Intimacies in Transition: The Formation of Post-Socialist Subjectivity in Life Narratives from Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine

Bilyana Valerieva Manolova

Student number: 2327554

Date of Submission: 25.08.2023

Supervisor: Dr. Anna Poletti

Second Reader: Dr. Aleksandr Prigozhin

Thesis Submitted for the RMA Comparative Literary Studies, Utrecht University

Abstract

This thesis provides a comparative analysis of the formation of post-socialist subjectivity in life narratives from Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine. By attending to the practices of intimate relationality articulated within five post-socialist self-narrations, I argue that the post-socialist sense of self is characterised by a dynamic negotiation of the socialist past within the neo-liberal present, which manifests in the relational practices within post-socialist contexts. Asking how it feels to be post-socialist across different post-socialist/post-Soviet spatio-temporalities, the research examines how the macro-structural changes of 1989 manifest as an emotional, lived reality, within the everyday experiences and self-understandings of people that lived through the collapse of socialism and continue to navigate its aftermath. By adopting a comparative approach to post-socialist self-narrations from three different contexts, the thesis develops a framework for examining post-socialist subjectivities comparatively, without eliding the specificities of their socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. Combining scholarship on post-communism, life writing, and affect theory in a theoretical framework, the project reconceptualizes post-socialism as an ongoing transition, characterized by an inherent in-betweenness, evidenced by the post-socialist practices of self-narration. My analysis of these life narratives reconceptualises the subjectivities that develop across different post-socialist locations after 1989 as continuously unfolding in a state of liminality between past, present, and future, rather than as fixed results of socialism's collapse. It attends to the ways subjects continuously negotiate the ongoing cultural, social, and political legacies of socialism within the present cultural, political, and institutional formations that characterise their national contexts. The thesis contributes to scholarship on post-communism by demonstrating the value of studying post-socialist life narratives for

understanding the hybrid dynamics between socialism and neo-liberalism that shape the self-understandings of subjects within the post-socialist contexts of Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine.

Universiteit Utrecht

Faculty of Humanities
Version September 2014

PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism
Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism
Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.
The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism

Universiteit Utrecht

entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.
Name: **Bilyana Manolova** Student number: **2327554**
Date and signature: **22.08.2023** 

Submit this form to your supervisor when you begin writing your Bachelor's final paper or your Master's thesis.

Failure to submit or sign this form does not mean that no sanctions can be imposed if it appears that plagiarism has been committed in the paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Anna Poletti, for the immense guidance, support, and advice throughout all stages of navigating this project conceptually and affectively.

I would also like to thank my parents for talking to me about their own experiences of socialism when I asked. I know some of it was not easy. I hope I have listened as well as I intended. Thank you to my friends, for being my second family and my unshakeable support system while writing this thesis.

This project is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Sergei Manolov, and to all those who could not stay attached to life within the transition. You are with us always.

Introduction

As a child in the early 2000's post-socialist Bulgaria, I remember looking at the prices of the books at my parents', grandparents', and my friends' homes, ranging from 1 to 10,000 Bulgarian leva (BGN). As the "expensive" books were published in the 1990's, I reasoned that everyone must have gotten rich in the 1990's and they spent their fortune on books. It took the adults significant effort to explain it was the complete opposite, and an even greater effort for me to try and understand what inflation was. The prices of the books printed in the 1990's reflected the macro-economic crisis Bulgaria underwent during this timeframe - the fall of socialism led to the devaluation of the currency, leading to inflation rates reaching 1,000% in 1997 (World Bank, "Inflation consumer prices (annual %)"; IMF, "Bulgaria Country Data"). In the aftermath of socialism's collapse, Bulgaria retained its currency but underwent a severe economic crisis, as did all post-socialist countries. The crumbling national currency with which former socialist countries entered a system where capital is central has something to say about the trajectories they followed, as well as the post-socialist lives people built and continue to build within them. As socialism and capitalism are not just political and economic systems, but frameworks for cultural, social, ideological, and intimate life, post-socialist subjects entered capitalism not only with devalued financial capital, but also with their cultural capital destabilized by the new neo-liberal reality of crisis, deficit, and renewed inequality. Transitioning to a market-based economy with scraps of the socialist past embedded in the institutional and affective lives within former socialist nations, postponed the planned transformation into their Western neo-liberal counterparts indefinitely. Bulgaria has been planning to adopt the euro since its accession to the European Union in 2007, working on reforming, restructuring, and aligning its economic policies to meet the Eurozone criteria. Up to the present (2023), the timeline for accepting the euro remains unfixed and

with it, the completion of Bulgaria's post-socialist return to Europe remains postponed. Post-socialist Bulgaria is still transitioning, and in the meantime, people are building lives between the promise of a Western future and the scraps of the socialist past.

The collapse of socialism at the turn of the century in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) produced a need for new institutional and financial models, as well as for new self-understandings of the people that inhabited the former socialist world. In this research project, I look at the post-socialist transition as an intimately experienced time of crisis that produced a need for individuals to re-articulate their selves and their place in history in a transforming world. I propose that the proliferation of life narratives in post-socialist countries since 1989 evidences this effort for articulating an emerging post-socialist subjectivity. I therefore approach post-socialist life writing as an ongoing social and cultural practice that is an integral part of the transformation of traditional self-understandings in former socialist societies. In line with Smith and Watson's definition of life writing as an "intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (Smith and Watson, 16), I define post-socialist life writing as cultural and aesthetic practice that draws on lived experience to create a shared meaning of what it means to be post-socialist. Thus, my project approaches post-socialist life stories as dynamic spaces where individuals work out what it means to be post-socialist after 1989.

Historical and affective mapping of the transition

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 reconfigured the geopolitical relations, and the ideological and cultural landscape that had defined Europe for decades. The domino-like

series of 1989 revolutions in countries from the Second World system[1] set in motion a wave of postcommunist transformations that "naturalized the sense of the end of a world previously defined by division, and now imagined as progressing, from West to East, towards self-transparency" (Ţichindeleanu, 26). As political sociologist Raj Kollmorgen argues in his comparative analysis of post-socialist socio-political transformations, the fall of the Berlin Wall was the culmination of the gradual decline of Soviet state power, which began in the mid 1970s and accelerated from 1979 onwards, due to the exhaustion of political and administrative capacity of state-socialist economies and the absorption of economic resources into Soviet military attempts at expansion (Kollmorgen, 349-350). By then, the socialist project of a classless society had proven unachievable as the social inequality between the ruling elite and the mass of people had exacerbated, and the growing disappointment with the political system was palpable in the social realities of the states (Kollmorgen, 350). Kollmorgen notes that political scientists and sociologists have analysed the wave of post-communist transformations since 1989 through two distinctive and interlinked features – in the first place, the narrative of the transition as a "return to Europe", encompassing the expectation for the Second World to reunite with the West after forty-years of a "communist experiment" (349). Second, and stemming from this narrative, was the implementation of holistic projects of political and economic re-orientation towards Western democratic welfare capitalist models (349). The attempts to integrate post-socialist countries into the Western model of neo-liberal capitalism involved economic transformation packages with measures for economic stabilization, privatization and corporate restructuring that were implemented through either a strategic approach of "shock therapy" – a radical break with the old socio-economic model that would allow a "clean slate" for the new economic order and its

[1] The term Second World was used during the Cold War to refer to the countries from the Eastern Bloc (*OED*, 2023; *Merriam Webster*, 2023). It is still used in socio-economic analyses to refer to former socialist states and their post-1989 economic and political development (e.g., Kollmorgen, 348).

mechanisms[2] or the slower "gradualist" method of reform (Kollmorgen, 356). In economic and political terms, the post-socialist transition captures this macro-economic and political restructuring of former socialist societies and their integration into the capitalist economy - a transition from a centralized to a decentralized political system, and from a planned economy to a market economy (Djukić and Antonić, 50). Despite the measures taken in transitional societies, all former socialist countries, without exception, experienced a dramatic economic crisis and political instability in the years following the dissolution of their socialist systems of government (Kollmorgen, 356). The fast phases of privatization, the dissolution of traditional trade relations within the Eastern Bloc (e.g., Comecon) and the market liberalization effected slumps in production, dramatically peaking inflation, and rising unemployment rates across the post-socialist countries (356). As Kollmorgen argues, the collapse of socialism produced a "*protracted and dramatic economic crisis*" as well as a *"societal transformation crisis*" (356, emphasis in original). The economic instability experienced in the first years of democracy led to the shattering of people's expectations for the transition to improve their quality of life and a difficulty of adapting to the neo-liberal way of life, resulting in a social, and cultural crisis (Kollmorgen, 358; Svašek, 12). This two-fold expression of the post-socialist crisis encompasses the interlinking of the macro-scale reality of the transition and its affective imprint on the people that lived through it.

While in the early transitionary years the social sciences' attention was preoccupied with the political, economic, and social dimensions of the process (e.g., Wight and Fox, 1998; Creed, 1998; Verdery, 1996), more recently scholars researching post-communism have turned their attention to the transition's affective dimensions and emotional dynamics as

---

[2] Bulgaria and Russia implemented the "shock therapy" model (Kollmorgen, 357). Ukraine implemented a more gradual reform - "a special Ukrainian model introduced through evolutionary change" (Åslund, 46).

central to understanding the contemporary CEE socio-cultural and political landscapes. Looking at the emotional impact of the economic restructuring and political re-organization in Eastern Europe, anthropologist Maruška Svašek demonstrates how the political transformations led to feelings ranging "from hope and euphoria to disappointment, envy, disillusionment, sorrow, loneliness and hatred" (Svašek, 2). Svašek argues that the misalignment between people's euphoric expectations for their lives to "drastically improve by the introduction of democracy and the market economy" (9) and the reality of widespread unemployment, new class differences, poverty, and corruption they experienced instead, led to a "morning after" effect, contained in feelings of disappointment and disillusionment (10), as well as nostalgia for the socialist past produced by the harsh realities of the post-socialist world (12). Svašek's work, among others (Todorova and Gille, 2010; Koleva, 2022; Kojanic, 2015) has advanced our understanding of the corelation between the affective communities within the post-socialist present and the economic and political climate that heralds them, rethinking emotion as a central analytical unit for enquiries into post-socialism. They have provided fundamental insights into the affective narratives about socialism in relation to the local, national, and transnational transformational processes in CEE. However, they have largely remained invested in understanding the results of the post-socialist transition, rather than examining post-socialism itself as continuously unfolding process of becoming. In this project, I propose that to understand the impact of socialism's collapse on people's self-understandings, it is necessary to rethink post-socialism as an ongoing reality, an affective crisis-state that is dynamic, non-linear, and uncertain, where people negotiate their ongoing attachment to the socialist past within the post-1989 neo-liberal present. In this way, we can rethink the subjectivities emerging in post-socialist spaces not as static outcomes, but as continuously unfolding in relation to the structural shifts within post-socialist societies, providing a more nuanced approach to the dynamic interplay of cultural, social, and historical

formations across past and present that continuously re-shape post-socialist self-understandings.

Rethinking post-socialism as an "unfinished business"

Within post-communist scholarship, crisis, transition, and post-socialism are entangled concepts, with shifting parameters in different fields of academic enquiry. Generally, post-socialism is frequently aligned with the term "transition" (Jelača and Lugarić, 8), which carries the connotation of the social, financial, and political crisis associated with the collapse of the socialist states. The meaning of transformation, in-betweenness and uncertainty is embedded in all three, denoting a liminal stage in an otherwise linear temporal progression from past to future. In the context of my project, I approach "crisis" and "transition" as fundamental characteristics of post-socialism, rethinking their temporality as non-linear and ongoing. On a conceptual level, crisis is defined as a transition from one stage to the other, associated with a state of liminality or "in-betweenness" that denotes a disruption and temporal break in the perceived idea of normality (Dekker et al., 15; Boletsi et al., 3; Vigh, 7-8). Recent interdisciplinary work on crisis, such as Maria Boletsi, Natashe Lemos Dekker, Kasia Mika and Ksenia Robbe's edited volume (*Un)timely Crises: Chronotopes and Critique* (2021) has advocated for rethinking crises as contexts and frameworks, as ongoing experiences, rather than as "temporary deviations from a normalized state" (Boletsi, et al., 6). Boletsi et al. follow Henrik Vigh's rethinking of crisis "as a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration" (Vigh, 8) which entails "departing from our regular understanding of crisis and trauma as momentary and particularised phenomena and moving toward an understanding of critical states as pervasive contexts rather than singular events" (8). This view of crisis as a pervasive context allows scholarly attention to the process of subject-formation in crisis-scapes, by looking at subjects' conditioning by biopolitical configurations

therein, and at the creative and cultural practices that distort and challenge these configurations (Boletsi et al., 6). Boletsi et al.'s work rethinks the liminality of crises, redirecting our attention to the crisis-scape itself as a pervasive context of subject-construction, which is central to my project's enquiry into the subjectivities produced in post-socialism. Post-communist scholar Ksenia Robbe's contribution to *(Un)timely Crisis* uncovers how framing the collapse of socialism as a crisis has historically invisibilized the transition itself as an unfolding spatio-temporal context. Robbe argues that approaching the collapse of socialism through the popular "end of history"[3] rhetoric obscures the ways in which "time was experienced and space divided anew (with inequalities often enhanced) in the transforming locations" (Robbe, 71). She demonstrates how the absence of the post-1989 years from cultural memory is reproducing a dystopian vision of Eastern Europe as "the ground zero of authoritarian encroachment and growing ascendance of reactionary values" (Kurtović and Sargsyan qtd in Robbe, 68). Robbe argues that in order to face the "crisis" of the post-communist transition productively, we should approach it "sideways" through what is "adjacent" to it (Robbe, 69) such as remembering the transition from the "perspectives of ordinary life and marginal (e.g., children's) subjectivities" (72). My project builds on Robbe's argument by attending to the post-socialist transition through the narrated life experiences of post-socialists that lived through the collapse of socialism, enquiring into the relational life unfolding within the crisis-scape of the transition. Additionally, my project approaches the post-socialist transition as unfinished, deconstructing the spatio-temporality of post-socialism as ongoing rather than constrained to the 1990s, and as a non-linear

[3] Referring to Francis Fukuyama's argument that the Cold War's end marks the definite triumph of market capitalism and liberal democracy as a form of economic and political organization (Fukoyama, 1989).

temporality, enmeshing past, present and future, instead of following a linear path to Western neo-liberalism.

In economic and political terms, the integration of post-socialist countries into the world economy and their prospective membership in NATO, IMF, and the European Union, are perceived as thresholds for completing the economic and political transition from socialism to capitalism in the first half of the 2000's (Vliegenthart, 248; Smith, 761). While the foreign investments in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990's benefited the region, its dependency on Western investments posed significant problems during the 2008 economic crisis (Vliegenthart, 243), challenging the view of post-socialist world's reorientation towards the West as resolving its state of crisis. Vigh argues that historically, we contextualize crisis by focusing on the "post", emphasising the "after" of a traumatic event. This frames crisis as a sudden "tear within the fabric of everyday normality" which overlooks the fact that crises often result from slow processes of deterioration, and do not necessarily end with a return to "normalcy" (Vigh, 8-9). Approaching post-socialism through the logic of a linear progression towards the "normalcy" of Western capitalism, raises two fundamental problems important to address in my enquiry into post-socialist contexts. First, it enhances "the so-called TINA doctrine ('There is no alternative')—a slogan that marks neoliberal politics since its global hegemony in the early 1990s and the collapse of Eastern-bloc communism" (Boletsi et al., 14). As critical scholarship on post-communism has demonstrated, the linear view of the transition perpetuates the narrative of Eastern Europe's twentieth-century history as a temporary deviation from the normative path of neo-liberal capitalism to which the post-communist transitionary period would naturally lead: "Socialism was recognized as Europe's 'backward' past, which should be replaced with the more prosperous future, coming with the face of liberal democracy and capitalism" (Blagojević and Timotijević, 73). It therefore

enhances a narrative of Eastern European countries as perpetually lagging behind on their "return" to Europe - as cultural theorist Ovidiu Tichindeleanu argues

> due to the 'deviation of communism' from the progressive order of Western modernity, the local Eastern time is ontologically in delay from the Western hour and there is no alternative but to try and catch up with the standards of development, accepting the necessary sacrifices of the population. (Tichindeleanu, 26)

Post-communist scholars have applied postcolonial theory to examine the array of problematic implications of this narrative of "ontological delay" to capitalist modernity, such as the invention of post-socialist Europe from the Western gaze through stereotypical, homogenizing, marginalizing and exoticizing narratives of the eastern European "other" (Todorova, 2015; Tlostanova, 2012; 2015; Veličković, 2019; Kovačević, 2008; Wierzejska, 2015; Kołodziejczyk and Şandru, 2012). The second reason my research departs from the linear view of the transition, is that the progressive rhetoric of "catching up" posits a complete break with the socialist past as a prerequisite for the desired transformation. It suggests the implementation of a shock therapy-type radical break on a political and economic level, as well as on a cultural, societal, and intimate level. Socialism, however, is a lived experience rather than exclusively political and economic system (Jelača and Lugarić, 5; Dawisha, 467). As such, it has an affective aftermath that is pertinent to the cultural and societal imaginary in post-communist spaces as interdisciplinary post-communist scholarship has demonstrated (Koleva, 2022; Todorova and Gille, 2010; Buyandelgeriyn, 2008). Moreover, the history of socialism shapes the material space which post-socialist subjects inhabit - it is part of their aesthetic and cultural imaginaries (Čamprag and Suri, 2019), and as such is inseparable from their present sense of self. To avoid replicating the problematic connotations of the post-communist transition as resolving the crisis-state by transforming the

socialist subject into a Western one, my project rethinks post-socialism as a pervasive, non-linear context within which subjects negotiate an ongoing attachment to the socialist past that is central to their sense of self. Recent theoretical developments in scholarship on post-communism provide me with the frame to do so.

Post-socialist scholarship has challenged the transition's linear temporality through different, interlinked perspectives. For instance, Olga Shevchenko's *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow* (2009) demonstrates how crisis shapes everyday life in Moscow in the 1990's via ethnographic research. Arguing that "a crisis may be perceived not as an isolated occurrence, but as a routine and unchanging condition" (2), Shevchenko looks at crisis as a feature of everyday post-socialist life. She evokes the concepts of "chronic crisis" or "permanent liminality", in tracing how crises shape everyday realities and force people to move within fragmented worlds rather than waiting for their normalization (Dekker et al, 15; Vigh, 8). Shevchenko's work reveals that the post-socialist transition is experienced as a multi-layered, culturally dispersed sense of crisis which becomes a framework for Moscowits' self-narrations in the late 1990s. Rather than being an extraordinary event, the sense of ongoing crisis defines the ordinary post-socialist reality, becoming indistinguishable from people's habitus and central to their sense of agency (Shevchenko, 3). Her thinking on the post-socialist transition as "chronic crisis" or "permanent liminality", embedded in people's self-understandings, relates to recent scholarship's redefinition of post-socialism as an ongoing transition in a way foundational for my project. The recent volume *The Future of (Post)socialism: Eastern European Perspectives* (2018), redefines post-socialism as a permanently "unfinished business", challenging the narrative of linear capitalist progression associated with the transition. The contributions to the volume ground their thinking on Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn's rejection of the post-socialist transition as a "bridge between socialism and capitalism" (Buyandelgeriyn, 235), on the premise that "the enduring nature of

the [postsocialist] experiences shows that there is no tangible line between the so-called transition and the so-called expected destination" (237). Buyandelgeriyn argues that the unpredictable ways in which enduring socialist cultural and moral legacies operate within a context of neo-liberal market policies makes it pertinent to re-frame the post-socialist transition as an ongoing state of dynamic being, nonlinearity and uncertainty that is "part of a given culture and society with its own dynamics, as opposed to something that is in transition to a version of the contemporary Euro-American world" (237). Following this argument, in their contribution to the volume, Jelisaveta Blagojević and Jovana Timotijević argue that "[t]he postsocialist transition brings this kind of inherent state of being lost by leaving scraps of socialism […] while planting the seed of somehow already-broken neo-liberal democracy—being always between *not-being-anymore* and *not-being-yet*" (Blagojević and Timotijević, emphasis in original, 78). In line with this redefinition of post-socialism as an inherently dynamic, liminal spatio-temporality, the volume's editors argue that the post-socialist transition is ongoing:

> If social structures are dialectical processes rather than static states of being, then we can argue that there is indeed no end to any transition […] Rather than an abrupt temporal switch, the transition from socialism to post-socialism has been a long process that, in many ways, is still taking place. (Jelača and Lugarić, 8)

They conceptualize post-socialism as an "unfinished business", producing a sense of "perpetual liminality (as a deeply felt, lived paradox)" (5) defined by the ongoing presence of the socialist past within CEE countries. Rejecting post-socialism's linear logic of transformation makes it pertinent to look at its inherent in-betweenness as a "destination in its own right" (Jelača and Lugarić, 7). This conceptualization of post-socialism as non-linear, dynamic, and uncertain liminal context that "break[s] down the temporal boundaries between

past, present, and future, as well as between Self and Other" (Jelača and Lugarić, 12) informs my project's enquiry into the post-socialist subjectivities that emerge therein. Jelača and Lugarić's argument that the "*post* in post-socialism by no means implies the past, or something that is definitively terminated or foreclosed" (5) is central to my project's thinking of the post-socialist self. In line with their definition of post-socialism, I think of the "post" in the "post-socialist subject" as denoting an ongoing attachment to the past, which is central to one's sense of self, rather than signifying a definite rupture with it.

The conception of post-socialism as a non-linear, dynamic, and uncertain state of being – a perpetual transition or a chronic crisis – raises questions around studying it without reproducing the dominant perspectives critiqued so far. Complementing Robbe's argument for looking at the transition "sideways" through what is "adjacent" to it, Jelača and Lugarić ask how to approach post-socialism by preserving its dynamics and unfinishedness, "without succumbing to the desire to freeze it in time and space to get a clearer look" (12). In the context of my project, I propose that one way to look at post-socialism through what is adjacent to it, is by attending to the intimate relations that unfold therein. To avoid freezing it into a static state, I attend to post-1989 self-narrations, arguing that they express people's dynamic ongoing negotiation of the socialist past. I employ a comparative, transnational approach in studying life narratives from three post-socialist contexts – Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine, produced between 1989 and present day, through the "sideways" lens of intimacy, to avoid homogenizing the post-socialist experiences across different CEE countries.[4] As life writing "maintains its distinctive relationship to the referential world in its temporality" (Smith and Watson, 18), my hypothesis is that the proliferation of life narratives across

[4] To focus my project within the scope of this thesis, I have selected life narratives that address the transition through key historical moments since 1989 – e.g., the immediate aftermath of the fall of socialism, the entry of CEE countries in the European Union, the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Eastern European countries since 1989 and until the present day evidences the "unfinishedness" of post-socialism, manifesting as an ongoing negotiation of the socialist past that is central to the formation of post-socialist subjectivity. I therefore argue that by attending to selected self-narrations produced by post-socialist life writers, we can study how the ongoing negotiation of the socialist past within the emergent cultural, social, and political formations of the present shapes their post-socialist subjectivities.

If post-socialism is non-linear, dynamic, and ongoing negotiation of the past within the present, what sense of self does it produce? Can we speak of a shared subjectivity across different post-socialist countries? I attend to post-1989 life narratives to understand how the post-socialist "state of always between *not-being-anymore* and *not-being-yet*" manifests and materializes in one's self-narration. In other words, throughout this project I ask **how it feels to be post-socialist, and does it differ across different post-socialist realities.** I look at life narratives from post-socialist Russia, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, to probe ways of thinking post-socialist subjectivity across national spaces, while recognizing the national and historical specificity of post-socialist countries. By beginning to answer the above questions, my project aims to contribute to current scholarship about post-communism in two ways. First, by revitalizing our thinking of post-communism as an inherently transitional, pervasive context that produces subjects which continue to sustain attachments to the socialist past as foundational for their sense of self; and second, by expanding our understanding of the role of life writing as a cultural, social, and aesthetic practice in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe.

