Emptiness:
Capitalism without people in the Latvian countryside

ABSTRACT
In Latvian towns and villages, post-Soviet capitalism has produced a palpable change that locals describe as “emptiness.” People point to empty houses and apartments, and they list friends and relatives who have left. They fear school closures and the cancellation of transportation routes. They imagine the future as an entirely different world, one in which they will play no part. As a social formation, emptiness consists of (1) an observable reality wherein places rapidly lose their constitutive elements (people, infrastructure, services, social networks, and the future); (2) a way of life that emerges in response to such changes, which seem irreversible; and (3) an emic interpretative framework for making sense of the new reality. Emptiness in Latvia is symptomatic of post–Cold War spatiotemporal arrangements of power wherein capital and the state increasingly abandon people and places. [emptiness, capitalism, the future, postsocialism, Latvia, eastern Europe]

On an overcast day in mid-April 2011, in a small village 10 kilometers from the Latvia-Russia border, the afternoon bus from the nearby town arrives a few minutes early. It has brought home a few village children who go to school in town. A few minutes before its scheduled return, the bus awaits at the stop nearly empty.

An elderly woman, about 65 years old, takes the front seat across from the driver. The bus driver, who looks to be in his 40s, sits idly, waiting for the designated departure time.

“Empty, everything is empty [R: pusto],” says the elderly woman. “Before, there were so many people who took the bus, who waited for the bus. Now there is nobody.”

The bus driver glances at his watch, getting ready to depart: “Yes, completely empty. It’s the same everywhere. Many houses are empty, abandoned.”

The elderly woman continues, “The old ones die. Nobody needs anything here.”

The bus driver: “Yes, nobody needs anything.”

The woman: “Perhaps the Chinese will come here? They know how to get things going. We don’t. Look at how everything is deteriorating here.”

Silence. The bus rattles further down the dirt road. Nobody gets on along the way.

The bus drives through the forest, where the snow is melting and the first signs of spring are in sight. “I was in the forest this morning,” says the woman. “There were so many snowdrops there. White, so beautiful!”

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When, in 2010, I began fieldwork on emigration in eastern Latvia, the region of Latvia bordering Belarus and Russia, conversations quickly turned to the emptying of towns and villages. People
pointed to houses and apartments that stood empty, and they listed friends and relatives who had left. They described school closures, lamented the cancellation of transportation routes, and feared that medical services would become inaccessible. Young and old alike said there were no jobs, save for a few positions in the municipality or the remaining store. People cobbled together their existence through a variety of means, including cross-border trips to Russia for cheap gas and cigarettes. In villages where shops had closed, residents relied on shops on wheels that came once a week. Nobody, not even planners in municipal offices, offered visions of reversed fortunes for people if they stayed in eastern Latvia’s towns and villages; nor did they offer any such visions for the towns and villages themselves. Many imagined the future as an entirely different world in which they would play no part.

Talk of emptiness, signaling the coming of a radically different future, was most pronounced in Latgale, but “emptying” was ongoing throughout Latvia. Indeed, since 1990, the population of Latvia has decreased by 748,719 people, or 28 percent (CSB 2019). This has been the result of low birth rates and out-migration, the latter including the migration of Russian-speaking residents to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union (about 160,000 in 1989–99; Furman and Zadorozniuk 2004) and labor migration to Western Europe (about 260,000 in 2000–14; Hazans 2015). Meanwhile, more than 20 train routes have been canceled and 11 physically dismantled. Since 2009, when the Ministry of Education and Science began its school-optimization program, 171 schools have been closed, and many integrated into larger school districts (MES 2019). Bus routes, run by regional companies, have also been cut, leaving elderly residents without any means of transportation for much of the time.

More than statistics, however, it was the dark windows of empty houses and talk of people leaving that created a melancholic public mood (see Figure 1). Media coverage reinforced the mood. Publications aimed at nonelite readerships, for example, covered emptiness as an omnipresent phenomenon. Articles appeared covering emigration, low birth rates, and population decrease; these included photographs of closed schools (Ambote 2015), reports of villages erased from the map (Ambote 2018), and stories about Riga as a “place with lots of room and not many people” (Mawhood 2016). In 2018 artist Ivars Drulle made a map that marked all the empty houses in a 15-kilometer radius around his house in northeastern Latvia. In 2016 an anthropologist and a photographer published The Last Mohicans of the Latvian Borderlands, a book with photographs of inhabitants of 66 villages near the borders with Belarus and Russia, where the number of inhabitants was less than 10 (Kursite and Kolate 2016). In 2011, Jānis Balodis (2011) wrote a play called All My Presidents, in which the president of Latvia tries to talk the last two Latvians into staying, even if only long enough to help him bury the deceased elderly in the countryside.

Many of Latvia’s residents perceived emptying as a problem of national significance. Emigration and low birth rates depleted the cultural nation at the foundation of the state, deprived the state of intellectual resources, created the burden of an aging population for taxpayers, and led to labor shortages. But emptying was a novel and uncomfortable problem for the independent Latvian state. There were no external forces, such as the Soviet state, that could be blamed. After 50 years in the Soviet Union, Latvia joined “the free world” to achieve prosperity, but it was becoming empty instead. Everyone struggled to make sense of it. People blamed the state, and the state blamed the people. But few questioned the course Latvia had taken after the end of socialism, largely out of fear of returning to Russia’s sphere of influence. Emptiness seemed to beget silence.

