

Notes on Emptiness and the Importance of Maintaining Life¹

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Abstract: In these notes from the field, I will think ethnographically about the ways in which Latvia's rural inhabitants live what is referred to as the "emptying of the countryside." I will also consider how and with what effect policy makers, scholars, and intellectuals constitute the phenomenon of rural emptiness as a problem of migration and a problem of demography thought to have dire consequences for the life of the nation. In oscillating between these different registers of living and talking about the emptiness, my aim is to trace what Kathleen Stewart has called "a contact zone for analysis" without definitively enclosing it in particular interpretive frames. In the midst of research, I wish to see whether and how dwelling in this "contact zone" can generate insights that are overlooked by scholarly and political discourses concerned with migration and demography.

Keywords: emptying of the countryside, life, nation, migration, Latvia.

A sense of emptiness

On an overcast day in mid-April, in a small Latvian village 10 km from the Latvian-Russian border, the afternoon bus going to the larger nearby town arrives a few minutes early. It had just come from the town and brought home a small group of village children who go to school there. Now, on the return trip at 4pm, the idle bus awaits at the stop nearly empty. The village social worker, with whom I just had an interview on rural depopulation, arrives at the desolate bus stop. She lives in town and is planning to stop by a couple of administrative offices on the way home before they close at 5pm. We chat as we wait for the bus driver to give us a sign that we can come aboard.

There is only one other passenger. In the front seat sits an elderly woman, approximately 65 years of age. The bus driver, who looked to be in his mid-40s, sits and waits until the designated time of departure.

On the bus driver's dashboard, there is a vase with bright red flowers made out of yarn. The elderly woman compliments the flowers and asks the driver where he obtained them. The driver explains that his wife made them. We wait.

"Empty, everything is empty," says the elderly woman. "Before, there were so many people that took the bus, that waited for the bus. Now there is nobody."

The bus driver glances at his watch again, getting ready to depart: "Yes, completely empty. It's like that everywhere. Many houses are completely empty, abandoned." The conversation is taking place in Russian.

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."

The bus driver: "Perhaps they'll bring the Muslims here?"

The woman: "Yes, they will be praying here, head to ground. But maybe the Negroes [sic] from Africa? The desert there expands every day, soon they won't have enough space."

The social worker looks at me and says: "That's on your topic, right?"

The bus driver: "I was recently in Denmark, there are many of them there. I asked whether they work. They say, no, they don't work, they are lazy. They live on social welfare."

The elderly woman: "They are all refugees there, they can get social welfare. Our

people, those who leave, Latvians or non-Latvians, they are not refugees. They are slaves. Our people are slaves everywhere. We cannot get such a status. They can get political status, some sort of religious persecution, but for us, nothing. Everyone is leaving.”

Silence. The only sound now the roar of the wheels on the dirt road.

The elderly woman: “I was watching Lukashenko on TV the other day. *Vot*, that’s a man in the right place. He knows how to take care of business. A truly global president! He thinks about the people, and he lifts the state. What villages and fields they have! I would like to shake his hand.”

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

The woman: “And we have to learn the Latvian language here! But I speak German! If I went to Sweden, I would learn Swedish. I will learn the language when I’ll have a job. Every person thinks about how to make their life better, don’t they? But they are making all of us speak Latvian, *bljin!*² They don’t even answer me in Russian! I went to Riga and asked someone for directions. But they say, excuse me, I don’t understand. *Bljin*. Let’s speak German then! That’s the kind of people we have. And these are supposed to be *svoi*...”³

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!”

It is hard to imagine a better snapshot of life in rural Latvia today. The scene hits the anthropologist and her reader with a bundle of connections and creates a visceral impression of life in this small rural village, a “space on the side of the road.”⁴ When parsed out in constitutive elements, this brief episode enables tracing multiple intersecting trajectories that characterize postsocialist Latvia. It gestures towards post-Soviet language politics and practices. It provides a glimpse of the racialized perceptions of Muslims, Africans, and Chinese prevalent in public discourse, as well as suggests that Latvia’s residents—Latvians and non-Latvians alike—are increasingly leaving in search of employment elsewhere in Europe. Finally, it gives a sense of the radically changing rural placescapes where the spring may still arrive beautifully, yet where social and economic activity has dwindled to a degree where soon there may be no one left to witness its arrival, and where the rapidly emptying homes and buses haunt the present and the future.⁵

In these brief notes from the field,⁶ I will try to give concrete form to the sense of emptiness conjured up by the scene above. I will think ethnographically about the ways in which Latvia’s rural inhabitants live this emptiness. I will also consider how and with what effect policy makers, scholars, and intellectuals constitute the phenomenon of rural emptiness as a problem of migration and a problem of demography thought to have dire consequences for the life of the nation. In oscillating between these different registers of living and talking about the emptiness, my aim is to trace what Kathleen Stewart has called “a contact zone for analysis” without definitively enclosing it in particular interpretive frames (Stewart 2007: 5). In the midst of research, I wish to see whether and how dwelling in this “contact zone” can generate insights that are overlooked by scholarly and political discourses concerned with migration and demography.

