edited by
Katarzyna Więckowska, Anna M. Kola
& Michał Bomastyk

Discourses of Exclusion

Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices

edited by
Katarzyna Więckowska, Anna M. Kola and Michał Bomastyk

Toruń 2024

Anthology published in Avant Anthology series

Publisher of the series: Avant Project

Co-publisher of the anthology:
Institute of Philosophy of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

Address of the Editorial Office:
pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, room 203
20-031 Lublin, Poland

Number of pages: 230

Cover design by Janusz Matysiak

DOI 10.26913/ava4202401

ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6

Contents

Introduction

1. Katarzyna Więckowska, Anna Maria Kola & Michał Bomastyk: Discourses of Exclusion: Suppression, Silencing, and Inclusion

Part I. The Global and the Local

2. Aleksandra Ancite-Jepifánova: Beyond the "Hybrid Attack" Paradigm: EU-Belarus Border Crisis and the Erosion of Asylum-Seeker Rights in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

3. Anna Maria Karczewska: Medellín: Narratives of Trauma and Exclusion in the Works of Colombian Journalists

4. Joanna Ziemna: Self-Creation of Other-Than-Human Identities: A Netnographic Analysis of Identity Labels in the Alterhuman Community on Tumblr

5. Mateusz Piekarski: Can a Signboard Be Exclusionary? A Study of Linguistic Landscape in the Commercial Center of Poznań

Part II. Exclusion and Othering in Literary Works and Theory

6. Gülşah Göçmen: Exploring Environmental Ethics: From Exclusion of More-than-Human Beings Towards a New Materialist Paradigm

7. Katarzyna Ojrzyńska: Discourses of Human Disqualification: The Story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar on Screen and Stage

8. Joanna Antoniak: Accepting Invisibility? Experiences of Exclusion in Grace Lau's Poetry

9. Julian Rakowski: "They Too Will Be Gone and New": Colonial Otherness in the Interplay between Humanity and Elfdom in Andrzej Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World"

10. Agata Rupińska: Prettier Faces, Better Lives? The Impact of South Korean Facial Beauty Standards and Plastic Surgery on Women's Lives in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*

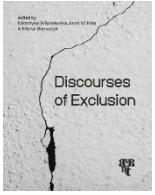
Part III. Healthcare and Marginalization

11. Agnieszka Żabińska: Social Exclusion of Mothers of Children on the Autism Spectrum as Presented in Popular Publications

12. Magdalena Grenda: Representation of Illness, Disability, and Ageing in Visual Arts, Dance, and Theatre as a Way of Combating Social Exclusion

13. Anna Baruch: A Study of the Reasons of the Social Exclusion of Infertile Couples in Poland

14. Kosma Kołodziej: Is Health Care an Example of Inclusiveness or a Space of General Exclusion?



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Discourses of Exclusion: Suppression, Silencing, and Inclusion

Katarzyna Więckowska[1*], **Anna Maria Kola**[1**] & **Michał Bomastyk**[1***]
[1]Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
[*]klew@umk.pl (corresponding author) [**]amkola@umk.pl [**]mbom@umk.pl

Accepted and published Online First 2024-12-31.

Abstract

The article provides an introduction to the anthology devoted to studying theories and practices of discourses of exclusion. Framing the discussion by references to Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality and Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the relations between discourse and power, the essay stresses the multiple forms of exclusion and entangled power differentials that determine a person's identity and social status and argues for the need to employ an interdisciplinary perspective. The overview of the issues analyzed in the anthology is guided by the recognition of the complex links between theory and practice and the awareness that exclusions reinforce precarity and dismantle networks of support.

Keywords: social exclusion, marginalization, normativity, discourse, inclusion, othering

> The way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion (Crenshaw quoted in Sicenica, 2023, p. 341).
>
> [W]e must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one […]. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process by which discourse can be both an instrument […] of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 1978, pp. 100-101).

Exclusion, as Kimberlé Crenshaw claims, can take multiple forms and can intersect with other kinds of disempowerment; discourses of exclusion, according to Michel Foucault, are unstable instruments of power that can give rise to strategies of resistance and opposition. Crenshaw's and Foucault's ideas illustrate

the fact that discourses and practices of exclusion comprise manifold "sociocultural power differentials and normativities" that determine "the construction of subjectivities" (Lykke, 2010, p. 71) and that they change in reaction to the transforming historical conditions. Recent debates on social exclusion have stressed the link between exclusion and various crises—social, political, health, financial, and military—that strongly affect individuals and communities and are simultaneously local and global. They have also shown that the excluded is an unstable category, prone to constant changes and re-definitions, differently re-constituted in varying social, political, and cultural contexts. Ultimately, discourses of exclusion establish "the normative conditions for the production of the subject" (Butler, 2009, p. 4) and determine not only who is recognized as human but also who deserves humane treatment.

The articles collected in this anthology explore various discourses of exclusion, critique marginalizing and discriminatory practices, and outline the possibilities of constructing different, more inclusive narratives and policies. All the texts address a crisis and examine the individual, systemic, institutional, and relational reactions to it. The anthology comprises three sections, each representing a different perspective and research field and reflecting the authors' diverse interests and institutional backgrounds. Additionally, in line with the inclusive policy of the issue, each section features articles by young scholars. The first part, titled "The Global and the Local," includes essays dealing with restrictions on movement across national borders and the rise of violence in urban spaces as well as articles on the formation of non-human identities on Tumblr and the linguistic exclusion in the city of Poznań. The second section, "Exclusion and Othering in Literary Works and Theory," starts with the study of the development of environmental ethics, followed by articles analyzing literary works dealing with various forms of exclusion and processes of othering. The final part is dedicated to "Healthcare and Marginalization" and contains texts that address the problems of exclusion and stigmatization faced by various disadvantaged groups.

The articles in the first section, "The Global and the Local," focus on issues experienced worldwide that significantly influence and are influenced by global and local policies. In "Beyond the 'Hybrid Attack' Paradigm: EU-Belarus Border Crisis and the Erosion of Asylum-Seeker Rights in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland," Aleksandra Ancite-Jepifánova employs a comparative socio-legal perspective to discuss the situation of non-EU nationals crossing from Belarus and the EU-level response to the crisis. Based on interviews with protection seekers, NGO representatives, volunteers and legal practitioners involved in the crisis, Ancite-Jepifánova argues that the EU's border with Belarus has become "an exclusion zone," where people on the move fall victim "to various types of inhu-man and degrading treatment." The article negatively assesses the instrumentalization of migration and the restrictions on asylum rights and provides a valuable commentary on what Reece Jones calls "the fundamental

conflict of mo-dernity," that is, "allowing 'good' movements while preventing 'bad movements" (2017, p. 166).

Anna Maria Karczewska's "Medellín: Narratives of Trauma and Exclusion in the Works of Colombian Journalists" examines the records of spatial, social, and cultural separation of the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods in the second-largest city in Colombia. The three reportage books discussed in the article document the exclusion, insecurity and violence that result from the activities of youth gangs, narco business, and the state. By giving account of the suffering experienced by the inhabitants, these books serve as secondary witnesses to their trauma and deliver the call for justice, reparation, and reconstruction. Ultimately, as Karczewska argues, telling the story of the inhabitants of Medellín should be seen as "a political and therapeutic act" as well as "a claim to power" that transforms the archives of public memory and initiates processes of community formation.

Joanna Ziemna's study of the experiences of exclusion focuses on the alterhuman community on Tumblr. As an alternative to the socially accepted notions of humanity, alterhumanity refers to the sense of not being human while having a human body and embraces a range of identities, including earthly animals, mythological beings, and immaterial ideas. Applying the non-participant observational netnographic approach to analyse self-creation acts by members of the globally scattered community, Ziemna discusses the alterhumans' experiences of exclusion and relates them to those of other social minorities.

The section finishes with Mateusz Piekarski's study of the linguistic landscape in the commercial centre of Poznań, Poland, which focuses on the exclusion caused by the lack of knowledge of the language used in signs of private establishments. The analysis of linguistic exclusion demonstrates the everyday effects of globalization and highlights generational differences and changing linguistic competencies.

The second part of the anthology, "Exclusion and Othering in Literary Works and Theory," comprises articles that describe recent developments in literary practice and theory and explore attempts to represent and speak for the groups excluded from the dominant discourse. Gülşah Göçmen's article examines the history of environmental ethics, highlighting the shift towards the inclusion of more-than-human beings in New Materialist approaches. Göçmen critiques the persistence of the anthropocentric orientation in environmental ethics and argues that the transgression of the traditional boundaries between human and animal, matter and discourse, or subject and object that characterizes New Materialism provides an excellent tool for radically questioning and destabilizing notions of human exceptionalism. The discussion of the key perspectives in environmental ethics documents the emergence of novel ways of thinking about the human and more-than-human world, exemplified by the work of Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, and Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino.

In "Discourses of Human Disqualification," Katarzyna Ojrzyńska discusses the portrayal of the first known victim of the Nazi programme of the extermination of people with disabilities in three contemporary texts: Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo's *Child K* (2014), Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag's *Kinder K* (2012), and Weronika Murek's *Feinweinblein* (2015). While the 21st-century texts use various representational strategies of monsterization, sublimation, and normalization to depict the body of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, they all invisibilize the disabled body-mind and ultimately, as Ojrzyńska argues, fail to evoke "the positive aesthetic potential of alternative forms of embodiment labelled as disability." The concluding discussion of the 2001 documentary *A World Without Bodies* points to a mode of representation that replaces strategies of exclusion and disqualification with what the Author proposes to call "aesthetics of human appreciation."

Joanna Antoniak's article continues the critique of dominant discourses and analyzes various kinds of exclusion in the poetry of the Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadian writer Grace Lau. Antoniak's reading of selected poems from Lau's debut collection, *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* (2021), focuses on the instances of exclusion experienced by the poet as a postcolonial subject, a queer subject, and a queer subject of colour and their influence on her identity. In the article, poetry becomes a mode of representation that allows the marginalized and excluded to tell their stories and those of their communities. By drawing attention to the processes of exclusion within the mainstream discourse of inclusion, Antoniak demonstrates how Lau's poetry presents the possibility of inclusion through marginalization and the creation of a community through "the shared experiences of exclusion."

The suppression of differences and the construction of norms through excluding others are the key concerns of Julian Rakowski's analysis of colonial otherness in Andrzej Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World" (1993). Situating Sapkowski's short story in the broad context of colonial violence, race studies, and genre development, Rakowski analyzes the processes of othering, colonial exclusion and monsterization in the relations between humans and elves. Examining the distribution of otherness and monstrosity in Sapkowski's work and the fantasy genre demonstrates that, as Rakowski claims, monsters "are born, but not out of mutation or magic: only by fear, hatred, and violence."

Agata Rupińska's article addresses the problems stemming from exclusionary beauty standards in her analysis of the influence of South Korean facial beauty norms and plastic surgery on women in Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*. Approaching beauty as a specific discourse of exclusion and inclusion, Rupińska discusses the complex relationships between beauty work, aesthetic labour, and social capital and questions the perception of beauty as a source of freedom.

The final part of the anthology, "Health care and exclusion," includes articles about the problems encountered by members of various disadvantaged and marginalized groups, such as parents of children with autism spectrum disorders, persons with disabilities and their caretakers, and people facing involuntary childlessness. By focusing on works that engage with issues of the body and illness, the texts highlight the role of literature, theatre, performance, and the visual arts in making the public conscious of and sensitive to medical problems (Bleakley, 2015, p. 41). Moreover, they fulfil the goals of medical humanities, which Alan Bleakley describes as the critical examination of "historically and culturally determined assumptions about the body and illness" in healthcare and medicine and the assessment of "how apprentice practitioners are socialized, gain and consolidate identities—or learn" (p. 43). Accordingly, Agnieszka Żabińska's article examines the social exclusion of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders and offers an analysis of increasingly popular biographies and autobiographies by the parents. These personal accounts, as Żabińska argues, may help raise public awareness about the problem and improve the situation. The text traces the development of the medical and social discourses that have contributed to the mothers' stigmatization and their social and individual exclusion and concludes with the call to create an inclusive space for the children with ASD and their families.

Magdalena Grenda's article explores the portrayal of illness, disability, and ageing in projects by Polish representatives of critical art and independent theatre from the late 20th century to the present. Grenda addresses the problem of exclusion of bodies deemed imperfect by consumer culture and demonstrates how art has subverted and opposed normative and discriminatory social practices. Her analysis of the works of Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, and Alicja Żebrowska, performances directed by Janusz Orlik and Adam Ziajski, and the monodrama *The Whole Life in Tracksuits* (2016) is based on the belief that contemporary art not only provides a critical commentary on the ongoing exclusionary practices and raises public awareness but can also lead to action and inclusive change.

Anna Baruch's study of the reasons for the social exclusion of infertile couples in Poland discusses the key factors influencing the marginalization of this group, including the discrediting opinions expressed in public discourse and the media, frequently turning into ideological disputes, lack of educational programmes, and the passive attitude of the state. The article argues for the elimination of educational exclusion and ideological bias, the creation of support networks for persons struggling with unintentional childlessness, and the development of state-funded programmes to deal with reproductive health problems.

The exclusion of disadvantaged groups and minorities in the healthcare system is intricately related to other kinds of exclusionary and discriminatory behaviours discussed in the anthology. Kosma Kołodziej's article assesses the global

state of research about the situation of persons with a substance abuse disorder, seniors, people with HIV or AIDS, immigrants, refugees, and people from the LGBT community to argue that the lack of such studies in Poland makes it hard to promote and implement positive social inclusion in health care. Kołodziej's discussion demonstrates the persistence of inequalities in the healthcare system. Significantly, it highlights the need to guide healthcare professionals and managers on how to provide care to members of socially excluded groups.

The articles comprising the anthology have been written by participants of academic conferences organized from 2021 to 2024 by the Lab on Exclusion and Alienation Research (LEAR) at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, in cooperation with the NGO Institute for Prevention of Exclusions. The lab is a research project started in 2021, thanks to a grant from the IDUB Programme to support interdisciplinary research to identify and combat social exclusions. The texts gathered in this anthology edited by the lab members show that adopting such a perspective helps explore various forms and spaces of exclusion and study diverse practices and ways of thinking that produce inequalities but may also redress them. The articles examine theoretical and practical dimensions of exclusion: real-life contexts and experiences and conceptual systems—schemes, norms, and relations that generate and resist exclusionary discourses. Most importantly, they show how practices and discourses of exclusion and inclusion function "to *give face* and to *efface*" (Butler, 2009, p. 77).

Funding

Project 4101 000000 67 in Inter Disciplinas Excellentia Programme of Excellence Initiative—Research University at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

References

Bleakley, A. (2015). *Medical Humanities and Medical Education: How the Medical Humanities Can Shape Better Doctors*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso.

Foucault, M. (1978). The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge. (R. Hurley, trans.). Penguin.

Jones, R. (2017). *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. Verso.

Lykke, N. (2010). *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. Routledge.

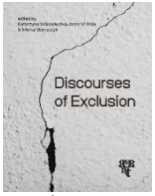
Sicenica, A. M. (2023). Increasing Representation: Expanding Intersectional Claims in Employment Discrimination, *Duquesne Law Review 61*(2), 341-364. https://ds-c.duq.edu/dlr/vol61/iss2/9

Katarzyna Więckowska – Associate Professor in the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland, and member of the Lab for Exclusion and Alienation Research (LEAR). Her research interests include environmental criticism, critical studies on men and masculinities, feminist criticism, discourses of exclusion, and contemporary Anglophone literature. She is the author of *Spectres of Men: Masculinity, Crisis, and British Literature* (2014) and *On Alterity: A Study of Monstrosity and Otherness* (2008), editor of *The Gothic: Studies in History, Identity and Space* (2020), and co-editor of several themed issues of academic journals. Her most recent work focuses on climate change and climate witnessing, post-anthropocentric ethics of care, and displacement.

Anna Maria Kola – PhD, Assistant Professor in the Institute of Educational Sciences at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Nicolaus Copernicus University. She holds an MA in sociology and Polish philology and is a certified speech therapist and teacher of the Polish language for foreigners. She is Deputy Dean of Education at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, member of the Lab for Exclusion and Alienation Research (LEAR), member of the Polish Accreditation Committee (2016-2023), and expert in the working team of the European Commission on micro-credentials. Her research interests are interdisciplinary but mainly concern the sociology of education (higher education) and social work in the context of global transformations embedded in the broad context of exclusion, including the exclusion of women. Researcher of elite universities worldwide (USA, England, China). She is a promoter and initiator of many social projects in the third sector, including projects strengthening women's empowerment.

Michał Bomastyk – Doctor of Humanities, philosopher, president of the Institute for Prevention of Exclusions Foundation, member of the Lab for Exclusion and Alienation Research (LEAR), and an employee of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion consultant, equity educator, and youth worker. He has conducted lectures and workshops for young people and training sessions for youth workers on discrimination, stereotypes, exclusion, and human rights. He is a graduate of the School of Leaders of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and the initiator of Poland's first helpline for men by the Institute for Prevention of Exclusions, providing psychological support for men in mental health crises. He is a coordinator of European projects such as Equality University and Re-Thinking Masculinity in Europe, dedicated to building an inclusive and open society. Participant in the European seminar *Let's Talk About (Anti)Racism* in Bucharest and a youth work laboratory in Milan. Member of the Gender Equality Plan Team at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and an expert involved in creating a similar document at the Tarnów Academy. He is member of the Local Ethics Committee

for Animal Experiments supervised by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Michał also coordinates the NCU Equality Counseling Center. He has completed postgraduate studies in gender studies and pedagogical preparation.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Beyond the "Hybrid Attack" Paradigm: EU-Belarus Border Crisis and the Erosion of Asylum-Seeker Rights in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

Aleksandra Ancite-Jepifánova
Central European University, Budapest
Refugee Law Initiative, University of London
Ancite-JepifanovaA@ceu.edu

Received 2024-06-27; accepted 2024-11-04; published Online First 2024-11-14.

Abstract

While in the recent years violations of asylum-seeker rights have been increasingly documented in EU Member States, the crisis at the EU-Belarus border has opened up a whole new chapter in this area. In response to the perceived migrant instrumentalisation by the Belarusian regime, several Member States—Latvia, Lithuania and Poland—have openly introduced long-term, far-reaching and blanket legislative measures that severely restricted the right to seek asylum and formalised pushbacks—contrary to their obligations under EU law and international refugee and human rights law. This paper approaches the topic from a comparative socio-legal perspective. Apart from a legal analysis of the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish domestic measures, it is based on interviews with non-EU nationals affected, as well as NGO representatives, volunteers and legal practitioners who have been providing legal and humanitarian assistance to people crossing from Belarus. The paper, first, offers an overview of Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish responses to the events at the border and looks at how the relevant measures affect the non-EU nationals involved. Second, it engages with the migrant instrumentalisation paradigm, relied on by the governments to derogate from EU and international legal framework, and explores the EU-level response to the crisis. This study argues that EU's border with Belarus has *de facto* become an exclusion zone where protection seekers are deprived of their right to claim asylum and continuously exposed to various types of inhuman and degrading treatment. It also demonstrates that the migrant instrumentalisation concept is problematic on multiple levels and does not correspond to the realities on the ground.

Keywords: EU-Belarus border crisis, Poland-Belarus border, Lithuania-Belarus border, Latvia-Belarus border, pushbacks, border violence, asylum, refugees, migrant instrumentalisation, hybrid attack

> *The Latvians used to take us to the tent for the night and bring us back to the forest at 4 or 5am. Sometimes they forced us to cross the border through the river. We cried and pleaded, "Please, we are women and cannot swim." The water was up to my chest but it did not matter to them. It was snowing already.*
>
> *The men were regularly taken out of the tent, beaten up and hit with electro-shock. We could not do anything; we cried and waited for the men to return. Sometimes they were beating them for several minutes, sometimes it lasted for 30 minutes or one hour. Those who hit them were commandos in masks and dark uniforms.*
>
> [Shirin,[1] an Iraqi national, spent nearly four months in the forest at the Latvia-Belarus border (11 August—late November 2021) and was returned to the Kurdistan region of Iraq in December 2021 without her asylum claim being registered.]

1. Introduction

It was August 2021 when Yousif, an Iraqi national of Yazidi origin, travelled to the Belarus border with Latvia to apply for international protection in the EU. Little did he know at the time that he would spend the following seven months in the forest—being moved back and forth by Latvian and Belarusian forces only to be ultimately returned back to Iraq without his asylum claim having even been registered.

Yousif is one of the non-EU nationals who have become target of the Latvian policy, adopted amid the so-called EU-Belarus border crisis. Its origins date back to summer 2021 when Belarus relaxed its visa regime for nationals of Middle Eastern and African countries and, in cooperation with local travel agents, started coordinating their travel to Minsk (see, e.g., Bruneau et al., 2021; Hebel & Reuter, 2021). The Belarusian authorities also stopped preventing irregular border crossings into the EU and, as widely documented, frequently facilitated such practices or, in some cases, even forced non-EU nationals to cross the border (see, e.g., Amnesty International, 2021).

[1] For ethical and security reasons, all names of research participants, including NGO representatives, humanitarian aid workers and non-EU nationals who have attempted to enter the EU from Belarus, have been changed to protect their identity.

In EU Member States bordering Belarus, the issue has been widely framed as a security threat, "migrant instrumentalisation" or "weaponisation" and a "hybrid attack" orchestrated by the Belarusian regime after the EU imposed sanctions on Minsk (for an analysis, see Baranowska et al., 2021; Szylko-Kwas, 2023). In response, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland took an unprecedented step and adopted long-term and far-reaching domestic legislative measures that severely restrict the right to seek asylum and authorise pushbacks—(forceful) returns to a third country (in that particular case, Belarus) without formal return procedures and individual assessment of asylum claims. Such measures openly breach EU and international human rights law, particularly where it concerns access to the asylum procedure and compliance with the *non-refoulement* principle, which prohibits returning someone to a state where they may face persecution and/or inhuman or degrading treatment.

Although the three Member States have reacted to the events at the Belarus border in a similar manner, their responses have not been identical. This paper briefly compares the domestic legislation introduced by the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish authorities and critically examines its compatibility with EU and international human rights law. Following that, it explores the practical implications of such measures for the non-EU nationals involved, particularly with regard to access to the asylum procedure and the prohibition of *refoulement*. Finally, it offers a brief insight into the EU-level response to the crisis and critically engages with the migrant instrumentalisation concept, relied on by national governments to derogate from fundamental rights.

2. Methodology

The paper approaches the topic from an interdisciplinary socio-legal perspective by combining an analysis of the relevant legislative measures with empirical research. To explore the situation in Poland and Lithuania, the author has undertaken research visits to the respective states where she conducted ~15 semi-structured interviews with local NGO representatives, humanitarian aid volunteers and legal practitioners, who have been providing assistance to non-EU nationals crossing from Belarus and/or engaged in documenting the events at the Belarus border. The visit to Poland took place in January 2023 and involved meetings with activists both in Warsaw and in the border area with Belarus. Interviews with Lithuanian activists and experts took place in Vilnius in March 2023.

In this context it is important to stress that in the beginning of the crisis, European public attention focused on the events in Poland and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Lithuania, whilst the situation in Latvia was largely neglected. Unlike in Poland or Lithuania, there have been no local NGOs, media or academics systematically documenting the events at Latvia's border with Belarus or

providing a comprehensive analysis of the issue from the perspective of Latvia's compliance with EU and international law. In addition, Latvian media have followed the government line of reasoning by exclusively portraying the issue as a security threat and a "hybrid attack" without publishing in-depth interviews with the non-EU nationals affected (for more details, see Ancite-Jepifánova, 2022).

To compare Polish and Lithuanian practices with those of the Latvian authorities, this paper builds upon an analysis of the empirical data the author has collected during her research into the situation at the Latvia-Belarus border. As part of her study, she has conducted in-depth interviews with over 40 non-EU nationals who had attempted to cross the Latvian border from Belarus during the autumn/winter of 2021/22, spent several weeks or months (in most extreme cases up to seven months) in the forest and were ultimately transferred to the closed detention centre for foreigners in the Latvian city of Daugavpils (Daugavpils Centre) on so-called "humanitarian grounds." From there, they were typically returned to their country of origin—in that particular case, Iraq—without their asylum applications being registered.

The author's informants were admitted in the Daugavpils centre at different times over the period from mid-August 2021 to March 2022. With several of those interviewed travelling with their family, the testimonies collected account for around 60 people; this, in turn, represents over one third of the individuals transferred to the Daugavpils Centre from the Belarus border on "humanitarian grounds" over this period. The first two informants were contacted with the help of a Latvian NGO, and the rest identified and approached using a snowball sampling method. Whilst the majority of the informants involve Iraqi nationals from the Kurdistan region of Iraq, including Yazidis, the people interviewed also include those coming from other parts of Iraq, as well as nationals of Afghanistan and Syria. Five of the interviewees are female and the rest male.

Despite multiple requests, the author was not provided access to the Daugavpils Centre during the winter of 2021/22. The Latvian authorities denied her requests first due to "security considerations" and later Covid-19 related quarantine measures allegedly introduced at the time. With a few exceptions, the interviews were conducted remotely via online video-calling software after the relevant persons had returned to Iraq.[2] The interviews took place between November 2021 and April 2022.

Several of the informants who could speak fluent English or Russian were interviewed in the respective languages. The rest of the interviews were conducted with the help of a Kurdish interpreter (Sorani and Kurmanji dialects).

[2] With the exception of persons who remained in the Daugavpils Centre until 6 April 2022 and were allowed to apply for asylum following the amendment of Latvian domestic legislation. See Section 3.1 for more details.

The collected testimonies are detailed, consistent and supported by various types of evidence, such as documents issued to the individuals involved at the Daugavpils Centre, International Organization for Migration (IOM) voluntary return declaration forms, Belarus visas and entry stamps, as well as photos showing the same people at both sides of the border at different times of the year.[3]

Image 1: The newly built border wall between Poland and Belarus, January 2023. Photo by Aleksandra Ancite-Jepifánova

3. Restricting the right to claim asylum and grounding pushbacks in domestic law

3.1. The initial stage of the crisis (summer 2021 – spring 2022)

The violations of asylum-seeker rights at the EU-Belarus border were documented long before 2021. Because of its geographical position, Belarus had become an important transit route for those travelling to the EU's border from the Caucasus, Central Asian countries, as well as from Afghanistan and, in certain

[3] The non-EU nationals interviewed explained that their phones were confiscated and the pictures were taken by the Latvian or Belarusian authorities who agreed to send them to their relatives to show they were alive.

periods, from Vietnam—most frequently, via Russia. People attempting to cross into the EU from Belarus also often included Russian nationals (particularly of Chechen origin) (see, e.g., Yakouchyk & Schmid, 2016). Whilst for many of them, the final destination were Western European countries, some attempted to claim asylum in the countries bordering Belarus. The Polish authorities, however, frequently ignored foreigners' claims for international protection and summarily returned them to Belarus even if they had expressed their wish to apply for asylum at official border crossing points, such as in Brest and Terespol (see, e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2017). Such practices, which intensified following the so-called 2015 refugee crisis, have been considered a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).[4]

Overall, however, the number of asylum-seekers in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland has traditionally been insignificant—both in absolute numbers and per capita (for an overview and trends, see European Parliament, 2022). For example, over the period from 2018 to 2020 Latvia registered less than 200 asylum applications claims per year (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs [Latvia], 2024). In 2020, 315 people applied for asylum in Lithuania, whereby less than 2,800 people submitted their claims in Poland, a country with a population of around 37 million (European Parliament, 2022). The situation changed in summer 2021 with the rising numbers of irregular border crossings from Belarus. In August 2021, the Latvian authorities registered 386 asylum applications, which was 2.5 times more than during the entire preceding year (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs [Latvia], 2021). As of mid-August 2021, the neighbouring Lithuania had apprehended (and subsequently detained) 4,110 non-EU nationals who had irregularly crossed into the country from Belarus (nearly 3,000 people were detained in July 2021 alone), compared to around 80 people apprehended at the particular border during the entire year of 2020 (ECRE, 2021, p. 2).

Although the upward trend was still very modest in absolute numbers, for all three governments it served as a rationale for introducing radical changes to domestic asylum legislation. Lithuania was the first country that adopted a set of measures effectively excluding foreign nationals irregularly crossing from Belarus from fundamental rights protection. On 2 July 2021, the Lithuanian authorities declared an "extraordinary situation" due to a "mass influx" of foreigners.[5] On 13 July, the Lithuanian parliament passed a resolution which stated that "the states hostile towards Lithuania are waging hybrid aggression"

[4] ECtHR, Judgment of 23 July 2020, *M.K.* and *Others v. Poland*, Applications nos. 40503/17, 42902/17 and 43643/17.

[5] The Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Nutarimas Nr.517 dėl valstybės lygio ekstremaliosios situacijos paskelbimo ir valstybės lygio ekstremaliosios situacijos operacijų vadovo paskyrimo [Resolution No 517 On the Declaration of the Extraordinary situation and the Appointment of the State Commander of National Emergency Operation] (2 July 2021, TAR, 03/07/2021, No 15235).

against the country by organising "flows of third-country nationals illegally crossing the state border [...] to destabilise the situation in Lithuania."[6] Following that, Lithuania amended its Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners. The changes provided that, in the event of a declared extraordinary situation due to a mass influx of aliens, in-country asylum applications could only be submitted if the person had lawfully entered Lithuania's territory. Other designated locations for lodging such claims were limited to official border crossing points and Lithuanian diplomatic missions or consular posts abroad.[7] Individuals entering Lithuania irregularly outside official border crossing points were accordingly deprived of the possibility to apply for asylum (for criticism see UNHCR, 2024).

The neighbouring Latvia went even further and introduced a blanket suspension of the right to claim asylum for anyone attempting to irregularly enter the country from Belarus, including at official border crossing points. On 10 August 2021, Latvia declared a state of emergency in all administrative territories along the country's approximately 170 km long border with Belarus. Under the relevant Cabinet of Ministers Order, the Latvian State Border Guard, the National Armed Forces and the State Police were authorised to order persons, who irregularly crossed from Belarus or attempted to do so, to immediately return to Belarus without formal return procedures.[8] In a "situation of extreme necessity," the Latvian authorities were also allowed to use "physical force and special means," including electric shock devices,[9] to ensure compliance.[10] The Order expressly provided that the structural units of the Latvian Border Guard and other authorities located in the territory where the state of emergency has been declared (including border crossing points) shall not register asylum claims,[11] rendering access to the asylum procedure impossible.

It was not until late March 2022 that the Latvian emergency legislation was eventually challenged before a domestic court which declared the Order incompatible with EU and international human rights law.[12] In early April 2022, the

[6] Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. Resolution on Countering Hybrid Aggression (13 July 2021, No XIV-505).

[7] Įstatymo "Dėl užsieniečių teisinės padėties" Nr. IX-2206 67 straipsnio pakeitimo įstatymas [Law Amending Article 67 of Law No IX-2206 on the Legal Status of Foreigners] (10 August 2021, No XIV-515).

[8] Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 518 "Par ārkārtējās situācijas izsludināšanu" [Cabinet Order No 518 Regarding the Declaration of Emergency Situation] (10 August 2021, Latvijas Vēstnesis, no. 152A).

[9] Ministru kabineta noteikumi Nr.55 "Noteikumi par speciālo līdzekļu veidiem un to lietošanas kārtību" [Cabinet Regulation No. 55 'Regulations Regarding the Types of Special Means and the Procedures for the Use Thereof by Police Officers and Border Guards'] (18 January 2011, Latvijas Vēstnesis, no. 15), §2.

[10] n 8, § 5.

[11] Ibid, § 6 (in the version in force until 5 April 2022).

[12] Administratīvā rajona tiesa, Rēzeknes tiesu nams [Administrative district court, Rēzekne courthouse], 14 March 2022, Case No. A42-01184-22/4.

Order was amended to allow foreign nationals to submit asylum applications at officially designated border crossing points and the Daugavpils Centre.[13] The amendments, however, did little to change the situation on the ground,[14] since intermediaries typically bring people to places far from official border crossing points and Belarusian border guards prevent foreign nationals without a valid visa, granted for entry in the EU, from accessing them. The same observations apply to the situation in Poland and Lithuania.

In Poland, pushback practices were grounded within two frameworks that operated in parallel. First, in August 2021 the Polish government amended the 2020 executive Regulation, introduced within the COVID-19 response framework. The Regulation suspended and restricted border traffic at selected border crossing points to Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and limited people allowed to cross the border to exceptional categories (such as Polish citizens, their family members and foreigners with a Polish residence permit). The amendments, which are still in force at the time of writing,[15] specified that those who do not belong to one of the listed groups but nevertheless crossed the border were to be returned to the border.[16] The amended Regulation did not foresee any exception for people seeking asylum or any formal procedures for return of irregularly staying third-country nationals, which are set out in the EU Returns Directive (2008/115/EC).

Second, Poland amended its Act on Foreigners to provide that, in case a foreign national is apprehended after crossing the border in an unauthorised manner, the Border Guard shall issue a decision ordering them to immediately leave Poland.[17] The relevant person would also be temporarily banned from re-entering Poland and other Schengen countries for the period between six months and three years. Moreover, even if a foreigner applies for asylum, the Head of the Office for Foreigners may refuse to consider the merits of their claim if the applicant had crossed the border irregularly. The only exception is foreseen for people coming directly from the territory of a country where their life or free-

[13] Ministru kabineta rīkojums Nr. 254 "Grozījums Ministru kabineta 2021. gada 10. augusta rīkojumā Nr. 518 "Par ārkārtējās situācijas izsludināšanu"" [Cabinet Regulation No. 254 'Amendments to the Cabinet Order No 518 of 10 August 2021 Regarding the Declaration of Emergency Situation] (6 April 2022, Latvijas Vēstnesis, no. 69).

[14] For a description of the situation of the ground, see Section 4.

[15] October 2024.

[16] Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie czasowego zawieszenia lub ograniczenia ruchu granicznego na określonych przejściach granicznych [Regulation of the Minister of the Interior and Administration amending the ordinance on the temporary suspension or limitation of border traffic at certain border crossing points], Journal of Laws 2021, item 1536.

[17] Ustawa o zmianie ustawy o cudzoziemcach oraz niektórych innych ustaw [Law amending the Act on Foreigners and other laws], Journal of Laws 2021, item 1918.

dom is threatened with persecution or the risk of serious harm. For their application to be considered, they are required to give credible reasons for their irregular entry and submit their claim immediately after crossing the border (for an analysis see Baranowska 2022).[18]

Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish domestic legislation comes into considerable tension with EU asylum law and international human rights law, most notably the principle of *non-refoulement,* which prohibits expelling someone to Belarus without an individual assessment of the person's risk of being subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment in that country or their country of origin. The relevant principle, which is protected under Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Article 3 of the ECHR and other instruments,[19] forms a cornerstone of international refugee law and cannot be derogated from even in the event of declared emergency.

The domestic legislation, introduced by the relevant Member States, also violates Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which guarantees every individual the right to seek asylum. The EU Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU) further confirms that every third-country national or stateless person has a right to apply for international protection in the territory of a Member State, including at the border, and obliges Member States to register and examine their claim, regardless of how the relevant national entered the country.

In addition, pushback practices are generally incompatible with Article 4 of Protocol No. 4 to the ECHR, which prohibits the collective expulsion of aliens. In *N.D. and N.T. v. Spain*, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) introduced the "own culpable conduct" exception to this principle. The Court stated that, in the particular case, there was no violation of Article 4, since the foreign nationals placed themselves in an unauthorised situation (such as by storming border fences), deliberately taking advantage of the group's large numbers and using force, despite being provided genuine and effective access to official entry procedures (i.e., a border crossing point), where they could claim asylum.[20]

[18] It appears that, when returning apprehended foreign nationals to the border with Belarus, the Polish authorities more frequently rely on the executive Regulation, rather than the Act on Foreigners. According to the Polish Border Guard statistics, between 5 July and 31 December 2023, 6,055 persons were returned to Belarus on the basis of the Regulation without any decision issued. In the meantime, in the entire year of 2023, 1,295 persons were issued orders to leave Poland on the basis of the amended Act on Foreigners (ECRE, 2024).

[19] Such as Article 3 of the UN Convention against Torture and Article 19(2) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

[20] ECtHR Judgment of 13 February 2020, *N.D. and N.T. v. Spain*, Applications nos. 8675/15 and 8697/15, § 231.

In a subsequent ruling in *A.A. & Others v. North Macedonia,* the ECtHR apparently further broadened the exception by applying it to situations where "by crossing the border irregularly, the applicants circumvented an effective procedure for legal entry."[21]

The approach taken by the ECtHR is highly problematic and has attracted widespread criticism from the academic community (see, e.g., Markard, 2020; Raimondo, 2020; Schmalz, 2022).[22] Nevertheless, at least formally, the exception does not abolish the general requirement for the states to provide those seeking international protection with genuine and effective access to means of legal entry. In other words, everyone must be offered a possibility to apply for asylum and receive an individualised assessment of their claim—even if they have crossed the border irregularly outside official border crossing points, unless such points are easily accessible.[23]

The Latvian and Lithuanian domestic measures explicitly preventing irregular entrants from submitting asylum claims and formalising immediate returns give a green light to *refoulement* practices and therefore openly violate these principles. Further, given the absence of legal avenues for claiming protection, the situation at the Belarus border does not fit the ECtHR-set criteria that may exempt the states from their obligations under Article 4 of Protocol No. 4. Even where the relevant rules allow submitting applications at official border crossing points, this is impossible to do in practice. Although formally Poland does not impose a blanket prohibition to claim asylum for irregular entrants, its legislation is equally problematic. When interpreting the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has earlier confirmed that an asylum claim must be examined even if the applicant has arrived in the EU via a third state, in which that person was not exposed to persecution or a risk of serious harm.[24] Moreover, as will be demonstrated in Section 4, Belarus cannot be considered a safe third country.

3.2. Follow-up developments (summer 2022 – autumn 2024)

As of October 2024, over three years on since the start of the crisis, none of the Member States involved has signalled intention to alter its policies. The rationale, relied on by the relevant governments for excluding the racialised

[21] ECtHR Judgment of 5 April 2022, *A.A. & Others v. North Macedonia,* Applications nos. 55798/16 and 4 others, § 114.
[22] A comprehensive analysis of the relevant ECtHR case-law falls outside the scope of this paper.
[23] This has been a generally established principle in the ECtHR jurisprudence. Among other cases, see ECtHR, Judgment of 15 December 2016, *Khlaifia and Others,* Application no. 16483/12, §§ 238 and 248; Judgment of 13 February 2020, *N.D. and N.T. v. Spain*, Applications nos. 8675/15 and 8697/15, § 198; Judgment of 8 July 2021, *Shahzad v. Hungary,* Application no. 12625/17, § 62.
[24] Case *C-564/18 L.H. v Bevándorlási és Menekültügyi Hivatal* ECLI:EU:C:2020:218.

"other" from human rights protection, has continuously been the so-called migrant instrumentalisation by the Belarusian and Russian regimes that allegedly wage a "hybrid attack" against the EU (see, e.g., Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia, 2023). Under EU and international refugee law, however, such concepts cannot be used as a basis to legalise pushbacks and deny someone their right to seek asylum. Importantly, this has been confirmed in a seminal ruling delivered by the CJEU in June 2022, which specifically addressed the situation at the EU's border with Belarus. In its judgment, the Court declared the Lithuanian legislation effectively depriving a non-EU national of an opportunity to apply for asylum solely because they had crossed the border irregularly as incompatible with the Asylum Procedures Directive—even in the event of declared emergency due to a "mass influx of aliens."[25]

The judgment, however, has been ignored by all three Member States involved. Moreover, in April 2023 Lithuania further cemented pushback practices in its domestic law,[26] a move that was swiftly followed by neighbouring Latvia.[27] More recently, the instrumentalisation discourse has also been taken up by Finland that, first, amended its Border Guard Act[28] and then temporarily closed all its land border crossing points with Russia as a reaction to increasing numbers of foreign nationals attempting to cross from that country to apply for asylum in Finland (Lehto, 2023). Moreover, Finland has ultimately followed in the footsteps of its neighbours and passed legislation allowing the authorities to turn away people seeking asylum—in other words, to exercise pushbacks—at the border with Russia (Tanner, 2024; for criticism, see Palander & Farzamfar, 2024).

Last but not least, Poland continues its hardline approach even after the October 2023 parliamentary elections, when the conservative populist Law and Justice (PiS) party lost power and was subsequently replaced by a liberal coalition. Poland's new government, led by Donald Tusk, not only has shown no intention to stop pushbacks, but went as far as to reintroduce an exclusion zone on parts of the country's border with Belarus. The exclusion zone was first introduced by the former PiS government in 2021 and later lifted after the completion of the border wall (Wądołowska, 2022). The decision to return to such measures

[25] Case C-72/22 PPU *M.A. v Valstybės sienos apsaugos tarnyba* ECLI:EU:C:2022:505.

[26] Valstybės sienos ir jos apsaugos įstatymo Nr.VIII-1666 1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23, 26 straipsnių pakeitimo ir Įstatymo papildymo 23-1 straipsniu ir nauju IX skyriumi įstatymas [Law Amending Articles 1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23, 26 of Law No VIII-1666 on the State Border and the Guard thereof and supplementing the Law with Article 23-1 and Section IX] (25 April 2023, No XIV-1891).

[27] Grozījums Latvijas Republikas valsts robežas likumā [Amendments to the Law on the State Border of the Republic of Latvia] (22 June 2023, Latvijas Vēstnesis, no. 125); Grozījumi Valsts robežsardzes likumā [Amendments to the State Border Guard Law] (22 June 2023, Latvijas Vēstnesis, no. 125).

[28] Laki rajavartiolain muuttamisesta [Law on amending the Border Guard Act] (8 July 2022, 698/2022).

was taken following an incident when a Polish soldier was stabbed by a foreigner who attempted to cross into Poland. During his subsequent visit to the border, Tusk announced that aggression against Polish border guards was increasing and claimed that "[t]hese are organised methods of hybrid warfare, [aimed at] destabilising the Polish state and all of Europe" (Tilles, 2024a). The new rules effectively deny access to the border area for individuals without Border Guard authorisation, including journalists and volunteers, which severely limits their possibilities to monitor the situation at the border and provide humanitarian aid. Moreover, in October 2024 Poland's government approved plans for a new migration strategy that will include the possibility to temporarily suspend the right to seek asylum if "immigrants threaten to destabilise the state" (Tilles, 2024b).

4. Realities on the ground: Various forms of inhuman and degrading treatment

Since mid-2021, following the adoption of the domestic measures described above, pushbacks in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have become a systematic and open practice that is sanctioned and accordingly perceived as lawful at the domestic level. Individuals who have irregularly crossed the border or attempted to do so are transported back to the border and ordered to return to Belarus at places outside official border crossing points. Such practices have led to a situation where non-EU nationals are forced to remain in the forest in inhuman conditions and where deaths, disappearances and amputated limbs have become an everyday reality (see, e.g., MacGregor, 2023; Wallis, 2022; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2023).

In all three Member States, asylum claims from persons, who cross the border irregularly, are generally disregarded. Non-EU nationals are admitted into the territory of the respective Member State and allowed to apply for asylum only exceptionally. The interviewed Polish activists revealed that the chances of the claim to be registered largely depend on the presence of witnesses (such as humanitarian aid volunteers, the applicant's legal representatives, journalists, or the Ombudsman's Office representatives). The outcome also depends on whether the ECtHR has indicated interim measures[29] obliging the relevant Member State not to expel the foreign national to Belarus. Lithuanian activists underlined that in Lithuania, interim measures are the only way to largely guarantee that the person will not be pushed back.

[29] Interim measures are temporary measures that are urgently granted according to Rule 39 of the Rules of Court in exceptional circumstances where there is an imminent risk of irreparable harm. There are nevertheless cases when border guards ignored interim measures and pushed foreign nationals back to Belarus (See, e.g., Euractiv.com, 2021; OMCT, 2022).

Another group with better chances of being admitted are those considered vulnerable, such as women, underage children, and people needing medical assistance. For instance, under the Lithuanian domestic legislation, the border guards are allowed to exceptionally accept asylum applications from a foreigner who has crossed the border irregularly, taking into account their vulnerability or "other special circumstances."[30] The interpretation of these terms, however, is left to the discretion of the border guards. Whilst single men are obviously the most disadvantaged category in this regard, an adviser to the Lithuanian interior minister further clarified that the vulnerability category was generally limited to unaccompanied minors or persons in need of immediate medical attention; meanwhile, families with young children were not automatically considered vulnerable (Platūkytė, 2021).

Overall, however, third-country nationals are regularly taken from the border to a hospital with a variety of medical conditions, most frequently caused by being forced to remain in the forest for prolonged periods of time—such as hypothermia, frostbite, injuries, digestive or orthopaedic problems, or worsening of already existing health issues. Following the erection of border fences in all three Member States involved (Eng.LSM.lv, 2024; Skėrytė, 2023; Drabik, 2024), foreign nationals increasingly end up in hospital with broken limbs or other injuries after jumping or falling from the fence. Laurynas, a Lithuanian humanitarian aid volunteer, remarked in an interview: "There was an idea among ruling politicians that, once we build the fence, people will be afraid to come and will not try anymore, but they keep trying. They cut the fence, they climb over the fence."

Both Lithuanian and Polish activists stress that there are numerous cases when people were taken from the hospital to the forest and pushed back to Belarus irrespective of their declared wish to apply for asylum (see also Grupa Granica, 2023a). The chances of their claim to be registered and examined depend on the rapid action by activists, which is more difficult to take if the person is only admitted in an emergency unit without further hospitalisation.

In the experience of interviewed Polish and Lithuanian activists, the longest time a non-EU national had spent in the border area was 1-1,5 month. In spring and summer 2022, they also encountered cases where people attempted to cross the border after spending the cold winter months in a makeshift camp close to the Bruzgi town on the Belarusian side, a warehouse facility used by the Belarusian authorities to temporarily host foreigners during the border crisis. The Bruzgi camp was closed in March 2022 (see Human Rights Watch, 2022). Anna, a Polish activist involved in humanitarian interventions in the forest, recalls:

[30] Republic of Lithuania. Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners (29 April 2004, No IX-2206) [Consolidated version valid as of 12 August 2021], Article 67(1^2).

> In March-April [2022], I met quite a lot of people who had to leave Bruzgi when it was closed. They told us they came [to Belarus] in October or November [2021] and did not manage to cross the border in autumn, so they spent the winter in Bruzgi and then tried again. And in June [2022], I met a guy from Guinea who told me that he came to Belarus in September 2021, tried [to cross the border] several times and was several times pushed back. Then he spent the winter in Bruzgi and when Bruzgi was closed, he went to Grodno or Brest where he lived with an elderly lady who allowed him to stay because he helped her around the house. In the beginning of June, he heard that there was again a possibility to cross the border, so he decided to try again.

The situation in Latvia in the autumn/winter of 2021/22 differed significantly from that in Lithuania and Poland. The pushbacks, carried out by the Latvian authorities during that period, targeted a small group of largely the same people[31] who were forced to remain in the forest for up to seven months in life-threatening conditions without access to any means of communication to the outside world. The testimonies, collected by the author,[32] reveal that on the Latvian side of the border, the foreign nationals were apprehended by Latvian border guards who would typically hand them over to unidentified armed officers in black gear with covered faces,[33] referred to by the interviewed persons as "commandos."[34]

In autumn 2021, the persons apprehended at the border used to be driven to a large heavily guarded tent, set up by the Latvian authorities several kilometres inside the Latvian territory in an undisclosed location (which changed several times) and allowed to stay there overnight. Early in the morning, they were split into smaller groups, loaded in vehicles, driven to different sections of the border and ordered to cross into Belarus. During the day, they were transported back to Latvia by Belarusian border guards who did not allow them to return to Minsk. This pattern continued every day, with the non-EU nationals involved becoming trapped in the forest—typically for several weeks or months. The people interviewed report that Latvian or Belarusian forces systematically destroyed or confiscated their SIM cards or phones; therefore, it was impossible to document what was happening at the border or get in touch with their families, who had no information about their whereabouts for months.

[31] ~250 people who arrived at the border at different times during the period between 11 August 2021 and 6 April 2022, see Sections 2 and 3.1 for more details.
[32] See Section 2 for more details.
[33] It is known that, in addition to regular border guards, the law enforcement personnel deployed by Latvia at the border included the military and the police special operations unit (SUB) (Sargs.lv, 2021).
[34] The author's findings are consistent with the Amnesty International report on the situation in Latvia (2022b).

Hasan, an Iraqi national who spent two months at the Latvia-Belarus border (October-December 2021), recalls:

> Every day early in the morning when it was still dark, we were all taken from the tent to the forest in Belarus. The commandos entered the tent, woke us up and told we had to be ready in 10 minutes. After 10-15 minutes, they opened the tent's door and took us one by one to the cars. On the way to the border we needed to hold our heads down and not to look anywhere, so that the location of the tent was not revealed. If anybody raised their head up they would get hit. Hitting was normal for them.

Mohammad, another Iraqi national who spent three months (11 August- mid-November 2021) at the same border, describes the conditions in the tent:

> The toilet was just a hole in the ground with sticks around it. There was the black plastic material wrapped around these sticks. The commandos were watching us even while we were sitting on the toilet and hit us if we looked them in the eyes. We did not have any possibility to wash ourselves in the tent. I did not shower for around three months.

It is testified that from mid-December 2021 on, the Latvian authorities drove people to the tent only occasionally, forcing them to live under an open sky in very low temperatures (up to -20C) and continuing to subject them to regular pushbacks—sometimes multiple times a day. The people stranded in the forest suffered from severe malnutrition (the Latvian authorities only gave them a pack of biscuits and a bottle of water per day), as well as burns, frostbite and other skin conditions, caused by inability to maintain hygiene. Hiwa, an Iraqi national, recalls: "It was very cold, and we needed to make fire during the night to survive. One or two people had to stay awake to keep the fire burning. I have never seen life like this, I will never forget that."

The author has also been able to familiarise herself with Latvian hospital records, provided to her by several non-EU nationals who were hospitalised (in some cases, multiple times over the course of several weeks or months) and later brought back to the forest following discharge from hospital.

The collected testimonies show that the Latvian authorities asked people trapped in the forest to agree to return to their countries of origin as a precondition for being transferred to the Daugavpils Centre. All the interviewees said that, once at the Centre, they were pressured into signing IOM voluntary return declarations and typically returned to Iraq within several days. According to their testimonies, the Latvian authorities informed them there was no possibility to apply for international protection and threatened to take them back to the forest or keep them in detention for a long time if they did not agree to return. Rashid, another Iraqi national, describes his situation as follows:

> On one occasion, the Latvians asked me and several people I was with [in the forest] if we would agree to return to Iraq. I did not agree because I have serious problems in my country. After I refused to return I was beaten severely by the Latvian commandos. Three men hit me with electric shock and beat me in the ribs.
>
> Several days after they beat me up I tried to kill myself. I went aside and tried to hang myself with a scarf on the Latvian side in the forest but my friends eventually noticed that and did not let me do that. I thought there was no way out of there.
>
> Later they [the Latvian authorities] offered me to return home again. They took me to a border guard's office and then to the Daugavpils Centre where they forced me to sign the voluntary return papers. The inspector said that if I signed them, I would fly back to Iraq, and if I did not sign, they would take me back to the forest. I begged them not to send me back to Iraq and asked for asylum many times but they did not react. I would have never signed the papers if I were not forced to do so.

Further, third-country nationals are subjected to violence on both sides of the border. Individuals who have attempted to cross the Latvian border testify that the Latvian authorities regularly exposed them to intimidation, verbal abuse and physical violence, including beatings and electric shock. Polish and Lithuanian activists equally report the use of violence by the authorities of their respective states. Regarding the Polish side of the border, there are not only reports of beatings, but also the use of tear gas, pepper spray throwers, rubber bullets and firearms (see also Grupa Granica, 2023a; 2023b).

From a legal perspective, one can distinguish two separate situations when people irregularly crossing into the EU from Belarus are subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of Article 3 of the ECHR. First, the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish authorities violate the *non-refoulement* principle by ordering them to return to Belarus without examining their asylum claims. As noted in Section 3.1 above, Belarus cannot be considered a safe third country. Belarus is not a party to the ECHR. There are numerous reports of the Belarusian authorities beating people and forcing them to cross the border (see, e.g., Amnesty International, 2021). On the border with Latvia, Belarusian border guards did not allow people to return to Minsk, effectively forcing them to remain in the forest in the middle of the winter in life-threatening conditions—with no opportunity to claim asylum in Belarus. Second, the actions of Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish state actors on the EU side of the border, described above, can equally be regarded as inhuman and degrading treatment.

5. The concept of migrant instrumentalisation and EU-level response to the situation at the border

Since the second half of 2021, the situation at the EU's external border with Belarus has remained largely unchanged. Forced summary and repeated returns to Belarus continue to remain systematic practice irrespective of extensive criticism by multiple international bodies and organisations, including the UNHCR (2021; 2024), the Council of Europe (2022; 2023), and Amnesty International (2022a; 2022b).

The situation has been further exacerbated by the lack of a firm EU-level response to open asylum-seeker rights violations in all three Member States concerned. The migrant instrumentalisation narrative has also been accepted by the European Commission, who succumbed to the pressure of national governments and appeared willing to sacrifice its role as the guardian of the Treaties by failing to initiate any infringement procedure against the Member States involved (for an analysis, see Grześkowiak, 2023). Moreover, in late 2021, following the call of the European Council, the Commission also presented a set of proposals codifying the instrumentalisation concept into EU asylum law.[35]

While the Commission proposal failed to secure a majority in the EU Council in December 2022 (ECRE, 2022), the migrant instrumentalisation concept has eventually found its way into EU law. In particular, it has been incorporated in the new Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation (2024/1359), which was adopted as part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum and will apply from 1 July 2026. The new Regulation does not go as far as domestic legislation authorising pushbacks and restricting the right to seek asylum. It nevertheless allows Member States to derogate from the EU's asylum standards by extending registration period for asylum applications, the extensive use of border procedures and *de facto* detention of protection seekers.

For the purposes of the Regulation, "a situation of instrumentalisation" occurs where

> a third country or a hostile non-state actor encourages or facilitates the movement of third-country nationals or stateless persons to the external borders or to a Member State, with the aim of destabilising the Union or a Member State, and where such actions are liable to put at risk essential functions of a Member State, including the maintenance of law and order or the safeguard of its national security (Article 1(4)(b)).

This formulation, however, is overly broad and does not capture the complexities of the situation on the ground. First and foremost, the migrant instrumentalisation concept diverts attention from the main reasons of why people undertake dangerous and irregular routes to seek protection in Europe—

[35] Including a proposal for a Regulation addressing situations of instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum (COM/2021/890 final).

namely, global passport inequality, the EU's externalisation and containment policies, designed to deter unwanted foreigners from entering Europe (for an analysis, see Mitsilegas, 2022; Xanthopoulou, 2024), and the consequent absence of legal routes to seek protection (ECRE, 2017). In the majority of cases, for someone holding an Iraqi, Syrian or Afghan passport obtaining a visa for Europe is nearly impossible.

The conducted interviews reveal that people who attempt to irregularly cross into the EU from Belarus make up a heterogeneous group and frequently belong to categories with relatively high asylum-recognition rates. Examples include Afghans fleeing the Taliban, Syrians fleeing compulsory military service, Iranians fleeing political persecution, and Yazidis, an Iraq-based ethno-religious minority that was persecuted by ISIS and has since been living in protracted displacement for nearly a decade. Nada, a young Yazidi woman who spent nearly four months at the Latvia-Belarus border and was forced to return to an IDP tent camp in the Kurdistan region of Iraq without her asylum claim being registered, said over a video call:

> I live in a Yazidi IDP camp near the city of Zakho. I previously lived in the city of Shingal[36] and was forced to flee after it was taken over by ISIS. During that time I was captured by an ISIS militant who raped me and forced [me] to live with him for three months before I managed to escape. I now live in a tent and do not feel safe. I am afraid that someone will abduct me again.

Second, establishing the aim of destabilising the EU may also appear highly challenging from the perspective of legal certainty. Whilst in the summer and autumn of 2021, Belarus indeed appears to have used migration as a political leverage against the EU, the situation seems to have changed. Following pressure from the EU, foreign airline companies introduced travel restrictions on nationals of certain Middle Eastern countries. Already in November 2021, for instance, the Turkish authorities denied Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi nationals from boarding flights to Minsk (Roth & O'Carroll, 2021). In addition, several hundreds of Iraqi nationals were returned from Belarus to Iraq on so-called "repatriation flights" (Wallis, 2021).

The conducted interviews suggest that, starting from 2022, most of the non-EU nationals arriving at the EU's external border hold Russian, not Belarus, visas that are issued for purposes such as tourism, study, work or private visits. People are typically brought to the EU's border with Belarus by intermediaries of diverse backgrounds who are non-state actors. Interviews with Polish volunteers also reveal that the Belarusian authorities now increasingly attempt to intercept people who attempt to cross into the EU, detain and return them to Russia. Many people had also previously resided in Russia for prolonged periods of time (either regularly or irregularly, including with expired visas) before deciding to seek protection in the EU due to the lack of safety, human rights

[36] Also known as Sinjar.

violations, risk of being expelled or forced to fight in the war in Ukraine, or deteriorating political and economic conditions in that country (see also Walker & Ali, 2024).

The author's informants and media reports reveal that people in such situations were also among those who recently attempted to cross from Russia into Finland (Da Costa, 2023). The latter group also included foreigners who were brought to the Russian border by fixers following previous unsuccessful attempts to cross into the EU from Belarus. Further, there are people who arrived at the Belarus border by land via Russia and Central Asian countries (e.g., from Afghanistan), had never procured Belarusian or Russian visas or had any other connection with the Belarusian or Russian authorities. In general terms, the current situation is no different to the pre-2021 state of affairs when, because of their geographical location, people coming from a variety of regions used Belarus and Russia as transit routes to the EU's border.[37] Any determination that a third-country national has been instrumentalised would thus seemingly necessitate an individualised assessment of each case on the basis of unknown criteria, an impossible task to undertake.

Last but not least, putting "essential functions of a Member State" at risk is a very high threshold to meet. Although in public discourse, the situation at the EU's border with Belarus is typically described as a "crisis," caused by the "mass influx" of aliens, the number of people who try to irregularly enter the EU via Belarus is much lower than the number of arrivals in Europe via the Mediterranean route (Buchholz, 2023). Moreover, the situation at the Belarus border cannot be compared with the years of 2015-16 when EU Member States registered over 2.5 million first-time asylum applications (Eurostat, 2017). In 2021, at the peak of the crisis, Polish border guards recorded fewer than 40,000 "attempts of illegal border crossings" from Belarus (Straż Graniczna [Polish Border Guard], 2022), with the numbers having dropped sharply in 2022 and 2023 (Sas, 2024). Moreover, it is crucial that the number of recorded border crossing attempts does not represent the actual number of people crossing the border, as many are pushed back and forth multiple times, inviting the abuse of statistics by the relevant governments. For example, in the period from August 2021 to April 2022, the Latvian authorities claimed to have registered over 6,600 border crossing attempts (Valsts robežsardze [Latvian State Border Guard], 2022). Yet, the author's analysis of daily border guard statistics and interviews with the non-EU nationals involved suggest that the actual number of people behind these figures was as low as around 250.

[37] See Section 3.1 above for more details.

6. Concluding remarks

The EU-Belarus border crisis has set an unprecedented example of how far EU Member States have been prepared (and were allowed) to go in their efforts to arbitrarily exclude the racialised "other" from the scope of fundamental rights protection, even where foreign nationals have managed to reach the EU's territory in the first place. Used as a rationale for radical departures from EU and international refugee law, the migrant instrumentalisation concept has led to the creation of a highly securitised exclusion zone where protection seekers are deprived of their rights only because they attempt to enter the EU via a certain third country. The Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish domestic legislation severely restricting the right to seek asylum and authorising pushbacks has normalised grave violations of human rights that amount to inhuman and degrading treatment. Among other things, that frequently results in serious injuries, limb amputations and deaths on the border.

This situation has been further aggravated by the *laissez faire* approach of the European Commission who has failed to initiate any infringement procedure against the Member States involved. Moreover, the migrant instrumentalisation concept has ultimately found its way into EU law as part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Yet, the above analysis has shown that this term is vaguely defined, highly problematic on a variety of levels and does not accurately reflect the realities on the ground. People crossing from Belarus make up a highly heterogeneous group, find themselves in diverse situations and do not necessarily have any connection with the Belarusian or Russian authorities. To establish an instrumentalisation element, it would thus be necessary to carry out an individualised assessment of each person's circumstances based on uncertain criteria, which is impossible to do in practice. Finally, national, as well as EU-level responses to the issue are highly disproportionate. It is highly doubtful that the modest numbers of foreign nationals crossing from Belarus can represent a serious threat to a state's national security and put at risk the essential functions of the Member States concerned.

Funding

This research was supported by the re:constitution Fellowship programme, a joint initiative by Democracy Reporting International and the Forum Transregionale Studien, funded by Stiftung Mercator.

