

MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY
OLGA BURLYUK AND LADAN RAHBARI

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Narrating Migrant Academics' Precarity and Resilience in Europe	ix
---	----

Ladan Rahbari and Olga Burlyuk

(Non)Belonging	xxxi
-----------------------	-------------

1. A Journey to the 'Self': From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground	1
---	---

Vera Axyonova

2. Unbelonging as a Post-Colonial Predicament: My Tryst With European Academia	9
--	---

Sanam Rooli

3. Unlearning	21
---------------	----

Mihnea Tănăsescu

(In)Visible Inclusions and Exclusion	31
---	-----------

4. Who Do the Dead Belong to? Considering the (In)visibility of Death as an Outsider in France	33
--	----

Norah Kiereri

5. The Invisible Migrant: The (Im)Possibility of Getting Behind the Iron Curtain of Western Academia as an Eastern European Academic	43
--	----

Martina Vitáčková

6. Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place	51
--	----

Dragana Stojmenovska

7. A Stroll through the Darkness: The Mental Health Struggles of a Migrant Academic	61
---	----

Anonymous

Borders, Mobility, and Academic 'Nomadism'	69
8. Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure	71
<i>Maryna Shevtsova</i>	
9. Have You Ever Heard of British Hospitality? Neither Have I	83
<i>Vjosa Musliu</i>	
10. On Being a 'Migrant Academic': Precarious Passports and Invisible Struggles	95
<i>Tara Asgarilaleh</i>	
The Complexities of Privilege and Precarity	103
11. Becoming White?	105
<i>Apostolos Andrikopoulos</i>	
12. Academic Mobility the 'Other' Way: Embodying Simultaneous Privilege and Precarity	117
<i>Karolina Kluczevska</i>	
13. 'A Small Plot of New Land at All Times': A Narrative of a Vulnerability Mortified	129
<i>Bojan Savić</i>	
14. Conversation with San Precario	137
<i>Alexander Strelkov</i>	
Gendered Precarity and Sexualization	143
15. Survival in Silence: Of Guilt and Grief at the Intersection of Precarity, Exile, and Womanhood in Neoliberal Academia	145
<i>Ash Vatansever</i>	
16. To the Center and Back: My Journey Through the Odds of Gendered Precarity in Academia	155
<i>Emanuela Mangiarotti</i>	
17. A Smart Hot Russian Girl From Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia	163
<i>Olga Burlyuk</i>	

Embodied Differences and (Non)Whiteness	181
18. Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe	183
<i>Lydia Namatende-Sakwa</i>	
19. A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium	191
<i>Atamhi Cawayu</i>	
20. Inside the Migrant Academic's Body: Strategic Outsider within Toxic Substructures	201
<i>Sama Khosravi Ooryad</i>	
21. 'Who Deserves a Chair?' Performative Kinships and Microaggressions in the European Academy	213
<i>Ladan Rahbari</i>	
Afterword: Reflections on Migrant Academics' Narratives	225
<i>Umut Erel</i>	
Authors' Biographies	231
Index	241

19. A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium

Atamhi Cawayu

This letter started as an essay to share my reflections as a racialized researcher in white Belgian academia. However, I did not feel comfortable producing another essay that followed the conventions of the Ivory Tower, especially since this edited volume welcomed other creative forms of written texts. I decided to transform my essay into a letter to future adoptee researchers, hopefully offering room for dialogue with the reader.

Dear future adoptee researcher

How great that you are interested in pursuing an academic career by examining transnational adoption. I am happy to share some of my personal experiences of being an adoptee researcher employed in a white institution. Since I am in the final months of my doctoral studies, this allows me to reflect honestly on my own doctoral journey. It has certainly been filled with ups and downs, with feelings of loneliness and togetherness, and emotions of disillusion and happiness. I assume that these feelings and emotions are part of the doctoral trajectory at large and are also present in fellow non-adopted researchers' academic journeys. Nevertheless, with this letter I would like to elaborate on my academic journey as a politically engaged researcher of color in Belgian academia and demonstrate how activism and research can be

compatible. As we live the reality of being removed from our parents, community, and land, we do not want to examine this topic in a sterile way but instead contribute to processes of social change and turn the narrative on transnational adoption.