Framing migration as a matter of life

Upon arriving in Riga in January 2010 to begin a three-year research project on migration funded by the European Social Fund, I found myself in the midst of a lively debate about *lielā aizbraukšana* (the great departure). Most people I knew and met had friends, colleagues, or family members who had left to work in Ireland or England, some following

the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009, while others long before that. Knowledge about the phenomenon of “the great departure” was largely produced through people’s situated reflections about their surroundings. For example, when estimating the scale of departure, people counted how many of their peers (usually taken to be one’s cohort at the university or high school as far back as 20 years ago) were still around and how many were known to have left. Many noted that houses and apartments in the rural areas they lived in or hailed from stood empty, that schools lacked children, or that schoolchildren were living with their grandparents because their parents were working abroad. People also consistently remarked upon the fact that there were considerably less people in the streets—with the exception of holidays when the departed returned for a visit. Media reports, increasingly focusing on “the great departure,” contributed to the shared sense that something consequential was under way. People I talked with referred to such media reports as proof of a mass exodus. Social media sites circulated cynical jokes calling for the last person at the airport (that is, the last person departing) to turn off the light, as one would when leaving one’s home.

If in public life people were talking about “the great departure,” policy and research circles had begun to articulate this phenomenon through a discourse on “the problem of emigration.” In these elaborations on the problem of emigration, the most conspicuous absence was that of clear statistics. No data gathering mechanism in place could provide accurate data on how many people had left, because most people did not register their departure with local authorities, and estimates ranged anywhere from 5% to 30% of the labor force (Hazans 2005, Zvidriņš 2007, SAK 2006).⁷ Despite or perhaps because of this lack of precision on the magnitude of departure, research reports were continuously produced, including a qualitative study on Latvians in Ireland, where the émigrés were questioned about their motivations for leaving and the conditions within which they would be willing to return (SAK 2006).

Whatever the accurate figure of the elusive number of departed, there was a general panic from politicians, policy makers, and scholars who were concerned with what appeared to be an impending demographic crisis, brought about not only by emigration, but also by record-low birth rates.⁸ For example, demographer Ilmārs Mežs regularly published articles in the media warning the public that if radical measures were not taken, by 2050 the number of Latvians—as members of an ethnic community—will have dwindled from the current 1.3 million to less than half of that.⁹ In these articles, Mežs expressed concern about a lacking general sense of moral obligation towards the nation, which resulted in people having fewer and fewer children. On a number of occasions, Mežs criticized the prevailing desire for individual financial comfort as a root cause for the missing concern with the well-being of the collective. Meanwhile, in other public forums, economist Raita Karnīte accused the émigrés of betraying the nation by choosing to leave rather than to stay, reproduce, and build the kind of country they want to live in (Koļeda 2008).

In her analysis of pronatalist politics in Greece, Heather Paxson (2004: 163) shows how liberal family planning policies which seem to contradict pronatalist politics can nevertheless become integral elements of such politics through displacing demographic responsibility onto individuals, women in particular. The comments of Mežs and Karnīte above similarly displace the responsibility for reproducing the nation onto individuals partly because the liberal politics of individual freedom do not leave them with many other options.¹⁰ Besides raising an array of interesting questions about moral debt and obligation (see Graeber 2011), such comments also constitute migration and reproduction as central concerns of modern biopolitics (Foucault 2003). Namely, they are grounded in the historically specific conjunction of modern science and practices of government that focus on knowing and governing the life of the population (Foucault 2003).¹¹ Preoccupied with the life of the nation, Latvian scholars, politicians and intellectuals sought strategies for reviving and

