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Navigating the In-Between: An Autoethnographic Study of an International Graduate Student in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

International student scholarship largely relies on quantitative studies that, while useful, often flatten cultural contexts and overlook researcher subjectivity. Dervin (2011) argues that quantitative studies of international student experience remain at the surface of the conversation and urges researchers to acknowledge their biases in data analysis by being more self-reflexive and admitting their subjectivity. These pleas for more self-reflexive approaches challenge traditional methods that prioritize objectivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This research study responds to Dervin's plea by employing autoethnography, a method rooted in lived experience and personal narrative. Using analytical vignettes and narratives, I examine my lived experience as a Kosovar international graduate student in the United States. My approach highlights the complexity of cultural adjustment, academic struggle, and identity negotiation and expands the body of international student scholarship by foregrounding the marginalized voices of non-Western international students in the U.S. Some interconnected themes that emerged from my analytical vignettes included otherness, silence, loneliness, financial precarity, international student identity, and resistance to cultural erasure. The findings illustrate how students from developing and post-conflict nations navigate complex processes of cultural adjustment, linguistic insecurity, belonging, and identity negotiation while confronting structural inequities that often remain invisible within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Acculturation, Autoethnography, Belonging, Communication, International Graduate Student, Identity Negotiation, Resistance

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INTRODUCTION

I can't possibly change or unlearn, in one graduate seminar, what I was taught my whole life. I can't possibly change it in ten, fifteen, or a hundred seminars. I can't stop overthinking and being overcome by anxiety whenever I am about to say something in class. Participation requires vulnerability and confidence and energy that I simply don't have. I am drained whenever I speak in class. I was taught to think twice before I speak out, for fear of being wrong. Instead, here, in this small room of seven people, I think twice and twice and twice and twice, until I lose momentum.

"You should think very hard because you can't be wrong or else, you'll be embarrassed in front of the whole class," I remind myself as I try to muster all the courage within me to express my opinion.

"But what if they don't understand you? What if you're not as clear or as articulate as everybody else? And you're not. Because you were not born here. You were not raised here and your vocabulary is not as rich as theirs. You have an accent so that makes it even more difficult for others to understand you," I remind myself as I nod my head to signal to the professor that I am following the discussion.

"I would say this..." I speak half-heartedly while my chest tightens and my voice cracks. As I express my opinion in the lowest tone possible, I can see everybody lifting their eyes off of their laptop screens and staring at me. I receive all of these strange, yet curious looks and feel alien, as if I don't speak the same language as them, as if I'm from outer space. Never before had it crossed my mind that, indeed, according to the U.S. immigration laws, I am a legal alien here. My brain freezes as I think about my immigration status but try to speak about the topic for which I had raised my hand.

"They are still staring at me! I don't think they understand."

Krejt po m'kqyrin! Spo m'kuptojnë, po m'doket!

I feel a rush of heat on my face and neck. I can sense that I am turning red. The whole cohort is focused on what I, the legal alien, have to say and it seems they are all being even more attentive because of my foreign accent. I feel self-conscious and afraid I am taking up too much time and space. So, I stutter, reiterate half of my argument, and stop mid-sentence. I smile, embarrassed, apologetic, as if I am asking for everybody's forgiveness that I had taken up too much time and space without significantly contributing to the conversation.

"To build off of what Eri just said..." I hear somebody else speak without raising their hand. The redness from my face dissipates, and a sense of relief washes over me as my peers turn to look at my colleague instead. My heart rhythm goes back to normal, and I force a smile and nod to her as if I want her to know I perfectly understand what the conversation is about. I feel validated that she built her argument from mine. Less alien now. I almost feel a desire, a possibility, to change and to fit in. "If you only give yourself the chance to speak in class, again, and again, then perhaps, you could change. It might take ten, fifteen, or a hundred seminars, but you could...change" I say to myself.

FINDING A GAP

What we study is messy and how we write is messy. Writing, as Richardson (1994) maintains, "is a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis" (p. 516). Longing for a way of knowing is how this autoethnographic study emerged as I was approaching the end of my first year in my master's degree in the U.S. I was the only international student in my cohort, so I didn't feel like I could really relate to anybody. My fellow domestic students could not understand me. My professors, no matter how supportive and willing to help, were off the table. I come from a high-power distance culture where the student-professor relationship is formal, so I didn't even consider going to my professors for help. In my mind, I could only talk to them about things that were specifically related to class discussions, assignments, or exams. Or so I thought.

