The Polish Journal
of Aesthetics

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# Postsocialist Affectivity and Intersectional Feminism

Edited by

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# *A Welcome Note*

Dear reader,

Thank you for getting to this volume and joining in. Together now, we will explore some terrains of postsocialist affectivity. Our starting point is intersectional feminism, and along the texts of this volume, we will navigate further into the realms of literary criticism, somaesthetics, theories of nationalism and agency, as well as environmental humanities and postsocialist studies. This volume will take us to the ongoing protests for women's reproductive rights and the sleepy atmospheres of provincial towns, to numbing scenes of the Bucha massacre, global and local dialectics within Eastern Europe, as well as the Latvian pagan traditions and Estonian fiction. The volume enhances the understanding of what post-socialism might feel like and what affects it generates, while addressing its rhizomatic roots, which pass through local and global histories of socialism, communism, neoliberalism, capitalism, nationalism, consumerism, sexism, ageism, etc., as well as exploring its decolonial, environmental, and anti-capitalist potentialities. In various articles, the authors likewise register the postsocialist love-hate for the West, the ambiguities of Eurocentric Western modernity, and neoliberal capitalist rationality in the postsocialist condition, which is understood in a rather broad sense as a new global social and political situation.

The impetus for this volume emerged as a desire to locate postsocialist sceneries in the transnational geographies of affect theories, which so far had primarily focused on exploring Anglo-American contexts or their postcolonial Others. Since both of the editors are also feminists, we were particularly interested in intersectional feminist framings, that would both pay tribute to earlier feminist work on emotions prior to the so-called affective turn (associated with the threshold of the new millennium) and attest to gendered sensitivity, commitment to exploring womxn's embodiment, experience and perspectives, as we all expanding the critical vocabulary and toolkits of contemporary feminist theories. While postsocialist feminism is sometimes presented as a marginalized "little sister" of the transnational

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feminist community, oscillating between its socialist and neoliberal displays, the volume attempts to establish a consistent standpoint and cross-disciplinary affinities for addressing some blind spots and filling the gaps in theoretical inquiry and academic debates.

    We are thankful to the authors for their contributions and willingness to navigate these wild and unexplored fields with us. Special thanks also to the artist Rasa Jansone for the kind permission to display her hand-cut collage from the series "Three Courses and Dessert on Top" (2020) on the journal's cover. Its rich layers resonate with the lively hybridity and vibrant abundance of the special issues' subject. We hope the insights of the volume in its reader will spark curiosity, passion, and hope.

<div align="right">

With love,
Jana and Natalia

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# Teresa Fazan[*]

# "Our Indignation Drives Me."
# The Biopolitics of Abortion and Counterpublic in Poland[1]

Abstract

This paper approaches the Women's Strike (2020-2021) from the participants' perspective. First, the author outlines the political and cultural context, emphasizing the contemporary debate about abortion in Poland. Then, the analysis of the protests, conducted in line with Butler, Czarnacka, Graff, Korolczuk, and Majewska, is combined with the author's research outcomes based on the multi-sited participant observation and semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants of the protests. The main argument is that re-evaluating the outcomes of a social movement that did not achieve its goal necessitates expanding the meaning of social change beyond the completion of said goal.

Keywords

Abortion, Biopolitics, Counterpublic, Postsocialism, Reproductive Rights, Social Movements

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*Over the last few years, every Fall, attempts have been made to
tighten abortion law in Poland. Therefore, I was not surprised by this
decision, and going out to protest was a natural step to take,
not an emotional outburst. But my emotional investment
in this struggle is fluctuating. Sometimes I am enraged, sometimes
touched, and sometimes it seems like I feel nothing.*

The above assertion comes from one of the interviews I conducted between
February and April 2021 during the Women's Strike (OSK).[2] On October 22,
2020, the Polish Constitutional Court issued its decision regarding the con-
stitutionality of one of the premises ensuring legal abortion in Poland. The
decision itself (the law authorizing abortions for fatal or severe fetal im-
pairment was declared unconstitutional) was not unanticipated, as most of
the judges were appointed by the governing right-wing Law and Justice (PiS)
party. However, the size of the social reaction evoked by this decision could
not have been foreseen. On the next day, massive protests took place all over
the country, and in following months, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, they
continued, amounting to what appears to be the most extensive protest ac-
tion in Poland since 1989. Despite the mass mobilization of activists, pro-
abortion protesters, and anti-government sympathizers, the ruling was pub-
lished in the Journal of Laws on January 27, 2021, effectively banning most
of the small number of legal abortions. Consequently, Poland has the most
restrictive abortion legislation in the region.

    The opening quote highlights two critical issues. Firstly, although un-
precedented in scale, the Strike is an integral part of a complicated history of
abortion legislation in postsocialist Poland. Secondly, the role of emotions is
vital in understanding this history. In the article, I approach the Strike from
the perspective of the movement's participants. The emotions they ex-
pressed when recounting and evaluating the events are of particular focus.
My argument is that re-evaluating the outcomes of a social movement that
did not achieve its goal necessitates expanding the meaning of social change

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    [2] OSK stands for Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (the All-Poland Women's Strike), a social
movement and an organization established in September 2016 to oppose the right-wing
proposal to make abortion law even harsher by banning abortion also in cases of fetal
damage. In November 2020, in response to the demands of the all-Poland protests, OSK
established the Consultative Council inspired by the Belarusian Coordination Council that
had been created during the 2020 Belarusian protests. Although the organization and the
council were generally supported by the protesters, many of their statements and deci-
sions remained controversial. Throughout the text, I will employ the terms OSK as well as
the (Women) Strike to relate to the discussed social movement.

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beyond the completion of said goal. As I argue, a social movement can not only change a ruling but also the surrounding discourse and a way of understanding the issue at stake. It can delineate a new interest group or create a new sociopolitical coalition. First, I draw a political and cultural context and explore the contemporary debate on abortion that originated in the late 1980s. Then, the interviewees' assessments are presented against the theoretical framework located at the intersection of biopolitics and social movement studies.

## History of Abortion in Poland: Politicization and Resistance

Post-war Poland had a liberal approach to abortion, with the most progressive legislation in the region after 1956 (Zielińska 2000, 25). Since 1989, however, in most former Eastern Bloc countries, regulations ensuring access to abortion during that period have been challenged on the highest parliamentary levels (Gal 1994, 258). According to Katherine Verdery, partial socialization of reproduction, access to abortion, and the degendering of the workforce under socialism after its collapse resulted in blaming women[3] and the system for destroying traditional values. This often led to abortion bans: the commonality between different countries of the socialist bloc after its collapse was "increasingly visible ethno-nationalism, coupled with anti-feminist and pro-natalist politicking. Much of it centers on the issue of abor-

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[3] OSK engendered a vibrant discussion about abortion-related language. Specifically, different ways of narrating the subjects of the conflict created divisions as well as alliances within the protesting group. Although cis-women comprise the group most affected by the ban, the right to an abortion is a human right, and it concerns a wider range of people. It must be acknowledged that trans people, intersex people, and non-binary people also get pregnant, and advocating for access to legal and safe abortions for them is equally important. Additionally, as Preciado notes, "not all women have uteruses and not all uteruses are reproductive" (2020, 5) thus using the term "women" might seem too broad. During the protests, some activists noted that the movement's narrative should not only focus on women as this leads to exclusion of other people who need abortions and suggested using terms like "people who need abortions." Others claimed that terms like "persons with uteruses" reduces subjects to their reproductive capabilities and ignores the feminist legacy. The context of transphobic backlash in Poland made the discussion quite charged. During my interviews, all the above notions were used interchangeably. Throughout the text, I tend to use the term "women." My choice is motivated by brevity and because this term is commonly used in the Polish context. At no point do I want to ignore the demand to make the discourse on reproductive rights inclusive, and I encourage the reader to bear in mind that I write about all people who might need abortions.

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tion" (Verdery 1994, 250). Thus, it is not paradoxical that anti-abortion atti-
tudes accompanied democratization (Holc 2004, 758). Janine Holc interprets
anxiety around reproductive freedom as expressing anxiety about the trans-
formation itself (2004, 775, 777). The shift from state socialism to parlia-
mentary democracy and the free-market economy was an abrupt transition
that had profoundly gendered effects (Gal 1994, 256). As Susan Gal noted
during the transformation, gender, reproduction, and ethnicity were dis-
cussed as "moral and natural categories rather than social ones" (1994, 257),
becoming sides of the biopolitical struggle between different actors of the
sovereign republics proclaimed as reemerging nation-states.

Iza Desperak argues that abortion was strongly politicized in Poland as
early as the 1980s, rupturing the political scene (2003, 193). The dividing
line ran across various groups of interests: unions, political parties, public
opinion, medical circles, and nascent NGOs. In 1989, the Polish Catholic-
Social Union, with experts from the Episcopate, submitted a proposal not
only prohibiting but also penalizing abortion. A year later, the Ministry of
Health required a certificate from four doctors to allow abortion, and a con-
science clause was introduced, *de facto* exempting from the obligation to
perform abortion. In 1993, an even more narrow bill was passed. It restricts
abortion to three cases: a severe threat to the life or health of the pregnant
person, rape or incest, and fatal or severe fetal impairment.

Marcin Kościelniak grants the abortion debate a crucial meaning in the
transformation process. As he notices, the opposition negotiated an agree-
ment with the Catholic Church to fulfill its political goals while ignoring the
popular demand for accessible abortion. While this fact is often treated as
a side effect of democratization, Kościelniak argues that denying reproduc-
tive rights was necessary (2020, 28): it allowed the opposition to win the
Church's support and base the narrative of new Poland on the Catholic-na-
tionalist interpretation of its pre-socialist history. Similarly, Gail Kligman and
Gal argue that "it was through the restriction of abortion [...] that politicians
attempted to signal the new Solidarity-dominated government's morality,
opposition to communism, and alliance with the Catholic Church" (2000,
204). The 1993 bill was in line with a principled approach of the time: as
Katarzyna Wężyk notes, "it combined neoliberal thinking in terms of indi-
vidual entrepreneurship and resourcefulness with the official monopoly of
the Church on morality" (2021, 423).

During the transformation, the government's stand on abortion was part
of an attempt to produce national exceptionality. It was influenced by the
discourse promoted by the Church and pro-life organizations. Thus, refer-

ences to, for example, the "lives of the unborn," "child" (rather than "fetus"), and "mother" (rather than a pregnant person) dominated the public debate. In the 1993 bill, the phrase "conceived child" appears repeatedly and at one point is even attributed "legal capacity."[4] This ideological discursive shift enabled the so-called "abortion compromise" to become a supposedly neutral solution to the "abortion issue." An interesting analysis of this process is proposed by Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, who write that, at the time, the problem of gender and reproductive justice became an uncomfortable excess (2018, 250). During the transformation, gender inequality was ignored, while women's care work was taken for granted. Women performed their roles in new Poland by merging two models of femininity: the Polish mother and the emancipated woman "who has it all." As a result, when the new democratic order came to a crisis, the issues of gender inequality and care work reemerged as fundamental social concerns. Additionally, as noted by Korolczuk and Graff, abortion became central in the Polish "war on gender," which originated when the government tried to pull out of the Istanbul Convention in 2012 (2018, 252). Within the right-wing narrative, the convention became a symbol of the gender ideology that stood for everything contrary to the Polish tradition: gender equality, rights of sexual and ethnic minorities, sexual education ("sexualization of children"), reproductive justice, gender studies (2018, 253-254), and, obviously, the right to abortion.

In the following years, the concept was further demonized as ideology, threatening everything that was Polish. "The Polish nation" has been identified with the traditional patriarchal family and culture of the Catholic Church. The reactionary approach to gender theory allowed right-wing politicians to earn powerful political capital by awakening imaginary fears and proposing immediate remedies (2018, 257-258). The "war on gender" helped to channel economic fears by identifying the violence of the capital with the EU, LGBT+ rights, and feminism, which were blamed for spreading "harmful individualism" and building an "easily manipulated society without qualities" (2018, 263-265). In this narrative, it was possible to provide a coherent characterization of abortion as both a postsocialist relic and a Western import. Firstly, it was a part of the socialist legacy, understood as a fight against the Church and traditional family (2018, 263). Secondly, liberal abortion legislation was identified as one of the instruments of the Western colo-

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[4] "The Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion", [online] https://www.reproductiverights.org/sites/default/files/documents/Polish%20abortion%20act--English%20translation.pdf [accessed: 07.12.2022], pp. 3-5.

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nization project, aimed at secularizing Poland and robbing it of its fertility, tradition, and family. The opposition to accessible abortion became synonymous with resistance to the attacks on Poland. The term "nation" was successfully annexed by right-wing parties, and it no longer functioned in any neutral way. The fact that pro-life organizations effectively pressured the state to implement their biopolitical demands on a legislative level led to a partial identification of the state (at least the PiS government) with pro-life agenda.

The 1993 bill was, and by some still is referred to as an "abortion compromise." For years, it was narrated as a solution balancing the interests of "all sides" and became a hallmark of Polish morality shaped by Catholic tradition and nationalist sentiments against the background of the socialist past and secular Western standards (Korolczuk & Graff 2018, 263). In reality, it ignored the interest of the most essential "side:" a substantial group opposing restricted access to abortion that repeatedly attempted to change it. As noted by Kościelniak, the adoption of the law was preceded by a stormy media debate, a series of demonstrations, and a large-scale campaign to hold a referendum on the issue (2020, 2). Despite its persistent presence in parliamentary debates and the existence of robust pro-life and pro-choice activism in the pre- and post-transformation periods, abortion was repeatedly denied significance. As Eleonora Zielińska points out, this debate provokes emotional responses, and thus "[…] it is viewed as a surrogate topic by which attention can be drawn away from the enduring socioeconomic problems generated by the transformation" (2000, 24). Moreover, as Agata Czarnacka notes, abortion, in line with an unwritten consensus, was seen as a "typically female" topic that should be discussed by women, who in a patriarchal Poland are given limited space in public debate (2017, 10). The analysis of social movements in contemporary Poland makes it impossible to uphold such a perspective: recent years provide evidence for abortion being quite a central political issue and the primary reason for mobilization.

Desperak emphasizes that although the opposition to restrictive regulation has been present since the 1990s and some initiatives were taken to liberalize the law, the 2016-2018 Black Protests[5] marked the beginning of

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[5] The name of the protest action comes from the role black clothes played in identifying the supporters, both on the streets and social media. On Monday, October 3, 2016, thousands went on strike to oppose the bill to ban abortion, which was voted down on October 6. The rainy weather on the day of the strike contributed to establishing the black umbrella as the symbol of the protests. The other symbol was a wire coat hanger, a reference to a brute abortion "technique" performed when other methods to terminate an unwanted pregnancy were unavailable.

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a mass movement around the issue (Czarnacka 2017, 15). The outcome of this mobilization, apart from preventing further restrictions on abortion, was a transformation of discourse: women gained more subjectivity and realized they could claim their rights in a more uncompromising manner (Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 19). Finally, the "compromise" was undermined, and the social approach to abortion was liberalized significantly (Czarnacka 2016, 27, 32). This event happened due to mass mobilization and the possibility to debate abortion more freely online (Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 20; Majewska 2018, 235). What linked different and dispersed agents of the mobilization was fear of tightening the abortion law (in 2016, the "Stop Abortion" bill, attempting to ban and criminalize abortion, was debated in the lower house of the parliament). Although mobilization was a reaction to this specific project, its size, surprising to everyone from politicians to feminist activists (Czarnacka 2016, 31), is often explained by the achievement of a critical mass: in 2016, the importance of liberal access to abortion and the universality of this issue were realized for the first time (Majewska 2018, 227; Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 22).

Although compared to the Solidarity movement from the 80s (Korolczuk 2016; Majewska 2018), the Black Protests were unprecedented in the history of social movements in Poland. The organization was based on the usage of social media and movement formed within the framework of "connective action," not "collective action" (Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 20). Social media usage did not undermine the mobilization's regional aspect: local Facebook groups played an essential role in organizing outside the most populated cities (Majewska 2018, 228). Importantly, all protests were undertaken in a grass-root manner without any institutional or state support. As noted by Czarnacka, this differentiates pro-choice activism from pro-life (2016, 28-29). This unprecedented mobilization soon became part of the international feminist struggle for reproductive rights. The Strike, inspired by the events in Iceland in 1975, became the leaven of mobilization in other countries (Majewska 2018, 243; Fraser *et al.* 2019, 6). Additionally, the size of the protests led to the extension of the scope of postulates. Activists got engaged in other issues, e.g., changes in the judiciary system and education, defending the rights of the guardians of persons with disabilities, and LGBT+ rights (Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 22). Consequently, in today's Poland, abortion is seen as the basis for the mobilization of actors arguing for other social and political goals (Nawojski & Pluta 2018; Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 143).

According to Ewa Majewska, Black Protests mark the beginning of grassroots mass feminism in Poland (2018, 244-245). While describing how the movement reclaimed the language on abortion, Korolczuk recounts a feed-

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back loop mechanism that organically emerged between different mobilized agents, often across boundaries of class, geography, and age. Feminist experts became present in the media, and outlets gained interest in the medical aspects of abortion and discussed the issue more multifacetedly (Korolczuk *et al.* 2018, 139-140). The politicization of the masses, liberalization of the approach to abortion, and the emergence of a communication network might be the movement's most significant achievements. All this produced a strong base for the upcoming mobilization. The movement granted participants a sense of agency and solidarity they had never experienced, which was articulated during the protests as well as afterward, in retrospect (Nawojski & Pluta 2018, 127-128). This network expanded even when the protests ceased to be organized: over past years, communication strengthened, and the number of pro-abortion protesters increased. The role of activists normalizing abortion and providing reproductive services for Poles was and is pivotal here: besides practically opposing the abortion ban, they fulfill the propaganda role by changing the understanding of abortion. Even if committed to organizing procedures for Poles abroad, most organizations promote pharmacological abortions as cheaper and giving patients more control.[6] Focusing on at-home abortions and employing a normalizing narrative is a powerful tool for opposing the over-dramatic narrative of the pro-life movement, "portraying abortion as murder and women undergoing abortion as cruel and deviant" (Cullen & Korolczuk 2019, 12). As I argue, the pro-abortion activism in the years following the Black Protests made it possible for the Strike to become the most extensive mass mobilization in contemporary

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[6] Besides practically opposing the anti-democratic limitation of access to reproductive services, those organizations fulfill a propaganda role by changing the social understanding of abortion and educating public opinion about reproductive justice. For example, Women on Web is an open forum that has been providing pregnancy options counseling and information on abortion since 2006 and the Abortion Dream Team (ADT) is a collective helping access abortion and promoting knowledge about abortion. Many organizations emerged around the Black Protests. For example, Abortion Without Borders, a transnational initiative of six organizations working to help Poles access abortions, launched on December 11, 2019. Those organizations offer two ways of accessing abortions: supplementing people with pills to perform at-home abortions or assisting them while they pursue surgical abortions abroad. All of my interviewees acknowledged that education about pharmacological abortion, considering the recent ban, is life-saving: it gives the means of reproduction to the hands of pregnant people. Especially that as long as abortion is not criminalized, it can be performed in this way despite the ban. Still, my informants were aware that pharmacological abortion is not sufficient in some cases, e.g., termination of late pregnancies.