From orphan to activist, from activist to researcher

It is not so strange to research a topic that is very close to your heart. Nonetheless, during your academic journey, you will often hear from strangers that your adoption background might prevent you from conducting objective scientific research. They will tell you that you are too subjective, too biased, too critical, too involved, too everything because you will never be able to comply with their standards. For those critics, our adoption histories are seen as a disadvantage, while white non-adopted researchers are often seen as the embodiment of objectivity. Yet, I consider adoptee's voices as indispensable in adoption research. Studying adoption without adoptee researchers is like studying women without female researchers or studying migrants without migrant researchers. We are the ones who live it. We are the ones who stayed short or long term in orphanages. We are the ones that lost all legal ties with our families of origin. We are the ones that have been relocated and displaced from one continent to another. We are the ones whose names were changed. We are the ones that were assigned to white strangers that spoke a language we did not understand but we had to call them 'family.' We do have the lived experience of being adopted, and I rather see this as an advantage instead of a disadvantage. Feminist methodologies provide us with methodological tools and concepts, such as positionality and reflexivity, that allow us to share our personal involvement with the topic and how this is present in the research process. Fortunately, the field of adoption studies has been transformed over the years. The first generation of adoptee researchers has paved the way for the newer generations, including myself. I am very glad to notice that more adoptee researchers are entering the academic field of transnational adoption. That said, I think we have come to the part where I explain my own personal journey of becoming a researcher, and what my motivations to start doctoral studies and examine transnational adoption were.

I was born in the indigenous city of El Alto (Bolivia) in October 1992, and was adopted six months later by a white Belgian working-class couple. I had a happy childhood and a lovely adoptive family. Only after my first trip back to Bolivia did I realize that my adoption did not only 'give' but it also 'took' many things from me. I searched for other Bolivian adoptees in Belgium and became acquainted with a fellow Bolivian adoptee, who was also adopted the same year and month, with the difference being that her adoption was an illegal one. I returned to Bolivia to obtain more information about my pre-adoptive past, but was confronted with institutional issues. According to Bolivian law, my adoption did not happen, as the respective adoption intermediaries did not finalize the adoption process in Bolivia, which means that I am registered as an 'orphan' to this day. In addition, I discovered that my orphanage was hiding parts of my adoption documents. Needless to say, the return trip was a disillusioning experience.

I started to develop a critical stance towards the global system of transnational adoption. Fueled by the injustices present in the current adoption system, I became politically engaged in the public adoption debate in Belgium and participated in political hearings in the Flemish Parliament. At the same time, I decided to write my second Master's thesis in gender and diversity on the lived experiences of Bolivian adoptees in Flanders. The field of critical adoption studies not only enhanced my academic knowledge of transnational adoption but also helped me develop a substantiated vision that I deployed in my adoptee activism. After graduating, I wanted to pursue a professional career in the field of adoption. Eventually, I was hired as a staff member at the Flemish Central Authority for Adoption, a governmental institution that supervises transnational adoption practices. This work experience gave me a behind-the-scenes view of adoption practices and nuanced my understanding by giving me insights into how adoption policies came about and who has responsibility for them. At the same time, I was also working on a proposal to conduct research on transnational adoption, with specific attention to the families of origin and stakeholders in the adoption system in Bolivia. The idea of doing research on this came from my own questions and interests at the time, as someone without any information available on my family of origin.

Nevertheless, I wanted to understand other families' stories of relinquishment and adoption. I wanted to understand the social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances that led to child relinquishment in Bolivia. I wanted to understand why thousands of Bolivian/indigenous children were displaced and relocated to families in the Global North. In addition, my experiences in my activist work made me realize that, despite my knowledge of the theme, I would always be considered as an 'adoptee' instead of an 'expert.' Whilst an academic career would provide me with the skills and tools to conduct a thorough investigation, this is not always a guarantee of being considered an 'expert.' For others, our personal stories will always be more interesting than our academic expertise on the theme. Nonetheless, I chose the academic route so that I could contribute to the democratization of academic knowledge on adoption. My involvement in adoptee organizations on the one hand, and my previous work experience at the Central Authority on the other hand, motivated me to bridge academia and the adoption field. To my great surprise, my research proposal was accepted. It was like a dream come true, but little did I know that the academic world would not turn out to be the safe space I had thought it would be.

