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## Curating the Canon: Editorial Decision-Making, Bias and Privilege in Publishing

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### ABSTRACT

In September 2003, the independent publishing house Continuum launched a book series under the banner of “33 1/3”. These were, in the publisher's own promotional literature, “short books about classic albums”. But who decides what constitutes a classic album, and who decides which authors should write such books? Using an autoethnographic approach to analyse the curatorial thinking and strategy behind this book series, and through close analysis of the online discourse around it, the article innovates by exploring the commercial and curatorial practice of one publishing imprint in the first decade of the 2000s. By focusing closely on the work of one editor and drawing on primary data concerning book proposals that were accepted or rejected as well as reader reactions to those decisions, I illustrate how decisions are made and how editorial bias might impact the authorial voices that publishers choose to amplify. Finally, the article examines curatorial practice in publishing in light of more recent discussions of inequalities and imbalances of power (along both gender and ethnic lines) in the industry.

**Keywords:** publishing, evaluative judgements, ethics, taste, bias

### INTRODUCTION

This article aims to bring into the open a set of publishing decisions that were made between 2002 and 2009. The article will use as its case study a book series called “33 1/3” – a collection of short books published by the New York and London based Continuum International Publishing Group (hereafter “Continuum”), each one of which took as its subject an album of recorded music ranging from *Dusty in Memphis* (Dusty Springfield) and *Exile on Main Street* (The Rolling Stones) to *Sign O' the Times* (Prince) and *Paul's Boutique* (The Beastie Boys). The series name “33 1/3” stems from the speed at which long-playing vinyl records spin on a turntable.

(The 33 1/3 series continues to this day under the umbrella of Bloomsbury Academic – Continuum having been acquired in 2011. Since 2016 I have had no connection with Bloomsbury or the series and nothing discussed in this article should be taken as a reflection on any previous or current employee of either Bloomsbury or Continuum, other than myself.)

The aim of this study is to examine the publishing choices made during the first years of the series. There is a small but growing field of study about the editorial / curatorial function of book publishers, attempting to demystify why some books get chosen for publication and others do not. By focusing on this book series and my role in its creation, I hope to provide insight into such publishing decisions, and to expose how the biases of an editor can impact the types of books that make it to market. I aim to examine whether the series established certain expectations for readers, authors and booksellers which excluded non-white and non-male voices.

Much of the existing scholarship around editorial decision-making includes (usually anonymous) views from current publishing employees. It is difficult, however, for these research subjects to be entirely honest about their instincts and tastes as editors. Anonymity does allow some openness (as seen in Saha and van Lente's report of 2020) but in the form of short quotes rather than sustained reflection and analysis. With the benefit of hindsight and the privilege afforded to me by no longer working in the industry<sup>1</sup>, I have the opportunity to go further here.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL**

As mentioned, the 33 1/3 series has been picked as a case study because I was its originating publisher and worked as its sole commissioning editor for the first several years of its existence. As a researcher, if I were studying the series I would endeavour to interview the editor who created and built it. So, I will be interrogating myself at times during this article. As per Chang (2008), I do this not with the aim of 'focusing on self alone, but...searching for understanding of others (culture / society) through self.' (Chang, pp.48-49)

I have chosen to use an autoethnographic approach for this study, and will be making use of – and contextualising – a range of sources including my own memories of how those books were commissioned, documentation from the time, as well as archival posts written by myself (as well as reader comments on those posts) from the series blog which was active for much of the period covered by this study and is still available to view online.

There is a broad field of scholarship which examines and reflects upon autoethnography as a method of research and which serves as a theoretical underpinning to this article (Denzin, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Vickers, 2002; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Barton, 2011; Chang, 2008). It is not my intention here to survey that field, but one researcher I have chosen to highlight is Campbell, who has explored the benefits of autoethnography in her own work around legal education, and whose writing resonates on a few levels.

Arguing for the value of the autoethnographic method, Campbell (2016) suggests that "We need stories of lived experience in order to amass multilayered knowledge of a phenomenon, understand its truths and meanings and its place in the culture. The thick description embodied in an autoethnographic approach can help make sense of our own experiences" (p.98). There's a dual approach here that feels authentic: using autoethnography as reflective attempt to make sense of one's own experiences, on the one hand; and working to understand a broader phenomenon (i.e. a series of books) and its place in (publishing) culture, on the other. As a former publisher tasked at the time with commissioning authors and building a list, there is an opportunity now afforded to me by temporal distance and my current role as an academic. By unpicking my own decisions and interrogating what lay behind them, it should be possible to offer insight into the broader cultural phenomena that surround parts of the publishing industry – particularly with regard to editorial bias.

This method of research is not without pitfalls. Campbell (2016) warns that one risk is that the researcher might change or reinterpret their experiences under the microscope, to better 'suit the purpose of the story'. (p.100) This could be deliberate or it could be a result of memories having faded or shifted, as noted by Marsden and Squires (2019). I will try in this article to rely on documented evidence – but memory will be a valuable part of the story, too.

Given that these events took place almost 20 years ago, how reliable is my memory? Is there a temptation to recall my decisions more positively, to make me seem more enlightened than perhaps I was? According to Chang (2008), '...autoethnographers are expected to treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what is recalled, observed, and told.' (Chang, p.49) We will be relying at times on my own recall, but I shall be as critical and analytical as it is possible to be.

I was not working alone on the 33 1/3 series. I was the sole editor until 2010 but even during those years I was working with colleagues in other parts of the company – in particular, from Sales, Marketing and Production. The series could not have functioned without valuable input from those colleagues and I need to be careful about how I frame that input within the context of this research. Campbell (2016) questions the dangers of how other people's stories might intersect with one's own, in such work. "It is inevitable that other people will be (in)direct participants in autoethnographic research. Even if I went on a year-long retreat into a cave without human company, I would naturally reflect on the people whom I had encountered in my life, those who moulded me, those whose advice I did or did not heed" (p.102). Editors in publishing do not work in a vacuum and there were many discussions during those years – as a tight-knit group of colleagues and friends in a small office environment – which fed into the series and its direction. I am confident, though, in stating that to a very large extent the concept of the series and the authors and subjects selected for publication were my decisions. Any bias we may discover will rest with me.

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<sup>1</sup> Since February 2017 I have been a lecturer in publishing at the University of Derby.



## THEORIES OF CURATION AND COMMISSIONING

The literature devoted to editorial decision-making and curatorial processes can be divided into three discrete but somewhat overlapping categories.

First, what might be classified as memoirs by eminent publishing figures (including Unwin, 1926; Harrap, 1935; Warburg, 1959; Blond, 1971; Doubleday, 1972; Cerf, 1977; Korda, 1999; Maschler, 2005; Goodings, 2020), typically written more as autobiography than as scholarship, and full of anecdotes (and wisdom) about famous authors and literary scenes. These books do contain reflections on publishing processes but often the focus is on the more commercial aspects of the business, around profits, bookselling, discounting, etc.

Second, there is insightful work by researchers including Bhaskar (2016, 2019), Davies (2004), Rodgers (2017), Squires (2017), Ginna (2017) and others – all of whom are, or have been at some point, editors within the industry, faced with making commissioning decisions about which book projects to acquire or reject. Bhaskar has pursued the editorial function with the greatest theoretical vigour so far. His thinking around how editors curate in order to build their lists is of direct relevance here, in particular the concept of a ‘unique editorial signature’ (2019, p.229) which is developed by individual editors. I hope to explore this, certainly taking into account ‘factors like gender, race and class...educational levels, personal beliefs...and temperament’ which Bhaskar (2019, p.231) suggests all contribute to how an editor goes about the act of commissioning books and building a list.

Thirdly, we have contributions to the field – often rooted in sociology – by scholars from both inside and outside the loose discipline of Publishing Studies, who have chosen to include publishing and its editorial functions in their broader investigations (Powell, 1985; Bourdieu, 2008; Thompson, 2010; Stewart, 2018; Ramdarshan Bold, 2015, 2019; Greenberg, 2015, 2018; O’Brien, 2016; Saha, 2017; Saha and van Lente, 2020). Much of this work focuses on disparities and inequalities in the industry, from Ramdarshan Bold’s pioneering work on representation in children’s and young adult books to O’Brien’s wider focus on the Creative Industries as sites of inequality and classism. Interestingly, much of this work prioritises fiction over non-fiction. It is, of course, essential that the creative stories told to readers represent diverse voices, but I argue that equal attention needs to be paid to diversity in non-fiction books (where expertise is often more important than narrative skill).

This article will contain elements of each of these three strands. There will be career recollections and reflections, but only in order to inform my thinking around the editorial function – which in turn will prompt further thoughts on the issue of diversity and bias in the publishing industry.

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND SERIES ORIGIN

Privately educated and having grown up in Berkshire, I was a typical publishing industry entrant in 1996: according to the most recent Publishers Association survey, 26.1% of respondents grew up in the south-east of England and nearly 20% of respondents attended a fee-paying or independent school – considerably higher than the national average for the UK. (Publishers Association, 2020) Did this background have an impact on my work as a commissioning editor? It seems essential to ask this, as per O’Brien et al: ‘... given the dominance of the children of professionals and managers in publishing, what are the implications for English literary culture?’ (2016, p.128).

Having moved from London to New York City in the spring of 2001 – five years after starting as an Editorial Assistant – with the remit of increasing the publishing output of Continuum’s small US office, I was lucky to have the time to think creatively about what types of books I wanted to publish, under the broad umbrella of non-fiction about popular culture. Aside from increasing title count, what was also at the front of my mind was trying to make my job as fun as it could possibly be. (The concept of publishing as “fun” is one that I aim to explore in future research.) I spotted the chance to create a book series that might allow me to indulge my two biggest passions: books and music.

My focus was on building a list of books that might appeal to committed music fans. To that end, I put together a list of 100 albums that I thought might work from three perspectives: that readers might want to buy the books, that authors might want to write them, and that book and record stores might want to support them. I no longer have the original list but I can recall that it contained albums by (among others) David Bowie, Radiohead, Bob Dylan, The Beach Boys, Patti Smith, Bruce Springsteen, Joy Division, The Smiths, Joni Mitchell, and The Rolling Stones. It did not contain much, if anything, in the genres of hip-hop, R&B, soul, disco, blues, metal, folk or pop.

The first six books, published in September 2003, were about albums by Pink Floyd, Dusty Springfield, Love, Neil Young, The Smiths and The Kinks. The authors were John Cavanagh, Warren Zanes, Andrew Hultkrans, Sam Inglis, Joe Pernice and Andy Miller. It was not a conscious decision to launch the series with six books written by six white men of about the same age as myself. I do not remember it even occurring to me that the author mix might be an issue.

It is worth interrogating the extent to which my own tastes influenced the series at the outset. There is a considerable body of research around taste in the field of cultural sociology and while there is not the space to discuss it fully here, it is still useful to touch upon.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his analysis of the work of editors in one type of publishing (literary fiction, in France) discusses taste in the context of a curatorial strategy.

“A book’s dual nature – as both a signifier and a commodity, a symbolic and an economic entity – requires an editor to have a dual character, one that can reconcile art and money, love of literature and the pursuit of profit, by devising strategies situated somewhere between the two extremes of cynical subservience and heroic indifference to the house’s economic needs.” (Bourdieu, 2008, p.138)

Bourdieu’s model of ‘art and money’ does not fit so neatly for editors working with non-fiction texts, or with more blatantly commercial books where the concept of ‘art’ might not apply so readily. In all sectors, though, one of the ways in which an editor is most likely to express their “love of literature” is to commission books that align closely with their own interests, as far as that is allowed within the publishing house’s (or imprint’s) remit. And when editors are, as the data tells us, overwhelmingly white and middle-class then we have one reason why so much publishing output might be targeted at those interests, those tastes. It is not the case that all editors are limited to their own experience of the world – there are examples of editors who work hard to publish different stories by different voices – but it is a default setting that can be easy to fall back on.

Another way of framing Bourdieu’s ‘dual character’ is presented by Stewart (2018), in his analysis of taste and curatorial practice of editors at larger independent publishers. Stewart suggests that a ‘portfolio approach’ is used in list-building: a deliberate policy of commissioning a mix of books, some that are very close to that editor’s personal tastes and some that are not – but which make commercial sense for that publisher to take on. (This has echoes of Childress’ description [2012] of editors acquiring a blend of books that either capture economic or cultural capital.) I certainly recognise this approach in my own commissioning past but again, as with Bourdieu’s framework, it feels more applicable to fiction. As with broader cultural discussions of publishing, fiction tends to dominate attention around curation and commissioning: we need to ensure that processes and patterns in the publishing of non-fiction are interrogated, too.

Childress (2012) in his study of how editorial taste intersects with use of BookScan sales data in US trade publishing, highlights how the “aesthetic sensibilities” (p.607) of editors play a key role in how books are acquired. He also argues that editors build up social capital within a publishing house by attempting to acquire books which they know most of their colleagues (other editors, staff in sales and marketing teams) will also support – thus creating an echo chamber of sorts in which the tastes of whole publishing imprints or divisions can settle into a groove with little risk of disruption. In her study of changing methods of commissioning in UK publishing in the digital age, Squires (2017) finds that editors learn to combine their personal taste with the corporate environment: what might feel like a gut reaction may well be an equally instant awareness of whether a manuscript one likes might fit the company’s list.

Although I recognise that personal/corporate hybrid from other commissioning in my career, at the outset of the 33 1/3 series it did not apply for the simple reason that the series bore little relation to the rest of Continuum’s output. The series, at the very start, was shaped by my own personal taste (the first six titles featured three of my favourite artists in The Smiths, The Kinks, and Love – and another of my favourite singer songwriters, Joe Pernice, as an author) and by a set of rudimentary assumptions about the possible readership for a series of obsessive books about music. I do not remember being challenged by any colleagues at the time about the white, male nature of the initial list of books – although it is possible that this occurred and I have forgotten it. My excitement about the project and its commercial potential was probably enough to encourage others to support it. We were also a small, tight-knit group of colleagues at that point which might have made it more difficult for anyone to raise the issue of bias with me.

It is also worth mentioning here – not as an excuse for any possible bias in the series but as further context for the cultural field with which the books were overlapping – the lack of gender and ethnic diversity in classic and indie rock. Sahim (2015) in her discussion of the whiteness of indie music (and “indie culture” more broadly) demonstrates that a network of artists, labels, producers is backed up by written coverage of the scene to reinforce a monoculture that seems designed to make outsiders (in her case, as a woman of colour) unwelcome. Schaap and Berkers (2020) explore the attitudes of American and Dutch rock music fans from a range of ethnic backgrounds towards their participation in that scene, finding that non-white rock fans report reactions of surprise, suspicion and scrutiny – again, not the unquestioning welcome that white participants typically feel. The music industry itself, like publishing, has often been accused of a lack of diversity. Smith et al (2021) report that in the U.S. music business, women of colour account for only 3.2% of senior executive roles despite the fact that the artists represented by those businesses are considerably more diverse in terms of both gender and ethnicity. And Wilson (2007) observes that for indie rock in particular, beyond issues of diversity mentioned above, social class can

exclude broader participation, too – arguing that this genre of music tends to be “bookish and nerdy” and packed with allusions and concepts that assume a certain level of cultural capital. This offers some further background to the attitudes and assumptions that I, as a white, male, middle-class and highly educated editor, was bringing to my curation of the 33 1/3 series from the outset.

## COMMISSIONING PROCESSES AND EARLY SERIES PROMOTION

A year and a half into the series’ life, 33 1/3 books were being published in batches at a quick pace. By this point, artists covered in the series included Jimi Hendrix, Abba, Prince, Joy Division, The Velvet Underground, The Beatles, James Brown, Jethro Tull, Radiohead, The Replacements, The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin and The Ramones. Further titles were about to publish on albums by Jeff Buckley, R.E.M. and Elvis Costello. In terms of the authors involved, all but two were male (writing about Abba and Jeff Buckley) and all were white except one (again, writing about Jeff Buckley).

I had moved from the original proactive commissioning model (initiating contact with potential authors) to a more reactive one. The series gained a lot of coverage during its launch period, so by the summer of 2004 I was receiving 5-10 emails per week from interested writers. How was I sifting through these queries? Often I was swayed by a writer’s existing profile: did they have a track record of writing articles for national or regional newspapers? Had they written for the music press? Did they have an online platform with a following? There were commercial considerations involved in those lines of thinking and there was also the suggested artist/album to consider, each time. I was not consciously choosing books about albums I liked but it certainly helped to sway some 50/50 decisions at times.

Was it inevitable that this initial process of curation would lead to a roster of white, male authors? I do not recall any thoughts of pushing back against that inevitability. It was easier not to think creatively about the voices I was offering a platform for.

The commissioning process flows in more than one direction. I, as the series editor, was selecting authors and proposals for publication. Equally, writers were proactively pitching their ideas to me: there was a selection process in play before the emails and phone calls reached me. Bourdieu (1985) writes about this ‘preselection’ process, arguing that authors develop specific perceptions of publishers during their own process of deciding where to submit or who to contact.

What was the image that potential authors received from the start of the series? Looking at the books published in 2003 and 2004, most authors might have concluded that we were looking for a combination of classic rock and pop with a sprinkling of mildly alternative artists added to the mix. The series had included Prince and James Brown by that point, but the output (in terms of subjects and authors) was still overwhelmingly white and male in its focus. Powell (1985) sees the author selection process as a kind of mating ritual, with editors and authors hoping to find overlapping aims – although to me that suggests more authorial power than many writers feel they have in the publishing relationship. Powell also writes about authors seeing publication as a way of enhancing their careers; but this too can flow in both directions. Often editors are looking to enhance their career prospects by seeking out content which might boost their reputation within the company or the wider industry. And under pressure to hit targets (as described by Thompson, 2010), it is tempting for editors to take the occasional shortcut by gravitating towards the types of content with which they are already familiar.

Such cultural familiarity can also be seen in promotional methods. With 33 1/3, any mainstream advertising was beyond our budget. Instead, we printed up a couple of thousand postcards to introduce the brand and the first six books and decided to hand those out to concertgoers in New York City in the summer of 2003.

Most of us who worked on the series lived in Brooklyn, where one of the major summer events was the “Celebrate Brooklyn” programme of shows in Prospect Park. I decided that this would be an ideal place to let music fans know about the series for the first time. Of the 26 events on the programme that summer, I chose to hand out the postcards at a concert by Belle & Sebastian, at that time my favourite band, so a show I would have attended anyway.

It is possible to argue that this decision made commercial sense: two of the launch titles in the series were on albums by Love and The Smiths, both bands beloved by Belle & Sebastian and hence by many of their fans, too. (Neither would it be a stretch to imagine their fans also being into The Kinks, Pink Floyd, Dusty Springfield, perhaps even Neil Young.)

By focusing on this audience for the series’ first promotional push, we were reinforcing the lack of diversity already apparent in the artists and authors selected. Other events that summer at which promotion could have happened included shows by Joan Armatrading, Blackalicious, Erykah Badu and Café Tacuba. Already at that point (before the series had even launched) I had decided that those audiences might not be the “best fit” for the books we were going to publish. It was far easier for me to stay within my comfort zone of broadly white, bookish readers who were just like me.

In their report (2020) about diversity in UK publishing, Saha and van Lente suggest that those involved in commissioning content ‘need to reflect more critically on the assumptions that frame their approach and challenge them where necessary.’ (p.15) I was not doing this, at the time I was launching the 33 1/3 series. There was no element of critical reflection in my job. It was simply a matter of commissioning and acquiring book projects, getting them approved in meetings, and hitting my targets each year. (For the books in the series, the decision was taken to avoid second-guessing which titles might outperform others and instead we projected an average global first-year sale of 5,000 copies each. Although some sold better and others sold worse, as an average that turned out to be fairly accurate. Our publishing meetings largely operated as rubber-stamping individual books in the series.) It would be easy to say that in the busy cut and thrust of publishing, there was no time for reflection; but the reality is that – at that point in the early 2000s – there was no impulse that I can remember to challenge my own assumptions.

The dynamic around the series and the method of commissioning started to shift in 2005 with the start of the series blog – the point of which was not only to promote the series but also to demystify and democratize (in my eyes) the publishing process, to open it up as much as possible. The blog launched by listing the books and authors published and due to publish in the coming months. It soon developed into a medium for informing readers about new titles, updates as to which book and record stores were stocking the series – and an increasing amount of more personal content. There were posts about what songs my father wanted to have played at his funeral; about short stories I’d enjoyed reading; about new bands I was enjoying; about my music teacher at school; about my dislike of vegetables, and about the death of the footballer George Best.

Scrolling again through these hundreds of blog posts between 2005 and 2009, I am struck by how consistent they are in their tone and their likely appeal to a narrow cross-section of readers. It would be possible to argue that this was smart publishing. The blog was an integral part of the series’ identity during those years, seeing a considerable amount of online traffic and even being covered as “Blog of the Week” in the UK’s *Sunday Times*. As smart as it may have been as a way of promoting the series, the blog served to amplify my own (white, male, middle-class) voice at the expense of others. From a potential author’s perspective, the content of the blog might have felt familiar, comfortable and inviting – or it could have looked exclusive and closed. One editor interviewed in Stewart’s 2018 study of independent publishers puts it bluntly: ‘...people will come to your website, and look around, and then they’ll see nothing but white, and they’ll be like, well this isn’t for me’ (Stewart, 2018, p.10). It isn’t simply in the books they choose to publish that publishers need to be inclusive. The paratexts around that publishing need to be inclusive, too – including the language and cultural references used on websites, in back cover copy and on social media.

The blog became more than a way of engaging readers and promoting the series when I started using it as a way of commissioning content. In the next section, I will analyse how that process worked as a method of curation, examining the range of authors and subject matter that resulted from the open calls and determining to what extent – if any – the series shifted its identity as a result.