References

Amnesty International. (2021, December 20). *Belarus/EU: New evidence of brutal violence from Belarusian forces against asylum seekers and migrants facing pushbacks from the EU.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/belarus-eu-new-evidence-of-brutal-violence-from-belarusian-forces-against-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-facing-pushbacks-from-the-eu/

Amnesty International. (2022a). *Lithuania: Forced out or Locked up. Refugees and Migrants Abused and Abandoned.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur53/5735/2022/en/

Amnesty International. (2022b). *Latvia: Return Home or Never Leave the Woods. Refugees and Migrants Arbitrarily Detained, Beaten and Coerced Into "Voluntary" Returns'.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur52/5913/2022/en/

Ancite-Jepifánova, A. (2022, November 15). Seven Months in the Freezing Forest: Why events at the Latvian-Belarus border were long hidden from the public. *Verfassungsblog.* https://verfassungsblog.de/seven-months-in-the-freezing-forest/

Baranowska, G., Başdaş, B. & Welfens, N. (2021, November 25). The Dangerous Politics of Framing: The Situation at the Polish-Belarusian Border. *Border Criminologies Blog.* https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/11/dangerous

Baranowska, G. (2022). Pushbacks in Poland: Grounding the practice in domestic law in 2021. *Polish Yearbook of International Law*, *41*, 193–211. https://doi.org/10.24425/PYIL.2022.142346

Bruneau, C., Plucinska, J. & Nader, Y.A. (2021, November 16). Insight: How Minsk became a destination for migrants travelling as tourists. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-minsk-became-mecca-migrants-travelling-tourists-2021-11-15/

Buchholz, K. (2023, April 14). Number of Migrants Crossing the Mediterranean Picks up. *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/chart/18753/migrants-arriving-across-the-mediterranean-in-europe/

Council of Europe. (2022, January 27). Third party intervention by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights under Article 36, paragraph 3, of the European Convention on Human Rights. R.A. and others v. Poland (no. 42120/21). https://rm.coe.int/third-party-intervention-before-the-european-court-of-human-rights-in-/1680a5527a

Council of Europe. (2023, January 27). Letter to the Minister for the Interior of Latvia. https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/latvian-authorities-should-put-an-end-to-pushbacks-and-safeguard-the-human-rights-of-people-seeking-protection-at-the-border-with-belarus

Da Costa, M. (2023, December 4). Stuck at the Russian-Finnish border: 'I feel that I will die here, in the cold'. *InfoMigrants.* https://www.infomigrants.net/en/-post/53623/stuck-at-the-russianfinnish-border-i-feel-that-i-will-die-here-in-the-cold

Drabik, P. (2024, February 29). Poland: Fence in the Swamp. *Reporting Democracy.* https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/29/poland-fence-in-the-swamp/

ECRE. (2017). *Protection in Europe: Safe and Legal Access Channel.* https://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Policy-Papers-01.pdf

ECRE. (2021). *Extraordinary Responses: Legislative Changes in Lithuania,* 2021. Legal Note N11. https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Legal-Note-11.pdf

ECRE. (2022, December 8). *ECRE Reaction: No Majority for Instrumentalisation Regulation.* https://ecre.org/ecre-reaction-no-majority-for-instrumentalisation-regulation/

ECRE. (2024, June 13). Access to the territory and push backs. Poland Country Report. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/poland/asylum-procedure/access-procedure-and-registration/access-territory-and-push-backs/

Eng.LSM.lv. (2024, July 31). Latvian-Belarusian border fence project completed. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/31.07.2024-latvian-belarusian-border-fence-project-completed.a563367/

Euractiv.com (2021, September 10). *Lithuania pushes back Afghan migrants despite European Court stand.* https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/lithuania-pushes-back-afghan-migrants-despite-european-court-stand/

European Parliament. (2022). *Asylum and Migration in the EU* https://www.europarl.europa.eu/infographic/asylum-migration/index_en.html#filter=2022

Eurostat. (2017, March 16). *1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2016.* News release 46/2017. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7921609/3-16032017-BP-EN.pdf/e5fa98bb-5d9d-4297-9168-d07c67d1c9e1?t=1489575151000

Grześkowiak, M. (2023). The “Guardian of the Treaties” is No More? The European Commission and the 2021 Humanitarian Crisis on Poland–Belarus Border. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 42(1), 81–102. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac025

Grupa Granica (2023a). *October 2023 Report.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/-1RJv8-HzjbG8LBafYUe9sAk5MNsLlywo1M/view

Grupa Granica (2023b). *November 2023 Report from the Polish-Belarusian border.* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tqPuTu0q018kj0TUCCICXUOUAvWy7_IM/view

Hebel, C. & Reuter, C. (2021, August 13). Wie Belarus zum Sprungbrett für Geflüchtete wurde. *Der Spiegel*. https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/belarus-wie-alexander-lukaschenko-schutzsuchende-gezielt-in-die-eu-schleust-a-3a5952cb-0002-0001-0000-000178784949?context=issue

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2023, November 23). *Disappearances at the Polish-Belarusian border—HFHR response.* https://hfhr.pl/en/news/disappearances-at-the-polish-belarusian-border-hfhr-response

Human Rights Watch (2017, March 1). *Poland: Asylum Seekers Blocked at Border.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/01/poland-asylum-seekers-blocked-border

Human Rights Watch (2022, June 7). *Violence and Pushbacks at Poland-Belarus Border.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/07/violence-and-pushbacks-poland-belarus-border

Lehto, E. (2023, November 23). Finland to close all but northernmost border crossing with Russia. *Reuters.* https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finland-close-all-one-border-crossing-with-russia-pm-2023-11-22/

MacGregor, M. (2023, February 21). Deaths mount at Polish border as authorities defend migrant expulsions. *InfoMigrants.* https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/46988/deaths-mount-at-polish-border-as-authorities-defend-migrant-expulsions

Markard, N. (2020, April 1). A Hole of Unclear Dimensions: Reading N.D. and N.T. v. Spain. *Odysseus Blog.* https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/a-hole-of-unclear-dimensions-reading-nd-and-nt-v-spain/

Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia. (2023, February 3). Reply to a letter from the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. https://rm.coe.int/reply-from-the-minister-of-the-interior-of-the-republic-of-latvia-to-t/1680aa0fa9

Mitsilegas, V. (2022). The EU external border as a site of preventive (in)justice. *European Law Journal 28*(4-6), 263-280. https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12444

Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs [Latvia] (2021). Statistics on Asylum Seekers [unpublished, on file with the author].

Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs [Latvia]. (2024, February 27). Statistics on Asylum Seekers until 2023. https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/en/statistics-asylum-seekers-until-2023

OMTC. (2022, April 21). *Lithuania: Criminalisation of solidarity as people on the move are pushed back.* https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/lithuania-criminalisation-of-solidarity-on-the-rise-as-people-on-the-move-are-pushed-back

Palander, J. & Farzamfar, M. (2024, July 11). Border Crisis as a Crisis of Law: National Security & Mobility Rights at the Eastern Border of Finland. *IACL-AIDC Blog.* https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2024-posts/2024/7/11/border-crisis-as-a-crisis-of-law-national-security-amp-mobility-rights-at-the-eastern-border-of-finland

Platūkytė, D. (2021, October 7). Migrants starving in Belarus next to Lithuanian border, NGO says. *Euractiv.com*. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/migrants-starving-in-belarus-next-to-lithuanian-border-ngo-says/

Raimondo, G. (2020, April 20). N.D. and N.T. v Spain: A Slippery Slope for the Protection of Irregular Migrants. *Border Criminologies Blog*. https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/04/nd-and-nt-v-spain

Roth, A. & O'Carroll, L. (2021, November 12). Turkey bans citizens from Syria, Yemen and Iraq from flying to Minsk. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/12/turkey-bans-citizens-syria-yemen-iraq-from-flying-minsk

Sargs.lv. (2021, August 12). *Austrumu robežas sargāšanā iesaista 71 policijas speciālo uzdevumu bataljona darbinieku*. https://www.sargs.lv/lv/latvija/2021-08-12/austrumu-robezas-sargasana-iesaista-71-policijas-specialo-uzdevumu-bataljona

Sas, A. (2024, May 28). Number of attempts to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border in Poland from August 2021 to April 2024. *Statista.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/1271292/poland-attempts-of-illegal-crossing-of-the-polish-belarusian-border/

Schmalz, D. (2022, April 6). Enlarging the Hole in the Fence of Migrants' Rights: A.A. and others v. North Macedonia. *Verfassungsblog.* https://verfassungsblog.de/enlarging-the-hole-in-the-fence-of-migrants-rights/

Skėrytė, J. (2023, September 18). Lithuania wants to build border fence even in marshes. *LRT*. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2079447/lithuaniawants-to-build-border-fence-even-in-marshes

Straż Graniczna [Polish Border Guard]. [@Straz_Graniczna]. (2022, January 4). W 2021 r. granicę polsko-białoruską próbowano nielegalnie przekroczyć 39 670 razy, w 2020 r. nielegalnych przekroczeń było 129, w 2019 r.—20, w 2018 r.—4 [Image attached] [Post]. X. https://x.com/Straz_Graniczna/status/1478327785903038469?t=k2VdF_GmykZQBEunvENA9g&s=19

Szylko-Kwas, J. (2023). Two Crises—Framing Messages about the Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border. *Res Rhetorica 10*(4), 118-39. https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2023.4.7

Tanner, J. (2024, July 12). Finnish lawmakers approve controversial law to turn away migrants at border with Russia. *Associated Press.* https://apnews.com/article/finland-migrants-russia-92c3c414d60ba1f7097297f7dca62e78

Tilles, D. (2024a, May 30). Poland to reintroduce exclusion zone on Belarus border following stabbing of soldier by migrant. *Notes from Poland*. https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/05/30/poland-reintroduces-exclusion-zone-on-belarus-border-following-stabbing-of-soldier-by-migrant/

Tilles, D. (2024b, October 12). Poland to suspend asylum rights as part of tougher migration policy to "regain control" of borders. *Notes from Poland*. https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/10/12/poland-to-suspend-asylum-rights-as-part-of-tougher-migration-policy-to-regain-control-of-borders/

UNHCR. (2021, October 13). UNHCR observations on the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia on the Declaration of Emergency Situation (No 518). https://www.refworld.org/legal/natlegcomments/unhcr/2021/en/124040

UNHCR. (2024, March 14). Submission by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the case of *A.S. and Others v. Lithuania* (Application No. 44205/21) before the European Court of Human Rights. https://www.refworld.org/themes/custom/unhcr_rw/pdf-js/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.refworld.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2024-06%2Funhcr_-_as_and_others_v_lithuania_submission_combined_march_2024.pdf

Valsts robežsardze [Latvian State Border Guard]. (2022, March 28). *27. martā novērsts 5 cilvēku mēģinājums nelikumīgi šķērsot Latvijas—Baltkrievijas valsts robežu*. https://www.rs.gov.lv/lv/jaunums/27-marta-noversts-5-cilveku-meginajums-nelikumigi-skersot-latvijas-baltkrievijas-valsts-robezu

Wądołowska, A. (2022, June 14). Poland to lift exclusion zone on Belarus border as anti-migrant wall nears completion. *Notes from Poland*. https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/06/14/poland-to-lift-exclusion-zone-on-belarus-border-as-anti-migrant-wall-nears-completion/

Walker, S. & Ali, F. (2024, July 29). Beaten and conscripted into Putin's army: a Somali refugee attempts to reach Europe. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/29/somali-refugee-reach-eu-putin-russia-germany

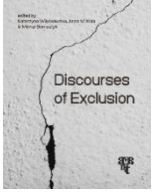
Wallis, E. (2021, December 6). More migrants flown back to Iraq from Belarus. *InfoMigrants.* https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/37025/more-migrants-flown-back-to-iraq-from-belarus

Wallis, E. (2022, December 12). Frostbite at the border: Third migrant loses limb. *InfoMigrants.* https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/45343/frostbite-at-the-border-third-migrant-loses-limb

Xanthopoulou, E. (2024). Mapping EU Externalisation Devices through a Critical Eye. *European Journal of Migration and Law*, *26*(1), 108-135. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12340170

Yakouchyk, K. & Schmid, A. (2016). EU-Belarus Cooperation in Border Management: Mechanisms and Forms of Norm Transfer in: Raphael Bossong and Helena Carrapico (eds.). *EU Borders and Shifting Internal Security: Technology, Externalization and Accountability*, Springer, 2016, 121-138.

Aleksandra Ancite-Jepifánova is an interdisciplinary scholar working in the field of European and comparative migration and asylum law. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Rule of Law Clinic at the Central European University Democracy Institute and a Research Affiliate with the Refugee Law Initiative, University of London. She received her PhD in law from Queen Mary University of London and has held fellowships, teaching positions and visiting appointments at various institutions, including LSE, Cardiff University, Forum Transregionale Studien, and VU Amsterdam. Her ongoing research project focuses on the situation at the EU's border with Belarus, particularly where it concerns access to the asylum procedure, prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment, and compliance with the Rule of Law.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Medellín: Narratives of trauma and exclusion in the works of Colombian journalists

Anna Maria Karczewska
University of Białystok
a.karczewska@uwb.edu.pl

Received 2023-12-27; accepted 2024-08-01; published Online First 2024-10-11.

Abstract

This article traces the discursive representation of cultural trauma and social exclusion of the inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods of Medellín in the reportage written by Colombian journalists. The three books written by Ricardo Aricapa, Alonso Salazar and Juan Camilo Castañeda Arboleda cover the period from the 1980s, years of extreme violence, to the first decades of the new millennium, representing marginalized people dragged into the narco business, youth gangs and armed conflict. The article's aim is to examine how violent urban life is represented in the aforementioned reportage and how these books function as secondary witnesses to cultural trauma. By including the voices of the marginalized groups and incorporating them to the national discourse, these books demand emotional, institutional and symbolic reparation and reconstruction.

Keywords: collective memory, reportage, *No nacimos pa' semilla, Nuestro otro infierno, Comuna 13*, cultural trauma, Jeffrey Alexander

1. Introduction

Medellín is a place where poverty and social exclusion are a massive urban phenomenon in low-income neighborhoods called *comunas populares* (or *barrios populares*) (Koonings & Krujit, 2005). The denizens of the second-largest city in Colombia have been drawn into the vicious circle of exclusion, insecurity and violence, especially since the 1980s with migration from rural areas, which caused the expansion of secondary metropolitan areas and the growth of the

informal sector[1] (Koonings & Krujit, 2009). The inhabitants of *comunas populares* became second-class citizens and were abandoned by the state. They were separated, spatially, socially and culturally, from the middle-class city of formal employment, public services and law enforcement. The advent of the Medellín cartel and drug trafficking activities generated unprecedented violence. Persistent social exclusion, linked to alternative extra-legal sources of income and power, combined with an absent state, provided means and motives for violent actions, which contributed, in turn, to the disintegration of the social and moral fabric. Over the years, an incredible variety of criminal actors have emerged: gangs, left-wing militias, drug traffickers, hired killers, criminal organizations called *oficinas*, death squads dedicated to social cleansing, guerrilla fighters of FARC, ELN and CAP, and various groups of right-wing paramilitaries. The actions of these organized groups have claimed many casualties among the civilian population. Certain neighborhoods or districts were labeled no-go areas while their inhabitants were in turn stigmatized as "undesirables." The poor were disproportionally affected by violence, and at the same time, they were also seen and feared as inherently dangerous (Rozema, 2007, pp. 57-69).

The excess of violence and injustices in Colombians' lives was reflected in literature and poetry, which became a reminder to jolt the public conscience and memory. They are used as vehicles for political and creative expression and as a means of including the stories of the marginalized inhabitants of the *barrio* who experienced trauma and violence. Literature is one of the practices that has served to tell truths and speak of recognition to heal the wounds of the past in order to live in the present. It also helps undo the exclusionary discourses and give voice to the harmed and silenced, serving as a platform for the subaltern, for all those who suffered violence which impacted their physical and mental health and who could never speak in their authentic voice.[2] However, not only novelists and poets speak on behalf of the dispossessed. There are also journalists who give voice to the marginalized and abandoned by the state and whose texts are agents and products of public memory, recorders of memory, to use Olick's words (2014, pp. 29-30). Although these are often individual stories, they are relevant to the group and constitute its cultural memory. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is carried largely by individuals, but he also showed that individual memories are socially framed and that they are the lifeblood of group existence. What is also important to note is that the memory of a community relies exclusively on mediated representations of the past (Assmann and Shortt, 2012, p. 3), and the reportage books analysed here constitute such a representation.

[1] Informal sector: unregulated economic sector with informal, often makeshift housing.

[2] For further discussion, see Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

This article traces the discursive representation of cultural trauma and social exclusion of the inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods of Medellín in reportage written by Colombian journalists Ricardo Aricapa, Alonso Salazar and Juan Camilo Castañeda Arboleda. The article's aim is to analyze the portrayal of violent urban life in these books and discuss their function as secondary witnesses to cultural trauma which, by including the voices of the marginalized groups and incorporating them into the national discourse, demand emotional, institutional and symbolic reparation and reconstruction.

2. Narratives of cultural trauma

The three books of reportage by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda deal with different periods, providing insights into the prevailing problems of the time and focusing on specific groups in the society. The texts cover the years from the 1980s, times of extreme violence, to the first decades of the new millennium, representing marginalized people dragged into narco business, youth gangs and armed conflict.

In *No nacimos pa'semilla* (1990), Salazar gives voice to the inhabitants of *barrios populares,* protagonists of the violence that Colombia suffered in the 1980s and 1990s. The crisis was caused by the deployment of violence and terrorism by the drug trafficking group headed by Pablo Escobar, who coordinated criminal gangs and a large number of hired assassins (*sicarios*). The book depicts the world of youth gangs and presents the historical and cultural roots of a dispossessed generation intertwined with the phenomenon of drug trafficking. Through various characters, Salazar describes the hard life of the young hired assassins and of the inhabitants of the most marginalized neighborhoods of the city. Salazar's book expands the perspective and focuses on *sicarios,* who are generally not considered by the society as worthy of concern.[3] However, they are also victims of violence, pushed to commit acts of oppression, and deserve to be heard. The reportage entitled *Comuna 13. Crónica de una guerra urbana* (2015) allows victims of violence to tell what happened in the Comuna 13 neighborhood in Medellín. Aricapa describes the neighborhood's origins, shows how its inhabitants lived, and explains their role in the urban war that placed them in the middle of bellicose forces. The book describes the informal sector of the Comuna 13 neighborhood, created through migratory processes and forced displacement. Lack of infrastructure and mobility, poverty and violence attracted multiple armed actors such as militias, guerrillas and paramilitaries who took advantage of the inhabitants. The reportage also concentrates on different episodes of internal armed conflict, in particular Operation Orion (2002), which was one of the seventeen military operations of urban warfare in Comuna 13.

[3] Concentrating on the trauma of *sicarios* as a result of their commission of violence is beyond the scope of this article. For further discussion on perpetrator trauma, see McGlothlin (2020, pp. 100-110).

Aricapa's book is an account of the painful daily life of the inhabitants of Comuna 13 which shows how the poor and the dispossessed became entrenched between illegal forces and how they bore the brunt of Colombia's armed conflict. The last reportage, *Nuestro otro infierno: violencia y guerra en Manrique* (2017), brings the reader closer to the phenomenon of everyday violence, not only in Manrique[4] (*barrio* Santa Inés) but throughout the city, and is representative of other low-income neighborhoods. The history of Manrique, as a constant scene of violent actions, began forty years ago. Since then, three waves of violence have disturbed the lives of its inhabitants. The first occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s; the second in the late 1990s; and the last, and most intense, is the subject of the stories in Castañeda's book. Many *sicarios* of the former Medellín cartel, who had lost their jobs, decided to join new criminal (youth) gangs (*combos*) that ravaged the city for years. The high crime rate in the neighborhoods was mainly due to the criminal activities of the *combos*—hundreds of teenagers lost their lives in armed confrontations between different gangs. Castañeda Arboleda describes the violent conflict that the Manrique Santa Inés neighborhood experienced between 2009 and 2011 to understand how its inhabitants had lived through the war. The journalist shows that *barrios populares* are the scene of violent actions which disrupt the lives of their inhabitants. He depicts the participation of young people in street gangs, the role of the State in the confrontation and the functioning of an illegal social order. Castañeda's reportage constitutes a history of a sector in which violence becomes part of everyday life and relates the events of *barrios populares* to the social situation of the city.

All three books are chronological compendiums of violence and exclusion in low-income neighborhoods in Medellín. They look at the daily life of the people who were affected by different types of violence. They are based on the testimonies of their inhabitants and they explore temporal and spatial location and the historical reasons for violence in *barrios populares*. Salazar's, Aricapa's and Castañeda Arboleda's books give voice to the urban excluded to describe their reality of insecurity and examine social dynamics of exclusion, at the same time offering them a platform to present their cultural trauma narratives. The stories by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda invite the readers to reflect on the pain, anguish and human misery produced by violence and exclusion.

In Colombia, narrative has become both evidence and a form of remedy. It has been used instead of punishment or victim compensation, thereby echoing Walter Benjamin's positing of narration as an "act of justice" (1999, pp. 83-107) and his claim that narration offers the possibility to end traumatic events, hatreds and social resentments. By the same token, Elisabeth Jelin views narration as a tool of peace-building and providing stability through the

[4] Comuna 3 Manrique is one of the sixteen comunas in Medellín. Comuna 3 consists of 19 neighborhoods, and one of them is Santa Inés.

implementation "of politics of forgetting and reconciliation" (Jelin, 2003, p. 21). Reportage has given testimony of the life of Colombia, perhaps more vivid and more complex than the novel. Reportage expresses the intimate experience of atrocity and provides a subjective[5] dimension to cultural trauma (Strejilevich, 2006, pp. 701-702); its language springs from urgency and from necessity. The books of reportage analysed in this article are narratives that represent the personal experience of injustice, marginality, exclusion and precarity that is illustrative of a larger class. Victims bear witness to what they have suffered and share an aspiration to reparation through storytelling, and their narration of trauma, exploitation and injustice may serve at once as testimony, redress and public catharsis (Stone Peters, 2015, p. 19). Trauma victims must tell their stories as through narrative they create a memorial to suffering. Telling a traumatic story is not only a means of overcoming trauma but also a way "to speak for others and to others" (Felman, 1995, p. 14). Allowing victims to tell their own stories offers them relief and emotional release. The healing power of testimony seems to offer narrative closure both for victims and for society as a whole. It also has the power to create witnesses of suffering who engage empathically with terrible events. Such storytelling, by keeping the past alive, invites readers to act and generates compassion and benevolence. It is essential for the validation of cases of human rights abuses (Whitlock, 2015, p. 110).

Homi Bhabha argues that trauma narrative is not only an individual human right, whose exercise is necessary to prevent further atrocity, but essential to our general humanity. Bhabha claims that "the right to narrate means the right to be heard, to be recognized and represented" (Bhabha, 2014, n.p.). In such a view, narrative is seen as a kind of post-atrocity remedy. Under this optic, not only could victim narratives be considered as potentially subject to the interpretive tools of literary criticism, but the narration of atrocity could also be seen as a good in itself, offering its own special form of redress through catharsis and rectification through the truths of storytelling (Stone Peters, 2015, pp. 20-21). The reportage books analysed in this article constitute such a storytelling in which the most defenceless segments of Medellin's population tell the world about their traumatic injuries.

In the reportage books by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda, the people from Medellín's most marginalized neighborhoods describe their social reality, producing a new collective and complex speech act. Their representation is

[5] "The DSM-V (2013) eliminates the only symptom cluster, introduced in the DSM-IV (1994), that addressed the subjective category of the victim's emotional response to the event: reactions such as fear, helplessness and horror. Some psychotraumatological handbooks, such as Charles Figley's (1985) and Fischer and Riedesser's (2009), have argued for a relational model that takes the subjective factor into account, defining trauma as "an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary, catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm" (Figley 1985, p. xviii quoted in Sütterlin 2020, p. 16)

"a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstruction" (Alexander, 2004, p. 11). Their narratives are stories of cultural trauma which, according to Alexander, occurs when members of a group feel they have been subjected "to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, p. 1). Alexander adds that "events are not, in and of themselves, traumatic" (8). To be seen as traumatic, they must be articulated as such by members of a collectivity. For Eyerman and Sciortino (2020, p. 209), narration seems to be the principal mechanism for this process: as they claim, "a central aspect of the cultural trauma process is the attempt to re-narrate and reestablish collective identity." According to Alexander (2004), cultural trauma refers to the impact of disturbing and damaging events on collective identity. Alexander explores how societies collectively remember, represent and interpret traumatic events. Alexander & Breese claim that traumas become collective when they are conceived as wounds to social identity. This is a matter of intense cultural and political work because

> suffering collectivities do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being. When social processes construe events as gravely dangerous to groups, social actors transform individual suffering into a matter of collective concern, of cultural worry, group danger, social panic, and creeping fear. (Alexander & Breese, 2011, pp. xii-xiii)

What is important for collectivities is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. The construction of collective trauma is often fueled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to the collective rather than individual identity that defines the kind of suffering and the danger. That is why individual suffering must be transformed into a "we." It must be constructed via narrative and coding, which is cultural work that requires speeches and meetings, marches and rituals, plays, movies and storytelling. According to Alexander & Breese (2011, p. xi), the creation of a narrative of social suffering is a symbolic-cum-emotional representation, a collective, sociological process that is centered on giving voice and visibility to marginalized groups. An important aspect of this type of narrative is not simply the way in which it represents a historical event, but the collective identities that it produces. Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story. For the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaning-making work. A successful process of collective representation must provide compelling answers about the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the trauma victim to

the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility (Alexander et.al., 2004, pp. 13-15). This representational process creates a new master narrative of social suffering which is critical to the process by which a collectivity becomes visible and heard.

3. Living conditions of precarity

In their various books about exclusion and violence in Latin American cities, Koonings and Krujit (2005, 2007, 2009, 2015) note the following problems of the poor inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods in the so-called megacities[6]. The poor face a series of restrictions in how they use time, space and social relations. They have to learn a different set of rules and codes of conduct. Also, because they often live in informal sectors, they are prone to environmental and life hazards as their safety and security are impacted by inadequate urban planning. The inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods are abandoned by the state and they suffer from different forms of violence, among them structural violence. They live in conditions of precarity and vulnerability because they are exposed to social and political forces that they cannot fully control. All these problems generate trauma which the protagonists of the reportage books by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda share with the wider audience in the cultural trauma narrative.

The books of reportage by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda show the reality of the inhabitants of *comunas populares* and the intertwined dynamics of social exclusion and proliferation of violence in their lives. The relationships between poverty, exclusion, urban informality and violence are by no means direct or automatic; however, they form a backdrop to violence and fear in the sense that they lower barriers and inhibitions and tend to make non-violent practices less attractive and legitimate. Poor people look for alternative economic opportunities and often get involved in drug-based organized crime. Reading the reportage of cultural trauma, one sees that trauma is the outcome of a constellation of life experiences and that it may arise both from an acute event and a persisting social condition (Erikson, 1994, p. 228). The insidious trauma is often the suffering of people belonging to non-Western or minority cultures. They also must be given due recognition so that trauma studies can redeem its promise of ethical effectiveness (see Bond & Craps, 2020).

In the reality of the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods of Medellín, living conditions are often a source of trauma. Medellín is one of the main destinations for internally displaced Colombians. The peasants, the poor, the displaced

[6] Megacities are usually defined on the basis of their population size, with a minimum of 5 million inhabitants; however, Koonings and Krujit (2009, pp. 2-3) do not base their understanding of the conurbation on its demographic size and "consider urban spaces to constitute a megacity if their size reflects a certain pattern of social and economic problems."

who arrived in Medellín built their shacks wherever and however they could, without adhering to any urban planning norms. Some built their houses out of boards and cardboard, others had the luxury of brick, cement and eternit roofs. Makeshift networks of paths and stairs, smuggled electricity, no water supply or sewage—these are very often the living conditions of the poor and marginalized denizens of Medellín. In his reportage, Aricapa describes their reality, and based on the example of Esperanza shows their precarious quality of life:

> Esperanza had been living for a year in the sector that had been Medellín's garbage dump [...]. They called it the Moravia dump, because at that time the garbage was not subjected to any sanitary treatment. It was simply deposited in the open air in overlapping layers that over the years became a mountain, where legions of vultures fought over the leftovers and waste with the multitude of people who came to recycle. The expansion of the city to the north made this dump unsustainable, so it was closed. But it was only after it was closed that dozens, hundreds of homeless families moved in [...], they built their huts in which they lived at the mercy of everything that sprouted from the ground: flammable gases that in an ill-fated spark turned into fire, cockroaches of heroic sizes, nauseating vapors that gave no respite [...]. And, of course, at the mercy of the punctual visit of the rats.[7] (Aricapa, 2015, p. 21)

The economics of mass urbanization and the high concentration of impoverished people on sites unsuitable for human habitation increased human vulnerability to natural hazards and created the conditions for what Anderson (2011, p. 6) calls "mega-disasters". In Anderson's terms, disaster is the opposition to defined normality. Furthermore, disaster is related to loss, psychological or material, the absence of hope, self-esteem or love, as much as that of food, employment, housing or education. To live constantly in an "underdeveloped" place is also to be in a permanent state of disaster. One could say that in the marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín, there is a kind of permanent state of catastrophe that calls into question the existence of any notion of "normality." In such situations, people are vulnerable not only to health hazards and the trauma of living conditions but also to different forms of deviant and violent behavior.

4. Criminal gangs and *sicarios* as the results of precariousness

Poverty is not the only cause of violence in Medellín, but it is not a coincidence that the poorest neighborhoods are where violence and crime occur. Structural violence, which operates routinely, overloads people's daily lives and limits their life chances (Jaramillo Morales, 2015, pp. 57-58). Criminal gangs (*combos*)

[7] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

emerge in unplanned neighborhoods without public services, where the critical material situation of their inhabitants influences the decision of young people to join a gang. Many young people are voluntarily or involuntarily involved in illegal businesses, which is confirmed by this excerpt from *Nuestro otro infierno*:

> Arley, for example, was forced into the *combo*. They offered him a grave, a gun or banishment. He chose the gun. The same one with which he earned money and became known for his bravery during the confrontations. The gang gave him those options, but what did society and the state give him instead? I suppose little. Probably, if he had had other options such as a job or a place at a university, he would be alive. In Medellín they teach that you have to have money, a motorbike, a car and women any way you can, as easily and quickly as possible. The *combos* provide that in a very short time. (Castañeda Arboleda, 2017, n.p.)

The description above confirms what Duncan and Eslava (2015) argue about poverty. Poverty influences the decision to join a criminal gang, but it is also the economic ambition of young people as living according to the law does not provide them with opportunities and they have limited opportunities to advance in social hierarchies. That is why they follow a criminal career to gain an important position within gangs that provide them with wealth, power and prestige. Membership in criminal organizations can generate enormous profits. For this reason, generations of young people form violent criminal subcultures in many locations in Medellín:

> These gangs were made up of two or three older men and a pack of little boys who had grown up to be thugs; 13, 14, 15-year-olds doing the Devil's work. They collected taxes of two thousand pesos a week from the shops and five thousand from the public buses, they searched the streets as if they were the law, they robbed delivery trucks. (Salazar, 1992, p. 56)

The gangs aspire to regulate the life of many communities, control flows of resources from criminal economies, impose rules of coexistence in the community and provide a series of public services such as “justice” and security that would not otherwise be available. There are places where alternative normative systems and different socialization parameters are established with the use of violence as a private resource to impose order and claim a superior position in the social hierarchy. An example of this is the description from Salazar’s book:

> When I returned to the neighborhood in 1988, what I found was the problem of gangs. Kids that I had known when I was a kid had turned into terrible muggers and murderers. […] One day I was in the shop when one of those little gangs arrived, with revolvers, and they broke in. They stole some money, the television, the sound system. They came out very cool, threatening me so I wouldn’t tell the police. (Salazar, 1992, p. 46)

In situations of pervasive and severe inequality, the urban poor are undervalued and marginalized, and their everyday living conditions increase the potential for conflict, crime or violence (Winton, 2004, pp. 157-182). Medellín is a city with a network of violent actors who seriously affect the communities in which they operate. The city has experienced a multiplicity of conflicts that are articulated in specific ways, including wars between youth gangs (Duncan & Eslava, 2015, p. 15):

> In the neighborhood there have been many gangs [...] And as the song says: This bed ain't big enough for everyone [...]. The wars have been tough, whole families have been killed for revenge. They put me in a tub of water up to the back of my neck. They left me there all night freezing my balls off, and ran electric current through me too. They kept asking me about the others in the gang, who the leaders were, but I didn't say a word. "Think you're a real tough guy, don't you, you fairy," they shouted, kicking me as hard as they could in the stomach. (Salazar, 1992, pp. 29-30)

The aforementioned quote clearly illustrates that hatred, revenge, desire for recognition and retribution triggered endless small wars between the gangs. Such conflicts mean loss of life and pervasive fear:

> For some years now war has visited every corner of the neighborhood. A war of young people, almost children. A gang war that has left so many dead over the years that everyone has lost count. A war that generated another one [...]. In each street three, four, five have died... because of the shooting of the gangs, because of the shooting of the law, because of the shooting of self-defense, because of the shooting of... (Salazar, 1992, pp. 29-30)

The allure of conspicuous consumerism also draws poor, jobless youth into drug-trafficking activities and youth gangs. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Medellín cartel, youth gangs diversified their activities and services to include a variety of smaller drug trafficking, organized crime and urban crime networks. These new social actors come from the very margins of society, from *barrios populares*. Both *Nuestro otro infierno* and *No nacimos pa' semilla* reveal the world of young people who, associated with gangs, have terrorized Medellín, and especially the poor inhabitants who had no means or resources to escape the terror. Young people joined the ranks of armed groups due to the lack of social policies and opportunities; the absence of the state reinforced the illegal mentality. Thanks to their participation in contract killings and drug trafficking, the youth of low-income neighborhoods can "be protagonists in a society that has closed its doors on them" (Salazar, 2001, p. 187). They get involved in crime because it is an attractive world for them, with easy money, possibilities for promotion, pretty women and parties organized by their bosses. They turned life, both their own and that of their victims, into an object of economic transaction. This is the legacy of Pablo Escobar, who is the role

model for many poor and marginalized youths. Young people from *barrios populares* had to choose between an economy of dispossession and unemployment, and the so-called narcotics economy (Herlinghaus, 2009, pp. 106). Drug trafficking became the reference model, unlike the traditional one of studies and work. Many young people from the marginalized neighborhoods incorporated death as an everyday element and consider life as a disposable object. In neighborhoods where conditions of precarity are prevalent, death is normalized and life is devalued.

All this occurs when certain people are consistently subjected to conditions of poverty, violence and disenfranchisement, and this, in turn, leads to a desensitization to their suffering and struggles. Judith Butler argues that the differential distribution of precariousness creates frameworks that shape people's perceptions and recognition of certain individuals as full subjects deserving of rights and dignity. Individuals from marginalized communities often fall outside of these frameworks and are not seen as fully human or worthy of consideration. This dehumanization allows for their suffering to be disregarded, as their lives are not deemed valuable or intelligible within dominant societal conceptions of what constitutes a valuable life. Their experiences are rendered invisible or insignificant within the broader social discourse, which perpetuates their marginalization and systemic inequalities. Those unrecognizable people, whose lives we do not consider valuable, are forced to bear the brunt of hunger, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement and differential exposure to violence and death (Butler, 2009, p. 25). And this is exactly what happens with the youth of the *comunas populares* of Medellín. When the deaths of civilians are treated as collateral damage, when there is no law, no justice but insecurity, violence and impotence instead, and very little is done against reality in poor neighborhoods, then some lives are really treated as if they were not worth living, not worth protecting. Salazar cites the words of a priest from one of the parishes in *comuna popular* of Medellín that confirm the value of life for the hit men:

> They know they are *desechables*, disposable. When they join a group they know they won't last long, but nothing stops them. They start to think of death as something natural. You see them from funeral to funeral. Today they say goodbye to one, tomorrow another, and the day after tomorrow… There are days in this parish of three and four funerals, all of them youngsters. […] It doesn't matter if you die, after all, you were born to die. But to die at once, so as not to have to feel so much misery and so much loneliness. (Salazar, 1992, p. 107, 31)

Instead of suffering from structural violence and dying slowly in misery, they choose to kill and most probably be killed in the foreseeable future.

5. Lack of security and socio-cultural damage

The inhabitants of *comunas populares* suffer from a lack of human security in enclaves that obey a totally different set of rules and codes of conduct, where the inhabitants have to face a series of restrictions in how they use time, space and social relations. Their neighborhoods or districts become stigmatized as no-go areas, while their inhabitants are, in turn, stigmatized as "undesirables." Portraying daily life in the urban areas of the city of Medellín, the authors of the reportage show a feeling of generalized helplessness and risk of paralysis. Violence rewrites the conditions of citizenship in poor communities of Medellín and destroys the social fabric, creating institutional disorder. Violence is one of the daily phenomena that most contribute to the traumatization and deterioration of the quality of life of the inhabitants of *barrios populares*. The books of reportage written by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda demonstrate that fear, risk and anxiety are deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary Medellín, shaping all kinds of social practices. An interviewee from Castañeda's book observes the change in habits when the wars between youth gangs began in Manrique:

> Years ago the weekend habit was different. We preferred to go to see my uncles Jaime and Giovanny's football games or, in my case and that of my cousins, go to a bar. We used to go out with our partners or we looked for a house to throw a party. But in Santa Inés, fear became a jailer who kept us at home. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

Similar cases are described by María Clara in Aricapa's reportage about Comuna 13:

> And the atmosphere in the street at night [...] was one of fear. No one with their instincts in order ventured out after nine o'clock. Only the ownerless dogs and the militiamen who, with or without hoods, patrolled the corners. It was a curfew that no one had decreed and to which the whole neighborhood submitted. And not only El Salado and Nuevos Conquistadores, but also Veinte de Julio and Independencias, La Divisa, La Loma, not to mention Belencito Corazón, where the conflict was burning. [...] It was dangerous to be there at night, within easy reach of a stray bullet. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 156-157)

It is visible here that violence changes the habits of citizens. As Nancy Cárdia (quoted in Rotker, 2002, p. 19) observes, people move to other places, stop using public transportation, withdraw from community life, and become more fearful of the stereotypical adolescent.[8] The inhabitants of the marginalized neighborhoods suffered socio-cultural damage that altered their ties, social relation-

[8] In the period between the 1980s and 2000s, local youth became key social actors both as perpetrators of crimes and as victims of violence. The event that marked this generational change

ships and ways of living. From the experiences narrated and the reflections of the victims, one can understand that because of violence, people change their customs and use different measures to protect their lives. Such ways of surviving are illustrated by the habits of one of the denizens of Santa Inés neighborhood:

> Gilberto worked as chief archivist at Social Security's San Ignacio headquarters. When his son arrived by taxi, he took the same vehicle but slept in his office. He preferred that to going out in the middle of a shooting the next day. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

Some protection measures were easier to apply, others less so. In *barrios* populares, during the armed conflict or the wars between youth gangs, different armed actors also usurped and used the houses for purposes that represented a kind of "profanation" for their owners:

> The war could not have been bloodier; there was such control of the territory that it was impossible to cross borders. The response of the *combos* was to take over the terraces of the houses as trenches and fight for nights on end, to such an extent, says Alicia, that: -We became experts. In the end we could distinguish the sound of shots fired from revolvers, pistols or rifles. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.**)**

People could not feel safe in their homes which ceased to be shelters, places of tranquility and comfort. The paramilitaries, guerrillas or members of other gangs could enter with force, rob, kill the inhabitants or rape the women and girls. Also, many civilians died from stray bullets. This is how Luz Estela remembers her life in Comuna 13:

> There were days when I couldn't go out, and I had to pay some boy to go to the shop to buy me a pound of rice or a bag of milk. And since our new house was made of wood, there were nights when we had to go to my parents' house at dawn because bullets could easily penetrate wood. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 212)

All this limited the realization of their productive activities, the movement and the social use of the spaces.

Numerous examples from the reportage by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda illustrate how violence has become part of daily life, thus showing that with the growth of the levels of violence, the naturalization and normalization of vio-

took place in April 1984, when two assassins, acting on the orders of the Medellín cartel, assassinated the Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. The image of the juvenile murderer on a motorcycle, an inhabitant of one of the poorest neighborhoods in Medellín, traveled throughout the country (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006, p. 1). Since that day, adolescents have been perceived as agents of violence.

lence also grow. Naturalization of violence is a process of getting used to different actions that are characterized by aggression and becomes a strategy to survive in a traumatized society, allowing violence to spread silently in the culture (López Bravo, 2017, pp. 111-126). This can be seen in the testimony of an inhabitant of Manrique in Castañeda's reportage:

> At first, she says, it was very hard to hear those gunshots and know that Luis, my daughter's husband, could be the one shooting. Or to think that one of those bullets could be killing him. Then I relaxed because you get used to it and it becomes a routine. (Castañeda, 2017, n.p.)

What Inés María narrates is another striking example of the daily nature of violence that has become a habit for many citizens of Medellín:

> Mum had to stay at my house for a while, while we were getting a ranch for her. And she hadn't even been there for three days when the first shooting in the neighborhood hit her. And it took her a while to get used to it. She heard gunshots and ran to hide in the back room, and she didn't understand why Manuel, the children and I didn't do the same. We were already used to the shootings and the dead, but she would hear that someone had been killed and she would start asking who it was, what he was doing, if he was known to the family. As if you knew. […] Eventually, she got used to it just like we did. She no longer ran to hide when she heard gunshots, unless they were very close. As she got used to it, she also got used to the dead, and the militiamen didn't seem so horrible to her anymore. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 93-94)

Victims often do not realize that what is being done to them is violence, perhaps because they have come to accept that what they are being subjected to is generalized, expected, culturally sanctioned, and therefore "normal." As Simpson puts it, in a hostile environment one can get used to almost anything, including injuries, so someone raised in the midst of turmoil or social decline may not recognize that they are being subjected to violence (Simpson, 1970, pp. 22-35). That is why the stories described by the journalists need to be read, heard and reflected upon.

Reading these books of reportage, one clearly sees that the living conditions, armed conflict, criminal gangs and wars between them produced injuries and alterations in social practices. People close the doors carefully every night, think about how they will interact with others on a night out, how they will get home. They also have evasive strategies planned in case of danger (see Rozema, 2007). Spaces and forms of meeting, associated with parties, celebrations and commemorations were lost or destroyed. The logic of war imposed mistrust, silence and isolation. Living amidst armed conflict or war brought direct consequences such as physical injuries and disruptions to daily life and routine mobility. Poor living conditions also lead people to greater insecurity and unpredictability in daily life. Fear of violence affects the quality of life in multiple

ways. As a form of chronic stress, fear of violence may also be a key mechanism affecting other physical and mental health outcomes during and after conflict, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Williams, Ghimire & Snedke, 2018, pp. 145-159).

6. Psychological and emotional damage

Traumatized people often scan the surrounding anxiously for signs of danger, erupting into explosive rages and reacting to ordinary sights and sounds, but at the same time all that nervous activity takes place against a numb gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness and a general shutting down of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm. The quote below from Esperanza's testimony shows what traumatic experiences the inhabitants of Medellín lived through and what responses the body provoked:

> I was about ten years old at the time, but I remember everything. I remember the dead, because at that time they killed a lot of people in this village, so many that the men from my house couldn't go out to the village or walk much on the roads.[…]. And because I was so clever, my father used to send me alone with three mules loaded with loads of coffee to sell them in the warehouses of the Federation of Coffee Growers. Because I was a child, they were not supposed to do anything to me. And nothing ever really happened to me. Seeing dead people was the only thing. Once I came across a herd of mules loaded with dead bodies on their way to the Cauca River, and twice I found corpses lying on the water basin. But what shocked me most was finding a head, all alone, strung on a fence post. That's worse than seeing a whole dead body. […] I got sick. I almost didn't sleep, my blood pressure was high and my nerves were on edge. (Aricapa, 2015, pp. 240-241)

What Esperanza's testimony clearly illustrates is that the inhabitants of Comuna 13 lived through a barbaric time. People found the mangled corpses of pregnant women, the elderly, children who had left school or other people along the roads when they were coming back from work in the middle of fire exchange. The children witnessed horrific events, such as the murder and torture of their parents and neighbors and the destruction of their homes and personal belongings. Young people describe Dantesque scenes, the tortures, the smell of blood— that have been inscribed in their memory, tormenting them in their dreams and altering their ability to pay attention, concentrate, remember and learn (¡BASTA YA! 2013, pp. 314–321). It is recognized that post-traumatic stress disorder can be acquired indirectly through witnessing traumatic events. It can affect people physically, emotionally and mentally. The events described in the quotes below, which show situations experienced by the children and youths in Medellín, can lead to cognitive and behavioral deficits, such as anxiety and long-term memory impairment:

> […] on two occasions we had to pass by dead bodies lying in the street. On one of those occasions, my little sister, Carolina, was so frightened by the sight of the dead body that she dropped the notebooks she was carrying in her hand, and they fell into the pool of blood. She had to pick them up and clean them. And it became very common to see people sleeping in class because of the late night shootings. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 152)

> A boy had come up and sat in front of me. He had not yet finished slumping into the chair when I saw a black hole surrounded by blood. He was pale, the wound seemed to breathe with a life of its own. […] A woman, the boy's mother, had come up with him, and she was on the verge of tears saying to him: "Calm down, son." But it was she who needed to calm down. Next to her was a man who seemed to be the father and he didn't say anything, he just looked with despair in his eyes. I don't know if the boy had a shirt, I only remember the blood that we all saw and smelled, and we were all as terrified as he was. (Aricapa, 2015, p. 222)

The violence in Medellín caused psychological and emotional damage resulting from the victimizations suffered. Victims are silenced, the social world of audiences shrinks and fear restricts the threshold of moral vision. Horror and barbarity reduce victims to dehumanized objects (Humprey, 2002, p. 86). Many children and young people lived through days of terror, endured loneliness, darkness and hunger, and not only witnessed violent events but were also subjected to them. Some methods of exercising violence can extremely destabilize people's lives, destroy their sources of support and make it impossible for them to work through mourning and regain stability and control over life projects, be they individual or collective (Aricapa, 2015, p. 288).

All the three books by Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda Arboleda show how different armed actors introduced their own rules, violated human rights and murdered residents with opposing political ideas. The books of reportage present the range of fears, violence and traumas produced and experienced in Medellín by the inhabitants of *barrios populares*. The reader learns that violence and traumas were as diverse as the people and spaces that make up the urban fabric. Different armed actors gained a strong presence in more than sixty neighborhoods in Medellín, and their death squads carried out cleansing campaigns (Riaño Alcalá, 2006, p. 54). The people of Comuna 13 often experienced selective assassinations by the militiamen: "several boys were accosted in the street or taken from their homes and shot to death, and signs of this kind were left beside them: for being a thief, for being vicious, for being a traitor …" (Aricapa, 2015, p. 42). Violence against the civilian population has been a tool used in a premeditated manner by different armed actors who want to achieve support and subordination. The testimonies presented by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda show that ordinary people were the ones who suffered the most. As the stories of the inhabitants of barrios populares of Medellín show, all the armed actors used the attack on the civilian population as a war or survival

strategy, using different forms of violence. The repertoire of violence included selective assassinations, massacres, forced disappearances, torture, threats, massive forced displacement, economic blockades, sexual violence, kidnappings, attacks against civilian property, looting and arbitrary arrests (¡BASTA YA! 2013, 35). This all created a situation in which violence became "banal" (see Pécaut, 1999). Although in everyday life, in the representations and perceptions of the city, the situation is simply called violence, it is in fact the result of a sum and superimposition of various forms of violence, from those perpetrated by armed conflict actors and organized crime actors to neighborhood violence (*Medellín, memorias de una guerra urbana*, 2017, p. 19). This article deals with all of them to show the more global spectrum of violence in Colombia, its continuity and its cyclical form.

7. Conclusion

The books of reportage written by Salazar, Aricapa and Castañeda Arboleda show the trauma of exclusion and violence the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods of Medellín experienced. They have been traumatized by violence in all its manifestations, inflicted on them by different armed actors, as well as the Colombian government. Aricapa's, Castañeda Arboleda's and Salazar's books answer the question of who is the responsible party for the trauma and list violations and different economic strains that constitute the pain that accompanies cultural trauma. The reportage contributes to a cultural narrative by painting a more vivid picture of the victims of the trauma and indicating vulnerable groups in society. It helps to revise the collective identity of the community affected by violence and exclusion and remember its past. This article looks at reportage as a practice used to deal with memory as a way to heal trauma, demand justice and build peace. The reportage can be treated as what Alexander calls a foundation story, which is recognized by the whole community and makes it possible to mark an important and distinctive caesura in its history. It constitutes a new narrative that concentrates on the daily life of the marginalized inhabitants of *barrios populares* who form the so-called "carrier group" which plays a key role in the process of recognition, trauma healing and demanding justice as they possess certain discursive abilities to articulate claims about the shape of their social reality (Parish and Rugo, 2021, p. 2). Thanks to the work undertaken by the "carrier groups," a new "model story" is created about a particular event/events. If the new narrative proves to be sufficiently carrying—through "symbolic extensions" and "emotional identifications"—there is a routinization and institutionalization of memory, whose framework extends beyond the scope of the community constituting the starting point of the trauma process. The "carriers" of the meanings and representations of violence in Medellín also have another task before them: to make the story competitive with the already existing narratives about the past. It seems

that the authors of the reportage are concerned with everyday life, not a particular traumatic event: surviving, suffering from different forms of exclusion, protecting children from falling into street gangs, etc. The transition from family, private memory, often handed down orally, to community myth takes place through a history that codifies, legitimizes and validates the story. Then, personal experiences become a common history that can bring into play other emotions, such as solidarity. They create a mixture of common feelings for moral repudiation, which could be translated into actions of reparation and recognition.

According to Assmann & Shortt (2012, p. 4), to achieve reconciliation and social integration it is important to study how citizens of various social groups remember or refer to their experiences of violence, exclusion and marginalization. Reportage plays a significant role in the representation and the critical reception of the past, in social and political change. Reportage might guarantee integral reparation, solidarity towards victims and peace building, in a bid to rebuild the social fabric broken by the armed conflict, narcotrafficking and injustices perpetrated by the state. Aricapa, Salazar and Castañeda accumulate many stories of violation and embed the individual stories in a larger cultural trauma narrative. The traumatized community needs the narrative of their suffering, in which they will find a space to discuss the reasons, the pain and the loss they have experienced in recent history; this is also a space for reflection, for naming and claiming the experience and bearing witness. Recognizing their suffering and cultural trauma, the society might be able to answer Gonzalo Arango's question: "Is there no way that Colombia, instead of killing its children, makes them worthy of living?" (Arango, 1974, p. 125).

Aricapa's, Salazar's and Castañeda's reportage is a producer and a product of public memory and attempts to provide a social understanding of history among members of a community united by experience. It is an active agent in historical documentation and it goes beyond its reporting function, becoming a new form of "remembrance" of the past that helps create a mnemonic community which shares the experience communicated through narrative, in the case of the reportage analysed in this article, in an attempt to come to terms with the intensely disturbing experience of violence and exclusion. Speaking out for them is both a political and a therapeutic act, and as such it is a claim to power. Trauma narratives point to the unjustified violence done to people. They are stories in search of a voice to stop the torment of the solitude in not talking. They liberate individual memory, which is essential in establishing justice (see Roberts and Holmes, 1999).

Funding

This research has been supported by a grant received from the National Science Centre (NCN) as part of "Miniatura" funding scheme (no. 2021/05/X/HS2/0002).

References

Alexander, J. C., Ayerman, R. Giesen, B., Smelser, N. J. & Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity.* University of California Press.

Alexander, J. C. & Butler Breese, E. (2011). Introduction: On Social Suffering and Its Cultural Construction. In R. Eyerman, J. C. Alexander and E. Butler Breese (Eds.), *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering* (pp. xi–xxxv). Paradigm Publishing.

Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma. In J. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. Smelser and P. Sztompka (Eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (pp. 1-30). University of California Press.

Anderson, M. D. (2011). *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America.* University of Virginia Press.

Arango, G. (1974). Medellín, a solas contigo. In *Obra negra. Contiene prosas para leer en la silla eléctrica y otras sillas*. Selección Antológica de Jotamario, Cuadernos Latinoamericanos (pp. 120-127). Ediciones Carlos Lohlé.

Aricapa, R. (2015). *Comuna 13. Crónica de una guerra urbana. De Orión a la Escombrera.* Ediciones B.

Assmann, A. & Shortt, L. (2012). Memory and Political Change: Introduction. In A. Assmann and L. Shortt (Eds.), *Memory and Political Change* (pp. 1-14). New Palgrave Macmillan.

¡BASTA YA! (2013). *Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad*. Imprenta Nacional.

Benjamin, W. (1999). The Storyteller. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Iluminations* (H. Zorn, Trans.) (pp. 83–107). Pimlico.

Bhabha, H. K. (2014). The Right to Narrate, *Harvard Design Magazine,* 38. www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/38/the-right-to-narrate

Bond, L. & Craps, S. (2020). *Trauma*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* Verso.

Castañeda Arboleda, J. C. (2017). *Nuestro otro infierno: violencia y guerra en Manrique.* EAFIT, Kindle.

Davis, C & Meretoja, H. (Eds.). (2020). *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma.* Routledge.

Duncan, G. & Eslava, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Territorio, crimen, comunidad. Heterogeneidad del homicidio en Medellín*. Centro de Análisis Político—Universidad EAFIT.

Erikson, K. T. (1994). *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters.* W.W. Norton & Co.

Eyerman, R., Alexander, J. C. & E. Butler Breese (Eds.). (2011). *Narrating Trauma. On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. Paradigm Publishing.

Eyerman, R. & Sciortino, G. (2020) "Conclusion". In R. Eyerman & G. Sciortino (Eds.), *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization* (pp. 205-228). Palgrave.

Felman, S. (1995). Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (pp. 13–44). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory* (L. Coser, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Herlinghaus, H. (2009). *Violence Without Guilt. Ethical Narratives from the Global South*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Humprey, M. (2002). *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation. From Terror to Trauma.* Routledge.

Jelin, E. (2003). *State Repression and the Labors of Memory.* University of Minnesota.

Jaramillo Morales, J. D. (2015). *Entrando y saliendo de la violencia: construcción del sentido joven en Medellín desde el graffiti y el hip-hop*. Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

Koonings, K. & Krujit, D. (2005). Armed actors, organized violence and state failure in Latin America: a survey of issues and arguments. In K. Koonings & D. Krujit (Eds.), *Armed actors. Organized violence and state failure in Latin America* (pp. 5-15). Zed Books.

Koonings, K. & Krujit, D. (2007). *Fractured cities: Social exclusion, urban violence and contested spaces in Latin America.* Zed Books.

Koonings, K. & Krujit, D. (2009). *Megacities: the politics of urban exclusion and violence in the global South.* Zed Books.

Koonings, K. & Kruijt, D. (2015). *Violence and Resilience in Latin American Cities.* Zed Books.

López Bravo, D. (2017). De la naturalización de la violencia a la banalidad del mal. *Ratio Juris*, 12: 24 Enero—Junio, 111-126.

McGlothlin, E. (2020). Perpetrator Trauma. In C. Davis & H. Meretoja (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (pp. 100-110). Routledge.

Medellín, memorias de una guerra urbana. (2017). Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica CNMH, Corporación Región, Ministerio del Interior, Alcaldía de Medellín, Universidad EAFIT, Universidad de Antioquia, https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/medellin-memorias-de-una-guerra-urbana.pdf

Olick, J. K. (2014). Reflections on the Underdeveloped Relations between Journalism and Memory Studies. In B. Zelizer & K. Tenenboim-Weinblatt (Eds.), *Journalism and Memory* (pp. 17-31). Palgrave Macmillan.

Parish, N. & Rugo, D. (2021). Memories from the margins: violence and counter narratives—introduction. *Journal of the British Academy*, 9: 3, 1-9. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/journal-british-academy/9s3/

Pécaut, D. (1999). From the banality of violence to real terror: The case of Colombia. In K. Koonings and D. Kruijt (Eds.), *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (pp. 141–67). Zed Books.

Riaño Alcalá, P. (2006). *Jóvenes, memoria y violencia en Medellín. Una antropología del recuerdo y el olvido Medellín*. Universidad de Antioquia e Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia.

Roberts, G. & Holmes, J. (Eds.). (1999). Healing Stories. Narrative in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy. Oxford University Press.

Rotker, S. (2002). Cities written by violence. Introduction. In S. Rotker (Ed.), *Citizens of Fear. Urban Violence in Latin America* (pp. 7-22). Rutgers University Press.

Rozema, R. (2007). Medellín. In K. Koonings & D. Krujit (Eds.), *Fractured cities: Social exclusion, urban violence and contested spaces in Latin America* (pp. 57-70). Zed Books.

Salazar, A. (1990). *No nacimos pa' semilla*. CINEP.

Salazar, A. (1992). *Born to Die in Medellin* (N. Caistor, Trans.). Latin American Bureau.

Salazar, A. (2001). *La Parábola de Pablo. Auge y caída de un gran capo del narcotráfico*. Planeta.

Simpson, E. (1970). Social Norms and Aberrations: Violence and Some Related Social Facts. *Ethics*, 81: 1, 22–35.

Spivak, G. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.

Stone Peters, J. (2015). "Literature", the "Rights of Man", and Narratives of Atrocity: Historical Backgrounds to the Culture of Testimony. In E. Swanson Goldberg and A. Schultheis Moore (Eds.), *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (pp. 19–40). Routledge.

Strejilevich, N. (2006). Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 28: 3, August 2006, 701-713.

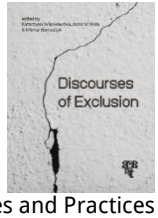
Sütterlin, N. A. (2020). History of Trauma Theory. In. C. Davis & H. Meretoja (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (pp.11-22). Routledge.

Whitlock, G. (2015). Postcolonial Life Narratives. Testimonial Transactions. Oxford University Press.

Williams, N., Ghimire, D. & Snedker, K. A. (2018). Fear of Violence during Armed Conflict: Social Roles and Responsibilities as Determinants of Fear. *Soc Sci Res*, Mar; 71, 145–159.

Winton, A. (2004). Urban Violence. A guide to the literature. *Environment and Urbanization*, 16:2, 165–182.

Anna Maria Karczewska is Assistant Professor at the University of Białystok, where she teaches in the Department of Comparative Literature. She holds a Ph.D. in cultural studies from the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. She has published articles related to Latin American culture and Latin American literature.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Self-Creation of Other-Than-Human Identities: A Netnographic Analysis of Identity Labels in the Alterhuman Community on Tumblr

Joanna Ziemna
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
joanna.ziemna@icloud.com

Received 2023-12-30; accepted 2024-11-07; published Online First 2024-11-15.

Abstract

The paper discusses the alterhuman community composed of individuals who, despite having human bodies, identify as other-than-human. Such identities range from earthly animals to mythological or otherworldly beings such as elves, dragons, aliens or angels, or even immaterial ideas. While alterhumanity is not inherently an online phenomenon, the community is based mainly online, which allows them to discover labels that describe their identities and discuss their lived experience with non-humanity. The paper is based on a project completed in 2021. This research explores the phenomenon of alterhuman identity, including but not limited to otherkin, therian or plurals, focusing on non-human identities. The study looked at the ways in which members of this community produce and use labels which aid in categorizing one's experience. Through observational netnography with elements of content analysis of existing data gathered from identity labels included in self-introductions on 200 Tumblr blogs, the paper examines the relationship between identifying as alterhuman and being part of (other) social minorities.

Keywords: personal identity, alterhuman, Internet-based communities, non-human identities, netnography

1. Introduction

> My name is Adriel and I was a (fallen) angel
>
> I used a masculine form, with short black hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. I had a rather athletic physique, but I was of average size. I had two wings and I remember them being quite large. They were navy blue from the top with pale blue undersides, and they turned pure black after I fell. …
>
> After falling, I remember feeling lost, betrayed, and furious. Though I know I eventually grounded myself again, the anger remained through it all. I may have started going by Azriel in order to distance myself from my previous life. …
>
> I was often sarcastic and cocky, enjoying the thrill of flight and of victory. Though I tried to be compassionate, my temper often got in the way of this, and it, unfortunately, meant I struggled to make close friendships. The angels who did stay I remember fondly, and hope to find them again in this life. …[1]

In an apostrophe to the alterhuman community, one of its members states: "Your identity doesn't exist for other people" (therianimal, 2022)—it does not depend on others' approval, nor does it require legitimization or, in other words, being "valid" to be useful to someone. In some very inclusive communities, online personal identities are presented in a form of short strings of "microlabels"—hyperspecific terms that describe very particular experiences with gender, sexuality, mental health, and racial, ethnic or religious identity (*Microlabel*, 2023). Such labels often transcend the common understanding of various personal identity categories (e.g. "xenogenders," which are gender identities outside of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, going beyond the human understanding of gender; see *Xenogender*, 2023).

This paper aims to investigate experiences of exclusion of other-than-human beings.[2] While the focus is mostly on non-human identities (e.g., otherkin, therian, and so on), this work is not limited to only this facet of the alterhuman community. Since this community on Tumblr attaches great importance to identity labels, especially in the self-introduction parts of their blogs, this research looks into what types of labels are common for alterhuman beings. Self-bestowed labels are a useful tool, helpful with exploring and understanding one's own identity, and the way their identities make them different from the

[1] The quote comes from a self-introduction from one of the studied blogs with original spelling preserved. All such quotes cited in this paper have been anonymized (including heavily redacting them to assure their unsearchability).

[2] Not all alterhumans are comfortable with being referred to as "person" because for many non-humans it insinuates a certain level of humanity which they do not identify with. This paper will use the following terms instead: "entity", "being" or "individual", as more inclusive terms that are often preferred by the community and its members.

rest of the society, as well as an accessible source of information on the variety of most influential experiences in the lives of the members of this very globally scattered community.

2. Not wholly human

"Alterhuman" is an umbrella term for any experience that is "beyond the scope of what is traditionally considered 'being human'" (Alt+H, 2019).[3] This may mean feeling a strong connection to other-than-human beings on a psychological, spiritual or philosophical level, feeling as if one was born in the wrong—human—body (often described as being "transspecies," similar to the transgender experience), having memories of another entity in one's past life, and many more. This term was preceded by "otherkin," which denotes identifying as various fantastical or mystical creatures (Scribner, 2013, p. 24). According to Orion Scribner (2012, p. 26), the earliest use of the term "otherkin" was in the early 1990s. "Alterhuman" is, however, a rather recent term, coined in 2014 (phasmovore, 2014b), and although it has not initially gained much traction (vagabond-sun, n.d.), it is now considered broader and more inclusive to the variety of other-than-human experiences.[4] This change was a consequence of a discussion on whether "otherkin" can function as a general term for all other-than-human identities (House of Chimeras, 2021; phasmovore, 2014a), such as therian (individuals who identify as, usually, earthly animals or sometimes plants), factkin and fictionkin (those who identify as real people or fictional characters, respectively), as well as otherheartedness (strongly identifying *with*—instead of *as*—another being), copinglink (identifying as alterhuman as a form of coping mechanism for mental illnesses and disorders or trauma); or non-human alters in plural systems,[5] and many more. This list is by no means exhaustive since the various kinds of other-than-human experiences are vast and new labels and microlabels are being continuously created; however, it catalogues the most commonly encountered identities in the alterhuman community.

