

Stitching Memories: Collaborative (Re)search of Epistemic Wholeness

Emina Bužinkić, University of Minnesota

Abstract

This contribution describes the collaborative autoethnography that emerged between Aicha, a Syrian refugee living in Croatia, and myself, a researcher and a former refugee from Croatia. Aicha was one of seven refugees who took part in my narrative research on refugee youth's schooling experiences as the novel COVID-19 virus shut the schools and established online schooling. In this manuscript, I write about two experiences while using metaphors of weaving and embroidery: one regards the journey of collaborative autoethnography that emerged between Aicha and myself accounting for building our relationship in reciprocity and vulnerability; the other looks into our shared stories and their resemblance cutting across different temporal contexts, while discussing long histories of social distancing against Muslims, migrants, and refugees as the racial and cultural Other. Aicha has become a sister, friend, co-writer, and co-agitator of solidarity and justice in times when her voice, hijab and language represent an ongoing war.

Keywords: Collaborative auto-ethnography, narrative inquiry, epistemic wholeness, anti-Muslim and anti-migrant politics.

Contact: Emina Bužinkić, ebuzinki@umn.edu

Introduction

When Aicha and I met in April of 2020 during the time of lockdowns and restricted movement, she was the first of seven refugee youth whose stories I documented as a part of my narrative inquiry on the schooling experiences of young refugees impacted by the novel COVID-19 pandemic. Our first serendipitous encounter took us on a journey that defeated the social distance in mutual care, and as such has allowed us to embark on a journey that has become the co-weaving and intersecting one (Mountz et. al, 2015). Stretching over the cold and warm seasons of 2020, I was honored to document a story of a storyteller and a visionary. Aicha offered her life story, with a soul of a gentle narrator. After Aicha shared part of her narrative with me, she invited me to speak about my life and schooling during the war in the nineties in Croatia, a part of former Yugoslavia, where Aicha lives today. Our conversations went back and forth as we both spoke memories and triggered each other's flows. Our memories from refugee camps and schooling revealed such resemblance that it made us write to each other and speak to each other with a profound sense of relationality and reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013).

While I strongly focused on documenting Aicha's refugee life in Turkey and education experience in Croatia, the narration of my exile from home and disrupted schooling in Croatia and elsewhere erupted in unexpected flows. The long conversations in person, with little time boundaries, that built a close relationship with Aicha and the relationality of her own experience to mine stimulated my autoethnographic writing mostly through diary entries and text messages exchanged with her (Aicha). Bhattacharya (2017) explains autoethnography as a location from "where the researcher takes a personal, reflexive journey into parts of her experiences and systematically analyzes those experiences within the cultural context of where those experiences occur" (p. 25).

In this paper, I write about the two experiences. One regards the journey of collaborative autoethnography that emerged between Aicha and myself accounting for building our relationship in reciprocity and vulnerability. The other looks into our shared stories and their resemblance cutting across different temporal contexts speaking to the long histories of social distancing against Muslims, migrants, and refugees as the racial and cultural Other. I weave in these two threads representing an organic synergy of method and content, revealing and claiming silenced epistemes.

In our storytelling journeys about different but relational experiences (Kimmerer, 2013), we came together to a place of a "collaborative autoethnography" (Holman Jones, 2021) and even more so to "collaborative-spirit writing" (Alexander & Weems, 2021) as we remembered and shared our childhood refugee days and educational journeys. Our stories first flew in conversations taking place amid tall green trees and their breeze, the muddy, slippery lanes which gave us laughter, as well as on the streets and alleys of our neighborhood *Željezara*, named after the long-dead Yugoslav metal industry that ensured jobs for Bosnian migrants and lower middle-class workers back in the day. The intent of making this piece of writing came to life months after our stories danced together. As we continued exchanging text messages, seeing

each other on Zoom, and engaging with each other's posts on social media, I suggested to Aicha that we write about our experiences of displacement and radicalized schooling. We both shared and processed our stories, and thought of the ways our stories connect and speak to the longevities of social distancing. With Aicha's consent, I put together this larger piece while tying in our oral and written flows that occurred both in our in-person and virtual encounters in the previous years. I consider this piece a form of co-authorship nourished through the collaborative embroidery that we stitched together in unique circumstances for each of us. When we decided to write about our experiences, I enjoyed the privilege of time to write while Aicha was struggling with racialized schooling and being invested in the daily labor of sustaining her resilience. She reviewed the written text and translated it into Arabic so as to understand every word that found its place here. In that sense, this piece represents our co-weaving and co-writing of our personal accounts woven into the memory work, research ethics, and epistemic justice.

These pages come as quilt weaving stories, memories, intimacies, struggles, and imaginations of both of us - a quilt that writes long histories of exclusionary politics against Muslims, refugees, and Others as well as our refusals. The metaphors of weaving and embroidery threaded through the text are, as Katie Collins (2016) explains, "material metaphors: knitting, weaving, tapestry, embroidery, and quilting variously represent kinship, identity, complexity, time, structure and style." What emerged through our collaborative autoethnographic embroidery was precisely the location of the relational identities, knowledge production cutting across different temporalities, and stitches testifying to complex landscapes. This process countered the extractive nature of traditional ways of documenting refugee and migrant experiences.