reproducing it. It was hoped that each research report, however vaguely related to the topic, would shed some light on the prospects for the survival of the nation. Two or three months into my research, I too began to receive phone calls from journalists asking about the results of my research, as well as for solutions to the problem that preoccupied everyone: how to keep people from leaving, and how to return those that had left. I spent hours in conversations with journalists trying to convey that while my research was publicly relevant and politically situated, it was not the kind of research that set out to provide solutions to pre-formulated policy problems. It was the kind of research, so I explained, that took the very constitution of the policy problem—in this case, the reproduction of the nation—to be one of its objects of inquiry and critical reflection. I am afraid some of my conversation partners left thinking that since my research was not applicable to problems that people found important, there was no good reason it should be funded. Such a stance was common in Latvian public and political discourse. In the context of extreme financial austerity measures implemented as a way to manage the economic crisis, it was widely thought that science was legitimate and supportable only if it explicitly contributed to the public good, here understood as economic growth or the reproduction of the nation. Given the increasingly narrowly defined public good, I was convinced that I needed to focus on rethinking the problem itself. And thus while most of the political and scholarly attention was focused on migrants, I set out to study rural places in order to see what the great departure looked like in the form of concrete social relations and practices.

My decision to study rural places is not only a response to the moral panic about emigration in Latvian public and political life. It is also a methodological move that diverges from the increasingly common modality of studying migration through multi-sited ethnographies that follow migrants or from studying the constitution of the problem of migration (or demography) through analysis of state-based discourses and practices of governing. I am informed by recent scholarship on migration and demography in eastern Europe (e.g. Solari 2010, Rivkin-Fish 2010), yet I am interested in exploring analytical possibilities that might emerge from a different methodological orientation. Namely, I do not posit the problem-space of migration as my object of inquiry, thus undertaking research by tracing how the problem of migration manifests and is constituted in different circuits, but rather engage in what Matei Candea has referred to as the anthropological practice of bounding a site (2007: 172). I conduct my research in a concrete place as an “arbitrary location,” which has no necessary relationship to the problem of migration (Candea 2007: 169).¹² That is, there is no one particular reason why I study one place rather than another to see how rural inhabitants live emptiness. This methodological move is not motivated by a desire for a return to traditional ethnography, but rather by a concerted effort to de-familiarize established modes of studying migration. What emerges in the process is the problem-space of maintaining life, which unfolds on a different register than the state-based concern about the life of the nation.

Counting life

In the spring of 2011, the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Latvia conducted a national census. Politicians, policy makers, and scholars eagerly awaited the results of the census to see how many people had left the country and what that meant for the nation. One of my visits to the aforementioned small municipality in the Eastern part of Latvia fell right after the census. I stopped by the municipal building to visit Inta, the head of the municipality. Despite other municipal workers being somewhat disgruntled about the fact that my idea of work was talking to people, and that I was funded to do so, Inta was always willing to spend time with me, to tell me about her work, the situation in the municipality, as

well as direct me towards people who, in her view, had valuable insights with regard to the questions that were of interest to me. On my previous visit, a month or so earlier, Inta had just begun her duties as a census taker.¹³ At that time, we had talked about the advantages of being a local—people knew you, they were more willing to let you in, it was easier to arrange meetings, and you also knew something about everyone which prevented people from outright lying.¹⁴ However, as we continued our conversation a month later, it turned out that if being local helped to gain access to households, having local knowledge did not help to produce more accurate data about emigration. For example, Inta was able to tell that some of the local residents withheld information about family members working abroad or about the length of time they had been working abroad. Yet, Inta did not record this, because she had to record exactly what her respondents were saying. Moreover, Inta respected her compatriots' and in many cases her friends' wishes to withhold such information. Inta and I speculated that perhaps people did not want to report that family members had emigrated out of fear from some kind of unforeseeable consequences. Even though the census data is protected, we could imagine that people might not believe it was confidential information for one reason or another. Yet, we could not figure out what imagined consequences people feared, because, as things stood now, it would have been more advantageous to record absences of family members as that would result in lower utility payments.

Inta noted that there was always more to the story than just bodies moving back and forth. "People did not want to have this [departures] recorded," continued Inta. To illustrate this, Inta quoted one of her respondents: "My daughter has long since left...she has long since left, but don't write that down, don't write that. I hope that she may still return, I hope so." After Inta had finished sounding out the last words of this incident, we both paused. Silence. "It seems that it is for her own sake that she did not want this to be recorded," I said. "Yes, so it seems," agreed Inta. It had occurred to both of us that recording this data, recording that her family members were permanently gone, would have reconfigured life in ways that the woman respondent found undesirable. Proper statistical accounting to the state for herself and for her family would have amounted to fixing a state of affairs that the woman did not wish to see as final or permanent. That year's census did not just establish the population count—accurate or not—but also, and perhaps most importantly, forced people to account for life in ways that felt unsettling. This applied to the respondents as much as to the census takers themselves.

