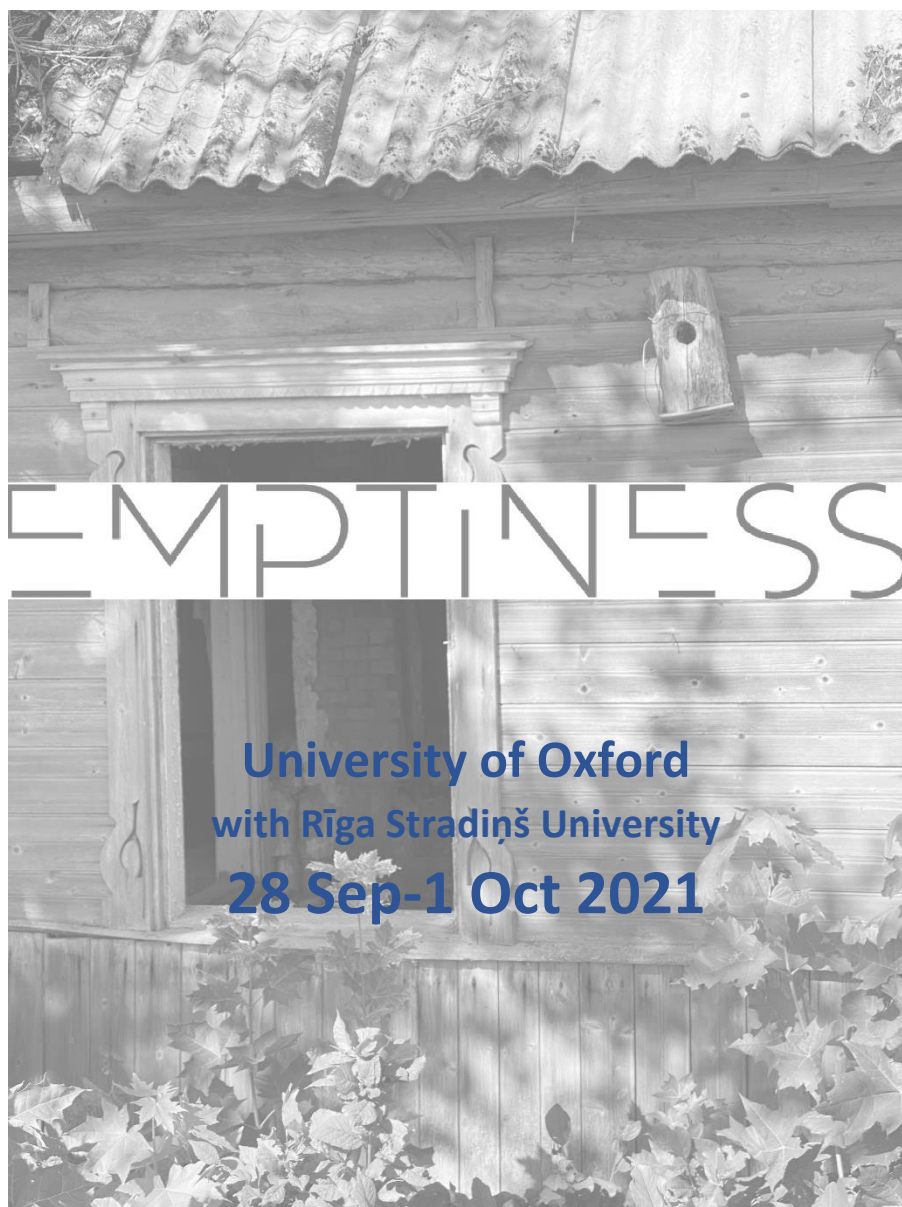


“Emptiness: Ways of Seeing” Conference 2021



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Conference Programme

Tuesday, 28 September 2021

1400-1700 (Riga) 1200-1500 (BST/GMT) 0700-1000 (EST)	Field Workshop: Negotiating Emptiness in Latvia <i>Chair:</i> Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford/Rīga Stradiņš University <i>Discussants:</i> Liene Ozoliņa, Latvian Academy of Culture; Dominic Martin, University of Oxford; Volodymyr Artiukh, University of Oxford <i>Papers and speakers:</i>	
	<i>"Life is life": Some Insights into Fieldwork in Latgale Border Regions Before and During the Pandemic</i>	Anna E. Griķe, University of Latvia
	<i>Depopulating Small Monotowns in Latvia: Making Sense of Place and Shrinkage</i>	Māris Bērziņš, University of Latvia Regita Zeiļa, University of Latvia Guido Sechi, University of Latvia
	<i>Infrastructural Breakdown: Tracing the Socio-spatial Articulations of Politics in Latvia</i>	Andris Šuvajevs, Rīga Stradiņš University
	<i>Emptiness as Politics of Habitability: Capital and Imaginaries of Dwelling in Riga</i>	Kārlis Lakševics, University of Latvia

Wednesday, 29 September 2021

1230-1300 (Riga) 1030-1100 (BST/GMT) 0530-0600 (EST)	Welcome and Introduction to the EMPTINESS Project Team	
1300-1500 (Riga) 1100-1300 (BST/GMT) 0600-0800 (EST)	Panel 1: Infrastructures and Governance <i>Chair:</i> Maria Gunko, University of Oxford <i>Papers and speakers:</i>	
	<i>After Abandonment: Transitions of Land Cover and Governance in Rural Russia</i>	Alexander Vorbrugg, University of Bern

	<i>Emptiness and Educational Imaginaries in Rural Communities</i>	Alis Oancea, University of Oxford Mariela Neagu, Independent Researcher Arzhia Habibi, University of Oxford
	<i>An Empty Road: Visual Impressions and Temporal Aspects of Implementing the BRI in South-eastern Kazakhstan</i>	Verena La Mela, University of Fribourg
1500-1515 (Riga) 1300-1315 (BST/GMT) 0800-0815 (EST)	<i>Screen break</i>	
1515-1645 (Riga) 1315-1445 (BST/GMT) 0815-0945 (EST)	<p>Roundtable 1: Emptiness: Space, Capital, and the State</p> <p>This roundtable will consider the contours of emptiness by examining the shifting relationships between people, place, capital, and the state. It will aim to combine macro-level analysis of how the presence or absence of capital and the state shapes lives with perspectives from the affected places by addressing the following questions: What are the limits and possibilities of the existing analytical tools for understanding abandonment of people and places? What, if anything, is new about today's 'emptying' compared to other historical instances of abandonment? What do attempts to reconnect – for example, via desire for tourism or foreign investment – tell about the spatial configurations of contemporary capitalism? What could a perspective from the postsocialist context add to the analysis of space, capital, and the state? Is emptying a transitional moment, when afterlives of postsocialism are preventing commodification or is this a reflection of contemporary capitalism working via expulsion of space rather than expansion in space?</p> <p><i>Moderators:</i> Volodymyr Artiukh and Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford</p> <p><i>Participants:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saskia Sassen, Columbia University • Johanna Bockman, George Mason University • Don Kalb, University of Bergen • Martin Demant Frederiksen, Aarhus University 	
1645-1700 (Riga) 1445-1500 (BST/GMT) 0945-1000 (EST)	<i>Screen break</i>	
1700-1900 (Riga)	Panel 2: Lives and Livelihoods	

1500-1700 (BST/GMT) 1000-1200 (EST)	Chair: Friederike Pank, University of Oxford	
	Papers and speakers:	
	<i>The Life Extempore in the Twilight Zone of Soviet Industry</i>	Lori Khatchadourian, Cornell University
	<i>Gardening and Grieving in An Emptying Council Estate</i>	Mayanka Mukherji, University of Oxford
	<i>A Place Where Things Happen: The Nursing Home in Emptying Rural Latvia</i>	Anna Žabicka, University of Vienna