Surviving white academia

Let us imagine you have made it into academia. Then what? Academia may seem like a safe space that is open to new insights and critical perspectives; one which celebrates diversity. This might be true to some extent. However, I consider academia an elitist institution that upholds the same structural inequalities of race, gender, and class as the rest of society. If you are not part of academia, this might sound very abstract, but I hope to provide some examples throughout this letter. The last thing I want to do is discourage anyone from pursuing their academic dreams, especially because there are too few researchers of color. The higher you go on the academic ladder, the whiter and more masculine it becomes. There is a great need for researchers with all kinds of different backgrounds to diversify the academy and challenge the status quo of those who possess institutional power.

In retrospect, I would say I started my academic journey with a large portion of naïveté. I recall my first day as a doctoral student at Ghent

University very well. In the early morning, I had an appointment with my supervisor to discuss what I would focus on in the first weeks of my academic career. Then I went to my new workspace, which I shared with a fellow doctoral student. The office was still fairly empty, a bit uninviting, and looked somewhat industrial. Despite that, I felt really happy that I finally had the time to read all the books and articles that were on my reading list. The research center I was affiliated with supported critical, feminist, and anthropological research, and this allowed me to focus on theories and methodologies that really spoke to me. I decided to immerse myself in postcolonial and decolonial thought and critical methodologies that provided me with tools for social change. During my first year as a doctoral student, I was very enthusiastic about participating in seminars, conferences, and courses on a range of topics. I was very eager to learn, expand my horizons, and become familiar with new theoretical insights and concepts. In the beginning, I considered these events interesting and challenging, but later I started to get disappointed when I saw how, for the umpteenth time, a prominent white scholar's theoretical framework was applied to anthropological research. The academic space slowly began to disenchant me. Do not get me wrong, I believe all academics can make a valuable contribution, regardless of their race. However, using Pierre Bourdieu as a central theoretical framework to analyze the daily life practices in a village in South Asia and not mentioning one South Asian author sounds problematic. I noticed how Northern theories and concepts were constantly reproduced by (white) European academics during several seminars and conferences. This made me even more interested in the knowledge production of scholars in the Global South. I learned about Southern theories, feminisms, and methodologies. The fact that my research topic was situated in Bolivia undoubtedly played a role in my curiosity about Southern and marginalized epistemologies.

Then comes the question, 'What do you do when you consider certain approaches, theories, and concepts used in academic research ethically problematic?' Although most seminars are considered spaces of exchange and feedback, I sometimes felt a certain fragility when pointing out the Eurocentrism in the research presented. Similar to this, I also noticed that when I addressed people about everyday words and phrases with racial connotations—for example, the Dutch expression 'a

Chinese volunteer' (an expression used for someone who is forced to volunteer)—I felt some kind of resistance and even negation. I think we all have our blind spots when it comes to topics such as race, gender, age, disability, and so on. Nevertheless, I naïvely thought that fellow social scientists would be open to a constructive conversation, but instead, I often returned home empty-handed. This had the effect that I started to withdraw from certain activities, seminars, and meetings. I did not feel comfortable anymore, and I did not have the energy to raise these issues again. Writing a doctoral dissertation was already challenging enough for me, and I preferred to focus on my academic work and adoptee activism. Fortunately, I had other colleagues of color with whom I could reflect extensively during breaks or after working hours on dealing with racial issues in academia and sharing experiences. I am eternally grateful to the Belgian-Nepalese researcher, Hari Prasad Adhikari Sacré, who has been there for me during almost my whole doctoral journey. Together, we organized back in 2019 an event called 'Surviving White Institutions,' in which we invited scholars and professionals of color to reflect collectively on working in white institutional spaces. This event led to new connections and gave me the energy to continue in white academia.

The rise of adoptee researchers

Maybe some good news: I can reassure you that adoptee researchers are on the rise. It has not always been like that. Back in the early 2000s, the first generation of adoptee researchers entered the academic field of adoption. At that time, the perspectives of transnational adoptees were largely absent, and the field was dominated by white non-adopted academics. The influential book *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (Trenka, Oparah, and Shin, 2006), composed by adoptee authors, aimed to rewrite the dominant adoption narratives through the contributions of predominantly adoptee scholars, adoptee authors, adoptee activists, and adoptee artists. In the introduction, they note that mainly white academics, professionals, and adoptive parents dominated the literature on transnational adoption in the previous decades. Their book has been influential in providing artistic, scholarly, and literary counternarratives to transnational adoption. I have great admiration

and respect for these first-generation adoptee authors who paved the way for newer generations of adoptee scholars. This also means that adoptee researchers are no longer marginalized in the field of critical adoption studies, but have contributed substantially to transforming the field. Yet that does not mean that the field is dominated by us. There are still more non-adopted researchers than adoptee researchers. And even though I greatly admire both for their work, I remain a bit skeptical of white non-adopted academics that decide to research us, interview us, analyze us, apply their Eurocentric concepts to our stories, sometimes misinterpret us, and talk about us at conferences that most of us adoptees cannot attend due to the high conference fee or the closed nature, which upholds academic elitism—some exceptions notwithstanding.

