Re-naming ourselves: The political act of conceptualizing identity

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Abstract

We live in a post-ludic society, whereby various kinds of phenomena escape acknowledgment, in virtue of some complex (inter)face that intimidates intellectual effort. It is time for scholars in academia to take the enterprise of naming their experiences, with an eye to the possibility of creating a new domain of order, a new 'ivory tower,' more accustomed to the current every day. Like Bastian Balthazar Bux in The Never-ending Story, by Michael Ende, we need to enter this Fantasia that interpellates us and start giving things and phenomena their right names. The world around us requires our response. We shall prepare ourselves for giving it. In this paper, we want to think of ways of looking at the democratic game of political encounter and rename its new rules, in a quest for new forms of societal transparency.

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1. The politicized nature of the academic enterprise. A project

In his Foreword to the fourth edition to Gonzalez, Houston, and Chen [1], Orlando L. Taylor from Howard University writes:

"One of my favorite stories involves a little boy who loved to hear his mother read tales to him about lions. The boy was simply fascinated with the lion, king of the jungle. A regal and most beautiful animal who never, absolutely never, lost in battle when in combat with another animal. But one thing was most perplexing to the little boy about these stories. It was the fact that the lion always lost battles in which the opponent was a man. How could it be, the boy wondered, that this most powerful animal warrior, who never lost a battle when in combat with other animals, would invariably lose when in combat with a man? One day, the boy asked his mother about this. In all of the stories she read to him, why did the lion always manage to lose against man? With a slight smile, his mother replied: 'Son, that's an easy question to answer. You see, as long as men write the books in which these stories appear, the lion will always lose!' " [1].

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All of us have been the lion or the man once or twice in our lives. All of us have (been) talked about, written about, (mis)represented, made transparent or opaque in various circumstances of our everyday lives. When thinking of the lion’s story, as Taylor narrates it, I ask myself the following questions: How do I feel about that particular experience? What shall I do in response to that (ab)use? Neither the lion’s subject position, nor the man’s (in the story) is intellectually satisfying to me. Between these positions exists collision, not cooperation; suspicion, not trust; antagonism, not transparency; war, not play. I want to find a new way, a third way. I want to tell the story in a different manner, which is to say I want to tell a different story. Taylor prefaces the book by asserting that,

“As long as the story of human communication – whether presented in journal articles, books, or monographs – is written largely from a selective, traditionally privileged viewpoint, those people without such privilege always lose because of limited opportunities for contributing stories in their own voices. All of us who study communication also lose the chance to encounter this multitude of human communicative experiences in our literature” [1].

Pelias [2] inspires me to search, through my speaking and writing, for avenues of self-expression, avenues that would invite participation to the respective act(ion)s. I believe participation, rather than exclusion, is the key to (cultural) transparency. Speaking and writing are the boulevards whereby various interests of cultural participants/communities are being articulated/served/made visible/made explicit, while the interests of other cultural participants/communities are being excluded/left aside/put in shadow/silenced/muted.

According to Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep [3], “binary thinking” is not the one to blame for the above effect: “My theoretical position is that human language is such that we cannot escape binaries or differences. So, binary thinking is not guilty.” By use of language and its binaries, we make selections all the time between what is said and what is unsaid. With the same gesture, we put some information forward, while excluding/leaving aside all other information. We do that every step of the way. But we want to be present, rather than absent, in our speaking and writing. As the scholars above contend through the same voice of Wen Shu Lee, “what is oppressive is the power to silence alternative binaries and to suppress debates among alternatives” [3].

When we deal with issues of interests, purpose, celebration, marginalization, inclusion/exclusion, visibility, and invisibility, we use “politically charged vocabulary” [3]. But what does political mean in this instance? When do we take into account the politics of human interaction? What are the signs of our entering the domain of the political? How do we seize the term political?

