

FROM THE MARGINS: POSITIONALITY IN AREA STUDIES

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Abstract

This article analyzes the positionality of the researcher in the field of area studies, taking as an example our engagement with African and Dalit studies and issues of race and caste. We present an autoethnographic essay on our own historically constituted agentive positionality by weaving together different angles of inquiry – Lithuanian area studies (and its institutional context), Lithuania's position in the post-Soviet and postcolonial narratives (the historical context), and our positionality in area studies and our particular fields of research (the personal context). The article shows how we as researchers construct our professional identities and relations with our interlocutors as we navigate through the Soviet past and the globalized present. We argue that the crucial question for scholars of area studies is not only the macro-political context in which knowledge production takes place (the predominant focus of area studies for decades), but also the personal micro-dimensions of knowledge production, which are inherent in the particular researcher as a historically constituted and strategically acting individual.

Keywords: area studies; positionality; Dalit studies; African studies; Lithuania; Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The positionality and reflexivity of researchers with regard to their subjects have long been overlooked within area studies. While some disciplines have taken a keen interest in reflexivity since the early 1970s, this was not always routine practice in area studies. As Anna-Katharina Hornidge and Katja Mielke argued,

Positionality – although ever present – has long been treated as invisible in the quest for neutrality and objectivity in science, as well as given the desire for the universality of knowledge and its production. Currently, positionality is increasingly viewed as critical to scholarship due to the understanding that all knowledge is specific, limited, partial and situated, that is, produced in particular circumstances that shape it (as well as the researcher and the researched) in discrete and certain ways.¹

Therefore, the crucial question for scholars of area studies is not only the macro-political context in which knowledge production takes place (a predominant focus in area studies for decades), but also the personal micro-dimensions of knowledge production, which are inherent in the particular researcher as a historically constituted and strategically acting individual.

Seeking to address this latter concern, we here present an autoethnographic essay on our own historically constituted agentive positionality. We focus our attention not so much on our research subjects, but rather upon ourselves. We subjectivize ourselves by bringing our reflexivity and positionality to the spotlight of the academic analysis and relating it to broader socio-political processes – the history of Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuania and the history of area studies on both the international and national levels. We do not do this simply to illustrate the subjectivity of research work in general, but rather to interrogate that subjectivity and expose the interplay of historical, institutional, and personal contexts that shape area studies. By explaining in a detailed manner our personal journeys through the fields of African and South Asian studies (specifically Dalit studies), we seek to deconstruct our engagement with area studies and the subjects within that field that most interest us. Close engagement with our positionality will reveal the actual mental processes of researchers who engage with different cultures and demonstrate how our fields of study are shaped by personal experiences.

¹ Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, eds., *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 17.

We find Victoria Reyes's notion of "strategic positionality" particularly useful as we begin unpacking our positions in our academic and research fields.² Reyes argued that "researchers have their own ethnographic toolkit from which they draw. This toolkit consists of researchers' social capital and backgrounds, among other characteristics, and shapes field access, field dynamics, and data analysis."³ Paul Kingston noted that "we make choices when moving from outsider to insider roles (and between them), contingently adapting our positionality in the hope that it will help us better understand the political dynamics that underlie our research projects."⁴ These ideas suggest that our positionality is not a static and passive thing (shaped once and for all by our culture), but a shifting and agentive process (used in different ways to shape our research). In the vein of Reyes's and Kingston's arguments, this article contends that we as Lithuanian researchers construct our professional identities and relations with our interlocutors by navigating through the Soviet past and the globalized present. Delving into our personal experiences within our academic fields of research will illustrate how knowledge production is inseparable not only from the researcher's historical constitutedness but also from the "politics of ourselves."⁵

Most of the academic discussion of positionality focuses on "how our social positions shape access to participants, data, and field sites."⁶ The major concern is about the researcher's relationship with her or his interlocutors and field sites and how that affects the academic presentation. But how do our academic fields and the prevalent trends within them affect our relations with interlocutors and how we act in the field? Discussion of positionality should focus not only on how researchers approach the subjects of field research but also on how researchers situate themselves in their academic disciplines – and how these two types of positionality interact. Therefore, this article discusses the authors' double positionality. First is how we situate ourselves as Lithuanian researchers within the history and prevalent trends of area studies and within African and Dalit studies

² Victoria Reyes, "Ethnographic Toolkit: Strategic Positionality and Researchers' Visible and Invisible Tools in Field Research," *Ethnography* 21, no. 2 (2018): 220–240, doi: 10.1177/1466138118805121.

³ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴ Paul Kingston, "Playing with Positionality?" in *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, ed. Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 242–253, here 242.

⁵ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Jean-Thomas Martelli, "The Politics of Our Selves: Left Self-fashioning and the Production of Representative Claims in Everyday Indian Campus Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 6 (2020): 1972–2045, doi:10.1017/S0026749X2000013X.

⁶ Reyes, "Ethnographic Toolkit," 222.

in particular. We call this “academic positionality.” Second is how we situate ourselves with regard to the people we study, our interlocutors, whom we happen to meet in our fields (we call this “fieldsite positionality”). Most researchers doing research work think and act strategically in both of these two dimensions. Reflecting on one’s fieldsite positionality has become the norm in humanities and qualitative social sciences. However, accounts of academic positionality are largely absent, even though they significantly shape the research process. We suggest that both academic and fieldsite positionality should be seen as being interrelated and influencing each other.

In this article, we try to weave together different angles of inquiry: Lithuanian area studies (and its institutional context), Lithuania’s position in the post-Soviet and postcolonial narratives (the historical context), and our positions in area studies and our particular fields of research (the personal context). In the first part, we investigate how Lithuanian area studies is situated within the larger field of area studies and its history, because that is our primary field of study and has constituted our professional identities. In the next two parts, we explore certain similarities between the postcolonial and the post-Soviet conditions as a backdrop for further analysis of our academic journey to and within African and South Asian studies. In the last part, we reveal how we situate ourselves within the race and caste debates and respond to criticism leveled at us by insiders in those two fields.