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Polish history. Abortion became an issue mobilizing people for political and social aims different from the accessibility of termination of pregnancy or, to be more precise: it once again proved most effective in mobilizing people in contemporary Poland.

After the 2020 Court's decision, despite the lockdowns, massive protests took place all over the country in what appears to be the most widespread strike conducted in modern Polish history.[7] The UN independent human rights experts criticized the ruling, urging Polish authorities to respect the rights of protesters, especially considering the escalation of police brutality. Some commentators argue that although the Court's decision was a direct reason for the mobilization, the protests were triggered by accumulated sentiments related to the perpetuating exploitation of women's reproductive labor (Czapliński 2021, 8). This attitude was present in the names the events were given: they were referred to as the "October Revolution of Dignity,"[8] "October Insurrection,"[9] or "Polish revolution."[10] In such narratives, protests articulated the disagreement with the ban, which in 2016-2018 was based on a desire to uphold "the compromise" rather than fully liberalize access to abortion. The Strike was based on the structures that emerged in 2016. Both protest actions were similar in a biopolitical sense: on one side, there was the state's apparatus attempting to control reproductive rights; on the other, the counterpublic that protested, prepared legislative projects, and organized reproductive services. The fluctuations between the two occurred: the state did not monopolize the pro-life advocacy, and some institutionalized actors advocated for liberalization.

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[7] For vast and detailed visual documentation of the protests organized by the Women's Strike as well as different instances of activism opposing breaches of democratic norms in Poland, I recommend researching the Archive of Public Protests (APP): https://archiwumprotestow.pl/en/home-page/ [accessed: 02.02.2023]. I also recommend reading Agata Pyzik's text, giving a sense of how the protests felt back in October 2020, PROTESTS IN POLAND: GET THE FUCK OUT, MOTHERFUCKERS, [online] https://artsoftheworkingclass.org/text/protests-in-poland-get-the-fuck-out-motherfuckers [accessed: 05.02.2023].

[8] See: Michał Sutowski, *Październikowa rewolucja godności*, [online] https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/michal-sutowski-pazdziernikowa-rewolucja-godnosci/ [accessed: 02.02.2023].

[9] See: Sebastian Słowiński, *To nie jest rewolucja. To insurekcja*, [online] https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,26558540,to-nie-jest-rewolucja-to-insurekcja.html [accessed: 02.02.2023].

[10] See: Masha Gessen, *The Abortion Protests in Poland Are Starting to Feel Like a Revolution*, The New Yorker, [online] https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-abortion-protests-in-poland-are-starting-to-feel-like-a-revolution [accessed: 02.02.2023].

Figure 1: Stare Miasto, Kraków, January 2021, a billboard promoting perinatal hospices painted over with pro-abortion slogan; Mokotów, Warsaw, April 2021, "policja zabija," i.e., "the police kill" sprayed on a pavement in Pole Mokotowskie park. Photographs from the author's archive.
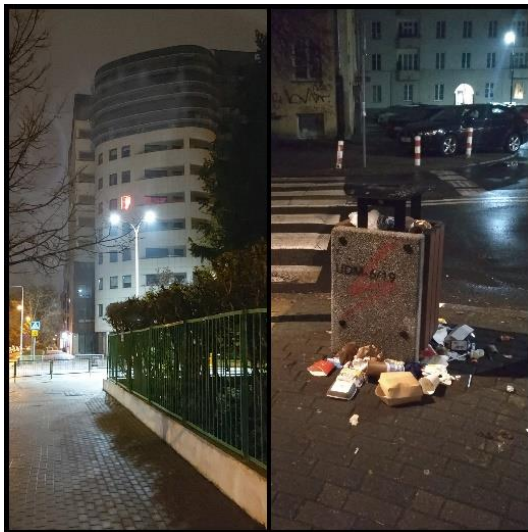


Figure 2: Mokotów, Warsaw, December 2020, red lightning bolt, the symbol of the Women's Strike, displayed in a window of an apartment and sprayed on a rubbish bin. Photographs from the author's archive.

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## Biopower, Abortion, and the Counterpublic

Penelope Deutscher notices that in the international history of reproductive justice, legislations on abortion repeatedly produce "women's bodies as reproductive biopolitical targets" (2009, 64). Alike, Paul Preciado writes about "an act of annexation of wombs as territories over which nation-states claim full sovereignty, 'living spaces' over which they deploy a strategy of occupation" (2020, 3). The author describes how a patriarchal capitalist state extends its power over land to "infiltrate the interiority of the body, and designate certain organs as its 'vital space'" (2020, 5). More specifically, according to Przemysław Czapliński, Polish anti-abortion laws express the patriarchal state's perception of women as "a worse kind of persons" reduced to a reproductive role who are in a position of "half-citizenship" (2021, 8-9). According to Majewska, the Polish state's simultaneous affirmation of the "prenatal" life and its ignorance towards women's lives could be interpreted in terms of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics (2018, 245). By focusing on the "life of the unborn," anti-abortion policies reduce women to a "living space," putting their actual(ized) life in danger.

Still, as Foucault reminds us, the functioning of power is ambiguous: it is dispersed, decentralized, intentional, and "nonsubjective," performed not only by the state's regulatory means but also by numerous disciplines by which people exert control upon themselves. As he puts it, "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations [and] [...] there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled" (1978, 94). The power is thus dynamic and dissident: the plurality of its points of exercise generates the plurality of resistance points (1978, 96). Therefore, the public, a self-organized yet ideal "social totality [...], the people organized as the nation" (Warner 2005, 65), is constantly confronted by the counterpublic, "a subset of publics that stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology's construction in public discourse" (Fattal 2018, 1). As long as public and counterpublic are not regarded as strictly distinct (resistance is always part of power; Foucault 1978, 95), such understanding of the public sphere is in line with how power functions in society. The notions of biopower and counterpublic allow for a nuanced understanding of social agency: the relationship between the dominant power and individual action is reciprocal and changing. As Lois McNay puts it, the "existing structures are reproduced by human agents who modify and change these structures to differing degrees as they are shaped by them" (1992, 60).

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Such an understanding of agency resonates with how Polish researchers described Black Protests' subjects. In order to investigate the movement, Majewska defines the notion of "counterpublic" (after Kluge & Negt 2016; Fraser 1990) as a group of resistance that opposes both the state apparatus and the cultural-economic elites or, in other words, a public sphere created by those who are already marginalized (2019). In the context of the afore-mentioned "war on gender," her conception helps position the progressive counterpublic in opposition to both the conservative state and the neoliberal elites. In addition, it allows delineating of a non-homogenous group deter-mined by exclusion from access to power rather than any uniform identity. Moreover, as the counterpublic is geared toward a concrete political goal, its membership is unstable and fluctuating. Majewska writes about the acti-vation of the "regular men and women," highlighting that movement com-prised a group of diverse agents, many of whom were previously politically inactive (2018, 248). Despite being specific in its demand, the movement remained inclusive. As noted by Jennifer Ramme and Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, in the case of the Black Protests, the protesters were frequently referred to as "ordinary women" not only by the media but also by them-selves (2018, 76). As they found, the "ordinary women" denoted something different from the traditional populist usage,[11] namely, "not being active before; diversity; acting above divisions; having a common goal; all women; the majority" (2018, 82). As they notice further,

> the term 'ordinary women' (...) should rather be understood as akin to the emancipa-tory category of 'the people,' embodying a version of the intersectional practice. Such an understanding of the subject of the OSK is at odds with the understanding of the (ordinary) 'people' the party Law and Justice and far-right claim to represent. Contrary to OSK, the ordinary 'people' within the right-wing discourses are defined through homogeneity (2018, 93).

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[11] According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, in populist narratives, the usage of notions of "common" or "ordinary" people often implicates the "critique of the dominant culture, which views judgments, tastes, and values of ordinary citizens with suspicion. In contrast to this elitist view, the notion of 'the common people' vindicates the dignity and knowl-edge of groups who objectively or subjectively are being excluded from power due to their sociocultural and socioeconomic status" (2017, 10). Similarly, in the usage of the Polish right-wing politicians, the "ordinary" people are usually opposed to the mainstream neo-liberal or leftists "elites". Paradoxically, of course, those "common" people are represented by the elite of the well-off educated class of right-wing politicians of the governing party.

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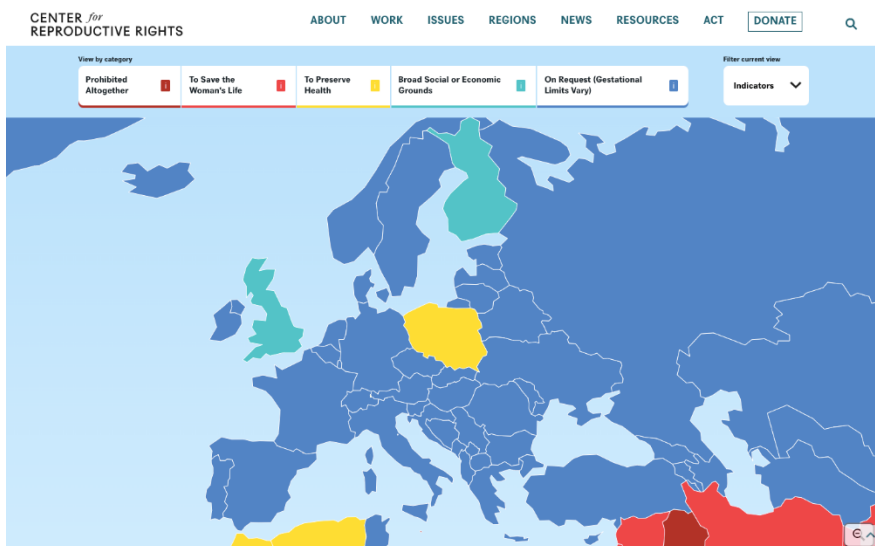


Figure 3: A screenshot of the map of the World's Abortion Laws at the website
of the Center of Reproductive Rights. Here, "pathological" Poland stands out
as a yellow spot in the middle of "blue" Europe, where abortion is accessible
on broad social and economic grounds or requests. During the interviews,
the adjective "normal" was used by some interviewees, who referred to
the European standards as opposed to the Polish "pathological" ones.
See: The World's Abortion Laws, Center of Reproductive Rights: https://
maps.reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws [accessed: 18.01.2023].

Researchers recognize the understanding of "ordinary women" as those
not politically active before as significant, especially since, till now, most
women have felt excluded from politics and activism (2018, 84). As men-
tioned before, Black Protests were the moment of the activation and radical-
ization of Poland's broader society. The mass character of the movement
relates not only to the number of participants but also to its popular charac-
ter. Majewska argues against theories of political agency that exclude such
actors and advocates for more inclusive conceptualizations proposed by
Gramsci and Spivak (2018, 49). She uses their term "subaltern," referring to
those who do not give orders but receive them, and a more local version of
it: Václav Havel's concept of the power of the powerless (2018, 262). Against
this background, Majewska defines the counterpublic of the Black Protests
as one focused on the economic side of the ban, which *de facto* limits access
to reproductive services only for the disadvantaged. What emerged was a
feminist counterpublic that criticized the conservative state's power, focused

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on controlling women's bodies, and the neoliberal technocratic elites treat-
ing reproductive rights purely instrumentally as an identity-related issue
(2018, 263).

W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) propose to narrate
contemporary social movements in terms of "connective action" instead of
"collective action." Here, communication becomes an integral part of the or-
ganizational structure, not just a way of exchanging information. Importantly,
identity cohesion is less critical in the case of connective action, and civil
activities' organization goes beyond a centralized decision-making process
(2012; cf. Korolczuk 2018, 20). They are similarly employing the notion of
counterpublic aiming at surpassing the limitations of identity politics. What
Judith Butler describes as a political feminist postulate, i.e., that "[…] gender
politics must make alliances with other populations broadly characterized as
precarious", appears in Majewska's description of the mobilization. Butler
highlights the necessity "to realize that we are but one population who has
been and can be exposed to conditions of precarity and disenfranchisement"
(2015, 66) that many protesters articulate. Solidarity and alliance between
different groups are evoked as the only feasible tactic, especially when pro-
testers face the other side's power: the shaping of the widespread feminist
counterpublic was prompted by the government's attempts to control access
to abortion. The state used biopower to discipline citizens and suppress the
manifestations of resistance; the sovereign counterpublic formed in the pro-
cess, in reaction, employed the means of biopower: people protested, broke
the illicit law, and organized in ways practically and rhetorically focused on
bodies. During mobilization, this power exchange between the state and the
counterpublic was productive: the discourse on abortion changed signifi-
cantly, and many new actors got engaged.

**Shared Emotions as the Basis of Individual Agency**

For my research, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews (O'Reilly
2009, 126) with ten people who actively participated in the protests. I fo-
cused on persons between 23 and 30 years old living in Warsaw, most polit-
ically active but not engaged in any structures related to the Strike. Consider-
ing that for years the debate on abortion has been dominated by people not
directly affected by the legislation (i.e., male politicians, the clergy), voicing
demands of women exerting pressure on public opinion and legislators
seemed significant from the perspective of feminist research ethics (Stacey
1998; Lather 2001). In my interviewing practice, which developed over time

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as I met my interlocutors, I was inspired by Robert Weiss's remarks (1994). Since I was interested in the narratives of the past, I made sure to ask about specific events and use the past tense in order to avoid generalizations. Furthermore, I tried not to include any presuppositions in my questions or imply any interpretations of the events. Lastly, I was attentive to any cues the interviewees introduced, tracing the similarities and differences among their accounts. Following Weiss' practice, I was able to distinguish some "markers": while reconstructing the events, my informants used specific words describing places or persons, e.g., "tajniak" (an undercover cop), "naziol" (a nazi), "libki" (neoliberals). During our conversations, we covered multiple issues connected to their engagement in the Strike (e.g., police brutality, their approach to abortion, their conversations with friends and families, and everyday life during the Strikes and amidst the pandemic). Considering the scope of this text, I will only focus on some aspects, especially those related to emotions and the interviewees' sense of agency.

Due to high frequency and intensity, protesting influenced the lives of my interlocutors, becoming their "new normality" between October 2020 and January 2021. As one admitted, protesting was central, especially initially: "because of how often they happened and how long they lasted, often up to five-seven hours, protests became a big thing. We met up to protest, sent photos to friends who were not there, and even if we did not go, we still talked about them." Most of them went out with the same group that emerged in their neighborhood or peer group. This mode of participation was convenient and strategic: after each protest, co-protesters made sure to come home together, taking care of each other. Protesting organized their everyday life. One of them recounted that when she was abroad during the initial part of the mobilization, she could not focus on her everyday life; instead, she would constantly check the news and read about what was happening in Poland. Only after she returned to the country and joined the movement, she stopped feeling inert. In a way, mobilization influenced her life even before she started protesting. I could say the same for myself: at the time, I lived in Vienna, and my attention and emotional investment focused on what was going on in Poland until I returned to the country. The protests becoming the "new normal" is an example of politics understood as a way of living: by transforming an ordinary afternoon walk into a protest, members of the public joined the counterpublic; for a moment, they exchanged being subjected to power for performing it by "forming bodily modes of obstruction to police and state authorities" (Butler 2012, 167). Overall, no matter how often the informants protested, they all confirmed that participation

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significantly impacted their lives. First, due to their political and emotional commitment; second, the specific context of the pandemic made the protests the most intense interpersonal experience of that time.

When asked why they thought abortion was so decisive in mobilizing the public, most informants recounted its biopolitical aspects. One interviewee noticed that the primary reason was that abortion relates intimately to one's body, personal situation, and future. According to her, when compared to economic or more abstract political issues (e.g., freedom of speech, legal justice, income equality), abortion is more urgent: damage done by the inability to access the procedure has immediate and irreversible consequences for people's lives. Some pointed out that mobilization around the issue of abortion was more prominent than raising awareness of the climate catastrophe because it was experienced as less distant. Besides advocating for liberalization of the law, additional motives for my informants were feeling frustrated with having to protest continuously for three months and feeling ineffective, angry, and ignored by the authorities. One protester explained she protested because she did not want anyone limiting her freedom of choice. Others noted that protesting was a way of expressing disagreement with what is going on in the country in general (still, most interviewees were angry that, over time, the movement's message was blurring, turning from pro-abortion to anti-government).

Many of the interviewees recounted a sense of agency granted by their participation. They recognized that under the circumstances, protesting was the only way to demonstrate one's political views, and they could not imagine not going out. As one put it, "Protesting gave me a sense of strength and belonging when everything felt hopeless. The Court's decision unsettled me, but when I was protesting, I felt I am not alone as a person who could need abortion and who thinks getting one is 'okay.'" One of the interviewees attempted to look beyond her personal gains and highlighted the importance of the symbolic and performative meaning of the Strike: "People who sit at home see that we are on the streets, and it touches them, I am sure it does. We have been protesting since 2016, and now the attitudes among young people have changed. Protesting changes reality." In an emotional utterance, she explained how mobilization changes people's awareness, strengthens citizenship, and grants a sense of agency: "Staying at home would be exhausting. Doing nothing is a silent way of agreeing with the government. I don't want to judge others; I speak for myself. For me, protesting is a minimal form of political involvement, the same as voting. It is just our civic duty."

Figure 4: In the case of two interviewees, their emotional investment was reflected in their decision to tattoo a red lightning bolt, the official symbol of the movement, on their fore-arms. As far as I know, this is not exceptional, and many protesters tattooed the symbol during the Strike. Photographs: courtesy of the interviewees.

Figure 5: Another protester tattooed the lightning bolt amidst the mobilization. Hers is located behind the ear. Photograph: courtesy of the interviewee.

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As my research indicated, emotions (both positive and negative) were an inherent element of the informants' motivations for protesting and their experience of participation. Most of them did not differentiate their rational reasoning from emotions, grievances, and desires but described them as a complex unity experienced personally, in connections with other agents, and throughout the ongoing occupation of public spaces. Still, while considering emotions as powerful means of building alliances and granting agency to the participants, their ambivalent character should be recognized. For example, one interviewee described the powerful feeling of unity while simultaneously being worried that it was superficial: "you feel you are occupying the whole city together, you are forming a large group which gives you a sense of community and strength. But that's not entirely true: there are differences among the protesters, and some of them matter significantly." As noted by some others, understanding the differences inside the counter-public, even if not crucial during the mobilization when shared emotions dominate the masses, matters in the long term: "without diagnosing the differences, it is impossible to persuade more people to support the pro-abortion postulate."