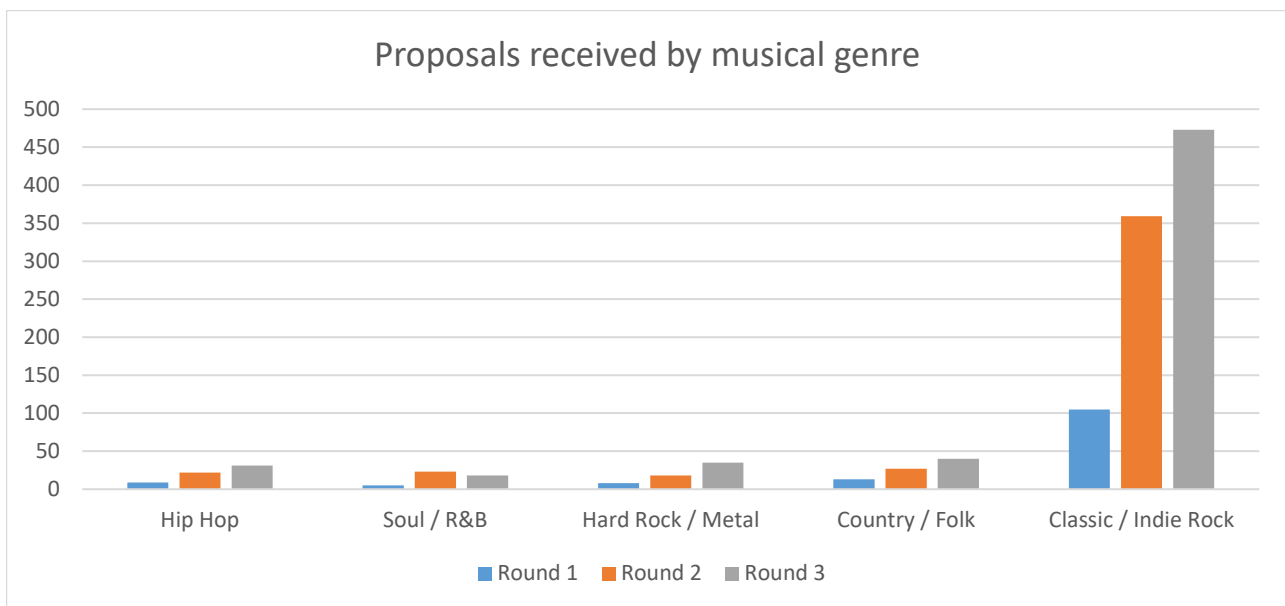
## PROPOSALS SUBMITTED: DATA ANALYSIS FROM 2005 TO 2009

The following sections of this article will break down the submitted proposals received via the three open calls in the years 2005 (Round 1 below), 2007 (Round 2) and 2008/9 (Round 3), with the aim of assessing how closely the books which were commissioned mirrored the mix of the proposals received, in terms of author profiles and subject matter. In other words, was I using the privilege of my editorial role to make my publishing representative of the proposals I received? Or was I still subconsciously pursuing my own agenda for the series, under the guise of being open and democratic?

The graphic in [Figure 1](#) shows the number of proposals received across the three open call windows, by musical genre. It shows clearly how the overall numbers increased after the first window in 2005 and also how proposals for books about classic/indie rock acts dwarfed those for books about other types of music. These numbers are not rigidly scientific as not all of the albums suggested fall precisely into one musical genre but I have tried to be as consistent as possible in classifying them and I am confident that these ratios are representative.

The first call for proposals on the blog was on 21 September 2005. My aim was to be as open as possible, as well as to funnel potential authors into a window of time – in order to slow the stream of emails from people asking to write for the series. In terms of openness, I do not recall framing this in terms of a deliberate, proactive drive for diversity. It was more in the sense of ‘anybody should feel welcome to have a go at writing for the series’. I remember feeling excited by this change of commissioning strategy and hoping that it would make readers feel more connected to the series.

This initial post was followed on 1 December 2005 by a list of proposals which had been received: the first fruits of a commissioning method which would become one of the series’ hallmarks in the following years.



**Figure 1.** Proposals received by musical genre.

### Late 2005 call for proposals

During that first call for proposals in late 2005, 140 were received. In terms of the artists covered, 6% fell under the genre of hip-hop, 3% were soul / R&B / reggae / funk, 6% were hard rock / metal, 9% were country / roots / folk music, and the remaining 76% fit the broad classic / indie rock / pop category as described earlier. Considering that some artists received more than one proposal (The Flaming Lips received four, for example), we can break down the gender of the artists as follows: 9% of proposals were for books about solo female artists, all-female bands, or clearly female-fronted bands. The remaining 91% of proposals were for books about male solo artists or all/mostly male bands.

In the comments from readers below the blog post announcing the list of artists for whom proposals had been received, there was one mention of the lack of metal artists on the list – quickly followed by: “Still very few women...very interesting.” (Anon, 2005) The remaining comments covered the publishing decision-making processes involved, for example:

“I’m amazed that bands like Arcade Fire and Libertines are being pitched. Not that I don’t like them, but classic albums need time and historical perspective to be considered classic.”

and

“I would love to be a fly on the wall for the selection process. You must have some serious aesthetics/audience/series cohesion mathematics to perform to get the answers here.”

A few weeks later, I announced on the blog that we would be offering contracts to 21 of the proposals received. Of those 21 books, 24% would be written by women and 76% by men – a more balanced ratio than in the submissions received. 10% of the authors selected for publication were non-white. In terms of the music being written about, all the artists were white except for two: Stevie Wonder and A Tribe Called Quest. And five of the artists were female (or female-led) with the others being male bands or solo artists.

It would be possible to argue that the 21 books commissioned during this open call represented a more diverse range of authors and subject matter than the pool of 140 proposals originally received. By this stage, if the series was shifting in its focus it was towards a few more left-field choices (Celine Dion, The Minutemen, Throbbing Gristle, Lucinda Williams) – but in terms of diversity it still remained closely aligned to my own experience and tastes instead of taking the opportunity to publish more writers of colour and to tell more stories about artists from diverse backgrounds.

### Early 2007 call for proposals

The next open call for proposals took place a year later, in January 2007. Prospective authors were no longer able to submit a proposal for a book about an artist that had already been covered by the series. (Was this an attempt to encourage more diverse submissions, or simply a commercial decision to prevent cannibalisation of our

own sales? I cannot remember.) In mid-February the blog announced the list of proposals received under the heading “Maybe we’ll do both of the Osmonds albums”.

The total list included 449 separate proposals. In terms of artist gender, 9% were solo female artists, all-female bands, or female-fronted bands. The remaining 91% were solo male artists, all-male bands, or mostly male bands. In terms of musical genres, 5% fell under the genre of hip-hop, 5% were soul / R&B / reggae / funk, 4% were hard rock / metal, 6% were country / roots / folk music, and the remaining 80% fit into the broad classic / indie rock / pop category.

There were over 150 comments left below the blog post which listed the proposals, showing a large amount of reader participation with the series at this point. Most of the comments were from people listing what their own book choices would be, from the list. There were no mentions of the list’s overwhelming focus on white rock and pop music – one interpretation of which might be that these engaged followers of the series were being offered what they had come to expect.

In March 2007, I announced on the blog that we would be offering contracts to 21 of the proposals received. Of those, 9% would be written by women and 91% written by men. 9% of the authors were non-white. There was a notably higher proportion of non-white artists than the series had previously engaged with (29% of the books signed up), with albums chosen by Funkadelic, Nas, Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, Public Enemy, Wu-Tang Clan and Outkast. In stark contrast, only one of the artists (Tori Amos) was female.

The books commissioned in this 2007 open call certainly showed a more diverse range of subjects and was moving away from my personal tastes, to an extent. It seems like there was an effort to include more hip-hop in particular – although some of those books never made it to fruition due to authors later dropping out.

In terms of comments left by readers below the announcement of the 21 titles signed up, there was an even (and at times acrimonious) split between those who thought the list looked great, and those who didn’t like it, mainly because too many of the artists were “obscure”. One anonymous commenter noted the near total lack of female authors as problematic:

“David, very disappointing that there aren't more women authors, it doesn't seem right. From the number of proposals you received I'm sure there were more women, and more music by women for that matter.” (Anon, 2007)

Although I did respond to quite a few of the comments below the announcement of the 21 books chosen, I chose not to respond to that one. At a distance of fourteen years I cannot remember precisely why, but I would assume that it was a combination of feeling “guilty as charged” and a reluctance to get into an online debate that would have reflected badly on me.

### **Late 2008 call for proposals**

The next open call for proposals took place at the end of 2008, shortly after the economic crash. This time, authors were able to submit proposals for albums by artists who had already been covered in the series. By mid-January 2009 the deadline had passed and I announced on the blog a list of proposals received under the heading “The Longlist”.

There were 597 separate proposals. In terms of artist gender, 8% were solo female artists, all-female bands, or female-fronted bands. The remaining 92% were solo male artists, all-male bands, or mostly male bands. In terms of musical genres, 5% fell under hip-hop, 3% were soul / R&B / reggae / funk, 6% were hard rock / metal, 7% were country / roots / folk music, and the remaining 79% fit into the classic / indie rock / pop category.

There were over 250 comments left below the blog post which listed the proposals, showing an even higher amount of reader engagement than previously. Again, many of the comments were from people listing what their own book choices would be – but there were also flashes of debate around what readers thought the series should be doing. Two anonymous commenters pointed out the series’ lack of books by women and about women, for example: “There needs to be more female artists / more female writers represented in this series...the proposals have to be chosen on merit, what will sell, how good the angle is...but come on 33 1/3, there MUST be some female authors from this list that fit those criteria?” (Anon, 2009)

Others argued that more recent albums shouldn’t be considered for the series, because “classic albums” need time to achieve that status. One person commented that the series needed more books about soul music. Another commenter noted the narrowness of the hip hop proposals on the list, comparing that to the breadth of the list’s music by white people. Interestingly it was the writers who were criticised for being boring, instead of the series itself (or myself, as editor). Several commenters suggested that the series was in danger of catering exclusively to rock snobs or indie hipsters.

In May 2009, I announced on the blog that we would be offering contracts to 11 of the proposals received. This was a considerably lower number than in previous open call processes: the economic crash of September 2008 had a negative impact on Continuum as well as the rest of the publishing industry. Still, my reaction now on

revisiting this announcement is that choosing only 11 proposals from nearly 600 submitted feels like a poor return on time for those writers.

Should I have been clearer about this at the outset of the open call window, about how few authors would end up receiving contracts? And is this perhaps part of the gatekeeping role that publishers could demystify for authors? Data about the numbers of proposals accepted and rejected each year by publishers and agents could be made public. Academic publishers often do this, making public their “rejection rates” as a way of trying to demonstrate the quality of their output, but I have seen few attempts from trade publishers to discuss this openly. Crisp (2017) wrote briefly about one imprint and showed that of 503 submissions to Tor UK over a period of five months, four books were signed up. Such transparency could feed into useful discussions around diversity and bias, as well as around the likelihood of earning a living as a (traditionally published) author. There will be sensitivities around this but that is part of the underlying problem: if publishers and agents have nothing to hide in terms of their commissioning practices then there should be no such concerns around making the data available.

Of the 11 books I signed up in May 2009, ten would be written by men and only one by a woman. Two of the 11 authors were non-white. In terms of the music being written about, only one of the artists was non-white (Aretha Franklin) and only two of the artists (Aretha and Liz Phair) were female.

In contrast to the previous open call, the 11 books commissioned here showed a retreat from opening the series up to a broader range of content. My reaction, undertaking this research now, is one of embarrassment. Six years after the series started, I was still mostly signing up books about white men, written by white men. I have zero recollection of this being a deliberate strategy but neither do I recall thinking that I should be doing something about it. A charitable interpretation might be that the economic crash prompted a safety-first approach to commissioning new books in the spring of 2009. Some of the artists chosen do back that up (The Rolling Stones, Johnny Cash, Radiohead, AC/DC, Aretha Franklin) while others don't (Dinosaur Jr., Slint, Ween, Portishead). There were perhaps, echoes of this conservative approach in 2020 when the *Bookseller* reported publishers as looking for guaranteed hits on the back of the disruption caused by COVID-19. (Chandler, 2020)

In terms of comments left by readers below the announcement of the 11 titles signed up, there was some vigorous debate between those who found the list disappointing and those who were still supportive of the series. One comment in particular stands out, arguing at some length that the demographic of people who might want to write an obsessive book about one album is likely to be white, male and college educated – and that the books being signed up might therefore reflect the ratio of submissions received. But this is surely reflective of the 33 1/3 series and its identity over its first six years. Why would (for example) a young, black, female music writer even have considered the series a welcoming space back in 2008, given its near relentless focus on books about college rock and classic rock written by white men?

After this open call in late 2008 / early 2009, there was a long gap. Continuum at that point was transforming itself into a purely academic publishing company and the 33 1/3 series didn't fit that identity neatly. Continuum was acquired by Bloomsbury in the summer of 2011, to bolster the latter's academic publishing depth and capability. In late 2012 another open call took place but by that point I was handing over editorship of the series to a colleague and my role at Bloomsbury was changing.

I won't, therefore, analyse that submission window in any detail here but we will see its impact (and the impact of subsequent open calls, post-2013) during the next section of this article. I don't intend to discuss the work of my successors on the series but it can be instructive to compare output during the early years when I edited the series and the later years when it was edited by others.

## VARIANCES IN SERIES DIVERSITY DURING MY EDITORSHIP COMPARED TO LATER YEARS

The graph in [Figure 2](#) shows the number of female authors published by the series annually, from 2003 through to 2019. The point at which I stopped having a direct influence on what was being signed up was 2012. It's clear from this graph that the subsequent series editors (both of whom were women) took a more proactive approach to signing up female authors.

The graph in [Figure 3](#) shows the number of female artists covered by the series annually from 2003 through to 2019. Again, there is a clear trend here that the years after 2012 saw a more proactive approach to signing up books about female artists.



Figure 2. Number of female authors published by the series annually, from 2003 through to 2019.

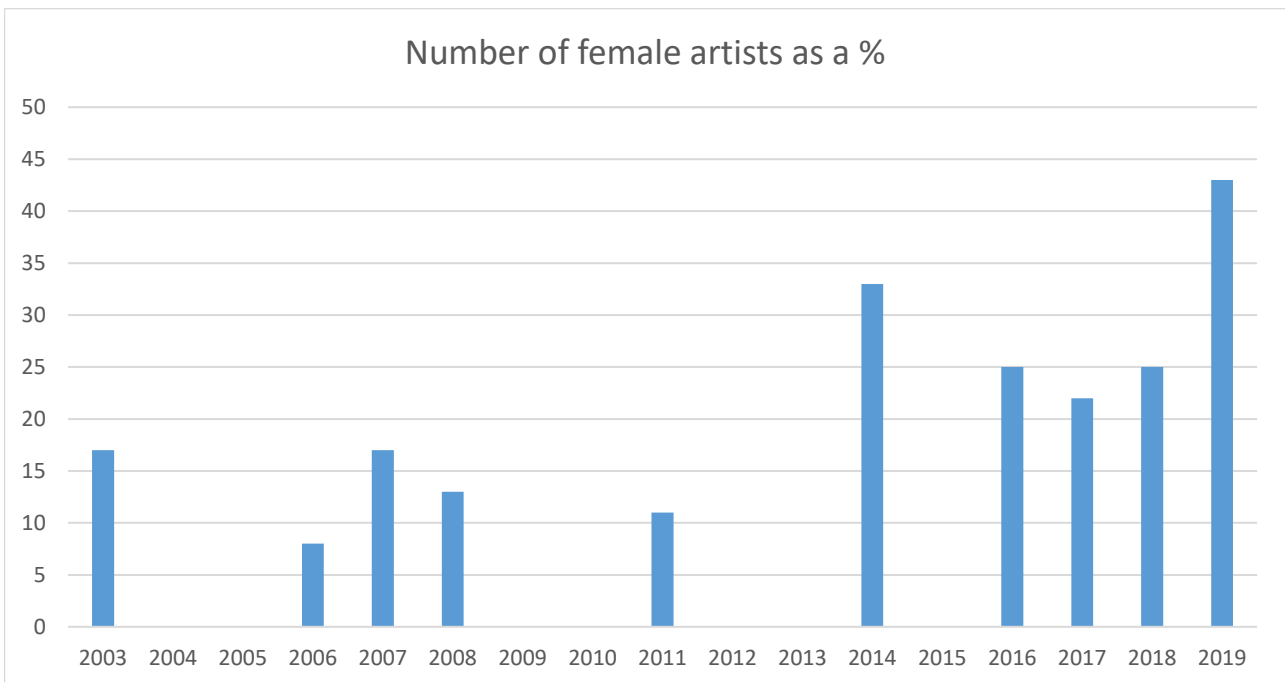
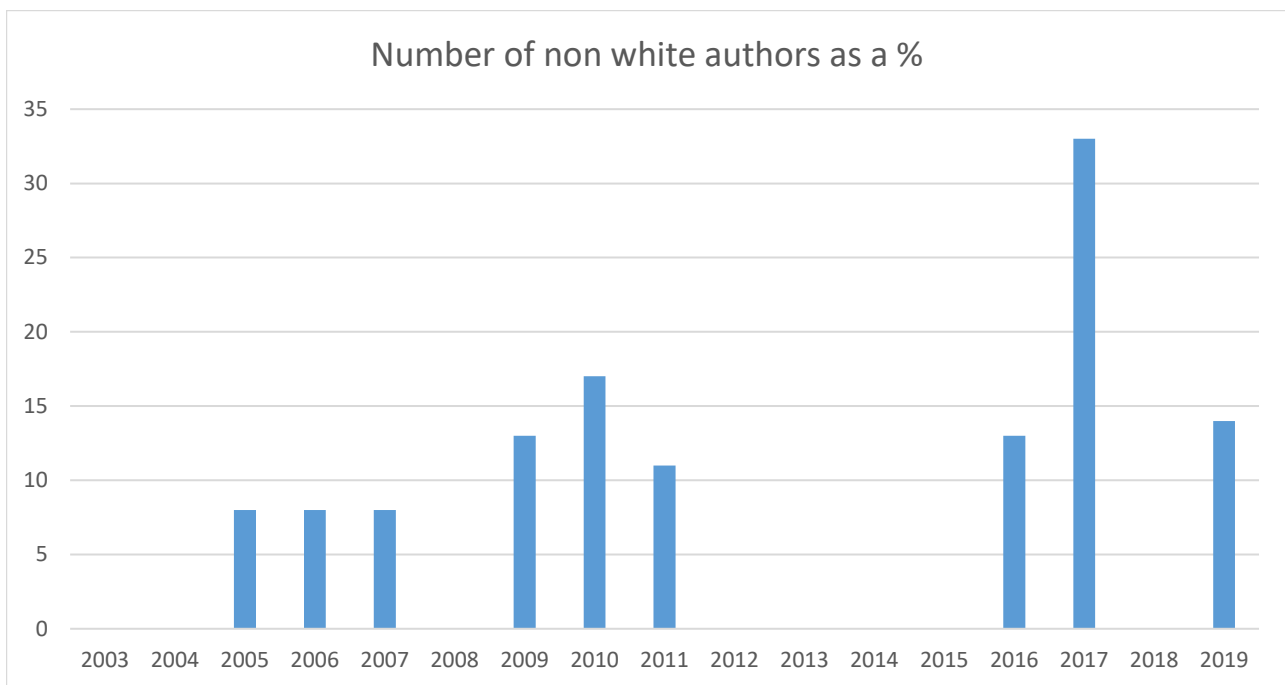


Figure 3. Number of female artists covered by the series annually from 2003 through to 2019.

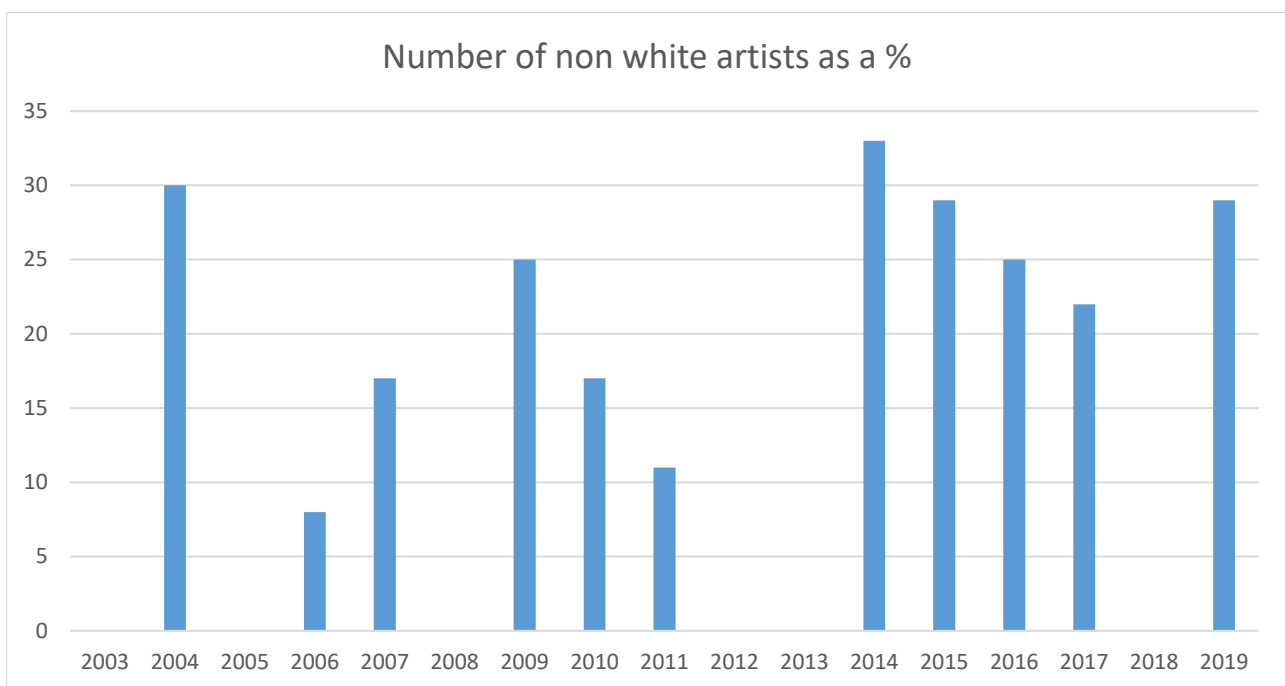
The graph in [Figure 4](#) shows the number of non-white authors published by the series from 2003 through to year 2019. There is less of a divide here between the results of my editorship and the years that followed, although a strong hint in 2017 that the series was working to be more inclusive.

The final graph in [Figure 5](#) shows the number of non-white artists covered by the series from 2003 through to 2019. Again, there are indications here that the years after my editorship saw a more consistently proactive approach to signing up books about non-white artists.





**Figure 4.** Number of non-white authors published by the series from 2003 through to year 2019.



**Figure 5.** Number of non-white artists covered by the series from 2003 through to 2019.

These graphics demonstrate, to varying degrees, that the series became more diverse along gender and ethnicity lines after my editorship ended. This is difficult for me to write about, as the narrative I had constructed for myself was that although the series did start out being very monocultural, by the later stages of my direct involvement in commissioning it had become much more welcoming and inclusive. The data doesn't support that, and this failure was my responsibility. In order to explore a little more of the possible publishing psychology behind it, in the next section we will interrogate my thinking around sales figures and projections in the series.

## SERIES SALES EXPECTATIONS AND BIAS

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 gave rise to several articles and reports which were sharply critical of the publishing industry. Much of this was focused on employee diversity as well as gatekeeping by agents and editors. There were also insightful discussions around how the industry uses “comparable books” to predict sales of new titles.

