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Author: Selbi Durdiyeva

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Theorizing binaries through auto-ethnography, method, and commoning: Reflections from the field

Selbi Durdiyeva

Columbia University, USA / Nottingham Trent University, UK

Selbi Durdiyeva offers auto-ethnographic reflection on her fieldwork conducted at the Butovo firing range memorial site, where over 20,000 people fell victim to the Stalinist regime in Soviet Russia. Since 1995, the site has been managed by the Orthodox Church. In published research, she has observed how the involvement of the Church seemed to impact on the openness of the memory culture developed there. With time, though, as reflected critically here, she has come to reconsider her authority as a researcher and the assumptions she made regarding the identity of the mainly female, Christian mourners at the site. This text traces the author's shift from imposing rigid interpretations on her encounters in the field towards an open approach that sees scholarship as a result of common efforts of researcher and subjects. The key moment of realization was a shared meal with mourners at the local parish. Her self-reflexive approach draws on the idea of "unbuilding binaries", the theme of the 2020 Graduate Workshop at GSOSES UR and the ScienceCampus, where she presented these ideas. A report on that event is [available here](#). Vita Zelenska, co-organizer of the workshop and co-author of that report, served as conceptual editor of this article and the text for *Frictions* by [Sasha Shestakova](#).



*Butovo Firing Range Memorial
Site - mourners*

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Memory doesn't work in a linear way, nor does life either [...]. Instead, thoughts and feelings circle around us; flash back, then forward; the topical is interwoven with the chronological; thoughts and feelings merge, drop from our grasp, then reappear in another context. In real life, we don't always know when we know something. Events in the past are always interpreted from our current position. Yet, that doesn't mean there's no value in trying to disentangle now from then, as long as you realize it's not a project you'll ever complete or 'get right';...[1]

Carolyn Ellis, 1999

Non-linear memory brings me back to the summer of 2019, when after taking a metro, bus, taxi and walking, I arrived at what I viewed as *the field*. The characters appeared as if in a novel, priests dressed in red, walking around a cross with a burning essence in their hands, surrounded by a couple of dozen people, mostly women, wearing long dresses and headscarves, singing along, bowing to a cross brought from one of the largest gulags. Then everyone started walking along the line of the memorial, with the names of 20,672 people who had been shot dead and buried naked, in three layers, covered with soil and chlorine. Their shoes, clothes, and belongings form the closest layer to the ground. I wore a black dress with a scarf loosely covering my head, observing the ceremony from the back. The procession followed, entering the ground floor of the large church across the road. The walls in the church were made out of wood and full of frescoes. A prayer followed, and I started to examine the printed coloured A4 pages with the stories of the priests who died at the site - "the new martyrs." I then approached the chief priest, greeted him politely (I did my homework: you cannot say "hello" to the priest of the Orthodox Church of Russia. The appropriate greeting is "Good day, father"). He invited me, "the foreign guest," to share a meal with the commune.

For lunch, the room divided silently into men's and women's tables. Two younger women poured me wine and I tried to follow what everyone was doing, completely oblivious to the rules or traditions. Sometimes everyone would stand up for a prayer, and I would as well. The youngest woman at the table, still at university studying medicine, shared the *savoir-faire* of travelling light. She remarked how they would fry minced beef and then dry it to take on their travels. Dried beef is

lightweight, unlike canned food. And it is good to put on porridge. The thought of dried minced meat on porridge made me wretch; I have found the idea of it more disturbing than their stories of not having a shower for two weeks or lacking a phone connection to call her mother to say she was ok. She was proud. She had followed the route taken by a priest exiled by the Soviet regime.

Then there followed an interview with the local priest. I sat in his office across from him, feeling small, surrounded by the solemn black furniture, long ceilings, and heavy table. The priest showed me around the grounds of the premises afterwards, though he had to hurry to another meeting. I wanted to say goodbye to the women who were nice to me at lunchtime but did not know how to ask to do that. The priest saw the confusion and read it as me being shy to ask him where the bathrooms are. "They are along that corridor," he pointed.