Inta said that even though she lived in the municipality and thought she knew all there was to know about the place, she was truly shocked to find out how many homes stood empty. We sat by her table 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 homes 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, nobody, nobody." "Who lives in the houses that are inhabited?" I asked. "Mostly retired people," replied Inta,

Here, in this cluster of homes, there are three old ladies. Two are over 80 and one is young, in her sixties. There are no men. The women import the only man in the neighboring village to help them with cutting the grass. He is 70. There is one family with three children who lives in Kaijas [the name of the household]. They were hoping they would do well, because the wife worked in the local school. Then the school was closed down. They had taken lots of credits to keep up the house, and now they are stranded. But mostly there are old people. The houses are still there, but the people are gone.¹⁵ The old people are dying too. Every year. They are like flowers who do not wake up from the winter sleep.¹⁶

Agita, the census taker from the neighboring municipality, related a similar story. “For example,” Agita explained, “you have a cluster with about six homes, but there is only one old woman living in one of them. In one house! All others are empty!” Agita had not been “down that way” in a while, and had returned from “there” with “an eerie feeling.” The village of Keselova, which she knew from her school days when it had been full of life, now stood nearly empty: “Three houses empty, in the forth, there is an 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.”

Indeed, the sense of abandonment is carved into the landscape. The road to Keselova is almost indescribable. The pavement is covered with patches of different sizes, colors, textures, and varying degrees of wear. Trying to get to Keselova, I stopped the automobile and contemplated calling off the trip. The rental car rattled to the point of falling apart. When I finally did get to Keselova, late in the day in the twilight hour before nightfall, I encountered pretty much the scene described by Agita. Most houses did not have lights on, though TVs were flickering in a few of them. There were no people outside. Quite a few buildings had broken windows and overgrown yards—a clear indication of their abandoned state. I saw an elderly woman by one of the homes and stopped the car. The woman was in her 70s, spoke Russian, and was eager to talk to a stranger. She confirmed that there were very few people left in the village, but said that that’s how things were and that there was nothing that could be done about it. Her own daughter has been living in St. Petersburg for years, and the old woman and her husband go for visits when they can afford it. There are few young people around, except for those working and living in the new customs building next to the railroad station that is the first stop for trains coming in from Russia.

Such a rural landscape—a disintegrating articulation of humans and buildings—produces anxiety in those who live there, as well as in those who simply travel through. I could not help feeling that the village was dying together with the old people, their homes, and their fields. A similar sense of death was present and visible in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union when trees, grass, and wildlife started to take over the communal farmhouses and rural factories of the communist state. Then it was not seen as death, however, but rather as a new beginning. The existential nausea of today is an index of the failure of that dream—the dream of a national, yet European state, of capitalism and of rural Latvianness as an enduring way of life. The failure is readable in the landscape and it produces the kind of nausea that makes people existentially sick.

Inta said that when going about her daily activities, she noticed that the social relations that make up life and place had thinned, but it had not occurred to her that the situation was so bad.¹⁷ For both Inta and Agita, the enumeration demanded by the census had crafted a different reality, one of despair and disintegration, though one that could not quite be fixed in the population count—or that, if accurately reported in the population numbers, could not capture the magnitude of the tragedy nor suggest a remedy. By tracing the dwindling relationships between homes, people, and the landscape, whether on the road or on the map, they had obtained a different sense of place from the one they had before.

However, this disintegration of rural places is not always seen as a direct result of the labor migration that has been billed as the great departure. As put by the head of the Kalašova municipality, “we are not affected by migration, because there is nobody left here to migrate. Young people do not stay in the countryside.” While on the one hand it seems that “the emptying of the countryside” is not directly linked to “the great departure,” the young people that leave rural areas are also the same labor migrants that subsequently leave cities in search for work abroad. Once they leave the rural place, it is marginally important for the municipality whether they have moved to the city or have emigrated abroad, unless they have

remained registered as residents of the municipality in which case some part of their tax income should be redistributed to the municipality as well.

