

Ecological Community: Pogroms, Peat Bogs and the Zapust Festival

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The social life of natural spaces has changed tremendously with the advent of a liberal economy in postsocialist Poland. Dozens of new national parks and nature preserves rebranded land and people thought of as backwards into forward-thinking ecological communities whose former peasant agricultural practices lay at the core of preserving rare nature. New nature preserves also set up cultural expectations for the meaning of community. Polish nature activists, a loosely bound group of NGO employees, artists, biologists, journalists, photographers, teachers and others, believed that ecological projects within new national parks could unite people around a common ideal to form more civically-minded communities than in the past. Within the same time frame of the last 20 years, a new democratic system offered Poles the hope that historical truth could be brought to light. This paper examines the way a suppressed historical event has undergone a transformation in tandem with changing ideas of nature and community in northeastern Poland.

The natural and cultural space that I write of is the Biebrza Wetland, in northeast Poland, established in 1993. The expansive peat bog, the biggest primary marsh of its type in Central Europe, measures nearly 600 square km, and has been used as a source of village resources for hundreds of years.¹ The park borders villages with traumatic histories of Polish on Jewish violence during the Second World War, brought to light by the Princeton scholar, Jan Gross in his 2001 publication, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, a book that sent shock waves through the Polish national consciousness for implicating Poles in the Holocaust, and a book that triggered local elisions in regards to the new national park, including the village Stoczek's non-involvement in ecological projects.

This paper theorizes how the reassignment of "backward" land and people into a "progressive" project of nature protection teases out ecological gaps; that is, how promoting the marsh and rural people as ecological community-based figures tacitly omits the violence Gross uncovered and by doing so draws more attention to it via discourses about ecology and community. I write about these experiences and findings on the basis of doctoral research over 15 months from January 2005 to June 2007. In living and traveling in northeast Poland I looked at the way the communist and peasant pasts complicate social relations in new national parks.

The peasant and communist pasts in Poland are rich with historical detail, but to abbreviate for this article, it is important to note that farming was never successfully collectivized during the 45 years of state socialism in Poland, leaving a legacy of millions of small farms, most measuring no more than a few hectares. Peasant agricultural practices shaped the landscape, including much of the wildlife populations that co-existed with small scale,

extensive agriculture. In many villages around the Biebrza National Park nature activists attribute the success or failure of their nature protection efforts to rural people's willingness to rally around the figure of the peasant in real and figurative ways. Retaining traditional agricultural practices requires activists to convince rural people that joining in ecologically centered projects will benefit rural people's cultural status and the marsh ecology. Nature activists promote ecological agriculture subsidy programs, ecotourism, fairs, and farmers' markets. Under structural readjustment pressures farmers with land around the marsh have more often chosen to grow the scale of their farms and abandon older agricultural practices. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy subsidizes all farmers, but in western Europe, farmers tend to make up around 5% of the population, whereas in Poland in 1989, the rural population made up around 40% of the population. International advisory bodies, such as the World Bank, instructed Poland early on to reduce the number of people in the farming sector, encouraging farmers to compete with one another for efficiencies in scale. Today the official farming population includes 18% of the population.

As overarching loan and subsidy programs influence competition and growth, several EU programs are aimed at protecting small farms and traditional farming practices around national parks. In the midst of these competing pressures to modernize and hold onto traditions, most villages, at least on an official level, participate with the nature activists to demonstrate a show of support in promoting the national park and the figure of the peasant sustaining the marsh.

One of the more interesting responses to this rebranding of land and people was the reinvention of a pre-Lenten peasant carnival drawing upon ancient fertility rites. The residents of Stoczek (fictive name) had not had a cooperative relationship with nature activists, and many nature activists labeled the festival as xenophobic, drawing upon the village's depiction in Gross' book (the village is not Jedwabne, a nearby village). Nature activists likened the symbolism of burning mythical creatures dressed in hay to Jews trapped in flames while villagers prevented their escape.