This embroidery gives a critical perspective to the questions of epistemic erasures and the counter search for epistemic justice that preoccupy my own dissertation. I labor with shared stories and memories of Aicha and myself to reclaim epistemologies that offer salient and nuanced knitting of epistemic justice, a political project attentive to the practice of dialogue and *radical vulnerability* (Nagar, 2019). In this writing, I reconceptualize the meanings of self-knowledge shaped at the intersections of shared experiences and self-reflexive practice - sewn with the threads of counternarrative and defiance of academic boundaries. In creating such bonds we shape the political commitment to creating and practicing new ways of knowledge-making, and "we do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

The narration of self and the other, and specifically in the times of social distancing in which Aicha and I made many crossings to each other, strengthened my commitment to the practices of ethical (re)search for vital ways of knowing - through documenting, theorizing, writing, strategizing, and sharing memories and stories on the sufferings and struggles as foundations to solidarity and justice. This writing is inspired and held by the words and work of the transnational feminist scholars and activists sowing unique stitches in the embroidery of Aicha and myself.

The Journey of Auto-Ethnographic Co-Weaving in Multiple Pandemics

When schools shut their doors and switched to online learning in the Croatian

language, in the midst of the first month of virality of the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee youth, and other minoritized youth were left behind (GOOD Initiative, 2020). Since online schooling was only offered in Croatian, some refugee youth were excluded from the learning platform by education authorities for not knowing and speaking the dominant language sufficiently well (Hermes, 2016). They could only join schooling at the beginning of the new school year despite the applied public pressure by the civil society actors, and refugee youth parents. Aicha was one of those refugee youth who did not receive a single notice about schooling switching to online learning, let alone was she provided any support in her interrupted education journey from her school and the educational authorities.

I have been engaged in the collaborative work of advocating for the holistic inclusion of refugee youth in the Croatian education system and society, through the Workgroup UnEqual of the GOOD Initiative as the national informal platform that advocates for quality education, and local initiatives in Sisak. This work has been a continuation of almost two decades in which I have been leading or collaborating on organizing, public advocacy, and policy-making for quality educational and life opportunities for refugee youth in Croatia. I was eager to meet these young refugees excluded from schooling but the state of emergency and lockdowns did not allow for movement and connections. However, the set of serendipitous moments connected me with Aicha and a few other refugee youths and their families who breathed in life to an ethnographic narrative inquiry (*UN*)*safe identities. Race and ethnicity in the times of social distancing: youth refugee perspectives*. The start of the ethnographic narrative inquiry intersected with the start of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and only a few months before a series of devastating earthquakes in central Croatia.

Building on years of community and academic activism in the critical interrogation of how migration and education regimes are bruising the refugee and migrant youth, I was concerned with the question of what might it mean for refugee youth in Croatia to be of a non-dominant race and ethnicity in a time where the social distancing of the COVID-19 pandemic is intersecting with the social distancing of the enhanced securitization politics that normalizes racialization and criminalization of refugees and migrants. Ever since the disruptive closure of the Balkan corridor (Bužinkić & Hamersak, 2017) after the *long summer of migration* (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) popularly misrepresented as the *refugee or migrant crisis* (Bužinkić & Hamersak, 2017), the securitization politics of the European Union has been restored on the idea that refugees and migrants - portrayed through a figure of the “Muslim extremist” - “represent() a security threat” (De Genova, 2017, p.13). Hence the investments in infrastructure and equipment of border protection, as well as militarization of border police have taken a prominent role in migration regimes. Drawing from a number of scholars, Pozniak and Petrović (2017) explain securitization as, “repressive practices deployed by techniques and technologies of steering, surveillance, risk-control management, procedures of preventive detention, deportation and dispersal, arbitrary deployment of violence, denial of rights, and criminalization of asylum seekers and migrants” (p. 48). One of the most pronounced forms of securitization and criminalization politics is the deployment of physical removals or *pushbacks* of refugees, migrants, and people on the move across the borders. Given the normalization of securitization related violence and the effects of negative propaganda on refugees and

migrants that “relied heavily on racializing practices and the mobilization of racist sentiments in the public sphere” (Beznec & Kurnik, 2020), I claim that such politics is not only localized at the borders but that it rather disperses to the social locations, interactions, and strategies. Such politics gnaws social tissues and deepens mistrust while unsettling the process of social inclusion.

In that sense, I was particularly interested in exploring the semiotic meaning of border regimes, that is the translation of securitization discourse and the effects of the enhancement of securitization politics in distance-schooling (*škola na daljinu*) of racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally different refugee youth during the pandemic. Moreover, I explored how the experiences of refugee youth in (distance) schooling have been shaping their complex identities (racial, transnational, national, religious, gender) and how those identities have been negotiated in socially distant schooling and everyday life. In that sense, the study came as a continuation of my ongoing relationship and solidarity movement building with refugee youth and their families in the towns of Sisak and Zagreb.

With the occurrence of the earthquakes at the end of December last year, additional layers of exploration unfolded in the inquiry - those of safety, and perpetual displacements, as well as those of hope, solidarity, and imagination of possibilities. With seven unique life stories and the narration of *self* -- about our refugee journeys, the *longue durée* of social distancing, schooling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent earthquakes as experiences of literal and figurative perpetual displacements, this ethnographic narrative inquiry evolved from bilateral conversations to the process of collective memory writing revealing and releasing pain, yearnings, and struggles. Both individually and collectively shared narratives ground nuanced understanding of the complexities refugee youth are living through while negotiating their identities and existence amidst multiple societal pandemics such as anti-Muslim violence, anti-Black racism, and anti-migrant sentiments (ITSRC, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the virality of the social pandemics in schooling that have also created social distance from and against the racial, ethnic, and transnational other.