But emptiness was not only about absence. It was an observable reality and a way of life that locals imbued with meaning by drawing on the discursive frame of modernity, in which emptiness comes before civilization and sets in after its retreat. Emptiness was materially present in the form of abandoned industrial buildings, homes without people, schools without students, and train tracks without trains. This generated new practices and social relations. Abandoned buildings were cordoned off to prevent accidents. Unpaid tax bills for empty houses piled up on the desks of municipal accountants. In the absence of bus services, people walked or relied on irregular rides from acquaintances.

Emptiness also had a sensual dimension. The smell of damp basements in urban areas suggested empty apartment buildings; the sound of doors swinging in the wind, an abandoned house in the countryside. Some of my interlocutors said that passing by empty houses made them feel anxious, even a little nauseous. Often, it was precisely the affective dimension of emptiness—the feeling one got when seeing abundant apple trees by abandoned homes (see Figure 2)—that conjured the future as something radically different but not yet graspable in language (Berlant 2011; Bryant and Knight 2019; Massumi 1995). The “vernacular timespace” of emptiness lay somewhere between affective orientations toward a radically different future and a conceptual framework of modernity inherited from the past (Bryant and Knight 2019, 23).

The radically different future anticipated in the Latvian countryside entailed a separation of people and place. Everyone was sure that people and places will have a future, but not together. Emptiness thus stood for a transitional state between a world that was coming to an end and a world yet to come. The contours of the new world were not yet visible, save for some glimpses of possible scenarios in the imagination of my interlocutors. Most of these scenarios included some form of takeover: Danish farmers or Chinese businesses would displace rural residents, or wild
nature would take over their abandoned homes (Dzenovska 2011a). While my interlocutors were anticipating the new but not yet visible world, emptiness was becoming a lasting state of affairs with its own internal dynamics. It is still ongoing.

Emptiness in the Latvian countryside is a complex social formation—at once an observable reality, a way of life, and a term that people use to describe their lives. It is also a powerful lens for analyzing novel relations between capital, the state, people, and place. At first glance, emptiness
might seem like simply more of the same. After all, cycles of growth and decline are envisaged in mainstream economic theories. And, according to Marxist analysis (Harvey 2006), uneven spatial development is a central feature of capitalism. But the form and scale of postsocialist emptiness suggest significant transformations in the spatial and ideological dimensions of contemporary capitalism and political power. These transformations turn some places,
such as global cities (Sassen 2005), into sites of intense connectivity where the future is made. Other places, meanwhile, such as rural towns and villages, become sites of disconnectivity that experience the future as made elsewhere (Ferguson 1999; Schwenkel 2014; Vaccaro, Harper, and Murray 2016). Most importantly, there are no political ideologies that promise to overcome this spatial inequality. It is within such constraints that my interlocutors make life go on and pursue their futures.

**Capitalism after socialism**

In Mazciems, a village that emerged in the middle of the 19th century next to a railway station on the St. Petersburg–Warsaw line, residents continually describe their world as emptying. Most of them agree that rural-to-urban youth migration started already in the Soviet period, and that the number of railway workers began to decrease in late 1980s as the railway became more automated. But it was in the 1990s, when capitalism returned to the Latvian countryside, that there began a process of “true emptying”—meaning a multifaceted, radical reconfiguration of the social and material relations that compose present lives and the anticipated futures that shape them.

Latvia existed as an independent republic from 1918 to 1940, when it was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was widely perceived by ethnic Latvians as a form of liberation from Soviet occupation and its restrictions on personal freedoms, suppression of national self-determination, and large-scale industrialization (accompanied by the in-migration of Russian speakers and the purposeful Russification of the population). More than that, for ethnic Latvians, the fall of the Soviet Union was not something that happened to them but something that they had actively brought about through struggles for freedom. Thus, contrary to the “break of consciousness” described by Alexei Yurchak (2005) in his ethnography of the late-Soviet generation in Russia’s main cities or the “moral vacuum” described by Serguei Oushakine (2009) in his ethnography of postsocialist life in Barnaul, Latvians knew just what to do after the Soviet Union fell: return to the interrupted pre–World War II model of capitalism and national independence.

Socialism had not been the same everywhere, and neither was postsocialist capitalism. The historically specific form of capitalism that emerged in the Latvian countryside after independence was simultaneously post-Soviet, nationalist, neoliberal, and European. Rural residents were to become at once responsible entrepreneurs and loyal members of the Latvian nation. They were to rely not on the state but on themselves and on grants and subsidies from the European Union (Dzenovska 2007, 2011a, 2018b; see also Ozolina-Fitzgerald 2010). Political and economic freedom in the borderlands meant geopolitical reorientation from East to West and the closure of Latvia’s Russian border, which would now signify more than a national border and represent the easternmost border of the European Union (Dzenovska 2018a).

Guided by foreign economic advisers, the Latvian government set out to reinstate the interwar (1918–40) property regime, privatizing state enterprises to correct the historical injustice of Soviet collectivization and to create the conditions in which a capitalist market could reemerge (Aistara 2018; Eglits 2010; Mah 2012; Ringel 2018; Schwartz 2006; Verdery 2003). In rural areas, this meant returning land and buildings to their original owners or their descendants according to archival evidence; collective farms were dismantled and their resources privatized. In a rush to regain property and distribute resources, the new capitalists impeded productive activity. Collective farms were dismantled piecemeal. In one village where I conducted fieldwork, one person got the horse, another the cart. Factories of nearby towns were privatized, but most did not manage to shift to sustainable production because privatization efforts had been botched, existing supply chains had been severed, and they could not access and compete in the global market. As a result, there were few viable business opportunities with sufficient access to markets and almost no jobs outside municipal offices and incoming supermarkets, which, given the declining productive activity, became the main suppliers of everything from nails to produce (Dries, Reardon, and Swinnen 2004). Labor migration remained restricted in the early post-Soviet years—although exit restrictions were lifted, entry into Western labor markets was not yet open. Income-generated capital was hard to come by, and rural residents relied on credit, EU grants, and, after Latvia joined the EU in 2004, subsidies. Taken together, decollectivization, privatization, fragmentation of resources, lack of capital, and rapid neoliberal marketization meant that private entrepreneurial activity could not fill the gap created by the disappearance of state enterprises. There were far too few successful and labor-intensive businesses to absorb the rural labor force.