Lost and longing to be understood, I turned to research on international students, hoping I could come across stories about students like me. I wondered if others, too, felt a lack of belonging, an absence of home, if they considered themselves marginalized, and if they learned at all how to navigate this novel experience. I immersed myself in the world of international student literature and spent hours skimming through a plethora of quantitative articles filled with Likert scales and generalized patterns of social loss, isolation, and identity negotiation to only realize that numbers were not my way of knowing, stories were.

The literature on international students offers a number of research methods with the majority being quantitative studies examining international student experience by using variables, Likert scales, pretests, post-tests, and other statistical procedures (Gebhard, 2012; Hudzik, 2011; Chaliawala et al., 2025). Tests like *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory* and *Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory* have been used to assess the effects of studying overseas (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Thus, much of the research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s has been quantitative survey approaches to the experience of larger numbers of students.

In contrast, qualitative, in-depth investigation of this experience of a smaller number of students is encountered less often (Montgomery, 2010; Krsmanovic, 2020; Leong, 2015). Survey-based research has resulted in a range of general findings but lacks depth in several aspects of international student experience (Bochner et al., 1977). In addition, a gap in literature in regard to the multifaceted and dynamic identities of international students exists and that gap cannot be filled in with international students “checking boxes” but rather with “listening to their stories” to understand how they construct meaning across borders (Gebhard, 2012, p. 187).

In my process of reviewing the literature, I craved stories. I craved *thick description* (Geertz, 1973). Denzin (1989) notes:

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

In international student scholarship, there is an absence of studies that render the complexity of the international student experience in thick description the way autoethnographic studies do. In addition, as an international student coming from a developing country, such as Kosova, I found myself underrepresented, even as I turned towards autoethnography.

As I was making my way through articles, I did not often come across emotionality, detail, and contextualized lived experiences to invoke in me any feelings of *verisimilitude*. Verisimilitude is depicted as thick meaning of findings that leads readers to “cognitively and emotively place themselves within the research context” (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543). I was an international student, and I still did not feel as if I was fully part of the context, neither cognitively nor emotively. As a Kosovar student pursuing a graduate degree in the U.S., I realized that I did not belong in a classroom discussion, and I did not belong in the larger discourse of international students. Once again, I was reminded that I was indeed an alien.

Thus, in this piece, I extend understandings of the “Second-World” identity and lived experience in the U.S. academe and offer alternative methodological ways of knowing through autoethnography. In the sections below, I detail the ways in which I utilize autoethnography as a method that feels like a facsimile of home and I offer analytical vignettes that depict my experiences with acculturation as a Second-World international student in the U.S. Lastly, through Borderlands theory, I interpret themes that emerged from my lived experience and provide implications for faculty and universities on how to best support international students like myself.

ON AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND A CALLING TO COME HOME

“To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own... I am a turtle. Wherever I go, I carry “home” on my back” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 21).

“Academia is not a piece of cake, I don’t know what kind of a researcher I am, and my research interests are vast and not particularly consistent,” I sigh in exasperation, as I try to wrap my wandering thoughts to focus on my Research Methods class. We are waiting in anticipation for our guest lecturer to introduce us to the unfamiliar world of Autoethnography.

Coming from a developing country meant that I was not exposed to the same knowledge as my fellow graduate students were. I was not familiar with the variety of research methods I could possibly entertain, and ostensibly I felt disadvantaged ever since I stepped foot in the multifaceted world of the U.S. academe. We were already on week 9 and I did not feel at home with any of the methods we had discussed thus far. Berry (2011) maintained that when researchers used methodological practices that were meant for them, they would feel at home. If they used other methodological practices, those practices would feel strange and weird, kind of like “cold homes that are awfully distant” (Berry, 2011, p. 173). I knew that I was not a quantitative researcher. I cared more about depth than breadth. I cared more about stories and thick description than about numbers. However, since I deemed myself to be organized and structured, I assumed, despite logic and reason, that I might feel some kind of belongingness within the quantitative realm. I convinced myself that I should have found a home by then, so I assumed, reluctantly and brimming with uncertainty, that the quantitative realm was home. Even though it felt strange and weird and “awfully distant” (Berry, 2011, p.173).

The anticipation hadn’t declined as Dr. Alemán began introducing us to the world of Autoethnography. I had read her evocative article on *Dementia*, that she provided as a class reading, and that marked the first time that a scholarly article resonated with me to the core of my being. I couldn’t understand if it had resonated because I had also been involved in family hardships with dementia, or because the article was so wonderfully written and evocative that I couldn’t skim it, like I would other articles in that research methods class. I read it a couple of times, slowly and carefully, and made a long list of questions to ask Dr. Alemán in class.