[3] According to the person who coined the term "alterhuman" (phasmovore, 2014b), it was not originally meant to be used as a synonym for "non-human" (X-RDS, 2023b) because the latter is more narrow in meaning. However, since the differences between various terms are rather subtle and their proper application can in some cases be based on technicalities, this paper uses "non-human," "other-than-human," and "alterhuman" interchangeably.

[4] Other similar terms have been proposed in the meantime: alterbeing, otherbeing, Other+, and so on (*Alterhuman*, 2023), however, they are used less frequently.

[5] "Plurality" or "multiplicity" often refers to dissociative identity disorder (DID), which is a disorder that, according to the DSM-V, is often linked to severe trauma early in childhood development (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, pp. 334–335). Plurals often call the collective of their identities "systems", and their other personalities—their "alters" or "headmates".

3. Social Media

Online profiles that we might come across on our Facebook walls or X (formerly known as Twitter) timelines are short and concise: we are meant to presume who the user is by reading all of the information that they shared in the profile summary just below their picture, as well as the content posted on the profile. Facebook in particular provides a rather small amount of specific types of affordances in building an online profile: a form with prepared questions about one's education, current occupation, relationships, and similar life experiences and milestones (see Arfini et al., 2021). Additionally, Facebook is very community-oriented or, more specifically, interaction-oriented, compared to services that provide a space for writing online diaries such as blogs and microblogs (mainly Tumblr and Pillowfort). This is not to say that Facebook or X cannot perform a similar function but that those services are more restrictive, with strict moderation of content or, in the latter's case, character limits per post. Tumblr, on the other hand, attempts to provide a space for sharing more free-form content while utilizing a much less advanced algorithm for curating the users' experience.

Krzysztof Abriszewski (2017), in his interpretation of audiophile internet forums from the perspective of Berger's and Luckmann's "Social Construction of Reality," views such a forum as an example of a dynamic symbolic universe. As such, it forms and formulates knowledge, and offers, among others, validations, arguments, counterarguments and countervalidations during interactions with other users (2017, p. 140). That is facilitated by the immateriality and interactive nature of Internet websites, such as forums, Facebook groups or microblogging platforms. Such an environment lends itself to expressing one's personality and experiences by allowing its users to hide behind a nickname and freely partake in discourses, roaming around various personal blogs, becoming a member of scattered and fragmented communities at will, and detaching from them a moment later (see Kończykowska & Ziemna, 2021).

Tumblr, on the other hand, is a microblogging website, which gathers all personal blogs on a single platform and allows interactions between users. As it is a social media network, the users can interact with each other by commenting under a post, sharing new or unoriginal content (the latter is known as „reblogging" —the original posts get shared, often with added commentary from other users), and sending direct messages. The users can also follow blogs or tags as well as block them, which results in curating one's dashboard.

Tags are a crucial form of communication on Tumblr. Besides assigning a thematic category to content in the form of descriptive tags (which describe the content of a post), it is common to use that space for commentary tags, which facilitate sharing opinions, reactions, and meta-commentary in a less public manner. The latter are used as a method of replying to the original post without the commentary getting added to the post itself —in other words, commentary

tags do not become a part of the original post when it is further reblogged, so their content can be more personal.[6] The former is used for categorizing posts, which facilitates the searching process and allows for curating one's dashboard by filtering the available content. Due to the affordances available on Tumblr, it seems to be the most appropriate medium for gathering information on personal experiences, next only to private blogs and, perhaps, forums, whose popularity has significantly decreased with the emergence of other kinds of social media. The relative lack of popularity among the mainstream, the users' belief in the absence of an algorithm that curates each dash (for example, neilgaiman, 2023), and the perceived anonymity provided by the website (mainly through nicknames) all seem to support the practice of treating the platform as an equivalent of a personal diary by its users.

4. Categories and the self

Social interactionism claims that interactions between an individual and their environment influence people's behaviours as well as their sense of identity. For G. H. Mead, the self is a social process divided in two phases: the "I" and the "me." Mead (1972) defines the difference as follows: "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (p. 175). The way others view me through the relationship of other actors (such as my family, my surroundings, rules that function in my country) to myself —is what constitutes "me." The "I" appears for a short moment in reaction to a stimulus: "The 'I,' then, […] is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual" (p. 177). The responses of "I" are changing dynamically, often differing from reactions to similar situations from the past, but the "I" exists only during the present, in the time of taking action, never knowable in the moment. However, through retrospection we can gain consciousness of our selves: "It is only after we have acted that we know what we have done; it is only after we have spoken that we know what we have said" (p. 196), and it is only when apprehended in memory and objectified that the "I" becomes knowable—through the "me" (p. 174). The "me" is the more passive and continuous phase; it is conventional and habitual, and those habits, "those responses which everybody has" are necessary for the individual to be a member of a community (pp. 197–198). However, only together the "I" and the "me" constitute a whole self.

[6] Tags can be seen by the original poster, the reblogger and those who access the post directly through the reblogger's blog. They are not visible under other users' reblogs of the post. Using tags as a method of commentary, thus, limits engagement with the reblogger's thoughts—the only way to interact with them is by screenshotting the tags and posting the picture in another reblog.

A similar approach to social constructivism is represented by John Turner, whose Self-Categorization Theory is based on the concept of self-stereotyping —a process of applying categories to one's self (Turner & Reynolds, 2012, p. 442). This occurs in two circumstances, differentiated by the context of group membership: "[w]ork from this perspective emphasizes the role that social identity salience (i.e., the definition of the self in terms of group membership shared with other people) plays in the stereotyping process. One crucial determinant of salience is fit, the degree to which a social categorization matches reality" (Haslam et al., 1999, p. 810), which occurs in two aspects. The first one is the comparative fit, for which "[s]hared social identities provide the frame of reference for the perceived intragroup similarities and differences that form the comparative basis of personal identity" (Reynolds & Turner, 2006, p. 242). Therefore, by the nature of their atypical identities, the alterhuman individuals notice their differences from others, both human and non-human. The second aspect is the normative fit, which refers to "the shared norms, beliefs, and world-views from which the meanings of personal identities are constructed" (2006, p. 242). Accordingly, what the alterhumans as a group believe (for example, what qualifies as an other-than-human identity, what are appropriate and inappropriate displays of alterhumanity, and so on) makes them a collective with common characteristics. The basis of those two processes is called depersonalization, which Haslam (2004) defines as "the process of self-stereotyping through which the self comes to be perceived as categorically interchangeable with other ingroup members" (p. 30). In consequence, the "psychological distance between self and other" is shortened, while simultaneously demarcating polarity between the in-group and the out-group (Onorato & Turner, 2002, p. 155). This leads to stereotyping of both parties —the in-group and the out-group —by each individual on either side of the interaction (especially in case of a conflict), focusing on the most common characteristics of each group, and viewing themselves through the lens of those particular traits.

However, when creating labels which properly describe their identities, alterhumans seem to be most concerned with the in-group normative fit—finding others who understand what they are going through. Thereby, discovering new identity labels and comparing one's life experiences with those categories creates what Hacking (1996) calls a "feedback loop"—a causal relation between people and their descriptors. The basis of such feedback loop is constituted by the concept of *acting under a description*, which —simply put —refers to an action that an individual intends to perform under that description (Hacking, 1998, p. 235). However, an appearance of new descriptions opens up the way for new ways to act: "[w]hen new intentions become open to me, because new descriptions, new concepts, become available to me, I live in a new world of opportunities" (1998, p. 236). In other words, finding a label that describes one's identity leads to a transformation of the self and opens up new possibilities which this information provides.

5. Methods

This paper's aim is to enquire into the alterhuman community and possible experiences of exclusion which may accompany this identity. For this reason, this study examines social groups such entities may belong to through their usage of labels in the self-introduction sections on their blogs. Such information is often provided in the most visited parts of one's blog, mainly the blog's description, a variation of "about me" pages, including pinned posts at the top of the webpage, and the so-called "carrds" linked on the blog.

The data has been gathered throughout the entirety of May 2021. The collected data consists of information provided by Tumblr users from first 200 blogs which were found by searching by the "otherkin" tag. Initially, the project was mainly interested in otherkinity, which is the reason for choosing that particular tag. However, during the coding process it became clear that the relations between various other-than-human identities are more complex and intertwined than originally assumed. For this reason, this paper will resort to certain generalization of all alterhuman experiences (unless indicated otherwise) based on observations and information gathered from analyses and research conducted by the members of the community itself (this will be further explicated in the Discussion section).

The general content of the blog has not been taken into consideration because of the structure of the website, which has a limited search function and includes infinite scrolling in its design. This does not allow for finding information manually, especially on very active blogs that are several years old. An exception has been made for blogs with no mentions of the users' kintype (the type of non-human identity) in the description, "about me" pages or carrds, as long as the contents of their blogs are dedicated to their alterhuman identity and the blog itself has been found through browsing the "otherkin" tag.

For this study, the non-participant observational netnographic approach has been utilized. Furthermore, to see what kind of labels the users identify with and whether there are any significant co-occurrences, computer-assisted content analysis has been conducted on the data gathered from self-introductions provided by the blogs' owners. Additionally, the inductive approach to coding the data has been employed. The goal was to keep those categories open for those labels that the author of this paper has not encountered before. By creating most of the codes during the coding process itself, this approach allows for careful reading of the users' words without restricting their freedom of naming their experiences with chosen labels. For this very reason the original spelling, punctuation, and grammar in each quoted statement made by the users have been left unchanged.

Tumblr.com has been chosen as an exemplificatory medium because of both its structure, the affordances it provides, and prevalence of labels usage within

the community that, besides Facebook groups, Discord servers, or Reddit's subreddits, seems to be one of the biggest post-mailing lists collectives which does allow for interactions between the users (as opposed to Wiki pages and other websites that focus on gathering knowledge and resources). Nevertheless, unlike some other social media platforms, Tumblr provides a possibility to use nicknames and remain anonymous and does not force interactions. It also facilitates a wide range of types of content (text, photos, videos) and is characterized by a lesser focus on follower count and other types of audience interaction measurement.

It is crucial to note that since the data has been gathered from online sources through desk research, it may not always be up to date. Verifying the date of some content was not possible because it was not timestamped. Additionally, during this research process same blogs were archived or entirely deleted from the website. In a few instances, the users themselves acknowledged that the labels they used to identify with had changed or they stopped identifying as alterhuman altogether—in such cases, the most up to date information has been used.

6. Results

Alterhuman individuals experience discrimination for their atypical personal identities, often pathologized and equated to a mental disorder (Proctor, 2019, p. 90). Moreover, many users identify with labels that point to them being part of other social minorities: gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, religious, and linked to health issues: disability, neurodiversity, and mental illnesses. 57,5% of users stated this membership directly through labels. Additional 21% indicated a potential membership indirectly, mainly through gender neutral pronouns and neopronouns which might suggest gender identity outside of the male-female binary; some users identify as pet regressors—a form of age regression (but as pets), which one of the users in this study defined as a nonsexual practice used as "a coping/relaxing headspace," which suggests mental health struggles.[7] Less than a quarter of users (21,5%) did not mention being a part of any minority. It is worth pointing out that it does not necessarily mean that they are or are not members of any (un)privileged group. Some users shared very little personal information, limiting it to their pronouns and age.[8]

[7] Scientific literature on age regression, often called "agere," is very limited; most information comes from personal accounts (e.g. Alex, 2020). Age regression is usually described as a response to traumatic experience or psychiatric disorders (see O'Donovan et al., 2022).

[8] The purpose of providing such personal information as specifying one's age or describing oneself with the "adult"/"minor" categories is to protect minors from inappropriate interactions with adult users—a practice often undertaken by minors themselves. In other words, some personal information, such as age or pronouns, is often mentioned for such pragmatic reasons.

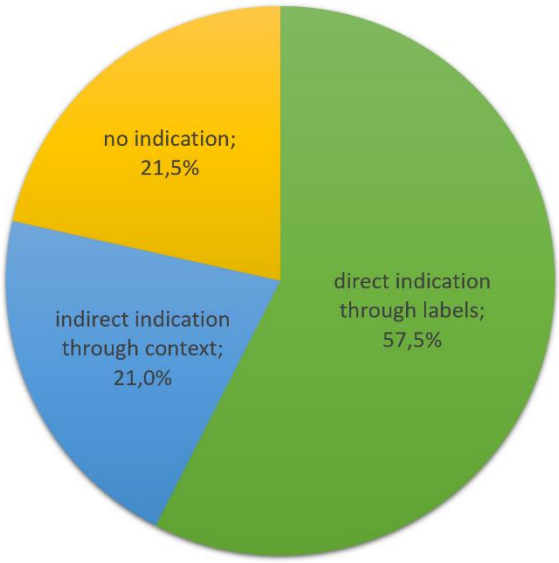


Chart 1: Indication of belonging to social minority groups

Additionally, some users provided a "DNI" (Do Not Interact) or "BYF" (Before You Follow) section. Such sections can suggest various life experiences; for example, while asking nazis not to follow one's blog is a fairly common practice on Tumblr, mentioning, for instance, "pro-ana" (content promoting anorexia and unhealthy weight loss) is less frequent, which might indicate personal struggles with the eating disorder. However, it has been decided that this data is too ambiguous and leaves too much to interpretation to qualify the user into the previous two categories.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
LGBTQIA+	98	49,00	85,22
Mental Illnesses and Disorders	56	28,00	48,70
Disability	13	6,50	11,30
People of Color	7	3,50	6,09
Religious minorities	5	2,50	4,35
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	115	57,50	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	85	42,50	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	200	100,00	-

Table 1: Minority groups membership

Out of all users who directly stated their underprivileged status, nearly a half is LGBTQIA+. Almost a third struggles with mental illnesses or disorders, with the biggest group (over ¼) being neurodivergent. The remaining 12,5% include individuals who mentioned being disabled (6,5%), POC (3,5%) or a religious minority (2,5%).

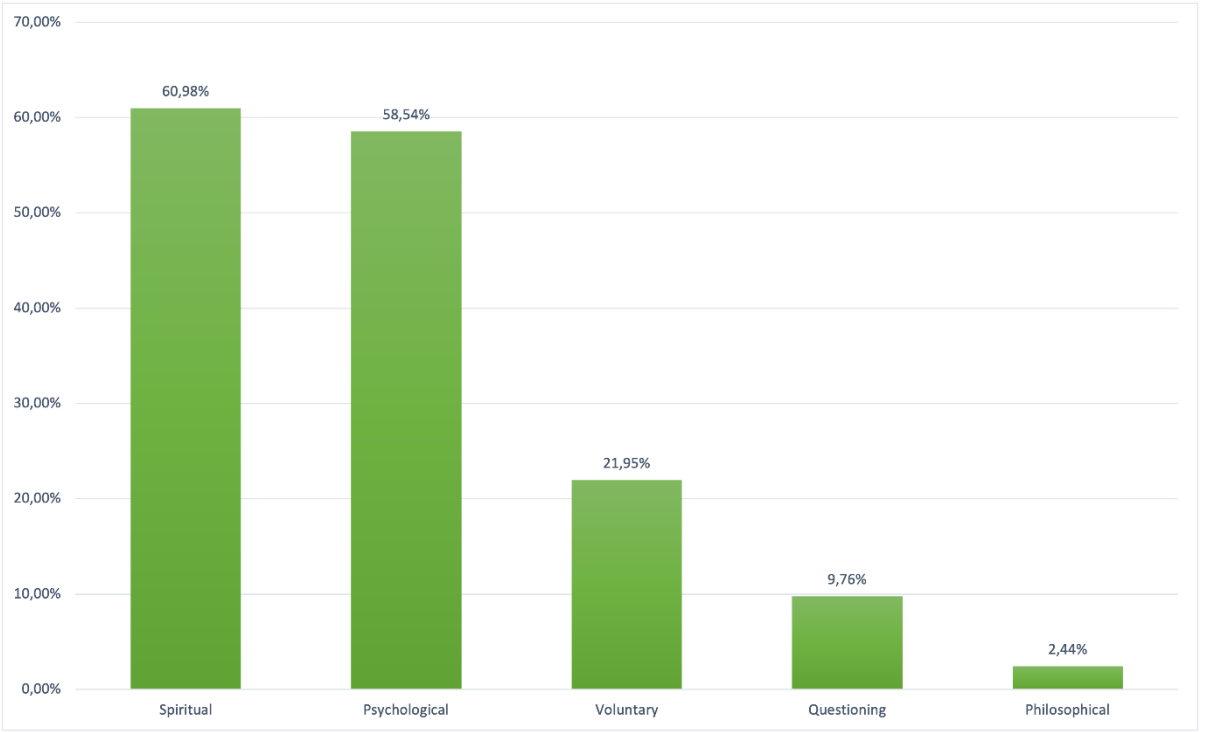


Chart 2: Reasons behind non-human identity

Although a high number of individuals struggle with their mental health, it is not the primary reason behind their non-human identity (which is important to mention, because the community as a whole does struggle against such understanding of alterhumanity, see Proctor, 2019, p. 90). Out of 41 users who stated why they identify as alterhuman, the majority, that is nearly 61%, indicate spirituality as the main reason: their non-human identity stems from such beliefs as reincarnation and past lives lived as non-human beings. Almost 60% point to psychological reasons which span from the feeling of being born in the wrong body to the so-called “shifts”—changes in one’s mental state, behaviour,

and ways of experiencing the world typical to that of another creature[9] (for example, a person who identifies as a dog—a dogkin—claims to experience phantom limbs such as a tail or dog ears alongside a difference in hearing ability and their general behaviour becoming more instinct-driven and dog-like). Only four individuals in this group indicated their non-human identity to be closely related to their mental health state, mainly being alterhuman as a result of experienced trauma. Nearly 20% would call their alterhuman identity "voluntary" and all of those users consider themselves copinglinkers (one identifies additionally as "kin for fun," which means a voluntary alterhuman identity embraced for personal entertainment (*KFF*, 2023)[10]). 29,26% out of all those who stated their reasons (which is only 6% out of all 200 blogs) admit to their non-human identity being a coping mechanism in managing their mental health, mainly as copinglink or endel (defined as "[a] nonhuman self-identifier to describe one's identity being caused by, rooted in, or influenced by [a] delusion": strawberrybabydog, 2021). Almost 10% of the users at the time of the study were questioning their identity and considering calling themselves alterhuman. 2,44% claim for the reason to stem from philosophical beliefs. Those individuals, however, did not elaborate on those philosophies.

7. Discussion

Not fitting in is a fairly common feeling that accompanies alterhumanity. The human world may feel strange and foreign, with rules and ways of being centered around being human.

> From my earliest memories I had a sense of being other, not belonging, not being human. My skin didn't fit right and I had to learn the rules of this place and these people and play a role to fit in, but it all felt unnatural. My mother even used to call me a changeling, and she was only half joking.

The process of discovering their alterhuman identities is rather solitary and personal. The most common reasons indicated by the users are either spiritual or psychological (see Chart 2), the latter referring mainly to being transspecies or experiencing shifts or phantom limbs; the former (usually)—to reincarnation. Mentions of those reasons suggest a considerable amount of effort put into

[9] "Shift" is a very broad term used most commonly by otherkins and therians in reference to experiences which bring a being closer to their other-than-human identity. For example, as Scribner (2013) explains, "[d]uring a mental shift, a therianthrope's way of thinking temporarily changes to resemble that of her animal side more than her human side," (p. 22) while a perception shift is "[a]n event in which a therianthrope's senses temporarily become more like those of his animal side, and/or his senses become heightened" (p. 28).

[10] In the non-human community, those who use the term "kin for fun" (KFF) are often considered as misguided individuals who misrepresent the specific experiences of being otherkin (a-dragons-journal, 2021; aestherians, 2020; fluffnstuffq, 2021). According to this discourse, KFF delegitimizes those experiences by treating a personal identity too lightly, and forcing them out of labels by using them incorrectly (Irkeneon, n.d.).

self-reflection to unravel feelings and experiences of the self, which are not commonly discussed in the open offline due to the human society's potential adverse reaction.

The past, according to Hacking (1998), is indeterminate because it is revised retroactively:

> When we remember what we did, or what other people did, we may also rethink, redescribe, and refeel the past. […] I do not mean only that we change our opinions about what was done, but that in a certain logical sense what was done itself is modified. As we change our understanding and sensibility, the past becomes filled with intentional actions that, in a certain sense, were not there when they were performed. (pp. 249–250)

Such redefinition of the past is noticeable in what the users describe as their "awakenings" (what made them realize that they were alterhuman):

> When I began exploring online I quickly found the otherkin community and it clicked immediately. I'd been experiencing phantom limbs at that point for a couple years, and dreams which seemed like memories for even longer.
>
> I stumbled across a [name redacted] website [dedicated to otherkinity] […]. As I was reading I realized that a lot of [username redacted]'s […] experiences lined up […] to my own […]. [S]uddenly a lot of things were falling into place […]. [They] had an explanation that fit.

A noticeably common trend among the users is finding out about alterhumanity from the online community. As Page states on his blog, the community is quite reliant on online communication: "both because of how scattered we tend to be, and how we tend to not be geographically-focused in where our communities are divided, instead being more mindful towards the interpretation or details of experience and identity" (who-is-page, 2021b). The Internet can be a valuable resource for seeking support and for exploring one's identity, searching for more accurate labels or creating new ones, and interacting with beings who understand and share their experiences (a similar direction to the one often taken by LGBT+ people, see, e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Lucero, 2017). When such resources are found, one can learn of other-than-human identities and become aware of their own alterhumanity, which did not fit any previously known categories of experience. Their actions and feelings of the past become objectified and thematized, categorized into new labels—in Meadian terms, the "I" becomes knowable through the "me." Having taken the attitudes of human others, instead of "adjusting one's self," they choose "fighting it out," and by self-asserting oneself becoming "a definite self" (Mead, 1972, p. 193).

In the self-introduction part of their online profiles, the users have absolute control over their auto-presentation—others can only learn as much information about them as they consciously choose to share. They can state their identities directly, in a definite, indisputable manner and be taken seriously by other members of the in-group (even if humans sometimes fail to respect them,

both offline as well as online, through trolling or being an "anti"[11]). However, while the alterhuman community is certainly supportive of nearly all identities, it is not entirely free of conflict. Certain labels cause discord over their validity. Thus, some users used to participate in "grilling" to confirm the legitimacy of their identities.

The so-called "grilling" or "questioning" was, as Page explains, "a form of cyber-hazing used to remove what is described as 'fluff' and 'roleplayers' from groups" (who-is-page, 2021a). This practice used to be much more common, especially on websites other than Tumblr, for example in mailing lists or on Facebook (it has not vanished entirely yet, though it is now a significantly less accepted behaviour). Though the intention might have been to protect the community and its members from, for example, the aforementioned trolls or individuals who were not deemed as "legitimately" alterhuman, nowadays it is seen as a harmful and misguided practice (strawberrybabydog, 2021b; who-is-page, 2021c). During the process of grilling, the individual would have been required to do extensive research on the being they identify as (whether it is a wolf, a demon, or Sonic the Hedgehog), and present the community with the fruits of such labour. The being's identity would have most likely been accepted as alterhuman, as long as their proof of their non-human identity did not break the laws of what Proctor (2018) calls "the Otherkin science": "a socially constructed combination of abstract physics, psychology, metaphysics, and ancient belief that renders other-than-human identification thinkable in a contemporary Western paradigm" (p. 487). For example, claiming to experience "P-shifting" —physically changing shape to resemble one's kintype—would have been criticized and might have even resulted in public shaming, while "M-shifts" (mental shifts which result in behaviour more typical for the being one identifies as) were deemed perfectly reasonable (2018, pp. 485–487).

With grilling came positioning oneself as an expert. According to Proctor (2018, p. 490), alterhumans (particularly otherkin beings) would engage in boundary work, which is a rhetorical style used by scientists "for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as 'non-science'" (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). As Proctor (2018, p. 490) further explains, this style echoes in the practice of "grilling" in the alterhuman community, through "exclu[sion of] rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as 'pseudo', 'deviant' or 'amateur' (Gieryn, 1983, p. 792) —for example, those

[11] Broadly speaking, in Internet slang an "anti" is someone who is opposed to a particular community, belief or sometimes behaviour. In the context of alterhumanity, antis openly challenge the legitimacy of other-than-human identities in online discussions (*Antikin*, 2023).

who identify as "kin for fun" would be considered "fakers" or trolls (fluffnstuffq, 2021), just like those who identify with non-traumagenic plurality[12] (e.g., griffinsystem, 2022; the central nervous system, 2022).

There is a key difference which separates traditional modes of creating expertise from the Internet ways of generating and accumulating knowledge, especially on identity. The latter stem from analysing one's own lived experiences, rather than having someone from the out-group (like myself) interpret their experiences for an academic paper. The alterhumans do not need scholars to generate such knowledge for them, nor to (re)define their existence. The new systems of accumulated expertise, to use Giddens' (1991) nomenclature, are sets of knowledge shared by many separate individuals who create it independently from each other and are often later gathered in the form of so-called "masterposts" (a system of links, frequently gathered on private blogs on Tumblr, redirecting a user to other resources off-site), collected in the Alterhuman Archive, in Discord servers, or in carrds, and referenced on online encyclopaedias such as the Otherkin Wiki or Pluralpedia. Due to the fact that the topic of alterhuman identities has been of interest to few academic researchers (although it has been gathering more attention in recent years), some beings resort to taking the matter into their own hands (or other appendages) and conducting studies on their own (i.e., a recently closed survey which will later be used to publish a book on alterhumans (who-is-page, 2023)). While the scientific value of such community science is disputable, depending on what demarcation criteria for scientific and non-scientific knowledge are chosen, the studies themselves may provide knowledge which would be otherwise difficult to obtain—the community is more enthusiastic and willing to be subjects of research conducted by the in-group than by someone from the out-group.

There is a significant co-occurrence of alterhumanity and other identities, notably LGBT+ and mental illnesses and disorders, which has been noticed by the members of the community who analysed quite extensively, including conducting community-wide surveys (to list a few: azuremist, 2023b; goddamnitlopori, 2020; pantomorph, 2019; PinkDolphin, 2020; scaled-silence, 2021). In a very interesting post on the intersection of alterhumanity and being queer, vagabondsun states that non-human identity is inherently transgressive in a manner similar to queerness. Queer, as it states, pushes the boundaries of various social norms, by "recogniz[ing] that your gender identity—that is, the way you *express yourself*, the way you *relate to other people*, and the way *other people percieve you* ***cannot*** **be untangled from other social categories**." (sic, vagabondsun, 2019). For alterhumans, too, those other social categories are very much intertwined with their non-human identities. Gender seems to be particularly

[12] Since DID is a disorder associated with trauma, particularly in early childhood (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, pp. 334–335), the idea of plurality being caused by other factors apart from traumatic experience used to be—and still sometimes is—quite controversial and for a long time has been a source of discord in the plural community.

significantly influenced. The mere fact that one of vagabond-sun's preferred pronouns is "it," which humans would find quite uncomfortable to use, speaks of purposeful dehumanization of its self in a way that, despite the usual human intuition, is not and does not need to be derogatory. Such non-normative pronouns force humans to view it in ways that fit with how it views itself. Moreover, one of the users whose blog was used in this study even states directly: "My gender identity and alterhuman identity are very closely intertwined." As they explain:

> Growing up, I never took interest in anything that seemed to be made with the intention of appealing to a specific gender. […] It never made sense to me, but it also felt like it didn't apply to me, like everyone was caught up in a weird dance I felt no desire to join. […]
>
> I couldn't relate to Barbie dolls or fashion because I took no interest in human bodies. My body never looked the way I felt, no matter what I wore. Where's the fun in pretending to be exactly what everyone already perceives you to be?
>
> I disliked cars and trucks, and robotic things, and pretty well any media explicitly geared towards boys and only boys. Not just because I already had a negative association with boys thanks to bullies at school. Boys' media just seemed so saturated with machines, and machines are man made, associated only with humans. I could not relate to anything strictly human.
>
> I only ever took interest in performing my assigned gender when high school bullies and societal/religious brainwashing convinced me that I had to in order to be accepted and attract a mate, which we're all led to believe we're worthless without. But even then, my feline core never changed. And I liked to roleplay as a boy and flirt with my female friends to remind myself that I had not surrendered completely to the pressure of gender.
>
> And, of course, those boys I roleplayed as were animal in one way or another.
>
> I'm thrilled to understand myself now as non-binary. And it's remarkable to look back and see how intimately my alterhumanity influenced that.

While beings who identify with xenogenders, that is, gender identities which cannot be contained to human understanding of gender (*Xenogender*, 2023), are often met with ridicule, the non-humancentric identities, as pointed out by Christine Feraday (2014), are often "practiced by a population of marginalized people whose voices are regularly silenced" and can be seen a challenge to cisheteronormativity, "requir[ing] us to examine deeply ingrained ideas about gender and attraction" (p. 9). Alterhumanity encompasses a wide variety of beings and concepts some individuals identify as. It is not unlikely for a fictionkin being to have their gender identity influenced by the fictional character they identify as. Similarly, a being who identifies as a dog could perceive their gender through a more animalistic perspective and a non-human entity such as, for example, a spacekin—as related to space (e.g. astrogender). Aside from the study conducted for this paper, the answers to online polls on this relation with

gender by members of the alterhuman community provide similar results (for instance, some answers in scaled-silence's survey [2021] mention having no concept of human understanding of gender, as well as different gender and social roles of animals compared to humans). Furthermore, the so-called "neurogenders" denote gender identities which are linked to one's neurotype (neurological type—referring to neurodivergence): "a gender or experience of gender that is so heavily influenced by one's neurodivergence that one's gender and neurodivergence cannot be unlinked" (*Neurogender*, 2023). For example, in the case of autismgender, the claim is that, since autism is linked to a different cognition of the world, the perception of various social categories will also be influenced by this neurotype (*Autigender*, 2023). The link between autism and alterhumanity is, thus, based on a similar assumption, on top of a connection with non-humanity inherent to the autistic experience and portrayal in media (azuremist, 2023b, 2023a; see also Ziemna, 2020).

Additionally, valuable insight might be brought by the stated reason behind non-human identity. A significant number of beings state that such a reason may be related to their mental health. One of the studied users shares their belief that their therianthropy is a result of mental disorders and an "odd upbringing", but "[it] is not inherently unhealthy." Oftentimes, alterhumanity co-occurs also with plurality. The overlap is especially common with otherkinity (anomalymon, 2024) and its history dates back to an online mailing list from 1999 (Scribner, 2012, p. 51). This connection is frequent enough to have inspired the coinage of the term "alterhuman" (X-RDS, 2023).

While for a long time alterhuman beings rejected the idea that their non-human identities may be linked with their mental conditions, in recent years some beings started to embrace this connection in cases such as psychosis and delusions influencing their sense of self (which during this study gained a new label: "endel"). For others, alterhumanity can be a form of coping mechanism. In one case of an ex-otherkin, being "angelkin was an escape": it was "an obsession with a past life. It was creating an identity out of a past I was using to cope with." However, alterhumans firmly assure that being other-than-human does not innately fulfil that role (e.g., flock-of-changes, 2017), nor that is it inherently linked with mental illnesses. It is a way of being alternative to the typical human one.

8. Conclusion

Alterhumanity is a complex personal identity which heavily influences the sense of self. Not being human while occupying a fully human body contributes to feelings of not fitting in and exclusion and may lead to discrimination if one decides to "come out" and embrace this identity publicly. Such identities are often taken to be a sign of mental illness or an attention-seeking behaviour—even more so now, with a new wave of young people online identifying as

other-than-human on social media, primarily TikTok. The goal of this paper was to examine experiences of exclusion of entities who do not identify as human as well as to explore how alterhumanity can be intertwined with other social minority groups, as exemplified by the other-than-human community on Tumblr.

Funding

This work was supported by the "Study@Research" competition organized under the "Initiative of Excellence—Research University AMU" program [grant number: 014/34/UAM/0071].

References

Abriszewski, K. (2017). Audiofilskie fantazje i konstruowane pragnienia. In *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* (Vol. 2, Issue 32). http://dx.doi.org/10.4467/20843860PK.17-.010.7358

a-dragons-journal. (2021, June 16). *Anonymous asked…* [Post]. Tumblr. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20231229194248/https://www.tumblr.com/a-dragons-journal/654120158383767552/whats-a-kff-why-does-kinnie-have-a-negative

aestherians. (2020, December 10). *Can kinnies/people who "kin for fun"…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://aestherians.tumblr.com/post/637106890492575744/aestherians-can-kinniespeople-who-kin-for-fun

Alex. (2020, April 25). *Age Regression—Stop the Stigma*. Teenagers With Experience. http://www.teenagerswithexperience.com/124/post/2020/04/age-regression-stop-the-stigma.html

Alt+H. (2019). *Al·ter·hu·man*. Alt+H. The Alterhuman Advocacy Group. https://www-.alt-h.net/2017/01/ontological-ambiguity.html

Alterhuman. (2023, February 24). WikiFur. https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Alterhuman

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Dissociative Disorders. In *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* ((5th ed., text rev.), 1–0). American Psychiatric Association Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425-787.x08_Dissociative_Disorders

anomalymon. (2024, March 5). *Addressing Anti-Endogenics in the Alterhuman Community* [Post]. Tumblr. https://anomalymon.tumblr.com/post/744130842499121-152/addressing-anti-endogenics-in-the-alterhuman

Antikin. (2023, December 24). Alterhumanity Wiki. https://alterhumanity.fandom.-com/wiki/Antikin

Arfini, S., Botta Parandera, L., Gazzaniga, C., Maggioni, N., & Tacchino, A. (2021). Online Identity Crisis Identity Issues in Online Communities. *Minds and Machines*, *31*(1), 193–212. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-020-09542-7

Austin, A., Craig, S. L., Navega, N., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, *21*(1), 33–44. https://doi-.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202

Autigender. (2023, November 13). LGBTQIA+ Wiki. https://lgbtqia.wiki/wiki/Autigender

azuremist. (2023a, August 11). *Alterhumanity and Autism (Script)* [Post]. Tumblr. https://azuremist.tumblr.com/post/725403404291178496/alterhumanity-and-autism-script

azuremist. (2023b, August 11). *Alterhumanity and Autism (Survey Results)* [Post]. Tumblr. https://azuremist.tumblr.com/post/725403987475660800/alterhumanity-and-autism-survey-results

Feraday, C. (2014). *For lack of a better word: Neo-identities in non-cisgender, non-straight communities on Tumblr* [Thesis, Toronto Metropolitan University]. https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14648067.v1

flock-of-changes. (2017, September 30). *Alright, I wanna talk about why calling otherkinity a coping mechanism is harmful.* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/flock-of-changes/165878757390/alright-i-wanna-talk-about-why-calling

fluffnstuffq. (2021, January 17). *We all know that the "kin for fun" trend is bad...* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/fluffnstuffq/640524836527030272/we-all-know-that-the-kin-for-fun-trend-is-bad

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (p. 264). Stanford University Press.

Gieryn, T. F. (1983). Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists. In *American Sociological Review* (Vol. 48, Issue 6, pp. 781–795). https://doi.org/10.2307/209-5325

goddamnitlopori. (2020, August). *General demographic and alterhuman specific results*. https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRQ5gdCTKDPjxBH6om62-fkcd9HLgM8zmKyxEJ237Ug_LbW5AiBNZ7u1NurB-PTw7m-0C2F9gMgT-3if/pub

griffinsystem. (2022, April 28). *Hot takes about endogenics* [Post]. Tumblr. Retrieved from https://perma.cc/5NUM-J8KS

Hacking, I. (1996). The Looping Effects of Human Kinds. In D. Sperber, D. Premack, & A. J. Premack (Eds.), *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (pp. 351–394). Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press.

Hacking, I. (1998). *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton University Press.

Haslam, S. A. (2004). *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (p. 306). https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446278819

Haslam, S. A., Oakes, P. J., Reynolds, K. J., & Turner, J. C. (1999). Social identity salience and the emergence of stereotype consensus. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *25*(7), 809–818. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167299025007004

House of Chimeras. (2021, October 31). *A Timeline of the Alterhuman Community*. www.houseofchimera.weebly.com. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BMVh5k080IMop8RsRV-QVxVdE8L0YyOEt/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook

Irkeneon. (n.d.). *On The Kinnie and Kin For Fun Communities*. Irkeneon. Retrieved 29 December 2023, from https://irkeneon.neocities.org/writings/kinnie

KFF. (2023, December 3). Otherkin Wiki. https://otherkin.fandom.com/wiki/KFF

Kończykowska, J., & Ziemna, J. (2021). Pojęcie wspólnoty w ramach teoretycznych aktora-sieci. Analiza treści forum pomocy psychologicznej dla osób z tendencjami suicydalnymi". In Ł. Scheffs (Ed.), *Samobójstwa w Polsce. Podejście interdyscyplinarne* (pp. 133–154). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.

Lucero, L. (2017). Safe spaces in online places: Social media and LGBTQ youth. *Multicultural Education Review*, *9*(2), 117–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2017.1313482

Mead, G. H. (1972). *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Eighteenth Impression). Chicago.

Microlabel. (2023, July 4). LGBTQIA+ Wiki. https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/Microlabel

neil-gaiman. (2023, December 15). *Is it just me or…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/neil-gaiman/736742188229230592?source=share

Neurogender. (2023, October 16). LGBTQIA+ Wiki. https://lgbtqia.wiki/wiki/Neurogender

O'Donovan, A. J., Cardiel Sam, H., & Lagman, J. G. (2022). Voluntary Age Regression Entering "Headspace" in a Child With Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. *Cureus*, *14*(2), e22131. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.22131

Onorato, R. S., & Turner, J. C. (2002). Challenging the primacy of the personal self: The case for depersonalized self-conception. In *Self and identity: Personal, social, and symbolic* (pp. 145–178). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

pantomorph. (2019, July 23). *Alterhumanity & gender survey results* [Post]. Tumblr. https://pantomorph.tumblr.com/post/186480726444/alterhumanity-gender-survey-results

phasmovore. (2014a, September 26). *This will probably...* [Post]. Tumblr. https://phasmovore.tumblr.com/post/98482696958/this-will-probably-be-my-last-post-on-semantics (archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20231128221743/https://phasmovore.tumblr.com/post/98482696958/this-will-probably-be-my-last-post-on-semantics)

phasmovore. (2014b, September 26). *This will probably be...* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/phasmovore/98482696958/this-will-probably-be-my-last-post-on-semantics

PinkDolphin. (2020). *Therianthropy and Gender Experience*. Google Docs. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc0Cr0pIR2Aq65Ai-aeC04rn9HzaOQTsM4fqxAaDFcBswbuhQA/viewform?usp=embed_facebook

Proctor, D. (2018). Policing the Fluff: The Social Construction of Scientistic Selves in Otherkin Facebook Groups. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, *4*, 485. https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2018.252

Proctor, D. (2019). *On Being Non-Human: Otherkin Identification and Virtual Space* [Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/e156c24bf65c4efb0918a8db37433cce/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Reynolds, K. J., & Turner, J. C. (2006). Individuality and the prejudiced personality. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *17*, 233–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280601050880

scaled-silence. (2021). *Otherkin and Gender*. Google Docs. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7Dot2ZqmilBFyTk9BVQSN9hFNnVSU2XE-9VDUE2tFYkhuvw/viewform?usp=embed_facebook

Scribner, O. (2012, September 8). *Otherkin timeline: The recent history of elfin, fae, and animal people* (http://orion.kitsunet.net/nonfic.html). O. Scribner. http://frameacloud.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Scribner_Timeline2p0.pdf

Scribner, O. (2013, January 21). *Otherkin lexicon: A multi-lingual dictionary of jargon used in the communities of otherkin, therianthropes, and other similar peoples* (http://orion.kitsunet.net/nonfic.html). O. Scribner. http://frameacloud.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Scribner_Lexicon_0-1.pdf

strawberrybabydog. (2021a, April 22). *Endel* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/strawberrybabydog/649212611976724480/endeldefinition

strawberrybabydog. (2021b, October 4). *Yeah I'm gonna agree...* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/strawberrybabydog/664129904929030144/yeah-im-gonna-agree-that-the-grilling-was-a-big

the central nervous system. (2022, March 25). *Fuck you, endos* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/the-central-nervous-system/679714032560783360/fuck-you-endos

therianimal. (2022, March 24). *Your identity doesn't exist for other people.* [Post]. Tumblr. https://therianimal.tumblr.com/post/679641325262585856/your-identity-doesnt-exist-for-other-people

Turner, J. C., & Reynolds, K. J. (2012). Self-categorization theory. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology, Vol. 2* (pp. 399–417). Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n46

vagabond-sun. (n.d.). With all this talk… [Post]. *Tumblr*. Retrieved 24 March 2024, from https://www.tumblr.com/vagabond-sun/139864061255/with-all-this-talk-of-new-terminology-lately-im

vagabond-sun. (2019, June 13). *Otherkinity isn't LGBT+ but Alterhumanity is Queer* [Post]. Tumblr. https://vagabond-sun.tumblr.com/post/185551734270/otherkinity-isnt-lgbt-but-alterhumanity-is-queer

who-is-page. (2021a, May 21). *Otherkin Criteria* [Post]. Tumblr. https://who-is-page.tumblr.com/post/651839500613484544/otherkin-criteria

who-is-page. (2021b, November 6). *Digitalized Natural Selection: The Importance of the Internet, Literature, and Art in Alterhuman Communities* [Post]. Tumblr. https://who-is-page.tumblr.com/post/667119011426893824/digitalized-natural-selection-the-importance-of

who-is-page. (2021c, November 9). *I'm watching a bunch…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/who-is-page/667357226520002560/im-watching-a-bunch-of-30-old-guard-alterhumans

who-is-page. (2023, March 17). *We're writing a book about alterhumans…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://who-is-page.tumblr.com/post/712062897802690560/the-otherkin-community-survey-is-gathering-data

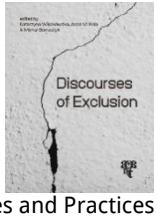
Xenogender. (2023, December 3). LGBTQIA+ Wiki. https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/Xenogender

X-RDS. (2023a, February 19). *Just for the record…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/x-rds/709694807213211648/problemaddtic-thelunastusco-problemaddtic

X-RDS. (2023b, March 27). *I don't wanna bother…* [Post]. Tumblr. https://www.tumblr.com/x-rds/712949341799727104/i-dont-wanna-bother-you-and-i-guess-this-is-a

Ziemna, J. (2020). Autyzm, neuroróżnorodność a podmiotowość. *Sensus Historiae*, *39*(2), Article 2. http://www.sensushistoriae.epigram.eu/index.php/czasopismo/article/view/545

Joanna Ziemna is a PhD student in the field of Philosophy at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, with a Master's Degree in Philosophy. They are primarily interested in alterhumanity, neurodiversity, and enactivism. They are currently focused on the concept of identity in the context of linguistic bodies.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Can a Signboard Be Exclusionary? A Study of Linguistic Landscape in the Commercial Center of Poznań

Mateusz Piekarski
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
piekarski.mateusz77@gmail.com

Received 2023-12-30; accepted 2024-11-06; published Online First 2024-11-12.

Abstract

A signboard is an element of the linguistic landscape of a given place. The linguistic landscape is a space open to everyone, but it may be experienced differently by people from various generations. To examine the extent and quality of comfort or discomfort resulting from linguistic exclusion in public spaces, in the article the linguistic landscape of the center of Poznań is analyzed in terms of the absence and presence of the native language of residents and visitors to this place. The research material comes from the most frequented places in this city and includes signs of private establishments ("bottom-up tokens"), which contribute to the linguistic landscape of Poznań. The study of linguistic exclusion takes into account the diverse linguistic competencies of five living generations of Poles. It aims to identify potential causes of the feeling of exclusion in open urban spaces for specific groups of Poles.

Keywords: linguistic exclusion, linguistic discomfort, linguistic landscape, bottom-up tokens, signboard

1. Introduction

The exclusionary nature of language has been studied before, for example in the context of the workplace (Hitlan et al., 2006). But can the linguistic landscape of the public space in a sample country exclude people who speak the language of the given country? This study aims to investigate the extent and quality of comfort and discomfort resulting from linguistic exclusion in public spaces. The adopted thesis is that different generations may feel differently in

a space open to everyone. This may be influenced by the language present on the signboards of private organizations. In the first two parts of this work, the concepts of *signboard*, *linguistic landscape*, *multilingualism*, and *comfort* are explained and the reason for selecting the analyzed group of people and the area is provided. The research method used is the analysis of the linguistic landscape in the tourist center of Poznań in terms of the presence and absence of the native language of the inhabitants and the majority of people visiting this place.

2. Signboards in the linguistic landscape

A signboard, which the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines as "a sign with information on it or showing the name of a business, school, hospital, etc." (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), dates back to Ancient Egypt, where owners every so often put out "inscriptions denoting the trade, with the emblem which indicated it" (Larwood & Hotten, 1875, p. 1). In the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, two ancient cities of the Roman Empire, artifacts resembling today's signboards were found. Aside from the text, graphics connected to the trade or goods sold inside were present (Larwood & Hotten, 1875, pp. 2–4). Nowadays, signboards are omnipresent in cities across the world, which forms a field of study for researchers of different disciplines, most prominently—linguists, who analyze them as a part of the linguistic landscape.

The term *linguistic landscape* was used for the first time in 1896, although as a field of study linguistic landscape is considered relatively novel due to many researchers naming Rodrigue Landry and Richard Y. Bourhis (1997) as the creators of the term (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023, pp. 3–5). The *Cambridge Dictionary's* definitions of both words *linguistic*, "connected with language or the study of language" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), and *landscape*, "a large area of land, especially in relation to its appearance" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.), already paint an idea of what *linguistic landscape* actually is. Gorter and Cenoz (2023, pp. 21–23) provide multiple definitions of the term, which together create the description of the study which analyzes the language of the words present in the public space and the motives and decisions behind their selection. Research regarding this has been made in multiple cities and areas, for example in Tokyo (Backhaus, 2006), Kyiv (Pavlenko, 2010), Kuala Lumpur (Manan et al., 2015), the Baltic region (Kreslins, 2003), Chinatown in Washington, DC (Lou, 2012), and post-Soviet states (Pavlenko, 2009). Moreover, the concept of linguistic landscape can also be applied to the virtual world (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2009). Dejan Ivkovic and Heather Lotherington, while trying to characterize a virtual linguistic landscape based on sites such as *YouTube*, *Wikipedia*, or the role-playing game *Second Life*, take notice of the presence of multilingualism.

Multilingualism is a term that appears in many works regarding linguistic landscape. The reasons for the existence of more than one language in the public space are considered to be *inter alia* globalization (and what comes with it—English being the worldwide *lingua franca*), migration (İnal et al., 2021, p. 1), the attractiveness of the language to different audiences, and presence of minority languages in the area (Gorter, 2006, pp. 4–5). Multilingualism applies not only to the whole landscape but also to individual signs.

As Thom Huebner (2006, p. 34) states, signs can be either mono- or multilingual, and in some cases of those that are multilingual, one of the languages might be dominant. This was noticed by Dominika Krysztofowicz and Zofia Krupienicz (2017, pp. 66–67), who designated *polyphonic signs*, on which precisely the same information is presented in two or more languages, and *mixed signs*, on which the text in one language is not equivalent to the text in the other language or languages. It is also important to distinguish between top-down and bottom-up signs. Official signs that are government- or city-owned are considered as top-down signs and private or commercial signs as bottom-up signs. The two groups may differ when it comes to the language or languages used on them (Gorter, 2006, p. 3). In the linguistic landscape, signs and signboards are considered *linguistic tokens* (Huebner, 2006, p. 32).

Currently, signboards are a subject of study of visual pollution in cities (Portella, 2014) and their readability, whether it comes to people who are reading them (Williams, 2020) or Artificial Intelligence (Panhwar et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). Roland Williams (2020) names several visual factors that may negatively influence the comprehensibility of signs, including their size and location, the type and size of font , level of luminance, poor contrast, distracting visual elements, and placement among similar signs. Yet if multilingualism, which is present on signboards, is taken into consideration, one more obstacle emerges. This obstacle may drastically affect the comfort of people who are present in a given public space.

3. Who, where, and why?

To examine the theoretical level of discomfort caused by the multilingual aspect of signboards, a group of people and an area were chosen. The term *comfort* has been a subject of study in papers related to nursing (Kolcaba & Kolcaba, 1991; Morse et al., 1994; Tutton & Seers, 2003), yet the definitions introduced there can correspond to the meaning of the word in the general sense. Katherine Kolcaba and Raymond Kolcaba (1991) describe as many as six meanings of the term. According to those, comfort can be identified as *inter alia* a state of ease and peaceful contentment, relief, and pleasure. However, as Peter Vink (2005, p. 14) states, “Comfort is a subjective experience. For Passenger 1 on a long distance flight, back discomfort is of great importance. Passenger 2 wants a reduction in noise and Passenger 3 needs more space”. Thus, although

the group of people chosen in this project is Polish tourists, it is important to notice the fact that not all of them are the same.

To test what impact multilingualism can have on them, it was decided to divide the group according to the generations they belong to. The generational division is often used in marketing research (Williams & Page, 2011), which in a way applies to this paper. It is also essential to take into consideration that the generations may differ from country to country. At the moment, the six generations that live in Poland are the War Generation (born before 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979), Generation Y, which are later called Millennials (born between 1980 and 1995), Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2009), and Generation Alpha (born after 2010) (Kryvachuk, 2021, p. 294; Sadowski, 2018). The three foreign languages most known in Poland are English, German, and Russian (*Languages in Poland*, n.d.). As a consequence of the political situation during and after the Second World War, the two dominating languages among people who belong to the War Generation and Baby Boomers are Russian and German. Russian was also the main foreign language taught in elementary schools in the Polish People's Republic (1952-1989); hence, it is one of the two main languages known by Generation X, the second being English, which was learned in their later stages of life. Currently, because of globalization, English is widely spoken by Millennials and the members of Generation Z. According to data on the choice of foreign language during Matura (high school leaving examinations) in the past 20 years, German was the second most popular (English being the first) among Generation Z and Millennials (*Egzamin Maturalny – Raporty*, n.d.). Generation Alpha has been omitted in this analysis as some of its members are too young to start learning languages different from Polish.

The place that was chosen to analyze is Poznań. Poznań is a city in west-central Poland, the fifth most populated and, based on TripAdvisor's Travellers' Choice 2022 list, the fifth most visited city in Poland (*10 najchętniej odwiedzanych przez turystów miast w Polsce*, 2022). Why examine the theoretical level of discomfort of Polish tourists in a Polish city? According to the official data provided by the city on tourism in Poznań, 81.68% of all tourists were Polish and only 18.32% were foreigners, which makes the described analysis highly appropriate.

Three areas were selected to be examined based on opinions from Facebook tourist groups and personal experience. All of them are part of the city center. The Old Market Square is a historical center of Poznań, the so-called "must-see" for all tourists. Półwiejska Street is the city's main shopping promenade, rich in stores, places to eat, and service establishments. Święty Marcin Street is another shopping promenade near popular sightseeing buildings, such as The Imperial Castle or the main building of Adam Mickiewicz University, but it is also where the St. Martin's Day parade takes place every year. This holiday has a very long and important tradition in the history of Poznań (Hadaś, 2021). In

the linguistic landscape of those areas, over four hundred tokens were found, which will be analyzed to determine whether they can be exclusionary to particular generations of Polish tourists.

4. Language analysis of signboards

The data used in this research was collected between 13th November and 23rd November 2023 by the author of this paper. It is essential to stress this as the city is ever-changing and the signboards and the visual aspects of the establishments connected with them can be altered. Sometimes even within a month, some businesses may close and new ones may open. As an example, a unique café located in an old tram may be used. In 2022 it was called *Caffe Bimba* (modified Italian word *caffè* and *bimba* which in the Poznań dialect means "tram"). At the moment of the analysis, it was called *Habeshawi* ("a person from Habesha" in Romanized Amharic). The already mentioned Poznań dialect in this analysis had to be considered as a foreign language. Even though it is a dialect of the Polish language, the words might be unrecognizable and completely incomprehensible for some Polish tourists. For clearer results, some of the tokens were grouped as *Group X*, because they are made of initials, foreign names, or made-up words, for example, *Hebe* (from *Health & Beauty*), *ING* (from *Internationale Nederlanden Groep*), and *C.H. Beck*. Lastly, digital signboards have been excluded from the analysis, because of their constantly changing textual and visual aspects.

51 bottom-up tokens were found on the Old Market Square, 178 on Półwiejska Street, and 197 on Święty Marcin Street. Altogether, there were 25 signboards of different types of establishments: 112 signs of food services, 104 of retail facilities, 22 of places of entertainment (arcade, club, etc.), 20 of law firms, 15 of medical services, 15 of combined retail and service facilities, 13 of education centers, 13 of banks, 11 of real estate agencies, 5 of currency exchange offices, 5 of pharmacies, 3 of pawnshops, and 88 of other services (e.g., beauty salons, computer repair stores, or tattoo studios). The names of these categories will be used later in this article. The number of languages present on all signboards is 27, including Polish (287 times), English (173), French (18), Latin (15), Italian (14), Spanish (11), Poznań dialect (6), German (4), Russian (4), Japanese (4, 3 of which were Romanized), Czech (3), Georgian (3, 2 of which were Romanized), Romanized Greek (3), Turkish (3), Ukrainian (3, 1 of which was Romanized), Hawaiian (2), Romanized Sanskrit (2), languages appearing only once include: Croatian, Norwegian, Romanian, Scottish Gaelic, Romanized versions of Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Persian, Thai, Urdu, and once a word composed of both Romanized Greek and Latin *mediaskop*. Words from Group X appeared 63 times. The predominant foreign languages are Germanic (178 times), Romance (59 times), and Slavic (17 times). Languages present on the signs were identified by dictionary research and speaking with representatives of establishments.

Usually, the language used is in some way connected to the establishment: Japanese (both in katakana and in Romanized form) is used on a signboard above a restaurant with Japanese cuisine (e.g., *マダラ ラメン*; *Madara Ramen*) and Czech above a Czech restaurant (e.g., *Dřevny Kocůr; Tanková Hospoda*). The connection can be based on stereotypes, as in the case of the French language used for establishments affiliated with the French culture such as cafés (e.g., *café atelier*) and perfume shops (e.g., *Eyfel; Eau de Parfum*) or the use of Sanskrit in a Yoga center's sign *DAKINI*. Yet some of them seem not to be connected in any way, e.g., Romanian in a pretzel bakery's sign *Covrig; Prosto z pieca!* or Norwegian in a medical center's sign *Helse Clinic*. Food services have the greatest number of different languages : 23 different languages present on signboards. Second are other services (9 languages) and retail facilities (9 languages). The number of languages on food services' signboards is closely related to the number of different types of world cuisine available in the chosen areas of the city.

Among all 425 tokens, monophonic signs predominate. There were 226 monophonic signs (53% of all) found in the three areas (e.g., *Raj dla kociarzy*, *flying tiger copenhagen*) or 267 (63%), if the cases of "one language and a word from Group X" are counted (e.g., *Zegarmistrz Madwar*, *HAH Cocktail Bar*). The second most common were mixed signs with two or more languages—136 (32%) signs (e.g., *4 eyes; Salon Optyczny*, *United; United Agencja Pracy; Агенство Працевлаштування United; Агенство занятости United*). The number of polyphonic signs, conveying exactly the same information in two languages, was much smaller—only 4 (1%) signs (e.g., *Kantor Wymiany Walut; Currency Exchange*, *Twój lekarz w Poznaniu; Твой врач в Познани*). The remaining 18 (4%) signs were entirely composed of words from Group X (e.g., *H&M*, *Lilou*).

In order to determine how many signs negatively impact the comfort of Polish tourists and therefore exclude them, it is important first to distinguish the number of signs that are entirely in Polish and signs that have the Polish language on them. There were 145 (34% of all signs) completely Polish signs (e.g., *Skład Gier*, *Sklepik Magiczny*), 19 (4%) signs with Polish and a word or words of group X (e.g., *GMZ Dystrybucja Budowlana*, *hebe zdrowie i piękno*), and 123 (29%) signs on which Polish is present (e.g., *Wargamer; Gry bitewne i strategiczne*, *Biuro Badań Marketingowych Mediaskop*). Thus, there were 120 (28%) signs in a language or languages other than Polish, and again 18 (4%) signs fully comprised words from Group X. Consequently, at this point of analysis, there were 138 (32% of all signs) signs which can be considered as exclusionary to Polish tourists.

Having said that, the visual aspect of the establishments cannot be dismissed. Although the language on a signboard may be incomprehensible for a Polish tourist, they may understand visual attributes such as store display, graphics on doors and windows of the business, and graphic symbols in the logo or the logomark. For example, a picture of silverware in the logo of a Czech restaurant

Pyšná Chalupa; Tankovna Hospoda, a picture of a coffee bean in the logo of café *PAVIN CAFFE*, or a picture of a dumpling in the logo of Russian food establishment *Брайтон родные продукты*. Even windows that are transparent enough, so not tinted or decorated in a way a person cannot see through, can facilitate figuring out what the establishment is. Besides those, additional texts can contribute to inclusivity (e.g., a list of provided services written in Polish and a menu outside of the restaurant). Taking all this into consideration, out of 139 possibly exclusionary signs, only 54 (13% of all signs) are left. Thus, 371 (87% of all signs) establishments theoretically would not impact negatively the level of comfort of Polish tourists. Yet if foreign words that became loanwords in the Polish language, such as *bar*, *billard*, *hotel*, *pizzeria*, *karaoke*, and *fitness* are ruled out as exclusionary, the number changes from 54 to 46 (11% of all signs).

Languages present on the 46 exclusionary signs are as follows: English (present 33 times), French (5), Spanish (3), Latin (2), Croatian (1), Italian (1), Poznań dialect (1), Romanized Sanskrit (1), and words from Group X (14). When it comes to the multilingualism of the signboards, 27 signs are monophonic, 8 are a combination of a language and a word from Group X, 6 are mixed, and 5 are composed solely out of words from Group X (e.g., *Jean Louis David*, *TEDi*).

Looking at the foreign languages known to each generation of Poles again, members of the War Generation and Baby Boomers mostly speak Russian and German, Generation X—Russian and English, and Millennials and Generation Z—English and German. Because Russian and German are not present in the current 46 exclusionary signs, all of them (11% of all signs) exclude Polish people who belong to the War Generation and Baby Boomers. English, known to members of Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, appears on 33 of the 46 previously mentioned signs. Therefore, only 13 (3% of all signs) can be considered exclusionary to the three youngest analyzed generations of Poles.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The thesis that different generations may feel differently in the public space is confirmed, as older generations are significantly more excluded than younger ones. Due to the language, the most excluded are the generations that do not speak English, which is the second, after Polish, most frequently used language on analyzed signboards. Possibly, signs that are in a language unknown to older generations but are surrounded by visual amenities do not exclude them. The language used on a sign is not always stereotypically associated with the industry of the establishment. In the studied areas there was no font styling according to the writing system of a given language (e.g., Greek or Arabic). Most importantly, the linguistic landscape of Poznań is highly multilingual.

It is important to note that the analysis is theoretical, thus, it is not complete and an interdisciplinary study is necessary, e.g., interpersonal or field study. Tourists of particular generations should be asked about their feelings towards signs that, in theory, exclude them. Moreover, it will be useful to examine which establishments are most often visited by tourists from these five generations and whether the signboard influences people not to go inside.

However, collecting linguistic landscape data is a technique that enables the study of both market trends and the preferences of residents and tourists, especially in the field of commercial signs. It can be used as well for diachronic research. Consequently, the data obtained in my research and parallel research, if collected properly and systematically, may provide useful information not only for synchronic and diachronic linguistic research but also for sociological, cultural, historical, and interdisciplinary studies, which have an objective of demonstrating social and cultural linguistic behavior in a certain time or along a passage of time.

Simultaneously, this study can be used for marketing purposes, as it may happen that the signboard will exclude potentially the most affluent tourists, who are among the two older generations. These two generations include also inhabitants of Poznań, and together form the group of the richest customers. They also create a larger group of brick-and-mortar users than younger generations who prefer to use the Internet. This opinion is confirmed by some available data (Iskiev, 2022; Kluza, 2019) but parallelly older generations are not used to multilingual and multicultural circumstances. Therefore, foreign languages, especially those that use non-Latin graphic systems, can be a factor that makes these people avoid those commercial establishments. Unfortunately, deeper and more detailed research is not available for Poznań and Poland at the moment. In this light, I assume my study may be the point of departure for further and more reliable studies on the discourse of exclusion of various generations.

References

Ahmed-Kristensen, S., & Stavrakos, S.-K. (2012). Definition of Comfort in Design and Key Aspects—A Literature Review. In P. A. Hansen, J. Ramussen, K. A. Jørgensen & C. Tollestrup (Eds.), *NordDesign 2012—Proceedings of the 9th NordDesign Conference*. Aalborg. https://www.designsociety.org/publication/35498/DS+71%3A+Proceedings+of+NordDesign+2012%2C+the+9th+NordDesign+conference%2C+Aarlborg+University%2C+Denmark.+22-24.08.2012

Backhaus, P. (2006). Multilingualism in Tokyo: A Look into the Linguistic Landscape. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668385

10 najchętniej odwiedzanych przez turystów miast w Polsce. (2022, February 21). Dziennik Gazeta Prawna. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from https://serwisy.gazeta-prawna.pl/turystyka/galeria/8362169,10-najchetniej-odwiedzanych-top-10-przez-turystow-miast-w-polsce.html

Egzamin maturalny – Raporty. (n.d.). OKE Łódź – Okręgowa Komisja Egzaminacyjna w Łodzi. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from https://www.oke.lodz.pl/info.php?i=33

Gorter, D. (2006). Introduction: The Study of the Linguistic Landscape as a New Approach to Multilingualism. In D. Gorter (Ed.), *Linguistic Landscape: A New Approach to Multilingualism* (pp. 1–6). Multilingual matters.

Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2023). *A Panorama of Linguistic Landscape Studies*. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/GORTER7144

Hadaś, E. (2021). *Celebrating Saint Martin's Day in Poznań*. Blog Key to Poland. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://keytopoland.com/post/celebrating-saint-martin-s-day-in-poznan

Hitlan, R. T., Kelly, K. M., Schepman, S., Schneider, K. T., & Zárate, M. A. (2006). Language Exclusion and the Consequences of Perceived Ostracism in the Workplace. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 10(1), 56–70. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2699.10.1.56

Huebner, T. (2006). Bangkok's Linguistic Landscapes: Environmental Print, Codemixing and Language Change. In D. Gorter (Ed.), *Linguistic Landscape: A New Approach to Multilingualism* (pp. 31–51). Multilingual matters.

İnal, D., Bayyurt, Y., Özturhan, M., & Bektaş, S. (2021). Multilingualism in the Linguistic Landscape of Istanbul. *World Englishes*, 40(2), 280–289. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12514

Iskiev, M. (2022, July 22). *How Each Generation Shops in 2023 [New Data from Our State of Consumer Trends Report].* Hubspot. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-each-generation-shops-differently

Ivkovic, D., & Lotherington, H. (2009). Multilingualism in Cyberspace: Conceptualising the Virtual Linguistic Landscape. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 6(1), 17–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710802582436

Kluza, S. (2019, September 2). *Każde pokolenie ma własny czas i... preferencje zakupowe. Jak kupują pokolenia X, Y, Z?* Magazyn E-Commerce Portal. Retrieved February 2, 2024, from https://www.magazyn-ecommerce.pl/artykul/kazde-pokolenie-ma-wlasny-czas-i-preferencje-zakupowe-jak-kupuja-pokolenia-x-y-z

Kolcaba, K. Y., & Kolcaba, R. J. (1991). An Analysis of the Concept of Comfort. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 16(11), 1301–1310. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.1991.tb01558.x

Kreslins, J. (2003). Linguistic Landscapes in the Baltic. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 28(3–4), 165–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/03468750310003659

Krysztofowicz, D., & Krupienicz, Z. (2017). Krajobraz językowy ul. Ratajczaka oraz ul. Garbary w Poznaniu. In *Kreatywność językowa w przestrzeni publicznej* (pp. 63–76). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

Kryvachuk, L. (2021). *Pokolenie iGeneration (Z) i Alfa: Analiza w kontekście sytuacji politycznej i zmian społecznych na Ukrainie*. Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa.

Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002

Languages in Poland. (n.d.). Languageknowledge.Eu. Retrieved December 14, 2023, from https://languageknowledge.eu/countries/poland

Landscape. (n.d.). In Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-/landscape

Larwood, J., & Hotten, J. C. (1875). *The History of Signboards, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day (Eighth Edition)*. Chatto and Windus.

Linguistic. (n.d.). In Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/linguistic

Lou, J. J. (2012). Chinatown in Washington, DC: The Bilingual Landscape. *World Englishes*, 31(1), 34–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2011.01740.x

Manan, S. A., David, M. K., Dumanig, F. P., & Naqeebullah, K. (2015). Politics, Economics and Identity: Mapping the Linguistic Landscape of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 12(1), 31–50. https://doi.org-/10.1080/14790718.2014.905581

Morse, J. M., Bottorff, J. L., & Hutchinson, S. (1994). The Phenomenology of Comfort. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 20(1), 189–195. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1994.20010189.x

Panhwar, M. A., Memon, K. A., Abro, A., Zhongliang, D., Khuhro, S. A., & Memon, S. (2019). Signboard Detection and Text Recognition Using Artificial Neural Networks. In W. Li and G.Zuo (Eds.), *2019 IEEE 9th International Conference on Electronics Information and Emergency Communication (ICEIEC)* (pp. 16–19). https://doi.org/10.1109/ICEIEC.2019.8784625

Pavlenko, A. (2009). Language Conflict in Post-Soviet Linguistic Landscapes. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, 17(1), 247–274. https://doi.org/10.1353/jsl.0.0025

Pavlenko, A. (2010). Linguistic Landscape of Kyiv, Ukraine: A Diachronic Study. In E. Shohamy, E. Ben-Rafael, & M. Barni (Eds.), *Linguistic Landscape in the City* (pp. 133–150). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847692993-010

Portella, A. (2014). *Visual Pollution: Advertising, Signage and Environmental Quality*. Ashgate.

Sadowski, R. (2018, March 21). *Raport Newspoint: Pokolenia w Polsce i potrzeba monitorowania ich rosnącej aktywności.* Newspoint. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://www.newspoint.pl/blog/raport-newspoint-pokolenia-w-polsce-i-potrzeba-monitorowania-ich-rosnacej-aktywnosci

Signboard. (n.d.). In Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/signboard

Tutton, E., & Seers, K. (2003). An Exploration of the Concept of Comfort. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 12(5), 689–696. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2702.2003.00775.x

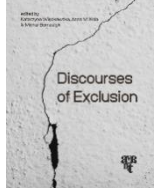
Vink, P. (2005). *Comfort and Design: Principles and Good Practice*. CRC Press.

Williams, K., & Page, R. (2011). Marketing to the Generations. *Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business*, 3, 37–52.

Williams, R. (2020, November 24). *What Makes Signage Difficult to Read?* Lektron Branding Solutions. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from https://lektroninc.com/blog/what-makes-signage-difficult-to-read/

Zhang, R., Yang, M., Bai, X., Shi, B., Karatzas, D., Lu, S., Jawahar, C. V., Zhou, Y., Jiang, Q., Song, Q., Li, N., Zhou, K., Wang, L., Wang, D., & Liao, M. (2019). ICDAR 2019 Robust Reading Challenge on Reading Chinese Text on Signboard. 2019 International Conference on Document Analysis and Recognition (ICDAR), 1577–1581. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICDAR.2019.00253

Mateusz Piekarski is a graduate of Adam Mickiewicz University. He completed his bachelor's degrees in Ukrainian Philology with English Philology and Cultural Linguistics, and his master's degree in Ethnolinguistics. His current research interests revolve around linguistic landscape, multilingualism in public space, postcolonial linguistics, language policy, the role of the language standard, the social functions of official languages, and the quality of existence of collateral languages.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Exploring Environmental Ethics: From Exclusion of More-than-Human Beings Towards a New Materialist Paradigm

Gülşah Göçmen
Aksaray University
gulshgocmen@gmail.com

Received 10 September 2023; accepted 13 October 2023; published Online First 19 October 2023.

Abstract

Environmental ethics deals with discussing the ethical framework of environmental values, their organization and regulation, and their ethical premises. One of the main cul-de-sacs that environmental ethics has is its anthropocentrism that can be observed through its diverse ethical approaches—even ecocentric ones, developed as non-anthropocentric egalitarian alternatives. This article aims to question the exclusiveness of Anthropos, the practices, values, and discourses that determine the scope and course of environmental ethics, and the exclusion of nonhuman animals or more-than human beings from its focus. It first examines the main approaches in environmental ethics (land ethic, deep ecology, social ecology, and postmodern environmental ethics)—biocentric, ecocentric, anthropocentric, socialist, postmodern—and reveals that they are but limited to the human perspective, deeply rooted in human exceptionalism. All of these approaches provide us with a critical frame that still needs to be deconstructed so that they will not project an anthropocentric orientation. This article posits that the compass of environmental ethics, recently aligning itself to embrace the more-than-human world in its ecocentric attitude, still needs to be revisited for its discourses of exclusion. At this point, new materialism functions as a prolific theoretical site as it diminishes the classical boundaries between human and animal or subject and object that anthropocentric environmental ethics relies on. With such concepts as "agential realism" (Barad), "transcorporeal ethics" (Alaimo), "vibrant matter" (Bennett), or "storied matter" (Oppermann and Iovino) the new materialist view of the

human and the nonhuman evolves to end set dualities in the discourses of environmental ethics. This article concludes that the new materialist theory destabilizes any anthropocentric position in environmental ethics and includes more-than-human beings in its ethical focus, discarding any dualities that serve anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism.

Keywords: environmental ethics, new materialisms, exclusion of more-than-humans, anthropocentrism, nonanthropocentrism

1. Introduction

Environmental ethics deals with discussing the ethical framework of environmental values, their organization and regulation, and their ethical premises. Heavily influenced by the environmental activism of the 1970s, environmental ethics promotes diverse approaches that examine the roots of our contemporary ecological problems, such as loss of biodiversity, increasing effects of global warming, or climate change. It deciphers the role(s)/ways that human beings are engaged in these ecological crises by identifying certain value systems so far developed in relation to the environment. Among these sets of values environmental ethics points to an essential divergence in their ethical orientation: anthropocentric and ecocentric. This division is basically set on privileging either environmental values that place human interests over all other beings or ecological principles that equally consider human and more-than-human beings as part of their physical environment. The dominant mode that currently leads human beings to a crossroad of ecological disasters is the anthropocentric one, ascribing "value to things of nature as they benefit man" or "regard[ing] them as instruments to man's survival" (Murdy, 1993, p. 303). This human-centered attitude involves frequently contested yet adopted ideas and practices that exclude the well-being of nonhuman beings from its ethical consideration. As environmental historian Lynn White (1967) rightly observes in his notable essay titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," the anthropocentric belief in humans' right to exploit nature is employed through modern technology "cast in a matrix of Christian theology" (p. 1206). Examining particularly how Western philosophical and religious traditions reinforce the hierarchical order among human and nonhuman beings, White reveals the historical, cultural, and religious complexities that need to be critically attended to in relation to the concept of anthropocentrism. Botanist William H. Murdy (1993), on the other hand, alleges that anthropocentrism, though it comes as "a pejorative in many of the articles which deal with the so-called 'ecological crisis'" (p. 303), is "coexistent with a philosophy that affirms the essential interrelatedness of things and that values all items in nature since no event is without some effect on wholes of which we are parts" (p. 309). Murdy's point does not necessarily prove how anthropocentrism can accompany such

an understanding of interconnectedness; yet, it directs human beings to reconsider their relationship with nonhuman others in the sense that they have the potential to affect them. However, this view simply disregards the superior position that human beings assume in this web of interconnections. Environmental ethics, thus, searches for the ways that revise humans' perception of not only their own species but also all more-than-humans in a wider ecological lens, resulting in ecocentric and biocentric approaches. Ecocentrism grants each life and nonlife form a significance that solely depends on its existence as part of the ecosystem, while biocentrism limits this ethical concern to living beings or biotic communities on earth. Though their ethical consideration might differ in settling the value of beings (animate or inanimate), both stances acknowledge an anti-anthropocentric sentiment and become two distinct holistic attitudes in environmental ethics.

2. Environmental Ethics: Parallels and Schisms

American writer, environmentalist, and philosopher Aldo Leopold stands out as one of the leading dissenters of anthropocentrism with his land ethic, introduced in his well-known work *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Leopold's land ethic intends to create a moral code about how to treat the land that includes "soils, waters, plants, and animals" (p. 203) with special ecological concerns about sustainability and conservation. In land ethic, the boundaries of the land are not limited to its physical or material qualities but determined through the biotic communities that it sustains. In other words, land ethic treats every living being as part of a whole system and "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (p. 204). Leopold proposes the idea that it is only through this shift of human role in ecology that humans can have an equal biotic community where there is a possibility for conservation and sustainability for all beings on earth. He does not necessarily address ecology as the pinnacle of his ethics, yet what he remarkably focuses on indicates a web of interconnections that might be better managed through the dictum: "We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in" (Leopold, 1949, p. 214). Leopold's land ethic, as is evident here, adheres to a special notion of love, respect, and care that should be developed for all life forms and attributed to human beings. To be ethical in his terms requires an environmentally conscious attendance to humans' relationship with their biotic community members. In this respect, his ethics underlines that human beings need to go through a change of perception about their place in the hierarchical anthropocentric ladder of beings, and their ways to dominate the natural world should be replaced with an approach that is built on care and respect for the environment. It is possible to observe that the critical interest of land ethic is manifested not only in the land itself but also in all its beings via evolutionary and ecological

explanations. Leopold points to the rooted anthropocentric view that dominated the relationship between human beings and all other life forms, and leads the way for a holistic and anti-anthropocentric ethics.

Deep ecology, developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s, provides another noteworthy framework to discuss the new direction that environmental ethics takes, as it is similarly dedicated to creating a "more ecocentric environmental ethics" (Naess, 1995, p. 66). As "a philosophical and scientific social/political movement during the so-called Ecological Revolution of the 1960s" (Sessions, 1995, p. ix), deep ecology aims to "bring about a major paradigm shift—a shift in perception, values, and lifestyles—as a basis for redirecting the ecologically destructive path of modern industrial growth societies" (Sessions, 1995, p. ix). Deep ecologist critical agenda combines the ideas of such significant figures from Western philosophy or social criticism as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Roszak, or historian Lewis Mumford with the inspirational practices of Eastern religions (Taoism and Zen Buddhism) (Sessions, 1995, p. ix). Both lines of ecocentric thinking contribute to Naess's development of a new set of environmental values that should replace "the dominant anthropocentric orientation of Western civilization" (Sessions, 1995, p. x) in order to overcome the contemporary ecological crisis. Naess counter-develops his deep ecology approach versus what he labels as shallow ecology, which basically refers to environmentalist attitudes and practices human beings embrace due to anthropocentric reasons. For instance, while shallow ecology puts emphasis on "resources for humans, especially the present generation in affluent societies" (Naess, 1995, p. 72), deep ecology concerns itself with "resources and habitats for all life-forms for their own sake" (Naess, 1995, p. 72). At the target of deep ecology's criticism stand all anthropocentric conceptions about the environment and all beings within it.

With an aim to clarify deep ecological philosophy, Naess and Sessions collaboratively establish eight tenets of deep ecology that offer "a new ethic, embracing plants and animals as well as people" (Naess, 1995, p. 66). The tenets start with the confirmation of the idea that every being has its own intrinsic or internal value, "independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by any conscious being" (Naess, 1995, p. 69). This is a key concept in deep ecology that is frequently highlighted and asserted by deep ecologists, and it dissolves the hierarchical relation between human and nonhuman beings. The second principle introduces the idea that "[r]ichness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves" (Naess, 1995, p. 68). With each tenet Naess and Sessions secure a stronger ecocentric standpoint in their ethics and put human beings at the centre of their criticism. The third and fourth tenets are solid examples of such criticism as they strictly claim that "[h]umans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs" and "[t]he flourishing of non-human life *requires*

a smaller human population" (Naess, 1995, p. 68; emphasis in original). It is evident that deep ecology aims to uncover the damaging consequences of human beings' activities on earth and the reduction of biodiversity via those practices and overpopulation. Deep ecologists rightly point to the radical transformation on earth due to anthropogenic effects, which will eventually lead environmental scientists and geologists to identify this impact as the essence of the age of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Instead of avoiding understanding the fundamental reasons of the modern global environmental crisis, deep ecologists explore them, even though the exploration seems misanthropic at times since all these causes stem from an anthropocentric view of nature. Deep ecological thinkers promote a deeper understanding of the relationship between human and more-than-human life forms, rejecting "the man-in-environment concept," which prioritizes human beings in this relationship, and offering "the biospherical egalitarianism-in principle," which indicates "a deep-seated respect" for each life form (Naess, 1995, p. 151). In other words, deep ecology entirely dismisses any view that entails "homocentrism, anthropocentrism, and human chauvinism" (Naess, 1995, p. 76). Deep ecology's contribution to a non-anthropocentric ethics is essential to note since it requires reconsidering the ethical consequences of certain ecological principles, voiced ardently by Sessions and Naess in the deep ecologist platform.

Another notable aspect that deep ecology imports into environmental ethics is its attempt to establish certain norms as a derivational system and enable people to form their individual ecosophies as "*general* philosophies, in the sense of total views, inspired in part by the science of ecology" (Naess, 1995, p. 79; emphasis in original). An ecosophy does not rely on dogmatic rules or notions but is intended to be "openly normative, as it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe" (Dregson & Inoue, 1995, p. 8). It functions like an ethic does through certain norms which are already derived from "other norms and hypotheses" (Naess, 1989, p. 43) based on a relational and derivational system. This indicates rejecting dominant environmental values that strictly favor human beings' existence, values, and practices over all nonhuman others. In Naess's deep ecological philosophy no life form remains excluded from the realm of ethical consideration as he supports "the relational field image," which corresponds to "the totality of our interrelated experience" (Naess, 1989, p. 55). He further works on an individual philosophy called Ecosophy T[1], which "has only one ultimate norm: 'Self-realization'" (Naess, 1995, p. 80). This idea of the self refers to a greater, ecological self that perceives its interconnectedness with the entire environment around it (Naess, 1989, p. 168). Leading with his exemplary ecosophy, Naess opens new possibilities in environmental ethics, noting

[1] Naess is deeply influenced by Norwegian *friluftsliv* (a movement to experience living in the outdoors), Gandhian non-violence, Mahayana, Buddhism, and Spinozan pantheism. *T* refers to his mountain hut where he worked on his ecosophy (Drengson, 1997).

the significance of "ecospheric belonging" (Naess, 1989, p. 168). Overthrowing the hierarchical superiority of *Homo sapiens*, this sense of belonging certainly promotes "cooperation and togetherness" in the world (Naess, 1989, p. 168). What deep ecology offers here is a philosophical, social, political, and ethical response to the modern ecological crisis, which American deep ecologist Fritjof Capra (1995) identifies as "a crisis of perception" (p. 19). Capra believes that this new paradigm shows a way out with its ecological platform that aims to change humans' perception of nature from a mechanistic, dualistic, and deterministic one towards an interconnected, nonanthropocentric, and pluralistic view[2].

Social ecology, highly critical of deep ecological ideas, presents another notable anti-anthropocentric attitude in environmental ethics, which addresses ecological issues as part of the agenda of social problems and refers to "wedding the social to the ecological without denying the integrity of each" (Bookchin, 1996, p. 92). Responding to how individualistic and spiritual deep ecology's philosophical emphasis becomes, social ecology rather contends that it is humans' social practices that radically transform the environment and lead to ecological catastrophes. The leading theorist of social ecology Murray Bookchin (1986) notes this idea in the following manner: "The imbalances man has produced in the natural are caused by the imbalances he has produced in the social world" (p. 84). Building on such fundamental correlation, social ecologists explore how hierarchical organization among not only all beings but also that of human beings leads to certain forms of environmental and social injustice. The ethics that can be framed through social ecology, then, critically examines major social dynamics that cause ecological problems, revealing that the market economy of capitalism is the most influential factor among these social forces. John Clark, another prominent social ecologist, identifies "the horror of economistic-technocratic globalism" (2000, p. 29) as the antagonist in modern environmental history as it simply holds its control over the ecological, social, and economic relations through the means of capitalism. Particularly, social ecologists point out that ecology is above all others threatened by human practices that prioritize economy, profit, or capital over any other ethical value. As a result, as Bookchin strongly suggests, "[t]he greatest danger we face—apart from nuclear immolation—is the homogenization of the world by a market society and its objectification of all human relationships and experiences into commodities"

[2] One of the main inspirational sources for not only deep ecology but also for other nonanthropocentric and ecocentric environmental ethics is indigenous people's lifestyle and practices that are in harmony with their natural surroundings. Their ecological consciousness is considered to be a telling example of where our environmental concerns should lie. However, indigenous peoples around the world have been among the victims of the exploitative anthropocentric practices as their "world of balance and renewal" keeps "rapidly eroding under modern conditions and circumstances" (Segundad, 2004, p. 165). As Özkan clearly states, "The secular anthropocentric human-nature relationship disrupts [the indigenous people's] sacred attachment to the land and environment," considered merely as "a capital, property, and subordinate just like the [indigenous] people" (Özkan, 2021, p. 64).

(1996, p. 85). Social ecology in this manner voices environmental concerns through a Marxist criticism of social values that reflects on the entanglement of the social, the ecological, the political, and the ideological.

The profound emphasis social ecology puts on human society as the main actor of ecological crisis is made evident in its ethical frame, and it is crucial to configure how it treats more-than-human beings in this social and ecological entanglement. Albeit environmental values related to the nonhuman are not forged through a personal connection with or individual appreciation of them in social ecological thought—as is promoted by deep ecology—they are considered to be the primary part of the ecological whole. Human beings in social ecology's philosophical realm serve as complements to them. This is called "ethics of complementarity," an ethics in which "human beings would complement nonhuman beings with their own capacities to produce a richer, creative, and developmental whole—not as a 'dominant' species but as supportive one" (Bookchin, 1964, para. 5). Bookchin's ethics of complementarity recontextualizes human and nonhuman relationships in a non-hierarchical order, pointing to their mutual evolutionary processes, which might eventually lead to freedom, complexity, and diversity for both. It not only rejects the exclusion of more-than-human beings from the ethical realm but also promotes the idea that human beings are there to complement all other beings in this complex web of interconnections. Therefore, it presents a non- and anti-anthropocentric attitude in environmental ethics and displays how social structures or material conditions equally affect values attached to both human and more-than-human beings.

To add onto the flourishing new nonanthropocentric ethical insights in environmental philosophy, postmodern environmental ethics sets out to dismantle the long-established boundaries between human and nonhuman beings in traditional epistemologies and offers "a radical epistemic shift in perspective from a mechanistic to an ecocentric paradigm" (Oppermann, 2012, p. 38). Following the same path of ecocentrism as land ethics, deep ecology, and social ecology, postmodern environmental thinkers such as Jim Cheney, David Ray Griffin, or Charlene Spretnak highlight the need to realize how anthropocentric practices and discourses have created destructive effects for the environment. As a strategy, they endorse postmodern deconstruction of dominant environmental values that are discursively produced within a Cartesian, scientific, mechanistic, and anthropocentric worldview and put to use through capitalist practices. As an example, Jim Cheney makes a compelling point about how human beings initially need to deconstruct their existing values about the environment and replace those after a reconstruction that is based on a contextual process. In a basic sense, Cheney sets "an agenda for conceiving environmental ethics in contextual and postmodern terms" (1993, p. 88), drawing attention to the transformative power of narrative. He roots his ethics in the idea that narrative has the key potential to govern human beings' relations to their environment and

that recontextualizing narrative elements in a nonathropocentric manner is what postmodern environmental ethics should aim for (Cheney, 1993, p. 88). Leopold's conception of biotic community and Holmes Rolston III's notion of storied residence are Cheney's main sources of inspiration for his theory on bioregional narrative, for both views indicate a human-land connection as well as a contextualization or narration of it. Cheney (1993) further explains his suggestion of endorsing postmodern bioregional narratives as alternative ecocentric paradigms: "Bioregions provide a way of grounding narrative without essentializing the idea of the self, a way of mitigating the need for 'constant recontextualization' to undercut the oppressive and distorting overlays of cultural institutions" (p. 89). In other words, Cheney highlights the need to build a contextual relationship to the land and its biotic community members through stories or narratives that are produced and reproduced about them. Although bioregional narratives are "normative," "they are [at the same time] the subject of social negation" (1993, p. 93) for Cheney, and they should be always revisited and reconstructed without totalization. In Cheney's postmodern ethics, the more-than-human world is not excluded from the ethical realm as this world connotes the whole that human beings attach themselves to via stories. Notably, postmodern environmental ethics focuses on the question of justice for all beings in bioregions, engaging in a deconstruction and reconstruction of discursive practices that establish values for both human and nonhuman beings.

American environmental ethics philosopher J. Baird Callicott redirects the postmodern route that investigates the essential role of human beings in recent ecological crisis towards constructing a viable ethics that embraces both biological similarities and cultural differences in relation to *Homo sapiens*. Callicott's multicultural environmental ethics posits that previous forms of ethics—he labels them simply ecological and hegemonic—fall short merely because they fail to recognize the multicultural aspects of the ecological problems, and offers "an orchestral approach" (2001, p. 83) among various environmentally conscious ethics and practices. In a basic sense, Callicott (2001) notes that though based on principles of ecology, an ethics cannot function globally without acknowledging "the paradoxical duality of humanity" (p. 85), which indicates that "we are surely many peoples, but just as certainly we are one species; correspondingly, we are each now also bicultural—members of at least two cultures simultaneously, a traditional, regional culture and the new international, global culture" (p. 85). He contends that any viable frame for global environmental ethics should coordinate these different cultural realms in such a way that they are harmoniously synchronized like an orchestra, and he grants the role of the conductor to "a postmodern reconstruction of scientific epistemological privilege" (Callicott, 2001, p. 91). This ethical view sustains "the unity-in-multiplicity" (Callicott, 2001, p. 84) as its principle, anticipating that "the one globally intelligible and acceptable ecological ethic and the many culture-specific ecological ethics may mutually reflect, validate, and correct one another—so they

may exist in a reciprocal, fair, equal, and mutually sustaining partnership" (Callicott, 2001, p. 95). Consistent with such ethical pursuit, multicultural environmental ethics embraces a postmodern revisiting of scientific discourse and Leopold's land ethic, both of which contradict the traditional hegemonic hierarchies among human and nonhuman beings. In this manner, this form of ethics attempts to shape an environmental vision with its "temperately pluralistic" (Callicott, 2001, p. 78) stance that refrains from setting absolute boundaries between the human and more-than-human world.

3. New Materialist Insights into Environmental Ethics

Postmodern attendance to environmental ethics has thus an enormous impact on the way human beings think about such dualisms as nature and culture, human and nonhuman, or mind and matter that have so far dominated the ethical realm. More notably, the linguistic turn of poststructuralist thought started to bring attention to the discursive aspect of ecological problems, which endorsed a questioning view of the existing epistemologies about human and nonhuman nature. Yet, this gradual transition from anthropocentric to nonanthropocentric ethics has reached its pivotal point with the New Materialist theory as it brings back the critical focus on the material side of the environment and argues for the inseparability of "matter and meaning" (Oppermann, 2012, p. 43). Indicating the material turn in science and ethics, new materialisms encompass a groundbreaking set of values to accompany ecological thought, rooted neither in Cartesian dualisms of body and mind nor limited to postmodern revisions of such binaries. Instead, the new materialist philosophical route leads to embracing the idea that it is impossible to treat matter and discourse separately as they constantly generate one another. This perspective emphasizes that "the linguistic, social, political and biological are inseparable" (Hekman, 2010, p. 25). The previous postmodern emphasis on the discursive aspect of nature is thus challenged within the new materialist framework, attributing a capacity both to the human and more-than-human world in the construction of environmental discourses.

Karen Barad's theory of agential realism best explains the locus of new materialisms as their theory identifies "the nature of nature" (2007, p. 132) as "the entangled material practices of knowing and becoming" (2007, p. 133). Building their theory upon Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics, Barad concurs that "we are part of the world that we observe" (2007, p. 133) and rejects the traditional positions that the dominant Western epistemology is built on: the tripartite division of "knowledge, the knower, and the known" (2007, p. 132). In the same manner, Barad overthrows the human-centered superiority or anthropocentric privilege that the traditional scientific discourses promote and draws attention to corporeality or materiality as an ontological and epistemological precursor

of both human and more-than-human beings. In Barad's perception of corporeality, "all bodies, not merely human bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity—its performativity" (2007, p. 139). Instead of interaction, which potentially hints at the separateness of two things, Barad (2007) intentionally coins the term as "intra-action," which "presumes the prior existence of independent entities" (p. 139). Intra-activity denotes indeterminacy about the positions of the agencies involved within. Barad defines agency that matters in her theory of performativity as such:

> Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity. Nor does it merely entail resignification or other specific kinds of moves within a social geometry of antihumanism. Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of "subjects" or "objects" (since they do not preexist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever—it is "doing"/"being" in its intra-activity. Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity. (2008, p. 144)

Barad's quantum-physics-based model of agency makes it possible to reconsider how the so far ascribed role of the subject to human beings has excluded the nonhuman from this position and limited their presence to passive objects. However, Barad's agential realism presents a compelling account of environmental ethics, notably discarding the representationalism inherent in traditional scientific practices and discourses based on the notion of an external knowing subject (2007, p. 48). This theory replaces the "basic premises of representationalism" (2007, p. 49) in science with the idea of performativity, which refers to "thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being" (2007, p. 134). In a performative understanding of the world, there are agencies that belong to all life and nonlife forms, actively involved in the "world's becoming, in its on-going intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 136). This agential view in performative theory, contesting the "anthropocentrisms of humanism and antihumanism," reflects a posthumanist attitude, denying the calibrated role of the human at the center (Barad, 2007, p. 136). In other words, Barad situates humans as performative agencies, simultaneously produced by and producing all other agencies through intra-action.

In light of Barad's new materialist ontology, Stacy Alaimo (2008) discusses ethical configurations of posthumanist agency, concentrating on "the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world, and at the same time acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies" (p. 238). Alaimo incorporates posthumanist agency in her discussion of "the ethical space of nature" (2008, p. 237), which is an imminent issue to attend to in environmental ethics. She treats transcorporeality as an essential term that helps us "reconceptualize bodies and natures in ways that

recognize their actions" (2008, pp. 244–45). Without reserving an active, humanist, rational, external position of the knower for human beings, Alaimo's transcorporeal ethics endorses agencies at work or in intra-activity, to use Barad's term, as the center of the ethical realm. Alaimo further explains how this reconceptualization works for her understanding of environmental ethics:

> I would suggest, however, that dwelling within trans-corporeal space, where "body" and "nature" are comprised of the same material, which has been constituted, simultaneously, by the forces of evolution, natural and human history, political inequities, cultural contestations, biological and chemical processes, and other factors too numerous to list, renders rigid distinctions between "mind" and "matter" impossibly simplistic. Thus, by recasting the terms of the debate, something as unlikely a candidate for glory as dirt may be understood as an agent, rather than as (solely) the ground for the action of something else. (2008, p. 257)

Alaimo here reiterates the critical function of trans-corporeal space that concurrently incorporates all processes: evolutionary, material, natural, historical, biological, social, or chemical for the human and non-human world. This is the space that should lead the debate in environmental ethics. Alaimo's transcorporeal environmental ethics, as a posthumanist performative theory, thus invites critics to address the current environmental problems within a new materialist paradigm that functions as a catalyst of all divisions between mind and matter or the human and the more-than-human.

In a similar new materialist approach, Jane Bennett (2010) turns her critical focus to the materiality of nature, more specifically, to what she calls "vitality of matter" (p. 53). She posits that humans need to remind themselves of appreciating matter's vibrant quality as "[t]he figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption" (Bennett, 2010, p. ix). Treating the nonhuman world as pure matter with no vitality is a residue of the Cartesian ideology within environmental ethics, and Bennett endows matter with vitality, an essential force used to prioritize human beings over more-than-human members of the world. For Bennett (2010), vitality signifies "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (p. viii). Vital materialism, in this sense, functions as another notable response to the "crisis of perception" (Capra, 1995, p. 19) in ecology, and it effectively replaces the environment with vital materiality, which "better captures an 'alien' quality of our own flesh, and in so doing reminds humans of the very radical character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman" (Bennett, 2010, p. 112). What emerges from this new materialist realization is the fact that human beings should recognize the so-far denied materiality of their bodies and incorporate the excluded aspects of both materialities: human

and nonhuman. Vital materialism thus connects all life and nonlife forms through a capacity or potential to create a change or an effect in their activities. This view brings about a notable shift of perspective in relation to the ethical significance of nonhuman others as it suggests an active involvement of human and more-than-human agencies in such ways that deny human exceptionalism in ethics.

It is significant to introduce Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino's concept of "storied matter" into the ethical discussion of new materialist projections of all agencies. Oppermann and Iovino (2014) compellingly argue that it is urgent "for humans to declare their agentic independence in a hybrid, vibrant, and *living* world" (p. 3). The necessity arises from "the new materialist paradigm [that] is premised on the integral ways of thinking language and reality, meaning and matter together" (Oppermann and Iovino, 2014, p. 4). In their theory, matter has a narrative agency that reminds humans of "the emergent nature of the world's phenomena, the awareness that we inhabit a dimension criss-crossed by vibrant forces that hybridize human and nonhuman matters, and finally the persuasion that matter and meaning constitute the fabric of our storied world" (Oppermann and Iovino, 2014, p. 4). With such an understanding of matter and the world (entirely rejecting the traditional boundaries between the knower and the known) it is possible to re-envision our human nature and more-than human nature as Oppermann and Iovino further posit that:

> Even though no preordered plot can rigorously distinguish these stories of matter, what characterizes them is a narrative performance, a dynamic process of material expressions seen in bodies, things, and phenomena co-emerging from these networks of intra-acting forces and entities. Seen in this light, every living creature, from humans to fungi, tells evolutionary stories of coexistence, interdependence, adaptation and hybridization, extinctions and survivals. (2014, p. 7)

This new materialist insight into "the nature of nature" (Barad, 2007, p. 24) and "the entanglement of matter and meaning" (Barad, 2007, p. 1) encourages humans to revisit their environmental ethics that has so far either excluded the non-human or relied on a traditional binary of the human and more-than-human world.

4. Conclusions

The quest of environmental ethics for eradicating human-centered views of more-than-human natures, ruling over them with their exceptionalism, necessitates reframing the basic notions about what is human and what is more-than-human. Paving the way towards the inclusion of all life and nonlife forms within the ethical realm, Leopold's land ethic envisions a more inclusive image of the world, that is, the biotic community of the land. The exclusion of the members of the biotic community, so far commonly accepted by the dominant

ideologies, is first challenged with the land ethic, which demands care and respect for every member of the biotic community. Deep ecologists take this renewed connection of human beings with their environment further and argue for the intrinsic or inherent value of each being as part of the greater ecological whole. Aligning themselves almost at the verge of misanthropy, deep ecologists also advance the idea that environmental ethics should lead individuals to construct their own individual ecosophies. Following a similar nonanthropocentric view and a political agenda, social ecology thinkers direct the debate into the mutual exploitation of human and nonhuman beings within modern capitalism. They make a compelling point about the inseparability of the ecological and the social, which demands searching for the liberation of both human and more-than-human beings from the hierarchy of profitability. Similarly, skeptical in attitude towards the social construction of environmental values, postmodern environmental ethics conducts a linguistic examination of these values and points to their discursivity, promoting a reconstruction of our ethical considerations about the environment in a liberating, nonanthropocentric manner. The material turn, however, brings about a breakthrough for environmental ethics as it overthrows all boundaries that any anthropocentric view holds onto in relation to the nonhuman world, merging the two into "performative agencies," "transcorporeal beings," "vibrant matter," or "storied matter." Within the new materialist paradigm, nonhuman beings are as actively involved in the meaning-making processes as are human beings. What dissolves in this performative, transcorporeal or vibrant realm is the ethical position of human beings: situated no longer as superior or dominant but in an active becoming of all agencies. The new materialist understanding of this ethical role has the potential to cultivate more sustainable relations with the nonhuman world since the discredited notions of the humanistic subject and object are replaced by the idea of new materialist agency. The entanglement of matter and meaning in the new materialist sense opens an unexplored path for environmental ethics that still seeks the way out of any hint at anthropocentrism or exclusion of nonhuman beings from the ethical realm. The ethical configurations of the recent new materialist theories might produce more conundrums than elucidations on environmental concerns as they require humans to radically shift their perception of what it means to be human and nonhuman. Yet, it is an imminent call that environmental ethics should respond to in order to address the current environmental crisis.

References

Alaimo, S. (2008). Trans-corporeal feminisms and the ethical space of nature. In S. Alaimo and S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material feminisms* (pp. 237-264). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Barad, K. (2008). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. In S. Alaimo and S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material Feminisms* (pp.120-156). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12101zq

Bennet, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jh6w

Bookchin, M. (1996). *The philosophy of social ecology*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Bookchin, M. (1964, 2003). What is social ecology? *Communalism: International Journal for a Rational Society* 4. n.d.

Callicott, J. B. (2001). Multicultural environmental ethics. *Daedelus* 130 (4), 77-97.

Capra, F. (1995). Deep ecology: A new paradigm. In G. Sessions (Ed.), *Deep ecology for the twenty-first century* (pp. 19-25). Boulder: Shambala.

Cheney, J. (1993). Postmodern environmental ethics: ethics as bioregional narrative. In S. J. Armstrong & S. G. Botzler (Eds.), *Environmental ethics: Divergence and convergence* . (pp. 86-95). New York: McGraw Hill.

Clark, J. (2000). *A social ecology*. The Anarchist Library. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/john-clark-a-social-ecology.

Crutzen, P. J. & Stoermer, E. F.. (2000). The 'Anthropocene'. *IGBP Newsletter*, 41, 17-18.

Drengson, A. (1997). An ecophilosophy approach, the deep ecology movement, and diverse ecosophies. *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, 14(3): 110-111.

Drengson, A. & Inoue, Y. (Eds.). (1995). *The deep ecology movement: An introductory anthology*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Publishers.

Hekman, S. (2010). *The material knowledge: Feminist disclosures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Leopold, A. (1949). *A sand county almanac and sketches here and there*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murdy, W. (1993). Anthropocentrism: A modern view. In J. Armstrong & S. G. Botzler (Eds.), *Environmental ethics: Divergence and convergence*. S. (pp. 66-70). New York: McGraw Hill.

Naess, A. (1995). The deep ecological movement: Some philosophical aspects. In G. Sessions (Ed.), *Deep ecology for the twenty-first century*(pp. 64-84). Boulder: Shambala.

Naess, A. (1989). *Ecology, community and lifestyle: Outline of an ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511525599

Oppermann, S. (2012). Rethinking ecocriticism in an ecological postmodernframework: mangled matter, meaning, and agency. In T. Müller & M. Sauter (Eds.), *Literature, ecology, ethics: Recent trends in ecocriticism*. (pp. 35-50). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg.

Oppermann, S. & Iovino, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Material ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

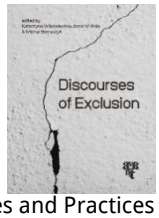
Özkan, H. (2021).Transforming the self and society: Zitkala-Ša, critical reflection, and action. *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, 11(4), 59-80.

Segundad, P. (2004). Biodiversity and Tradition in Malaysia. In Roger S. Gottlieb (Ed.), *This sacred earth: Religion, nature, environment*. (pp. 162-166). New York and London: Routledge.

Sessions, G. (1995). Preface. In G. Sessions (ed.), *Deep ecology for the twenty-first century*. (pp. ix-xxviii). Boulder: Shambala.

White, L. (1967). The historical roots of our environmental crisis. *Science*, 155, 1203-1207. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203

Gülşah Göçmen is Assistant Professor in the Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Aksaray University, Turkey. Her PhD centers on the modernist sense of place in the works of E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf from an ecocritical viewpoint. She is an advisory board member of the Environmental Humanities Center at Cappadocia University. She is also the co-managing editor of the center's international, peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary Environmental Humanities journal *Ecocene*. Göçmen's Turkish translation of Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan's co-edited collection *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explanations* (Duke University Press, 1995) has been partly published as short series in 2022 (A7 Publishing, İstanbul). Among her academic research interests are Ecocritical Theory, The Novel, Environmental Ethics, and Blue Humanities.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Discourses of Human Disqualification: The Story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar on Screen and Stage

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska
University of Łódź
katarzyna.ojrzynska@uni.lodz.pl

Received 2024-07-22; accepted 2024-10-23; published Online First 2024-10-31.

Abstract

The article centres on a contemporary short film and two plays that were inspired by the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, the first known victim of the Nazi programme of the extermination of people with disabilities; these are: Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo's *Child K* (2014), Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag's *Kinder K* (2012), and Weronika Murek's *Feinweinblein* (2015). I examine verbal and visual discourses of human disqualification that these works reveal and challenge or reinforce. Following Tobin Siebers, I define disqualification as "a symbolic process" that excludes individuals from being considered rightful human beings, thereby exposing them to "unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers, 2013, p. 23). As regards visual discourses of human disqualification, the article argues that even though each play or film employs a different representational strategy, which can respectively be called: monsterization, sublimation, and normalization, they all render the "severely" disabled body of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar invisible. In other words, they hide the "unsightly" from view, hence denying full representation to those body-minds that fall significantly outside the "norm" and perpetuating their aesthetic disqualification.

Keywords: cultural disability studies, disqualification, aesthetics, disability, Nazi Germany, Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar, theatre, drama, film

1. Disability Aesthetics, Human Disqualification, and the Beginning of the Nazi Extermination of People with Disabilities

In his book in which he examines disability as an aesthetic category, Tobin Siebers states that "[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies" (2013, p. 1). Strong affective responses that disabled body-minds elicit in those that fit in the "norm" are one of the reasons why they are often devalued by "the aesthetics of human disqualification" (Siebers, 2013, p. 21), whereby disqualification is understood "as a symbolic process [that] removes individuals from the ranks of quality human beings, putting them at risk of unequal treatment, bodily harm, and death" (Siebers, 2013, p. 23). Impaired body-minds are rarely appreciated and valued for their diversity, heterogeneity, and non-conformity. Yet, as Siebers argues, they are a major source of innovation in art; for instance, they were foundational to the modernist works of Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Ernst Klee, and Marc Chagall. At the same time, atypical body-minds are rarely recognized as such and hence their role in modern art has for decades remained unacknowledged. One notable exception is Nazi Germany, where both modernist works (seen as representations of disabled body-minds or products thereof) and actual disabled body-minds were disqualified from the realm of art and the ranks of humanity, respectively. Nazi authorities publicly labelled modernist art "degenerate" (cf. Siebers, 2013, pp. 28-39) and presented people with disabilities as not fully human.

Disability featured widely in the Nazi visual discourse of human disqualification, as best evidenced by Hermann Schwenninger's 1942 propaganda film *Dasein ohne Leben* (*Existence without Life*),[1] which used the camera angle and dramatic, expressionist lighting to present psychiatric patients as terrifying and monstrous sub-humans that pose a threat to the Aryan race. The film was presented to medical and military staff—those at the helm of Aktion T4, the programme of the extermination of people with disabilities in the Third Reich, which officially started in October 1939 when Adolf Hitler authorized "mercy killings" of those who were deemed incurable.[2] The Nazi propaganda envisaged disability as a threat to the "healthy" social tissue and a burden that affects not only non-disabled citizens but also impaired persons themselves since it precludes the possibility of them leading satisfactory lives. Thus, Hitlerites sought to implement a utopian eugenic vision of a "better" world that does not have disability in it.

[1] Fragments of the film are available on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (https://collections.ushmm.org/search/?f[orig_title_facet][]=Dasein%20ohne%20Leben%20[Existence%20Without%20Life]).

[2] The letter that authorized the murder was backdated 1 September 1939—the date of the German invasion of Poland.

One of the most vulnerable groups targeted by the Nazis were the children considered "defective." The first one was killed already in July 1939. Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar was a few-months-old child from Pomssen in Saxony. Born blind, without a leg and a part of an arm, he might also have had an intellectual disability. In the spring of 1939, Kretschmar's father—a local farm labourer—wrote a letter to Hitler, pleading "that this creature should be killed" (as cited in Schmidt, 2007, p. 118), as we learn from physician Karl Brandt, whom Hitler asked to examine the child personally. The baby was "euthanized" in July. Officially, he died of heart failure.

For a long time, the child's identity remained a secret. Gerhard Kretschmar was commonly referred to as the Knauer child. In his 2007 book, Ulf Schmidt explains, "German medical historian Udo Bezenhöfer has recently found the name and sex of the child, but he is adamant that he cannot disclose this information because of strict German data-protection laws;" Bezenhöfer, therefore, argued that the child should be referred to as "child K" (2007, p. 177). Schmidt was the first one to reveal the boy's real name. As he explains, his decision was ethically motivated. He notes that Bezenhöfer's argument "somehow overlooks the child itself [sic!] and its [sic!] suffering. […] By calling the case the 'child K,' we would not only medicalize the child's history, but also place the justifiable claim of the parents for anonymity above the personality and suffering of the first 'euthanasia' victim" (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 117-118). Furthermore, Schmidt explains that at the Nuremberg Trial, Brandt "never mentioned the child's real name" (2007, p. 120). This could have been motivated by his wish to present himself as a professional who respects the confidentiality of medical data or provide a strategy to defend his ideological stance. Thus, when questioned by the investigators, Brandt referred to the Kretschmar child not as "an infant" but a "thing" (as cited in Schmidt, 2007, p. 122). Consequently, Schmidt's choice to reveal Kretschmar's name was a step towards recognizing the disabled victim as an individual rather than a life unworthy of life (*Lebensunwertes Leben*).

The story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar exemplifies a much broader problem related to the fact that disabled victims of the Nazi regime for a long time remained neglected and forgotten. In Germany, it was only in recent decades that the memory of them has to some extent been restored thanks to initiatives such as the Gadenkort-T4 blog, the new memorial erected near Berliner Philharmoniker, individual attempts to reconstruct forgotten parts of the family history (see e.g., Hechler, 2017; Gilfert, 2022) as well as various artistic endeavours to commemorate the victims and reveal the prejudice which caused that for a long time they remained unrecognized (e.g., the theatre contest titled *andersartig gedenken on stage*, Jochen Meyder's project *Grafeneck 10654*, Daniela Klein's 2017 play *Brandenburger Märchen*).

Further in the article, I will explore how three different non-German visual works (one film and two plays) address the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar. More specifically, I will focus on verbal and visual discourses of human

disqualification that they either expose and problematize or perpetuate. In visual terms, as will be argued, each work uses a different representational strategy, which I call monsterization, sublimation, and normalization. Yet, what they all have in common is that they render the "severely"[3] disabled body of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar invisible.

2. The Monstrous: Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo's *Child K* (2014)

The Italian short film *Child K* (2014, dir. Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo) is closely based on the story of the first victim of Nazi "euthanasia." Robert De Feo and Vito Palumbo gave the family depicted in *Child K* a fictitious name (Kretschkopf), which seems to underscore the fact that the film offers a fictionalized vision of the past, even though the directors make it clear that it is based on historical facts.

Set in Germany, *Child K* opens with Lina Kretschkopf giving birth to a stillborn child. Unable to emotionally cope with the situation, her husband becomes consumed with a desire for a strong and brave son to the point of obsession. Richard projects these characteristics onto his future child by naming them Gerhard (Ger. *ger-* meaning spear + *-hard* meaning strong/brave) and thus attributing them with virtues that will make them a worthy member of the Aryan Volk-Community. Such a narrow set of expectations disqualifies all manifestations of human embodiment that do not conform to the narrowly defined criteria.

When Richard's wife, troubled with his manic behaviour, seeks help from the local priest, the protagonist gives vent to his anger and disappointment. He accuses God of injustice and banishes him and the priest from his house, announcing that he will be the sole architect of his family's future. Having witnessed this emotional outburst, the terrified, God-fearing Lina cries and asks the Blessed Virgin Mary not to "listen to the angry words of this poor ungrateful soul" (De Feo & Palumbo, 2014). Her prayers, however, go unanswered. Kretschkopf is soon punished for his sin of pride as the film clearly suggests a possible causal connection between the act of banishing God from the house and the later birth of a disabled child. In this way, *Child K* perpetuates superstitions that inform the so-called religious/moral model, which sees disability as a divine retribution for the wrongdoings of the impaired person or their parents.

When Gerhard is born in the Kretschkopfs' modest cottage and lets out his first cry, we do not see him. The film cuts to the next scene, which takes place at night. The viewers hear an owl's cry, and the camera quickly moves into the room where Lina is sleeping. Richard is still awake, rhythmically rocking in a wheelchair. His manic gaze is directed at a hand-carved cradle with the name

[3] I intentionally use inverted commas to accentuate the constructedness of this category.

Gerhard inscribed on it, from behind which the camera eye stares at him. Featuring tracking shots, low angles, late-night setting, and disturbing sounds of creaking floor, the scene resembles a horror film. What additionally helps build the tension is the fact that the child remains invisible. Like in the final scene of Roman Polański's *Rosemary's Baby*, we get close to the cradle, yet we are not given an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the baby whom the protagonist describes in the letter that he writes to Hitler as a "monster."

Richard does not recognize Gerhard as his son and suggests that the child "may not even be a human being" (De Feo & Palumbo, 2014). This alludes to German folk beliefs in changelings (German *Wechselbalg*, *Wechselkind*). Already in the nineteenth century, Jacob Grimm noted in his *Teutonic Mythology* (*Deutsche Mythologie*, 1835) that "the physicians […] say that the disease named bolismus […] apetitus caninus […] makes the child so unshapely, that men call it a *changeling* (wächsel-kind)" (2012, p. 1777). More recently, in her analysis of descriptions of these fantastic creatures in the British Isles, Susan Schoon Eberly argued that they correspond to specific congenital disorders, which "evoked a […] response of mingled awe and fear" (1988, p. 59). These folk beliefs frequently served as justification for violence directed at those suspected of being changelings, which often led to their premature death. In De Feo and Palumbo's film, the disabled Gerhard Kretschkopf is effectively monsterized; what turns him into a horrifying changeling are not only his father's words but also the camera work, setting, and sounds in the cradle scene, in which the viewers are made to share Richard Kretschkopf's perspective as if the baby were too horrifying to look at both for the parents and the spectators.

In the last five minutes of *Child K*, the audience's attention is redirected from the family to Richard's letter, as the camera traces its long journey to Hitler's desk. As De Feo explains,

> The change of focus from the Kretschkopf family to the journey of the letter was pivotal for our vision, because in that shift lies all the meaning of "Child K." An insignificant farmer wrote an apparently insignificant letter, and a series of events that was meant to mark history forever was set in motion. How many of us think we're leading an ordinary life, without any power of changing things? I think every one of us, in [our] own small way, everyday, with small gestures, can change the world. For the better, one hopes. (2015, Jul. 23)

The film makes Richard Kretschkopf/Kretschmar co-responsible for the mass extermination of people with disabilities, suggesting that it was his letter that set the wheels of the killing machine in motion. While the directors' intentions to make the viewers realize the importance of their individual choices seem noble, it needs to be remembered that Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar's case was instrumentally used by Nazi authorities to justify the "euthanasia" programme

that they had earlier developed. Already in 1935, Hitler planned to implement it once the war started (see Evans, 2004, p. 25). As Schmidt explains,

> [t]he petition of the Kretschmar family was certainly not the only one KdF [Kanzlei des Führers, the Chancellery of the Führer] received from German parents since 1933, especially after racial propaganda had stressed that such children were "ballast existences" for the German body politic, and should be eliminated. [...] It is likely, however, that Gerhard Kretschmar's case would have caught the attention of the KdF officials. Given the many disabilities of the boy, they must have realized that the case could serve as a precedent to implement further eugenic measures. (2007, p. 119)

In the film, Richard's decision seems largely decontextualized. Even though he uses the Nazi rhetoric, his letter seems to be predominantly a fruit of his trauma and obsessive desire to have a strong and healthy son. In other words, *Child K* locates the origins of the Nazi extermination of children with disabilities in the emotionally unstable and unpredictable mind of a German farm labourer, rather than in the eugenic milieu and its discourses of human disqualification.

The film ends with slides presenting a brief history of Action T4 and six black-and-white historical photos taken from the Bundesarchiv and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, most of which present children with mental disabilities. The images seem somewhat incongruous with the film, which depicts the disabled newborn as a mysterious monster hidden from the audience's curious eyes. It is only at the end of *Child K* that the viewers get an opportunity to see children whom the Nazis considered beings that are unworthy of life as fellow humans, even if their bodies and facial expressions uncomfortably depart from the so-called norm. Although they appear more relatable than Richard's monstrous son, the film does not provide the spectators with sufficient tools that would help them fully recognize these victims' individuality and humanity.

3. The Sublime: Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag's *Kinder K* (2012)

Gerhard Kretschmar is also concealed from the audience's view in the play *Kinder K* (2012) by Norwegian dramatist Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag.[4] The text juxtaposes the history of the child with a contemporary story of a pregnant woman and her husband who face an ethical dilemma when amniocentesis indicates that the baby will be born with an impairment. As Grønskag explains, his play was inspired by his visit to Berlin's Topographie des Terrors, where he learnt about Gerhard Kretschmar and Aktion T4, and the public debate that was held in Copenhagen, his place of residence at the time, "about prenatal testing,

[4] Originally written and produced in Norwegian, the play was translated into English and staged in 2017 by Cut the Cord at Drama Centre London (dir. Camilla Gürtler). I am very grateful to Kristofer Blindheim Grønskag for sharing the text of his play with me before it was published.

where some mothers had felt that they were advised to remove fetuses with Down Syndrome" (K. B. Grønskag, personal communication, 2018, February 6; also cf. Bernt, 2014).

Kinder K opens with a symbolic domestic scene in which one of the characters trims a pot plant with scissors. Always dissatisfied with the result, she "*cut*[s] *off all the good shoots, all the flowers and flower-stalks until all that is left is a short little stump*" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 33). The scene alludes to the Nazi gardening metaphors and the destructive outcomes of strife for impossible perfection. It is followed by a poetic fragment, repeated at the very end of the play, whose central metaphor is that of a furnace. Alluding to Nazi crematoria, the furnace and its fire devour all that does not fit in the medical norm:

> It gorges on fused fingers and hare-lips.
> It delights in empty pupils and hearts lacking valves.
> It gorges on the voices in heads. (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34)

Although the furnace is "[h]idden, deep in the darkest woods you can imagine," its "fire never goes out" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34). The fire is described as one that "warms us" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 34). It is a source of sensory pleasure and comfort. Fire also gives a sense of safety as it dispels darkness, which represents our greatest fears. The images of physical atypicality and a mention of mental disability in the poem suggest that disability is one of those fears. In fact, the drama essentializes human fear of disability, accentuating its continuity over the years, rather than exploring changing social and political contexts in which it emerges.

Grønskag's play features two actors (referred to as HE and SHE) who impersonate multiple roles, which underscores the parallels between the present and the past that the text seeks to uncover. The protagonists are not presented as realistic flesh-and-blood characters but rather as receptacles for a myriad of concepts and ideas related to human impairment. These include various discourses of human disqualification that have been used against people with disabilities, for example,

- the religious discourse which attributes devilish provenance to disability (Grønskag, 2019, p. 61);
- the medical discourse, represented by Karl Brandt, who is convinced that incurable disability is a source of pain and suffering and hence needs to be eradicated (Grønskag, 2019, p. 83);
- the physiognomic or moral discourse, according to which "the body's outside is a true picture of the body's inside" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 36);
- the discourse of social stagnation, according to which the world is and will be a hostile and unwelcoming place for people with certain disabilities (Grønskag, 2019, p. 86); much like the ideas expressed by

> Brandt, the discourse is informed by subjective assessments of what constitutes a life that is worth living.

The ideas expressed by the play's flat characters serve as commonly reiterated clichés.

The plotline set in 1939 starts with Richard Kretschmar bringing his son to a doctor in Leipzig. The baby is carried in a bag—hidden from the audience's as well as his own father's eyes, as apparently even his parents cannot bear to look at him. When the doctor is about to examine Gerhard, his father "*puts the baby bag on the floor*" and says: "There… But don't… Just… OK. Just look" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 38). The physician slightly uncovers the boy. Her immediate reaction is grotesque and exaggerated: "*a sharp light shoots up from the bag. SHE leaps back,*" screams: "Oh, for fuck's sake! Jesus!" and asks Richard to "cover *it* up" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 39, emphasis added). The unsightly child "[i]s lacking a number of limbs," is probably blind, "sometimes enters a kind of epileptic state," and is most likely "an idiot" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 76). For these reasons, Gerhard is treated like a repulsive object (or, as Kristeva would put it, abject), or an incurable "monster" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 41), "a stain[, a] smear against us, the family, the race" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 42)—the one who pollutes, an impurity that needs to be removed. Gerhard is never shown to the audience, who only see him as the blinding light emanating from the bag. As specified in the stage directions, the light causes painful discomfort, like "*a shard in the eye*" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 49).

Writing about the affective impact of disability on the viewer, Tobin Siebers takes recourse to Roland Barthes's notion of punctum—"the sensitive point that rises out of the [image], 'shoots out of it like and arrow,' and 'pierces' [one] to the heart" (2013, p. 128). He thus underscores the vulnerability of the viewer (perhaps related to the uncomfortable realization of their own vulnerability and "imperfection") and the high affective potential of the disabled image. In *Kinder K*, it is Lina whose reaction to the child is the strongest. She describes her revulsion towards the unsightly newborn in visceral and physical terms, calling Gerhard a monster that is "eating [her] up" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 51), tearing off her nipples, and injecting her with "mercury-grey poison" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 52). Lina's sense of fear and disgust are so strong that the woman does not want to look at or touch her child, whom she perceives as venomous and unclean. She uses the Nazi rhetoric that presented people with disability as a burden that causes degeneration of Volk-Community to describe her own individual, bodily experience.

The visual representation of the child on the stage in no way corresponds to these descriptions as the light emerging from the bag, even if hard to look at, evokes a number of positive metaphorical associations with, for instance, knowledge, innocence, hope, potential, as well as a form of divine radiance that ordinary people find impossible to endure. Like the Christian God, Gerhard

cannot be seen or even "embraced by the words" (Grønskag, 2019, p. 51), as the Kretschmars put it in their letter to Hitler. In fact, the stage metaphor of light clearly alludes to the concept of the sublime, which has often been associated with divinity and which, as the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke argues, elicits delight that is more sophisticated that the pleasure humans derive from beauty since it incorporates elements of fear and pain. As he further notes, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful" (Burke, 2017, p. 40). Grønskag's choice to represent Gerhard Kretschmar with the use of the light metaphor sublimates the image of his bodily difference to the extent that he renders it virtually invisible. In other words, in the process of creating a safe distance between the viewers and the disabled child and thus allowing them to delight in the Burkean sublime, the author conceals and, in a sense, eliminates from the stage that which the aesthetics of human disqualification labels as unsightly, monstrous, or/and unhuman.

4. The Normal: Weronika Murek *Feinweinblein* (2015)

Yet another dramatic work that alludes to Gerhard Kretschmar's case and that I would like to discuss in this article is a Polish dramatic text—Weronika Murek's *Feinweinblein*. Recognized with the prestigious 2015 Gdynia Drama Award, the play is set in timeless rural limbo which yet resembles the Stalinist 1950s in the region of Upper Silesia[5]—an area with a sizeable German minority and complicated history, famous for its mining, iron, and steel industries. As Anna Zalewska-Uberman (2015) notes, the characters represent people who are "isolated from the world, deprived of a sense of time, place and national identity, suspended between Poland and Germany." It is into this context that Murek inserts the story of Gerhard Herbert Kretschmar—in the play referred to as the Knauer child. Even though the fictional plot does not claim to be an accurate representation of history, it is interesting to examine the authorial choices of what to include in the play and what to leave out.

Murek presents the Knauers as very simple, poor, illiterate people who live in a secluded Silesian village, forsaken by God and the Polish government, away from the capital where even cloakroom attendants allegedly have big lives. The Knauers do not differentiate between the Nazi and the communist regimes but see them as the same nameless authorities. What serves as the central element

[5] In the play, it is not clearly stated when or where it is set. Yet, there are numerous hints that suggest a more specific time and place, such as frequent mentions of "Adenauer's gob," allusions to Hindenburg (today's Silesian city of Zabrze), and references to the eponymous Feinweinblein, a creature that allegedly belongs to the Silesian folklore [at one point, the author herself admitted that she may have invented the Silesian bogeyman (Murek, 2015, October 15; Szyngiera as cited in Podgajna, 2017)].

in their lives is a radio receiver whose major role is to create a sense of connection to the world and society, kill boredom, and fill in the uncomfortable silence which brings back painful memories of the past. When the wireless breaks down, we learn that the Knauers got it during the war. To be precise, they received the device together with "almost a pound of meat" in exchange for their disabled child who was "stupid" and "would not pass the fit-to-work tests" (Murek, 2019, I.VI). The discourse of human disqualification that resonates in the characters' words alludes as much to the Nazi concept of "useless eaters" (*Unnütze Esser*) as to the Soviet work ethos which was particularly strong in Poland in the decades after the Second World War, when "the heroism of the sword" had to be replaced "with the heroism of labour" (Wycech, 1961, p. 45) in order to rebuild the devastated country. When they can no longer listen to the radio, the Knauers visit Świetlicowy (the manager of a local community centre) and his wife, who are the only literate people in the area. The protagonists hope that they will help them write a letter of complaint to the authorities so that they will have their radio receiver repaired or get their child back. In the very last scene, Świetlicowy receives a letter from "the old committee for aggressive ailments [komitet dawny chorób zajmujących]" (a fictional equivalent of the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Severe Hereditary Ailments?).[6] Its content is not revealed to the audience, but we may suspect that it is a much belated note informing the parents about the death of their son.

In the play, the wireless resembles a historically-inspired character in its own right. Although the Nazi authorities did not reward the parents who reported their disabled children with radio receivers, as the author suggests,[7] it is possible to claim that the wireless was their "gift" to common German citizens. It was in the 1930s that radio receivers were finally made affordable for general public—the elitist entertainment was transformed into a populist tool of totalitarian propaganda. As Joseph Goebbels, who commissioned *Volksempfänger* (People's receiver) for mass production, stated in his speech *Der Rundfunk als achte Grosmacht* (*Radio as the Eighth Great Power*), delivered on 18 August 1933: "[w]e live in the age of the masses; the masses rightly demand that they participate in the great events of the day. The radio is the most influential and

[6] Historically, when the parents were asked for consent to have their child transferred to a facility, they were often reassured that the place offered "the best and most efficacious treatment available" (as cited in Lifton, 1986, p. 55). Some time after the child was murdered, they would receive a certificate with a false cause of death.

[7] Even though the author claims otherwise (Murek, 2015, July 23), there does not seem to be any historical evidence that would prove that parents were encouraged to report their disabled offspring in return for radio sets or other specific material rewards, unlike "German doctors and midwives [who] were obliged to report all children under their care who had been born with" specific impairments "[i]n return for a small payment" (Evans, 2004, p. 26). Some historians argue that, since the extermination was conducted in secret, initially both doctors and parents may not have been aware of the fate awaiting the children (see e.g., Lifton, 1986, p. 52).

important intermediary between a spiritual movement and the nation, between the idea and the people" (2013, p. 613). The radio in the Third Reich was a gift to the nation struggling with the consequences of the Great Depression that hit them extremely hard, and an instrument of Nazi propaganda. As Michael Windover explains,

> [t]he Bakelite models that proliferated throughout Germany after 1933, due to low price, were designed to receive only medium-wave signals . [...] This effectively meant that the owners of Volksempfänger models could only tune in to nearby (German) broadcasts. These receivers thus carried the propaganda of the ruling Nazi party, in addition to the "look" of a modern appliance. (2019, p. 152)

In other words, by giving common people access to fashionable products, Goebbels sought to increase their sense of dignity and self-worth as well as show the benevolent face of the Nazi regime, which cares for all its citizens.