Joining the European Union in 2004 enabled free labor movement to the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden (the other EU member states opened their labor markets in 2011), and people began to leave. The 2008 financial crisis further pushed down wages, destroyed businesses, and placed an unbearable burden on those with credit obligations. This accelerated emigration, which came to be known as the Great Departure (Dzenovska 2013). It was not only young people but also their often highly educated parents and grandparents who left for the cabbage fields of England or the strawberry fields of Norway. Those who stayed cobbled together an existence from a variety of sources—part-time work, subsistence farming, leasing out the unused land of regained farmsteads, EU grants and subsidies, welfare payments, informal and cross-border trade,
remittances, fast credit, and more. In many cases, people’s income was too low to sustain the regained houses and land, which many experienced as a burden rather than an asset (Verdery 2003). People survived but felt disconnected from the global circuits of capital and political power.

These same circuits enabled other people to arrive. Among those who came were Danish farmers who bought land from speculators or from impoverished rural residents, hoping to establish large-scale industrial hog and grain farming. In the locals’ imaginary, this involved turning their living space into an unlivable zone of industrial production. Rural residents believed that capitalism was bound to complete the destruction that socialism had begun but could not complete because of its inherent inefficiencies. For example, when Danish farmers expressed surprise that locals objected to hog farming, even though there had been hog farms in the area during the Soviet period, locals responded that there had been only a limited number of pigs on Soviet collective farms, whereas “the Danes” were planning to increase production beyond what their living space could tolerate (Dzenovska 2011a). Moreover, “the Danes” and the locals operated according to different models of capitalism. Whereas “the Danes” planned to reinvest profit and grow capital in a linear model of accumulation, the locals relied on cyclical flows of grants and subsides and prepared to “take the money” when it appeared (Dzenovska 2011a). All in all, there were too many conflicts and tensions, and many of the Danish farmers have since left.

Taken together, capitalism after socialism produced a palpable and radical change that locals describe as “emptying” (L: tukšošanās) or “emptiness” (L: tukšums). The term refers to concrete shifts in material and social relations that make up lives. It does so by interpreting the present vis-à-vis imaginaries of futures lost—or “futures past” (Koselleck 2004) and futures anticipated, if unknown (Bryant and Knight 2019). Moreover, these imaginaries of the future, both lost and anticipated, draw on imaginaries shared by Soviet and Western modernization projects. Historically, the notion of emptiness lent force and meaning to a variety of modernizing projects. Nineteenth- and 20th-century colonial powers used the trope of empty lands (or terra nullius) to launch expeditions of exploration, conquest, and development from the Russian North to the American West, from sub-Saharan Africa to Canada (Geisler 2012; Harding 2014; Slezkine 1994; Sparke 1998). Those found living in the “empty lands” were “people without history” and therefore subject to civilizing efforts (Wolf 2010). Twentieth-century theorists recognized that progress came with destruction, thus producing—rather than conquering—emptiness, both material and existential (e.g., Benjamin 1998; Schumpeter 2008). Today, some scholars reflecting on global capitalism suggest that humanity may soon face an apocalyptic scenario brought about by our impact on the environment (marking a new geological era called the Anthropocene) or by a radically destructive version of capitalism (Capitalocene) (Latour et al. 2018). The apocalyptic strands in the imaginaries of the future connect with creation myths that posit chaos and nothingness as preceding order or following its demise. Emptiness was there in the beginning and may return at the end. But what does it mean to experience it in the present?

Emptiness in the Latvian countryside is informed by and conjures up this rich archive of meanings and associations, but it is also historically specific. For example, the present-day Latvian countryside is not a place deemed empty and nonmodern by carriers of progress who wish to bring left-behind people and places into history and civilization. Rather, it is the locals themselves who speak of Latvia as empty and emptying, and they draw on experiences of Soviet modernization when they diagnose the present as such. To be sure, Soviet modernization entailed its own share of “emptying”: the state deported “enemies of the people” in the post–World War II period, and it resettled people from single farmsteads to the centers of “villages of an urban type”; later, rural people migrated to urban areas in hopes of achieving social mobility. But at no point did people experience emptiness as the dominant modality of collective life, because the Soviet state filled the gaps. In the postwar period, the empty homes of “enemies of the people” were given to new residents, often migrants from other parts of the Soviet Union. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Soviet government took measures to slow down rural-to-urban migration by modernizing agriculture and urbanizing rural villages with the aim of providing rural populations with an “urban-style” standard of living (Zaslavskaya and Korel 1984). This involved separating production and residential areas by building apartment complexes in the countryside, paving village roads, boosting social life and educational opportunities, and requiring that urban-educated professionals spend two years working in rural areas, which often led to marriage and settlement.