The idea of community provides a powerful conceptual framework for understanding how the extermination of Jews during the Second World War and Poles' complicity in it, taints an otherwise "pristine" space of nature. Nature activists promote a vision of community consonant with that in many community-based resource management projects.² They believe that rural communities have lived and can continue to live in harmony with nature. Resident human populations belong in the newly established national park, where they must continue traditions of scything the reeds and grazing animals to keep the wetland open for avifauna. Without scything and grazing, the wetland quickly covers with shrubs and trees, losing its biological importance. Rare birds, such as snipes, aquatic warblers and graylag geese will not breed in the Biebrza marsh if humans do not manage it as an open wetland.³ The European Union also has a stake in maintaining the openness of the marsh. The Birds and Habitat Directives are the strongest tools the EU has for enforcing global Conventions it signed onto, such as Ramsar, Bern and the World Summit and Sustainable Development. The EU offers rural Poles who live next to new national parks opportunities in the way of ecological subsidies to maintain the marsh. But heavily rural

postsocialist Poland has joined the EU in an era of globalized markets of agriculture, a moment recognized as the crisis of the countryside where ecological subsidies compete with opportunities to expand the scale of one's farm and eliminate neighbors as competition. Big, mechanized agriculture threatens the marsh by way of chemical contamination and the loss of traditional agriculture. Thus, nature activists—in convincing rural dwellers to maintain, or in many cases, revive, their peasant-like land practices—recognize the importance of making those practices green, modern, and cosmopolitan.⁴

Residents in Stoczek have acted in response to this distinct conjunction of a globalized market place and pressure to hold onto obsolete practices as they conceive a vision of community in their reinvented festival. For the people in Stoczek a reinvented peasant festival, Zapust, is a more authentic enactment of peasant-like practices than those being offered in nearby villages. Everything is “for show” in places where tourists visit or where ecological subsidies dominate, but residents of Stoczek say that the Zapust festival is spontaneous, created by and for residents of Stoczek. Villagers describe their community and its culture as bounded. The festival, they say, can serve a need to work against the economic forces dispersing their community. As a demographic group severely impacted by the EU's structural readjustment policies for agriculture, many residents seasonally migrate for work in west European countries in order to modernize the farm, some returning to participate in the festival. The festival helps them feel a point of connection and continuity for an otherwise dispersing collective of families.

Nature activist often read the festival differently. They conjured the image of an angry mob of Polish Catholics burning Polish Jews in barns, perhaps the most vivid example of the violence from Gross' book. According to nature activists, the festival mocks people who are different, as demonstrated by villagers dressing up like “darkies” or “gypsies” to scorn the bride and groom, played by two male actors. Crass humor marks the tone of the festival and nature activists see a notion of community at odds with their own in the festival's enactment. Where nature activists want villagers to use their traditions to be pro-Western and “green,” in the village of Stoczek they can only see villagers as “anti-Semites” who have not come to terms with their violent past, nor with their Eastern nationalism and their conservative, uneducated positions regarding both nature and the truth about their past. Jan Gross' book stands in between these two conceptions, between the ideal of a harmonious peasant community and the history that Poles, including those in Stoczek, find difficult to confront.

Violence against Jews in the sites of ecology

The Polish national consciousness “freed” of communist ideology wasn't ready to learn of Polish complicity in the Holocaust when Gross published *Neighbors*.⁵ As Michael Steinlauf (1997) has described in his classic work on communist-era memory of the Jewish past, the Holocaust became marginalized during the communist period and was repressed in public memory. The communist approach to the Holocaust in Poland was collective amnesia—a way to meet popular needs of forgetting the trauma. Thus, the stories of Polish-Jewish relations before,

during and after the war have seen much revision in Polish historiography following 1989. Only recently, since the publication of Gross' book in 2000, which coincided with the reinvention of the festival, have the pogroms surfaced as a complicating factor in ecological politics.

Gross' book recounts that Polish Catholic villagers carried out many murders and pogroms against their Jewish neighbors in the Lomza district two weeks after the outbreak of the Russo-German declaration of war in 1941, an isolated set of events, but not entirely uncommon in twentieth century Poland (Gross 2001: 32-41). The violence in Stoczek took place within days of large pogroms in two nearby villages.

