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MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY
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6. Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place

Dragana Stojmenovska

The day I started my PhD is also the day I stopped being a migrant and became an expat. September 15, 2016. That day, I went to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) office in Amsterdam to pick up my residence permit, which was going to secure my stay in the Netherlands for the next four years. My expectations for how this visit was going to go were very clear. Walk in. Feel anxious. Exhibit socially desirable behavior. Sit down. Wait. Waiting room packed. Observe nervous leg tapping of others. Absorb anxiety of others. Look down at your hands and notice you are fidgeting. Worry you are not going to get the permit even though you got a letter that says you got the permit. Maybe you do something weird, and they say no. Maybe the civil servant accidentally drops the permit into the dark abyss. It is irrecoverable and they can't make you a new one. Your number on the screen. Your turn. Be nice. Show facial expressions that suggest that you, too, are fully human. Done. You got it. Feel happy about it and instantly reproach yourself for feeling happy (and thereby insufficiently anti-systemic). Go outside. The sun will be out. It's not. You are in the Netherlands.

I am in the Netherlands, and it has been six years since I moved to Amsterdam to pursue a liberal arts and sciences Bachelor's degree. Six years by actual count, three years according to the IND.¹ My regular trips to the IND during those years—to pick up residence permits—were due

1 Years spent on residence permits of a temporary nature—such as student permits—count only as half-year periods towards the necessary time period for applying for a permanent residence permit or Dutch citizenship.

to the fact that my home country, Macedonia (read 'Eastern Europe', 'Southeast Europe', 'the Balkans' or '??' for the purposes of this essay), is not part of the European Union. While this September 2016 visit to the IND was similar to previous ones in its sweaty-palms-inducing character, it was also different. A few firsts. For the first time, I was getting a so-called 'scientific researcher' permit, and for the first time 12 months were going to count as 12 months because this permit was of non-temporary nature.² And then, there was also one surprise: for the first time, I was in the wrong place. At the IND I was told that, to pick up my residence permit, I had to go to the *Expat Center* located in the *World Trade Center* in Amsterdam's business district. How very fancy! Walk in. Sit on a comfy couch in an empty waiting room only briefly. Get picked up by an enthusiastic smiling face. Would you like a drink and here is your permit and this is all you would like to know about it and how can *we* be there for *you*, Miss? Go outside. The sun is out. You turned from a migrant to an expat in just a bike ride.

In my research on gender and the workplace, I think a lot about the marriage of status beliefs about categorically distinct individuals (categorized on the basis of gender, race/ethnicity, migration status, educational attainment, and other axes of signification) and status associated with different types of jobs. Widely held social, cultural, and political beliefs about which groups of people are more status-worthy and competent than others interact with status beliefs about jobs to produce inequality in the initial distribution of jobs, as well as in the experiences within these jobs (Ridgeway, 2014). This shows clearly in my work on gender and workplace authority. Devalued groups such as women are under-represented in jobs that entail authority, positions which are generally associated with higher status than those that do not involve authority (Stojmenovska, Steinmetz, and Volker, 2021). The view on women as less status-worthy also influences their experiences when they do have authority at the workplace. Because of the perceived incongruence between women as a lower-status group and authority jobs as higher-status, women in authority experience hostile reactions

2 Non-temporary, but not permanent, because there are two types of non-temporary (niet-tijdelijke) permits, of indefinite (onbepaalde) and definite (bepaalde) duration, with scientific researcher permits belonging to the latter group.

from colleagues and clients in the form of harassment and bullying (Stojmenovska, 2023).

Much like most authority jobs, academic jobs in the Netherlands are seen as high-status jobs. Coming from years of precarity as a non-EU/EEA migrant student and a working-class background (though academia got me into other types of precarity), my ‘becoming an expat’ story was just a preview of privilege. Over the following few years, I will have gotten to enjoy a financially comfortable life, traveling often to present my work and having the privilege of being seen as a legitimate source of knowledge at conferences and in the classroom. To call this merely ‘a story of academia and status’ is, however, not telling the full story. The more complete story—in my current narration of it—goes under the tentative name ‘Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place’ and is about how (analogous to the way women are seen as incompatible with having authority in the workplace), my positionality at the intersections of migration background, gender, and class (among other things) is perceived as incongruent with being an academic in the Global North. Through recollection of a few social interactions I have had outside and within academia, I will speak about how these views, commonly held by the Dutch (and more generally, Western European) public, show up in interactions in everyday life.

Interaction 1: “Coming from such a place”

It is a sunny Sunday morning, and I am at a friend’s having breakfast. My friend is Dutch, and so is her flatmate. Her flatmate’s dad is coming over to watch football with his son, a Sunday father-son tradition. Their favorite football club is playing; they are excited. As he walks into the living room, I make a mental note, something about football and masculinity and father-son traditions. My mind shushes itself: ‘it’s Sunday morning. Turn off any analyses of the patriarchy and refocus on the mundane, like that perfect medium-boiled egg on the table in front of you.’ What is more mundane than the patriarchy, really?