Listening to her talk about her article with such love, appreciation, ease, and comfort gave me a feeling of warmth. “Home”, was it? I didn’t have a word for it. I felt goosebumps over my body as I listened, in awe, to the story of Melissa and her matriarchs. “She is most definitely home,” I thought, resting my tomato red cheek on my left hand, and dreaming of ever developing abilities to speak and write with as much humility, love, and devotion as she did.

It did not cross my mind until a year later that the way I wrote was organized and structured, and I did not like it. I wished for my writing to be less like me, to be a little messier and not conform to criteria, like I had conformed to the new culture around me. Through writing, I wished to embrace complex experiences and learn to value transparency, subjectivity, uncertainty, and the messiness of the field. But I had always taken great pride in the fact that I was objective, organized, structured, and how much I disliked unpredictability. I couldn’t help noticing how I was changing, despite thinking I never could. I was coming to the realization that what I thought was my objective writing was also my silos, keeping me safe, yet distant, and isolated. My writing oddly mimicked my first year in the U.S.

I allowed myself to seek change by developing an interest in autoethnography, hoping that finding a home to the writing of my experience would translate to finding a home in the U.S. culture. Autoethnography was a search for the very thing I had lost. It offered me a chance to construct a place I had been longing to find throughout my time as an international student. It provided me with space to slowly set roots and begin building blocks towards a sense of belonging. Autoethnography, to me, became a facsimile of home, a journey of discovering my authentic self.

Utilizing autoethnography as an approach towards making sense of my own lived experience, a female who was born and brought up in a developing country, in a predominantly hegemonic and patriarchal society, who has navigated identities as refugee, immigrant, legal alien, and now international student, enables me to come to terms with these unfinalized, ever-changing identities. Moreover, this method permits me to build bridges and to immerse myself in the worlds of Others like me. Anzaldúa claims that “there are no bridges. One builds them as one walks (Anzaldúa, as cited in Keating, 2009, p. 73).” I build bridges as I write in this method; Bridges with foreigners like myself, graduate international students who grapple with alienation, otherness, and isolation, amongst other astronomical standards and expectations that academia, graduate domestic fellows, our families back home, and we have set for ourselves.

As an autoethnographer, as Goodall (2000) asserts, I have an “obligation” to write about my life with self-reflexivity, to be credible and examine myself while rendering my observations of myself, others and of my cultural accounts. My narratives then show “not only how I see the world” but also “why I interpret it as I do?” (Goodall, 2000, p. 95). Throughout this project, I have thought about the ways I represent others in my narratives, what I am achieving by choosing to depict certain stories, what I am learning about myself and my experience in the process and how I am implicating other voices and stories. To remain as ethical as possible, I have shown my vignettes to “those I implicate in my writing”, like family members, and made sure they approved of them.

My writing has been a continuous self-reflection of the way I speak, for whom I speak, and to whom I speak, by also recognizing my fallibilities and biases. Leeds- Hurwitz (1995) maintains that reflexivity can result in the “I” of the researcher to come to the fore with a multiplicity of voices and meanings. Therefore, I tried to be mindful of this multiplicity of voices and the way that influences what stories I write about.

The narratives I include here are based on memory recollection and journal entries from my first and second year in grad school. The journal entries did not follow any format or any specific themes or patterns. Instead, they were entries I scribbled when I needed to record and process what I was going through.

To use them as my fieldnotes, I began reading and re-reading and reflecting on them. As I began reading and analyzing, I became able to recognize emerging patterns and take note of things that connected. In that process, I would add references to the pieces I had been reading from literature on international students and acculturation, as well as from literature on ethnography and autoethnography. These emerging patterns intertwined with literature helped me craft my vignettes and aided my sensemaking of myself as an international student. So, I used autoethnography to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I aimed to simultaneously understand emotional patterns that I have grappled with, as well as explore academic challenges, social relationships, culture and language and their influence on my sense of self, as crucial to understanding my lived experience as an international student and as a child of war.