Butovo: A site of commemoration and redemption

The Butovo firing range, one of the places where I have conducted my fieldwork, is the largest site of executions and burial that occurred at the peak of the Stalinist terror in Moscow and in the Moscow region.[2] 20,762 people were executed and buried at this site in the period from August 1937 to October 1938. Some estimates are higher, but they have not been proven yet by archival evidence. People who were persecuted at Butovo, had their execution orders issued by judicial or quasi-judicial *ad hoc* bodies with complete disregard for due process. The victims were often labelled as "the enemies of the state," charged with supposed crimes including counter-revolutionary activities, espionage, cooperation with the international bourgeoisie, betrayal, and distribution of or owning prohibited literature. During the Soviet period, people were also persecuted based on their ethnicity, religion or belief, belonging to a social group or due to their political views. They were then brought to Butovo, a field concealed in forest; they would be stripped naked, shot, and then buried at the site. This was performed in complete secrecy, with even the relatives of victims unaware of what had happened. The Butovo firing range was given to the administration of the Orthodox Church of Russia in 1995. Before then, it was a territory protected by the state security bodies.[3]

I have recently conducted a research project on how religious groups, by claiming ownership over the site of conscience, create exclusionary approaches to memory.[4] My findings show that while there are many benefits to having religious actors involved in memorialization activities, it also often results in a "rigid conceptualization of victimhood," leading to "the construction of a very

particular image of the victim.”[5] This, in turn, could cause “narrative inequality” due to the exclusive administration of the territory of the memorial where one narrative of atrocities and victimhood dominates.[6] I wrote an article based on these findings with a heavy heart and I think one can sense my semi-apologetic language. On the one hand, academic research presupposes a critical approach and considerations of various positions; on the other hand, I felt a deep personal sympathy with my respondents, despite the assumptions I had made before meeting them regarding their identity. Implicitly, I viewed myself as a “neutral” researcher, not driven by religious or other dogmas, thus creating a boundary, as I found myself thinking in binary terms, and assuming superiority over those on whom I imposed a fixed identity, one that did not resonate with me.

Encounters with auto-ethnography

A year later, I took training on autoethnography. I was particularly enchanted by the notion of bricolage and the use of non-conventional artistic data. The professor who led the session started off by presenting some facts about himself. He also encouraged us to think about a metaphor or poem that would best describe our research. All of it seemed very different from traditional training on methodology in social sciences. I knew from the outset that this would be a good session. He introduced us to the term autoethnography, which is

an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.[7]

Another term for it is narrative ethnography as it seeks to examine culture in conjunction with reflections on the self.[8] According to Ellis, we should think not only *about* the story but *with* the story; our writing is not a reflection of the participants’ world, but rather a reflection of how we organise our world.[9] For a researcher, adopting an autoethnographic approach means asking questions such as: why are we doing what we are doing? Why did I choose this particular PhD topic? Why did I choose this particular method and research design? How do I position myself with respect to my research?

As people, we are influenced and conditioned by a range of experiences. I do not know yet how to make sense of these experiences, let alone how to incorporate

them in a socio-legal study, where the voice of the researcher is often suppressed by the voice of the authority of law. How do I describe an atmosphere, which seemed peaceful and almost idyllic, with flowers and apple trees, carefully cut grass, and small wooden churches? The meaning and sensations the place evokes become mixed; on the one hand, we do not forget what this place is: a site of mass execution and mass burial, but at the same time - a place of redemption, so much so that people marry or perform baptism ceremonies there.

Being invited to share a meal together with members of the parish erased the perceived barriers and imposed identities (that of a researcher and the subjects of research).



Butovo - walking along the memorial

From imposing identities to “thinking within”

No matter how much I try to avoid putting myself at the centre of such questions, I inevitably come to the issue of what, why, and what for. By answering these ‘whats’ and ‘whys’ and ‘what fors,’ Walter Mignolo argues, we will come to understand the ‘how,’ that is, our methodology. Once we comprehend what we want to do, why we want to do it, where and what for, the question of method will come itself.[10] Jacques Rancière has argued against methodology, stating that the confines of the method of social sciences reinforce inequality, as it puts a researcher above their subject by way of claiming the hegemony of knowledge.[11] In a similar vein, Mignolo argues that method can disqualify some people from engaging, therefore we need to delink ourselves from disciplinary formations.[12] There are, as Mignolo shows, multiple ways of gaining knowledge.

Mignolo encourages us to think from within, but not as an individual or ego, because of what has happened to us has happened to many.[13] When acknowledging our lived experience, we allow our research to voice multiple perspectives. This, in turn, generates space to explore empathy, make sense of emotions and amplify the voice of those whose voices are muted. I could see it exemplified in such expressions of co-producers of research (commonly referred to as “subjects,” “respondents” or “interviewees”):

“The interview is about me, isn’t it?”

“I am old, and I’ve never been interviewed before.”

“I will answer your questions for as long as necessary. It is my life. It is the memory of my grandfather.”

