Writing as Performance

Writing as Performance:

Accounts of Autoethnography

Edited by

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REAL COMMUNICATION IN
A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

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In early 2020, as I was returning from London, the first lockdown of my life was announced: the Covid-19 pandemic had begun. From one day to the next, my life – our lives – changed, because I had been working with my students in a face-to-face manner for fifteen years at the time. We were at the beginning of the second semester when the schools first closed. It was winter, but I was waiting for the spring already. I could not wait to walk the hallways of the university again, to urge my students to take exercise in the green courtyards and organize events for the new course we were about to commence. As always, we had plans, ideas for activities in which we could integrate as teams of future communication specialists. The pandemic itself was to become the subject of our practicing the stages of gathering information, documenting, selecting, checking, and writing news. The pandemic began to offer dozens of topics every day. We would be working in the online environment for two weeks. It promised to be an interesting experiment for the young journalists, who were going to nurture their curiosity and learn the correct methods of documentation via the internet. Then we would go back to the classical environment, our classrooms, and talk about all of these experiences. That was the plan.

Fortunately, the West University of Timișoara immediately switched to an online teaching system. The timetable was adapted, and we began to meet our students on various platforms, while sitting in our own home offices. At the time, I thought to myself that those two weeks would create a good opportunity for me to learn how to use certain online tools that I had neglected before. I participated in training sessions, created a comfortable environment in which I would teach my classes for the two weeks, and experienced being able to communicate enthusiasm to my students even when using a laptop. It was probably then that I acquired most of the skills

I needed for online education. I learned how to work on the established platforms, how to implement Google Classroom in all courses, and how to interact with my students in the given conditions. It was a challenge from which, in the short term, it seemed to me that I had something to gain.

It has been almost two years since I first read, taught, talked, and communicated online. Sometimes I have done it with conviction and dedication, while at other times I have been troubled by the deep feeling that everything was not what it should be. One thing is certain: I have been learning. About programs, about the new internet environment in which we live, about how much I can do and how much of myself I can adapt to the new life.

There is an apparent contradiction between communication and living one's life online almost exclusively. To work in the field of communication means interaction above all else, no matter what position one holds within the field. I studied communication and journalism. Everything I learned and experienced helped me to transform from an introverted person to one who is open to everything that happens around her. I worked as a journalist for a few years. Being in the middle of events and among people every day opened up new opportunities for communication. Then, for fifteen years, I worked every day, with dedication, with my students, because it seemed to me that the development of communication skills was perhaps the most important stage in their growth as future public relations experts. And now, for the last two years, we have been hiding behind our computer screens, trying to convince ourselves that we can do all those things that we used to do, despite the pandemic, just as well now as we did then. As for how much I have succeeded – that is what I am trying to figure out through this chapter.

Things changed once the first two weeks of lockdown began to gradually turn into indefinite extensions. I quickly understood that all the practical applications I had in mind for my students needed to be changed, rethought, and adapted to our new lives. The hardest aspect was, obviously, reinventing my ability to stimulate enthusiasm. One of the most important aspects in the work of a public relations specialist is their ability to work in a team, to adapt on the fly to the needs of the colleagues with whom they implement a project. The biggest difficulty I ran into during the first semester of online education was finding the energy we all needed to bring together a group and create a well-defined and applicable public relations project. It was more difficult than usual to motivate the students to be part of such teams, given that after the first few weeks of online education, fatigue, boredom, or, in some cases, even depression started to appear. In addition, being in

their home environment, many of the students did not want to open their cameras, so it was quite difficult for me to communicate with them. I believe that the development of skills and abilities is more important than the accumulation of knowledge. In the online conditions, I did not have the skills and knowledge to transmit these notions myself. I then had a choice between working on the desired projects with a smaller group of students, or trying a change the teaching strategy and adapt it to the online format for larger groups of students. For me, that meant I needed to participate in workshops where I could learn more interactive online teaching and learning methods and tools. I took an online postgraduate class at the University of Maastricht, Netherlands, to help myself meet this new challenge. However, all the hours I spent in front of the computer (as a teacher, as a student, and, as much as I could, as a researcher) resulted in a mental fatigue that I had never known before.

Another challenge was the first online exam session. What I had planned with the third-year students of communication and public relations – that is, a practical exam on organizing an event – proved to be inapplicable. The same was true with regard to the students who were completing their master's degree in media and public relations. Classes such as "Writing and communication techniques," wherein I intended to implement a social campaign, and others ("Introduction to the media system,", "Writing techniques," "Writing public relations materials," "Communication with the press," "Public relations management"), for which I initially wanted to propose evaluation "based on projects and essays – all these proved unfeasible, because of the implementation of the electronic catalog. The grades were due 48 hours after the exam, and as I had several hundred students it was impossible for me to maintain the initial requirements. So I chose evaluation and testing in the form of a grid with multiple questions and answers. After three exam sessions held that way, I still could not say whether the final grades of the students fully reflected their level of knowledge.