Mahey-Morgan (2020) argues that assumptions about sales forecasts for books by non-white authors are often misleading, as previous publications by writers of colour may well have been inadequately promoted – or promoted to the wrong audience. Saha and van Lente (2020) in their report find similar practices. In one particularly illuminating section they describe how it’s possible to use ‘comparable’ sales data on previous books in order to reinforce an editor’s bias about certain types of books or authors.

This fits with my own interior monologue about the 33 1/3 series, every time I studied the sales data. (The blog had a regular ‘league table’ feature, in which I ranked all titles in order of sales units, so I was constantly aware of which books were selling well and which weren’t.) The league table I posted on 7 November 2007, for example, lists 49 books published in the series to that point, in descending order. The top-selling books are on albums by Neutral Milk Hotel, The Beatles, The Kinks, The Smiths, The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin – three of which can be partially explained by being among the first batch of books published in the series. These squarely fit the classic / indie rock template for which the series had become known. At the bottom end of the table, there are books about James Brown, Abba, Sly and the Family Stone, The MC5, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, Guns N Roses and A Tribe Called Quest.

I remember trying to figure out why these books hadn’t worked as well as others. To take one example: when analysing disappointing sales of the books about Joni Mitchell and James Brown, my thought process was roughly: *People who listen to James Brown probably don’t buy books about him, and I must have chosen the wrong Joni Mitchell album to publish a book about.*

My self-questioning at the time didn’t go any deeper than that: a problematic assumption that fans of James Brown’s music were less likely to buy books about it, while fans of Joni Mitchell must surely live in houses festooned with books. I remember framing it in my mind at the time as a “rhythmic / dancing music” vs “literate / bookish music” dichotomy but there was racial bias in play here. As Saha and van Lente (2020) observe of beliefs held within the UK publishing industry: “There also remain suspicions over whether racial and ethnic minorities read, or at least to the same extent.” (p.10)

Part of my bias stemmed from cultural ignorance. I was aware that there were more famous Joni Mitchell albums we could have chosen, because I knew a fair amount about her music; while about James Brown’s body of work, I knew very little. As Mahey-Morgan (2020) argues, ‘the industry has a history of letting down Black and brown writers through monochrome work forces who don’t know how to speak to different audiences.’ I had not even gone that far, however: instead of finding a Black writer to tackle the work of James Brown, I had signed up a middle-class, Harvard educated, white male author.

Did the relatively poor performances of the James Brown, Sly Stone and Stevie Wonder books make me reluctant to sign up more books about other non-white artists? It certainly contributed to my lack of confidence around being able to predict strong sales for such books. I knew enough about indie rock to be certain that a book about Neutral Milk Hotel would sell well but my knowledge of similarly cultish soul, R & B and hip hop acts was minimal. In a way it became a self-fulfilling prophecy: books I signed up about non-white artists weren’t published with any confidence – and if you don’t publish a book with confidence, to the right readership, then its chances of succeeding in a crowded marketplace are vanishingly small.

There are other factors in play in the publishing ecosystem. The series was primarily supported by independent record stores in the United States. These connections did not overtly shape my editorial choices but did perhaps add to the loop of feedback when re-orders kept coming in for books about certain artists which were popular with those stores’ clientele (examples being Neutral Milk Hotel, Joy Division, The Velvet Underground, Guided By Voices, and The Ramones). The same blog post referred to above also mentioned a promotion that Barnes & Noble were running with the series in late 2007, bundling together a book from the series with a CD of the relevant album. The books selected by B&N were those about The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen and Jeff Buckley: evidence, I would suggest, that the biggest bookstore chain in the US at that time was as focused on the monocultural aspects of the series as I was. The music books buyer at Barnes & Noble was interested in the series, but would look up their sales history of other books about musicians or bands to help with her decision-making – so if their internal systems showed poor sales for books about an artist, our book would not be ordered. This is one small example of the centralised book buying power which all bookstore chains use to some extent and which is flagged up by Saha and van Lente (2020) as another area in which the publishing ecosystem favours well established norms. (Their report focuses on non-white authors of fiction but the same issues apply to non-

white authors of non-fiction and also to non-fiction about subjects which might lie outside of a buyer's comfort zone or cultural awareness.)

## CONCLUSION

This has been a difficult article to research and write. My memories of the period covered are uniformly positive. As mentioned earlier, creating and curating the 33 1/3 series was fun. I had the chance to work with brilliant authors and colleagues to build a series of books which I was proud of and which entertained and informed – and occasionally infuriated – its readers. Reflecting now, it is striking just how *unaware* I was of how my editorial decisions over a period of years combined to create a space that was so unwelcoming to writers and readers who were female or non-white.

There are limitations to this study. It would have been instructive to be able to compare the gender and ethnic backgrounds of all the writers who submitted proposals to the series with the projects I eventually signed up during each open call, in order to gain a deeper understanding of any particular bias I was showing towards authors. It would also have helped greatly to have the original list of albums I created at the start of the series' life. Neither of these gaps, in my view, detract too much from what the evidence here tells us.

Also, this is one specific case study, covering events which occurred several years ago. It is very possible that editors now are being more inclusive in their publishing decisions – the available data shows improvements in some areas but not in others. (Penguin Random House UK, for example, across both its staff and its authors / illustrators, comes in at least three times higher than the national average in terms of people having attended fee-paying schools.) I would like to think that conversations within publishing companies have moved on since the early 2000s and there are encouraging signs that this may indeed be the case.

The key point here, though, is that at no point was I doing my non-inclusive commissioning work deliberately. There was no conscious plan to make the 33 1/3 series a space dominated by white, male voices. And there were no checks and balances in place to prevent this from happening.

Undertaking this autoethnographic research has reinforced for me the position of privilege that commissioning editors have in the publishing industry and how easily that position can be abused. I should have figured it out myself, of course, but at no point did any senior figures tell me about the responsibility that needs to go along with the role of commissioning (and rejecting) books. There was no training and there were no audits in place beyond the simplest commercial ones – only an assumption that I would bring in books that would generate revenue for the company, within the confines of that list, that imprint, that division. Any words of advice from managers and senior colleagues that I had received since starting my entry-level role in 1996 had all focused on the more administrative side of working in publishing: how best to manage my time, what methods to use when chasing up a late manuscript, and – once I started commissioning – various tips around ways of finding and approaching potential new authors.

It never occurred to me when I became an editor that the role which would occupy the next 20 years of my life should revolve around amplifying the voices of authors. Neither did it occur to me that by choosing to amplify some, I was prioritising those voices over others. I never realised that even if you are dimly aware of the need to reflect society in your publishing decisions you can still demonstrate cultural incompetence in how you go about your commissioning. Whether an editor is working with non-fiction about music or travel, nature or politics, sport or history, religion or humour, or whether an editor is looking to publish poetry or crime fiction, Young Adult novels or picture books, literary fiction or romance, the privilege and the responsibility are still the same – and this needs to be drummed into editorial staff from the day they start as assistants.

Again, this is not to deflect from my own failings, but if publishing companies are serious about increasing the range of what they publish then this type of editorial training feels like an essential step. Early signs from discussions around the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 were positive. Commitments from the heads of Penguin Random House UK and Usborne in particular seemed to acknowledge the need for much greater responsibility around which voices get published. To hear a children's publisher unequivocally state that 'we are in a position of privilege and influence and we must use that' (Usborne, 2020) does appear to demonstrate increased awareness of curatorial responsibility. Similar language is used throughout the statement put out by Penguin Random House UK. Describing a 'profound sense of responsibility' (Weldon, 2020), the document also includes a commitment to mandatory training around inclusivity and anti-racism. It also includes a commitment that PRH UK's acquisitions will closely reflect UK society by 2023 although there is no mention of how that goal might be audited or enforced at the level of each individual editor.

The "Rethinking 'Diversity'" report (2020) offers ample evidence to suggest that publishers 'need to challenge their own assumptions about whether publishing truly is a meritocracy.' (Saha and van Lente, p.17) This is the trap I fell into with the 33 1/3 series. The assumption I made was that the open call process created a level playing field for all interested authors. But by framing the series from the start as very much focused on white, male rock music,

and by conceiving of the blog as a space to showcase aspects of my personal tastes, certain parameters had already been established – for readers, for bookstores, and for prospective authors. As a thought experiment, imagine if the first six books in September 2003 had been written by a mix of women and men from diverse backgrounds, and the subjects had been Prince, Aretha Franklin, Public Enemy, Bjork, The Beatles, and Blondie. As a set of six books, that would have been just as commercial and could have shaped the future direction of the series in very different ways.

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Comment Piece

## Stealing (as) Art. Performances of Restitution from Mwazulu Diyabanza to Frankfurter Hauptschule

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### ABSTRACT

Restitution, the returning of art works and objects collected under colonial regimes, still is a fictitious act. In the restitution debate, declarations of intent as made by the French president Emmanuel Macron in 2017 have been among the most radical acts so far – at least in politics. In pop culture and the arts, restitution has come to be imagined more and more radically in the recent past. In line with a more general trend of art activism, artists have also turned to enactments of restitution by symbolically stealing looted or colonialist art. In this comment piece, I analyze two different examples of art activism on restitution – actions by Mwazulu Diyabanza and Frankfurter Hauptschule. In my analysis, I address both aesthetic and ethical questions of positionality, artistic agency and the western gaze.

**Keywords:** restitution, activism, western gaze, ethical turn, art criticism

If restitution was an art genre, it would be fiction – at least for now. In the political discourse about restitution – the returning of artworks and objects collected under colonial regimes – declarations of intent as made by the French president Emmanuel Macron in 2017 have been among the most radical acts so far (Sarr and Savoy, 2019). Given the slow process, a new sense of urgency seems to emerge in pop culture and the arts. Restitution has not only come to be *imagined* all the more frequently and radically in the recent past, it is also slowly being moved towards the *doable* through performance and enactments, forms that stress the prefigurative potential of the arts (Serafini, 2018). In the successful Marvel movie *Black Panther* (2018), the practice of looting art was transferred to today's political imaginary and aesthetic, symbolically reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed. In March 2020, the Congolese activist Mwazulu Diyabanza stole a funeral stake from the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris arguing that it was absurd that he needed to pay to see a piece of art that was stolen from his country of origin.<sup>1</sup> In October 2020, the German artist collective Frankfurter Hauptschule performance published the video 'Bad Beuys', in which three performers steal the German artist Joseph Beuys' sculpture 'Capri Battery' (1985) from an exhibition and bring it to the former German colony of Tanzania. While it is not the stolen objects that are returned, a German piece of art is re-located as an enacted reversal of the historical process, aimed at activating the German debate on restitution. In this comment piece, I would like to discuss these political actions of Mwazulu Diyabanza and Frankfurter Hauptschule to highlight some aspects of the current relationship between art and politics and how they show in the debate about restitution. Using a comparative approach, I employ a

<sup>1</sup> Mwazulu Diyabanza also staged several similar actions in other museums throughout Europe.

methodological mix of aesthetic and ethical criticism which Claire Bishop has reflected upon in her considerations about the ‘ethical turn’ in art criticism, i.e., the tendency to judge activist art by ethical standards only – at the expense of the aesthetic (Bishop, 2012).

Since a wave of global protest in 2011, including the artist-initiated movement *Occupy Wall Street* (McKee, 2016), art activism has become more common and even mainstream (van den Berg et al., 2019). Art activism takes on at least three forms: *activists* moving towards artistic ‘repertoires of contention’ (della Porta, 2013), *artists* becoming more directly involved in politics, and *artists* or *activists* addressing the institutional politics of the arts.<sup>2</sup> Mwazulu Diyabanza can be considered part of the latter group. He does not present his campaign as his artistic work but relies on artistic means to pursue a predominantly political goal. Frankfurter Hauptschule, on the other hand, is a group of artists who – at least in the work I study here – situate their political work *within* their art.<sup>3</sup> Even though these are two distinct forms of art activism, both actions are not only united by a relationship to art, but also by an attitude of urgency that, I would argue, is characteristic for art activism across the three mentioned forms.<sup>4</sup> In a similar line of reasoning, art historian and restitution expert Bénédicte Savoy described the action of Diyabanza as a ‘step to action’ (Deutschlandfunk, 2020) – thereby suggesting that the topic had been *imagined* sufficiently in the arts beforehand, and that there is now a sense of urgency to act.

Despite sharing an activist approach, the differences in how these two actions are articulated are quite striking. Diyabanza’s action was not considered art but theft, and he was fined 1,000 euros by a Parisian court. He used the attention for his case to accuse France of hoarding 90,000 objects of African cultural heritage in French museums. Diyabanza’s action can be seen as a campaign about art, that includes performative elements. However, he does not cling to the institutional realm of art, nor does he appear as an artist. He acts with a critical distance to the art system, drawing on media tactics. In contrast, Frankfurter Hauptschule’s ‘Bad Beuys’ is forwarded as art, and as such it has a complex relationship with its own object of criticism. Almost as a disclaimer that navigating this complexity comes with ambivalence, the video is dedicated to ‘Christoph Schlingensief, who did not always do everything right’ (Frankfurter Hauptschule, 2020).<sup>5</sup> The video documents how Joseph Beuys’ sculpture ‘Capri Battery’ is brought to Tanzania by the artists, supposedly with the goal of displaying it in the ethnological museum Iringa Boma with the explanation that “under the colonial regime, art objects ... of Hehe leaders were stolen from Iringa and brought to Germany in ... numbers” (Frankfurter Hauptschule, 2020).

The video shows the act of stealing from the exhibition as imagined in generic gangster movies (wearing black masks, carrying torches). On their trip to ‘Africa’,<sup>6</sup> the performers are shown getting on the plane wearing safari gear, relaxing during a massage at the airport, hanging by the pool upon arrival and having a party before travelling to the ethnological museum Iringa Boma the next day, where they hand over the artwork during a festive ceremony. The video abstains from spoken commentary, with Toto’s song ‘Africa’ playing in the background and producing an atmosphere of casual joy. A few weeks days after the publication of the video, ‘Bad Beuys’ turned out to be a staged theft and a media hoax – the ‘Capri Battery’ was found a few days later in storage at the theatre of Oberhausen.

What the action achieves is to show – and question – a sequence of clichés about ‘Africa’. In the video, Frankfurter Hauptschule exaggerates the western gaze to an extent that may productively detach the viewers from this way of seeing, ashamed of their intuitive literacy of the signs on display. In this line of interpretation, the video is a somewhat brutal compilation of Western rudimental knowledge about Africa. The peak of this may be the moment when one of the performers holds up high the Beuys sculpture, while standing on a cliff, referencing an iconic scene from the Walt Disney movie *Lion King* (Figure 1). If casually seen on social media however, which is where the work was distributed, the video was also smoothly consumable as it matches the conventions of the medium and does not offer any obvious break with its ways of seeing – exaggeration, I would argue, constitutes no substantial break in this case. As such, the video also reproduces many exotifying clichés of ‘Africa’.

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<sup>2</sup> These forms can intermingle.

<sup>3</sup> It seems important to state that both trends seem interconnected and non-hierarchical. In this piece, I am predominantly interested in artists turning to activism.

<sup>4</sup> I should note that the designation *art activism* or *activist* is rarely embraced by the artists themselves. I use this designation as an analytical perspective that stresses the political act, well aware that this is a contingent perspective that does not serve as an absolute designation of the works and subjectivities analyzed.

<sup>5</sup> Christoph Schlingensief was a German artist and theatre director who staged many political actions. The exhibition in Oberhausen, that the ‘Capri Battery’ was ‘stolen’ from, was dedicated to his work.

<sup>6</sup> The destination ‘Africa’ – rather than Tanzania or the local destination – is a quote from the video caption.





**Figure 1.** Video still from “Bad Beuys”, Youtube Channel of the collective Frankfurter Hauptschule, October 2020

Having looked at the performative and aesthetic elements of these very different artistic approaches to restitution, I would like to consider some ethical questions. The urgency, or even the somewhat liberating impatience that unites the two projects, is based in the aesthetic gesture of *doing something*, that is, *enacting theft*, instead of bearing the length of the cultural and political processes within which restitution seems to be stuck. As such, both projects offer a concrete boost in imagination, offering viewers to be confronted with how it feels to see (ephemeral) change. Still, the politics of restitution are about giving more weight to African perspectives in the first place. This is linked to a broader debate about decolonizing art, in which questions of authorship and positionality are being raised. One key line of reasoning in this debate suggests that it does make a difference *who* makes art, i.e., who stages an act of restitution, from what position of privilege and at whose cost.<sup>7</sup> Frankfurter Hauptschule holds a double privilege – as EU citizens, but also as artists operating with a special freedom. Their work is conceptualized as an act of solidarity, but especially its post-ironical approach to the topic seems based on a privilege someone like Diyabanza does not hold.

I do not aim to argue that there cannot be a pro-restitution artwork from a white art collective – on the contrary. It is especially white silence that holds back restitution from happening, which calls for acts of allyship by and with white people. While I explicitly refrain from criticizing the artists for their political identities, – an absurd track for art criticism that tends to flirt with an essentialist notion of culture – I do have to stress that their different backgrounds both as white folks and as artists make a crucial difference in their *approach* to restitution discourse, as well as in the *risk* of their actions. The performers of Frankfurter Hauptschule make art and are as such protected from legal consequences. Diyabanza acts in a real space, and *as himself* – thereby risking both fees and prison fines. What seems crucial in this distinction is that it is the very notion of art that privilege is hooked on: not fearing consequence, operating outside of social norms and certain legal frameworks.

While ‘Bad Beuys’ may be strong in ironically anticipating the absurdities of ethical art criticism (‘For Christoph Schlingensief, who did not always do everything right’) – the work does not offer a break with its own political conditions. This mainly shows in the narrative of restitution as reconciliation: it reproduces a white perspective of redemption and liberation from colonial guilt. Solidary activism needs to go further, it needs reflect its own positionality and the conditions of the artist’s perspective – not to comply with any standard of political correctness, but to get to the cultural grounds of what makes restitution meaningful and necessary.

<sup>7</sup> To name two examples: the debate about the German translation of Amanda Gorman’s poem ‘The hill we climb’ in 2021 or the dispute about Dana Schultz painting ‘Open Casket’ at the Whitney Biennial in 2017.

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## The Liminality of Loneliness: Negotiating Feminist Ethics and Intersectional Affectivity

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### ABSTRACT

This paper draws on auto-ethnographic and creative material to disentangle loneliness as including moments of tension but also the potential for personal liberation. The analysis draws on intersectional reflexivity as a joint project building on feminist friendship and activist academic collaboration. Our collaborative critical auto-ethnography sought to reach the co-production of narratives of loneliness while embracing the diversities of our positionalities. Our differing points of departure and arrival were harnessed to understand our experiential perspectives on loneliness. We conceptualise through feminist and intersectional theories the liminalities of a 'biopolitics' of loneliness. We address ethical, affective and performative aspects of how loneliness is understood. We can then advance propositions for alternative analyses that can contribute to feminist studies of loneliness. In the analysis we clarify the often nebulous interconnections of materialisms, affectivities and ethical feminisms to disentangle loneliness from the 'individual experience' to a 'social platform' of wider collective responsibility in tackling some of its traumatic and destructive effects. We explore these issues in the emerging context of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that has led to far-reaching social, psychological, and physical impacts upon loneliness, in turn augmented by UK state policies.

**Keywords:** feminist ethics, liminality of loneliness, intersectional affectivity, critical auto-ethnography, performativity

### INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF LONELINESS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Socialisation processes are positively enhanced when social subjects have a social surrounding that enables them to thrive (and not simply survive). When social isolation or loneliness abound, then feelings of vulnerability become heightened with an exacerbated need to reconnect with others (Courtin and Knapp, 2017; Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010). Features of loneliness have an impact on physical and mental health as well as overall consequences for behavioural, cognitive and psychosocial development (such as premature mortality) (Leigh-Hunt, et al. 2017). The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission report (2017) called on the UK government to devise a national strategy to combat a condition that affects millions of people and is as harmful to health, according to medical experts as smoking almost a pack of cigarettes a day (Orr, G. June 2014) and is reaching 'epidemic' proportions (Psychology Today. n.d.)

Loneliness may (or may not) also be linked to gender (Victor et al. 2006), and a wide range of other (potentially interacting) socio-economic dimensions or life circumstances and experiences (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018; Beutel et al. 2017; Courtin and Knapp, 2017; Hansen and Slagsvold, 2016; Cacioppo et al. 2010; Beal, 2006).

Loneliness is not simply being alone (as different to social isolation) and any interventions to reduce loneliness and its impact on well-being require that the multi-dimensionality of social and behavioural effects, are taken into account (Courting and Knapp, 2017; Hawkey and Racioppo, 2010).

Public Health England conceptualise social isolation, loneliness and ‘social inaction’ (e.g. unable to participate) as overlapping (Varney, 2013: 6-10). More specifically: Social isolation is an “absence of social interactions, social support structures and engagement with wider community activities or structures” (which can be linked to ‘marginalisation’ and ‘discrimination’). Loneliness was seen as an “individual’s personal, subjective sense of lacking connection and contact with social interactions to the extent that they are wanted or needed” (ibid).

As such, both these two main concepts (whilst useful) tend to simplify or even avoid complex structural (and non-structural) causes of these social experiences. There is also less clear emphasis on the social and economic factors, processes, and specific barriers that continue to prevent engagement, for instance isolation could be created by ‘marginalisation or discrimination by families or communities’ but this is not explained or explored fully. ‘Being alone’ is something that may be forced upon many people not simply a lack of opportunity or engagement. Similarly, loneliness is seen as an individual and subjective experience, which is useful to some extent – since it potentially includes social, psychological, and physical needs, (e.g. the need to be physically cared for) whether or not people affected are ‘aware’ of that.

However from the point of view of intersectional and feminist thinking around loneliness (particularly at the current time) (e.g. Gao and Sai, 2020), we perhaps need to consider both macro and micro factors including both policy and structural drivers and the context, in relation to how individuals or groups and communities may (or may not) be able to utilise resilience against loneliness and why. We live complex lives with complex causes leading to these feelings and experiences. Loneliness is not just about being alone, and being alone is not the only factor in experiencing loneliness. We propose to reframe the concept of loneliness in the following way: Loneliness, is a social phenomenon experienced by individuals, groups and families within certain complex socio-economic circumstances, exacerbated by policies, belief systems (such as those which create racism or sexism), opportunities including income, life situations, all of which intermesh to reduce opportunities and wellbeing in those individuals and groups.