Among its various other roles in Murek's play, the wireless serves as a site of what Susanne Knittel calls historical uncanny—"the vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was familiar has become strange" (2015, p. 9). This is, for instance, conspicuous in the echoes of the Nazi eugenics that resonate in the words coming from the Knauers' radio, such as Orchardman 3's question: "Do you know how many people work to feed a field rodent?", to which he answers: "One hundred thousand only in the USSR" (Murek, 2019, II. VIII). This alludes to Nazi propaganda posters presenting calculations according to which the money spent on one mental patient could feed a healthy Aryan family. The words of Male Voice 4, who encourages the listeners to "[c]ultivate plants with the help of an educationist not God" (Murek, 2019, II.I), also sound ominous and uncanny, as they allude to the gardening metaphors used by the Nazis, including the main ideologist of the Third Reich and specialist in agriculture Richard Walther Darré (Darré 1978, p. 115; Bauman, 1989, pp. 113-114). Explaining the concept of "a gardening estate," Zygmunt Bauman writes that "it usurped the right to set apart the 'useful' and the 'useless' plants, to select a final model of harmony that made some plants useful and others useless, and to propagate such plants as are useful while exterminating the useless ones" (1992, pp. 178-179). The Third Reich created a medical and legal system that helped put this idea into practice. Allusions to its ideology and propaganda ominously reverberate in Murek's play. The Knauers themselves mindlessly repeat the slogans: "like empty shells, they told us,"[8] "there is no compassion where there is no feeling" (Murek, 2019, II.VII), trying to justify their deed and assuage the sense of guilt.

[8] The phrase "human shells" was used by Alfred Hoche (2012, p. 35) in the 1920 book *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life. Its Measure and Form* (co-authored by Karl Binding), which had a major influence on the later Nazi policies.

In a sense, the wireless replaces the lost boy. The couple use it to reenact gestures of love and care for their child:

> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Before we noticed all these taps that one can turn one way or the other, we listened to the radio very, very quietly.
> KNAUER
> Well… So close. Such flutter.
> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Like listening to a heart.
> KNAUER
> Putting it close to your ear.
> KNAUER'S WIFE
> Holding it in your arms and putting it close to the ear. (Murek, 2019, II.VI)

Overcome with a sense of guilt, the characters do not seem to be able to mourn their child, whose name they never even mention as to do so would be too painful. They mourn the radio receiver instead. Ironically, however, when the wireless is broken (like their child was "broken"), they seek to have it replaced with one that works properly, which suggests an entrapment in a vicious circle of repetition (and eugenic discourse which still emanates from the radio).

Even though the Knauer child is not physically present in the play, he features on the book cover, designed by Iwona Chmielewska, of a collection of Murek's dramatic texts released in 2019 by Wydawnictwo Czarne. The image shows the front of an old-fashioned grey wireless whose speaker resembles prison bars behind which we see a profile view of a boy's screaming head. The boy does not have any atypical features while the scream seems to be a reaction to the forced confinement. In fact, in *Feinweinblein* references to bodily non-normativity are conspicuous by their absence and what serve as sole reasons for the Knauer child's murder are his "stupidity" and unproductivity. In the actual play, his only visual representation can be found in an embroidered piece of cloth hanging above the Knauers's bed. It shows a child with a bowl of soup, "holding the spoon the other way round" (Murek, 2019, I.II). It is doing things otherwise that serves as evidence of his inferiority. By choosing not to attribute the boy with visible markers of "severe" disability, Murek normalizes his body, or, to be more precise, "return[s it] to an acceptable degree of difference" (Mitchell & Snyder 2000, p. 7), which David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder see as a strategy typical of traditional representations of disability grouped under the label of "the narrative prosthesis." Once again, Gerhard Kretschmar's atypical embodiment is erased from the stage.

5. Conclusion

While De Feo and Palumbo's film reinforces, even if unwittingly, certain discourses of human disqualification by validating the superstition that informs the religious model of disability and monsterizing Gerhard Kretschmar, the two theatrical plays inspired by the same story are more successful in problematizing such discourses. Tackling various negative clichés about disabled lives, *Kinder K* and *Feinweinblein* hint at the enduring uncanny presence of the past in post-war and contemporary times. Yet, the origin of the prejudice informing these discourses of human disqualification is presented as markedly different. While in Grønskag's play ableism is suggestive of an innate human fear of disability, in Murek's drama it is just part of radio drivel which the characters mindlessly devour.

Despite these and other differences, there is at least one crucial element that all three reworkings of Gerhard Kretschmar's story have in common. The representational strategies that their authors use, be it monsterization, sublimation, or normalization, serve as a mask to conceal the "severely" disabled body-mind and hide its perceived difference. In other words, the film and the dramatic texts help remove that which pierces the eye more than the bright light in Grønskag's play from the stage or the screen. Even if some of these works are more effective in challenging and questioning various ableist discourses and models of interpreting disability, none of them uses the positive aesthetic potential of alternative forms of embodiment labelled as disability, which Tobin Siebers brought to light in his monograph. This, in turn, suggests that some, especially "significant," forms of disability are still considered grounds for human aesthetic as well as social and cultural disqualification.

Perhaps what is needed is not so much the sublimation or normalization of images of disabled body-minds, but rather some guidance on how to view them differently. This can, for instance, be found in the 2001 film entitled *A World Without Bodies*, which is a documentary presenting a trip to the former killing centre in Bernburg, now a memorial site—a trip that American scholars Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell took together with their children Cameron and Emma Mitchell. Towards the end of the film, we see a group photo of children from Brandenburg standing or sitting against a brick wall. They are hardly presented as medical specimens, and their individuality is underscored by means of the camera closing up on specific faces. The photo is juxtaposed with a shot of Emma Mitchell vigorously rolling in her wheelchair towards the camera. The narrator (Snyder) comments: "[w]hen I looked at this photo, I saw my daughter. I saw beautiful children, stubborn children, children who might say, like she does, 'let's get out of this scary castle'" (Snyder & Mitchell, 2001). Snyder thus helps the viewer find new ways of interpreting atypical body-minds and seeks to replace the aesthetics of human disqualification with that of appreciation.

References

Bauman, Z. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Polity.

Bauman, Z. (1992). *Intimations of Postmodernity*. Routledge.

Bernt, B. (2014, 27 February). KINDER K—av Kristofer B. Grønskag. *Vårscenefest*. https://web.archive.org/web/20181117132446/http://vaarscenefest.no/arrangementer/event/kinder-k-av-kristofer-blindheim-gronskag-nor/

Burke, E. (2017). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. (J. T. Boulton, Ed.). University of Norte Dame Press.

De Feo, R. (2015, Jul. 23). Interview by Elle Schaffhauser. RIIFF News & Updates. http://rifilmfest.blogspot.com/2015/07/filmmaker-spotlight-roberto-de-feo.html

De Feo, R., & Palumbo, V. (Directors). (2014). *Child K*. Colorado Film / Dinamo Film / Eidolab with the support of Mibact and Apulia Film Commission. Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfhGbP0G1H4&t=233s

Darré, R. W. (1978). Marriage Laws and the Principles of Breeding. In M. Lane & L. J. Rupp, (Trans.), *Nazi Ideology before 1933. A Documentation* (pp. 110-118). University of Texas Press.

Eberly, S. S. (1988). Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy. *Folklore 99*(1), 58–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1988.9716425

Evans, S. E. (2004). *Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities*. Iven R. Dee.

Gilfert, J. (2022). *Himmel voller Schweigen*. Eckhaus.

Goebbels, J. (2013). Radio as the Eighth Great Power. In A. Rabinbach & S. L. Gilman (Eds.), *The Third Reich: Sourcebook* (pp. 612-616). University of California Press.

Grimm, J. (2012). *Teutonic Mythology*. (Vol. 4; J. S. Stallybrass, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Grønskag, K. B. (2019). Kinder K. In N. Howard (Ed. & Trans.), *The Oberon Anthology of Contemporary Norwegian Plays* (pp. 144-163). Oberon.

Hechler, A. (2017). Diagnoses That Matter: My Great-Grandmother's Murder as One Deemed "Unworthy of Living" and Its Impact on Our Family. *Disability Studies Quarterly 37*(2). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5573/4651

Hoche, A. (2012). Medical Remarks. In C. Modak (Trans.), *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life. Its Measure and Form* (pp. 27-42). Suzeteo.

Knittel, S. C. (2015). *The Historical Uncanny. Disability, Ethnicity and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*. Fordham University Press.

Lifton, R. J. (1986). *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. Basic.

Mitchell, D. T., & S. L. Snyder. (2000). *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Michigan University Press.

Murek, W. (2015, July 23). Wiśnie w hełmie [Interview by J. Jaworska & P. Olkusz]. E-Teatr. https://e-teatr.pl/wisnie-w-helmie-a201662

Murek, W. (2015, October 15). Mała literacka performatywnie [Interview by A. Cytacka]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7uWlw9Gmiw

Murek, W. (2019). Feinweinblein. In *Feinweinblein. Dramaty*. Wydawnictwo Czarne [eBook edition].

Podgajna, E. (2017, April 4). "Feinweinblein" czyli ludzie w krajobrazie zmiecionego świata. *Gazeta Wyborcza Szczecin*. https://szczecin.wyborcza.pl/szczecin/7,137466,21591663,feinweinblein-czyli-ludzie-w-krajobrazie-zmiecionego-swiata.html

Schmidt, U. (2007). *Karl Brandt—The Nazi Doctor: Medicine and Power in the Third Reich*. Hambledon Continuum.

Siebers, T. (2013). *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press.

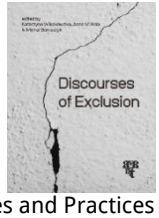
Snyder S. L., & Mitchell D. L. (Directors). (2001). *A World Without Bodies* [Film]. Brace Yourselves Productions.

Windover, M. (2019). Art Deco and the Fashioning of Radio Spaces. In B. Elliott & M. Windover (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Art Deco* (pp. 139-159). Routledge.

Wycech, C. (1961). *Dobre i złe tradycje*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.

Zalewska-Uberman, A. (2015). Melancholia i śmiertelne seanse (nie)pamięci. *Teatr 9*. https://teatr-pismo.pl/5207-melancholia-i-smiertelne-seanse-niepamieci/

Katarzyna Ojrzyńska is assistant professor at the Department of English Studies in Drama, Theatre, and Film (Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, Poland). Her research interests mostly oscillate around cultural disability studies. She collaborates with the Theatre 21 Foundation and Warsaw's Downtown Centre of Inclusive Art. She translated Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book *Staring: How We Look* and Tobin Siebers's *Disability Aesthetics* into Polish, and co-edited (together with Maciej Wieczorek) a collection of essays entitled *Disability and Dissensus: Strategies of Disability Representation and Inclusion in Contemporary Culture* (Brill, 2020).



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Accepting Invisibility? Experiences of Exclusion in Grace Lau's Poetry

Joanna Antoniak
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
antoniakjo@umk.pl

Received 2023-12-31; accepted 2024-04-15; published Online First 2024-07-05.

Abstract

In her poetry collection *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* (2021), Grace Lau, a Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadian poet, showcases different experiences of exclusion and inclusion, some connected to the long history of prejudice and discrimination of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. The aim of this article is to discuss depictions of three types of exclusion experienced by Lau—that of a postcolonial subject, a queer subject, and, finally, a queer subject of colour—and the impact those experiences have on her identity. The analysis of three of Lau's poems—"Birth/Right," "Another God," and "Perfect Groupie"—provides an insight into her reflections on different instances of exclusion she experienced, whether motivated by her ethnicity and nationality, her sexual orientation, or the combination of both, and the impact they had on her identity as a queer postcolonial subject.

Keywords: Chinese Canadian literature, exclusion, Grace Lau, perpetual foreigner stereotype, model minority myth, queer literature

1. Introduction

The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak is a debut poetry collection published in 2021 by Grace Lau, a Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadian poet. The poems included in *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* can be described as vignettes illustrating Lau's experiences—being a Canadian and Chinese migrant stuck between the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the model minority myth ("Escape Artist," "Birth/Right"), a queer woman of colour caught adrift between the white queer community and the Chinese diaspora

("The Levity," "The Lies That Bind," "My Grief Is a Winter"), and an aficionado of both contemporary Western popular culture and traditional Chinese culture ("When Yuhua Hamasaki Went Home")—and highlighting the complexity and intricacy of the mosaic that is the contemporary Canadian identity.

Lau belongs to a group of young Canadian poets of East Asian descent[1] who in their works often describe their experiences of living in Canada as people of colour and address the issues plaguing the Canadian society, exposing the faux inclusivity of Canadian multiculturalism. This form of auto/biographical writing (Davis, 2011) can, as Larissa Lai (2014) notes, serve as "a way to 'break the silence,' especially for marginalized subjects and those people who have been rendered invisible through racist exclusions from Canadian cultural life" (p. 37). Therefore, the works of Lau and other poets become a mode of empowerment which allows them—and their readers—to liberate themselves from the stigma of "subjects excluded from official histories" (Lai, 2014, p. 38) and finally tell the stories of their communities on their own terms.

In her poetry collection, Lau showcases different experiences of exclusion and inclusion, some connected to the long history of prejudice and discrimination, such as the treatment of the Indigenous people ("Red and Yellow"), Asian migrants ("Pedicure at Pinky's"), or the queer community ("Another God"), and others—to more recent events, fuelled by the rapid development of media and technology as well as the exploitative and consumerist character of Western neoliberalism ("3 a.m. Communion," "I Don't Hear Cantonese in Chinatown Anymore"). Hence, her writing can be described as not only auto/biographic but also as autoethnographic[2]—it is the record of "the ethnography of one's own group [...], autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Through the employment of this type of writing, Lau's works not only reflect Paul Ricoeur's perception of identity as "bound up in identifi-

[1] The said group consists of poets, often of Chinese or Japanese descent, who debuted in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Apart from Lau herself, other members of this group include, among others, Michael Prior, Isabella Wang, Mercedes Eng, Jody Chan, Phoebe Wang, Kai Cheng Thom, Natalie Wee, and David Ly.

[2] It is worth noting that the idea of the autoethnographic character of Asian diasporic fiction has been met with different reactions from postcolonial and diasporic scholars and writers. While Mary Louise Pratt (1992) claims that autoethnographic writing can function as a form of resistance against the colonizer, Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn (2008) note that, due to its reliance on the notion of the authentic self/other, autoethnography may not be fully applicable to discussing Asian diasporic writing since Asian Canadians are a highly heterogenous group that is "still in the formative stages of developing hybridized group identities" (p. 4). Similarly, Lai (2014) highlights that autoethnographic writing can deepen the oppression experienced by post-colonial subjects, "retrospectively folding [them] back into a discourse of national belonging, while actually covering over the violent history of exclusion it was supposed to have expiated" (p. 37).

cation with significant others" (in Davis, 2011, p. 9)—other members of the Chinese diaspora, the queer community and her own family—but also place her experiences in the context of the said communities (Davis, 2011, p. 11)[3].

The aim of this article is to discuss depictions of three types of exclusion experienced by Lau—that of a postcolonial subject, a queer subject, and, finally, a queer subject of colour—and the impact those experiences have on her identity. The analysis of three poems—"Birth/Right," "Another God," and "Perfect Groupie"—provides an insight into Lau's reflections on different instances of exclusion she experienced, whether motivated by her ethnicity and nationality, her sexual orientation, or the combination of both. Furthermore, the close reading of the selected poems allows this article to address the impact those experiences of exclusion have on Lau's identity.

2. Being a perpetual foreigner—experiencing exclusion as a postcolonial subject

As Dan Allman (2013) notes, different forms of exclusion and inclusion have existed since the beginning of human existence. The notion of exclusion, especially in the social context, can be seen as connected to other concepts, such as "depravation and destitution, hardship, poverty and inequality, discrimination, ghettoization, marginalisation, the underclass, disaffiliation, and dispossession" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 21). Hence, exclusion implies the existence of a limitation or restriction in the access to different spheres of life, being it employment opportunities, housing, education, social and cultural capital and participation in public and political life; in consequence, such a restriction negatively impacts not only self-perception of an excluded individual but also their sense of belonging (Silver, 1994).

This "multifaceted, multidimensional and fluid nature" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 23) of social exclusion is reflected in its different definitions. Ruth Levitas and colleagues (2007) describe social exclusion as a complex and multidimensional process which

> includes the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. (p. 9)

[3] In this context, Lau's writing can be also described as an example of biomythography (Antoniak, 2023), a type of writing that "allows the author to discuss how social and cultural oppression can be internalised as a part of their identity" (Antoniak, 2023 p. 89). In her poetry, Lau's childhood recollections are placed side by side historical events which, in turn, are often mythologised and shaped by her affects and emotions. Hence, it is possible to identify the speaker in Lau's poems with the author herself.

Tania Burchardt and others (2002) also highlight the inability to fully participate in different key activities as the major feature of social exclusion due to a variety of interconnected factors, whether economic, social, cultural, political, spatial, individual, or group (Rimmerman, 2013). Allman (2013) notes that the state of exclusion is maintained through the reproduction of discriminatory practices and social relations, one of which is stigmatisation—this process occurs when "a shared characteristic of a category of people becomes consensually regarded as a basis for disassociating from (that is avoiding, excluding, or otherwise minimise interaction with) individuals who are perceived to be members of this category" (Leary, 2005, p. 48).

While inclusion can be seen as an answer to social exclusion, the relationship between those two can be seen as a multidimensional continuum "along which people and groups have different degrees of participation and unequal access to resources, capabilities, and rights" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 28). The multidimensional nature of the said continuum means that not only individuals can be simultaneously included in one dimension and excluded in others but also their experiences of exclusion and inclusion can differ over time and place (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022). This leads to the possibility of inclusion in exclusion, a phenomenon that "implies inclusion, but in a position of subordination [...] justified in traditional or community terms" (Mascareño & Carvajal, 2015, p. 137) and often experienced by groups who are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic origin, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, language, or religion.

As Hurriyet Babacan and Alpherhan Babacan (2013) observe, the categories of exclusion and inclusion can be particularly useful for discussing migrant and diasporic literature since immigrants want to be included in the host society and host culture without abandoning their own history, backgrounds and identity. Simultaneously, though, they often experience exclusion on the basis of their culture and race. Those experiences are an integral part of the history of Chinese diaspora in Canada. As noted by Jin Tan and Patricia E. Roy (1985), the Chinese migrants were subjected to anti-Asian prejudice and hostility from the moment they arrived. Seen as a threat to the labour market and the nation as a whole (Lee, 2006), the Chinese migrants fell victims to numerous exclusionary policies which aimed at not only limiting their participation in the cultural and political life but also restricting their presence in Canada. The implementation of legal solutions aiming at limiting Chinese immigration to Canada and their presence in Canadian spaces (the introduction of the head tax, the forceful ghettoization, the limitations imposed on Chinese-owned businesses, or the refusal to grant Chinese Canadians full civil and political rights) started as early as in the 1870s; however, it was not until 1923 that the Chinese Exclusion Act virtually ceased Chinese migration to Canada (Anderson, 2007). The discriminatory actions undertaken by the Canadian government—both on federal and provincial level—resulted in the withdrawal of Chinese migrants from public spaces.

Yet, this tendency to separate themselves from the host society was seen as a proof of their outright refusal to assimilate which, in turn, only further fuelled anti-Chinese prejudice and, in consequence, "prevented many Chinese from considering Canada as their permanent home" (Chan, 2019). Although the political situation of Chinese Canadians improved significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, their cultural and racial exclusion continued, either under the veil of inclusion as exemplified by the model minority myth, or more openly, in the form of the perpetual foreigner stereotype.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype is the assumption that Asian immigrants are unassimilable and unable to fit with the idea of perfect—meaning white—Canadian (Huynh et al., 2011). The perpetual foreigner stereotype is considered to be an instance of microinvalidation, a type of microaggression "characterised by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (Leonard, 2014, p. 6). Microinvalidations are considered to be more harmful than other types of microaggression as they "exclude, negate, or deny the psychological thoughts and feelings of target groups and persons" (Leonard, 2014, p. 7).

The impossibility of escaping the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the markers of difference and Otherness it entails as well as its microinvalidating character are discussed by Lau in the last poem of the collection, "Birth/Right." The tone of the poem seeps with anger and frustration, accentuated by the structure of "Birth/Right"—the poem consist of eleven couplets that create tense and suspenseful atmosphere—and more aggressive language. The poem opens with Lau acknowledging her colonial origins, but its tone quickly turns accusatory:

> I was born
> in an English colony so naturally
> I'm pro-Oxford
> comma, I know when to use a semicolon, and also
> who the fuck cares.
> Have you ever seen white people
> care about grammar as much as
> Chinese parents do? (Lau, 2021)

Born in one of the last vestiges of the British Empire, Lau highlights the pressure of adopting some characteristics of the former colonizers—in this case the fluent command of the English language—by the postcolonial subject. This process of mimicking the former colonizer is, as Lau points out, intergenerational in nature as parents and grandparents believe that speaking English perfectly would ensure future success of their children and grandchildren[4]. However,

[4] According to Daniel Shek and colleagues (2022), one of the biggest parenting stresses affecting Chinese/Hong Kong parents is academic achievement of their children—as they want them to attend the best schools, preferably those located abroad, they often pressure them to speak perfect English.

anger and frustration voiced by Lau in the last two couplets undermine that belief—the sudden and unexpected use of profanity "who the fuck cares" shocks the reader, but, at the same time, emphasizes all the negative emotions Lau is experiencing when she talks about mimicking the former colonizers. As noted by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2007),

> [w]hen colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to "mimic" the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a "blurred copy" of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. (p. 125)

The threat posed by such mimicking becomes a justification of further discrimination as the impossibility to flawlessly replicate the former colonizer highlights the Otherness of the postcolonial subject. Lau is aware of that as she openly acknowledges that people like her—people of colour born in the former colonies of the British Empire—will never be fully accepted or treated as equals by their white counterparts, no matter how successful they are in mimicking their culture. This painful awareness of rejection faced by the postcolonial subject is particularly visible in the second part of the poem when Lau mentions using her English name, Grace, over her Chinese one:

> […] there is no redemption
> in keeping strange tongues from stumbling
> over who I am
> when Eve still remembers the taste
> of mutiny, so I fall back into waves
> of a fragrant harbour.
> A baptism
> will not save me**.** (Lau, 2021)

Lau points to the precariousness of her position as a person of colour: no matter how much she tries to adapt herself to the Western culture—going even as far as choosing a name that would be easier to pronounce for English speakers—she knows that, ultimately, she would still be seen as an exotic Other, a perpetual foreigner. The pointlessness of the intergenerational effort to mimic the former colonizer, as Lau sees it, becomes the source of her anger and frustration as she slowly realizes that the main reason for her exclusion is not her insufficient command of English, but the colour of her skin. Yet, despite all the frustration, Lau acknowledges that rebelling against such treatment would not change anything. In the final couplets of the poem, Lau refers to Eve and her disobedience; however, unlike Eve, Lau knows that her rebellion would be unsuccessful—she is aware that, as a migrant from a former British colony, she would never be able to successfully challenge her position and the way she is perceived by the Westerners. Knowing that she will never be accepted for who she really is, Lau is forced to accept her role of a perpetual foreigner, an Other simultaneously included and excluded from the white Western communities.

This sense of helplessness is reflected in the last two couplets of the poem. Lau's claim that she "fall[s] back into waves of a fragrant harbour" shows that she passively accepts the reality in which she is reduced to her place of origin; this is emphasized by the reference to "a fragrant harbour," the name of Hong Kong in Cantonese which was adopted by the British colonizers and applied to the whole island. In the poem's concluding statement—"A baptism will not save me"—Lau acknowledges that even taking a new name and identity will not change her situation. While the reference to baptism ties in with the water imagery introduced earlier—as falling back into the waters of the harbour resembles an immersion baptism—it also implies that the removal of one's true self is an impossible endeavour. Furthermore, baptism serves not only a religious but also a communal function—through a performative act of naming an individual, they officially become a member of a group. However, as Lau notes, even when she adopts a new Anglophone name, she is still not treated as an equal and rightful member of the white Canadian community. Therefore, the experience she describes is an example of inclusion in exclusion as, while she is included in the white host society, her position is still that of a subordinate, a second-class citizen.

3. Looking for representation—experiencing exclusion as a queer subject

The beginnings of Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement (GLLM) in Canada can be traced back to the introduction of Bill C-150 by Pierre Trudeau's government in 1969. The bill—which decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting adults (Adam, 2009)—was implemented as a result of the public debate surrounding the case of Everett Klippert who, in 1965, was sentenced to three years[5] in prison after revealing that he had engaged in sexual activities with male partners (Warner, 2002). The fight for sexual minority rights gained momentum in the 1970s when, in 1977, the provincial government of Quebec prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and the amended Canadian Immigration Act lifted the ban on the immigration of gay man (Rau, 2021). However, it was not until the introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985[6] that challenging discriminatory legislation became easier (Lahey, 1999). In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled that Section 15 of the Charter—the one that guaranteed "right to the equal protection and equal benefit to the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability" (Rau, 2021)—included "sexual orientation as prohi-

[5] Klipper sentence was later indefinitely extended on the basis of diagnosis made by a forensic psychologist who described Kippler as 'a dangerous sex offender'. Despite his appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, Klipper was released from prison only in 1971, six years after his sentencing (Warner, 2002).

[6] The Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms was adopted in 1982 but it was not until 1985 that it came into effect (Rau, 2021).

bited basis of discrimination" (Rau, 2021). The first three decades of the twenty-first century focused predominantly on the issues of same-sex marriage and trans rights. The former was achieved on 20 July 2005 when the introduction of Bill C-38 allowed same-sex marriage (Rau, 2021) while the 2017 amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act paved way for the latter since it provided legal protection to trans and gender-fluid people[7] through including "gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination" (Rau, 2021)[8]. However, despite all the progress made by GLLM, queer people either are still being excluded from some spheres of social and cultural life—for instance, representation of queerness and queer people in the media is still rather scarce or limited only to more socially acceptable "forms" of queerness, such as lesbianism—or prohibited from speaking openly about their sexual orientation.

Those issues are addressed by Lau in "Another God," a poem about her fascination with an African American basketball player Allen Iverson. Although Iverson himself is not gay, his refusal to adhere to the norms imposed on him by the dominant white culture—"You were a walking unapology, so much swagger the NBA declared a dress code to contain your durags and baggy jeans and recreate you in its own image" (Lau, 2021)—gave young Lau strength to find her own voice and be open about her sexuality:

> This is how a shy girl
> raised to fear the Lord,
> the devil and her own queer self
> becomes fearless like you
> have to be when you're the smallest player.
> Learns to fight through giants
> with flair,
> always with flair. (Lau, 2021)

Using her younger self as an example, Lau acknowledges the power diverse representation in media and other public spheres of life has on the marginalised youth. She notes that through embracing his Otherness and refusing to fit in within clearly defined categories, Iverson questions—or even threatens—the existing cultural order, making his presence even more captivating and alluring. In "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" Stuart Hall (1997) notes that difference is both necessary and dangerous as it constitutes the foundation of cultural order.

[7] Furthermore, in 2018, the process of changing gender on official documents was made easier in all Canadian provinces while in December 2021 the Canadian government banned conversion therapy (Rau, 2021).

[8] It is also worth noting that Canada was one of the first Western countries to grant refugee status on the basis of sexual orientation (Molnar, 2018).

Therefore,

> [m]arking "difference" leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes "difference" powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order. (Hall, 1997, p. 237)

This ability to threaten the supposedly fixed cultural order becomes a source of inspiration and strength for Lau. This is reflected by the epithet "a walking unapology" she uses to describe Iverson. While the noun "unapology" has negative connotations as it is usually used to refer to an insincere apology, Lau uses it to both praise, rather than condemn, Iverson's behaviour and criticise the NBA for trying to restrict his freedom of expression—it is, after all, Iverson's refusal to apologize for his "different" way of living that earned him Lau's respect and elevated him to the position of her new idol.

Similarly, in the stanza quoted above, Lau lists the fear of "her own queer self" alongside that of God and devil, indicating how her religious upbringing impacted her perception of her own sexuality as something shameful and dangerous. However, this fear is contrasted by Lau with Iverson's unapologetic attitude, the approach to life that Lau wants to imitate; as a result, she remains torn between the fear of her queerness and the desire to express it freely. Interestingly, Lau takes inspiration not only from Iverson's behaviour outside of the court but also on it. In a later part of the aforementioned stanza, she draws parallels between the game of basketball and her own struggles, noting that both she and Iverson are faced with giants. While, due to his stature, Iverson often plays against much taller players, in her attempts at being more accepting of and open about her sexuality, Lau fights with more metaphorical giants: both important and intimidating people in her life, such as her parents and prominent figures in her community, as well as the ideas concerning sexuality that were instilled in her since the very young age.

As the penultimate stanza of the poem suggests, Iverson, the embodiment of the freedom of self-expression and being true to oneself, became a god-like figure for young Lau, replacing that of the Christian god whose image was used to make her feel ashamed and scared of her true self. However, despite her admiration, Lau is quite critical of Iverson's later complicity in commodity capitalism:

> […] godliness is not
> a part-time job.
> Even gods make
> music of murder, 40 Bars
> of money, blood, and pulling triggers.
> I traded one God of violence for
> another, yet

another god
who has painted me with death,
yet another god who will not
see me. (Lau, 2021)

In this stanza Lau expresses her disappointment upon discovering that, in the end, Iverson has transformed his difference and resistance into a commodity that can be marketed and sold as he uses his controversial image to sell his music. Furthermore, while she acknowledges the impact Iverson has had on her life and subsequent rebellion, Lau realizes that, as a god figure, he is not that different from the Christian god he replaced in her personal pantheon when she traded "one God of violence for another" (Lau, 2021). In the quoted fragment Lau refers to "40 Bars," a rap song written and performed by Iverson and infamous for not only the use of derogatory language and imagery associated with gun violence, but also the inclusion of threats of physical violence against queer people (Moss, 2001). As she draws parallels between Iverson's song and the teachings of Christianity concerning the treatment of queer people, underlining their disrespectful and violent attitude towards sexual minorities, Lau concludes that, despite everything, Iverson cannot represent her as he refuses to see people like her as human beings.

This epiphany leads Lau to the conclusion that only queer athletes, who understand the plight of people like her, can serve as role models for new generations of queer youth. However, she is aware that having this type of representation, especially in male-dominated sport disciplines, is almost impossible to achieve. At the same time, in the last stanza of the poem—"There are still no out NBA players" (Lau, 2021)—she poses an important question concerning the lack of queer representation in professional sport. Lau notes that what is possible for Iverson through embracing his difference is not possible for queer male athletes. Pat Griffin (1998, p. 20) highlights that sport, and especially team sport, "is where men learn their masculinity skills: [to be] competitive and tough[,] to deny feelings of compassion [and] to value physical strength and size, aggressiveness and the will to dominate." Hence, Griffin notes, gay male athletes subvert not one but two stereotypical representations: "[a] gay male athlete violates both the image of athletes as strong, virile and heterosexual and the image of gay men as swishy and homosexual" (1992, p. 25). Furthermore, while the world of professional sport may be more accepting of athletes of colour, it still creates a hostile environment for queer male athletes, discouraging them from coming out publicly. This discouragement is particularly disheartening for Lau because, as Lai (2014, p. 126) notes, "[t]he identities themselves become less important than the action taken to produce them," preventing them from being used for consumption, "marketing [or] institutionalization." Although

Lau seems to be aware of those issues, she still feels disappointed by the scarceness of queer representation in sports[9], implying, on the basis of her own experiences, how beneficial it can be for queer youth[10].

4. The curse of the model minority—experiencing exclusion as a queer subject of colour

As a queer Chinese Canadian, Lau remains torn between the Canadian society—and the queer community in particular—and the Chinese diaspora. While the former provides her with understanding and acceptance, the latter functions as a combination of a safe space (Strier & Roer-Strier, 2010), foundation for building a new migrant identity (Délano & Gamlen, 2015), and a place providing a sense of stability (Dahinden, 2010). Hence, for Lau and many other queer Chinese Canadians maintaining the connection with their diaspora becomes an important element of their everyday life in the new homeland[11].

Due to the turbulent history of the Chinese community in Canada, the members of diaspora remain anxious of becoming a target of racially motivated preju-

[9] It is worth highlighting that Lau's comments on the scarceness of queer representation in sports seem to be rooted in her own observations from her youth and apply predominantly to male sports. As Frankie de la Cretaz (2022) observes, "women's sports spaces are reflective of queerness: they centre certain aspects of queer culture, making them safer places to be out, and making them unique among an often homophobic and heteronormative men's sports culture—even as the media and culture at large wants to heterosexualize women's sport."

[10] The question of queer representation in media—especially that of queer people of colour—is also addressed by Lau in the first poem of the collection, "When Yuhua Hamasaki Went Home." The poem, which serves as a celebration of the inclusion of the first drag queen of Chinese descent in a popular American reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, uses the differences between performativity of gender in Western and Chinese cultures as a starting point for the discussion on the importance of representation and its role in challenging racialized stereotypes. What seems to matter to Lau the most is the fact that Yuhua serves as an example of positive representation of queer Asian North Americans in a world where "the oversaturation of white [gays and] lesbians in LGBTQ+ media consequently promotes the exclusion of queer [men and] women of colour in the LGBTQ+ community and broader society" (Patel, 2021, p. 29).

[11] Maintaining connection with their diasporic communities seems to be of particular importance for queer people of colour since they are often excluded from Western, white-dominated queer communities. According to Daniel Eng (2010), the queer identity created by Western activists places whiteness at the centre of queer experiences; in consequence, it reinforces colonial and imperial discourses, often opposing "a politics of intersectionality, resisting any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another, each often serving to articulate, subsume, and frame the other's legibility in the social domain" (Eng, 2010, p. 4). The clash between the dominant—and white—experience of queerness and that of people of colour is also addressed by Lau in her poem "The Levity" in which she describes how her experience of coming out to her mother differed significantly from the images she encountered in mainstream media and the stories she heard from her white friends.

dice. As a result, they try to avoid engaging in any behaviours which could potentially draw the negative attention of the host society. This decision to become socially invisible resulted in the emergence of the model minority myth, a construction which depicts Asian immigrants as examples of successful adaptation to new conditions—it exaggerates economic and academic success of Asian diaspora while being rooted in anti-Asian prejudice, often questioning their cultural assimilation (Kim, 1999). Furthermore, the existence of the myth contributes to the erasure of all the discrimination and disenfranchisement Asian migrants have suffered since arriving to Canada (Cui, 2019). Despite its harmfulness[12], many members of Chinese diaspora try to maintain and reinforce the model minority myth since it aids the process of becoming socially invisible, even if it involves adjusting their cultural practices to the Western norms and standards or emphasising those behaviours and characteristics that are seen as "normal" by the host society. One of such examples of normalcy is heteronormativity (Zhu et al., 2022)[13]. In fact, as Stephen Hong Sohn (2018) notes, emphasising heteronormativity in Asian diasporic communities is a way of reproducing the model minority myth:

> Sex is simply a mechanism for parents to replicate the model minority child in their own heteronuclear families. […] [T]he heterosexuality of the Asian or Asian North American parent exists only as a function of raising the model minority child from birth to overachieving adulthood. In this sense, the model minority plot implicitly precludes the possibility of the queer subject, while promoting the centrality of the monogamous, heterosexual marriage and nuclear family formation. (p. 29)

As a result, performative heteronormativity[14] becomes a means of survival for many queer Asian migrants, a way of reinforcing the model minority myth cherished by so many of their compatriots (Tam, 2018). The notion of performative heteronormativity is addressed by Lau in "The Perfect Groupie," a poem in which she reminisces on her fascination with boybands:

> For a time I went to bed
> dreaming of boys.
> My first boy band was a tweenage dream

[12] According to Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin (2010), the negative consequences of adherence to the model minority myth include, among others, substantial emotional and cultural stress, significant increase in the rates of depression, suicide and suicidal thoughts as well as substance abuse.

[13] It needs to be noted that pre-colonial Asian societies were much more tolerant of queerness than their Western counterparts; the notion of compulsory heterosexuality was implemented in those societies by the British colonizers who labelled their openness to alternative sexualities and gender roles as the proof of the barbarity and degeneracy of Asian societies (Rajgopal, 2018).

[14] Performative heteronormativity should be understood here as "the execution of cultural, systemic, and individual practices that normalize opposite-sex attraction and behaviours" (Zhu et al., 2022, p. 345).

of ripped jeans, frosted tips, and too much hairspray
pouting from my bedroom walls. […]
For a time
I went to bed dreaming
of five man-boys named after Orlando
but not from Orlando.
I still remember
their favourite books, sports, and pizza toppings;
I studied Angelfire fansites the way we study
what we want to become.
My mother was so excited for me
to act like a girl. (Lau, 2021)

The opening couplet—"For a time I went to bed dreaming of boys"—is repeated three times in the poem, each repetition marking the introduction of a different aspect of Lau's fan behaviour and its connection to performative heteronormativity. In the first part of the poem, quoted above, Lau describes her pre-teen fascination with boybands, listing different fan activities in which she engaged, such as decorating her room with posters, collecting merchandise, watching shows and performances, or actively participating in online communities dedicated to her favourite singers. In fact, in the penultimate stanza of the quoted part of the poem, Lau draws parallels between her motivation to learn more about the band through extensively studying the websites made by fans—Angelfire she refers to is a paid web hosting service—to the dedication people put in choosing and pursuing their careers or learning skills necessary to achieve success. The introduction of such a comparison implies that, as a teenager, Lau considered collecting information about her favourite boyband equally important to her future as choosing a career. The part ends with a couplet highlighting the positive reaction of Lau's mother to her daughter's behaviour as finally she "act[ed] like a girl" (Lau, 2021). Lau notes that her mother's excitement stemmed not from her support for her child's hobby, but rather from the fact that the hobby itself was labelled as feminine.

Fascination with pop music has been connected with femininity since the 1960s (Coates, 2003). Pop music plays an important role in reinforcing traditional feminine gender roles while giving girls "the freedom to be individual wives, mothers, lovers [and] glamorous, desirable male sex objects" (Firth & McRobbie, 1990, p. 381). Furthermore, according to Simon Firth (1983), as girls' public engagement with music serves primarily as a tool to find a male partner, it is seen as an act of performing patriarchal femininity. More recent studies on girls' listening habits also reveal that pop music plays an important role in negotiating gender identities and is used by both pre-adolescent and teenage girls to not only facilitate interactions with their peers but, more importantly, to construct and express their cultural and ethnic identities (Coulter, 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that Lau's mother interprets her daughter's fascination with boybands—a staple of pop music of the 1990s and the 2000s—

as her embracing and accepting traditional feminine gender roles. Additionally, Lau's obsession with male artists is seen by her mother as a confirmation of her daughter's heterosexuality[15] as exemplified by the second couplet of the poem—"My first boy band was a tweenage dream of ripped jeans, frosted tips, and too much hairspray" (Lau, 2021)—with "a tweenage dream," a wordplay on "a teenage dream," referring to the feeling of falling in love for the first time.

The second part of the poem further explores the performative nature of sexuality:

> For a time
> I went to be dreaming of boys—
> their hair, their clothes,
> their songs, their dances.
> They were the perfect
> blueprint for a little girl
> who longed to be a teen
> -age heartthrob,
> the kind of girl
> a girl could love. (Lau, 2021)

Immediately after mentioning her mother's excitement upon seeing her daughter behave in a more girly manner, Lau reveals the real motivation behind her fascination with boybands—for her, they were icons of masculinity that she could observe and, later, try to replicate. In fact, in the second couplet of the quoted fragment, she lists the features that she paid particular attention to, analysed in depth and, later, incorporated into her model of a perfect boy. Lau's decision to use the word "blueprint" to describe the real reason for her interest in boybands indicates that, even as a teenager, she seems to be aware, whether consciously or not, of both her sexuality and the artificiality of gender norms. Hence, in her teenage naivete, she does see boybands as a literal blueprint, believing that through copying, recreating and adapting some of the features she determined to be attractive to girls she could also reshape herself into a being that would attract the same attention.

Performing heteronormativity was for Lau a cover which allowed her to explore her own queerness. In an act of rebellion, teenage Lau engages in an activity seen as manifestation of both femininity and heteronormativity; however, she uses the knowledge she acquires to transgress traditional perceptions of gender and sexuality as she weaponizes those ideas to fit her own purposes. Furthermore, she seems to be rather proud of her plan as it allows her to not

[15] Interestingly, the attention Lau gets from her mother for her interest in pop music is rather paradoxical in nature. While the mother "sees" her daughter, noticing her for her activities, the real Lau remains invisible, hiding beneath the mask of performative heteronormativity. Such an invisibility can be interpreted as another illustration of exclusion in inclusion as Lau can only feel visible and accepted when she adheres to expectations both her mother and her community places on her.

only achieve her goal but also keep her mother happy and satisfied. Even as a young girl, Lau seems to understand that performing heteronormativity is not only beneficial for her as it ensures parental acceptance but also for her mother, who is satisfied that, to the outside world, her daughter appears "normal." Although the tone of the poem remains relatively carefree, reflecting cheekiness of Lau's younger self, it already foreshadows the conflict between the need of an individual to express themselves and the responsibility of maintaining face and protecting family reputation of which adult Lau, from whose perspective the poem is written, is fully aware[16].

5. Conclusions

Grace Lau devotes a significant number of poems included in *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* to share her experiences of exclusion with her readers. Whether rooted in the markers of Otherness that make her a perpetual foreigner or her sexuality, those experiences influence Lau's identity and the ways she perceives and expresses herself. She addresses the faux inclusivity of the Western world, showcasing that even determination to become fully assimilated and eagerness to mimic and replicate Western behaviours and norms are not able to ensure equal treatment. In "Birth/Right," Lau points out the hypocrisy of the Western world which, on the one hand, encourages migrants to integrate and assimilate with white host societies while, on the other, continues to see them as perpetual foreigners, continually judged and appraised on the basis of their skin colour. Unsurprisingly, such an experience of exclusion in inclusion influences Lau as illustrated by the anger and frustration she feels upon realising that no matter how successful she is in assimilating, she will never be fully accepted by her white counterparts. However, those emotions are quickly replaced by helplessness and resignation as Lau realizes that no matter how much she challenges the hypocrisy of the West and how vocal she

[16] Lau discusses performative heteronormativity as a way of maintaining face and protecting family reputation (and, through that, further reinforcing the model minority myth) even at the cost of her own comfort and self-expression in another of her poems, "The Lies That Bind." In this poem, Lau presents her sexuality as a secret plaguing her family and compares it with another one, namely that of her grandmother's real age. Both women keep the truth about themselves hidden from the rest of the family to protect their loved ones from emotional harm and, in Lau's case, also to ensure the peaceful coexistence within the confines of both the diasporic community and the host society. The poem, therefore, can be seen as a depiction of the difficulty of negotiating queer Chinese Canadian identity as it takes into consideration both individual's need for self-expression and the needs of family and community (Antoniak, 2023). Lau continues her discussion on this particular topic in "My Grief Is a Winter," this time, however, focusing on the negative side effects of performative heteronormativity, especially on the mental state of queer diasporic individuals and their relationships with their families and the Chinese diaspora as a whole.

is about it, she would not be able to change her situation. In the end, she feels that she has no other choice but to accept that she will have to constantly defend her identity to others.

The difficulty of challenging the norms and ideas imposed by the white dominant culture is also discussed by Lau in the context of queer experience. In "Another God" she describes how enormous of an impact Iverson had on her when she was a child—his refusal to apologize for being "different" and "Other" aids her in overcoming the fear of her own queerness, instilled in her by her Christian parents and other prominent members of her community. Unfortunately, those feelings of excitement, admiration and elation that Lau felt upon watching Iverson play quickly turn to disappointment as she learns that, despite his own experiences with exclusion, her hero refuses to see queer people as human beings. While Lau uses the figure of Iverson to showcase the importance of diverse representation for the process of identity formation, especially among the youth, she also bemoans how, despite the inclusivity the Western world praises itself over, the representation in cultural, social, and political spheres of life is far from reflecting that. The relative invisibility of queer people in the public sphere and the scarceness of their proper representation becomes another source of disappointment for Lau as she realizes that, once again, she experiences exclusion in inclusion—while she may be accepted as the queer subject, she does not enjoy the same level of privilege as others.

However, what also transpires from Lau's poetry is the interconnectedness of those experiences of exclusion as illustrated in "Perfect Groupie" where she discusses how the pressure to adhere to the model minority myths present in many Asian diasporic communities, forces its queer members either to repress this side of their identity or to explore it only in secret. While Lau's younger self seems to be excited at the thought of using gender norms and conventions for the sole purpose of exploring her own queer identity, as an adult she is aware of the conflict between the natural desire to express herself and the fear of being excluded by both the diasporic community and the queer community. This tension mars her identity, forcing her to either hide parts of it or to constantly modify and transform them.

Yet, although Lau's depiction of her personal experiences of exclusion seems to be particularly gloom, she, in fact, manages to find a space where she feels she belongs. In two of her poems—"3 a.m. Communion" and "Red and Yellow"—Lau describes that she feels accepted in the community created by her and other queer people of colour. The community in question, founded in the shared experiences of exclusion, not only allows its members to freely express themselves without the fear of being rejected but, most importantly, provides them with a safe space where they can find respite from all the negative emotions and trauma they experience as a result of being excluded from either their diasporic communities or the host society. Finally, Lau acknowledges in her

poems—many of which are written from the perspective of an adult reminiscing about their childhood—that although some of her experiences were undoubtedly negative and traumatic, going through them was necessary as they helped her form her identity and become the person she is today.

References

Adam, B. (2009). Moral Regulation and the Disintegrating Canadian State. In B. Adam, J.W. Duyvendak & A. Krouwel (Eds.), *Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (pp. 12-29). Temple University Press.

Allman, D. (2013). The Sociology of Social Inclusion. *SAGE Open Journal* January-March, 1-16.

Anderson, C.G. (2007). The Senate and the Fight against the 1885 Chinese Immigration Act. *Canadian Parliamentary Review, 21*, 21-26.

Antoniak, J. (2023). "Fearing Your Own Queer Self": Depictions of Diasporic Queer Experience in Grace Lau's Poetry. *ANGLICA. An International Journal of English Studies, 32*(1), 87-108.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*. Routledge.

Babacan, H. & Babacan, A. (2013). Equal Valued Status: Belonging, Identity and Place. In N. Steiner, R. Mason & A. Hayes (Eds.), *Migration and Insecurity: Citizenship and Social Inclusion in a Transnational Era* (pp. 149-168). Routledge.

Boardman, J., Killaspy, H. & Mezey, G. (2022). *Social Inclusion and Mental Health. Understanding Poverty, Inequality and Social Exclusion*. Oxford University Press.

Burchardt, T., Le Grand, J. & Piachaud D. (2002). Degrees of Exclusion: Developing a Dynamic, Multidimensional Measure. In J. Hills, J. Le Grand & D. Piachaud (Eds.), *Understanding Social Exclusion* (pp. 30-43). Oxford University Press.

Chan, A.B. (2019, September 13). *Chinese Canadians*. The Canadian Encyclopedia. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-canadians

Chou, R.S. & Feagin, J.R. (2010). *Myth of the Model Minority. Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Routledge.

Coates, N. (2003). Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and early 1970s. *Journal of Popular Music Studies, 15*(1), 65-94.

Coulter, B.H. (2020). *Popular Music, Girlhood and Identity*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield]. White Rose eTheses Online. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/26248/

Cui, D. (2019). Model Minority Stereotype and Racialized Habitatus: Chinese Canadian Youth Struggling with Racial Discrimination at School. *Journal of Childhood Studies, 44*(3), 70-84.

Davis, R. (2011). *Relative Histories: Mediating History in Asian American Family Memoirs*. University of Hawaii Press.

Dahinden, J. (2010). The Dynamics of Migrants' Transnational Formations: Between Mobility and Locality. In R. Bauböck & T. Faist (Eds.), *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Method* (pp. 51-72). Amsterdam University Press.

de la Cretaz, F. (2022, June 10). *Behind the Visible Queerness in Women's Sports—Andy Why It Matters*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/06/10/lesbian-culture-womens-sports/

Délano, A. & Gamlen, A. (2015). Comparing and Theorising State-Diaspora Relations. In N. Sigona, A. Gamlen, G. Liberatore & H.N. Kringelbach (Eds.), *Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging* (pp. 176-179). Oxford Diaspora Programme.

Eng, D. (2010). *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. Duke University Press.

Firth, S. (1983). *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*. Constable.

Firth, S. & McRobbie, A. (1990). Rock and Sexuality. In S. Firth & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *On Record. Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (pp. 371-389). Routledge.

Griffin, P. (1992). Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism and Lesbians in Sport. *Quest, 44*(2), 251-265.

Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sports*. Human Kinetics.

Hall, S. (1997). The Spectacle of the "Other." In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (pp. 223-279). Sage Publications.

Huynh, Q.-L., Devos, T. & Smalarz, L. (2011). Perpetual Foreigner in One's Own Land: Potential Implications for Identity and Psychological Adjustment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 30*(2), 133-162.

Kim, C.J. (1999). The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics and Society, 27*(1), 105-138.

Lahey, K. (1999). *Are We "Persons" Yet? Law and Sexuality in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.

Lai, L. (2014). *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Lau, G. (2021). *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak*. Guernica Editions, Inc.

Leary M.R. (2005). Varieties of Interpersonal Rejection. In K.D. Williams, J.P. Forgas & W. von Hippel (Eds.), *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying* (pp. 35-51). Psychology Press.

Lee, K. (2006). Asian and African-American Co-operation and Competition in Nineteenth Century USA. *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies, 4*(1), 82-91.

Leonard, D.J. (2014). Academia. In M.Y. Danico & A.C. Ocampo (Eds.), *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia* (pp. 5-9). SAGE.

Levitas, R., Pantazis, C., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D., Lloyd, E. & Patsios, D. (2007). *The Multi-dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion*. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6853/1/multidimensional.pdf

Mascareño, A. & Carvajal, F. (2015). The Different Faces of Inclusion and Exclusion. *CEPAL Review, 116*, 127-141.

Molnar, P. (2018, May 14). *LGBTQ+ Refugees in Canada*. The Canadian Encyclopedia. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lgbtq2-refugees-in-canada

Moss, C. (2001, February 10). *Misunderstood Allen Iverson Skips Hip-Hop for Hoops*. VH1. https://web.archive.org/web/20090414122500/http://www.vh1.com/artists/news/1449517/10022001/iverson_allen.jhtml

Patel, S. (2021). *The Politics of (Not) Giving a Sh*t: Understanding the Invisibility of Queer South Asian Women in Pride Toronto*. [Master's thesis, University of Ottawa]. University of Ottawa Repository. https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/42899/1/Patel_Sonali_2021_Thesis.pdf

Pratt, M. L. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge.

Rajgopal, S.S. (2018). Queering South Asia? Deviant Sexualities and the Role of the Indian Media in Shaping Perceptions. In S. Jha and A. Kurian (Eds.), *New Feminisms in South Asia: Disrupting the Discourse Through Social Media, Film, and Literature* (pp. 197-218). Routledge.

Rau, K. (2021, December 2). *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Canada*. The Canadian Encyclopedia. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-rights-in-canada

Reed-Danahay, D. (1997). Introduction. In D. Reed-Danahay (Ed.), *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (pp. 1-17). Berg.

Rimmerman, A. (2013). *Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities: National and International Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Shek, D.T.L., Sun, R., Leung, J.T.Y. & Law, M. (2022). Parenting in Contemporary Hong Kong: Observations Based on Recent Research Findings. In H. Selin (Ed.), *Parenting Across Cultures: Childrearing, Motherhood and Fatherhood in Non-Western Cultures* (pp. 149-163). Springer.

Silver, H. (1994). Social Exclusion and Social Solidarity: Three Paradigms. *International Labour Review, 133*(4-5), 531-578.

Sohn, S.H. (2018). *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction.* Stanford University Press.

Strier, R. & Roer-Strier, D. (2010). Fatherhood in the Context of Immigration. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (pp. 435-458). John Wiley & Sons.

Tan, J. & Roy, P.E. (1985). *The Chinese in Canada*. Canadian Historical Association.

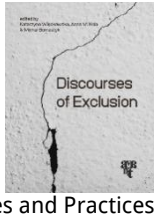
Tam, M. (2018). *Queer (and) Chinese: On Be(long)ing in Diaspora and Coming Out of Queer Liberalism*. [Master's thesis, Queen's University]. QSpace. https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/items/ca8376c0-26d2-4110-af9b-83123b3b53af

Ty, E. & Verduyn, C. (2008). Introduction. In E. Ty & C. Verduyn (Eds.), *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* (pp. 1-27). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Warner, T. (2002). *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.

Zhu, J., Stok, M., Bal, M. & de Wit, J. (2022). Mapping the Antecedents, Conditions, and Consequences of Family Pressure that Drives Chinese Queer People into Heterosexual Marriage: A Systematic Review. *LGBTQ+ Family: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 18*(4), 339-368.

Joanna Antoniak is Assistant Professor of Literature at the Department of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Comparative Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland where she teaches contemporary British and Anglophone literature. In her research she focuses on the literary depictions of diasporic experiences in British- and Canadian-Asian diasporic literature. Her book *Faces of Immigrant Fatherhood: Portrayal of Immigrant Fathers in Selected Asian-Canadian Diasporic Fiction* (2023) explores the relationship between fatherhood, immigration and diaspora in the late 20th-century novels by Kerri Sakamoto, SKY Lee and M.G. Vassanji. She is also a member of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

"They Too Will Be Gone and New". Colonial Otherness in the Interplay between Humanity and Elfdom in Andrzej Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World"

Julian Rakowski
University of Łódź
julian.rakowski@edu.uni.lodz.pl

Received 2024-01-07; accepted 2024-04; published Online First 2024-08-27.

Abstract

Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy narrative and novel saga, as exemplified by the "The Edge of the World" short story, borrows largely from J. R. R. Tolkien's depiction of elves in defining most of their traits and the relationship between them and humans. Sapkowski, however, clearly transforms the image of the (predominantly) benevolent elf defined by Tolkien. The aim of this article is to explore the way in which Sapkowski portrays the elven race as sovereign in their exclusion from the world of humanity. Sapkowski's story allows the group to maintain its unique motivations, resisting morally dualistic stereotyping at the same time. Moreover, because neither humanity nor elfdom may claim moral superiority in their conflict, the colonial experience of the elves is not simply appropriated by the author as an example of Indigenous victimhood. Rather, it serves the purpose of presenting readers with a multifaceted tapestry of colonial conflict contained within a fantasy world. The players of this world, though opposed and prone to othering their enemies, are nevertheless rhetorically equal[1].

Keywords: The Witcher, Tolkien, Elves, Colonialism, Otherness, Monsters

[1] Source of the quotation in the article title: Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 205.

1. Introduction, or The Elf as the Other

In defining otherness, or the discursive use of such distinctions as sex and race with the specific goal of imposing the identity of the "dominant in-group" over the "dominated out-group," Jean-François Staszak enumerates three kinds of the so-called "Geographical Others" (2009, pp. 44-45). These are:

1) the cultural other (in Ancient Greek terms—the "Barbarian," "a person who did not speak Greek and thus had not mastered the *logos*;" 2009, p. 44),
2) the natural other ("the Savage"[2] or "the Man of the Forest;" 2008, pp. 44-45), and
3) the racial other (found in "the opposition of colonist/native or White/of Color;" 2009, p. 45).[3]

All three categories seem closely linked with a belief in the inherent crudeness of the out-group. Just as the Barbarian lacked access to the superior cultural heritage of the Greeks, so, too, the natural and racial others are deemed inferior by the in-group. As suggested by Alison Mountz, it is not certain if the interplay of these hierarchies is currently heading in any direction which could be deemed beneficial for such out-groups, as, though the UN posited in the 1950s that "all humans [belong] to a single human race", the remnants of racialised (or othered) modes of discourse and classifications remain heavily ingrained in, for example, the US census (2009, p. 332). The relations of cultural and political subjugation and exclusion through othering thus still seem a treacherous ground to tread, and yet some authors choose to relate or adapt these conflicts and hierarchies to a dimension (seemingly) detached from our world, which is the realm of fantasy.

Within this realm, the road to presenting fantasy race dynamics has seemingly been paved by J. R. R. Tolkien[4]. His writings are ripe with creatures distinguished by their racial and cultural traits, such as humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves, and orcs. Among these groups it is the orcs who seem to be the ones most deserving of Staszak's categorisation of the cultural others as beings representing the "corruptions of the 'human' form," both in morality and appearance. As such, they are not (and possibly may not) be counted as one of the "'free peoples of Middle-earth'" (Tneh, 2011, pp. 37-38). Tolkien's orcs have already been reviewed by numerous critics, many of whom have explored their seemingly evil

[2] The term "savage" itself contains the imagery of the woods, as it is derived from the Old French word "sauvage" meaning "from the woods" (Simpson, 2007, p. 562).
[3] These three terms (the cultural other, the natural other and the racial other) are of my own invention, their aim being to more efficiently reference Staszak's definitions of otherness.
[4] Sources reviewed in the writing of this article, as well as Tolkien himself (Battis, 2004, p. 194), have used the term "race" when referring to such fantasy peoples as the elves. However, as Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of the popular Dungeons & Dragons fantasy role-playing game, have decided to use the term "species" instead (Carter, 2022), calling race "a problematic term" (DND Beyond, 2022), a critical analysis of its use in fantasy writings is warranted.

nature (Tneh, 2011, Loback, 1990), with some emphasising their honourable aspects (Tally, 2010; Young, 2010, p. 358). Yet, as noted by Robert T. Tally Jr., "the unquestioned assumption of the 'free peoples' … is that Orcs must be evil by nature" (2010, p. 21). In Tolkien's tapestry of races, however, there remains a certain under-appreciated tension—namely that of elfdom and humanity.

Elves as a race are considered extensively in criticism devoted to Tolkien's fantasy world (Fimi, 2006; De Rosario Martínez, 2010; Simpson, 2011), yet with noticeably little attention paid to their geo-political dealings with humans, most probably due to the fact that both races belong to the aforementioned alliance of the free. Despite this, Helios de Rosario Martínez observes, that the elves "dwindled [in power] as the world grew older" and as humans rose in strength (2010, pp. 73-74). It is seemingly in this state of withering that the elves of *The Lord of the Rings* depart for the Undying Lands, despite having aided the triumph over Sauron (Tolkien, 2004, pp. 224-225). Moreover, it is this state of elfdom that goes on to be explored by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, author of the critically acclaimed witcher saga (Majkowski, 2021). It is, perhaps, of little surprise that Spakowski borrows the races of dwarves, hobbits (or halflings; Sapkowski, 2022, p. 142) and elves in the creation of his fantasy world, as he has argued himself that obliviousness to the genre's Anglophone tradition was, in his view, the condemning factor of modern Polish fantasy texts (Sapkowski, 1993, p. 70)[5]. As a result, the world inhabited by Geralt of Rivia (Sapkowski's titular monster-hunter or "witcher") could, at first glance, be characterised as twin similar to Middle-earth. His depiction of elves, however, would seem to disprove this claim.

Jacqueline Simpson defines Tolkien's elves as "noble, wise, beautiful, deathless beings living in remote and enchanted woodlands" (2011, p. 76). As people of the woods, then, they would fall into Staszak's category of the natural other, though, in Tolkien, they may not in any way be conceived as either "[h]airy" or "violent" (Staszak, 2009, p. 45). Simpson argues that, although they are given some moral variation in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, they are nevertheless "wholly benevolent" in his *The Lord of the Rings*, despite the fact that they inspire "awe" and "fear" in other races (2011, p. 76). In this, they collectively resemble the character of the elven Lady Galadriel who, though terrifying, in the end manages to ward off the dark influence of the One Ring (Tolkien, 2012, p. 443). Sapkowski twists the positive image of the elves into a yet more multi-faceted construction, however, as exemplified by his "The Edge of the World" short

[5] It seems that in Sapkowski's opinion, Polish culture simply lacks any sort of cultural archetype that could be used as replacement of Celtic tradition, which he found to be prevalent in Western fantasy writing (p. 66, 1993). Despite such assertions, one of the aliases of the prophetess/goddess Lille from Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World", namely "Lyfia" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 204) or, originally in Polish: "Żywia" (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 244), has been linked to the western Slavic goddess by the same name (Obertová, 2022, p. 128; Zaborowski, 2015, p. 22).

story. Namely, his portrayal of the race presents it as a socio-political group which remains sovereign despite its exclusion from the colonial status quo of the humans.

Sapkowski's short stories and novels have already been analysed as to their racial implications. Describing the conflicts of the world of the witcher, Katarzyna Kaczor notes that "the elven-dwarven antagonism classic to fantasy has been replaced [by Sapkowski] with the human antagonism towards all members of the Elder Races [i.e. elves and dwarves, among others]" (2015, p. 252)[6]. This observation does not fully reflect the dynamics of othering presented in "The Edge of the World," however. As noted already by Szymon Cieśliński, the elves, too, use racial hatred in motivating their views and actions (2015, pp. 56-57). Cieśliński's broader approach to the racist rhetoric displayed in Sapkowski's imaginarium will be of much help in defining its racial implications, yet in this article I will focus on describing such aspects in "The Edge of the World" specifically, as I believe that the short story may serve as an example *par excellence* of the ways in which Sapkowski defines his racially and politically complicated world.