A new generation of students started their journey in the fall of 2021. As always, for all specializations offered by the Department of Philosophy and Communication Sciences of the West University of Timișoara (communication and public relations, journalism, digital media, advertising), enrolment was high, so we have over two hundred first-year students in our department. That means I teach all of them a class, "Introduction to the media system," during the first semester. To my surprise, this class has become the one I am eager to teach each week, because the first-year students are active, involved, full of initiative. They

demonstrate special skills in working in the online environment. Perhaps this is because of the past year, which they have already spent doing online education. Or maybe it is because they understand that the future of their profession is in online communication. Every notion they learn is already adapted to online communication.

The first year of the pandemic and online education was also the first year in which we implemented the ROSE (Romania Secondary Education) Project, which aims to prevent and reduce early school abandonment. When I applied for this project, I was teaching face to face, I was meeting my students in class every week, we used to talk even in the hallways, and it was relatively easy to organize remedial workshops for students at risk of dropping out. But how was I to convince precisely those who do not turn their cameras on, do not answer questions, and most of the time do not get involved in any activity to participate in these online workshops? This was and is one of the greatest difficulties of this period. Fewer than half of the students identified as being at risk of dropping out of school participate in counseling sessions. We created a classroom where we regularly post materials to help the students, yet we do not know how effective that is, because we do not receive any feedback from them.

The past two years revealed to us a probably irreversible direction. The digital environment is one in which we will have to live a good part of our professional lives. Young students have often become the teachers of their teachers, in terms of online work skills. That makes me think that the future of education will be about *partnership between teachers and students*. I believe that from now on, we need to build our work in an open communication relationship with the students, based on trust and curiosity. Looking back at this period of time, I realize that I had a lot to learn, but at the same time that some of my older questions about the purpose and mode of education became more acute, while new questions arose that I had not asked myself before but that demand answers as soon as possible. In summary, what I learned was:

- To integrate online tools in teaching activity. From a real classroom with desks and chairs, I learned to work in the Classroom with shared screens on my home computer; instead of writing on the board, I make concept maps online with the students; instead of raising their hand, the students activate an icon; and so on. Online teaching activities forced me to learn new programs and new platforms, which help me to quickly create surveys among students or get immediate feedback.

– To change my attitude toward the class. While before I could observe the students' reactions and adjust my behavior or speech accordingly, now everything is based on the assumption that reactions to what I say do exist, albeit I have nearly no control over them. This is why I ask the group far more questions now. Through them, I try to get the feedback I need in order to continue.

One of the prejudices that we had been inoculated with over years of academic training and that I cultivated somewhat unconsciously as a teacher was that, in the field of communication, face-to-face interaction is indispensable and that any learning process involves more than virtual interaction on the internet. The last two years have made me wonder if that is really the case: if that condition that appeared as *sine qua non* to me before the pandemic is really absolutely indispensable. Hence the whole rethinking and restructuring that both I and my students were faced with in the virtual classroom. Obviously we faced not only new technology and new teaching techniques but also *a new paradigm of communication*, wherein many of those little examples of anecdotal personal data by which we used to define our acquaintances (appearance, way of moving, speech, perhaps even tone of voice or other things related to nonverbal communication) are now history. Today, both teachers and students face a computer screen, a mediated, sometimes distorted image of a person who is no longer with us; they are merely a pure virtual projection on their own computer screen. Was it the same before the pandemic? Was everything that seemed *real* just a projection on our mental screens? It is hard to say. What is certain is that in this *loneliness that is not loneliness*, in front of the screen, we experience a communication whose essence and purpose are real. We now live in a world wherein we perceive ourselves and are being perceived through the mediation of a virtuality that we have to believe in and in which, by believing in it, we function.

My fellow teachers also experienced the paradigm shift in communication. Most of them, like myself, made efforts to adapt; others simply refused the purely online form of education and found their own methods of communicating with students; yet others simply clicked with the new approach. We have all been confronted with an unprecedented expansion of a phenomenon that had more insidiously penetrated and spread into our lives over the previous twenty to thirty years. I am talking about the inescapable dependence of more and more aspects of our lives not only on the internet and technology but also on virtuality. Looking at it this way, I think it is safe to say that the years of the pandemic will radically change the whole structure of education. Why learn handwriting anymore when I

am going to use a keyboard all my life anyway? How long till kids stop learning how to write by hand and instead are taught only to type on a keyboard? Why learn math, when I can use a computer or even my phone to solve the most difficult computations? And maybe – why not – why should I study in an academic milieu when all information is now available on the internet? There are tutorials through which we "learn how": for instance, great pianists, guitarists, and others offer tutorials on how to play an instrument, and there are body language tutorials for presenters, teachers and students alike.