But the reason for my visit this time was actually not to discuss the census. I had come to attend a public meeting about the district development plan in which Inta's municipality participated. The district development plan was being prepared as part of a country-wide municipal planning exercise financed by the European Union. In accordance with the administrative rules, the planning exercise was carried out by the consulting company that had won the bid. In all of Latvia, there were about five such consulting companies that had participated in the bidding process and were now undertaking development planning exercises throughout the country. All of these planning exercises struggled to figure what to do about rural depopulation. Nobody thought that the tendency could be reversed any time soon. The problem was: what kind of development could be planned in such conditions? When I asked Inta what the planning teams meant by development, she said: "What development? We are slowly dying here. Who will develop? I don't know... I guess some Germans are coming in, the Danes are buying land ... I don't know." With this, Inta gestured towards what many local residents saw as "the other side" of rural depopulation, namely the foreign acquisition of land for the purposes of intensive large-scale agriculture—a process that, indeed, might be coded as development under the European Union's "community strategic guidelines for rural development."¹⁸

Maintaining life

Roberts, a young man in his 20s who works for the "local Dane," talked to me during his break on a hot summer day.¹⁹ In reply to my questions about land, labor, and mobility, he told several stories. One of the stories pertained to the way his compatriots who worked as taxi drivers in Birmingham, England produced work for themselves by puncturing the tires of bicycles parked by bars. Another story pertained to the "local Dane" who was always on the lookout for more agricultural land in the area.²⁰ Roberts began the story with a delicious chuckle about "how the Dane wanted to drag Mrs. Papule to the grave." Mrs. Papule, you see, was an elderly local resident who had moved to the village center and sold her farm to the Dane with one condition, namely that the Dane could not do anything to the standing house—such as take it down or move it elsewhere—while she was still alive. One day the Dane had called up Roberts and said that Mrs. Papule had passed away. He claimed to have seen her grave in the cemetery. "What do you mean?", Roberts was surprised. "Mrs. Papule is alive." "No, no, I saw her grave," insisted the Dane. Roberts called up the old woman only to find out that she was alive indeed. "Imagine, he is walking around the cemetery, looking for her grave!" exclaimed Roberts and chuckled again.

Roberts did not comment further on the incident, but I took the story to be illustrative of local imaginations of what is to come in the future that will replace the dying Latvian countryside, namely, intensive and industrial agriculture run by foreigners, or what the newly established foreign farmers' association has named active and productive farming. Productive farming would replace the political, emotional, and subsistence-oriented relationship with land that, in the view of the new "active farmers," had dominated Latvia for the last 20 years. In Roberts' story, carriers of the "new order" were already roaming the cemetery, waiting for the empty homes and fields to be left behind by the disintegration of the "old order." It was neither the Muslims, nor the Chinese, nor the Africans, as imagined by the elderly woman on the bus, but rather Danish farmers who were to fill the empty spaces as part of the uneven process of capital expansion that structures agrarian capitalism in this corner of contemporary Europe.

In all the rural areas that I worked in, significant chunks of agricultural land and / or forests were owned by local companies with 100% foreign capital.²¹ Foreign investors and farmers with access to accumulated capital or credit could work on the scale that most local farmers could not, though there were exceptions. On the one hand, the relationship between local residents and Danish farmers in the areas that I worked in was often strained, given the amount of land purchased, the ways in which land acquisition was accomplished, and the fact that quite a few Danish investors were embroiled in controversies over their wish to establish environmentally hazardous industrial pig farming in what they saw as the comparatively empty Latvian countryside.²² At the same time, however, while the presence of foreign investments was felt in the form of cultivated fields, farms, and public controversies, the presence of foreign farmers in local life was mostly mythical. Danish farmers and local residents seemed to inhabit entirely different social, economic, and ideational spaces. This formation of parallel worlds was also evident in the development planning exercise that was unfolding in the municipality and the wider district.

When I arrived at the planning meeting in the village of Kalašova, there were four people there: the district development specialist, the head of the municipality, the secretary, and one other person. By the time the meeting started, all of six people—excluding myself—had gathered around the table out of Kalašova's 480 registered but not necessarily residing inhabitants. Judging from the numbers amassed and from her demeanor, the development specialist who led the meeting did not seem to harbor any great hopes for the outcome, so she proceeded with standard questions about what everyone thought should be accomplished in the spheres of culture, healthcare, social services, and so forth. "Do we want to change the windows for the kindergarten?", she asked. Even though the town had barely any young children, those present decided that the kindergarten should be kept up and kept open so that the young people who are still here might see it as a potential social service and perhaps decide to stay. While there was also a functioning school in the village, there were only 24 children in the school, and the municipality did not think they would manage to keep the school open the following year.²³ "Does the House of Culture need anything?", continued the development specialist. The House of Culture was definitely in need of renovations. However, while the building was currently heated by deteriorating wood stoves, the six-person group did not even consider the possibility to invest in a new heating system; instead they decided to renovate some of the stoves.