Area Studies From the Margins

In the last three decades area studies have been the target of substantial criticism, which has led to a “crisis of legitimacy” for area studies.⁷ Scholars argue that area studies are embedded in colonial, orientalist and imperial mindsets that seek to impose European and American dominance and racialized views on the rest of the world. Having survived the Cold War period, area studies continues to be deeply rooted in the framework of the nation-state and hence serves more pragmatic national interests than it produces pure knowledge. Another fault of area studies that draws criticism is its outdated focus on cultural regions. In a time of globalization, territorial, and nation-state boundaries lose their

⁷ Chua Beng Huat et al., “Area Studies and the Crisis of Legitimacy: A View from South East Asia,” *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 1 (2019): 31–48, doi: 10.1080/0967828X.2019.1587931.

significance when exposed to various “trans-” processes and formations, e.g., migration, social networks, and connectivity.⁸

These critical voices have produced an impetus for rethinking area studies. Some area studies scholars have realized that their field can only survive in the twenty-first century if it undergoes significant changes.⁹ Some of them argue that area studies should be replaced by “comparative area studies”¹⁰ or “critical area studies.”¹¹ Other scholars are reinvestigating area studies’ relationship with “classical” disciplines such as sociology, political sciences and geography.¹² While the process of globalization poses a challenge for a regionally defined world, there are still other processes at play that suggest a continuing significance and re-emergence of various types of regionalism, which in their own way call for area-specific expertise.¹³

⁸ Claus Bech Hansen, “The Crossroads Perspective,” Crossroads Asia Concept Papers 5 (Bonn, January 2017); Travis Workman, “A Minor Philosophy of World: From the Anthropological Illusion to Relation in Area Studies,” *Cultural Dynamics* 32, no. 1–2 (2020): 31–48, doi: 10.1177/0921374019900696; Mielke and Hornidge, eds., *Area Studies at the Crossroads*.

⁹ Huat et al., “Area Studies and the Crisis of Legitimacy.”

¹⁰ Ariel I. Ahram, “The Theory and Method of Comparative Area Studies,” *Qualitative Research* 11, no. 1 (2011): 69–90, doi: /10.1177/1468794110385297; Ariel I. Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil, eds., *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-regional Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Matthias Basedau, “Rethinking African Studies: Four Challenges and the Case for Comparative African Studies,” *Africa Spectrum* 55, no. 2 (2020): 194–206, doi: 10.1177/000203972094532; Dirk Berg-Schlosser, “Comparative Area Studies: Epistemological and Methodological Foundations and a Practical Application,” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2020): 288–302, doi: 10.22363/2313-0660-2020-2-288-302; Bert Hoffmann, “Latin America and Beyond: The Case for Comparative Area Studies,” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, no. 100 (2015): 111–120, doi: 10.18352/erlacs.10125; Rudra Sil and Ariel I. Ahram, “Comparative Area Studies and the Study of the Global South,” *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 20, no. 2 (2020): 279–287, doi: 10.22363/2313-0660-2020-2-279-287.

¹¹ Natalie Koch, “Is a ‘Critical’ Area Studies Possible?” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 5 (2016): 807–814, doi: 10.1177/0263775816656524.

¹² Ahram, Köllner, and Sil, eds., *Comparative Area Studies*; Sharad Chari, “Trans-Area Studies and the Perils of Geographical ‘World-Writing,’” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 5 (2016): 791–798, doi: 10.1177/0263775816656522; Elliott C. Child and Trevor J. Barnes, “American Imperial Expansion and Area Studies without Geography,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 66 (2019): 43–54, doi: 10.1016/j.jhg.2018.08.001; Koch, “Is a ‘Critical’ Area Studies Possible?”; David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); James D. Sidaway et al., “Area Studies and Geography: Trajectories and Manifesto,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 5 (2016): 777–790; Deen Sharp, “Difference as Practice: Diffracting Geography and the Area Studies Turn,” *Progress in Human Geography* 43, no. 5 (2019): 835–852, doi: 10.1177/03091325187889.

¹³ Hansen, “The Crossroads Perspective”; Ali Mirsepassi, Amrita Basu, and Frederick Stirton Weaver, eds., *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World: Recasting the Area Studies Debate* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

Less discussed is how we should understand the proliferation of interest in area studies outside Western Europe and the United States, and what is specific about area studies when pursued beyond the reach of the former colonial and imperialist homelands. Today, there are various types of area studies established as study programs and research fields in different parts of the world. These have their own specifics, but lack visibility. This relates to certain reductionist tendencies in postcolonial theory identified by Piotr Piotrowski:

For post-colonial scholars, instead, Europe is the negative rhetorical figure. Post-colonial scholars used to homogenize culture of the old continent. Frankly speaking they can perform such a simplification, since for their purposes detailed differentiation of inner-European issues, including inner-colonization, does not have much sense. Europe for them is “simply” the Dutch, Belgian, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonizer. They do not care so much about Moldavia, Lithuania, Slovenia or Slovakia, and the latter are very often confused to each other.¹⁴

It is important to recognize the diversity in the ways area studies is practiced in different parts of the world and not to attribute the same colonial failings to all European countries. Area studies’ emphasis on white people vs. people of color, colonizers vs. colonized, and the West vs. the Rest needs to be reconsidered while still being attentive to the colonial and imperial history of the field of area studies itself and how that shapes certain representations.

Lithuania is probably best known as an object of area studies, and as part of the post-Soviet area (sometimes it is studied as an aspect of Eastern European studies or more rarely, Baltic studies). It is not well-known as a producer of area studies itself. However, it is not widely known that since the nineteenth century, Lithuania has had developed Oriental studies tradition that was shaped at the crossroads of the global superpowers.¹⁵ Antanas Andrijauskas provides a detailed description of the rebirth of interest in Eastern cultures in Soviet Lithuania in 1977–92. He traces how Lithuanian orientalism (*orientalizmas* in Lithuanian) transformed itself and was institutionalized as Oriental studies

¹⁴ Piotr Piotrowski, “East European Art Peripheries Facing Post-Colonial Theory,” *Nonsite.org* (blog), August 12, 2014, <https://nonsite.org/east-european-art-peripheries-facing-post-colonial-theory/>.

¹⁵ For the history of area studies in Lithuania, see Valdas Jaskūnas, “India Studies in Soviet Lithuania: Approaching Asia from Outside the Establishment,” in *Framing Asian Studies: Geopolitics and Institutions*, ed. Albert Tzeng, William L. Richter, and Ekaterina Koldunova (Singapore, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 189–208.

(*orientalistika*).¹⁶ In independent Lithuania, Oriental studies gradually shifted its focus from largely textual studies of Asian cultures to more interdisciplinary approaches to research. The result of this process was the renaming of the Center of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University as the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies in 2018. African studies are not yet established as a formal degree program in Lithuania. However, several courses on Africa have been taught at Vilnius University and the General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania.