Likewise, we are on the verge of redefining not only the paradigm of communication but also *the status of the teacher*. In the face of students who sometimes have greater digital skills than ours, what should we do as communication teachers? Is there a breach in this virtual wall to justify our existence? Certainly, the breaches do not belong either to technology or to virtuality. I think they belong to what has been the basis of education since the ancient Greeks. What no machine can build is a value system. A machine can tell us if something is "done well" but not if it is good, or beautiful, or true. Ethics or axiology are more than philosophical area of study; they are the foundation of human activities. My future students will be communicators in public relations, journalism, and advertising. They will probably know very well how to do things. But what I think is our responsibility as teachers is to direct them to fundamental human values. With little imagination, any student of mine can launch fake news; but is it okay to do it? Is it morally right to distort facts? And in the end, doesn't the ugliness of producing fake news make the person who engages in such kinds of activities ugly, in their turn? Perhaps our role as teachers in this overwhelming virtuality is to educate others to propagate the maintenance of a real humanity.

2

Don't Take It Personally

Iasmina Giurgev

> People create stories create people; or rather stories create people create stories.
>
> <div align="right">Chinua Achebe</div>

This chapter is my first attempt at writing an autoethnography about the intercultural communication of a group of foreign students in Serbia. I will describe and analyze my reactions to the intercultural communication that took place online (via instant messaging) by use of a theoretical model of communication. The model, proposed by Baldwin et al. (2014), considers the individual, intergroup, and intercultural dimensions of groups. It builds on Barna's (1994) discussion of the stumbling blocks in intercultural communication caused by the assumption of similarity.

A long time ago, I decided that I would put my professional life in the service of intercultural communication, in my quest to understand human relationships. I have a keen interest in comprehending the stories that people create together. The funny part is that once we embark on the journey of knowing each other, we always analyze "the other" but not ourselves. We try to attribute meanings to the reactions of "*others*," to their words, gestures, worldviews, in our aim to understand what happens beyond the veil of our ignorance. We lack the courage to do the introspective work of asking ourselves who we are in the story of "*others*" and simply take for granted what we think we are in our own story. To understand others and interpret their actions and ways of being in general, we need knowledge; but to understand ourselves in relation to others, in addition to knowledge, we also need courage: the courage to convey our vulnerability in our social interactions. After all, how can we expect to know how to interpret the reactions of others if we take our own reactions for granted? How can we expect to become a part of the story and create common meanings if we do not know what we bring to the table?

One step forward, two steps back: Theoretical framework

The research method that I am going to use is autoethnography. The main purpose of this chapter is to help the reader to understand the urgency of expressing more vulnerability in academic writing. The reason for my choosing this method is my desire to raise new questions about some things that seem very well known, such as how we see others. This chapter opens a window onto an experience of vulnerability that, through the autoethnographic method, becomes a *shared* experience: "Autoethnography is predicated on the ability to invite readers into the lived experience of a presumed 'Other' and to experience it viscerally" (Stanley and Vass, 2018, 19).

Although autoethnography has gained more and more popularity among scholars, especially since the 1990s when it was made popular as a qualitative research method of inquiry by Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner and other communication scholars such as Tony E. Adam, Derek Bolen, Stacy Holman Jones, and Anne Harris, the practice itself is not something new. In 1975, Heider coined "autoethnography" as a term describing the practice of members of a culture who engage in giving a written account of that culture. Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017) describe autoethnography as the process of self-reflection of a researcher who uses their personal experience to describe and explain the practices and beliefs that emerge at the intersections between the self and the social life. In the authors' words, "autoethnographers aim to show people the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner and Ellis, 2006, 111; quoted in Adams, Ellis, and Jones, 2017); "the autobiographical genre refers to writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, 739).

Thus, autoethnography became a method for using personal experience and reflexivity to examine cultural experiences in the field of communication (Adams, Ellis, and Jones, 2017). Because "all writing is socially situated, social scientists should have particular audiences and purposes in mind when they write" (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007, 3). I believe the same is true of humanities scholars. Accordingly, the audience that I have in mind for this chapter is anyone who is interested in understanding intercultural communication at the interpersonal level and who is prepared to confront their vulnerability throughout the process of understanding: "To get the sort of deep emotional terrain that moves your reader into your story, you have to be open to emotional vulnerability yourself" (Gullion, 2016, 25).

Intercultural communication is a process of sharing messages between people with different cultural backgrounds (different worldviews, gender roles, and even ways of communicating and showing emotions), wherein communication partners bring their own identities to the exchange as producers and consumers of messages (Baldwin et al., 2014). The process of communication takes place on the different levels of intergroup communication and interpersonal communication. The two are intertwined. We perceive others as members of a group and "read" them as such when we decide how to communicate with them. We negotiate our positions regarding their group pertinence, and we decide whether to accept them or not and whether to try and get to know them better on the interpersonal level. The interpersonal dimension reflects the degree to which we perceive the other person as an individual. This aspect is of key importance, "because it reminds us that even if we are speaking with members of other groups or cultures, we are ultimately speaking to or listening to media created by individuals, who will both reflect and differ from their culture" (Baldwin et al., 2014, 62). This dimension gives us the ability to get to know others in various life circumstances and through a plethora of shared experiences.

