

# MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY  
OLGA BURLYUK AND LADAN RAHBARI



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331>

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>.

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331#resources>.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-923-1

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-924-8

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-925-5

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-926-2

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 978-1-80064-927-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-928-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-929-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0331

Cover image: Filip Kominik, 'Before the Czech' (2017),

<https://unsplash.com/photos/IHtVbLRjTZU>. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 15. Survival in Silence: Of Guilt and Grief at the Intersection of Precarity, Exile, and Womanhood in Neoliberal Academia

*Ash Vatansever*

---

*Trigger warning: The chapter details an episode of sexual assault.*

The crisp July evening is filled with melancholic cheerfulness. Music in the background is slowly dying, overstatements of friendship and mutual affectio fly around. We are already lamenting the passing of this night; the present is already a memory, as our minds slowly depart towards impending return flights, upcoming summer vacations, next year's projects. To ward off the heavy air of farewell, overoptimistic plans are made to meet at this-and-that international conference here-or-there, whenever wherever. Little does anyone know at that point that, within less than a year, all those trips and conferences will turn into Zoom meetings. In less than a year, we will have understood that all those in-person meetings could have been emails, after all. But right now, we are all in that mood that only summer farewells can put you in: a state of sensitive vibrance, a sort of wistful optimism.

I'm on my third glass of wine and my third year in exile. I'm not tipsy but somewhat intoxicated by the blues of a whole year gone by. As is the rule in the hyper-mobile 21<sup>st</sup>-century academia, I am practically used to farewells exactly around this time of the year, every year. Except this time, I'm the one staying behind for a change. People I met this year are

either going back to their home institutions or transferring to someplace else. I don't have an institution or a home to go back to. I'm staying put in my main exile station, Berlin. Somehow stationary yet eternally in transit. Formally safe but substantially precarious.

I am sad, but also kind of relieved for not having to move internationally, as I had done every summer for the last three years. This time, I'm only moving within the city, to another apartment. Finding an apartment in Berlin is a nightmare known to anyone who has ever lived here. Moving apartments, alone, without a car or a helping hand, will be my individual horror story that I allow myself not to think about tonight. By the beginning of summer, when it became clear that I was going to have to move from my sublet soon, on a dare, I had made a bold and contradictory decision to finally ship my entire household from Istanbul to Berlin, knowing that this time I would not sublet but rent a long-term apartment. It was a bold decision, because I didn't have a job except for a one-year extension of my current fellowship, and there was no possibility of any sort of life stability in sight. And it was a contradictory decision, too, because I hate the city with all my heart—I always did, even before exile—and it's the last place I'd want to settle and spend the rest of my life in, even if I had the chance to do so. But I had grown tired of living in guesthouses, sublets, with stuff that wasn't mine. I couldn't stand the thought of letting my entire life perish in a dark storage room anymore, waiting for me to go back and reclaim it, like an abandoned baby at the doorsteps of a mosque. I was done suspending time. I was tired of keeping my finger pressed on the 'pause button,' so I decided to not only resume but flash forward while I could.

On that July evening I know that I'm still hanging by a thread, but I'm desperately trying to make that thread a bit more appealing for myself. I'm lingering on—but lingering on a little more firmly every year. I work better the less I believe that hard work will bring anything at the end. The less I see a future, the more strongly I attend to the present. The less I wish to settle here, the more I get used to the soul-crushing dullness of this stationary. So, I stay put that summer and for the foreseeable future. I make plans to move my old life from Istanbul to Berlin. I am waiting for the results of my seven-hour-long asylum interview with the Migration Office a few months back. In dispassionate lucidity and proper German, I had explained for seven hours how and why the social

contract between the Turkish state and me has been breached for good. The fact that I had to struggle to obtain the right to stay in a place I don't even want to stay in is the kind of cruel irony you would find in Gogol. But I never expected a Jane Austen type of jolly satire from my life, anyway.

Thus, at the onset of 'the summer of cruel ironies,' I find myself at this party. Inside, the hoopla is still in full swing. Outside on the terrace, I'm watching the belated sunset fade away behind the cityscape. People come out to smoke and then go back in to dance or get another drink. When I'm alone, I feel the famous summertime sadness like a papercut. Whenever people come by, I crack jokes and entertain everyone. Here, on the terrace, I find the perfect balance between extroverted socialization and introverted withdrawal. I hardly expect anything else from a social activity, anyway. Fun is not a prerequisite. Not since I went into exile, at least. And most certainly not in Berlin. In Berlin, any attempt to have actual fun beyond the predictable social pleasantries is more painful than the absence of fun itself. So, I'm sitting here serenely in my lack of genuine interest for anything or anyone. At one point, I find him sitting in a chair next to me. Suddenly, I feel his fingers moving on my thigh where I sit. A little farther over the other side of the terrace, there are people. *There are people around.* It's his indecent act but, somehow, I feel like I have something to hide. I move uncomfortably in my chair; I feel like I should cover this up on his behalf. *There are people around.* But the knowledge that men in power will always find a way to punish you for their own crimes is too deeply rooted. After all, everybody knows that he is a notorious sexual predator with past records of molesting female students, and the entire German academia has been willing to turn a blind eye to this for the sake of his shrewd sense for lucrative academic businesses.