Life Writing in Post-communist Scholarship

The abundance of memoirs, autobiographies and testimonies by individuals who lived through the collapse of socialism, published after 1989 across the former Eastern Bloc, has occupied a central place in interdisciplinary post-communist scholarship. The memory of the socialist past evoked in life stories has been central to the work of anthropologists, cultural historians, and memory scholars who have used post-communist life writing and oral histories to enquire into the status of the socialist past in the cultural, social, and political imaginaries of the former Soviet and socialist societies. The work of cultural historian and memory scholar Daniela Koleva (2012; 2017; 2022) and anthropologist Gerald Creed (1998) in Bulgaria, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2005) and cultural historian Catherine Merridale (2010) in Russia, social anthropologist Vieda Skultans (1997*)* in Latvia, cultural memory scholar Tanja Petrović (2010) in Serbia, have foregrounded the assemblages of pre- and post-socialist linguistic, institutional and cultural discourses that inform the portrayals of socialist life in narratives from different national contexts. As "the personal story of a remembered past is always in dialogue with emergent cultural formations" (Smith and Watson, 103) these scholarly works have cautioned us to think of post-communist life narrations as historically and culturally situated practices, whose portrayal of socialism reveals as much about the post-socialist present, as it does about life behind the Iron Curtain. A variety of post-socialist scholars have enquired into the public discourses which post-1989 life narratives respond to or reflect, such as Milla Maneva's analysis of nostalgia for socialism as critique towards the neo-liberal present and a resource for imagining alternative futures (Maneva, 2014) and Daniela Koleva's analysis of post-socialist trauma narratives as geared towards European recognition (Koleva, 2022). My project builds on the interdisciplinary body of work in post-communist studies by enquiring into life narrations as social and cultural practices that

produce knowledge about the emerging subjectivities within post-socialism's dynamic, uncertain, and non-linear spatio-temporality.

Furthermore, memory scholars and ethnographers such as Ene Kõresaar and Kirsti Jõesalu (2016) in the Estonian context and Daniela Koleva in the Bulgarian context (2022) have studied the role of post-communist life writing and oral narrations as a form of memory-making, importantly positioning life narrations as practices that shape the mnemonic imaginary of post-socialist societies. Approaching post-socialist life stories as shaping the larger contexts of memory and culture in former communist societies is central to my project as memory-making is a process integral to subject-formation. These works bring into focus the idea that life writing can be read for "what it does" rather than "what it is", namely reinforcing or challenging particular values and normative frameworks in ways that may re-assert or re-shape social reality (Smith and Watson, 19). Post-communist scholars from Literary studies and Life writing have also argued for post-socialist life stories' capacity to nuance our interpretation of the socialist past by reconstructing it outside of the totalizing narratives of totalitarian repressions, or romanticized nostalgia. Contributions to post-communist interdisciplinary volumes such as Iveta Silova, Nelli Piattoeva, Zsuzsa Millei's "Childhood and Schooling in (Post)Socialist Societies" (2018) have studied post-socialist life stories through gendered and generational perspectives, asserting that narratives of childhood during socialism can sustain a more democratic relationship to the past. In "Communism: Intimate Publics", life writing scholar Ioana Luca analyses how depictions of intimate publics in post-communist life narratives add to our historical knowledge of the communist period. As the personal and private during communism existed in complex interrelation to the state (Luca, 73), she argues that experiencing and maintaining intimacy within a circle of family and friends was a "means of resisting, of demonstrating awareness of the dangers of the collective, the absurd, the oppressive, the all controlling" (77). Luca's analysis of intimate

relationships under communism as a source of agency provides an important avenue for thinking through the impact of communism's collapse on the practices of relationality after 1989. While these works have examined in detail the portrayals of the socialist past in life stories from the former Eastern Bloc, the temporality of the transition in relation to life writing has received little attention from post-communist scholarship so far.[5] My project aims to intervene in this gap, bringing together life writing scholarship and recent scholarship on post-communism, approaching life narratives as textual manifestations of the dynamic, non-linear and heterogenous context of post-socialism. As a symbolic interaction with the world (Smith and Watson, 63), post-socialist life stories offer an insight into subjects' relationship to the contexts in which they are positioned. By shifting the perspective towards life writing as a space where people negotiate their attachments to the past and articulate what it means to be post-socialist, my project diverges from scholarship preoccupied with post-communist life writing solely through a lens of memory. Instead, I examine self-narrations to enquire into the shifts and continuities in the relational life that underpins individuals' self-understandings after the collapse of socialism. My project focuses on intimacy as a core structure of relation that evidences the emergence of a sense of self within the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which post-socialist subjects are positioned.

Research Design and Methods

My project combines life writing, post-communist studies and affect theory in a theoretical framework to explore the narration of post-socialist subjectivity in post-1989 life stories. As discussed above, Life writing provides the conceptual ground for reading autobiographical

[5] The forthcoming edited volumes *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989,* edited by Veronika Pehe, Joanna Wawrzyniak, Routledge, 2024; and *Remembering Transitions: Local Revisions and Global Crossings in Culture and Media,* edited by Ksenia Robbe, De Gruyter, 2023 promise to bring further insights into the transition from the realm of post-communist memory studies.

acts as historically situated and culturally embedded acts (Smith and Watson, 18). I also derive from Life writing the theory of subjectivity through which I analyse the construction of autobiographical subjectivity in my case studies. My project's understanding of subjectivity is grounded on Judith Butler's theory of recognition set out in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), foundational for Life writing. For Butler, humans are inherently relational, social beings, and as such, interpersonal recognition is central to constructing and maintaining their sense of self. As we are constituted in relation to one another, our practices of self-narration are necessarily addressed to an 'other' from whom we require to be seen and recognized. In their practices of giving and receiving recognition humans draw on shared cultural understandings that determine what constitutes recognizability in a specific historical context (Butler, 30) and through which they construct shared meaning in their intersubjective encounters. Butler's theory positions life writing itself as an intersubjective exchange, a staged encounter between narrator and reader, where autobiographical subjects draw on shared cultural, social, and institutional norms to narrate their sense of self, and to be recognized by the other. Butler's theory of subjectivity frames the "self" as a social and relational construct, demonstrating how subjects are both constrained and enabled by social, cultural, and institutional frameworks in their self-understandings and practices of self-narration. Following Butler, to understand what subjectivities emerge within post-socialist contexts, my project attends to the norms narrators draw on or challenge in their relational lives to establish a shared sense of what it means to be post-socialist. I use the term "self-narration" throughout my analysis to refer to the formation of post-socialist subjectivity within the intersubjective exchanges portrayed and staged in my case studies. I utilize this term to capture the dynamic constitution of the self within relational encounters, as opposed to its conception as a fixed, pre-existing entity, as well as to emphasise its formation and fictionalization within the space of the life narratives I analyse.

To scale down relational life in the space of my project, I focus specifically on the expressions of intimacy within post-socialist self-narrations. As intimacy is a structure of relation, and a central practice of giving and receiving recognition in one's private life, I use it as a lens to study what characterises relational life in post-socialist self-narrations, and how it is portrayed as transforming, adjusting, or resisting change after 1989. I follow contemporary affect theorists in thinking through feeling and emotion as an entry point to studying how large-scale structural forces register and shape everyday life, how the emotional, the private, and the intimate, is co-produced with the public, social, and institutional contexts it circulates in (Berlant, 1998; Shah, 2011; Wilson, 2012, 2016; Ngai, 2005). As a methodological lens, intimacy allows me to "look at relational life, including the feelings and acts that comprise it, in relation to colonial empire or capitalist modernity, without a fixed analytical definition" (Wilson, *The Infrastructure*, 251). While my general conceptualization of intimacy as a core structure of relation that evidences the interpolation of public and private in the production of the self is indebted to American affect scholarship, I wish to remain sensitive to the specificities of the Eastern European cultural, political, and social context I am examining. Instead of transposing an existing theory or definition of intimacy, my enquiry into the forms of intimacy foundational for post-socialist relational life is grounded on my primary material. Reading my case studies comparatively, I identified thematic clusters of intimacy, around which my chapters are organized. The expressions of intimacy central to each chapter (polyphonic intimacy, familial intimacy, and intimacy with the West) reflect the specificities of the social, cultural, political, and institutional post-socialist contexts in my primary material. I argue that attending to the portrayals of these intimacies in relation to the non-linear, and heterogeneous post-socialist realities, reveals how the negotiation of the socialist past materializes and shapes the relational practices of post-socialist subjects.

Method

As Smith and Watson argue, autobiographical texts require "reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text" (13). In this project I utilize the Literary studies' method of close reading which grants me the interpretative tools to read for the textual and aesthetic strategies in life narratives, specifically for the cultural and historical context of post-socialism in portrayals of intimate relationality in post-1989 self-narrations. I close read my case studies comparatively to attend to post-socialist subjectivity across national spaces, while preserving their specificities.

Geographical Scope of Research – Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine

I close read five post-socialist life narratives from Russia, Ukraine, and Bulgaria, selected from a larger corpus of life narratives. My rationale for studying case studies from different post-socialist contexts is grounded on my project's comparative enquiry into post-socialist subjectivity. In selecting case studies from three separate post-socialist contexts – Russia, Ukraine, and Bulgaria – I have considered the temporal and geo-political positioning of these countries in relation to Soviet power, as well as their respective trajectories of post-socialist development in relation to each other and the "collective" West. While Ukraine was one of the Soviet Union's founding constituent republics in 1922, despite the USSR's status as a federal union, its politics and economy remained heavily centralized in Moscow, with centre-periphery struggles between Russia and the other republics permeating the USSR's socio-political climate (King, 149). Bulgaria adopted state socialism following the 1945 occupation by Soviet forces, becoming one of the Soviet "satellite" states which remained closely economically, politically, and ideologically aligned with Soviet Russia. Despite the independent status of the satellite republics, the Soviet policy with regards to its Eastern

European counterparts was grounded in a requirement to abide by the norms of Marxism-Leninism as interpreted in Moscow, framing Eastern Europe as an extension of the Soviet Union's own frontiers (Kramer, 182) and positioning Russia as the epicentre of imperial-style Soviet power. The three countries' relationships to Soviet power provide a fruitful ground for comparative analysis. While considering the historical specificities and centre-periphery power dynamics of twentieth century socialism across the three countries, my project is mainly preoccupied with the post-socialist present. Political geographers Alison Stenning and Kathrin Hörschelmann's argument that a conceptualization of post-socialism needs to uphold difference rather than collapsing into homogeneity when analysing the former Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union forms the backbone of my comparative approach. Stenning and Hörschelmann argue that

> whilst a conception of post-socialism rests on at least some shared history, it need not imply uniformity, but rather commonalities which enable us to interrogate how and why markets, elections, consumption, families and so on work differently in different places, despite their shared past. (326)

Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia are marked by similarities and differences in their socialist pasts and in their trajectories of post-socialist economic, political, and cultural development in the post-Cold War years. My project thus seeks not to construct the post-socialist world as homogenous and the post-socialist condition as singular, but instead to enquire into the multiplicity of post-socialist lives in their making after 1989 across different locales. Notwithstanding this multiplicity, in the context of my research I use "post-socialist" as an umbrella term that covers trajectories of development after the collapse of state socialism across both the Soviet Union and its satellite states. However, when delving into my case studies' particularities, I may also utilize the term "post-Soviet" when discussing Ukraine and

Russia and "post-communist" when discussing Bulgaria, as per their national academic and popular vocabularies (Koleva, *Memory*, 22).

My choice of geographical scope for the study acknowledges that post-socialism's heterogeneity is shaped by the former socialist countries' transition to liberal market economy, as well as their relationship with the West (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 323). Specifically, and importantly, my choice is informed by the present context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Bulgaria's social and political polarization of opinion and indecisive action in relation to the war, extending the relevance of centre-periphery power dynamics in between post-socialist countries into the present. Extending my rationale from geopolitics to the field of cultural memory studies, the three countries chosen for the study share comparably ambiguous narratives around their socialist pasts (Troebst cited in Koleva, *Memory*, 45). They are characterized by a lack of unified, socially accepted memory or public "consensus" about what socialism was and how it fits into their imaginaries of national identities. I thus look at these countries as inter-locked into post-socialist trajectories of development where they still grapple with the influential political and affective legacies of Soviet-era power relations, negotiating the narratives of their pasts with their visions for the future. I ask what kinds of intimate relations are built between past, present, and future across these differing post-socialist contexts, and what kind of subjectivities are formed therein.

Case Studies

My criteria for selecting the case studies from Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine, is grounded in the way they address the transitionary state of the narrators' post-socialist realities. My selection of post-socialist self-narrations provides an excellent time coverage for analysing the cultural, political, and social frameworks post-1989, as they are produced in and/or portray key moments in the three national contexts' trajectories of post-socialist development.

The two Ukrainian case studies - Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* (1996) and Oleg Sentsov's *Life Went On Anyway* (2019) - present a feminist auto-fictionalized memoir that covers the early transitionary period of Ukraine in the 1990s and a memoir of childhood in Soviet Crimea by a Crimean activist, written in the context of Crimea's Euromaidan demonstrations. Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* (2008) addresses the narrator's experiences of growing up in late-socialist Bulgaria, migrating during the turbulent changes of the 1990s, and returning on the eve of Bulgaria's entry in the European Union to attempt and reconnect with her native space. The memoir *Stories of a Life* (2021) by Nataliya Meshchaninova portrays the experience of growing up in the Russian town of Krasnodar in the early 1990s. Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013) is a polyphonic configuration of life narratives, composed by interviews carried out across the former Soviet Union in the twenty years after its collapse. It narrates post-Soviet experiences of life before, throughout, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is composed of three thematic chapters and a conclusion. Considering the scope my project, I hold one case study in focus – the Bulgarian – and compare it with case studies from the Russian and Ukrainian post-Soviet contexts in each chapter. To deepen the comparative approach of my work, I have divided the chapters thematically instead of geographically. Each chapter focuses on a specific expression of intimate relational life, through which I demonstrate how post-socialist subjects navigate the non-linear, dynamic context of the transition, negotiating the continuities and ruptures between past, present, and future, to narrate their sense of self.

As a Bulgarian scholar working from a Western academic context, this research is motivated by my personal investment in better understanding the social, cultural, and political

formations that shape life within my native context in relation to other post-socialist locations, including their relationships with the West. The analysis of primary material I provide, specifically the post-socialist emigree perspective in Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*, is influenced by my personal knowledge of life within post-socialist Bulgaria, and of its perception in the West. The addressal of a Western audience in Kassabova's narrative of post-socialist homecoming, left me with a sense of ambivalence, which I attempted to delve into through my research's overarching query into post-socialist feeling. This research project therefore originates not just from an academic standpoint, but also from a deeply personal connection to the subject matter, which shaped my interest in the threads that connect post-socialist life narratives with wider societal and transcultural dynamics.

In **Chapter 1 "Polyphonic Intimacy in Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* and Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*"** I demonstrate how post-socialist self-narrations frame the collapse of socialism as a relational crisis that ruptured the forms of intimacy of socialist societies, which post-socialist narrators navigate throughout their intersubjective encounters. I argue that the narrators recuperate a sense of interpersonal intimacy by positioning themselves as listeners to heterogenous memories of socialism. As listening subjects, Kassabova's and Alexievich's narrators recuperate a sense of intersubjective relation grounded in the shared, but internally heterogenous lived experience of socialism, transforming their ambiguous attachment to the past into a resource for interpersonal intimacy and compassion. Expanding my theoretical framework to include scholarship on memory, polyphonic literature, and Russian cultural practices of intimacy, I argue that these works provide a glimpse at the formation of a new subject that does not subscribe to the paradigms of traumatic and nostalgic remembrance of socialism, but instead searches for a more nuanced and personal approach to the past which could salvage the sense

of broken interpersonal relation in the present. In **Chapter 2 "Gendered Subjectivity and Familial Intimacy"**, I zoom in on the familial intimacies in the Ukrainian, Russian and Bulgarian socialist childhoods portrayed in Sentsov's *Life Went on Anyway*, Meshchaninova's *Stories of a Life* and Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*. Introducing scholarship on the Soviet/socialist family and post-socialist gender relations, I argue that these self-narrations reveal the preservation and "repackaging" of patriarchal notions of familial intimacy in post-socialist Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia which shape the narrators' self-understandings as post-socialist subjects, revealing a continuity of gender inequality across the continuum of past and present. I analyse the relationship between the narrators' childhood figures and their adult perspectives to demonstrate how the movement of gendered, patriarchal conventions between socialism and post-socialism underpins the narrators' self-understandings as gendered subjects, structuring their negotiation of the socialist past in often subtle, and invisible ways. Having attended to the portrayals of relational practices within post-socialist societies in Chapters 1 and 2, **Chapter 3 "Embodied Intimacy: The Post-socialist Subject between East and West"** moves on to examine the intersubjective exchange between post-socialist narrators and Western addressees in Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* and Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*. I demonstrate how the post-socialist subject's sense of liminality materializes in the narrators' embodied subjectivities, exposing the West's double function as an object of desire, and a culturally hegemonic presence that influences the post-socialist subject's self-understanding by distorting the eastern European other as backwards, primitive, or exotic. To shed more light on the East/West power relations that structure the scene of recognition in *Street* and *Fieldwork,* I apply postcolonial theory in the way it has been utilized by post-socialist scholarship to enquire into the Western epistemic marginalization of Eastern Europe post-1989 and its impact on post-socialist subjects' self-understandings.

I will now move on to Chapter 1, where I begin my analysis by attending to the I-you relation portrayed in Kassabova's and Alexievich's self-narrations. I examine how the two post-socialist narrators navigate relational life within the post-socialist societal crisis-scape, demonstrating how their ambiguous attachment to the past shapes their intimate encounters as post-socialist subjects.

Chapter 1: Polyphonic Intimacy in Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* and Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*

As an ideological, political, economic, and social structure, socialism engendered forms of relational and intimate life grounded on shared attachments and visions of futurity. The reality of the transition interrupted these, proving incompatible with the visions of linear progress heralded by both the socialist and capitalist versions of modernity (Buyandelgeriyn, 237). The economic crisis, political instability, rushed privatization, widespread unemployment, poverty, and new class differences that followed, resulted in feelings of isolation, disillusionment, and abandonment in both those bound to the socialist promise of a "Bright Future", and those invested in the neo-liberal dream for ideal market economy (Svašek, 12). As noted in the Introduction, this project approaches post-socialism as a liminal, non-linear spatio-temporality, to attend to the emerging subjectivities within the ongoing affective and epistemic crisis-scape of the transition's failed promises. If post-socialism is experienced as a "chronic" crisis, indistinguishable from people's everyday lives and shaping their self-understandings (Shevchenko, 3) it is essential to examine how it manifests in the relational life that unfolds within it. This chapter explores how post-socialist self-narrations dramatize the post-socialist present as an ongoing crisis of intimacy, resulting from socialism's collapse, which shattered collective fantasies and visions of futurity and disrupted the established norms of intimate relations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union broke down habitual social life, and in many cases, the personal and social relationships built during socialism did not survive, leaving an "empty space in people's lives" (Theocharis, 200). Throughout this chapter, I refer to this outcome as a "relational crisis" to focus on the lived experience of the transition's ongoing impact on the forms of relational life within post-socialist societies. I start from the hypothesis that the sense of alienation and isolation in the post-socialist present is exacerbated by the totalizing narratives of the past and lack of

dialogical relations within post-socialist memory cultures. The culturally, politically, and institutionally mediated grand narratives through which socialism is interpreted in the post-socialist present (such as trauma and nostalgia), promote diametrically opposed affective readings of the past (Koleva, 2022), exerting pressure for people to fit their more ambiguous attachments to their old socialist lives into an affectively coherent narrative. In this chapter I demonstrate how the narrators in Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* and Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* navigate the post-socialist relational crisis in the former Soviet[6] and Bulgarian contexts by sustaining an ambiguous attachment to the past throughout their intersubjective exchanges. I argue that the intimate conversations the narrators engage in within their social encounters evidence the emergence of a new subjectivity characterized by exploring, rather than resolving, the ambiguity of the socialist past.

Post-communist feminist scholars Jelisaveta Blagojević and Jovana Timotijević propose a queer reading of post-socialism as neither fully oriented towards the past nor the present but instead as reworking the present by "insisting on the potentiality for other ways of living, other worlds, other types of relationalities and other public affects" (78). They argue for imagining post-socialism "as a multiplicity of uncountable and incalculable narratives, as a plurality of disharmonious voices" (79), rather than a homogenous progression from past to future. In this chapter, I analyse the intersubjective exchanges portrayed in Alexievich and Kassabova's self-narrations to demonstrate how post-socialist subjects create intimacies specific to the post-socialist present's non-linear, heterogenous context of disharmonious voices. I examine the narrators as polyphonic remembering subjects, claiming that while memory is central to the portrayed scenes of recognition, it is not restricted to a singular

[6] *Secondhand Time* spans interviews with subjects across multiple former Soviet territories. As a Ukrainian-Belarusian author who writes in Russian, Alexievich's own identity intersects three post-Soviet national contexts. In her Nobel Lecture she notes she has three homes – Ukraine, Belarus, and "Russia's great culture, without which I cannot imagine myself" (Nobel). I therefore examine her self-narration as a cross-cultural post-Soviet life narration.

voice, but instead presents an interconnected reconstruction from multiple perspectives, a "multiplicity of uncountable and incalculable narratives", challenging the need to assimilate the past into a coherent narrative. I argue that the multiplicity of remembering perspectives is a strategy for navigating the post-socialist present's relational crisis-scape. In defining the post-socialist subject as remembering, I consider memory's meaning-making potential as an imaginative reconstruction of the past (Keightley and Pickering, 2012), that plays a central role in the narrators' need for a reimagined relationality in the post-socialist present.

In *Secondhand Time*, I examine Alexievich's self-narration as a post-Soviet subject, thinking through the polyphonic remembering voices weaved into the narrative as central to the narration of her own sense of self. I argue that her positioning as listener to the memories of other post-Soviets is a central strategy for recuperating a post-socialist sense of intimacy through the Russian cultural practice of intimate conversations. In *Street Without a Name*, I analyse the Bulgarian emigree narrator's internally polyphonic consciousness, demonstrating how she moves from attempting to resolve her ambiguous attachment to the socialist past, towards using it as a condition for building interpersonal intimacy in post-socialist Bulgaria. In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrate how post-socialist narrators dramatize the transition as a crisis of intimacy that results in a sense of alienation and ambiguous attachment to the past. In the second section, I trace how this ambiguity forms a prerequisite for an intimate relation with the conversational other in the post-socialist present.

Post-socialism as a crisis of intimacy

In this section, I explore how the narrators in Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* and Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* frame the collapse of the geo-political spaces of the USSR and People's Republic of Bulgaria as bringing about the loss of intimate relations inherent in their social lives, resulting in a personal and interpersonal alienation. I demonstrate how the polyphonic narrating voices are a strategy for framing the narrators'

ambiguous relation to the past as central to their sense of self and to the forms of intimacy they can sustain in the present.

Alexievich's method of collecting and assembling life stories throughout her body of work has been described as pertaining to the tradition of the polyphonic novel (e.g., Artwińska (2021), Lenart-Cheng (2020), Tumarkin (2017), Coleman (2017)), a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin to capture the poetics of Dostoevsky's writings. The polyphonic textual space is inhabited by multiple, distinct voices, each with an autonomous internal world - "*a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*" (Bakhtin, 6). Rather than being subjected to the author's ideological system, Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky's characters as possessing a unique otherness - the character's consciousness "*is given as someone else's consciousness*, another consciousness" rather than being an "object of authorial discourse" (7, emphasis in original). Alexievich's characters, like Dostoevsky's, are heterogenous, autonomous voices, a "plurality of unmerged consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 9) which reconstruct the Soviet past to comment on their sense of self in the post-Soviet present. In *Secondhand Time*'s prologue, Alexievich addresses the interpersonal dynamics post-Soviet collective remembrance produces: "We share a communist collective memory. We're neighbours in memory" (5). Although the communist collective memory is "shared", the neighbourly relation in post-Soviet cultures is an ambiguous one, referring at once to close familiarity, contestation, and secrecy (Meloni, 2007; Boym, 1994). Being neighbours in memory therefore captures not only the heterogenous nature of "communist collective memory", composed by multiple perspectives to the recent past, but also the ambiguity of the remembering subjects' relationship to each other. Alexievich's project is to explore this ambiguity, looking for spaces of intimate knowledge of the other within it. While scholars have analysed the relationality between the voices in Alexievich's work, her own relationship to them has been primarily analysed through her authorial function of piecing the separate

narratives together. For instance, while in her analysis of generational memory in *Secondhand Time* Artwińska notes that "the author is also a member of this chorus, even though her reflections occupy only a small portion of the work" she proceeds to argue that by "presenting questions, the author seeks to be as little intrusive as possible, instead ceding the stage to her characters" (230). I draw a distinction between Alexievich's historical "I", the author Alexievich, and the narrating "I", the version of herself we encounter in the life narrative[7], to examine the role of the polyphonic voices in the constitution of her own post-Soviet subjectivity. I propose that Alexievich's selective absence and presence from the textual space does not simply cede the stage to the memories of her characters, but is a function of her subjecthood, a strategy of self-narration that recuperates a deeply intimate knowledge of the other, through occupying a position of a listener in an intimate conversation with her interlocutors.