In the Lithuanian context, area studies have been most thoroughly analyzed by Valdas Jaskūnas. As the most outspoken advocate for area studies in Lithuania, he argued that in the context of a globalizing world, the interdisciplinary nature of area studies is a major advantage over more rigid academic disciplines.¹⁷ But he also admitted to a weakness of area studies, which is its territorial boundedness and limitations. He also argued that area studies needs to more fully develop its theoretical approaches.¹⁸ Jaskūnas's other works focused on the relationship between area studies and Lithuania's national identity. He argued that Lithuanian academics lacked exposure to the world beyond their national boundaries and that as a result they had an inadequate understanding of Lithuanian national identity, especially in the context of globalization.¹⁹ Proposing a notion of "inward orientalism," he argued that:

[w]hat is specific about engagement with Asia in these stateless countries [authors' note: meaning the Central and Eastern European states] is that instead of producing knowledge in the service of the state, the local academics and in particular the cultural activists set out to appropriate orientalist knowledge for the construction of national identity aimed at resisting the colonial regime."²⁰

¹⁶ Antanas Andrijauskas, "Orientalistikos atgimimas Lietuvoje (1977–1992): orientalizmo transformacijos į orientalistiką pradžia," in *Rytų Azijos studijos Lietuvoje*, ed. Aurelijus Zykas (Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, 2012), 19–54.

¹⁷ Valdas Jaskūnas, "Regionistika kaip teritoriškumo ir globalumo analizė," *Logos* 54 (2008): 40–51, http://www.litlogos.eu/L54/logos54_40_51.pdf.

¹⁸ Valdas Jaskūnas, "Teritoriškumas, socialiniai mokslai ir regionistikos studijų genealogija," in *Rytų Azijos studijos Lietuvoje*, ed. Aurelijus Zykas (Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, 2012), 55–66.

¹⁹ Valdas Jaskūnas, "Iššūkiai nacionalinei tapatybei ir jų refleksija regionų kultūros studijose," in *Rytų-Vakarai: komparatyvistinės studijos XI. Kultūrų sąveikos*, ed. Antanas Andrijauskas (Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2011), 126–138.

²⁰ Jaskūnas, "India Studies in Soviet Lithuania," 189.

Thus, in Lithuania the main impetus for Oriental studies and later, area studies, was not the pragmatic interests of the state but rather an intellectual desire to understand the world and the individual's national and/or personal identity against a backdrop of socio-political changes, i.e. changing political regimes and globalization. Currently, area studies in Lithuania stands for a certain ideological worldview. In Lithuania, area studies advocates for multiculturalism and cultural tolerance in the context of the increasing strength of various types of nationalisms and ethnocentrism around the globe. Looking at the world from the Lithuanian perspective, area studies is a relevant and necessary platform for cross-cultural understanding, which helps us to relativize our cultural constitutiveness and establish respectful relations with "cultural others."

Most accounts of area studies in Lithuania provide a macro (i.e., historical and institutional) perspective on the development of the discipline in the country. They provide an example of area studies as it is practiced away from the centers of the former colonial and imperial powers. We will attempt to elaborate on how we approach our specialties in area studies, centered on our personal positionalities within African²¹ and South Asian studies.

Our Situation Between the Post-Soviet and the Post-Colonial World

Often being called post-Soviet obliges us as Lithuanians to reflect on our Soviet past and how African and Asian histories, cultures and peoples were perceived and represented in the public culture of Soviet Lithuania. Many current Lithuanian researchers, or their parents who raised them, grew up within Soviet culture and under its influence. One of the essential ideological mottos of the Soviet Union was the "friendship of the peoples." The fundamental principle of the Soviet state was all-around fraternal cooperation and mutual assistance of the peoples and nations that have taken the socialist path of development. The meaning of "friendship of the peoples" was widely discussed by politicians and academics. Vladas Sirutavičius writes about how Soviet Lithuanian Communist party members, in their speeches during various party and non-party meetings, emphasized the special significance of the phrase.²² Soviet propaganda made

²¹ In the context of Lithuanian humanities, I (K.S.) tend to identify myself as an African studies scholar. However, when introducing myself to international researchers, I usually describe myself more specifically, as a researcher working with Southern African history and culture. This shift in my professional identity reflects the challenges of my academic positionality.

²² Vladas Sirutavičius, "Nacionalizmo manifestacijos' ir 'tarybinių tautų draugystės' ideologema, Kaunas 1944–1953 m.," *Kauno istorijos metraštis* 18 (2020): 91–106.

the “friendship of Soviet nations” a part of daily life of the people of the Soviet Union. That friendship was praised at party conferences and exalted in literature and the arts.

One of the simplest and most effective ways to inculcate the desired ideology was through stories and illustrations in children’s magazines. Soviet internationalism was illustrated in magazine photos and drawings of multinational youth embracing and smiling like “one family.” Such images undoubtedly had a significant impact on young people’s worldviews at a time when Lithuanian nationality was considered a “relic” of isolation and nationalism. It could only be expressed in innocuous Lithuanian folklore, i.e., dances, songs, and fairy tales, so long of course as they corresponded to the ideological framework of the Soviet Union. The ideal of the friendship of people appeared in the first issues of the monthly children’s magazine *Genys* after World War II. In the May 1954 issue, one can see a drawing of an African girl by Sofija Veiverytė. The April 1955 issue features an article by Antanas Venclovas about his trip to China, the life of children in that country, and his visit to a school full of tributes to the Soviet Union, such as a dove of peace cut out of paper and posters on the walls with the slogans “We love work! We love peace! The Soviet Union is China’s best friend!”

Very often, Soviet Lithuanian artists would exaggerate the facial features or physiques of African people. They almost always depicted Africans at least partially unclothed. If such images were meant to combat racism, their persistent appearance in the pages of *Genys* is puzzling, to say the least. Racial stereotyping in Soviet propaganda, produced by supposedly internationalist Soviet artists and commissioned by the supposedly internationalist state, was clearly at odds with the message. Whether the stereotypes arose from ignorance or some deeply rooted racism within Soviet culture is as yet unclear.