When we refer to the intergroup level, we understand our perceptions, feelings, and prejudices about the other solely from the position of a group member. Finally, the last dimension, the intercultural level, is the level whereby we deal with differences in values and worldviews, which trigger all aspects of communication, from verbal to nonverbal perception of gender roles and so forth. The nature of all interactions between individuals can be thought of in terms of these three dimensions.

In their social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner (1986) explain that perceiving others is a continuum that ranges from the interpersonal at one end to the intergroup at the other: "They argue that we always see people, at least in part, in terms of the groups to which they belong" (Baldwin et al., 2014, 61–62; see also their three-axis model). It often happens that in conflict situations, we perceive the individual only as a group member and attribute to them all the characteristics of that group. But what happens in a friendship relation situation? According to social identity theory, we perceive close communication partners (friends or lovers) mostly in terms of our personal experiences with them. As we get to know them better and engage in shared experience, we get to see them more and more as individuals, but group appurtenances can still weigh heavily on our minds.

Intergroup and interpersonal communication were treated as two separate dimensions by Gudykunst and Lim (1986) when they analyzed

them in the context of close relationships. According to them, when two people from different cultural groups are friends, they validate each other as persons (based on individual characteristics), on the one hand, and each validates the group to which the other belongs, on the other hand.

Intercultural contact is never easy. It involves the ability to give up on something (something that you perceive as true) in order to receive something else in return. It is like a game that you play without knowing what you will get in return. You have to venture into the unknown. In order to get the courage to do that, you look for clues that seem familiar to you; you look for similarities. This is how you can in fact engage in intercultural contact and take on the interpersonal communication process. Barna (1994) lists a few stumbling blocks to communication, of which the assumption of similarity is ranked first on the list. We tend to assume that we all are the same simply because we are all people, and therefore we have the same basic needs and emotions. Through such an assumption, the discomfort of dealing with differences is reduced. However, "Since there seem to be no universals that can be used as a basis for automatic understanding, we must treat each encounter as an individual case, searching for whatever perceptions and communication means are held in common, and proceed from there" (Barna, 1994, 337). Barna also suggests that the confidence that comes as a consequence of believing in the myth of similarity is a lot stronger than the kind of attitude people build on the assumption that they are different. Nevertheless, it is only by accepting these differences and reactions that interpretations and communication in general may be adjusted to the other person and their story.

In the following, I will look at how the assumption of similarity influenced my way of communicating and acting in a specific circumstance. In my autoethnographic account, I reflect on my experiences of engaging in a verbal conflict that took place in a WhatsApp group around August 2020. I will discuss the natural and uncontrolled thoughts that emerge in a conflict situation where people from different cultures are implicated. I will describe and reflect on my own actions and my own way of perceiving others in that conflict situation.

How I "read" others and how others "read" me

It was February 2014 when I first arrived in Serbia and met my new colleagues who, just like me, were going to study in Belgrade. I was thrilled, because I had never met so many foreigners (non-Europeans) in one place

before. I remember that I felt I was lucky: I had new colleagues around me from many countries in Africa and Asia to live among and get to know better. I felt like I had an advantage over those students … or so I thought. My advantage was that I had a clue, at least in theory, about what was going to happen when intercultural contact occurs. Until then, I used to pay lots of attention to the way I looked at the "*other*" person, to the questions that I would ask them or I would not, to when and how I should express curiosity. I tried to make any novelty or cultural peculiarity seem normal, even if sometimes, integrating such things into my own normality was difficult.

Yet, as Barna (1994) states, the tendency to evaluate others in terms of approval or disapproval, instead of trying to fully understand the reasons behind their actions or thoughts "prevents the open-minded attention needed to look at the attitudes from the other's point of view and behavior patterns" (Barna, 1994, 342). In my mind the idea was imprinted that it would be easier to communicate if I focused on similarities, rather than differences. However, the best intentions may be a trap: "One answer to the question of why misunderstanding and/or rejection occurs is that many people naively assume there are sufficient similarities among peoples of the world to make communication easy" (Barna, 1994, 336). And this is how my story begins, with the best intentions.

At the time, I already had a certain level of fluency in Serbian, I was already accustomed to the Serbian ways of communicating, and I was in an intercultural communication doctoral program. Even though no one asked me for help, I felt like it was my duty to help others to integrate, to reveal part of the culture and ways of thinking of the Serbs. At the same time, I observed how my colleagues interacted with each other, building friendships most often with their country-mates or with other foreign students. They were all looking for similarities, such as a common language or religion or even academic major. As I voluntarily took on the role and responsibility of *the cultural mediator*, I gained respect among my foreign colleagues and my opinion was often taken into account whenever we, the foreign students, encountered any difficulty.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caught us in Belgrade, in the student dorms. The local students were sent back to their homes in order to avoid congestion. We, the foreign students, were the only ones left. All we had was each other. There is a feeling of appurtenance that grows in people when they have to face difficult life situations such as quarantine, survival on little money, depression and anxiety regarding school obligations, or even the illness or death of their colleagues. Those foreign students became

my extended family, especially when I had no contact, except for online, with my loved ones. We were all there for each other, supporting each other when our relatives back home were suffering (most of the time sick with Covid-19).