In this context, my journey with refugee youth, particularly with Aicha who has become the closest co-traveler (Nagar, 2015) has been one of making sense of a today that is interwoven with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Memories and stories became the point of envisioning different futures and critical junctures of social inclusion calling for rebuilding social closeness and intimacies that represent stark opposition to the regimes of social distancing caused by the COVID-19 and social pandemics.

In further writing, I write about the collaborative embroidery of Aicha and myself while revealing our intimate conversations, struggles, yearnings, everyday pressures and refusals, and the vision of possibility making. First I write about our embroidering experience as a journey of discovering relationalities and intentionality of the ethical research praxis. Second, I meditate on how fragmented and fractured stories and memory telling regain our epistemic wholeness amidst the perpetual erasures of our voices. Lastly, I close these pages by musing over the politics of hope woven into storytelling as viable means of building solidarity and social inclusion movements.

Unrolling the Yarn

Aicha and I met in the small town of Sisak that we call our *hometown*. It has been almost twenty years since I left Sisak and less than a year since Aicha and her family moved to my old neighborhood. We never thought that we would live there (myself again), however, life circumstances have brought us there and kept us for long enough for our paths to cross in the most profound ways. In this writing, I co-weave narratives of Aicha, a young refugee from Syria whose family fled Aleppo in 2012 and who lived for 7 years in a refugee camp close to the Turkish-Syrian border, and myself as an activist and researcher with an early childhood refugee experience in Croatia, Slovenia, and France amidst the civil wars in former Yugoslavia in the nineties.

As the pressure of the first round of COVID-19 curfews lightened in the most beautiful April with cherry and apple trees blossoms and bright yellow dandelions covering long green fields, Aicha and I went on the first of our many long walks. Our intimate conversation on schooling experiences evoked the early memories of two refugee children. I bring two fragments from our childhoods in refugee camps from different times and different locations.

Aicha's memory from a refugee camp in southern Turkey (2005-2012)

We came to Turkey from Aleppo as a family of seven. I was seven, and my two youngest twin sisters had just been born. For over four years we lived in a tent - there we slept, cooked, studied, played, talked. Then we moved to a container where we lived for the next three years. There was not much difference; we still slept on the floor. We had a good school in the camp, I liked it a lot. Many Syrian children were there, thousands. I mostly enjoyed spending time with the elders as I loved hearing their stories. And I used to tell stories to the elders and younger children alike. With their eyes and ears wide open, all the children and grownups would gather and listen to the wisdom shared through the centuries-old stories. Those years of storytelling in a hopeless container, Emina, yielded much hope.

I need to be telling stories. That is my purpose. But no one listens to me here. There is no one to tell stories to and

listen to me. These are rough times for my soul. You are the first one I am sharing my intimacies with.

Emina's memory from a refugee camp in Slovenia (1992)

I was holding a pink elephant in my hands. I cannot tell if it was wooden or plastic. I held it obsessively, looking at its bright color, as the days were passing in an overcrowded refugee camp. I held onto the elephant while gathering strength to absorb the grey walls with broken windows. My new home, for who knew how long. I cannot recall whether it was spring or fall, but the days were grim and grey, with an occasional sun warming our cheeks and our under-dressed bodies. I had not seen my *mama* and *tata* in such a long time.

Twenty-five years later the pervasive chill endures. The chill never abandoned me, as much as the memory of the old and wet walls covered in mold, the obnoxious smell of the mattresses and blankets, the appalling taste of

cooked beans, and having almost no room to lie down and rest. It was too frightful to close my eyes in the room with men who devoured women and female children with their gaze and curled up next to my three sisters and

aunt, words would suddenly dry up as the mind went on unknown paths, journeys where the pink elephant became a co-traveler, an omen of hope. I have not been telling this story in years. I cannot recall have I ever said this before.

These two fragmented memories came from different temporal and geographical locations. However, they offer a nuanced account of refugee life in a refugee camp, life in uncertainty, and life with a loss. These fragments come as a response to the question that Callier and Hill noted in their collaborative writing and that asks, “What might we newly locate within our stories and each other through this collaborative process and what textures can we create by (re)membering in togetherness?” (Callier & Hill, 2021, p. 285).

When Aicha told me about her life in a refugee camp in southern Turkey, the chills and the pink elephant sneaked in. The strong currents of memory always find their flow. The past lives in us, and even if we try hard we cannot run away from it. It comes after us. In her *Sites of Memory* Toni Morrison (1995) writes,

They straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory - what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (p. 99)

Again, when Aicha and I walked on the chilly Sunday morning, we felt a strong connection between the two of us. The relationality is hard to express to those who have not felt the cutting of their roots, the loss of home, the detachment from family, and the exclusion from society. The relationality in the embodied memory of suffering and hope nourishes each other as if they are not opposites. Alexander and Weems (2021) write similarly in their recent text as they narrate their experience of coming together as “*collaborative spirits [...] incorporeal but ubiquitous, nonquantifiable co-presences of shared humanity, both with hauntings from our pasts and materialized embodiments of our current realities. Each [spirit] conjured from a conforming heritage of oppression; feeling like a target and feeling unsafe - yet finding strength in a kindled kindredness*” (p. 247). Drawing on their assertion, the journey of Aicha and myself became a journey of friendship, kinship, and comradeship through which we pieced together scraps of our memories, ever-lasting fears, struggles, as well as our hopes.