Kaczor and Cieśliński's colonial and racial explorations of Sapkowski's writings, coupled with comparable approaches to Tolkien (Battis, 2004; Kim, 2004; Young, 2010), prove that fantasy as a genre is rich with contexts of othering and exclusion, which must be carefully weighed in order to analyse both the colonial relations of the peoples contained within and the ways in which said relations reflect real-world struggles. This, precisely, will be the aim of this article. As noted by Staszak, "if … otherness comprises a geographical dimension, it is because cultural surfaces are divided into supposedly homogenous spatial blocs" (2009, p. 44). Though Tolkien's elves supposedly belong to the same civilisational "bloc" as humans, it can be observed in *The Lord of the Rings* that their unique mode of being all the same excludes them from partaking in the spoils of their victory. Sapkowski seems to follow this idea closely, even going as far as speculating about a moment in future in which the humans themselves will be left behind. Thus, "The Edge of the World" encapsulates a space in which the dynamics of othering, exclusion and subjugation are fluent and everchanging. Nevertheless, it is only in this ambiguous net of relations that a racialised or monstrous other may find parity with the in-group, as, within, humanity itself may also bear the marks of a monster. As claimed by Kaczor, there indeed seem to be "no manifestations and representatives of absolute Good and Evil" in the world of the witcher; "instead, there are only the arguments of protagonists fighting for the right to make their own decisions" (2015, p. 252)[7].

[6] My own translation.
[7] My own translation.

2. "Werethings", "Bats" and "Myriapodans"[8]

"The Edge of the World" could very well be interpreted as a story devoted entirely (or at least predominantly) to presenting the degrees of otherness found in the relationship between humanity and those it perceives as monstrous. In Sapkowski's imaginarium, the monster-hunting witchers, such as Geralt of Rivia, are, after all, the ultimate tool of exclusion, or rather "extermination," that humanity may use against beings it deems too otherworldly to exist (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 164). And yet, as observed by Cieśliński, the witcher saga "lacks any clear-cut distinction of monstrosity"[9] (2015, p. 65). Because of this, it is perhaps all the more important to consider Sapkowski's monsters in detail.

In the story, Geralt and his trusty companion, Dandilion the bard[10], embark on a journey through the villages of the remote "Valley of Flowers" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 169), inhabited mostly by human farmers. Their worldview is immediately rejected by the witcher, as he is not at all impressed with their stories of "werethings," "bats" and "myriapodans" (p. 164-165), and thus, does not intend to promise the villagers to eliminate the creatures that he knows to be fictitious. They do, however, seem to perceive a real danger in the form of the elves inhabiting the mountains surrounding the valley. The alderman of Upper Posada, one of the two villages that the travellers visit in the story, describes the race in the following terms:

> Only look ye yonder, see ye those mountains? There's elves live there, that there is their kingdom. Their palaces, hear ye, are all of pure gold. … 'Tis awful. He who yonder goes, never returns. … From the land of elves [the werethings] come, to be sure. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 165)

The elves are hence categorised by the villagers as simultaneously awe-inspiring and dangerous, much akin to Simpson's remarks about the race in Tolkien (2011, p. 76). And yet, the alderman's beliefs ascribe them with a much more nefarious nature. This is because both the imaginary monsters invoked here, as well as the elves may quite accurately be described by the categories of monstrosity proposed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)."

Staszak observes that such "savages" or "woodsmen" as the elves are spatially relegated to the outskirts of society, such as forests (2009, p. 45); or in Sapkowski—the mountains. According to Cohen, the same is true of monsters, as they are defined by a kind of "ontological liminality," that is existence outside or on

[8] Taken from Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 164-165.
[9] My own translation.
[10] Although the later translator of the witcher saga, David French, chose to translate the Polish name of "Jaskier" the bard as "Dandelion" (e.g. in Sapkowski, 2022, p. 20), Danusia Stok's "Dandilion" is used here for consistency with her translation of "The Edge of the World" and the rest of *The Last Wish* (Sapkowski, 2020a). Incidentally, "jaskier" (Zmigrodzki et al.) would seem to find its more literal translation in "buttercup," rather than dandelion (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 219, 398), though both flowers are yellow.

the border of man-made categories (1996, p. 6). Here, these *limites* are apparently both the story's eponymous "edge of the world," in which such creatures dwell and, more specifically, the outskirts of the human-made village—both constituting different layers of distance from civilisation. As Cohen posits under his Thesis V, "[f]rom its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes" (1996, p. 12). This exactly seems to be one the functions of the monsters of Lower Posada, as, because "[h]e who yonder goes, never returns," he who does not—survives (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 165). On the other hand, in this apparent "abjection" (a term defined by Julia Kristeva) there must be an element of attraction (Cohen, 1996, p. 19), and we find it precisely in the elves' golden palaces. Sapkowski's elves, in their monstrosity, thus become at once terrible and alluring—beautiful and deadly. Again, the dualistic nature of Tolkien's Galadriel is evoked, and yet Sapkowski complicates it further by presenting the elves as the epitome of the monstrous other.

So far, this analysis has considered the fictitiously monstrous (the "werethings") and the truly or abject monstrous (the elves), but there remain, at this point, at least three other creations. To return to Staszak, perhaps the most classically defined figure of an othered woodsman, at least at this point, is to be found in the human denizens of the Valley of Flowers themselves. This is both because of Geralt's harsh judgment of their worldview, and because of Dandilion's mockery of their use of "jargon" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 180). Though the villagers do not seem to fully meet any of Cohen's criteria, and thus seem more "other" than specifically "monstrous," they are nevertheless excluded on the account of Geralt and Dandelion's cultural sensibilities. After all, it is Geralt who takes the position of superiority necessary to dismiss Upper Posada's werethings, and it is Dandilion who reserves to himself the power to criticise their imperfect mastery of logos (Staszak, 2009, p. 44), even though he quickly falls victim to the same "infectious mannerism" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 180-181). And yet Geralt, as a witcher, is monstrous himself.

This is the case because witchers, in Sapkowski's imaginarium, are human beings turned monster-hunters by means of magical mutation and extraordinary training. This treatment seemingly bolsters their bodies, as well as allows them to use magic and further enhance their natural capabilities by their use of alchemic concoctions (Sapkowski, 2020b, p. 22). As such, Geralt may be seen as "[a] construct and a projection," that is—the projection of human fear towards monsters (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Geralt's body is a weapon in the hands of humans, but one which may also prove dangerous to themselves, as demonstrated by his bloody moniker—"The Butcher of Blaviken" (Sapkowski, 2020c, p. 117). As both human and non-human (mutated or magical), Geralt is also a Cohenian "Harbinger of Category Crisis" (1996, p. 6). Hence, the fictitiously and truly monstrous categories of othering are supplemented in this analysis by two

more: the provincially other (the villagers) and the weaponised/mutated monstrous (the witcher Geralt). There is, however, yet one more monstrosity worth mentioning here.

As Geralt and Dandilion travel on and reach Lower Posada, they are tasked by its elder with dealing with a goat-like creature called a "doevel" (or "devil;" later classified by Geralt as a "sylvan"[11]; pp. 180, 185) from the vicinity of the village. It is with this "devil" that the story most strongly alludes to the processes of othering, or, more specifically, to scapegoating. Richard Kearney describes scapegoating as a process of exclusion in which the ostracization of the person (or group) excluded is believed to bring positive change (renewal, cleansing, safeguarding of values) for the person (or group) guilty of exclusion (2003, pp. 26-28). This, as it seems, would be a perfect role to play for a half-human, half-goat hybrid such as the satyr-like sylvan[12] as goats have been used extensively to fill this role (2003, p. 27). And yet, this easily accessible context is not realised in "The Edge of the World."

Instead, the "doevel" is characterised by Dhun, the elder of Lower Posada, as little but a trickster, or in fact—an occasional benefactor, fertilising the soil and scaring birds away (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 171). It is, thus, little surprise, that the villagers do not want to see the doevel killed, but only want to push him out of the proximity of the village, seemingly to limit the extent of his mischief.[13] This creature, however, can hardly be seen as a monster, though it remains in an ambiguous, liminal position of a dweller of the fields—both part of the village and part of nature. Hence, the seemingly most monstrous entity of the story (the hybrid scapegoat) is described as one of its most benign characters, and the fair elves take on the mantle of the primary monster of the Valley of Flowers.

3. The Fading

As Geralt and Dandilion pursue the devil, they eventually fall victim to an attack by an unknown rider who defends the creature and at the same time—secures the heaps of offerings in the form of various plants and seeds that it has received from the villagers. This stash and defence thereof are crucial to the story, as they provide evidence that the doevel's mischief has had goals far larger than itself. As Geralt and Dandilion awake tied-up and brutalised, having been rendered unconscious by their unknown assailant, they are made privy to a most informative conversation:

[11] The name itself seems related the woods, i.e. the Latin *silva* (Sinclair, 1999, p. 1550).
[12] According to Amanda Herring, *satyr*, *silenos* or *faun* are all names used to "describe mythological human-animal hybrids," such as the one in question (2016, p. 32).
[13] Geralt's second encounter with the devil, in which the witcher fails to persuade it to relocate and attempts to win a game of riddles with it, is strongly reminiscent of the competition between Gollum and Bilbo Baggins in The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1973, pp. 73-81).

> "Three sacks of corn," he heard. "Good, Torque. Very Good. You've done well."
>
> "That's not all," said the bleating voice, which could only be the sylvan devil. "Look at this, Galarr. It looks like beans but it's completely white. And the size of it! And this, this is called oilseed. They make oil from it." (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 190)

Galarr, the recipient of the sylvan's (or—Torque's) offerings, is one of the elves that have been the patrons of the devil's operation, its cause being to provide the *Aen Seidhe* (as Sapkowski calls his elves)[14] with seeds and methods of cultivation previously unknown to the elder race (2020a, p. 191). Thus, the story begins its proper exploration of the conflict between humanity and elfdom, which, in this case, pertains to the very elemental needs of the latter. As to why such a seemingly illustrious group would require aid, remains to be seen both in the elves' justification of Torque's mission and in a vital trait of their nature already found in Tolkien, which is their "fading."

Helios De Rosario Martínez classifies Tolkien's elves as subject to a "fading" of spirit, body, and number, which results from the aging and apparent withering of the world at large or, in Tolkien's earlier writings, to the proliferation of humans (2010, pp. 73-74). This sense of fading is precisely why Sapkowski's elves require Torque to provide them with human crops, as they find themselves stranded in a world which does not fully allow for their survival. In "The Edge of the World," however, this happens precisely because of human actions. As explained by Filavandrel, the leader of the elves encountered by Geralt and Dandilion:

> [Y]ou took our land from us, drove us from our homes, forced us into the savage mountains. You took our Dol Blathanna, the Valley of Flowers … [,] you have changed this world. …
>
> Yes, we are starving. … The sun shines differently, the air is different, water is not as it used to be. The things we used to eat, made use of, are dying …. We never cultivated the land. Unlike you humans we never tore at it with hoes and ploughs. To you, the earth pays a bloody tribute. It bestowed gifts on us. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197)

Hence, whereas the origin of the dwindling of Tolkien's elves as identified by De Rosario Martínez is ambiguous and does not refer to any specific act of aggression, the *Aen Seidhe* are determined and persistent in blaming humanity for actively conquering and destroying the land that allowed for elven survival.

[14] Sapkowski's usage of the word *seidhe* (similar to Irish "sidhe" used in reference of the so-called "fairy-folk"; Mac Ritchie, 1893, p. 367), coupled with his classification of Celtic mythology as the defining influence behind Western fantasy writing (Sapkowski, 1993), invites analysis of the "Old Language" (2020a, p. 192) of his elves in terms of such influences—especially as Tolkien himself was said to have had an ambiguous relationship with Celtic influences on English folklore and his own prose (Fimi, 2006, p. 156-157).

In the wake of human expansion, the elves find themselves excluded from the bountiful harvests of the Valley of Flowers, even though it belonged to them first (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 169-170). This conflict bears the marks of colonial struggle in the terms defined by John Rieder. In his *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* he describes colonialism as "the entire process by which European economy and culture penetrated and transformed the non-European world … including exploration, extraction of resources, expropriation and settlement of land" (2008, p. 25). Here, Sapkowski's humanity takes on the mantle of the European colonialist, and so the elves are put in the position of a colonised, Indigenous nation, stripped of its land and subjugated. And yet, colonialism also refers to the "postcolonial renegotiation of the distribution of power" (Rieder, 2008, p. 25), which is what the elves of *Dol Blathanna* seek to engage in, both rhetorically and, in the scope of the later witcher novels, militarily (Cieśliński, 2015, p. 57). And yet, their colonial exclusion is only exacerbated by Geralt, who seeks to deny them the political agency necessary to criticise this turn of events. As such, in what was described by Cohen as a "self-validating, Hegelian master/slave dialectic" Geralt "naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another" (1996, p. 11). This elven other has already been described by the villagers as monstrous, and, though Geralt mocked them, he nevertheless internalises the human rhetoric of othering or exclusion, which is unleashed upon the elves.

The witcher insists that in order to survive in this changed, colonised world, the elves should peacefully coexist with humanity, much like he, as a mutant, has all his life (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197). He advocates for trade instead of the stealing of seeds, and the non-violent acceptance of human repression, rather than rebellion against it. In doing so, however, he mistakenly equates his own personal experience of otherness (based on profession and weaponizing mutation) with that of an entire ethnic group that the elves constitute in his world.[15] Thus, despite the fact that their unwillingness to cohabit with humans means the elves are "condemning [themselves] to annihilation" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197), Filavandrel explains that they have little choice to act differently, as they would risk using their dignity and sovereignty as a nation:

> Cohabit on your terms? … Acknowledging your sovereignty? Losing our identity? … Cohabit with your women and hang for it? Or look on what half-blood children must live with? … We're not so naïve that we don't know your merchants are just outposts of your way of life. We know what follows them. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197-198)

[15] I here go against Cieśliński's argument that the othering encountered by Geralt may be classified as an example of racism (2015, pp. 62-64), though it is certainly exclusionary in nature. Nevertheless, as noted by Cieśliński, witchers are observed more as members of a professional "caste" (Sapkowski, 2020e, p. 5) or more classically defined monsters rather than a racial or national group *per se*, and so I would remain cautious in equating the nature of repression (rhetorical and otherwise) experienced by them and Sapkowski's non-human races.

In Geralt's conversation with Filavandrel, the story of the fair, magical race of elves as a tragically yet unavoidably fading one is transformed by Sapkowski into a much more tangible issue. It is no longer the passing of time or the mere existence of other, more populous races that forces the elves out of their world, but rather the imperialist, colonialist drive of humanity. Moreover, Sapkowski's humans, dwarves and elves are no longer joined in any sort of benevolent, cosmopolitan force, as is the case in Tolkien (Young, 2010, p. 354). Instead, it is humans that take a role comparable to that played by the Dark Lord Sauron in the socio-political landscape of Middle-earth, which Jes Battis describes as that of a domineering, enslaving colonizer (Battis, 2004, p. 911).

This relationship, solidified into discourse in the form of the villager's fictitious cautionary tales, is so ingrained in the ideology of the human in-group that to see a reality which would destabilise it is unthinkable, even for a member of another monstrous out-group, such as Geralt. After all, as pointed out by Cohen, "[t]he monster's eradication functions as exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism" (1996, p. 18). Thus, it is permissible for the monster to renounce its monstrosity and emulate the culture of the in-group under the terms proposed by Geralt, but it is never possible for the in-group to accept the other. Cieśliński notes that "according to [Albert] Memmi and [Étienne] Balibar, a tolerant multicultural society should allow diverse cultural groups to peacefully exist next to each other," and not to force their others into "forceful assimilation" which "leads to an exclusion by means of inclusion" (2015, p. 59)[16]. This dimension, here, is seemingly lost not only on the denizens of human cities, as explored by Cieśliński (2015, pp. 59-61), but also on Geralt himself.

This change of dynamics invites a re-evaluation of Tolkien's alliance between elves and humans. Although "the 'Free Peoples' of Middle-earth" enjoy "several centuries of relative peace and prosperity" after their initial defeat of Sauron (Battis, 2004, p. 911), this prosperity does not reverse the fate of the elves, which is their voyage out of the lands of the mortal races. Instead, as is the case in the world of the witcher, it allows for the beginning of the "human era and age," which, as claimed by Filavandrel, is already "as natural as the rising and the setting of the sun" to Geralt (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198), and which leaves no room for the existence of the elves as we know them.

4. The Indigenous Elf

Sapkowski's transformation of the doomed state of Tolkien's elves allows for the creation of a fantasy world in which the distinction between good and evil is more ambiguous than one based on racial features, such as the pointed shape of elven ears (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 191). In the world of the witcher, it seems it is geo-political conflict rather than inherent morality that defines socio-political

[16] My own translation.

relations between its species. In associating the fantasy race of elves with an experience of colonial exclusion and subjugation, Sapkowski may, however, be deemed a perpetrator of a kind of exoticization criticised by Indigenous interpretations of speculative literature. As argued by Miriam C. Brown Spiers, "[b]y labelling texts that reflect Indigenous worldviews as 'science fiction' [or in this case—fantasy] we run the risk of trivializing Native voices and communities, of reducing lived experiences to primitive superstitions" (2011, p. xvi). And yet, Rieder notes that science fiction "nonetheless estranges the colonial gaze … [,] swinging the poles between the subject and object, with each swing potentially questioning and recoding the discursive framework of scientific truth, moral certitude, and cultural hegemony" (2008, p. 10). If fantasy may wish to consider the same dimensions of historical colonialism as science fiction, it seems that it must remain wary of both Spiers' anxiety and Rieder's expressions of post-colonial potential.

As I have already tied the elves with Staszak's geographically excluded woodsmen, I feel obligated to reference the historical process of othering encapsulated in the literary and discursive trope of the "noble savage." As mentioned before, the "marginal man" or "savage," described by Murray K. Simpson as relegated to "the mediaeval wilderness" (2007, p. 562), may be most accurately represented by the humans of the Valley of Flowers (though, not fully, as they themselves constitute the valley's only stronghold of in-group human civilisation). This is because the second natural others of the story—the elves—are seemingly ascribed a much more venerable position. In Tolkien, because they are described as moral, wise, and fair (as "originators of [Middle-earth's] written culture;" Battis, 2004, pp. 909-910), they instead resemble a kind of other described by Edna C. Sorber as "The Noble Eloquent Savage" (1972). These others, predominantly American Indian leaders, were, as opposed to Staszak's Barbarians, characterised precisely as masters of *logos*—masters of oratory practice and statesmanship (Sorber, 1972, pp. 228-229). Yet, because the laudatory terms used towards such orators have always been marked with traces of the Europeans' own ideology (1972, pp. 228-229), they seem to constitute little but a "saccharine" ideological appropriation of Indigenous rhetoric (p. 228-230)[17]. In other words, Europeans alluding to the noble/eloquent savage trope did not as much value American Indians for their virtue or skill, as they projected their own political aims and beliefs onto unique Indigenous experiences and worldviews. In this sense, it matters little that Tolkien's elves may be seen as majestic and fair, as they all the same leave the mortal Middle-earth and cease to exist as an ethnic group involved in its geopolitics.

[17] This mechanism of appropriation may already be identified in the writings of Tacitus. In his *Germania*, as noted by W. Beare, he "is contrasting the Germans with contemporary Rome … [,] [s]o when he gives special praise to those tribes which, like the savage Heruli, do not allow widows to marry again, he is not so much recommending their practice of suttee …, as reflecting on the frequency of re-marriage in Rome" (1964, p. 69).

And yet, Sapkowski seems to eliminate such glorified depictions of the race of elves from his writing, which is also noted by Cieśliński in the broader scope of the witcher novels (2015, p. 56). Instead, though still portraying them as othered, colonised and monsterised, he, ironically, portrays them as fully human. This humanity, however, is not the idealised moral superiority of Tolkien's free peoples. Rather, it is a kind of humanity only found in vice, as the superstitious ramblings of the human villagers of the Valley of Flowers soon find their reflection in the stigmatising language used by the elves. Though Filavandrel claims that "[i]t is … humans who hate anything that differs from [them], be it only by the shape of its ears" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 196), the elves themselves betray the weakness to discriminate against others based on their physique. They insult Geralt and Dandilion by calling them "ape-men" and "savages," as well as insinuating that their (human) body odour is repulsive (pp. 192-193). The human, then, becomes a monster in itself, reflected through the elven perspective.[18]

This monster is both a Barbaric other, as the elves perceive humans as lowly and crude, as well as a monster in Cohenian terms. For elves, humans, though seemingly able to construct their own society, are nevertheless comparable to "lice" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198) and are deemed unable to emulate elven sophistication. Thus, they also become "Harbinger[s] of Category Crisis" (Cohen, 1996, p. 6) and, as political others, may be reviewed as monsters who "[Dwell] at the Gates of Difference" (p. 7-8). Most interestingly, however, humanity constitutes a blend of the monstrous traits reviewed under Cohen's Theses VI and VII. Because humans and elves can produce offspring together, and because this is perceived by the elves as dangerous due to the repression suffered by "half-blood children" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198), fear of the human monster does, truly, become "a Kind of Desire" (Cohen, 1996, p. 16). Specifically, the desire or possibility to reproduce with humans becomes (or is inextricably linked with) a fear of subjugation and repression which, eventually, may lead to the annihilation of the elven race—not only through acts of racial violence, but also through the absorption of elven blood into the more numerous human populace. In this way, the elves do not only experience the "simultaneous repulsion and attraction" of humanity (Cohen, 1996, p. 17), but also fear to become one with the monster (p. 20)—to acknowledge that the human primitivity may soon become their own.

[18] Cieśliński delineates four kinds of monsters found in the witcher saga: "I. Humans exhibiting monstrous traits. II. Monsters exhibiting human traits. III. Humans in the skin of a monster. IV. Monsters in the skin of a human" (2015, p. 65). "The Edge of the World" invites a slight re-evaluation of these distinctions, however, as the elves, too, are portrayed by Sapkowski as monstrous (monsters in extra-human skin?).

Thus, "The Edge of the World" portrays the victimised elves as, in many ways, equal to humans in their racialised hatred[19]. As both groups are capable of demonising the other, the elves are no longer the predominantly wise and benign beings described by Tolkien. This is because Sapkowski's *Aen Seidhe*, though subject to colonial conquest and repression, do not, by virtue of victimhood or any of their inherent traits, become the epitome of morality. Instead, they are nothing more than a distinct ethnic group, subject to the same violent socio-political workings as the humans they wage war against and similarly fallible in their rhetoric. Quite ironically, as Filavandrel's disciples injure and terrorise their human captives (Geralt and Dandilion), they are chastised only by the devil's, that is—Torque's moral inhibitions, rather than their own (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 193-194). Hence, though Sapkowski's elves are "long-living" (2020a, p. 199), this trait does not exclude them from the geo-political workings of the world of the witcher, and their fantastic nature does not dehumanise them. There is, however, a crucial factor which could disrupt this apparent balance of violence and othering, and it lies in the focalisation of the story through the experience of Geralt of Rivia—the monstrous defender of the human in-group.

5. The Verdict of Nature

Whereas Dandilion seems more focused on the local women of the Valley of Flowers rather than on its monstrosities (p. 170), the witcher takes on a much more vital role. Namely, it is Geralt who carries out the role of explicitly answering some of the philosophical questions posed by the events and characters of the story, as exemplified by his deliberations about monstrosity:

> "Geralt," [Dandilion] said suddenly, "but monsters do exist. … So how do you account for people inventing ones, then? …"
>
> "People … like to invent monsters and monstrosities. Then they seem less monstrous themselves. When they get blind-drunk, cheat, steal, beat their wives …. They feel better then. They find it easier to live." (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 167).[20]

Geralt's position as the story's moral oracle is, however, distorted when, quite symbolically, his hands are tied and he is subject to Filavandrel's defense of the vengeful sentiments of his brethren. The positions taken by both speakers—Geralt's (or the human in-group's) philosophy of assimilation and Filavandrel's rejection of it—stand as rhetorically equal, as both groups seem culpable of

[19] Cieśliński goes as far as to suggest that the elves "instrumentalise difference and, as a colonised race, internalise the behaviour of their colonisers—the humans" (2015, p. 57).
[20] Geralt's definition of monsterisation seems to reflect Kearney's deliberations on scapegoating. Thus, any such "werethings" as the ones imagined by the denizens of Upper Posada become others on which the "sin" of the community is transferred and which may be sacrificed in order for the community to be cleansed (Kearney, 2003, pp. 26-27).

similar misdeeds. Moreover, the elves of *Dol Blathanna*, though subjugated, refuse to give up their ideological sovereignty, rejecting the witcher's attempt at appropriating their experience of oppression for his own, in something akin to the acts of "epistemic violence" reviewed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994, p. 76). In this sense, Geralt's ideological defense could be read as an act of rhetorically "re-presenting" the elven struggle rather than "representing" the political interests of the race to which he does not belong (Spivak, 1994, p. 70). The elves of the Valley of Flowers clearly reject such practice.

This parity despite subjugation is, however, given more context by the appearance of the transformed Lille—the goddess of the Valley—who saves the lives of Geralt and Dandilion and whose influence distinguishes the villagers of Lower Posada from their neighbours. When met after the witcher's first encounter with Torque, Lille is presented as a shy, "strange" young girl, whose purpose in the village is to assist its old wisewoman in her art of deciphering the writings included in "the booke"—an ancient manuscript detailing ways to deal with various kinds of monstrosities that the village must face (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 177-182). Though Geralt is quick to notice that Lille's "strangeness" has its source in her supernatural status as a prophetess (pp. 183-184), the true reveal of her capabilities takes place only when his discussion with Filavandrel draws to an end, and he is about to be executed. Right before this happens, the story reads:

> Lille entered the glade.
>
> She was no longer a skinny peasant girl in a sackcloth dress. Through the grasses covering the glade … floated a queen, radiant, golden-haired, fiery-eyed, ravishing. The Queen of the Fields, decorated with garlands of flowers, ears of corn, bunches of herbs. …
>
> "Dana Meadbh," said Filavandrel with veneration. And then bowed and knelt. (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 201-202)

As an authority for both groups, *Dana Meadbh* allows for a point of comparison to be drawn between their beliefs. As exemplified by the villagers' inhibitions against enacting violence upon Torque (p. 172) as well as her intervention, she is not only a goddess of crops and harvests, but rather—a being who preaches non-violence and rejects revenge. Despite this, neither group can fully internalise her message, as both use or have used violence in the past against their opponents. Moreover, Lille does not, as a deity, stand for the moral superiority of either of her peoples. Rather, she safeguards the continuous prosperity of *Dol Blathanna*, regardless of which race comes out on top. This benevolent intent does not, however, come without its price. As Geralt replies to Dandilion, again taking on his warrior-philosopher mantle:

> Geralt? Lille lives in the village, among people. Do you think that–
>
> –that she'll stay with them? … Maybe. … If people prove worthy of it. If the edge of the world remains the edge of the world. If we respect the boundaries (Sapkowski, 2020a, 206).

Lille thus becomes an equalising factor in the othered discourse of both races. She does not favour the chronologically first nation to inhabit her valley (the elves), nor does she blindly enforce the status quo (the human colonial rule). Rather, she is an entity interested in preserving the unique character and balance of her land. Therefore, no conflicted group existing on this land becomes ontologically superior by virtue of divine grace—both are subject to the same laws of the universe they inhabit and both may fall from the grace of powers much stronger than themselves. After all, as is writ in "the booke," "different tribes will follow," but Lille "eternal is, was and ever shall be until the end of time" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 205).

Lille, as a goddess of nature and non-violence, invites a conclusion that the only way to escape such power dynamics as the ones employed by her subjects (humans and elves) is to find a political *tertium comparationis*—a point of reference allowing for shared peace and understanding. In Kristevan terms, as summarised by Kearney, such a shared basis of thought could be found in the Kantian Universal Republic, which "would fully honour the diversity of cultures, languages, confessions and peoples …, safeguarding the right of hospitality to 'strangers' on the basis that the world … belongs to everyone" (Kearney, 2003, p. 75). This is akin to the definition of a truly tolerant society as proposed by Memmi and Balibar, which was mentioned before (Cieśliński, 2015, p. 59). In "The Edge of the World," however, it is not quite so. The Valley of Flowers does not belong to everyone—it belongs to *Dana Meadbh*, harmonic nature personified. What is more, it is her prosperity alone that can ensure the survival of the peoples she deems her own, and her favour is not easily gained. If there is any hospitality to be found in her valley, either by her people or any strangers, it is only to be found by respecting her boundaries—by accepting her broader perspective as one's own. And yet, the concrete nature (*nomen est omen*) of these boundaries remains unclear.

6. Conclusion, or Weighing the "Grains of Truth"[21]

Hence, whether humanity will prove worthy of Lille's favour remains to be seen. In this way, the story seems to advocate for a detachment from the perspective of one's in-group and for the ultimate internalisation of the monstrous in the self. If there is a moral verdict in "The Edge of the World," then it may only be found when negotiating the perspectives of all its peoples and only

[21] In reference to Sapkowski's "A Grain of Truth" story, included in *The Last Wish* (2020, pp. 39-69).

when respecting the unique sensibilities of all groups present in this heavily politicised world. This lack of a clear moral conclusion could be interpreted as a means of trivialising or discrediting the colonial experience of the elves, yet it neither disproves the violence enacted upon them nor pictures them as morally superior. The *Aen Seidhe* thus escape the noble-eloquent coding applied to the elves by Tolkien, which allows for evaluating the race not on the basis of its inherent positive traits, but rather based on its actions as a player in a geo-politically interconnected world.

If, in this world, everyone can be a monster in the eyes of another, then perhaps everyone can also negotiate with the "fuller knowledge of [their] place in history" that the monstrous brings with itself into the ideology of the in-group (Cohen, 1996, p. 20). This knowledge, gained through shared experiences of othering, provides insight into how racialised hatred and political considerations create the "homogenous spatial blocs" mentioned by Staszak (2009, p. 44). Because the differences between humans and elves are cultural, surely the elven perception of humans as vermin is superfluous. Because humans may soon find traces of elven blood in themselves, surely their mode of being needs revaluation to accommodate the other. When this is not the case—when degrees of otherness and monstrosity are nevertheless used to exclude certain kinds of people from the in-group—monsters, indeed, are born, but not out of mutation or magic: only by fear, hatred, and violence.

Though this analysis has focused mostly on Sapkowski's racial interplay of elves and humans, humanity itself is by far not monolithic. For example, the villagers of Lower Posada, as followers of Lille, seem to obtain a fuller, less hateful and more peace-oriented outlook than that of their neighbours, as exemplified by their treatment of Torque. What follows "The Edge of the World" is a saga of novels which describes in detail an invasion set against the human Northern Kingdoms by the southern Empire of Nilfgaard (beginning with the appropriately named *Blood of Elves* novel; 2020d). In this struggle of north versus south, the northern human colonialism, to which the elves of *Dol Blathanna* fell victim, is contrasted with yet another imperialistic force, which transgresses notions of inherent speciesist solidarity. Thus, Sapkowski creates a fantasy world the races and nations of which are entities in a multi-faceted web of fluctuating historical and ideological conflicts, and it is only in this complicated tapestry of others that such groups may ever hope to stand as rhetorical equals, despite their spiteful preconceptions.

A fuller analysis of the world of the witcher would need to carefully consider its racial interplays, bearing in mind that Sapkowski's Polish cultural background includes both the experience of "the colonized and the colonizer" (Wise,

2010, p. 285-286),[22] much like his human Northerners[23]. Nevertheless, when analysed primarily on the basis of the human-elven relationship of othering, colonial exclusion and monsterisation, Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World" seems to prove that discussing racial struggles in a fantasy setting is possible, as long as, to quote Geralt the philosopher, we respect them, treating each group as sovereign. This, however, is seemingly not that simple, as others following in Tolkien's footsteps, such as the Canadian video game developer BioWare, are criticised for crudely or simplistically appropriating Indigenous experiences in their dark fantasy narratives (Isaac, 2020). And yet, as argued by Lydia Isaac, who commented on BioWare's presentation of the Indigenous elf: "[t]he solution is *not* to stop with the allegories. … *The solution is to make an effort*" (2020).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Katarzyna Ostalska (UŁ) for her determined efforts in leading me through the process of writing this article, Professor Andrzej Wicher (UŁ) for his apt comments about my references to Tolkien, and Doctor Joanna Matyjaszczyk (UŁ) for introducing me to the theory of othering. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of the article, the editors of the journal, and my two colleagues for their comments, corrections, and support.

References

Battis, J. (2004). Gazing upon Sauron: Hobbits, Elves, and the Queering of the Postcolonial Optic. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50(4), 908–926. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26286384

Beare, W. (1964). Tacitus on the Germans. *Greece & Rome*, 11(1), 64–76. http://www.jstor.org/stable/642633

Błaszkowska, M. & Jakubiak, M. (2015). Inni, obcy, potworni. Wokół zagadnień obcości i inności w cyklu wiedźmińskim. In R. Dudziński, A. Flamma, K. Kowalczyk & J. Płoszaj (Eds.), *Wiedźmin: bohater masowej wyobraźni* (pp. 69-81). Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Popkultury i Edukacji Popkulturowej „Trickster".

[22] As examples of the latter, Wise, quoting Ewa Thompson, mentions "the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century and occupation of Poland by Soviet Russia after the Second World War" (2010, as cited in Wise, 2010, p. 286). As to the former, Aleksander Fiut notes that "[u]ntil the end of the 19th century the supremacy of the Polish cultural pattern in the territories of today's Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine was regarded, at least by the Poles themselves, as self-evident, and suitable for the purpose of fostering a sense of a civilizing cultural mission" (2014, p. 37).

[23] An analysis of the post-colonial dimensions of CD Projekt Red's *The Witcher 3* video game has already been proposed by Majkowski (2018) though, as admitted by the author, it leaves the relationship between the game and Sapkowski's source text "mostly unexplored" (2018, p. 3).

Carter, C. (2022, December 1). *Dungeons & Dragons replaces "race" with "species" in latest playtest material*. Dicebreaker. https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/news/dungeons-and-dragons-replaces-race-with-species-playtest

Cieśliński, S. (2015). Mutant, odmieniec, wiedźmin. O problematyce rasizmu w wiedźmińskim cyklu Andrzeja Sapkowskiego. In R. Dudziński, A. Flamma, K. Kowalczyk & J. Płoszaj (Eds.), *Wiedźmin: bohater masowej wyobraźni* (pp. 51-67). Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Popkultury i Edukacji Popkulturowej „Trickster".

Cohen, J. J. (1996). Monster Culture (Seven Theses). In J. J. Cohen (Ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (pp. 3–25). University of Minnesota Press.

De Rosario Martínez, H. (2010). "Fairy" and "Elves" in Tolkien and Traditional Literature. *Mythlore*, 28(3/4 (109/110)), 65–84. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26814912

DND Beyond. (2022, December 1). *Moving On From "Race" in the 2024 Core Rulebooks*. https://www.dndbeyond.com/posts/1393-moving-on-from-race-in-the-2024-core-rulebooks

Fimi, D. (2006). "Mad" Elves and "Elusive Beauty": Some Celtic Strands of Tolkien's Mythology. *Folklore*, 117(2), 156–170. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30035484

Fiut, A. (2014). In the Shadow of Empires: Post-colonialism in Central and Eastern Europe—Why Not? (B. Koschalka, Trans.). *Teksty Drugie—Special Issue—English Edition, Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?* 1(2014). 34–40. http://www.rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/70991

Herring, A. (2016). Sexy Beast: The "Barberini Faun" as an Object of Desire. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25(1), 32–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24616616

Isaac, Lydia. (2020, November 28). Indigenous Coding in the Elves of Dragon Age. *Medium*. https://tepkunset.medium.com/indigenous-coding-in-the-elves-of-dragon-age-f77b71caeda2

Kaczor, K. (2006). *Geralt, czarownice i wampir: Recykling kulturowy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego*. Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.

Kaczor, K. (2015). Bez konfliktu nie ma opowieści—konflikt jako czynnik fabułotwórczy polskich opowieści fantasy na przykładzie Wiedźmina Andrzeja Sapkowskiego. In K. Łeńska-Bąk (ed.), *Zatargi, waśnie, konflikty: w perspektywie historycznej i kulturowej Stromata Anthropologica,* 10 (pp. 243-252). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.

Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. Routledge.

Kim, S. (2004). Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in "The Lord of the Rings Films." *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50(4), 875–907. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26286383

Loback, T. (1990). Orc Hosts, Armies and Legions: A Demographic Study. *Mythlore*, 16 (4 (62)), 10–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26811988

Mac Ritchie, D. (1893). Notes on the Word "Sidh." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 3(4), 367–379. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25508068

Majkowski, T. Z. (2018). Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia. *Open Library of Humanities* 4(1), 6. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.216

Majkowski, T. Z. (2021, April 8). *Master of disenchantment: how Sapkowski and the Witcher confound the critics* (B. Koschalka, Trans.). *Notes From Poland*. https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/04/08/master-of-disenchantment-how-sapkowski-and-the-witcher-confound-the-critics/

Mountz, A. (2009). The Other. In C. Gallaher (Ed.), *Key Concepts in Political Geography* (pp. 328–338). SAGE.

Obertová, Z. (2022). Slavic Mythology Lost in Fantasy: Literary Adaptations of Slavic Beliefs in Andrzej Sapkowski's and Juraj Červenák's Novels. *Croatian Journal of Ethnology & Folklore Research / Narodna Umjetnost*, 59(2), 119–132. https://doi-1org-100000eaq02cd.han3.lib.uni.lodz.pl/10.15176/vol59no206

Rieder, J. (2008). *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press.

Sapkowski, A (1993). Piróg, albo Nie ma złota w Szarych Górach. *Nowa Fantastyka,* 128 (5), 65-72.

Sapkowski, A. (2014). Kraniec Świata. In *Ostatnie Życzenie* (pp. 198-246). SuperNOWA.

Sapkowski, A. (2020a). The Edge of the World. In *The Last Wish* (D. Stok, Trans.; pp. 164–206). Gollancz.

Sapkowski, A. (2020b). The Witcher. In *The Last Wish* (D. Stok, Trans.; pp. 2–32). Gollancz.

Sapkowski, A. (2020c). *The Last Wish* (D. Stok, Trans). Gollancz.

Sapkowski, A. (2020d). *Blood of Elves* (D. Stok, Trans.). Gollancz.

Sapkowski, A. (2020e). *Time of Contempt* (D. French, Trans.). Gollancz.

Sapkowski, A. (2022). Eternal Flame. In *Sword of Destiny* (D. French, Trans.; pp. 136–194). Gollancz.

Simpson, J. (2011). On the Ambiguity of Elves. *Folklore*, 122(1), 76–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41306567

Simpson, M. K. (2007). From Savage to Citizen: Education, Colonialism and Idiocy. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(5), 561–574. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036235

Sinclair, J. M. (Ed.). (1999). *Collins English dictionary* (4th ed.). HarperCollins.

Sorber, E. C. (1972). The Noble Eloquent Savage. *Ethnohistory*, 19(3), 227–236. https://doi.org/10.2307/480974

Spiers, M. C. B. (2021). *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*. Michigan State University Press. https://doi.org/10.14321/j.ctv21ptzb1

Spivak, G. C. (1994). Can the Subaltern Speak? In Williams, P. & Chrisman, L. (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (pp. 66-111). Routledge.

Staszak, Jean-François (2009). Other/Otherness. In R. Kitchin and N. Thrift (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, vol. 8 (pp. 43–47). Elsevier.

Tally, R. T. (2010). Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs: Simple Humanity in Tolkien's Inhuman Creatures. *Mythlore*, 29 (1/2 (111/112)), 17–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26815537

Tneh, D. (2011). Orcs and Tolkien's treatment of evil. *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, 52, 37–43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614766

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1973). *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (3. ed.). Unwin.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (2004). *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of the Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Tolkien, J. R. R. (2012). *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

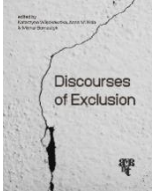
Wise, A. K. (2010). Postcolonial Anxiety in Polish Nationalist Rhetoric. *The Polish Review*, 55(3), 285–304. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25779884

Young, H. (2010). Diversity and Difference: Cosmopolitanism and "The Lord of the Rings." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 21 (3(80)), 351–365. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352268

Zaborowski, P. (2015). Mitologia słowiańska w cyklu o wiedźminie. In R. Dudziński, A. Flamma, K. Kowalczyk & J. Płoszaj (Eds.), *Wiedźmin: bohater masowej wyobraźni* (pp. 21-32). Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Popkultury i Edukacji Popkulturowej „Trickster".

Żmigrodzki, P. et al. (2024, February 10). Jaskier. *Wielki słownik języka polskiego*. https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/55466/jaskier/5170736/roslina

Julian Rakowski is an MA student of English Studies at the University of Łódź, interested in exploring fantasy literature and media, post-colonial theory, and the discourses of othering. His BA thesis involved the creation and analysis of the current (as of Dec. 2023) Wikipedia article devoted to William Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" poem, which discusses nature, motherhood and the poetics of disability.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Prettier Faces, Better Lives? The Impact of South Korean Facial Beauty Standards and Plastic Surgery on Women's Lives in Frances Cha's If I Had Your Face

Agata Rupińska
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
503363@doktorant.umk.pl

Received 2023-12-30; accepted 2024-04-15; published Online First 2024-06-25.

Abstract

With the rising popularity of South Korean worldwide culture (called *hallyu* or "the Korean wave") which presents us with images of beautiful stars and k-beauty products, it is worth exploring the nature and impact of Korean facial beauty standards. The following article analyzes the depiction of South Korean appearance norms in the Korean American novel *If I Had Your Face* by Frances Cha. In the introduction, I familiarize the reader with the novel's author and plot. Next I give an overview of what South Korean beauty norms entail and explain whether they are inspired by Caucasian appearance standards. Finally, I analyze the novel in-depth with a focus on two characters who undergo plastic surgery, a popular practice in South Korea. Applying the concepts of beauty work, aesthetic labor and social capital, I argue that to Cha's characters the striving for fulfilling restrictive facial beauty norms represents: an employee's duty, a desire to escape stigma and social exclusion, and a hope to improve one's life circumstances. The article therefore approaches beauty as a specific discourse of inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: k-beauty, Frances Cha, Korean American literature, South Korea, appearance

1. Introduction

When looking at the 21st-century global popular culture, it is hard to deny the ubiquitous influence of South Korea. Currently, many Korean forms of media enjoy popularity, such as dramas which amass millions of viewers (Kooima & Scheer-Erb, 2023) and k-pop groups who reach world-wide stardom (Sherman, 2021). Consuming South Korean media, television dramas, music videos and advertisements, it is not difficult to notice the uniform (Hu, 2023, Introduction) and strict (Peletz, 2007, p. 30) female beauty standards which they depict. This phenomenon is not surprising considering the fact that, over the years, South Korea has become the so-called "Beauty Capital of The World" (*How*, 2019). The country's skincare and makeup products, similarly to Korean entertainment, have become internationally successful, attracting many consumers, especially among young women (Russon, 2018).

To date, Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* (2020) has received little scholarly attention despite being a thematically rich work about Korean women and their experiences regarding appearance and beauty standards. In this article I aim to analyze the depiction of Korean facial appearance norms, its influence on young women, as well as motivations for and consequences of striving to fulfill it. My purpose is to demonstrate the impact both South Korean beauty standards and plastic surgery itself have on the characters of Cha's work.

Frances Cha is a Korean American writer and lecturer at Columbia University. Previously, she worked for the CNN fulfilling the role of a "travel and culture editor" in the cities of Hong Kong and Seoul, South Korea. *If I Had Your Face* (2020) is Cha's debut novel and remains her only work of adult fiction. This work has been received enthusiastically, with the BBC, *Time Magazine* and NPR naming it one of the best novels of the year. The author has followed her debut with a children's book, *The Goblin Twins* (2023).

If I Had Your Face is a piece of literary fiction set in contemporary Seoul. The novel follows a cast of young women who live in the same building. Rather than having one over-arching storyline, the book is a collection of vignettes focusing on selected characters. The narration in *If I Had Your Face* is split between four first-person narrators. The characters telling their stories are: Ara, a hairdresser and k-pop fan with a speech disability, Kyuri, a beautiful room-salon girl[1], Wonna, a young wife who is trying to conceive a child, and Miho, an artist who returns to South Korea from America. The fifth important character of the novel is Sujin, a young woman who strives to achieve beauty and seeks plastic

[1] Room salons are South Korean establishments where hostesses entertain (usually) male guests with conversation and drinking alcoholic beverages together. These salons tend to have an underground character (Charlesworth, 2020).

surgery in order to become an attractive room-salon girl similarly to Kyuri. Due to the limited scope of this article, the analysis focuses mostly on the portrayal of Kyuri and Sujin.

2. Under The (Glass) Skin: South Korean Beauty Standards

In order to discuss South Korean female beauty standards it is crucial to firstly establish what they usually entail. It is also important to remember that in Korea it is the face that is considered to be the defining body part in evaluating women's physical appearance (Lee et al., 2001, p. 146). While in most parts of the world certain trends are subject to change, a general preference for specific traits can be noticed in South Korea. Some of the most desirable features are a slender nose, a v-shaped jawline (Hu, 2023, Chapter 4), and big eyes with double eyelids (Goodwin, 2023). The Korean beauty standard also places importance on fair skin which should not have any blemishes (Goodwin, 2023). According to Elise Hu, Korean beauty emphasizes a "skinfirst" approach which manifests in complex, multiple step skincare routines. The preferred dewy look of the seemingly makeup-free skin is internationally known as "glass skin" (Hu, 2023, Chapter 4).

The preference for some of the features discussed above, such as double-lidded eyes, might raise questions whether Korean women desire to look Caucasian. According to scholars such as Jasmine Kwak (Kwak, 2021, p. 2) and Valérie Gelézeau (2015) this is not the case. Kwak acknowledges the influence of Western beauty ideals on the Korean canon of beauty which are mostly reflected in the preferences regarding the eyes and high nose bridges. However, she stresses that the motivation to comply with the beauty norms stems not from the desire for a Caucasian appearance but is rooted instead in old Korean notions regarding beauty. Moreover, in the critic's view, this partially westernized Korean beauty canon was initially a means of protest against Japan, Korea's former colonizer, and the aesthetic preferences of the Japanese (Kwak, 2021, p. 2). A similar view is expressed by Gelézeau who highlights that the interest in beauty and practices such as skin whitening are primarily rooted in the traditions of the Korean aristocracy. Historically in Korea, fair skin was considered desirable due to its association with belonging to a higher social stratum (Gelézeau, 2015).

The practice of plastic surgery can be considered to be relatively common in South Korea. Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang claim that depending on the source, as cosmetic procedures are often not properly reported, between 20% and 30% of Korean women have undergone such surgery (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 59). Therefore, it can be said that such procedures are rather normalized within Korean society. An instance of this normalization can be found in the phenomenon of treating aesthetic procedures as a form of

a gift. According to Sharon Heijin Lee, many parents fund their child's plastic surgery to reward them for graduating from high school (Lee, 2015, p. 5).

The reasons for the popularity of plastic surgery in Korea are complex and have attracted scholarly attention. For the purpose of this article, I focus on the two most important factors pointed to by researchers (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 58; Lee, 2021, p. 2). The notion of "physiognomy," the belief that one's looks dictate their life trajectory, is considered to be influential on both the decision to seek cosmetic surgery and the type of procedures chosen by individuals in South Korea (Lee, 2021, p. 2). Another motivating factor for undergoing surgery is employment prospects. Lee claims that because South Korea has a high number of university educated citizens, potential employees need to distinguish themselves from others. Being physically beautiful is one of possible strategies to succeed in a competitive employment market (Lee, 2021, p. 2). As one can notice, both of these important reasons are not found in vanity, but instead in hopes for improving one's fate.

3. Kyuri—the Beauty Labourer

Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* is a novel that, like its title suggests, deals with the problems connected to feminine facial appearance standards. "I would live your life so much better than you, if I had your face"—Kyuri, one of Cha's protagonists, thinks to herself upon seeing a beautiful woman in an early section of the novel (Cha, 2020, p. 31). Indeed, in the world of *If I Had Your Face* attractive appearance is seen as an invaluable asset that should be cherished in line with Rhoda K. Unger's theory of beauty as a source of interpersonal power for women (Unger, 1979, as cited in Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 178). Throughout the novel, the author familiarizes the reader with South Korean beauty standards. An evocative example of these standards can be found in one of the novel's first scenes where a meek hairdresser Ara admires her friend Kyrui's beauty. The woman's description entails "double eyelids", a tall nose, eyelash extensions, permanent eye makeup, fair skin, as well as cheekbones and jawline of desirable, slender shapes (2020, p. 4). Ara is aware that Kyuri's appearance is not natural, but instead created by surgical intervention and elaborate beauty rituals. However, this awareness does not have an impact on her admiration (2020, p. 4). It seems that through showcasing this awareness, Cha highlights the normalization of plastic surgery within South Korean society (see Holliday & Elfving-Hwang, 2012, p. 59). This point is emphasized further by the author, when in the following scene Ara remembers how many girls in her school have undergone a blepharoplasty (2020: 5), which reflects a real-life phenomenon (see Lee, 2015, p. 5).

While the characters of *If I Had Your Face* see beauty as an admirable quality and a form of currency, ugliness, in turn, is seen as a mark of deviancy. Such views on beauty and ugliness are of course not novel. Instead, they reflect a tendency which has been ingrained in various cultures, for example, as Marcia R. Lieberman argues, in fairy tales (Lieberman, 1972, p. 385). Kyuri, an attractive woman, does not understand why her employer refuses to have her face, which the protagonist deems ugly and "toad-like" (2020, p. 20), surgically altered. The character wonders whether the salon's Madam is immoral and unintelligent, assigning negative qualities of character solely on the basis of her noncompliance with beauty standards. The views expressed by the character are rather extreme, extending even to thinking that it is better to be dead than to live as an ugly person (Cha, 2020, p. 13). Another apparatus through which Kyuri's condemnation of the guest's and the Madam's lack of care regarding her looks can be understood is the notion of beautification as a 'civilizing' force. According to Giselinde Kuipers, since the 20th century engaging in beautifying practices emerged as a mark of "self-control and social worth" (2022, p. 6). As a result, from this standpoint, women such as those assessed as unattractive in the novel, can be seen as inferior and uncultured.

However, being ugly, as in the above example of the salon's owner, is portrayed in *If I Had Your Face* as an option only available to people with a significant financial advantage over others. This is confirmed by the incident when a rich young woman visits the salon. Kyuri judges her face that does not meet the beauty standard very harshly. The protagonist seems almost disgusted by the woman's flat nose and monolid eyes. However, she quickly remembers that people from higher social strata do not need to be beautiful to be granted new opportunities as they already possess them (2020, p. 19). In turn, as Mia Åberg explains (2015, p. 5), less wealthy South Koreans often try to improve their quality of life by seeking surgical enhancement,

Cha's novel calls into question whether decisions to strive to achieve the beauty ideal are a matter of free choice. In *If I Had Your Face* it is continuously highlighted that there is only one type of appearance that is socially rewarded, one that embodies the South Korean standard. Those deemed unattractive are judged harshly by the novel's characters, which the author illustrates numerous times (2020, pp. 4, 13, 19, 20, 26, 57, 261). Moreover, women who work in places such room salons, like Kyuri, are stripped off agency regarding their looks. Various aspects of their appearance are not chosen by themselves. Instead, it is the establishment's owner who decides what each employee will look like during a given season (2020, p. 12). As Heather Widdows argues, the moment a practice becomes required either explicitly or implicitly, it is difficult to consider it a matter of choice (2021, p. 258). In this case, the decision to comply with the prescribed looks is a way to fulfill one of the necessary job requirements. This phenomenon is depicted in a scene where Kyuri is at the hairdresser's and expresses her delight at being prescribed a hair style that is

popular with customers. Here, it is implied that lack of compliance with the look selected by the salon's madam would be met with negative consequences, possibly such as a cessation of employment (2020, p. 12). This is an important element of what Ashley Mears refers to as aesthetic labor, a type of labor where employees receive compensation "for their own body's looks and affect" (2014, p. 1332). In such positions the worker, arguably, becomes a part of the object or service that is paid for by the client (Mears, 2014, p. 1332). In order to become an aesthetic laborer and maintain their position, a person has to engage in various type of beauty work, such as makeup and plastic surgery.

By exploring Kyuri's choices, *If I Had Your Face* offers a compelling portrayal of beauty work and the experience of plastic surgery. Kyuri is a woman who has already had a number of cosmetic procedures done and now works in a room salon. Although Kyuri struggles with personal problems and debt, she is considered by her friends to be a successful person as the salon she works in is an exclusive one. In the portrayal of Kyuri, Cha offers a realistic depiction of a room salon employee who has to implement a significant amount of beauty work in order to remain employed as an aesthetic laborer. The author describes her character's weekly beautifying rituals which involve daily hairdressing visits, as well as a 10-step skincare routine implemented both in the morning and at night (2020, p. 57). These measures seem absurd to the protagonist's friend, Miho. However, Kyuri performs them without a question and tries to encourage other women to do the same (2020, p. 57). It is not surprising, considering the fact that the woman's employment depends on her face and hair looking attractive. Her job can be considered a precarious one, similarly to that of fashion models (Mears, 2017, p. 156), and loss of beauty would result in the loss of work opportunities.

Moreover, through Kyuri, Cha also signals the financial difficulties that may be encountered by women who decide to have plastic surgery. While they might be inclined to seek cosmetic enhancement hoping to improve their financial situation, the reality often does not bring the desired profits, as documented in Soohyung Lee and Keunkwan Ryu's research (2012, p. 224). This is the case of Cha's protagonist, whose attractive looks require frequent upkeep, both in terms of hairstyling, makeup and skincare (Cha, 2020, pp. 5, 57), but also of additional plastic surgeries. While in the novel Kyuri does not undergo any surgical interventions, the author portrays her character being "sorely tempted" by them in an advertising brochure (2020, p. 262). This scene highlights that a beautiful woman's journey of appearance improvement is never finished and always requires new resources, such as time, energy, products, and perhaps most importantly, money. The character attempts to improve her finances (2020, p. 11) and limit her personal expenses (2020, p. 54) in order to help her mother (2020, p. 29). Other characters, such as Sujin and Ara, however, are not aware of Kyuri's financial problems. They assume she and other room salon employees waste money on men and entertainment (2020, p. 11). While

Cha does not depict Kyuri's work colleagues in more detail, one can hypothesize they invest significant resources into beauty work, required to keep and perform their jobs. In short, a job of a room salon employee which belongs to the category of aesthetic labor, is depicted by the author as difficult and demanding.

4. Sujin—Beauty as Social Capital

In Sujin's case, in contrast to Kyuri's, plastic surgery represents a hope for improving one's life situation. Interestingly, she is the only of the novel's main characters who is not granted the role of a narrator. Perhaps Cha intended to make a distinction between Kyuri, an 'insider', who already works in a room salon and whose unglamorous life is described throughout the novel, and Sujin, an 'outsider', who aspires to perform the same type of job and has an almost romantic view of the profession. This protagonist has grown up in an orphanage, and lacks education and beauty (Cha, 2020, pp. 4-5), which makes her more vulnerable and limits her life opportunities. Sujin, due to where she was brought up, is a character that can be described as afflicted with stigma, which Erving Goffman describes as circumstances where a person "is disqualified from full social acceptance" (1986, *Preface*). In the novel, the orphanage is said to be considered a place where "the disabled and deformed" reside (Cha, 2020, p. 8). It is not surprising then that Sujin worries about her looks, considers herself to be in need of fixing, and desires to escape unjust stigmatization by improving her appearance (2020, pp. 8-9, 14). According to Goffman, such strategies are frequently employed by stigmatized individuals (1986, pp. 7, 9).

Sujin is a character fascinated by the world of beauty. She spends her free time consuming TV programs about plastic surgery and enjoys dramatic transformations the participants go through (2020, pp. 13-14). While it is not explicitly stated, it seems that watching reality television has at least partially inspired the character to seek surgery. In the same scene where her favorite entertainment is described, she tells her friend Ara about her hopes regarding a cosmetic procedure. Sujin's views can seem quite naive as she believes surgery will drastically change her life, and bring her wealth and happiness (2020, p. 14). However, they also show the character's awareness that beauty could increase her social capital. While, as discussed above, some forms of beauty work do not always fully bring the desired benefits, being beautiful can be seen as a form of social capital. Kathleen M. O'Connor and Eric Gladstone state that attractive individuals worldwide are treated more kindly by others, enjoy more attention and popularity. Moreover, scholars point out that beauty is associated with the 'halo effect' which causes others to assume that a pretty person possesses various, admirable features of character (O'Connor & Gladstone, 2017, p. 2; Talamas et al., 2016). Most women are well-aware of these and many more social perks that are associated with being considered attractive. It is not surprising then

that, as Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts point out, they strive to comply with the appearance ideal in order to obtain those benefits or, at least, escape unjust treatment by others (1997, p. 180). Given the stigma that has marked her life, Sujin aspires to perfect beauty as an important social capital. Inspired by Kyuri, whom she deeply admires, the protagonist decides to undergo plastic surgery. Afterwards, she goes through a long recovery process to finally emerge as a beauty and begins her first, although much less glamorous than Kyuri's, room salon job.

In the scene of the protagonist's meeting with a plastic surgeon, Cha depicts an aspect of the beauty industry which can be seen as predatory. According to Widdows, those creating or maintaining beauty standards can invent flaws and methods to fix them for their own financial gain (2021, p. 259). The novel seems to contain such an example as when Sujin visits the office, she is initially mostly interested in blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery). The surgeon, however, claims that the protagonist "desperately" needs two types of jaw surgery and recommends additional surgeries for her cheekbones and chin. The doctor also uses persuasive language characterized by negative connotations, "such a masculine-looking jawline" and, at first, is unwilling to specify how much time post-surgical recovery would require (Cha, 2020, p. 15). All of the above suggest that this untrustworthy character serves as an example of a practitioner exploiting his client.

Through Sujin Cha also highlights the unpleasantness of recovery after plastic surgery. During the process Sujin's face is swollen, and her jaw does not move properly making it hard to speak (2020, p. 90) and producing disturbing noises (2020, p. 145). The character expresses her disappointment as her progress does not mirror what she saw on social media (2020, p. 145). For a long time, the protagonist has difficulties with eating, due to the misalignment of her teeth, and struggles with extreme self-consciousness when her face is exposed. Kyuri describes her as looking "like a sad, old balloon" (2020, p. 175), whereas Ara thinks her friend appears "toothless" (2020, p. 145). As Pamela K. Stone has argued, many beautifying practices are characterized by limiting women's abilities, either temporarily or permanently (2020, pp. 40, 52). This phenomenon can be observed in the depictions of Sujin's struggles. The protagonist is not only limited by the aforementioned side effects of the surgery but also by recovery rules. For instance, she cannot accompany her friend to saunas due to health hazards (Cha, 2020, p. 146)[2]. The character's discomfort, similarly to that of many women in real life (see Stone, 2020, p. 52), remains invisible to others.

[2] Sujin is not the only character suffering from the procedure's consequences. The apparently recovered Kyuri struggles as the numbness in parts of her jaw never disappears (2020, p. 251).

3. Conclusion

Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face* is a novel offering a realistic and compelling portrayal of South Korean women's experiences regarding facial beauty norms. In the world of Cha's book, the impact of facial beauty on women's lives is not to be underestimated. As the author shows throughout her novel, those more privileged can opt out of following beauty standards. Unfortunately, those from the lower social strata do not have such a choice and fear they might be forever excluded from a glamorous life unless they invest in their appearance. Cha chronicles the journeys both her characters go through, engaging with the issues of aesthetic labor and beauty capital. For Kyuri plastic surgery and other types of beauty work, such as hair-styling and skincare, constitute a part of her usual work-related duties as her room salon job is a form of aesthetic labor. For Sujin, however, striving for beauty symbolizes a social capital and reveals her (perhaps unrealistic) hope for a better future where she is free from multiple forms of exclusion caused by childhood stigma. When Sujin recovers from most side effects, "beauty […] emerge[s] dramatically from her face" (Cha, 2020, p. 251). Kyuri admires the character's transformation facilitated by the cosmetic procedure as well as treatments which she herself recommended. Sujin is delighted with the final results (2020, p. 251) and overwhelmed with happiness stemming from being attractive. These feelings cause the protagonist to ignore Kyuri's suggestions regarding the drawbacks of room salon jobs (2020, p. 254). Indeed, it is hard not to notice the overt optimism in Sujin's views. Cha's protagonists still see appearance norms as something worth struggling for, even though beauty work might not necessarily result in a life resembling a fairy tale or, perhaps more accurately, a romantic k-drama. While on the surface, it might seem the future can hold great opportunities for the character Cha created, the reality might be much less fortunate. Considering the struggles of room salon women known from Kyuri's story (2020, p. 185), it is difficult to reach an optimistic conclusion. Perhaps, beauty is rarely a source of freedom—more often, it can replace one type of struggle with another, creating an illusion of happiness and inclusion.

References

Åberg, M. (2015). *Legitimizing the Plastic Body: Rise of Plastic Surgery and Changing Body Ideals in Contemporary South Korea*. Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University. http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/7510659

Cha, F. (2020). *If I Had Your Face*. Ballantine Books.

Charleston, A. (2020). *Author Q&A: Frances Cha. Big Issue North*. https://www.bigissuenorth.com/reading-room/2020/07/author-qa-frances-cha/#close

Fredrickson, B.L. & Roberts, T.-A. (1997). Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *21*(2), 173-206. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x

Gelézeau, V. (2015). The Body, Cosmetics and Aesthetics in South Korea: The Emergence of a Field of Research. *HAL Open Science*. https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01211686

Goodwin, E. (2023, March 8). Foreign Residents Struggle with Korea's "Impossible" Body Standards. *The Korea Times*. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/10/113_346561.html

Goffman, E. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Touchstone-Simon & Schuster Inc.

Holliday, R. & Elfving-Hwang, J. (2012). Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea. *Body & Society*, *18*(2), 58-81. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X12440828

How South Korea Became the Skincare and Beauty Capital of the World. (2019, February 19). *Skale*. https://www.skale.today/blog/2019/02/19/kbeauty-skincare-industry-secrets/

Hu, E. (2023). *Flawless: Lessons in Looks and Culture from the K-Beauty Capital*. Dutton.