Thus, emotions and affects, however important, can not sufficiently explain the motivation behind prolonged protest actions, as was the case of the Strike. All the informants were tired of protesting when we spoke, expressing disappointment with the current situation, saying they were energetically drained after a few months of going out on the street. Some believed that the change could only come "from the top." Many admitted their emotional engagement was changing over time. As one put it, "There is a resignation, a feeling that protesting does not work. But that does not mean we are putting down our arms. We are not because there is no alternative. With this government, there will only be more reasons to protest." Interestingly, many said that protests had no actual impact and doubted whether anyone believed they were changing anything. Still, they admitted that people need to let off steam and express how upset they are. Otherwise, "they will sink into resentments and develop a sense of lack of political agency." One said she believed protests to be the simplest way of expressing one's emotions, as well as a very democratic form of acting and communicating. She recognized the right to protest as a human right: "I may romanticize protests a bit, but I have a feeling that they always work somehow, always bring an effect, maybe not always the intended one, but still it's a powerful method of exercising democracy. Maybe the only one we have at the moment."

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For many, even if ineffective, protesting remained a valid form of activism. Some differentiated activities directed at helping people access abortion and those focused on changing the legislation, holding both equally important. One interviewee wondered whether more constructive forms of activism, like abortion assistance, were not more influential than protesting. Still, she believed the law has to change, which can not be achieved without going out on the street: "Being visible in the media, even if in a negative or critical context, allows more people, also outside the biggest cities, to see and hear that 'abortion is ok.' This is how we can change people's attitudes. The group of those who are pro-abortion must grow; we will not come out of the bubbles without public mobilization." For another protester, the motivation to protest did not come from the belief that things would change immediately, and the value of protesting was not limited to the efficiency of mobilization. According to her, the existence of a group of people who organize and voice their views while waiting for the moment when the change will be possible was valuable in itself: "Currently, the protests are a bit *pro forma*; we protest to contain the strength in anticipation for the time when the change will be possible." Noteworthy, the belief that protesting matters and influences reality despite being momentarily ineffective was expressed by the polled supporters of the Strike.[12] Both the massive size of the mobilization and the cultural resonance of the movement (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 279) may play a part in this. As already noted, not meeting the political goal, although discouraging, by many was understood as temporary rather than ultimate. The sense that participation in the movement was the only plausible way of political engagement was widespread; as one had it: "even when protesting is not successful, it is still more successful than doing nothing. I am exhausted but our indignation drives me."

Treating emotions and affects as an essential aspect of political agency allows for surpassing the private-political divide and disrupts the classical model of a disengaged political actor. The risk of merging the personal with the political was a source of anxiety in the 19th and most of the 20th century. According to Deborah Gould, protests were not perceived as legitimate political action at the time. Any instances of collective political action were seen as "nothing more than unthinking, impulsive, irrational, destructive group behavior" (2010, 20). Only when social movement studies emerged in the 70s did protests start to be "understood as normal political behavior" and

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[12] The report is available on the Women's Strike's website: http://strajkkobiet.eu/2021/01/26/badania-opinii-ostrajku-kobiet/ [accessed: 05.02.2023].

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protesters as "rational actors in the sense that they engage in reasonable, thoughtful, strategic behavior designed to achieve their sensible political goals" (2010, 22). Still, the rational-actor model assumed the irrationality of emotions, and only in the late 90s attempts were made to "posit emotion as a ubiquitous feature of social life" (2010, 23). The rational-actor model does not explain social movements in which actors become allies despite the incoherence of their beliefs. In the absence of shared views, shared grievances and emotions matter: they facilitate or even create conditions of possibility for acting together. Even reflex emotions like anger, fear, or joy are not necessarily irrational and might be recognized as strategic organizational tools (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta 2004, 416-417). As Butler noticed while examining grounds of political alliances, "something has to hold such a group together, some demand, some felt sense of injustice and unlivability, some shared intimation of the possibility of change, and that change has to be fuelled by a resistance to, minimally, existing and expanding inequalities [...]" (2012, 166).

Arguably, the "something" that "holds such a group together" might already be different from the anger spontaneously felt after reading the news about the abortion ban. As compared to reflex emotions, affective ones persist over a more extended time and are "positive and negative commitments or investments [...] that we have toward people, places, ideas, and things" (Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta 2004, 418). Although reflex emotions are crucial when on protests, affective ones might be more important in upholding the counterpublic over time. They even might "play the role" of the missing shared identity: "collective identities, in fact, are nothing more or less than affective loyalties" (2004, 418-419). To give an example, the main slogan of the Strike became "Wypierdalać!," which means "Get the Fuck Out!" and does not carry any concrete political meaning. Instead, it expresses indignation with the Court's ruling and is a straightforward suggestion to leave directed at the government. This emotion-driven slogan united many people with different political views in this particular struggle. Interestingly, by some media outlets, it was criticized both as being "too emotional" (gendered as "female" and described as "hysteric" or "irrational") and for being "too vulgar" (i.e., "not properly female"). This kind of reactionary comments made the slogan even more powerful, giving the protesters a sense that together they are opposing an imposed disciplinary measure.

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## Conclusion: "You" and the Unsuccessful Movement

Majewska noted that the phrase "You will never walk alone" became one of the most popular slogans during the Strike (2021, 16). The motto resonates with the agency part of the counterpublic experienced. The original version addresses a feminine "you," a lone protester manifesting on the streets; simultaneously, it assures her that she is not alone. Primarily a statement of support, the slogan can be understood as a reminder that she can not be alone: if she were, her walk would be a mere stroll, not a protest. According to Butler, "No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only 'between' bodies [...]; my body does not act alone when it acts politically" (2015, 77). Accordingly, the fact that the protester is a singularity among different subjects grants her agency: solidarity and alliance become the base or condition of possibility for experiencing political agency. As Butler writes, the "anarchist moment," emerging when the legitimacy of the existing rule is undermined, but no new order appears, "is one in which the assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will, not a single identical will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies" (2015, 75). The counterpublic is a multitude of subjects acting together in motion towards a common goal; their singular agency is inseparable from the shared one. Respectively, the counterpublic is formed by new subjects whose agency is embedded and embodied: after Arendt, Butler notes that social mobilization is always supported and bodily, even in its virtual forms (2015, 73, 76). Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg argue that both offline and online mobilizations are "in important ways embodied and enacted by people on the ground" (2012, 768). This embodiment, as well as the co-productive agency, is what makes this counterpublic biopolitical: the aim of the struggle is bodily self-determination, and the means of participation are corporeally determined and enacted.

Although the mobilization that originated in October 2020 is over, the social movement it (re)created is not "done": its demands were not met, and its participants still advocate for accessible abortion. Although the movement's "ineffectiveness" does not surprise, its consequence remains the suffering of people who cannot safely terminate unwanted pregnancies. Primarily a struggle of the potentially pregnant people and their families, it is a struggle of the whole society: it concerns safe reproduction and the ability to make free informed choices of utmost importance. As I argued in this paper, despite being "unsuccessful," the mobilization did generate a strong coun-

terpublic that managed to unify for a common cause despite quite significant differences among its members. The "success" of a social movement is marked by the ambivalence present within the emotional and affective layers of the event. Arguably, such ambivalence is part of many social movements: while they "fail" to achieve their goals, they are successful in some other, less obvious ways. No win can be declared regarding the "normalizing" of the law, but multiple changes occurred: people got empowered, and their attitudes shifted, not only towards abortion but also towards the state, police, and sense of agency. On a political level, the Overton window irreversibly shifted when it comes to the narrative on abortion and the understanding of how it can be accessed. This shift would not be possible if not for the sociopolitical change resulting from the activism of pro-abortion groups and the affects shared by the thousands of protesters who overtook the streets of Poland.

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# Anne Sauka[*]

# Breaching the Dialectic with Situated Knowledges: The Case of Postsocialist Naturecultures

Abstract

The article analyzes the significance of situated knowledges for going beyond dominating conceptual dichotomies that a) establish *status quo* dialectics, b) proliferate homogenization of the Global Northern experienced materialities, and c) conceal and suppress alternate affectual body-environment experiences and materializations. With the example of postsocialist ontogenealogies, the article analyzes the potential blind spots when failing to consider both sides of a *status quo* dialectic in their interconnectedness. To conclude, the article suggests the potential of situated knowledges as a vehicle for future environmental ethicalities.

Keywords

Ontogenealogy, Postsocialist Embodiment, Situated Knowledges, Genealogy, Environment

## Acknowledgments

## Introduction

In this article, I analyze the dialectic of the local and the global (both in schoolarly as well as a material context) to demonstrate the significance of situated knowledges (Haraway 2016) via concrete examples of local ontogenealogies

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of the body-environment parallelisms in the postsocialist time-space of
Latvia. The main goal of this article is to use local knowledges as a vehicle for
going beyond the dialectic between local and global, self and other, private
and communal that make up the fabric of Global Northern understandings of
body-environments, and to investigate these entanglements via the route of
parallelisms between the understanding of the body and human relations
with the environment.

   After a brief note on the method, the first part of the article will concisely
comment on the conceptual background from which I refer to the dominat-
ing conceptual dichotomies and the formation of a *status quo* dialectic upon
the backbone of substance ontology that haunts the Global Northern socio-
political discourses from at least the Antiquity. In line with various accounts
of environmental humanities scholars, esp. in feminist posthumanities, such
as Astrida Neimanis (2017), Stacy Alaimo (2010), Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi
Braidotti (2018), it is my argument here that the reflection of environmental
humanities research through philosophical conceptualizations of the body
exposes a significant dimension for the necessity of transgressing the status
quo dialectics of local–global, private–communal, self–other, and other such
dichotomies that raise various philosophical and environmental debates
circling the question of rootedness and nomadism (Heise 2008).

   I then focus on a specific case in the next part of the article. Namely,
the dialectic between the Soviet socialist and the capitalist understanding of
body-environments expressed via deprivatization[1] and privatization under-
stood as dialectic processes behind the communal and private dichotomy.
Here, I argue for the need for a different kind of subjectivity beyond this
dialectic via the reflection of postsocialist affective experiences and what
they can contribute to the scholarly discussion. There are several intercon-
nected reasons for this move. First, the postsocialist or post-soviet space
represents the "East" that has vanished with the establishment of the Global
North in contrast to the earlier conceptualization of the West (Jehlička et al.
2020, 286-287; Müller 2018, 3-4; Sauka 2022d), and as such represents the
materialization of the homogenization of narratives within the Global North
itself. Second, the Soviet past allows considering both 1) the significance of
affectual and experienced body-environment relations that go beyond the
dominating narratives as sources of knowledge production, as well as 2) the

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   [1] Here, I use the term "deprivatization" in a broader meaning than its original meaning
of something private being transferred to the public sector, to emphasize the ontogenea-
logical depersonalization of nature via not only economical but also ideological deprivati-
zation practices.

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various ways in which the *status quo* dialectic can come up in most various circumstances (as in the case of Soviet and capitalist logics), showing its unfortunate importance also beyond the usual framing of the Global North.

Lastly, I conclude the article with a brief reflection upon Rosi Braidotti's proposal of nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 1994), with the example of Latvian pagan traditions, as a potential proposition for affirmative, affectual environmental ethicality, to showcase the possible way forward with situated knowledges that reflect planetary embeddedness and heterogeneity, beyond the *status quo* dialectic. In this context, the postsocialist space is a significant potential ground for rich alternate genealogies, esp. in the context of the Baltic region as one of the latest regions to be Christianized in Europe. Thus, it demands further reflection on its potential as an independent knowledge producer rather than an unimportant 'province' of the North.

## A Note on the Method

Critical genealogy (Koopman 2013; Sarasin 2009; Sauka 2020b) outlines a complicated way of the development of phenomena, accentuates the multiplicity of 'beginnings,' and refuses the search for a single origin (*Ursprung*), thus, refusing grand, universal narratives (Šuvajevs 2015). Among others, the idea of genealogy can overstep its role as a methodology and be reframed within the context of new materialism and biophilosophy within the sphere of experienced materiality, according to Michel Foucault's idea of the lived body's entanglement with its co-constituting conditions—natureculture, its climate, nourishment, and soil (Foucault 1977). Within this context, life itself is exposed as genealogical.

For the sake of a conceptual distinction between genealogy as a method and a genealogical conception of life itself, I, thus, reconceptualize an ontologically understood new materialist genealogy via the concept of ontogenealogy (Sauka 2022b) to denote the genealogical development of naturecultures (Haraway 2016) and to accentuate the materialization of genealogies via transcorporeal (Alaimo 2010) entanglements of body-environments, and the parallelisms between imaginaries that refer to the body and those that refer to the environment, and their respective materializations due to the transcorporeality and processuality of human and more-than-human naturecultures (Sauka 2020c; 2022c).

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Upon these conceptual grounds, grows the significance of the question of the time and space wherein a specific understanding of the body and nature develops,[2] and the ontogenealogies of the environment and the body can be understood as co-constitutive to the lived materiality (Sauka 2022b), while the lived materiality itself partakes in the constitution of the ontogenealogies we live by.

Here, the ontogenealogical account demonstrates the necessity to take process ontology seriously for future ethicalities via the two interrelated paths of embodied critical thinking (Sauka 2022a) and seeking out existing (if somewhat concealed) situated knowledges (Sauka, *forthcoming*) for reflection upon affectual and experienced genealogies via a first-person phenomenological approach and a genealogical analysis, respectively.

Moreover, by combining Foucauldian genealogy with new materialist and critical posthumanist considerations (Braidotti 2013), the ontogenealogical approach critically assesses human-centered substance ontology as the potential grounds for homogenization of today's narratives and lifeworlds. Namely, a genealogical conception of life reflects the processuality of life itself as well as the processuality of the understanding of life that, in turn, influences the lived materialities. It is, hence, a likely account for a critique of the status quo dialectics of life and death, local and global, subject and object. Namely, although this is a wide range of dichotomies that requires a more detailed analysis in other contexts, here they are demonstrated in the light of their common ground within substance ontology (Radomska 2016; Nicholson and Dupré 2018; Dupré 2012). Thus, the approach of ontogenealogy allows me to view these dichotomies as ontologically interdependent and interconnected in the context of their roots within substance ontology that emphasizes *things* before *processes* and strives to define and fixate meanings within a logic of A is not not-A. This logical structure is in stark contrast to the material processuality of life and (non)living (Radomska 2016, ch. 1, Povinelli 2016), and the fixation of meanings within this logic, thus, creates a mutually dependent dichotomy (subject as the opposite of object, life as the opposite to death, local as the opposite of global) that here is termed as a status quo dialectic due to the practical interdependence of the opposites.

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[2] The conceptual backbone of these considerations is further explored in "Ontogenealogies of Body-Environments: Perspectives for an Experiential Ontological Shift" (Sauka, *forthcoming*) a forthcoming article that was presented at the "The XVIII Symposium of the International Association of Women Philosophers (IAPh): Defining the Future, Rethinking the Past 2021" (the speech is available online, see Sauka 2021). Thus, this article is a further installment for the consideration of situated knowledges and will not dwell on the method of ontogenealogy in any further detail.

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**The *Status Quo* Dialectic:**
**A Critical Note on Abstraction and Substance Ontology**

The dominance of the critique of Global Northern or Western conceptualizations of nature in research is to be evaluated ambivalently. On the one hand, nature discourses of the Global North are dominating and, as such, require critical attention since their influence has overstepped their supposed geographical borders. Thus, the critique of the Global Northern understanding of nature is significant for the environmental humanities. On the other hand, the dominance of this critique itself acquires critique today (Neimanis et al. 2015) since it instates the perception of the univocity of genealogies. Namely, it creates the illusion that the lived experience and understanding of concepts such as *nature, the body*, or *the environment* is exhausted by the dominating discourses not only in a local but also in a global context, where they have proliferated due to the globalization processes (Guha 1989; Guha and Martínez Alier 1997; Neimanis et al. 2015).

This accentuation of the dominating perceptions, thus, both secures a false perception of the homogeneity of nature genealogies, as well as facilitates and enforces these dominating perceptions, continuing their expansion. According to the perceived *inscription into the flesh* of the genealogies of beliefs and understandings, this also means that the popularization of certain discourses results in their material implementation, thus, restricting access to other alternative development options of the embodied experience and socialization.

For example, if the dominating narrative rests upon the understanding of nature-culture distinction, wilderness and civilization materially become increasingly separated, or—if the forest is understood as a timber farm, this understanding also gnaws into the forest itself, reflecting a lived genealogy, namely transforming the forest into a timber farm, and thus, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The co-constitution of materiality is, hence, related to the dominance of certain perceptions.

The homogenization of critique *vs.* the ruling narrative goes hand in hand and represents another dimension of the dominating perceptions called the *status quo* dialectic. Namely, according to the ontogenealogical interconnectedness of dichotomies, the dominating perception *is not just* that nature is a mere resource for human use—a measurable, static, mechanical background for human flourishing. Instead, nature simultaneously is *both* a resource and a sacral ground that *should not be touched*, and the dominating Global Northern narrative upholds this contrasting dichotomy of fragility vs.

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meaningless object, subject vs. object, sacral vs. secular, mind vs. body, etc., abstractions that are based upon a substance ontology that seeks to categorize upon the basis of either–or. As such, it is in opposition to a genealogical and processual understanding of life and non-life, where the manifold beginnings of each occurrence presume the possibility of anything to be "either" and "or" at the same time. For example, a stone might be living and non-living at the same time, depending on the perspective of its role in the proliferation of life, or—an entity might have agency without pronounced subjectivity in context with the processual entanglement in which it is situated.

What allows the *status quo* dialectic to build a non-contradictory lifeworld for its carriers is the common attribute of human exceptionalism (Anderson 2018) that the opposing dichotomies bear with them. Either considered angelic or demonical, humanity is exempt from these dichotomies as an alienated onlooker whose *touch* upon nature is either toxic or to be thought of as a blessing. This enantiosemy makes sense in a human-centered substance ontology, where, from an *I-conscious* standpoint, *thingness* trumps *processuality*, both as a measure for distinguishing between self and other or subject and object, as well as from the standpoint of defining life as opposed to death, or as opposed to an object, in context with the strive for self-preservation.[3]

Evidence for the fact that this anthropocentric substance ontology goes deep within the Global Northern lifeworlds can be thought of in the context of language, for it is linguistically hard to formulate concepts that go beyond the *status quo* dialectic, without falling into the trap of a new abstract dichotomy and the debates over either–or that follow.

