

Self-Reflexivity Is/As Resistance

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My shoulders were tight from the heavy weight I had to carry at the young age of five. My little brain was constantly challenged every weekday from early morning until the school bell would announce a brief break before I had to revisit the books once again at home. My eyes were strained, gathering as much knowledge as they could until they were allowed to retire for the night. Soon, the sun rises, marking another day when I would do it all over again. And weekends only meant more time with books, reading, writing, and drilling.

Growing up, I was conditioned to be productive and to work hard. Arabic sayings such as “foul are the idle hands,” and “those who work hard, succeed; those who sow the seeds, harvest” were often reiterated in my Egyptian household. Hard work became my dedication, my motivation, the source of my value, my self-worth. And nothing is meant to stand in the way of me being productive—not even family obligations. My parents, like most middle-class, college-educated Egyptians, saw a solid education as a panacea. One main asset of that solid education is gaining fluency in at least one additional language—particularly English, French, or German—on top of our native Arabic. To gain such fluency, I was sent to a Catholic, all-English school. By fourth grade, I added French as a third language, and in college, I studied German as a fourth language. Knowing so many languages did not make me any more special or prepared than my peers who share my social and economic statuses, and whose parents were first-generation college students. We, Egyptians, perceive language acquisition as a way out—out of a country that was colonized for too many years to retain an appreciation of its own Arabic, out of a limited and limiting income bracket that crushes one’s potential, out to pursue the American dream. That fascination with languages is, indeed, one of the consequences of colonization. Taken to an extreme, our fascination turns into a misconception that speaking in tongues is evidence of modernity. But that pursuit of modernity mandates hard work. So, for me, work always came first.

That drive, I presume, is probably what gravitated me toward academia in the first place. Realizing now how intellectually demanding, emotionally daunting, and psychologically draining academia can be, I understand why I chose it as a career. Scholarship, teaching, and service: they are my source of bliss, my calling, as well as the root of my anxiety attacks—all at the same time and not necessarily in this order. That anxiety, though, is what I have always perceived as a healthy exercise. It is the anxiety that fuels and sustains my productivity. A sustained productivity keeps me normal, keeps me sane. And any disruption to that normalcy throws off my rhythm and breaks me down, all while inciting my self-guilt. That typical looming manuscript submission deadline, that infamous growing pile of student papers, that additional committee to serve on—all spike my heart rate and anxiety level—the healthy anxiety. It is only when something interferes with my productivity that I experience the other kind of anxiety—the destructive kind. Then, I catch myself gasping for air.

Though that breathing difficulty is not associated with COVID-19 on a medical level, the pandemic has definitely accentuated my anxiety and panic attacks, particularly during the first few weeks of the lockdown. To my surprise, as time went by, anxiety was replaced with clarity—clarity to perceive the problematics of not only the academy, but also of my own labor practices.

My first reaction to institutional orders to self-quarantine was a sense of denial—not of the fact that the world is facing a global crisis, but of the fact that I have lost grip. I was in denial of the fact that post-COVID-19 times brought about a new understanding of normalcy and what that notion entails. Like most academics who work against the tenure clock, I saw a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in the lockdown. I left campus on March 13 not only with hopes to maintain my pre-COVID-19 productivity levels, but with aspirations to exceed such expectations. That is how delusional I was. Those aspirations were induced and further complicated by institutional and academic expectations of productivity. The promise of time abundance during the quarantine solidified my then-delusional state of mind only to realize my inability to accomplish even the pre-COVID-19 baseline productivity levels. And then self-guilt set in. Since I was slow to realize that the meaning of normalcy is shifting, I experienced a creeping sense of guilt that I was not making use of all the time that the lockdown afforded me. What complicated that sense of guilt was observations of

fellow academics who were maintaining a daily writing regimen—exactly like they did pre-COVID-19. In honesty, their chameleon powers still mesmerize me. And those unhealthy comparisons between my dismal adaptation to post-COVID-19 new normal and the adaptation of others were not only maddening, but also counterproductive. I spent more time drawing comparisons than being productive. That abundance of time—though it did not allow me to be over productive—definitely afforded me self-reflexivity. Though I discovered I was continually incapable of achieving daily tasks, let alone being over productive, I began to realize the bliss of slowing down.