Kooima, M. & Scheer-Ebb, P. (2023, October 29). The 20 Biggest K-Dramas on Netflix of All Time. *Movieweb*. https://movieweb.com/most-watch-kdramas-on-netflix/

Kuipers, G. (2022). The Expanding Beauty Regime: Or, Why It Has Become so Important to Look Good. *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, *13*(2), 207-228. https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00046_1

Kwak, K. (2021). The Influence of Western Culture on Plastic Surgery Consumption in South Korea. *Journal of Gynecology and Women's Health*, *21*(2), 1-4. https://doi.org/10.19080/jgwh.2021.21.556059

Lee, S.H., Rudd, N.A. & Kim, J.S.. (2001). Body Image I: A Comparison of Ideal Beauty, Body Image, and Appearance Management Behaviors Among Korean and American Women. *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing and Textiles*, *25*(5), 969-980. https://koreascience.kr/article/JAKO200111920721240.page

Lee, S. & Ryu, K. (2012). Plastic Surgery: Investment in Human Capital or Consumption*? Journal of Human Capital*, *6*(3), 224-250. https://doi.org/10.1086/667940

Lee, S.H. (2012). *The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism, and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture.* University of Michigan Library. https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/93903

Lieberman, M.R. (1972). “Some Day My Prince Will Come”: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale. *College English*, *34*(3), 383-395. https://doi.org/10.2307/375142

Mears, A. (2017). Interview with Ashley Mears, Author of Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model: “Things May Look Great and Glamorous on the Outside, but There is Much More Work behind This.” *Journal of Economic Sociology*, *18*(5), 152-158. https://doi.org/10.17323/1726-3247-2017-5-152-158

O’Connor, K.M. & Gladstone, E. (2017). Beauty and Social Capital: Being Attractive Shapes Social Networks. *Social Networks*, 1-6. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2017.05.003

Peletz, M.G. (2007). *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia*. Association for Asian Studies.

Russon, M.-A. (2018, October 21). K-Beauty: The Rise of Korean Make-up in the West. *BBC*. https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45820671

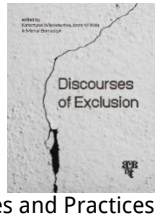
Sherman, M. (2023, August 17). How K-Pop Came to Dominate the Music Scene. *Elle*. https://www.elle.com/culture/music/a36898177/k-pop-multibillion-dollar-industry/

Stone, P.K. (2020). Bound to Please: The Shaping of Female Beauty, Gender Theory, Structural Violence, and Bioarchaeological Investigations. In S.G. Sheridan & L. Gregoricka (Eds.), *Purposeful Pain: The Bioarchaeology of Intentional Suffering* (pp. 39-62). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32181-9_3

Talamas, S.N. et al. (2016). Blinded by Beauty: Attractiveness Bias and Accurate Perceptions of Academic Performance. *PLoS One*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0148284

Widdows, H. (2021). Structural Injustice and the Requirements of Beauty. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *52*(2), 251–269. https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12369

Agata Rupińska is a PhD candidate in the field of Literary Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. She received a Master’s Degree in English Philology. Her main interests include gender studies, aesthetics, beauty standards, and American Literature.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Social Exclusion of Mothers of Children on the Autism Spectrum as Presented in Popular Publications

Agnieszka Żabińska
Casimir Pulaski Radom University
a.zabinska@uthrad.pl

Received 2023-12-31; accepted 2024-12-14; published Online First 2024-12-27.

Abstract

The text provides an introduction to analyses of the social exclusion of mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders. The aim is to highlight and discuss several stories from the increasing number of printed accounts by mothers describing their daily struggles with disability and social judgment. The discourses of exclusion concerning this social group are a highly interesting research topic due to its multidimensionality and stereotypes ingrained in society.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, difficult motherhood, transference stigma, mothers' biographies, popular publications

1. Introduction

Nowadays, special pedagogy strongly emphasises the need to support persons with autism spectrum disorders in the context of education, revalidation and social inclusion. An important element building the effectiveness of the methods applied is the child's environment, including above all a family that accepts and embraces disability. Social exclusion has accompanied disability since the dawn of time. In the context of exclusion and stigmatisation of persons with autism spectrum disorders, it is an extremely interesting issue from the cognitive point of view due to theories emerging in recent years concerning factors influencing the development of the disorder itself. The examination of the topic should begin with the first theoretical publications (from the 1940s), as at that time the causes of autism were considered to be completely different from those recognized today. The aim of this text is to provide an insight into the

issue, based on the accounts of mothers of people with autism spectrum disorders. The accounts presented are a slice of content taken from popular publications (biographical and autobiographical) written by parents, resulting from their need to talk about their experiences, including frustrations. The main objective is to identify and cite those aspects of the reality of families affected by social misunderstanding and consequently transferred stigma. The overarching aim is to highlight and draw the society's attention to the multidimensionality of the needs of parents and families of persons with autism spectrum disorders. The analysis is made on the basis of statements by mothers who face exclusion and stigma on a daily basis due to the autism spectrum diagnosed in their children. The history of the theoretical approaches to the issue—the causes of autism spectrum and stigma—is also presented.

2. The mother as the source of autism—historical overview

The "discovery" of autism is attributed to Leo Kanner, although there had already been publications that spoke of "autistic behaviour" (for example, in the work of Grunia Sukhareva in 1925). Kanner, in a 1943 publication entitled "Autistic disorders of affective contact," described the disorders of the children as "congenital." At the same time, he paid a lot of attention to the description of the parents, whom he portrayed as intellectual, cold and rigid; consequently, researchers from the psychoanalytic school established a link between the parents' characteristics and autism.[1] Kanner explained his words by misinterpretation, even going so far as to say to the parents "I acquit you."[2] However, the machine of stigmatisation of mothers of children on the autism spectrum took off in earnest. They were called "Frigid mothers." In a text that appeared in *The Time* magazine of 26 April 1948, entitled "Medicine: Frosted Children," the authors described those who "wear schizoid nappies" and who "are happiest left to themselves." The entire text maintains an accusatory tone and ends with a rhetorical question: "Is it the frigid parents who are defiling their children?". The text concludes with a reference to the words of an expert who presented the parents as cold and flawed. This expert used a metaphor in which children were "carefully stored in a refrigerator that was not defrosted." Consequently, for many years the name of "fridges" was attached to the mothers of autistic children, turning compassion into contempt (Donvan & Zucker, 2017, p. 89).

[1] The researchers include Melanie Klein, author of the separation-individualisation disorder theory, where autistic behaviour is the result of abnormal and "cold" parental care, particularly the mother; Tustin Francis, author of a theory of the cause of autism in the premature loss of the symbiotic relationship with the mother; and Tinbergen Niko, author of the theory that autistic behaviour occurs as a reaction to the severe anxiety felt by the child as a result of insecurity in the relationship with the mother (Pietras & Witusik, 2010, p.102).

[2] At the First Congress of the National Association for Autistic Children in San Francisco on 17 July 1969, Leo Kanner said: "I would like to state here that I acquit you as parents. I have been quoted falsely many times" (Kanner quoted in Brauner & Brauner, 1988, p. 218).

The most frequently cited researcher, a strong supporter of the theory that mothers are to blame for the emergence of autism in their children, was Bruno Bettelheim. Interestingly, he was neither a psychologist nor an educationalist by training (he held a doctorate in art history). Accidently, he became an authority on autism, not least through a book he wrote in 1967 entitled *The Empty Fortress. Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. The text was written as a guide to the strange world of autism. Bettelheim detailed the cases of the children in his care at the Orthogenic School. He described the children's behaviour as clues to help the reader understand why these children choose to escape reality. This publication became a key position to prompt readers to negatively label mothers as the cause of the "empty fortress" in the child.

In the spirit of negative connotations, social campaigns have been organised by foundations and associations that bring together parents and that are dedicated to finding the causes and treatments for the autism spectrum. One campaign was accompanied by the text: "Autism is the enemy. Autism takes children away from their parents. Autism destroys society. Autism causes families to break up."[3] Such campaigns aimed to draw public attention to the problem of diagnosing autism, but there is a risk that many people who do not deal with the spectrum on a daily basis may treat their slogans literally, that is, misunderstand the message of the campaign authors. Thus, an image of a family with autism is built on the basis of a few words, or, as in the case of Hollywood films, a few scenes created to enrich the storyline, which have little to do with the "real" life on the spectrum. In this case, the saying that it does not matter whether people speak well or badly—it is important that they speak, is a threat to the true face of the spectrum for autistic persons but also their immediate family.

Unfortunately, the myth of the mother being responsible for the child's autism also operates today. A 2004 study by Katarzyna Markiewicz on psychology students' knowledge of the causes of autism indicates that among the respondents as many as 34% believe that the cause of autism is lack of parental love, especially from mothers. As many as 32.8% suspect the presence of personality disorders in the parents themselves, while 16.4% of the respondents believe that the cause of autism are poor parenting attitudes. Thus, although the concept of frigid mother guilt was debunked as early as the 1960s and 1970s, it still finds its promoters and people who relate to it in a sympathetic manner.

[3] "I am Autism, Autism Speaks" campaign in 2008 (Drzyzga-Lech, Kłeczek & Ir, 2021); a similar event was the 2007 campaign of the Children's Research Center at New York University: "We have your son. We're going to make sure he can't take care of himself or interact socially for the rest of his life. This is just the beginning. Autism." The campaign was accompanied by billboards with, among other things, the above text, which was entitled "A letter from the kidnappers" (Donvan & Zucker, 2017, pp. 504-505).

3. The mother of a person with autism spectrum disorders in everyday life—the perspective of the mother and the society

Motherhood in the context of a child's disability is called “difficult motherhood” in the disability literature. The disability of the new-born child can, to a certain extent, slow down or even in some cases stop the process of self-realization as a mother and provoke a lack of acceptance of the child and the new situation. The lack of acceptance and the rejection of the thought of the diagnosis, and at the same time the emerging sense of injustice, can cause a crisis or even a shock, and these feelings can sometimes last for several years and have a destructive and traumatic effect on the woman (Kościelska, 1998). In addition, the mother often has to give up her ambitions, plans for her life and her dreams for her child’s future. Thus, for her it means a change of perspective regarding her whole life situation. According to Anna Zalewska (1999) and Małgorzata Kościelska (1998), women affected by “difficult motherhood” feel as if a part of their “self” has been destroyed and they cannot find their new identity. Instead of becoming mothers and enjoying their new role, they assume the position of disability experts. As Aleksandra Maciarz (2004) points out, the assessment of motherhood itself “is usually made through the prism of the health and development of her children, their academic and behavioural achievements” (p. 16). Thus, in this context, the child’s disability becomes the basis for an often negative social evaluation of both the child and the mother. In a similar vein, Ewa Pisula (1998) writes that “[w]hile in the case of physical illness or death, compassion and help from those around is a matter of course, in the case of a mentally handicapped child people are unable to talk openly about the problem and support the parents” (p. 25).

The texts analysed in this article were selected on the basis of literature search available on the Polish publishing market. Nowadays, disorders from the autism spectrum are described not only in the literature on the subject but they increasingly appear in books aimed at a wider audience. Initially, 11 books were examined, of which 5 were used for this particular analysis. The selection was dictated by the emerging keywords: autism spectrum, mother, social exclusion, everyday life and the date of publication, i.e. the last 3 years. One publication is from 2012 and was included due to its reportage nature. The publications selected for analysis present the quintessential struggles of a modern mother of a child with an autism spectrum disorder; these are stories that are true, unvarnished and aimed at readers who do not deal daily with the spectrum but also those at the beginning of their journey due to the arrival of a child with a disorder in the family.

The publications analysed in the context of the public perception of the mother of a child with autism spectrum disorders, in the narratives of these mothers, often sound as follows:

> Let this mother not deviate too much from the image, and if she dares to break the elaborate portrayal of an angel in a skirt with the face of a sufferer and the seriousness of a blessing, we will judge her. Society is entitled to give an opinion: such children should go only to the institution. But she, as a mother, does not have the right to say that—because of what kind of mother she would be. (Zalewski, 2012, p. 115)

In addition to the image attributed to the mother of a child with a disability, there are still opinions in the society about mothers' guilt: "Another visit to the neurologist and the doctor's statement: 'She is fine. It's all because of you, you're an over-theorised teacher'" (Niklewska, 2020, p. 29).

Constantly under pressure from society's perception of their children's disabilities, mothers struggle with many aspects of exclusion. The disability of children with autism spectrum disorders is often described as invisible: due to the lack of changes in outward appearance, the child's disability cannot be seen "at first sight." The phenomenon of "invisible disability" can be extremely oppressive for parents. It often causes exclusion, to which the parents themselves lead, anticipating, as it were, the social reactions when the person standing next to them nevertheless realises that they are dealing with a child with autism. The mothers themselves say: "Children and young people with visible disabilities evoke empathy in us. Fit and healthy but behaving atypically arouse surprise, mockery and often anger and indignation" (Hołub, 2022, p. 221), or: "I kept hearing: you can't see anything from him, he'll grow out of it, you'll see. This is the perception in Poland—a disabled person is a person in a wheelchair, with obvious physical defects. And if you can't see it, there's no problem" (Zalewski, 2012, p. 127); "Disabled—then let him be in a wheelchair, at least let him look weird!" (Zalewski, 2012, p. 77), while when "[p]eople on the street see a boy fluttering his arms[, they] automatically take a step back" (Zalewski, 2012, p. 107). "The invisibility of autism" is also a stigma of supposed responsibility for disability. There is

> a certain "problem," which is the invisibility of autism. It is a fact, autism is invisible, without physical dysfunction. Parents therefore do not elicit pity, while they are indeed exposed to many comments. Here, in small towns, I think their background is more often faith and religion. I refer to opinions like "She's so smart, he's so smart, and they have THIS child. Well, God doesn't choose…" (Zalewski, 2012, p. 107)

Due to such a difficult definition and perception of disability, and society's perception of the child's "naughtiness," most mothers often succumb to the accepted image and take on the stigma of "the guilty one." Almost every mother describing her situation in the publications analysed experienced a moment of blaming herself for her child's disability: "I wanted to determine the causes of what happened. I started by completely unjustifiably blaming myself as co-responsible for Ola's autism. Since this was the case, I must have 'failed' something" (Niklewska, 2020, p. 31). In another case, the narrative is even more

blunt: "I was cruel and ruthless to myself, I burdened my psyche with a monstrous sense of guilt" (Niklewska, 2020, p. 32). Unfortunately, in none of the cases described did the mothers receive adequate specialist support.

Importantly, the mothers themselves often reach the point where they are able to gain distance from their own role—that of the mother of a child with autism:

> I learned to relax. I started to "allow" myself time for myself and my own pleasures. Before, I also relaxed sometimes but only theoretically. Sitting in the cinema, I thought I had no right to be there because I should be helping Ola. I realised for the first time how much I was "pasting" myself. It came to my consciousness that you cannot truly love anyone if you treat yourself so cruelly. (Niklewska, 2020, p. 93)

The mothers need a lot support and understanding, but they often have to come to a point in their lives completely on their own where they can coexist with autism, while being aware of their family's "otherness." Urszula Klajmon-Lech points out that

> [t]he sense of otherness does not only affect the affected persons themselves, but also (and sometimes even more so) their loved ones. They feel cheated (by fate, by God, by themselves), they experience a sense of guilt, they painfully experience the lack of acceptance of their own child, but also of their own family by society. (2017, p. 268)

Numerous scientific publications have been written on the topic of stigma in the context of intellectual disability and the autism spectrum. In contrast, the phenomenon of transference stigma has not been discussed extensively and is a relatively neglected area of special education. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon; therefore, it is difficult to capture precisely and unambiguously. Transferred stigmatisation involves the extension of the stigma from the individual directly affected to the associated environment or person. According to Erving Goffman, "when an individual is associated in the social structure with a stigmatised person, the environment may treat him or her in the same way as the stigmatised person" (2007, p. 33). Thus, those who care for a sick, disabled or disturbed person—a spouse, siblings or extended family—are exposed to transferred stigma. Transferred stigma is most often analysed in relation to the broader family/caregiver of a person with disability or chronic illness, without identifying specific family members. It is then referred to as "family stigma." This stigma is usually defined through the lens of three dimensions: carer stigma, structural stigma and social stigma, which reflect the intrapersonal, interpersonal and social aspects of stigma. The above dimensions are characterised by three main elements: cognitive attributions (related, for example, to the appearance or severity of the illness), emotional reactions (positive and negative emotions) and behavioural responses (i.e. reducing direct involvement in care and hiding it). These elements reflect a process where ste-

reotypes or cognitive attributes lead to emotional reactions and later to behavioural consequences. Families raising children with explicit or less explicit disabilities repeatedly experience family stigma. Transferred stigma, according to Stanisława Byra and Monika Parchomiuk (2014), is observed in individual family members in three contexts: 1. the very relationship to the person stigmatised because of the disability or illness experienced; 2. the care exercised in relation to a family member burdened with a discreditable attribute; 3. the conscious choice of a partner possessing socially stigmatised attributes. (2014, p. 33). These contexts are part of the difficult everyday life of families of persons on the autism spectrum: "'Autism is a thousand-fold challenge,' 'One child, and it's like having four,' 'Maybe you need a psychologist?', 'As much work as with twins'—how many times have I heard sentences like this… Interestingly, mostly from doctors" (Pyszny, 2023, p. 79). It is therefore possible to move beyond the stigma by recognising the mother's hardship. However, such a way out is only partial, because apart from sympathy and enigmatic words of support, the mother is still left alone with her daily struggles. Her transferred stigma is a huge challenge not only to her psyche, but also to her mundane physical endurance.

4. Diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders as anti-exclusion: through the eyes of the mother

The moment of receiving a diagnosis is socially associated with a disintegration of the previous life, defeat and despair, because the family receiving the diagnosis faces many difficult decisions and dilemmas. Above all, it has to cope with accepting the otherness of its new member and the changes that are and will be taking place in the existing functioning of the whole family. In fact, in many cases the situation at the beginning of the life with a child with a disability is often critical, but usually with time one comes to terms with this state and accepts a specific model of life, creates one's own model of upbringing, recognizing the capabilities and limitations of one's child (Minczakiewicz, 2010, p. 81).[4] On the other hand, analysing the narratives of mothers of children on the spectrum, a different, optimistic tendency can be discerned: "We went there (the counselling centre) to get this diagnosis, not to hear that our son does not have autism. We went to find out what we could do" (Zalewski, 2012, p. 19). Another mother states: "This may sound strange, but when I found out it was autism, I was happy. It was like a stone had fallen from my heart. Finally I knew what was wrong with my child, I could try to help him" (Hołub, 2022, p. 26) and yet

[4] Twardowski (1995), among others, has written about the moment in the life of parents when they find out about their child's disability, dividing this period into different phases of parental adaptation to disability: the phase of shock (emotional shock), emotional crisis (despair, depression), apparent adaptation (use of various defence mechanisms), and constructive adaptation.

another writes: “I finally knew for sure what was wrong with Ola—she has autism. I felt relieved and somehow reassured, I was beginning to understand something” (Niklewska, 2020, p. 44). The diagnosis itself, therefore, became a point in life that was not bad or depressing, but a pivotal moment in a positive sense—it gave the parents the knowledge what to do next. One mother even wrote that:

> When we got the diagnosis, I felt like my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. [...] I had never felt such pain. I understood that for 16 years, without realising that my son had Asperger’s syndrome, I had tried to force things on him that were beyond his strength. (Hołub, 2022, p. 179)

Others wrote that “The diagnosis was a magic paper, a pass to let you go” (Michalczak, 2023, p. 44), and that “Relief that what is happening has a name, fits into some kind of framework” (Zalewski, 2012, p. 43).

However, when news of receiving a diagnosis reach outside the immediate circle, some unwarranted and erroneous stereotypes continue to operate in social groups not directly related to the disorder:

> Autism. Six letters lumped together in one word that don't tell me anything. They are so random... I cry all night. A colleague asks in the morning at work what happened. An avalanche of stories follows. “And do you know what psychologists do when a child with autism comes to them?” she asks. “They congratulate the parents because, after all, these children are often little geniuses.” (Pyszny, 2023, p. 28)

People with autism are often thought to have some kind of exceptional ability or at least a high intelligence quotient. This is one of the most common misconceptions about the autism spectrum. Another is the belief that it is a problem of parental inefficiency and therefore the child’s “naughtiness.” It should definitely be noted that autism is not a parenting problem or the result of inconsistent parenting attitudes, and such opinions strongly discredit and build misconceptions about everyday life with autism.

5. Conclusions

The discourses of exclusion in the case of mothers of people with autism spectrum disorders can concern multiple aspects, from social exclusion in a broad sense to individual exclusion, but also self-exclusion. Mothers struggle with reacting to other people’s opinions but also have to face their own emotions and unfulfilled expectations of their children, for example: “I had the belief that if you give someone everything you have that person responds in exactly the spirit we expect. It was an expectation full of hubris. It had nothing to do with what I, as a mother, got” (Michalczak, 2023, p. 50). The contemporary world is not yet quite open to understanding the everyday life of families of people with disabilities. Although it is increasingly common to find popular books that talk

about autism "from the inside," the audience for these texts is quite limited, and the stereotypes and beliefs regarding disability and autism are built on rather superficial knowledge. The publications in question, however, give hope that, through their truthfulness of the narrative, they will make "ordinary" people want to talk to each other, cause amazement but also a desire for appreciation on the part of mothers/parents because the more acceptance, understanding and praise they receive, the more strength and energy they have for their children.

Autistics and their mothers do not need pity and sympathy—they need a space without exclusion because, as Temple Grandin said, "If I could stop being an autistic person, I wouldn't choose to, because then I wouldn't be myself" (Grandin in Sacks, 1999, pp. 210-211). Homplewicz writes that "[a] mother's love and a father's love are to a child as the sun and the earth are to a plant: it is impossible to exist without either of them—the plant then dies and the child falls into internal disability" (2000, p. 70). It is therefore worthwhile, in line with the spirit of autism self-advocates, to abandon the medical model, in which autism is "what you have," in favour of an identity model, in which autism is understood "as what you are" (McGuire & Michalko, 2011). Such a transition will definitely benefit autistics themselves, as well as their immediate families and, consequently, society as a whole. On the other hand, talking out loud about everyday life, analysing and pointing out paths that have already been discovered and blazed by other parents, is an extremely important element of support for families where a child is born on the spectrum. And pointing to publications that describe real-life situations and events becomes all the more credible. Perhaps it is worthwhile to reach for biographies and autobiographies, in addition to using scientific publications, when teaching the public about autism to understand the disorder "from the inside." The very title of the book by autism self-advocate Naoki Higashida, *The Reason I Jump*, prompts the search for answers.

References

Bettelheim, B. (1972). *The Empty Fortress. Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. Simon&Schuster.

Brauner, A. & Brauner, F. (1988). *Dziecko zagubione w rzeczywistości: historia autyzmu od czasów baśni o wróżkach. Fikcja literacka i rzeczywistość kliniczna*. WSiP.

Byra, S. & Parchomiuk, M. (2014). Stygmatyzacja przeniesiona. Część 1: perspektywa rodziców dzieci z niepełnosprawnością i chorobą. *Niepełnosprawność, 15*, 29-46.

Donvan, J. & Zucker, C. (2017). *Według innego klucza. Opowieść o autyzmie*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Drzyzga-Lech, M., Kłeczek, M. & Ir, M. (2021). Różne sposoby definiowania autyzmu. Przegląd stanowisk. *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Sociologica* 7*9*, 49-62.

Goffman, E. (2007). *Piętno. Rozważania o zranionej tożsamości.* Wydawnictwo GWP.

Hołub, J. (2022). *Niegrzeczne. Historie dzieci z ADHD, autyzmem i zespołem Aspergera*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.

Higashida, N. (2015). Dlaczego podskakuję. Wydawnictwo Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal.

Homplewicz, J. (2000). Pedagogika rodziny. Wydawnictwo Instytutu Teologiczno-Pastoralnego.

Klajmon-Lech, U. (2017). *Doświadczanie niepełnosprawności jako Inności. Trudy adaptacji.* Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

Kościelska, M. (1998). Trudne macierzyństwo. Wydawnictwo WSiP.

Maciarz, A. (2004). Macierzyństwo w kontekście zmian społecznych. Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak".

Markiewicz, K. (2004). *Możliwości komunikacyjne dzieci autystycznych*. Wydawnictwo UMCS.

McGuire, A. E. & Michalko, R. (2011). Minds between us: Autism, mindblindness and the uncertainty of communication. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 43(2),* 162-177.

Michalczak, K. (2023). *Synu, jesteś kotem*. Wydawnictwo Cyranka.

Minczakiewicz, E. M. (2010). *Zespół Downa. Księga pytań i odpowiedzi*. Wydawnictwo Harmonia.

Niklewska, A. (2020). *W drodze na spotkanie z moją córką. Opowieść matki dziecka z autyzmem.* Wydawnictwo Harmonia.

Pietras, T. & Witusik, A. (2010). Autyzm—pozycja nozologiczna, charakterystyka kliniczna i diagnoza. In T. Pietras, A. Witusik & P. Gałecki (Eds.), *Autyzm—epidemiologia, diagnoza, terapia* (pp. 13-30). Wrocław.

Pisula, E. (1998). *Psychologiczne problemy rodziców dzieci z zaburzeniami rozwoju*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Pyszny, M. (2023). *Żółte przedmioty—czyli kosmiczne życie na warunkach spektrum*. Agencja Wydawnicza Gajus.

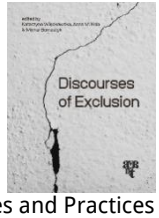
Sacks, O. (1999). *Antropolog na Marsie*. Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka.

Twardowski, A. (1995). Sytuacja rodzin dzieci niepełnosprawnych. In I. Obuchowska (Ed.) *Dziecko niepełnosprawne w rodzinie* (pp. 18-54). Wydawnictwo WSiP.

Zalewska, A. (1999). Typy zadowolenia z życia a system wartościowania. *Forum Psychologiczne, 4, 2* (pp. 138-155).

Zalewski, G. (2012). *Inne, ale nie gorsze. O dzieciach z autyzmem opowiadają rodzice.* Wydawnictwo Biała Plama.

Agnieszka Żabińska is a doctor of education, master of arts, *typhlopedagogue and* special educational needs teacher. Currently, she is an assistant professor at Casimir Pulaski Radom University. Her research interests include biographies of families of persons with disabilities and creative works by people with intellectual disabilities.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Representation of Illness, Disability, and Ageing in Visual Arts, Dance, and Theatre as a Way of Combating Social Exclusion

Magdalena Grenda
Adam Mickiewicz University
mgrenda@amu.edu.pl

Received 2023-12-28; accepted 2024-12-10; published Online First 2024-12-27.

Abstract

Since the mid-20th century, there has been a noticeable shift of interest in topics related to disability, illness, old age and the discourse of exclusion, both in practice and theory. Numerous artists, who often employed diverse strategies and aesthetics in their works, would confront similar themes, engaging in activities aimed at counteracting various forms and manifestations of social ostracism. This article describes and analyzes selected projects by Polish representatives of critical art and independent theatre which address these issues. The primary aim of this text is not to catalogue as many artistic undertakings as possible but to highlight a certain trend and demonstrate the significance and purpose of art that boldly explores disability, illness, and deteriorating, ageing and dying bodies. Such themes are often taboo in consumer culture, while the task of art is to expose the mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization and to draw public attention—often in a highly debatable manner—to topics that are omitted in the official discourse. The artistic projects discussed in the text demonstrate that persons with disabilities can be successful artists, dancers, performers, and actors.

Keywords: exclusion, representations of disease, disability, critical art, social change

1. Introduction

Polish artistic practices and the associated critical reflection have recently brought forth a considerable number of undertakings showing the ill, disabled, impaired, and aged body. Numerous artists representing various forms of art engage with the subject, often violating social and moral taboos. After all, as Roland Barthes claims, the body is not an object "eternally inscribed in nature; indeed, the body has been subjugated and shaped by history, by societies, regimes, ideologies" (quoted in Dziechcińska, 1996, p.14)[1]. The human body is subject to cultural transformations, becoming a social construct. Traditional philosophical narratives, beginning with ancient philosophers (Aristotle and Plato) and culminating in the Enlightenment (Descartes), have approached the body and related issues as matters of secondary importance. Today, it is impossible to talk about the identity of human beings while ignoring their corporeality. Izabela Kowalczyk is undoubtedly right in stating that "the question about our identity, about our 'self' is at the same time a question about our body" (quoted in Gajda, 2006, p. 47). Simultaneously, the discussion of disability or illness should involve a multifaceted approach, which embraces the medical, cultural, and social levels (see Opozda-Suder, 2016). In this article, the analysis focuses on works created from the early 1990s to 2018, reflecting interdisciplinary debates on the entanglement of the human body in nature and culture as well as on the position of persons with disabilities. My aim is not only to describe and analyze these projects but also to try to answer several questions: Why do artists readily take up the precarious subject of disability, illness, and impairment in their works? How do they tackle the issue of "playing on the emotions of the viewer"? Can their work be assessed on the basis of purely artistic values? When viewing such projects, is it possible to translate formal reception into ordinary human feelings? When shattering the normative social order and violating the boundaries of official discourse, are such projects merely shocking or do they have an actual impact on the reality around us, restoring voice to those silenced by practices of exclusion? Affected by illness and disability, are the depicted individuals merely an object or the subject of that art? The paper employs a variety of research methods to answer these questions, including a review of pertinent literature, content analysis (official websites, publicity material, interviews with artists), analysis of audiovisual sources (footage from performances, photographs), and participatory observation. It should be emphasized that within my research perspective, I focus on the approach to corporeality where the body is defined as a product of consumer society due to the processes of globalization. I am aware that 20th-century sociological and philosophical research stresses the importance of corporeality and the intersectional structure of identity (Crenshaw), but I decided not to use this framework in the article.

[1] All translations from Polish are by Szymon Nowak.

Prior to the description and analysis of specific artistic undertakings which address the difficult and risky subject of illness, disability, or aged human body, I want to define the culture within and "thanks to" which such projects were created. Following a number of scholars (e.g., Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Mike Featherstone, Zygmunt Bauman), I assume that present-day culture qualifies as consumer culture. Specifically, if culture is understood as the world of meanings and senses shared by members of a community, then a large part of those meanings and senses relates to consumption. Unlike modern societies, postmodern ones do not need their citizens to be producers but consumers. As Zygmunt Bauman aptly observed,

> The differences are so deep and multiform that they fully justify speaking of our society as of a society of a separate and distinct kind—a consumer society. The consumer of a consumer society is a sharply different creature from consumers in any other societies thus far. If the philosophers, poets and moral preachers among our ancestors pondered the question whether one works in order to live or lives in order to work, the dilemma one hears mulled over most often nowadays is whether one needs to consume in order to live or whether one lives so that one can consume. That is, if we are still able, and feel the need to, tell apart the living from the consuming. (Bauman, 1998, p. 94)

We refer to contemporary capitalist societies as consumer societies, which is to assert that consumption has become the driving force of the modern world, well beyond the purely economic dimension. Consumption and the associated hyper-consumerism fuel the economy and influence cultural norms and values. Consumerism engenders meanings and affects interpersonal communication, human conduct, and the construction of human identity. Nor is human body immune to consumption and its related phenomena. Jean Baudrillard argues that

> In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other—and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY. Its "rediscovery," in a spirit of physical and sexual liberation, after a millennial age of puritanism; its omnipresence (specifically the omnipresence of the female body, a fact we shall have to try to explain) in advertising, fashion and mass culture; the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic cult which surrounds it, the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an object of salvation. (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 168)

In consumer society, increasing importance is attached to visual communication and aestheticization of everyday life, which largely involves the aestheticization of one's image: "In line with the tendency to aestheticize life, contemporary culture places corporeality at the centre of attention [...]. The body, or

more precisely the awareness of one's own body is now a superior category in the process of identity formation, confining our consciousness to corporeality" (Jaxa-Rożen, 2011, p. 116). To a significant extent, the identity of the contemporary person is constituted by the external appearance: the figure, the proportions, hair or skin colour, and clothing. Since everything is a commodity in consumer culture, subjectivity becomes identical with visual manifestations. The body has become a language, a sign, a system of communication and that is why the postmodern human sets so much store by external appearance, which is considerably influenced by fashion and advertising. Richard Schechner explains it as follows: "Advertising encourages people to believe that by means of cosmetics, surgery, mood-altering drugs, exercise, diet, hairstyle, and clothes one can radically change personality. Who 'I am' is no longer a given, if it ever was" (2002, p. 241). Globalization and the mediatization of contemporary culture produce one desirable model of subjectivity: a body that is young, healthy, fit, slim, proportionate, hairless, tanned, and perfect. Through diets, cosmetics, drugs, and aesthetic medicine procedures, the contemporary person is constantly striving for one, universally accepted model, which for the most part has been fabricated by the mass media. In a consumer culture saturated with the images of the idealized body, there is no room for showing an old, obese body, let alone an ill or a disabled one. This is because everything that deviates from the commonly recognized norms, undermines the tenets of social order, or contradicts the established paradigms is marginalized or excluded from the dominant discourse. This is where the artists and the protagonists of their projects—with whom this article is concerned—come to aid, as I concur with Jolanta Brach-Czaina, who emphasizes that

> It seemed that in contemporary culture the body has been subject to comprehensive exposure and has thus lost the capacity to reveal its own meanings and values. Meanwhile, positive solutions have been advanced in the works of artists focusing on the flawed or sick body which, failing to provide a beautiful front, must take on more serious tasks and create values of corporeal experience of the world and bodily presence. (2000, p. 9)

In this article, I will discuss the works of representatives of critical art - Katarzyna Kozyra, Artur Żmijewski, and Alicja Żebrowska - as well as dance and theatre projects by artists residing in Poznań. Before turning to these works, I would like to caution that the language used to describe them—used by both the artists and the commentators on their art—may seem inappropriate and exclusionary today. In these analyses, we find terms that are inacceptable nowadays, like "crippled', "deformed", "defect", "ugly", "weakness," and some ableist assumptions that are not currently allowed. On the other hand, critical art is controversial. It deliberately juxtaposed contrasting images, often causing shock or disgust. Its descriptive language may be perceived as offensive or exclusionary. Critical art and engaged art often use subversive strategies

that aim to expose certain mechanisms (including social exclusion due to disability) while using the original concept. It is about shifting meanings. Artistic activities often adopt offensive, discriminatory stereotypes and terms, but with a critical or ironic intention. In my analysis, I have tried to avoid outdated expressions, which was difficult, because the available sources, literature, and descriptions of artistic works were not edited and reflect the discourse of the time.

2. The issue of exclusion in Polish critical art

The corporeality overlooked or excluded from the official visual sphere has become a compelling theme for contemporary art, especially for critical art, body art, abject art, and performance. My description and analysis of the projects by Polish artists focusing on human corporeality—which is often subject to social, cultural as well as illness-related constraints—will begin with the work of Katarzyna Kozyra. The artist has been recognized among the leading and emblematic representatives of Polish critical art, whose principal task was not to shock but to bring out difficult topics and prompt a public debate. Many of her works, such as *Olympia*, *Bathhouse* or the series *In Art Dreams Come True*, show the body as a cultural and social construct governed by numerous prescriptions and prohibitions, which is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's paradigm of "power-knowledge" (see Foucault 2009). In her projects, Kozyra also addresses the ubiquitous sexualization of (especially) the female body and the exclusion of the aged, unwanted, impaired, and ill bodies from the dominant discourse. Given the scope of this text, *Olympia* (1996) is a particularly interesting project: an autobiographical piece which documents the artist's struggle with cancer, it comprises a several-minute-long video and a series of three large-format photographs. The latter depict naked Kozyra lying on a hospital bed like Olympia from Manet's work; the artist in hospital during chemotherapy, accompanied by a nurse; and an old, wrinkled, lonely woman in a flat resembling a retirement home. Drawing on Manet, whose avant-garde painting showed the body of an ageing prostitute, Kozyra crossed the cultural barrier by showing the sick, ravaged, and aged female body, which is so often excluded from contemporary cultural imagery as a source of suffering and a social taboo. Izabela Kowalczyk notes that

> The sight of the old body [...] is a source of anguish for the viewer, as it demonstrates the failure of all practices aimed at maintaining the quality of the body. Seeing an old body means coming face to face with the failure of existence; the old body proves to us that we are not in charge. It tells us about our future; it is a project of ourselves. It is a blueprint of death. (2002, p. 47)

The sight of an old body that has been devastated by illness is shocking to viewers who function in consumer culture, where a completely different feminine beauty ideal prevails. As Kozyra explains,

> I allowed to photograph myself naked on a drip to prove that sick body has just as much dignity and is just as normal as the healthy one. When you look nice, you don't think about how you function. Looking at a sick body, you are thinking about its mortality. All the healthy people are OK, because they don't wear their physicality on the outside. And they walk around as their perfect selves. (Kozyra, n. d.)

By making herself the object and abject in *Olympia*, Kozyra demonstrates that the sick body should not be treated as something shameful that needs to be erased from the official discourse. Her later work continues to oppose cultural oppression and test the dominant codes of representation both in fine arts and daily life, engendering a debate on the forms of social exclusion.

Another Polish artist who explores the issues of corporeality, the category of the Other, the body with disability, and social ostracism is Artur Żmijewski. One of his most recognizable and widely discussed projects is *Eye for an Eye* (1998), a series of photographs portraying male bodies with missing limbs. In the photographs, Żmijewski compensated for those deficiencies using the arms and legs of healthy individuals:

> In this way, strange, multi-legged and multi-headed beings were created. Simultaneously, an awkward interaction took place between the fit and the disabled. The "healthy" have been taken into the most profound confidence, allowed to perform the most shameful touch, the ultimate disgrace: they touch the scars. (Sienkiewicz, 2009)

Żmijewski further highlighted the contrast between healthy and sick bodies in *Out for a Walk*, a film shot at a rehabilitation facility for paralyzed persons. One of the elements of their therapy involves regular walks, during which the patients are accompanied by strong, healthy men, whose fitness and physical robustness is almost jarring when juxtaposed with the disabled, emaciated bodies of the patients.

Another film by the artist, *Caroline* (2002), is undoubtedly a drastic and poignant project. It shows a woman suffering from osteoporosis, a disease associated with excruciating pain, which can only be mitigated by morphine. Administered in large quantities, the drug condemns the heroine of Żmijewski's work to a slow, cruel, and certain death.

These works allowed Żmijewski to think about art, its significance, and its impact on the reality. His diploma project, entitled *40 Drawers* (1995), already betrays interest in the body, its plasticity and representations, its belonging to and dependence on culture and society. The artist's works demonstrate that art plays a considerable role in analysing urgent, yet often disregarded social issues. Finally, it is worth stressing that by aestheticizing bodies marked by illness, disability, or impairment, Żmijewski defies conventions and undermines the entrenched stereotypes.

Another representative of critical art is Alicja Żebrowska, whose interests also encompass the body and corporeality, sexuality, illness, disability, and the discourse of exclusion. In *Humanitarian Cases* (1994) (a video and a series of photographs), she juxtaposes two women of much the same age. One is a beautiful, shapely, physically fit woman with long hair, shown in the nude; the other, short-haired and fully dressed, uses a wheelchair for mobility. The screening of the film is accompanied by comments from the audience. By contrasting these highly distinct images, the artist provokes a discussion on the representation of the female body in consumer culture, which "naturally" presupposes an ideal, young, proportionate, and slim body that is pleasing to look at, or which should elicit a sense of pleasure. The second depiction is thoroughly remote from the widespread ideal, perhaps even makes one look away. According to the audience's comments, it may induce embarrassment, discomfiture, distaste, or even disgust. In her work, the artist underscores the fact that reading the body is not "neutral," since it is often based "on a certain knowledge (accepted in a given place and time) of what the body is and should be. Although such knowledge is almost always asserted to be objective and universal, it is nothing more than a particularistic, discursive construct" (Melosik, 2010, p.12). Tobin Siebers is right in noting in *Disability as Masquerade* that it is the social representation of difference as negative or inferior, not the existence of physical and mental differences, that defines disability discrimination (Siebers, 2017, p. 79). In addition to an evident critique in the spirit of feminism, Żebrowska's *Humanitarian Cases* addresses another problematic issue, namely the sexuality of persons with disabilities. When preparing the work, the artist conducted a series of interviews with young men who openly admitted that they find women with a disability sexually unattractive.

3. Disability and sickness in dance, theater, and performance art

The above analyses focused on the visual arts, notably abject art and Polish critical art of the 1990s. At this point, I would like to take a look at more recent undertakings within dance, performance, and theatre, since numerous current dance and theatre projects in Poland are concerned with illness, disability, and the social ostracism they give rise to. In this respect, the most recognizable companies include Theatre 21, Biuro Rzeczy Osobistych Theatre, OD-NOWA Therapeutic Theatre, Ubogi Relacji Theatre, the MAZOWIACY Integrative Song and Dance Ensemble as well as a number of individual artists working with people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. From this abundance of diverse projects, I have decided to select works by artists residing in Poznań.

I will start with a dance performance directed and choreographed by Janusz Orlik (experienced in working with variously affected persons), featuring Pia Libicka, a dancer with disability. The project was curated by Joanna Leśniarowska and premiered as part of the *Old Brewery/New Dance* residency. *Exérese*

Monobloc (2004) was based on the personal story of the performer, who was diagnosed with bone cancer shortly before defending her diploma at a ballet school. The young woman underwent six operations that cured the cancer but did not allow her to return to dancing. The performance shows the successive stages of the illness and the resulting mental crisis. The viewer experiences a range of emotional states of the protagonist, from disbelief and breakdown, to becoming reconciled with her situation and the need to forgo her life's aspirations and career goals. The set design of the performance is very basic: it is a white sterile space reminiscent of an operating theatre. The costumes of the performers are a hybrid of a hospital gown and the typical ballet outfit known as "tutu." The main character is Pia Libicka, who dances in a wheelchair and wielding crutches. Although a script based on her personal reminiscences provides the principal axis of the project, Orlik's performance

> asks multiple questions about disability, or physical impairment, and its impact on dance movement. Can such movement be as accurate and speak to the viewer as effectively if it is conveyed by a person (dancer) with reduced physical capacity? Do we know what disability can be in dance art? Does it have a place there? How can it be reflected in elaborate choreography? (Orlik, n. d.)

The autobiographical nature of the story does not prevent the project from having universal significance. Brilliantly danced and performed, the piece by Poznań artists shows that persons with disabilities may be successful dancers, performers, or actors. Paradoxically, they reclaim subjectivity through art, as demonstrated by Pia Libicka's comments about the performance:

> For me, the starting point for creating *Exérese Monoblock* was to showcase my capabilities rather than my limitations in the performance. As a student of ballet school, accustomed to perfection and ideal form (as defined by the classical dance environment), I could not entertain the thought that the performance might reveal my flaws. I would never agree to perform in a show that would evoke pity from the audience because of my handicapped movement. This is unthinkable for someone with a ballet mindset. The sensitivity that choreographer Janusz Orlik possesses regarding the capabilities of the human body, his ability to seek alternative solutions for movement, and his exploration of stage possibilities within my limitations allowed the creation of a performance in which I felt the harmony of my body. The creative process did not differ from that I remembered from before my illness. My movement limitations did not matter at all.[2]

Another Poznań-based artist working with persons with disabilities is Adam Ziajski, the founder of the legendary Strefa Ciszy Theatre and currently the leader of the Theatre Residency Centre Scena Robocza. I will discuss two per-

[2] Private communication with the artist asked to comment on this article.

formances that he has directed. The first one, entitled *Don't Tell Anyone*, premiered in 2016. It was developed in collaboration with d/Deaf persons Ziajski had invited to contribute to the project. The script was inspired by *The Deaf Realm*, a reportage by Anna Goc, though it also drew substantially, or perhaps above all, on the personal experience of the creators. Again, the set design was very simple, as it consisted of a bright floor, five chairs and as many tables with glass filled with coloured powder. As the centrepiece, the stage featured a screen on which the text was displayed, i.e. simultaneous translation from sign language used by the actors. Still, the sound was perhaps the most interesting element: it was monotonous, loud, and sufficiently unpleasant for all spectators to be provided with noise-cancelling headphones. Using such a simple device, Ziajski impaired their sense of hearing, which enabled the viewers to get an idea of what the protagonists confront every day. The performance was reportage-like, consisting of personal narratives of the actors/amateurs who spoke of the daily struggles with their condition. Although the stories were touching, moving, and thought-provoking, they did not verge on cheap sentimentalism. A reviewer observed as follows:

> The statements of the individual narrators are concrete and factual. No one bemoans their fate, but states: that is just the way it is with me. We look at simple situations through their eyes: a visit to the doctor's, attending to one's affairs at an office; we see more difficult, more complex situations, for instance, the hearing partner of a woman with impaired hearing faces genuine puzzlement of those who wonder why he has become involved with the "deaf one." (Tyszka, 2016)

Together with his actors, Ziajski raises vital questions concerning persons with disabilities. He asks about their private, sexual, social, or professional life. Without pitying the protagonists, without exploiting the difficulties of their situation, he opens a social discussion on the status of people with disabilities. We also see how difficult it is to overcome the typical course of life that the education system imposes on deaf persons who do not speak a phonic language, epitomized in the verdict: "Locksmith! Seamstress!"

The visually impaired are the protagonists of Ziajski's next undertaking. The script of *Look at Me* (2018) follows the pattern described above, with a reportage-like narrative based on personal stories of the people invited to cooperate. The director "interviewed visually impaired and blind persons for several months. From among them he selected the protagonists of the piece—a dramatic reportage—who would perform on stage" (teraz teatr, 2013). *Look at Me* premiered at an institutional venue, featuring sighted professional actors (from the Silesian Theatre in Katowice) and blind amateurs side by side. Ziajski and his collaborators, Mixer Group, opted for a very modest set design and costumes. All actors were dressed in white jackets and wore face masks. The main technical effects of the performance included the sound in the headphones and

the visuals, which played a major role in the show. Lines, circles, squares, abstract images "projected"' and displayed on the white outfits unified the characters and made them blend in with the space. Importantly enough, the performance was staged with heavily reduced lightning or in total darkness. Consequently, the spectators "did not see" the protagonists and struggled with vision just as they do. In our ocularcentric culture, advanced eye disease brings social exclusion and stigmatization, because sight is the privileged way of judging and being in reality. The monologues of the five blind protagonists—the accounts of personal challenges—explored painful issues such as loneliness, helplessness, mobility in unadapted spaces, and difficulties with finding a job or establishing relationships. The conclusions one can draw from Ziajski's performance are unfortunately rather gloomy: being blind means being invisible at the same time.

Don't Tell Anyone and *Look at Me* demonstrate that people marked by illness and disability regain their presence aided by the medium of theatre. Using creative activities as a vehicle, they talk about their experiences or the problems of the marginalized community in which they function. Without sentimentality, without playing on the viewer's emotions, or resorting to cheap pedagogy, they undertake social dialogue. It is a colloquy that concerns them directly but in which all those who wish to live in a democratic, equal, and involved society should engage.

Among the artistic projects which focus on illness, disability or impairment, one which also deserves mentioning is a performance directed by Przemek Prasnowski, a Poznań-based artist, activist, and founder of Barak Kultury. The foundation is dedicated to communities that are discriminated against, excluded, or subject to stigmatization, also due to illness or disability. *The Whole Life in Tracksuits* (2016) is an authorial monodrama created under the banner of Ba-Ku Theatre. Unlike the projects by Ziajski, it features an "able-bodied" person on stage, who discusses the experience of being a mother of a severely affected child with a disability. Playing herself, Justyna Tomczak-Boczko introduces the audience to her life, outlining her four-person family's daily existence, largely determined by the serious condition of the eldest son, Jeremi. The entire performance follows the convention of stand-up, with the set composed of gym equipment and a screen showing photographs of Jeremi and material from the Facebook profile his parents had set up for him. By this means, the director skilfully brings the protagonist of the story onto the stage, as due to severe physical and mental handicap as well as dependence on medical devices, he could not appear in person. Although it explores a difficult subject, the story is told lightly, with a great sense of humour, distance, and self-irony. The experienced actress, especially given the monodrama format, approached caring for her son

> as an art of living in which a sense of humour is essential. Because her life is neither as sad nor as frightening as it might seem. Perhaps this is why she sometimes hears from friends: "Justyna, you don't look like the mother of a child with a disability at all." (Barak Kultury, n. d.)

In a sense, the performance works through personal trauma, but it still manages to highlight the struggles of those who take care of persons with severe disabilities on a daily basis. The performance brings attention to how caring after a person with a disability may disrupt the life of the carers and change their professional, family, and social roles.

Finally, I want to refer briefly to initiatives which primarily pursue therapeutic and rehabilitative rather than artistic ends. Here emphasis is placed on the process in which the participants are involved, as opposed to the goal or outcome in the shape of a theatrical performance. Such undertakings may be characterized as dramatheatre or therapeutic theatre. This type of art therapy "has been practiced for several decades in the milieu of persons with disabilities, dysfunctional groups or those at risk of social exclusion, whereby it serves as an intermediary in the process of individual development of the actors and education/cultural animation of the group" (Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego, n. d.). In this case, theatre is employed as a tool of diagnosis, rehabilitation, therapy, and social inclusion. Artistic activities can genuinely improve the condition of persons affected by illness or disability, as well as counteract exclusion and stigmatization of people due to their health. In Poznań, successful initiatives of this type include the Theatre Under the Fountain, headed by Janusz Stolarski, and Halszka Różalska's Efekt Motyla [Butterfly Effect]. Both undertakings bring together professional actors, therapists as well as persons whose lives have been transformed by illness, disability, or addiction. The primary activity of those informal ensembles focuses on recovery and rehabilitation as well as socio-occupational development. Although their work is rooted in art therapy, appropriate care and collaboration with professional directors, stage designers, dancers, and musicians results in a fully-fledged artistic message. This kind of theatre enables persons who are ill, disabled, or addicted to grow into protagonists of art who, through this medium, reclaim their agency.

4. Conclusions

In the above analysis, I have referred to only few examples of artists from Poland—representatives of critical art and contemporary independent theatre—who engage with the issues of persons with disabilities. However, the aim of this text is not to catalogue as many artistic undertakings as possible, but to highlight a certain trend and demonstrate the significance and purpose of art that boldly explores disability, illness, and the deteriorating, ageing, and dying bodies. Such themes are often taboo in consumer culture, while the task of the art is to expose the mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization, to draw public

attention—often in a highly debatable manner—to topics that are omitted in the official discourse. This is also the driving force behind theatre with and for persons with physical or mental disabilities.

The above examples demonstrate that contemporary art provides a critical commentary on the world around us. It can not only comment and encourage discussion, but also have an actual impact on social, political, and cultural realities. Art can prompt social change, which "begins with the opportunity to articulate one's own opinions and culminates in the creation of sustainable social relations as well as organizational and spatial structures" (Rogozinska, 2009, p. 91). This is also where doubts may arise. Does art, a small fragment of which I have delineated in this article, actually fulfil such a function? Can the experience that its creators and protagonists undergo really improve their situation, solve pressing social problems, counteract exclusion, change reality? Does it not border on naivety to believe that this is the case? This text does not aspire to resolve such questions but to take a critical look at the functions, goals, and tasks of the projects which address important, yet sensitive or even controversial issues. On the other hand, the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has rapidly made such issues conspicuous and tangible. In these circumstances, the well-known and somewhat overused quote from the American researcher Susan Sontag takes on a new meaning:

> Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag, 1978, p.78)

References

Barak Kultury, (n. d.). https://barakkultury.pl/cale-zycie-w-dresach

Baudrillard, J. (2006), *Społeczeństwo konsumpcyjne. Jego mity i struktury* (S. Królak, Trans.). Sic!

Baudrillard, J. (2016). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. SAGE Publication.

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Globalizacja. I co z tego dla ludzi wynika*. PIW.

Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization. The Human Consequences*. Polity Press.

Brach-Czaina, J. (2000). Ciało współczesne. *Res Publica Nowa,* 11/2000, 2-10.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139-167. http://chicagounbound-.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Dziechcińska, H. (1996). *Ciało, strój gest w czasach renesansu i baroku*. Semper.

Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego. (n. d.). Terapia a teatr. In *Internetowa Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego*. Retrieved December 21, 2023. https://encyklopediateatru.pl/hasla/274/terapia-a-teatr

Foucault, M.(2009), *Nadzorować i karać. Narodziny więzienia* (T. Komendant, Trans.). Wydawnictwo ALETHEIA.

Gajda, K. (2006). Zdeformowane, umierające ciało. Ofiara czy bohaterka? In M. Gołaczyńska & Ireneusz Guszpit (Eds.), *Teatr- przestrzeń – ciało – dialog. Poszukiwania we współczesnym teatrze* (pp. 123-135). Wyd. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Jaxa-Rożen, H. (2011). Sztuka krytyczna jako refleksja nad estetyzacją ciała w kulturze współczesnej. *Colloquia Anthropologica et Communicativa*, *4*, 115-122. https://wuwr.pl/cac/article/view/815/788

Kowalczyk, I. (2002). *Ciało i władza: polska sztuka krytyczna lat 90*. Sic!

Kozyra, K. (n.d.). Photographic Installation Olympia. https://katarzynakozyra.pl/-projekty/olimpia.

Melosik, Z. (2010). *Tożsamość, ciało i władza w kulturze instant*. Impuls.

Opozda-Suder, J. (2016). Społeczne konsekwencje niepełnosprawności – między wykluczeniem, a partycypacją. *Zeszyty Pracy Socjalnej*, *21*, 49-63.

Orlik, J. (n. d.). Exérèse monobloc. http://www.januszorlik.com/exerese-monobloc

Rogozińska, A. (2009). "Animacja kultury a zmiana społeczna w kontekście *community arts* oraz *community cultural development*. *Kultura Współczesna 4*, 90-102.

Schechner, R. (2006). *Performatyka. Wstęp* (T. Kubikowski, Trans.). Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego i Poszukiwań Teatralno-Kulturowych.

Schechner, R. (2002). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge.

Siebers, T. (2017). Niepełnosprawność jako forma maskarady (K. Ojrzyńska, Trans.). In E. Godlewska-Byliniak & J. Lipko-Konieczna (Eds.), *Odzyskiwanie nieobecności. Niepełnosprawność w teatrze i performansie* (pp. 77-105). Fundacja Teatr 21.

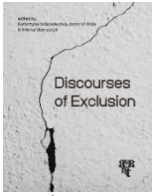
Sienkiewicz, K. (2009). Artur Żmijewski. *Culture.pl.* https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/artur-zmijewski

Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Teraz teatr. 2013. https://www.terazteatr.pl/spektakle/spojrz-na-mnie,opis,3706

Tyszka, J. (2016). Zza szyby po węgiersku. *teatralny.pl.* http://teatralny.pl/recenzje/zza-szyby-po-wegiersku,1802.html

Magdalena Grenda is Associate Professor at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She is the author of four books on alternative theatre in Poznań after 1989 and articles in cultural sociology, cultural studies, theatre, performance studies, performing arts organizations, community arts, community engagement, and democracy. She is a theatre instructor and animator of culture and has collaborated with companies such as Close-Ups, Rehearsals, and the Zone of Silence Theatre. Leader of Theatre GRANDA UAM. Graduate of the Academy of Alternative Theatre. Recipient of scholarships awarded by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage and the "Unique Graduate" scheme.



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

A Study of the Reasons of the Social Exclusion of Infertile Couples in Poland

Anna Baruch
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Collegium Medicum in Bydgoszcz
Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Bydgoszcz
anna.baruch@cm.umk.pl

Received 2024-02-04; accepted 2024-12-14; published Online First 2024-12-27.

Abstract

This article addresses the underresearched issue of exclusion of a social group consisting of people experiencing involuntary childlessness, which has not been thoroughly studied from this perspective yet. Apart from the available literature on this subject, there were also used conclusions from research that represent only a small part of the author's unpublished doctoral dissertation *Niepłodność w narracjach małżeństw jako indywidualne i wspólne strategie uczenia się egzystencjalnego* [Infertility in the accounts of married couples as individual and joint strategies of existential learning]. The author argues that the marginalization of childless people is a consequence of receiving no external support from state organs and institutions (mostly from the educational and medical sector) that would make it possible to prevent infertility or, if it is diagnosed, to make available all possible ways to overcome it.

Keywords: exclusion, marginalisation, infertility, infertile couples, IVF (in vitro fertilization), NaProTechnology

1. Introduction

The process of social exclusion can be defined as a series of events that begin with an incident which leads to the gradual deterioration of the living conditions or the quality of life of an individual or a group. At first, this process has little impact on the daily life of a person who is excluded, yet over time it intensifies and starts to affect more and more areas of their existence (Bal, 2012, p. 253). One of such events for people who want to become parents is a diagnosis of infertility, received both by women and men. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that as many as 15–20% of couples of repro-

ductive age around the world are affected by infertility (Cui, 2010, pp. 877–953). That means that one out of six couples experience the problem of inability to conceive a child. This problem concerns about 1.5 million couples of reproductive age in Poland (Drągowski et al., 2015, pp. 257–258). According to WHO, infertility is a disease as it violates the physical, mental and social well-being of humans (Radkowska-Walkowiak, 2013, p. 50). From the medical perspective, it is either partial or complete inability to produce high quality gametes or to fertilize them (Kula & Słowikowska-Hilczer, 2008, pp. 118–119). In the literature on this subject, infertility is called "a reproductive trauma" (Bhat & Byatt, 2016, p. 31).

The discrediting language used by part of the public has a strong impact on the activation and development of the process in which people who struggle with infertility become excluded. Discussions on what infertile people should and should not do that are held in the media take the form of ideological disputes.

The exclusion of infertile people is also, if not primarily, escalated by the passive attitude of the state authorities, who limit access to free of charge solutions that might improve their situation and help them overcome marginalization (Grotowska-Leder, 2005, pp. 28–32). It refers especially to the medical, psychological and educational services sectors. The overview of the exclusion process perceived in the above mentioned way is provided later in this article.

2. Research method and the aim of research

The whole research project is based on the unpublished doctoral dissertation *Niepłodność w narracjach małżeństw jako indywidualne i wspólne strategie uczenia się egzystencjalnego* [Infertility in the accounts of married couples as individual and joint strategies of existential learning] (Baruch, 2023) completed at Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences at Nicolaus Copernicus University (NCU) in Toruń.[1] Although the research referred to the learning processes, the collected data contained information on the social exclusion of infertile couples, which is the subject of this article.

The aim of this research is to recognize and identify the reasons for the sense of social exclusion among infertile individuals and couples in Poland. The research was conducted between 2016 and 2020 in the scheme of qualitative research, using a case study method and an in-depth interview technique. 14 infertile married couples participated in the research; 28 in-depth interviews were conducted. The couples represent the group of people who have used

[1] The dissertation is available upon request in the NCU Library.

three methods of overcoming unintentional childlessness most available in Poland: a cause-and-effect treatment better known as NaProTechnology (NPT), Assisted Reproductive Techniques (ARTs) and the adoption process.[2]

3. External factors contributing to social exclusion of infertile couples in Poland

This part of the article discusses characterises the external factors that have a direct impact on the exclusion of infertile people in Poland. These factors are associated with limiting or denying access to goods or services which might improve such individuals' situation. They are also a result of the public debates that prevail in the media on medical treatment methods, especially in-vitro fertilization (IVF), which is recognized by scientists.[3]

3.1. Symptoms of educational and health exclusion of infertile people

There are no well-established and systematically conducted prevention activities regarding reproductive health undertaken by state bodies in Poland. Despite the fact that the issue of reproductive health was raised by WHO in 1994 during the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo when 179 countries (among them Poland) signed a pledge to ensure access to prevention and appropriate treatment of infertility for their citizens, little progress has been made in this area over the next 30 years (Gipson et al., 2020, pp. 505–506). The 2018 report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (Starrs et al., 2018, pp. 2642–2692) highlights that infertility is not treated as a priority by global public health decision makers. Health education in this area focuses on issues related to contraception, leaving aside the issue of supporting people's reproductive potential (Gipson et al., 2020, pp. 505–506).

The problem of involuntary childlessness is also ignored in Poland, as regards both prevention and treatment. The goal of improving reproductive health was not included in the National Health Programme for the years 2021–2025; therefore, neither prevention nor health education is provided in this area. Such actions can be regarded as educational exclusion since they deprive citizens of the generally accessible opportunity to gain knowledge of this topic. Representatives of Polish medical community were against removing the above objective.[4] Polish experts in reproductive health, fertility care and infertility treatment asked the Minister of Health to reinstate this objective. They under-

[2] Names of quoted respondents were changed to prevent their identification.

[3] In 2010 Robert Geoffrey Edwards, a British physiologist, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for the development of IVF, which revolutionized the infertility treatment.

[4] I.a. members of the Polish Society of Reproductive Medicine and Embryology and the Polish Society of Gynecologists and Obstetricians.

lined the need to provide health education and conduct information and prevention campaigns regarding endogenous and exogenous factors which influence male and female reproductive health, fertility preservation, pregnancy and postpartum care, diagnosis and treatment of infertility. All efforts should be taken to make the above activities accessible to citizens, in accordance with the latest scientific knowledge and medical standards, which will guarantee the quality, efficacy and safety of the undertaken health procedures (Polskie Towarzystwo Medycyny Rozrodu i Embriologii, 2021). Thus, firstly, it is advisable to carry out actions that enhance reproductive health and prevent failures to achieve pregnancy. Secondly, couples that need medical help ought to have equal and free of charge access to the whole treatment package and psychological or counselling care.

Having analysed institutional conditions, it is possible to identify two main problems that infertile people have faced and that are signs of their exclusion. The first one is the lack of access to free of charge infertility treatment, regardless of the method chosen. The second one is the still insufficient medical infrastructure despite the fact that new clinics are created.