Some research identifies socially marginalised communities for example such as the elderly, or LGBTQIA+ groups and migrants, the chronically ill or caregivers etc., as potentially particularly prone to suffering from loneliness (Courtin and Knapp, 2017; Vasileiou et al. 2017; Hughes, 2016; Kvaal et al. 2014). All of these complex issues are highlighted in discussions related to dealing with the impact of COVID-19 and loneliness. Whilst there has been some attention paid to the impact of COVID-19 on different groups already experiencing social discrimination and marginalisation, the detrimental and multifaceted impact on certain groups may not necessarily be as well highlighted as others.

There are intense experiential, emotional and embodied modalities that shape the ‘phenomenology of loneliness’ (Dahlberg, 2007). In exploring new and emerging deep understandings of the spatial and temporal contexts of the liminality of loneliness, we are also compelled to question if loneliness might have a *transformational potential* within solitude. We seek to push these ideas into a rigorous dialogue with feminist theory and ethics to address questions of ‘space’ and ‘self’. This can usefully be based from critical auto-ethnographic research informed by sociocultural practices and the political geographies that shape the experiential dynamics of the liminality of loneliness. We address some of the core psychosocial underpinnings of loneliness that might become productive points of connection with the ‘self’ and ‘society’. We draw on auto-ethnographic accounts to address affective and embodied understandings of the phenomenology of loneliness in everyday life as *spatially experiential liminality*.

A feminist ethics paying attention to different identities and perspectives is centrally important to taking women’s lives and experiences seriously, as well as being central to eliminating oppression of women, sexual minorities, and other oppressed groups. Thus, Jaggar (1992) framed ‘feminist ethics’ as the creation of a gendered ethics that aims to eliminate or at least ameliorate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women. We are reflective that while on the one hand our discursive choice of using the term ‘feminisms’ is one that aims to be inclusive (e.g. Karayianni and Christou, 2020) and on the other ‘feminist’ does not signify a holistic approach. At the same time we maintain awareness that feminism or feminist theory within the ‘western’ (white/colonial/mainstream/popular) academy resembles what Min-ha (1987) calls ‘occupied territory’, as space already marked by hierarchies and oppressions. Aligned with our continued activism, learning, research informed-teaching and constant self-checks in our academic practice, we accept the limitations of the concepts we use, and by no means do we claim to have all the answers.

The social and political landscapes of loneliness we explore in this paper are inescapably marked by relations of power and ideology. These can take the form of gendered and classed divisions, along with the stigma (Tyler, 2020) attached, which often re-directs responsibility to the individual rather than society. When Van Gennep (1960) coined the term ‘liminality’, its explanatory purpose was to highlight the middling stages of ritual transitions. These liminal landscapes of loneliness can manifest across generational and age groups but are pronounced when coupled

with other vulnerabilities (e.g. disability, disease etc.) and as a result develop into compounded layers of marginalisation and isolation. In this paper, we understand ‘liminality’ as ‘performance’<sup>1</sup> of the ‘flow of actions and interactions in generating new meanings and symbolic signifiers’ (Turner, 1980). In this way, we uncover the subjectivities that shape loneliness experiences and trajectories, and, Turner’s ‘life crisis’ rituals contribute to understanding how processes of socialisation may entail and exacerbate solitude. At the same time, the agency and subjective experiences of individuals develop within differing social frameworks and the meanings of such are generated through everyday life practices. The liminality of loneliness unfolds within temporal<sup>2</sup> and spatial dimensions and can have elements of empowerment despite the isolation and lack of social interaction.

Loneliness often takes root in childhood and not solely as a transient state experienced and endured in a deep seated painful sense of emptiness during periods of adulthood (Sagan, 2017). Methods for managing the experience of loneliness over time may often direct attention to those suffering and highlight their resilience, such as efforts to connectivity and sociability. This can further stigmatise those suffering in underscoring an ‘individual deficit’ model rather than collective social responsibility. The phenomenology of loneliness thus should be attentive to the constituent elements that piece together the often puzzling accounts of the lived experience.

Loneliness is a commonly experienced phenomenon that characterises the human condition of existence as it might inevitably be experienced by most people, no matter if they are surrounded by others or on their own. Capturing its ‘existential meaning without reducing its complexity’ (Dahlberg, 2007:195) is challenging as there are multiple subjectivities that might saturate its meaning. Our auto-ethnographic research aims to partially fill this void by drawing on both the complexity of the phenomenon and the subjective elements that shape how it is experienced.

The experiential aspect of loneliness incorporates ethical and political dimensions too. And, within those parameters, a feminist ethical politics is a necessary project for change. For instance, (in opposition to Levinas, as argued by) Vikki Bell (2001:159) contends that:

“one can argue that it is in the way that the dangers of the non-ethical are handled that politics begins. If this is so, one can refigure the question of ethics within feminism. Ethics becomes a check on freedom and politics rather than its originary source”.

By extension, (and, along with Michel Foucault and William Connolly as claimed again by), Bell (2001:159) argues:

“that ethical responses, while coming from the other, have also to be subjected to genealogical critique, so that their conditions of possibility are not naturalized”.

Additionally, we see as central to further development, projects that acknowledge ethical feminist responsibility to alleviate the trauma of loneliness; which embraces those who require such a support, whilst creating a central priority, on the political issue(s) of, loneliness.

In the next section we outline our theoretical framework and core concepts while reflecting on methodological issues. We then briefly examine the developing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, feminist perspectives and associated issues. We subsequently present our empirical auto-ethnographic and creative material grappling with wider ethical questions and advance propositions for a feminist approach to loneliness studies. We conclude by clarifying materialisms, affectivities and ethical feminisms<sup>3</sup> to disentangle loneliness from the individual experience of tackling some of its traumatic and destructive effects, to a social platform of wider collective responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> From Goffman to Butler there are a number of detailed accounts of the usage of ‘performance’ and performativity which are elaborated in great detail by Ute Berns (2014) in ‘The Living Handbook of Narratology’. Here we draw on performativity to refer to the level of the narrator’s agency or act of narration in how we use auto-ethnography and poetry as our storytelling devices in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Adam (1994) argues that the complex aspects of time should hold a central stage in social theory especially if individuals are to take responsibility for their actions: past, present, and particularly the long term future. An explicit understanding of time Adam contends, generates not only a basis for a more adequate social theory, but a chance to be a participating agent in a world where human creations have frequently become the factor controlling human life. We agree that to grasp the multiplicity of time is to come to terms with the complexity of our times, but see this temporal understanding on an equal conceptual footing with space, where social relations and social subjectivities unfold.

<sup>3</sup> The affective turn, new materialisms, and in particular the study of material-discursive and “affective processes in relation to a certain empirical study” (Knudsen and Stage, 2015: 1) focuses on affective encounters and embodiment as a crucial part of knowledge production; one that can formulate new questions, research agendas, and modes of data collection and analyses (ibid.). Affective methodology takes emotions and bodily affects such as love, disgust, suffering and desire seriously, because such resonances expose ethical dilemmas that are part of knowledge production processes, while simultaneously offering other modes of ethics.

## THE LIMINALITY OF LONELINESS: THEORISING CONCEPTS AND CAPTURING METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

In this section we situate our conceptualisation of loneliness within an intersectional and feminist theoretical context and reflect on our critical auto-ethnography (Harris and Watson-Vandiver, 2020). Loneliness is framed within ideologies, which function to conceal, mask and distort, the ethical citizenship relations in society (with its own collective responsibility). Leslie Armour (2014: 57) declares: “‘Ethical citizenship’ is a puzzle. An ethical citizen should be someone who accepts responsibilities and duties and acts accordingly. How is that possible amidst forces that are global and economies from which individuals and whole groups can be excluded? Good intentions and sound preparation may be of no avail. The identification of responsibility may be difficult. The ability to discharge it may not exist”. What we explore in this paper is how this liminality of responsibility (and by extension, loneliness) can be addressed as a collective policy matter through feminisms that do not reduce action to solely an individual burden of change. The ideological parameters of loneliness reflect such partial truths, drawing attention to the *suffering self* as the ‘consensual individual’ to one’s loneliness, and not to the role of (that and within) society. These (neoliberal) ideologies of loneliness, draw attention to fictional self-induced suffering, rather than a set of social circumstances created for those social selves. This is a conflictual stance and it brings a clear political dimension to the conceptual landscape of loneliness. Loneliness is not simply a condition; it is a structural matter replete with power.

We find conceptual clarity in employing feminist and intersectional theories to the study of the ‘biopolitics’ of loneliness. ‘Biopolitics’ is a complex concept and linked with Foucauldian social theory in exploring mechanisms and strategies whereupon social life processes are managed and controlled under regimes of authority through knowledge, power and subjectivities (Nilsson and Wallenstein, 2013). Although there is the original rendition of intersectionality in the field of feminist studies (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) we embrace it as a theoretical and methodological tool to analyse power in its complex forms. This involves exploring the constraining social normativities that situate issues (structurally, discursively, institutionally, socially and culturally) and related social categorisations (gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age, generation, dis/ability as well as poverty, unemployment, mental health etc.) as producing (tautological) social constructions of inequalities and societal injustice. As an everyday life modality, “intersectionality also approaches lived identities, and systemic patterns of asymmetrical life opportunities and harms, from their interstices, from the nodal points where they hinge or touch” (May, 2015 :3).

Feminist and intersectional theories also perceive power and opportunities for resistance as processual and relational (Ahmed, 2017; Ferguson, 2017; Collins and Bildge, 2016; Butler, 2015; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Cho et al. 2013; Fraser, 2013; Hemmings, 2011), thus in anticipation of agency and in opposition to structural and ontological obstacles that might impede dissent. While we do not align our thinking with binaries of oppression/agency or the latter in terms of power/resistance solely, we see an intersectionally aware position to loneliness as one precursor for action collectively, as both personal and political empowerment with a transformative potential in eliminating loneliness. Hence, in our analysis here, loneliness is perceived as primarily an experience of unwarranted trauma and social suffering. However, other approaches can envisage the departure from oppression and aim to identify sites of resistance within loneliness – to view forms of societal organisation that would eliminate this trauma (preventatively) such as change brought about by wider collective action. To achieve this theoretically:

“As a critical heuristic, intersectionality offers many valuable tools and skills in this regard. For instance, in the interests of ‘deciphering’ power, it directs our attention to gaps, inconsistencies, opacities, and discontinuities and insists that such omissions or silences be treated as (potentially) meaningful and significant, not just as obstacles to work around or anomalies to set aside” (May, 2015: 227).

This journey to disentangle feminist loneliness studies is a pathway that entails moments of tension and liberation, enmeshed with intersectional reckoning and reflexive awakening. As a joint project building on feminist friendship and activist academic collaboration, it is also an enriching project of potentialities for personal growth and realisation. Our collaborative critical auto-ethnography sought to reach co-production of narratives of loneliness while embracing our diversities, positionalities and our differing experiences of loneliness and life more generally.

We decided to undertake a qualitative, interpretative, but not wholly un-structured approach to data gathering and analysis (i.e. not coding). This was with a view to building theories, from both our data (auto-ethnographic writing, observations and discussions) and existing knowledge (via our literature review exploring bodies of work and published academic and policy interventions). This left us with a measure of flexibility in which preconceptions were minimalised and outcomes undetermined but employing some degree of systematic reflection, as in, grounded theory with an intersectional feminist slant.

In order to capture some of these methodological complexities and enable this process, we agreed to exchange written creative and intellectual reflections, of our personal experiences. This follows an approach identified (useful here and now) as collaborative auto-ethnography (Roy and Uekus, 2020) and increasingly used to explore pandemic experiences (Raimondi, 2021; Zheng, 2020). This exchange then led to deeper and more critical discussions around the literature, how it links to experience, and contextual issues. One author drew on, and utilised the genre of poetry, to express deep reflective thought, emotion and the complexity of the dimensions of experience, and the (sometimes affectively elusive) loneliness. The use of poetry in this paper is to capture, signify and illustrate these complexities where appropriate. This approach is now being increasingly used not only in multidisciplinary research (McCulliss, 2013; Prendergast, 2009) but also as a specifically feminist methodology (Faulkner, 2020; 2018) and therapeutic auto-ethnographic encounter (Sharma, 2020). These methods proved pivotal in exposing some important nuances and complex mappings, in a dynamic process, allowing the intermeshing of personal experience, sociological theory, an understanding of policy and practice around loneliness in the UK (and specifically COVID-19) and the current political climate (e.g. history of austerity).

Furthermore, we see this as an ‘antidote’ to the reductionist quantitative, policy-driven, approach to loneliness in academia. Complex experiential perspectives become reduced to socio-economic characteristics largely speaking disaggregated from each other. This inevitably misses crucial and important nuances, of the interactive and dynamic relationship between personal experience, and socio-economic structural conditions. Here, we agree with Fakoya et al. (2020) that the individuality of the experience of loneliness and isolation may cause difficulty in the delivery of standardised interventions. They correctly observe that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing loneliness or social isolation, and hence the need to tailor interventions to suit the needs of individuals, specific groups or the degree of loneliness experienced. Therefore, future research should be aimed at discerning what intervention works for whom, in what particular context and how. It has been suggested that “making theory from the self requires a critical engagement with autoethnography” (Boon, et al. 2018:7) and in this sense the researchers are the central research instruments encompassing both an ontological and epistemological nexus to theorise from personal biographies which in turn will interrogate the social and reflect wider social practices and processes (Ellis and Bohner, 2016; Reed-Danahay 1997).

In our collaborative approach we piece together somewhat discordant edges of emotions and embodiments, memories and self-narrations. While not seeking harmonisation of subjectivities of our life/scapes<sup>4</sup> we became aware of our deeply embodied social geographies of loneliness. All these aspects were woven into the analysis informed by our feminist and intersectional positionalities. We thus agree that, “in this collaborative venture, we operate from the premise of embodied autoethnography, concerned both with the embodied nature of political, social, and cultural relations (that is, how we are intersectionally shaped by our fleshy, material selves), and with the conceptual insights and knowledges that emanate from our lived experiences of our bodies” (Boon et al. 2018:7).

Finally, this leads to the concept of *embodiment*, a central focus in this paper and of feminist theory. It is the site for the social and symbolic construction of sexuality and sexual difference, a focus of subjectivities and performativities, a gazing field of materialities from commodification and objectification to caring, and, the location of a politics of exclusion (or inclusion) power, affect and resistance (Braidotti, 2011; Butler, 1999; Young, 1990).

Lived bodies and embodiment as social practice and sociological discourse are often messy and ambiguous in their interpretations. Interactions are not easily reducible to single meanings and this might embed ambiguity in how we situate and position bodies and embodied actions. Corporeal interactions also involve hierarchies of power and knowledge, hegemonic processes and differing locational positionalities (Shilling, 2003; Williams and Bendelow, 1998). For instance: “Studying people’s experiences with chronic illness and disability teaches us of the fragility of our body and its appearance, and how subject we are and have always been to contingencies that affect it. Such realizations change the view we believe others hold of us and the actions we take in response to our imagined view – whether of awe and respect or of frailty or incompetence” (Charmaz and Rosenfeld, 2006: 36).

As a result of hierarchies of power and hegemonic exclusions, experiences of embodied social inequalities are contained in social relations. Yet, “embodied social inequality is therefore not the inevitable product of organic interaction, but instead the unfortunate by-product of the discursive and practical solidification of ideologies” (Vannini and Waskul, 2006:196.). We are thus living in ‘somatic societies’ (Turner, 1992) where bodies are sites that can be transgressed but also contexts where extensive socio-cultural and politico-policy issues are negotiated.

These kinds of negotiations are reflections of critical societal concerns that might become embodiments of disruptive social interventions. This is a way to think about political and protest interventions but also disruptions that yield contentious and controversial reactions: such as the washing up of dead migrant and refugee bodies on

<sup>4</sup> While the definition of ‘lifescapes’ suggests: “A layout or representation of one’s life, often depicted by life experiences, events, and circumstances” (<https://www.wordsense.eu/lifescape/>), we use the backslash symbol (/) in order to signify that those representations of life experiences also include both ‘escapes’ and ‘landscapes’ in the experiential, emotive and imaginative sense.

the shores of wealthy nation-states reflecting social subjects seen as ‘despicable others’(Christou, 2018). Such bodies trigger social panics and anxieties through possible contact zones which transfer fears of ‘contamination’.

Scholars have noted a lack of consensus on a clearly defined intersectional methodology in public health, (particularly for quantitative studies), due to a disconnect between theory and the development of intersectional research designs and questions (Bowleg, 2012). So, finally, the engagement we pursue with intersectional theory (Cho et al. 2013) is one where intersectionality reflects the idea that individuals belong to multiple social categories (such as gender, ethnicity, social class, or disability) and these are intersecting while creating opportunities and constraints, where people depending on particular intersections and social context experience dis/advantage (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). While an intersectional approach can make policies effective, it is claimed by definition ‘the winning solution’, but whether governments want to make such an investment is a political choice (Meier et al. 2015). By maintaining a focal point on how individual experiences are shaped by the socio-political embedded frames we discuss, loneliness becomes entrenched in human experience and not a web of policy imaginaries.

In the next section we explore the context of the new and challenging situation globally and nationally of the pandemic and its threats and impacts. We also explore responses from feminist thinkers, academics and related debates, including COVID-19 policy and practice and the role of gender specifically affecting women.

## **FEMINISMS, COVID-19 AND LONELINESS**

The unprecedented circumstances experienced across the globe currently regarding the pandemic, resulted in an explosion of discussion, comment, and research into many different dimensions related to this public health and social crisis. Interestingly, some issues affecting gender (e.g. men dying more; mostly women experiencing domestic violence and bearing the burden of caring) have made it into the mainstream media (and perhaps public consciousness and beyond) (Armstrong, 2021; Chadwick, 2021; Blanchard, 2021; Express and Star, 2020). We see an extraordinary and probably unparalleled focus on the complexities of the social impact of this situation in the public and academic domain. However there are debates about how women’s voices and perspectives have not been emphasized as much as men’s (Majid, 2020).

We examine the current (general) understanding within feminist thinking, of issues related to the COVID-19 crisis. Equally important background is the relationship between COVID-19 and the social changes and its impact on loneliness. Instances and experiences of loneliness have become more ubiquitous to some degree (affecting all areas of social life and all people); unusual (i.e. different types of new social experiences such as the lack of social contact through work) and demonstrating more unequal effects (distinct pandemic policies /services impacts, and health and social inequalities).

Whilst there is growing focus on COVID-19 and loneliness in both academic and mainstream media outlets, there are overly simplistic policy-orientated perspectives regarding the interaction with social isolation and different life and social circumstances. There is little mention of any of the distinct socio-economic interactions (e.g. between gender, race, social status, economic status) in terms of experiences of the illness/risk, and/or health services access and provision, or social/care needs of different groups, or of the policy responses to any of that (e.g. Sanders, 2020).

Within more explicitly feminist orientated discussions, a number of perspectives and interacting issues have been identified nationally and globally (Nanthini and Nair, 2020; Berkhout, and Richardson, 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen, 2020; Ashoff (n.d)). Clearly the impact of COVID-19 on communities of people (and specifically women) is complex and many forms of discrimination, exclusion, disadvantage, have been exacerbated by it, and the policies, introduced to deal with it (Feminist response to COVID-19 (n.d); Ashcroft (n.d); Brooks, 2020; BBC World Service, 2020; Al-Ali, 2020; Rigby, 2020; Gbowee, (n.d)).

Of course internationalist perspectives add in global South perspectives that critique white feminist dialogue and western interests “paying attention to the intersectional pre-existing inequalities that have given rise to specific risks and vulnerabilities” (Al-Ali, 2020: 1). These more inclusive and global perspectives draw attention to the multiple and intersectional dimensions adversely affecting women (and specific groups including those affected by poverty) during the pandemic resulting in an ‘exacerbation of gender (in) equality’. Further they advocate paying attention to comprehensive holistic solutions that embrace ‘feminist economic visions’ in a planned economic recovery plan. This requires a prioritisation of care and social reproduction taking into consideration unpaid and undervalued labour, increasing state support and critical investment in key services, securing pay and work conditions for frontline workers so their rights and job security are improved with better social and safety nets. We note that whilst there are emerging and explicitly feminist policies and governmental approaches, such as that from Hawaii (Hawai‘i State Commission on the Status of Women Department of Human Services, April 2020), these approaches may remain few and far between. Given the complexity of the relationship between women’s social lives, gender roles, caring responsibilities, types of work and other social inequalities of many different kinds,



set against access to services and opportunities, post COVID-19 policies must address these, with a coherent set of strategies.

In the next section we delve into our empirical data to discuss liminal aspects of loneliness and how we negotiate or navigate interaction and solitude. Loneliness in this sense is an amplified constellation of feelings of estrangement leading to social separation and eroding social emplacement. It is thus perceived as a ‘feeling state’ and an ‘emotion cluster’ (Bound Alberti, 2018) which points to its complexity, messiness and ambiguity.

## **AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS: PERFORMATIVITIES OF SOLITUDE AND AFFECTIVITIES OF LONELINESS**

In our research on loneliness we adopt an auto-ethnographic approach that delves into the interconnectedness of researcher reflexivity, subjectivities and social experience. Grammars of individuality intersect with vocabularies of solitude when articulating experiences of loneliness while also embedding those stories in family, kinship and social relations. Throughout the discussion it becomes clear that intersectionalities of gender, ethnicity, class, dis/ability, sexuality, age and generation are means of anchorage and dis/connection in a wider societal abyss that does not always engender a sense of ontological security in the loneliness of the self.

For one, loneliness in the auto-ethnographic accounts appears to be either an aspect of a ‘temporality of struggle’ or a time-dependent phenomenology. In either case, the temporal dimension is very important. For instance, generation, age, life stage, the time before, during or after an illness or personal tragedy, etc. are all integral to the how loneliness is both experienced/encountered and the impacts of such instances. We approach this experiential experience in auto-ethnographic observation and analysis, from the position(s) of identifying as disabled/ non-heterosexual and older woman, semi-retired and not living on a low income (second author) and additionally as one who self-identifies as a working-class academic activist, trade unionist, feminist and anti-racist migrant woman (first author).

We attempt to draw connections between our distinct complex lived identities and experiences in socio-economic situation with the particular reflections from auto-ethnographic material for analytical and theoretical purposes. We also understand that our personal situations give us partial and incomplete perspectives on social experiences we have not encountered, and thereby draw on intersectional thinking to fill these potential gaps where possible.