DEPARTURE

It is 3:00 AM and I leave in three hours. My heart is beating like a rattling rock in a box. My mind is grappling with fear and excitement, sending shivers down my spine. I am anxious. I do some breathing exercises but can’t seem to have any control over my panic. My heart increases the beats. *Inhale. Pause. Exhale.*

I leave in three hours, and I have not gotten any sleep yet. Tonight is one of those scorching summer nights in Prishtina, the capital city of Kosova, a night so hot one can’t possibly find a middle ground, it’s either too hot or too cool, nothing in-between. “It’s too hot,” I think to myself as I exhale loudly in frustration and move my sheet aside trying to make this unbearable heat slightly more bearable. I uncover myself and a couple of minutes later I feel a draft in the room. I reach over and pull the sheet

around me again, even more frustrated. I move my sheet aside and reach back for it, repeatedly, for a solid hour before I finally give up. This is what summers in the capital city (the concrete jungle) of a still-developing country feel like. My family is not a big fan of air conditioners.

Apparently, they're unnatural, expensive, and take up quite a lot of room. So, we face the heat. Naturally. Just like we do with all other things in life. We are used to not being comfortable. We are used to overcoming obstacles. We are used to doing things, one way: as we always have.

"I don't think it is what is outside as much as what is inside that is causing my utter discomfort." My reflexive self comes to the fore. It is not the heat of the night as much as it is the uncertainty and fear of leaving everything behind boiling inside my body. I sigh in despair. I've been doing this (sighing and fidgeting) for two hours now, but my brother and sister, with whom I share a room, seem to not have heard anything. I wonder if they are sound asleep or pretend they can't hear me. I hope it's the former. I don't want them to interpret my sighs as me being scared and having second thoughts about my departure for the U.S. Even though, this is exactly the interpretation that my sighs are desperately trying to convey to anybody who is willing to lend them an ear.

I am scared.

I am anxious.

I am having serious second thoughts about departing for the U.S.

Nobody knows. Nobody should know.

I leave in three hours, and I have not gotten any sleep yet. The room seems to be shrinking, and with each sigh, the room shrinks some more. At least I will have my own room once I am in the U.S., I try to comfort myself and gain back some control from this creeping anxiety. I've always wanted a room of my own. The one I share with my siblings is small, cramped, and messy. Our room is filled with books from our childhood and clothes my sister refuses to give away and yet has no interest in ever wearing. The room brims with material things, and overflows with hopes, some tended to, some abandoned forever. The room is small; it is small; it is small; it makes me feel small. It makes me not want to occupy any more space than is absolutely necessary.

"Will I still feel this small when I leave?" I don't want to feel small. I exhale again and the room shrinks. My innards keep boiling and I can feel my ears are warm and my eyes are welling with tears. *Inhale. Pause. Exhale.* I take a deep belly breath, pause, and release it slowly. My chest feels tight. I panic. My heart keeps beating fast...uncontrollably. I think of the great things I will be exposed to once I am in the U.S.; the people I will meet, the places I will get to go, the independence I will have. I *inhale, pause, and exhale* again louder, and if I'm trying to make a statement. Only, this time, when I exhale, the room does not shrink. This time, I sigh in relief.

"I will be going to the U.S. in three hours," I remind myself and a wave of excitement spreads through my body. I reach over and pull the sheet around my waist. I feel calmer now as I drift away to sleep. And so does my anxiety.

MISH EDHE PERIME

My father called me back today. I had called him earlier but hung up when he didn't answer. He was probably watching the news. As I hung up, it crossed my mind that, until this point in the year, he had never called me first. I believe it is partly because he doesn't want to disturb me and partly because each of our conversations tends to revolve around money...or the lack thereof.

Once I answer, he says:

"Po t'i çoj do pare, babush. Edhe sa t'kanë metë?"

He asks if I still have money left. Money left from when? Or from where?

"Po po, kom pare. Mos ki dert! Hala as si kom prekë t'Kosovës." I lie to him. It's a white lie. I tell him I haven't even touched the money I got from my sister, which she took out as a loan to give me. I'll pay her back, of course. I used the loan, at first, to pay for my unreasonably expensive health

insurance and to treat myself to some good food and coffee. Then, somehow, the rest just vanished. It lasted me two weeks, not even. I don't have any money from back home, but I can't tell father that. I can't tell anybody that.

So, I keep telling him white lies. I keep telling anybody who asks white lies. One after the other.

"A ke hongër sot, babush?" He asks if I've eaten today.

"Po, po. Kom hongër." I reply (a lie) that I have.

My brain works quickly to fabricate a healthy meal so that I do not worry him.