Another important aspect of Soviet politics was a “lesson” about the special character of the Russian nation and its role in consolidating the Soviet system and helping the “fraternal” nations of the Union to build socialism.²³ Rasa Čepaitienė states that the “friendship of peoples” publicly promoted in Soviet art covered up the inevitable Russification.²⁴ A Slavic-looking child (who in the context of Soviet culture would be unmistakably recognized and assumed to be ethnically Russian) is commonly pictured as a leading figure for children from the “ethnic” republics of the Soviet Union, such as Armenia and Kazakhstan.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rasa Čepaitienė, “Sovietinės kultūros šaltiniai: Tarp futurizmo ir paseizmo,” *Darbai ir dienos* 52 (2009): 85–104, 99.

Although the ethnic makeup of the Soviet Union was highly diverse, in the context of the visual hierarchy, the ethnic Russian child was the leader of the Soviet Union as a whole – the big Russian brother leading the little brothers from the remaining fourteen Union Republics. The preponderance of such tableaux in *Genys* highlights the problem of “Soviet whiteness.” The Slavic figure denies and erases the ethnic complexity of the Soviet Union. Illustrations and stories signaled the importance the regime placed on the Soviet Union being seen as tolerant and friendly towards people of different races, in contrast to the racist image of the United States created in the Soviet press. On the other hand, the Soviet narrative of the friendship of peoples glossed over racial differences, inequalities, and negative stereotypes within the Soviet world, rendering them invisible, at least officially.

The imaginaries of the Orient in Soviet Lithuania were quite contradictory. Antanas Andrijauskas describes how in Soviet Lithuania for artists, scholars and writers Orientalism promised a romantic escape from the harsh and oppressive reality of Soviet life, while for the communist regime it associated with “dangerous” anti-Soviet ideology.²⁵

The influence of the Soviet ideology of “fraternity” on the representations of African and Asian people in Lithuanian culture is insufficiently researched. One of the very few publications that has broached the topic is the book *Another History of the Children’s Picture Book: From Soviet Lithuania to India* (2017), co-authored by the Lithuanian and Indian scholars Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and V. Geetha. This book is a rare challenge to Eurocentric thinking, in which Lithuania and India have jointly been deemed to be merely targets of Soviet visual propaganda. Further research is needed to explore the peculiarities of the Soviet imaginations of Africa and Asia and the legacy of Soviet Orientalism in contemporary Lithuanian culture.

Throughout the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods and until recently, race was rarely part of the political and public discourse on identity in Lithuania. In the almost two decades since Lithuania joined the EU, the country has become increasingly enmeshed in the process of globalization. Questions about the country’s role in the worldwide conversation about race, our relationship with racism, and the role race plays in the production of everyday life are finally starting to be raised. These developments are intensified by echoes of the protests against police brutality and systemic racism in the United States and

²⁵ Andrijauskas, “Orientalistikos atgimimas Lietuvoje.”

Europe in recent years, immigration flows from non-EU countries, and the rise of Sinophobia due to COVID-19.

Racial awareness is also beginning to inform Lithuanian academic work and public discourse through the adoption of (primarily) American and British decolonial discourses, especially those about race and skin color. As Paul Gilroy argues, race has been and remains a powerful force within the context of modernity.²⁶ The decolonial program originated in Latin-American subaltern studies and later evolved into a much more epistemologically and politically radical and global critique of Western modernity/coloniality. It has so far remained marginal in Lithuania's domestic society and academia, but it is central to the positioning of Lithuania as a legitimate member of the EU.²⁷ Because of its history as a subject of the Soviet Union, Lithuania lacks the political vocabulary of race, not to mention caste, in its everyday discourse. Race did not exist as a social and political form of identity, as opposed to nationality within official Soviet policy even though the peoples that constituted the Soviet Union were quite diverse. Contemporary Anglo-American discourses and modes of analysis of race are based upon their history of slavery and colonialism and therefore do not map neatly and easily onto the Lithuanian context and experience. Decolonial thinkers would argue that two essential elements of the colonial network of power were missing in the Soviet context – capitalism and race. Although that might have been true before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the ensuing change of political system Lithuania acquired some of the benefits of the Western imperial experience, its economic models, and its anthropological and political discourses that eventually actualized debates on race and decolonization.²⁸

Another aspect to consider is the relationship between the postsocialist and postcolonial experiences. Some scholars have tried to compare the theories and methodologies applied to the two of them. According to Jill Owczarzak, “‘post-socialism’ has been used as a geographic label, not an analytic category, in contrast to ‘postcolonialism,’ which has a rich history as a theoretical paradigm.”²⁹ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery claim that:

²⁶ Paul Gilroy, *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Allen Lane, 2000).

²⁷ Madina Tlostanova, “A Decolonial View of Baltic Drama. Countering Postcolonial Narratives,” *Baltic Worlds* 3 (2016): 83–86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Jill Owczarzak, “Introduction. Postcolonial Studies and Postsocialism in Eastern Europe,” *Focaal* 53 (2009): 3–19, here 4, doi: 10.3167/fcl.2009.530101.

despite differences in timing, both ‘posts’ followed and continue to reflect on periods of heightened political change – the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Communist Party monopolies, or the formal granting of independence – and both labels signify the complex results of the abrupt changes forced on those who underwent them: that is, becoming something other than socialist or other than colonized.³⁰

In his groundbreaking article “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” David Chioni Moore pointed out that by the early twentieth century the scope of postcolonial theory included almost the entire world except for the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. He believed that the absence of the Soviet bloc countries is one of the principal issues missing in postcolonial thought.³¹ He argued that the term “postcolonial” is a useful “designation for yet another zone: the post-Soviet sphere – the Baltic states, Central and Eastern Europe (including both former Soviet republics and independent ‘East Bloc’ states), the Caucasus, and Central Asia.”³² Moore later added that the two most important features of this giant area are “first, how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Soviet regions are; and, second, how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact, at least in these terms.”³³ Without trying to generalize about the social conditions in the quite different societies living in the region, Moore stressed the parallels with postcolonial societies and the general conditions of Soviet colonialism that have influenced it.³⁴

Despite the parallels, there is a certain hesitance on the part of the Baltic societies to apply postcolonial discourse to themselves. They are reluctant to identify themselves with the countries of the “third world,” as the still-used rhetoric of the Cold War period refers to them, and their problems.³⁵ Violeta Kelertas in her research on Baltic postcolonialism states, “[p]referring to think of

³⁰ Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 6–34, here 11, doi: 10.1017/S0010417509000024.

³¹ David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–128, doi: 10.1632/pmla.2001.116.1.111.

³² Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?” <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/postcolonial-post-soviet/is-the-post-in-postcolonial-the-post-in-post-soviet-toward-a-global-postcolonial-critique-david-chioni-moore.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The question of Russian colonialism and Russia’s imperial ambitions is especially relevant in the current context of the Russian war in Ukraine.

³⁵ Violeta Kelertas, *Baltic postcolonialism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

themselves as superior to other colonized peoples ... the Balts find being lumped together with the rest of colonized humanity unflattering, if not humiliating, and want to be with the ‘civilized’ part of the world.”³⁶

Ontologically, as the aforementioned scholars imply, there are certain similarities between the postcolonial and post-Soviet conditions. There are epistemological similarities as well, in that there is a noticeable tendency in postsocialist studies to write about postsocialism using the terminology and conceptual framework of postcolonial studies, applying concepts like otherness, hegemony, knowledge formation, etc. As Jill Owczarzak aptly argued, in the colonial understanding, the embodiment of the East for the Western world was the so-called Orient – the Middle East, China, India, etc. Then, in the Cold War context, the East, represented by the big new “other” – the Soviet world –, was moved epistemologically closer to the West. Owczarzak highlights that “[t]hese same dichotomies have been perpetuated in the postsocialist era, particularly through discussions about what essentially distinguishes Western democracy from the communist regimes of the Cold War era. ... On this developmental scale, Eastern Europe served as the West’s intermediary ‘Other,’ neither fully civilized nor fully savage.”³⁷

What relationships are formed when a “postsocialist” subject decides to research a “postcolonial” subject? Do their ontological and epistemological similarities play a part? Having internalized the postcolonial and decolonial discourses, we as Lithuanians quite often attribute to ourselves the blame of being white and Western, even though our country never directly instigated any colonial or imperial projects. We accept that we as individuals and researchers cannot meaningfully engage in conversations about Africa and Asia, race, and caste without leaving behind all the colonial baggage that is omnipresent in the ways Europeans perceive themselves and the world. We carry that baggage by default as members of the European culture. Moreover, our feelings of discomfort as researchers may also be nudged along by the fact that as children we were raised in the late Soviet cultural milieu, which had certain romantic orientalist imaginaries and racial prejudices against peoples of different colors and cultures. Hence, as “westernized” Eastern Europeans, we carry double guilt with regard to racial prejudices – that of both the Soviet and the Western worlds. As westernized Eastern Europeans, we are one step behind in the process of mental decolonization.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Owczarzak, “Introduction,” 5–6.

It is our experience that on the first encounter our African and South Asian interlocutors tend to focus on our supposed white privilege. We are often perceived to be typical Westerners by those with whom we engage in our research, without their recognizing our cultural and historical specificity. However, after they get to know the history and realities of Lithuania (particularly the history of its occupation and Sovietization and its brief experience with development assistance), they begin to discern new shades of cultural racism and coloniality. As one Dalit interlocutor put it to us, “Now I realize that you [Lithuanians] are not really white, but rather grey people.” It is as if Soviet history and our post-Soviet condition provides us with a specific identity that allows us to overcome the stigma of colonialism. The similar experiences of postcolonial and post-Soviet life are not self-evident, as are differences in skin color. Once explained, however, they become a bridge of sorts that helps us to establish relationships. As many others probably do, we as researchers share our history with our interlocutors not only because it is a part of our own identity, but also because it opens doors to us.

Our Situation Within African and South Asian Studies

In this part, we divide our discussion to talk about our personal professional journeys through African and South Asian studies. We seek to provide a view from inside the two disciplines and a context for the subsequent discussion of our positionality in the race and caste debates.

Karina Simonson

I am a professional historian of African art whose primary research focus is South African Jewish history and culture. The title of my doctoral dissertation was “Baltic Jewish Photographers in the Republic of South Africa (1930–1976): Leon Levson and Eli Weinberg” (2018). Several geographical, chronological, political, ideological and cultural problems came up in the course of analyzing my dissertation’s subject matter. First of all, I was keenly aware of my positionality when I was writing it. I had to acknowledge that and be cautious about becoming yet another white Western scholar who prematurely and all too eagerly declares herself as an “expert in African art.” My awareness and feelings of responsibility motivated me to try to find an approach to the oeuvre of South Africa’s Jewish photographers without imposing any Eurocentric preconceptions or imperialist attitudes on it. Second, I wanted to find a way to make my

dissertation project a bridge between geographically disparate countries and cultures. Third, my dissertation was an attempt to raise critical issues of decolonization, Eurocentrism and white privilege that are rarely addressed in Lithuanian art history studies. Finally, the project opened up to me an ambitious avenue of research dedicated to Lithuania's relationship with African art, and that of the Baltic region as a whole.

Before becoming an art historian, I was trained as a professional artist. My undergraduate degree was in photography, from the Vilnius Academy of Arts. Later, I graduated with two Master's degrees, one in photography and video from the Vilnius Academy of Arts and another in media arts from the University of Cape Town. Looking back, it was the time I spent in South Africa, and not my university studies, that led my career in an unexpected direction – African studies. After a significant amount of time away from academia and working various commercial jobs, I decided to return and study for a doctoral degree. It was the South African experience that shaped the topic of my PhD dissertation.

Researching the life and works of Jewish photographers in the socio-political context of South Africa's apartheid regime made me reconsider my position in African studies. It also made me add some new and diverse historical topics, including the historical connections between Lithuania and some African countries, questions of colonialism and decolonization, and issues of race and racism in Eastern Europe, to my research focus. What this means is that I always keep in mind the issue of the right and competence of a Lithuanian academic to talk authoritatively about African culture and history. Is there a way one can earn that right?

South Africa was *terra incognita* for most Lithuanians at the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, South Africa, along with Palestine, was one of the most popular destinations for the emigration of Lithuanian Jews, despite being thousands of kilometers away from Europe. They were seeking asylum from antisemitic Tsarist policies imposed on the territory of Lithuania. As a result, about 80 percent of today's Jewish population of South Africa is of Lithuanian origin. The contribution of the South African Jewish community to the political and cultural life of South Africa has always been huge, even though Jews make up only 0.2 per cent of the total population there. The history of South African photography features many Jewish names. They took advantage of the wider availability of photographic equipment and the rise of the photo atelier business, developed ethnographic documentary photography, and documented the anti-apartheid resistance.