Years and years of research on power relations and inequalities in academia, feminist teachings, my otherwise assertive flair and combative exterior—and all I manage to blurt out is a pathetic 'you know, this makes me uncomfortable.' I get up softly to avoid suspicion and go mingle with the other people. I feel guilty for some reason. Why did I act so vaguely? Am I scared of the consequences? Scared that a loud and scandalous rejection might cost me my affiliation which I need so badly for my residence permit, my asylum application, and my next round of

funding? Could I be that small? Or could the will to survive in a hostile environment, no matter what, be so big? No, it can't be so dramatic. I surely must be overthinking for no reason. I keep telling myself that nothing significant happened. I keep telling myself that it's late and we're all a bit too loose. I relativize the surreal memory of his fingers on my thigh a minute ago. I whitewash his misdeed on his behalf, for my own peace of mind. After all, there are people around. If it were such a big deal, he wouldn't have dared to do such a thing in public, would he? *There are people around.* Their existence is my reality check.

I'm making the rounds, talking to those other people who are my sole anchor to solid reality at this point. He is following me wherever I go. Sometimes with his eyes, sometimes physically. I don't read too much into it. He is drunk and he is generally a vulgar and impudent type. People don't mind. The entire German academic community doesn't mind. I, an absolute nobody with no protective professional or personal ties around here, shouldn't mind either. Soon, I decide to take off and say goodbye to a few people. Loud and chaotic farewells, big hugs, promises to keep in touch and meet then-and-there, thanks and good wishes getting thrown around all over the place.

Who will clean up this mess?—Ah, the poor cleaning lady, shall we at least throw away the bottles?—No, no.—You're leaving already?—Man, we drank a lot!—I'm gonna miss you so much!—You guys, we will definitely come to Berlin next summer.—I can't believe you don't have Facebook!—Are you going to keep your WhatsApp number when you get back?—I'll be around for another week.—Oh my God, we should totally meet before you leave!—Love youuuu!!

Asli, could you come to my office for a sec? I want to show you something.

When I get out of that office, I am not the same person who went in. There are still people around. There were people around, too, when I was in that office for probably four to five minutes, biting his tongue when he forcefully stuck it into my mouth, pushing him away, struggling to rid myself off his bearish grasp, biting the arm with which he was squeezing my breast. There were people around, they were supposed to be my reality check. But behind that closed door, he obviously possessed the power to suspend reality. Outside, there were people, when, inside, I was fighting, both physically and with strategic remarks on how

inappropriate it was, or would be, if he pursues this. For some reason, I am trying to act as if all he did was to ask me out on a date. I remain ice-cold throughout the episode. Because somehow, I cannot bring myself to see myself in a victim role. I am habitually not afraid of uninvited sexual advances in social situations. I keep telling myself I can fend off anything, as long as I'm not kidnapped at gunpoint, thrown into a van, and raped in a dark corner, which, by the way, is a frighteningly possible scenario for all women, at any given time. What actually throws me off at this moment is my own cold-blooded reaction. There is something disgusting in the way I never lose sight of the register of power relations I'm entangled in. Something feels off in the way I maintain a sociopathic detachment during the hurly-burly. Impulsively yet shrewdly, I try to make it look like a negotiation—as if there is anything to negotiate. I try to act with a high sense of power—as if I still possess some sort of leverage and control over the situation. He literally uses brutal, physical force.

A surreal scenery, an absurdly non-epic battle, a close-up from Rubens' 'Rape of the Sabine women' reincarnated for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century German academia: a foreign female guest researcher in exile struggling to fight off a senior German professor in his office, biting and kicking around, trying to release herself from his violent grasp, but keeping her calm and full composure all the while, telling him placidly that her life is hard enough the way it is, in order to subliminally signal authority and tranquility, as if they're sitting and talking over a glass of wine. If the abduction of the Sabine women was a tragedy, this ambush he set up in his office is a bitter farce: the banality and grossness of an old man in power, forcing himself onto women in lower academic positions, unable to contain himself even with people in immediate proximity, confident that his title grants him the same rights as a feudal lord in late Middle Ages. And his confidence is not at all unsubstantiated: full professors in Germany indeed possess virtually the same rights over their precarious juniors as a feudal lord did over his serfs. The German academic system is a broken time-machine, where medieval hierarchies and feudal bonds co-exist alongside the 21<sup>st</sup>-century neoliberal mechanisms of labor devaluation. Just a few months after this incident, one of my interviewees for my project on precarious academic workers in Germany will use the

exact same words, when she says that 'the assistants are the serfs of their professors.'