Much of Soviet modernity’s built environment is now decaying. Abandoned collective farm buildings, unfinished apartment blocks (see Figure 3), and roads paved only through the village center are seen by many of Latvia’s residents, especially urban elites, as monuments to the inefficiency and failure of the Soviet state (Gupta 2018; Lahusen 2006; Schwenkel 2018). For those expelled from the circuits of global capital and care of the state in the post-Soviet period (Sassen 2014), however, Soviet ruins stand as reminders of futures past. Buildings, however poorly constructed, had been inhabited. They produced sociality, whether through attempts to maintain and repair them or through their everyday use (Humphrey 2005; Schwenkel 2013). Thus, Latvia’s residents, especially in the countryside, relate to the Soviet legacy in a contradictory way. On the one hand, they comment on the failures of Soviet modernity, especially in relation to its Western counterpart, which
many refer to as simply the West (L: Rietumi) (Schönle 2015, 654; Schwenkel 2013, 267). On the other hand, they value the lives they lived during the Soviet period, in relation to which it is post-Soviet capitalism that looks like a failure. Either way, the future is the end of the world as they know it.

The futures of emptiness

Among those who understand the future as an end-of-the-world scenario, there is a range of individual temporal orientations. People try, as Felix Ringel (2016) has argued, to trick time. Some people pursue futures past by moving in space (Dzenovska 2018a), some work to maintain the future as a little bit more of the present (Dzenovska 2018a; Ringel 2014), and some enjoy the freedom that comes with the end of the world.

Ninety-two-year-old Milda is the oldest resident of Mazciems, the village that was a vibrant transportation hub during the Soviet period. Residents recall “wagons of watermelons” that passed through, crowds of summer residents (R: dachniki) from Leningrad, and “the world’s tastiest doughnuts [R: ponchiki]” in the station’s buffet. Things have changed since then, the locals say. Now everything is “empty” (L: tukšs). The last passenger train passed through two years ago. There is no work, and the store has closed. Only a few homes are occupied. In the summer of 2018, I asked Milda when the best time of her life was. “Now,” she replied. Her parents died when she was very young. Her teenage years were ravaged by war. For most of her adult life, she worked as a secretary of the village soviet and sang in the district’s folk choir. Her husband drank too much and died early. Now Milda was enjoying life. She moved across the yard with a skip in her step, but the world around her was getting emptier by the day. “There used to be 30 cows [in the village],” said Milda, “but now there is one.”

Milda’s daughter, granddaughter, and great-grandson live in England. On Milda’s shelf, next to the Soviet awards for dedicated labor, stand photographs of a small boy from
another world. He is wearing a velvet jacket and a fancy tie. He does not speak Latvian, but he can say one phrase in Latvian: “Great-grandmother, I love you very much! [Vecvecmamma, es Tevi joti milu]” While Milda is having the time of her life, her world is simultaneously shrinking and expanding. On the one hand, there are fewer cows, people, and homes around her. On the other, her world now extends all the way to England, where her family lives. Her village seems to be losing its future while the futures of her family members are multiple, dispersed, and, to Milda, mysterious. She lives fully in the present, for her own future is arranged: she makes sure that everyone knows that the empty space next to her husband’s grave in the local cemetery is hers (see Figure 4).

For other residents, preparing for the end of the world means managing the area’s emptying out today. Residents need to be moved out of crumbling houses. The elderly need to be cared for, especially in the winter, when few visitors come. Even the people who talk about emptying as the end of the world make life happen from one day to the next. They plant potatoes, weed flowerbeds, and fix floors. When the head of the municipality demands it, some reluctantly go to public meetings to discuss local development plans. But development no longer means moving toward the future prosperity promised by the “post-socialist transition” and European integration. Rather, it unfolds in the temporality of what Ringel (2014, 2018) has termed “enforced presentism,” namely maintaining life—and infrastructure—without any certainty that it will go on (Berlant 2007, 759; Dzenovska 2018a). This means keeping up buildings, such as the local school, that are no longer used for their original purpose but that cannot be allowed to decay, either because people fear losing the cultural heart of the community or simply because European Union funds had been used to renovate it (Dzenovska 2018a).

The funding-based and growth-oriented logic of development plans is coming into tension with the pragmatics of emptiness. The head of the municipality says

Figure 4. The grave of an elderly woman’s husband, with the empty space next to it reserved for her, Mazciems, Latvia, August 2019. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]
that the biggest challenge in Mazciems, which is about 85 percent empty, is to collect property taxes and figure out what to do with the crumbling buildings. This is because it is unclear who owns some of the abandoned buildings. In juridical language, they are “buildings of undetermined ownership.” The last lawful building residents from the Soviet era may have had the right to privatize their buildings, but many failed to complete the privatization process because they lacked money or interest, or had emigrated. Such potential owners and their whereabouts are recorded not in the land register but in social memory. This memory is disappearing as neighbors die or leave. The local government lacks the resources to locate the rightful owners to demand that the buildings be maintained or demolished. And they do not have the resources to dismantle the buildings themselves. Yet, unlike eastern Germany’s formally designated “shrinking cities,” which receive government resources to undertake demolition (Ringel 2018; Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012), Latvia’s rural municipalities draw up development plans that “look like long lists of infrastructure maintenance plans,” said a Mazciems development consultant in 2011. In 2019, when I asked about the development visions built into the new planning cycle, the deputy head of the county exclaimed, “What vision?” After a pause and with a note of irony, he added, “There is enough room in the cemetery.”

Places that had been intensively territorialized during the Soviet period—that is, subjected to socialist planning and infrastructure development with the aim of increasing productivity and population—are becoming deterritorialized. In some cases, municipalities have removed villages from their official maps, thanks to the disappearance of the village’s residents, their crumbling buildings, and their deteriorating infrastructure. Since 2001, when the Latvian State Land Register began to collect information about such villages taken off the map, the number of villages in Latvia has decreased by 2,770, or 32 percent (from 8,547 in 2011 to 6,314 in 2018) (Ambote 2018). Villages, defined as territorial units with concentrated and planned residential buildings, infrastructure, and continuously residing people, are being dissolved as territorial units or integrated into larger units as localized problems. While they do not form a hole on the map, they no longer serve as coordinates on the map through which territory is conceived.