As I was sitting there, listening to the seemingly pedestrian wishes of the six residents of Kalašova, I realized that they did not see this list of projects as development, but rather as the best they could do in the given circumstances. They had no illusion that a development program could be anything else but a program for the barest preservation of life or for slowing down the inevitable deterioration and death of their village. As I also discovered during the same meeting, large areas of land in the municipality (about 30% of the territory) are owned by two large forestry companies, one a national company and another one a local company with mainly Swedish capital. Both were far from doing badly. "They don't care about our infrastructure projects," explained one of the participants, a local businessman. "They fix those parts of the road they need to take the wood out and they leave the rest in shambles. We have to make a development program to fix those fragments of the road they neglect." Needless to say, no representative from either one of the companies was present during the planning process. They could take care of their own needs, and they did not need the municipality other than for taking care of land titles. They also did not need a life-preservation plan that went under the name of development planning. The six people in the room here were planning for their survival or looking for a way of "slowing down death", as put by one of the consultants of the development planning company I interviewed. Planning

occurred in spaces on the side of the road that were non-spaces in terms of business interests. Yet, it was in this fraught space that the remaining local residents lived.

That preserving life was crucial to local residents was evident in another episode of development planning, this time occurring in another corner of Latvia. Here, the population had decreased by 20% in the last 10 years as a result of emigration, rural-to-urban migration and low birth rates. Yet the last 10 years had also seen the renovation of infrastructure and municipal buildings, such as water facilities and schools, financed by European Union funds. Since the money was available through projects, the buildings were renovated. It seemed to be the obvious thing to do regardless of the fact that the number of people that might benefit from such improvements was decreasing by the day. Development planners, well trained in economic thinking, gently suggested that this investment in infrastructure was unsustainable and that the district would have to decide whether they needed to keep up all those buildings in conditions where the population was decreasing, thereby increasing the costs for those who stayed.

Faced with this question during the public discussion of the development plan, which was a long list of small-scale infrastructure and cultural projects, the district head replied that it was important to maintain life in the area, because, “if we cannot maintain life, then you know what we’ll have to deal with...” While the district head left the sentence half-unfinished, he was not grimly suggesting that the hearse was on the horizon; rather, for those gathered there, it was not very difficult to realize that he was referring to the local conflicts over plans to expand an already operating Danish pig farm in the area. In their view, it was crucial to maintain life in the area to prevent this expansion, because pig-farming proponents often used arguments that vast areas of the Latvian countryside were empty, thus reducing the environmental risks, mostly the saturating smell. The plea for maintaining life was not so much a plea for maintaining a population count, but rather for maintaining life as a particular set of relations and practices related not just to imaginations of rural landscapes that roused nationalist sentiments in elite urban locales or to threatening EU conceptions of development, but to the existential experience of living at the edge of a vanishing world.

Emerging conceptions of life

Dwelling in the “contact zone of analysis” seems to open the possibility of tracing a more complex sense of life than the notion of it as a matter of survival of the nation. To be sure, the contact zone sketched above is not without its fair share of biopolitics. Rural residents are fully aware of the concern with the reproduction of the nation. As one official in a rural municipality said to me, a researcher hailing from the city: “We [in the countryside] will soon run out of blood with which to replenish the nation in the cities.” Thus, in the space of Latvian biopolitics, life unfolds in the intersection between moving and reproducing bodies and the affairs of the population conceived of as the nation.

In the remains of the rural countryside, there is another sense in which life or living can be articulated with the nation, however. In their reflections on “race, nature and the politics of difference,” Donald Moore, Jake Kosek and Anand Pandian discuss Friedrich Ratzel’s 19th century notion of living space (*lebensraum*) that marks a people’s (*Volk*) historical relationship with a territory (Moore et. al. 2003: 34). While Ratzel emphasized that living space does not pertain to an a priori ethnic or racial kinship, as Moore, Kosek and Pandian point out, it did not prevent Hitler from articulating it with racialized conceptions of national territorial spaces (2003: 64). Liisa Malkki too has critically engaged the imagined relationship between a people and a territory underlying the “national order of things” (1992, 2002).²⁴ The articulation of a historical relationship between a people and a territory also informs the way Latvians see the problem of migration insofar as opening the borders for

immigrants is feared to result in an undesirable disturbance of the historically established relationship between Latvians as a historical community and the territory of the Latvian state. There are indications, however, that this relationship is not always grounded in racial or ethnic notions of kinship. For example, the elderly woman in the opening vignette identified with an “us,” however fraught, as a historical community of Latvians and non-Latvians that shared a common territory and juxtaposed it to other potential incomers, whether Muslims, Africans, Chinese or Danes. On other occasions, however, the people-territory articulation is racialized, as when the aforementioned municipal official invoked a blood kinship between Latvians in the countryside and Latvians in the cities.²⁵