To this day the scope of studies in Lithuania related to twentieth and twenty-first century Africa is very limited. Those who have a global perspective on art history notice the lack of knowledge about the representation of Africans in Lithuanian art history. Mainstream art history has focused on the connections between nation-states and “Western” art centers in the global metropolises. Lithuanian art historians pay the most attention to neighboring countries (Latvia, Poland, Belarus) and canonical art centers (Rome, Paris, Berlin, London, New York). Several non-European art studies and studies on cultural interactions have appeared in Vilnius University’s journal *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* since 2000 and the series of edited volumes *Rytai-Vakarai: komparatyvistinės studijos* (East-West: Comparative Studies; edited by Antanas Andrijauskas) since 2002. One of the very recent examples of this positive change is a 2022 issue of *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* edited by Laura Petrauskaitė, which is dedicated to cultural interactions between South America and Eastern Europe.

In my current research on cultural connections between Eastern European and African countries, the question of my positionality reappears every time I prepare and conclude an article, curate an exhibition, or give a lecture to university students. I strongly believe that in many cases, raising the issue of my positionality and starting a conversation about it is more important than having precise and detailed answers to it.

Kristina Garalytė

My academic journey began with Indology studies at the Center of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University in 2004. Back then, the Center and the program of study had a strong focus on classical textual studies of various Asian cultures. Several courses engaged in a critique of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism, a perspective that was significantly underdeveloped in the Lithuanian academic field outside of Asian studies and anthropology programs. Even though Lithuania did not experience the Western type of colonialism directly, in the course of our studies we learned to interrogate how our thinking was influenced by a colonial mindset that placed Europe and Western civilization at a central point when thinking about the world.

Throughout my undergraduate studies, and following the tradition of Indology, I was interested in the Ramayana (the classical Indian epic focused on the god Rama’s story). I ended up writing my undergraduate thesis on the Ramnami, followers of Rama who form a so-called untouchable caste in Chhattisgarh, in central India, where I did short-term fieldwork. My research interests then

shifted from the “great tradition” to the “little traditions,” and from classical Indology to anthropology. In the context of Indian studies, the “great tradition” is understood as rituals and customs rooted in various textual sources of the Brahmins (reputedly the highest and most ritually pure caste of Hindu society). Meanwhile, the “little traditions” are the various vernacular, rural traditions that are adaptations of the Brahmanical “great” tradition or independent creations of the people. Anthropology and its focus on non-textual traditions provided me with a base for a critique of the textual study of Indian culture rooted in Brahmanical tradition and Sanskrit texts, and allowed me to discover the diversity of practices and beliefs within Indian culture.

Another shift in my academic journey took place through my engagement with the Dalit (the former untouchables in the Indian caste system) during my doctoral studies at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. I researched Dalit student activism on Indian university campuses. Since the 1990s, Dalits have been mobilizing on Indian campuses to assert their communal rights and challenge the dominant upper-caste Hindu culture. They are seeking to forge national and international solidarity among various marginalized communities. My research on Dalit activism confirmed ideas that had been elaborated in many anthropological works about the cultural differences of the communities of the “little traditions” with the dominant cultural milieu. The major takeaway from my engagement with Dalit student activism and Dalit studies was a theoretical understanding of and practical experience with the politics of constructing knowledge. The question of how people and groups are represented within the academy has been an ongoing concern for this marginal yet rising group of people. The question of their representation in the academy directly relates to the theme of this article.

In the course of my academic journey from classical Indology to anthropology, and from Indian epics to Dalit student activism, I had to resolve several fundamental questions about my positionality. How does my cultural background affect the process of getting to know “cultural others”? On what sources do I base my research and how do these sources shape my understanding of the cultures I study? Most importantly, what is my position within my research field and what ethical concerns arise for me as a representative of the academy? Every stage of my academic engagement had a lesson for me to learn. Indian studies taught me about cultural relativism and how to reflect critically on the colonial legacy in Western academic thought. Anthropological research enabled me to focus on multiple forms of lived reality and understand that “Indian culture” looks very different from what classical Indology portrays when it is viewed

from the perspective of the marginal communities. Meanwhile, Dalit studies encouraged me to reflect critically on the way Dalits were presented and how academic knowledge about them was constructed. This is not to say that one perspective, that of Indology or anthropology, is more intellectually valid than the other. Rather it is to acknowledge that the different questions and concerns that are of interest to these two academic disciplines can fruitfully build upon each other.

Situating Ourselves within Race and Caste Debates

Though our research fields and professional journeys have been rather different, the problem of representation has emerged for both of us as a unifying experience. Moreover, we have encountered this problem not only in our own direct experiences but also in the theoretical insights to which we have been exposed during the various stages of our postcolonial, decolonial, African, and Dalit studies and research. African and Dalit studies insiders have fervently raised questions about the academic legitimacy and ethics of the production of knowledge in this area by outsiders, most of whom represent the Western academic tradition. Therefore, in this part, we once again individually examine how we situate ourselves in the context of race and caste debates and this criticism by insiders.

Karina Simonson

Scholars of African studies have recently come under increasing criticism for their marginalization of African voices, interests, and agendas. According to one study, the share of articles written by Africa-based authors and published in the two major UK journals *African Affairs* and *The Journal of Modern African Studies* from 1993 to 2013 has declined from around 25 per cent to 15 per cent of all contributions.³⁸ Increasingly, African scholarship is associated with the production of empirical facts and socio-economic statistics rather than theory. It has most often been published locally rather than internationally, and suffers from other disadvantages that discourage respectful exchange and engagement

³⁸ Ryan C. Briggs and Scott Weathers, "Gender and Location in African Politics Scholarship: The Other White Man's Burden?" *African Affairs* 115, no. 460 (2016): 466–489, here 460, doi: 10.1093/afraf/adw009.

with Western scholars.³⁹ On the other hand, the notion that the field of African studies is too dominated by Western epistemologies and interests⁴⁰ starts to look more and more reasonable. Given the large number of Western university programs, institutions, publications, and white scholars now active in the field, I kept wondering, is it still ethical for the white scholar to study Africa? It became important for me to explore the role that race plays in shaping knowledge production about the continent and how whiteness plays a role in my research.

