



Academia must recentre embodied and uncomfortable knowledge

When academics ‘westplain’ Russia’s war against Ukraine, they reinforce a culture of detachment. We must not ignore the embodied knowledge of war, writes Darya Tsymbalyuk.

Credit: Photograph by Ahmed Abozaid

When the escalation of the war against Ukraine started, I felt constantly nauseous, no matter if I stood still or walked, ate something or skipped food. Our bodies are vessels of knowledge. Safety and security are bodily experiences; they are experienced differently when you are in Ukraine, and even when you are from Ukraine but living abroad. Representation matters because knowledge is embodied, and different bodies carry different memories and different perceptions. Underestimating embodied knowledge creates a blind spot that leads to the West’s nonurgent response of pacifism and peace negotiations, while people of Ukraine insist on being given more military aid instead. This is exactly where ‘westplaining’, a toxic tendency of Western experts to ignore local knowledge while explaining Eastern European contexts, fails in its arrogance and privilege. The embodied memory is also what both the West and Russia overlooked in their calculations of the fall of Kyiv. Ukraine is a country that has a bodily memory of civic resistance that achieved its goals (heartbreakingly, at the cost of many lives) — the revolution of 2013–2014. That memory of mobilization and solidarity lives within our bodies, and that is what drove the country to immediately unite in a current volunteering effort.

Does academia have space for the embodied knowledge of war that is overlooked by mainstream Western narratives? When the escalation started I was employed on five precarious contracts, which included teaching for three different departments as well as working on various academic projects. The stress and efforts to do what I can to help people on the ground in Ukraine meant that I had to take a leave from working for two weeks. There is no compassionate leave for people on zero-hour teaching contracts. I was able to stop teaching because colleagues kindly volunteered to substitute for me. But

although some showed support, others kept pressuring me into carrying on with future marking, gas-lighting me into it. When I resigned from one of my zero-hour contracts, I retrospectively understood that it was easier for the department to see my troublemaking body go than to deal with an uncertain case. There is not much space for lived experiences of war in academia outside of texts and research analysis. A body that lives through a war is an uncomfortable body. Although our disciplines offer us intricate theoretical understandings of traumatic experiences, university departments systematically fail to support precarious bodies. Life with all its troubles becomes a natural disaster that violently intervenes and disrupts the smooth, detached flow of academic knowledge production and teaching.

Through these mechanisms, academia too often turns out to be about ‘sticking to business as usual’ — a disembodied place of privilege. Nothing is supposed to shake this abstracted idea of learning and knowledge production that operates through assignments and academic publications. How dare you to disrupt it with strikes, COVID-19 or war? And it is often the most precarious and most at-risk among us who disrupt the smoothness of the academic flow.

This detachment from real life is what prompts many scholars to engage with the texts that they study as if they are removed from past and current political contexts. The construction of the myth of ‘great Russian culture’ is an example of this tendency, cultivated through syllabi and research publications, in which Russian authors often exist as if slightly suspended from the context of imperialism. The war against Ukraine caused many academics and students to question the epistemic authority of scholarly knowledge production, when it keeps a safe distance from the wreck of reality. Ukraine is, of course, just one of the many examples, and experiences of Russia’s war against

Ukraine have added to the many existing questions about the role of knowledge brought to the forefront of academic debates by the Black Lives Matter movement, and generations of feminist, decolonial and other critical thinkers. They have long been fighting for the presence of different bodies and the knowledge that these bodies carry, yet academia tends to position their work on the margin — as an add-on week to a syllabus. The space for embodied knowledge is also a strictly designated format: impact not research, and public engagement not an academic publication. That is how institutions enable detachment from the material we study and teach, and it is also how they create hierarchies of knowledge.

Russia’s war against Ukraine, just like other struggles of people around the world, is not something that happens far away, to the ‘others’ we study, or in the texts we read. It happens here and now; it happens to us. As long as we keep treating it as an academic case study or a natural disaster that disrupts a usual flow of things, we perpetuate westplaining and colonial narratives, we teach them in classrooms and we disseminate them in our texts. The position of a detached observer is not about neutrality and objectivity; it is about complacency. If we want academia to remain relevant to the beating heart of life, and maybe even to speak to the challenges of contemporary world, today — more than ever — we need to learn from our tired, sleep-deprived, worried and nauseous bodies. Following decolonial, feminist and other critical scholars, we need to recentre embodied and uncomfortable knowledge, knowledge as a burden, knowledge as an injury and knowledge as emancipation. We need to stop erasing the fleshy weight of our bodies from our teaching and research. We need to think of knowledge as part of our diverse lived realities and our struggles. And we need to stand in solidarity with those who are excluded, those living through wars and oppression, and those

who fall between the cracks, by fighting for policy change within our institutions and by making these institutions more welcoming and inclusive. □

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