Thursday, 30 September 2021

1300-1500 (Riga) 1100-1300 (BST/GMT) 0600-0800 (EST)	Panel 3: Ideologies and Politics	
	Chair: Dominic Martin, University of Oxford	
	Papers and speakers:	
	<i>"Dying Villages" and Right-Wing Populism in Central Eastern Europe</i>	Natalia Mamonova, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) and Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI Europe)
	<i>Empty Actions on the Ruins of Ideology: Collective Actions' Kite Launch in Prora, Germany</i>	Marina Gerber, University of Hamburg
1500-1515 (Riga) 1300-1315 (BST/GMT) 0800-0815 (EST)	<i>The Politics of Possibilities in Cape Town's Empty Buildings: The Case of Woodstock Hospital, Cape Town</i>	Nobukhosi Ngwenya, University of Cape Town
	<i>Vacating History? "Heritage by Dispossession" in a Military Village in Urban Taipei</i>	Elisa Tamburo, King's College London
1515-1645 (Riga) 1315-1445 (BST/GMT) 0815-0945 (EST)	Screen break Art Exhibition (a separate SpatialChat link will be shared on the day) Artists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Re-Memory</i> – Ian McNaught Davis, Independent Artist 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Jarti Gleaners</i> – Tamta Khalvashi, Ilia State University <i>Granny's Bones</i> • <i>Eastern Estonia: Decline in its Multiple Facets</i> – Francisco Martinez, Tallinn University • Anya Gleizer, Ruskin School of Art and University of Oxford (Virtual Reality viewer recommended, e.g. https://arvr.google.com/cardboard/) 	
1645-1700 (Riga) 1445-1500 (BST/GMT) 0945-1000 (EST)	Screen break	
1700-1900 (Riga) 1500-1700 (BST/GMT) 1000-1200 (EST)	Panel 4: Time, Myth, Utopia, Future <i>Chair:</i> Dace Dzenovska, University of Oxford <i>Papers and speakers:</i>	
	<i>The Myth of Emptiness: Creation and Collapse of a Soviet Industrial Settlement</i>	Anna Varfolomeeva, University of Helsinki
	<i>Whose Utopia: Capitalism, Temporal Logics, and Phantasmatic Discourse on Two Empty Cities in China</i>	Siyu Tang, University of Oxford
	<i>Relational Emptiness: Between Absence and Potentiality in Post-crisis Spain</i>	Damián Omar Martínez, University of Tübingen
	<i>Postindustrial Futures and the Edge of the Frontier</i>	Chloe Ahmann, Cornell University

Friday, 1 October 2021

1300-1500 (Riga) 1100-1300 (BST/GMT) 0600-0800 (EST)	Panel 5: Migration and Displacement after War <i>Chair:</i> Volodymyr Artiukh, University of Oxford <i>Papers and speakers:</i>	
	<i>Manufacturing Ruin: Displacement and Migration in Detroit</i>	Ana Čuković, University of Vienna/Central European University
	<i>"We are cut off from everything": Infrastructural Vulnerability in Frontline Communities in Donetsk Region</i>	Anastasiya Ryabchuk, National University of 'Kyiv-Mohyla Academy'
	<i>Discovering Pryazombia: Revisiting Emptiness in an East Ukrainian Frontline City</i>	Anna Balazs, University of Sheffield

1500-1515 (Riga) 1300-1315 (BST/GMT) 0800-0815 (EST)	<i>Screen break</i>	
1515-1715 (Riga) 1315-1515 (BST/GMT) 0815-1015 (EST)	Panel 6: Ecologies and Materialities <i>Chair:</i> Alis Oancea, University of Oxford <i>Papers and speakers:</i>	
	<i>Ecologies of Emptiness</i>	Jonathon Turnbull, University of Cambridge Adam Searle, University of Liège Sandra Jasper, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
	<i>Backwardness, Revisited: Valuing Emptiness in the Balkan Mountains</i>	Ivan Rajković, University of Vienna
	<i>Between Emptying and Filling: Extractivism, Renovations and Affects in Serbian Mountains</i>	Dragan Djunda, Central European University
	<i>Albanian Bunkers: From Passive Fear to Active Use</i>	Frédéric Lasserre, Laval University Mia Bennett, University of Washington Enkeleda Arapi, Laval University
1715-1730 (Riga) 1515-1530 (BST/GMT) 1015-1030 (EST)	<i>Screen break</i>	
1730-1900 (Riga) 1530-1700 (BST/GMT) 1030-1200 (EST)	Roundtable 2: On the Edge: Life Along the Russia-China border. Book Discussion with Franck Billé and Caroline Humphrey In this roundtable Franck Billé and Caroline Humphrey will introduce their forthcoming volume which examines the lifeways, politics, and history of the Russia-China border, one of the world's least understood and most politically charged frontiers. Winding for 2,600 miles through rivers, swamps, and vast taiga forests, the border is a thin line of direct engagement, extraordinary contrasts, frequent tension, and occasional war between two of the world's political giants. It separates two differing worlds. On the sparsely populated Russian side, defence is prioritized over the economy, leaving dilapidated villages slumbering amid the forests. The Chinese side is heavily settled and increasingly prosperous and dynamic. Moscow worries about the imbalance, and both governments discourage citizens from interacting. But as Billé and Humphrey show, the ordinary imperatives of	

	<p>daily life ensure cross-border connection endures, whatever distant authorities say. It is anticipated that discussion will consider such issues as: remoteness — relations between highly centralised metropolises and their peripheries; infrastructural atrophy — ‘anisotropic’ communication links and the conquest of distance; ‘closed’ zones of development — their privileges and those they exclude and leave behind; the move from sustainability to ruin and back again — perspectives on the ebb and flow of emptiness; the mixing of old tropes of security and secrecy with new rhetoric of state-sponsored development — how to disentangle this simultaneous dynamic of closed-ness and openness.</p> <p><i>Moderator:</i> Dominic Martin, University of Oxford</p> <p><i>Participants:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caroline Humphrey, University of Cambridge • Franck Billé, University of California, Berkeley • Madeleine Reeves, University of Manchester • Alessandro Rippa, LMU Munich • Natalia Ryzhova, Palacký University Olomouc
1900-1930 (Riga) 1700-1730 (BST/GMT) 1200-1230 (EST)	<p>Closing Session for <i>panel speakers, roundtable participants, and exhibition artists only</i> (a separate Zoom link will be shared on the day)</p>

List of Speakers and Participants

Name	Affiliation	Role
Ahmann, Chloe	Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Cornell University	Panel speaker
Arapi, Enkeleda	Department of Teaching and Learning Studies, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Laval University	Panel speaker
Artiukh, Volodymyr	Postdoctoral Researcher, EMPTINESS Project and School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford	Panel chair and Roundtable moderator
Balazs, Anna	Research Associate, Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield	Panel speaker
Bennett, Mia	Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University of Washington	Panel speaker
Bērziņš, Māris	Associate Professor, Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Latvia	Workshop speaker
Billé, Franck	Program Director , Tang Center for Silk Road Studies, University of California, Berkeley	Roundtable participant
Bockman, Johanna	Associate Professor, Global Affairs, George Mason University	Roundtable participant
Ćuković, Ana	PhD Candidate, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna and Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University	Panel speaker
Djunda, Dragan	PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University	
Dzenovska, Dace	Associate Professor in the Anthropology of Migration and Principal Investigator of EMPTINESS Project , University of Oxford	Panel chair and Roundtable moderator
Frederiksen, Martin Demant	Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University	Roundtable participant
Gerber, Marina	Associated Lecturer for Eastern European Studies, University of Hamburg	Panel speaker
Gleizer, Anya	Independent Artist with MFA from Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford and PhD Candidate in Geography, University of Oxford	Artist
Grike, Anna E.	PhD Candidate, Latvian Language Institute, University of Latvia	Workshop speaker

Gunko, Maria	PhD Candidate in Migration Studies, School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography and EMPTINESS Project , University of Oxford	Panel chair
Habibi, Arzhia	DPhil Researcher, Department of Education, University of Oxford	Panel speaker
Humphrey, Caroline	Founder and Research Director, Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit (MIASU), University of Cambridge	Roundtable participant
Jasper, Sandra	Assistant Professor of Geography and Gender, Department of Geography, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin	Panel speaker
Kalb, Don	Professor, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen	Roundtable participant
Khalvashi, Tamta	Professor of Anthropology, Ilia State University	Artist
Khatchadourian, Lori	Associate Professor, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University	Panel speaker
La Mela, Verena	Junior Researcher, Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg	Panel speaker
Lakševics, Kārlis	Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Latvia	Workshop speaker
Lasserre, Frédéric	Professor, Department of Geography, Laval University	Panel speaker
Mamonova, Natalia	Researcher, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) and Principal Coordinator of the European Team, Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI Europe)	Panel speaker
Martin, Dominic	Postdoctoral Researcher, EMPTINESS Project and School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford	Panel chair and Roundtable moderator
Martínez, Damián Omar	Postdoctoral Researcher, Collaborative Research Center 'Threatened Orders', University of Tübingen	Panel speaker
Martinez, Francisco	Associate Professor, School of Humanities, Tallinn University	Artist
McNaught Davis, Ian	Independent Photographer, Filmmaker and Animator	Artist
Mukherji, Mayanka	Postdoctoral Researcher, School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford	Panel speaker
Neagu, Mariela	Independent Researcher	Panel speaker
Ngwenya, Nobukhosi	Urban Planner and Development Practitioner and Junior Research Fellow,	