According to Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep [3], through the voice of Wen Shu Lee, we mark two differences through the expression ‘political.’ The first difference opposes political to scientific: “Political reads ‘unscientific, unscholarly work done by partisans, politicians, and people <on the street>’ ” as opposed to “ ‘real scholarship – rigorous, scientific, generalizable, and done by people in the <academy>’ ” [3]. The authors endorse, through agreement, the second difference that Wen Shu Lee identifies: the one that opposes political to acontextualized: “Political reads ‘engaged, contextualized scholarship acknowledging interests served and limits/exclusions practiced.’ It is different from and superior to ‘acontextualized scholarship that does not or refuses to acknowledge interests served/promoted and interests left out/excluded’ ” [3].

The above distinction makes overt that, starting with the act of conceptualizing itself, scholarship – and intercultural communication in particular – is “through and through ‘political’ ”[3]. What that means is that every time we define our concepts, we have to ask ourselves the following political questions: “Whose interest is served by this definition? What definitions are left out or unimagined?” [3]. Political awareness becomes the mandatory equipment of the scholar who enters the domain of the social life with an intention to preserve values such as social justice and equal opportunity for self-expression.

The upshot of the above observations is, obviously, that it takes a great deal of attention and effort to define the very term by intellectuals/scholars in academia. It becomes apparent that the very concept has its political implications and it inscribes the class that falls under it in a certain set of social relations, rather than another. Gonzalez, Houston, and Chen [1] put forward the following questions: In what ways is naming/defining one’s
identity (as a person or a group) a political activity and what are some arguments for cultural participants/communities naming themselves?

Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep [3] have their say on the issue. They talk about ‘fringe scholars’ extensively. First, Wen Shu Lee defines the term:

“On the fringe of the empire are women and men of color. They were once the object of the imperialistic gaze, but now scholars want to talk to them. [. . .] The empire and the scholar cannot and will not see the subtleties and the power of the fringe. What they do see and create in their representation of the fringe must conform to the logic of the empire – domination, control, erasure, and profit taking” [3].

Secondly, the scholars identify themselves with the concept:

“Fringe scholars are not marching into the center and preaching to the already converted. There is a responsibility to remain on the fringe, so that we can see and hear more clearly from ‘meta’ perspectives, and think and talk impurely to push issues unaddressed and unnamed” [3].

Finally, as the scholars’ “vocation as intellectuals makes it imperative that [they] address social issues, the changing structure of social and political relations” [3], they manage to develop and articulate together the project of being scholars in academia/intellectuals, whereby those engaged in it identify and respond to “the political turn in scholarship”[3], a turn that acknowledges that “[t]he issues are real and urgent, and so is the need for [their] commitment to democratic goals in the production of knowledge” [3].

2. Intellectuals, Inc.

However remarkable a step they make towards self- and culture actualization, Collier, Hedge, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep [3] talk about a concept whose meaning is problematic, to say the least, within the constructed reality of the cultural space where I am teaching, writing, speaking, and breathing. What I want to do is make sense of the concept in the cultural space where I live my life. Any rhetorical act (and defining a concept is by all means a rhetorical act) is a product of the culture that produced it [4], therefore the question, eventually, becomes: What would be a definition of the Romanian intellectual/scholar that would make sense to those who want to find part of their identity in that concept? Can such a definition give a sense (to the group it tries to represent, within and outside itself) of identity in the first place? Where should it find its groundings? Can ‘academia,’ as it has already been constructed as a concept in this cultural space, provide for a grounding of a viable concept of intellectual/scholar, one that would better serve the interests of the group? And, more importantly, what are those interests and precisely who can articulate them?

In order to respond to the above questions, I make a loop through my own personal (hi)story as an intellectual trying to find her space of expression within cultural milieus of very different profiles. Through this personal story, I am trying to articulate a notion/concept of identity that preserves the most important tenets of the cultural space(s) that inform it, but at the same time endeavors to build a bridge between cultures by use of the very concept under consideration. I believe my story suggests a basis for theory building inside the context of academia, whereby the concept of intellectual/scholar survives idiosyncratic restrictions and manages to articulate some common interests of the group, wherever it finds its location in space and time.