The work of collaborative stitching of our memories can be described as co-constitutive. Holman Jones (2021) notes that in collaborative autoethnographic writing, “to live autoethnographically means to write in mutually constitutive relation to each other and the page” (p. 219). That relation to each other and the page too requires what Richa Nagar (2019) describes as the *radical vulnerability* which becomes

inevitable in shaping critical movements striving for social change and justice-oriented social inclusion. In that sense, the autoethnographic memory work and storytelling of *self* became entangled and inseparable from the one of others (Nagar, 2015), just as Sarah Hunt (2020) simply reminds us that “In telling stories of others, we are always also telling stories about ourselves” (p.7).

While traditional anthropological and ethnographic scholarship asserts that the role of the researcher must remain distanced from the stories of the researched, I unsettle this approach by arguing that the narration of the researcher’s experience is formative in shaping trustworthy and meaningful relationships. My collaborative research project with Aicha and earlier research experiences with refugee and migrant communities have been critical in developing research methodologies and political analysis that speak to the longevities of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee politics in Croatia and wider. Even more so, sharing of our experiences with each other about our war survival and refugeeness in different geographies and temporalities have been instrumental in mobilizing social movements that build a political and social climate of hospitality towards refugees and migrants.

In this very location of the entangled narratives of Aicha and myself, political projects of epistemic justice and social inclusion (e)merged, in the dialogical flows and intimate narrations that resist pressures of time and space and refuse traditional research or NGO practice solely looking for data and quantifiable change (Mountz et al, 2015). Close reciprocal collaborations are essential for ethical research as well as ethical community praxis. Such given rhythm might be described as “jazz-like democratic improvisation [that] facilitates reciprocal interactions and meaningful relationships among and between researchers and respondents” - and beyond - as portrayed by Dance, Gutierrez, and Hermes (2010).

Although my early work in preparing the grounds for the critical ethnographic narrative inquiry with young refugees always entailed the labor of ethical and respectful documenting and writing about their experiences with a lot being at stake, it was the labor of embroidering with Aicha that complicated my researcher’s positionality and the ethics of sharing of my own story. Given my position of power as a researcher and activist with a public reputation in Croatia, I needed to be careful with what and how much I shared not to disrupt and overshadow Aicha’s storytelling flows. However, with no pressures of time and outcome, what emerged in our autoethnographic piecing was what I call the *ethics of invitation* - both Aicha and myself invited my experience to emerge in our intimate dialogue and collaborative sharing of the critical perspectives coming through memories and stories of two perpetual refugees.

The liberating flows of sharing *self* were inspired by Tuhiwai Smith’s invitation to decolonize our researcher’s positionalities by deploying compassionate research as well as by Nagar’s concept of *radical vulnerability* (2019). Nagar asserts that radical vulnerability “seeks to reimagine the temporalities and meanings of knowledge-making partnerships by surrendering to a politics of co-traveling and co-authorship [...]. A relationality embedded in radical vulnerability strives to internalize that our self is intensely co-constituted and entangled with the other” (p.). Such collaborative, and entangled autoethnography not only felt intuitive but truly was “a space for free speech, decolonized inquiry, and advocacy; to imagine new spaces and forms for working

together” (Holman Jones, 2021, p.217) while countering harmful, disrespectful, and exploitative research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Our collaborative labor was deeply embodied and connected to our bodies, minds and souls (Bang, 2016). In *Thinking De<=>coloniality through Haitian Indigenous Ecologies*, Pierre (2020) writes that the body has its own knowledge and memories, and that “agency, politics, and subjectivities are always engaged through various means, worlds, registers, and temporalities; and these registers include affects, effects, and spirituality that are lived both in and through the intimate and the collective.” She adds that “knowledge is what is, just is, simply is. Knowledge is the lived, embodied, on-the-go experience, the place from which there is nothing to understand except to return to oneself to see better” (p.402).

In this sense, turning to oneself and to one another created the entanglements that stitched together the stories of self and stories of the other. After having this experience, I argue that sharing self is desired and inevitable praxis in ethical and life-giving praxis of research that intentionally carves out the space and time for the labor of joint weaving of the truths in search of epistemic justice.

Knitting epistemic wholeness from the past and present fragments of social distancing

Salam aleykum! Ki fei halek, Emina?

Wa aleikum salam, Aicha. Bikhair, shokran. Ki fei halek, anti?

Tamam, shokran

Emina: Peace be with you, my friend. I hope you had a nice day in school today. But your face tells me that something doesn't feel right. What happened?

don't they let me wear a hijab?