	African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town	
Oancea, Alis	Professor of Philosophy of Education and Research Policy, Department of Education, University of Oxford (also EMPTINESS Project Head of Advisory Board)	Panel speaker
Ozolina, Liene	Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Sociology and Management, Latvian Academy of Culture	Roundtable participant
Pank, Friederike	PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography and EMPTINESS Project , University of Oxford	Panel chair
Rajković, Ivan	Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Social & Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna	Panel speaker
Reeves, Madeleine	Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology , University of Manchester	Roundtable participant
Rippa, Alessandro	Freigeist Fellow and Project Director: “Environing Infrastructure” (2020-2025), Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society, LMU Munich	Roundtable participant
Ryabchuk, Anastasiya	Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, National University of ‘Kyiv-Mohyla Academy’	Panel speaker
Ryzhova, Natalia	Senior Researcher, Department of Asian Studies, Palacký University Olomouc	Roundtable participant
Sassen, Saskia	Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology, Columbia University	Roundtable participant
Searle, Adam	Postdoctoral Researcher, Département des Sciences Politiques, University of Liège	Panel speaker
Sechi, Guido	Researcher, Department of Human Geography, University of Latvia	Workshop speaker
Šuvajevs, Andris	Lecturer, Faculty of Communication, Rīga Stradiņš University	Workshop speaker
Tamburo, Elisa	Research Associate in Social Anthropology, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London	Panel speaker
Tang, Siyu	PhD Candidate, School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford	Panel speaker
Turnbull, Jonathon	PhD Candidate, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge	Panel speaker

Varfolomeeva, Anna	Postdoctoral Researcher in Indigenous Sustainabilities, Faculty of Arts & Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), University of Helsinki	Panel speaker
Vorbrugg, Alexander	Postdoctoral Researcher, Institute of Geography, University of Bern	Panel speaker
Žabicka, Anna	PhD Candidate, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna	Panel speaker
Zeija, Regita	Independent Researcher	Workshop paper co-author

Abstracts

Field Workshop and Panels

Chloe Ahmann

Postindustrial Futures and the Edge of the Frontier

Port Covington is a 260-acre development underway in south Baltimore City, featuring a multibillion-dollar campus for the popular sportswear brand, Under Armour. It promises to transform a vacant and degraded former railyard into a 'city within a city', and to catalyze Baltimore's comeback. It also promises to cost a lot. In 2016, after tense public debate, developers secured a \$660 million tax-increment financing (TIF) deal to begin work, committing taxpayers to decades of debt on the company's behalf. Eligibility for that deal hinged on making the site's industrial history visible as an obstacle to profit. The dominant spatial tropes that scholars use to understand dispossession make it hard to appreciate this instrumentalization of the past. In this paper, I pay particular attention to the blind spots of the frontier concept. Arguments that foreground frontier motifs emphasize erasure as a primary technique of dispossession: by covering up past and present lifeways, 'urban pioneers' legitimate land seizure as benign discovery. But in Port Covington's case, developers dramatized a history of municipal neglect. Far from concealed, this history became a key ingredient in developers' claims to the land and a mechanism structuring their access to financial options. In the process of exploring these dynamics, I query whether frontier concepts may reach the limits of their usefulness in the postindustrial city. Here, land's not-so-distant past provides both the template for development dreams and the justification for dispossession by private actors who (the story goes) are best equipped to manage reconstruction. Besides TIF, the range of development incentives available for improving 'blighted' spaces suggest that postindustrial futures are rarely conceived on a blank slate. Instead, historicity drives debates about who the city is for and what it can become.

Enkeleda Arapi (with **Frédéric Lasserre** and **Mia Bennett**)

Albanian Bunkers: From Passive Fear to Active Use

Between 1967 and 1986, under orders by First Secretary Enver Hoxha, the Albanian government built 500,000-800,000 military bunkers for defence purposes. These mushroom-shaped concrete installations were spread across the country, concentrated along borders and beaches, in cities, and near key industries, strategic points, and transportation infrastructure. Some bunkers were also placed in the interior with the aim of slowing down potential invaders like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or NATO. Although construction of new bunkers ceased following Hoxha's death in 1985, the military maintained existing bunkers until 1991, when the communist regime collapsed and the original military reasons for their existence dissipated. In the years that followed, many bunkers were destroyed. Yet others, especially beginning in 2010, were decorated or even fully transformed into productive assets, serving as tourist attractions, bars, or hotel rooms. Albania's bunkers, emptied of the defence forces that originally occupied them, became physically and symbolically reinvested with meaning. This paper will examine how Albania's bunkers constitute objects that have become recontextualized and repurposed over time. Drawing on interviews and field trips carried out during 2007-17, the paper addresses how popular perceptions of bunkers in Albania have shifted from fear to a set of more nuanced emotions. It will also critique how people have developed ways to recycle and integrate once-vacant ruins into their daily lives. While Albania sits outside post-Soviet studies' usual sphere of analysis, partly because of the Soviet-Albanian split, the country's experiences in many ways parallel the political and economic experiences of the former Soviet republics following the collapse of communism. Examining Albania through a post-Soviet lens can thus provide unique insights into the wider material, aesthetic, and emotional

consequences of the shift from communism to capitalism – and how amidst the ‘ruins’ of communism, capitalism can find new ways to enclose emptiness.

Anna Balazs

Discovering Pryazombia: Revisiting Emptiness in an East Ukrainian Frontline City

In Eastern Ukraine, the abandonment and material decay often associated with post-Soviet urban landscape carries specific regional significance. After 1991, the former industrial heartland of the Soviet Union turned into a peripheral region of the newly emerging Ukrainian nation state, facing political and economic marginalization. In this context, emptiness as a spatial marker points to the simultaneous ‘evacuation’ of the past and future that undermined previous interpretive frameworks of life, creating spaces of indeterminacy that “escape ideas of either waste or value” (Alexander and Sanchez 2019). The outbreak of the Donbas war in 2014 presented a radical turn in this status by locating Eastern Ukraine in the centre of conflicting geopolitical projects with distinct teleological orientations. In this new constellation of power, emptiness becomes a strategic resource used by the various players to further their own political agenda. For the Ukrainian authorities, Soviet urban legacy constitutes one of the multiple symbolic battlefields where the struggle against Russian geopolitical influence is perpetuated. For the international organizations that appeared in the region with the start of the war, empty and decaying infrastructure presents an area of intervention addressed by the distinctive language and know-how of humanitarian projects. Following a group of local artists in Mariupol who explore abandoned and decaying objects through practices of urban walking and filmmaking, my paper discusses how residents navigate the contradictory politics around emptiness while searching for new interpretive frameworks to make sense of the ongoing transformation in the region. Addressing their artistic practice as a way to embrace contradiction, I show how they challenge rigid dichotomies of waste and value reiterated in the official discourses, revealing the complexity of meanings hidden behind a façade of abandonment.

Mia Bennett (with **Frédéric Lasserre** and **Enkeleda Arapi**)

Albanian Bunkers: From Passive Fear to Active Use

Between 1967 and 1986, under orders by First Secretary Enver Hoxha, the Albanian government built 500,000-800,000 military bunkers for defence purposes. These mushroom-shaped concrete installations were spread across the country, concentrated along borders and beaches, in cities, and near key industries, strategic points, and transportation infrastructure. Some bunkers were also placed in the interior with the aim of slowing down potential invaders like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or NATO. Although construction of new bunkers ceased following Hoxha’s death in 1985, the military maintained existing bunkers until 1991, when the communist regime collapsed and the original military reasons for their existence dissipated. In the years that followed, many bunkers were destroyed. Yet others, especially beginning in 2010, were decorated or even fully transformed into productive assets, serving as tourist attractions, bars, or hotel rooms. Albania’s bunkers, emptied of the defence forces that originally occupied them, became physically and symbolically reinvested with meaning. This paper will examine how Albania’s bunkers constitute objects that have become recontextualized and repurposed over time. Drawing on interviews and field trips carried out during 2007-17, the paper addresses how popular perceptions of bunkers in Albania have shifted from fear to a set of more nuanced emotions. It will also critique how people have developed ways to recycle and integrate once-vacant ruins into their daily lives. While Albania sits outside post-Soviet studies’ usual sphere of analysis, partly because of the Soviet-Albanian split, the country’s experiences in many ways parallel the political and economic experiences of the former Soviet republics following the collapse of communism. Examining Albania through a post-Soviet lens can thus provide unique insights into the wider material, aesthetic, and emotional consequences of the shift from communism to capitalism – and how amidst the ‘ruins’ of communism, capitalism can find new ways to enclose emptiness.