My journey through academia has been as old as I can remember. When I go back in time and look through my first memories, I find both my parents working as college professors at the Polytechnic University of Timisoara. Therefore, I got a first concept of what it was like to be an ‘academic’ very early in life. At that point, around the age of five, being part of my parents’ experience as intellectuals only implied missing the time that I would not spend with them, due to their work commitments throughout the semesters. As I grew up and started school myself, education was portrayed to me as the most valuable tenet, and so I started my own journey convinced that I could become anything I wanted to become if I studied hard. Even now I remember my first day of school, when I built my confidence through the objects that I took with me into the classroom: the school bag,
the notebooks filed in nice, blue covers, the pencil box, the pen and the pencils, even the eraser. Those were the things that I was bringing with me from home, things that I surrounded with attention a few weeks before school started, until they gathered a vibe of familiarity. Enough to make me step into the classroom convinced that nothing bad would happen to me in there.

As I am writing this story, obviously trying to make the most appropriate selections in terms of relevant data to include, I realize that I have had a similar experience years later, when I travelled to the United States to get my PhD in Communication Studies from an Ohio University. I carried with me an ‘essentialized’ luggage: there were old things in it, such as clothes, books, or photographs, but there were also new things that I barely got the time to get familiarized with – personal objects of hygiene and whatnot. Still, those objects were my world. They gave me a feeling of belonging, of – again – familiarity, that I so much needed when stepping into a far away land and a new culture. Through those objects, I was able to narrate myself in a familiar way, one that would first make sense to me, and then, hopefully, help me articulate a concept of ‘me’ to the others.

I have been a student of Mathematics, Philosophy, and Communication Studies, respectively. I got my Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics in 1998, and a year later I was the first of my class in Philosophy. A month later, I was flying to the United States to pursue a doctorate in Communication and, after four more years, I was flying back to Romania, where I stayed. I became an assistant professor of Communication Studies at the West University of Timisoara, a year after the domain had started. Ever since, I am trying to pay back the tribute I owe the place that first gave me enough ‘substance’ to be able to fly over the Atlantic and endeavor to present a consistent self to the people that I worked with there. It is remarkably difficult to summarize an enormous amount of data and information in a few article pages. But, to serve this paper’s purposes, suffice it to say that my experiences as a student and professor in various domains of study within two different cultural milieus gave me a sense of identity that I want to place an emphasis on, for it might articulate the interests of other people whose tribute to ‘academia,’ like mine, does not (ever) end.

In this instant, I am asking myself, what was that ‘substance’ about? What was I navigating with, through all the intricacies of my intellectual adventure? The answer is right at hand, and it leads me to the new concept of intellectual/scholar that I am trying to propose throughout this paper. It is interesting that I always stepped into a new regime ‘adorned’ with ‘familiar’ objects. Instead, what characterizes my journey through a domain of knowledge or another, and through academia in general, are my alliances with other people.

If once I believed something like, “both in arts and in sciences, for which a conceptual paraphernalia exists at the expense of a material one, so to speak, intellectuals worldwide (see reference list) deal with society and culture as a continuum along whose lines they erupt as significantly distinctive names inasmuch as they afford contemporaneity with their own bodies” [5], a statement in which, even though I got a vague glimpse of the network like character of the complex relation that ‘intellectuals worldwide’ sustain in engaging (with) each other, I was not yet aware, at the time, of the core values intrinsic to the concept as I see it now. I was closer to my current understanding a few pages down the road:

“[… an author exists only inasmuch as he (or she) constructs his (or her) name in such a manner as to become ‘accountable’ on the intellectual market. In our postmodern age, issues such as translatability of names across cultures becomes, if not the cornerstone in making sense of the contemporary sovereignity of the political over the epistemological, then at least a striking – with evidence value? – substitute […] for the above. By making a person’s name an addendum to a list of names of objects, the sovereign rule of extant logics within the political dictates – based on a presumption of (some) intrinsic value associated (in virtue of an arbitrary statement) with specific positions/locations existing within a finely compartmentalized system of relations – that all names become ‘exchangeable’/‘unities of exchange.’ However, provided that such an approach to the politics of human interaction is being undertaken, one should be prepared to answer the following question: What for?” [5].