Listening to "*someone else's consciousness*" and another's memories, is a strategy for constructing an intimate relation that is central to Alexievich's post-Soviet self-narration. The concept of relationality, the interweaving of one's story with another's, exemplifies how the boundaries of the "I" shift and modify in life narrations. Relationality "invites us to think about the different kinds of textual others— historical, contingent, or significant—through which an "I" narrates the formation or modification of self-consciousness" (Smith and Watson, 86). I suggest that the braiding of distinct voices is central to Alexievich's post-Soviet self-narration, whose "I"'s boundaries are formed through the conversational other. Her first-person narration in the prologue exemplifies this dynamic from the introductory sentence: "We're paying our respects to the Soviet era. Cutting our ties with our old life. I'm trying to honestly hear out all the participants in the socialist drama…" (Alexievich, 1). The

[7] Throughout the analysis, I refer to Alexievich's narrating "I", the version of her self-consciousness we encounter in the narration.

interpolation of first and second person pronouns in her opening sentence frames Alexievich's narrating "I" as both one of the "participants in the socialist drama" and an active listener to her co-participants. It marks listening as central to coping with the loss of "our old life", to making sense of one's attachment to the past. The continuous interpolation of plural and single pronouns in her prologue, reinstates her own positioning as a post-Soviet subject: "Some see him as a tragic figure, others call him a *sovok*. I feel like I know this person; we're very familiar, we've lived side by side for a long time. I am this person" (1). Her passage examines the boundaries of her own self-consciousness, shifting from external evaluation: "some see him"; through personal relation: "we're very familiar"; to the inclusion in the "I"'s boundaries: "I am this person". Her narration marks the intimate knowledge of the other as central to her self-understanding ("I feel like I know this person"), without collapsing the post-Soviet otherness into a homogenous whole. Instead, she looks for forms of post-Soviet intimacy that allow her to maintain difference while looking for spaces of intersubjective relation, as I will demonstrate next.

The shifts in the cultural, ideological, and political contexts of post-Soviet nations post-1990, resulted in a loss of shared investments and fantasies that sustained people's intimate relations during socialism. In Alexievich's narration, reconstructing the ordinary becomes the central framework through which she registers this loss, framing the transition as a relational crisis:

> I don't ask people about socialism, I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad sundry details of a vanished way of life. It's the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and to tell a story. (7)

Alexievich's narrator is not interested in claims about socialism as a system, but in the imaginative reconstruction of the intimate lifeworlds it sustained, and the attachments, fantasies and pleasures rendered obsolete with the advance of capitalism. Framing the post-socialist transition as a "catastrophe" that alters the "contours of the ordinary", Alexievich's enquiry into the post-1989 transformation of everyday life captures Shevchenko's argument that in the transitionary years "crisis evolves from a singular and alien happening into the very stuff of everyday life" (Shevchenko, 2) and the relational practices within it. The transition presents a radical shift in people's desires and longings: "now we have new dreams: building a house, buying a decent car, planting gooseberries […] After perestroika, no one was talking about ideas anymore – instead, it was credit, interest and promissory notes" (Alexievich, 8). Amongst this transformation of internal worlds, the new "dreams" and the new language associated with "Her Highness Consumption" (8), Alexievich is seeking out people unable to loosen their attachments to the past, whose ability to dream up a continuous future was rendered obsolete by the transition: "I sought out people who had been permanently bound to the Soviet idea", who "couldn't walk away from History, leaving it all behind and learning to live without it" (4). She narrates herself as sharing this experience: "I remember it well: After we finished school, we'd volunteer to go on class trips to the Virgin Islands, and we'd look down on students who didn't want to come" (4-5). Reconstructing a narrated "I" transfixed by the ideological promise of socialism, and later by the promise of perestroika: "What an incredibly happy time! We believed that tomorrow, the very next day, would usher in freedom" (6), Alexievich repeatedly positions herself as one of the participants in the "socialist drama" whose sense of self was dramatically altered by the transition. Her use of conditional tense and collective "we" associated with the collective fantasies for a future: "We believed"; "We'd be just like everyone else"; "we'd finally get it right" (7) marks the reconstruction of this time as a hopeful but naïve fantasy, whose collapse

constrains the ability to dream up a future within the past. Instead of "just like everyone else", namely the Western neo-liberal subjects they imagined becoming, post-Soviet subjects are "easy to spot" (Alexievich, 1). Unable to assimilate into the new way of life, they grapple with a lost futurity within the non-linear temporality of the transition: "our future is, once again, not where it ought to be […] our time comes secondhand" (11). Alexievich's self-narration outlines the post-socialist present as a liminal, disorganized temporality, wherein the inability to imagine a collective future is linked to a sense of lost interpersonal intimacy. The sense of abandonment, alienation and dislocation is multiply reiterated by her different narrators: "The young can adapt, while the old die in silence behind closed doors" (53); "I exist, but I don't." (226); "We exist, but we don't exist..." (266); "The terrifying loneliness… the sense of abandonment… […] Everyone is terribly lonely" (271). Alexievich frames her project as searching for a language to simultaneously speak from and about this state of half-existence: "I'm searching for a language. People speak many different languages: there's one they use with children, another one for love. There's the language we use to talk to ourselves, our internal monologues" (9). As a primary medium for structuring relationality, the lack of available language to capture the post-Soviet experience speaks of an intersubjective rupture in the post-socialist present and the need to imagine a cultural tool to repair it. The examples in her passage (a language of love, self-address etc.) outline a need for affective, as well as linguistic framework to respond to this experience. In the context of her polyphonic narration, the language Alexievich establishes is one of interpersonal intimacy through which she navigates the intersubjective crisis-scape of the post-socialist present. Her self-narration as a listener of heterogenous memories of socialism becomes a strategy for reconstructing intimacy between post-Soviet subjects in the present.

Artwińska positions Alexievich's work in the Russo-Soviet tradition of "documentary literature" characterized by "factographic quality and the technique of montage, and, on the

other hand, dialogicality and emotionalism" (230). Considering the framing of *Secondhand Time* as oral history, however, we should also account for the cultural scripts and linguistic implications inherent in what Alexievich, the author, describes not as "interviews" but "conversations about life" (Alexievich cited in Tumarkin, 2). The conversations *Secondhand Time* are prolific in references to the Russian soul.[8] Anna Gladkova studies the communicative aspects of Russian intimate relationships through the cultural meanings of terms such as "duša" (soul/heart) that shape specific types of intimate conversations. I utilize Gladkova's analysis to conceptualize the conversational mode in *Secondhand Time* as a social and cultural practice of intimacy. Gladkova notes that the term "duša" in Russian folk psychology is an "invisible human organ which determines the essence of a person" (332), whose workings are hidden from outsiders (339). Although the *duša* is thought of as a deeply personal, hidden, repository of memories, feelings, desires, and emotional responses (332) in order to intimately know someone, one should "strive to know what happens in that person's duša" (Gladkova, 333). According to her, a culturally valued model of intimate conversation originating in this understanding of *duša* is "razgovory po dušam 'heart-to-heart talk / a conversation in accord with the souls'" or "an intimate talk in which you bare your soul" (337). This soul-baring conversation is an interpersonal interaction "which happens over some time and in which the interlocutors get a chance to openly share their innermost and dear thoughts and feelings" (338). Soul-baring conversations are culturally valued ways of talking, a Russian cultural and social practice which has "important implications for structuring human relationships" (339). Pesmen's ethnographic study of everyday life in 1990's Russia, cited by Gladkova, captures the vulnerability and the delicate intersubjective balance sustained in soul-baring conversations: "We need others to see our duša but cannot

[8] For example, see references to the Russian soul on pp. 4; 17; 50; 84; 97; 156; 205; 216; 264 etc.

tolerate when they try to crawl in there to look" (Pesmen cited in Gladkova, 334). Pesmen's observation parallels Maria Tumarkin's reflections on Alexievich's method:

> This singular quality has a lot to do with the time Alexievich takes with her books. Not rushing conversations. Not trying to get anywhere, to extract anything […] All the way through she is listening for moments when people in front of her are able to go into the deepest parts of their lives and selves. (Tumarkin, 3)

The act of listening, patiently and noninvasively, characterises the presence of Alexievich's narrating "I" in the intimate, soul-baring conversations with her interlocutors.

Alexievich herself notes that she seeks an intimate, soul-baring exchange: "I am piecing together the history of 'domestic', 'interior', socialism. As it existed in a person's soul" (4)[9]. She stages a scene of recognition between herself and her interlocutors in which the memory of socialism, as it lived in "one's soul", forms the basis for intimate intersubjective knowledge.[10] Rather than making unifying truth claims about the past, she is interested in its emotional dimensions, in its ambivalent, multiple nature: "There is an endless number of human truths. History is concerned solely with facts; emotions are outside of its realm of interest […] But I look at the world as a writer, not a historian" (7). As a writer, Alexievich allows for an "endless number of human truths", associated with emotion, prioritizing the heterogeneity and ambivalence of the affective responses to the past, rather than their potential for constructing a historical narrative. As "one's duša can do well only in communion and interaction with other people" (Gladkova, 334), I read Alexievich's position as a listener to the intimate "truths" of her interlocutors as an attempt at reconstructing a

[9] In the Russian original, the word for "soul" in the passage is also duša (душа): "То, как он жил в человеческой душе" (9).
[10] Alexievich's interlocutors understand the soul as a bearer of the affective dimension of memory, it is a repository of affect, rather than storing organized information about one's life - e.g., "[m]y memory grows dimmer, but my soul hasn't forgotten a thing" (205).

sense of relation she seeks herself as a post-Soviet subject. She comments on the need for an other, for her protagonists, to address the lack of continuity in her own sense of self: "We were bitterly disappointed that the Revolution and Civil War had all happened before our time. Now you wonder: Was that really us? Was that me? I reminisced alongside my protagonists" (Alexievich, 5). The shifting of the pronouns: "you wonder"; "was that really us"; "was that me" here brings into focus the post-Soviet subjects' shared sense of distance from their past self and the necessity of the other to reminisce, to re-establish one's self-understanding. Her position as a listener to polyphonic memories is therefore aimed at self-reflection as much as at ceding the stage to her protagonists. In the process, the intimate conversation becomes an intersubjective space where one can bear the ambivalence of their relationship to the past, transforming it into a resource for relationality in the post-Soviet present.

Both the narrators in Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* and Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* frame the collapse of the geo-political space of the USSR and People's Republic of Bulgaria as bringing about the loss of intimate relationships and visions of futurity inherent therein. They portray a present neo-liberal temporality characterized by isolation, disorientation, and exhausted horizons of futurity, exploring the affective challenges of navigating post-socialism's non-linear, uncertain crisis-scape. Kassabova's narrator outlines a sense of stuckness, alienation, and lack of futurity associated with the post-socialist present in her self-narration too. In the prologue, Kapka shares her aim to "write about a journey of a people through time. I am one of them" (Kassabova, 3), positioning her self-narration as an exploration of time – past, present, and future, and the intersection of these in the post-socialist present. As a post-socialist emigree, having left Bulgaria after the fall of the socialist state in 1990 for England and then New Zealand, Kapka outlines her consistent attempts to get rid of her "Bulgarian past, which was not of the miserable variety but bothered me

nevertheless, like an infirm relative calling from the back of the house" (2). Her narration captures a lingering attachment to the past, which disrupts her attempts at complete belonging in the West, at being "absorbed by any other country" (2). The comparison of her past with a sick relative conveys her ambivalent disposition towards it - one of entangled inconvenience, responsibility, and care. Although she consistently describes her childhood home in the socialist-built concrete blocks of flats in Youth as "citizen storage" (41), an unwelcoming and depersonalizing landscape of concrete and mud, she also notes she hasn't "felt settled anywhere since we left Youth 3" (141), emphasising the sense of belonging it provided. The narrator attempts to respond to this affective ambiguity by writing her "own Bulgaria into being", a creative act that requires an imaginative reconstruction of lived time and emotion. Noting that the "only authentic way" to do so is by telling her story of growing up in the last decade of the Cold War (3), similar to Alexievich, Kapka is not interested in making truth claims about the past, but rather in evaluating its bearing on her present sense of self as a post-socialist subject.

In reconstructing her childhood and adolescence in socialist Bulgaria, and documenting her travels across the post-socialist present, Kapka's self-narration interweaves different narrative perspectives through which she examines her relationship to her native context. As Claudia Duppé argues in her analysis of *Street*, the various layers of perspective weaved through the narrative – the ironic cosmopolitan, the child in socialist Bulgaria, the travelling journalist, the Bulgarian emigree longing for her native country, are generated by a "polyphony of voice(s)" the narrator possesses (425). However, while Alexievich's self-narration frames polyphony as central to her own self-understanding as a post-Soviet, Kapka thinks of her polyphonic consciousness as an unwanted schism of selfhood, an obstacle to belonging and intimacy in the post-socialist present. Kapka frames her return to Bulgaria in 2006 as a "schizoid experience", a contradictory, disorienting state of possessing a ruptured

consciousness in need of reconciliation: she is "at once an outsider to the present and an insider to the past", looking for answers in "the apparent chasm between past and present" (Kassabova, 4). Her conception of time as a post-socialist is marked by the absence of futurity, portraying herself as caught between past and present - a "time-loop" (288) and "psychic jet lag" (289), an experience of lingering tiredness, disorientation, and displacement. This sensation is directly echoed at the start of the first chapter, describing the delay of the Sofia flight at Frankfurt's Gate 58 upon her return to Bulgaria: "the Sofia flight is delayed, and then delayed again. The passengers sit in plastic chairs, patiently squashed by the intimacy of their fellow travellers" (Kassabova, 5). The description of the passengers as "squashed" in a collective present of indefinite waiting, sets up an atmosphere of postponed, obscure futurity and eternal liminality. The use of "intimacy" to highlight physical discomfort in the passage, emphasises the challenge of connecting emotionally with the fellow post-socialist Bulgarians. The sense of indefinitely postponed futurity frames post-socialism as a crisis-scape, defined by an inherent liminality, which Kapka experiences as static, rather than dynamic and unfolding. Her sense of stuckness within the post-socialist present at the airport, carries over to both her reconstruction of the immediate post-transitionary years, and her travels across Bulgaria while writing her travel memoir, consolidating the portrayal of the post-socialist present as an ongoing liminality.

Kapka's description of the early post-socialist years articulates a collective sense of self-alienation that deeply impacts her intimate life. In reconstructing her family's return to Bulgaria to renew their visas after a year of emigration in the United Kingdom in 1990, she recalls encountering a gloomy urban landscape of social chaos that reshaped her family's domestic life:

> Back in Sofia, things were grim, very grim. The euphoria of democracy and blue badges was gone, and what we had now was chaos, crime, and deficit […] My mother had resigned her job at the Central Institute for Computational Technology, and her days now consisted entirely of queuing up with coupons to buy bread, sugar and petrol, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days. (130)

Kapka reconstructs the atmosphere of social, political, and economic collapse in the early nineties through its impact on her family members' everyday lives. The collective "euphoria of democracy" in the final years of socialism, wherein the blue badges with "Democracy" and "SDS" (the oppositional party Union of Democratic Forces) capture the collective enchantment with the promise of neo-liberal democracy, is contrasted by a sense of isolation and eternal waiting in the post-socialist transition. Her mother's everyday life becomes paralyzed in endless queues, conveying a sense of precarity and exhausted futurity. Kapka's description of her father as captured in a Kafkaesque administrative loop solidifies the atmosphere of suspended development that characterises post-socialism as a crisis-scape:

> As the power went out over the Youths, and we were plunged in darkness, my father sat in the kitchen by candlelight and filled in endless emigration papers in triplicate, while his hair turned grey. He was forty-three, and I had never seen him so old and so lost. (132)

Kapka reconstructs her younger self's impression of her father as disconnecting with himself in a disorderly passage of time - pre-maturely grey, "so old and so lost", portraying him in a state of isolation and confusion. Using the perspective of her coming of age "I" ("I had never seen him") to reconstruct the post-1989 years, Kapka comments on the way her own sense of self shifted with her family's experience of the transition. Throughout the narration the professional identities of Kapka's parents are central not only to their own subjectivities, but

also to her self-understanding – she refers to her narrated "I" during socialism as a "child of 'engineers'" (43); "my mother (the engineer) […] my father (the engineer)" (36). Her teenage perspective registers the dislodging of her parents' professional identity as impacting her own sense of self. Additionally, the description of the post-socialist power-cut in the passage contrasts Kapka's earlier portrayal of the power-cuts during socialism when the "Youths were plunged in darkness" and her family "wrapped up in blankets and played dominos by candlelight" (36). In the memory of life under socialism, it is "the Youths" that are plunged in darkness - the concrete socialist blocks representing the external socialist structure, counteracted by the cosy, familial activity of the candlelit game. Contrastingly, the transitionary years find the family itself as descending into disorientation - "we were plunged in darkness" – conveying a threat to the relationality within her domestic space, portraying a crisis of intimacy registered in the familial experience of the post-socialist present.

Kapka's description of stuckness, isolation and disintegration in the transitionary years is consistent with her portrayal of the immobilized post-socialist present she encounters upon her return to Bulgaria sixteen years later. The "bored children and hairy chinned old people" (197) among which she wonders off into a "muddy sunset" in Pavlikeni (198); the abandoned village of Slivarovo where "the quiet is thick and oppressive, like walking through syrup" (254); the village of Brushlyan (Ivy) where beneath the charm of the ivy lurks "a rot of depression" (252) create a sense of thick, sticky, and suffocating present. The narrator's descriptions of the towns' atmospheres mimic her own sense of displacement and isolation, resulting from her inability to reconcile her socialist past with her present sense of self. Her internal conflict culminates during her stay at a socialist-era hotel in Silistra, whose preserved socialist environment disorganizes her "mental furniture" (290) and breaks down her defences - "all defences have broken down" (291). She fears she will "never emerge" and stay "stuck […] an oversized grown-up squeezed into a twilight world of vinegary

Communist salads" (290). Her sense of being stuck and lost between the pre- and post-1989 worlds captures Blagojević and Timotijević's conception of the transition as bringing about an "inherent state of *being lost […]* being always between *not-being-anymore* and *not-being-yet*" (78). Being "stuck" in an intermediary "twilight" world of post-socialism, feeling like a "guest from the future" (Kassabova, 290) petrified in the liminal temporality of post-socialist Bulgaria, endangers Kapka's cosmopolitan being, her "global soul" (Kassabova, 7), accustomed to Western modernity's linear logic of progression from past to future. However, as Duppé argues, Kapka's "outspoken cosmopolitanism, her ironic – and at times sarcastic – stance discloses what the narrator tries so meticulously to conceal, namely the 'deep attachment to a culture or homeland'" (Duppé, 430). With the defences of her "imported personality" being "broken down" by post-socialism's inherent liminality, this attachment is exposed. In Lauren Berlant's formulation, the affective "defences" we build against an object express an attempt to manage an ambivalent attachment to it - "defenses are against something or someone that's still there, whether the 'there' is just in one's head or appreciable by others or verifiable via research" (*Inconvenience*, 26). The breaking down of Kapka's "imported personality" defence against the post-socialist context reorganizes her relation to it. In the post-socialist crisis-scape, returning to normalcy proves impossible: "How wrong I was about being just a tourist, about putting myself back together" (Kassabova, 290). Instead, Kassabova's narrator uses the ambiguity she experiences to build intersubjective relations within the post-socialist present as it is, a context of inherent temporal in-betweenness and ambiguity. Learning how to navigate this in-betweenness is central to Kapka's ability to move through the social world of the post-socialist crisis - as Berlant argues, "in the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it" (*Cruel Optimism*, 10). Forming an intimate connection

with other post-socialist subjects, who are as ambiguously connected to the past as herself, presents a way to stay attached to life from within the Bulgarian post-socialist crisis, and to sustain relationality within the liminality of the transition, similarly to Alexievich's narrator, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

Relating within the post-socialist crisis

As soul-baring conversations do not necessarily happen with "close people" but can occur with people who one "feels [they] can trust in a given situation" (Gladkova, 339), Alexievich's presence as a listening subject to her interlocutors' reconstructions of the past recuperates a sense of intimacy and trust through a social and cultural practice, difficult to sustain within the post-Soviet neo-liberal present. One of Alexievich's interlocutors, the mother of a Ksyusha, a survivor of a Moscow subway terrorist attack, references her sense of displacement in the new world as resulting from the lack of intimate, soul-baring conversations:

> No one has ever asked me so many questions about my life before, that's why I'm talking so much. 'Mama, put your soul away' my girls would say. They're always educating me. Young people today inhabit a world that is much crueller than the Soviet Union (359)

Re-educating yourself to "put your soul away", to talk less, in order to adapt to the neo-liberal order is evaluated by the narrator as one of the cruelties of the regime's collapse - the post-Soviet world allows no space for intimate conversations to unfold within society. The narrator frames her sense of alienation as a direct result from this re-organization of relationality, and Alexievich's presence as counteracting it:

> I observe people from the outside, I don't feel like I'm one of them anymore… I look at them as though I am no longer a person myself… You're a writer, you'll understand what I mean: Words have very little in common with what's going on inside of you [...] 'Mama put your soul away!' No, my darling girls, I don't want to put my feelings and tears to simply evaporate. (362)

The post-Soviet present is perceived as evaporating the narrator's sense of humanity by rupturing her relation to the social world. She equates her post-socialist being as half existence, becoming a spectator, marginalized in a society that has become impersonal, disinterested in one's "feelings and tears". Alexievich's presence as a writer and listener recuperates this sense of loss through the conversational form. Being asked about one's life, and having the space to reconstruct it, is an affective effort that requires a listener, an addressee (Butler, 31). Alexievich's presence therefore has a function beyond the recording of one's words, it responds to a need for intimate relationality within the post-Soviet present. The emphasis is placed on the affective exchange in the act of self-narration and the trust placed in Alexievich's sensibility to emotion. Her presence as a listener responds to the need for an "other", continuously reiterated throughout her different encounters: "I've always waited for someone, whether it be a good or a bad person, to come and listen to my story" (235); "we lived through so much and have no one to tell the story to" (261); "Thank you… […] For not turning away like the others. For listening" (247). Alexievich's self-narration in *Secondhand Time* is therefore contingent upon occupying a position as a listener, central to the post-Soviet relationality and subjecthood emerging in *Secondhand Time* – in her Nobel lecture she calls herself "a human ear" (Nobel). Narrating her attendance of a commemorative event of the victims of terrorism in Moscow, inserting her own voice in the middle of Ksyusha and her mother's, Alexievich notes: "*I'm also part of this crowd. I ask questions and listen to people's conversations. How are we living with this?*" (362). Her use

of collective "we" frames asking questions and listening to otherness as means to self-understanding, to staying attached to life within the post-Soviet present. Reconstructing the past in an intimate conversation is central to this process, as demonstrated by the explicit focus on memory in the intersubjective exchanges in *Secondhand Time*.

Memory is always mediated by narrative (Assmann, 213), and narratives about the past are constructed through shared tropes and themes that stabilize in collective memory through repetition, mediation, and association. In sharing their memories, the voices in *Secondhand Time* reconstruct specific physical spaces as entangled with social modes of intimacy during socialism, rendered extinct with the transition. I refer to these spatial imaginaries as "topoi of intimacy", to capture the consistency of the affective associations they bear, as the term "topos" works with physical imaginary (from Greek "place") and symbolic meaning (a common theme or idea in a literary work). The topoi of intimacy are physical locations imbued with symbolic meaning in the act of imaginary reconstruction. The kitchen is one of the primary topoi of intimacy in *Secondhand Time*, through which multiple narrators dramatize the collapse of the affective expectations of the transition and the resulting relational crisis.[11] As such, it is central to Alexievich's framing of the text itself as a space of interpersonal intimacy – a symbolic "kitchen" of intimate conversations where the reader is invited.

Through the kitchen topos, the narrators reconstruct their narrated "I"'s as inhabiting intimate worlds of shared visions of futurity, that dramatically contrast the post-socialist context their narrating "I"s navigate. Temporally, the kitchen topos captures an affective expectation for political and social transformation, associated with the last years of the Soviet

[11] See, for example, different narrators' reconstructions of the kitchen as locus of intimacy on pages 18; 19; 20; 23; 29; 30; 49; 59; 156; 289; 291; 342; 426. For the purposes of my analysis, I only draw on a few examples that illustrate the core relationship between intimacy, futurity and loss that shapes the imaginative reconstructions of the kitchen space.