Māris Bērziņš (with **Guido Sechi** and **Regita Zeiļa**)

Depopulating Small Monotowns in Latvia: Making Sense of Place and Shrinkage

Our study focuses on small, planned mono-industrial towns built in Latvia under Soviet rule, between the late 1940s and early 1980s. The devisal of these settlements had a multiple role: to bridge and possibly erase differences in urban/rural living standards, to connect and integrate Latvia into the Soviet industrial system, and to balance spatial development of the whole settlement system. Moreover, this type of urban development created specific socio-cultural environments that were to a large extent distinct from the traditional Latvian countryside. Nowadays, notwithstanding their morphological differences and partly different post-Soviet trajectories, these towns, affected by economic restructuring and in many cases full deindustrialization, are experiencing urban shrinkage, physical decay of the built environment, and demographic decline. Thus, they have become sites of socioeconomic tension and uncertainty, as their originally functional role and place identity significantly changed leading to alienation among local residents. The aim of our research is to illuminate how post-Soviet transition has been experienced by this particular type of urban communities shaped by socialism. The study adopts a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach. Socio-spatial analysis of socio-demographic dynamics at the micro-geographic scale is carried out on the basis of individual level data from the latest population census rounds and most recent population register data. Qualitative analysis is based on interviews with local residents and aims at investigating their attitudes towards urban change and the sense of local identity. The observed similarities and differences are mostly associated with the diverse degrees of functional transformations that the monotowns have witnessed since 1991.

Ana Ćuković

Manufacturing Ruin: Displacement and Migration in Detroit

The political manufacturing of ruin and decay in US Rust Belt is related to ongoing efforts at revalorization. Included in these initiatives are migrants and refugees who are framed as actors representing economic and demographic solutions to the declining and deindustrialized cities. Moving beyond the assumption that migration and cities are somehow separate, I build on growing scholarship that sees migration globally and relationally and that asks about the global and human costs of revitalization. I argue that processes of revalorizing urban space are historical, built on multiple forms of displacement and dispossession of marginalized people, and are part of processes of accumulation that link seemingly divergent geographies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Detroit, I analyze the emergence of welcoming initiatives toward migrants and refugees, whether from Iraq, Yemen, or Syria, among others, as part of policies at urban revitalization that are multiscalar and situated historically. Emerging in various states and localities, welcoming initiatives are depicted in national headlines that read 'Let Syrians Settle Detroit'. However, Detroiters are framed as makers of their own crises and are simultaneously erased from history through images depicting the city as a post-apocalyptic landscape. These depictions of vacancy then serve as justifications for relentless imposition of undemocratic state measures and takeovers. I position efforts at revitalization and global migration within the lens of systematic dispossessions that manifest in imperialist wars and invasions, as well as privatizations and austerity measures. Pursuits that create ruin and emptiness are then conceived and remedied under shifting power constellations. I show how different subjectivities come to be framed and deployed in manufacturing of ruin and the social reproduction of place across space and time as part of capital accumulation.

Dragan Djunda

Between Emptying and Filling: Extractivism, Renovations and Affects in Serbian Mountains

Emptiness is a landmark of the energy transition in the Western Balkans, operating as an enabling and counteracting factor and political articulation. Three thousand small hydro-power plants (SHPPs),

detrimental to the environment and communities, were planned on the region's pristine rivers. In the Stara Mountain (Serbia), the local communities opposed these investments through renovations of the affected villages. Through the ethnography of the revitalization of the House of Culture in Dojkinci village, my paper suggests approaching emptiness as a dialogical concept which unifies the opposing processes of 'emptying' and 'filling'. The social and material deterioration of the villages operated as an enabling factor of the extractive investments in the SHPPs. The paper outlines the legal and economic means of 'emptying', materialized in the ruins of the House and the slow disappearance of the local community. But emptiness was not only a galloping condition, nor merely another step of the well-known dispossession of the region. Rather, I suggest looking at it as a coupling of the state's demography, environment, energy production, and international finance. The counter-response to the emptying was the process of material and social 'filling' of the villages in the Stara Mountain. The revitalization of the House was one instance, which reconnected the rural areas with the urban centers and called for a return to the traditional life in the Stara Mountain. This dialogical view allows me to understand emptiness not as a temporal abyss between the familiar past and unknowable future, but rather as a temporal bridge between the multiple conflictual pasts and a desirable future. I depict this bridging through the analysis of the new visual appearance of the House. The design reveals how the affective, material and symbolical dimensions of filling provide a political grammar for unifying the environmental, demographic, and political concerns in Serbia.

Marina Gerber

Empty Actions on the Ruins of Ideology: Collective Actions' Kite Launch in Prora, Germany

In this paper I will talk about one work by the Muscovite artistic group Collective Actions that was realized on the German island of Rügen in 1994 on the ruins of the monumental Nazi-built holiday resort. Planned personally by Hitler, as the myth goes, nearly completed with Polish forced labour during the Second World War, occupied subsequently by the Soviet Army, taken over by the German Bundeswehr in 1991 and now being converted into fancy holiday homes, there are few places that are more ideologically charged. Two members of Collective Actions, Andrej Monastyrski and Sabine Hänsen, travelled there shortly after the territory of the two-kilometres-long complex on the coast of the Baltic Sea seized to be a restricted area (military zone) in 1993. The action that took place here was titled 'Kite Launch in Prora' (1994). In this paper I will analyse this peculiar artistic action by contextualizing it within Collective Actions' practice of emptying ('empty action') which is pursued by the group since 1976 and by providing the historical and theoretical context for the ideological tensions that surround this exceptional place on Rügen until today. Formerly part of GDR, Rügen has a particular existence in between Eastern and Western Europe, which makes it particularly relevant for thinking about the ruins of Socialism more broadly. I will use materials that were provided by the Prora Documentation Centre in Rügen, Collective Actions' own documentation and approaches to this issue from the architectural theory.

Anna E. Griķe

"Life is life": Some Insights into Fieldwork in Latgale Border Regions Before and During the Pandemic

In 2018, I began to work on my thesis entitled *Borderland Traditions: A Case Study in South-east Latgale* and went on a journey to explore in-depth the region. By coincidence, I found myself in an after-party of the annual veterans' meeting in the beginning of July by the Mound of Friendship. The gathering was saturated of speeches, songs and talks around a bonfire, and a disco until 4am with Opus hit "Life is life" repeating from time to time. The well-grounded discourse of emptiness, emphasized by almost everyone who still inhabits or visits this quasi-abandoned area, seemed to be absent that night. However, it appeared as crucial while further researching local customs which involved the necessity to have a larger number of participants, such as going around the neighborhood and singing on Easter. Nevertheless,

people still held dear memories of the past and these stories had already established a solid amount of data to base the thesis on. Suddenly, the state of emergency declared in March 2020 made its own adjustments within my position in the field and the way I was about to talk about the customs of the inhabitants of the Latgale borderlands. Exhausted by the urbanity, I moved for good to an old-believer's parish of four inhabited houses. Still exploring the region marked by 'skeletons' as the locals call the debris, my and my neighbors' everyday life seemed all but empty. Local customs – still present – have been adjusted to the contemporary situation, have been readjusted in the light of pandemic and proved once again the capacity to deal with the unpredictable, especially where the unpredictable is characteristic to different understandings of a border.

Arzhia Habibi (with **Alis Oancea** and **Mariela Neagu**)

Emptiness and Educational Imaginaries in Rural Communities

This contribution describes how small or isolated rural communities and individuals in places that are 'emptying' (i.e. experience the disappearance or radical reconfiguration of material and social relations that constitute a place (Danovska 2019) due to demographic change, migration, economic situation, COVID, etc.) continue to live and become after permanent school closures. We aim to understand and theorise the different senses of emptiness at play in these contexts. The empty school buildings, objects emptied of function, lost routines and calendars, together with the disappearance of part of the local labour market and community services and support network, do not only open a keenly perceived material and social hiatus within the community, but school closures also transform its rhythms, aesthetics, self-understandings and imaginaries. In post-socialist contexts (e.g. Horáková 2015, Kovács 2012) unfulfilled or non-linear educational trajectories reconfigure the happenings and agencies of isolated communities. Our methods include use of digital and remote ethnography and online oral history interviews with key people, knowledgeable of the history of our two research sites in Romania. We also analyse social media (including images and documents from non-restricted Facebook accounts) and press content (articles/images from local newspapers and other press outlets). Findings will explore the changing perceptions of time and the ruptures of community life as it peels away from the closed school buildings, and the changes to the sense of community renewal, now no longer prompted by the rhythmic reminder of the daytime routines of children being schooled in the village. We will also trace how participants purposefully mobilise individual memory and networks to construct collective memory through various material fragments, and their shared sense of nostalgia as they curate and preserve the memory of a school as a digital assemblage of words, images, sounds, emojis, hyperlinks, and social media signals.