Moreover, human-centered substance ontology can be traced, for example, through classic Freudian psychoanalysis (via the dichotomous understanding of life and death forces (see further Sauka 2020c) or classical phenomenological structure of an intentional *I-consciousness* that "has" a body as an object to control and maintain. Both conceptualizations represent a dominating understanding of the self as a fixation that needs to be preserved in a fight against the force of dispersion identified as a death drive.[4] Within this conceptual background, deterritorialization and reterritorializa-

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[3] I have talked about this more elaborately in other articles, such as Sauka 2020a; 2020c and 2022c.

[4] In contrast, a processual understanding would equate both drives as non-dialectic life drives for the proliferation and sustenance of life, where preservation is only possible as a moment, a fixture within the movement, and selfhood comes about as a stabilized process.

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tion (Heise 2008, 51; Deleuze and Guattari 1977; 1978) mirror the forces of death and life, de-centralization and de-subjectification, and the maintenance of selfhood.

Thus the dichotomic, dialectic thinking of embodiment also seeps into other similar dichotomies of local vs. global, deterritorialization vs. reterritorialization, rootedness vs. nomadism (Heise 2008), etc., both on account of the constitution of selfhood based on substance ontology that leads to the prioritization of self-preservation over dispersion and variability, as well as on account of the either–or logic of the *thing*-oriented ontology.

Many of these dichotomies are of great importance for environmental philosophies and humanities today and allow considering the discussion of the Anthropocene as one side of a contraposition of the dialectic dance of the opposites.

The scholarly insights that work within this dialectic are not always misguided. In most cases, scholarly contributions that can be considered part of this dialectic give meaningful insight into the consequences of human impact upon planetary processes, thus, reflecting the consequences of the *status quo* dialectic. Yet, it seems that a reflection of the deep-seated assumptions that come from the conceptualizations that we, as humans, have of ourselves as the bodies that we live by, and the environments we live by, is necessary to find a way to go beyond the dialectic and to expose the substantial heterogeneity of the ontogenealogies we live by since a critique of the dominant narrative often cannot go further than providing negation (i.e., the inverted image) of the same, thus, replicating it,[5] where future ethicalities are considered.

"Negate thyself," thus, lives hand-in-hand with "negate the world" within this dialectic, as is also evidenced by the pleas to save and conserve nature that goes hand-in-hand with human "progress" already from Antiquity.

**The Case of the Local and the Global:**
**The Pains of Abstraction**

However, the materializations of this dialectic are problematic because of the inherent human exceptionalism and because the abstracted dichotomies that make up its structure stifle other alternate ontogenealogies by pushing

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[5] Some of the more radical accounts of human toxicity, represent this dialectic well. See, for example, del Val 2022, and MacCormack 2020 that propose stopping human reproduction, or, as in McCormack's case—the ideal of a planet without humans, without considering humanity as part of the planetary naturecultures.

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them out of what can be meaningfully expressed into the realm of the lin-
guistically impossible, which is often the case of any or most dichotomic
constructions that create the illusion of an either–or logic, thus representing
a genealogy of the either–or at hand. Since the scope of this article does not
allow a further discussion of the variable dichotomies and their respective
consequences, I here briefly discuss the local vs. the global, wilderness vs.
civilization and rootedness vs. nomadism as exemplary cases.

A well-known critique of the Global Northern discourses is Ramachandra
Guha's (1989; 1997) critique of what is termed as the "radical American
environmentalism"—an approach in environmental philosophy and practice
that has stemmed from the movement of deep ecology (Naess 1973; 1985;
1989) and primarily focuses on the preservation of pristine wilderness. His
reflections demonstrate how damaging it can be to extrapolate a local ap-
proach based upon the local situation—the American wilderness–civiliza-
tion divide to global contexts. However, what is significant in this context is
how the dichotomy becomes useless in these discussions. While the "global
contexts" *within* American environmentalism are usually understood via an
essentialist lens of homogeneity that presumes wilderness and nature to
have equal needs everywhere, the factual global contexts presume hetero-
geneity, i.e., the global necessitates the acceptance of the local, and *vice versa*
—the presumed essentialist understanding of nature as a global phenome-
non is, in fact,—a local approach. Thus, by presuming that alternate ap-
proaches are conflictual with global demands, American environmentalism
extrapolates a local approach to global heterogeneity. From a substance
ontological view of either–or, the dichotomy, thus, becomes useless to any
coherent thinking with the environments we live by.

Moreover, the "local context" from which it stems is almost certainly rein-
forced by the thought patterns that maintain it; namely, it is not only the case
that this local thinking stems from the situation at hand (a distinction be-
tween wilderness and civilization in America) but also the case that the local
situation stems from this way of thinking. Thus, this case also exemplifies
the genealogy of the dichotomy of wilderness vs. civilization as embedded
within the *status quo* dialectic and can be similarly dismantled when ques-
tioning the naturality of a carefully preserved supposedly "wild" region (for
what is wild about its careful maintenance?) and the wilderness of the mod-
ern urban jungles.

Should the idea of nature and, with it, also the intimate connectedness
advertised by deep ecology, thus, be abandoned as such to get beyond the
dialectics of human–nature? Scholars are undecided in this regard, where,

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for example, embodied materialism (Salleh 2017) and critical embodied thinking (Jóhannesdóttir and Thorgeirsdottir 2016) underscore the necessity to reconnect with the natural embeddedness, among others, on the grounds of the debasing that nature, as well as women, have endured in the Global North (Lloyd 1984; Merchant 1990), and others (Vogel 2015) argue for the "death of nature" as it has been previously understood. However, the problem with these discussions is the discussion itself—for it presumes a particular idea of nature as an abstracted concept that, via abstraction, lies within the dialectic. The main takeaway, thus, seems to be the necessity to reformulate the concept of nature outside of the dialectics of anthropocentrism–biocentrism, human–nature, local–global, etc., to allow deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1977; 1978) to exist in a constant flow of powers, rather than as fixed and finite processes.

In place-based approaches and global demands, going beyond the dialectic might mean a reconceptualization of what constitutes the relationship one experiences with what is colloquially referred to as "nature." Namely, it might mean a reconceptualization of dwelling, sense of place, or rootedness (Heise 2008, 29-49) via a process ontology.

When thinking of "home" in the context of human–nature dialectics, one usually thinks of a human-made space, a landscaped place, or a haven of civilization in the chaotic surroundings (be their "natural" or "urban") (Sauka 2022a). Conversely, "home" might mean the world, the Earth, or "Mother Nature," which speaks to the same dialectics of biocentrism vs. anthropocentrism or bioconservativism vs. transhumanism. This notion of "home" as a dwelling, however, can be reconsidered in the context of experiential relations with the homes that people have, considering "becoming at home" or homing as a continuous, dynamic interaction that is both transformative and transformable and does not place human will in the center. In this sense, the notion of "a sense of place" might prove vital, and deep ecology could maybe redeem itself as an experiential practice that allows a shift in the dominating ontologies towards a postanthropocentric landscape that, however, takes into account the heterogeneous relationship that communities experience with their "home ecologies," and the differences between the communities themselves and their ecological needs.

Thus, a genealogy that follows a Deleuzian logic of "and… and…" instead of "either–or" allows the hope that the exposition of the heterogeneity of ontogenealogies that breaks down the *status quo* dialectic allows appraising the bodily and transcorporeal experience of body-environment intercarnality as well as affectual and experienced ontogenealogies in a certain time-

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space, illuminating the hitherto underrepresented aspects. For this analysis, the postsocialist space is not only a possible path as an "and…" in the overall heterogeneity of genealogies but also a fruitful ground of exploration because of the various, contradictory genealogies these regions bear within their experienced lifeworlds that, for example, have undergone long periods of occupation that signify being at home in a foreign land and being in a foreign land at home, often, both at the same time.

## A Postsocialist Conundrum:
## The State and the Capital

The question of the private and the communal is frequently linked with the question of the use of the commons (Hardin 1968; Ostrom 2015). It is, however, sometimes overlooked that a particular system is also always entangled with the discourses of embodiment and the environment that encircle it. Thus, to analyze the genealogies of the postsocialist and post-soviet naturecultures, it is not enough to reflect upon the pragmatic aspects of the situation since the phenomena (theories, practices, and attitudes) are embedded in particular ideological structures.

   With the example of privatization via exceptionalism of the One vs. communalization via the creation of a Mass, I argue here that the Soviet ideologies of body environments are one side of the same denomination of the capitalist ideologies,[6] which, hence shows that neither socialist nor capitalist visions can be sufficient for the betterment of human-environment relations, as far as they stem from the same underlying human exceptionalism.

   There is often the sentiment in place that Soviet embodiment is in complete opposition to Western notions of the body, especially in the context of sexuality. This sentiment seems, however, not the case when discussing the discourse of hygiene and physiology in the 20th century, where literature

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   [6] I am here, of course, generalizing some of the conceptual underpinnings of "the soviet" and the "capitalist" (or "the state" and "the capital." While both these social structures exist in an elaborate complexity of ontogenealogical underpinnings, from whence they become, and have been and deserve to be thus analyzed in a more detailed fashion, here my aim is precisely to emphasize these very big conceptual dichotomies because socially accepted and experienced generalizations tend to have a respectively huge ontogenealogical impact in terms of co-constituting materiality via the *ingraining in the flesh* of these ideas. The capitalist context is here, therefore, based on the previous discussion of the dominating Global Northern genealogies, while depersonalization is introduced as a concept that is especially characteristic of the Soviet era.

mainly reveals significant similarities between the discourses of hygiene and physiology in the 20th century across Eastern and Western Europe and Russia (Starks 2009).

Igors Šuvajevs, when commenting on the imperial discourses and their continuation in the soviet era, characterizes it like this:

> It also has another characteristic inherited by "soviet anthropology," namely, naturalism and the racialization of social thought. Society is viewed as an organism, thus maintaining the organologism of the discourse praxis (characterized by different organs, their entirety, that can be cured and cut out in the medicalization process).[7]

Organologism, however, is not lacking in Western conceptualizations of the society of that time, esp. in biopolitical contexts (Lemke 2007). How, then, to pinpoint the difference in place felt by so many, esp. in the postsoviet–postoccupied countries?

An important aspect of differentiation is the deprivatization of the body endeavored by the Soviet regime and communism more broadly. A sample case of this might be Stalin's plans to transform Nature. This case might be one of the most radical attempts at transforming nature via technologization, and it falls roughly in line with other similar attempts at the time in the USA and other Western countries, as it is the time of the beginning of the Great Acceleration. The introduction of "In the Name of the Great Work: Stalin's Plan for the Transformation of Nature and its Impact in Eastern Europe" (Olšáková 2016) notes that the plans for nature transformation implemented by the USSR are not widely different from similar events in the rest of the world in this time, yet the differences are marked by the attitude toward the significance of the individuality, namely, the seemingly similar discourses of industrialization at the beginning of the "Great Acceleration" are different in their attitude toward the individual embodied persons. While both sides of the iron curtain employ exploitative tactics, whether through the State or the Capital, in the first, the exploitation is masked with the veil of equality, while in the second—with the veil of opportunity, thus creating a monstrous dialectic dichotomy of the Mass and the One (that also mirror the different power structures).

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[7] Tomēr kopumā šo diskursīvo praksi raksturo nacionalizēšana un rasizācija. Tai ir vēl viena raksturīga iezīme, ko pārmanto arī „padomju antropoloģija", proti, naturālisms un sociālās domas rasizācija. Sabiedrība tiek skatīta kā organisms, nodrošinot diskursīvās prakses organoloģiskumu (to raksturo dažādi orgāni un to kopums, ko medicinizācijas procesā var ārstēt, arī izgriezt) (Šuvajevs 2015, 70).

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The difference in the genealogical underpinnings of both ways of exploitation demonstrates part of the difference between Western and Soviet understandings of the body as anchored within the opposition of impersonality and subjectification. Here, the search for situated genealogies, hence, faces the phenomena already highlighted by Michel Foucault—the similarity of discourse in the conditions of different praxes (as, for example, Foucault characterizes the sexual revolution as a continuation of Victorian puritanism, Foucault 1978) and—on the contrary—the existence of different discourses in the conditions of similar praxes (Foucault exemplifies this via the discourses of virginity in Ancient Greece and Medieval Europe, Foucault 1990).

The impersonal attitude toward the human being, propagated by the Soviet government, goes parallelly to the depersonalization of the environment, reflected by realized and unrealized nature transformation projects in the USSR, as well as Soviet architecture and city planning. Here the intercarnality of bodies and environments is represented in the context of the scientific materialism that highlights and seemingly affirms the significance of nature and simultaneously negates it in a dialectical move that demonstrates the human being as part of nature, while nature itself—as mechanical and thus to be depersonalized and deprivatized.

Moreover, since "Stalin's ecological planning, which was essentially very utilitarian towards nature, obviously had mixed effects" (Lāce 2020, 65), among them—a "massive tree planting campaign […] and a planting system of rotating crops" (Lāce 2020, 65), this is an example of the variability of the status quo dialectic, where despite the highlight on technologization, these plans include some aspects of conservationist discourse. This conundrum showcases Stalinist environmentalism and acceleration as a dialectic phenomenon in itself.

The danger is here to think that a preceding of the individual goes beyond human exceptionalism by considering the negation of humanity for the "good of nature."

Entirely on the contrary, the parallelism of human and environmental imaginaries in Stalin's plans for the transformation of nature and their further development can also be considered via the prism of exploitation (Olšáková 2019)—the value of nature is directly linked to its usefulness (similarly to how it is framed in the capitalist society), which, among others, can also be an aesthetic value, but, significantly, in the Soviet context nature loses individuality, and is subjected to the ideology of collectivism and communal work (Lysenkoism)—it is a proletarian nature that works towards the achievement of the "great goals of communism." This (forcefully im-

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posed) ideology, in context with an ontogenealogical account of the material-
ization of ideologies, not only co-constitutes the carnal becoming (in the
forms of body exploitation and nature degradation) but also alienates the
human from nature via the strive to connect them in a depersonalized and
exploitative way that again demonstrates the abovementioned dialectic via
the negation of affirmation. The human body undergoes similar dialectics
marked by negation via affirmation and exploitation that is endeavored via
literal negation of exploitation, etc.

Here, it is an example of how the devaluation of human bodies in the
name of the depersonalized "Mass" reinforces the Same and the devaluation
of human bodies in the name of the "personalized One" in a dialectic move of
negation (of the personal) via affirmation (of the amorphous mass) mirror-
ing the dialectic move of affirmation (the personalized One) that negates
(the manifoldness) as an object. Suppose, in one case, nature represents the
depersonalized crowd that is both the subject of exploitation and also the
Goal of victory over nature, thus, negated via affirmation, in the other. In that
case, nature is outwardly negated for the One (human, person), yet, both
cases forego senseful, affectual manifoldness, giving way to an amorphous
mass (Marder 2021) of the Same.

The Soviet case is, however, engaging as far as it includes the contradict-
tory dialectic in one ideology (affirmation through negation), in contrast
with Western discourses, where the affirmation of nature comes as an out-
side environmentalist critique of the dominating discourse rather than being
concealed within the narrative. Thus, while the Great Acceleration in West-
ern countries demonstrates a dialectic with deep ecology and other envi-
ronmental philosophies, the depersonalization of nature within scientific
materialism of the Soviet era includes the negation via affirmation within
one seemingly non-contradictory ideology, thus, demonstrating how such
dialectic can be thought of as a single two-sided coin also in the Western
context.

Consequently, among other things, the depersonalization of nature and
the human body in the USSR gave rise to a particular type of environmental-
ism—one that focuses on particular personalized objects that hold cultural
value and are to be protected (Lāce 2020). Such as the 18-meter-high cliff
Staburags on the bank of Daugava in Latvia that since 1965 has been 6.5
meters underwater due to the construction of the Pļaviņas Hydroelectric
Power Station dam, raised many discussions, as it was considered a national
treasure with considerable mythological and symbolical value. Until today,
this discussion is still part of the cultural background. In response to the

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depersonalized and deprivatized attitude toward nature, environmentalism
in the 1980s originally served national purposes in the Soviet-occupied
countries:

> In places such as Latvia and Estonia, environmentalism was put in the service of na-
> tionalism, thereby contributing to the eventual breakup of the Soviet Union. In Hun-
> gary and Czechoslovakia, too, in the 1980s, popular environmentalism escaped the
> control of officialdom and became a vehicle for the expression of political dissent (Mc-
> Neill & Engelke 2016, 197).

Behind this loophole are thus both pragmatic and ideological reasons.
Pragmatically it is a possible cover for national agendas. Nevertheless, politi-
cally–ideologically, it is also a consequential choice that links environmental
concerns with sacralization, personalization, and individualization of nations
and their living surroundings—putting value not only on the "great master-
works of the Soviet nature at large" but also on the individual natural values
such as the cliff mentioned above Staburags. Here is an example of the na-
tionalization of the commons and its parallels to the nationalization of the
human being—festivities, bodily expressions, etc.

While not without its benefits, this kind of environmentalism, born out of
the national resistance to occupation, while decolonial or at least de-coloniz-
ing at its heart, ironically becomes defenseless against capitalist colonization
of nature that makes up the second half of the dialectical contraposition of
human-nature relations, namely, the privatization party over the commons
that sees its roots already in the "Age of Discovery" and even before.

Privatization mirrors deprivatization via the dialectical move of placing
particular importance on a personalized One against the mass of depersonal-
ized[8] and exploited others.

Thus, Global Northern environmentalism often falls into the trap of de-
privatization, readily accepting calls for prioritizing the communal that
quickly leads to the depersonalization of humanity, with the hope to thus
take down the human from its ivory tower of exceptionalism. What the So-
viet regime demonstrates, however, is that this is the double bind of human-
ity to both resent itself as a demon to be extinguished in the name of nature
and to hail humanity as the highest good—in both cases, the dialectic per-
sists. In both cases, however, what goes missing is the agency of the more-
than-human natureculture, as well as the senseful, affectual ties humanity

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[8] I do not use the word "dehumanized" here since that would make it seem that all the
othered populations are essentially human.

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has with the environment both as a continuation of the individual bodies, as well as the place of habitation that does not only surround but also goes through, lives within and co-constitutes the transcorporeal embodiment.

This dialectic of the private and the communal (in the context of privatization and deprivatization as well as personalization and depersonalization processes) mirrors the dialectic of dwelling vs. global nomadic citizenship and the local and the global and refers to many interconnected problems in environmental humanities. In a broader sense, it can also be demonstrated as a dialectic of subjectification and objectification. As such, it is exemplified in scholarly environmentalism and non-academic, sociopolitical genealogies of thought and practice. In environmental thought, this dialectic of deprivatization and privatization is, again, reflected by the calls for human extinction on the one hand (as in MacCormack 2020 or Del Val 2022 and other antinatalist movements) and the call for "humanization" or personalization of all non-human life-forms on the other, as in the environmentalist accounts that endeavor an extension of humanism, for example, toward land (Leopold 1949) or animals (Singer 1975).