Deterritorialization—as disappearance from the map—haunts locals as a terrible future possibility. In 2011, when the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Latvia conducted a national census, Inta, a census taker in Mazciems and the head of Mazciems’s municipality, said that she was shocked to find out how many homes stood empty. We sat by her desk looking at a detailed wall-sized map of the area unfolded on the table. Inta showed me which roads she had taken to carry out her census duties. We followed the road with a finger, stopping by all the houses marked on the map, while Inta commented, “Nobody lives here, nobody here, nobody there, nobody . . . OK, one family lives here . . . again, nobody, that house has fallen apart, my grandmother lives here, here nobody, nobody.” Inta continued, “Here, in this cluster of homes, there is one old woman. She is scared to live there. When I asked her if she could go and live with her kids, she started crying. She did not have anybody. I felt nauseous.”

A few years later, in 2014, a woman I will call Ilze bought two houses in Mazciems—one for her family and one for her brother’s family. Inta’s mood improved. When I talked with Inta in the summer of 2018, she recalled the time of the 2011 census, a time when she had tried to avoid going to Mazciems because it was too depressing. She said she now went there more often because of Ilze’s family and two elderly brothers who had retired to their childhood home and were slowly renovating it. “It’s not that life is back,” she said, “but there seems to be a pulse.” Ilze bought the houses for 200 euros each, but she first had to spend lots of time and some money to establish who the buildings’ legal owners were in order to complete the privatization process. She moved her family to the village because up until then they had lived in a small Soviet-style apartment in the urbanized center of another rural village. She offered beauty services to women from the nearby town and delivered mail for the Latvian postal service. Her husband was working abroad. When I talked with Ilze in the summer of 2018, she said she was thinking about quitting her job with the postal service because it cost her more than she was paid. Ilze had to use her own car to deliver mail, and the formula used by the Latvian postal service to calculate expenses did not cover the damage done to the car by country roads. The Latvian postal service did not invest in equipment to service the sparsely populated countryside, preferring to outsource it to the remaining rural residents. Finding this too burdensome, Ilze hoped to get by with the money she earned as a beautician. But she was reluctant to quit the mail delivery job because “who else is going to deliver those few newspapers and letters to the old ladies?” Just like the shop on wheels that services village residents with little profit and the retired nurse who tends neighbors’ wounds, Ilze felt she had become part of a makeshift family, which required her to continue working a burdensome job. And yet, by the end of the summer, Ilze left for Germany to care for the elderly for 2,000 euros a month. Her presence had created a sense of life returning to the village, but it was fleeting. The future of the village remains oriented to the death or departure of both the remaining residents and the village itself (Bryant and Knight 2019; Dzenovska 2019).

When I bade Milda farewell in September 2018 after a summer of fieldwork, she said, “God willing, I will see you in the spring.” In the fall, the few summer residents—usually former full-time village residents who have moved in with their urbanite children—return to the city. This is also the
time when the death toll is the highest, Inta told me. “Old people go with the leaves,” she said. “Later on, in December, death takes those it left behind during the year.”

I visited Milda in December 2018. The village seemed lonely and desolate (see Figure 5). But as I was approaching Milda’s house, I ran into her former folk choir colleagues, who had come from the nearby town to cheer her up with a winter solstice ritual called budēji. There was a flurry of dance steps, music, warmth, and laughter in the midst of the empty village’s winter landscape. It seemed that things were not so bad, that emptying proceeded in fits and starts, and that, while persistent, it was also uneven. This uneven dynamic of emptying lent force to competing and contested representations of life in the Latvian countryside and across the former socialist spaces.

**Representing emptiness**

Mazciems and other emptying villages and towns in the Latvian borderlands near Russia and Belarus are not alone. The thinning of social and material relations that make up lives and places is an increasingly common state of affairs across the former socialist states of Eurasia and eastern Europe. One indication of this is the intensified circulation of popular and scholarly narratives of postsocialist emptiness, which have been used to discuss the abandoned Chernobyl disaster area (K. Brown 2015), deindustrialized Russian “monotowns” (single-industry towns; Mah 2012), a rapidly depopulating eastern Europe (Romei 2016), the war-torn “wastelands” of eastern Ukraine (Cohen 2016), ruined industrial buildings in Hungary (Premiyak 2018), and eastern Germany’s shrinking cities (Ringel 2018).

Popular and policy representations of emptying in the former socialist world tend to link it to systemic endings, that is, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of eastern European socialisms. Many post-Soviet economic reformers, especially in the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, where neoliberal restructuring was most radical (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, 96), see postsocialist emptiness as an inevitable outcome, a correction of socialist
modernity's erroneously conceived organization of political and economic life, itself based on erroneous conceptions of human nature (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016, 690). Development specialists and policy makers in Latvia think of emptying as a necessary cleansing after decades of artificial and inefficient economic activity within the confines of the Soviet command economy. For example, a high-level official at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me in 2011 that rural emptying is simply a form of catching up with the West. In his account, the rural-to-urban migration that took place in western Europe in the 1970s was impeded in Latvia and the rest of the Soviet bloc by artificial socialist efforts to prevent it. Now, in conditions of capitalist freedom, “nature,” that is, market economy, is taking its course.