Union and Gorbachev's perestroika: "that's where perestroika really took place. 1960s dissident life was kitchen life" (18); "In that little patch of freedom. Kitchen talk (49); "We sat in our kitchens criticizing the Soviet government and cracking jokes" (59); "I grew up in a dissident family…in a dissident kitchen…" (291). The kitchen in the cultural memory of perestroika is a physical space, as well as a social institution (Abramson, 506), the "most sacred place in Russian/Soviet society" where people could "spill their souls openly" (Ries, 21). As a topos of intimacy, it is intrinsically connected to the "uplifting emotional responses" associated with the expectations that "everything would now change for the better" before and immediately after the collapse of socialism (Svašek, 9). In their reconstructions of the kitchen, different narrators simultaneously draw attention to their collective dreams of transformation, and to the relationships sustained through the very practice of talking, framing kitchen conversations as socialist practices of intimacy rendered extinct in the post-Soviet present, as demonstrated by two interlocutors: "We lived in our kitchens… The whole country lived in their kitchens. […] These secret kitchen societies are long gone; And gone with them is our friendship which we thought was eternal" (156); "There was a time… It's hard to believe that it existed, but we all used to be that way… […] We lived in our dreams, our illusions. Baring our souls to one another in our kitchens" (436). Both narrators reconstruct their narrated "I"'s as inhabiting the kitchen as a topos of social life ("we lived in our kitchens") and a space of collective fantasy, hope, and dreams ("we lived in our dreams, our illusions") that enables deeply intimate relations – the future-oriented belief in "eternal" friendship, the soul-baring conversations. The extinction of the kitchen topos in the present symbolizes the extinction of a social structure of intimate relation that Alexievich attempts to recuperate.

The symbolic of the kitchen as an intimate topos shapes the textual space of Alexievich's self-narration, reconstructing relationality at the level of form. Highlighting the

irretrievable rupture with her past self, similar to her interlocutors: "there's no way back to this naïveté" (10), Alexievich explores the potential of the textual space itself to function as a symbolic reconstruction of the kitchen space, to represent the intimate relation sustained through soul-bearing conversations with other post-Soviets. Through the aesthetic arrangement of the narratives, the text itself becomes a patch of intimate "kitchen talk" that Alexievich herself occupies as a post-Soviet subject. Discussing her students' responses to Alexievich's work, Tumarkin notes that "if students did walk away from her work half-way through a monologue, they felt guilty – as if abandoning an important, intimate conversation for no good reason" (6). Alexievich's selective presence in the narrative seeks this effect. Her descriptions of the spatial atmospheres in which the intimate conversations take place – e.g., the "*eternal tea, this time with the hostess's homemade cherry jam*" (52) served during an interview break, the rainy day: "*We sit talking on a terrace. The leaves are rustling, then it starts to rain*" (212), positions her narrating "I" in a private, intimate atmosphere with her narrators, that readers are symbolically invited to witness. In participating in intimate conversations as a listener, Alexievich's polyphonic self-narration transforms her attachment to the past into a resource for post-Soviet relationality within the non-linear, temporally disorganized post-Soviet context. The post-Soviet subject that emerges from this restructured form of intimate sociality in *Secondhand Time* therefore prioritizes the sense of interpersonal connection as a primary means of navigating the post-Soviet context in its heterogenous, multiple nature.

Kassabova's self-narration similarly frames the intimate knowledge of the conversational other as central to navigating the post-socialist present. Within her encounters with her friends, family and strangers, the narrator works through the feeling of isolation resulting from her ambiguous relation to the past within the post-socialist present. Her meeting with Grégoire, a high school friend who emigrated to France, portrays an intimate

connection based on their shared longing for a version of Bulgaria they can belong to. Kapka perceives her meeting with Grégoire as one of the "few moments in my life when the past and the present connect in the right place" (Kassabova, 145). It is an intersubjective encounter where her own sense of self as both "outsider to the present and insider to the past" transforms into a condition, rather than an obstacle, for knowing the other and herself. Together, they reflect on their lingering attachment to the socialist past and its bearing on their sense of self in the present:

> When I was at the Lycée, I wanted to be in France, to be free, to be myself. Now that I'm in France, I wish I could come back here, to be at home again. I feel more connected with the past than with the present. Is that normal?
>
> 'I don't know', I say. 'Probably not. But at least you feel connected to something' (147)

Grégoire reconstructs his longing for the West in socialist Bulgaria as a desire for freedom - being "myself" captures a possibility of living openly as a gay man, illegal under the socialist regime and still challenging in present Bulgaria where the religious conservative attitudes continue to define homosexual desire as a deviance from traditional Christian values. His longing to be "at home again" portrays a fantasy of the past as a space of belonging that never existed – he could not "be himself" in the past he feels connected to, yet it provides him with a sense of belonging. In her response, Kapka emphasises the importance of feeling "connected to something", regardless of the nature of the object. Although "probably not" normal, this ambivalent longing sustains an intimate relation and a sense of closeness between Kapka and Grégorie. Their conversation presents an instance where they navigate the post-socialist present from within its non-linearity, where the disorganized past and present "connect in the right place". Moreover, the portrayal of Kapka's encounters through

dialogue, rather than indirect speech, imbues the post-socialist others in her self-narration with distinct voices and consciousnesses. Kapka therefore narrates herself as engaged in intersubjective exchanges where she and her interlocutors respond to each other dynamically, developing intimate knowledge of one another that advances their own self-understandings with the progression of the narrative.

The intimate conversations in Kapka's self-narration encompass a variety of encounters with strangers throughout her travels, taking place on buses, trains, and hikes, in spatio-temporalities of movement and transience that capture her attempt to move through the post-socialist present's in-betweenness. On the bus to Sofia from Pavlikeni, she strikes up a conversation with three men, where they discuss the ambivalent desire to leave and return that characterizes the Bulgarian emigree experience. The scene portrays an intimate exchange where Kapka feels known and recognized by the three strangers. Reflecting on his experience of living abroad, one of the men, Stoyan, notes the ambivalence of his relationship to post-socialist Bulgaria – although he would "never give this rotten country a thought" if he left, he also shares that "you don't feel yourself abroad […] Even if you meet good people, it's not the same" (223), expressing the restless, contradictive feeling of post-socialist ambivalence, articulated also by Kapka and Grégorie. Upon their arrival, Stoyan gives Kapka his good luck charm, which transforms into a symbolic object of intimacy for Kapka:

> 'Have it. My lucky charm. To remember crazy Stoyan on the bus' […]
>
> 'And remember me too.' Ahmed smiles. 'Though I haven't got anything to give you.'
>
> I still have Uncle's compass with its live, flickering hands and its worn leather strap, and Stoyan's worry-beads too. When I feel blue, in Scotland, I take them out and hold them, and feel connected with something that may be a little broken, but cannot die. (224)

Stoyan's worry-beads provide an intimate sense of comfort, signifying an interpersonal connection accomplished not despite, but through the two post-socialists' sense of in-betweenness and contradictive longing for connection to and within Bulgaria. Being reassured in the resilience of her connection to "something that may be a little broken, but cannot die", Kapka's post-socialist sense of self is formed through sustaining meaningful relationships within the "little broken", disorganized temporality of post-socialist Bulgaria. Stoyan and Ahmed's appeal for her to remember them expresses a primary post-socialist anxiety in Kapka's self-narration. The sense of interpersonal alienation and the fear of being forgotten, characterise the post-socialist crisis-scape in both *Street* and *Secondhand Time*. It is reiterated as a collective anxiety within the social world Kapka encounters in Bulgaria - "All they want is not to be forgotten" (199); "And we wait for someone to remember us" (306); "We've always been forgotten from the world up here in the corner" (286). By incorporating a multiplicity of voices, expressed through direct discourse in her self-narration, Kapka recuperates a sense relationality within the post-socialist present, reconnecting those marginalized and alienated by writing them into her "own Bulgaria". Portraying herself as profoundly affected by her multiple conversations with post-socialists during her travels - her "ears ringing with voices" (305), she notes the central role of the others in constituting her own sense of post-socialist being. The intimate conversations she holds from within the spatio-temporality of post-socialism, are a central tool for navigating the affective crisis-scape of post-socialist Bulgaria, for staying attached to life as a post-socialist subject.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how post-socialist self-narrations frame the collapse of socialism as an ongoing relational crisis, altering people's social worlds and resulting in a sense of personal and social alienation within the present. I argued that the polyphony in Alexievich and Kassabova's self-narrations expresses the post-socialist narrators' ambiguous attachment

to the past, which produces a sense of interrupted belonging to the present, and difficulty in imagining a future. Both the Ukrainian-Belarusian-Russian narrator in *Secondhand Time* and the Bulgarian emigree in *Street* navigate the sense of disruption in the linearity of time through their relational encounters with other post-socialists in their self-narrations. By attending to the social encounters in the two narratives, I argued that post-socialist narrators navigate the post-socialist crisis by creating new modes of intimate relationality, based on maintaining and sharing, rather than resolving, their ongoing attachment to the past. Kassabova and Alexievich's narrators prioritize interpersonal intimacy as a means to live with the inherent affective ambiguity of being post-socialist, finding ways to stay attached to one another within the post-socialist present. Instead of subscribing to a harmonious reading of the past, they use its heterogenous nature and their own affectively ambiguous orientation to it, for reconnecting with the other, as a language of intimacy within the in-betweenness of post-socialism. Treading water, surviving within the post-socialist affective crisis-scape, in Alexievich and Kassabova's self-narrations therefore involves a movement in interpersonal relations rather than movement with the unilinear direction of neo-liberal modernity. Rather than overcoming the past, the post-socialist subject emerging in their self-narrations prioritizes the place of the other in acknowledging its ongoing presence and transforming it into a basis for relationalities that respond to the post-socialism's inherent in-betweenness.

Having demonstrated how post-socialist self-narrations portray subjects as navigating the post-socialist relational crisis-scape, coping with the ruptures in social life produced by socialism's collapse, the next chapter will move on to closely examine the portrayals of relationality within post-socialist subjects' familial lives. I will delve deeper into the ways post-socialist narrators negotiate the legacies of the socialist past within their understandings of familial intimacy, examining the context of the transition in relation to the gender relations in post-socialist societies.

Chapter 2: **Gendered Subjectivity and Familial Intimacy in Oleg Sentsov's *Life Went on Anyway*, Nataliya Meshchaninova's *Stories of a Life* and Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name***

Chapter 1 examined how post-socialist narrators establish new modes of intimacy in the transitionary world through negotiating their ongoing ambiguous attachments to the socialist past. It approached post-socialist intimacy as a form of interpersonal relation contingent upon memory and unrestricted to one's close circle and familial relationships. This chapter zooms in on relational life within the familial space, tracing the role of gender as structuring post-socialist subjects' ongoing negotiation of the past within the present.

The socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union shared a policy towards the family as a "primary cell of Soviet society", a fundamental site for educating men and women into the new order (Brunnbauer and Taylor, 287). In Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine, the official socialist policy sought to diminish patriarchal authority and gender stereotypes, remodelling the family as a unit of two working parents and their children, living independently from older generations. The socialist household envisioned the liberation of women from patriarchal authority in the domestic space through labour and equal rights of employment. However, as scholarship on communism has demonstrated, although gender equality was officially endorsed as a key ideological tenet by the socialist state, it was never fully implemented in the existing social realities (Massino and Penn, 2009; Brunnbauer and Taylor, 2004; Brunnenbauer, 2009; Geiger, 1969; Bureychak, 2012). The socialist construction of women as "workers" did not remove the expectation of domestic labour but resulted in a double subject position of "workers-mothers" (Marcus, 12; Massino and Pen, 2; Brunnbauer, 291). While patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical gender role expectations in the domestic space persisted, they were largely left uninterrogated by the states. Gender

inequality in the Soviet household was therefore largely preserved because of an "inefficient state service sector and adherence to old patriarchal norms that saw girls raised to serve the family" (Bureychak, 328). The analysis of the Ukrainian, Bulgarian, and Russian post-socialist life narratives in this chapter demonstrates that post-socialist self-narrations negotiate the movement of gender relations between the socialist and post-socialist spatio-temporalities. Central to this chapter is anthropologist Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn's analysis of gender in her critique of transition theories that uphold progression from socialism to capitalism as the necessary outcome of the transition. Buyandelgeriyn argues that post-socialist contexts produce new, hybrid, in-between forms as "socialist moral and value systems, when merged with Western ideas, create unpredictable outcomes" (240). She argues that gender is involved in all aspects of this process, providing a "necessary lens for comprehending the chaotic and uncertain changes in nuanced ways that might otherwise get overlooked" (240). Gender is therefore a lens through which to enquire into the unpredictable, eclectic mixtures of socialist and Western cultural, social, and political influences and the subjectivities they shape in post-socialist societies. In this chapter, I focus on familial relations, and the intimacies therein, as central to understanding the gendered subjectivities in post-socialist contexts. Drawing on scholarship on the Soviet family, post-Soviet gender relations, and Sarah Ahmed's feminist critique of happiness, I demonstrate how the spatio-temporal and cultural in-betweenness of post-socialism materializes in the post-socialist narrators' negotiation of the past as gendered subjects. I analyse portrayals of familial intimacy within three self-narrations from Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine, demonstrating that domestic intimacy in the post-socialist world is still contingent upon gender conventions that invisibilize and normalize inequality in the social, cultural, and political post-Soviet contexts. In the first section, I trace how the retrospective portrayals of familial intimacy in late Soviet Crimea in Oleg Sentsov's *Life Went on Anyway*, late

Soviet/early post-Soviet Russia in Natalya Meshchaninova's *Stories of a Life*, and late socialist Bulgaria in Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*, reveal intimacy in the domestic space as contingent upon unequal gender relations, invisibilized and normalized across the continuum of socialism and post-socialism. I then move on to analyse how the inequalities in post-socialist gender relations structure the narrators' claim for agency within their post-socialist self-narrations, illustrating gender as central to post-socialist subjectivity.

Gendered Familial Intimacy in Self-Narrations

This section examines how the relational dynamics within the familial units of the narrators' childhoods reflect the shifts in gender relations between the overarching structures of socialism and post-socialism. I first analyse how the nostalgic, apolitical portrayal of familial intimacy during socialism in Sentsov's *Life Went On* reveals patriarchal masculinity as central to his self-understanding as Ukrainian freedom fighter during Russia's annexation of Crimea. I argue that in positioning himself as a Ukrainian national hero, Sentsov's self-narration recycles Soviet legacies of gendered patriarchal values into a model of post-Soviet Ukrainian nationalistic masculinity. I then compare Sentsov's quintessentially masculine nostalgic self-narration with Meshchaninova's traumatic portrayal of girlhood in late Soviet/early post-Soviet Russia which exposes female abuse as institutionally and socially normalized and invisibilized in post-Soviet Krasnodar, demonstrating how gender shapes the narrators' negotiation of the socialist past within their self-narrations. I end the section by analysing Kassabova's childhood in late socialist Bulgaria, which frames the repression of female agency in the family as reproduced at an axis of pre-socialist, socialist and post-socialist cultural models of patriarchal relations, expanding the analysis to the impact of Western cultural models of femininity and masculinity on post-socialist gender relations in Bulgaria. The three-way comparison in this section reveals that gender influences how

narrators negotiate cultural legacies of the socialist past within their post-socialist self-narrations, and is therefore a central element of post-socialist subjectivity.

Ukrainian political activist, filmmaker, screenwriter, and author Oleg Sentsov's *Life Went on Anyway*, is a collection of short stories, that recall Sentsov's experience of growing up in late Soviet Crimea. The autobiographical stories were published during his five-year imprisonment in a Russian prison on charges of terrorism stemming from his opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Glaser; Sadovskaya). Sentsov was detained after his participation in the Euromaidan protests and was sentenced to twenty years in prison by the Russian military court, based on allegations of participating in a nationalist terrorist organization which planned to blow up a Lenin monument in the city of Simferopol. In 2019, he was released as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine (Gessen; Chu; "Russia/Ukraine: Filmmaker Oleg Sentsov"). Sentsov has gained international recognition as an activist, an "important figure in Ukraine's fight for its independence" ("Oleg Sentsov Speaks"), a "powerful symbol of resistance to President Vladimir V. Putin's version of Russia" (Higgins) and a winner of multiple human rights and freedom of thought awards, including the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought ("Sakharov Prize"). His status as a Ukrainian political dissident and activist is reiterated in the introduction, back matter, and back cover of the book, referring to Sentsov as a "dissident artist" and to his stories as "acts of dissent", shaping the intersubjective encounter between reader and narrator. The work starts with a translator's introduction by literary scholar Uilleam Blacker, who contextualizes Sentsov's imprisonment in Russia in light of the Euromaidan demonstrations, drawing links between his detention during the Crimean protests and the Russian practices of political repression in the Soviet past – e.g., referring to Sentsov's case as a "classic show trial" (x), he compares it to the Stalinist Moscow show trials in 1930's. Blacker's reference to Sentsov's statements in court as "powerful

demonstration of dignity in the face of tyranny" (xi), imbues Sentsov's self-narration with a universal dimension, positioning him as a martyr figure, sacrificing himself in the name of universal human rights. Blacker asks readers to read Sentsov's autobiographical stories and think of "Oleg Sentsov the political prisoner, as well as the other Ukrainian political prisoners […] and the injustice they have suffered in Russia", but also to "appreciate Oleg Sentsov the artist" (xiv). We are asked to perceive Sentsov's narrator as a subject whose artistic sensibility intersects with his identity as a dissident and a symbol of the Ukrainian-Crimean post-Soviet movement for independence. As scholars Tetyana Bureychak and Olena Petrenko argue in their analysis of heroic masculinity in post-Soviet Ukraine, revisiting the national past to look for new heroes is a trend in many post-socialist countries (Bureychak and Petrenko, 4). In the case of Ukraine, they argue that the Euromaidan demonstrations gave a central place to a hero archetype grounded on nationalistic masculinity – "the Ukrainian male protestors embodied the ideal of a strong, undefeatable and freedom-loving warrior, who for some, was associated with the militaristic masculinity of the Cossacks, OUN and UPA fighters"[12] (20). Euromaidan was an opportunity for ordinary men to "approximate the dreams of heroic masculinity" associated with nationalist sentiments (20). I argue that Sentsov's post-Soviet self-narration as a fighter for Ukraine's political independence is based on these models of heroic masculinity, and that his nostalgic narration of childhood in Soviet Crimea is central to sustaining them. Through analysing the portrayal of familial intimacy in his childhood, I demonstrate how the nostalgic register he utilizes obscures a gender-based logic of authority, producing a quintessentially male subject who challenges Ukraine's post-Soviet political subjection, while hanging on to residues of Soviet power in his intimate familial life, upholding gender inequality as a norm. Sentsov's self-narration evidences how gender

[12] OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) are nationalist organizations active in Ukraine.

conditions the legacies of socialism that are being negotiated, upheld or rejected in the post-Soviet present.

The child figure in Sentsov's nostalgic self-narration is constructed by the adult voice of Sentsov, the Ukrainian political dissident. As Kate Douglas argues in her work on autobiographies of childhood, the adult narrating voice "structures the tale and, having done so, is ever-present thereafter—sanctioning memories, inserting humorous anecdotes, and fashioning naïveté where necessary" (Douglas, 73). At a first glance, the narrator's depiction of his childhood is driven by an apolitical nostalgic longing for a universal childhood, uncomplicated by questions of authority and institutional control in its domestic dimensions. Sentsov continuously reiterates his childhood as happy and uncomplicated, investing it with a universal, apolitical bearing – it is "like any other childhood, a happy time […] I only have good memories" (Sentsov, 3); "Childhood is a happy time. Thank God I had a happy childhood" (16); "I had it all: a childhood with enough light in it" (21); "it was full, full cup of childhood happiness" (32). His narrated "I" inhabits a childhood world that is wholesome, bright, and complete, an idyllic world of hope and innocence lost through the passage of time, in a typically nostalgic register (Douglas, 32). As scholarship on nostalgia has shown, to retrain its "aura of authenticity", nostalgic longing has to insist on its "apolitical if not antipolitical quality" (Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 506). Sentsov's utilization of nostalgic rhetoric creates a universal, apolitical interpretation of this "happy time" like "any other childhood". The episodes portraying everyday realities – the games with his friends (Sentsov, 28), riding his bicycle (29), walking his dog (14) - build up a universal reference to a happy childhood where the spatio-temporal setting lacks historical specificity: "If you never spent even one summer in the countryside, if you never played hide-and-seek with your friends at dusk, then you never had the childhood that all children deserve" (28). In idealizing childhood as a symbol of universal happiness, Sentsov regularly conflates his narrating and

narrated "I" into a common temporal moment, seeking continuity between the internal world of his childhood "I" and his adult self: "I want to freeze that moment and live in it for eternity. Although really, I guess that moment already is eternity for me" (27); "The boy hopping on one leg [...] I'm still going to hop on one leg" (34). This conflation establishes his happy, idyllic childhood as an ongoing resource of futurity - it is "already eternity" for him, he is determined to continue to "hop on one leg". Framing the family as an object of happiness and intimacy is central for establishing this continuity between his childhood and narrating self. The family functions as a universal value he preserves as an adult:

> And as an adult […] you also understand that back there, in your childhood, for you, as a child, it really wasn't the main thing either.
>
> The main thing – what was and should be the main thing – is your mum, your family, it's your friends, it's your beloved animals, everything that surrounds you, that gives you light and makes you glow from the inside, forever, so that there will be no such thing as "after". After childhood (21-22)

The emphasis on his relationship with friends and family as the "the main thing" in both adulthood and childhood express the narrator's investment in a value system where familial relations are central, but also vaguely detached form the specificity of the socio-cultural context they unfold within and are shaped by. The nostalgic portrayal of his seemingly universal childhood that goes on "forever", I will argue, is a central strategy for narrating Sentsov's post-Soviet masculinity as a Ukrainian hero.

Tetyana Bureychak analyses the archetype of the post-Soviet masculine Ukrainian hero as inspired by the ideal of the Cossack – a character from the Ukrainian past[13], glorified in the post-Soviet present as a figure of dissent. Cossack values inform the archetype of the Ukrainian national hero "glorifying traditional male qualities like dominance, leadership, courage, physical endurance, and sexual potency" (Bureychak, 348). Although the popularity of the Cossack figure rests on its ability to oppose Soviet ideals and defend Ukrainian national values, the "qualities ascribed to the Cossack reveal similarities to those of the Soviet models of men (defender of the motherlands, physically strong man, and builder of communism)" (Bureychak, 350). Sentsov's self-narration reflects this national hero archetype, intermixing Soviet, and post-Soviet Ukrainian conceptions of masculinity. Oleg interrupts his nostalgic register only halfway through the book by referencing the specific historical and institutional context of the Soviet Union, portraying his stay at a Soviet hospital for tonsillectomy, and his subsequent encounters with other hospitalized boys. He ironically narrates the operation as a Soviet practice of terror, positioning his childhood "I" as faced with Soviet violence – "if that's how the Soviet Union did operations on their kids, then I'm not surprised the Red Army triumphed over the Whites" (Sentsov, 42). While recovering, Oleg witnesses the humiliation of a boy with Down syndrome but does not intervene. He reconstructs this episode with outspoken regret and shame, relaying the pain from the operation as incommensurable with the shame from his complicity: "That was one of the worst days in my life, but not because of the operation or the pain after it. I'd have gone through it all again if only what happened later hadn't happened" (46). Highlighting his readiness to withstand the physical pain from the operation again, Oleg reiterates his sense of

[13] The Cossacks were a military community that played an important role in Ukrainian history between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Bureychak, 348).

duty and honour, and alludes to his physical endurance of Soviet-inflicted pain in the name of universal justice and human rights. The episode is framed as a deeply transformative moment that symbolically ends his childhood: "For me, this last day in the kids' hospital feels like a very distinct moment in my life, the moment when my childhood ended" (51). The hospital scene is an episode of becoming, where we witness how Oleg's apolitical happy childhood is interrupted by his awareness of social responsibility that is central to his sense of self as a Ukrainian defender: "what matters is that since then I've never kept quiet when I saw somebody trying to humiliate someone else, and I know I never will" (52).