"Kom hongër, mish, edhe perime." I tell him I've already had meat and vegetables, a hardy food, a staple food, as I, instead, swirl my spoon in a bowl of shrimp-flavored top ramen noodles I bought on sale last week for \$1.49.

"E pse se merrshe edhe do jogurt e do djathë, ose ni lang, babush? Aiii, ha mire! Mos ta ninë pë r pare!"

"You should have gotten yoghurt, juice, and some cheese. Get some vitamins!" He advises me, clueless about the price of anything in the U.S.

"Eat well! Don't worry about the money." He reiterates.

"Jo, babush, mirë po ha!" I reassure him that I'm eating well, as I once again look down at my bowl of shrimp noodles.

"Po t'i çoj do pare, babush. Edhe sa t'kanë metë?" He asks again if I still have money left from back home. He always asks again. I always offer the same white lie.

This is a sign that our conversation is coming to an end. So, as per tradition, I promise to tell him when I need money, but I am sure he knows I am too proud to do that. He knows well I would rather eat noodles for two weeks than ask for more money.

I look at my bowl again.

For a moment, I wish things were different. I imagine myself asking whether he has any money left. I imagine myself asking him if he is eating well. I hear him breathe from the other end of the phone, but he remains quiet. He is waiting for me to hang up. I tell him I'll call him again soon and hang up. But I wish I could ask, "How come you never call?"

LONELY ON U.S. SOIL

I used to think of my future and how free I would be once I lived on U.S. soil. I would go to bed imagining how my life would turn out once I got to study where and what I wanted. I used to look at pictures of colleges in the U.S. and dream of what it would be like to wander around their campuses, go to events, and make friends with the other graduate students. I used to go to bed dreaming about how carefree and easy my life would be. If only I was ready to go...

"Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar."

I would pray to my Grandmother's God.

"Please help me go."

I would put both hands in front of my face and mumble the prayer until I fell asleep.

Now, in the U.S., I can't remember the last time I mumbled the prayer. I feel distant...from prayers, my religion, my old ways of being, my people. I don't pray even when it gets cold at night, when all I need is to be surrounded by my folks, but they are continents away and hours ahead of me. I don't pray even when it gets lonely on a late Spring afternoon, when the smell of flowering dogwood trees permeates the air and reminds me, with every beating of my heart, of Kosovar spring, where my friends and I would sit outside of the Miqt Pub drinking beers and soaking in the aroma of linden flowers in bloom.

There are people in the U.S. There are plenty of people where I live: good people, smart people, funny people—but they are not my people. I just wish on a breezy afternoon like this one, when life sucks

and nobody speaks my tongue, that I could be back home grabbing a drink with the ones who warm my soul.

She is weary.

Tired. Othered. A legal alien.

Yet, she doesn't pray.

She needs familiarity, people.

She aches.

She cries.

"I'm lonely. I'm scared. I'm brave."

She needs a break.

Yet, she doesn't pray.

Or maybe a kind soul; togetherness.

I remind her:

It's time you stopped being alone.

It's time you found support.

It's time you found your new people.

"Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.

Allaho akbar.

Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allaho Akbar."

Yet, rarely, mostly unconsciously, she slips into her old ways when she thinks of her future. She puts both hands in front of her face and mumbles the prayer until she falls asleep. She prays to her Grandmother's God.

"Please help me find my new people.

DISCUSSION OF MAJOR THEMES

"Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a traversia, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing", I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before."

(Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 49)

In keeping with the idea that autoethnographers do not hide the process, this section explains concepts that were key to the creation of my narratives and the transformational effect that writing them had on me.

Otherness

Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory is particularly adept at examining the historical processes of dominant cultures and the ways in which they represent the identities of "the other" as inferior and create stereotypes about them (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). I have experienced this idea of otherness in the U.S., especially when I would speak in classroom settings. My whiteness granted me privilege, as long as I stayed silent. To reduce this sense of otherness and to keep my "fake" white privilege intact, I often remained quiet and ashamed. I have internalized this otherness and throughout my narratives, I render it and its accompanying feelings of inferiority.

To clarify, I call my white privilege "fake" above as it stems from a whiteness theorized from a U.S. context and contradicts with how my whiteness (stemming from my country's geopolitical standing) is perceived in a European context. Here, I am supposed to cherish the privileges of a white identity, of a white U.S. citizen, yet my student visa and my immigration status, among other things, complicate it. In

Europe, people from Kosova are considered “peripheral to white” not Western white, and do not fully embody the same “whiteness” as those residing in the European Union. Discussing and theorizing race from a Second World context is, unfortunately, outside of the scope of this piece and will have to wait to become a separate project.