But right now, there are people outside. Just outside that door. You could hear them talking. Weird that I don't even think of them in that moment. I don't even think of alarming them; for some reason, making a scene in the middle of the academic community does not even exist as an option in my mind. So detached is the image of the academic business from the day-to-day abominations that occur in its shadowy hallways and locked offices. Just like we are convinced that the job insecurity we face in academia is something we need to overcome individually by working harder, publishing more, and beating our rivals, somewhere along the line, I must have subconsciously internalized the idea that I'm completely alone in this hostile environment and have to deal with workplace misconduct and sexual harassment from seniors on my own. A perfect combination: the 21<sup>st</sup>-century individualization of misery meets the archaic patriarchal tradition of woman-blaming.

I get out of that office with a victory that doesn't feel like one. Yes, I did manage to ward off his assault. But I feel like the way I did so has corrupted a part of my soul. I feel like I'm complicit. I feel like I acted out of character. I feel like I'm decadent and cunning. I feel like I should have lost my calm in there and shaken the entire building with my screams for help. I feel like I shouldn't have tried to appear powerful. I should have let myself become the victim, so that he could be exposed as the villain he was. But I stayed calm, despite the wrestle, in a subconscious act of refusal to accept the power dynamic that a sexual assault imposes upon the victim. Even though I was subjected to physical assault and literally had to engage in a visceral fight, *I failed to feel vulnerable*. I failed to feel and act like a woman under assault. *I failed to feel and act like a woman*.

But maybe it wasn't exactly 'out of character'. After all, I had been accused of *unwomanly self-defense* in the past. Not awfully long ago, a senior male professor personally attacked me in a colloquium and publicly discredited my work for having a Marxist approach. Instead of bending in and sugarcoating my arguments in the usual accommodating submissiveness that is often expected from non-tenured female faculty, I had assertively and systematically refuted his subjective insults disguised as critique. Yet, while trying to fortify my arguments, the necessity to



'feminize' my mode of argumentation must have escaped me. Later on, I heard how one female colleague tried to defend me afterwards by drawing attention to the stark power asymmetry in that debate, whereas another female co-worker is said to have argued condescendingly that I don't *deserve* feminist solidarity, for I am obviously capable of defending myself 'like a man' against men. In any case, this had been a real eye-opener for me: in some people's eyes, to be worthy of feminist solidarity (or any solidarity, for that matter), you had to act the part, you had to let your wounds bleed and your voice tremble.

As a matter of fact, being an exiled 'scholar at risk,' I was familiar with such expectations. The rules of the game of professional solidarity have been all too clear in recent years. Haven't I been asked the same questions about 'what I've been through' over and over again, in every interview, at every conference, with the same appetite in the correspondents' eyes to rub the wounds they assumed were there? Wasn't the entire academic risk industry—which I, like many other fellow Peace Academics, had been greatly dependent on for the last few years—based on this type of victimization and pornography of pain? Occasions might vary, but solidarity, as long it is not the result of an organic collective struggle but offered as an act of generosity, is universally (and patronizingly) premised on the injured party's helplessness and conformity to victim stereotypes: you have to build your whole identity around your wound, or else your wound is not real. If you don't show where it hurts, no one will trust that it hurts. If you carry it too well, no one will believe how heavy your burden is. Patronage disguised as solidarity. Clientele disguised as collectivity.

I go out to the hallway. I'm relieved to see that there are still people around. As if I had been in there for hours. People in the hallway don't seem to suspect anything. But why do I care whether they find out or not? Why do I feel like I have to hide what happened? Why did I fight a secret battle inside and why am I still trying to cover it up? *There are people around.* If I had made a scene inside and screamed for help, they could have heard and come to my rescue. Why didn't I? Am I, in my reluctance to expose his act, justifying it? Did my passive reaction to his fingers on my thigh invite him to lock me in, force his alcohol-reeking tongue into my mouth, and grope me? At that moment, all I can think of is to go get my coat and my purse from my office as fast as I can and

get the hell out of the building. While I'm running to my office at an unsuspecting speed, I quickly calculate in my mind various trivial things like a habitual sociopath: 'I had said goodbye to most people before he duped me into his office, so I don't have to make the rounds again—this saves me time so I can get out more quickly'; 'Shall I take the fire exit, in order to avoid the risk of bumping into him in the elevator? But the staircase is too deserted at this hour; it could be even more dangerous if he catches me there,' and so on.