Here are some reflections on how loneliness is interconnected with structural conditions, the state and the ‘struggling’ self from the perspective of being a disabled, Buddhist, non-heterosexual and older woman (second author):

*I’ve come to reflect a bit more on the impact of chronic illness on the experiences of socialising and loneliness. ....I also experienced yet another barrier to receiving support through the state (waiting nine months for psychological help)*

*...and in addition to that being LGBT, there are particular ways in which I can’t socialise ... I can’t possibly participate in an equal and easy way.*

*The problem here is that actually you can get used to it; can get used to being ‘pushed out of society’ and the isolation that results from that – and then sometimes you can’t even see it yourself.*

*There’s also how chronic illness can affect self-esteem; self-esteem can affect the way people relate socially, and how this can impact then on the usual socialising and emotional needs the people have. It is difficult to socialise when your own self-esteem, albeit mostly in general terms OK, underneath that can be a continuous and almost ‘central fear’ of being rejected, in fear of ‘not being up to perform’ like other people, as a physically challenged/ differently abled person. (pre-pandemic extract)*

In the extract above, the intersectionalities of dis/ability, sexuality, age and other parameters of individual identities are stretched to the extreme when one has to develop coping mechanisms and self-esteem survival strategies in the presence of an absent state and governmental system of support.

*The more ‘beaten down’ one is from one’s illness, the harder it is to get out and integrate and mix with people – and the more loneliness becomes another additional problem on top of illness. (pre-pandemic extract)*

Self-esteem, self-identity, personal resilience and autonomy are further ‘crushed’ when individuals make extensive efforts not to ‘burden’ family, friends and loved ones.

.....scared of getting too close to people in case I 'let them down' because I can't sustain a relationship. My friendships are strong and they are loyal but I'm very mindful not to 'burden them too much' with my own emotions so as not to complicate the relationship. (pre-pandemic extract)

This puts the onerous responsibility onto the individual, already stripped of layers of dignity – under pressure to reach 'superhuman' endurance (as indicated in the narrative of Paralympic athletes below as role models). And, while, the extraordinary achievements of Paralympic athletes should be applauded, recognised and celebrated, it is the 'celebrity' status endurance that often is conferred to all physically challenged/differently abled groups that requires caution in moving away from essentialisations of capacities. It is exactly such performativities expected from *all* physically challenged/differently abled groups and the enhanced affectivities that such expectations can have on people which can exert further loneliness.

*Images of courageous and triumphant sporting heroes who are physically challenged/ differently abled, momentarily motivate me, but underneath that there is a sinking feeling of unattainable achievements being dangled in front of my nose – in order to make me feel even worse about myself and my situation. ... My own self-esteem and self-identity is damaged and crushed by my illness...* (pre-pandemic extract)

Loss of identity or threat to identity is another emerging theme in the experiences of loneliness especially with social changes related to the pandemic. People working from home, combining childcare with work, carers having to move in with parents, and the general changes around socialising and mixing, bring profound changes and loss of various kinds. These losses can be linked to various dimensions of our identities, which can be multiple and experienced differently by different groups.

*...in the pandemic I'm cut off from the lesbian and gay community that was 'always there for me', in pubs, in quizzes, in special events, in certain places, online and physically –opportunities to embrace and express and engage with my sexuality in a culture of affirmation and acceptance* (during pandemic extract)

As such this raises the issues around the pandemic creating a new form of loneliness related perhaps to collective experiences of grief and loss, as illustrated by the first named author who self-identifies as a working-class academic activist, trade unionist, feminist and anti-racist migrant woman.

<sup>5</sup>*Poem: 'Discomfort as Grief: Poem #2'* (extracts below written during the 2020 pandemic)

*I have captured the light from a million candles in your eyes.*

*They will not grieve the symphony of clouds piercing the dark purple sky.*

*Nearing the peak of despair, let me be your sanctuary from the tide of times.*

Lack of access to appropriate state support services during the pandemic (such as the rolling out of vaccination prevention programmes to some types of physically challenged/differently abled people but not others) exacerbates feelings of abandonment, sitting alongside other forms of separation and the lack of social support or contact. Often it is effectively the promise and a degree of certainty of intervention and healthcare that provides reassurance, but when deeply affected by lockdown resulting in difficult access pathways, this *liminality* has massive impacts on anxiety and mental/physical health especially for physically challenged/ differently abled people.

*...the uncertainty of vaccination programmes and its impact, provides us with hope but also not being able to access that early as a physically challenged/ differently abled person, due to narrow criteria for inclusion, is the cause of worry. My life is impacted; I can't travel anywhere, I can't see anyone, and my life is on hold.* (during pandemic extract; second author)

Another example when one author is denied access to dental care worsening chronic illness (being physically challenged/differently abled did not bring about priority care), triggered additional distress:

*...feelings of being overpowered and crushed were immense. I felt completely powerless.... All of these worries and anxieties impact on the way I feel about my daily life, I think affected my levels of anxiety, probably my mental and physical health...* (during pandemic extract; second author)

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<sup>5</sup> Poetry by the first named author is forthcoming, 2021, in the *International Human Rights Arts Festival*, <https://www.ihraf.org/>

At the same time the new times lead to 'new forms' of social engagement sometimes overriding difference: groups of people and communities respond to crisis as well as a time when we could engender, a time of transformation and change:

*I find myself moved by the efforts of my neighbours to help me when I need it. This is irrespective of my sexuality and of course some social divisions/differences have been swept away ....In some respects certainly in my area, it has made people kinder. (during pandemic extract; second author)*

*'Solidarity in Solitude: Poem #3', (extracts below written during the 2020 pandemic; author one)*

*Restless lockdown diaries in the quarantine of minds: decluttering the hate, social distancing the poverty and giving solidarity a home.*

*Communities of crisis and we will decimate the ruins to heal again.*

*'Glimpse of Void: Poem #1' (extracts below written during the 2020 pandemic)*

*Curtains drawn and darkness falls, they promised the dawn will come again.*

*Silent Spring.*

*Entangled pandemics with the patriarchy we would dismantle.*

But high expectations of people even within the family context can become vehicles of leading to further loneliness when coping is difficult:

*I am intrigued, I am concerned, I am both resisting and experiencing throughout my life loneliness. Often it has been because it is either challenging to trust people, make deep and authentic mutual connections with them or simply because of lack of reciprocity when relationships become superficial, fleeting, fading away, selfish.*

*I know deep to my core how loneliness feels at all stages of my life course so far. Quite draining and often a source of loneliness to know that you are the one, perhaps the only one in your family who is responsible for the lives of all others. Indeed a burden and not a privilege to show any other human elements of limitations and weakness.*

*This has been most exhausting and actually depleting when loneliness has been most pronounced during major life events, turbulence, loss, grief, illness, change. While there have been exceptions and once and a while on a rare, but very special occasion, somebody who has cared and has picked up the phone, sent a card, sent an email, offered to help in some way, has made a difference, for the most part I have felt alone while dealing on my own with serious existential and logistical life matters. (pre-pandemic extract; author one)*

In capturing or even de-centring loneliness from identity, the realisation is that the self is not always in a state of void and emptiness; on the contrary it can be that the 'saturated' self (Gergen, 1991) is one of profound loneliness. Loneliness in this sense becomes a condition, a state of mind in the journey to endurance of personal struggle and hardship. It can be challenging when there is no collective to support the journey. This would offer the antidote which can be in the form of supportive kindness, generosity of time, compassionate caring, and selfless giving of im/material contributions. It is otherwise, not the void or the emptiness of the self, but astonishingly quite often the stark elimination of the collective (one person or more) presence, even symbolically in the contribution of the sympathetic ear to signify co-presence. The latter illustrates that loneliness emerges as the lack of recourse to the collective and not necessarily an individualistic absence, along the lines that mirrors what Lykes and Kimmelmeier (2014) have found in their study in confirming that levels of loneliness are higher in collectivistic compared with individualistic societies, but societies differed in terms of their predictors of loneliness. In collectivistic societies, the absence of interactions with family was more interlinked to loneliness than in the case of individualistic societies. Moreover, in individualistic societies, the absence of interactions with friends and having some kind of confidant is more closely linked to loneliness than in the case of collectivistic societies. Their findings are consistent with the notion that autonomy and choice with regard to interaction partners have greater implications for well-being in individualistic societies whereas traditional social bonds are more potent in collectivistic societies.

Loneliness in a generational sense (in different ways) can be an 'anti-feminist' experience and frequently entails efforts to process the increased instances of 'othering'. 'Non-intersectional' behaviours, and lack of understanding around difference, can forge distance between people or groups (othering them), and further exacerbate feelings of social rejection and loneliness. Within the divisions and fragmentations of feminist ideologies and practices,

generational loneliness is a characteristic divider further exacerbating distance and dialogic interactions. Issues of 'authenticity' of feminist praxis are also at stake and ground loneliness in elements of the politics of practising feminisms.

## DISCUSSION

Examining the policy research evidence does suggest a correlation between age/generation and loneliness with a set of more 'hidden' issues when it comes to caring responsibilities or disability<sup>6</sup> involved in the process (Courtin and Knapp, 2017; Vasileiou et al. 2017; Kvaal et al. 2014). Research on loneliness has been considered sociologically challenging as regards its focus on individual emotions, but, at the same time revealing in that the subjective experience is critical for understanding a number of issues beyond the structural (Parigi and Henson, 2014). In the extracts above, the irony illuminated is that loneliness is not only a feminist issue; it can be an issue *with* feminists. That is, rather than collectively creating feminist spaces within intersectional practices where relationships can build on enhancing and fostering links to reduce loneliness, the 'clique' mentality can accentuate further marginalisation of those feminists who do not fit the 'clique' criteria model. Frequently, this translates politically into conceptualisations of (white) western feminism and the coloniality of power that has been referred to by Grosfoguel, Oso and Christou (2015) as enriching our understanding of intersectionality in the framework of modernity and the capitalist/imperial/patriarchal/racial colonial world-system which reproduces a northern-centric social science view of the world that comes from the experience of 'others' in the zone of being.

It might in a sense appear rather dated to think about the 'old feminist days' of 'consciousness raising', but those were encounters of authenticity exchange whereupon feelings of pain and exclusion (sexisms, racisms, ableisms, homophobias, ageisms, classisms) were shared and became learning experiences (Napikoski, 2019). However, these kinds of approaches need to be developed, and extended, given persistent and complex dimensions of oppression and emerging understandings of these, e.g. trans-issues. Of course issues of inequalities also persisted in the past, and even through a feminist lens tackling forms of discrimination, many voices were/are silenced e.g. the issue of transphobias (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Anti-Violence and Policing Group. n.d) or staff sexual misconduct in higher education (Massey, 2019). Loneliness thrives in places, times, situations, where discrimination or exclusion is rife. Programmes of inclusion of any kind therefore strike at the heart of the process of separation, barriers to understanding, and tackling core drivers of loneliness and ways of removing these barriers to understanding are crucial to removing loneliness.

Lewis and Hemmings (2019) explore the 'thick, suffocating fog of whiteness' in feminism in tackling creative possibilities of intersubjectivity. Creative possibilities of intersubjectivity can become means by which fragmentations in feminisms<sup>7</sup> can become productive opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Indeed, communication and collaboration would appear to be key in carving a pathway to tackling loneliness. It is the lack of open conversations and interactive collaboration that seem to impact on issues of self-esteem, isolation and depression. Being stuck in an idle space of feeling without agency can further exacerbate negative feelings. It is then experienced as 'perpetual grievance' in a "cycle of trauma produced by the toxicities of misogyny and racism and heteronormativity and class-based hatreds" (ibid). These experiences create silos that entrap us in these traumatic zones where 'othering' (Rohleder, 2014) is experienced by those who are denigrated, marginalised, and oppressed.

Eliminating the personal and social barriers to tackling loneliness should and can become a feminist project. This is a powerful realisation that if we do this in the context of feminist lives and ontologies and we could mould, and foster a type of feminism that is truly intersectional. These inclusive intersectional realisations and learning opportunities, can be created within social feminist activities and actions, to identify and overcome divisions by difference. This is a feminist strand as action to tackle loneliness. Loneliness is the ontological outcome of division when society is split, then distance creates uncaring. Intersectionality in the feminist approach we utilised does not suggest we all experience all social categorisations, in all occasions, of loneliness. As the extracts illustrated, for some people it might be disability coupled with sexuality and for others gender, ethnicity, generation, age, class. Taking an intersectional understanding of 'similar and different', highlights the interactive nature of these dimensions on loneliness, and refocuses us on what it means to be a feminist within that.

We also draw attention to the dimensions of time on multiple different levels in how we understand the experiential liminalities of loneliness. In the auto-ethnographic material we draw upon dimensions illustrating temporalities of 'personal time'. These unfold in such instances as how loneliness is linked as a 'time limited'

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed review of the field of affect and critical disability studies refer to Goodley, et al. 2019; 2018.

<sup>7</sup> On the fragmentations in feminism and with particular reference to sociology and social theory in the UK, see for instance: Platt, J., and Hopper, S. (1997). Fragmentation, Social Theory, and Feminism: Sociology in the United Kingdom. *Contemporary Sociology*, 26(3), 283-285. doi:10.2307/2654004

experience. So for example, institutional time (e.g. increasing demands of employers, work demands, where work is, types of work, travel time); state time/context such as demands/limitations that the state imposes on individuals, and the impact of public policy on the social sphere (such as benefits processes, waiting times and health and disability, lack of care /access to services) and collective time (e.g. unpaid carers, personal responsibilities and lack of choice). These temporal figurations become hidden modalities of loneliness in the absence or demands of time as well as how the socio-economic environment affects and shapes the impact of time (cf. Adam, 2002). Moreover, it would be particularly useful to know how these time dimensions figure in the more classic approaches to studying loneliness. We also observed that the other temporal aspects to loneliness and/or social isolation can change, as personal experiences and opportunities or lack of them change, and, therefore, it is not a single fixed experience (in time or space). It may have a tendency to be of a temporary nature within certain social and economic situations and contexts at micro and macro levels.

Thus, epistemologically, we see the storytelling of loneliness as a necessary narrative in understanding how more ethical feminisms can combat the phenomenon itself. Storytelling in the sense of auto-ethnographies can become a more rigorous tool, in that multiple intersubjectivities can illuminate how loneliness is a complex situated experiential encounter. In examining the more interpretive underpinnings of stories of loneliness we can identify failures of systems and policies by exposing the harm that destructive practices can have. By focussing on the way that individual experiences are conditioned by (and negotiated over) socio-political embedded frames, loneliness is entrenched in human experience and not a web of policy imaginaries.

## **CONCLUSION: LONELINESS MATTERS – ETHICAL FEMINISMS, MATERIALITIES AND EMOTIONALITIES**

Feminist perspectives on loneliness pose ethical questions and require public policy answers. We draw from auto-ethnographic extracts through which we consider the meanings, implications and feminist possibilities of loneliness. To provide some degree of contextualisation of these personal experiences and reflections, we also take a critical look at the current government's strategic approach to tackling loneliness and its political and emotional development.

There are some positive aspects and dimensions to this strategy (HM Government, 2018) which does perceive loneliness as a serious social issue, given that it was led by a Labour MP, Jo Cox, who sadly lost her life. As a cross party initiative it shows loneliness needs to be tackled with a collaborative, partnership-led, collectively focused, but also an all-encompassing approach (using as many resources as possible within society). A considerable degree of funding has been channelled by the government towards these issues, and each government department was tasked with addressing loneliness within their work. Whilst it is clear that there is a focus on further 'civil connectedness' in various dimensions, through a variety of positive initiatives, at the same time (paradoxically perhaps) such governmental initiatives have a tendency to reify and essentialise the experience of loneliness, which is 'individualised' within the broader political context.

These issues of reification and essentialisation can be seen in the way in which loneliness is described and defined, as well as the way in which it is then decontextualised. This, (whilst also both appropriate and useful) also lends to an idea that personal resilience to circumstances is more relevant, than the effect of those social and economic circumstances, on individuals and groups (in the first place). Whilst the report suggests that 'loneliness can happen to anyone', research in this area demonstrates that to a great extent, clearly certain groups of people are more likely to suffer it, to much greater degree as well, including those most affected by cuts in public spending and austerity.

Characteristically the report states a definitional approach to loneliness as:

...“a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want” (HM Government, 2018:18).

This 'way of thinking' about loneliness as a 'single concept' in such a unidirectional and mono-dimensional perspective (as compared to a critical feminist and intersectional perspective) and experienced by an individual or 'groups of individuals' disconnects that experience from the broader socio-political and economic context. This lends to the idea that 'only individuals', can take responsibility for loneliness by identifying 'expectations' as being why people feel disconnected, that is, it leads to the idea that behavioural interventions are more relevant. This shifts away from the idea that interventions that improve the overall quality of life in more material ways might have an impact on loneliness (ironically perhaps a perspective that many participants in the report, might agree with).

To illustrate this (though there are many examples) there are sections dealing with physically challenged/differently abled people specifically (as if somehow their experiences are divorced from those of women, carers, unemployed people etc.). Clearly, people who are physically challenged/ differently abled struggle to maintain social contact as well as form relationships and maintain those in positive ways that are meaningful to them and provide a degree of support. The socio-political context that affects other groups of people will also ‘cascade into’ the experience of physically challenged/differently abled people, to the framing that physically challenged/differently abled people do not live in isolation from others, even if lonely.

This government report, rather than exploring the difficulties of physically challenged/differently abled people in the context of their overall policy impact including a shrinking public sector, and the impact of austerity on them, instead focuses on the potential impact of physically challenged/ differently abled people ‘returning to or being able to work’ as a key solution. The real physical organisational barriers to and the reality of ‘returning to work’ as a physically challenged/differently abled person, makes this kind of approach alarming.

The book ‘Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People’ (Ryan, 2019), demonstrates how physically challenged/differently abled people have been affected by austerity which impacts on their quality of life, opportunities and experiences. Their health in this context predictably likely to become poorer, their ability to connect less, so loneliness would be one outcome, from this process of disempowerment and undermining of basic human needs and rights. No amount of ‘connecting existing resources organisations /networks’ or ‘pump priming’ these connecting resources (important though they are) can make up for the overwhelming and profound impact of for instance withdrawing physically challenged/differently abled benefits on the grounds that this is ‘fairer’.

*So austerity and neoliberalism are impacting hugely on the most vulnerable people, forcing them back into the home and back into a more dependent and neglected state and place (auto-ethnographic reflection(s) on personal experiences; both authors).*

We may need to embrace a set of social policies which are based on understanding that loneliness is ‘experienced by individuals and groups’, in ways that are due to societal discrimination and disadvantage. This needs also to acknowledge loneliness is experienced by those people and groups by virtue of a complex range of social and economic, physical and other circumstances. Loneliness if created by a combination of social changes, access to resources of various different kinds, political strategies and agendas that further disadvantage existing disadvantaged groups, and policies that hit the poorest and the most at risk of loneliness harder, requires taking centre stage in feminist intersectional agendas.

In a much broader societal context, the strategy whilst ‘extending or refining existing projects and services, policy and practice’, needs to be applied or implemented by tackling the inequalities (related to loneliness). These inequalities are embedded deeply in social systems and political action/inaction and have been clearly exacerbated in the current pandemic. We need a more strategic or holistic way to tackle loneliness and its impact, based on solid and changing understandings of how these inequalities develop and how the pandemic situation is affecting them. Intersectional thinking could be particularly useful since it enables loneliness to be seen as linked to complex and multidimensional social disadvantage(s) and the policies that create or aggravate these. We need more research and scholarly work to address these sorts of perspectives in more detail, drawing on existing and other academic work related to social processes of discrimination and disadvantage.

At the same time the ontological experience of feminisms could benefit from the intersectional understandings brought about by addressing loneliness, both as a set of political issues affecting many different disadvantaged groups, as well as the interactions between these factors, domains, dimensions and experiences. It is especially important to understand fully and completely the cumulative and multiple negative impacts inflicted on groups of people, who suffer multiple forms of deprivation, discrimination and disadvantage. These social situations arise from ideologies embedded in social systems and policies, and interacting multidimensional factors such as ill-health, risk of illness from COVID-19, related to poverty and low income, lack of educational and job opportunities, in a broader and changing social context. Some of these understandings and perspectives are already emerging within the COVID-19 context, either within (or outside of) an explicit feminist framework.

Perhaps all of these developing understandings contribute to advancing the alleviation of human suffering, wherever and however, it exists in relation to loneliness. The collective experience of this as societies almost certainly includes shared experiences of trauma, loss and grief, in many different forms in many different ways but experienced more deeply and more frequently, or in varying ways, by different groups of people.

As expressed in the poems by the first named author: ‘Trilogy of Dystopian Contemporaneous Suffering Selfdom Illuminating Hope?’

*'Glimpse of Void: Poem #1'* (extracts below written during the 2020 pandemic)

*Contours of stark divides.*

*On pause, standstill in isolation....*

*The promise of hail cathartic, a glimpse of void.*

*They said summer will return and the hazy afternoons would silence the noise.*

*Obliterate the mood and the glimpse of void will prevail.*

*Nightmares have evaporated, there will be a new constellation of dreams.*

*Asymptomatic epoch of numbness, a glimpse of void, whispers in yellow fields.*

We note that national and local organisations and government, businesses, charities, community groups have all tried to address isolation and lack of support in vulnerable individuals during this pandemic, including such initiatives as the Royal voluntary service support (The Royal Voluntary Service, 2020) accessed by any individual or by referral. However prior existing socio-economic inequalities have contributed hugely within certain areas and social groups, such that they were more likely to end up isolated or socially cut off, unsupported and suffering from loneliness. We need initiatives that speak directly to these economic and social inequalities.

Many feminist authors question the whole approach taken to the threat of COVID-19 in the UK and beyond, e.g. Branicki (2020) calls for a radical alternative to the normative assumptions of rationalist crisis management used to tackle the impact of COVID-19. A core question remains whether this is the time to formulate a better understanding (with feminist thinking) of discrimination and its causes, and how this can be a useful set of underpinning principles and efforts to tackle ongoing (and reproduced) health and life opportunity inequalities during this world crisis.

Feminists need to also benefit from tackling loneliness through their feminisms, in order to better understand the experience of other people within their sphere of political action, work, emotional spaces, social lives and other intersectional domains. This may require feminism(s) to both reflect on, and understand loneliness 'better', and incorporate this within their work, networks, and action. For us, this might be an ongoing, but enormously necessary, activist project that deserves replication and expansion. We see this as a necessary component of a more ethical feminism. This may require feminists and feminist projects enabling both difference and similarities, across people who are considered, and shared, as a shared movement towards a more connected society. This can aim to move beyond a 'hierarchy of credibility' that can be prohibitive to embrace multiple interacting forms of discrimination which also change. This is illustrated by our auto-ethnographic work that shows both the different and shared experiences of loneliness across two very different lives and social situations.

We need reminding, of the famous quote from (the sadly missed) Jo Cox:

"While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel round the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us". (Demianyk, 2016, The Huffington Post)

## **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS STATEMENT**

We state that we have no conflicts of interest to declare, and have not gained any financial or other benefits arising from direct applications of this work.