Soon after the pandemic struck, one of my friends from Antigua (B.) asked me to create a support group on WhatsApp in order to keep all the foreign students connected. We already had a group on Facebook and I was one of the admins, but that group was mostly used for posting updates relating to our studies, programs, stipends, etc. It had more of an administrative purpose and therefore, students were not so eager to exchange messages there. The purpose of this new group, however, was communication itself! Our intention was to connect the foreign students, to find out what happened to them on a daily basis, and to offer support. We all received a letter from the Ministry of Education, whereby we were informed that we were not left alone and that the student restaurant would continue to function despite the critical situation … but there was a lack of real support. Our stipends were late for months. Given the new restrictions and short opening hours of the grocery stores, we had to organize to shop once a week or so, when we were so short of money.

Once I had created the WhatsApp group, two colleagues from Cape Verde contacted me immediately to ask me to find a way to help with sanitizers, masks, and gloves. They suggested an appeal for donations, to make sure that each of us had the basics to protect ourselves from the virus. The girls next door thought that it would be best if I wrote this call for donations. "They all know you," they said. We organized the donations in a noninvasive way, so that the students who needed help remained anonymous. People were asked to contact me or one of the girls from Cape Verde (E.). In no time, our WhatsApp group became the provider of everything we needed, from hygiene products to food to notebooks. When we had enough money from donations, we would cook "African food" and distribute it to the students who were more in need or who had got sick after eating small portions of food from the student restaurant. I believe that it one of best foods, because the African students prepared it with love.

After a prolonged period of quarantine, a lot of administrative problems appeared that needed immediate resolution. In our chats, we often tackled these topics and a few times we even wrote letters to the authorities in the name of all the foreign students who were a part of the "World in Serbia" and "Serbia for the Serbs in the region" projects. We, the older, more experienced students, wrote and distributed the letters to the authorities after

the WhatsApp group had decided to make official attempts to signal our situation. In the beginning no one wanted to sign the letters, because no one wanted to take responsibility for the possible unpleasant consequences. A student from the previous generation of the project, H. from Burundi, and I were the only ones who were willing to take the risk. I was also responsible for translating the letters, sending the emails, and taking the printed letters to the responsible institutions. As I said, I felt responsible for making the adaptation of my fellow colleagues easier. However, H., who was already a Ph.D., did most of the posting. I was perceived as someone who was there mainly for support, while my colleague was perceived as someone who could take decisions on behalf of the foreign students. Depending on who saw or commented on my posts, I was able to estimate whether my ideas would be supported or not. Despite how much I tried, I could not imagine that certain colleagues of mine, who were more conservative or who came from a more collectivistic society, were also a part of the group. It was all a process of trying to control myself and my own thoughts and avoid labeling people or attributing their characteristics to the entire group.

In time, the foreign students, who felt free to discuss any topic, became more and more active in the WhatsApp exchange. However, it happened that I would read racist posts too. A colleague from an African country posted a photo of little boy with a skin color and eye shape characteristic of East Asia and the text: "We don't want this in Africa." His post was a response to some news relating to the business investments that China was about to make in Africa. Some students were deleted from the group by other administrators, because they engaged in hate speech or posted videos where violence against women was portrayed as a joke. Another time, there was rumor that we all would be kicked out of our dorms and moved to other student dorms with worse living conditions. The students were desperate and started to make assumptions, such as "They want us out of their country." It was always me who tried to keep the balance and explain that, in situations like ours, it is easy to make inaccurate assumptions, especially because we had no official information from the Ministry. Unfortunately, in my attempt keep things balanced I was perceived as someone who took *the side of the other*. One colleague from Tanzania called me and said: "I know you have a big heart and you want to help, but I also know you have your preferences, you are not like us. But deep in your heart, you are a good woman."

As time passed and our attempts to get answers from the authorities failed, my friend B. proposed that we write one more letter, this time more complex, and send it to more institutions, including the prime minister. We

did not send that letter to the prime minister in the end, but I made sure that it got onto the table of all the other institutions that could possibly give us a hand. At first, I was reluctant to pursue the idea: I was so tired with my own life … I was fighting anxiety and depression … I had my own problems relating to school … I had no energy to find solutions to my own issues: I did not feel strong enough to deal with the issues of others. But I told myself that if I was not brave enough to face my own problems, the least I could do was help others solve theirs. I promised myself that it would be the last time I got involved. It was indeed, but it did not end as I expected.