The scene at the hospital consolidates his narrating self as a protector of the weak, based on the gendered understanding "of men as defenders, as strong, undefeatable warriors" (Bureychak, 10). Oleg's shame from witnessing the child's abuse is triggered by observing the intimate care from the boy's mother: "Turns out that slow kids also have mums, and they love their kids, and their kids love them. She came to see him after the operation and he laid his head on her lap, curled up like a little dog, and she stroked him" (Sentsov, 49). The mother's care is portrayed as an expression of universal love that triggers Oleg's transformation from a child, into a defender: "I wanted to jump out of bed and give the boy from the good family a good kicking and apologize to the mum of the kid with Down's" (49). The figure of the care-giving mother references the Ukrainian female ideal of traditional femininity, a guardian of the family and a caregiver, that compliments the figure of the hero in the post-Soviet Ukrainian national imaginary (Bureychak and Petrenko, 9). Oleg's descriptions of female and male figures in his childhood are grounded on these traditional conceptions of gendered familial roles. For instance, the portrayal of him playing as a child depicts his father as a classic example of Soviet masculinity, a worker and protector:

> we're playing soldiers. I've got my machine gun and my friend with me, we're hiding behind a rock near my house. Suddenly, someone sneaks up from the behind, pulls the plastic pistol from behind my belt and sticks it into my back. I turn around – my dad. […] His strong, calloused driver hands, black with bloody smudges from doing repairs. He's on his way home from work. Sober. I'm happy (23)

The soldiers play presents Oleg's childhood "I" as already on the path to inhabiting the heroic, "warrior" ideal in his adulthood. His father is introduced as interrupting the military-inspired child's play, playfully reasserting his own masculinity. He is described as a strong male figure, admired by Oleg for carrying the signs of masculine labour on his "bloody hands", reasserting the traditional masculine presence in Oleg's familial life. His emphasis on his father being sober is the sole indication of a rupture in the ordinary, happy childhood, as it alludes to the father's sobriety as an exception. The nostalgic narration of Oleg's domestic life as uncomplicated by power relations is at tension with the portrayals of grown-up figures as aligned with traditional expectations of female and male roles that evidence a gendered power dynamic in the Soviet-era familial relations. As a resource for post-Soviet heroic masculinity, Oleg's investment in his childhood as ordinary and "happy" sustains an attachment to a gendered logic of power, authority, and female submission, that intersects the (post)Soviet temporalities, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

While Sentsov insists on his childhood's ordinariness, aligning with the idea of the traditional happy family to narrate his post-Soviet Ukrainian masculinity, Meshchaninova's female narrator introduces her family members in the Russian town of Krasnodar as grappling with addiction, abuse, suicide, crime, and fanaticism in the post-Soviet present, asserting that "there isn't a single normal person in our family" (Meshchaninova, 2). She narrates her childhood years in a traumatic register which dramatically contrasts Oleg's

nostalgic voice. Rather than smoothing over the gendered relations that structure her portrayal of familial life, Meshchaninova's narrator, Natasha, exposes them as institutionally and culturally nurtured. The narrator portrays the brutality of the social context of early post-Soviet Krasnodar in which she grows up,[14] articulating the domestic abuse she suffered as socially entangled and enabled by dysfunctional post-Soviet state institutions and their representatives. In her self-narration, the figure of the local woods symbolizes the inescapable violence and glaring complicity in Krasnodar's post-Soviet community that invisibilizes violence against women. The portrayal of the woods builds up the description of her childhood as a subverted fairy tale by defying all expectations of small-town idyllic childhood – instead of safety and protection, "walking you home meant chase you, catch you, and fuck you in the woods" (21). The woods are a spatial anchor for the gradual moral decay of the local kids, where they pass through different thresholds of violent behaviour, from physical and psychological abuse to murder: "at age five, they tied girls to trees and whipped them with stinging nettles" (12); "at age ten, they made you lie on the tracks between the rails and wait for an incoming train to pass over you" (13) and finally, "seven teenagers brutally raped and killed a fifth-grader in the woods" (19). Throughout her narrative, Natasha uses a vocabulary of serenity and blissful ignorance to emphasise the continuity between institutional, social, and familial lack of protection which normalizes gendered violence within the post-Soviet space. When the teenage boys convicted of murder are released within two years of their sentence (highlighting the institutional inadequacy of the post-Soviet judicial system) they come to the young people's nightclub. Instead of being alarmed, the chaperone at the dance – an "employee from the cultural association" - watches "serenely" as the young girls "twisted and writhed and the murderers nursed their beers" (20). Similarly,

[14] As the narrator situates her teenage years in the 1990s, and the author was born in 1982, I draw on both the narration's textual clues, and the author's biographical data to situate Natasha's life experience within the late Soviet/early post-Soviet transitionary context.

her mother remains "serenely oblivious" (134) to the sexual abuse Natasha suffers from her stepfather in their domestic space and sleeps "blissfully unaware that her daughter was being groped by some shady dudes" in the apartment building (21). Stressing that "there were no good kids in town, nowhere to come from" (12), Natasha notes the generational continuity between (post)socialist generations' invisibilization of gendered violence in everyday life.

Natasha's familial relations come to reproduce the violence of the historical context on a smaller scale – her mother's idea to hire a hitman to kill her sister is enabled by the social chaos of the 1990's: "I'm not joking. It was the nineties, and finding an affordable hitman was a piece of cake" (95). At the same time, her grandmother is left "completely jaded" by "war, prison, and multiple rapes" (74), referencing her Soviet life as shaped by political violence and systematic sexual abuse that eroded her capacity for intimate connection with her daughter and granddaughter. The narration reveals the relational dynamics in Natasha's family life as produced by a historically normalized pattern of abuse and a conventional expectation of women's submissiveness and private suffering. Her mother's relationship to Natasha's abusive stepfather, Uncle Sasha, is grounded on a logic of subordination as well - she saw him as "strong" and "fair" (128), but never as an object of affection: "there was never a mention of love when she talked about her feelings for him" (128). While the family was an important entity in Soviet official policy, the patriarchal organizational principles of masculinity and femininity persevered in familial relations as scholarship on the Soviet family has demonstrated (Geiger, 219; Massino and Pen, 3; Marcus, 121). Official policies encouraged gender equality in families, but the "private" aspects of masculinity – "men's behaviours as husbands and fathers in families and as sexual beings within and outside the family" and the practices of domestic violence present therein - were not interrogated in the majority of the socialist states (Marcus, 121). The familial life of Natasha's childhood "I" unfolds within this context of continuously invisibilized gender

inequality and domestic violence that intersects the socialist and post-socialist temporalities. Throughout her self-narration, her attempt to differentiate herself from the conventional expectation of female submissiveness nurtured in her post-Soviet community, evidences the ongoing negotiation of socialist-era conventions of female submission as central to her narration of female subjectivity within the post-Soviet present.

Read comparatively, Sentsov and Meshchaninova's narratives demonstrate how gender conditions post-Soviet subjects' negotiation of the socialist past's cultural, social, and institutional legacies within their self-narrations. Kassabova's description of family relations in socialist Bulgaria provides further evidence of how gender conventions from the socialist era continue to operate within the post-socialist present, influencing people's self-understandings. Kapka narrates her childhood "I" as observing the relationship of her socialist paternal grandparents Kiril and Kapka, whose familial life mirrors the discontinuity between the socialist ideal of domestic life, and the gendered violence it obscured and reinforced as a lived reality. Kapka describes her grandfather Kiril as a "one-man terror regime", a paranoid misogynist who "kept everybody within shouting range in a constant state of alert" and considered women "the fertilizer from which sons grew in order to continue the bloodline" (Kassabova, 85). The narrator foregrounds the generational continuity between Kiril's violent disposition and his own father's "tyrannical character", as well as between her grandmother's "eroded personality" from "forty-years of co-existence" with him (84) and Kiril's mother who "had tried to drown herself in the nearest river no less than three times, and each time she'd been dragged back – after all who would cook and clean for the men?" (85). Kapka emphasises the patriarchal cycle of gendered violence in her grandparents' domestic life and the systematic dissolution of female agency therein, spanning the (pre-)socialist temporalities. She recalls her impression of seeing her grandmother "absent, as if she existed somewhere on the periphery of her own life" (86), invisibilized and

in a state of psychological and emotional disintegration. The reality of her grandparents' domestic life of alienation, contrasts their insistence on upholding the socialist ideal of exemplary family:

> Despite the grubbiness, the operational phrase in that household was 'sterile cleanliness' – a term that fitted with the ideal of Exemplary Socialist Homes. My grandparents flung 'sterile cleanliness' at you with such conviction that it left you stunned and, they hoped, blind to the truth. (85)

The aim of the socialist "operational phrase" in the domestic household is to invisibilize the "grubby" reality of the marital relationship by maintaining an illusion of an exemplary domestic space. As Penka Ivanova states in her analysis of the socialist ideology in Bulgaria, the state tolerated practices characteristic of the traditional Bulgarian family that were not typical for the "modern time" including the "strict prescription of the patriarchal moral code regarding the relationships between genders" (Ivanova, 186, my translation). At the same time, the domestic household was central to the socialist state's attempt to re-educate people – "the new 'house'/'apartment' is present not as a centre of domestic life […] but only and exclusively as a visible expression of the material prosperity of the Builders [of socialism]" accumulated through labour (147, my translation). In Kapka's narration, the state's effort to educate people into a new domestic life, "connecting the family more closely to the state" (Brunnbauer and Taylor, 286), reinforces patriarchal authority and female subjection rather than establishing gender equality. Kapka's retrospective narrating voice frames the socialist ideology as invisibilizing and intensifying patriarchal, heteronormative violence in the domestic space, by noting that her grandfather's aggression was a product of his repressed homosexuality - he "had been a victim of something bigger than him. After all, there was no homosexuality under Socialism" (Kassabova, 87). Kapka's childhood exposure to her

grandparents' "sterile" domestic life is a testimony to the unsuccessful attempts of adjusting the socialist state's conception of familial life to social reality, replacing emotional and sexual attachment as a binding factor in domestic intimacy with the void ideal of the state, obscuring and reinforcing gendered heteronormative violence.

Kapka portrays her younger self as mimicking this pattern of emotional repression, refusing to face the terminal illness of her beloved liberal maternal grandmother Anastassia. In the "summer of Chernobyl", as Anastassia is passing away, Kapka is sent to her aunt and uncle's house in Suhindol where she pretends to be "too young to understand what Auntie meant when she said […] 'the worst might happen'" (91). She avoids processing her emotions, spending the summer overeating instead: "there was nothing to do but eat" (91). Upon her return to Sofia, the shame and self-disgust she experiences from gaining weight further intensifies her emotional paralysis and testifies to the accumulation of patriarchal, socialist, and Western cultural standards of femininity that interrupt the intimate connection within her familial space:

> I had breasts now but they were not female breasts, they were porcine pockets of fat. I was a pig that spent the summer in Auntie's kitchen-trough, while my mother had been transformed into a saint. I was so self-disgusted that I forbade myself from being sad about my grandmother Anastassia to whom, there was no denying it now, the worst had happened. Only thin people could have emotions while porkies like me ate, slept, and wallowed in honey. (92)

Kapka's self-disgust links the expectation of the female body's appearance and the emotional world it can sustain, evidencing the rise of new cultural expectations of femininity that affect

her familial life.[15] The scene demonstrates how the emotionally repressive patterns Kapka internalizes under socialism intersect with the Western cultural expectations of female beauty. Kapka's physical appearance is framed as a norm for relationality, a condition for recognizing herself as an emotional being rather than a "porkie". Her narration of doing "punishing hours of aerobics at home to the sound of 'Like a Virgin', 'Material Girl' and 'Flashdance'" (92), situates her young self in the late socialist socio-cultural context marked by the advance of Western music and cultural standards in Bulgaria. Media studies scholar Elza Ibroscheva analyses body image as central in the construction of gender identity in transitionary Eastern Europe, wherein the entry of Western cultural objects reinstated a heteronormative paradigm in which "beauty operates as a moral imperative, as a defining feature of femininity, as a dream and a necessity. Taken together, these functions make beautify (or body care) an essential field of activity for women" (Svendsen qtd. in Ibroscheva, 450). The entry of this Western framework of gendered expectations furthers the gap between Kapka and her family in the time of grief. Her physical features make her incapable of sustaining intimacy with her grieving mother: "it seemed we were not worthy of her: me because of my corpulence" (Kassabova, 93). Her childhood body, at the verge of adolescence, becomes a site where the conventions of female repression during socialism collide with the advancing Western heteronormative ideals of femininity. In her self-understanding, Kapka negotiates various forms of female repression, invisibilized by socialism's credo of gender equality and repackaged by the Western consumer culture and beauty standards. Her self-narration evidences the interpolation of cultural, social, institutional repressive norms of femininity, preserved in the movements between ideology,

[15] In the summer of 1986, Kapka was twelve. Her teenage years relay the entry of Western cultural goods in the last years of socialist Bulgaria.

policy and lived reality within the socialist and post-socialist frameworks, shaping post-socialist subjects' gendered self-perceptions.

The gendered conventions in the portrayals of childhood familial intimacies demonstrate how the unequal gender relations enabled by the socialist cultural, institutional, and ideological contexts persist in post-socialism and shape Sentsov's, Meshchaninova's and Kassabova's self-narrations as post-socialist subjects. In the next section I will further examine these conventions in relation to the narrators' sense of agency within their post-socialist self-narrations, to illuminate the post-socialist gendered sense of self as formed not simply by carrying over cultural legacies from the past, but by reshaping these in relation to the present's cultural, political, and social formations.

Negotiating Post-socialist Agency

As demonstrated in the previous section, Sentsov's narrator draws continuities with his childhood "I" to portray familial intimacy as universal, apolitical, and uncomplicated by the Soviet socio-cultural context - an alternative, as opposed to a conduit, of Soviet violence. In her work on happiness, Sara Ahmed defines happiness as an affective expectation invested in an object, rather than an intrinsic quality residing therein. Objects, such as the family, are imagined and sustained as happy in a shared affective environment within a specific cultural and historical context - they are regarded as happy when we "share an orientation toward these objects as being good" (Ahmed, 577). For instance, the family "might be happy not because it causes happiness, or even because it affects us in a good way, but because of a shared orientation toward the family as being good, as being 'what' would promise happiness" (Ahmed, 577). In the post-Soviet Ukrainian space, the restoration of the traditional gender roles is seen as a way to preserve "the family, and to renew moral traditions that the Soviet system had destroyed" (Bureychak and Petrenko, 5). The central

place of the family in the Oleg's system of values is underlined in a short, snappy, and general statement at the beginning of his story: "for more than ten years I've been living with the same woman. I'm married to her. I have two little kids with her. I love them all" (Sentsov, 6). This brief and only reference to his own family reaffirms him as devoted father and trusted and stable partner, committed to preserving the familial unit as a happy object. Except for this note, his self-narration does not reflect on his romantic interests, following the conventional portrayal of post-Soviet Ukrainian hero. As Bureychak and Petrenko highlight in their analysis of the recent biographies of UPA commander Roman Shukhevych, the Ukrainian post-Soviet hero's sexuality is "amorphous and standardized, that of 'a legitimate couple,' with the woman in the role of bride or wife. Sexuality is represented in terms of continuity of the kin" (13). Similarly, Sentsov's self-narration presents him as part of a legitimate, married couple, demonstrating continuity of kin through fatherhood. Although *Life Went On* does not delve into the narrator's romantic interests, Oleg's relationship to his childhood dog foregrounds a conception of intimacy that is intertwined with a logic of authoritative masculinity:

> When I was a child, I wanted to have a dog […] I wanted my own. To take it for walks, to train it. To walk along the street and have everyone look at me. I wanted it to obey me, I wanted us to love each other (Sentsov, 9)

Instead of companionship, the description emphasises his longing for exclusive ownership, his "own" dog, over which he could exercise singular authority. The logic of authority and the expectation of submission that underlies his conception of love ("I wanted it to obey me, I wanted us to love each other"), frames obedience to a male "master", as a precondition of developing mutual intimacy. The narrator stresses this understanding of love further by comparing it to the intimate dynamic in a heterosexual relationship:

> Love for a dog is the closest thing there is to love for a woman. Your mum can love you, but she also has to love your dad, your brothers and sisters, her own mother and father […] But a dog will love only you and will be devoted only to you. (19)

At a first glance, Oleg seems to compare the depth of one's affection for their dog with one's feelings for a romantic partner. However, the consecutive contrast he draws with the distribution of the mother's love, requires a different reading. What Oleg is comparing is the nature of a dog's exclusive love for its "master" and the expectation of a woman's complete devotion to her male counterpart in a romantic relationship. The exclusive subordination to a masculine figure is understood as a distinctive feature of romantic love, asserting a conception of romantic intimacy where masculinity is idealized and imbued with power. The assertive tone of his understanding of intimate relations speaks of his investment in a hierarchical logic of female subordination that is central to Oleg's position as a male Ukrainian hero. His nostalgic investment in the family as an inherently "happy" object obscures a rigid hierarchical structure that underlines it, mirrored in his conception of romantic intimacy. As Bureychak and Petrenko argue, the male Ukrainian hero's investment in a "traditional family" reproduces a version of power relations in the private sphere that "also affects the hierarchical positioning of men and women in the public realm" (Bureychak and Petrenko, 16). The co-existence of Sentsov's position as protector of the nation and a fighter against inequality on the one hand, and the hierarchical nature of his ideas of intimacy on the other, speak of the contradiction that underlines his post-Soviet Ukrainian male subjecthood, striving for political equality and independence, while simultaneously reproducing structures of inequality on the micro-scale of intimate relations. Oleg's negotiation of Ukrainian post-Soviet national agency is therefore contingent upon upholding legacies of gender inequality invisibilized under Soviet state power. The feeling of post-Soviet Ukrainian masculinity, central to his self-understanding as a fighter for national

independence, is therefore entangled with an affective investment in patriarchal power, traditional gender hierarchies, and militaristic heroicness. While Sentsov's self-narration as a freedom fighter invisibilizes the patriarchal heteronormativity in post-Soviet Ukraine, Meshchaninova's work exposes the normalization of domestic violence in Krasnodar's post-Soviet community in an attempt to negotiate female agency.

Contrasting Oleg's investment in the familial world as an ideal, happy object, Meshchaninova's narration breaks with the conventions of female domestic subordination in post-Soviet Russia. While Sentsov draws continuities between his narrated and narrating "I" to re-assert a sense of agency based on traditional masculinity, Meshchaninova's narrator distances herself from her younger self, to expose the normative pattern of female submission reproduced in post-Soviet Russia. The internal world of Natasha's childhood "I" is portrayed through snippets from her childhood diary, based on Laura Palmer's fictional diary.[16] Natasha's practice of diary writing in her youth occludes the abuse she suffers in her domestic life, through crafting a fictional world that sustains possibilities for tenderness and love in a reality that precludes them. For instance, her first sexual experience in the diary is imagined to be "all consensual, unhurried and sweet", which the narrator evaluates as "an alternate reality, a sweet dream, not a word of harsh truth" (Meshchaninova, 33). Importantly, she does not quote her diaries directly as we learn she burned them to teach her "so-called life" (43), and by extension, her younger self, a lesson. The ironic tone through which she remediates her younger self's voice is a meaningful device for creating distance between her narrative perspectives. She uses multiple exclamations, pauses, and sentimental clichés in her quotations to satirize her younger self's diary: "'Quiet! Hush! Don't say anything… We are victims of fate. I know you suffer as much as I…' and so on. You get the idea" (36). The

[16] Laura Palmer is a character from the *Twin Peaks* franchise that gained a cult following in post-Soviet Russia (Amos, n.p.; Kozlov, n.p)

narrator consistently ironizes and discredits her younger self's sentimental fantasy as "abstract bullshit" (40), because it lacks the self-exposure she considers a source of female agency in her post-Soviet context – her childhood diaries are the voice of the internalized female oppression, working to invisibilize rather than expose it. As a child, Natasha is consistently anxious that a future reader would find out the truth about her experience: "I couldn't imagine some future biographers finding my diary and reading the whole truth about what that man did to me. No! No! No! Anything but that" (32). In masking the reality of domestic abuse, however, her diary fails to expose the social norms that enable it and reinforces the female silence her narrating "I" critiques. Natasha's adult voice stylistically differs from the sentimental, convoluted language of her diary through short sentences written in vernacular language, refusing to conceal the reality of her abuse. This results in a post-Soviet female self-narration in the model of Sarah Ahmed's "feminist killjoy" (581), disrupting the gendered conventions of her community by exposing how female suffering is silenced by the cultural model of the family in Krasnodar.

Ahmed introduces the figure of the feminist killjoy as a subject who disrupts the fantasy that happiness is inherent to certain objects, such as the family, by breaking with the shared affective stance towards them (577). Being misaligned with a conventionally happy object marks a refusal to participate in the cycle of cultural repetition that reproduces it as such, opening a possibility to uncover structures of inequality that underline it (Ahmed, 583). In *Stories*, Natasha's self-narration reveals the conventionally "happy" familial life as structured by a framework of female submission and the disavowal of violence in Krasnodar's community. To expose the gendered conventions in her community, Natasha becomes a killjoy, disrupting the communal investment in the fantasy of familial happiness. She quotes an entry from her adult diary, where she expresses her misalignment with the ordinary familial life endorsed in the Krasnodar community:

> *I need to leave this city where everything reminds me what a weak loser I am. I have to leave this city, this house, this yard, these people, my mother, my husband and my friends. I can't love anyone here anymore*. (46, original emphasis)

Both the physical space of her childhood ("this town"; "this yard") and the space of her intimate relationships ("my mother, my husband, my friends") are an anchor to a past self she perceives as a "week loser", unable to challenge the hierarchical structure of familial life. Moreover, Natasha challenges the subject positions commonly associated with a promise of familial intimacy (e.g., daughter, wife) by framing them as an obstacle to it ("I can't love anyone here anymore"). Ahmed writes that "to place your hope for happiness in the family might require that you approximate its form" (577). As the "form" of the conventional family in Meshchaninova's work involves an expectation of female silence, Natasha refuses to adopt it: "None of this is *me*. Everything around here makes me sick. Weddings, kids, dogs… it's not *me*" (Meshchaninova, 43). Reasserting that "none of this is *me*" opens a possibility for reinventing her relation to the communal conventions that structure her familial life.

As we share the promise of happiness we invest in objects with others through a cycle of cultural repetition, when we misalign with their happy status, we become "affect aliens", an obstacle for the others' investment (Ahmed, 581). As a feminist killjoy, Natasha disrupts the group's "organic enjoyment and solidarity", she is seen as "sabotaging the happiness of others" (Ahmed, 583). When they read the expression of unhappiness in Natasha's private diary, her aunt and her mother label her a "cruel and ungrateful bitch":

> That evening they read it, reread it, and cried […] Apparently they talked about how, despite having parents and relatives who were really very decent, I had turned out to be such a cruel and ungrateful bitch. (47)

Natasha's unhappiness is an attack on her female family members' own affective investment and active participation in upholding the fantasy of "really very decent" domestic life, occluding its hierarchical and violent underpinnings. Being a "cruel and ungrateful bitch" signifies Natasha's newfound position of dissent, and paradoxically reaffirms her agency within this context. Being "affected in the wrong way" (Ahmed, 583), misaligning herself with the family as happy, leads to her decision to leave Krasnodar and write the memoir we encounter. Natasha's self-narration is an exploration of the options for female agency within the context of normalized gendered violence that spans the Soviet and post-Soviet temporalities, crafting opportunities of female dissent within the post-Soviet present. Her self-narration contrasts Sentsov's quintessentially male perspective to the family as happy, by exposing how its culturally sustained "happy" status invisibilizes gender hierarchies, amplifies female suffering, and perpetuates socialist legacies of female oppression. Read comparatively, these life narratives reveal that obtaining agency as a gendered subject within post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine is contingent upon negotiating gender conventions of the socialist past in relation to the present, evidencing how the socialism's legacies both structure and are continuously restructured by the shifting cultural contexts of the post-socialist present.