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## Post-Soviet Civil Society in Transition: Leftist Social Movements in Lithuania

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### ABSTRACT

The existing discourse on leftist movements in post-Soviet countries characterizes them as weak and isolated. This research analyzes the case of Lithuania, which has had parliamentary left parties since the democratic transition. Despite this, a new leftist movement recently began to emerge. Therefore, I answer the question, how can we explain the emergence of new leftist political groups in the context of a continued prominence and authority of the “old” left in the Lithuanian government? I analyze the case on several levels. The macro-level analysis is based on the European Value Study (EVS) 3rd pre-release of 2017 data, while for meso/micro-level analysis I conducted 8 interviews with the members of the new leftist movement. The research reveals that a precarious society was formed by those who lost out in the democratic transition. The opportunity for the leftist movement to arise was due to a sense of disappointment stimulated by the long-lasting inefficiency of political parties and their inability to deal with precarious conditions in the country. The new leftist movement was formed recently because of the frustrations of the first post-Soviet generation, rising from the discrepancy between dominating class-based capitalist politics and social issues, including identity politics, which stimulated the search for alternative explanations of the socio-economic structure. Moreover, because of the nature of this generation, the new leftist movement is dual -- an anti-austerity-care movement, fighting not only for the improvement of the precarious conditions they are facing but also taking care of the most vulnerable ones and thus creating a more inclusive and equal democracy.

**Keywords:** democratic transition, post-soviet civil society, first post-soviet generation, anti-austerity movements, care movements

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of leftist social movements in the post-Soviet space is considered to be a complicated phenomenon. Analysis of this topic is usually focused on the study of mechanisms through which leftist movements are repressed and then isolated (Piotrowski, 2005; Abăseacă and Piotrowski, 2018; Cisar, 2013). However, in my research I will ask the difficult and often avoided question: what kind of circumstances allow the leftist social movements to arise and be visible in post-Soviet countries?

The Baltic States are pictured as pioneers of the independence that wanted to break away from the Soviet Union and to eliminate the Soviet legacy as soon as possible (Piotrowski 2015). Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the political focus in the Baltic States turned anti-socialist and after the restoration of independence stayed central-right; however, this did not occur in all three states entirely. In Lithuania, the first president after the restoration of independence, Algirdas Brazauskas, was the former head of the Lithuanian Communist Party; and

the Democratic Labor Party, which mainly consisted of former members of the Communist Party, won the first election (and got 73 places out of 141) (Smith-Sivertsen, 2010). People tended to vote for the candidates they knew for years and expected to retain the economic benefits that they had enjoyed (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2014).

Despite the presence of the left in Lithuanian government, the alternative leftist movement started to organize in 2016. People took part in protests against the new Labor Code, created the “Life is Too Expensive” collective, started to print broadsheets and organize various actions to address the exploitation of workers. Simultaneously, the social center, called “Emma”, was opened where readings of feminism, Marxism, underground music nights, screenings, and discussions were organized. Activists from the informal movement “Life is Too Expensive” founded an independent trade union “May 1<sup>st</sup>” in 2018. They also registered a formal leftist media platform “Life is Too Expensive” in 2019. This way a part of the broad informal movement became formalized while also carrying on its name and ideals. In 2018 the student movement “Scream” at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) was created and soon established connections with the aforementioned trade union and the leftist group. These groups supported and encouraged participation in major 2018-2019 protests, marches and strikes.

Therefore, the question of this research is: How can we explain the emergence of new leftist political groups in the context of a continued prominence and authority of the “old” left in the Lithuanian government?

The needs of the electorate to keep the social benefits and economic security from the Soviet system were not satisfied by the elected leftist party. In the 2016 elections, the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party lost their previous recognition in society (in 2012 they got 37 seats in Parliament, while in 2016 only 17). This opened room for discussion about the weakening of the social-democratic tradition in the country (Laučius, 2004) and brought attention to the dissatisfaction of the electorate. According to a 2019 survey, about 60% of the population does not trust the Lithuanian Parliament and parliamentary parties, showing that the trend of disappointment is a long-lasting phenomenon (Eurobarometer). Without the trust of the electorate, parties in Lithuania are not able to stay in power for long. Such a situation, when the government is not able to build trust and the ideological path of an alternative (representative) party is not clear or satisfying enough, provides an opportunity for new political actors to rise, in this case, on the political left.

There are several theoretical explanations in political science which would guide my discussion of the emergence and specifics of leftist movements in the post-Soviet space. First is the political opportunity theory by Sidney Tarrow (2011). He puts forward the necessary conditions for a successful political opportunity to arise. Most important for this research is an increased access to power. The Lithuanian case suggests that the left-wing electorate was always there, however the trust in the existing parties had broken. Therefore, there was an opportunity for the new leftist social movements to emerge as an ideological alternative to the existing social democratic party. Thus, Tarrow’s framework will be useful to discuss the context in which new leftist social movements in post-Soviet space appeared.

To explain how the political opportunity formed in this specific regional context I use Ronald Inglehart’s (2008) theory of silent revolution in the light of Butler’s (1997), Fraser’s (1997; 2013), and Moran’s (2014; 2020) critique of the subject. Inglehart suggests that in economically developed Western societies, generations born after the Second World War are shifting towards non-material values. Applying his theory to the post-Soviet space we can see that the progress of economic development is visible in several countries; however, the shift is not holistic, since in many of these countries, material living conditions require improvement. Democratization processes in Baltic states allowed the new generation to socialize in a liberalized context and to acquire, as Inglehart would suggest, “non-material” values. In other words, material insecurity together with socio-cultural modernization created a generation concerned about both material and non-material issues. This generation is forming the new left movement. However, many authors have been critical of the understandings perpetuated by Inglehart and others that material concerns have been replaced by non-material concerns. Instead, Butler (1997), Fraser (1997; 2013) and Moran (2014; 2020) have argued that even apparently ‘non-material’ issues are rooted in material conditions; and that concerns with gender, racialized or other ‘identities’ cannot be treated as wholly lifestyle or cultural issues, divorced from the political economy of capitalist societies. Material conditions may arise in and shape various social issues, which afterwards may maintain the order of the economic system. In other words, the existence of social inequalities based on gender and race derive from material conditions in capitalist societies – and the presence of these inequalities allows capitalist societies to function and maintain their class-based order. Therefore, the transition in post-Soviet space is not from material to non-material values, but from class-based reproductive politics and consciousness to a recognition and addressing of social issues, including identity politics. Moreover, the Baltic states, in restoring their independence, accepted the neoliberal model of economy which centers on the free market and its maintenance as the main goal. Thus, the social issues discussed above became even more visible in this context. So, the new generation manifests itself as pioneers of the leftist social movement, which is grappling with the complex interplay of social issues, including of identity and environment, with material conditions.

A further reason for the political opportunity to arise and its specifics take shape can be developed from Donatella della Porta's (2017) research. She analyzed social movements in Southern Europe and noticed that after the Great Recession in 2008, the livelihood of a large part of society became precarious. People lost their previous security and were disappointed. These feelings encouraged some to turn radical and form anti-austerity movements, demanding greater equality and inclusion in society. These goals are also components of a more representative democracy and therefore such movements aimed to eliminate precariousness by improving their democratic regimes (della Porta, 2015). This theory can be used to explain the emergence of the new leftist social movements in Eastern European context as well, because the disappointment and precarious conditions persisted after the transition period (Žilinskienė and Ilic, 2018; Milanovic, 1995). However, there are several points to add. First, not everybody turns radical and forms coalitions. A lot of people try to keep their disappointment to themselves and act on an individual level. The grievances they experience force them to isolate themselves from collective action because they fail to meet the social norms or have psychological problems (Santos, 2020). The disappointment of Lithuanian society is represented by the high percentage of distrust in governmental institutions<sup>1</sup>. However, this disappointment is publicly expressed only by some trade unions becoming active after the 2008 crisis period (teachers', doctors', agricultural workers', and drivers' trade unions, which organized strikes periodically). Meanwhile, the problems of other less prominent or prestigious sectors were not able to surface. Such conditions, however, can foster a sense of solidarity based on empathy, where people who do not directly benefit from union membership form movements to share their resources with the most vulnerable and those who are not represented in the political arena. Felipe Santos (2020) refers to these movements where collective action is based on assistance and empathic solidarity as care movements. Therefore, della Porta's idea can be revised when talking about post-Soviet countries and the consequences of their democratic transition by complementing it with the theory of care movement.

The case of Lithuania demonstrates that declining trust in existing social democratic parties can open up opportunities for new leftist groups to mobilize. Therefore, we must reconsider the existing consensus on post-Soviet civil society and its ideological stances. This study will seek to explain the emergence of leftist social movements: the opening of the political structure for opportunities to arise, the nature of social support they receive, their ideology and framing. Thus, I will be using the three previously discussed theoretical concepts to analyze the subject of my research: declining trust in the existing leftist parties; the shift from the reproduction of class-based consciousness and politics towards social issues and identity politics; and the precariousness of those on the losing end of democratic transition.

The research hypotheses are:

- H1: Disappointment based on the inefficiency of ideologically similar political parties stimulates the emergence of alternative political powers.
- H2: Precarious conditions stimulate the survival of materialistic concerns in the post-Soviet generation.
- H3: Socio-cultural modernization leads to the growth of importance of social issues in the post-Soviet generation.
- H4: Discrepancies between the dominant capitalist class-based politics and social issues stimulates a questioning of the existing socioeconomic structure.

The paper is structured in the following way. In the first section the shortened history of the new left movement in Lithuania will be discussed by revealing the national situation and existence of disappointment in the main political parties. The second section presents an analysis of the reproduction of material deprivation through the generations. Third section has two parts. In the first part, the impact of the socio-cultural modernization for the first post-Soviet generation is presented, while the second part discusses the growth of importance of social issues and identity in the first post-Soviet generation. Also, the interplay between dominating capitalist class-based politics and social issues is presented in this section, which leads to a discussion of the creation of the new leftist movement in Lithuania. In the last section the nature of the new left movement is discussed, revealing its duality: it is an anti-austerity movement and also a care movement.

## METHODOLOGY

This study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods. For the macro level analysis, I use the 3<sup>rd</sup> pre-released European Values Study (EVS) 2017 data. It includes integrated and national datasets. The fieldwork in Lithuania was conducted in 2018. I analyze this data using the SPSS quantitative data analysis program. I calculate descriptive statistics and proportions for each generation to understand what percentage of each generation holds

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2019 survey, about 60% of the population does not trust the Parliament and the Parties (Eurobarometer).

certain values. For this reason, I compare the last Soviet generation and the first post-Soviet generation. I define the last Soviet generation as those born, socialized, entering adulthood in Soviet Lithuania (born 1961-1970). The first post-Soviet generation are those born and socialized in independent Lithuania and who are now entering adulthood (born 1991-2000). The generations between these two periods are considered to be the transition generations since they were socialized and entered adulthood during the transition period and were therefore affected by the unstable political and economic situations of the time.

Since the macro level data shows the emergence of alternative political action and increasing differentiation of economic values, the micro/meso analysis focuses on the new left movement. The movement is primarily organized by the representatives of the first post-Soviet generation and focuses on improving the material conditions without excluding social issues and identity politics. For the micro/meso level analysis I conducted 8 semi-structured in-depth interviews with the representatives of the new left movement from three different but inter-related organizations. These organizations are the leftist media platform “Life Is Too Expensive”, the trade union “May 1<sup>st</sup>”, and the student movement “Scream”. In the following sections I am going to present the analysis of EVS data and dive deeper into the formation of leftist organizations by testing my hypotheses.

## **DISAPPOINTMENT AS A WINDOW FOR A NEW POLITICAL POWER – THE LEFT IN TRANSITION**

In this section the shortened history of the alternative (new) left movement in Lithuania will be presented. It will be discussed by highlighting the moments of opportunities which emerged from the political situation in the country. So, the first hypothesis that the disappointment based on the inefficiency of ideologically similar political parties stimulates the emergence of alternative political powers will also be tested in this section. At the end of the section, I will also discuss possible pathways for the future of the movement.

First, it is important to mention several pre-existing activities, gatherings, and communities, which formed and shaped the emergence of the new left movement. The following is a description of the context in which the new left emerged:

“Since the late Soviet era, there have been those radical leftists who oppose the authoritarian system and want libertarian communism. The need has always been there, only fragmented, and subcultural. The punk movement can be attributed to this. Punk rockers emerged from the basement and staged a protest in 1991 against militaristic laws. In the 90s it was difficult to get together, because then we had to endure and wait for capitalism to bring happiness. (...) In 2005 anarchija.lt appeared. The people who wrote there were cultural anarchists. That year saw the emergence of the grassroots movement on the issue of public spaces. The Free University was founded in 2008. NK95 was the voice of academics that paved the way for LGBT people. It showed that there is a great deal of left-wing thought in academia.” (Informant 5)

However, these activities never solidified into a long-lasting movement, which would be characterized by officially registered organizations and those working towards the recognition of a new left movement in the country. This citation represents how people gathered for the first actions of the new left movement:

“It was first the International Free Speech movement, which operated on the basis of a creative workshop. There we worked on our own expression, enabling the expression of others. (...) And then I joined the organizers of the Free University, where people were clearly more left-wing. (...) The Free University was founded in response to educational reforms. It was an idea that you could create a free education, create your own lectures, and invite people, and at the same time create a certain discussion space for certain people. Here I met people on the left, I think they were also gathering at the time, but were not working on inclusive activism. But then a certain collective was born out of it, which was engaged in the setting up autonomous spaces, the protests of organizations on various topics, and which understood itself as a certain collective of people. It was the Solidarity Network that was designed to help workers who have suffered at work or those who tend to fight for better pay (...). In 2016, there was resistance to high prices (...) which were converted from litas to euros (...). There were many groups and small protests all over Lithuania, around 20 events, and then we joined the Kaunas group, and with these people, we organized a march together, and the one in Kaunas was the most successful one in Lithuania. And then I suggested that we do a wider assembly, the proposal was to organize a protest against the labor code. The occupation took place in the City Garden in Kaunas, later in Kudirkka Square in Vilnius. And then that movement was called “Life Is Too Expensive.”” (Informant 6)



In 2016 a new Parliament was elected. In 2015, Lithuania joined the Eurozone and prices immediately started to rise. In 2016 there was an explosion of disappointment caused by the realization that entering the EU would not result in better life conditions. Additionally, as we can see from the citation above, there were also other disappointments and disagreements with the political decisions (educational reform, exploitative new labor code), which enabled people to gather and demand change. It was an opportunity for these leftist groups to unite for action. Especially when the only “left” party, the Social Democratic Party, received significantly fewer places in Parliament than usual. However, the new left clearly state that they offer an alternative to the existing Social Democratic Party:

“These people had a political influence that was formed and sustained under the rule of the Soviet apparatus. They remained recognizable as a force from the former system and were able to stay.” (Informant 6)

“[We would like to be] an alternative not within the framework of the Social Democrats but an alternative to them, the pressure on the Social Democrats to become Social Democrats.” (Informant 2)

The Social Democratic Party is criticized because they do not introduce progressive programs and most of their members understood communism as it was understood in the former system. The alternative to this is a social movement without a definite goal to become a political party and to formalize their position at the level of parliamentary politics. Although it is not a goal of the majority, some members are thinking about standing as candidates in the municipal elections.

Since 2016 the movement has been growing, and it has since been formalized. So now “Life is Too Expensive” became an official leftist media outlet and the trade union “May 1<sup>st</sup>” was formed to solve the problems of labor exploitation. Meanwhile, the social center “Emma” offered a place where gatherings and events of the previously mentioned organizations could take place:

““Life Is Too Expensive” was an informal organization in which employees helped each other in some way to demand the elimination of injustices. The newspaper “Life Is Too Expensive” was printed for different sectors of workers. That informal network seemed suspicious to the workers, and the press added that the Lithuanian left was probably representing Russian interests. It was decided to establish an official organization, which led to the formation of the “May 1<sup>st</sup>” trade union. The newspaper was replaced by the “Life Is Too Expensive” page, which was registered as an official left-wing media platform.” (Informant 7)

“The purpose of (Emma) is (to provide space) for social activities, film screenings, lectures, concerts, gatherings, meetings of the same organizations May 1<sup>st</sup> and Life is Too Expensive. There are people who are (legally) in charge of the space, participate in activities, go to meetings” (Informant 6).

The presence of “May 1<sup>st</sup>” and “Life is Too Expensive” and their development of leftist discourse influenced another political movement and trade union to emerge. It partly shaped the emergence of the student movement “Scream” and the revival of the trade union in Vytautas Magnus University:

“During the party at Emma’s social center we were discussing student representation and lost our patience (...) it had an impact because looking at their activities, you realized that it is possible to form an organized network because they already had experience and [therefore] some of the people were invited to the “Scream” organizational group.” (Informant 5)

The members of the student movement “Scream” do not tend to conclude that their movement formed as a result of “Life Is Too Expensive” or the activities at social center “Emma”; however, these played an important role. The idea to form a student movement came up during a party in the social center and some members belong to more than one of these organizations.

The main goals of the student movement “Scream” is the empowerment of students because the present representative organ, the Student Union, is not perceived to be functioning as a voice of students. Therefore “Scream” emerged as an alternative to the non-functioning and/or bureaucratic Student Unions at Vytautas Magnus University and Vilnius University:

“[The biggest achievements of the Scream are] the resolution to support the teacher’s community, because it was rejected a year ago. This is a development of discourse. Also, students got involved in these issues and protests. Last thing, the change of Vytautas Magnus University’s Student Union, as members of the Scream have appeared. We started to constantly criticize and push for change, so the Student Union started to listen, they are starting to do what it must do, due to this pressure. (...)

[However], the VMU Student Union hinders some decisions that are made in the Student Parliament, because it was initiated by the members of the Scream. Therefore, it is the only way to win a majority election next year” (Informant 4).

The emergence of the “Scream” is an example of where the new left movement is going:

“There is a need for as many separate movements as possible to cover their own areas of interest and then to form a coalition” (Informant 2)

In general, the movement is planning to create a coalition of future leftist organizations and movements by establishing a well-recognized leftist political structure. In the near future, the plan is to strengthen the “1<sup>st</sup> of May” trade union, together with the “Life Is Too Expensive” left media, and to continue growing the student movement “Scream” to get as many votes as possible in future elections of the Student Parliament in Vytautas Magnus University.

H1 was confirmed in this section. Disappointment, rising from the perceived inefficiency of the political parties to deal with precarious conditions, is causing a decrease in political identification with the Social Democratic Party. However, this allows alternative political powers to emerge, such as a new leftist movement.

## **REPRODUCTION OF MATERIAL CONDITIONS**

In this section I will discuss the fact that financial problems were of frequent concern for the last Soviet generation. However, even after the democratic transition the situation improved, but not drastically and the financial hardships concentrated in the less privileged social groups. This environment stimulates the reproduction of concerns about material conditions in the first post-Soviet generation. So this section will test the 2<sup>nd</sup> hypothesis, which states that precarious conditions stimulate the survival of material concerns in the first post-Soviet generation.

Interview analysis revealed that almost all informants’ parents experienced financial hardships, job loss and difficulties in finding new employment, before and during the transition period or after the Great Recession. This was happening despite the fact that in most cases, one or both parents had higher education degrees:

“It was difficult, and they could not afford much, and that stress of survival and constant work and struggle was a common motive in their lives (...) they were both studying in a polytechnic institute, where they met (...) it was very difficult because they worked several jobs at once, a little sister (was already born) and they themselves were very young. And everything changed with the restoration of independence, that whole transition that ... there were a lot of direct sales (...) my dad found a job offer at a direct sales company” (Informant 1)

“My mother was working in the Bazaar, my father was involved in illegal activities, smuggling of goods or machine parts. When I was little, my parents divorced, and my mother's financial situation was very bad. (...) she has a university degree in economics” (Informant 4)

“Dad is a bureaucrat. He feared he would lose his job due to redundancies in 2008” (Informant 5)

Having a university degree did not help these families to secure good, high-paying jobs. Instead, they were working several jobs which were not prestigious or were taking on illegal positions and activities. However, hardship cannot be unequivocally attributed to the transition period. For some families this was the point where their situation improved. For others, economic hardship was caused not only by the unstable situation in the country but also by the circumstances of their private lives, such as having children or getting divorced and being a single parent in a context of a materially deprived society.

These stories confirm that economic hardship and financial pressures were present in most of the families. However, even if the children were protected from these problems, they faced it in other environments. Experiences in the family or in society formed a perception among informants that a lot of people in Lithuania are facing economic hardship, in most cases this included informants’ families. In 2005, 41% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat 2020, [Appendix 1](#)). The lowest percentage (27%) was in 2014. The latest data of 2019 has the figure at 28%. When around 30% of the population is balanced on the edge of poverty or social exclusion, a feeling of insecurity about life and the material situation is felt not only for those 30% but also those in wider society. Moreover, the unemployment rate in Lithuania is much more unstable compared to other post-communist states such as Poland, Hungary and Romania, and also Western European countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Eurostat 2020, [Appendix 2](#)). High peaks, with 17.5% of the population unemployed after crisis periods (2001 and 2010) suggests that the labor market is very sensitive to

**Table 1.** Signing a petition

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (187)	28-37 (177)	38-47 (208)	48-57 (236)
Have done	18.7 %	21.5 %	19.2 %	14.8 %
Might do	60.4 %	53.1 %	52.9 %	51.7 %
Would never do	20.9 %	25.4 %	27.9 %	33.5 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

recessions. More recently, the rate of unemployment has reached around 5-6% (in 2019). This situation creates a sense of instability and insecurity.

Concerns about financial problems are imprinted in the discourse and consciousness of the society; however, for the first post-Soviet generation these concerns were activated when they became students, entering the labor market, relying less on their parents/family, and experiencing the precarious conditions themselves:

“The job issue is that when you reach a certain age, you need to start working (...) and you start to see that somebody was fired because of [sexual] orientation or (you are) paid a lower salary because you are a woman” (Informant 6)

“I did not have people in my immediate environment who faced a difficult financial situation or discrimination, but over the years I met such people. I have friends who are gay...and the experiences I had only read about, they confirmed. (...) for me then it became more personal and less abstract (...) [I have] a much greater appreciation of material matters now. It is only because I entered adulthood and began to work and realized that work sucks. Despite having a decent position, it drains a lot of energy from you. If my job is frustrating because I don't have time for personal life, then how should people who are doing repetitive, routine work feel, and the manager behaves like you're a replaceable robot?” (Informant 3)

“Looking at the social space, society is very angry and dissatisfied, it accumulates anger and simply burns with it because it experiences humiliation at work (...) I, as a student, also feel precarious because I have no guarantees for my future” (Informant 5)

H2 was confirmed in this section: material concerns were reproduced in the first post-Soviet generation through their family situation and simultaneously through the observation of a precarious society. However, these concerns were activated and became respondents' primary concern only when they started to enter the labor market and adulthood.