My friend B. decided to discuss the topic of the letter in the WhatsApp group. The main topics of conversation at the time were health insurance and the stipend (which was months late again). My friend Dr. H. – as the students called him – thought that discussing this particular issue was not a good idea and did not get involved. However, B. and I managed to write the letter in two days. I then delivered it to every institution that it was addressed to, and also requested registration numbers as proof of posting for each document that I sent. The same day, after I returned from the city, I posted the stamped letters on Facebook for everyone to be able to read them. From there, things went down the drain, and seeing this was a painful experience for me. In less than one day, I became "just another Serb." First I was excluded from the Facebook group. When I wanted to post the letters on the WhatsApp group, I discovered that I could not post anything there anymore. Some of the administrators who were country-mates decided that I could not take decisions for the majority and coordinate a group, given that, all of a sudden, I had become a minority. In fact, I was the only student from Romania, and pretty much the only student from "Serbs for the Serbs from the region" who was active on the WhatsApp group. Days later, I was deleted from the WhatsApp group altogether. There was a debate between the students on whether I could still be a part of the group or not. A day before, the last message I saw was: "She is not one of us." I felt excluded. I was also too exhausted to explain others that I had never had any special treatment, that I was just like them: a foreigner. I found myself referring to my colleagues as "them" and using generalizations such as "Nigerians," "Palestinians," etc. when in fact I knew the names of those whom I was talking about. My friends from Cape Verde and B. kept me informed about the exchanges after my deletion from the group. That way, I learned that a meeting had been organized to decide whether I could join the group again or not. Ultimately, the group discussed whether other people in my project group should continue to be accepted as part of the foreigners' group!

In the meantime, I also received private messages from my friends and acquaintances. What was common to all those messages was that they said, "Don't take it personally." I remember one message from my friend from Nigeria, where she tried to make me understand: "Don't take it personally, this is not about you, but about the students in your project. You know, they are not like you." I was tired of getting so many messages and I decided to close the account and return home.

It was after Christmas 2020 when Dr. H. let me know that he had just returned from a meeting where they had discussed whether the people in my project – and especially me, as I was basically the only active one – should be accepted as part of the group again. Dr. H. told me that he had insisted that I be allowed to return. For the millionth time, I heard the sentences, "Don't take it personally. It was never about you, they had bad experiences with the people in your project." Then I realized that I was the labeled one! Up until that very moment, I had no idea how others saw me. And I labeled them in my turn: I told Dr. H that I was not interested in being a part of the foreigners' group anymore. I had forgotten all about those people whom I used to know personally and I ended up perceiving them solely as a group.

I was wrong from the beginning: I assumed that because all of us were students, we all had the same needs and ways of dealing with problems that involved the authorities. I assumed that the best-case scenario for all of us was to find quick solutions together. I did not think that students from certain collectivistic cultures would perceive my initiatives as rude. I also assumed that the foreign students would never see me as a Serb, given that we had the same problems, which we needed to face together as foreign students. Half a year later, I joined the WhatsApp group again: I was accepted with 52 percent of votes in my favor. And then I met a new colleague from Grenada. When I let him know what my name was he said, "Iasmina? I remember now! There was a huge fuss in the group about you. I did not take your side back then; you know … since you're not in our project, I didn't want to get involved."

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3

THE DAYS WHEN I THOUGHT
I HAD LOST MYSELF

ANDRADA CALIOPE IACOBICI

People live every day of their lives with the confidence that they have everything under control. Their parents are healthy, their studies or jobs are fulfilling, their friends are with them, and they feel … just happy. But … at what point do they realize that they are, in fact, solely small beings thrown into this world? Helpless people who have no choice but to adapt to the unpredictability of life? The years 2020 and 2021 were a turning point whereby people realized that they had no power whatsoever in the face of certain events that in the twenty-first century had so far been found only in movies. Until the pandemic struck at the beginning of 2020, I did not realize how powerless I could be in a crisis situation, despite my stubbornness. These years have instilled in me not only a constant fear for my own life and the lives of my loved ones but also an anger at how the pandemic "cut my wings off" when I was just beginning to open them and let me fall into a void.

I was in my first year of college when this madness came upon us. That was when I had started to figure out who I was and what I could do. I stepped enthusiastically into the university hallways and looked forward to socializing, but also to learning as much as I could about the field that represents my passion: advertising. All it took was a statement by the president of Romania for all my dreams to shatter.

Now, I am in my third and final year in college and I am still looking from a distance at the building where I once started to dream about an amazing future. Instead, all the classes moved online, career opportunities dwindled, and human interaction struck ground zero. Suddenly, my life was reduced to four walls and a laptop. Each day was the same. I would wake up, eat breakfast, participate in the online courses, then I would do my homework, and the following day I would start all over again. Each week,

each month was the same, as if I were a robot without any dreams or goals whatsoever.

One day I remembered my younger self: the girl that I was before my college years. I was looking at the future with naïve eyes, hopeful that one day I would be somebody. That memory was the epiphany that I needed in order to do something with my life. So what if this life-threatening pandemic exists? Why do I have to give up on being a human with potential because of it? I put a stop to all my negative thoughts and I fought for the opportunities I deserved. I studied for each exam that I had, even though they were online. I stayed up during the nights to finish all the homework that I received from my professors. Apparently, homework was the only solution that, when the pandemic started, our professors were able to find in order to teach us online what they could not teach us in face-to-face interaction. The whole educational system turned upside down and we, the students, could not do anything else besides keeping up with the endless changes.

