special issue in one year from start to finish, despite many of us being primary caretakers for our children and some of us dealing with serious kids' illnesses, broken limbs, pregnancy loss, and even the unspeakable sorrow of child loss. Turns out women can and do deliver quality work on time, despite being immersed in the chaos of family life. An all-female project on civil society—'and yet' there are so many male scholars out there (holding most of the permanent positions, it appears). The vast majority of paper proposals we received came from women, and the few men we selected lost interest along the way—which makes one wonder about the gender allocation of research fields. I have a book title for a potential academic study on this: 'Men are from energy and security, women are from civil society and human rights.'

## 2018

'Are all Ukrainian women as strong and confident as you and talk as fast?'—'Eh...' [awkwardly]

## September 2018

Inspired by a workshop on critical ethnography, I embark on writing an autoethnographic essay on the superiority-inferiority dynamics in



academia.<sup>1</sup> I quickly decide to write the essay as a diary, let the episodes speak for themselves and leave the reader to understand the points I am making 'to the best of their depravity,' as a Russian saying has it (and you are correct in thinking that this essay is written similarly). Brainstorming for the essay, I sketch out a few episodes that expose everyday sexism and gendered racism (and again you are correct in suspecting that several of those found their way into this piece).

I seriously doubt whether they rightfully belong in the essay, however, and as I write, this uneasiness grows. For one, I want my story to speak to—and for—the experiences of both male and female migrant academics, and so I believe I ought to make an honest attempt to tone gender down if I cannot keep it out altogether. More fundamentally: I don't want to speak of gender in an essay 'about inferiority complexes' because, well, I have never had an inferiority complex because of my gender, most certainly not in a professional context. Over-sexualization and over-feminization of women notwithstanding, *professionally* speaking, women in Ukraine are pretty emancipated—arguably more so and definitely longer so than women in the West. 'Long live communism!', I am afraid. My mother and aunts all had university education and careers; both my grannies had university education and careers; even my great-grandmothers had vocational training, and one of them worked as a 'village doctor' of sorts. I encountered the concept of 'stay-at-home-mom' in American period dramas about the 1950s, and it was not until I went to Western Europe and met my peers' mothers that I encountered actual stay-at-home-moms. The point is: growing up, nobody ever questioned my intellectual abilities or professional ambitions because of my gender. I was encouraged at every step and had endless role models within and without my family. 'Olya, know that you can be *anything* you want to be, *next to* being a wife and a mother.' (There's always a caveat, right?) I would object the dual burden and over-sexualization of women in society, I would, but it simply never occurred to me to feel inferior for being a woman. It was quite a cognitive dissonance, I must confess: coming to the 'advanced' West and discovering that 'housewife' was #1 career among women only a generation or two ago.

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1 The essay was published as Olga Burlyuk, 'Fending off a triple inferiority complex in academia: An autoethnography', *Journal of Narrative Politics* 6/1 (2019): 28–50.

And so I delete all the ‘gender episodes’ from the draft. I don’t so much as cut-and-paste them into another document for future reference: plain select-and-delete.

2019

‘Do you miss home?’—‘Of course I do!’ [Wait, do locals ever get asked this question, or is it reserved for migrants?..]

May 2019

I am in New York for the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Nationalities. It’s the welcome reception, and as I gaze around the room, I catch myself speculating cynically what the odds are that the few women in bright-colored tight extravagant dresses and high-heeled shoes flew in directly from Central or Eastern Europe: 95 percent? 99? A full 100? I notice it; everyone notices it; and, to be sure, it is *actually* discussed in one of the circles of people I find myself in at some point during the evening. The thing is: I know not to read absolutely anything about a woman’s intelligence or morality from her clothes. But I know that others do. And it drives me mad.

As an Eastern European woman in the West, you find yourself—I find myself—in a paradoxical position: it is expected that you dress up, and when you do, you become a topic of conversation and occasionally a laughing stock, too. As soon as you figure that out, you feel compelled to dress down, to ‘mimic the walls’ as my mother calls it. And then you come to realize that this is also expected of you: it is considered *only normal* for you to want to conceal your Eastern Europeanness—to take it off, quite literally—and blend in. So much so that eventually you feel compelled to dress up as a form of protest. It is a Sophie’s choice, really, with no outcome preferable over the other. Because what you want is simply to dress as you feel like waking up that day; but, no matter what you go for, people will read something ‘typically Eastern European’ into it, and usually not in your favor.