As an interdisciplinary scholar also working in Jewish studies, I was very much aware of the history of othering and excluding Jews in Lithuania, as well as in other countries of the world.⁴¹ Therefore, the question of my positionality as partly a Gentile, partly a Jew myself often appears to me in my research on Lithuanian Jews. When I started to write my doctoral dissertation on South African Jewish photographers, I had to review it carefully and find novel ways to access the life stories of the photographers and to engage with their artworks. The Lithuanian Jews in the Tsarist Russian Empire had been an “othered” and oppressed minority group for ages. Arrived to apartheid South Africa they were still a minority, but the color of their skin made them a very privileged group. Therefore, I was obliged to ask questions about their positionality with regard to the mostly black subjects of their photography. That led me to question my positionality regarding the subjects of my research and its moral and academic legitimacy.

My engagement with questions of race in the context of African studies did not start out as a personal one, but it did lead to my unpacking the complex personal relationship I had with the notion of race and my place in the race conversation. The process started during my Master’s degree studies at the University of Cape Town. There, I realized for the first time in my life that I am “white.” Indeed, I was a typical white Lithuanian who did not see herself as belonging to any race at all, because in my mind back then race was for those who were different from you.

³⁹ Insa Nolte, “The Future of African Studies: What We Can Do to Keep Africa at the Heart of Our Research,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 31, no. 3 (2019): 296–313, doi: 10.1080/13696815.2019.1584552.

⁴⁰ Paulin Hountondji, “Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies,” *RCCS Annual Review* 1, no. 1 (2009), doi: 10.4000/rccsar.174.

⁴¹ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, eds., *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Zygmunt Bauman, “Jews and Other Europeans, Old and New,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 42, no. 1 (2009): 121–133, doi: 10.3167/ej.2009.420111; Manuela Consonni and Vivian Liska, *Sartre, Jews, and the Other: Rethinking Antisemitism, Race, and Gender* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020).

In the still highly segregated context of post-apartheid South Africa, it is nearly impossible to go shopping or take a bus ride without encountering race in one way or another. While I clearly belonged to one particular racial group, I was not equipped with the proper knowledge or the proper mental tools for engaging with what for me was a new dimension of my identity. I most often tended to take the easy road, that of “observer.” I was well aware of the racial tensions and racism present in South African society, but I saw myself as an outsider. As such, I did not have the right to interfere with, comment upon, or judge anything or anybody. My usual stance was, “I do not understand this because I am coming from a supposedly racially homogenous, non-colonizer country.” It took years and dozens of conversations with my South African friends and colleagues to realize how wrong I was to take that view. Very patiently, they brought me to realize that I participate in the race conversation just like everybody else, whether they are from Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Being Lithuanian and not from a country with an imperialist past, I had to learn both my privilege and my responsibilities as a white person.

There was another fact that I was forced to acknowledge, another type of personal engagement with my topic of study. Multiracial families, whose members can be classified under certain circumstances in different racial categories, are relatively common. I happen to belong to one. Such families have interesting dynamics, especially when they appear in public. It was on a return visit to South Africa in 2020 that I realized that I felt proud walking down the street with my multiracial son, going to museums, and visiting my alma mater. My son came with me to all my meetings with friends and colleagues. Then I began to wonder about my unmerited sense of pride. It was as though I was treating my son’s identity as some kind of achievement of my own. My son seemed to me to give me a voice or even credibility to speak about race. He was my “pass.” It took me months of Covid quarantine back home to unravel my multilayered, complex feelings about being a white scholar of African studies. At that depth of complexity, I had a nagging feeling that I was subconsciously thinking of myself as not “good enough” to connect in any meaningful way with the very subject about which I supposedly am an expert, and that I was using my son as some kind of “human shield” to deal with that. Perhaps in a *hintergedanken*, I feared that without my mixed-race son I could not be accepted, taken seriously, trusted, or even worthy of the friendship of my interlocutors. Having him gave me a “right” to do my research.

Since the emergence of critical race studies in the United States in the mid-1970s, questions of race have been mainstreamed far beyond African studies in many American and European universities. On the other hand, the question of caste is still underdeveloped outside of South Asian studies programs and departments. In Europe, and the Western world more broadly, caste is largely seen as a purely Indian or South Asian thing. However, there is a growing number of works that argue that caste has ceased to be only a South Asian phenomenon, and has migrated with the diaspora communities and been adapted to host societies in different parts of the world.⁴² There are initiatives by Dalit activists to bring the question of caste discrimination up to the level of racial discrimination and to frame Dalit rights as human rights in the context of the United Nations.⁴³ Dalit engagement with caste debates on a global scale is framed as “Dalit cosmopolitanism.”⁴⁴ Through the work of Dalit intellectuals and activists, who seek to establish solidarity with minority communities around the globe, the world is being sensitized to Dalit experiences and grievances. Their initiatives are contributing to the internationalization of caste issues and Dalit concerns.

Even Westerners whose home countries have no tradition of colonization carry the burden of whiteness. By contrast, caste does not appear to raise any direct ethical qualms in the non-South Asian researcher because she/he is by default “caste-free.” It would be easy to assume that because a non-South Asian researcher does not belong to the caste hierarchy, she/he does not harbor any of the caste biases for which upper caste South Asian researchers are often reproached by Dalit activists and intellectuals. However, I would like to challenge that assumption by showing how caste continues to matter, even if a researcher comes from a supposedly caste-free society. No longer specific to

⁴² Nicolas Jaoul, “Beyond Diaspora: Ambedkarism, Multiculturalism and Caste in the UK,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 27 (2021), doi: 10.4000/samaj.7489; Vivek Kumar, “Different Shades of Caste Among the Indian Diaspora in the US,” *Transcience* 12, no. 1 (2021): 1–12, https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol12_No1_1_12.pdf; Suraj Yengde, “Caste Among the Indian Diaspora in Africa,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 37 (2015).

⁴³ Clifford Bob, “Dalit Rights Are Human Rights’: Caste Discrimination, International Activism, and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2007): 167–193, doi: 10.1353/hrq.2007.0001; Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁴ Luis Cabrera, “Dalit Cosmopolitans: Institutionally Developmental Global Citizenship in Struggles Against Caste Discrimination,” *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2017): 280–301, doi: 10.1017/S0260210516000322; Luis Cabrera, *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-State Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

South Asia, caste is becoming a social, political and moral issue for the global community.⁴⁵ Now, researchers inevitably have to take a political and moral stand with regard to caste discrimination. Even in Lithuania, espousing certain universal values, such as human rights, obliges the researcher to address the problem of caste discrimination, although it is still not part of our reality here. In the current context of global connectivity, what is seen as a foreign and alien issue or concern can easily metamorphose into a “glocal” reality. This is exactly what we have seen with Black Lives Matter protests in Vilnius in 2020, where previously distant racial discrimination issues managed to bring Lithuanian youth to the streets.