Yet neither of these two understandings of life or living exhaust the sense of life that emerges from an ethnographic engagement with the emptying countryside. This sense of life emerges at the moment of its reconfiguration, even disintegration. It is a sense of life as a particular set of social practices and relations between humans and between humans and their material environment. In conclusion, perhaps turning to some other anthropological instantiations of life might help to broaden the view as a way of laying ground for further analysis. In recent years, anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to what Eduardo Kohn calls “the anthropology of life,” a move that attempts to bridge the human and the non-human with a view to the larger processes and relationships that exceed the human (Kohn 2007). Many such anthropological engagements have sought to consider relationships between human and non-human living beings, such as dogs, bees, and insects (Kohn 2007, Haraway 2003, Kosek 2010, Raffles 2010). Bruno Latour has, of course, been at the forefront of analyzing networks in which humans are one among many nodal points (2006). An anthropological concern with life has also extended beyond the relationships between human and non-human living beings to include materiality as another important dimension of life (Miller 2005, Arenas & Dzenovska 2010). The point here is that the sense of life that emerges in rural Latvia—as life that is practiced, cherished, lost, lamented, and preserved—is precisely an articulation of practices and relations that unfold between, and thus also constitute, particular kinds of humans, buildings, places, and landscapes. These are not separate entities that are arranged in particular relationships to each other, but rather dynamic articulations of life. In that sense, life is not about bodies—individual or collective—but about emplacement in the world (Massey 2005).

When things seem to be unraveling, concern with life takes center stage. The extreme financial austerity measures that the Latvian government implemented to deal with the economic crisis not only set people on the road (Hudson & Sommers 2010), but also marked the return of a familiar sense of uncertainty well theorized in postsocialist contexts (Humphrey 2002, Oushakine 2009, Petryna 2002, Smagalska-Follis 2008, Burawoy & Verdery 1999). In conditions when the political and economic project of Europe is at risk of falling apart, when the capitalist system is once again in crisis, when notions of social security threaten to become “cultural survivals” of times past, the relations and practices that make up life become much more vivid and tangible.

²⁶ It’s as if all the “representational thinking” (Stewart 2007) recedes into the background, foregrounding a “contact zone of analysis” which offers the hope of being generative not only of new analytics, but also of new practices of life.

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2 The word bljin is widely used instead of the Russian curse word bljadj. The latter literally means whore, whereas the former is derived from the word pancake.

3 Svoi refers to "ours", "one of us" in the sense of a specific sociality which Alexei Yurchak describes in the Soviet context as marking a difference from authoritative state discourses (2005: 108).

4 I borrow this expression from Kathleen Stewart's wonderful book "A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America" where she traces life in former coal mining towns in the in-between spaces of American modernity.

5 In this particular locality, there was one fairly successful business enterprise—a young family was running a guest house and horse stables in the farmstead their grandfather obtained during the 1930s when the authoritarian president Kārlis Ulmanis subsidized land credits for former Latvian soldiers in order to Latvianize the Eastern frontier. Their business was quite successful due to tourists coming from abroad. The family was also involved in some community activities, such as upkeeping an old manor park. They could provide for themselves and they did participate in communal life, but their success did not seem to provide a model for others, nor could they alone reinvigorate the social and economic life of the village.

6 This research is undertaken as part of an interdisciplinary and collaborative University of Latvia / European Social Fund project "Development Strategies and Changing Cultural Spaces of Latvia's Rural Residents" (University of Latvia / European Social Fund Project: 2009/0222/1DP/1.1.1.2.0/09/APIA/VIAA/087)

7 A recent research report produced by Mihails Hazans and presented to the University of Latvia on September 12, 2011 put the number of Latvia's residents living or working abroad at 250,000 to 300,000 and the population of Latvia at 1.9 million. He argued that despite the falling numbers of the population as indicated by a recent Census, the Central Statistical Office still operated with a population estimate of 2.2 million, a difference of 300,000 people that was seriously hindering the planning process in a number of policy areas.