While both sides of the dialectic contraposition are to some extent beneficial for environmental theories, they also demonstrate serious fallacies. For example, the anthropomorphizing or, more precisely, capitalo-morphizing of individuality upon non-human agencies often implies what Elizabeth Povinelli identifies as part of the processes of geontopower (Povinelli 2016)—the individualization of geological structures that, however, forgoes the embeddedness of these structures in the vaster planetary processes. At the same time, the desubjectification of humanity leads to the conclusion that human social structures and societies as such are parasitic at heart and should be led to their logical denigration that Deleuze via Nietzsche would term as "passive nihilism" (Deleuze 2006, 148-151) and that plays into what today is often termed "climate grief."

A further reflection of sociopolitical processes, for example, the case of forest protection in Latvia, would show that the dialectic of environmental protection vs. nature utilization operates on similar grounds yet fails to reconsider human-environment relations in connection to the human embodiment.

As this part of the article demonstrates, while emphasizing the Mass or the One might differentiate between Soviet and Capitalist dominating genealogies and their exploitative practices, they mirror each other. Moreover, they fully partake in the dialectic—as in, an affirmation via negation is necessary to uphold the dominating ontogenealogical line. Namely, while they

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are each other's "dark" side of the dialectic "coin," the dialectic is also duplicated within their respective genealogies as a deviant or disruptive force (of an imagined concept of "capitalist" or "socialist" attitudes) to fight against qua necessary because of the need of opposition to uphold the *status quo.* Hence, the force of dialectic itself is demonstrated as the *status quo,* with different emphasis but a similar structure. The risk for critical thinkers of either capitalist or postsocialist background is, therefore, to fall into the trap of either of the "dark sides" of the dialectic contraposition of their respective dominating genealogies.

What is lacking here is to consider the false dilemma that something is either the property of someone or does not belong to you or the makeup of what you are. Whether via objectification qua depersonalization or objectification qua subjectification, the body becomes an object to either own or utilize as commons, mirrored by the soviet and neoliberal environmental policies and can be shortly termed by the concepts of the Mass and the One. The post-soviet ontogenealogies are, however, not exhausted by the Soviet and Global Northern understandings of body, nature, and the environment, which, themselves, are also weaved through by various genealogical lines.

## Conclusion:
## The Settled Nomads

Hitherto, the article has considered the significance of situated knowledges to recognize the blind spots in thinking, understanding, and research when operating within an accepted ontogenealogical makeup immersed in *status quo* dialectics. Already here, it was clear that a single dialectic is not in place, but the dialectic structure of substance ontologies bears significant grievances that hinder the consideration of the embodied environments beyond the false dilemmas of abstracted dichotomies. In conclusion, it is essential to note the path forward beyond the dichotomies that come to the fore when considering the complexity of the genealogies behind the dominating paradigms.

In context with Rosi Braidotti's call for a new kind of subjectivity (Braidotti 1994), affirmative of a self-constitution yet beyond the dialectic of the self and the other, I, hence, propose that further exploration also has to consider the background genealogies that continue to thrive both within the postsocialist as well as the neoliberal context. Here, I think in line with thinkers such as Nancie Marie Brown (2022), that emphasize rethinking the local and situated mythologies–epistemologies (next to, for example,

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already more often considered Indigenous situated knowledges) to seek future ethicalities, as well as to expose the heterogeneity of our ontogenealogical makeup—and thus, maybe also endeavor a shift in thinking and experienced materialities.

This shift would also include rethinking various dimensions of the socialist past that, among others, allowed the reanimation and conservation of many of the practices that sprouted in the shadows of the Soviet ideologies both as the opposition to these ideologies as well as their continuation or their complimentary practices for practical purposes. Thus, such practices as the gift economy of garden-grown goods, widespread mushrooming and harvesting practices, composting, and communal garden plot utilization continue to thrive in the margins of newly globalized Eastern Europe, often without recognition by their actors of the positive environmental aspects of said practices (Jehlička et al. 2020; Mincytė and Plath 2015; 2017; Trenouth and Tisenkopfs 2015, 369; Sauka 2022d). These practices reveal a different kind of post-privatization that might also be termed just as likely as pre-privatization, where sharing not only among humans but with the more-than-human is regarded as a cyclical process of give-and-take.

When considered in the context of Baltic pre-Christian traditions, which still co-constitute the ontogenealogical materialities of these regions, it might be possible to arrive at the idea how what is "mine" is also "not-mine" either in the context of the body or the environment (in their material entanglement as well as parallel genealogies), via the agency of the more-than-human lifeworlds and the entanglement of the human as a transspecies assemblage with the living.

Latvian folklore traditions mark a seemingly deeply personal link with nature that obviously has lost its influence over time but has not been completely lost and continues to co-constitute human-environment relations today. Latvian Dainas or folksongs reflect a cyclical understanding of nature that does not separate humanity from nature and depict their intercarnality. Here, processuality gives way to understanding the importance of One as non-contradictory to the importance of the "many," precisely on the grounds of more-than-human entanglement. One of my favorite images is the almost posthumanist depiction of a dying girl turning into a Linden tree that is then made into a kokle (a string music instrument—a Latvian variation of the zither) which makes the most beautiful yet poignant sound. A story of dendromorphism that also links together technology and nature, thus embedding humanity firmly within the naturecultured planetary structures.

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This cyclical understanding of nature is also present in mythology and folklore of other regions in various forms, and what is significant to both 1) disallow falling into the trap of privatization, as well as 2) consider alternate genealogies beyond the trap of deprivatization, is to highlight the entangled yet identifiable genealogies of local cultures that are today often misleadingly covered under the umbrella term of the Global North.

The author of "Against the Grain" (Scott 2017) proposes a thought-provoking argument defending the idea that a settler lifestyle was possible and even thrivingly so (in certain places) before the agricultural revolution by settling within environments that allow human flourishing rather than creating these circumstances on purpose. This idea does not only illustrate the practical possibilities of an affirmative, processual understanding of environmental embeddedness and a life beyond the dialectic of the private and the communal but, philosophically, also illustrates the selfhood disentangled from the dialectic of the self and the other, where a "self" is usually to be affirmed via independence and freedom that practically necessitates the negation of interdependence and symbiosis.

What the old epistemologies, as well as postsocialist sharing practices, might demonstrate is the necessity to reframe selfhood, freedom, and nature beyond this dialectic of self and other via a processual understanding of freedom in relatedness (since only via the more-than-human can the human become) that is not to be confused with the Soviet depersonalized understanding of commonality as a totalizing power that subjects. Similarly, the idea of property rights (either in the form of their negation or defense) can be reframed, instead showing the relational character of living with the commons as lands we have, perhaps, leased and the bodies as vehicles for self-expression beyond and before a fixed state of ownership or relegation to a communal other.

Thus, what the postsocialist affective relations with the environment and situated knowledges show is not only the dangers of sticking to either or both sides of dialectic contraposition but also the possibility of reconnecting with the genealogies that are hitherto relegated to the shadows of the materialities we live by, realizing their tangible presence in our everyday lives.[9] Moreover, thus, we can ask ourselves—what other stories have made us that we are not yet aware of—and can those stories help us to reconnect to what we are made of?

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[9] In part, also as a form of "weak" or "visceral resistance" strategy (Kukaine 2021).

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# Jana Kukaine*, Jānis Taurens**

# Forgetful and Drowsy: The Affective Atmospheres in Contemporary Latvian Photography

Abstract

In the article, we advance the notion of an affective atmosphere for analyzing the works of art by two contemporary Latvian photographers—Aija Bley (b. 1967) and Arnis Balčus (b. 1978). The spatial relations of bodies and environments and the photographed subjects' facial expressions and postures negotiate a sense of postsocialist affectivity that we describe as forgetful and drowsy. In the selected images, the affective atmospheres enact the ambiguities of the Soviet legacies, along with the challenges of neoliberal rationality affecting today's Latvian society.

Keywords

Affective Atmosphere, Postsocialism, Latvian Contemporary Photography, Forgetting, Sleeping

This article draws from feminist affect theory to analyze the affective atmospheres in the works of two Latvian photographers—the series *Amnesia* (2008–2009) by Arnis Balčus and *Sleepers* (2014) by Aija Bley. Both artists employ a method of staged photography to enact situations relevant to the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in Latvia. Affective components of their works proceed from the spatial relations of the bodies and environments and the expressions of the faces and postures of the photographed subjects. In the article, we argue that these images negotiate a sense of postsocialist affectiv-

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ity that we describe as forgetful and drowsy. While there are different schol-
arly approaches to thinking through affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009,
Böhme 2017), in the article, we view it as a collective and transpersonal
phenomenon capable of traversing between people and spaces, ideologies,
and epochs. The affective atmospheres we are interested in are forgetfulness
and drowsiness and corresponding clusters of affects like disillusionment
and doubts, apathy and estrangement, dizziness, and a sense of absurdity
and loss. These atmospheric patterns we encounter in the works of artists
Arnis Balčus and Aija Bley are "shaped by the contact zone," in Sara Ahmed's
terms, between the viewer of the photographs and the photographs them-
selves (Ahmed 2004, 194). Thus, postsocialist affectivity does not reside in
the photographed people or represented environments, nor in the material-
ity of the images or the viewers. Instead, the affective atmosphere inhabits
the relational in-between space encompassing both the photographs and the
audience, potentially also the readers of this article.

## Affective Atmospheres: The Haze in Photography

After the so-called "affective turn" that emerged as a response of critical
theory to ongoing political, economic, and cultural transformations, intro-
ducing "a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter" (Clough
2007, 2), the study of the role of emotions in culture has become of para-
mount importance in the humanities. In this inquiry, affects are often re-
ferred to as a bodily capacity to affect and be affected, i.e., the augmentation
or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect, such that
affectivity is associated with the "the self-feeling of being alive (…) aliveness
or vitality" (ibid.). Likewise, affects are often perceived as "pre-individual
bodily forces" (Clough 2010, 207). They are unpredictable and autonomous
(Massumi 1995), fostering new insights into embodiment, investment, and
emotion. While some authors tend to locate the affective in the preconscious,
pre-social, pre-linguistic, and pre-discursive realms, a feminist reading of
affect embraces its value for registering and promoting the awareness of
social meaning (Hemmings 2005, 565). From this point of view, the pre-
individual character of affect is attributed to the visceral bearing of ideolo-
gies inscribed histories and cultural configurations into bodies. They con-
tinue to orchestrate their movements, experiences of spatiality, and identi-
ties (Pedwell, Whitehead 2012; Parvulescu 2019). By claiming that affective
moods are conditioned by the relations of power (colonial pasts and neolib-
eral futures), we expand the idea of personal being political, offering this
feminist mantra a visceral reading.

Fig. 1. Arnis Balčus, from the series *Amnesia*, 2008–2009.
Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Arnis Balčus, from the series *Amnesia*, 2008–2009.
Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3. Arnis Balčus, from the series *Amnesia*, 2008–2009.
Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4. Arnis Balčus, from the series *Amnesia*, 2008–2009.
Courtesy of the artist.

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As noted by various scholars, affects not only attach to bodies and objects but are contiguous; they slide into each other, stick, and cohere (Ahmed 2010b, 32; see also Berlant 2011; Anderson, Ash 2015). This view underpins an understanding of an affective atmosphere, which can be perceived as "a plane upon which certain affects circulate and commingle" (Wall 2019, 4). It presents the air of a space, its mood, and its ambiance. The atmosphere seems to fill the space with a feeling of a haze (Böhme 2017, 12). This haze might blur the precise outlines of bodies, objects, and events, affectively wrapping and unifying them. In turn, the subjects enveloped by this haze generate particular bodily responses. However, their bodily movements and reactions can also interact, respond or alter the atmosphere since the bodies are not just *in* the atmosphere but are also a *part of* it—atmospheres do not exist independently (Shyldkrot 2019, 149). From this point of view, the transpersonal character of the atmosphere is explained: it transcends individual emotions and biographical details yet is, to a certain degree, dependent on them. A feminist reading of the affective atmospheres is motivated by the interest in the manifestation of a visceral set of relations, an entanglement of embodied experiences and political feelings, and the transfer of emotive energies that orchestrate bodies, binding them in the affective dynamic and animating historical subjects (Khanna 2020, 1–7). These histories consist of socially and politically enacted inequalities, bodily vulnerabilities, rituals of remembering and forgetting, and the underlying value systems, desires, and dreams, inciting a particular sense of place and time.

Despite its overall impact in the humanities, affect theory, with a few noteworthy exceptions,[1] is still not widely used in the analyses of visual art, especially in post-Soviet contexts. In art criticism and histories, overlooking of feelings often concur with the marginalization of feminist, queer, and racialized perspectives. As Susan Best emphasizes, considering affect is not yet a part of any critical methodologies deployed in art history. Hence, we have a limited descriptive vocabulary to reason with (Best 2014, 7). Similarly, the prevailing tendency in photography criticism has been to avoid "personal thoughts and feelings" to provide a more precise exploration of the photographic meaning and its interaction with ideological and cultural contexts (Brown, Phu 2014, 2). Yet, embracing the affective dimension in art is rewarding since affect disturbs and subverts already established meanings, promotes artistic innovation, and enacts new "beginnings" (Best 2014, 3-5). Attending to affect in art interpretation amounts to discovering a "new

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[1] See Pollock 2013; Brown, Phu 2014; Best 2014, 2016; Olin 2012; and Zelizer 2010—to mention a few recent examples.

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ingredient" of an art object, even if its interpretation might seem opaque or ambiguous. Likewise, acknowledgment of feeling is central to addressing difficult, disturbing, and distressing images and overcoming trauma, revival, and healing. Adopting the perspective of affect encourages the development of reparative practices (Sedgwick 2003; Best 2016) that often employ complex, post-critical aesthetic strategies to engage the audience in an affective way, seeking pleasure and surprise. Yet, attending to "less affective" affects is helpful—those monotonous, seemingly inexpressive, and "dull" emotions. In the works of art, these feelings, according to Sianne Ngai, are explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic because they offer no satisfactions of virtue nor produce any therapeutic or purifying release. These "less dramatic" affects are weak but nasty. Defined by flatness and ongoingness, they have a remarkable capacity for lasting and tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions (Ngai 2005, 6-7). In her analysis, Ngai refers to affects like envy, anxiety, animatedness, stuplimity (a mixture of boredom and shock), paranoia, and disgust. We would like to embrace even flatter and more insipid affects like forgetfulness and drowsiness.

In the works of Arnis Balčus and Aija Bley, these affects enact atmospheres of standstill and emptiness, a sense of absurdity, detachment, desolation, hopelessness, and estrangement. In our inquiry, we use the terms "forgetful" and "drowsy" as gravity points, yet, the structure and arrangement of affects invoked in this article are not clearly defined, and we perceive them as clusters that can freely float, circulate and blend. In what follows, we attempt to attend to their post-Soviet socio-cultural significance in the context of the selected artworks while acknowledging that postsocialist affectivity presents a broader spectrum of affective states. In the article, guided by the selected works of art, we focus only on a few of them. Likewise, it should be noted that, while testing the potential of an affective atmosphere in the analysis of photographic works, neither works of art nor the article provide definitive answers to the questions evoked by such an inquiry. Instead, while making sense of postsocialist affectivity, we aim to grasp its potentiality for further critical inquiry.

**Forgetfulness and the Sponge: Collecting Fragments**

The works of photography by Arnis Balčus and Aija Bley provide a possibility to approach the affective atmosphere of (post)Soviet conditions. While in scholarly research, there are various framings of postsocialism, in the article, we will use a narrower meaning of the term that delineates how the cultural

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situation in Latvia, like other countries in the region, is still, to a great extent, influenced by socialist legacies, which also determines its current struggles with neoliberal capitalist politics. The notion of the postsocialist condition allows accounting for how beliefs, dispositions, behaviors, and personhood of people proceed from their own or their predecessors' life in socialism (Gallinat 2022). In Latvia, it amounts to embracing a half-century from the Soviet occupation in 1940 until the restoration of independence in 1991. According to Madina Tlostanova, within the global neoliberal modernity/ coloniality, East European countries were interpreted in a progressivist manner, i.e., "they were considered reformable and eventually subject to European assimilation, but always with an indelible difference" (Tlostanova 2018, 4). The "indelible difference" often marked the secondary status of the region, which was further strengthened by social, economic, and political transformations. Nevertheless, the term "postsocialist" does not suggest that countries are merely "stuck in the democrato-capitalist transition" and that the situation is temporal but instead invites to explore the embodied practices and affective patterns experienced by those in the region (Stenning, Hörschelmann 2008). These explorations can be carried out not only in the academic field but also in contemporary art.

In the visual arts in Latvia, a reflection or critique of the postsocialist engagements is not a very common subject. Instead, it tends towards a particular interpretation—"mostly taken up by chance or treated ironically, in a kitsch-like way" (Lāce 2013). The reasons for this tendency are several: an inclination in Latvian society to let the Soviet past "merge and disappear," a general underestimation of this cultural heritage due to its ideological and traumatic charge, as well as a risk of "sinking in a semi-sweet nostalgia of the "good old days" when everyone had a job, and the big mother state took care of us" (ibid.). Like in other postsocialist countries, in Latvia, after the end of the Soviet Union, the Soviet legacy was often dismissed for being replaced with Eurocentric visions based on the narrative of progress, liberation, and the return to Europe. However, it soon turned out that the visions for a brighter future were saturated with the premises of cruel optimism, to borrow a term from Lauren Berlant (2011)—an embracement of neoliberal capitalism, instead of happiness and freedom, caused anxiety and increased social inequality. Although people had expected a much higher "Western" level of prosperity, they soon discovered themselves in an impoverished periphery with a declining quality of life and loss of dignity and self-worth. Widespread unemployment, new class differences, poverty, corruption scandals, and economic disadvantages are among the factors that promoted disil-

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lusionment and skepticism (Svašek 2006). An important reason for the so-
cial and economic downfall was the massive depopulation of rural areas,
which limited people's capacity to imagine and plan for a future (Dzenovska
2012) and generated the affects of emptiness and desolation mimetic to the
closed factories and deteriorating landscapes.

Balčus and Bley are among the few contemporary photographers in Lat-
via that have addressed these topics by creating atmospheric images to
evoke certain postsocialist affectivity features. Balčus' interpretation of the
Soviet legacies includes resorting to living memories and often conflicting
attitudes towards this period. These motives also appear in other works
(e.g., *Beyond the Blue River*, 2015, *Victory Park*, 2012–2016, etc.). While Bal-
čus' approach can often be considered to be anti-aesthetical, and one could
argue that his photographic gaze might lack compassion towards the photo-
graphed subjects, his photographic framing of the marginalized groups of
people exposes social vulnerabilities produced by neoliberal capitalism,
which was introduced to Latvia at the beginning of the 1990s and negotiated
associated affective states, like disillusionment, a sense of non-belonging,
and a feeling of failure. Likewise, Balčus' subjects often disclose symptoms of
nostalgia which, in line with Svetlana Boym, can be interpreted as longing for
another time or a better life and a commitment to the visions of the future
that have become obsolete (Boym 2001, xvi). The subjects of Balčus' photo-
graphs might appear out of sync with time, expressing a sentiment of loss,
displacement, and disorientation. They are stuck in the past, failing to come
into the present.