Whether in the register of nostalgia or ridicule, there is language available for describing the end of socialism and its ruins. Many stories and images of abandoned socialist industrial complexes or towns circulate in the global public discourse (e.g., Litchfield 2014; Premiyak 2018; Romei 2016). They invite reflection on the place of ruination in modernity and attest to the modern subject’s attraction and attachment to ruins (e.g., Boym 2011; Gordillo 2014; Lahusen 2006; Mah 2014; Schönle 2015; Stoler 2008; Szmagalska-Follis 2008, 346). By observing ruination, the modern subject constitutes itself as a witness to the irreversibility of time and the contingency and unpredictability of the future (Boym 2011). Observing ruination, the modern subject remains unscathed, somehow able not only to withstand ruination but also to reconstitute itself anew. This is even more the case when the ruins are not the subject’s own but those of a system that has collapsed, taking along infrastructure—factories and hospitals, schools and prisons. In observing the ruins of Soviet modernity, the subject emerges as the modern Western subject, whether or not that subject position is occupied by a citizen of the former socialist world or of “the West.”

I observed inhabitants of the emptying Latvian countryside resenting such ways of seeing. The people who lived and talked about emptiness every day were reluctant to embrace representations of emptiness that they perceived as a diagnosis from the outside. For example, people in Mazciems were critical of a Reuters photographer who arrived in the area in 2011 to take pictures of emptiness to accompany news stories about emigration and depopulation. As the photographer put it himself, he wanted to capture emptiness with images of abandoned homes “where the morning cup of coffee is still on the table and the stove is warm,” that is, through the ruins of a life. Inta and I accompanied the photographer on his quest. We spent a long time driving around the surrounding area, and once in a while Inta inquired somewhat mockingly, “Well, have we given you what you were looking for?”

But living emptiness was not outside the realm of representation; those who lived it grappled with making sense of it and representing it to themselves and others. In 2017, I accompanied two men in their mid-30s on an “expedition” (L: ekspedīcija), as they called it, to Mazciems’s abandoned houses that had fallen under the care of the municipality. One of the men was a musician with an interest in local history. His family had lived in a now-abandoned railway workers’ house built in the middle of the 19th century. His mother had moved to the nearby town some years earlier, whereas he now lived in another town about an hour’s drive away. The other young man was a politician and an employee of the local municipality. Some of his childhood friends came from the village, and now the empty houses fell within his sphere of responsibility as the municipality’s environmental inspector. Both men wanted to go on the expedition because they simply wanted “to see what’s in there.” Near the railway station there was an empty house divided into three apartments; as we approached it, the house came to life through the men’s memories. The musician told us that children were once afraid to go near one end of the house because an aggressive drunkard lived there. He recalled that the drunkard died in his bed and lay there for a day or two, and children tried to sneak into the apartment to finally look at the man, with fear not of his anger but of death. Once we entered this and other houses, the men sorted through the abandoned objects that spoke of times they either remembered or had heard about from their parents. To get in, they broke down doors, moved rubble, and took pictures. I took pictures of their pictures, and together we produced representations of emptiness that were both multilayered and embedded, proximate and distant (see Figure 6).

Interpretations and representations of emptiness were also contested politically at the time of my fieldwork and continue to be contested to this day. Development consultants, successful entrepreneurs, members of the political establishment, the emerging middle class, and liberal media outlets prefer “success stories” (L: veiksmes stāsti) of individual entrepreneurs over stories of collective emptiness. They attribute talk of emptiness to a widespread pessimistic disposition among the Latvian population—a disposition that, they think, holds back not just individuals but the country as a whole, reflecting a lack of personal initiative and responsibility that characterized the so-called Soviet mentality (Ozolina-Fitzgerald 2010). On occasion, Latvian media outlets link reports of emptiness to the Russian propaganda machine, which produces stories about how hard life is in Latvia and implicitly connects this to the country’s accession to the European Union (e.g., Antonevičs 2017). Stories of emptiness tend to be uncomfortable, perhaps even a bit dangerous, in the Latvian public sphere, because there are no politically legitimate ideological frames for interpreting them (Dzenovska 2016c; see also Zarycky 2014). Until the establishment of the Progressives, a new left-wing party, in 2017, there was no legitimate left-leaning
political discourse that could question the neoliberal frame without risking association with Russia. Geopolitical tensions thus overdetermined public discourse and relegated some aspects of the social and material reality to the realm of the unspeakable.10

In the public sphere, the rhetoric of emptying continues to be countered by stories of successful individual entrepreneurship that are preferred by liberal national elites (e.g., in the weekly magazine *Ir*). Such stories implicitly suggest that the emptying of Latvia’s towns and villages is a matter of perspective rather than a troubling material and social reality, as it is perceived by those who live it. There are thus two visions of what is happening in Latvian towns, cities, and villages—one focusing on emptying as a collective and tragic state of affairs, the other on successful individual entrepreneurship taken to stand for the good health of the nation and the state. The two visions are disconnected from each other and mapped onto subjects with different socioeconomic statuses, levels of education, political inclinations, and worldviews. Very few people recognize that successful entrepreneurship unfolds alongside emptying and that emptiness is, in fact, the product of post–Cold War logics of capital accumulation and statecraft. For example, small-scale farming may provide for subsistence, but it does not result in substantive capital accumulation and, in most cases, has to be propped up by European Union subsidies and grant schemes (Gray 2000). For profitable large-scale farming to be established, the landscape must be emptied of single farmsteads that were reinstated after the fall of the Soviet Union in the process of decollectivization (e.g., Eglitis 2010; Verdery 2003).