Aicha: No one on the bus wants to sit next to me as I wear a hijab. I get looks of suspicion, I see fear in their eyes. My teachers told me that school is too hard for me and that I can't do well in school since I don't speak the language. You know, I want to prove them wrong and show them that I can speak this language. I mean, I speak Arabic and Turkish and other languages too. I heard from my classmates that I should take off that silly cover on my head. My teachers said that women in Europe are free. But how do I then feel incarcerated in hostility!? If women are free, why

Emina: I remember when my sister and I were recruited into a school choir, it must have been 1992. Because we practiced at home, my mom heard us singing church and nationalistic war songs. She got so upset and went to school to withdraw us from the choir. My head teacher, a lighthouse for families who strongly opposed the war, Jovanka Dragičević, pulled us out of the choir.

At the same time, a few Muslim children from my classroom were taken into the other classrooms. So, our classrooms' ethnic and religious composition allowed only a few Muslims and Serbs to be in the same space. For years we could

not attend religious education at schools, Islamic religion class was only introduced after the war ended, usually taking place on Friday evenings, when everybody else would be out of school. I never felt comfortable saying my name either or when teachers would call on me there was always a tone to it. They sent us away too many times. They told us to get back where we came from.

Aicha: But we cannot go back to where we come from, as there is nowhere to come back to. But we can return to ourselves, our inner strength, and build resilience and resistance. Resist and hope, as those two sustain us.

The excerpt from a conversation I had with Aicha on that chilly October morning revealed layers of social exclusion she has been subjected to as a young female refugee wearing a hijab while acquiring Croatian language skills. Those experiences speak to the workings of the multiple pandemics, predominantly those of Islamophobia and anti-migrant violence, showing the erasure of her racial and ethnic otherness particularly represented through *hijab* as the primarily visible cue of her religious devotion to Islam; negligence of her linguistic richness due to the cultural hegemonies of the Croatian language; as well as the marginalization of her unfortunate experience of forcible displacement from her home. In a young woman's life where teachers, classmates, and people on the bus are the only people she interacts with or regularly meets, such rejection causes deep injuries to one's identity and sense of belonging. Aicha's narration of her life, and particularly the schooling experiences in Croatia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, uncover critical insights about the exclusionary nature of schooling, perpetual trajectories of the politics of social distancing against racial and ethnic Other only layered by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and the assimilationist landscape she was subjected to as a Muslim woman with hijab. It disallows the revelation of personal intimacies and silences the narratives of daily struggles and yearnings. Even more so, it disrupts the trust-building process essential for social solidarities and inclusive societal projects. Aicha's experiences, in relation to her narrative in the previous section, also speak volumes about the fractured systems of refugee integration, particularly the resettlement programs and education of refugee and migrant youth in Croatian society, which I previously analyzed in detail.

The parts of our conversation in which I invoke memories from my childhood schooling thirty years ago also speak to the longevity of anti-Muslim politics and ethnonationalism in Croatia. The demographic of my school changed with the engineering of ethnic representation in each classroom, especially during the Croatian-Muslim wars in the neighboring country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The memories of my schooling experience were those of identity-based displacements and non-belonging. Muslim children were equally as targeted as their parents and other adults - I recall conversations in my house and community in which both of my parents, our family friends and colleagues of Muslim identity would be assigned the most exploitative and perilous public duties (*radna obveza*) in obtaining their jobs while being underpaid, exhausted and threatened with job loss or even detention and rape. For over twenty years, my public work has been ill-painted with similar threats of violence, particularly rape against a Muslim woman advocating for the rights of refugees

and migrants - representing a double threat in their refugeeness and Muslimness. The long summer of migration in 2015 triggered the old wounds and made Croatian public space unbearable with the replenishment of nationalism - migrants and refugees, and activists and citizens acting in solidarity with them, became targets of criminalization of migration and solidarity (Kogovšek, 2020). Given that my public agitational work defied the representation of refugee women as captives and refugee men as terrorists, I received dozens of violence and rape threats from former and current police and right-winged men. My labor of documenting police violence against migrants at the borders instigated different forms of political pressure including intelligence phone tapping, framing for alleged criminal-based deportation from the United States, calls from the politicians to join secret meetings, and viral headlines calling to stop “Emina Bužinkić - a Muslim who targets Christians”. Numerous times I was accused of Islamization of Europe and the Croatian *Antemuralis Christianitatis*.

Aicha’s and my narratives resemble and stitch to each other in that they speak to the segregational and assimilationist politics of schooling and social treatment of Muslim and other minoritized youth during the war times in Croatia in the nineties as well as nowadays. We share those fragments of memories and current experiences as we stand in the “place [that] evokes the previous events that have occurred there” (Holman Jones & Harris, 2021, p. 253) and echoes historical continuities of ideological and cultural displacements to which ethnic, racial and linguistic others have been subjected. Our two narratives and sharing of those matter for the social inclusion of both of us as we reach the point of intimate and deep relationality. Our two experiences were the instigator of the attentive and creative knitting process with other young refugees during the ethnographic narrative inquiry which took us further into the collective memory writing process elaborated in the following chapter (Haug, 1998).