The availability of infertility treatment in Poland is limited, and it is mostly provided by the private healthcare sector. Therefore, the main obstacle mentioned by respondents is the cost of services connected with treatment. Expensive medical procedures lead to the health exclusion of some couples, that is, unequal access to medical services. WHO emphasises that it is necessary to integrate the efforts of many countries to overcome these inequalities (Gipson et al., 2020, pp. 505–506). As a member of the European Union, Poland has also committed itself to adopting the *acquis communautaire* in this area and adapting Polish legal regulations concerning medically assisted procreation to the EU law. Currently, ARTs and NaProTechnology procedures are not funded by the government in Poland despite the fact that citizens are covered by health insurance.[5] Respondents frequently referred to the high cost of treatment provided by the private healthcare sector:

[5] The IVF method treatment was not reimbursed from the public funds in Poland for the last eight years. At present, on the basis of the Act of 29 November 2023 on the change of the Act on healthcare services financed from public funds that came into effect on 2 January 2024, the Minister of Health was obliged to develop and start implementing the first infertility treatment program using the above mentioned method. The program started on 1 June 2024. Before that, it was possible to be treated with this method for free under the health program funded by the Polish Ministry of Health "Infertility Treatment with the IVF method" only between July 2013 to June 2016. The couples who participated in this research did not have such an opportunity as after June 2016 the program was suspended by the government. One of the first actions taken by the new government in December 2023 was to restore reimbursement of this treatment in Poland. The Act of 29 November 2023 on the change of the Act on healthcare services financed from public funds. (2023). *Journal of Laws*, item 2730. https://dziennikustaw.gov.-pl/DU/2023/2730.

> Each of the clinics at which we were treated was a private clinic. (Agata)[6]
>
> At the time when my husband and I were treated it was possible to seek only private healthcare. (Beata)
>
> It was fully private treatment […]. We paid for everything ourselves: laboratory tests, medical consultations. (Żaneta)
>
> Even if we had wanted to get treatment from the National Health Fund, it would not have been possible because it is difficult to make an appointment with a gynaecologist overnight even in case of an infection. You need to wait in a queue in the morning and either you make it or not; otherwise, you can get the appointment in two weeks' time. If you are infertile, you need to make appointments very often. Moreover, not every gynaecologist specialises in infertility treatment and it may turn out that such visits are a waste of time. (Brygida)
>
> I cannot recall that we have ever used the services of the National Health Fund […], we had private appointments with gynaecologists, endocrinologists and finally, we found this NaProTechnology clinic, which is also a private clinic. (Przemysław)
>
> From the very beginning it was private treatment […]. Yes, we underwent treatment in private healthcare clinics […], we worked a lot, so we had money and it was spent on treatment […], not every person can afford it. (Grażyna)
>
> NaProTechnology is often referred to as infertility treatment for the poor, but it is not, as only private treatment is possible. (Tomasz)
>
> NaProTechnology was provided by the private healthcare sector and we paid a lot of money for it. We both worked and our main aim was to have children so we did not care how much it cost. One appointment cost 500 PLN because the price included various tests […]. We paid for all these things and it was very expensive, including the cost of trips to Białystok. (Mariola)

High costs were associated with appointments with gynaecologists and endocrinologists (access to free appointments was limited mostly due to very distant dates) and specialist treatment in fertility or NaProTechnology clinics where the provided medical services were not financed from public funds.

Respondents pointed out that receiving treatment in the private healthcare services sector represented a high financial burden to their household budgets:

> It must have been a financial burden. We have never counted how much it actually cost, but I think that it was a lot of money. (Żaneta)
>
> The finances allocated for treatment were a kind of burden for sure, as each treatment that we take into consideration is expensive, so this is something that one must bear in mind […], one must cover these costs and they are great

[6] All translations in the article are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

> even if we consider NaProTechnology, hmm, actually each of these methods is expensive. (Tadeusz)

> We underwent mostly private treatment. NaProTechnology is not financed from public funds [...]. It was a financial burden, but thank God it turned out that we found money for everything, I do not know how. We did not have a busy social life, we did not travel much, we lived a modest life and we could afford it [...], we carried on, it does not mean that we were starving, but we lived from end to end, from month to month. We always managed to collect money for this treatment. (Wojciech)

> We knew that these appointments and trips would involve certain financial sacrifices for us, for example, we would not go to the cinema, I would not buy new trousers or we would not go on exclusive holidays but somewhere closer to our house and for less time than before, but it was never a reason to consider resigning from the treatment. Of course, when we had to pay over 3000 PLN for an operation we had some doubts but we knew that we had to do this and it was beyond dispute. (Krystyna)

The more money was spent on treatment, the higher was the level of frustration among respondents. Difficult situations that arose during the treatment, such as loss of job and therefore, loss of income, also created considerable stress:

> My employment contract expired, I stopped working and applied for unemployment allowance. This treatment was a huge financial burden [...], we had to pay for treatment, tests, but this child was our priority. We decided that it is the best moment as we reached a certain age. Everything was expensive: diet, supplements, medicines. Although we had some savings, I was frustrated that I do not earn income, one salary is only one salary. Sometimes I was not sure how we would cope with it, but finally we could afford it. (Alicja)

> Later my wife had a crisis because we had to pay for everything and she complained that we paid again and again, but I told her that if we started, we had to go through this process. The NaProTechnology instructor informed us that learning the Creighton Model System would cost ca. 900–1000 PLN. At the beginning such sessions took place once every two weeks and it was an additional expense of 200 PLN per month. (Michał)

The most expensive ART is in-vitro fertilization (IVF). Poland is the only country in the European Union where the cost of IVF is not reimbursed, whereas medical community indicates that this is the most effective ART. Prices vary between clinics, but usually range from a few to several thousand PLN. The majority of couples are not able to cover all the costs linked with this form of treatment. Consequently, they might be excluded due to their low financial capability, which creates the problem of inequality in access to the above medical services for less well-off citizens. Those who cannot afford this procedure, which is often the last chance to have biological offspring, might feel rejected by their own country (Debita, 2018, p. 21).

A fundamental change in the Polish government policy regarding IVF occurred in 2015. The new government decided to suspend and discontinue the health program funded by the Polish Ministry of Health "Infertility Treatment by the IVF method." The only time when it was possible to be treated with this method for free in Poland was from July 2013 to June 2016.[7] This program aimed at ensuring equal access and opportunity for infertile couples to use IVF. Despite the fact that 19 600 couples took part in it and 22 200 children were born, this program was suspended. Instead, the Comprehensive Reproductive Health Protection Program came into force in Poland for the years 2016–2020 and its implementation was extended for the years 2021–2023.[8] The objective of this program is to increase citizens' access to high quality services associated with infertility diagnosis and treatment. However, it does not include IVF. Moreover, there are no references to NaProTechnology as an alternative method, which is not financed from public funds in Poland as well (Debita, 2017, p. 103).

Being a citizen of a country requires that one complies with the applicable laws, also those associated with reproductive health. A heated debate on ethical issues, including reproductive health, especially abortion and IVF, has been taking place in Poland since 2015. These issues became a matter of ideological disputes. In the end, the government limited its role in funding medically assisted reproduction as regards IVF and tightened abortion laws.[9] These decisions were perceived by many communities as undermining civil liberties and equality of all people who have the same guaranteed constitutional right to family planning (Debita, 2018, p. 14–16).

Another problem that has an impact on availability of goods and services is insufficient medical, psychological and counselling care infrastructure which could be used by infertile couples. Even though new infertility treatment clinics are created in Poland, there is still no adequate infrastructure and the availability of treatment centres that would be located in close proximity to the place of residence of infertile people is rather limited. Despite the fact that infertility treatment clinics which offer ARTs can be found in nearly every city in Poland, there are significantly fewer acclaimed and recommended health centres that offer the NaProTechnology method. Due to this, couples have to devote many hours or even their annual leaves to frequent appointments associated with infertility treatment:

[7] The citizen's legislative initiative "Yes for IVF" is being considered in the Polish parliament now.

[8] See: Ministerstwo Zdrowia, 2022.

[9] The Constitutional Tribunal's Judgement of 22 October 2020 on the unconstitutionality of provision that allows abortion in cases of high probability of a severe and irreversible foetal defect or an incurable illness that threatens the foetus' life was published on 27 January 2021 in the Journal of Laws and came into effect on this day.

> It was necessary to set enough time aside, take a holiday on these days when we had to go for tests or undergo some medical procedures. (Marcin)
>
> It was difficult to set considerable time aside because the whole process is really time-consuming, as regards both trips and treatment. Due to this part of annual leave had to be devoted to trips to doctor's appointments. (Tadeusz)
>
> Yes, it meant nearly seven hours' drive one way. It was really tiring as it was a distant destination and it was always necessary to take two days off work because we had to stay somewhere overnight. (Przemysław)
>
> The clinic was located quite far from our house, so these trips were a considerable sacrifice. There were many patients so it was not easy to find a convenient date, and the date of appointment had to match a specific day of my menstrual cycle. It was necessary to take a few days off work, discuss it with our superiors and explain to them why we do it and why on these days. We had to organize it, wake up early, at night and drive there. (Krystyna)

Furthermore, infertile couples rarely use psychological or pedagogical help, therapy or coaching due to their unavailability and high cost of professional and long-term support offered by the private healthcare services sector. There are no counselling points for people struggling with reproductive health problems.

3.2. Debates excluding particular groups of infertile people in the media

This part of the article discusses the debates in the media in which representatives of the government, religious communities and the wider public participate. On the one hand, such discussions discredit people who decide on IVF as well as children conceived in this way, but on the other hand they also deride people who undergo the NaProTechnology treatment.

As a result of ideological disputes, the Polish public debate primarily concentrates on IVF, ignoring infertile people and the psychological, health and social problems that they must face on a daily basis. In this public debate, one can hardly notice any efficient communication that would lead to a social consensus. Instead, two sides of the conflict can be identified: communities which are for and those which are against; none of them accepting substantive arguments of the opponent (Baruch, 2015, p. 28). As a consequence, the ideological disputes and the conflict might only escalate, to the detriment of both infertile couples, for whom IVF is the only chance to have children, and people who were conceived through this method. The whole atmosphere, ideological disputes, stigmatisation of people who undergo this procedure as well as children who were conceived through this method can be referred to as "IVF moral panics." The theory of moral panics was described by a British sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972, p. 29). According to Cohen, communities get into moral panics from time to time. In this situation, a condition, episode, person or group of persons are perceived as a threat to societal values and interests. The nature of this threat

is presented in an exaggerated and stereotypical way by the media, whereas journalists, the clergy, social activists or politicians erect moral barricades. Renowned experts diagnose the situation and propose other courses of action. The media are generally used in order to amplify moral panics, therefore having a great impact on the public.

Respondents stated that ideological disputes of "morality experts" in the media that focused primarily on IVF only intensified their suffering caused by the inability to conceive naturally. Language that is used in the media debate in Poland abounds in utterances with negative if not brutish overtones. One of the most pejorative statements was made by bishop Tadeusz Pieronek who asked: "Isn't the literary portrayal of Frankenstein, created against nature, the precursor of IVF?" (Radkowska-Walkowiak, 2013, p. 193). Such a radical language of the opponents of this method and denunciation of infertile people hurts, offends and stigmatises them:

> It is difficult to listen to all these opinions. Much can be done and said but still these people are stigmatised. This is exactly how I feel [...], the main problem is what is said, what arguments, deprecating and mean words are used [pause] and it really hurts us [...], I cannot believe that the spirit of infertile people who are determined to have children and want to undergo this procedure will be broken and such words will have influence on their decision. Nevertheless, such opinions cause mental harm. The couples are in a difficult situation because of their infertility and these people make our lives even more difficult and painful. (Marcin)

> I felt absolutely humiliated and insulted [...], it was when bishop Pieronek said these silly things about implementers of Frankenstein's idea. There were a few moments that crushed me, also Pieronek's words, they caused that, I remember it like it was yesterday, it was in winter, when I came back home and fell down on the doormat and started crying bitterly. My husband did not know what happened but these were Pieronek's words, I had heard them before but at that particular moment I was struck by them. I told my husband that I could not endure this humiliation anymore. I thought it was horrible what we were experiencing and why we were being admonished by people who had no idea about this. (Beata)

> We react to media reports with anger. The anger at the fact that they judge what we do without having any experience or even the right to do so. We are angry and disappointed, we are sad to hear such things, but I do feel sorry for other couples because we could take part in the partially funded IVF program and now they probably cannot do this. I am sorry to live in a country where there is no understanding for us. We, the infertile, are damned by the government's decision. (Patrycja)

Moreover, there are numerous scientifically unsubstantiated opinions that children conceived through IVF are different from those conceived in a natural way. One of the most controversial statements on the subject is that of Rev.

Franciszek Longchamps de Bérier, a member of the Polish episcopate's council for bioethics: "There are doctors who can recognize an IVF child just by looking at their face. Such a child has a tactile crease which is a sign of genetic defect […]" (Pawlicka, 2013). After the publication of the interview with Rev. Longchamps de Bérier in 2013, the Association for Infertility Treatment and Adoption Support "Our Stork" sent an open letter to the Polish Society of Genetics asking for the opinion if children conceived through IVF are different from those conceived in a natural way (Krawczak, 2016, p. 108–109). The society's response was as follows:

> The scientific data clearly show that there are no differences in physical build between children depending on how they were conceived. It must be also emphasised that even the most renowned dysmorphologist cannot conclude that a child was conceived through an ART in the course of clinical examination. […] We are concerned that academics recognised in their field, with no substantive competence in other fields, are misleading the public and create unnecessary stress for families whose children were conceived through ART, as was the case with Rev. Longchamps de Bérier, since there are thousands of such families in Poland and millions around the world.[10]

Nevertheless, one can still hear in the media new, stigmatising utterances concerning both couples trying to conceive and the children themselves.

Pioneering research carried out by Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowiak and Ewa Maciejewska-Mroczek (2017, p. 158–165) in which children, teenagers and adults conceived through IVF or insemination participated reveals that media debates and labels applied to children born thanks to IVF are not without influence on them and the formation of their identity. The researchers refer to "individuals marked by IVF" and "an IVF identity." The research shows that even eleven- and twelve-year-olds are aware of the fact the method through which they were conceived is the subject of controversy. Children recognize the strongest negative terms (the most often quoted were the ones mentioned earlier, about doctor Frankenstein or a tactile crease). Ideological and political debate becomes a source of certain simplified cognitive patterns in society in which IVF is associated with murder, Holocaust and death; they are also frequently linked with abortion. People who were conceived through this method can learn that they live at the expense of killed brothers and sisters (embryos), which leads to the "post-IVF survivor syndrome." Consequently, people who were conceived through ART are stigmatised and discriminated. This fits with the theory of stigma, which makes certain individuals or a group of individuals alien and inferior. Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowiak states that the "process of monsterising IVF children" is taking place in Poland since they are presented as ill, weak and blameworthy (Radkowska-Walkowiak & Macie-

[10] Response of the Polish Society of Human Genetics to an open letter of 28 February 2013 sent by the Association for Infertility Treatment and Adoption Support "Our Stork."

jewska-Mroczek, 2017, p. 189). Children born thanks to IVF, like all their peers, are also "digital natives"; thus, all media debates on this topic reach them. This is all the more important as not every child can cope with stigmatisation, which might result in emotional problems and social withdrawal in the future (Radkowska-Walkowiak, 2018, p. 166–167).

On the other hand, there are supporters of ART who are sceptical about NaProTechnology.[11] Infertile Christians who have tried this method in order to conceive heard comments that discredit this method of treatment:

> I could learn that NaProTechnology actually does not consist in using the calendar method and praying for a miracle every evening […], if someone tells people that NaProTechnology is the calendar method, it really is not right, I do not know why they say such things. Probably they want to discredit this method, this treatment. (Żaneta)

> I could hear quite often ridiculous comments that NaProTechnology is the same as the calendar method and it is a pseudo-treatment for Holy Joes or those who listen to Radio Maryja. These were really unpleasant comments, made by people who in fact did not know that we have such a problem. (Michał)

> Every time when I informed my colleagues at work that I was going to a NaProTechnology centre, they told me that we should give it up and make an appointment with an infertility treatment specialist because NaProTechnology is a waste of time. Now I know they were not right because thanks to this method we are parents. (Alicja)

NaProTechnology is fully accepted and promoted by the Catholic Church for world view reasons, but it is not recognised as a proven method of infertility treatment by the medical community in Poland.

> A professor in an infertility treatment clinic only smiled derisively when I told him about NaProTechnology, as we cannot accept APT for world view reasons […]. During our last visit the doctor told us that NaPro is not a treatment method and it does not have any effect. (Krystyna)

NaProTechnology is recommended neither by the Polish Society of Reproductive Medicine and Embryology nor the Polish Society of Gynaecologists and Obstetricians as a standard infertility treatment method (Łukaszuk et al., 2018, p. 31).

[11] NaProTechnology – Natural Procreative Technology is a trademark registered by The Saint Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction in Omaha, Nebraska, USA. According to the institute, NaProTechnology is a woman's health science which helps to monitor one's fertility. It consists in recognising a woman's cycle. Consequently, married couples can try to conceive and consciously postpone the conception (Hilgers, 2012, p. 41).

4. Conclusions

It is recommended that actions are taken in at least two areas in order to level the social, educational and medical exclusion of infertile people. The first one is the elimination of educational exclusion by spreading knowledge of infertility at different levels of education, taking preventive actions and sensitizing the public to the topics connected with reproductive failures. The other one is the creation of public infertility treatment centres and opportunity to use all available methods, in accordance with the decision of the people who are concerned, as well as providing support networks for those facing unintentional childlessness, especially enabling them to get free psychological and counselling help.

Thus, it is necessary to conduct and organize various campaigns in Poland which aim at raising public awareness continuously in this area. The society does not have basic information on that topic. When a person or a couple from nearer or more distant social environment face this problem, people often withdraw from the conversation because they do not know how to behave, what to say or how to support such individuals. This is precisely due to the lack of knowledge on that subject matter. Accordingly, it is absolutely necessary to educate the Polish society on the topic of reproductive failures, so that people could talk about it in a casual and uninhibited manner, and therefore support such couples. Moreover, if individuals facing this disease gained basic knowledge about it, they would not blame or stigmatize themselves and most probably they would be under a lower level of stress associated with the initial stage of confusion.

It is also noted that the problem of unintended childlessness and the methods chosen to overcome it, especially regarding treatment methods, provokes great controversy over worldview. Therefore, it is necessary to form attitudes full of tolerance and respect for all infertile people in our society, regardless of the treatment method that they have chosen. In Poland this problem especially refers to the disputes between supporters and opponents of ARTs (in particular IVF) and NaProTechnology.

It seems reasonable to build a support network for people struggling with infertility through the creation of associations, self-help groups as well as a pedagogical and psychological counselling system, therapy or coaching. Infertile couples hardly ever benefit from this kind of assistance due to lack of its availability and high cost of professional and long-term support. There are also no counselling points for people with reproductive health problems.

Taking the above measures seems a necessity today. This is because of the fact that the magnitude of the infertility problem is significant and the current demographic situation in Poland remains highly unfavourable. If the treatment were funded as regards both ARTs and NaProTechnology, the birth rate would increase and each couple could choose the method in accordance with their

personal beliefs. It is a documented fact that the population of children born thanks to IVF exceeds 8 million around the world. As regards Europe, the majority of treatment cycles and children conceived through this method are recorded in Spain, Russia, Germany and France.[12] The data concerning Poland are only estimated and imprecise as they are not collected systematically. There are also no reliable data on how many children around the world and in Poland are born through NaProTechnology treatment. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that reimbursement of both treatment methods might result in the birth rate increase.

References

Bal, I. (2012). Marginalizacja i wykluczenie społeczne jako bariera rozwoju regionalnego. In G. Ślusarz (Eds.), *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy. Determinanty rozwoju regionalnego w kontekście procesów globalizacji. Zeszyt nr 28* (pp. 252–262). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego.

Baruch, A. (2015). Komunikacja między wybranymi podmiotami w procesie leczenia i zapobiegania niepłodności. Kontekst społeczno-edukacyjny problemu. *Wychowanie na Co Dzień*, (6), 25–30.

Baruch, A. (2023). *Niepłodność w narracjach małżeństw jako indywidualne i wspólne strategie uczenia się egzystencjalnego*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń].

Bhat, A. & Byatt, N. (2016). Infertility and Perinatal Loss: When the Bough Breaks. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, *18*(3). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-016-0663-8

Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rocker*. Martin Robertson.

Cui, W. (2010). Mother or Nothing: The Agony of Infertility. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, (12), 881–882.

Debita, M. (2017). Program Kompleksowej Ochrony Zdrowia Prokreacyjnego w Polsce – cele, planowane działania, prognozy kosztów. In J. Blicharz & L. Zacharko (Eds.), *Trzeci sektor i ekonomia społeczna. Uwarunkowania prawne. Kierunki działań* (pp. 93–103). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Debita, M. (2018). Psychospołeczne uwarunkowania i skutki nierównego dostępu obywateli do medycznie wspomaganej prokreacji w Polsce w świetle przepisów unijnych. *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Nauki Społeczne*, *20*(1), 9–23.

[12] Data presented by David Adamson on behalf of the International Committee for Monitoring ART (ICMART) (European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, 2018).

Drągowski, P., Siemionow, K., Zaręba, I., Prokop, I., Rysiak, E., Cekała, E. & Rutkowski, M. (2015). Społeczno-ekonomiczne skutki leczenia niepłodności. *Polski Przegląd Nauk o Zdrowiu*, (4), 255–258.

European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology. (2018, July 3). *More Than 8 Million Babies Born from IVF since the World's First in 1978*. https://www.eshre.eu/Annual-Meeting/Barcelona-2018/ESHRE-2018-Press-releases/De-Geyter

Gipson, J., Bornstein, M. & Hindin, M. (2020). Infertility: A Continually Neglected Component of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, *98*(7), 505–506.

Grotowska-Leder, J. (2005). Ekskluzja społeczna – aspekty teoretyczne i metodologiczne. In J. Grotowska-Leder & K. Faliszek (Eds.), *Ekskluzja i inkluzja społeczna. Diagnoza, uwarunkowania, kierunki działań* (pp. 25–44). Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne Akapit.

Hilgers, Th. (2012) *Creighton Model Fertility Care System. Autentyczny język zdrowia i płodności kobiety: podręcznik wprowadzający nowego użytkownika*. Fundacja Instytut Rozwoju Położnictwa i Ginekologii.

Krawczak, A. (2016). *In vitro. Bez strachu, bez ideologii*. Wydawnictwo Muza SA.

Kula, K. & Słowikowska-Hilczer, J. (Eds.) (2008). *Medycyna rozrodu z elementami seksuologii*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Łodzi.

Łukaszuk, K., Kozioł, K., Jakiel, G., Jakimiuk, A., Jędrzejczak, P., Kuczyński, W., Kurzawa, R., Pawelczyk, L., Radwan, M., Spaczyński, R., Wielgoś, M. & Wołczyński, S. (2018). Diagnostyka i leczenie niepłodności – rekomendacje Polskiego Towarzystwa Medycyny Rozrodu i Embriologii (PTMRiE) oraz Polskiego Towarzystwa Ginekologów i Położników (PTGP). *Ginekologia i Perinatologia Praktyczna*, *3*(3), 112–140.

Ministerstwo Zdrowia. (2022). *Rządowy program kompleksowej ochrony zdrowia prokreacyjnego w Polsce w 2021–2023 r.* https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/program-kompleksowej-ochrony-zdrowia-prokreacyjnego-w-polsce-w-2021-r.

Pawlicka, A. (2013). *Ks. Franciszek Longchamps de Bérier: człowiek z bruzdą*. https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/ks-franciszek-longchamps-de-berier/f1ykh0v

Polskie Towarzystwo Medycyny Rozrodu i Embriologii. (2021, January 15). *Stanowisko Polskiego Towarzystwa Medycyny Rozrodu i Embriologii (PTMRiE) oraz Polskiego Towarzystwa Ginekologów i Położników (PTGiP) w sprawie projektu rozporządzenia Rady Ministrów dotyczącego Narodowego Programu Zdrowotnego na lata 2021–2025*. http://ptmrie.org.pl/o-ptmrie/aktualnosci/narodowy-program-zdrowotny-na-lata-2021-2025

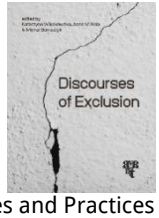
Radkowska-Walkowiak, M. (2013). *Doświadczenie in vitro. Niepłodność i nowe technologie reprodukcyjne w perspektywie antropologicznej*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Radkowska-Walkowiak, M. (2017). „Jak zaczęła się twoja historia". Nowe technologie reprodukcyjne i nowe formy stygmatyzacji. *LUD. Organ Polskiego Towarzystwa Ludoznawczego*. *101*, 149–169. https://doi.org/10.12775/lud101.2017.04

Radkowska-Walkowiak, M. & Maciejewska-Mroczek, E. (2017). „O nas się mówi, ale z nami się nie rozmawia". Dziecko w kulturze współczesnej i badaniach społeczno-kulturowych w kontekście polskiej debaty na temat technologii reprodukcyjnych. *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, *18*(4), 188–190.

Starrs, A., Ezeh, A., Barker, G., Basu, A., Bertrand, J., Blum, R., Coll-Seck, A., Grover, A., Laski, L., Roa, M., Sathar, Z., Say, L., Serour, G., Singh, S., Stenberg, K., Temmerman, M., Biddlecom, A., Popinchalk, A., Summers, C. & Ashford, L. (2018). Accelerate Progress – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All: Report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission. *Lancet*, *391*(10140), 2642–2692. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30293-9

Anna Baruch is a doctor of social sciences, employed in the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Bydgoszcz, academically connected with Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland).



Discourses of Exclusion: Theories and Practices
ISBN 978-83-969444-3-6, AVANT Anthologies

Is Health Care an Example of Inclusiveness or a Space of General Exclusion?

Exclusion in Health Care Using the Example of Disadvantaged Groups

Kosma Kołodziej
Collegium Medicum in Bydgoszcz
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
kosmakolodziej@cm.umk.pl

Received 2023-12-31; accepted 2024-12-14; published Online First 2024-12-27.

Abstract

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, every citizen has the right to health care. Unfortunately, some disadvantaged or minority groups have difficulties accessing a general practitioner, psychologist or other specialists in broader medical care. The article reviews scientific research on the issues outlined in the title using the following groups as examples: persons with a substance abuse disorder, the elderly, people with HIV or AIDS, immigrants, refugees and people from the LGBT community. For years, the World Health Organization has stressed that improving the health of members of socially excluded groups can improve the health of the entire population. However, there is still no program in Poland focusing on combating inequalities in the healthcare system. The article presents research results from other countries. Unfortunately, in Poland, there is still a lack of studies on minority groups, their access to the health care system, and the attitudes towards those groups of medical personnel.

Keywords: health care exclusion, health care, disadvantaged groups, immigrants, LGBT

1. Introduction

Szarenferberger (2005) distinguished four areas in defining the concept of social exclusion. The first refers to participation in social life, the second relates to access to goods and resources of various types along with institutions and the social system, the third to poverty and deprivation of needs, and the last to social rights and their implementation. Healthcare and exclusion within it seem to go beyond a single area of exclusion described by the author. Thus, the term "health inequality" appears in the literature to refer to systematic inequalities in the observed health condition between some socio-economic groups (although within these groups, there may be various inequalities due to, for example, gender, race or social position). There is no doubt that the feeling of exclusion, regardless of how long an individual has had it, affects their functioning. The experience of exclusion is associated with strong negative feelings and additional stress, which affect emotions, self-esteem and functioning (Wesselmann et al., 2012). Stigmatization may also influence the effects of therapy and treatment. Such correlations were found in the case of people suffering from mental illnesses who experience very high levels of social exclusion. It is exacerbated by the attitude of medical staff and medical students who, despite their knowledge in this field, are often unable to treat patients in a professional manner without prejudice. Stigmatized individuals often feel fear and insecurity, a sense of rejection, and increased sensitivity to the opinions of others. A division of stigma into felt and enacted stigma has been adopted. The former is directly related to the stigma, e.g. disease or disability. It is perceived as shame or disgrace accompanied by an obsessive fear of being stigmatized by the environment. In order to protect themselves from the undesirable behavior of the environment, such a person will hide the stigma for as long as possible. Enacted stigma, on the other hand, otherwise known as discrimination, is defined as current episodes of stigmatization (Suwalska et al., 2016). The feeling of stigmatization affects the quality of life of an individual and reduces life satisfaction. These people have a poorer assessment of their lives and suffer from chronic diseases, lower self-esteem, a sense of helplessness, anxiety, and depression (Chodkowska et al., 2010). The experience of exclusion in childhood results in differences in personality traits, such as caution and fearfulness (Killen et al., 2013). Studies on young children who exhibited aggressive behavior showed that their aggression was reinforced by lack of acceptance and exclusion from their peer group (Stenseng et al., 2014). Long-term ostracism increases the risk of depression and suicide attempts (Zadro et al., 2004). It has also been confirmed that social exclusion is a risk factor for suicide attempt mortality in European men (Yur'yev et al., 2013). Research on transgender people has shown that discriminatory attitudes towards them and their exclusion from society make this group susceptible to risky behavior, forcing them to become commercial sex workers, beggars, or drug addicts and even causing suicidal thoughts (Shah et al., 2018).

When it comes to health, social exclusion has been proven to affect mental health and overall physical well-being (van Bergen et al., 2019). Struggling with minority stress, homophobia, discrimination, victimization, anxiety, and persecution all contribute to more frequent alcohol consumption, drug use, and cigarette smoking in the LGBT group compared to heterosexuals (Kołodziej, 2018). Stigmatization, prejudice and exclusion result in constantly increased vigilance and a sense of threat as well as fear of humiliation in social situations. Very often, the consequence of such obsessive anxiety is increased suspicion of members of the majority group. This, in turn, has a major impact on the misinterpretation of this group's behavior, which may cause a strong emotional reaction (Major et al., 2003). The lack of openness and negative attitudes towards different social groups also have an impact on the number of hate crimes. Moreover, exclusion increases health problems and significantly worsens the quality of life (Fabiś et al., 2015). According to the World Health Organization, health exclusion means systematic differences in health status between different socio-economic groups. These inequalities are caused by social factors (and therefore can be modified) and are unjust (Whitehead, 1992). In 2010, the same organization concluded that in 53 countries of the European region, poverty and social exclusion are the main factors of health inequalities.

2. Examples of excluded groups in the healthcare system and the reason for selecting these groups

Social exclusion in the health system affects many groups. In these article, the following groups have been selected: persons addicted to psychoactive substances, people treated psychiatrically, the elderly, people with AIDS, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This choice results from the policy of the Polish state, the war in Ukraine and the ageing of the population in Europe. This article is not an analysis of Polish research on the attitudes of medical personnel but aims to show how important it is to change the healthcare system in Poland and educate future and current medical personnel in the context of working with excluded groups. The reason for choosing the LGBT group is the fact that Poland has been the most homophobic country in the European Union for the last three consecutive years (ILGA-EUROPE, 2023). The choice of refugees and immigrants is linked to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. After this event, a very large number of refugees came to Poland (UNHCR, 2024). According to the results of a survey made by UNHCR, the vast majority (63%) declare that they plan to stay in their current host country (Chugaievska, 2023). Due to the influx of a large number of war refugees, a higher incidence of HIV and AIDS was also noticed in our country (ECDC, 2022). For several years now, there has been a clear trend in Poland towards an increase in the number of deaths due to alcohol use, reaching a peak of 14,048 cases in 2021 (Malczewski & Jabłoński, 2023). Regarding the elderly, many authors have noticed changes to the demographic structure of our society (ageing) that require reforms of the statutory

health care system (Jodkowski, 2014). The first argument is the need for more frequent visits to the health sector. On the other hand, many authors emphasize the problem of poor treatment of the representatives of these groups in the health care system (Malewicz-Sawicka et al., 2022; Krüger et al., 2023; Rogala et al., 2023; Burak & Reczyńska, 2015). The article presents research results from around the world and an analysis of the literature available on this issue in Poland.

One of the previously mentioned groups that suffer from exclusion in health care is people addicted to drugs and alcohol. Research on 222 medical students and social work students about patients addicted to alcohol or nicotine and those suffering from depression showed that both groups were less willing to treat people with addictions than those with depression (Ahmedani et al., 2011). In another study on medical students, a high stigma against patients with depression and addiction to alcohol and drugs was observed (Fernando et al., 2010). Medical students often believe that the patient is to blame for their addiction (Imran & Haider, 2007). According to some scientific studies, nurses' attitudes towards alcoholism are influenced by many variables such as age, type of specialization, working hours, their own habits related to alcohol consumption, competences related to collecting information and additional training in this area (Seabra, 2023). Moreover, nurses ask patients about the amount of alcohol consumed far less often than doctors do. As many as 53% of nurses feel apprehension related to an offensive reaction from the patient (Tan et al., 2022). In Poland, many employees of the health care system assess working with this type of patients as unpleasant and unsatisfying. Such patients very often arouse many negative feelings among this professional group, including reluctance, anger, and even impatience and disgust. The greatest reluctance on the part of medical personnel was caused by vulgar behavior (80.6%), intoxication (68.0%), and personal hygiene (43.7%) of the patient (Burak et al., 2016). Similarly, health care system employees often do not have an open approach to patients undergoing psychiatric treatment. In this group of patients, social exclusion is very common, frequently intensified by the lack of awareness of medical staff and students of medical universities, who are often unable to treat patients in a professional and unbiased manner (Suwalska et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been noticed that among medical students, there is a high stigmatization of people with mental health conditions (James et al., 2012). A more open attitude towards patients in this group was influenced by the experience of treating people experiencing a mental illness or the occurrence of this type of disease in a family member of the respondent (Korshun et al., 2012; Ay et al., 2006). There are students who believe that mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and depression can be cured (Naeem et al., 2006). Some medical students consider this type of patient to be dangerous. In the case of anxiety and depression, patients are assumed to be responsible for their condition and should "pull themselves together" (Imran & Haider, 2007). Social exclusion is deepened by the lack of support from anyone other than immediate family and structural

discrimination in mental health care. The lack of sufficient funding for this field of science favors the continuity of the stigmatization process (Podogrodzka-Niell & Tyszkowska, 2014). Assigning uselessness and low value to patients undergoing psychiatric treatment reduces their activity on the principle of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It diminishes their intellectual and social competence, further deepening social alienation (Kowalik, 2007). Polish research from 2022 showed that one-third of patients in psychiatric wards experienced various types of ill-treatment by medical staff (Malewicz-Sawicka et al., 2022). In a 2017 survey of psychiatrists, as many as 95% of them admitted that mental illness in Poland is a health problem hidden from others (Kochański & Cechnicki, 2017).

Another group that should be mentioned are the elderly. One form of exclusion that affects this group of people is digital exclusion. In this case, the limitation is understood primarily as unequal access to information, including medical information, as the Internet is where we often look for information about health. Additionally, this limitation is related to the possibility of using telemedicine services such as medical consultations or prescription renewal (Korczak, 2019). A frequently overlooked topic in Poland, also by medical staff, is the sexuality of senior citizens. Many international studies show that older people feel the need for sexual intercourse and declare sexual desire (Helgason et al., 1996). Marginalization of the elderly may also be a predictor of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (Crnek-Georgeson et al., 2017). It should be added that for many people, old age is associated with various types of disabilities. Many studies indicate that people with disabilities often have difficult access to the health care system (Temple et al., 2020a). A 2019 study in Australia of the elderly with disabilities found a very high risk of discrimination or engaging in health care avoidance behaviors, which was related to the reporting of unmet healthcare needs by primary care physicians, medical specialists, hospitals and dentists (Temple et al., 2020b). In Polish studies by Kropińska (2013), 14.9% of seniors felt discriminated against while in healthcare facilities, and 19.4% witnessed discrimination against other seniors. In addition, 60.9% of the elderly believe that age discrimination in the healthcare sector is a social problem.

People suffering from AIDS or those who are HIV carriers often face social exclusion. HIV-infected patients have reported stigmatization in health care and even changes in attitudes on the part of physicians after disclosing information about their HIV status (Bunting, 1996). In a 2011 study in EU countries, 60% of respondents reported negative and discriminatory attitudes among health sector workers (ECDC, 2017). In many cases, stigma and social exclusion can add up. Research shows that discrimination against people infected with HIV may be more acute than against people suffering from other diseases. HIV primarily affects groups that are stigmatized in the absence of infection (e.g., gays, people who inject drugs) and also disproportionately affects African Americans and Latinos, who experience racism/ethnic discrimination independent of HIV

(Capitanio & Herek, 1999; Kelly et al., 1987). It should be mentioned that the level of perceived stigma is associated with more depressive and HIV-related symptoms, lower levels of antiretroviral therapy adherence and poorer health-related quality of life in cross-sectional analyzes (Rintamaki et al., 2006; Vanable et al., 2006; Stirratt et al., 2006). The fact that Poles have no knowledge about the HIV virus, AIDS and the ways of its transmission does not help here. Medical staff often have a low level of knowledge about disease transmission. The lack of information about the disease and the stigmatizing approach of health care workers have a negative impact on the prevention and treatment of people with AIDS (Stutterheim et al., 2009). The fear of being mistreated by medical staff means that patients often do not seek help in the medical sector. Very frequently, sick people and those infected with the virus can be treated against their will, medical confidentiality is not kept and even access to treatment is limited (Dong et al., 2018). It should also be added that stigmatization, discrimination and isolation contribute to an increased risk of HIV infection (Magnus et al., 2010; Arnold et al., 2014). Polish studies have shown that 27.5% of HIV patients, after being informed of their positive result, were refused healthcare services by medical personnel (Rogala et al., 2023). Another example of a large nationwide project is a study conducted in 2010 on a sample of 502 in 7 Polish cities. The respondents were asked how often they had been refused health services, including dental care, due to HIV infection, in the previous 12 months. A total of 20% of the respondents indicated refusal—of varying frequency—as an example of discrimination (Sieć Plus, 2011).

Refugees and immigrants are often mentioned as groups affected by social exclusion (Ringold & Kasek, 2007). Unfortunately, racism and discrimination also occur among health care workers. Many patients from this group reported that their ethnicity resulted in poorer access to health care and lowered its quality. Negative attitudes of doctors and nurses affect compliance with recommendations related to the treatment of these people (Van Ryn & Fu, 2003; Williams & Rucker, 2000; Sorkin et al., 2010). Another problem in this group is overcoming the language barrier, which is also necessary to guarantee the quality of health services. In the case of patients who do not speak fluently the language spoken by health care workers, the risk of incorrect diagnosis and medical errors increases (Ku & Flores, 2005). It turns out that for such people, the hospitalization time is also longer and the frequency of readmission to the hospital after the patient's discharge increases. Other studies in English-speaking countries have proven that people with low English proficiency who did not use professional translation services were more likely to be readmitted to a hospital within 30 days after discharge (Lindholm et al., 2012). In the literature, there have been documented many examples of delayed diagnosis, misdiagnosis, inappropriate referral, failure to explain the patient's condition or recommended care, or failure to ensure confidentiality or obtain informed consent because the patient's native language differs from that of the health care provider

(Bowen, 2001). In the absence of confidentiality and lack of access to an interpreter, such patients may avoid medical care and be reluctant to communicate about matters that may be difficult or embarrassing for them but may be important to the overall clinical picture (violence, sexuality-related topics) (Stevens, 1993; Li et al., 1999). This problem also concerns Poland. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in Poland alone, there are almost a million war refugees from Ukraine.

Another group that often experiences discrimination are people from the LGBT community (gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual persons). One of the largest reports in recent years on the health of people from the LGB community in Switzerland showed that compared to heterosexual people (38.4%), LGB people were significantly more likely to visit a specialist (40.8-58.5%). The additional "LGBT Health" study shows that many Swiss LGBT people are at risk of experiencing discrimination or violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (67.6% at least once in their lives). These types of experiences also occur in health care (26.6% at least once in their lives), and they most affect trans/non-binary people (Krüger et al., 2023). The following aspects are mentioned in the literature about limiting the access of trans people to medical care: discrimination in the health care system, specialists who do not have adequate knowledge about transgender health issues, past negative experiences in medical care, and the lack of coverage of necessary services, including health insurance (Heng et al., 2018; Lerner & Robles, 2017; Ziegler et al., 2020; Cicero et al., 2019). In Poland, few researchers focus on the access of LGBT individuals to the healthcare system. A 2016 study examining the attitudes of various professional groups found that medical personnel exhibited the most homophobic attitudes among all the groups surveyed (Kołodziej, 2016). Knowledge about other studies was a significant predictor in examining attitudes towards homosexual people and knowledge of topics related to this issue among Indian doctors and trainees (Banwari et al., 2015). Many specialists admit that they do not have the knowledge to work professionally with non-heterosexual patients (Erwin, 2006). Other studies have indicated that a significant predictor of attitudes towards LGBT patients is knowledge about this group (Kowalczyk et al., 2016).

3. What are the patient's needs?

In a study from 2012 in which the aim was to find factors influencing patients' assessment of the quality of medical care services, the number of staff and their level of education, medical equipment, organizational structure and management structure were mentioned (Czerw, 2010). As can be seen, in most cases, a good and professional team is needed to achieve the best possible result in these components of success. The need for good and competent medical staff and good patient-staff relations is also visible in another study. In 2000, Grażyna Bartkowiak referred to the expectations of patients staying in hospital

towards medical staff. If the reason for staying in hospital was a disease requiring surgical intervention, the most important factor determining the assessment of the service was the professionalism of the staff; however, if there was no such need, the importance of relationships with the medical staff was emphasized (Bartkowiak, 2000). In studies assessing patients' expectations towards nursing staff, the most important features were observation skills, appropriate medical knowledge, humane attitude towards the patient and diligence in performing procedures. However, the traits of character desired in nurses by the respondents were trust, selflessness, respect for the dignity of others and responsibility (Moczydłowska et al., 2014a). When it comes to the medical staff, the most desirable character traits of a doctor were trust, selflessness, respect for the dignity of others and responsibility (Moczydłowska et al., 2014b). Many patients expect a sense of security and trust from medical staff. In research on the LGBT community, it turned out that these people would be more willing to tell their doctor about their sexual orientation if they were sure that the doctor would keep medical confidentiality (Allen et al., 1998). According to patients, disclosing non-heteronormative orientation or transsexuality should be important for every member of the treatment team (Cloyes et al., 2018). The effects of good therapy for alcohol-dependent transgender people were visible among therapists who respected their patients' requests and did not use their "deadnames" during meetings (Lyons et al., 2015). Additionally, this group emphasizes the importance of the inclusive attitude of medical staff (Kowalczyk et al., 2016).

4. Conclusion

Positive social inclusion is influenced by the following factors: family activity, social activity, professional activity, income, political and civic activity, public sector services, financial services, safety at home, place of residence, transport, free time, mental health, physical health and educational activity (Huxley et al., 2006). Other EU countries have developed guidelines for healthcare professionals on how to work with socially excluded people. An example is Great Britain, where the UK's Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and National Health Service (NHS) have developed guidance specific to primary healthcare professionals and health service managers relating to the care of socially excluded groups (Department of Health, 2010; Force, 2010).

For many medical professions, the basis is working to promote social justice in health care (Reutter & Kushner, 2010). For this purpose, it is recommended that the already working medical staff increase their knowledge about social exclusion and its impact on health and quality of life. It is also necessary to modify medical professions training programs in response to today's ever-changing social problems related to health care needs. Classes conducted at medical simulation centers are helpful in this regard. Special information on the health of people from minority groups is also being gathered, often by organizations and associations that have a hard time influencing the healthcare system in Poland.

We must also not forget that some of the medical staff themselves may be people from minority groups. It can be seen, among others, in homosexual medical staff, who very often do not admit their psychosexual orientation in the work environment (Mays & Cochran, 2001).

Primary health care workers (POZ) are the key group in combating social exclusion in health care. Already in 1995, Dr Iona Heath stated that in the functioning healthcare system, the health of the weakest people in society suffers the most (Heath, 1995). This has been confirmed by, among others, research on alcohol addicts and persons with mental illness (Trnka et al., 2010; Le Boutillier & Croucher, 2010). It is crucial to remember that good communication with the patient and an inclusive attitude influence the continuity of care and the ability to provide information regarding the patient's history, treatment, preferences and goals of care (Care, 2013).

References

Ahmedani, B. K., Kubiak, S. P., Rios-Bedoya, C. F., Mickus, M. & Anthony, J. C. (2011). Willingness to treat drug dependence and depression: comparisons of future health professionals. *Substance abuse and rehabilitation*, 2, 43-51. https://doi.org/10.2147/SAR.S14747.

Allen, L. B., Glicken, A. D., Beach, R. K. & Naylor, K. E. (1998). Adolescent health care experience of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *23(4)*, 212-220. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(98)00022-6.

Arnold, E. A., Rebchook, G. M. & Kegeles, S. M. (2014). 'Triply cursed': racism, homophobia and HIV-related stigma are barriers to regular HIV testing, treatment adherence and disclosure among young Black gay men. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 16(6), 710-722. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2014.905706

Ay, P., Save, D. & Fidanoglu, O. (2006). Does stigma concerning mental disorders differ through medical education? A survey among medical students in Istanbul. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *41*, 63-67.

Banwari, G., Mistry, K., Soni, A., Parikh, N. & Gandhi, H. (2015). Medical students and interns' knowledge about and attitude towards homosexuality. *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*, *61*(2), 95-100.

Bartkowiak, G. (2000), Kompetencje interpersonalne w relacji lekarz-pacjent. In M. Głowacka (ed.), *Promocja zdrowia. Konteksty społeczno-kulturowe* (pp. 206-211). Wyd. Wolumin.

Bowen, S. (2001). *Language barriers in access to health care*. Health Canada.

Bunting, S. M. (1996). Sources of stigma associated with women with HIV. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *19(2)*, 64-73.

Burak, A., Reczyńska, A. (2015). Dyskryminacja pacjentów w starszym wieku przez pracowników ochrony zdrowia Discrimination of elderly patients by health care employees. *Geriatria*, *9*, 218-226.

Burak, A., Dembna, I., Cierzniakowska, K., Zacniewski, R. & Popow, A. (2016). The patient under the influence of alcohol – Discriminated victim or aggressor? *Alcoholism and Drug Addiction*, *29*, 131–152.

Capitanio, J. P., & Herek, G. M. (1999). AIDS-related stigma and attitudes toward injecting drug users among Black and White Americans. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *42(7)*, 1148-1161.

Care, H. (2013). *Clinical practice guidelines for quality palliative care*. Third National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care.

Chodkowska, M., Byra, S., Kazanowski, Z., Osik-Chudowolska, D., Parchomiuk, M. & Szabała, B. (2010). Stereotypy a warunki życia osób niepełnosprawnych. In S. Byra, M. Chodkowska & Z. Kazanowski (eds), *Stereotypy niepełnosprawności. Między wykluczeniem a integracją* (pp. 131-148). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.

Chugaievska, S., Dybała, A., & Wisła, R. (2023). *Ukraiński kryzys migracyjny: konsekwencje ekonomiczne dla krajów Unii Europejskiej i Ukrainy: wyzwania oraz ryzyka.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe TYGIEL, s. 77- 122.

Cicero, E. C., Reisner, S. L., Silva, S. G., Merwin, E. I. & Humphreys, J. C. (2019). Healthcare experiences of transgender adults: An integrated mixed research literature review. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *42*(2), 123-138.

Cloyes, K. G., Hull, W. & Davis, A. (2018). Palliative and end-of-life care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) cancer patients and their caregivers. *Seminars in Oncology Nursing*, *34*(1), 60-71.

Crnek-Georgeson, K. T., Wilson, L. A. & Page, A. (2017). Factors influencing suicide in older rural males: a review of Australian studies. *Rural and Remote Health*, *17*(4), 1-11.

Czerw, A. (2010). *Marketing w ochronie zdrowia*. Difin.

Department of Health. (2010). *Inclusion Health: Improving Primary Care for Socially Excluded People*. http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_114067?PageOperation=email

Dong, X., Yang, J., Peng, L., Pang, M., Zhang, J., Zhang, Z., Rao, J., Wang, H. & Chen, X. (2018). HIV-related stigma and discrimination amongst healthcare providers in Guangzhou, China. *BMC Public Health*, *18*(1), 1-10.

ECDC SPECIAL REPORT (2017). *The status of the HIV response in the European Union/European Economic Area.* https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/status-hiv-response-european-unioneuropean-economic-area-2016

ECDC. (2022). *Kwestie operacyjne dotyczące zapewnienia w UE/EOG ciągłości opieki uchodźcom z Ukrainy zakażonym HIV*. https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Operational%20considerations_HIV%20continuum%20of%20care_Ukraine_PL.pdf

Erwin, T. M. (2006). Infusing lesbigay research into the counseling research classroom. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *51*(3), 125-164.

Fabiś, A., Wawrzyniak, J. K. & Chabior, A. (2015). *Ludzka starość. Wybrane zagadnienia z gerontologii społecznej*. Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls".

Fernando, S. M., Deane, F. P. & McLeod, H. J. (2010). Sri Lankan doctors' and medical undergraduates' attitudes towards mental illness. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *45*, 733-739.

Force, S. E. T. (2010). *Inclusion Health: Evidence Pack*. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Heath, I. (1995). *The mystery of general practice*. Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust.

Heng, A., Heal, C., Banks, J. & Preston, R. (2018). Transgender peoples' experiences and perspectives about general healthcare: A systematic review. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, *19*(4), 359-378.

Helgason, A. R., Adolfsson, J., Dickman, P., Arver, S., Fredrikson, M., Göthberg, M. & Steineck, G. (1996). Sexual desire, erection, orgasm and ejaculatory functions and their importance to elderly Swedish men: a population-based study. *Age and Ageing*, *25*(4), 285-291.

Huxley, P., Evans, S., Munroe, M., Webber, M., Burchardt, T., Knapp, M. & McDaid, D. (2006). *Development of a Social Inclusion Index to capture subjective and objective domains*. National Co-ordinating Centre for Research and Methodology. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=d42e452c754dc8437c3b69c264fc5d522eba36db

ILGA -EUROPE. (2023). *Rainbow Europe Map and Index 2023*. https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/rainbow-europe-2023/

Imran, N. & Haider, I. I. (2007). The stigmatization of psychiatric illness: What attitudes do medical students and family physicians hold towards people with mental illness? *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences*, *23*(3), 318-322.

James, B. O., Omoaregba, J. O. & Okogbenin, E. O. (2012). Stigmatising attitudes towards persons with mental illness: A survey of medical students and interns from Southern Nigeria. *Mental Illness*, *4*(1), 32-34.

Jodkowski, L. (2014). Health care Systems in Europe on the Example of Poland and Germany. *European Journal of Economic Studies*, *4*, 225-240.

Killen, M., Mulvey, K. L. & Hitti, A. (2013). Social exclusion in childhood: A developmental intergroup perspective. *Child Development*, *84*(3), 772-790.

Kelly, J. A., St Lawrence, J. S., Smith Jr, S., Hood, H. V. & Cook, D. J. (1987). Medical students' attitudes toward AIDS and homosexual patients. *Academic Medicine*, *62*(7), 549-556.

Kochański, A. & Cechnicki, A. (2017). The attitudes of psychiatrists toward people suffering from mental illnesses. *Psychiatria Polska*, *51*(1), 29-44.

Kołodziej, K. (2016). Temperament afektywny i czynniki środowiskowe a postawy wobec osób a postawy wobec osób homoseksualnych. *Edukacja w dyskursie*, 4, 217-229.

Kołodziej, K. (2018). Zwiększony problem uzależnień w grupie. In W. Ślusarczyk, R. Wilczyńska & G. Frischke (Eds.), *Nałogi. Medyczne i kulturowe aspekty uzależnień na przestrzeni dziejów* (pp. 143-150). Wydawnictwo Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.

Korczak, K. (2019). Wykluczenie cyfrowe w ochronie zdrowia z perspektywy pacjentów oraz personelu medycznego. *Polityka Społeczna, 545*(8), 24-29.

Kowalczyk, R., Rodzinka, M. & Krzystanek, M. (2016). *Zdrowie LGBT. Przewodnik dla kadry medycznej.* https://kph.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Zdrowie-LGBT-_-Przewodnik-dla-kadry-medycznej.pdf

Kowalik, S. (2007). *Psychologia rehabilitacji*. Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Kropińska, S. (2013). *Dyskryminacja osób starszych ze względu na wiek w polskim systemie ochrony zdrowia*. [Doctoral dissertation, Poznan University of Medical Sciences]. http://www.wbc.poznan.pl/Content/298683/index.pdf

Krüger, P., Pfister, A., Eder, M. & Mikolasek, M. (2023). *Gesundheit von LGBT-Personen in der Schweiz*. Nomos.

Ku, L. & Flores, G. (2005). Pay now or pay later: providing interpreter services in health care. *Health Affairs*, *24*(2), 435-444.

Lindholm, M., Hargraves, J. L., Ferguson, W. J. & Reed, G. (2012). Professional language interpretation and inpatient length of stay and readmission rates. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, *27*, 1294-1299.

Le Boutillier, C. & Croucher, A. (2010). Social inclusion and mental health. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *73*(3), 136-139.

Lerner, J. E., & Robles, G. (2017). Perceived barriers and facilitators to health care utilization in the United States for transgender people: a review of recent literature. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, *28*(1), 127-152.

Li, P. L., Logan, S., Yee, L. & Ng, S. (1999). Barriers to meeting the mental health needs of the Chinese community. *Journal of Public Health Medicine*, *21*, 74-80.

Lyons, T., Shannon, K., Pierre, L., Small, W., Krüsi, A. & Kerr, T. (2015). A qualitative study of transgender individuals' experiences in residential addiction treatment settings: stigma and inclusivity. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, *10*(1), 1-6.

Major, B., Quinton, W. J. & Schmader, T. (2003). Attributions to discrimination and self-esteem: Impact of group identification and situational ambiguity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *39*(3), 220-231.

Magnus, M., Kuo, I., Phillips, G., Shelley, K., Rawls, A., Montanez, L., Peterson, J., West-Ojo, T., Hader, S., Greenberg, A. E. (2010). Elevated HIV prevalence despite lower rates of sexual risk behaviors among black men in the District of Columbia who have sex with men. *AIDS Patient Care and STDs*, 24(10), 615-622.

Malczewski, A. & Jabłoński, P. *Raport 2023. Uzależnienia w Polsce.* Krajowe Centrum Przeciwdziałania Uzależnieniom. https://kcpu.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Raport-2023-wersja-Internetowa.pdf

Malewicz-Sawicka, M., Więcek-Durańska, A. & Chotkowska, K. (2022). Agresja i przemoc w oddziałach psychiatrycznych wobec pacjentów i z ich udziałem– wyniki badań pilotażowych personelu placówek. *Biuletyn Kryminologiczny*, *29*, 11-25.

Mays, V. M. & Cochran, S. D. (2001). Mental health correlates of perceived discrimination among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in the United State. *American Journal of Public Health*, *91*(11), 1869-1876.

Moczydłowska, A., Krajewska-Kułak, E., Kózka, M., Bielski, K., Kulesza-Brończyk, B. & Kalandyk, H. (2014a). The expectations of patients towards nursing staff. *Nursing Problems/Problemy Pielęgniarstwa*, *22*(4), 464-470.

Moczydłowska, A., Krajewska-Kułak, E., Kózka, M. & Bielski, K. (2014b). Oczekiwania chorych wobec personelu lekarskiego. *Hygeia Public Health*, *49*(1), 142-151.

Naeem, F., Ayub, M., Javed, Z., Irfan, M., Haral, F. & Kingdon, D. (2006). Stigma and psychiatric illness. A survey of attitude of medical students and doctors in Lahore, Pakistan. *Journal of Ayub Medical College Abbottabad*, *18*(3), 46-49.

Podogrodzka-Niell, M. & Tyszkowska, M. (2014). Stygmatyzacja na drodze zdrowienia w chorobach psychicznych–czynniki związane z funkcjonowaniem społecznym. *Psychiatria Polska*, *48*(6), 1201-1211.

Rintamaki, L. S., Davis, T. C., Skripkauskas, S., Bennett, C. L. & Wolf, M. S. (2006). Social stigma concerns and HIV medication adherence. *AIDS Patient Care & STDs*, *20*(5), 359-368.

Reutter, L. & Kushner, K. E. (2010). Health equity through action on the social determinants of health': taking up the challenge in nursing. *Nursing Inquiry*, *17*(3), 269-280.

Ringold, D. & Kasek, L. (2010). Social assistance in the new EU member states: Strengthening performance and labor market incentives. *World Bank Working Paper no. 117*, 7-12. https://hdl.handle.net/10986/6744

Rogala, M., Brzyski, P., Donesch-Jeżo, E., Biechowska, D.,Kowalska-Bobko, I., Kozela, M. & Koziara, K. (2023). Analiza odczuć pacjentów z HIV/AIDS i HCV w kontakcie z przedstawicielami zawodów medycznych. Ocena dokonana na podstawie przypadków stygmatyzacji i dyskryminacji. *Psychiatria Polska*, *329*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/OnlineFirst/169912

Seabra, P., Nunes, I., Silva, V., Valentim, O., Pinho, L., Moutinho, L., de Vargas, D. & Curado A. (2023). Cultural Adaptation and Validation of the Attitudes Towards Alcohol Scale for Health Professionals in Portugal. *Mental Health Addiction*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-023-01193-w

Shah, H. B. U., Rashid, F., Atif, I., Hydrie, M. Z., Fawad, M. W. B., Muzaffar, H. Z., Rehman, A., Anjum, S., Mehroz, M. B., Haider, A., Hassan, A. & Shukar, H. (2018).

Challenges faced by marginalized communities such as transgenders in Pakistan. *Pan African Medical Journal*, *30*(1). https://doi.org/10.11604/pamj.2018.30.96.12818

Sieć Plus. (2011). *Ludzie żyjący z HIV Stigma Index*. Ogólnopolska Sieć Osób Żyjących z HIV/AIDS. http://www.stigmaindex.org/sites/default/files/reports/Poland%20People%20Living%20with%20HIV%20Stigma%20Index%20reportPolish%20(2).pdf

Sorkin, D. H., Ngo-Metzger, Q. & De Alba, I. (2010). Racial/ethnic discrimination in health care: impact on perceived quality of care. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, *25*, 390-396.

Stenseng, F., Belsky, J., Skalicka, V. & Wichstrøm, L. (2014). Preschool social exclusion, aggression, and cooperation: A longitudinal evaluation of the need-to-belong and the social-reconnection hypotheses. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *40*(12), 1637-1647.

Stirratt, M. J., Remien, R. H., Smith, A., Copeland, O. Q., Dolezal, C., Krieger, D. & SMART Couples Study Team. (2006). The role of HIV serostatus disclosure in antiretroviral medication adherence. *AIDS and Behavior*, *10*, 483-493.

Stutterheim, S. E., Pryor, J. B., Bos, A. E., Hoogendijk, R., Muris, P. & Schaalma, H. P. (2009). HIV-related stigma and psychological distress: the harmful effects of specific stigma manifestations in various social settings. *Aids*, *23*(17), 2353-2357.

Suwalska, J., Suwalska, A., Neumann-Podczaska, A. & Łojko, D. (2016). Medical students and stigma of depression. Part I. Stigmatization of patients. *Psychiatria Polska*, *51*, 495-502.

Tan, H. T., Lui, Y. S., Peh, L. H., Winslow, R. M. & Guo, S. (2022). Examining the attitudes of non-psychiatric practicing healthcare workers towards patients with alcohol problems in general hospital setting. *Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment*, *16*. https://doi.org/10.1177/11782218211065755

Temple, J. B., Kelaher, M., Utomo, A., Williams, R., & Brooke, L. (2020a). *Components of disability exclusion: Discrimination, avoidance and accessibility in later life*, Australasian journal on ageing, 39(2), s.101-111.

Temple, J. B., Stiles, J. A., Utomo, A., Kelaher, M., & Williams, R. (2020b). *Is disability exclusion associated with experiencing an unmet need for health care?*, Australasian Journal on Ageing, 39(2), s.112-121.

Trnka, J., Susło, R. & Drobnik, J. (2010). Lekarz rodzinny wobec zjawiska nadużywania alkoholu przez pacjentów. *Przewodnik Lekarza*, *2*, 184-187.

UNHCR. (2024). *Ukraine Refugee Situation / Poland.* https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10781

Wesselmann, E. D., Nairne, J. S. & Williams, K. D. (2012). An evolutionary social psychological approach to studying the effects of ostracism. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, *6*(3), 309-328.

Whitehead, M. (1992). The concepts and principles of equity and health. *International Journal of Health Services*, *22*(3), 429-445.

Williams, D. R. & Rucker, T. D. (2000). Understanding and addressing racial disparities in health care. *Health Care Financing Review,* 21(4), 75-90.

World Health Organization. (2010). *Regional Office for Europe. Poverty and Social Exclusion in the WHO European Region: Briefing on policy issues produced through the WHO/European Commission equity project: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe*. http://www.euro.who.int/pubrequest

Vanable, P. A., Carey, M. P., Blair, D. C. & Littlewood, R. A. (2006). Impact of HIV-related stigma on health behaviors and psychological adjustment among HIV-positive men and women. *AIDS and Behavior*, *10*, 473-482.

van Bergen, A. P., Wolf, J. R., Badou, M., de Wilde-Schutten, K., IJzelenberg, W., Schreurs, H., Carlier, B., Hoff, S. J. & van Hemert, A. M. (2019). The association between social exclusion or inclusion and health in EU and OECD countries: a systematic review. *European Journal of Public Health*, *29*(3), 575-582.

Van Ryn, M. & Fu, S. S. (2003). Paved with good intentions: do public health and human service providers contribute to racial/ethnic disparities in health? *American Journal of Public Health*, *93*(2), 248-255.

Yur'yev, A., Värnik, P., Sisask, M., Leppik, L., Lumiste, K. & Värnik, A. (2013). Some aspects of social exclusion: Do they influence suicide mortality? *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *59*(3), 232-238.

Zadro, L., Williams, K. D. & Richardson, R. (2004). How low can you go? Ostracism by a computer is sufficient to lower self-reported levels of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *40*(4), 560-567.

Ziegler, E., Valaitis, R., Carter, N., Risdon, C. & Yost, J. (2020). Primary care for transgender individuals: A review of the literature reflecting a Canadian perspective. *Sage Open*, *10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020962824

Kosma Kołodziej is a doctor of health sciences, sociologist, nurse and paramedic. His scientific research concerns the phenomenon of social exclusion and its impact on health and quality of life. As a lecturer, he teaches students how to communicate with patients from disadvantaged groups. He also researches issues related to suicidology in these groups.