The photographic series of *Amnesia* (2008–2009) consists of staged pho-
tographs—a somewhat atypical method for the artist, combined with an
unusual level of the aestheticization of the images—the artist had attempted
to make these scenes look rather "beautiful."

According to Balčus, the series performs various rituals that have died
out from the daily life of Latvians due to social and political changes. These
rituals are subject to "collective amnesia—forced or voluntary suppression
of memories (…) for both to deny the Latvian Soviet identity and get over
recurrent political and economic failures" (Balčus 2008/2009). By uncover-
ing the suppressed memories presented as a ritual, the images expose a kind
of forgetfulness sustained by the pattern of represented situations, bodily
postures, and environments. Forgetfulness is an affect that comprises arrest-
ing confusion, disappointment, and an estrangement from the self. It ema-
nates from the act of forgetting, which Ahmed aptly calls "a repetition of the
violence or injury" (Ahmed 2004, 33). This repetition can be embedded in

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racist, sexist, postcolonial, and post-imperial practices. For Ahmed, to forget means to continue the oppression by surrendering to the "fantasy of reconciliation" that invites us to leave behind the histories of pain and injustice (Ahmed 2010a, 148). However, escaping one's memory will not undo but only intensify the harm by closing oneself off, withdrawing from proximity, staying silent, and numbing one's sensations to "learn not to be affected or to be affected less" (Ahmed 2017, 24). As a result, that which is not revealed becomes a burden or a secret.

Meanwhile, remembering indicates a willingness and courage to acknowledge the social and political changes and face the unresolved pain that goes along with them. Ahmed's paradoxical comparison of memory to a sponge might be helpful here. Although the sponge seems to be a metaphor for erasing memories, for her, to remember is to put the pieces together, holding and waiting to see what "gets mopped up." Therefore, memory work is not only about recalling what has been forgotten but also allowing memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness and clarity when things become more than half-glimpsed. Ultimately, one acquires a fuller picture by highlighting the connections between different experiences (Ahmed 2017, 22). In *Amnesia*, the selected scenes of the extinguished social rituals get mopped up to present a fuller understanding of the Soviet past, acknowledging its legacies and drawing connections between the scattered scenes. A fuller picture can function for negotiating the oppressed features of today's identities that are inscribed into Soviet legacies, comprehending the indelible difference of a postsocialist country, as well as providing a potential for a critique of eurocentric neoliberalism.

The rituals of Balčus' photographs start from early childhood and lead to an elderly age: a little girl in a pink dress on a tricycle and a boy in a checked shirt and a "kepka" (soft, billed hat) on a pedal car. The toys and clothes can be recognized as Soviet ones. The scene evokes a myth of a happy childhood which unfolds in a fairytale-like atmosphere with encoded gender roles: the girl looks like a doll, but the boy's clothes resemble a worker's. (Fig. 1). A schoolboy holding an empty bottle in his right hand looks at another one on the ground before him. A "perhaps bag" (a string bag called in Russian "avoska") popular in Soviet times is full of bottles—perhaps the boy is gathering empty bottles to earn some pocket money. His Soviet school uniform is too big for him, causing a sense of discrepancy and exposing his vulnerability, also enshrined by the unwelcoming look of the long row of silicate brick sheds characteristic of Soviet-era construction in the background (Fig. 2). Another picture with an even more explicit air of absurdity shows an office:

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behind the "director" (man), that is, the official representative of the organi-
zation, is a portrait of Lenin, while in front of him is a worker (probably
a woman) in a gas mask, which can be interpreted as a reference to the Cold
War. The power relations between the Soviet ideology (symbolized by
Lenin's portrait) and the "ordinary human being," official administration,
and the workers, as well as between man and woman, appear to be accurate
for the time. In this physically and ideologically restricted space, the ritual
encounter fosters self-humiliation and social alienation (Fig. 3). Finally,
the series addresses retirement and old age: in the image, an older woman is
sitting in an armchair and looking at the empty screen of the TV set. Her tiny
room in a Soviet-era block of flats allows minimal variations of standard
furniture. At the same time, the only way to interact with the outer world—
the television—is likewise suspended  (Fig. 4).

    In these works, the atmosphere of forgetfulness is created by the bodily
and spatial practices of the depicted subjects. In contrast, the constraints of
the environment translate into the limitations imposed by ideological con-
trol and social and economic circumstances, inhibiting the capacity to act
and their aliveness or vitality in a more broad sense. The photographed sub-
jects appear to close themselves off, to withdraw from reality, numbing their
bodies and sensations. In the interview with Madina Tlostanova, Estonian
artist Liina Siib, who likewise researches Soviet legacies, concludes that "Our
bodies are trained under the Soviet discipline (…) Even if the bodies sur-
vived, the souls are corrupted by the conformity to reality" (Tlostanova
2018, 69-70). These bodily disciplines include kindergartens, schools, uni-
versities, working places, and private environments, such as the pocket-
sized flats of the Soviet people. Tlostanova interprets these bodily con-
straints in the conceptual frame of "spatial history," where "space becomes
a palimpsest" of overlapping traces left by "the rhetoric of dictatorships,
totalitarian regimes, and colonialist states" (Tlostanova 2017, 98). For Liina
Siib, the representation of these disciplining practices  can be achieved due
to the capacity of the space to bear witness and thus become a "telling space"
that makes "invisible social structures visible and present" (Tlostanova
2018, 67). In Balčus' photographs this aim is achieved by the introduction of
a "telling atmosphere" which exposes the disciplining and life-inhibiting
practices. Bodies are put at a standstill and appear unable to look back or
move forward. Although the photographs do not explicitly address the issues
of violence and injury of the Soviet regime, nor attempt to unpack the bur-
den or the secrets of the photographed people, the series acts like a sponge
—it collects ritualized affective fragments in a fuller whole, inviting to over-
come the state of enforced amnesia and retrieve vitality and liveliness.

Fig. 5. Aija Bley, from the series *Sleepers*, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6. Aija Bley, from the series *Sleepers*, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 7. Aija Bley, from the series *Sleepers*, 2014.
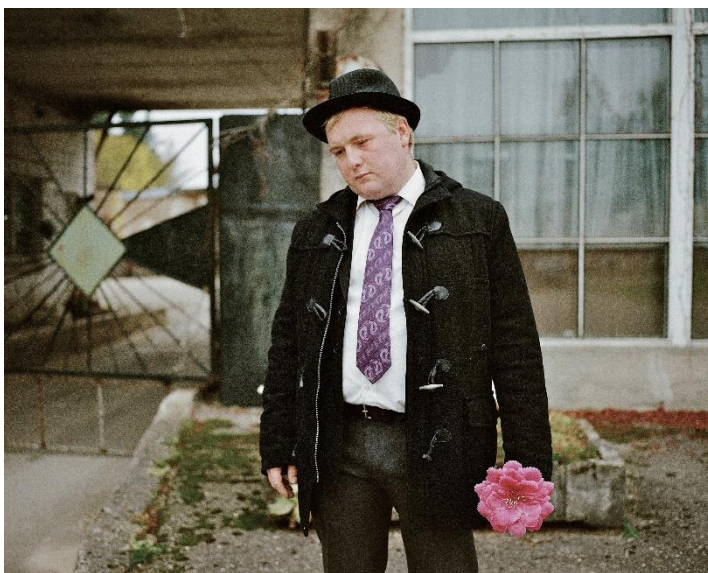Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8. Aija Bley, from the series *Sleepers*, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

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Fig. 9. Aija Bley, from the series *Sleepers*, 2014.
Courtesy of the artist.

## Drowsiness: Postsocialist Precarity and the Agency of Sleep

Our second example is the series *Sleepers* by Aija Bley, an artist and film director. Guided by an anthropological curiosity, her photographic works research everyday life practices and expressions of the subjectivity of various social groups: schoolgirls, taxi drivers, elderly widowed women, or women participating in an orgasm masterclass. Her photographic gaze comprises irony and empathy, while the images range from documentary precision to poetic interpretation. In the series of photographs, *Sleepers* Aija Bley revisits the Latvian town Līvāni which has turned from a large industrial center in the 1970s into an "underdeveloped province of the European Union where only dreamers have stayed" (Bley 2014). In the images, people are sitting, standing, or lying by a garden table, in a hairdresser's salon, in a sauna, in a bedroom, in a canteen kitchen, on an old ferry, in a waiting room at the bus station, etc. (Fig. 5, 6, 7). The affect of drowsiness is evoked not only by the title of the series but also by the looks of the photographed people: they seem tired, with dazed expressions and aimless gestures, flagging bodies. The eyes are closed, or the vacant looks are directed nowhere. The "empty" faces do not exhibit intense emotions but indicate detachment,

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apathy, affective numbness, and estrangement from the situation. The bodily postures in the images are staged so that the effect of a silent standstill is even more emphasized to convey the atmosphere of the disintegration of the economic and social, as well as personal relationships. A telling figure is a half-awake man in a black suit, with an artificial flower in hand, in front of abandoned buildings. He seems to be rather disoriented about his love affairs, confused about the date he is going to (Fig. 8). Yet, the plastic look of the flower attests to the ongoingness of the situation and introduces a perspective of permanence. The situation does not have any expected solution in the near future. The flower will not wither. Likewise, he will not meet his beloved one.

It is easy to recognize the mimetic similarity between the atmosphere of drowsiness and the social and economic reality of Līvāni after the 1990s, marked by unemployment, migration, and the closing of the future for those who decided to stay or were not able to move away. Like Balčus, Aija Bley's staged photographs enact almost absurd scenes to negotiate the loss of hope, the standstill, and the confusion. These flat but nasty affects not only interfere with but inhibit the emergence of others' potential emotions. The sleepers sharply contrast with the happy citizens and active workers of the Soviet Union who were supposed to build a communist future according to the well-known ideological slogans. Nevertheless, they also resist the standard of the neoliberal capitalist subject and the new model citizen introduced to the postsocialist countries. This "newly born man" is supposed to be autonomous, self-mastering, and single-minded, fulfilling the demand of the enterprising self that includes responsibility, self-help, and flexibility (Makovicky 2014). In this light, social vulnerabilities, inequalities, and limitations are often explained as personal failures to develop an enterprising attitude to life and meet the standard of neoliberal rationality, which depends on the particular definition of agency and visibility, as well as a commitment to market-based values.

The immersion of Aija Bley's photographic subjects in the atmospheres of passivity and abandonment enables the artist to capture the sense of postsocialist precarity, the term developed by scholar Jennifer Suchland to accommodate the "the loss of previous lifeworlds upon which symbolic and material forms of living were (re)produced," as well as the hybrid forms of exploitation and social vulnerabilities intrinsic to postsocialism (Suchland 2021, 15). Despite the ongoing "return to Europe" discourse, these territories maintain their "indelible difference" and continue to be presented as Europe's periphery or of secondary importance. Suchland invites us to re-

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think how the political desire to get out of the Soviet (and Russian) yoke of power, while in many ways justified and necessary, actually invoked another colonial turn because the eurocentric visions "cannot be seen outside of the imperial projects of European empires" and they continue to establish global hierarchies of economic and political powers. In reaction to postsocialist precarity and the loss of the previous lifeworld, the atmosphere of fatigue and drowsiness emerges. Allowing oneself to become sleepy is a metaphor for the economic standstill and the disintegration of social and cultural life.

However, we would like to end this article with a more energizing per-spective. The atmosphere of drowsiness can also be read as a resignment from the fantasies of progress, as well as a critical disregard of the models of the enterprising self and neoliberal rationality sustained by the discourse of the eurocentric orientation. Moreover, sleep tackles the ideas of continuous work and consumption inscribed in the pattern of neoliberal capitalism. According to Jonathan Crary, in its profound social uselessness and intrinsic passivity, sleep "poses the idea of a human need and interval of time" (Crary 2014, 10-11), which cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, nor any other ideological purposes. Thus, drowsiness is "an incongruous anomaly which frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it" (ibid.). While the subjects in Balčus' images seem stuck in time against their own will, the remaining inhabitants in Līvāni paradoxi-cally reclaim their agency by refusing to move anywhere, to do anything, be it work or consumption. Their idleness demands reclaiming the interval of time for rethinking, remembering, and embracing the failures of the never-ending "transition." The atmosphere of drowsiness points to fundamental questions about Latvia's geopolitical situation, policy-making, and the possi-ble futures for those inhabiting the peripheries. The urgency of these ques-tions is further unpacked, yet in a somewhat comical way, by the image of the two side-by-side tattered posters with the stars of the European Union on a blue background and almost illegible information about the implemen-tation of a project, probably supported by some European funds (Fig. 9). On one poster, a carelessly sniffed penis is visible, a sign of skepticism of today's pro-European orientation and proof of a failed attempt of westernization of a Latvian province. In the end, the agency of the dormant provincial town is twofold; it questions the political framing of the postsocialist condition and, by revising the center-periphery preferences, offers the potentiality for de-bunking geographical and ideological hierarchies.

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**Tentative Conclusion: The Indelible Difference**

The photographic series of Arnis Balčus and Aija Bley consists of partly nostalgic, partly uncanny situations staged in private or public spaces, tracing the prevalence of the often-overlooked Soviet legacies in constituting the environments, spatial histories, and affective moods in today's Latvia. We have found the innovative concept of affective atmosphere to be beneficial for the analysis of these photographic practices since it enables us to account for the lived histories under the Soviet occupation, the aesthetic qualities of the images, together with the affective responses attached to the viewers. This floating, hybrid, and ontologically ambiguous in-between space is the site where the argument of this article develops.

In the images, we sensed affective patterns that we believe could be distinctive of the postsocialist condition. They manifest in the estranged, detached relationships to reality, the loss of previous lifeworlds, and hesitation to embrace the emerging ones. As a result, affects like standstill, dizziness, absurdity, and apathy commingle in an atmosphere whose gravity points in the article are forgetfulness and drowsiness. However, different affective arrangements are equally probable. The affective haze in the works of Balčus and Bley animates the photographed subjects. It unfolds constellations of embodied experiences and political feelings, cultural configurations of bodily practices, everyday rituals, desires, and dreams, as well as strategies of survival and identity-making, the geopolitical location on the periphery of Europe, and the failures to remember the Soviet past in a non-traumatizing and constructive way. Likewise, the atmospheres in the works of Balčus and Bley materialize some of the most pressing issues of today's political and economic situations: unemployment, poverty, inequalities, abandonment of rural areas, migration, along with a set of vulnerabilities resulting from the dominant model of neoliberal rationality and postsocialist precarity.

Although the affective patterns investigated in the article revolve around forgetfulness and drowsiness and might suggest a rather monotonous and disabling view of the legacies of the Soviet period, neither we intend to view people as passive victims with impaired capacity to act, nor do we want to suggest that these were the only or the essential traits of postsocialist affectivity. Whereas in the article, our interest was affected by the selected images, which we found enticing and promising in terms of analysis, we invite expanding the topic and advancing further investigations into the hazy fabrics of the indelible difference of postsocialist affectivity.

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Table of Figures

**Raili Marling**[*]

# Feeling Historical:
# Postsocialist Affect in Estonian Fiction

Abstract

In this article, building on the work of Lauren Berlant (2008, 2022) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), I ask what it means to feel historical in the context of today's pervasive crisis ordinariness, whether it is possible to talk about a particular postsocialist affect, and what aesthetic forms the affect takes in fiction. The analysis of two Estonian texts will follow the theoretical discussion: Tõnu Õnnepalu's novel *Border State* (1993) and Maarja Kangro's story collection *Õismäe ajamasin* (2021).

Keywords

Postsocialism, Affect, Neoliberalism, Estonia, Fiction

## Introduction

Lauren Berlant opens her article on feeling historical with the following sentence: "these are not ordinary times" (Berlant 2008, 4). The times of the writing of this article are not ordinary, either, especially for a person from Eastern Europe contemplating postsocialist affect. Russian aggression in Ukraine, economic precarity, and systematic populist attacks on democratic freedoms have created an uncanny affective effect of returning to the 1990s, but with a twist. While the 1990s in Eastern Europe were optimistic, the dire economic situation alleviated by a promise of joining the West, the 2020s seem bleaker. The promises of economic prosperity have not been fulfilled for many who now fill the ranks of various populist movements taking power in different countries. The promises of parity with our Western partners

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have been frayed by Western politicians who treat Eastern Europeans as, at best, supporting characters with limited speaking rights on the world stage. The West itself has lost some of its luster: while for some segments of Eastern-European societies, its promise of inclusion and dignity continues to be a dream, for others, it is this very inclusiveness that makes them protest against the decadence of the West (e.g., for the so-called "anti-gender" movements (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017)). Postsocialist reality forces us to confront diverse specters of futures past: specters of economic prosperity, democratic inclusion, and globalization (cf. Derrida 1994). We have again been made to reflect on a specific postsocialist Eastern European identity in the past year, something many had thought unnecessary after EU and NATO accession. Yet, the revival of Cold War tropes in international policy circles has been accompanied by patronizing speeches and multiple colonial gestures that ignore the history, lived reality, and agency of countries on Russia's borders (cf. Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022). We are once again feeling not European but distinctly Eastern European. Berlant (2008, 5) states that "a situation has changed the ordinary into something they can no longer presume." Indeed, the ordinary has become extraordinary, creating new ethical challenges. Today, to echo Heather Love (2007), we seem to be feeling backward and bad—but in a historically specific way.

These are not ordinary times because of the fraying of the ideal of a rational public sphere and its replacement with fractured and fractious affective publics. Although in the 1980s, Fredric Jameson (1984) mourned the waning of affect under late capitalism, now we are drowning in affect. Paranoia is "the ordre du jour" across the political spectrum (Apter 2006, 369). This affective flood needs critical attention that is both socially and historically informed. Thus the present article is attuned to the affects of the present, but also their ideological context.

This article is positioned at this precise historical and affective point to ask whether we can locate a particular postsocialist affect forged in the context of historical rupture, nationalism, and neoliberalism. As generalizations on topics like these are often untenable, despite the Western tendency to lump the region into one unified whole, the focus of the article will be postsocialist Estonia, whose struggles with neoliberalism I have traced in multiple publications (e.g., Marling 2010, 2015; Marling and Põldsam 2022). I will build on the work of Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011, 2022) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), but my claims will be illustrated with an analysis of contemporary Estonian fiction. As I have argued elsewhere, artistic texts can "access the visceral truth of experience better than scientific and critical methods"

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(Barnwell 2020, 14). I argue that fiction is especially invaluable in accessing ambiguous affects. While Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Piiririik* (1993, translated as *Border State* in 2000) is an almost stereotypical example of the postsocialist love-hate relationship with the West, Maarja Kangro's recent short story collection *Õismäe ajamasin* (Õismäe Time Machine) (2022) expresses a more self-confident and ironic commentary on the failure of Western modernity. I argue that the two texts trace the historical shifts in the specifically Eastern-European postsocialist affect.