When I entered academia, I wanted to disseminate the knowledge produced within critical adoption studies to professionals, stakeholders, and directly impacted people. Because of my background as an activist in adoptee communities and as a professional in the adoption sector, I wanted to bridge these different areas and stir up a constructive dialogue between all parties. Together with my supervisor and other scholars and professionals, we decided to organize a symposium, which later received the name *Symposium Intercountry Adoption: How to Continue? Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*. In contrast to many academic adoption conferences, in this one, adoptees played a leading role either as academics, professionals, or by sharing their own experiences. The symposium was well-received by the adoptee participants, but less so by the adoption agencies—probably because the symposium did not shy away from addressing the abuses and illegalities inherent in transnational adoption in past and current practices.

As a result, a debriefing was organized by the Flemish Central Authority to engage in dialogue with the adoption agencies. Instead of having a constructive conversation, the professionals from the adoption agencies critiqued the research outcomes of several academic presentations. They said the empirical data was ‘dated,’ ‘not generalizable,’ ‘too biased,’ and were unwilling to engage with the suggested recommendations. At that point, I realized that, despite my efforts to engage adoption agencies in an open dialogue, they would never accept research findings that exposed the flaws in the global adoption system and its vulnerability to potential abuses and malpractices. It was the wake-up call that I needed because

for too long I naïvely thought that my research would contribute to a social change in the adoption field, but I realized then that my research would possibly be put aside and read as ‘too subjective.’ This all made me wonder for whom I was making all these efforts, especially when professionals working in the adoption system did not want to consider research outcomes. To be honest, I had an existential crisis during that time, and I questioned the added value of my own research if nothing would be done with it anyway. It saddened me deeply knowing that the adoption agencies responsible for abuses and malpractices did not want to take any responsibility. Instead, they minimized these issues and emphasized the positive outcomes that come along with adoption—as if positive adoption stories erase the lived experiences of adoptees who have been kidnapped, trafficked, and sold to the industry of transnational adoption.

Pursue your dreams, we are the change

I hope this letter did not discourage you from writing that research proposal. Never give up on your dreams and keep following your ambitions. I realize I have focused too much on the challenges of being an adoptee researcher of color in academia, but I have also had many beautiful moments. My doctoral journey has introduced me to some wonderful people, critical minds, and excellent scholars. I greatly appreciate the relationships I have been able to build with Bolivian adoptees, first families, and adoptive families I have met through my research project and who have let me into their lives. Furthermore, my research has allowed me to stay for long-term periods in Bolivia, which not only let me familiarize myself with the field of child protection and adoption, but also permitted me to build lasting relationships with people I encountered along the way.

Despite the disillusionments during my doctoral studies—and thanks to the happy moments—I have not given up yet. Academia allowed me to engage with critical scholarship and to organize numerous small-scale events open to academics and non-academics. I strongly believe that knowledge should not be confined to the academic world, but that exchanges, dialogues, and open conversations are necessary if we want to continue the transformative process of knowledge exchange.

In addition, I have lost my naïveté about academia, and my doctoral dissertation no longer intends to radically transform the adoption sector. I am now writing the thesis primarily for myself and for the Bolivian adoptee community. That said, I am convinced that social change will happen, partly through us and our work; this has already started happening. In recent years, I have seen an increase in the number of students expressing their dissatisfaction with the curriculum as it is too white and Eurocentric. On top of that, more student organizations and movements are organizing actions to decolonize the university. In the field of adoption, I have seen some changes over the seven years I have been actively involved. Adoptee voices are much more present now than in the past. On the political level, the global adoption system is questioned much more than before, and several European governments have installed commissions to examine abuses in the past and current adoption system. All this shows me that, over a period of several years, critical voices still seeped through. Someday the world will look different thanks to all our small efforts.

If you have any more questions or doubts, feel free to contact me. I am not sure if I will still be in academia then but let us see what the future holds for me.

With Love,
Atamhi Cawayu