8 Anthropologists of Eastern Europe have also recently turned to analysis of both migration patterns and national panics about demography. See Solari 2010 for the former and Michele Rivkin-Fish 2010 for the latter.

9 See Mežs 2011: <http://www.ir.lv/2010/10/28/drumas-prognozes-par-latviesu-skaitu-nakotne>

10 In the political arena, there have been suggestions to introduce a "childless tax" which was operative during the Soviet period. Interestingly, during the first Republic of Latvia (1918-1940), it was bachelors who were subjected to moral critique for not getting married and producing children. Several times during that period, the Latvian

government came close to instituting a bachelor's tax. The focus on male bachelors was justifying by their allegedly bohemian conduct of spending time and money in restaurants rather investing in family. Women were not blamed, for they could always say that nobody was marrying them (Lipša 2006).

11 See Greenhalgh & Winkler 2005 and Paxson 2004 for a related treatment of the politics of reproduction in China and Greece.

12 See Candea 2007 for a really interesting argument about how the anthropological practice of bounding or de-limiting a field-site enables a truly multi-sited ethnography and does not fall into the trap of holism. Candea argues that multi-sited ethnography of the type advocated by George Marcus, one that attempts to trace the circuits of a particular problem, is more complicit with a desire for holism than de-limiting a field-site as an arbitrary location.

13 This was not part of her official duties. Inta had applied for the temporary position with the institution conducting the census.

14 Though, of course, the census taker was supposed to record exactly what the people were saying rather than correct the information according to their own understanding of how things were. See Francine Hirsch's work on the Soviet census in the 1930s where she describes how ethnic identification was constructed as a result of the interface between census takers and the people they were interviewing.

15 It should be noted that this does not mean that the homes and the land upon which they stand are not owned by anyone. Most owners are children or relatives of the deceased who either do not live in the area or do not come to visit or take care of the homes. There are also properties which might serve as summer residences and are looked after, but they are few and are not inhabited year round.

16 Medical services in the area are difficult to access. If visits to family doctors can be arranged and planned, acute illnesses present a serious risk. Inta, the head of municipality, brought this up in every conversation we had. Several people had died in the municipality, because the only district ambulance was in another town or because the doctors waited for a formal call from the dispatcher and did not respond to calls for help. Inta explained that every family has to constantly think about how they would get to an emergency room should such a need arise. Some are simply stranded and unable to come up with a viable plan for action in case of a medical emergency. There is also no police force in the area. While I have not heard accounts of any serious crime, Inta did complain that they had to rely on community policing and people's good will when they had youth discos or similar events.

17 Shortly before my visit, the media reported that a village in the Daugavpils district was stripped of its official village status, because there simply were not more residents left. Apparently, 13 villages in the Daugavpils district had already had a similar fate. Inta invoked this frequently during our conversation.

18 http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/agriculture/general_framework/160042_en.htm. See also Gray 2000 for analysis of the constitutive tensions of the European Common Agricultural Policy. On the one hand, the policy is meant to support life in rural areas, whereas on the other hand such life is only possible at the expense of small-scale farming.

19 Many of the incoming foreign farmers hailed from Denmark where land was expensive and scarce. The concentration of Danes in rural Latvia has to do with a complex set of factors, one of them being the work of local real estate speculators who purchased large areas of agricultural land and thereafter explicitly targeted Danish investors and farmers. The trend is so widespread that every rural locality speaks of the own "local Dane" (See Dzenovska 2011).

20 Most local farmsteads consisted of about 15-20 ha of land, with "large" farms consisting of approximately 300 ha of agricultural land. Danish farms usually consisted of 1,500 or 2,000 ha and upwards. The land acquired was not contiguous, and the workers often had to drive tractors long distances to work all the fields. Obtaining plots that were contiguous to existing plots, even if they were not good agricultural land, was thus highly desirable for the purpose of consolidating resources.

21 During the land reform that is still ongoing and is envisaged to end at the end of this year, with some activities ongoing until the end of next year, foreigners can only purchase agricultural land as legal persons.

22 The juxtaposition between Danish farmers and local residents overlooks the fact that there were local residents and officials who did support pig farming and who themselves were pig farmers.

23 The school has indeed been closed down.

24 See also Gupta & Ferguson 1992 and Barth 1998.

25 See also Paxson 2004: 167.

26 Edward T. Tylor put forth the notion of cultural survival as discursive or material elements of social life that are linked to earlier stages of cultural formations (1958: 16).