Gross reprinted Menachem Finkelstajn's testimony, one of the few survivors of the pogroms. Selections from this testimony not only recount the violence from those days, but also confront the perceived tensions over wealth, and importantly the portrayal of Poles, not as victims of Nazi aggression, but as perpetrators of a horrible crime, enacted in the space of the marsh:

Poles and Germans continued to torment the Jews until they chased them to a swampy little river near the town. Jews were ordered there to undress and to get up to their necks in the swamp... From this day on a horrible chain of sufferings and torments began for the Jews. Poles were the main tormentors, as they mercilessly beat men, women, and children, irrespective of their age... The wild and bloodthirsty mob took it as a holy challenge that history had put upon it—to get rid of the Jews. And the desires to take over Jewish riches whetted their appetite even more ... [Gross 2001:34-35, 38]

Gross' account, including the veracity of his historical witnesses, remains highly contested in the national, and especially the local, context. The public voices from the villages, those captured in media accounts, assert that Germans either carried out the murders or inspired a few hooligans who possessed the means to kill Jews through momentary collaborations with Nazis.⁶ Jewish collaboration with the occupying Russians often surfaces in their telling as an explanatory factor for the violence.⁷

Today, villages in Gross' book are symbolically associated with anti-Jewish violence in Poland. Even as surveys indicate that Polish people by and large do not believe Gross' account, many people in Poland spoke of inhabitants of Stoczek as people more capable of committing violent acts than other Poles.⁸ The stigma lingers with the names of villages, whether Poles believe Gross or not.

My ethnographic linkage between the festival, pogroms and ecological projects began in April 2005 in the library of the Biebrza National Park headquarters while browsing through park promotional materials. I came across a bright pink brochure with two garish dolls spinning on a wagon wheel. Inside were pictures of crowds gathered around burning figures, three men wrapped in twisted bundles of hay, with captions about how these "bears" would fertilize the soil with their ash.

The description and photos heightened my interest, for they did not depict the staid folklore of open-air village museums, present in some other villages in the marsh. Clearly the existence of a brochure indicated that somebody official was attempting to present the festival to outside audiences, using the theme of fertility to link the festival to family labor and a peasant economy in the marsh.

I did not immediately associate the name with the villages in Gross' book, which I had read a year earlier. The famous pogroms from the book are often referred to only by the book's title village, Jedwabne. The Park historian, Zbigniew, drew the association for me. "You know what happened in Stoczek?" He asked suggestively. In the course of Zbigniew informing me of the pogrom, I asked him if he might lecture about the Jewish past for an American student group I was bringing to the region. This moved Zbigniew to detail other acts of anti-Jewish violence in the villages outlining the Biebrza National Park, ones I might not know about.⁹

Zbigniew's descriptions included a village only a few kilometers from the Park headquarters. Our conversation clearly agitated another employee in the room, but she kept quiet until Zbigniew mentioned her village, to which she replied tensely but with polite composure, "You have to understand, Polish villagers killed Jews because they were rich. During the war people were desperate, starving." The statement shocked me, but I tried not to react, as I wanted to know more. Clearly Polish Catholics did not murder other Polish Catholics or Orthodox Christians who were "rich." What was interesting was that Zbigniew remained silent, and as I paid closer attention to Poles' excuses for violence against Jews I learned that talk about extreme poverty in the marsh was a common theme that often closed further discussion about Polish on Jewish violence. A pattern of economic neglect by both the socialist-era and post-1989 democratic government necessitated the modernizations away from a "peasant" economy towards economic development, a point that both nature activists and villagers throughout the marsh consistently emphasized, albeit in their own distinct ways.

Once I began to discuss my interest in Stoczek with nature activists I received several negative comments about the festival. Arek, an NGO organizer responsible for enrolling the region's many villages into one federation that could cooperate with the park, had nothing good to say about Stoczek. He insisted that peasant rituals were not worth reviving when they referenced xenophobia and the pogrom. He dissuaded me from going to study the festival, and said that the festival would not tell me anything about ecological politics, as if paternalistically guiding my research away from a sensational topic. "The festival makes fun of people who are different. It marks a kind of primitive aggression," he told me, "and that's all." He had never attended Zapust himself but had a great deal of interaction with mayors and village councils in the Biebrza region; he was even convinced that the festival was reinvented as a cover-up for all the negative attention the villages received after Gross' publication.