**Affects of Feeling Historical**

Like Ahmed (2004, 40), I maintain that a sharp differentiation of affect and emotion "negates how that which is not consciously experienced may be mediated by past experiences." The fact that something produces precognitive bodily intensities does not mean that the underlying cause is not sociohistorical or cultural. Many of our visceral dislikes are generated by cultural prejudice, as Ahmed has shown in her analysis of racist hate. Often affect has been valorized as something untouched by ideologies, but, like Clare Hemmings, I believe that affects may act as a mechanism of social reproduction rather than a radical challenge to it (Hemmings 2005, 551). Affective attunement encourages us to conform, to maintain allegiances to our social networks whose orientations towards people and ideas we embrace as part of our being, consciously or unconsciously. This attunement is also temporally and intersectionally specific, with notable distinctions between generations, social classes, metropolitan and peripheral regions, and majorities and minorities. Tracing collective affects is challenging, as what one feels strongly depends on the place and the time of this feeling.

  This article analyzes emotional responses to what Rob Nixon (2013), speaking about anthropogenic climate change, has termed "slow violence." This type of violence is gradual, delayed, dispersed, and not necessarily recognized or recorded as violence (Nixon 2013, 13). In the case of postsocialist countries, the fall of the Berlin Wall can be used as an example of a history-making spectacular event, while the postsocialist restructuring of the economy in which many found themselves redundant is an example of slow violence (cf. Majstorović 2021). If violence is not a significant event but a daily trickling of small acts, the violent acts only register as distinct in their aftermath when it is often too late to take action. We must be taught to recognize slow violence in today's heightened emotional public space. Representability is thus a vital issue related to slow violence, as we need to be taught to no-

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tice, respond, and act (cf. Marling 2019). Aesthetic tools are well positioned to register the often opaque flat affects and social frictions that slow violence creates. They can also create affective reactions in the readers, inviting them to engage with issues and perhaps even "see not an event but an emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively" (Berlant 2008, 5). Fiction makes it possible to experience what is hard to put into statistics.

Postsocialism is not a geographical concept in this article, but a temporal one, an "ontology of time" (Buck-Morss 2006). In other words, it is not limited to people in the former Soviet Block, as the fall of the Soviet Union radically transformed lives across the globe. Nevertheless, being postsocialist also specifically positions Eastern Europeans, not in a specific decade, but in an unusual temporal dislocation, forever "lagging behind" the West in a futile attempt to catch up, to join a shared sense of time (cf. Koobak and Marling 2014). So, I use the term "postsocialist" to indicate a specific relationship with time: being positioned in the aftermath of significant historical events and locked into a past that the West has left behind. The adjective "post-socialist," in this conceptualization, is not a tool of easy periodization but an example of "looping temporality" (Martin 2021). The end of socialism was supposed to return us to a shared time, but our temporalities have not been synchronized (Atanasoski, Vora 2023). The sense of running out of time, being haunted by an unwanted past and futures past, creates a unique affective atmosphere characterized by melancholy, pessimism, and a certain world-weary nihilism. The Eastern European of this stereotype is not just situated outside a temporal order but also alienated from the affective norm like an affect alien who rubs against the future orientation and the forced optimism of neoliberal capitalism.

This stereotype is not the only type of Eastern European, however. The post-soviet transition mainstreamed a kind of neoliberalism that has been embraced avidly by the Estonian elites since the 1990s. This neoliberal affective regime requires eternal optimism about a future that is promised to arrive if only one tries hard enough. However, the latter phrase is already telling, as this promised happiness requires labor and constant vigilance, resulting in anxiety, if not dread. Bruno Latour (2014, 3) has explained this tension well: "One of the *affects of capitalism*, that is, of *thinking* in terms of capitalism, is to generate for most people who don't benefit from its wealth a feeling of *helplessness* and for a few people who benefit from it an immense enthusiasm together with a dumbness of the senses." Neoliberalism has been associated with not just cruelty, but "optimistic cruelty," in which "feel-

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ings of resentment, fear, anger, and loathing are enacted against the weak, who are a drain to the worthy" (Duggan 2019, 84). Yet, the fear and anger are not that far from the happy veneers of the strong either, as neoliberalism requires constant vigilance. Even the happy elites are haunted by the uneasy proximity of the melancholic losers that they, too, might become, especially in the eyes of the Westerners.

Thus, neoliberalism is affective, as Ben Anderson (2016) has argued, producing affect. Neoliberalism is based on the belief in a "hopeful performative," a sense that by performing happiness, we will magically conjure up happiness, success, and perhaps even the future (Ahmed 2010, 200). Affects help to "shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" by orienting us towards social issues and helping ideologies and social structures to "get under our skin" (Ahmed 2004, 1, 216). Once these ideological orientations are under our skin, they become part of our being, moving us unconsciously, without intervention from our reasoning. In postsocialist contexts, these ideological internalizations can be contradictory and dependent on age, gender, and social class. The winners of the transition are affectively oriented in a manner that is radically different from the putative losers in their affective attunement to the pursuit of profit, self-optimization and being an entrepreneur of oneself (Foucault 2008).

For Ahmed, happiness is temporal in this neoliberal mode of thinking: negative emotions are placed in the past, and the promise of happiness in the future (Ahmed 2010, 199). The normative happy subjects, thus, are in a different temporal plane than the affect aliens who are forever stuck in the past. However, this temporal delay gives the latter a chance to pause and reflect on the promises of happiness (Ahmed 2010, 218). We can replace Ahmed's melancholic migrant with a melancholic Eastern European, a fixture of 1990s popular culture.[1] One example could be an underpaid Eastern European intellectual who holds an ambivalent position between the center and the margin, the present and the past. She remains an other to the Western self (e.g., in her attachment to national ideals) yet is uncannily able to imitate the self (e.g., in competing for EU research funding). This doubling makes the Eastern European affects a necessary critical correction to the often ahistorical affect theories that treat the world as a flat unified plane. Like Da Costa (2016), I want to invite a historically specific look into dispossession and depression in a context where there was no good life to lose, like in Berlant's theorization, but just a promise of a good life.

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[1] In fact, when writing this article, I was given Google recommendations of sad memes from both Facebook and TikTok.

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### Fictional affects

This affective-temporal conundrum, however, is a representational challenge. It is relatively easy to represent the happiness of neoliberal winners and the plight of its losers. But what about the people in between, who hustle to get by and manage to do so just barely, albeit at an emotional cost? Berlant argues that "it's very hard to produce a satisfying aesthetic event about the drama of not mattering where not mattering is a general historical condition" (Berlant, Greenwald 2012, 81). This redundancy is not a position that neoliberalism prepares us for; thus, Berlant believes that "suffering from disbelief is a prime affect of the contemporary moment" (Berlant, Greenwald 2012, 81). This disbelief can easily be seen in Eastern Europe, where many people have played by the rules of neoliberalism since the fall of the Soviet Union and are incredulous at not having arrived in the West and not being accepted as part of the Western self. This disbelief that can be articulated and punctured in fictional representations enables writers to capture the breakdown of life and to make it possible to inhabit this breakdown.

Although affects are subjective and intersubjective, they are also mediated, "dependent on past interpretations that are not necessarily made by us" (Ahmed 2004, 171). Literary archives are "repositories of feelings and emotions"; they encode preferred cultural orientations and affective responses but potentially can also be spaces where abrasive, counter-normative affects can be evoked (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). Affects live on the pages of books and can jump from them to the reader when they "move, stick and slide" (Ahmed 2004, 14). The affects often remain ordinary, but they "pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds" (Stewart 2007, 3). This very ordinariness of the breakdown of life and the affective attunements it creates interests me in this article, not the dramatic intensity of typical trauma narratives.

Affects recall the "inconvenience of other people" (Berlant 2022, x). While Berlant (2011) otherwise warns us against attaching ourselves to fantasies that prevent us from recognizing our lived reality for what it is, she also hopes that we can find "granular ordinary ways to lose, unlearn and loosen the objects and structures that otherwise seem intractable" (Berlant 2022, xi). I argue that fiction can also be a space of chafing against the inconvenient granularity of other lives to feel—even if in tension—with others. Being in relation with others is accompanied by tension, but this tension forces us to "shift a little while processing the world" (Berlant 2022, 2). This tension is part of being human and inhabiting a historical time—as well as becoming conscious of being either in or out of time.

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## Feeling Postsocialist in Estonia

Estonia has been a neoliberal success story since the 1990s, when economic restructuring was undertaken, following the Reagan-Thatcher model, as the most obvious antidote to Soviet past. The human cost of this restructuring and the sharp increase in inequality were treated as regrettable but necessary sacrifices on the road towards becoming a prosperous Western-European country. This suffering was accepted across the political spectrum until the rise of populism in the 2010s. The celebratory public discourse ignores the fact that Estonia has not done very well on the OECD Better Life Index and that, for a long time, it had the most significant gender pay gap in the EU (the second-highest at the time of writing the manuscript.) The hopeful performative can be seen in the desperate search for signs of success at national and personal levels, and what Lauren Berlant (2011) called "cruel optimism" thrives on.

The two authors discussed below are among the most celebrated and, one could even say, canonical living Estonian writers. Tõnu Õnnepalu might be Estonia's only author of literary fiction whose novels are widely bought and read by the general public and praised by critics. *Border State*, the novel analyzed here, is probably an essential literary representation of the postsocialist transition, with its extensive reflection on East-West tensions, and has been translated into more than 15 languages. He has perfected an impressionistic, highly affective, sensory-experiential writing style (Marling and Talviste 2022). His overall affective mode is not necessarily nostalgic but resigned: he seems to be a sensitive spectator of his own life and experiences. Maarja Kangro, in contrast, is one of the most celebrated female authors who has created her writing persona by assertively breaking norms of femininity by being aggressive and (often sexually) explicit. At the same time, her texts are cosmopolitan and casually reference both theory and international fiction classics. Her writing, too, is highly affective, like Õnnepalu's but she dwells on experiences of the physical breathing, sweating, and drinking body. Although Õnnepalu is ten years older than Kangro, they both started to write in the transition period and are highly aware of the historical time they have been thrown into, although they engage with it differently.

*Border State* is written as an epistolary novel in which an unnamed and gender-ambiguous narrator (in Estonian, it is almost impossible to identify whether the narrator is male or female; in the English translation, this ambiguity vanishes, but I will use the pronoun "they" here to recognize the ambiguity of the original). They have received a scholarship to go to Paris for

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a translation project and have an affair with a wealthy French academic whom they kill. The narrative, however, is intriguing in its temporality. The narrative does not unfold chronologically, and the narrator struggles to find the beginning (Õnnepalu 2000, 2). More pertinently for the present article, the narrator consistently refers to being not just from a distant, unnamed country, but from the past, from "that distant, unreal century" and, in a different location, "that dying century" (Õnnepalu 2000, 9, 7). The narrator explains their escape from this time as "headlong, yet looking back" (Õnnepalu 2000, 6). This belatedness and schizoid movement in opposite directions can also be seen in their relationship with Franz, who chose the narrator, they believe, because "who else would have listened as reverently to his rebellious tirades? Who else would have given a hoot about his philosophy, which was based on delights of deconstruction, or about any philosophy, for that matter? Here, where everything has been discarded long ago!" (Õnnepalu 2000, 20). Being from the past elicits superficial sympathy: "when they hear you're from Eastern Europe, they look at you with pity and speak with hollow words as if you were a dead relative" (Õnnepalu 2000, 45). The last image is especially telling as, in many ways, Eastern Europeans often are made to represent what the West wants to believe it has buried in the past (like nationalism or religiosity) on its path to a postmaterialist enlightenment. Yet, the narrator's temporal looseness allows them to be critical of their country of origin and the West they love and hate.

The novel seems to create a stereotypical vision of Eastern-European bleakness that the narrator has fled for the West, where there is always hot water and well-stocked refrigerators. Their hometown is represented as "a gray cluster of forsaken houses by the edge of a bleak landscape" (Õnnepalu 2000, 6). People's faces are gray; they "lurch," and trams alone are "carriers of transcendence" (Õnnepalu 2000, 6, 7). Some hints signal the fact that we are not in the nineteenth century but in the period of postsocialist transition: "On the next corner, one can buy fake American cigarettes, made in Poland, and Chiquita bananas, which are generally considered the symbol of the coming new prosperity" (Õnnepalu 2000, 6). The promises of prosperity are never fulfilled but create a further consumerist need. The East-West relationship behind this bargain is purely transactional: "All Eastern Europe has become a prostitute. From governments and university professors on, to the last paperboy, they are all ready to listen to wonderful speeches about democracy, equality, whatever you please, whatever the customer wishes! As long as he pays" (Õnnepalu 2000, 21).

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The narrator disdains their compatriots whom they see glued to store display windows, "criticizing the display, while secretly lusting for it, lusting for all the merchandise and wealth that their poor eyes were seeing for the first time" (Õnnepalu 2000, 68). However, they recognize themselves and their wants in the tourists, in their sneakers and sweatpants. The narrator is also highly aware of their affect-alien status: "I live a life that doesn't interest me, say things I don't believe, spend money that isn't mine. Who does it belong to, by the way? Who owns my life? To whom has it been pawned? To heaven or hell, to the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction?" (Õnnepalu 2000, 56). They know they are a part of the same transactional economy, if only as a different class, with their elegant clothes and cultural affectations. Some people desire bananas, some Michel Foucault.

The West is sunny and functional, but at the same time, Westerners are regularly described as childlike and sterile (Õnnepalu 2000, 45). The narrator muses that "here people don't even start to smell after death, because everything they've eaten is so clean and sterile," although the denatured character of the food is mentioned, like apples that "taste of death," in contrast to the nostalgically evoked childhood fruit (Õnnepalu 2000, 53). The past is not always something negative to leave behind. Western life is safe and satiated but, as Franz, the narrator's lover, admits, too dull. Franz seems to envy the narrator because "at least in your country, something real is happening" (Õnnepalu 2000, 75). The narrator adds, "I assured him that one can do very well without reality and history being made. It's even a lot more comfortable" (Õnnepalu 2000, 75). The thoughtless exoticization of the suffering of the others shows how thin the veneer of kindness is and how convenient it is to thrust Eastern Europeans back into history and to remove them from the shared temporal plane.

Kangro's short stories represent the postsocialist affect 30 years later, when Estonia is in Europe, perhaps almost in time, but at the same time at a distance from the dominant regimes of happiness and self-righteousness. Time, here, is ambivalent. Usually, the negative is in the past, and we strive to prevail over it in the future. In Kangro's stories, the present is not necessarily happy but livable, while the future might not be, if we refuse to surrender our illusions. She observes, tellingly, in one of her stories, "at that moment we were better than the rest of the world, we were ahead of them because we already knew that everything is pointless, but they still believed in meaning and progress"[2] (Kangro 2021, 176). The Eastern European characters

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[2] Here and in the following, the translations of Kangro's texts are mine.

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have been disillusioned long ago, unlike their Western counterparts, and
hence they can even accept the end of the world: "The world might be end-
ing, sea salt might contain plastic, but this does not prevent one from enjoy-
ing the autumn sun" (Kangro 2021, 168).

The stories' characters no longer have the desires that plague the narra-
tor of Õnnepalu's text, partly because of the improved material circum-
stances: "There were resources, one no longer had to behave like an asshole
to other people. There was no need for the anxious post-Soviet superiority
game: only Bvlgari jewelry, only peaty whisky; suppose you have a used
Audi, I have deconstruction" (Kangro 2021, 59). The material needs that
both tempted and tortured Õnnepalu's protagonist are now available, like to
Westerners, but the affective distance of the characters allows them to be
aware of their complicity without the embarrassment or ethical grandstand-
ing of some Westerners (quite scathingly portrayed in Kangro's take on
tourism to the Third World).

The characters, precarious as they are, have sufficient income to be
plagued by the specters of neoliberal life, like the fear that one's life is going
down the garbage chute, an image recurring in the collection's opening story.
The protagonist observes that "anxiety and comfort create a rather unpleas-
ant, corrosive mixture." Nevertheless, she still congratulates herself on being
able to take herself apart, and she "fell asleep, peacefully, convinced of the
illusory nature of herself and the world. OK, not illusory, but arbitrary, ran-
dom, sleep came" (Kangro 2021, 13-14). This behavior is part of a typical,
ironic distancing strategy that Kangro uses, combining sardonic social cri-
tique with affectively effective comparisons. She is going through the mo-
tions of enjoying life because "you have to live life to the fullest. If not, you
may later feel that living life to the fullest could have been truly awesome"
(Kangro 2021, 10). The fact that your life is pointless is a given, and one
might as well enjoy it. So, she travels but still cannot sleep as "she seems to
have wasted her life so far, and as a result, she'd better waste the rest as
well" (Kangro 2021, 25). The characters find pleasure in the physical aspects
of life: food, coffee, running, and sex, but they, like Õnnepalu's narrator, also
seem to be spectators of their life. Now the contrast is not only with the West
but also with the philistine fellow Estonians. The stance, though, is self-
ironic: we might be in an impasse, stuck in a crisis ordinariness of contem-
porary life, faced with the precarity of the cultural industry, but we are alive.
The past is gone, the present is here—and we know the future will be bleak.
We know that we inhabit a different temporality from the West, but this
gives us an advantage over those who still chase hopeful performatives.

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Instead of Berlant's cruel optimism, we get something that could be called cruel pessimism, which allows the characters to confront the present and survive.

## Conclusion

The two texts highlight Eastern Europeans' temporal delay in their own and Western eyes. However, this temporal dislocation affords a critical distance from the West. Eastern Europeans drift in time and, in a way, remain in multiple times. When we compare the stance of Õnnepalu and Kangro, we see that this temporal dislocation has ceased to be a source of anguish and has, instead, become almost a privilege. Kangro's characters know one can never catch up. This realization creates a flat affect, a numbed irony that recognizes the optimistic cruelty of contemporary neoliberal life.

The two Estonian writers engage particularly with Eastern European affects and experiences of time. The times represented are not ordinary in either case, as significant historical events have stormed through the narratives, leaving the characters to engage with the aftermath. This singularity allows the two authors to focus on minor affects created by being delayed in time. The world may be ending, but at least there are no illusions, and one can still, at least, enjoy lived experience, however transitory. This attitude creates contradictory affects—not just flatness and resignation but also a joy of how our bodies are attuned to the world, where we can catch affects from the surfaces of other bodies and the pages of books. These feelings are not always cozy and safe. They chafe and abrade, but they may also evoke strange intimacies with others.