It would be difficult to impute any innate caste bias to a Lithuanian researcher, simply because the cultural context of caste relations is not part of Lithuanian social reality (the country does not even have a distinguishable South Asian diaspora community). Still, caste bias might appear when I think about what I, as a researcher, might say about Indian society, how I represent it in my work, and how my representations might be rooted in certain social and political discourses. During my field research, I have experienced this several times, when my interlocutors have asked me what authors on caste I read or when they condemned some academic literature I had bought, which according to them was written by, as they put it, casteist scholars. It made me realize that there is no neutral writing on caste and that the whole field of caste research resembles an intellectual minefield that I, as a foreigner, am attempting to enter. If I read the literature that my informants criticized, I would be in danger of reproducing that caste worldview in those books. On the other hand, if I simply follow my interlocutors’ recommendations on “ideologically correct” literature, would not I be representing the partisan views of another particular social group and lack the proper critical distance?

Because my research was done on university campuses, my field positionality and my academic positionality eventually overlapped. I interviewed and carried on conversations with scholar-interlocutors, but I had to maintain professional relationships with them in the academic field and engage with their critique of my work. After all, we are players in the same academic field. Interestingly, I was never reproached by my Dalit interlocutors for taking this topic on for research. Rather, they commended me for engaging with their concerns and grievances. However, a more critical stance regarding the representation of Dalits in academic literature has emerged among Dalit intellectuals, movement leaders and non-Dalits engaging with Dalit studies in the last decade. This is aptly

⁴⁵ Cabrera, “Dalit Cosmopolitans.”

reflected by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. They question the relationship of theory to actual experience and observe that recently, “groups and communities began to assert the primacy of their experience” and “began to resist attempts by ‘outsiders’ to describe and re-categorize their experience.”⁴⁶ Particularly Guru finds any non-Dalit engagement with Dalit issues problematic. Both authors agree that attempts to rethink the relationship between theory and experience have been largely Eurocentric and fail to address the specificity of the different cultural contexts.⁴⁷ This reflects an ongoing wider debate about the authenticity of representations in the literature about various minority communities worldwide (e.g. Dalit, Adivasi, Burakumin and others).

Attempting to root the debate in the local Indian experience, Guru criticizes the Indian social sciences for their inegalitarian nature, their neglect of the authentic Dalit experience, and their preference for academic theorizing.⁴⁸ He accuses the Indian social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology, of reproducing the orientalist mindset and social-epistemic inequality of the West. He asserts that the so-called upper caste Brahmins are prioritized in theory while empirical research is prioritized for the Shudras (Dalits and other so-called lower castes). He argues that Dalits should stop “making guest appearances in somebody else’s formulations and restore to themselves the agency to reflect organically on their own experience.”⁴⁹ Though Guru’s criticism is primarily aimed at Indian scholars for their specific caste identities and privileges, its major premises problematize any non-Dalit’s engagement with the Dalit experience.

Then what arguments can one adopt, if he or she does not come from a Dalit background, in the face of such an ethically powerful critique? Guru’s approach can be commended for its social consciousness and for encouraging Dalits to engage with theory more bravely. However, his approach needs to take two counter-arguments into consideration. First, Guru speaks of the Dalit experience as a homogenous thing, as if all Dalits have one single uncontested experience of untouchability. A closer look would reveal that there are various caste groups within the Dalits that often come into conflict. It is quite often the case that the

⁴⁶ Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, eds., *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ This resonates with the aforementioned critique on Western epistemologies dominating the African studies field.

⁴⁹ Gopal Guru, “Egalitarianism and the Social Sciences in India,” in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, ed. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9–28, here 24.

social hierarchy of the caste system is replicated among Dalits themselves. Can different Dalit castes find unity and agreement about a theory built on a single social experience? Which base of the Dalit experience would best characterize the multiplicity of Dalit experiences?

Second, Guru's position denies any need on the part of the Dalits or those researching them to understand the "cultural other." If previously marginalized groups close themselves off from others, it becomes much more difficult for the others to empathize with their marginalization. Representations of the Dalits produced by other social groups or cultural outsiders may lack the depth provided by lived experience as a Dalit, but they will only be improved by dialogue. Dialogue is a necessary, if not inevitable path for any marginalized group seeking social inclusion to take.

Conclusion

The two personal accounts presented in this article should allow the reader to understand how we, as Lithuanian researchers, are not only constituted by the post-Soviet condition and postcolonial and decolonial trends, but also navigate them as we shape our professional identities, build field research contacts, and respond to critiques and morally justify our research. When one analyzes one's positionality, it is important to reflect upon various historical, institutional, and personal factors. We sought here to demonstrate how we experience two kinds of interrelated positionalities – academic positionality and fieldsite positionality. Both positionalities reflect Lithuania's and our own transition from the Soviet cultural and intellectual legacy to the Western postcolonial and decolonial discourses. This transition obliges us to remain conscious of the Soviet past while we adapt to Western academic trends. In this autoethnographic essay we wanted to describe the dual positionalities we as Lithuanian researchers have in the field of area studies, but even more to encourage other researchers to reflect critically on the multidimensional, agentive, and strategic aspects of their positionality. We hope that positionality will not become just another buzzword, as has happened with decolonization and many other words. We want it to be a useful tool and methodological approach in area studies and beyond for critical reflection on the micro- and personal politics of research.

Mielke and Hornidge observe that area studies now functions not in a bipolar but rather a multicentric world. This change in geopolitics has also changed

the nature of area studies, making it more diverse and versatile as a discipline.⁵⁰ Escobar has encouraged us to think of the world as a “pluriverse,” recognizing multiple possibilities and realities.⁵¹ These scholars’ support for diversity and plurality of perspective encourages us to embrace the regional specificity of area studies and researchers’ positionalities, keeping in mind that three-quarters of European countries do not have a direct history as colonial powers. Respect for diverse perspectives all around legitimizes the engagement of outsiders like us with “cultural others” and allows us the chance to make meaningful contributions to better understanding of our pluriversal world.

⁵⁰ Mielke and Hornidge, eds., *Area Studies at the Crossroads*.

⁵¹ Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).