People seem to lack a language for talking about emptiness as the product of the post–Cold War reterritorialization of power, in the course of which the state, capital, and people leave some places and concentrate in others, such as global cities, while new forms of governance are extended to the empty places. In fact, there is no sufficient language for talking about the emerging global divide between sites of concentrated relations, such as global cities, and sites of thinning relations, such as abandoned towns and villages.
The striking feature of the spatio-political power is that it is connected to the rich, and the country to the city, are changing. These explanations, however, remain too attached to the nation-state frame; emptiness can be fully grasped only if one considers the broader spatial and temporal patterns of contemporary capitalism and political power. In this new dispensation, capital and statecraft are concentrated in global cities while in-between spaces—and people—become sites of resource extraction or are abandoned to their own devices (Gille 2007; Vas- antkumar 2017). The striking feature of the spatio-temporal configuration of contemporary capitalism—and the resulting emptying in the Latvian countryside—is that it is delinked from narratives of progress and from attempts to incorporate people and places as resources and beneficiaries into circuits of global capital. Nobody is promising better futures to those living in the emptying villages—at least not if they stay put—because the people and places do not have a future together. Those who cannot start successful businesses—the only form of employment imagined by development planners and national elites—must leave. A capitalism that depends on adding value through financial speculation rather than productive activity is incompatible with rural areas thickly populated with thriving—rather than indebted—small-scale entrepreneurs. Small-scale entrepreneurship tends to be profitable only if it produces high-value niche products for export rather than for local consumption. Moreover, opportunities for migration abound. Thus, it is hard to imagine how to reverse the emptying of Latvia (or that of Bulgaria and Russia; Hannahan 2019; Pokrovsky and Nefedova 2015; Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2014). It is precisely for this reason that development plans in Mazciems resemble plans for maintaining infrastructure. In the future, they are likely to turn into plans for managing emptiness.

Similarly, nobody is promising to care for people who remain in the emptying places. The state’s need for people and the nation’s need for the right kind of people cannot counter the marketization of most spheres of life and the spatial reconfigurations effected by contemporary capitalism (W. Brown 2015; Sassen 2014). This is a significant paradigm shift. In Western social and political thought and practice, there have been different ideological and practical mechanisms for keeping people in place and for caring for the marginalized. At different times, they have been constructed according to particular understandings of labor, nation, morality, social order, and geopolitics. At the outset of industrialization, capital needed some of the peasants freed from servitude and land as free labor, even as many others migrated. In the rapidly growing cities, the urban poor constituted a threat as a rotting part of the social body and thus needed to be cared for. At home and abroad, the poor were prone to sympathize with radical movements, so the governing elites responded by improving their lives to avert the threat. This response was exemplified by the post–World War II European welfare state and the Cold War international development apparatus, which are no longer operative. The material, moral, social, and political ties by which people were kept in place and the poor were connected to the rich, and the country to the city, are changing.

The significance of postsocialist emptiness

Rural-to-urban migration, depopulation, ruination, and abandonment are not new in the history of capitalist industrialization and modernization. They tend to be folded into theorizations of capitalist development as inherently messy. Some of these theoretical frameworks remain influential, such as Joseph Schumpeter’s (2008) notion of “creative destruction,” which posits that progress comes with destruction. As a result, policy makers labor to prevent downturns within assumed cycles of capitalist development by fiscal regulation, attraction of foreign investment, or improvement of social policy. Yet these established understandings of capitalism and state-based policy measures obscure the specific relationship between current-day emptying and larger historical processes.

The emptying taking place in the Latvian countryside and across the former socialist space is not simply a case of delayed urbanization on the path of progress and development. It is not only young people’s rural-to-urban migration that is emptying the countryside, but also “transstatal” rural-to-rural migration of the middle-aged and the elderly who cannot secure lives and futures in their places of residence (Verdery 1994). In this sense, it is more akin to late 19th- and early 20th-century European migrations to lands of new opportunity rather than mid-20th-century urbanization (Zahra 2016). There are two main differences, however. First, the final destinations are not new frontiers to be incorporated into the global economy, but sites still protected from wholesale “expulsions” from circuits of capital and care of the state; such expulsions are increasingly common under conditions of finance capitalism (Dzenovska 2018a; Sassen 2014). Second, the current-day emptying gains force and meaning in relation to “spaces of experience” and “horizons of expectations” of post–World War II welfare states in the West and Soviet socialist modernity in the East (Koselleck 2004).

From a more critical perspective, it may seem obvious that the factors contributing to postsocialist emptying are the post–Cold War geopolitical reorientation, the neoliberalization of the economy and the state, and the (re)establishment of the national state. These explanations, however, remain too attached to the nation-state frame; emptiness can be fully grasped only if one considers the broader spatial and temporal patterns of contemporary capitalism and political
In the context of 19th- and 20th-century modernity, whether capitalist or socialist, the countryside could not be allowed to decay lest the city suffer, and the poor could not be allowed to fall ill lest the rich be affected (Poovey 1995). This led to the adoption of progressive social policies. Today, in contrast, the emerging logic is one of distance and disconnection. Social and material disconnection is expressed spatially and vice versa; that is, the distance is growing between sites of concentrated relations, such as global cities, and sites of thin relations, such as empty villages.