Arek's personal encounters in Stoczek conditioned his views on the people there. All other village municipalities joined together to coordinate various ecological projects. The federation exchanged information about marsh ecology and kept in touch with the park regarding ecological subsidies and workshops. Stoczek was the only uncooperative village, Arek stressed.

I found Arek's comments about his actual experiences with the administrators of Stoczek more believable than his literal interpretations of the festival (that villagers meant to remind people of Jews burning in barns when they reinvented the festival). I thought Arek adopted a position toward the village that was simultaneously aesthetic, moral, and economic. I would not call Arek's concerns about xenophobia disingenuous. However, the festival was simply in bad taste for Arek, whose motivations were not based upon his moral judgment alone. He was eager to see rural communities progress, but within the framework of their participation in conservation projects.

A Polish ethnologist from the Bialystok Center for Cultural Animation, Fabian, who nature activists had credited with re-starting the festival in 2001, had nothing but praise for the people in Stoczek. "The people from Stoczek," he said, stressing their village identity, "brought back an important tradition and gave it new life." He wanted me to understand that anyone who suggested that the festival was xenophobic misunderstood the ancient efficacy of the festival and the remarkableness of its survival into the present. He seemed to draw these notions from classical anthropological writings that see ritual as means for creating cohesion amongst a group. Those were not Roma people, *per se*, that villagers were making fun of. In fact they were not making fun of other people, but employing transgressive elements to ritually exorcise their own community's conflicts. The contemporary version of the festival was intended to meet the needs of people in Stoczek, in the here and now, to enable them to play and express themselves while taking pride in a tradition rightfully theirs.

During the socialist period, Fabian added, the state controlled the display of peasant customs, and distorted them because the customs had to be detached from their religious significance.¹⁰ He commented on the importance of Stoczek's isolation deep in the marsh for keeping the tradition alive. He sought out village elders who instructed him on how the festival was conducted prior to the Second World War when it was last performed.¹¹ In return Stoczek received a small sum to sponsor the festival. Nature activists, residents of Stoczek, and the Polish ethnographer all treated the festival as something historically and specifically unique to the Biebrza Marsh and the present. If any comparisons were made between this and other festivals they were to the Carnivals of Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans rather than a tradition of masking rituals at the heart of European theater, known as mumming.

Interpretations of community

Gerald Creed (2004) began an important discussion about communities constituted through conflict in his studies of post-socialist mumming rituals in rural Bulgaria. In his re-examination of Benedict Anderson's (1983) dictum that the nation is imagined as community, Creed argues that conflict is constitutive of community, not in opposition to it. He begins questioning Anderson by asking, if the nation can be imagined as a community even when people do not know each other, then what is being invoked in the term community? Following Raymond Williams, Creed argues that the term "community" too often carries romantic

connotations as a “warmly persuasive” term (Williams 1976:76). He writes, “Community is not just a conceptual tool for delineating social relations but increasingly a culturally specific expectation about the nature of social relations, with consequences for anything conceived in its image” (Creed 2004:56-70).

Thus we expect “communities” to be whole, virtuous, and to manage their conflicts harmoniously. In large modern societies the term nostalgically references a former era, the village community, where neighbors all knew one another and relied on each other for help. A sense of immediacy and locality is wrapped up in the term. Atomized, individualized societies require citizens who can act against the coercions of a faceless modern state bureaucracy, as Michael Watts (2002) suggests. Community, for the modern world is conjured as a social relation where citizens participate and reflect upon society as moral community members. Yet Creed’s work shows that when people strive for notions of community that are harmonious they often take this to the extreme through excising elements that do not belong. To borrow from Creed’s work, I am arguing that the festival in Stoczek, a mumming ritual that includes dressing up and parading in the streets, bands of “gypsies” going door to door to ask for money and sweets, and skits which poke fun of the village itself, is a call for revival in the face of external opposition, both from nature conservationists and that generated from the fallout over Gross’ book. Instead of trying to explain the violence of 1941 and the reactions to today’s public outing of this violence, I seek only to trace the way discourses about community operate.