Sandra Jasper (with **Jonathon Turnbull** and **Adam Searle**)

Ecologies of Emptiness

We begin with a question: how can scholars theorise emptiness across species, scales, and causal agents? In this paper, we present a more-than-human reading of emptiness, considering the ecological implications of various intensities of human absence. The emptying of space via an absence of human activity is often visually associated with the presence or resurgence of various plants, animals, and other nonhuman beings. Their presence can be viewed as relatively novel – in the case of abandoned cities like Pripyat in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone – or can be seen as more 'natural' – such as the Konik horses deliberately introduced to the Oostvaardersplassen rewilding site in the Netherlands to 'complete' the nonhuman ecosystem. Ecologies of emptiness can differ greatly depending on their causal agent, the species associated with emptiness in different contexts, and the way their ecological properties are valued. In this paper, we draw comparisons and contrasts between three case studies to help build a typology for thinking about the ways ecologies of emptiness vary: the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine, to which nature has 'returned' following its abandonment in the wake of the nuclear

catastrophe of 1986; the St. Kilda archipelago in the Northern Atlantic, whose inhabitants left for the Scottish mainland in 1930; and abandoned spaces in Berlin, whose ecologies have been shaped by contested geopolitical histories. Drawing on fieldwork in these three sites, which have diverse relations to emptiness, we show how nature is viewed, valued, and experienced differently at each, developing situated understandings of the varieties of emptiness across species, spaces, and scales.

Lori Khatchadourian

The Life Extempore in the Twilight Zone of Soviet Industry

Places of abandonment are rarely as empty as they appear through the ruins gaze. In postsocialist Armenia, the industrial remnants of Soviet modernity are in fact sites of improbable and improvisational lifeways that take shape in what Alfredo González-Ruibal calls the ‘twilight zone’. The twilight zone is a time between life and death, between use and abandonment, when despair and optimism jockey for position in the lives of those caught up in ruination. This paper is based on months of archaeological ethnography in the twilight zone of Armenia’s industrial landscapes, where decommissioned and ruined Soviet factories occupy a liminal state between fullness and emptiness. While the recent ‘turn to ruins’ in anthropology, archaeology, and cultural geography advances compelling critiques of capitalism, as well as new approaches to materiality, affect, and nostalgia, it does not account sufficiently for what happens in the twilight zone. Approaches to ruins that descend more or less directly from Walter Benjamin’s effort to wake us from the mythic dreamscape of industrial culture and expose modernity’s ideology of progress leave us without the conceptual resources to come to terms with lives lived in the emptiness. In post-Soviet Armenia, the twilight zone is a time marked by struggles with steadfastly hard matter — concrete, steel, and the machinic material culture of industrial life. These are struggles to unlock or forgo the ‘salvage value’ of Soviet machines and factories undergoing slow, irreversible decay. They enlist people into acts of constant extemporization, doing things one never planned or was trained to do. Here I focus on the improvisational practices of extemporists in different Armenian cities, and their efforts to revalue the anachronistic but persistent material world of Soviet industry. These are strenuous projects at the margins of global capitalism to retain industrial lifeways and make a living under conditions of ruination.

Verena La Mela

An Empty Road: Visual Impressions and Temporal Aspects of Implementing the BRI in South-eastern Kazakhstan

In this paper I address emptiness on a central road of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Kazakhstan through the lens of the anthropology of infrastructure. I draw on material collected during 16 months of ethnographic field research between 2016 and 2019 on and along a BRI highway in south-eastern Kazakhstan. The road under scrutiny is 300 kilometers long and officially opened in 2018. It connects Almaty, an important urban and logistical center in Kazakhstan, and Khorgos, a central economic BRI hub at the Sino-Kazakh border. The road was constructed within the frames of a costly state development project called *Nurly Zhol* (‘Bright Path’). Kazakh authorities envisioned the highway leading to a ‘second Dubai’, a huge international trade and services centre which was planned to be built around the dusty border town of Khorgos. The second Dubai has not materialized so far and the brand-new highway leading to it has provoked rather incredulous comments by international media and foreign visitors: instead of intensive traffic, colorful plastic bags litter the steppe around the poorly maintained service areas. How can we address emptiness in infrastructure studies and particularly on roads? In this paper I draw on the concept of suspension (*Akhil Gupta*) in order to analyze the time between the construction/ start of a project and its completion and to better comprehend the temporality of what is experienced or framed as emptiness. By documenting who during my time of research used the highway and how I show that it is not empty. I argue that in the context of the BRI, we need to employ a relational understanding

of emptiness. This can help us compare the plans and promises of governments and other institutional bodies involved in the project constructions as well as media coverage and the ways how infrastructure is used and made sense of on the ground.

Kārlis Lakševics

Emptiness as Politics of Habitability: Capital and Imaginaries of Dwelling in Riga

Riga has lost 300,000 inhabitants since 1990, making abandoned buildings and spaces not only a challenge to urban planners but a signification of this loss variously present in the urban fabric. Nonetheless, if many city actors blame suburbanization, neglect of liveable infrastructures and 'wild capitalism' for what they deem 'degradation' or 'waste' of territories as per long-dominant modern imaginaries of 'proper' land use, for some it also represents an opportunity. This paper explores this active and opportunistic way of envisioning emptiness that I conceptualize as politics of habitability through juxtaposing the ways how people without a permanent residence, temporary use activists, and real estate developers envision emptiness as a justification for inhabitation. By showing how socio-material imaginaries of capital, need and value shape practices of claiming abandoned spaces in Riga I argue that the charismatic figure of emptiness is both part of mechanisms for reproducing land management regimes and a challenge to be inhabited without access to either regimes of value, meaning and/or investment 'proper'.

Frédéric Lasserre (with **Mia Bennett** and **Enkeleda Arapi**)

Albanian Bunkers: From Passive Fear to Active Use

Between 1967 and 1986, under orders by First Secretary Enver Hoxha, the Albanian government built 500,000-800,000 military bunkers for defence purposes. These mushroom-shaped concrete installations were spread across the country, concentrated along borders and beaches, in cities, and near key industries, strategic points, and transportation infrastructure. Some bunkers were also placed in the interior with the aim of slowing down potential invaders like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or NATO. Although construction of new bunkers ceased following Hoxha's death in 1985, the military maintained existing bunkers until 1991, when the communist regime collapsed and the original military reasons for their existence dissipated. In the years that followed, many bunkers were destroyed. Yet others, especially beginning in 2010, were decorated or even fully transformed into productive assets, serving as tourist attractions, bars, or hotel rooms. Albania's bunkers, emptied of the defence forces that originally occupied them, became physically and symbolically reinvested with meaning. This paper will examine how Albania's bunkers constitute objects that have become recontextualized and repurposed over time. Drawing on interviews and field trips carried out during 2007-17, the paper addresses how popular perceptions of bunkers in Albania have shifted from fear to a set of more nuanced emotions. It will also critique how people have developed ways to recycle and integrate once-vacant ruins into their daily lives. While Albania sits outside post-Soviet studies' usual sphere of analysis, partly because of the Soviet-Albanian split, the country's experiences in many ways parallel the political and economic experiences of the former Soviet republics following the collapse of communism. Examining Albania through a post-Soviet lens can thus provide unique insights into the wider material, aesthetic, and emotional consequences of the shift from communism to capitalism – and how amidst the 'ruins' of communism, capitalism can find new ways to enclose emptiness.

Natalia Mamonova

'Dying Villages' and Right-Wing Populism in Central Eastern Europe

What is the common point between neo-Nazi settlers in eastern Germany, populist mobilisation against land reform in Ukraine, and conservative demographic policies of Poland and Hungary? The answer is

‘dying villages’. Since the collapse of communism, many rural settlements across the postsocialist space are being abandoned by capital, the state, and people. The ‘dying’ (but not ‘dead’) villages have become fertile ground for nationalist, socially conservative, illiberal populist movements and politics. Yet, the role of abandoned rural spaces and lives in the right-wing populist surge in Central and Eastern Europe remains largely overlooked. This paper is the first attempt to identify and explain the complex relations between right-wing populism and postsocialist emptiness. By analysing examples from different countries of Eastern and Central Europe, this paper will explain how, to what extent, and with what consequences the socio-economic vacuum of rural spaces influences the illiberal turn in postsocialist Europe. It will be largely based on my previous ethnographic research in the region, expert interviews, and secondary data.