While Meshchaninova's narrator positions herself as an affect alien to the post-Soviet conventions of domesticity to negotiate agency, as a post-socialist emigree, Kapka's narrating voice is already an "an outsider to the present" (Kassabova, 4) Bulgarian context. As discussed in Chapter 1, in her return to post-socialist Bulgaria she negotiates her ambiguous attachment to the past by forging intimacies specific to the post-socialist liminal temporality. Additionally, her position as an "insider to the past and outsider to the present" (4) allows her to comment on the gendered hierarchies in post-socialist Bulgaria, while recuperating her ability to grieve and express emotion, repressed in her childhood. Kapka's experience in her

family's apartment upon her return exemplifies her move towards recuperating her emotional agency and exposing the persisting patriarchal violence in the supposedly progressive Western-oriented post-socialist present. Her uncomfortable encounter with an oil portrait of her grandmother Anastassia speaks to the demand Kapka feels to finally process her loss:

> The eyes of my Macedonian grandmother Anastassia, aged twenty-something, follow me around the room from a spookily lifelike oil painting. She died in the year of Chernobyl, when I was twelve, but she seems to recognize me now [...] I don't want to be left alone with her in this unfamiliar room […] I turn on the TV. Here's an ad. A manicured female hand holds a credit card to the sound of some breezy classical music. A treacly male voice says: 'What's the difference between a good man and a perfect man? Five centimetres (14)

In the passage, Kapka attempts to avoid Anastassia's gaze by exploring the cultural production in the post-socialist present. However, the TV ad faces her with an updated repertoire of gendered hierarchical relations. Through the mute, disjointed female hands, subordinated to a male voice, the ad frames the neo-liberal ideal of a "perfect man" as one whose possession of a credit card guarantees a female romantic partner. Kapka turns the TV off, and attempts to listen to the radio instead, where a self-proclaimed "pimp" is "treating us to his liberal opinion on how he doesn't mind his girlfriend does it with other man" (14). Her narration reveals the male-centric cultural imaginary she encounters in the post-socialist Bulgarian media, masquerading as progressive neo-liberal discourse of financial and sexual liberation. The post-socialist cultural production in Bulgaria appears to re-package and conceal the hierarchical gender relations with which Kapka is familiar from her socialist childhood. Her refusal to attune to it: "I turn off the TV"; "I turn off the radio" (14) guides her back to exploring the familial presence in the apartment, through the inscribed books of

her grandparents and parents: "I turn to the bookshelves for therapy […] There are three generations of books here, with all sorts of random inscriptions" (14). Erasing the buzzing from the outside world leaves her in a space where she is able to be affected:

> Stupid tears burn my eyes and I can't form thoughts or even feelings […] In a fit of Proustian apoplexy, I grab handful of books from the shelves, open them at random, sniff them, search inside for clues and answers. (15)

Kapka's frantic search for answers in the familial objects is affectively messy, her feelings are unformed, "vague stirrings" (15), the sense of intimacy with these objects breaks in upon her suddenly. Her overwhelming emotional reaction to the proximity of her family afforded by the books, contrasts her childhood pattern of self-denial. This episode gives meaning to her post-socialist self-narration as a project of giving a voice to a childhood self that was emotionally muted, in a post-socialist socio-cultural context that still ventriloquizes female experiences through male voiceovers.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated gender as a central element of post-socialist subjectivity. Through analysing the portrayals of familial intimacy in socialist Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine, I argued that the cultural, social, and institutional invisibilization of gender inequality during socialism persists in post-socialism, influencing the narrators' self-understandings as gendered subjects. In seeking agency as a quintessentially masculine Ukrainian hero amidst Russia's annexation of Crimea, Sentsov's nostalgic self-narration obscures and upholds Soviet-era legacies of patriarchal masculinity, demonstrating how traditional gender roles are amplified by the post-Soviet political dynamics of Ukraine. Contrastingly, Meshchaninova's search for female agency within transitionary Russia exposes domestic violence and female submission within familial life as resulting from the continuity between Soviet and post-

Soviet normalization of violence within everyday life. In negotiating the (post)socialist gendered conventions of Krasnodar, Natasha exposes the social, institutional, and cultural socialist legacies of gender inequality that shape the gendered subjectivities in the post-Soviet present. Kapka's account of familial intimacy further evidences how the fusion of Western cultural notions of femininity with existing patterns of female oppression produces hybrid forms of gender hierarchies within post-socialist Bulgaria. Through the three-way comparison in this chapter, it becomes evident that gender is central to the way post-socialist subjects negotiate the socialist past's cultural, political, and institutional legacies within their present relational practices. The gendered subjectivities formed within these self-narrations testify to the post-socialist subjects' sense of dynamic liminality between the cultural legacies of the past and the emerging political and cultural formations of the present, continuously crafting, negotiating, and reshaping their self-understandings as gendered subjects with reference to both. The next chapter will explore in greater depth the cultural, political, and social influence of the West as a central element in post-socialist subjects' self-perceptions, focusing on CEE's shifting relationship with the West after socialism's collapse.

Chapter 3: **Embodied Intimacy: The Post-socialist Subject between East and West in Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* and Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name***

Throughout Chapters 1 and 2, I demonstrated how post-socialist subjects negotiate the socialist past's legacies through the intersubjective exchanges portrayed in their self-narrations. In this chapter, I expand my analysis to the encounter staged between implied reader and post-socialist narrator, to account for the place of the West in post-socialist self-narrations. If the post-socialist subject is engaged in a dynamic negotiation of the past within the present, it is fundamental to attend to the West as a key cultural, social, political, and institutional factor in the post-socialist present. The end of the Cold War reconfigured the dynamic between Eastern Europe and Western democratic capitalism, characterized throughout most of the twentieth century by the clash of two distinctive narratives of modernity – socialism and capitalism, described by Zygmunt Bauman as "married for ever in their attachment to modernity" (222). As set out in the Introduction, the triumph of Western capitalism in the Cold War established the West in a position of cultural, political, and ideological superiority over the former socialist East, reflected in the post-socialist discourse of catching up with the progressive neo-liberal course of modernity (Veličković, 9; Horvat and Štiks, 16). Although the end of the Cold War opened the path to new mobilities between the countries of the former Eastern Bloc and the West, the European geography remained marked by uneven power dynamics. Post-communist scholarship has utilized postcolonial theoretical tools to enquire into the centre-periphery power relations between East and West, and the Western construction of post-socialist CEE as barbaric, backwards, semi-civilized periphery on the one hand, and exotic and semi-oriental, on the other (Tlostanova, *Postcolonial*, 29; Todorova, 16; Veličković, 6; Wierzejska, 392). Drawing largely on Edward Said's concept of orientalism and Homi Bhabha's colonial mimicry, these post-socialist

scholars have examined how the linear narrative of "catching up" with capitalist modernity operates as a Western mechanism of power that shapes the self-understandings of post-socialist subjects. In this context, Madina Tlostanova and Jagoda Wierzejska have argued for understanding the CEE post-socialist subject as caught up in a decolonial, postdependency struggle from both the legacies of Russian Soviet power and Western capitalist hegemony. Tlostanova applies the concept of "global coloniality" to refer to modernity as a universal colonizing force, mirrored in both Soviet and Western narratives of linear progress (Tlostanova, *Postcolonial*, 30). She argues that the post-socialist subject is engaged in a double decolonizing project from former Soviet and present Western discourses of modernity that marginalize the CEE countries as ontologically delayed. In the same vein, Wierzejska argues that the East-Central Europeans' idealization of the West as culturally and economically superior before the fall of the Iron Curtain, positioned them in a zone of Western supremacy after 1989 which materializes as a multi-layered economic, discursive, and vicarious hegemony (378). She poses that the CEE societies remain discursively incapacitated by Western systems of knowledge that construct them as poor, barbaric, and inferior (375). In this chapter, I examine how the relation between East and West following the Cold War structures the negotiation of the socialist past in post-socialist self-narrations. I utilize tools from postcolonial theory in the way post-communist scholarship has reformulated them to examine the power relations that structure the post-socialist subject's addressal of the Western other. In line with my project's definition of post-socialism as a dynamic, non-linear context of inherent in-betweenness, I test Tlostanova's proposition that post-socialist aesthetic practices can decolonize post-socialist subjects' self-understandings of the linear, progressive, and imposing logic of modernity imposed by both socialism in the past and Western capitalism in the present.

In this chapter, I examine how the relation with the West shapes the post-socialist subjectivities in Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* and Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, addressing an implied Western reader from the point of view of Bulgarian and Ukrainian post-socialist emigree narrators. I argue that the negotiation of the socialist past in both self-narrations happens through an attempt at intimacy with the West as a path forward. As Butler argues, in giving an account of ourselves we do not pose the question of who we are in a self-reflexive register, but are responding to the other's address: "Who are you?" (Butler, 31). As it is the "you" who grants recognition, and upon whose existence the story of the self becomes possible (Butler, 32), the scene of address where the self emerges is haunted by a relation of power. Holding this in focus, I examine the addressal in *Fieldwork* and *Street* as testifying to the Western other's fundamental influence on post-socialist subjects' self-understandings following the Cold War.

As intimacy is an intersubjective relation between embodied subjects, embodiment in Kassabova's and Zabuzhko's life narratives is central to the terms by which the two post-socialist narrators seek intimacy with the West. As the socio-political body in life narratives reflects "a set of cultural attitudes and discourses encoding the public meanings of bodies that have for centuries underwritten relationships of power" (Smith and Watson, 50), attending to way post-socialist narrators articulate their embodied being in addressing the West is central to unpacking the discourses that structure their self-narration, particularly the perception of post-socialist otherness that haunts the relation with the Western other. I analyse Kassabova's Romantic travelling body within post-socialist Bulgaria, and Zabuzhko's embodiment of postcolonial post-Soviet sexuality, arguing that they demonstrate a dynamic move between decolonizing and re-colonizing post-socialist self-understandings from Western discourses of backwardness and marginalization. I argue that Kassabova and Zabuzhko's embodied being in the narratives articulates their subjectivities' inherent state of dynamic liminality,

negotiating agency between ongoing legacies of Soviet state power and post-1989 Western cultural hegemony.

Embodiment between East and West in Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*

In this section I analyse Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* arguing that the narrator's embodiment in the narrative is central to the post-socialist subject's attempt at intimacy with the West, particularly to the need to demarginalize and counteract the perception of Bulgaria as barbaric, backwards, and semi-civilized in the Western European imaginary. I argue that Kapka's embodied presence as a traveller in post-socialist Bulgaria, corporeally experiencing a palimpsest of cultures and historical layers, consistently shifts between decolonizing her self-understanding as a post-socialist subject from Western discourses of marginalization, and re-objectifying it for the Western reader.

In her prologue, Kapka frames the cosmopolitan, nomadic persona she constructs as an emigree in Western countries as a "chief delusion" (Kassabova, 2), stemming from an inferiority complex produced by the obscurity of Bulgaria in the Western imagination as "a country without a face" (12):

> Bulgaria. Capital: Bucharest. Uncle Bulgaria. A yogurt bacillus called bulgaricus. A republic of the former Soviet Union […] And, lately, a place from where swarthy folk will come beating down the doors of the European Union with their plumbers' tools. A cheap place-in-the-sun property paradise – or was it skiing – about which we know that… well, it's cheap. You soon learn not to take any of this personally, but the pain

> of it doesn't ever leave you. In the Western world Bulgaria is a country without a face (11-12) [17]

The passage comments on the interchangeability of post-communist national spaces in the Western imagination, reduced to placeholders for a capitalist fantasy of "property paradise", utilized as tourist resorts whose cultural, geographical, and historical specificities are irrelevant. Kapka frames Bulgaria's relation to the West, and her own sense of self as a post-socialist subject, as conditioned by a discourse of cultural inferiority and Western epistemic marginalization. Although Bulgaria was never a republic of the Soviet Union, it is perceived as a former outlet of Soviet state power, which after 1989 becomes available for the Western world to appropriate for its own use, as a "property paradise". Bulgaria's demand for Western European recognition in the post-socialist present, however, is reciprocally perceived as a subaltern invasion. Bulgarians might not have distinctive cultural and historical national "face" in the Western imagination, but they do have a body – it is dark-skinned and exercising a forceful and aggressive demand for entry into Europe. Kapka's comment on the Western perception of Bulgaria reflects post-socialist scholarship's preoccupation with the Western gaze's invention of CEE as a space of semi-alterity through a discourse of balkanism[18] dating since the Enlightenment (Todorova, 12) and amplified by the reconfiguration of Europe's borders and mobility policies after 1989, the CEE countries' accession to the EU in 2004 and 2007[19], and the lifting of work restrictions for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens in 2014 (Veličković, 2). Post-socialist literary scholar Vedrana Veličković

[17] In this chapter, I utilize the 2012 edition of *Street* which contains additional scenes central to my analysis. In the previous chapters I work exclusively with the 2007 edition.
[18] Balkanism is a concept Todorova develops to capture the construction of the Balkans through the Western gaze as backwards, primitive, and barbaric. It is related to, but distinct from Orientalism, as according to Todorova, the Balkans' geopolitical and cultural liminality positions them as a mirror to both Europe and the Orient. Rather than constructing the Balkans as an incomplete other, the discourse of balkanism positions them as Europe's incomplete self (Todorova, 18).
[19] Bulgaria and Romania became EU members in 2007.

argues that East Europeans remain knowable in the Western cultural imaginary through stereotypical depictions as economic migrants that occupy positions of manual labour such as builders, plumbers, and factory workers (9). Kapka's narration underscores both the semi-alterity of the Balkan body, perceived as "swarthy", associated with overt masculinity - a place of "men - and women – with moustaches" (Kassabova, 12), and its stereotypical perception as engaged in manual labour with its "plumbers' tools". Her narration emphasises a power imbalance that marks the post-1989 relation between Western and Eastern Europe, which propels her to avoid the question of national belonging throughout her travels, sliding into self-negation instead: "Where are you from? They ask. Does it matter? I answer. But it does. Because how can you truly know yourself, and how can you know other places and people, if you don't even know where you come from?" (31-32). The answer to the question "where are you from" has implications for Kapka's self-knowledge. She frames the relationality foundational for her sense of self (knowing yourself and knowing other people) as contingent upon knowledge of her origin. In answering the question avoided throughout her adulthood, Kapka's self-narration symbolically responds to the Western other's utterance of "Who are you" central to the scene of recognition. Her self-narration is geared towards obtaining recognition and forming an intimate relation with the Western other, counteracting the paradigms of subjection, peripheralization and ongoing "forms of silencing by the dominant discourses" (Tlostanova, *Postcolonial*, 29) that have shaped her self-understanding as a post-socialist emigree in the West.

Referring to the attempts of "travel writers of different nationalities […] to understand Bulgaria" as unsuccessful and reproducing its existence as an "appendix, a kind of afterthought" in the Western imagination, Kapka contextualizes her own project as aimed at overcoming the discourse of marginalization, "as a preventative antidote to future appendixes" (Kassabova, 12). Aiming to construct a reciprocal relation between the former

East and the West, Kapka's self-narration is an act of "exorcism" of the persisting "ghost of the Wall" (11) reflected in the sense of national inferiority that marks her self-understanding in the West. As "the mediating body and consciousness of the writer occupy a critical position in the history of travel writing" (Helmers and Mazzeo, 275), as a traveller in post-socialist Bulgaria on the verge of its accession to the European Union, Kapka's embodiment is central to her project of creating a reciprocal relation with the Western "other". As an embodied, travelling subject, Kapka aims to decolonize her own self-understanding from the Western epistemological frame of inferiority, by bringing the Western reader into intimacy with the national space of post-socialist Bulgaria. In her prologue, Kapka refers to the Bulgarian post-socialist sense of inferiority through a travel metaphor as well:

> Are they sneering at us, the last passengers at the EU gates? Are they in fact laughing with perfect teeth as we run along the speeding bullet-train and wave our tattered bundles desperately, smiling to show that we mean well? (18)

Her description captures post-socialist scholarship's critique of the neo-colonial character of the discourse of "catching up" with Western modernity (Veličković, 9; Horvat and Štiks, 16). Kapka frames the West as an imposing and arrogant figure, which speeds forward into the neo-liberal future with an air of superiority, while the Bulgarians are left behind to catch up, dragging their "tattered" baggage - a metaphor of the socialist past, attempting to present themselves as worthy Europeans. Within this context of Western hegemony over post-socialist subjects' self-understandings as ontologically delayed, Kapka's self-narration attempts to intervene and reinstate a balance in the East/West relationship by inviting the Western reader to travel inwards into the post-socialist space.

According to Tlostanova, post-socialist subjects have acquired a problematic human status as "the off-White Blacks of the new global world—looking and behaving too similar to

the Same, yet remaining essentially Others; hyper-visible invisibles who, according to Jennifer Suchland, like Spivak's subalterns, have never even started to speak" (*Postcolonial*, 29). She proposes that the narrative of linear neo-liberal progress associated with the transition is a fundamental colonizing mechanism of Western capitalist modernity that restricts the agency of post-socialist subjects and locks them in a paradigm of backwardness and dependency, unable to speak on their own terms. Tlostanova argues that post-socialist artistic practices of decolonization "focus on revealing what was hidden before and putting forward the ways of thinking, being, and perception disavowed by the rhetoric of modernity, both liberal and socialist" (31). They rehabilitate a "shifting, contradictory, and multiple spatial history" (33) to counteract the Western linear conceptions of the post-socialist transition, articulating alternative post-socialist subjectivities in the process. At a first glance, the embodiment of Kapka's travelling narrator works to decolonize her post-socialist self-understanding from Western hegemonic epistemologies through what Tlostanova names a bodily "merging" with the post-socialist space (36), "a physical and bodily amalgamating in the palimpsest of many contradictory cultural layers, historical events, and natural landscapes" (34). By travelling, Kapka corporeally re-lives an amalgamation of cultural strata and spatial histories co-existing in the Bulgarian post-socialist present. Her journey across the Rodopi mountains portrays a sense of corporeal relation with the palimpsest of Bulgarian history and culture, palpably felt within the reality of the mountain:

> Slowly, we wind our way up and down the narrow mountain road. We are in a realm of forests dripping with chlorophyll and legend.
>
> The Rodopi Ranges are the country's most mysterious region. Pirin, Rila and the Balkán have higher peaks, but the Rodopi breathe with a strangely zoomorphic

> energy. Entering this brooding landscape is like entering a dark, enchanted labyrinth of live flesh. (Kassabova, 225)

As Kapka's descends into the Rodopi, nature is personified and imbued with a tactile, fleshly sense of being – it is breathing and entering it feels like "live flesh". Her descriptions of the forests "dripping with chlorophyll and legend" and "zoomorphic" energy, position the surrounding nature as exuding an atmosphere of enchantment exceeding the temporal parameters of the present. Time and space in the passage stretch to encompass a depth of multiple historical layers inhabited at once – time slows down as the bus moves "slowly" in unison with the "dripping" mountains, evoking a sense of gradual, unhurried movement on the narrow road. The layering of space and temporalities is central to Kapka's travelling experience in the narrative. Inhabiting a travelling body, a body that is "neither 'at rest' nor at a destination but occupies multiple points along a vector of movement, discovery, space, and time" (Helmers and Mazzeo, 271), Kapka's self-narration seemingly fulfils a decolonial objective of transforming the post-socialist space into "an experimental field with constant crossings of borders, spaces, and times" experienced corporeally (Tlostanova, *Postcolonial*, 33). In being intimately nestled within the Rodopean natural surrounding, moving through the "live flesh" of "legend" and enchantment, Kapka portrays herself as immersed in different temporalities, historical and mythological, symbolically decolonizing her Bulgarian sense of being from the position of "ontological delay" to Western modernity (Tichindeleanu, 26).

Unearthing the palimpsestic historical past of Bulgaria, Kapka comments on the preservation of cultural heritage despite the socialist regime's attempts to eradicate any pre-socialist histories and cultures that didn't serve an ideological purpose, counteracting the socialist narrative of linear progressive modernity, the so called "Bright future". She

consistently underlines the sense of co-existing temporalities as a source of post-socialist agency:

> How naïve not to understand the basic mechanics of time-travel. Because it turns out that's what travel is, in Bulgaria. You may consult the latest bilingual map all you like, but one way or another, you always end up somewhere else. (Kassabova, 452)

The second person address in the passage cautions the implied reader about the complexity of the Bulgarian spatio-temporality, challenging the perception of post-socialism as temporally linear or easy to subject to a Western traveller's intent. The narrative frames the intersection of temporalities and cultural imaginaries as an essential resource for cultural resistance in the post-socialist present, an "antidote" to the simplistic and diminutive view of Bulgaria as "cheap" (3) and available for the West to appropriate. Kapka's corporeal merging with the Bulgarian landscape simultaneously aims to imbue her own post-socialist being with a sense of agency, as an attempt at self-decolonization from the conception of backwardness. However, her attempt is complicated by the aesthetic tools she utilizes to position herself in relation to the Bulgarian culture she encounters throughout her travels. Her persistent use of the Romantic, commonly associated with Western traditions of travel writing, as a structuring discourse for her embodiment as a traveller subverts the decolonial prospect of her self-narration. While Kapka seeks to decolonize her post-socialist sense of self from Western cultural supremacy, in deploying the Romantic to position herself within the Bulgarian context, she transforms into a vessel for Western modernity, as I will demonstrate next. The dynamic, continuous shift between decolonizing and re-colonizing post-socialist self-knowledge in the narrative captures the post-socialist subject's inherent liminality between East and West. It reflects Kapka's difficulty of forging an intimate relation with the West,

without reproducing the discourse of cultural inferiority in her self-narration as a post-socialist Bulgarian.

As Tlostanova argues, the process of "mind-colonization" is characteristic of post-socialist and post-Soviet contexts, resulting in "self-orientalization and self-racializing, inferiority complexes, mimicry and other phenomena well analysed by postcolonial theorists" (Tlostanova, *Postsocialist*, 132). Among others, Bulgarian literary scholar Aleksander Kiossev has analysed the self-colonizing character of Balkan cultures, produced by an enduring sense of inferiority to the Western other. According to Kiossev, the Balkans "not only welcome the expanding universalistic ideology of the foreigners which makes them marginal and undeveloped, but they fall in love with it as well" (3). Polish literary scholar Jagoda Wierzejska similarly argues that post-socialist CEE cultures engage in cultural mimicry, influenced by the West's "multi-sided hegemony" (384). While post-socialist mimicry resembles Bhabha's postcolonial concept, instead of disturbing "the authority of dominant discourse—as Bhabha sees it", it functions as a "hopeless attempt to gain authenticity through repetition" (Wierzejska, 384). Kapka's embodiment as a Romantic traveller presents an involuntary slippage into a Western narrative register that demonstrates the dominance of Western epistemologies in post-socialist subjects' self-narrations. Her embodiment as a Western Romantic traveller is characterized by an emphasis on sight and "an appreciation of the grandeur of nature" sensing in it "almost mystical power" (Buckton-Tucker, n.p). Her encounter with the historical village of Shiroka Laka, nested within the Rodopi, exemplifies how in attempting to portray a social world particularly resilient to the Western capitalist impulse, Kapka's presence as a Romantic traveller reproduces it as an exotic object for the Western gaze to consume. Her description of overlooking the village at sunset emphasises the interpolation of Romantic tropes that construct her corporeal presence:

> Then I walk to the top of the village, watch the sun set over the rooftops, and dine on wild plums from the trees […]
>
> From up here, Shiroka Laka looks like a bowl filled with broken brick fragments and set carefully in the middle of the canopy of hills. I think I get it now.
>
> […] Now it's as if survival in hard times has hardened the very soul of the village. As if the quiet, stubborn will to survive unadulterated is written into the DNA of the locals, and lives on for generations after the enemy is gone.
>
> Suddenly, a choir of undulating female voices rises from the bottom of the bowl […] The otherworldly, high-pitched lament of the voices takes you straight back to those Orphean times of wine, blood, and undying love. (370)

The passage's foregrounding of the narrator's connection to nature (dining on "wild plums"; admiring the sunset); the emphasis on sight as a dominant sense (on "top" of the hill, overlooking the landscape in the likes of a romantic wanderer), perceiving the scenery through a mythical imagination ("otherworldly voices"; "Orphean times") are all Romantic tropes, characteristic of travel writing (Buckton-Tucker, n.p.). While Kapka claims the cultural essence of Shiroka Laka, its "soul", is produced by an accumulation of temporalities that continue to resist cultural assimilation "long after the enemy is gone", Kapka's sense of insight, of "getting it" is pronounced from a position of distance, "from up here", as a surveyor. The spatial asymmetry between Kapka and Shiroka Laka's inhabitants is emphasised consistently – while Kapka's position is conveyed with spatial markers that stress height ("up"; "over"; "the top", close to the sun), the female voices from the village rise "from the bottom" as if from a mythical "Orphean" underworld. While she attempts to imbue Shiroka Laka with a sense of agency, Kapka simultaneously romanticizes it as an exotic object that transports "you", the Western addressee, into "Orphean times of wine, blood and

undying love" - an ancient, mythical, pre-Enlightenment atmosphere, reinforcing an objectifying discourse towards the Bulgarian culture as an exotic other.

The figure of the Romantic traveller has been associated with a particular Western sense of sovereignty which reasserts narratives of alterity, orientalism, and exoticization towards the explored space and its culture, traditions, and population. While vision is of central importance to the Romantic traveller, marking the body's relationship to knowledge (Helmers and Mazzeo, 267; Mulligan, 327), it has been critiqued for asserting a position of male, imperial sovereignty. Through the centrality of the gaze, the traveller adopts the position of "the monarch of all I survey", a figure that Mary Louise Pratt identifies as the "'seeing man', an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse – he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (Pratt qtd. in Mulligan, 327). The traveller's gaze, in Pratt's postcolonial analysis of travel writing, functions as an omnipresent "imperial eye", an "ideological apparatus of empire" as "the disembodied organ of an unmarked white, male body that is always subject and never object" (Pratt qtd. in Helmers and Mazzeo, 268). In her seminal work *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova demonstrates how quasi-journalistic literary forms such as travelogues have functioned as "the most important channels and safeguards of balkanism" (Todorova, 19). Analysing Western travellers' accounts of the Balkans, she demonstrates how they re-assert Balkan cultures as provincial, superstitious, and unmarked by Western Enlightenment on the one hand, and as a mirror to the Orient – exotic and mysterious - on another (12-14). Given the preoccupations of postcolonial and post-socialist scholarship with the Romantic traveller as a Western imperial figure, it is necessary to consider its implications in structuring the intersubjective exchange staged in Kassabova's post-socialist self-narration. The slippage of the narrator's decolonial project into the tradition of Western Romantic travel writing demonstrates the difficulty of staging a scene of recognition that both enables relation with

the West and preserves the post-socialist subject's agency. This slippage demonstrates Wierzejska's argument that post-socialist decolonizing efforts often result in the "the involuntary takeover of the Western Orientalizing point of view by the 'East-Central European' subject" (Wierzejska, 375). Kapka's effort to decolonize her self-understanding as a post-socialist subject from Western stereotypes adopts a Western imperial point of view, evidencing the epistemological influence of the West over post-socialist modes of self-perception and self-narration.