The retelling of the pogrom after 2001 and my study of the festival played upon the invocation of community at three intertwined levels that draw on the aforementioned notions of community: at the national level, where shock, disavowal, breast beating and renouncement marked the reactions to Gross’ book; at the site of Stoczek village; and in nature activists’ imaginings of an ideal rural community. The nation, as I will explain, motivates both villagers and nature activists to revive and reform peasant culture, even as these two groups profess to have other motives.

The national community both rejected Gross’ findings and in other cases—mostly at the level of official speeches and intellectual publications—reacted with openness and deep sensitivity. But combined with evidence of what people in other parts of Poland said about the villages Gross writes about, the result of national attention was an accusing finger pointed at residents of those villages, instead of a self-examination of the nation. The positive Polish national image hinges precariously on the notion that Poles were victims of Nazi aggression who heroically resisted Nazis and in many cases helped Jews survive the war in a place where anyone assisting a Jew could be executed on the spot. The emotion stirred by Gross’ book at the national level makes clear the obvious importance of these pogroms for the Polish national image of community. How did the national reaction to Gross’ work reverberate in the imagining of community around the Zapust festival, specifically in the way the nature activists condemned the festival, and then in the way the community in Stoczek came together for the purposes of the festival?

In this nationally significant place the nation, in the general sense of the term, lacked information about the festival. The event only possessed meaning at the local and perhaps regional level. It received scant and friendly media attention from the local news and served the needs of people living in Stoczek. However, national and regional opposition to the people of Stoczek played a large role in how outsiders imagined social relations in Stoczek, i.e. “those people in Stoczek are part of the national community that we do not want to see as ourselves.” And this imagining of Stoczek contributed to discourses about solidarity within the village. External opposition set up internal discourses about the importance of the festival.

Nature activists had an investment in delimiting the community in Stoczek. When villagers open bed and breakfasts (with the central element including food from the farm) or accept subsidies for ecological agriculture, nature activists position them as being in harmony with nature and thus with themselves. Conflicting notions of rural people’s identity in relation to ecology are constantly in motion. Are rural people the right type of “peasant” for tourists? Or must they be reformed for ecology? Rural people today can lay claim to once living in “harmony” with nature and if former practices on the land can be revived for the present—for ecotourism—nature stands a chance of weathering the ecologically destructive storms of a modern world that would fragment human and natural communities.¹²

Nature is distinctive, as are the humans that co-produced it. Ecological culture, or rather the way culture is articulated through ecological discourse, is part of a romantic tradition because it advocates specificity and distinctiveness rather than the universalism of culture, at the state or even international level. Distinctive human communities employing family labor shaped bird habitat in the Biebrza Marshes. But Polish nature activists do not sustain a belief in the cohesion of villagers in the Biebrza region. Villagers are understood as an unruly and unpredictable social force that nature activists hope to reform through their ecological promotions. Their promotions mix romantic nature with a globalized notion of ecology. In the process of this external scrutiny, insiders can adopt the appearance of cohesiveness.

From the inside, Poland and Polish villages are understood as contentious, quarrelling, and unable to govern themselves, which is often used as an explanation for why it became so easy to invade Poland in the past. However, when the village needs to be presented to the outside, as occurs in ecological promotions, nature activists and rural inhabitants consciously market the village and the “peasantry,” as coherent and mutually supportive.¹³

In many popular discourses the market is largely understood as the antithesis of small-scale romantic community (see Bauman 2001, Agrawal and Clarke 2001). In Poland a free market is most associated with the European Union, hardly a free-market for agriculture, given its wide ranging subsidy programs, but the forces of a globalized market impact Polish agriculture as subsidies coerce farmers to produce for the markets that the EU will mediate. This new economy of obsolescence for Polish farmers forces residents of Stoczek to go abroad for work. The market economy prompts many families to alternate childcare; for example a mother and grandmother will trade six-month cleaning positions in Spain or Ireland while investing remittances to purchase new farming implements the family needs if they are going to stay in the

game of competitive market farming. Farmers no longer need “unproductive” land in the swamp for their new commodity crops and animal husbandry. The land in the park once provided reeds, which people used as roofing until the 1970s. Now, aluminum roofs cover houses. Also, newer breeds of cows, with more delicate stomachs, do not prefer the grasses growing in the swamp. Other sources of income in the new economy of competitive agriculture have made use of the swamp obsolescent.