Being forced to actually sit down, take a deep breath, and watch my own life—for the first time—I got to experience my own life as a viewer, instead of an active agent; as an acted upon, instead of an actor. That sense of helplessness imposed by the virus turned out to be an eye-opener, providing me a clearer vision of my labor practices that were informed by my Egyptian upbringing, with its emphasis on perpetual productivity, and later reinforced by the American academy. It was like a curtain had been lifted to afford me clarity of vision. I found myself questioning academia's precipitancy—that tendency to place quantity before quality, to value the act of being productive over pondering, reflecting on, dwelling upon, and carefully examining (whether that is data or pedagogy or committee decisions). I found myself constantly working against the tenure timeclock rather than spending time with my research or pedagogy. And the quarantine afforded me the privileges of slowing down, of reflecting on my academic work habits, without worrying about my financial situation or employment stability. Unlike over forty million who have been impacted by the crisis, I am infinitely grateful that my academic status afforded me such privilege. The deeper I reflected on my work habits, the more I came to discover about myself as an academic as well as about academia and the profession. Soon, I realized that what I have always perceived as healthy anxiety is not healthy after all. I realized that it is perfectly fine to pause, to take a break, to slow down. I started to question academia's rush for productivity: we valorize it, and prioritize it over even our mental health. The reactions to the lockdown were a collective denial that that hierarchy cannot hold during a state of national emergency—denial that the right questions we should have been asking one another should not be about the progression of our writing and research agendas, but about our state of mind.

And I would not have discovered the bliss of reflecting during these difficult times had it not been for the prompted reflections that Cs' Documentarian role took the shape of following the conference's cancellation due to the pandemic. It was through those reflections that I was able to peek through a window to a sense of acceptance that slowly replaced denial, anxiety, and guilt that rippled as a consequence of the lockdown. Not only that, but the sense of solidarity experienced through those reflections was an additional privilege at a time when the majority of the nation experienced a lack thereof. The call for Documentarians to reflect on that particular moment in history created a sense of belonging and solidarity: knowing that all Documentarians are going through the same reflective exercises made me realize how tight the community is, which is a privilege that not all professions offer. And that sense of community and belonging, I have to admit, was much needed in that particular moment when loneliness and fear were the predominant emotions. That sense of normalcy, though fleeting, helped me during the journey toward acceptance—as I compose this reflection, about three months into the lockdown, it is finally sinking in that normalcy as we used to know and experience it is something from the past. It will be eventually replaced with a new normal that we may imagine now but will not fully comprehend until social isolation is lifted and we get to actually occupy other spaces than our homes. Though that sense of normalcy was fleeting, the reflective exercises that that moment created raised my consciousness about the true power of reflection as an act of resilience. While uncertainty can be maddening for most, engaging in reflective writing, I discovered, offers some clarity to the self and of the self, a way of making sense, of understanding the un-understandable.

In one of the reflective entries, I articulated the benefits of self-reflective writing, stating “daily reflections are helping me regain control over my own life, especially since I am aware that I have no control over the chaos outside my own house or beyond the self.” Now, that sense of control presented itself in a heightened metacognitive awareness of my mental health as well as of the physical movements and practices that promote a healthy mindset. For instance, in the first reflection I expressed hopes to “forgive myself when I do not achieve as much as I am used to during regular work days. . . . [admitting that] It is a learning curve.” In the evening of this same day, nonetheless, I fluctuated to despair and guilt when I expressed my failure to meet

the personal expectation “to compose more than three paragraphs” on that day. My metacognitive awareness of my mental health also shows when I realize that “I am constantly having to remind myself that it is okay to listen to my anxiety and practice selfcare, [admitting] that it is easier said than done.” Reflecting on my time management strategies in the second reflection, I noted that “my perception of the rigidity of [my hour-by-hour] plans has become more lenient and forgiving,” identifying such self-forgiveness as selfcare. That evening, I admitted, “Even though the writing is happening slower than it does in normal working days, it is still happening—those little accomplishments I am learning to celebrate.” As much as I started celebrating small writing progress, I celebrated my ability to take breaks from work and actually learn to spend “quality time with my spouse and Teebah, our dog,” such as making a special dinner and baking bread with my spouse, watching a movie, or “bak[ing] a cherry pie for some indulgence [that] weekend.” Another prominent pattern I noticed in all nine reflections pertains to my physical movement. In my post-reflection entry, I realized a particular pattern in my previous reflections:

I found myself consistently mentioning Teebah, our dog, and how the notion of taking her for walks—an act that used to be a chore—is now “an out” from the quarantine. Since going on walks is one of the few outdoor activities still permitted, I found myself perceiving Teebah as the actor and myself as the acted upon. I used structures such as “taking walks with Teebah” rather than “walking the dog/Teebah.” The walks became something I look forward to. They are reminiscent of normalcy.

But the yearning for normalcy as we once knew it does not dissipate, I now realize. Yearning for normalcy becomes particularly evident when I engage in mundane activities. Grocery shopping became an activity to equally dread and look forward to. Taking the risk of bringing home an infection, along with the groceries, is the one predominant thought I have every time I don my mask and gloves, and reach out for our reusable grocery bags. It might sound overly dramatic to admit that those motions, which are now part of the ritual, often bear a close resemblance to patriotism—only the country here is my own home, and the sustenance and safety of its residents is my duty. But that sense of patriotism is never pure and hardly altruistic. It is usually tainted with a selfish drive that is borderline celebratory.