I reach my floor; it's dark and empty. *There are no people around.* This means I have entered the zone of horrible surreal possibilities again. I am frightened and nervous, although, in my mind, I gravitate towards the comfort of self-doubt. I am already downplaying what happened. I am discrediting my own recollection of what just happened, telling myself I am being too dramatic. He did not rape me. I did not scream. I did not cry. I even doubt that I responded harshly enough. So, it must be nothing. But then again, why am I terrified to be alone in an empty floor right now? My heart is pounding as I make the fastest ever packing-up round in my office. Again: *Staircase or elevator? Staircase or elevator? Think but think fast.* There are people downstairs. They might take the elevator, too. Elevator is safe. Safer than the fire exit. Elevator is fast and good. Elevator it is then.

The fact is, at that point, two choices unfold in front of me, each more degrading than the other. The first option is to adopt a gendered and victimized mode of defense, which, for some reason, has always seemed like something ill-proportioned and unjustified for me. Something that I don't deserve with my impenetrable exterior and seeming invulnerability. I can never deem myself aggrieved enough to justify a call for help. I don't deserve compassion unless I'm shaken to my core. I am not worthy of feminist solidarity unless I'm completely crushed. I don't qualify as a woman in my feminist comrades' eyes, as long as I am capable of beating men in their own game. The second option is to own up to my allegedly watertight imperviousness to male toxicity, to tone down my anger and pain, and to convince myself that I am complicit in what happened to me, because I didn't let it destroy me. I am not as broken as a victim should be after a sexual assault. By virtue of resilience, I am the enabler of my own abuse. An intolerantly self-responsible form

of agency, a punitive self-centeredness, a self-condemning mode of subjectivation: that's my comfort zone.

Thus, with the past insight on feminist solidarity criteria engraved in my mind, knowing that my demeanor categorically disqualifies me as injured party, I start to gaslight myself. In the days and months following that night, I feel obliged to keep things gracious. I reply to his emails in a lighthearted—even sympathetic—way as if what happened that night was a flirtatious joke. I endure his presence on multiple occasions, once even at my own place along with other guests, only a few days after that incident, because I couldn't take the risk of causing a diplomatic scandal by disinviting him. But in the background, I cling to a young, precarious female colleague like myself the entire evening—in my own house!—telling her what happened the other day and begging her to stay with me until everybody (i.e., he) leaves. She does. She stays long after everybody leaves, letting me relax and shake off the anxiety of that night, talking about this and that, not once asking why I didn't scream and call for help in that office, not even slightly implying that I might have 'asked for it,' not denying me feminist solidarity for not acting 'wounded' enough.

To this day, I keep that corrupt friendly façade. I remain decadently outgoing. The more I do this, the more I loathe and blame myself for not being more unambiguous. And the more I keep this nonchalance, the less I see myself as justified to take a clean cut as time passes by. As if the real crime is not sexual harassment on the assailant's part per se, but paralysis on the attacked person's part. As if men are not to blame for unsolicited sexual advances, but women are to blame when they fail to scream loud enough. Even in cases where there is a clear power asymmetry and no trace of consent in any way, if a man makes a move and you fail to let him harm you enough to make a public scandal out of it immediately, you will forever be subjected to the violence of public suspicion. So, instead of delivering my head to that guillotine of backhanded victim-blaming, I retreated to a cunning-calculative mode of self-defense and executed myself, with my own hands, a million times in my mind since then.

In retrospect, I often thought: 'He wouldn't have dared to do this if I were a full professor!' As true as this assumption is, focusing on

the academic power dynamic must have appeared more soothing to me in its ordinariness, than thinking about the disturbing question *'what could have, would have, happened, if there weren't any people around in the hallway?'* But maybe the solution to our individualized grievances lies herein anyway: in asking what happens every day, in countless offices and hallways, in a hierarchical industry and exploitative work culture like this. And how the contingent faculty majority—those who do not know someone who knows someone who knows someone, those who do not have an elite alma mater or an influential benefactor, those who were born in one of the 'wrong' countries and do not possess the 'right' passport, women, migrants, people with a lower-middle class background, LGBTQI, people with disabilities or politically marginalized approaches—must be enduring all sorts of workplace misconduct by their seniors. And how many of them must be blaming themselves, feeling that a part of them has been irreversibly corroded and degenerated by a survival in silence.