## UNIQUE TRAITS OF THE FIRST POST-SOVIET GENERATION

### Impact of Socio-cultural Modernization

The change of the political regime and the accompanying socio-cultural liberation had its impact on civil society in Lithuania. Socialization, in the context of a more liberalized discourse and understanding of civil rights and freedoms, shaped civil activism even in the transition generations. But the change is more evident when we compare the first post-Soviet and the last Soviet generations. In this section I am going to reveal the shift in civil society towards different and more open modes of political action, which will later help us to test the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> hypotheses.

The analysis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> pre-released European Values Study (EVS) 2017 data reveals that the post-Soviet generation is or tends to be more politically active than their parents' generation. This growing tendency can already be observed in the transition generations (Table 2). The first post-Soviet generation has signed more petitions (18.7%) than their parents (14.8%) despite their young age. Moreover, they are much more open to forms of political activism than previous generations. The proportion of those who might sign a petition in the first post-Soviet generation is 60.4%, while in the last Soviet generation it is 51.7%. The tendency increases in the transition generations. Around 53% might sign a petition. Also, the first post-Soviet generation is less reluctant than previous generations. 20.9% of the first post-Soviet generation would never sign a petition, while the last Soviet generation is more critical with 33.5% of those who would never sign. A slow shift towards being more open to petitions is visible by observing the transition generations (Table 1).

Similar tendencies can be observed in joining boycotts (Table 2), lawful demonstrations (Table 3) and unofficial strikes (Table 4). However, there is a difference in the level of participation in these actions. The first post-Soviet generation has smaller numbers (boycotts 4.4%, demonstrations 4.2%, strikes 1.1%) than the last Soviet generation (boycotts 6.9%, demonstrations 7.8%, strikes 1.8%). This tendency can be explained by the fact

**Table 2.** Joining boycotts

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (183)	28-37 (167)	38-47 (205)	48-57 (231)
Have done	4.4 %	6.6 %	10.7 %	6.9 %
Might do	62.3 %	54.5 %	51.2 %	48.5 %
Would never do	33.3 %	38.9 %	38.0 %	44.6 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

**Table 3.** Attending lawful demonstrations

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (189)	28-37 (173)	38-47 (206)	48-57 (245)
Have done	4.2 %	2.9 %	9.7 %	7.8 %
Might do	65.1 %	56.1 %	54.4 %	55.1 %
Would never do	30.7 %	41.0 %	35.9 %	37.1 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

**Table 4.** Joining unofficial strikes

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (174)	28-37 (167)	38-47 (190)	48-57 (220)
Have done	1.1 %	0.6 %	1.6 %	1.8 %
Might do	50.0 %	35.3 %	39.5 %	30.9 %
Would never do	48.9 %	64.1 %	58.9 %	67.3 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

**Table 5.** Satisfaction with the political system

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (200)	28-37 (190)	38-47 (221)	48-57 (261)
Rather dissatisfied	37.5 %	44.2 %	39.4 %	49.4 %
Rather satisfied	41.0 %	33.8 %	43.4 %	32.9 %
Neutral	21.5 %	22.1 %	17.2 %	17.6 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

**Table 6.** Voting in national elections

Voting	Age/N			
	18-27 (190)	28-37 (192)	38-47 (226)	48-57 (269)
Always	12.6 %	21.4 %	25.7 %	36.1 %
Usually	45.8 %	65.1 %	67.3 %	58.4 %
Never	41.6 %	13.5 %	7.1 %	5.6 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

that the first post-Soviet generation has not had many opportunities to participate in such actions due to their young age, while the last Soviet generation could participate in the political demonstrations against the Soviet regime. Despite that, the first post-Soviet generation is more willing to participate in these actions (boycotts 62.3%, demonstrations 65.1%, strikes 50.0%), compared to the last Soviet generation (boycotts 48.5%, demonstrations 55.1%, strikes 30.9%) and the transition generations ([Tables 2, 3, 4](#)). The first post-Soviet generation is also less critical of the discussed actions, compared with the previous generations ([Tables 2, 3, 4](#)).

However, despite the willingness to participate in the contentious politics of the first post-Soviet generation, they report a much greater satisfaction with the political system than previous generations. 41% of them are rather satisfied and 37.5% are rather dissatisfied ([Table 5](#)).

Furthermore, the first post-Soviet generation is the least active in national elections (only 12.6% always participate and 41.6% stated that they never participate ([Table 6](#))). This can be explained by the fact that those who were 18-20 in 2018 were not able to participate in an election, since they were not 18 when the last national election took place (in 2016). However, the tendency of declining turnout in national elections is also visible in previous generations. Moreover, the recent parliament election turnout in 2020 shows that 39.1% of those, born between 1991-2000 participated in the election, in comparison with 48.1% of those born between 1975-1956<sup>2</sup>. Even if the year range of the former does not match with the last Soviet generation discussed in this research, the tendency suggests that society is becoming less politically engaged with each generation regarding national politics and therefore tends to look for alternative ways of political expression (such as petitions, demonstrations or strikes).

<sup>2</sup> Data from The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania

**Table 7.** Belonging to environment, ecology, or animal rights movement

Belonging	Age/N			
	18-27 (209)	28-37 (186)	38-47 (221)	48-57 (267)
Yes	2.4 %	2.2 %	2.3 %	1.5 %
No	97.6 %	97.8 %	97.7 %	98.5 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

**Table 8.** Important in a job: good pay

Important	Age/N			
	18-27 (210)	28-37 (193)	38-47 (230)	48-57 (268)
Yes	97.6 %	98.4 %	98.3 %	99.6 %
No	2.4 %	1.6 %	1.7 %	0.4 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

All in all, socio-cultural modernization after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is evident when observing the data about civil activism in Lithuania. The younger generations are becoming more open to contentious politics, compared to previous generations who were more afraid of it. Moreover, the younger generations are finding new ways of political expression, such as signing petitions.

### Between Social Issues and Class Politics: Emergence of Identity Questions and Search for Alternative Explanations

In the first section it was stated that material concerns are reproduced in the first post-Soviet generation. They are activated when young people experienced precarious conditions upon entering the labor market or when exposed to inequalities or exploitation in their immediate social environment. However, the unique trait of this generation was revealed during the interviews. They are also concerned about social issues and identity-related questions, usually simultaneously or even before being exposed to material issues. Therefore, in this section I am going to test the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> hypotheses of this research, which states that sociocultural modernization leads to the increasing importance of social issues, including identity in the first post-Soviet generation; and that the dominating discourse of class-based politics intersects with these social and identity-based questions. The first post-Soviet generation's rising disappointment and frustration about the socioeconomic system leads to questioning and the search for political alternatives.

To start with 3<sup>rd</sup> hypothesis, the emergence of identity-related questions is tackled in these experiences:

“LGBT + people are often more sensitive. Those, who did not fit in for a variety of reasons in their communities... To some extent, there are people who have some kind of mental illness or are more sensitive, have anxiety or depression, they may feel another's pain. But it also happens that people come from a bourgeois family and want to help others (...), but they also have some problems of their own.” (Informant 6)

“[Interest] in labor relations issues, labor policy stems from discrimination, which has been an important issue for a long time. After [x health problems] I moved to another school where I experienced bullying (...) later it helped me become a more empathetic person (...) sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, contempt for people who have not succeeded in life and the injustice that they are being blamed for their own situation ... It made me sick. (...) (so) in the beginning, social issues and identity politics were more important.” (Informant 3)

The growth of the importance of general social issues in the first post-Soviet generation is also confirmed by the data of The European Values Study. First, there is an increased tendency to belong to environmental, ecological and animal rights movements across all generations. However, the highest percentage (2.4 %) of participation in these movements is in the first post-Soviet generation (Table 7).

Decrease in the importance of material values among members of the first post-Soviet generation is presented in Table 8. When asked how important a good pay is when choosing a job, the first post-Soviet generation valued it the least (2.4% answered that it is not important, compared with 0.4% for the last Soviet generation). The importance decreases in younger generations.

Although the shift of interests is visible, it is not drastic. The emergence is happening gradually because it is only the beginning of the changes which started with the transition generation. The process is difficult, because of the presence of class-based discourse and politics – namely, the way the economy and society were structured after the democratic and capitalist transition. This notwithstanding, it is possible to track the increasing importance of social issues and identity politics.

**Table 9.** Protect environment versus economic growth

Position	Age/N			
	18-27 (177)	28-37 (175)	38-47 (203)	48-57 (232)
Protect environment	39.5 %	36.0 %	33.0 %	34.1 %
Economic growth	60.5 %	64.0 %	67.0 %	65.9 %

Table made by the author, using data from The European Values Study, 2017

The best representation of the shift towards social issues in the younger generations is in **Table 9**. The respondents were asked which they preferred, to protect the environment or to pursue economic growth. The first post-Soviet generation showed increasing interest in environmental issues (39.5 %), compared with the previous generations (34.1% for the last Soviet generation). Even though economic growth still receives more concern, its importance is decreasing (**Table 9**).

The analysis here confirms H3, that socio-cultural modernization stimulated the increase of importance of social issues, including identity and environmental issues in the first post-Soviet generation. Returning to the analysis of the personal stories of the interviewees, personal problems (which were social at their core) caused a feeling of injustice among the respondents. They were looking for explanations as to why society is full of discrimination, anger, and inequality:

“[Started] with cultural education, [interest] in punk rock, with the stupid rebellion that was broadcasted in music (...) that something in the world is not OK, that the present is problematic and flawed.” (Informant 5)

“After school and after quitting university, I really felt like there was something I fundamentally didn’t like. How life is typically organized in our society ... and somehow that was very intuitive and that led me to look for some conceptual ways to explain the frustration I felt.” (Informant 1)

These experiences of “sick society” guided them to look for answers in leftist theory and anarchism. It was usually the academic community or teachers that influenced such directions, but for some it was a personal discovery:

“I started to transform at university, I met some specific communities, I was influenced by the academic community, the social center Emma. I also went abroad to work in the summer, (where) I met people who were quite engaged.” (Informant 1)

““Santara Sviesa” is such an intellectual informal movement in which I also participated a lot. It was there that I met my young friends who were actually on the far left. And through some discussion, I realized that there was something there. It felt good to no longer be an alternative thinker, that opposite thinker who is disliked.” (Informant 2)

“I have always had an interest in alternative culture, questioning the norm, pop culture. (...) But I was interested in political theory from the outset (...) [as a teenager] I was impressed by the hippie subculture, such belief in idealism. (...) I discovered and started reading anarchist texts on social media, namely the site anarchija.lt. Then my understanding of capitalism, competition, liberalism began to expand...” (Informant 3)

Anarchism as the primary source of the alternative and radical ideas was mentioned in several interviews. The existence of radical leftist thought was also prominent in the stories of the interviewees. They mentioned academic circles and communities, which have links to Vytautas Magnus University. However, these informal communities were not able to morph into a unified movement that could represent not only their interests but struggles of the entire society:

““NK95” was the voice of academics that paved the way for LGBT people. It has shown that there is a great deal of left-wing thought in academia, but they have their positions and do not want to risk losing them by taking to the streets. "Life Is Too Expensive" was not out of nowhere, it gradually took some influence from certain people, learned from unfortunate events.” (Informant 5)

Previous generations were unable to act. They were limited by the unfortunate situation, where being a leftist was a crime against the state:

“[In the past] thinking left was a crime because some ... tried to legalize leftist political thinking through the courts.” (Informant 2)

“At first, [society] defined our group as anarchists because you know, there could be no communists in Lithuania for a decade. Now, as you know, you can be one. You can use that word. (...) Two prime ministers in a row called the teachers’ union protests pro-Russian. And never did this allegation turn out to be true.” (Informant 6)

However, these leftist, transitional generations were speaking up in the universities, writing articles, and organizing intellectual gatherings, which were noticed by the first post-Soviet generation. The conditions under which this generation grew up influenced their disappointment. This disappointment, arising from the discrepancy between the reality and the dominating discourse of neoliberal progress, stimulated the organization of the new left movement:

“For a while, this dream worked well and motivated things. The more West, the better, and we just need to try, and it will only get better, just like in the West. But then came the realization and the frustration that this model of competitive, free market and liberal democracy is not a source of prosperity for many, and this dream does not deliver what it promised.” (Informant 7)

To put all things together, socio-cultural modernization after the democratic transition influenced the flow of liberal ideas, including new ways of thinking about being different or having alternative opinions. The democratic transition brought not only neoliberalism and the negative consequences of the free market, including inequality and financial hardship, but also the idea that different identities can and should be tolerated as part of an inclusive society. The period when this recognition occurred was the time when the first post-Soviet generation was growing up. They were frustrated by unexplainable feeling that the social and economic system was not working and was in tension with their values. This frustration and disappointment caused the questioning of the socioeconomic system in which they are living and stimulated the search for the alternative explanations of social reality. This led to the formation of the leftist social movement. Therefore, taking the above into consideration, H4 has been confirmed in this section.

## **MOVEMENTS OF THE PRECARIOUS SOCIETY: BETWEEN ANTI-AUSTERITY AND CARE**

In previous sections the precariousness of the Lithuanian society was discussed. However, in this section it will be explained in fuller detail with reference to the emergence of the new left movement in Lithuania. The following citation succinctly describes an atmosphere of instability in the country, where the “dream” of a better, neoliberal future was shattered, and people faced economic and social deprivation:

“For older people, that dream never existed, they suffered trauma from the moment of transition. Some say they long for the Soviet era, but they have very specific reasons. They are longing for some stability, work, respect that they do not have now when they are expected to die for something to change in the country. And for the younger generation, this dream turned into emigration. When all your values are focused on the pursuit of the West, it is better for you to go West than to wait for things to catch up here. The 2008 crisis and the switch to the euro were a blow. Even my father, who is a liberal, says it is too expensive for him to live. It seems that recently a lot of sectors have started complaining, so this story that everything is getting better seems to be convincing only in the center of Vilnius.” (Informant 7)

The situation described by the interviewee suggests that only a small group of elites share the increasing wealth in Lithuania, while the majority is struggling because of economic and social inequality.

In response to this inequality, is the new left movement an anti-austerity movement, where the precariat is uniting? Or is it a care movement, which empowers the most vulnerable ones? In the previous section, it was argued that the importance of social issues started took root in the first post-Soviet generation; however, material concerns continue to dominate and are reproduced through family experience and experienced directly when individuals enter the labor market. Therefore, this generation is concerned with the complex interplay of material conditions and social issues, identity politics and recognition. This is how the informants describe the overlap of material and social concerns:

“Someone is fired because of his orientation or (someone) is paid a lower salary because she is a woman (...) And through the issue of work all social things can become visible.” (Informant 6)

Even though they focus mostly on the material issues, social questions are not left out of the discussion:

“[When] dealing with trade unions, where there is a labor movement, then there is a tendency to emphasize social solidarity, to introduce feminist, queer considerations.” (Informant 7)

Therefore, the movement focuses on social issues, including identity politics, and their relation to material conditions. Moreover, the movement is dual: it is an anti-austerity movement and a care movement. It represents the most vulnerable and plays a role of caring, thus being a movement of the precariat. These citations represent the duality of the movement:

“There were postmen who had problems because their workplace was supposed to be closed. Someone had [our] number and called. This group, which works in one workplace, started talking about working conditions; and then you start to think about what (may be possible) problems, maybe not according to the Labor Code in one way or another. “May 1<sup>st</sup>” members are now communicating with them further. There is a published article about their working conditions in the post office. Trade union offer free consultations to people, but after consultations, people rarely return or join a union. It’s like charity” (Informant 6).

“A group of women from the Lithuanian Railways called us because of unequal salary increases and asked for a consultation. We helped them with that, we advised on labor rights. (...) At the very beginning of the [Corona virus] crisis, there was an informational sheet of workers' rights. [It was informing] that they cannot simply fire you, [it was] warning that you will not sign any documents, or that you can cancel the signed document. It can also be a direct help. We have money in the treasury, if you lost your job, you can take it, the time will come - you will return” (Informant 8).

“When we built the Solidarity Network, there were a lot of students on our side. The point is, to appreciate that you will work in the future, and now you are a student... you may have to work. Those who had already worked were certainly the majority. At that time, you had to be able not to work and sit in the occupation. It’s a little harder for a working person to do that” (Informant 6).

First and second citations are illustrative of several situations where the movement acted as a care movement. Students in the Solidarity Network had such resources as time and some additional knowledge to organize the protests and occupations; however, they did this not only to represent the workers but also as a future investment in better working conditions for themselves.

In this section it was revealed that a sense of economic insecurity is common in Lithuanian society. The presence of this discourse, together with precarious economic conditions, stimulated materialistic concerns in the first post-Soviet generation. However, the impact of socio-cultural modernization can also be observed as part of first post-Soviet generation’s participation in contentious politics. For example, there has been an increased interest in ecological, environmental, gender and sexual equality issues in younger generations. The discrepancy between their ideals of an equal and inclusive society and the precarious economic conditions they were experiencing created the stimulus to form a movement. In doing so, they sought to deal with problems which concerned their generation as well as the problems facing the most vulnerable groups in wider society. Thus, the movement created by the first post-Soviet generation can be seen as an anti-austerity-care movement.

## CONCLUSIONS

In general, leftist social movements in post-Soviet and post-Communist countries are perceived as repressed and isolated. However, their recent emergence can be traced in Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania. In first two, the rightist government has been dominating for several years, while in Lithuania the leftist parties have been part of the government for a while even though their popularity has been decreasing. Therefore, even if the political context of Lithuania is slightly different, the socio-economic reasons for the emergence of a leftist movement are similar to those in other post-Soviet or post-Communist countries.

In this research I explored the reasons why a political opportunity for the new leftist groups emerged, despite the presence of the left in the Lithuanian government. In other post-Soviet countries, in contrast, leftist parties are small and lack a popular base.

This research was based on the theory of political opportunity, combined with the concept of generational value change. It offers a critique of the concept of silent revolution, stressing the significance material conditions and the emergence of winners and losers during the democratic transition. This theoretical framework explained the emergence of new political players in Lithuania, the reasons why the political opportunity emerged and its specificity, as a response to a precarious society. Social and economic factors combined with political changes created an opportunity for the new leftist movement in Lithuania to emerge.



All four hypotheses were confirmed by this research. The main political change was decreasing political affiliation, which is tied with low levels of trust and belief in political parties. It emerged from the inefficiency of parliamentary parties in dealing with deep-set, precarious social and economic conditions. Since the existing political parties did not satisfy the needs of the electorate, there was an opportunity for an alternative political power to emerge: the new leftist movement.

One of the reasons the political opportunity formed was revealed by using critique of the concept of silent revolution. Socio-cultural modernization in Lithuania started in the 80s and intensified after the restoration of the independence. Therefore, the first post-Soviet generation was socialized in an environment where the importance of social issues, including identity politics started to grow. Raising social issues worked with and against more traditional class-based politics and led to the search for the alternative explanations of how the socioeconomic system can be re-structured.

The analysis of the winners and losers of the democratic transition revealed that Lithuanian society is facing precarious social and economic conditions. Material insecurity was a common experience for the last Soviet generation. These materialistic concerns of the last Soviet generation were reproduced by the first post-Soviet generation and became activated when they started to enter the labor market.

These three conditions: long-standing precariousness, loss of trust in political parties, and the frustration for the first post-Soviet generation, rising from tension between class-based capitalist politics and social issues are the reasons that the political opportunity for the new left arose.

The research also revealed that the new leftist movement is not only an anti-austerity movement, fighting against inequality and precarious conditions in the country, but also a care movement. This movement mobilized to help not only its members but also to stress the problems of most vulnerable and to empower those who are under-represented. The reasons for this dual aspect of the movement may rise from the essence of the first post-Soviet generation, which is the main organizer of the new leftist movement in Lithuania. Their understanding of the complex intersection between material conditions and identity politics stimulates the goal to improve democracy and living conditions in the country. Therefore, they are interested not only in the issues which are significant to them, but also in the struggles of others. In this way, the new leftist movement is trying to eliminate precariousness by creating a more representative and thus more equal democracy.

The theoretical framework, which was adapted to this post-Soviet context, can be applied in research about leftist social movements in other post-Soviet or post-Communist countries to examine the emergence of identity politics after the democratic transition and the impact of precarious economic conditions on the first post-Soviet generation. In addition, this framework can be used to trace the emergence of the leftist social movements in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. By applying this framework, the dominant discourse about leftist movements in post-Soviet space and post-Soviet civil society can be challenged.

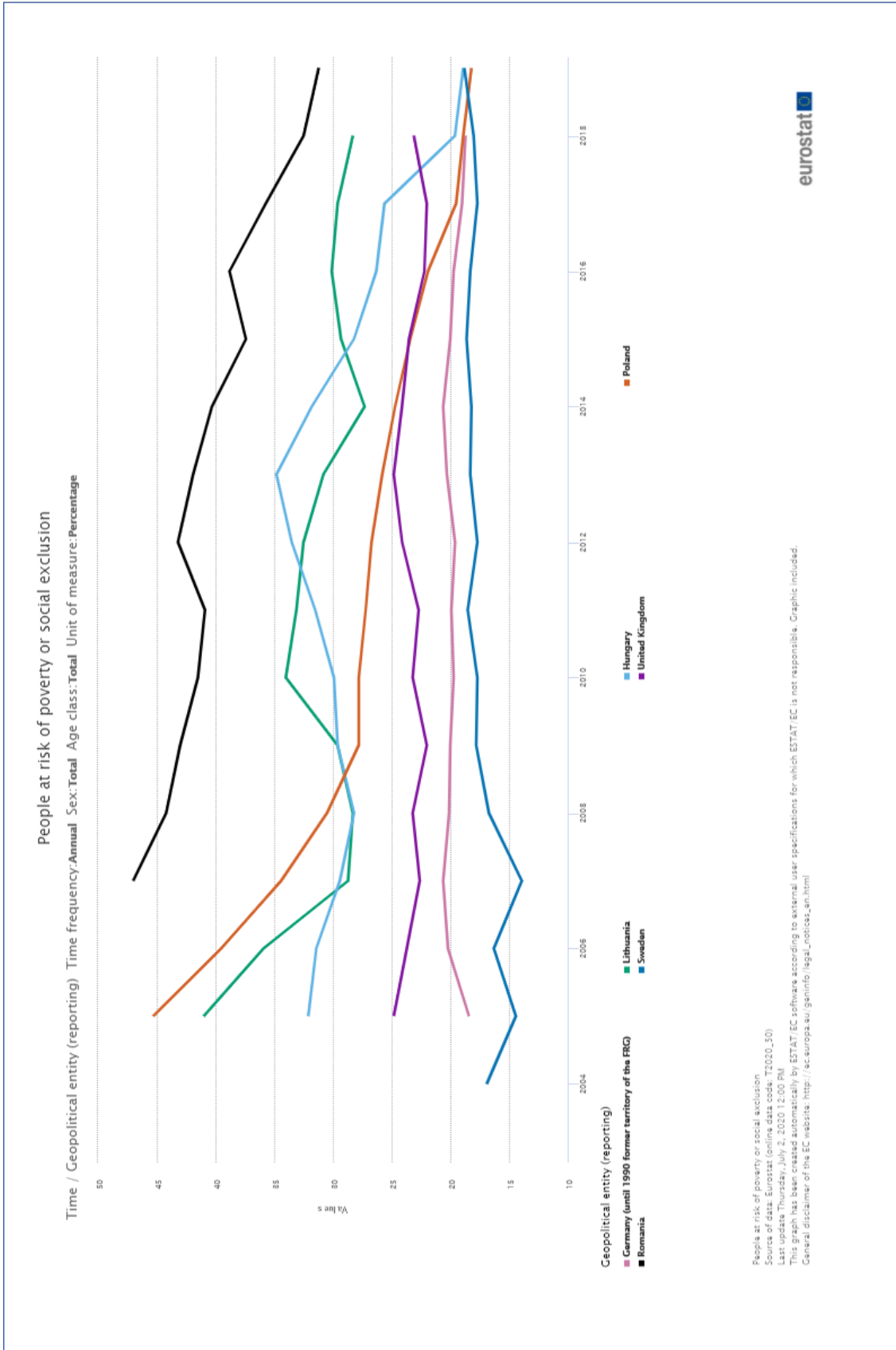
The research was limited due to its time-frame. Leftist groups from previous decades are not represented here, and their influence is discussed only through the lenses of the new leftist movement. Moreover, the broader picture of political players in the field, such as political right and rightist movements, are not discussed in this research. Thus, several important factors are, no doubt, omitted. Therefore, further research that aims to create a broader picture is recommended.