However, focusing on the experience with Aicha, the collaboration of ours layered “power and possibilities of coming together in autoethnography” (Holman Jones, 2021, p. 217), particularly when it comes to the questions of voice and representation. Although our painful stories often came through fragments of memories, our fractured souls felt deeply nourished and energized. Our conversations would usually end with expressions of gratitude for the wholeness we felt, for being listened to and heard, and for not being misrepresented and labeled as refugees and/or Muslims. The writings that would erupt after our encounters, mainly through text messages, were bathed in the poetics of piecing fragments together as we kept yearning for more of that feeling of wholeness. In *Staging Cross-border (Reading) Alliances: Feminist Polyvocal Testimonials at Work*, Patricia Collins-Shaffer (2012) precisely discusses tale-telling as a process of weaving fragments of truths of all the subjects included in the research process, as a pathway to *epistemic wholeness*. She writes, “Through heterogeneity of experience, fragmented truth claims subtly emerge, claims that then need to be pieced together and worked through in order for epistemic wholeness to more thoroughly materialize” (p. 20). In this practice of weaving fragments of each of our truths, we come to the wholeness of our voices and represent our unique experiences (Georgakopolou, 2007). The subtle emergence of epistemic wholeness through the acts of remembering and sharing, although coming with fractures and fragmentations, speaks to the redeeming nature of storytelling.

The act of knitting the wholeness at the same time represents individual and collective labor and opens the way to the collective authorship (Nagar, 2015) that counters the extraction of stories of the other with the danger of it becoming a story of the Other. In *Material Cultures of Research: Woven into the Fabric of the Text: Subversive Material Metaphors in Academic Writing*, Collins (2016) writes,

[t]his way of imagining how writing works is not individualistic or competitive. Each voice is a thread, and only when they are woven together do they form a whole [...] many voices not one, cut from the same cloth or different. [...] This way of imagining academic writing as something that is part of life, rather than something apart. (paragraph 7)

Building on Collins' (2016) threads, the search for epistemic wholeness fundamentally becomes a search for different ways of knowing, and the articulations of truths that contribute to the production of social knowledge that can only emerge in an honest and self-conscious dialogue (Connolly-Shaffer, 2012; Nagar, 2006). Such dialogue then is a process of weaving the individual stories and embodied knowledges and truths which then,

structurally allow(s) for a larger, collective "Truth" to cautiously emerge [...] in order to transform an experience from a claim into a potential source of social knowledge, beyond our own individual memory work, and beyond merely bringing it before others, it must enter into sustained dialogue with those who are poised to listen to our experience and to in turn question its meaning and our perspective of it from their own situated perspective and knowledge-base for the shared commitment of producing more accurate social knowledge. (Connolly-Schaffer, 2012, pp. 144-145)

The embroidering experience of Aicha and myself that occurred through metaphors of weaving and knitting was precisely about piecing our truths together and knitting political commitments in relation to critical social knowledge that aims to restore epistemic agency and justice.

How we as researchers document and share refugee and migrant narratives is one of the core questions in relation to epistemic justice and the critical knowledge production emerging within. Only the attentive and collaborative approach will ensure that we avoid slippery grounds of epistemic erasures and fragmentations of what is already fragmented and fractured. Therefore, becoming aware of the connections between what stories we as researchers listen to, write, create, sustain, nourish, extract, exploit and subjugate in different locales, must be committed labor of *self* and scholarly, community, or any other practice striving for justice and wholeness. Alongside the critical awareness-raising, we as researchers must keep in mind that the practice of research documenting refugee and migrant narratives, just like any other story-telling project which knits (joins or stitches closely and firmly), weaves (in-lay or a new thread between the knitted stitches), hems (sewing the edge on the backside of cloth or surrounding and restricting the movement or the space), and oversews (sewing the edges with every stitch passing over the join) social inclusion always remains incomplete and in yearning for more pieces to nuance critical search for epistemic justice.

The Politics of Hope: Foundations of Collective Solidarity

In this section, I have been musing over the experience of collaborative autoethnographic story-telling that serendipitously emerged between Aicha and myself. We carried the energies of healing and hope on our long walks between the refreshing winds of October 2020, over January's biting cold, to the steamy August of 2021. Aicha said: "Resist and hope, as the two sustain us." It is not exaggerating to claim that we found or reminded ourselves who we are and that we reinvigorated each other's spirit to keep searching and fighting for epistemic justice. Our experience relates to the grappling of Alexander and Weems (2021) who ask,

How can the politics and beauty of words serve as the immediate tool to penetrate and heal a wounded soul; offering an outlet to pain, a solace to suffering, a rhetorical and artistic rage of resistance; building a mobilizing *praxis*, breaking the discursive limits of the emperor's stages, and invigorating the dynamics of democratic contest in which the emperor and his new clothes (or lack thereof) are not continually refigured. (p. 245)

This very question is poignantly calling for our resistances and refusals of the politics of social distancing related to historical continuities of societal pandemics transmitted translocally and transnationally while attending to the question of what "can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future?" (Muñoz, 2009, p.1). And at the same time, it is asking us to mobilize our spirits, energies, and actions in spreading the wor(l)ds of solidarity and hope as a means of blurring boundaries imposed by the dividing regimes.

The journey of Aicha and myself of stitching memories and weaving in stories was an experience of ever going and unfinished arriving at *epistemic wholeness* and has also represented the labor of laying the foundation for the politics of hope. That "collective autoethnography embodies hope" (Holman Jones, 2021, p. 220) was felt in our embroidery throughout. Sharing stories of our perilous and devastating yet resilient refugee crossings blurred the boundaries between the researcher and the researched and allowed for the energy of hope and solidarity to emerge and flow. Being an activist, researcher, and writer that mediates the connection between academia, activism, and poetics of life, through the relationship with Aicha I have come to a deeper political commitment to disrupting the politics of epistemic erasures by sharpening the praxis of hope-making, which is the very location where the autoethnographic stitching emerges.