In nature activists’ discourses, participating in the ecological markets of tourism and other “green” ventures becomes a way to create better communities as inhabitants put on their best public persona and as they spend more time as hosts, becoming the figure that they represent. Rural people, who might otherwise be seen as the underclass of society, can transform into generous hosts and the type of people who work with the EU (that is, the progressive and liberal face of the EU, as opposed to the EU that sets out to destroy Polish small farmers). When rural people cooperate with national park officials and NGOs, they can act responsibly to the Biebrza Marsh and all the other people and creatures who live there. If “peasants” were always an anathema to progress in modernizing discourses they now appear as the key to that progress (see Leonard and Kaneff 2002).

Although nature activists lament the pressures of the market on the ecology of the marsh, in the activists’ ideal the market—both the one that forces people to go abroad for work and the one that brings ecotourists—is going to create better communities. For one thing, it exposes rural people to “western” values and tastes, and perhaps they will begin to value the quaintness and the integrity of their own cultural and natural heritage. And secondly, the entrepreneurship of ecotourism, when led by a moral ideal of an economy that will protect nature, generates an ethic of ownership. When “backward” people transform into entrepreneurs the forms considered backwards can become assets when directed toward national goals, of which eco-development is clearly one held by those who want to see Poland recognized for its commitments to value and integrity, as in its international association with the Solidarity movement in the 1980s and in figures such as Pope John Paul II. Thus, Stoczek exists within the same discursive-material space as ecological promotions yet has not or cannot develop as an ecological destination or project area.

Rituals and exclusions

My initial assumption before going to Stoczek at festival time was that the uniqueness of the festival in Stoczek against the backdrop of Gross’ book and its exclusion from ecological politics would lead to the formation of a different type of community. I thought this community would be a more cohesive one formed not for tourists, but for residents alone, and thus a community with local strategies for affirming the distinctiveness of their tradition. Clearly I was both anticipating and affirming a problematic bounded notion of community. I was aware of critiques against “localizing” people, but I was starting with the assumption of a bounded community because the pogrom haunted Stoczek (set it apart).¹⁴ I was reacting to Gross’ book

and the opposition of other Poles when I anticipated a bounded community producing a festival solely or primarily for themselves.

A vision of community where cultural forces operated on a deeper level than the public sphere of social and political change fit well with the views of the Polish ethnologist I mentioned earlier who reignited interest in the festival, and with the residents of Stoczek in their more implicit understanding and pronouncements that the festival was “spontaneous” and “just for the people in Stoczek.” In the ethnologist’s view the community in Stoczek could thus redeem itself in two ways. Stoczek could offer a better peasant festival than in the communist days, and, Stoczek could offer a better version of community than in other villages because participation in ecological displays for outsiders had not commercialized the festival. One significant complication stood in the way of the ethnologist’s and perhaps others’ celebratory notion of community, and that was the issue of Polish on Jewish violence.

Questions of truth, facticity, and authenticity were at stake in the enactment of the festival, even though those topics were never explicit in the festival’s enactment. Zapust’s detractors saw negative agrarian values of aggressiveness, valor, uncritical fidelity to political and religious leaders and conduct inspired by affect rather than reason, traits Ernest Gellner (1998) ascribes to romantic agrarian values when trying to sort out how these values associated with the peasantry take shape in new nationalistic contexts. Romantic agrarian values in their extreme form under the ideologies of WWII led to the pogrom. Nature activists wanted to excise this element of Poland’s rural and national past, a past that also used peasants to serve dangerously nationalistic elements in the society. The new era of a liberal economy and democratic politics enabled nature activists to set up the park, which they conceptualized as a purifying space of nature and culture reinvented for the present.