Damián Omar Martínez

Relational Emptiness: Between Absence and Potentiality in Post-crisis Spain

In this paper I will look at emptiness as a relational quality that allows us to account for the way in which the temporalities of stagnation and materialities of deprivation are experienced. Emptiness can be experienced both in relation to absence (what once was, but is not anymore) and potentiality (what is not yet but might become). Building on Bille, Hastrup & Soerensen (2010: 4), I will show how the absence evoked by emptiness affects the way people interpret and relate to urban materiality. Furthermore, I will add, emptiness also has effects on people’s “orientations to the future” (Bryant & Knight 2019), evoking hopeful and threatening potentialities. I will illustrate my argument by looking at three ethnographic instances of ‘ways of seeing emptiness’ that constantly reappeared during my fieldwork in the southeastern Spanish city of Murcia. Specifically, I will focus on the translucent (im)materiality of urban skeletons, on an empty plot left by a demolished kindergarten, and on how people experience the constant increase of housing vacancy in a shrinking neighbourhood. Half-constructed buildings form a ghostly landscape after the bursting of the real estate bubble; the void left by the kindergarten that was demolished as a first step in the reconstruction of this entire neighbourhood; and the increasing vacancy of flats. They all have become spectral absences of a past that anticipates dark futures: a new housing bubble and its subsequent burst, displacement and anomie have become the main horizons articulating how the city and urban life are experienced and imagined. Through these three examples, I will show the productivity of thinking emptiness in its relations to the material and the temporal, to what was and what might become, in order to understand the experience of the urban poor in the context of post-crisis Southern Europe.

Mayanka Mukherji

Gardening and Grieving in An Emptying Council Estate

Based on 12 months of ethnography inside one of London’s historic council estates threatened with demolition, this paper explores how residents, through practices of gardening and grieving, resist the ‘decanting’ carried out by the housing association. Set against the backdrop of financialisation of social housing, I will unpack the promise of ‘betterment’ that is used to justify the emptiness of seemingly uninhabitable homes. Such promises are paired with assurances that the new build will offer greater ‘value’ to investors and residents, thus situating emptiness as both the end of a place in its current form and the beginning of its new future. Yet these promises ignore the attachments engrained in the buildings, lands, and the lives and afterlives of intergenerational communities of primarily ageing residents of the estate. Using excerpts from letters, stories and drawings presented to me during my fieldwork, this paper examines how residents create value through tactile engagements with place, and how these tactile engagements challenge abstract notions of value through which emptiness is justified as a means towards a future that is cut off from the present. The paper focusses on how people physically root themselves in place via practices such as the planting of seeds or the scattering of ashes in the garden at the heart of the estate to evoke a sense of intergenerational continuity. These acts become

an antidote to the anxieties of potential displacement and create new ways of imagining value out of places, plants and people who find themselves swept away by the looming threat of emptying in the centre of London.

Mariela Neagu (with **Alis Oancea** and **Arzhia Habibi**)

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This contribution describes how small or isolated rural communities and individuals in places that are 'emptying' (i.e. experience the disappearance or radical reconfiguration of material and social relations that constitute a place (Danovska 2019) due to demographic change, migration, economic situation, COVID, etc.) continue to live and become after permanent school closures. We aim to understand and theorise the different senses of emptiness at play in these contexts. The empty school buildings, objects emptied of function, lost routines and calendars, together with the disappearance of part of the local labour market and community services and support network, do not only open a keenly perceived material and social hiatus within the community, but school closures also transform its rhythms, aesthetics, self-understandings and imaginaries. In post-socialist contexts (e.g. Horáková 2015, Kovács 2012) unfulfilled or non-linear educational trajectories reconfigure the happenings and agencies of isolated communities. Our methods include use of digital and remote ethnography and online oral history interviews with key people, knowledgeable of the history of our two research sites in Romania. We also analyse social media (including images and documents from non-restricted Facebook accounts) and press content (articles/images from local newspapers and other press outlets). Findings will explore the changing perceptions of time and the ruptures of community life as it peels away from the closed school buildings, and the changes to the sense of community renewal, now no longer prompted by the rhythmic reminder of the daytime routines of children being schooled in the village. We will also trace how participants purposefully mobilise individual memory and networks to construct collective memory through various material fragments, and their shared sense of nostalgia as they curate and preserve the memory of a school as a digital assemblage of words, images, sounds, emojis, hyperlinks, and social media signals.

Nobukhosi Ngwenya

The Politics of Possibilities in Cape Town's Empty Buildings: The Case of Woodstock Hospital, Cape Town

Narratives on emptiness in relation to the urban landscape have pervaded our thinking since the colonial era. Often depicted as a *tabula rasa* many spaces, both in the global North and global South were and continue to be (re)presented as though they are not the subject of any demand. But, this (re)presentation ignores that such spaces are, in fact, places that are the subject of several competing demands. These demands on place are made, primarily, by those who know these places. Although the nature of the demands has changed, multiple competing demands on place remain. These demands are indicative of the multiple meanings of 'emptiness'. This paper examines the multiple meanings of emptiness inscribed on Woodstock Hospital, Cape Town. Located in an inner city neighbourhood that is currently gentrifying, Woodstock Hospital, which has been renamed Cissie Gool House by the occupiers, lay largely vacant until its occupation in March 2017. Through a series of photographs, the paper unpacks the multiple meanings of emptiness ascribed to the Woodstock Hospital through language, collective action, and the (re)formation of the building's constitutive elements. The paper goes on to argue that these meanings are emblematic of a politics of possibilities insofar as the provision of well-located, affordable housing in Cape Town is concerned. Within this politics of possibilities, vacant land and buildings – as places not spaces – take centre stage in efforts to not only provide adequate housing for those in need but to also transform the spatial legacy of apartheid.

Alis Oancea (with **Mariela Neagu** and **Arzhia Habibi**)

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Ivan Rajković

Backwardness, Revisited: Valuing Emptiness in the Balkan Mountains

This paper explores the conflicting valuations of nature and depopulation as they are wrought in the Balkans’ ongoing energy revolution. As rivers flow fastest in mountain areas, where population is depleted and the aging villagers subsist on agriculture and pensions, small hydro-power projects spread in peripheral, borderline areas, amidst groups hitherto excluded from the mainstream politics. These in turn came to symbolize the demographic panic that haunts regional politics more generally, and became prime sites of ecological resistance and revival. One such site is the village of Topli do, a desolate place at the confluence of three rivers next to the Serbian border with Bulgaria. After numerous violent barricades and mass protests, in which this village’s rivers were finally defended, Topli do went from being seen as a far-off place dying out to a symbol of pristine nature, exceptional beauty and grassroots sovereignty. Such iconisation brought masses of eco-tourists, biodiversity projects, and rich urbanites buying local land. This revival takes place in a wider changing climate of Serbia ecopolitics where, due to urban pollution, pandemic and digitalisation of work, middle classes are yearning to abandon the cities for greener pastures. As I explore the transformation of Topli do and surrounding sites as both material and symbolic places, I trace how conflicting visions of ‘empty’ and ‘plenty’ emerge, and how they join as well as agonize different social groups. Revisiting areas previously seen as backward and void into new exclusive frontiers of value, I argue, is a process which uneasily shifts the environmentalism of the poor (“we have enough right here”) into a growing sense that unspoilt nature is becoming a new privilege.

Anastasiya Ryabchuk

"We are cut off from everything": Infrastructural Vulnerability in Frontline Communities in Donetsk Region

Prior to 2014, Donetsk was Ukraine's second largest city, surrounded by a myriad of smaller satellite-cities, all connected into an industrial network, centered on coal mining and heavy industry. Residents of smaller towns and villages around Donetsk, commuted to these cities for work and access to most social infrastructure, such as hospitals, centers for administrative services, institutions of higher education, etc. Many urban residents had relatives and summer houses in nearby rural communities, while elderly village dwellers kept in touch with their children in cities, looked after grandchildren during summer vacations, and passed on canned food and sacks of potatoes. These networks were abruptly cut off in 2014. Frontline communities at some 10-20km from Donetsk were isolated both geographically and socially. While conducting fieldwork in a rural community at 5km from the frontline, one could see at the horizon all the nearby cities that remain in Donetsk people's republic: the coal mine heaps of Horlivka, the destroyed railway and highway leading to Yasynuvata, the smoke from kokso-chemical plant in Avdiivka on Ukrainian side right next to the now destroyed Donetsk airport. In contrast to NGO reports from frontline communities that focus on vulnerable social categories, and see vulnerability as a personal characteristic, I propose to focus on infrastructural vulnerability witnessed by residents of these 'cut off' communities.

Adam Searle (with **Jonathon Turnbull** and **Sandra Jasper**)

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Guido Sechi (with **Māris Bērziņš** and **Regita Zeiļa**)

Depopulating Small Monotowns in Latvia: Making Sense of Place and Shrinkage

Our study focuses on small, planned mono-industrial towns built in Latvia under Soviet rule, between the late 1940s and early 1980s. The devisal of these settlements had a multiple role: to bridge and possibly erase differences in urban/rural living standards, to connect and integrate Latvia into the Soviet industrial system, and to balance spatial development of the whole settlement system. Moreover, this type of urban development created specific socio-cultural environments that were to a large extent distinct from the traditional Latvian countryside. Nowadays, notwithstanding their morphological differences and

partly different post-Soviet trajectories, these towns, affected by economic restructuring and in many cases full deindustrialization, are experiencing urban shrinkage, physical decay of the built environment, and demographic decline. Thus, they have become sites of socioeconomic tension and uncertainty, as their originally functional role and place identity significantly changed leading to alienation among local residents. The aim of our research is to illuminate how post-Soviet transition has been experienced by this particular type of urban communities shaped by socialism. The study adopts a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach. Socio-spatial analysis of socio-demographic dynamics at the micro-geographic scale is carried out on the basis of individual level data from the latest population census rounds and most recent population register data. Qualitative analysis is based on interviews with local residents and aims at investigating their attitudes towards urban change and the sense of local identity. The observed similarities and differences are mostly associated with the diverse degrees of functional transformations that the monotowns have witnessed since 1991.