Fortunately, I was and still am one of the lucky ones who do not need to pay a tuition fee, but how about the students that have to pay thousands in order to get an education? Besides the fact that we cannot enjoy all the facilities that our university provides, we have no choice but to learn by ourselves things that we should have learned with the help of the faculty and the technology. For example, I am a student of advertising, an area of specialization for which competence in the Adobe programs is an important asset in my future career. Everybody knows those programs are very expensive and challenging because of their format, but also because of the number of things that one can do with them. Even though my professors did their best to show me and teach me how to use them, I ended up learning most of the things that I know on YouTube. However, this is not the main issue. Getting an Adobe license is! The university did not give us, students, a magic code that would provide the programs for free. Until recently, we could not even use the university computers. We had to find solutions by ourselves.

Education is important, is it not? Think about those students with low income that live in deplorable conditions. The only way for them to get an education was to leave their families and the place they call home. Now, they cannot do that anymore. They wait for the state to help them, but everybody knows that some of them will be left out. This is the world we live in nowadays and it is not as beautiful as it once was.

We, the students, struggle on our own to find places where we can get real work experience, even though the university administrators promised to offer lists of companies where we could practice what we learned. I was really upset when, in my second year of study, that turned out to be just an unfulfilled promise. In the beginning, I was very excited, thinking that I would get a chance to work in my field, but the pandemic shattered my excitement. I had to find by a place to work by myself. I asked my acquaintances if they knew an advertising department or agency here, in town, but no one could help. Even my mother asked some of her colleagues from work and when she eventually found a small company that produced posters and custom merchandise for me, I was watched with suspicion there.

I got the same treatment at the second small company I tried to work for. The owner had some kind of an illness and he did not want to risk his life. Even though he agreed to help me remotely, it was not the same as if I had been there, by his side. In the end, I got a little experience in creating posters for a student organization where I volunteered. It was not until last summer that I could get real work experience in a company. That was in marketing; albeit it is not exactly my field, it gave me the opportunity to learn how life treats an independent adult. I worked four hours a day and I could choose to work from home or from the office. Some weeks I went there, to the company, which was nearly empty because of the restrictions, while other weeks I worked from home, where I was also alone.

The pandemic showed me how little I was, compared with the unknown of the world. During the past two years, I could not accomplish what I had in mind. I could not get the experience I wanted. However, even though the current reality broke my heart, I learned certain valuable lessons. I am more powerful and more determined now to get what I want, despite its being difficult and frightening. I am still fighting to achieve my dream. The pandemic will not prevent me from becoming an advertising specialist, and it should not stop anyone else from achieving their own goals.

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Injustice is everywhere: down your street, around your apartment, in your friends' life, or even in your home. Every second, someone is the victim of the cruelty of human beings. Regardless of the country one lives in or the history of one's family, everybody feels the anger that comes in response to such an experience.

Romania is not an exception. As a Romanian citizen, I have seen many cases of injustice around me and it has happened that I have been a victim of injustice more than once, but nothing compares to the unjust events that the pandemic made possible. I witnessed how someone's dream can be shattered. Why? Because most of my fellow citizens do not accept difference. To them, difference is wrong, period. Expressing yourself freely is wrong too. Coming up with new and useful ideas is also wrong. But are there things that are not wrong? Being like everyone else, with the same goals in life, the same values, and the same thinking – that is not wrong. If the public mind senses that someone is different, they will expel that person.

That happened to one of my teachers. She had a different opinion about the educational system and she was fearless in articulating it publicly. She expressed herself without hesitation. She cared about her students in a way that nobody else did and she gave her entire time to what she loved the most, namely her career. In twelve years of being in college, I did not see a more dedicated teacher than her. She was like a breath of fresh air in a defective educational system where we, the students, must learn what we read, but not think about what we have read. The first meeting with this new teacher was like a promise that we all were going to find a place where we could share our thoughts freely, without being judged! But Covid-19, instead of becoming a reason for people to be more considerate to each other and to give a hand to those in need, turned out to be an excuse for the university to get rid of this unique professor.

How could that happen? Let us return in time to the second year of my journey as a student, when people accepted the existence of the virus. The schools and the universities were closed. Going out for any reason meant wearing a protective mask. At that time, the vaccines were yet to be invented. During the previous semester (and the first of the pandemic), the faculty had learned that giving students lots of homework was not really helpful, so each professor adapted to the situation to the best of their ability and understanding. The management of the university established a rule whereby all classes would use Google Meet as a platform of interaction. Professors and students alike were to have their cameras and microphones on throughout the meetings. The course materials and the homework were to be posted on Google Classroom or on the university's platform. There was no acceptable exception to that rule.