I stood in the middle of two competing views on the value of the festival and thus the virtue of a community living next to newly redefined land made into nature. On the one hand the potential for community cohesion in the festival highlighted the importance of independent truths, such as Gross’ book. Only someone from the outside could investigate the trauma of the past. On the other hand, the festival could be construed as symbolizing community truth—not the opposite of what was written in Gross’ book, but an assertion that Stoczek in the present had been unfairly saddled with the guilt of a nation, the nation being a more appropriate even level for addressing Poland’s anti-Semitic past. I believe that people in Stoczek, motivated by the weight of external opposition, were consciously or unconsciously encouraging me to understand their festival as a type of organic prevalence of something uniquely theirs, and thus, something uniquely local, propelling the romantic version of community where they defended their internal forms of dealing with the past.

In my role as an anthropologist, I had to stand in the flow of these two powerful claims to truth and community even if I was not inquiring about the pogrom in Stoczek. People in Stoczek accepted me into their homes and into their festival because they presumed anthropologists studied cultural forms; in other words, the limits of culture, culture as bounded. Bounded culture does not threaten people in Stoczek, does not point the accusing finger at them because in this

version of culture, festival participants are organic, unknowing subjects of their own local inheritance so that the festival maintains internal order (traditionally adjusted to the rhythms of nature). I tacitly agreed to this appearance of culture when setting up the research and it allowed me join in the festival. Furthermore, a version of culture as peasant in origin rang true with much of East European ethnology, which studied the small details of villages to see how those details supported the larger national project (see Hann, Sarkany and Skalnik 2005).

As I attended the festival, including its preparations in the weeks leading up the festival and several subsequent visits over the course several years, what was important for the residents of Stoczek was who got to participate in the festival and who was excluded. Residents of Stoczek constituted the success of the festival on how it revived the community by bringing people back together rather than on how the festival communicated with an outside audience or broke through stereotypes about the village residents.

Conclusion

The pogrom, ecological politics, and the festival lay the ground for interpreting claims to community—who is an insider and who is an outsider, and what one's status (as a peasant, urban educated nature activists or U.S. scholar) meant for asserting truth about the past. In the nature activists' usage, the community should be a harmonious one based upon its comfort with the past. This ideal works best when nature and culture are timeless, which is one reason Stoczek contaminates nature activists' ideal of an ecological community. But if Stoczek were to at least participate more willingly in ecological projects and openly admit to the past Gross writes about, the village might find redemption in the eyes of nature activists. Following Gerald Creed's analysis of festivals in Bulgaria I am arguing that the festival challenges dominant political discourses threatening the community, such as changes in agriculture that impact the village, as well as Gross' account.

What I am attempting to show is that creating community happens through rupture and dissonance at multiple levels, as if in constant shuffling of what people want out of community. Knowing how to live with the dissonance marks the boundaries of community. The community I refer to is not just the residents of Stoczek, but the ideal community desired by ecological politics, and the imagined community of the Polish nation, for which the 1941 pogroms were an incredibly painful topic when Jan Gross brought them to light in his book. People fall back on the symbolic resource at their disposal to lay the bounds of their perceived community, which has consequences for how land is thought of as nature and whether or not villagers in Stoczek, or in the marsh more generally, will be managers of that nature.

I stood at the intersection of two loosely bound yet interacting communities (the village of Stoczek and the nature activists). I followed a trace to see what happens in the gaps of ecology, the spaces that cannot be nature and ecology, but are co-produced as an exclusion from ecological projects in an era that affords all kinds of false promises about truth, democracy, and rural development. In this gap, the violent past of Polish on Jewish violence shares physical and

psychological space with ecology. I agree with Creed that community is constituted through conflict, not only the insider/outsider conflict that in its extreme led to the pogrom, but even between people who cooperate on mutual projects, such as reinventing a festival. At all levels the romantic notion of community is an inescapable one. The romantic notion of community serves ideologies, in the present the ideology of ecological commodification, or ecological projects as an extension of capitalist ideology where the only means for small family farms to survive is in the spectacular form of tourism and museum ecology show pieces.

The specter of community is an illusory one, but one in this case based upon real people, real murders, biophysical realities of a changing ecosystem in the marsh, and real needs for entertainment and transgression in a place that seems increasingly obsolete for those who live there. Although the term “community” might be a common-sensical way of navigating the world, community, as an artifact of the past and nature, needs further specification to challenge what is hidden from plain view, what is hidden in the reeds of the marsh and threatened to be shaded out by trees, shrubs, and silence.