Andris Šuvajevs

Infrastructural Breakdown: Tracing the Socio-spatial Articulations of Politics in Latvia

The collapse of a supermarket in one of Riga's largely Russian-speaking neighbourhood in 2013 was the largest loss of life in Latvia since WWII yet remains poorly understood and researched. Until the moment the roof fell on tens of people, killing 54, Latvia had been the poster child of austerity politics the world over for nearly five years. Thousands had emigrated in conditions where both – public and private – levels of investment had seen a sharp drop. Yet even the sectors that did attract financial interest, like construction, were organised according to shifting principles. Quality and safety appeared to take a backseat not only in the way government regulations were altered to save money, but also in the way infrastructure projects were technically managed. In this presentation, I argue that the collapse of the supermarket in Riga was a symbolic event that encapsulated a series of tensions at the heart of Latvian society. The shifting political rationalities from socialist, to post-socialist and then to austerity are inscribed in infrastructure and the way such infrastructure is made possible spatially and socially. The narratives of survivors and the relatives of victims reveal a profound disorientation about the causes and the meaning of tragedy illustrating a vacuum of explanatory discourses. I suggest that tracing the history of infrastructure may fill the hole.

Elisa Tamburo

Vacating History? "Heritage by Dispossession" in a Military Village in Urban Taipei

The paper investigates the process of 'heritage by dispossession' experienced by the inhabitants of decaying military dependents' villages in urban Taiwan. It asks how vacating the residents of these neglected historical settlements prepares the terrain for a reappropriation of history and heritage making discourse by multiple agents other than the residents themselves. Military dependents villages are settlements built with makeshift means in 1949 by the Nationalist Government (Kuomintang, KMT) in Taiwan to temporarily house its military personnel who was exiled from China in the wake of the Chinese Civil War. With the KMT failing to return to mainland China, though, these settlements become the unlikely permanent home of many KMT soldiers and their families until a policy of relocation is enacted in the 1990s to rehouse veterans in permanent accommodations. Villages which had been in ruination for decades are thus emptied and either demolished to build new high-rise housing blocks or listed for heritage preservation. Yet, which history and whose heritage is advocated for when residents are forced to vacate their premises? Based on 18 months of fieldwork in Zhongxin Village – one of the last inhabited military dependents' villages in Taipei – before the relocation of its inhabitants to high-rise blocks in 2016 and a follow up fieldwork after resettlement in 2017, the paper opens with an ethnography of the now-empty village in ruination to then visually explore various preservation projects to reappropriate Zhongxin Village and its history via the commercialization of spaces and the performativity of partisan

pasts. The paper overall 2 suggests that investigating the ways in which emptiness is engineered already reveals the possible afterlives of abandoned sites and histories.

Siyu Tang

Whose Utopia: Capitalism, Temporal Logics, and Phantasmatic Discourse on Two Empty Cities in China

This paper takes as its objects of analysis the discourses of utopianism revolved around two different empty cities in contemporary China – firstly the futuristic ‘ghost city’ Kangbashi, and secondly the abandoned former socialist industrial city Hegang – to consider the relationship between capitalism and temporal logics in post-reform China. By drawing on Žižek’s idea (1999: 206) of utopianism as ‘impossible fullness,’ I explore how the utopian discourse in both cases functions as a performance of an (impossible) future that gives meaning to the dire present. To be more specific about my cases of consideration, while the utopian ideals of Kangbashi are depicted by its developers as well as those who have invested in the local real estate market (Ulfstjerne 2019), the discourse of utopianism about Hegang, where 7,000-dollar apartments in deteriorating conditions are widely available, is deployed by young people in fast urbanizing Chinese cities who are unable to afford housing and who perceives Hegang as the ‘paradise of homeownership.’ Utopia, a word by its Greek etymology means an impossible place, is then a phantasmatic future in both cases that signifies more about the present state the subjects using the term is situated in, than about an actually achievable goal. I thus investigate in this paper about how – in both the speculative capitalism experienced by real estate developers and investors, and in the precarious job market young Chinese urbanites are dwelling in – does the discourse of utopianism constructed upon empty cities replace the present with a fictive future, a future that renders the burdensome present more bearable.

Jonathon Turnbull (with **Adam Searle** and **Sandra Jasper**)

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Anna Varfolomeeva

The Myth of Emptiness: Creation and Collapse of a Soviet Industrial Settlement

This presentation analyzes the notion of emptiness in the industrialized landscapes of Northwestern Russia. It engages with two widespread Soviet and post-Soviet discourses: the emptiness of preindustrial landscapes and the symbolic 'nothingness' of former industrial settlements. The presentation specifically addresses emptiness as a part of mythological narratives reflecting the creation and collapse of industry. As a case study, it discusses the history of the Kvartsitnyi settlement in Karelia. The settlement was built in the 1970s near the newly opened quartzite quarry (from which Kvartsitnyi received its name). Kvartsitnyi was constructed next to indigenous Veps village Shoksha that was well-known in the past for its stoneworking traditions. In the 1970s-1980, Kvartsitnyi was viewed as a modern progressive settlement built according to Moscow-designed technologies and attracting young enthusiasts from different parts of the country. However, in the 1990s, the quarry went bankrupt and closed, and today's residents of Kvartsitnyi live in a permanent state of uncertainty. Both the pre-industrial and post-industrial periods are often represented in local narratives as symbolic 'nothingness'. The landscape of Kvartsitnyi is commonly viewed as empty and devoid of meaning before mining development started in the area, although many locals used it for fishing or berry-picking. The closure of the quartzite quarry in the 1990s resulted in returning to 'nothingness'. In the interviews with locals, the story of Kvartsitnyi resembles a classical mythological creation narrative when a new ideal world appears out of nothing, but then, as a result of human mistakes, gets destroyed. The paper discusses the cosmogonic myth of Kvartsitnyi within the larger context of Soviet and post-Soviet myth-making traditions. The research is based on participant observation and interviews conducted in Karelia in 2015-18; an additional field trip to Kvartsitnyi is planned for August 2021.

Alexander Vorbrugg

After Abandonment: Transitions of Land Cover and Governance in Rural Russia

Abandoned farmland often becomes elusive in various respects. When located in places of depopulation or withdrawal of political and economic resources and involvement, it becomes partially decoupled from many societal groups and interests. Land system scientists grapple with difficulties in categorizing, measuring and mapping such land, and so do state agencies for whom this land category is often both hard to know and to govern. Nevertheless, new things and relations emerge on and around such land, and new ways of seeing and knowing it can play a central role in this process. In this presentation, I reflect on the recursive relationship between new ways of mapping and representing abandoned land on the one hand, and materially transforming it on the other. Advances in satellite imagery provided the basis for new maps of abandoned farmland in Russia. These catalysed new interests, visions and programs, and set into motion public debates, legislative processes and political controversies around the reuse of such land. This brought to public attention not only to the scope of farmland abandonment but also to its complex environmental, economic and social implication. Thus new maps played an important role in altering the conditions for the reuse of abandoned land. In this presentation, I focus on (1) the recursive process of representations that eventually alter the material characteristics of the abandoned land they represent, (2) the relationship between the remote (sensing) perspective and the emptying of places by which situated perspectives have become rare, and (3) the impact of succession vegetation's materiality and effects on political representations and controversies. Empirically, I draw on a long term, multi-method research project on abandoned land and New Forests in Russia, and conceptually on a mix of governmentality studies, performativity thinking and STS.

Anna Žabicka

A Place Where Things Happen: The Nursing Home in Emptying Rural Latvia

The gravel road that leads to the nursing home is over 20 kilometers long, winding, and bumpy. Along the way, the municipality has confusingly installed road signs that mark the nearest village not two but four times: first, before and after the village and then a few kilometers down the road – right before and after the nursing home. Although that was done out of the practical consideration to reduce the driving speed around the nursing home, it also symbolizes the changes that have taken place: the once lively village now stands almost deserted, but the nursing home has become the most populated and busiest place in the surrounding area. In my paper, which is based on over 8-month long fieldwork in 2020-21 at a small nursing home or Pansionāts and the rural and supposedly emptying community around it, I investigate the nursing home's extending (care) relations within the community. I argue that amidst rural precarity marked by deindustrialization and outmigration and thus limited employment opportunities, the nursing home ensures jobs, income, and relations that facilitate continuity of local individual farmsteads, as well as a sociality that holds people together and creates a place 'where things happen'. My paper offers an ethnographic contribution to Dzenovska's (2020) argument that a way of life emerges in 'empty' places. I also show how people find stability and continuity in a precarious and emptying place by relying on societal aging – yet another national-level precarity and form of emptying.