The Eastern Europeans of these texts are like the inconvenient others that Berlant (2022) describes. Their discrepant awareness makes them distinct from the putatively unified postmaterialist Western self to remind it of the illusory nature of many of its promises. They feel backward, but this temporal dislocation allows them to recognize the slow violence that has transformed Eastern European life and left the many promises of happiness unfulfilled. Eastern Europeans accepted Western promises in the 1990s but are increasingly aware of the limited effects of their patient mimicry. Recent history reminds us that Eastern Europe remains not so much an Other to the West, like during the Cold War, as an ambivalent third space between the dominant and the subaltern. It is also a space with an ambiguous temporality, lagging behind the past and out of a future. However, this unbelonging creates a slowing of time that permits a critique of the optimistic cruelty of the neoliberal end of history and universalized approaches to affects. We feel historical in culturally specific ways, especially in extraordinary times.

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# Marta Maliszewska[*]

# Epistemic Injustice and the Body in Photography[1]

Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of the viewers of photographs of violence. The main argument is that due to the characteristic of the medium, both the photographer and the photographed subjects shape the image. The customary overlooking of the photographed subjects' agency is conceptualized as epistemic injustice first committed by the photographer and then by the viewer. A method of interpreting war photographs influenced by critical fabulation and listening to images is proposed to overcome it.

Keywords

War Photography, Epistemic Injustice, Somaesthetics, Critical Fabulation, Listening to Images

## Flood of (War) Images

From its peak during the Vietnam War (Sontag 2004, 46), war photography has never stopped haunting us. Horrifying pictures of conflicts worldwide are broadcasted all over the news in TV, posted on the Internet, or published in the press.[2] However, the recent events in Ukraine—especially in the con-

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[2] See: Mirzoeff 2016.
Even though many conflicts around the world are broadcasted nowadays, this clearly does not mean that European or American media attention is distributed evenly. This is also true about the war in Ukraine that at least in Eastern Europe—that feels threatened by Russia aggression—is one of the main topics for several months while media in many other countries present it more as one of many challenging issues.

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text of Eastern Europe, which is known to me from first-hand experience—again raised the ethical and political importance of those photographs. After the photographs of the Bucha massacre were revealed, many wondered how such images could even be approached.[3] By recognizing the seriousness of the problem, this paper does not attempt to give a definite answer to those questions. It is seen as an ongoing project and a joint effort to get closer to the answer step by step. After all, as is shown in this paper, not looking at or ignoring photographs of violence is unconvincing from an ethical point of view.[4]

Even though every case of the photography of violence is different due to its particular context, issues concerning the documentation of atrocities have been raised for many years, especially by those researching colonial or Holocaust archives. Authoritarian regimes often leave behind many files, among them photographs (Maliszewska 2022). The following generation faces doubts as to how to read those archives and give justice to the dead. Furthermore, today—in the era of photographs immediately spreading around the globe via social media—questions about viewers' attitudes to the photography of violence seem even more pressing. Those issues are raised, among others, from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. This paper focuses on how the theory of epistemic injustice and the two methods of interpreting—"listening to images" and "critical fabulation"—can be applied to at least some cases of violent photography to better understand the role of its viewers.

This paper claims that two moments of epistemic injustice in photography can be distinguished: first, when a photographer tries to impose their perspective on the photographed subjects in the act of photographing, and second when the viewer focuses on interpreting, even if critically, the photographer's perspective only. In the second case, the viewer unconsciously becomes the perpetrator of epistemic injustice. Two methods of interpreting photographs can be referenced: "listening to images" and "critical fabula-

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[3] After Jacques Rancière (2009a), those images can be called "naked" as they "intent solely on witnessing" (26).

[4] In the paper I use the term "photography of violence" to refer to both amateur and professional documentary (not staged) photographs depicting human victims of organized state violence. Even though I agree that this term can be understood in a broader sense or that it is not always possible to tell if a photograph shows a victim of violence (and not, for example, a victim of a natural catastrophe) or if it is not staged (and we can always make a mistake in judgment), for the clarity of this paper I have decided not to focus on those issues.

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tion" to overcome this and preserve the perspective of the photographed subject. In this process, the corporeal reactions of the viewer become the critical element, which helps to elicit the photographed subject's testimonies.

## Two Acts of Testimonial Injustice in Photography

Next to hermeneutical injustice, testimonial injustice is a form of epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker (2003), who first described this phenomenon, writes that testimonial injustice "occurs when prejudice on the part of the hearer leads to the speaker receiving less credibility than he or she deserves" (154).[5] This form of injustice is often illustrated by the history of the racist attitude to Black witnesses during juridical trials in the XIX century in the US—their voices were seen as much less reliable, and several Black witnesses had to testify in order to overcome a testimony of a single white person. In the case of testimonial injustice, "an act of telling someone something" (Wanderere 2017, 28) takes place. This "something"—the message that can be called a testimony—is ignored by the Hearer in the act of injustice.

When the communicative situation described by Fricker is compared to photography, one must return to an often-referenced relation between the photographer, the viewer, and the photographed subject (Barthes 1984, 9). This triangle is usually described in critical analysis as an uneven power structure, especially in the case of the photographer–photographed subject relations. Susan Sontag (2005, 3-5) goes as far as to describe photography as an act of imposing the photographer's intentions on the reality of the photographed. Following this reasoning, it can be said that the first episode of testimonial injustice might occur if the photographer attributes little credibility to the photographed subject—to stories they might want to present in the picture—instead dictating their own perspective. The photographer's domination may be implemented in a more or less intentional manner. Thus, some stylistic devices help the photographer minimize the potential testimony of the photographed subject by strict formal outlines, as in the case of mugshots, that blur individual portraits in masses of similarly looking faces with the same expression. Another device, which gives the photographer authoritative power over the image and photographed individuals, is fram-

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[5] Jeremy Wanderer (2017) summarizes Fricker's definition: "[...] testimonial injustice occurs when, following an act of telling someone something, a Speaker is accorded insufficient credibility by a Hearer due to a prejudicial stereotype held by Hearer" (28).

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ing—deciding who and how they will be captured.[6] A famous case of injustice in photography exemplifying these analyses is the one of XIX century police criminal archives, which used mugshot photography not only to identify photographed people but also to demonstrate the existence of a specific physiognomic type of criminal (Sekula 1986). Many of those photographed probably had their own stories—histories about suffering and injustice in societies that equate poverty and crime. However, those testimonies are forgotten in police archives. Instead, police photographers took pictures of incarcerated people not to allow them to voice their experiences but to show—by a standardized aesthetic of those photographs—that they are all the same, that photographed subjects represent a particular type predestinating them to become criminals. Even though it is an extreme example, there is the potential for violence and injustice in every act of taking a picture. Those issues seem even more pressing in photographing violence, where photographs of victims' bodies are often one of the few things—or even the only ones—that are left.

It might seem tempting to conclude at this point that the photography of violence is unethical. Thus, the burden of looking at those photographs could be lifted. One could turn off the screen every time new photos of Russian military atrocities appear—furthermore, it could be done with a wholehearted conviction of moral superiority. However, what is missed at that point is that those photographs are not shocking and unacceptable *per se*—the reality that exists behind them is the one that will not disappear when one stops looking.[7]

Following the claim, even if one agrees that an uneven power distribution shapes the relations in photography, it does not mean that the photographed subjects have no impact on the image; seeing photographs as only a photographer's vision does not fully resolve those issues. To better understand the influence of the photographed subjects, one must focus on the potential of their bodies to shape meanings.[8]

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[6] Judith Butler (2009), in their analyses of Abu Ghraib photographs, proposes the strategy of "re-framing"—always asking what is outside of the frame—to overcome the photographer's power of framing.

[7] W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) writes: "Perhaps the most obvious problem is that the critical exposure and demolition of the nefarious power of images is both easy and ineffectual. Pictures are popular political antagonists because one can take a tough stand on them, and yet, at the end of the day, everything remains pretty much the same" (33).

[8] This approach to aesthetics is highly influenced by the feminist perspective that focuses on embodied experience, presented by Jane Gallop in her often-referenced book *Thinking Through the Body* (1990).

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Recognizing this potential requires a different understanding of what photography is. Instead of perceiving it as some abstract code of references intended by the photographer, one must look at it through the lens of so-maesthetics:[9] an embodied praxis (Schuterman 2012). This perspective lets us realize that meaning in photography is created not by the photographer but in a space between the photographer and the photographed subject's bodies, even if this space is often marked by violence and uneven power structures. However—as Ariella Azoulay (2015) and Christopher Pinney (2015) notice—as long as the photographed subjects are separate living human beings, there is always some freedom in the act of posing in front of the camera. Nevertheless, a photographer cannot fully control their minds and bodies. Even in the extreme case of mugshots, the photographer cannot shape the photographed subjects' gaze. This gaze could potentially tell viewers a story about suffering.

The fact that the photographer may impose a variety of disciplinary techniques on the photographed subjects' bodies does not mean that their power over the photographed subjects or the image is omnipotent. Following Vilém Flusser (1984, 21-32), it might be said that what differentiates photography from other, more traditional media of representation is that in photography, the author does not have complete control over the image. They cannot control what is happening inside the camera—that photography represents the reality in front of a lens of a camera and not the author's impression of it (even though it does not mean that one can forget about the photographers' influence via framing or other stylistic devices). There is always hope—even if it is against the photographer's intention—for saving the photographed subject's testimony in the photograph.

Thus, the photographed subjects may perform acts of micro-resistance that the photographer misses. Body postures, hand gestures, facial expressions, or gazes might be seen as hidden messages.[10] One can also look for

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[9] "Somaesthetics" is a term coined by Richard Schusterman (2006), who writes: "Somaesthetics, roughly defined, concern the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning. As an ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, it aims to enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body but also our lived somatic experience and performance; it seeks to enhance the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our movement contribute and from which they also draw their energies and significance" (2). In his analyses of art practices Schusterman focuses on their corporeal dimension, often overlooked in traditional understanding of aesthetics.

[10] Fathima Tobing-Rony (1996), in her research on first ethnographic documentaries, applies the strategy that consists of carefully analyzing the bodies of photographed sub-

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marks that are present in and on bodies. Acts of violence are embodied experiences that often leave some characteristics and more or less visible scars. Regardless of the perpetrator's and even the victim's will, the body records the history of violence. Those intentional and unintentional signs may preserve the traces of victims' stories and often remain the only testimony of their suffering.

However, I claim that due to our prejudicial aesthetic stereotypes, these testimonies receive less credibility than they deserve. The first stereotype, common even in critical analyses of war photography, overestimates the photographer's power and sees the photograph entirely commanded to their will. Our habit of reading photography as an expression of its author's intention makes us forget the agency of the photographed subjects and, as a result, makes us perpetrators of testimonial injustice. The other stereotype is rooted in underestimating the significance of both images and corporeal experience, which presents them as less valuable and unreliable than verbal reports (Rancière 2009b).

In extreme cases, as José Medina (2017) warns, epistemic injustice—which we, as photography viewers, also often commit—can lead even to "epistemic death." It is a social annihilation of voices and perspectives that cannot be recognized anymore by the rest of society.[11] We are obliged to resist it as witnesses of epistemic injustice and even more as its perpetrators. This resistance could teach us not only to notice other perspectives but also help us to reshape society less unjustly: "A well communicated social body is needed so that all can share experiences, compare and contrast perspectives, learn about the insights and limitations of differently situated social gazes, and engage in the difficult process of social learning across differences" (Medina 2013, 22). Photography can become a tool for social learning. By overcoming our prejudices and trying to look at photographs differently, we can also learn how to benefit from the epistemic contribution of victims. It shows that giving justice to the photographed subjects does not end with a better understanding of images but extends to—at least—trying to better understand the reality behind it to counter our perspectives with victims' testimonies.

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jects. It helps her to overcome the colonial perspective of their authors and use these materials to elicit marginalized testimonies of colonial victims.

[11] While writing about 'epistemic death' Medina (2017) focuses on consequences of hermeneutical injustice. However, I believe this term describes well also extreme cases of testimonial injustice even if in this context it gains slightly different meaning.

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The photography of violence poses a challenge to its viewers. However, in the collective learning process, they might overcome it and gain access to other perspectives.[12] This effort must be undertaken if they want to reject the perpetrators' gazes. Furthermore—if one agrees with what has been presented in this paragraph, that photography may save testimonies and not only illustrate the news—it seems necessary.

## Listening to Images and Critical Fabulation in the Photography of Violence

Notwithstanding, the question emerges: how is that done? As it was emphasized at the beginning of the text, providing an exact remedy to those issues is not the aim. Instead, two existing theories of aesthetic interpretation, which might be helpful to understand better the task of viewers facing the photography of violence, can be referenced. The first, formulated by Tina Campt (2017), accents the significance of affective and corporeal experience in approaching photography. She studies identification photographs of Black people living in a diaspora to see how those photographs may save the memory of this community. To elicit this memory, she proposes the "listening to images" method. It focuses on listening to "a quiet hum" of photographs which is a multisensorial experience.[13] The second approach, "critical fabulation," proposed by Saidiya Hartman (2008), emphasizes the role of imagination in interpreting. In her archives research, Hartman looks for traces of colonial victims and creates stories about their possible fates. This creation is an ongoing process that can never reach a definite answer on what this person's life looked like, but rather, it can give them more than a mention in the documents of perpetrators. Even though both researchers focus on the (post)colonial context, I propose extending their methods of interpreting other oppression documents to war photography.

To overcome the photographer's point of view, one must learn to look at photographs from the perspective that elicits testimonies that had to be hard to notice to survive. Campt describes this kind of image as quiet—the photographed subjects do not shout their messages, but they are easily drowned

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[12] This strategy is related to how Jacques Rancière (2004) understands the relation between aesthetics and politics when he writes that art practices are "'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationship they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility" (13).

[13] "They [photographs] are accessible instead at the haptic frequency of vibration, like the vibrato of a hum felt more in the throat than in the ear" (Campt 2017, 8).

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out by a photographer or even by a viewer. Quiet images ask to be listened to instead of read or looked at—the gut impulses of viewers might help save the photographed subjects' hidden messages:

> What is the frequency of these images? Quiet. A quiet hum full of reverb and vibrato. Not always perceptible to the human ear, we feel it more in the throat. To look at these images is to see genre and form. To look at them is to look through their sitters and see function and format, to 'oversee' them [...]. To listen to them is to be attuned to their unsayable truths, to perceive their quiet frequencies of possibility (Campt 2017, 45).

This approach to photography focuses not on what can be seen while looking at images but rather on what can be felt or heard. Listening to images is not based on verbal communication but on corporeal reactions. Campt contrasts "listening" with "seeing"—while the first approach emphasizes the viewer's affects, the other proposes a more analytical understanding of interpretation. Seeing images does not consider the viewer's response but requires systematic analyses and classification. It poses questions about already coined categories we can use to describe an image. This dichotomy is similar to Roland Barthes's division between "studium" and "punctum." Studium is what one perceives due to their knowledge or a cultural context that they are part of (Barthes 1984, 25). Punctum, on the other hand, is sudden and unintentional—it "break[s] (or punctuates) the *studium*" (26). It is —as Barthes writes—"[...] this element which rises from the scene, shoots [out] of it like an arrow and pierces me" (26). To see an image means to analyze its studium. It is an interpretation based on recognizing the sociopolitical or aesthetic context. Listening in a different way emphasizes the viewer's affective reactions. They start with punctum, which is experienced in an intimate relationship between the viewer and the photograph. What differentiates Campt from Barthes is that, for her, those intuitions are not only mental but corporeal as well—punctum is what we can "feel in the throat."

However, those feelings cannot obscure what the photographed subjects might want to tell us. Imposing our position on their experiences would be an act of testimonial injustice. This feeling requires attuning to—as Campt puts it—"unsayable truths" of those images and those represented in them. Even if—as it often happens in the case of photography of violence—those truths might be far beyond our imagination. This effort to understand— to even  f e e l—the perspective of others is a part of the "difficult process of social learning across differences."

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This gut feeling might offer an impulse for a critical interpretation of the image for questions about power structures that represent violence and people in the photograph. Who are they? The short answer is—victims. However, this answer is deeply unsatisfying as well. This short answer reduces their lives to one position imposed on them by the perpetrators. Instead, one could ask: What stories might they want to tell? What are the overlooked stories they tell through a photograph?

Starting with this question again cannot lead to a definitive answer. It instead marks the beginning of an ongoing hermeneutical process that combines archival research with Hartman's method (2008) "critical fabulation." She explains it as:

> Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method [...]. The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resist being said [...] It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have or could have been (12).

Critical fabulation aims to provide a story or rather multiple possible stories to those who are reduced to being only victims—stories that combine not only the experience of violence but also what is outside of it, beyond the perpetrators' control. In order to start writing these stories, the viewer needs some clue—one name or a record mentioned in an archive surrounded by silence. Alternatively, one photograph appearing only for a short moment in the news to never come back (or otherwise be published so many times that it loses its significance). The viewer's task is to pluck this photograph up from a never-ending flood of images and carefully examine it[14] to fill and feel those gaps repeatedly. In this process, the viewer experiencing the photographed subjects' hum becomes a medium and conveys victims' testimonies using their living bodies. Hence, another story can begin, a story about the sufferings of the victims and (im)possible joys that would make them visible for a time longer than only the moment of their disappearance.

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[14] Georges Didi-Huberman (2012) applies the strategy of careful examination in his attempt to analyze four photographs taken by Sonderkommando in Auschwitz.

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### Conclusion

To understand the ethical and political potential of war photography, one must look at it from a different perspective—see it not as a final set of signs arranged by the photographer but as a performative process. This other way of conceptualizing photography may help us avoid becoming a perpetrator of epistemic violence. Valuing the agency of photographed subjects allows us to see photographs as forms of testimony.

The eliciting of those testimonies must consider the photographed subjects' bodies and the viewer's bodies. Images can cause corporeal reactions in the viewer, which may become an essential stimulus for interpretation. Attuning to those gut feelings may help in developing the process of critical fabulation. It may take the form of listening to the subject's body through the viewer's body—opening for corporeal affects and emerging from similarities and otherness between the photographed subject and the viewer. What happens at the intersection of the familiar and unfamiliar contributes to challenging the viewer's perspective of the testimonies of the victims. It may bring us closer to the "well-communicated social body."

The next time we see the photographs from the war in Ukraine—often published in mass by media without any second thoughts about their significance (and in a manner that makes them interchangeable), we might stop for a moment. We should look for a while and ask ourselves, "what stories do t h e s e people in t h i s photograph want to tell?" We will never know for sure; however, attuning to our affective reactions and taking them as another way of understanding photographs may help us start an ongoing listening process.

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