The experience unveiled on these pages has the potential to unsettle traditional research and community work with refugees and migrants. Furthermore, the building blocks of the inclusive societal project of equity and solidarity must avoid rigidities and expectations situated in hermetical epistemologies. Opening social and political landscapes for the epistemologies coming through narration, lay hope and possibilities for social inclusion and solidarities. The timely, however, not the time-constrained practice of listening, telling, exchanging, documenting, writing stories and memories, strategizing and public sharing, must be nursed through the interweaving of individual and collective praxis that imagines and lives hope. This after all might be the only way we claim different political and ethical "ways of knowing, valuing and believing"

(Lugones, 2010). The ethico-political labor of pursuing self-knowledge and unearthing wisdoms of subjugated ways of knowing, valuing, and believing can be read in Aicha's writing below.

Aicha [continuing our conversation]: I want to show you what I recently wrote.

سأصبح صيدلانية، وسيصبح لدي صيدلية لكنها ليست كباقي الصيدليات؛ سيكون بها صندوق ابتسامات تؤخذ في اليوم خمس مرات أو زجاجة فرح... وعلى تلك الرفوف سأضع كل ماتحتاج إليه تلك النفوس البشرية الجافة سأبيعهم حبة عطفٍ ليعطونها لأولئك الذين ماتت قلوبهم، ولاصقات للجروح الغير مرئية مع شراباً مقوي للقلب لأعطيهم للقلوب التي تركوها عديمي الشفقة منكسرة وحزينة... سأضع فيها حبات أمل وتفاؤل وحبات محبة أيضاً... وأقراص سعادة تدوم وتدوم... وغسولٍ لإنشغال البال لتأتي بعده راحة البال يستعمل كل يوم وكل ساعة.. ومعجزات لتقريب المسافات وإزالة الاشتياق...

"سنكون مأوى لليتامى والمساكين وعلاجاً للمريضين؛

😊... " وقطع شوكولا مع حبات الفراولة لتدوم سعادة أولئك الطفوليين

سأكون صيدلانية صابئة صيدلية لا مثيل لها ... 🍷

I will become a pharmacist! I will run a pharmacy, but not just any pharmacy. My pharmacy will give away boxes of smiles and bottles of joy. I will place on pharmacy shelves everything human souls long for. Hope pills, love tablets, and happiness concoctions for the everlasting effect. I will also add a lotion for releasing pain so everyone can find their inner peace at every hour of a day. And a magical potion for overcoming distance and reducing yearning. My pharmacy will be an asylum for the poor, cast out and sick. And I will make special chocolate with strawberries for kids so their happiness always stays. 😊

I will be a different, unparalleled pharmacist. 🍷

These were the words of a dreamer, whose life experience amidst multiple pandemics, seeks for cure and hope for humankind. A 16-year-old young hijabi woman Aicha, a student in the pharmaceutical high school that excluded her from the distance-schooling with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, asked her to take off her hijab by explaining to her that she lives now in free Europe and that recently suggested that she is suffering from a behavioral and emotional disorder due to her slower comprehension of the curriculum solely taught in the Croatian language - seems to be a brilliant visionary, a poetical and political one, who deeply understands what the social inclusion and solidarity should look like. One might say that Aicha's poetics sounds utopian. However, I claim that the utopistic strivings are well-needed "flooding" (Morrison, 1995) or imagination in the political landscapes where social inclusion and integration of refugees and migrants are measured by numbers, indicators, reports, and donor driven agendas. The creative lines of Aicha's crossings tell visions of solidarity and underpin the strong connection between politics of storytelling and solidarity-driven social movements. In connecting Nagar's (2015) claim that "all politics are politics of storytelling" (p. 215), Aicha's stories are "enact[ing] new worldings in the now (Holman Jones & Harris, 2021, p. 253).

Aicha's vision of the future and her powerful role in it circles back our attention to the thread we started our embroidery with - hope. In reading Aicha's hope through the lines expressing her vision of herself and the future of society in which she has a

visible role, she defies portrayals of refugees as miserable and desperate (Shakhsari, 2020). In that sense, what we see in her lines about the magic her pharmacy delivers as well as in all the shared narratives from both of us is that hope of a refugee is knitted in the critical and creative refusal of a portrayal as an everlasting refugee, a figure reduced to receiving help and compassion, sleeping on the floor in a refugee camp, and the one helplessly standing on the trembling grounds of everyday schooling which perpetually displaces her. Aicha's representation of herself as a pharmacist, a storyteller, a writer, a representation of one who claims truth, justice, and wholeness defies social divides, distills from hurtful past and fights against perpetual epistemic erasure while articulating her hopes in profound ways. Her own narration of self, and arguably the weaving of our collaborative autoethnography, poignantly guides our future critical work in weaving storytelling, ethical research, and solidarity movement countering pervasive regimes of assimilation and racialization, and imagining possibilities beyond such counter-politics.