Regita Zeiļa (with Guido Sechi and Māris Bērziņš)

Depopulating Small Monotowns in Latvia: Making Sense of Place and Shrinkage

Our study focuses on small, planned mono-industrial towns built in Latvia under Soviet rule, between the late 1940s and early 1980s. The devisal of these settlements had a multiple role: to bridge and possibly erase differences in urban/rural living standards, to connect and integrate Latvia into the Soviet industrial system, and to balance spatial development of the whole settlement system. Moreover, this type of urban development created specific socio-cultural environments that were to a large extent distinct from the traditional Latvian countryside. Nowadays, notwithstanding their morphological differences and partly different post-Soviet trajectories, these towns, affected by economic restructuring and in many cases full deindustrialization, are experiencing urban shrinkage, physical decay of the built environment, and demographic decline. Thus, they have become sites of socioeconomic tension and uncertainty, as their originally functional role and place identity significantly changed leading to alienation among local residents. The aim of our research is to illuminate how post-Soviet transition has been experienced by this particular type of urban communities shaped by socialism. The study adopts a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach. Socio-spatial analysis of socio-demographic dynamics at the micro-geographic scale is carried out on the basis of individual level data from the latest population census rounds and most recent population register data. Qualitative analysis is based on interviews with local residents and aims at investigating their attitudes towards urban change and the sense of local identity. The observed similarities and differences are mostly associated with the diverse degrees of functional transformations that the monotowns have witnessed since 1991.

Art Exhibition

Anya Gleizer

Granny's Bones

I am a Russian contemporary artist currently based in Oxford. The emphasis on emptiness, and what can be heard and seen through it transcends the dereliction of Russia's post-industrialized landscape after the fall of the USSR – it is a sense of space that I believe has always been there, both in the physical geography of the land and in Russian culture, it is present in folklore as Белый Шум, and I have never

seen it addressed in an academic setting in the West before. My work always returns to this subject-matter. Much of it is based in Siberia. I am attaching the abstract and information as well as links to [my artist's website](#) and a [5min clip of the VR film that I am proposing](#), which is called *Granny's Bones*. The full-length piece *Granny's Bones* comprises two VR films (each 15min long), intended to be viewed through a VR headset. *Granny's Bones* was featured in the last Moscow Biennale (Dec 2020) and won the inaugural Mansfield-Ruddock Prize. It explores the experiences of indigenous Siberians (Evenki Reindeer herders) encountering a legacy of colonial extraction in settlements they were forced to settle in and are now being forced to leave. The absence explored is that of a forcibly erased culture, the absence of reindeer, the theft of a grandmother's bones by an Oxford anthropologist, and the spirits that wander the taiga, that can be seen in the Белый Шум (White noise), emptiness.

Tamta Khalvashi

The Jarti Gleaners¹

This multimedia artwork assembles and celebrates both scrap metal gatherers' and citizens' collective ways of seeing, noticing and working in our cities. An artwork is based on a collaborative work of citizens involved in accidentally detecting and depicting with their own mobile phones the scrap metal collectors involved in an uneasy labor in various cities of Georgia. Here, both scrap metal collectors and citizens who serve as accidental ethnographers are like urban gleaners, reusing unwanted and broken materials, like scrap metal or poor images, as shared resources. Production of accidental videos and collection of scrap metal, then, could both be conceived of as a form of “carework”, for they both are invested in what I prefer to call an ethics of noticing things and people that otherwise are considered marginal and meaningless.

Francisco Martinez

Eastern Estonia: Decline in its Multiple Facets

In my gallery room, I will present the artworks made for the exhibition ‘Life in Decline’ (Estonian Mining Museum, 2021). For the show, the former administrative building of the Kohtla mine has been intervened to bring forth what goes on in a condition described as ‘in decline’. Here, ten Estonian contemporary artists were invited to act as ‘accidental’ anthropologists, helping the visitors (and the ethnographer) to understand how things endure in a context of negative capability and exhausted ecologies, as well as the adaptive processes of living with the leftovers of modernity. To prepare their contribution, artists had been visiting different places in Eastern Estonia, spending time there, talking to people, observing things.... As a result, their artworks do not simply function as conceptual or aesthetic objects, but also as analytical artefacts – provoking further reactions and relations, intensifying meanings and relations, making visitors think about current issues.

We have paid special attention to the side effects of the modern extractive industries in Eastern Estonia. Here, decline has been more severe and long-term than in the rest of the country. Grounds were affected by the intensive mining and extractive activity of Soviet modernisation. Then, industries were affected by postsocialist economic development since many were too large, used obsolete technology, or were of no interest to new, global investors and the state. Nevertheless, there are many things happening in a state of breakdown and decline; there is an intense social, cognitive and material activity in deteriorating

¹ Scrap metal in Georgian.

infrastructures, houses, roads, skills, etc. Indeed, breakdown can also be ordinary and normal, as a condition in which recovery has not been achieved, yet many things continue to go on in the meantime.

That is why it made sense to organise such an exhibition at the Mining Museum of Kohtla-Nõmme, in a region suffering from the harmful side-effects of a century of modern 'progress' and from decades of political abandonment. Indeed, decline can be presented as a problem of thought, a challenge of understanding, something hard to put into words. In this sense, the exhibition itself is a research method and an intervention in the field, bringing people from elsewhere to the site. In this area, the open-pit industrial extraction started in 1919. [Then, thousands of miners moved to the region, and a railway station and processing factories were rapidly built](#). Nowadays, everywhere you look you can find remains of infrastructural systems of the Soviet past, derelict sites that stand where heavy industry had once flourished.

In my case, as a curator, the exhibition allows me to lose the control over the research while taking part in the production of things. This take on fieldwork is interventionist and demands from the ethnographer to be an active participant in the construction of the field, not just observant. Through this kind of anthropological curating, the field becomes a site of experimentation and co-creation, one that makes room for diverse skills and interests to create something together – which requires generosity from the participants, and in some cases, unlearning our own epistemic tools.

Ian McNaught Davis

Re-memory

I am a South African visual artist who specialises in photography, filmmaking and mixed media art. I propose producing a body of images titled 'Re-memory'. Through working as a photojournalist in former-Soviet nations such as Georgia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, my initial photojournalistic concept of emptiness was simply showing relics of a forgone empire. As my career as an artist has developed, I have come to believe that emptiness is not just proof of some former life but an essential part of the human existence. Emptiness is the promise of uncharted land that drew our ancestors across Earth's shifting continents. It is the abyss Nietzsche warned us not to stare at for too long. It is the dissatisfaction that propels progress. The emptiness depicted in my photograph of cows grazing in a dilapidated tea factory in the village of Tsalenjikha in Georgia isn't simply a reminder of the decay of communism, it is also the promise of fresh grass to graze on. Emptiness can be shown as decomposition and as gestation.

In my art practice I construct new landscapes and scenarios from making collages from my photographs, and I print these amalgamations using a 19th century technique called cyanotype that results in blue and white images (and is where the term 'blueprint' comes from). [Here](#) is a video slideshow of my work using this technique, shown alongside a musical performance by London-based Goodensemble at last year's Bloombury Festival.

I propose to make series of images where I will take scenes of emptiness that I have accrued across my assignments throughout the former-USSR, Africa and London, and through using the technique of collage and cyanotype I will create new scenes that are sums of several emptinesses across time and space. The aim is two-fold. I want to show the universality of emptiness; that it isn't only confined to decaying palaces of deceased dictators but emptiness exists in London's financial district too.

My other aim of this project is to emphasise the complexities of emptiness through the concept of liminal space. Professor Jeff Malpas of the University of Tasmania describes liminal space in his essay The

Threshold of the World as "that which stands between, but in standing between it does not mark some point of rest". It is this sense of vigour in the dereliction that I am drawn to. "In Aristotelian terms, one might say that it is characterised by dynamis rather than energeia – by potency rather than actuality," writes Malpas of liminality. This notion of potency reinforces my idea that emptiness need not only be shown as an end point. Malpas writes how the liminal looks both ways, and how each way turns back on each other; so the end is a beginning, and the beginning an end. Through analogue photographic techniques I aim to produce a body of work that not only shows the universality of emptiness, but its duality too. It would be possible to produce a pre-recorded multimedia slideshow of the work, as well as a behind-the-scenes video of the making of these artworks.