I tell myself that I should not make any assumptions about the interaction I am about to have—I am meeting this person for the first time, after all—but my body starts feeling tense in anticipation. It is an embodied reaction I developed in response to microaggressions I have

experienced while being in exclusively Dutch contexts, meeting the family and friends of my Dutch friends. I know it is going to happen. It happens *every single time*. Like this one time my friend's mother commented on how I probably can't afford a nine-euro bag—unlike her, who found the bag very cheap—at a time when I was working as a researcher at the City of Amsterdam, earning a decent salary. Or this other time when another friend's mother asked me, over Christmas dinner, in the presence of her Dutch friends, all with pitying faces, exactly how miserable my parents were.

I put away my well-founded assumptions and put my best socially appealing behavior on, asking about the flatmate's father's profession. He teaches at a high school in the Netherlands. I feel mild excitement about our overlap in professions, seeing an opportunity to connect. He does not ask about my profession, however. Instead, he *enquires* into my migration background, and gives the standard account on his experiences with 'that part of Europe'. How he once went to Bulgaria on a school trip where he met this teacher who showed him this traditional dance (note the return of the 'traditional dance' later in this essay). My friend interjects and says that I am a teacher too. Our interlocutor responds with little excitement, requesting the details. I explain that I teach social science courses to Bachelor's and Master's students at the University of Amsterdam, and that I am about to start supervising the theses of a group of Bachelor's sociology students. I notice myself trying to get through my sentences as fast as possible because something in the interaction makes me feel like I am giving unsolicited information. Then, it happens. His response: 'Oh, how special that *you* get to do this, coming from such a place.' I mumble something like 'yeah, special', and that is the end of this conversation.

While in real life I said one thing, in my head I wanted to say another.

Edit to my response to my friend's flatmate's father, the high school teacher: 'Yes, meneer, I do get to do this. As a matter of fact, I am extremely qualified to do this. Growing up, my mother worked in a textile factory and my father was a construction worker. Growing up working class and becoming middle class in my adulthood has taught me a lot about class, which is one of the subjects I teach. I also know a lot about gender, another subject I teach. Learned some new things after moving to your country, where I got to experience racialized sexism for the first time when the men I studied with said that Macedonian women

have the perfect bodies and suggested I should bike to school naked.³ This later got me into what we call ‘intersectionality’, another subject I teach. I have the lived experience but also got my books right. I had to work extra hard because I did not inherit the cultural know-hows on navigating (Dutch) academia from my parents. Add to this the fact that I needed a scholarship to study in the European Union, because your country’s tuition fees for non-EU students are six times higher than those for EU students, and I was also not allowed to work to support myself financially because for that I needed a work permit. So, I got perfect grades in primary and high school, and continued working very hard in university to keep my scholarship and continue getting new ones. I graduated with distinction from both my Bachelor’s and Master’s and received a very competitive research grant to do my own PhD project. *That is the place I come from.*

Interaction 2: “Shouldn’t you be elsewhere?”

There is time for informal chatter over drinks and appetizers after every seminar at work. I am chatting with two male colleagues who are more senior than me, one of whom is a self-proclaimed wine connoisseur and is giving an extensive commentary on the wine we are drinking and the different sorts of grapes. I am there and simultaneously in multiple other places, tracing back memories of the first fancy academic dinners I had and the way my eyes then carefully traced others’ hand movements to learn which cutlery to reach for first. The other colleague ‘jokingly’ asks me if I shouldn’t be elsewhere harvesting grapes, ‘like the other Eastern Europeans.’ I am taken by surprise and, in trying to compose myself, I am too slow to respond. Before I know it, the conversation is about something else.

Edit to this interaction to include my response: ‘Look at that, humor. Sociologists’ preferred way of delivering -ist remarks (as far as I can tell). In using humor, sociologists intend to suggest that they actually mean the opposite of what they are saying, because they are sociologists and cannot possibly be classist/racist/sexist. Interesting, no?’

3 Dominant representations of Eastern European women in the West—that have remained relatively stable over time—revolve around images of hypersexual(ized) gendered “others” (Deltcheva, 2005).

Interaction 3: “Then maybe you should leave”

I am at a bar with a male Dutch colleague, having drinks. Two acquaintances of my colleague, both Dutch men, drop by. I am introduced as a colleague at the university. The acquaintances ask where I am from, after sharing their unsolicited guesses about where I come from. One of them imitates ‘a traditional Macedonian dance’ (there it is, the return of the dance!), after sharing that he had never been to the country and does not even know where exactly it is. They subsequently ask about my research. I tell them that I study women’s under-representation in positions of workplace authority, after which they share their knowledge on the subject matter. They ask if one of the aspects I study is how women ‘sleep their way up to authority’. They have heard this to be a rather common phenomenon in Eastern Europe. I make a quick exit to the restroom; I cannot be bothered to engage.