Silence

From staying silent in class for fear of disclosing my accent and otherness, to not sharing certain information with family and friends, the idea of silence recurs throughout my narratives. Familial and cultural silences manifest in my narratives through my father’s reluctance to talk about my difficult experiences in the U.S. and the concealment of my financial, academic, and professional struggles from him.

The role silence played in my narratives was a means to shield oneself and others from pain. I first reflected on this with my father and the feeling that he was not willing or able to engage with the difficulties of my experience here. I realized that silence was a protection mechanism. It helped him not revisit memories of his own experience during his medical residency program in Croatia, and in turn, he believed he was protecting me through his silence. Then, I also realized that the silence itself helps tell this story of vulnerability and protection, and so silence became an important component in all of my narratives.

International Student Identity

This project also allowed me to confront my relationship with my identities as an international student and as a Kosovar. Throughout the process of writing this piece, I was able to transform my perspective on aspects of my identity and uncover identities that I had been unwilling or unable to identify with before. International students in the U.S. are expected to let go of all of the baggage they carry from their homelands. They are expected to begin a new life in the U.S., to start with a clean slate, to assume an “international student” identity, and, in doing so, put themselves into a box in which they are always inferior to the domestic students around them. I had spent a year in that box, angry and ashamed of my accent, background, and my attempts to integrate into the dominant culture. However, through the process of writing, I have come to see the validity of the international student identity and I am no longer ashamed of it.

When I was ashamed, it was because I was constantly comparing myself to domestic students, not acknowledging that our cultural differences would always make that an unreasonable comparison. What I see now is that being an international student does require me to work hard to navigate cultural boundaries, which can be difficult, but does not need to be a source of shame. If I am not delegitimizing my own culture and feeling inferior to the dominant one, it opens possibilities for cultural exchange and enables research like this. Through doing this research, I have felt more at ease with my identity as an international student and less restricted by the “box.” I hope, by sharing these narratives, other international students who are experiencing tensions like I was can also transform their relationship with the stigma of this identity.

Cultural Erasure

Throughout my research, I have made preserving my language and culture central. I once took my country, my language, and my culture for granted because I grew up in a post-war, recovering Kosova, a homogenous country where I have always been part of the dominant culture. When I came to the U.S. as an international student, I, for the first time, intellectually understood what it was like to have my culture

be at odds with the dominant culture. This was the first time I could truly understand some small piece of what it must have been like to fight to preserve one's language and culture the way my parents and grandparents did from Serbia's attempted cultural erasure. I came to believe it is my duty and the duty of all my people to preserve our language and culture, to resist erasure and ethnic cleansing, and "to always carry home on [our] back[s]" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 21).

In writing these narratives, I wanted to honor not only my story, but that of my people, and to depict their struggle to preserve their language and culture. To do this, I did not italicize Albanian words as is conventional for non-English words in academic writing as a way to lend legitimacy to both my English and my Albanian. I have also referred to my homeland as Kosova, instead of the often-used Kosovo because Kosova is the name the majority of Albanians use to refer to it as an independent nation rather than an autonomous province of Serbia. Central to my narratives has been the idea that, after having experienced attempted cultural erasure and ethnic cleansing as a five-year-old, I would not permit myself to perpetuate it in my writing as a 25-year-old.

Personally, writing these narratives has helped me process and come to terms with my trauma, but also helped me develop stories that address a gap in scholarship. I hope that sharing these narratives will have implications for communication scholars and anyone else who reads them. For readers who do not have similar lived experiences to my own, I hope that these narratives will build empathy for the psychosocial, financial, emotional, and cultural struggles of international students, especially those from developing countries like Kosova. For readers who perhaps are international students, or who share some other elements of my lived experiences, I hope these narratives serve as story exchange to create a space of solidarity.

Finally, I encourage faculty to learn how to support linguistically diverse students in their classrooms primarily by recognizing that classroom silences may reflect student anxiety, different cultural norms, or fear of judgment rather than disengagement. At the institutional level, I hope administrators will acknowledge that international students are not a monolithic group and understand that students from developing countries and post-conflict nations often navigate additional burdens, including financial constraints, educational inequities, immigration-related stress, and collective historical trauma. Universities must expand access to resources and funding and create environments where international students can maintain their cultural and linguistic identities while developing a genuine sense of belonging in the U.S. academe.

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