This is to say that contemporary emptying is not part of routine cycles of capitalism; it is, rather, a product of the novel reterritorialization of economic and political power that entails the departure of capital (e.g., the disappearance of jobs) and statecraft (e.g., the dismantling of infrastructure and social security provisions). In the case of Latvia, as part of the European Union’s economic and political periphery (which is at the same time the frontier of the “international liberal order” in its confrontation with Russia), what is striking is that the reterritorialization of economic and political power sunders people from place. In other parts of the globe—for example, Africa and Latin America—global governing actors are working to keep people in place and prevent them from moving, lest they threaten the fragile good life in Western liberal democracies (Landau 2019). But it is postsocialist emptying in particular that brings into sharp focus the novel global spatiotemporal arrangements of economic and political power (Graan 2013). The fall of socialism unleashed a brutal form of capitalism. If market forces in Western liberal democracies were once mitigated by the welfare state, in postsocialist Latvia such counterforces did not exist. The formerly socialist people and places were subject to the most radical neoliberal reforms with the most radical consequences. The result was not only the expulsion of significant numbers of people from circuits of capital and care of the state, but also a radical spatial reconfiguration shaped by neoliberal futures and anticipated endings of familiar worlds (Guyer 2007).

**In the interstices of the old world and the new**

In the meantime, a specific form of life has emerged in the Latvian countryside. Amid empty homes and decaying infrastructure, people are reconfiguring social and material relations to maintain life for a little bit longer. Jobs are taken on and services provided not only because of income or profit, but also—and sometimes mainly—because someone, such as the postal worker in Mazciems, has to do them. Retired nurses care for elderly neighbors, while elderly neighbors care for lonely alcoholics. These concrete practices of care are not hope amid ruins, as the anthropology of hope would have it (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018; Jansen 2014), because there is no vision or tangible possibility of an alternative future or of building another world. Rather, such practices make life possible in the meantime, that is, between the death of the old world and the birth of a new. Since it is impossible to know what will come next, they are grounds for neither hope nor despair.

As a specific form of life, emptiness also requires different modes of government. Instead of planning for a better future, state and local officials have to plan for an unknown future. Communal buildings, such as schools, have to be repurposed, though this is not easy, since there is little demand for alternative use. Decisions have to be made about what to do with roads that lead nowhere. Summer residents and urban retirees usually do not reach the furthest corners of Latvia’s borderlands, but if they do, they do not make up for the loss of people. When and if they reach the villages, there may be little public infrastructure left. Managing emptiness is a new and—for most—unfamiliar logic of governance.

As a historically specific formation, emptiness must be considered on its own terms, not within discursive frames from different historical moments. The latter depict the emptying towns and villages as left-behind places that should be reintegrated into global circuits of economic and political power or as sites of world-making that conjure up hopes for alternative futures. But emptiness is not an aberration that comes before or after the good life. It is an increasingly widespread form of life shaped by an affective orientation toward an unknown but radically different future. In anthropology, emptiness is best used as a “portable analytic” (Howe and Boyer 2015), that is, not as an abstract and easily definable concept, but as a complex social formation that can be moved to other historical contexts. As such, the concept retains all its empirical richness, allowing anthropologists to comparatively analyze the shifting contours of global capitalism, state power, and associated ideologies.

**Notes**

**Acknowledgments.** For comments on earlier versions of the article, I thank Yuri Slezkine, Larisa Kurtović, Daniel Knight, Ruben Andersson, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *American Ethnologist*. For fruitful discussions, I thank panel participants at the conferences of the European Association of Social Anthropologists and the Association of Social Anthropologists. Research for this article was financed by the University of Oxford’s John Fell Fund and the University of Latvia’s European Social Fund (project no. 2009/0222/1DP/1.1.1.2.0/09/APIA/VIAA/1087).

1. Throughout this article, I use the abbreviation R to mark words and phrases in Russian, and L to mark those in Latvian.
2. A longer version of this story appeared in Dzenovska 2011b.
3. This is according to unpublished data provided by Toms Altbergs, industrial heritage expert on the Latvian railway, email message to author, August 28, 2018.
4. Whereas China’s abandoned villages have been described as “rural voids” (Driessen 2018), emptiness in the Latvian-Russian borderlands is a way of life that emerges even as places lose their constitutive elements.
5. Affect, as Brian Massumi (1995, 88) has pointed out, is embodied intensity through which people apprehend the world in all its complexity through qualifying it semantically and thus simplifying it (see also Connolly 2005). This embodied intensity is socially formed through the sedimentation of previous experiences and their representations, but it also incorporates new experiences that are not yet processed discursively. Thus, the anticipated future is lived affectively before it can be formulated in words (Berlant 2011, 547; see also Bryant and Knight 2019).

6. Mazciems is a pseudonym, as are all other place-names and personal names in the article.

7. The following two paragraphs were first published as part of American Ethnologist's collection on orientations to the future (Dzenovska 2019).

8. The Shrink Smart project is an example of one such effort; http://www.shrinksmart.eu/.

9. Popular uses of the term deterritorialization have been criticized for wrongly conceptualizing territory as pertaining to nation-states, rather than as a particular way of seeing space as calculable (Elden 2005). In my case, however, villages are indeed effectively being deterritorialized insofar as they are excluded from particular territorial visions.

10. Similar processes and discussions are taking place in Russia. For example, the Russian Council of Experts on Small Territories recently hosted a discussion on whether the emptying of monotonous and rural villages should be considered a case of “managed shrinking” or a threat to the territorial state requiring frontier resettlement (ESMT 2019).

11. In the interstices of global metabolises, cities generally tend to fare a little better than the countryside. For example, some eastern European cities, especially in eastern Germany, have been named “shrinking cities” and are managed through frameworks of “smart shrinking” or “smart decline.” Rural areas tend to be dismissed as “nature taking its course” or as simply uninteresting—that is, until they reappear on the radar of governing elites as seats of illiberal populism, as in the case of Brexit (Green 2016; Kalb 2019), or as havens for a variety of other “monsters,” such as right-wing organizations (Muehlebach 2016).

References


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