Her utilization of the Romantic as a structuring discourse of her embodiment exemplifies the subtle operations of power that underpin the scene of recognition in her self-narration. While Kapka demands Western recognition by highlighting the Bulgarian spatio-temporal resistance to both capitalist and socialist modernity, her Romantic gaze reinstates Bulgaria as an exotic object for the West to explore. Kapka is consistently positioned as a surveyor – at the top of a hill at Shiroka Laka at sundown, and subsequently at the top of the Nebet Tepe hill in Plovdiv, a site of an ancient Thracian settlement in the Rodopi:

> The hill underneath my feet is so packed with history that it's amazing it hasn't imploded from the sheer pressure of eras bubbling inside like elemental gases
>
> […]
>
> In the pink light of dusk, the rooftops of Plovdiv seem to shift, coming in and out of focus inside the long-zoom lens of time. A strange oriental tune suddenly rises from this open-air museum. I search among the detritus of Nebet Tepe and find a lonesome, barefooted hippie in a headscarf and long skirt. Turned towards the setting sun, her hair on fire, she is playing a flute (Kassabova, 372-373)

The layering of space and time in the passage - the hills are "packed up with history", the historical time is compared to "elemental gases", the rooftops shift in time - convey a multiplicity of histories that refuse to follow a linear logic of progress, seemingly rehabilitating spatial history from the logic of modernity. However, the scene is simultaneously defined by an intensifying Romantic rhetoric, from the depictions of the "pink light of dusk" and the emotional appeal in the narration ("it's amazing"), to her positioning at the top of the hill and, symbolically, "on top" of its "bubbling" histories, and the "oriental tune" provided by a bohemian hippie, that is barefoot – corporeally in touch with nature. Kapka's Romantic imagination subjugates the scenery, transforming it into an oriental, mysterious, exotic object for the Western reader to encounter. Her narration's consistent move between attempting to imbue the post-socialist condition with agency, and re-appropriating it through a Western oriental discourse, illustrates the difficulty of addressing the West as a post-socialist subject without re-subjugating one's self-understanding to a Western epistemology. To paraphrase Lorde's seminal phrase, Kassabova's attempt to dismantle the Master's house by utilizing the Master's tools illustrates the difficult relation of the post-socialist Bulgarian subject to the Western European other. In attempting to challenge the Western epistemic marginalization of post-socialist Bulgaria through a Western narrative framework, Kapka's self-narration is neither decolonial nor neo-colonial. Instead, it articulates the consistent dynamic, non-linear move between the two that is at the core of her self-narration's addressal of the West. Kapka's embodiment demonstrates both the need for intimacy with the Western other, and the difficulty in finding the terms through which to accomplish it, reflected in the reception of her book in Bulgaria as well. *Street* has become one of the most popular travelogues set in Bulgaria in the English-speaking world, as evidenced by the thirteen international reviews fitted across the first four pages of the 2007 edition, as well as its inclusion in the most popular reading list suggestions on Bulgarian

culture online (*Goodreads*; *tripfiction*; *boisdejasmin*; *theonearmedcrab; inyourpocket*). Its reception in Bulgaria has been less flattering – as Kassabova herself reveals, she has been accused of being a traitor to her country for not representing life under communism in an "exclusively positive light" (Kassabova, *From Bulgaria*, 76). She notes that these reactions unveiled a subtext of collective anxiety over the Bulgarian image in the West - "what are people going to think" – related to the Bulgarians' self-understandings – "if my country is so dysfunctional, that makes me dysfunctional too" (76). The liminality of Kapka's subjectivity, manifesting in the contradiction between her desire for intimacy with the West and the Western gaze's implications for her self-knowledge, therefore echoes in the reception of her memoir by the Bulgarian post-socialist readership. Oksana Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* thematizes this state of liminality further by problematizing the post-Soviet Ukrainian subject's complex relationship with the American West after the Cold War.

Neo-colonial liminality and the Ukrainian body in Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*

While Kapka's embodied travels across Bulgaria's palimpsestic cultural landscape attempt to symbolically re-position her post-socialist self-understanding in relation to Western imaginaries, Zabuzhko's narrator, Oksana, portrays her own body as a palimpsest of the Ukrainian cultural, political, and social subjugation to both Soviet colonial power, and Western hegemonic marginalization. Oksana Zabuzhko is a highly esteemed contemporary Ukrainian author, whose *Poliovi doslidzhennia z ukrains'koho seksu* (*Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, 1996) is recognized as a "quintessential feminist text of the decade" (Sywenky, 200) for its portrayal of the formation of the sexual subject in the socio-cultural context of Ukraine. The autobiographical character of *Fieldwork* has been an object of significant debate in the

public space. In an interview with her translator, literary scholar Halyna Hryn, Zabuzhko notes that the attempts to frame *Fieldwork* as autobiographical have aimed to

> depreciate the social impact of my book by ascribing its scandalous success to its being 'autobiographical'. Of course, it is, in many ways, an autobiographical novel (and which novel is not—starting with *Madame Bovary*?), but it can hardly be regarded as a pure documentary, a non-fiction (Hryn, n.p.)

Scholarship on *Fieldwork* has attempted to avoid replicating the debate by approaching it as a fictional work focalized through a first-person, autodiegetic narrator who shares biographical characteristics with the author. To avoid reproducing what Zabuzhko explicitly critiques, I will first contextualize *Fieldwork* through the life writing framework of my project, wherein the autobiographical does not claim a status of "non-fiction" - as Butler reminds us, in the making of its story, the "I" is necessarily fictionalized (Butler, 39) by virtue of its opacity. Following Butler, I look at the autobiographical as undoing the distinction between personal and social, revealing the personal itself as constituted by cultural, historical, and institutional norms that render it opaque to complete self-knowledge. I approach the fictional self in *Fieldwork*, produced by what the author refers to as her "most personal existential experience" (Hryn, n.p), as an overt attempt to address the self as constituted by and responding to the cultural, historical, and political factors that produce it. In my treatment of *Fieldwork* as a life narrative, its "scandalous success" is due precisely to its attempt to uncover the personal as shaped by and narrated through the social, the political and the historical. In referring to Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork* as a work of life writing, I aim to restate and unpack, instead of depreciating, its social embeddedness, analysing it as an act of Ukrainian post-Soviet self-narration that articulates the inherent liminality of the post-Soviet self between the legacies of the Soviet colonial past and Western post-1989 hegemonic cultural

present. Approaching Zabuzhko's work through a life writing framework, I demonstrate how the Ukrainian post-Soviet subject's intimate addressal of the West negotiates the need for Western recognition of Ukraine's colonial subordination to Soviet power while precluding its re-subjection to Western hegemonic epistemologies. The narrator's embodiment as a sexual subject is central to this effort, aiming to both bring the West into an intimate relation with the Ukrainian post-Soviet condition and to preclude the post-Soviet sense of self's subjection to dominant Western epistemologies.

Fieldwork has been primary approached through a postcolonial framework (e.g., in the scholarly work of Vitaly Chernetsky (2002), Irene Sywenky (2015), Alexandra Hrycak & Maria G. Rewakowicz (2009), Uilleam Blacker (2010)) where the narrator's story of a sexually abusive relationship with her Ukrainian lover comments on Ukraine's traumatic colonial legacy, problematizing the politicized sexuality of the colonized female and the sense of inferiority and impotence-turned-sexual violence characteristic of Ukrainian postcolonial masculinity (Blacker, 489; Tlostanova, *Postsocialist*, 137). As Blacker argues, the bodies of Zabuzhko's characters are "microcosms of the national-colonial space, in which the dramas of cultural identity collide with those of sexual and gender identity" (489). My analysis of Oksana's embodiment in *Fieldwork* builds on the academic works that approach the body of Zabuzhko's narrator as a carrier of Soviet-power colonial legacies and a space where decolonial agency is negotiated "between the imperial shadows of Russia and the looming presence of the West" (Sywensky, 200). I will demonstrate how the female body in Zabuzhko's work is, indeed, a site of struggle for visibility and agency – national, historical, and cultural, between the legacies of Soviet subjugation and Western hegemonic marginalization. I build on existing postcolonial interpretations of Zabuzhko's narrative by demonstrating how the addressal of a Western audience reveals the inherent in-betweenness of the post-Soviet Ukrainian subject, simultaneously striving for intimacy with the West and

resisting her self-understanding's assimilation into Western epistemologies. Zabuzhko's self-narration is characterized by the narrator's point of view's consistent shifts between the first, second and third person, situating her narrated experience in a complex relationship to the implied reader, as well as to her own self-understanding as a Ukrainian post-socialist subject. As autobiographical acts are intersubjective "investigations into processes of self-knowing" (Smith and Watson, 90), the instances of second person self-narration invite the Western other into an intimate relation with Oksana's self-understanding, into sharing the perspective of a Ukrainian post-Soviet subject in America post-1989. While the shifting I-you relation between the narrator and the Western addressee in *Fieldwork* at the level of form is comparable to Kassabova's double sense of being as both Eastern and Western, Oksana's addressal complicates the relation with the Western other at the level of language. Kassabova's work is written in English for a Western audience. Zabuzhko writes in Ukrainian, while formally framing her self-narration as a lecture she gives to an American audience at Harvard University where Oksana carries out research as a Fulbright fellow. This paradoxical narrative frame of addressing an English-speaking audience in Ukrainian is central to Oksana's attempt at self-decolonization from both Soviet and Western cultural supremacy, positioning language as a condition for an intimate relation between East and West.

While Oksana addresses an audience from within a Western academic establishment ("ladies and gentlemen" (e.g., p. 30; 35; 37; 55; 56 etc.)), like Kapka, she identifies as a nomadic persona, whose travels leave her with a sense of subalternity produced by Ukraine's invisibility on the global map:

> you had simply grown tired, after all these years of homeless wandering, of loving the world all alone—of passing, anonymous and unrecognized […] 'Where are you

> from?'—'Ukraine.''Where's that?' – you had grown tired of *not being* in this world (33, emphasis in original)

The narrator introduces her nomadic "homeless wandering" as alienating, her national space's unrecognizability produces a sense of anonymity and an affective cut from the social surrounding, of "*not being* in this world". The second person address in the passage both interpolates the reader into her experience of Western marginalization, and comments on the sense of disorientation it produces in Oksana's own self-understanding as a post-Soviet Ukrainian subject. Passing "anonymous and unrecognized", lacking intersubjective recognition endangers her sense of self. Instead of enjoying the newly open opportunities for international mobility, the sense of Ukrainian national inferiority inflicted by the Soviet state's decade-long political and cultural repression, is replicated on a global scale after 1989. While Kapka presents travelling across her native Bulgaria as an answer to the question "who are you" posed by the Western other, Oksana offers her own body to give an account of herself as a Ukrainian post-Soviet subject. Referring to herself as a "poor sexual victim of the national idea" (115), she notes the intimately lived effects of the Ukrainian dependency on Soviet power for the Western other. Oksana narrates her post-socialist subjecthood as produced by the Soviet system's colonial violence, corporeally replicated in her romantic relationship with her Ukrainian lover. As Blacker argues, "Zabuzhko sees national identity not as something that is confined to public political and cultural debates, but as being inscribed in the intimate, private spaces of the home and the body" (Blacker, 487). As the spaces of the body in Oksana's narration portray the sexual violence in her relationship as effected by the larger histories of Soviet-colonial oppression, her embodiment is central to bringing the Western reader into an intimate relation with the lived reality of Ukrainian political oppression. In emphasising the corporeality of Soviet systemic violence in her address of the West, Oksana sets out to counteract what she calls the "eternal Ukrainian curse

of non-existence" (Zabuzhko, 34), reflected both in the prolonged cultural subjugation of Ukraine to Soviet violence, and in its Western continuous marginalization, its perception as "anonymous and unrecognized" in the post-1989 world.

The conditioning of Oksana's intimate life by national oppression is a consistent theme in the narrative – inserting one of her poems in the narration, she frames the Gulag, a reference to Soviet political oppression, as a legacy that haunts any attempt at romantic intimacy:

> GULAG—is when they drive an empty half-liter bottle
> Between your legs—after which they address you as 'ma'am.'
> We are all from the camps. That heritage will be with us for a hundred years.
> We search for love and find spasmodic cramps. (60)

The Gulag is narrated as a way of being, a relational structure imposed by the Soviets ("they") and internalized in the intimate and sexual behaviours of post-Soviet Ukrainians, conditioning the forms of intimacy available to them ("we search for love and find spasmodic cramps"). The history of national suffering erodes the possibilities for healthy emotional connection and produces patterns of sexual oppression, humiliation, and violence, narrated as corporeally, sexually inhabited, felt "between your legs" and through muscle spasms. The relationship between Oksana and her Ukrainian lover, the artist Mykola, is central to Oksana's self-narration, capturing the dynamic between attempting to decolonize the Ukrainian being from Soviet power through mutual intimacy, and self-inflicting the colonial violence in their sexual relationship. Oksana's embodiment is where her violent relationship with Mykola is physically inscribed, becoming a repository of the effects of Soviet internalized oppression:

> your calves are decorated like a map of an archipelago of multicolored, reddish and brownish, peeled and peeling spots—scars, cuts, burns, a visual manifestation of your nine-month [...] 'mad love', from which you emerged as madness itself. (202)

Her phrasing echoes the metaphor of the forced labour camps as an archipelago scattered across Soviet territory from Solzhenitsyn's seminal *The Gulag Archipelago*. This embodied "mapping" of her intimate relationship as a labour camp, positions Oksana's body as a small, palpable unit where structures of national oppression are reproduced. The second person address ("your calves") continuously draws the implied addressee into the "skin" of the Ukrainian post-socialist experience of colonial suffering by creating a rhetorically shared corporeality, deepening the intimacy of the intersubjective exchange between the post-Soviet narrator and Western reader.

Rather than personal cruelty, Mykola's abusive tendencies are nurtured by his own involuntary subjugation to historical violence. As Chernetsky argues in his analysis of *Fieldwork*, "a Ukrainian man traumatized by the legacies of Soviet oppression replicates the trauma by abusing his lover, a Ukrainian woman, who too is a survivor of totalitarianism" (Chernetsky, 230). The abusive relationship between the protagonists is engulfed in a larger context of national suffering, which both draws them into a deeply intimate relation as a resource for cultural survival, and inevitably replicates the effects of Soviet cultural oppression. Oksana presents this dynamic as the only possible "Ukrainian" intimacy to experience, consistently emphasising the deep emotional and spiritual connection she shares with Mykola as a fellow Ukrainian:

> this was the first man from *your world*, the first with whom you could exchange not merely words, but simultaneously the entire boundlessness of shimmering secret

> treasure troves, reflections from inside the deepest wells that are revealed by those words (31)

The intimacy between the two is enabled through the shared Ukrainian language, a repertoire of deep relationality and resource for decoloniality that is central to Oksana's sense of self. As Mykola Riabchuk argues in his analysis of Ukraine as caught up in a paradigm of post-Soviet Russian cultural subjugation which produces a "self-colonizing inferiority" (338), language was a primary mechanism of Russification during Soviet rule and continues to operate as such in contemporary Ukraine where Ukrainian language is associated with "village backwardness and bumpkinness" and cultural inferiority vis-á-vis Russia (340). Russian language's persistent status as the "language of high culture" (Riabchuk, 342) positions it as a mechanism of self-colonization, adopted by Ukrainians as a result of centuries of colonial pressure and cultural inferiority (352). Oksana emphasises the Ukrainian language as a decolonizing mechanism and a central term for intimacy for the post-Soviet Ukrainian subject. Language is therefore a central tool for negotiating Ukrainian post-Soviet agency not only in relation to Russia, but to post-1989 Western cultural hegemony as well, as I will demonstrate next.

Oksana reflects on Russian and English as conduits of Soviet and Western colonial power, inducing comparable processes of Ukrainian self-colonization:

> Yet another reason why this foreign country is doing you no good—it's clogging up your brain, your nose, with the lint, down, and powder of foreign words and phrases, clogging all the pores and rudely shoving them into your hand even when you're alone with yourself, and before you realize it, you're beginning to speak "half this, half that," in other words, the same thing that happens at home […] in Kyiv, in

> Ukraine—with the Russian: it seeps in from the outside in tiny droplets, becomes dried and cemented (28)

Her description of English as forcefully "clogging up" her physical being – her nose, brain, and pores – positions it as a mechanism of involuntary self-colonization that blocks her self-understanding as a Ukrainian. She depicts her body as a conduit for the cultural dominance of both Western and Soviet discourses that exercise colonial power through language. The Russian language, cementing itself in the Ukrainian subject's speech, is presented as an external mechanism of power, seeping in "from the outside", taking hold of and colonizing the Ukrainian sense of self like a virus - "in droplets", through slow, gradual invasion. Similarly, her description of English language's sudden appearance in her private monologues ("before you realize it") testifies to the ease with which the hegemonic power of the West slides into the place of Soviet mechanisms of cultural subjection. Describing her speech as "half this, half that" calls attention to the in-betweenness of the Ukrainian post-Soviet subjecthood and the struggle for cultural agency that characterizes it. The invasion of the Ukrainian body by both Russian and English, positions the Ukrainian post-Soviet subject as locked between the hegemonic presence of the two twentieth-century powers of modernity originating in the Russian and the English-speaking worlds. In this context, Oksana's paradoxical addressal of the Western reader in Ukrainian, both seeks an intimate relation with the Western addressee, and frames Ukrainian language as a condition for intimacy, as a means for reciprocal relation where the power imbalance is rectified.

Oksana's embodiment in the narrative visibilizes the deep interpolation of Ukrainian historical subordination to Soviet hegemonic power, while simultaneously calling attention to Ukraine's marginalized place in the Western imaginary. Describing her social life in the United States, she notes her experience of affective alienation:

> as you forcibly dragged your miserable, oppressed body down the streets of an alien city, you first became familiar with the notion of invisibility […] yup, it's true—men walking toward you would glide over you with indifferent, unseeing eyes, like you were an inanimate object (41)

The passage merges the alienness of the foreign space with the invisibility of her body as an object of desire, emphasising her affective cut from the surrounding social world. Oksana's narration of her body as inanimate and unseen articulates its existing relation to the Western world, consistently emphasised as "unseeing" the Ukrainian national suffering. If Oksana's body visualizes the national paradigm of Soviet colonial oppression, its invisibility in the "alien city" comments on Ukraine's place in the Western imaginary as marginal and impotent, an "inanimate object". As the physical matter of the body articulates "the ways discourses leave bodies behind them in a certain condition" (Povinelli, 8), Oksana's rhetoric of invisibility comments on the Western epistemological marginalization of Ukraine she aims to counteract in her addressal. Throughout her self-narration, the second person point of view she uses to narrate her body – "your body" – invites the Western addressee to imagine how it feels to inhabit the Ukrainian sense of inferiority. Oksana's direct addressal of her Western audience, however, simultaneously problematises the limits of identification by highlighting the power imbalance in the encounter between the Eastern and Western subject. Her ironic expression of gratitude for occupying a speaking position as a post-Soviet subject within the West exemplifies this dynamic:

> I would like to thank all of you, present here and absent, for the completely unjustified attention you have given my country and my humble persona—because if there's one thing that we haven't been spoiled by yet it's attention: to put it bluntly, we've been lying there dying, unnoticed by bloody anybody (Zabuzhko, 30)

The passage equates Oksana's sense of self, her "humble persona", with her country, both "unnoticed" and unspoiled by attention in the West. In describing Ukraine as "a country hopelessly unconnected to the nervous system that criss-crosses the planet" (45), she utilizes a corporeal imagery, comparing her national space to a bodily part that seeks re-attachment to the rest of the world, while preserving its independent function. Oksana's body's invisibility in America thus expresses a failure of recognition from the Western world towards Ukraine, which her self-narration aims to rectify by symbolically re-attaching the reader to the Ukrainian "body" through the second person address. However, while Oksana's use of second person invites the West into an intimate relation, she simultaneously distances the reader from the Ukrainian "we" in the direct address of her audience. Insisting on Western epistemologies' insufficiency for grasping the post-Soviet Ukrainian experience of colonial subjugation, she emphasises the cultural differences between the post-Soviet and Western contexts: "In your culture tragedy is of an exclusively personal character […] you are unfamiliar with subjugation to limitless, metaphysical evil" (110-111), and ironically rejects the American psychoanalytic tools as insufficient to "neatly psychoanalyze a whole national history" (158). Oksana's self-narration thus dynamically moves between enacting and precluding the Western addressee's intimate understanding of the Ukrainian experience. It articulates the inherent liminality of the post-Soviet Ukrainian subject, torn between the Russian and Western hegemonic spheres of cultural influence, attempting to develop terms for an intimate relation with the Western other through which she can retain autonomy over her self-understanding as a post-Soviet Ukrainian.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I enquired into the terms by which post-socialist narrators seek intimacy with the Western other in their self-narrations, tracing how the Western cultural influence over

CEE after 1989 materializes in the post-socialist narrators' embodied self-understandings. By analysing the multiple, often contradicting discourses through which Zabuzhko's and Kassabova's narrators articulate their bodies in their address of the West, I argued that their strive for intimacy with the Western other produces liminal subjectivities, continuously negotiating their self-understandings between the legacies of socialism and the Western cultural hegemony after the Cold War. Kassabova's travelling narrator attempts to decolonize her self-understanding as a post-socialist subject from the Western perception of otherness, while simultaneously re-appropriating it for the Western gaze, transforming into a figure of Western modernity herself. While Kapka's self-narration is involuntarily shaped by a dynamic move between de-colonizing her self-knowledge and re-subjecting it to a Western discourse, Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork* thematizes this liminality, articulating the neo-colonial relation of post-Soviet Ukraine with both the West and Russia. In addressing the Western other in Ukrainian, Oksana dynamically moves between interpolating the reader into the Ukrainian experience and precluding its subjection to Western epistemologies by holding the cultural specificity of post-Soviet Ukraine in focus. In doing so, Oksana's self-narration frames the West as both central to the Ukrainian subject's negotiation of the legacies of Soviet oppression, and as an imposing presence that re-colonizes the Ukrainian subject's self-understanding. Zabuzhko's and Kassabova's self-narrations both demonstrate the central place of the Western other in the post-socialist subject's self-understanding, and the complex interpolation of past and present powers of modernity within which the negotiation of the socialist past takes place. Read comparatively, the inherent in-betweenness and transitionary nature that characterizes the Bulgarian and Ukrainian post-socialist subjectivities in *Street* and *Fieldwork* is located in the narrators' hybrid efforts to craft terms of decoloniality from both Soviet and Western power, looking for a language through which to address the West and to be intimately seen without being consumed by its gaze.

