

# Anthropology Book Forum

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**AIMÉE JOYCE**, 2024, *Spectral Borders: History, neighbourliness and discord on the Polish-Belarusian frontier*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 207 pp, ISBN 9781912385522

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How to live comfortably in a place haunted by traumatic events? How are lives lived, day-to-day, in a place that entails more than what meets the eye, where you need to know how to speak, where to go and what to say in order to be a good neighbour, but you feel and know things that make relations difficult and where at the same time organisational forces of the state and the ghosts of the past operate? The place, that on the one hand is a changing tourist landscape clearly following goals of EU-sponsored development, which exploits difference by making it “attractive,” and on the other hand an incredibly complex, multi-layered space inhabited by many entities of which currently breathing people are just one among many? How to deal with those very divergent ways of being in one space?

I reached for Aimee Joyce’s book encouraged by the Preface, in which Joyce positions her work in the context of the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border since 2021 and the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which for many observers are interconnected events. And although at the end of the day, neither the contemporary state border, movement across it, nor the war have much presence in the arguments pursued by Joyce, a reader has a feeling that the ethnography of the small town (in the book called Bielo) does help her to understand the situation on the border and in the broadly understood region better.

The book is divided into an Introduction, Conclusion and six chapters. Each chapter and the Introduction start from an “ethnographic vignette,” that is, a description of an encounter, conversation or a place, which brings the reader directly into the topic – a very efficient way of capturing and focusing attention.

The Introduction presents the basic notions of the book and focuses on neighbourliness and spectres. There is the third notion as well, which Joyce presents as central to her book and which is also present in the title: a border. Still I feel that this notion is at the end of the day of a limited use; much more adequate would be the one of borderland, for reasons to which I refer below. Border as a notion is applied in a broad sense, and any differentiation becomes an instance of (b)ordering. This is undoubtedly the case, but of little analytical value. Neighbourliness and spectre are on the other hand are crucial and thoroughly addressed in the Introduction and throughout the book. Joyce follows this type of hauntological studies, where ghost are interconnected with concrete impacts of organisational forces. Ghosts do not have to be seen as present in direct fashion, as separate and somewhat perceivable entities; instead those are things, moments, details

that draw attention to unspeakable traumatic pasts and also incomplete, no-longer-possible or unlikely futures of the region. They are potentials: lost or still present, enabling certain futures but also restraining what is possible.

Chapter 1 is chiefly methodological and its content is revealed in a subtitle: *Working with Fragments, Trances and Absences*. Joyce reflects on ethics and strategies of dealing with temptations which are present in many ethnographic works – not on a declarative level but really in ethnographic practice: how to deal with empty spots, when to restrain one's own need to search what was "really there," how to address what is unspoken or only what is hinted at? How not to give up to a temptation to "give a full picture," without gaps, "thoroughly research and documented"? Actually the book does follow the methodological recommendations the development of which Joyce shows in this chapter – the picture of Bielo Joyce paints is fragmented and uncertain, without recourse to the researcher's unshakeable authority. This should be understood as a great compliment.

Chapter 2 looks at the region as a tourist development area and shows how differently the region is constructed for different types of tourists and, moreover, in different languages. Joyce refers to practices of orientalization and exoticization, of exploiting difference for tourist purposes but she also points out that so-called "dark tourism," so much present in Poland in general, is not that prominent as it could be in this region, which can be better understood in light of description and analysis of spectre of Jewish presence analysed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3 presents some of the history of this region, in a very concise form, for readers not acquainted with it. It is impressive how Joyce managed to contain a wealth of information within relatively few pages, including such historical events as *bieżeństwo* – very important for this region, but relatively little known. Chapter 4 concerns religious difference presented as a kind of border in combination with ethnic identification and nation-focused policies of various states. This chapter is most importantly about state attempts at homogenisation, which were often conducted through exploitation of religious difference.

In Chapter 5 the hauntology approach is most straightforward. The main focus are stories told in confidence or not told at all; places that are treated in a special way without the reasons being explicitly addressed; and what Joyce calls asocial memories – those memories where disagreements, conflicts and absences have infused the landscape. It zooms on Jewish ghosts and the fact that although today's children learn about Holocaust, they still do not know much about Jewish neighbours of their grandparents. Although, this knowledge is lacking on explicit level; on another one, they still do not eat apples growing on a particular field – where Jewish cemetery used to be located.

Chapter 6 returns to the religious theme already addressed in Chapter 4 through analysis of Bielo as a pilgrimage site. It brings many themes of previous chapters, especially neighbourliness and tourism together, as interacting *modi* of the town's existence. In the Conclusion Joyce provides a good summary of the main arguments of the book and underlines that her work is not about past and present, and not only about how ghosts – from the past – influence the present. It is book about future, as many hauntological works actually are. She finished with a quotation from Max Fisher's work: "When the present has

given up on the future we must listen for the relics of the future in the unactivated potentials of the past” (Fisher 2013: 2013).

This book helps us to imagine what a borderland is and can be in this particular regional context and how important this notion is for contemporary politics. It delivers an ethnographic description of the phenomenon of the borderland in present-day Poland, and shows how it influences people's lives, thoughts and actions, both as an idea, but also as an everyday practice and result of state and other political forces. This deeper understanding of this particular borderland is particularly important as in the Polish context this one seem to feed particularly potently an image of borderland as such. Admittedly, there is a long history of interest in the eastern borderland in Poland, and Joyce refers to this interest to some extent (although she quotes and discusses almost exclusively works written in English, also by Polish scholars, and the literature in Polish, Belarusian or Ukrainian is little present in her analysis), but Joyce’s approach does bring a new dimensions especially through use of innovative frameworks of haunting, neighbourliness and borders. The idea of what borderland is or should be has been in a Polish context shaped by discourses and state organisational practices taking place where Joyce conducted her research; other border regions in Poland received much less research attention. Only in recent years, there has been a definite increase in interest in other borderlands and especially other hauntings – in particularly those inhabiting the so-called "post-German lands." Because Joyce shows how this eastern borderland is made and maintained, state-organised and practiced, and not only how it is imagined, I believe her work can help to generate more critical and innovative works on other haunted borderlands, and especially on how ghosts influence imaginings and materialisations of various futures.

#### Works Cited:

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**Agnieszka Halemba** (PhD Cambridge 2003) is a professor at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences and a lecture at the University of Potsdam in Germany. She conducted long-term field research in Siberia, Transcarpathian Ukraine and eastern Germany in anthropology of religion as the core field but with interest and outputs in border studies, anthropology beyond the human, and political anthropology.



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