I am ready to answer that almost decade-old question now. What we strive for, in academia, as intellectuals/scholars, Romanian, American or otherwise, is to make the best alliances that we can make, to ‘grow on the shoulders’ of the persons who can and want to support us politically – which is to say epistemologically, if my argument gets followed; or better yet, to navigate through the process of knowledge production holding hands
with those who look for answers in the same direction as we do. As I tell my students in each of my classes, time and again, I was lucky to have made the best alliances, to meet the most inspiring people, to figure out the portrait of the intellectual as reflected on the faces and in the written pages and verbal articulations of the most wonderful persons who ever dealt with speaking and writing. To these people I owe my every thought, my every line.

It is a custom to pay tribute to those who inspired or helped a piece of writing come into being in the beginning of the work, as a separate note. I am trying to articulate a different kind of approach here, by making of my acknowledgments and gratitude a part of the writing itself. For, we intellectuals are holding hands across time and space, thanking each other, through our writing itself, for all the inspiration we have received. We live in each other’s company.

3. About appropriateness or making one’s own

I have a book for children in mind. It’s *The Never-ending Story*, by Michael Ende [6]. The story is about a little boy, called Bastian Balthazar Bux, who enters an antique book store and steals a book called *The Never-ending Story*. He hides to read the story, and by doing so, he gradually becomes aware that he was becoming a part of it. The story that the boy reads takes place in a parallel world called Fantasia. Fantasia is being destroyed by the Nothing, which represents people’s lack of imagination in the real world. The Childlike Empress of Fantasia seeks help against the Nothing, which is spreading over the land. Her sickness and the invasion are somehow correlated. She chooses a brave young man, Baltazar’s age, called Atreyu, to save the land and its Empress from destruction.

Through his adventure, Atreyu discovers that Fantasia was made of the dreams and fantasies of the real world, while the agent of destruction, the Nothing – as well as the Childlike Empress’ disease – was a direct consequence of the lies people tell in their quests for power. The salvation could only come from a human child, who, by giving the Childlike Empress a new name, could stop the Nothing from spreading further and could start again the cycle of life in Fantasia. There is a special moment in the book, when Bastian, who was reading it, becomes aware that he was the savior that the Childlike Empress was calling and that he must carry out the task. After hesitations, he steps into Fantasia, by calling the Empress by the new name that he found for her.

The book continues with the adventures of Bastian into Fantasia, where his efforts to rebuild the land by use of his imagination take him to a predictable end: he loses so much of his true self as to develop the wish to take the Childlike Empress’ place. As he realizes he was not the only human to have fallen trap to that lust, Bastian sets out to find his own true wish, a wish that he can wish without losing himself. After he returns home, Bastian takes the book back to the antique store and finds out that the owner himself has been an adventurer through Fantasia. The two decide to share their experiences and also show others the way to Fantasia.

3.1. Metaphorically, Balthazar Bastian Bux is me.

As soon as I open my eyes, I am being interpellated. I am called to give things their right names. Fantasia starts everywhere, really. Every time I meet someone, the exchange contributes to saving or destroying the world of stories – our world of stories, because our exchange takes place within a narrative of our own making. In each of my experiences, appropriateness of my rapport to others through naming is key. Appropriate is a word that comes from French (a word that Michel Foucault worked with extensively), which means both to make right, and to make one’s own. I envision a project, whereby appropriateness describes without a remainder the practices of speaking and writing in academia for the intellectuals who seeks validation as such in the cultural space where they live their lives. In other words, I imagine a place where the effort of intellectuals can find validation from within the contexts through which they contribute to the process/project of knowledge production.
Like Balthazar Bastian Bux, I would like to feel confident that the Childlike Empress likes the new name I found for her. If nothing else, it saved her life.

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