Conclusion

This research thesis examined the formation of post-socialist subjectivity through the lens of intimacy in post-socialist self-narrations from Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine. It applied recent post-communist scholarship's reconceptualization of the transition as an ongoing, dynamic liminality between past, present, and future, rather than a linear progression from socialism towards Western neo-liberalism, asking how it feels to navigate this context as a post-socialist subject. Combining life writing and affect theory in a theoretical framework, the project attended to the ways in which post-socialism's in-betweenness, uncertainty and non-linearity materializes in the self-narrations of subjects across Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine who lived through socialism and continue to inhabit the ideological, economic, political, and socio-cultural aftermath of its collapse. Attending to five self-narrations across the Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Russian post-socialist/post-Soviet contexts, I argued that the post-socialist subjectivities articulated therein are formed through a dynamic negotiation of the socialist past which materializes in the relational practices of post-socialist subjects. In Chapter 1, I attended to the expressions of relational life within post-socialist societies depicted in the Bulgarian and Russian-Ukrainian self-narrations in Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*, demonstrating how the narrating subjects frame the transition as a crisis of relationality produced by the post-1989 disintegration of the socialist relational practices, resulting in feelings of disappointment and alienation within the neo-liberal realities of renewed inequality and economic impoverishment. I analysed polyphony as characteristic of post-socialist self-narrations, demonstrating the ambiguous attachment to the past narrating subjects maintain in the post-socialist present. I argued that within the relational crisis-scape, post-socialist subjects transform the ambiguity of their attachment to the past into a resource for interpersonal intimacy. The chapter demonstrated the formation of a post-socialist subject that accommodates the multiple and ambiguous

emotional attachments people continue to sustain to the socialist past, transforming it into the basis for a post-socialist public mode of intimacy. Chapter 2 delved into the gendered subjectivities of post-socialist subjects, demonstrating the central place of gender as structuring the negotiation of socialism's cultural and political legacies within the post-socialist present in Sentsov's, Meshchaninova's and Kassabova's self-narrations. For instance, in revealing how the ideal of Ukrainian-Crimean military masculinity that arises in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea organizes Oleg's self-narration and recycles Soviet legacies of unequal gender relations, the chapter demonstrated that socialist-era gender dynamics evolve to fulfil a different purpose in the post-Soviet present, both shaping and being shaped by the post-socialist present. Chapter 3 traced the liminality of the post-socialist self-understandings in Kassabova and Zabuzhko's memoirs, in relation to the visions of linear progress imposed by the Soviet and Western capitalist narratives of modernity. It demonstrated the inherent in-betweenness of the Bulgarian and Ukrainian self-understandings, torn between seeking intimacy with the West as a path forward after socialism's collapse, and grappling with the Western cultural imposition over their self-understandings. The chapter shed light on the Bulgarian and Ukrainian self-narrations' shift between decolonizing and re-colonizing their self-understandings from both Western and Soviet conceptions of being, moving inherently in-between, in a state of flux.

By attending to the post-socialist expressions of intimacy throughout all chapters, my analysis reveals that the negotiation of the socialist past through which post-socialist subjectivity emerges in all three contexts materializes in the relational practices within the post-socialist world. This evidences the value of studying post-socialist self-narrations as social and cultural practices that register the dynamic in-betweenness of post-socialism and demonstrate the relational negotiations of the socialist past central to the emergence of the post-socialist sense of self in the present.

This project demonstrates that thinking through post-socialist and post-Soviet subjectivities comparatively opens paths to exploring post-socialist self-understandings as they evolve and shift dynamically in relation to present cultural and political formations, rather than as fixed results of the 1989 political transformations. It aimed to provide a nuanced look at selected post-socialist realities as continuously unfolding, dynamic, shifting, and uncertain, while holding in focus their shared histories of socialist modernity which shaped the frameworks of life within these national contexts for decades. A broader thesis scope would allow for a more extensive consideration of the multifaceted post-socialist political, institutional, and historical contexts within which post-socialist narrators' relational practices unfold, as well as of the national specificities of the socialist regimes through which subjects lived, further nuancing the account of post-socialist Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Russian subjectivities. Nevertheless, the present research project develops a framework for thinking post-socialist subjectivities' comparatively, as sharing a spatio-temporal non-linearity and dynamic liminality whose national specificities can be examined through the relational practices of subjects therein. My analysis of intimate relationality within the analysed self-narrations demonstrates that post-socialist subjects, across all three contexts, resist both neo-liberal and socialist frameworks of self-understanding. Positioned in a liminal space between capitalist futures and socialist histories, they sustain hybrid ways of being, negotiating legacies from the socialist past that both shape the post-socialist present and are continuously re-shaped by the changing political, cultural, and social formations. Post-socialist subjectivity, in this sense, is not a completed or fixed state, but is rather characterized by a sense of dynamic liminality between past, present, and future, expressed in the relational life of people who continuously shape and reconfigure their manifold attachments to the socialist past in relation to the present.

In further research, the project can be expanded to additional forms of self-narration post-socialists engage in, attending to different media and art forms that function as self-narrations and to the relational encounters they stage, such as Andrey Paounov and Lilia Topouzuva's documentary *The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories* (2007), which documents the everyday lives and collective dreams of the citizens of the northern Bulgarian town Belene, where the largest and longest running socialist forced-labour camp in Bulgaria was positioned. Furthermore, my analysis of post-socialist subjectivity can be expanded to include life narratives produced by people who have not experienced the collapse of socialism first-hand, but are nevertheless entangled with its affective, institutional, material, and cultural aftermath in their everyday lives. These would be the life narratives by "second generation" post-socialists that negotiate the legacies of socialism in their self-understandings without having lived through its historical reality, such as the project "Block № 1989" by Bulgarian artists Anna Ivanova and Kalina Ivanova, which started as a BA thesis and developed into the 2023 exhibition "Slavic Tales". It narrates post-socialist life through a meticulously detailed mock-up of what one of the artists calls "my Bulgaria" (Anna Ivanova qtd. in Vasileva, n.p.) - a miniature model of a typical Bulgarian late-socialist panel apartment block, where the mixture of socialist legacies and Western cultural objects finds expression in the interior of the domestic spaces, forming the intimate background against which the authors' childhood and adolescence in Bulgaria unfolded post-1989. How do second-generation post-socialists negotiate the continuities and ruptures between the socialist past and neo-liberal present in their self-narrations? How does the socialist past's legacies materialize in the mnemonic, gendered, and embodied subjectivities of people whose lives unfold within the post-socialist perpetual liminality between past, present, and future? How does it feel to be post-socialist without having lived through socialism? Further research by Eastern European scholars can attend to these questions by combining the tools of cultural

and literary analysis with a situated sensibility and insight into the affective and political nuances of life within different post-socialist contexts, generating deeper knowledge of the hybrid ways of being and relating that emerge and continuously evolve within the dynamically unfolding, lived reality of post-socialism.

Bibliography

Abramson, David, "Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika. NANCY RiES. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997" *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999.

Ahmed, Sara, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 35, no, 3, 2010, pp. 571-594.

Alexievich, Svetlana, *Nobel Lecture*, Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2023. Wed. 10 May 2023. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/lecture/>

Alexievich, Svetlana, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. by Bela Shayevich, Random House, 2016.

Alexievich, Svetlana, Время секонд хэнд [Secondhand Time], Vremya, 2013.

Amos, Howard, "Peak Obsession", *The Moscow Times*, 26 June 2017, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/06/26/peak-obsession-a58255 [accessed: 03 July 2023].

Åslund, Anders, *How Ukraine became a market economy and democracy*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009.

Artwińska, Anna, "*'We're Easy to Spot'* Soviet Generation(s) after Soviet Era and the Invention of the Self in Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets"*, in *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, edited by Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, Routledge, 2011, pp. 227-247.

Assmann, Aleida, "Memory, Individual and Collective", in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, edited by Robert Goodin, and Charles Tilly, online edn, Oxford Academic, 2006, pp. 210 – 224.

Bakhtin, Mikhail and Caryl Emerson, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1991.

Berlant, Lauren, "Intimacy: A Special Issue", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no 2, 1998, pp. 281-288.

Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, 2011.

Berlant, Lauren, *The Inconvenience of Other People*, Duke University Press, 2022.

Blacker, Uilleam. "Nation, Body, Home: Gender and National Identity in the Work of Oksana Zabuzhko", *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 105, no. 2, 2010, pp. 487–501. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698706. Accessed 9 Aug. 2023.

Blagojević, Jelisaveta and Jovana Timotijević, "'Failing the Metronome': Queer Reading of the Postsocialist Transition" in *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives*, edited by John Frederick Bailyn, Dijana Jelača, and Danijela Lugarić, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2018.

Boletsi, Maria et all, "Introduction", in *(Un)timely Crises: Chronotopes and Critique,* edited by Maria Boletsi, Natashe Lemos Dekker Kasia Mika, Ksenia Robbe, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 1-11.

"Booklist: Eight Novels in English Set in Bulgaria." *inyourpocket*, https://www.inyourpocket.com/sofia/booklist-eight-novels-in-english-set-in-bulgaria_78156f [accessed: 05 August 2023]

Boym, Svetlana, "The Archeology of Banality: The Soviet Home". *Public Culture* vol. 6, no. 2, 1994, pp. 263–292.

Brunnbauer, Ulf ""The Most Natural Function of Women": Ambiguous Party Policies and Female Experiences in Socialist Bulgaria", *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, edited by Shana Penn and Jill Massino, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 77-96.

Brunnbauer, Ulf and Karin Taylor, "Creating a 'socialist way of life': family and reproduction policies in Bulgaria, 1944 –1989", *Continuity and Change*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2004, pp. 283–312.

Buckton-Tucker, Rosalind, "Romanticism and the Philosophy of Travel", *International Journal of Arts and Sciences,* vol. 3, no. 10, 2010.

"Bulgaria Travel Reading List." boisdejasmin, 24 Apr. 2019, https://boisdejasmin.com/2019/04/bulgaria-travel-reading-list.html. [accessed: 05 August 2023]

Bureychak, Tetyana and Olena Pertrenko, "Heroic Masculinity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Cossacks, UPA and 'Svoboda'", *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies,* vol. 2, no 2, 2015, pp. 3-27.

Bureychak, Tetyana, "Masculinity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Ukraine: Models and Their Implications", *Gender, Politics and Society in Ukraine*, edited by Olena Hankivsky and Anastasiya Salnykova, University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 325-361.

Buyandelgeriyn, Manduhai, "Post-Post-Transition Theories: Walking on Multiple Paths", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 37, 2008, pp. 235–250.

Butler, Judith. *Giving An Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, 2005.

Čamprag, Nebojša and Anshika Suri (editors), *Three Decades of Post-socialist Transition. Conference Proceedings*, Darmstadt, tuprints, International Conference on Cities and Change, 2019.

Chernetsky, Vitaly, "The Trope of Displacement and Identity Construction in Post-Colonial Ukrainian Fiction", *Journal for Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1-2, 2002, pp. 215-232.

Chu, Henry. "Ukrainian Filmmaker Oleg Sentsov Released After Five Years in Russian Prison." *Variety*, 7 September 2019, https://variety.com/2019/film/news/ukrainian-filmmaker-oleg-sentsov-released-1203327235/ [01 July 2023].

Coleman, Heather J. "Svetlana Aleksievich: the writer and her times", *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59:3-4, 2017, pp. 193-195, DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2017.1384664

Dawisha, Karen. "Communism as a Lived System of Ideas in Contemporary Russia." *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 19, no. 3, Aug. 2005, pp. 463–493.

Dekker, Natashe Lemos et al, "Navigating Chronic Crisis" in *(Un)timely Crises Chronotopes and Critique*, edited by Maria Boletsi et al, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 13-22.

Douglas, Kate, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*, Rutgers University Press, 2010.

Djukić, Aleksandra M. and Branislav M. Antonić, "Trends in New Multi-Family Residential Development in Serbia: Overview by Local Urban Professionals" in *Handbook of Research on Urban-Rural Synergy Development Through Housing, Landscape, and Tourism*, ed. by Aleksandra Krsti-Furundi, Aleksandra Djuki, IGI Global, 2019, pp. 30-50.

Duppé, Claudia "Tourist in Her Native Country: Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name*", in *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film*

and Culture, edited by Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Sissy Helff, Brill, 2010, pp. 424-436.

"Five Great Books Set in Bulgaria." *tripfiction*, https://www.tripfiction.com/five-great-books-set-in-bulgaria/. [accessed: 05 August 2023]

Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184. Accessed 8 Aug. 2023.

Geiger, H. Kent, *The Family in Soviet Russia*, Harvard University Press, 1968.

Gerald W. Creed, *Domesticating Revolution: From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.

Gessen, Masha. "The Release of Oleg Sentsov and the Plight of Those Left Behind." The New Yorker, 10 September 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-release-of-oleg-sentsov-and-the-plight-of-those-left-behind [accessed: 01 August 2023]

Gladkova, Anna "'Intimate' Talk in Russian: Human Relationships and Folk Psychotherapy", *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2013, 322-343, DOI: 10.1080/07268602.2013.846453

Glaser, Amelia. "LIFE WENT ON ANYWAY." *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6109, 1 May 2020, pp. 32+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A632137664/AONE?u=anon~3af4355d&sid=googleScholar&xid=dd1ca4e8]. Accessed 22 Aug. 2023.

"Goodreads – Books set in Bulgaria", *Goodreads*, https://www.goodreads.com/genres/bulgaria, [accessed on 03 August 2023].

Helmers, Marguerite H. and Tilar J Mazzeo. "Introduction: Travel and the Body." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 35 no. 3, 2005, p. 267-276. doi:10.1353/jnt.2006.0012.

Higgins, Andrew, "Oleg Sentsov: Russian by Blood and Language, Ukrainian in Spirit", *The New York Times*, 27 September 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/world/europe/russia-ukraine-crimea-sentsov.html [accessed: 20 August 2023].

Horvat, Srecko and Igot Štiks, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics After Yugoslavia*, Verso Press, 2015.

Hrycak, Alexandra and Maria G. Rewakowicz, "Feminism, intellectuals and the formation of micro-publics in postcommunist Ukraine", *Stud Est Eur Thought*, vol. 61, 2009, pp. 309-333.

Hryn, Haryna, "A Conversation with Oksana Zabuzhko", *AGNI*, vol. 53, 2018, https://agnionline.bu.edu/conversation/a-conversation-with-oksana-zabuzhko/ [accessed 09 August 2023].

Ibroscheva, Elza, "Selling the Post-Communist Female Body", *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2013, pp. 443-462.

International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Bulgaria Country Data - Inflation rate, average consumer prices (Annual percent change)", *IMF*, https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/BGR#countrydata, [accessed 22 August 2023]

Isabel Marcus, "Wife Beating: Ideology and Practice under State Socialism in Hungary, Poland, and Romania", *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, edited by Shana Penn and Jill Massino, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 115-132.

Ivanova, Penka. Човекът на „Светлото Бъдеще": Цели и Механизми на Социалистическата Идеология в България (1945-1956) [The Man of the "Bright

Future": Objectives and Mechanisms of the Socialist Ideology in Bulgaria (1944-1956)], University Publishing Sv. Kiril Ohridski, 2018.

Jelača, Dijana and Danijela Lugarić, "Introduction: The 'Radiant Future' of Spatial and Temporal Dis/Orientations" edited by John Frederick Bailyn, Dijana Jelača, and Danijela Lugarić, *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives*, State University of New York Press, 2018.

Kassabova, Kapka, "From Bulgaria with Love and Hate: The Anxiety of the Distorting Mirror (A Writer's Perspective)" in *Facing the East in the West : Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*, edited by Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Sissy Helff, Brill, 2010, pp. 68-78.

Kassabova, Kapka. *Street Without A Name: Childhood And Other Misadventures In Bulgaria*. Skyhorse, 2009.

Kassabova, Kapka. *Street Without A Name: Childhood And Other Misadventures In Bulgaria*. Penguin Books, 2012.

Keightley, Emily and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering As Creative Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

King, Charles. "Post-Postcommunism: Transition, Comparison, and the End of 'Eastern Europe.'" *World Politics*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2000, pp. 143–72.

Kiossev, Alexander, "Notes on Self-colonizing Cultures" in *Cultural Aspects of the Modernisation Process*, edited by Dimitŭr Ginev, Francis Sejersted, and Kostadinka Simeonova, Oslo, 1995.

Kojanic, Ognjen, "Nostalgia as a practice of the self in post-socialist Serbia", *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 57:3-4, 2015, pp. 195-212.

Koleva, Daniela and Alexander Kiossev, Трудният разказ. Модели на автобиографично разказване за социализма между устното и писменото [The Difficult Narrative: Models of Autobiographical Narrating about Socialism between Oral and Written], Siela, 2017.

Koleva, Daniela, "Belene: remembering the labour camp and the history of memory", *Social History*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2012, 1-18.

Koleva, Daniela, *Memory Archipelago of the Communist Past: Public Narratives and Personal Recollections*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Kollmorgen, Raj, "Post-socialist Transformations in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries" in *The Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation,* ed. by Wolfgang Merkel, Raj Kollmorgen, and Hans-Jürgen Wagener, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 348 – 369.

Kołodziejczyk, Dorota and Cristina Şandru (2012) "Introduction: On colonialism, communism and east-central Europe – some reflections", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 113-116, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2012.658242

Kõresaar, Ene, and Kirsti Jõesalu. "Post-Soviet Memories and 'memory Shifts' in Estonia." *Oral History*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 47–58.

Kovačević, Nataša, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial discourse and Europe's borderline civilization*, Routledge, 2008.

Kozlov, Vladimir, "Why David Lynch's 'Twin Peaks' and 'Eraserhead' Are Getting First Theatrical Runs in Russia." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/why-david-lynchs-twin-peaks-film-eraserhead-are-getting-first-theatrical-runs-russia-984705/. [accessed: 03 July 2023]

Kramer, Mark. “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1).” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2003, pp. 178–256.

Ksenia Robbe (editor), *Remembering Transitions: Local Revisions and Global Crossings in Culture and Media*, De Gruyter, 2023.

Lenart-Cheng, Helga. "Personal and Collective Memories in the Works of Svetlana Alexievich." *History & Memory*, vol. 32 no. 2, 2020, pp. 78-109. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/763942.

Luca, Ioana. “Communism: Intimate Publics.” *Biography*, vol. 34, no.1, 2011, pp. 70–82.

Maneva, Milla, “Communism Reloaded” in *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*, edited by Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou and Stefan Troebst, CEU Press, 2014, pp. 155-175.

Massino, Jill and Shana Penn, “Introduction: Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State”, *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, edited by Shana Penn and Jill Massino, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 1-10.

Meloni, Gabriella “Who’s My Neighbour?”, *European Political Economy Review*, No. 7, 2007, pp. 24-37.

Merridale, Catherine. “Soviet Memories: Patriotism and Trauma.” *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, edited by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 376–89.

Meshchaninova, Nataliya. *Stories of a Life*. trans. by Fiona Bell, Deep Velum Publishing, 2021.

Mulligan, Maureen, "Women's travel writing and the legacy of Romanticism", *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2016, pp. 323-338, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2015.1076431

Nadkarni, Maya and Olga Shevchenko. "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices." *Ab Imperio*, vol. 2004 no. 2, 2004, p. 487-519.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, 2005.

"Oleg Sentsov Speaks to New York Audiences." *Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University (HURI)*, https://huri.harvard.edu/oleg-sentsov-speaks-new-york-audiences. [accessed: 29 July 2023]

"Magnitsky Awards Winner's Bio: Oleg Sentsov", *Magnitsky Human Rights Awards*, https://www.magnitskyawards.com/bios/oleg-sentsov/. [accessed: 29 July 2023]

Petrović, Tanja, "'When We Were Europe': Socialist Workers in Serbia and Their Nostalgic Narratives" in *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, edited by Maria Todorova, Social Science Research Council, 2010, pp. 127-155.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A., *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*, Duke University Press, 2006.

"Reading List: Romania & Bulgaria." *theonearmedcrab*, https://theonearmedcrab.com/reading-list-romania-bulgaria/. [accessed: 05 August 2023].

Riabchuk, Mykola "Ukrainian Culture after Communism: Between Post-Colonial Liberation and Neo-Colonial Subjugation" in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, Brill, 2015, pp. 335-355.

Ries, Nancy, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika,* Cornell University Press, 1997.

Robbe, Ksenia et all, "In and Out of Crisis: Chronotopes of Memory", in *Un)timely Crises: Chronotopes and Critique,* edited by Maria Boletsi, Natashe Lemos Dekker Kasia Mika, Ksenia Robbe, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 51-76.

"Russia/Ukraine: Filmmaker Oleg Sentsov and Others Freed in Prisoner Swap." *Amnesty International*, 7 September 2019, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/09/russiaukraine-filmmaker-oleg-sentsov-and-others-freed-in-prisoner-swap/, [accessed: 09 August 2023].

Sadovskaya, Polina, "Oleg Sentsov: Five Years in a Russian Prison", *PEN America*, 26 May 2019, https://pen.org/oleg-sentsov-five-years-russian-prison/ [accessed: 29 July 2023].

"Sakharov Prize: 2018 Laureate Oleg Sentsov Receives His Award", *European Parliament*, 26 Nov. 2019, www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20191121STO67147/sakharov-prize-2018-laureate-oleg-sentsov-receives-his-award [accessed: 01 August 2023]

"Second World, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4673549971 [Accessed 23 Aug. 2023]

"Second world." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/second%20worldm [Accessed 23 Aug. 2023].

Sentsov, Oleg. *Life Went On Anyway: Stories*. Translated by Uilleam Blacker. Deep Vellum Publishing, 2019.

Sywenky, Irene, "Geopoetics of the Female Body in Postcolonial Ukrainian and Polish Fiction" in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, Brill, 2015, pp. 25-45.

Shah, Nayan, 2011, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shevchenko, Olga, *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*, Indiana University Press, 2009.

Silova, Iveta, Nelli Piattoeva, Zsuzsa Millei's, *Childhood and Schooling in (Post)Socialist Societies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Skultans, Vieda. *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and memory in post-Soviet Latvia*. Routledge, 1998.

Smith, Adrian, "Regulation Theory, Strategies of Enterprise Integration and the Political Economy of Regional Economic Restructuring in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of Slovakia", *Regional Studies*, vol. 29, no. 8, 1995, 761-772, DOI: 10.1080/00343409512331349373

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narrative*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

The Mosquito Problem and Other Stories. Directed by Andrey Paounov. Agitprop, Filmtank Hamburg, ITVS, 2007, https://vimeo.com/ondemand/mosquito

Stenning, Alison and Kathrin Hörschelmann, "History, Geography and Difference in the Post-socialist World: Or, Do We Still Need Post-Socialism?'". *Antipode*, vol. 40, 2008, pp. 312-335.

Svašek, Maruška “Introduction: Postsocialism and the Politics of Emotions” in *Postsocialism: Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Maruška Svašek, Berghahn Books, 2006.

Theocharis, Angelos, “Polyphonic Memory and Narratives of Resilience in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time*”, *Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society*, Vol. 3, 2019, 185-206.

Thorson, Connie C., and James L. Thorson. "*Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, by Svetlana Alexievich". *Canadian-American Slavic Studies,* 52.4 (2018): 486-489.

Thorson, Connie C., and James L. Thorson. "Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets, by Svetlana Alexievich". *Canadian-American Slavic Studies,* 52.4 (2018): 486-489.

Tichindeleanu, Ovidiu, “Towards a critical theory of postcommunism: Beyond anticommunism in Romania”, *Radical Philosophy,* 159, Jan/Feb 2010, pp. 26-32.

Tlostanova, Madina “Postcolonial Theory, the Decolonial Option and Postsocialist Writing” in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, Brill, 2015, pp. 25-45.

Tlostanova, Madina “Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2012, pp. 130–142.

Todorova, Maria, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Todorova, Maria and Zsuzsa Gille, editors. *Post-Communist Nostalgia*. Berghabn Books, 2010.

Tumarkin, Maria, “The Alexievich method”, *TEXT*, special issue series, no. 42, 2017, pp. 1-11.

Vasileva, Katerina, “'This Is My Bulgaria': Artists Replicate Life In Tower Blocks To Explore National Identity”, *Radio Free Europe*, 09 May 2023,

https://www.rferl.org/a/artist-replicate-life-bulgarian-tower-blocks/32397697.html, [accessed on 23 August 2023]

Veličković, Vedrana, *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan London, 2019.

Verdery, Katherine, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton University Press, 1996.

Veronika Pehe, Joanna Wawrzyniak (editors), *Remembering the Neoliberal Turn: Economic Change and Collective Memory in Eastern Europe after 1989*, Routledge, 2024.

Vigh, Henrik, "Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline", *Ethnos*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2008, pp. 5-24.

Vliegenthart, Arjan. "Bringing Dependency Back In: The Economic Crisis in Post-Socialist Europe and the Continued Relevance of Dependent Development." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 35, no. 2 (132), 2010, pp. 242–65. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20762458. Accessed 10 July 2023.

Wierzejska, Jagoda "Central European Palimpsests: Postcolonial Discourse in Works by Andrzej Stasiuk and Yurii Andrukhovych" in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, Brill, 2015, pp. 375-405.

Wight, Jonathan, and M. Louise Fox. "Economic Crisis and Reform in Bulgaria, 1989-92." *Balkanistica*, vol. 11, 1998, pp. 127-46.

Wilson, Ara, "Intimacy: A useful Category of Transnational Analysis" in *The Global and the Intimate, Feminism in Our Time*, edited by Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 31-56.

Wilson, Ara, "The Infrastructure of Intimacy", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2016, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 247-280.

Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

Zabuzhko, Oksana. *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, trans. by Halyna Hryn. Amazon Crossing, 2011.

World Bank, "Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) – Bulgaria", *The World Bank*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=BG, [accessed 22 August 2023]