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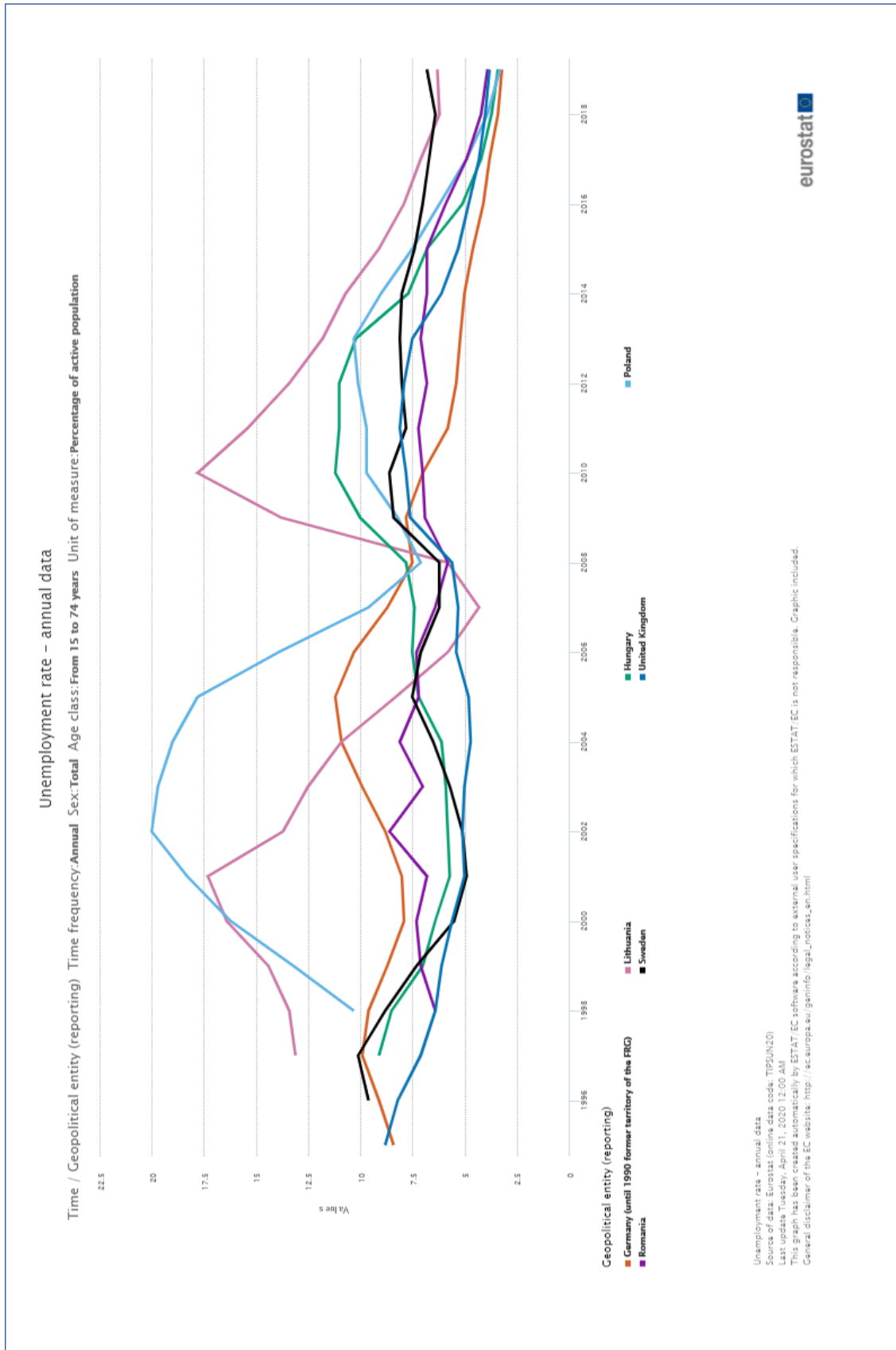
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APPENDIX 1: PEOPLE AT RISK OF POVERTY OR SOCIAL EXCLUSION



Eurostat (2020).

APPENDIX 2: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



Eurostat (2020).

## Book Review

# Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum

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Dominguez Rubio, F. (2020). *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

“Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum” is a carefully crafted study that bridges the gap between production, materiality, and meaning-oriented approaches in sociology of art. At first encounter, the book may feel like a continuation of Howard Becker’s (2008 (1982)) agenda that focuses on supporting actors and their role in the (re)creation of artworlds. Indeed, Dominguez Rubio is also interested in all the supporting activities of the art museum. He calls it mimeographic – as opposed to creative – labour: i.e. the labour required to keep art objects the same as they are. Mimeographic labour saves the object long enough, so it can be imagined as eternal. Such labour is performed by various museum employees, as well as by preservation, containing, transporting, digital-recording devices, and even by the artists themselves.

However, Dominguez Rubio goes beyond a set of separate stories about particular art practices, creating instead an holistic picture of both the master narrative of modern art and the political economy of the contemporary global art world, as they are connected through the dynamic ecology of art. His study provides a coherent analytical model that proves that mimeographic labour is not just one more as yet underexplored element of the contemporary artworld, but rather a crucial process that makes any social order possible, in arts and in our collective live in general.

The choice of a site for fieldwork is fully justified: The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) is the museum that played a decisive role in constructing the narrative of modern art over the course of 20th century, and it is also the largest, the most resourced and well-equipped machine that produces ‘the eternity’ of modern art. At the same time, MoMA is obviously one of the most iconic contemporary cultural institutions that the public would want to know more about. ‘Still Life’ does what is promised: it gives its audience an opportunity to see ‘behind the scenes’ of some of the most famous artworks and artists of the twenty and twenty first centuries that became defining for the master narrative of modern art. From Dominguez Rubio’s research readers learn a lot about the museum’s routines and the huge variety of jobs that are performed in coordination with each other – by humans, materials, devices, physical forces, and the artworks themselves. The book consists of four main parts. Each part explains one of the following aspects by which modern art objects are: preserved and repaired; contained and transported; emplaced and exhibited; and digitized.

“Still Life”, however, is not limited to the field of sociology of art. It is a part of a larger trend within the social sciences towards the exploration of maintenance and repair practices as well as the labour of care more broadly. The publication of Dominguez Rubio’s journal papers several years prior to the book’s release, have already

influenced and consolidated this emergent sub-field of sociology and nature of the research taking place therein. As a result, by the time that the full version of Dominguez Rubio's study became available as a book, his criticisms of the dominant approach within the field, Actor-Network Theory, had already been accepted and partly absorbed by (post-)ANT forms of scholarship (Denis and Pontille, 2019).

In the book, Dominguez Rubio criticizes ANT for adherence to a) a strict distinction between the functional and broken conditions of objects, and b) broader sociological assumptions concerning the natural solidity and stability of material things that enable for a particular order to be maintained. He highlights, firstly, the constant process of decay that any material thing is undergoing at any given moment of time, and secondly, the ecological nexus that either accelerates or slows down the decay. The order becomes possible through the constant maintenance of *things* in such a condition that enables them to be "put into work" as *particular kind of objects*. A "particular kind of object" is defined by the master narrative in which it is located. In this case, it is the modern art narrative. The same is applied to the humans who need to be put into work as particular kind of subjects. In this case, the artists, who often do not know why and how they created something, must acquire a well-narrated intentionality and clear memory about each stage of their creative career. That is achieved through the interviews conducted by museum curator and conservators or the analysis of supplementary documents (Part 1).

Ecology is one of the recurring notions that social sciences borrow for different purposes ever since the early stages of their development. Dominguez Rubio uses the notion of ecology not in a metaphorical sense but quite literally, and thus more in accordance with recent developments in environmental sociology (van Koppen, 2017). He demonstrates that on the level of things (including human bodies as things), there are no pre-given boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture. Light, air, humidity, temperature, and all the micro-elements, including those that are transmitted through the breath of a person who is responsible for preserving an artwork or through the materials constituting an artwork's container, are essential for the material condition of an artwork, its aesthetic qualities (especially, colours and shape), and its capacity to (re)produce the narrative of modern art (Part 2).

But it is worth noting, that, while flattening the ontology of artworks as things, the author successfully manages to link them to the meanings and values, distinctions, and hierarchies of artworks as objects. In doing so, Dominguez Rubio demonstrates how the labour of care occupies the very heart of all the key aesthetic, political, and economic processes animating contemporary art studies: globalization, colonialism, aesthetic and economic value, copyright, new art forms, digitalization, and so on. But Dominguez Rubio does not stop here. He amplifies the subject of his book to the level of existential, which he does by drawing parallels with the constant struggle against the decay of human bodies, and the current ecological condition of our planet. Articulating these wider resonances allows Dominguez Rubio to frame the book as a tale of fragility and loss, transcendence and oblivion.

Despite all the attention given to materiality and ecology, Dominguez Rubio avoids a possible de-humanization of the labour of care. Without specifically conceptualizing it, the author regularly gives us a glimpse of the emotions that museum employees experience while interacting with artworks or artists: their words and gestures express tension, curiosity, fright, concentration, frustration, and joy. He also shares his own feelings from the fieldwork. Describing, for example, what he felt when entered the conservation department of MoMA and its storage facilities for the first time. However, the researcher does not reveal many details of his eight-year study and fieldwork at the museum. This absence may help to avoid scaring away a broader audience. But the fact that the author does not let the readers see "behind the scenes" of his own work makes it more difficult to use "Still Life" as a model for further development of the methodological apparatus of the sociology of art.

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Book Review

## Class in the New Millenium: The Structure, Homologies and Experience of the British Social Space

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Atkinson, W. (2019[2017]). *Class in the New Millenium: The Structure, Homologies and Experience of the British Social Space*. London and New York: Routledge.

Will Atkinson's book, 'Class in the New Millennium', forms part of the recent wave of post-Bourdieuian class scholarship. The distinctive characteristic of these works is to combine multiple epistemologies, methodologies and theories to adapt, twist and employ the Bourdieusian framework to British lands. One quite unique sign of Atkinson's approach is what may be called his relative 'faithfulness' to Bourdieusian methodology. Unlike the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) team around Mike Savage, for instance, he does not use linear statistical techniques such as regression. Instead, he insists on applying Bourdieu's original statistical method (multiple correspondence analysis). Putting more emphasis on relationality, he chiefly looks at the relationship of the British 'Social Space' and the 'Symbolic Space' that represents it. In doing so, he wishes to identify and to explore the 'homologies' that exist between them and other fields.

The book is composed of two main parts. Part I – 'Field Analysis' – involves re-enacting the statistical analyses found in *Distinction* as applied – for the first time in this form – to the British Social Space. For the most part, Atkinson re-uses GBCS data structured by an aggregated standard occupational classification (as well as a few supplementary surveys). Chapter 2 is an exercise in stock-taking, looking at the different volumes and types of capital (economic vs. cultural) of Bourdieu's three major classes (Dominant-Intermediate-Dominated) that make up the Social Space. Chapter 3 looks at the 'space of lifestyles' and maps overlaps of the cultural practices of the various classes and class fractions with specific tastes and knowledge in sports, art, music, TV and body modifications. Finally, Chapter 4 broaches homological links to Social Space in terms of political attitudes. Almost all of part I is remarkably similar in approach *and* results compared to Bourdieu's work 40 years ago: there is the constant replacement of the structure towards ever more accumulation and inflation of higher education degrees. There is a strong intra-class conservation of capitals. There is class- and fraction-compliant knowledge of artists, sports, and newspapers. There is concomitant left-right voting and 'disenfranchisement' among the dominated.

But this is not all. Atkinson, in keeping with post-Bourdieuian scholarship more generally, seeks to go 'beyond Bourdieu' in Part II of the book. His adaptation consists in supplementing the kinds of macro-level analyses characteristic of Part I with a phenomenology-inspired (Schütz, Husserl) 'Lifeworld Analysis' which looks at various levels of 'everyday worlds'. Subsequent chapters thus look at the Nation and City Spaces (Chapter 5), Neighbourhoods (Chapter 6), Home (Chapters 7+8) and finally at the Family (Chapter 9). This is done with an aim to 'complicate' and to 'nuance' the initial analysis. His primary case-study for this is his home city of Bristol.

Utilising a qualitative study on 'ordinary lives', conducted with Harriet Bradley, he attempts to show how people use, and think of, quotidian aspects of their everyday lives such as houses, parks, the supermarket cashier or the rambunctious youngster. Atkinson wishes to sensitise for what he terms 'multiple field pertinence', the 'alloying' of various field influences and their 'dovetailing' into 'circuits of symbolic power'. Class as it was constructed in Part I, he holds, does have a grip on the everyday lives and perceptions of people. But it interacts with, and is complicated, irritated and deflected by, more local and inconspicuous conditions of existence.

There is little to be said against this intention of showing more broadly the complexity of and influences on class-related practices. However, Atkinson's application of the principle leads towards a kind of self-defeat of his original goal of staying epistemologically close to Bourdieu. If the emphasis is so much on showing 'interrelated' and 'interlocking' fields and practices, where does this leave the concept of the field itself? Where are the boundaries of fields such as that of the 'familial field', the 'work field' or the 'field of perception'? What are their specific forms of capital? What are their histories, and the changes that accrue to them? How can we situate various agents within them?

It is this rejection to systematically construct the *particular fields* featured in the analysis in Part II that is the main weakness of the book. For it hampers substantially the aim to tease out hidden homologies of them with the otherwise well-constructed Social Space of Part I. Thus, Atkinson constantly constructs additions, exceptions and qualifications to this model. In this way he rarely shows how the different areas of his analysis interact. As a consequence, the exceptions become the rule, threatening to render the field perspective de facto redundant.

An example: When talking about the gentrification of a particular Bristolian neighbourhood vis-à-vis one that borders right next to it (118-123), Atkinson first detects a few 'binaries' in the perception of the residents there that are 'homologous with the social and symbolic spaces' (119). But then he immediately links a comparatively high worry for littering and graffiti in the same area to the 'significant pockets' of non-gentrified space in it (119f.). Implicitly, we are referred to multiple fields - a field that consists of all the areas of Bristol, but also a field of the two parts that border each other, and finally one that consists of the gentrified areas and non-gentrified pockets of the overall gentrified area.

Part II of the book abounds with confusing interpretations of this kind where cultural practices are attributed to multiple fields without their peculiarities being analysed in any depth in any one of them in particular: fondness for a baby grand piano is both 'cultural capital' and the embodiment of a 'family ethos' (134); use of a study in a house is linked to the generation of cultural capital, to demands from family members, but also to work-related fields and activities (148-153); and the taste for raising children in a specific, 'non-pushy' way is clearly linked to the existence of 'cultural capital', but also to 'affective capital' (174-178). Each of these fascinating areas would merit a book-length study of their own from a field-theoretical perspective. But without deeper carving out of distinctive, delineated field areas the bulk of analysis mainly consists in the dispersion of labels - 'cultural capital', 'libido', 'symbolic mastery', 'affective recognition', and so on - that are rather freely attached to the practices and thoughts of the agents.

Thus, once finished, it is as if one has read two works: one a classic Bourdieusian field analysis; the other a form of recalibrated phenomenology of everyday life embroidered with Bourdieusian labels.



Book Review

## Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia

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Huang, S.-M. and Lee, H. K. (2020). *Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia*. Abingdon: Routledge.

In Western politics, heated debates over the representation of the colonial past have recently erupted in the form of mass protests demanding the removal of monuments that are perceived to celebrate the history of colonialism and slavery. Increasingly, material and symbolic marks of colonialism – statues, architecture, and place names – are being treated as ‘difficult heritage’, which pose moral and political dilemmas for former colonial powers as well as for postcolonial societies.

Japanese colonial prisons – used to house colonial convicts including anti-colonial activists – are undoubtedly such examples of difficult heritage. For East Asian societies which were colonised by Japan, the fact that authoritarian postcolonial regimes continued to use these prisons adds another layer of complexity for understanding the difficult legacies of these structures. However, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the historical trajectories of these disused prisons. Filling this gap and highlighting their importance in national and international politics as ‘sites of memory’, *Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia* sets the ambitious task of comparatively analysing the ‘afterlives’ of colonial prisons in China, South Korea, and Taiwan from the end of the Asia-Pacific War to the present day.

Chapter 1 begins by tracing the development of European penal philosophy of incarceration as rehabilitation, which directly shaped Japan’s modern penal system. As a burgeoning Imperial power, Japan actively imported and implemented Western penal thought in a bid to defy Orientalist myths of Asians as barbarians. Modern prisons were therefore crucial for demonstrating Japan’s ‘civilized’ status to Western states, and for justifying its ‘civilizing’ mission across its newly acquired territories including Taiwan (1895), Liaodong Peninsula (1905), and the Korean Peninsula (1910).

Chapter 2 introduces existing debates on the preservation of colonial heritage. Here, the authors present a three-tier model of prison preservation. Firstly, ‘Not Remembering’ entails the physical demolition of colonial prisons, which was the most common outcome for many of these sites (p. 26). Secondly, ‘Selective Remembering’ refers to preserving specific features of prisons that merit conservation; for example, emphasising the architectural value of the buildings while avoiding references to difficult political histories surrounding them. Thirdly, ‘Corrective Remembering’ refers to heritage preservation in which the past is ‘corrected’ for present-day political ends. Whether the separation of selective remembering and corrective remembering serves a clear purpose is somewhat questionable. Surely, either form of remembering will display characteristics of the other if we consider

that all forms of commemoration and conservation are usually subject to ‘the selective promotion or even rewriting of memories (usually by the state) to pursue a political agenda’ (p.28).

Chapter 3 provides a useful overview of the transnational flows of ideas, people, materials, and resources across the Japanese Empire, which shows how prisons became integral to Japan’s civilizing mission and resource extraction (p.37). Crucially, the authors show that the movement of convicts across Japan’s territories and the exploitation of penal labour – and forced labour more generally – was central to Japan’s imperial project, enabling the construction of key infrastructures (including the prisons themselves) and the production of food, goods, and military supplies for the Empire.

The following chapters focus on individual case studies. Chapter 4 discusses the Lushun Russo-Japanese Prison, returned to China in 1955. The disused prison was turned into a museum in the 1970s, reflecting the Chinese Communist Party’s intent to promote nationalism as well as anti-Russian and anti-Japanese sentiment. As an example of ‘selective remembering’, the museum retold certain aspects such as forced labour in graphic detail from a nationalist perspective, although there have been more recent attempts to internationalise memories of the museum by incorporating experiences of Korean prisoners. Chapter 5 traces the trajectory of the former Seodaemun Prison in Seoul as a key site for Korean nationalism. In transforming the former prison and the surrounding Independence Park as a sacred space, the authors point out that the site has excluded experiences of marginal groups, including political prisoners under South Korea’s successive military dictatorships, ‘comfort women’ (predominantly Korean women forced to provide sexual services to the Japanese military), and the *Okbaraji* community which supported the prison system. Chapter 6 examines Taihoku (Taipei) Prison and Chianyi Prisons in Taiwan, examples which have repurposed old colonial buildings in re-urbanisation projects. In both cases, the prisons underwent renovation without reflecting on the historical significance of the structures by making them appear more appropriate for everyday use whilst avoiding discussing negative histories attached to them. Perhaps the concept of ‘gentrification’ can be used in conjunction with ‘corrective remembering’ to understand not just the redevelopment of urban spaces but also the domestication of memory narratives to suit present interests.

Chapters 7 and 8 investigate transnational flows of ideas in the preservation of the prisons as heritage. There are moments of repetition, as Chapter 7 reiterates collaborative networks between Lushun and Seodaemun in transforming these sites as monuments to transnational anti-colonial struggle. Chapter 8 discusses the redevelopment of the area surrounding Taipei Prison to transform it into the ‘next Roppongi Hills’, a luxurious area of Tokyo. The authors argue such a move reproduces the punitive logic of the colonial state, as the state seeks to ‘other’ unwanted residents by criminalising them as ‘squatters’ and marginalising their experiences and memories as insignificant (p. 142).

Overall, this book presents an insightful overview of former prisons as heritage sites that adds to a growing body of research on the politics of negative heritage. The authors masterfully mobilize historiography, archival sources, and ethnographic data to provide a rich history of former colonial prisons. On a more critical note, however, the authors appear to situate the state as the primary protagonists of national memory, devoting less attention to the role of civil actors. For instance, Japan (the state) is consistently depicted as a reactionary force opposing preservation of colonial heritage. However, this overlooks the fact that Japanese NGOs have been some of the most active voices against colonialism in relation to the ‘comfort women’ controversy and history education, having worked closely with transnational counterparts across East Asia.

This minor point aside, this book will serve as an essential reference point for understanding the historic role of prisons under colonialism, as well as their political uses in postcolonial societies. Tackling the difficult legacies of colonialism and decolonisation, the authors offer a refreshing and compelling perspective that transcends the often myopic and simplistic debates surrounding Western colonialism. As such, this book has a broad appeal not only to scholars interested in East Asian history, but also to scholars in postcolonial studies, heritage studies, memory studies, and penology.

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