Home—a privilege morphed into a prison. And leaving its confinement, though precarious, feels liberating, with a promise of temporary normalcy as we once knew it.

The pandemic particularly raised my awareness of my privileges as a tenure-track academic who does not have to worry about the next paycheck. My institution has not resorted to furloughs or layoffs—yet. There is always a yet. There is always uncertainty. But, right now, I am grateful for not being contingent, and that gratitude is a constant reminder about the status of my contingent peers who might be struggling to pay rent or make ends meet. My privilege is in a sense a reminder about the status of the academy—an academy that is embedded in capitalism, pretending that, despite the pandemic, it is business as usual, that our classes should seamlessly move online, and that our writing productivity is expected to hold—regardless of our privilege or lack thereof.

The very act of composing this reflection is an epitome of that urge for productivity—that urge that I was conditioned to for as long as I could recall. Productivity is my normalcy. In fact, it is because of such conditioning to be productive that it became my normalcy. My Egyptian upbringing equipped me with a thick skin for hard work and productivity in adverse conditions. I was taught from a young age that doing the minimum is not an option if I am to fully utilize my potential, attain upward mobility, or chase the American dream. That perseverance might have conditioned me to survive and thrive for nine consecutive years as a graduate student in America, earning two master's degrees and a doctorate, and then conjure the resilience (or gullibility) to make a conscious decision to seek a tenure-track position. Though that sense of perseverance that my parents instilled in me from a young age did condition me for hard work, it also desensitized me to the adverse psychological and mental consequences of that constant drive for productivity. That drive, since it is usually accompanied by a state of euphoria or intoxication, has blinded me to simple evident facts: I am almost always exhausted, I do not get enough deep sleep, I do not practice selfcare as deliberately or as often as I should, I am alienated from healthy socializations, and I do not spend much quality time with my spouse or with our puppy. Many might perceive my work habits as evidence of workaholism. And it took a global pandemic to sober me up. With the sudden change of space and pace, the lockdown forced me into a state of paralysis as I lost all control over

my labor practices. What made it even more difficult to be productive is the daily habits that I self-created: religiously listening to NPR and watching the PBS news hour every morning, then sinking into sadness and despondence for the rest of the day. It took me a few weeks before I decided that remaining informed cannot come at the hefty price of my mental health. Reaching such understanding, I maintained my distance from the news. In hindsight, immersing myself in pandemic-related news placed me in a vicious cycle of anxiety and lack of productivity. And it was not until I started to put my reflections in writing that I realized that a pandemic was the worst time to chase my own normal, pre-pandemic rates of productivity. It was also the moment that I realized the therapeutic element of reflective writing.

Not only that, but I realize now more than ever that being conditioned to be productive is a privilege. It was privilege that conditioned me to be over productive as a middle-class Egyptian child, and it is privilege that now allows me to expect, and actually enjoy, a more moderate rate of productivity at a time when it is difficult for most to find the energy to do so. Not only do I find reflective writing, and the act of writing for that matter, to be enjoyable, but I also find it comforting. Reflective writing, particularly the reflections required in light of the newly-envisioned Cs Documentarian role, offered me a space to clearly track my movement as well as tune in to my physical comfort and ways it informs my productivity as I changed my work space during the lockdown. My new practices do not happen organically (yet) and have to be consciously self-driven: I am now more deliberate about taking walks with Teebah, since I am now more aware of the ways those movements help maintain my sanity and, consequently, my productivity. Through those reflections, I am now more cognizant that I am one of those to whom selfcare does not come naturally; it has to be intentional and calculated. At the risk of sounding frivolous, I now schedule baths in addition to the merely functional daily showers; I regularly do home facials; I have learned to enjoy my morning coffee in the outdoor morning breeze instead of rushing to my computer first thing in the morning and going through cycles of repetitively microwaving my coffee till it eventually becomes undrinkable. Reflective writing provided me a window to understand not only myself and my labor practices as a scholar-instructor and an academic, but also the academy and what it values.

If I am to name one lesson I have learned from this global crisis, it would be the bliss of self-reflexivity: of slowing down to question our

individual labor practices, and of raising our awareness of our privileges (or lack thereof) as academics. Those privileges are meant to be shared with those who were particularly impacted by the pandemic and whose livelihood is threatened by its consequences. Though my experience is not generalizable, I doubt anyone could argue against the benefits of reflective writing and the value of constantly examining our own positionalities in any given situation. But if not all of us, academics, are privileged enough to be afforded the time and energy to reflect on the ways our productivity might have been impacted by the pandemic, then it is the responsibility of the privileged of us to ensure that our campuses have the resources to support the mental health of faculty members, particularly contingent faculty. Mental health awareness, support, and resources are even more vital now than ever. And perhaps it is time for all of us to slow down and exercise self care and mindfulness. If this is not the right time, I am not sure when.