A few hours later, another male acquaintance of my colleague comes to the bar. The introduction goes in a similar way. After hearing what my research is about, this person expresses his surprise about me studying gender *in the Netherlands*. I wonder if the ‘me’ in the previous sentence should also be italicized. ‘Coming from such a place.’ Gender is, as far as he is concerned, not an issue in the Netherlands, he says.

My response, unedited: ‘Gender *is* very much “a thing” in the Netherlands, just like anywhere else. Depending on the indicator you look at, you will often find that the Netherlands is doing worse than other countries. My subject of research, known as “vertical occupational segregation” in the social stratification literature, is one example. For instance, if we look at the share of full professors who are women (the position of full professor being an example of a high-status job that involves authority), the Netherlands has one of the lowest shares of women full professors of all European countries.’

My interlocutor, unfit/unwilling/reluctant to engage in this conversation, responds with yet another classic: ‘Well, if it is so bad here, then maybe you should leave after your PhD.’

Pass it forward

Five years since my migrant-to-expat transition, the way being a migrant woman from a country classified as ‘Eastern Europe,’ ‘Southeast Europe,’ ‘the Balkans’ or ‘??’ routinely robs me of the higher status I would otherwise be enjoying as an academic ‘expat’ has changed little. What has changed, however, is that I am increasingly able to make sense of these interactions, to give them a name. Certainly, the sociological material in the few examples I engaged with is abundant.

These interactions are about who has the right to knowledge (re) production; who is to know, and who is to be known. My Dutch interlocutors—who are, by the way, white men who are older than me—express resistance toward me residing in the same body as someone who is teaching and doing research at a university in the Netherlands (Interactions 1 and 3). ‘Coming from such a place,’ I am someone who should not know things, and the suggestion that I *am* a legitimate source of knowledge is punished by telling me to leave (ehh, no thanks but you can pay for my ticket for the holidays if you like). I *cannot* know things but I *can* be known. And so my interlocutors can imitate ‘a traditional Macedonian dance’ without having the slightest idea of what Macedonian dances actually look like. I am tradition, and they are modernity. ‘Gender is not a thing in the Netherlands’—and that pretty much sums up the dominant white Dutch self-representation as free of gender and racial hierarchies (Wekker, 2016).

Interaction 2 speaks volumes about class and race/ethnicity. By explicitly stating that I should be elsewhere, harvesting grapes like the other Eastern Europeans, my colleague is suggesting a few things. First, an ascribed and prescribed equivalence between being Eastern European and doing manual work.⁴ Second, that because of this equivalence, I should not be working at the university, i.e., should be ‘elsewhere.’ Third, somewhat paradoxically, the humorous delivery of this message is supposed to soothe me so that I do not feel offended or embarrassed: I actually *am* an academic and so cannot possibly be

4 For context, note that jobs involving manual work in Western and Northern European countries are disproportionately occupied by Eastern European migrants, who are also among the lowest paid workers. See, for example, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2019/14/nearly-180-thousand-jobs-filled-by-polish-workers>.

doing work that is seen as inferior and less deserving of respect. Finally, my colleague uses humor as a means to detach himself of what is being said, assuming a shared understanding that being classist/racist/sexist is incompatible with being a sociologist.

In this sense, the 'knowing your place' part of the 'Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place' story is also about having the toolkit to make sense of these interactions scientifically, which, I find, is immensely empowering. The stories that my interlocutors in these interactions tell themselves are not the only stories. They are also not the most important stories. Instead, I am looking at the stories tucked away in sociology books, those drawn from the lived experiences of migrants who came before us, the narratives that sometimes don't materialize into words in the space between me and the other person because I am too flustered, or trying to self-preserve, or have decided to pick my battles: the edits to my responses. I recall a conversation with one of my class/race/gender/sexuality course students a few years ago, during which she told me that learning about the dominant heterosexual dating script in the course has ruined her experience of dating men. I would not exactly claim that being a social scientist has ruined my experience of being in the world. Surely, as far as I am concerned, one is better off knowing about the script than not knowing about it. After all, it is not the knowledge of the script that ruins the experience, but the script itself. The downside of knowing one's place too well, however, is the state of constant anticipation that comes with it. As I write this piece, I am a week away from my Dutch students' graduation ceremony (where I will give graduation speeches and meet my students' families) and very aware of the pre-emptive analysis happening in my head. Will I get to hear 'one of those comments' again? How explicit will it be? What's the best way to respond? I suppose that this is my way of coping, trying to have control over the situation before it happens. The silver lining in all the analysis? Pin it down, pass it forward. Like I did here.

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