Rancière argues for treating respondents not as objects but as subjects of research, an approach that requires looking for what the researcher and the subjects have in common, i.e., “the production of discourse,” in a sense referring to commoning.[14] Commoning is a term derived from “the commons,” “communing” and “common,” and although no single definition exists, it refers to “interpersonal relations” and “voluntary cooperation” between humans, nature, institutions and community.[15] Commoning and production of discourse between me and the people who I initially viewed as having a completely different world to mine, happened through “building amicable relations across gender, sexual, ethnic, religious and racial grounds,” by an act as simple as sharing food, that is, through the process of commensality.[16] Commensality is “an act of eating together;” it is a focus of study of numerous disciplines as it represents a cross-cultural phenomenon.[17] Socialisation and social solidarity stand at the centre of commensality.[18] According to Bargu,

“Eating and drinking together constitute the embodiment of closeness and friendship. Commensality fosters a sense of care for the other while it eliminates a sense of possessiveness and self-interested behaviour, it de-individualises.”[19]

Drawing on Mignolo’s call to “think within” I also discovered that my respondents were not the only ones who imposed fixed identities. I myself thought in binary and colonizing terms, building an invisible wall between what I viewed as “progressive” me and dogmatic respondents.

Sharing experiences and self-reflections

Being invited to share a meal together with members of the parish erased the perceived barriers and imposed identities (that of a researcher and the subjects of research). Sitting at one table, not even on separate chairs but rather on a bench, being part of a conversation in informal setting of eating and drinking, allowed me to engage with respondents in a way that a semi-structured interview would not. I did not need to worry about my notes, questions that need to be asked and followed up, checking whether my recorder is working or not. These informal conversations over a meal allowed me to understand more than I possibly could through traditional methods of research, that of reading or interviewing.

My fieldwork was a place of self-discovery, but the subsequent workshop on autoethnography and training on decoloniality helped me find vocabulary to explain the rigidity of disciplinary norms that permeated my previous writing. On the one hand, I found it difficult to relate to the rigid constructions of gender, ethnic and religious identities I encountered. My identity as a researcher was an important factor for those I engaged with; the first question I was asked was about my religious beliefs. The fact that I come from Central Asia was also implicitly or directly referred to during interviews. And despite the fact I could not relate to some of the worldviews of my respondents, especially those relating to the construction of gender, my relationship with the fieldwork over time proved to be more complex. Drawing on Mignolo’s call to “think within” I also discovered that my respondents were not the only ones who imposed fixed identities. I myself thought in binary and colonizing terms, building an invisible wall between what I viewed as “progressive” me and dogmatic respondents. Upon reflection, I have managed to make space for self-criticism and thus saw that I was guilty of the very

same judgmentalism I was implicitly blaming my respondents for. The divisive identities were not a stumbling block. The processes of commoning and finding empathy turned out to be more important.

Going back to the quote with which I have started this piece, I often return, in my memory, to the place and people, especially the human connection and deep sympathy, which I found where I was least expecting it. As a researcher, I have imposed binaries myself, othering those whose lifeworld I found difficult to understand. But imbued with the spirit of autoethnography, I have come to learn to appreciate it. Still, at the end of the day, I left. And they remained, living, working, serving at the site where 20,672 people lay and whose existence they honour each day.

Notes

[1] Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Ethnography", *Qualitative Health Research*, 9 (1999), 669, 675.

[2] See the official website of Butovo Center and the Church at Butovo, <http://butovo37.ru/>.

[3] Karta Pamyati, Nekropol Terrora i Gulaga: Kartoteka zahoronenyi i pamyatnyh mest (Map of Memory, Necropolis of Terror and Gulag: Index of the places of burial and places of memory): a note on Butovo, <https://www.mapofmemory.org/50-03>.

[4] Forthcoming, also forthcoming in a monograph.

[5] C. Lawther, "Transitional justice and truth commissions," in *Research Handbook on Transitional Justice*, eds. C. Lawther, L. Moffet, and D. Jacobs, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 346.

[6] Lawther, "Transitional justice", 348.

[7] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview", *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 36 (2011), 273.

[8] Robin M Boylorn and Mark P Orbe, Introduction, *Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

[9] Ellis, "Heartful Ethnography", 669.

[10] Walter D Mignolo, "DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality", *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2007), 449.

[11] Caroline Pelletier, "Rancière and the Poetics of the Social Sciences", *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 32 (2009), 267.

[12] Mignolo, "DELINKING", 449.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Pelletier, "Rancière", 267, 273.

[15] David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Patterns of Commoning*, (Commons Strategy Group and Off the Common Press 2015) 4.

[16] Banu Bargu, "The Politics of Commensality", in Jacob Blumenfeld, Chiara Bottici and Simon Critchley (eds), *The Anarchist Turn* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 51.

[17] H. Jönsson, M. Michaud, N. Neuman, "What is Commensality? A Critical Discussion of an Expanding Research Field", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18 (2021), 6235.

[18] Jönsson et al., "What is Commensality?", 6235.

[19] Bargu, "The Politics of Commensality", 51.

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