Our autoethnographic embroidery went beyond counternarratives to the transnational regimes of power with their historico-political longevities and weaved in new threads of solidarity and hope-making praxis. It had been over a year since Aicha and I knew each other when we jointly protested the recent occupational violence of Israel over the people of Palestine. As we stood on the Square of the Victims of Fascism in Zagreb, Croatia at the end of May of 2021 we read in choreography the statement in Croatian and Arabic which called for the immediate termination of the settler-colonial violence. Devastated by the murder of over 60 children in less than 20 days of May, we expressed,

Today we are gathered [...] to send a message of solidarity to Palestinians who have been resisting the terror, occupation, and violence of the Israeli settler-colonial state for decades now. All of us gathered here, with the experience of war, genocide, police violence, militarization, nationalism, and criminalization, say - 'Stop the occupation of Palestine. (Free Palestine. Solidarity from Zagreb, 2021)

While starting our knitted performance with the expression of deep relationality with the Palestinians, we continued it by countering occupational politics and articulating hope through the imagination of free Palestine, in the following, "As agitators for human life and dignity, freedom and full potential of political, feminist and decolonial, we want free Palestine and termination of all the violence destroying lives and hope." The protest action gathered hundreds of those who unsettle the world's dividing politics by reading the contemplations, struggles, and imaginations of the Palestinian (female) poets and writers. That particular event was another piece of our autoethnographic narrative, a different stitch woven into our embroidering fabric.

More stitches were woven through local organizing of the Women's Solidarity Circle in Sisak when two of us and a dozen refugee and migrant women living in Sisak took part in the global campaign No sanctions on Iran. The momentum of the gathering of women from Azerbaijan, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and Croatia who jointly read "We consider the U.S. sanctions to be war by another name, condemn sanctions on Iran, and stand in solidarity with other peoples who are subjected to deadly sanctions, from Gaza

to Venezuela” was a critical point in shaping the local solidarity movement that will rise slowly despite the fragilities of the refugee status amidst the multiple pandemics jeopardizing migrants and refugees.

Lastly, the most sensitive threads were woven into the embroidery through the process of collective memory writing (Haug, 2008) with seven refugee youth, including Aicha. Journeying with the collective memory writing of stories about our refugee experiences, life in camps, perilous crossings of borders, new life amid the COVID-19 pandemic, exile from schooling, and displacement by the earthquake, as well as our fears, desires, sexualities, shames, and joys, situated complex methodology, and commitments to the praxis of storytelling (Nagar, 2006) and memory writing. The collective experience of embroidering memories and stories included layers of chills in unveiling our relationalities while diving into an analysis of social injustice. Relatedly, Mohanty asserts that "collectively crafted autobiographical writing and discussion become the ground for analysis and transformation of self, as well as the building blocks that demystify the intricacies of power embedded in the interweaving of individual lives with social structures and institutions" (Nagar, 2005, p. xi). However, the layers of warmth emerged as the collective memory writing became a critical site of the intentional construction of the collective identity, commitment, collaboration, decision-making, and representation, which is more than a critique of injustice but a praxis and politics of hope and possibility-making.

In the encounters with each other and solidarity movements to which we extended our embroidery, Aicha and I both found refreshing and inexhaustible inspiration in the creative praxis of co-weaving, piecing, and stitching together our stories and memories. Fragments of those conversations came to this page because such labor inspired and flared up the energies of hope and raised critical awareness that telling and sharing stories became a pressing need for both of us in sharpening our individual and collective commitment to resisting injustice and living in solidarity. Our experience was deeply anchored in Nagar’s (2015) piercing writing about the affects and effects of the politics of story-telling,

Stories shape our sense of self: who we believe we are, our sense of our own inherited privileges and misfortunes, our affinities, identifications, and allegiances. Stories also shape what we wish or hope to do in order to give our existence meaning: whom we want to stand or fight with, whom or what we want to help or rescue in order to uphold what we think is ethical or just. (p. 205)

Our standing for free Palestine, imaginations of life in Syria after the war, futures in the landscape of Croatian nationalism, tutoring lessons, and collective memory writing project with other refugee youth clearly shaped where, with whom, and why do we agitate solidarity - and the process of social inclusion that takes time and attentive labor of mobilizing relationalities, reciprocities, and ethics.

The collaborative memory embroidery between Aicha and myself emerged as serendipitously as our first encounter. In revealing our intimate conversations, struggles, yearnings, everyday pressures and refusals, and the vision of possibility-making, Aicha and I agreed on publishing our autoethnographic weaving. Our embroidering experience was a journey of discovering the relationalities and my own preparation for the collective memory writing project with other refugee youth by

setting the intentionality of the ethical research praxis. This particular experience was also an active meditation on the ways that fragmented and fractured stories and memory telling regain our epistemic wholeness amidst the perpetual erasures of our voices. Lastly, this experience has set me musing over the politics of hope woven in storytelling as a viable means of building solidarity and social inclusion movements. I close this paper here in an open flow, moved by the spirit and politicality of co-weaving and embroidering, accountable to the ethical rigors of storytelling-based research and community practice, and nourished by the commitment of maintaining hope on the ever-present terrains of social distancing.

Author's Note: This article is part of a series that reflects upon my conversations with Aicha. Alongside this text, another piece titled, "Weaving Fragmented Memories: Defying Curfews and Perpetual Wars" was published in the American Ethnographic Society's new collection. The third piece is a digital performance experimenting with the red thread methodologies, an emergent project between four decolonial feminists and journal AGITATE! Unsettling knowledges.

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