Notes

¹ The peat bog has traditionally served many functions for village communities, including thatch for roofing, grazing land, peat, heating wood and timbers from the forested area, and hay for cattle. Several ecotones, even sand dunes, make up the Biebrza Marsh.

² Arun Agrawal (2005) highlights the role and function of neoliberal policies regarding community leadership and the environment. Taking cues from other writers on governance and environment, he traces neoliberalism’s strategies for eliciting cooperation amongst those subject to former state rule. In such scenarios, the objective is to transform individuals into instruments of their own governance. Motivating behaviors occur more and more often through non-state actors, such as NGOs. The market serves a greater role than ever in coercing such behaviors. However, there is a much longer history of Polish national projects to modernize whereby Poles see themselves as an undergrounded, non-state force needing to make strategic alliances with formal governments, while internally organizing. Peasants were always essential to Polish national causes. For a historical understanding of non-state Polish attitudes towards land and the rural underclass, see Eile (2000) and Kieniewicz (1969).

³ More than 40% of the land in the Biebrza National Park is privately owned. Owners agree to let the park administer their lands. Farmers consider the land unproductive for modern agriculture.

⁴ The term peasant has a long historical trajectory in Polish politics and thought. Here, I use the term, as nature activists do, to refer to small landholders who produced most of what the household consumed. For a history of the Polish peasant in feudal times, see Kieniewicz (1969).

⁵ Gross published the book first in Polish in 2000 through the Borderland’s publishing house in Sejny, Poland, and one year later in English with Princeton University Press.

⁶ I use the term “public voice” as a way to acknowledge that not everyone in these communities denies the role of villagers in these murders, but that village structures of representation, such as public monuments that still inscribe German Fascists as the murderers, and mayors who will not change those monuments, make it difficult to oppose these discourses.

⁷ Villagers believe that Jews selected inhabitants who were to be sent to Siberian work camps. Gross (2001) confirms this discourse in a chapter about the Soviet occupation of 1939-1941.

⁸ For a detailed presentation of Polish responses to *Neighbors*, see Polonsky and Joanna (2003).

⁹ The Polish Institute for National Remembrance recently published a report following Gross’ book indicating that 22 villages in the region saw Polish on Jewish murders in 1941. Gross writes about the worst triangle of this violence where more than a thousand Jews were tortured and killed within the span of a few weeks.
http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/en/3/133/The_Jedwabne_Case_Volume_II_Documents.html (Last accessed 21 October 2009).

¹⁰ Gerald Creed (2002) traces ritual decline to the loss of state backing for festivals. Deema Kaneff (2004) further delineates the differences between rituals and folkloric displays. Socialists created a new type of folklore, one that denied the importance of tradition while couching local specificity in nationalist terms on the way to internationalist goals.

¹¹ Festival participants frequently argued about the stopping date of the original festival. Some recall festival traditions, such as canvassing houses for money and treats, being carried out last in the 1960s. Elder residents defend the idea that the original festival ended in the war years and claimed that the festival’s origins go back hundreds of years.

¹² While Agrawal’s (2005) notion of *environmentality* finds application here, the idea that nature conservation projects are simply a guise for neoliberal agendas, there are many other European intellectual lineages that prefigure the development agendas today. Esther Kingston Mann (1999) has extensively document Russian borrowing of western concepts to “advance” the peasantry. Specific to Poland, an understanding of Polish romantic literature is critical to understanding how Polish elites imagine the role of the peasantry in advancing the nation. Anti-urban, and anti-capitalist biases can be found in the literature of Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz, and other romantics and is widely understood as the fundamental component of Polish conservative nationalism (see Eile 2000).

¹³ In the nineteenth century, Polish gentry and landowners sought to advance the emancipation of the peasantry in a common cause with the emancipation of Poland from Prussian, Austrian and Russian rule. Polish-speaking peasants acted inconsistently in the Polish national cause, sometimes siding with juridical powers against their Polish landlords (Kieniewicz 1969).

¹⁴ Hugh Raffles (2002) argues that people and places are always extra-local even as they are inscribed as local. Places are often constituted at a distance; for example, the Amazon rain forest informs international environmental discourses. See also Clifford (1997).

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