So there I stand at the conference venue, listening to the enthusiastic chatter about a woman’s dress, in my navy blue formal pants, a dark blue silk blouse (with a bold flower pattern and ruffled cuffs, however!),

low-heeled black shoes, a deliberately modest jewelry set, make-up 'au naturel', hair pinned back. In other words: meticulously censored, my inner protest screaming silently through the ruffled cuffs. Looking appropriate-with-a-twist, seemingly intelligent, somewhat European, almost Western (never mind the cheekbones). One foot here, one foot there. Neither here, nor there. Tired and resentful.

I go to the MET Opera later that night, and when the guy sitting next to me asks 'where are you from?' and I reply 'take a guess', he pauses a moment and says... 'European undefined.' A mic drop.

## October 2019

I arrive at a work meeting, and before it commences formally, someone starts gossiping about a suspected affair between a PhD student, a beautiful young Eastern European woman based in Western Europe, and a senior professor, a proverbial 'old white Western European man.' This is the first I have heard of it, although I know both parties personally. So I just sit there and listen, confused as to whether I am startled more by the very idea of an affair between these two (heh?!), or by the sheer fact that we are having a conversation about it (huh?!). The matter is discussed enthusiastically, with a mixture of curiosity, amusement, puzzlement, and disapproval. The people are setting the facts straight (who-saw-what-when and how this all adds up or doesn't), checking these against the girl's supposed relationship status ('I thought she had a boyfriend, no?') and purity of character—and concluding that, if true, this is one inappropriate situation. I feel extremely uncomfortable throughout, but I cannot pin down in that moment what about this discussion *specifically* puts me off—besides the fact that we are having it, obviously—so I do not intervene.

It hits me later what it was (I cannot let go and mull over this for days): not a word of judgement, or appraisal to that effect, was said about *the guy*. The one of the two who is much older. Who is way more senior professionally. Who is 'a Westerner.' Who is most likely married. And who is most certainly taking advantage of his social and legal status—and her lack thereof. Yet there were six of us in that room: three men and three women. If anything, the conversation should have been about how appalled we all were with the apparent abuse of power by the proverbial *old white man*. As this realization dawns on me, I am sincerely

stunned that it took me days to articulate an observation *this obvious*, to spot an elephant-in-the-room *that big*. And that no one else did. What does that say about each of us separately and as a group? I also wonder to what extent the entertaining overtone of the discussion was due to the fact that the girl was Eastern European—and so the whole situation somehow, consciously or subconsciously, simply ‘fit the bill.’ Would we be having a similar conversation if the ‘she’ in the story was, say, German or Danish? Would we be similarly blind to the elephant in the room? Finally, I question myself about how far my own ‘temporary analytical paralysis’ during the conversation and after was because I was Eastern European myself, the only one in that room. Did my brain go into some kind of freeze-mode to evade ‘tarnishing by association’ or what?

I feel at once sad and furious. Silence gives consent, the saying goes, and I ought to revoke mine. I consider writing an email to the people in that meeting, pointing at the elephant, but I decide to raise the issue in person at our next meeting instead. I don’t, however, as I cannot come up with an elegant way to do so and imagine it to be extremely confrontational and awkward, too.

Silence gives consent.

2020

‘Do you miss home?’—‘Of course I miss Ukraine, if that’s what you are asking. I miss my family, my friends, my favorite foods and places.’ [And I won’t tell you that I can no longer tell where home is. Perhaps there can be several? Or perhaps there is no such place?...] ]

February 2020

I am invited to speak about my autoethnography on inferiority and superiority in academia at the EDGE seminar at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). Vjosa—who suggested EDGE invite me—and I decide to frame the talk as a conversation, and we check in the day before to synchronize on what and how. Incidentally, we realize that both of us plan on wearing formal black dresses (only hers will be a trendy little black dress and mine will be a maternity one, as I am eight months pregnant at the time). We jokingly conspire that Vjosa should wear a bright red lipstick to the talk, and I should apply blue eyeshadow: to

pay tribute to our Balkan and Eastern European roots, respectively. 'Consider it an intervention on the Western aesthetics!', she says, and we laugh. The blue eyeshadow is too much for me, though, and does not go with the black dress at all, so I apply grey eyeshadow instead. I paint my nails red to compensate.

And so I sit at the event: a pregnant Ukrainian woman who thinks. A Ukrainian woman who thinks. A woman who thinks. A woman.

### Works cited

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- Olga Burlyuk, 'Fending off a triple inferiority complex in academia: An autoethnography', *Journal of Narrative Politics* 6/1 (2019): 28–50.
- Irena Karpa, *Yak Vyhodyty Zamizh Stilky Raziu, Skilky Zahochete* [How to marry as many times as you want] (#knyholav, 2020).