However, there was a lot of misunderstanding about this new rule and internal communication was poor. My teacher communicated with her students through emails. Her requirements for passing the classes were that

each person should express their opinion about the subject matter in writing in their own time, not in scheduled meetings online. Therefore, she did not teach on Google Meet, but that did not mean that she was not teaching. She made a different choice than the rest of the professors, while keeping in mind what was best for her students.

The management of the university thought that her insubordination was the best opportunity for them to silence a voice that was capable of speaking freely. They canceled her work contract without taking into consideration the fact that she had worked there for seventeen years. They did not even think about her students or the advantages of her way of teaching. All they cared about was the fact that she was different.

What was even worse was that it all happened in the middle of the semester. We, the students of advertising, did not take her classes that year, but many other students did. They all went through big changes: new professors, new ways of teaching, and new requirements. If you put yourself in their shoes, can you feel the pressure of keeping up with such a fast pace? Who thought about those students? Nobody. Later, in my final year, I had the same experience: my professor on a course changed, because this teacher fought for her beliefs. She won the case in court. She returned to us, to her rights, and to her dream of being a teacher. She was alone against the corrupt system and showed that, even in a restrictive world, the heart and mind win.

The pandemic brought to light the shortcomings of the educational system in my country. No wonder many students leave Romania in order to get a better education. I am one of them. The pandemic helped me to discover a desire that I was not previously aware of: to leave my family in exchange for living abroad and having meaningful educational experiences. That was not even a thought before, but now it is something that I cannot take my mind off. Covid-19 opened my eyes. It helped me to realize that I can be and do more! My teacher's experience helped me to understand that I have the right to defend myself, may the whole world stand against me. I lost myself during this unforgettable period of time, but I also found a side of me that I am certain I would not have found in normal circumstances. Better fight with a smile on your face than give in to the need to cry!

4

THE LEGAL AND THE HUMAN: SPOTLIGHTING SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH MEMOIRIST WRITING

LANE IGOUDIN

A word sometimes is a turning point. But which word?

How did Linda communicate her growing acceptance of us as her parents, the dissolution of her bond with Señora Teresa? What cries did Nikki use to convey her joy or distress? What exactly did Jenna say at the visit? How did I respond?

Memory keeps the overall content of what was said, the reactions it elicited, the actions it led to, though rarely holds the exact words. A general awareness lives on many years later, but not the baby steps that led up to the milestones. It helps that I kept a diary, saved the faxes, the emails, the paperwork – something more tangible than memories to rely on, if only to keep them locked up in the years that followed.

My memories of those days are like faded frescos, slowly coming into focus, emerging in their full drama only to dissolve back into the discolored plaster, and phase out into a long dissonance. Some images are etched with the precision of three-dimensional grooves; others uncertain, the attribution of words or actions wavering. A dissonance that keeps me trawling the murky waters of time.

An excerpt from my memoir *A Family, Maybe* (Igoudin 2022), deleted from the final draft

Ethnography, a scientific method of inquiry, is commonly understood as two-fold: "a descriptive study of a particular human society, or the process of making such a study" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). An ethnographer attempts to uncover deeper meaning through the description of data obtained from research subjects, and through reflection interpreting it. In the study of language and literature, including creative writing, an

ethnographic inquiry describes some stable features of language practices, and the relationships between these features and their social context (Blommaert, 2015, 2).

According to the sociologist Jack Mezirow, however, ethnographic observations and conclusions are never neutral, but are conducted through the lens of the researcher's meaning perspectives: a set of distinctive principles, which vary according to the researcher's stages of moral, ethical, and ego development, as well as their capacity for reflective judgment (Mezirow, 1990, 2). Uncovering meaning perspectives can reveal biases, such as behaviorist, feminist, Freudian, Marxist, neo-conservative, or positivist, that influence how the ethnographer chooses to depict and interpret observed language practices.

Reflection, including self-reflection, becomes critical, when it allows us to "elaborate, further differentiate, and reinforce our long-established frames of reference or to create new meaning schemes" (Mezirow, 1990, 2). These frames and schemes through which we make sense of the world include values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and fundamental worldview concepts, e.g., autonomy, commitment, democracy, freedom, justice, love, and labor (Mezirow, 1990, 3).

In an autoethnographic study, an ethnographer utilizes self-reflection to observe their transformation through the act of the study of their own experience, including the transformation of their meaning perspectives.

The subject of this study is *A Family, Maybe: A Turbulent Journey to Adoptive Fatherhood* (Igoudin 2022) – a memoir written by the present researcher, a trained linguist and a writing instructor. The memoir itself is ethnographic, describing, qualitatively and reflectively, a specific sociocultural phenomenon – the formation of a gay adoptive family in the US in the early 2000s in relation to the sociopolitical context of the time. The present analytical chapter is autoethnographic in nature, attempting to reveal the writer's meaning perspectives as well as dialogic relationships between the writer as a participant in a social process (public adoption) and the process itself.

To add another layer of complexity to the study, *A Family, Maybe* is not simply a text narrating a personal experience but a literary work, striving to match Vivian Gornick's definition of a literary memoir as "a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience,