

Mourning the More-Than-Human: Somatechnics of Environmental Violence, Ethical Imaginaries, and Arts of Eco-Grief

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Abstract:

Theoretically grounded in queer death studies and environmental humanities, this article has a twofold aim. Firstly, it explores the somatechnics of environmental violence in the context of Northern and Eastern Europe, while paying attention to ongoing ecocide inflicted by Russia on Ukraine, and to the post-WW2 chemical weapon dumps in the Baltic Sea. Secondly, the article examines the concept of eco-grief in its close relation to artistic narratives on ecocide. By bridging the discussion on environmental violence and artistic renderings of eco-grief, the article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the socio-cultural responses to more-than-human death and loss, and their accompanying ethical imaginaries and affordances.

Keywords: contemporary art; ecocide; eco-grief; environmental humanities; environmental violence; queer death studies.

Introduction

... if no stories are told, if all the violence goes unremarked, then we are thrust into the world of the doubly violated. Silence, however comfortable it seems at times, is a failure to acknowledge the gravity of violence.

Rose 2012: 139

... 'wolves that jump into our trench and stick close to us. They tremble during shelling, just like we do. Only once everything is over do they run

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away.’ Three nights ago even a cow got lost and, confused, tried to climb down to find shelter.

Giovara 2023

The lines of the second quotation above open a correspondence on the situation in the southern front of the Russo-Ukrainian war, published in the summer of 2023 in *La Repubblica*.¹ This image of shared human and nonhuman vulnerability and fear is a strong but not unique one. Military conflicts – like the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, unfolding since 24 February 2022 – carry profound consequences for nature and the environment (Rist et al. 2023; Wenning and Tomasi 2022). The direct destructive impact on biodiversity and ecosystems, combined with (in)direct effects on human populations, is persistent to armed conflicts globally – not the least to the ongoing military conflicts in Africa and the Middle East (Sousa et al. 2022). Yet, the extensive documentation of the unfolding ecocide in Ukraine points to the timeliness of the discussion on the environmental consequences of armed conflicts in general, and of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, in particular. We are talking here about military impacts on a rich diversity of ecosystems – from mountains (the Carpathians), through grasslands (the Pontic-Caspian steppe), large rivers with their estuaries (the Dnipro, the Dniester, and the Southern Buh), to coastal areas (the Azov and the Black Sea) – and threatened species, such as the European bison (*Unio crassus*) or the Crimean rowan (*Sorbus tauricola*) (ibid.). Cutting through nonhuman and human flesh alike, in both short- and long-term scales, military assaults are directly linked to the two interconnected questions explored in this article: the somatechnics of environmental violence and the workings of environmentally-based grief and mourning.

A sense of grief becomes increasingly tangible in contexts where climate change and planetary environmental destruction transform certain habitats into unliveable spaces and induce socio-economic inequalities and shared more-than-human vulnerabilities. Although grief and bereavement linked to the loss of a human or of that which has already passed are societally accepted or even expected, the mourning of nonhuman death and ecological loss has a rather different status. It is often described as ‘disfranchised grief’ (Doka 1989): not openly accepted or acknowledged in society. Simultaneously, death and loss can presently be understood as important environmental concerns. In many ways, they are entwined with mechanisms of environmental violence and the myriad of its manifestations.

Theoretically grounded in the interdisciplinary fields of queer death studies (Radomska et al. 2020) and environmental humanities

(Rose et al. 2012), this article has a twofold aim. Firstly, it aims to unpack and explore the somatechnical workings of environmental violence as it is presently unfolding in the context of Northern and Eastern Europe, while paying special attention to the above-mentioned ongoing ecocide linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Gardashuk 2022; Sousa et al. 2022), on the one hand, and to the post-WW2 chemical weapon dumps in the Baltic Sea, often referred to as one of the most polluted seas in the world (HELCOM 2018), on the other. Environmental violence unravels through entangled mechanisms comprised of soft and hard technologies that penetrate flesh (Sullivan and Murray 2009; Radomska 2017) and alter more-than-human bodies at diverse speeds, to various extents, and at different spatio-temporal scales. Its somatechnical workings may be ‘slow,’ occurring ‘gradually and out of sight’ (Nixon 2011: 2), like eighty-year-old bombs at the bottom of the Baltic Sea. But it may also be ‘abrupt’ (Neimanis 2021), like the bombings of animal shelters or enclosures since 2022 by Russians on the Ukrainian soil (BlueCross 2023). Secondly, this article aims to examine and revisit the concept of ecological grief (eco-grief) in its close relation to socio-cultural and artistic imaginaries of crisis and environmental ethics, especially relevant to the Northern and Eastern European contexts. Art projects, like those discussed here such as Polina Choni’s *Black Soil* (2023) and Eglė Plytnikaitė, Agnė Stirnė, and Oskaras Stirna’s *Invasive Species* (2023), create affective spaces for dealing with environmental violence, ecocide, more-than-human vulnerability, death, and loss. They mobilise a space for grieving that in turn fuels ethical response, concern, and care.

By bridging the discussion on somatechnical unfoldings of environmental violence and artistic renderings of eco-grief, this article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the socio-cultural responses to more-than-human death and loss, as well as their accompanying ethical imaginaries and affordances – in the here and now.

Meanders of Environmental Violence

Over the past two decades – more deeply than ever before – the annihilation of entire ecosystems, mass killings of animal and plant populations, the destruction of biodiversity, and species extinction have mobilised research and discussions among scientists, politicians, lawyers, environmental activists, and general society. Planetary environmental disruption – entwined with more-than-human polycrisis (Geerts 2023) – constitutes the primary focus for environmental scientists, engineers, and lawyers; and simultaneously, mobilises a strong socio-cultural response (cf. Carstens and Geerts 2023). It fuels contemporary cultural

productions: 'climate fiction' literature, film, and contemporary art,² all of which contribute to the present socio-cultural imaginaries of crisis. The latter, in turn, drive popular-scientific and cultural narratives, representations, expressions, and art. What this context requires is, on the one hand, an attentive engagement with cultural meanings, representations, and narratives of environmental harm and destruction and, on the other, a deeper philosophical reflection on the mechanisms and processes driving planetary environmental crises.

Environmental violence – a term forming part of the still relatively new interdisciplinary field of violence studies (DeKeseredy et al. 2019) – refers to a form of violence 'perpetrated by humans against ecosystems and non-human environmental entities such as animals, rivers and mountains ... [and usually] perpetrated in the course of "business as usual". It involves individuals as well as groups, companies as well as nation-states' (White 2019: 121). Environmental violence should be seen as structural and systemic, and is usually entangled with direct and/or indirect violence against other humans which, more often than not, are marginalised and deprived communities, the poor or Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. In a very direct sense, it may mean violence against or the killing of environmental 'defenders:' lawyers, NGO (non-governmental organisation) staff, activists, and members of Indigenous communities fighting for the protection of their land (Butt et al. 2019). Understood indirectly, harm and violence against the environment, the destruction of ecosystems, toxicity, and pollution, among others, translate into harm towards humans, primarily communities already living in precarious conditions (cf. Lee 2016). As criminologist Rob White (2019: 121) notes, environmental violence can also be understood as 'crimes of the powerful': transnational corporations, companies and even governments, who, 'in pursuit of private profit, systematically consume, harvest, contaminate and destroy the living Earth and its inhabitants.'

These crimes amount to purposeful actions or gestures of omission and neglect, resulting in land, water, and air pollution, deforestation, the destruction of habitats and ecosystems, as well as theriocide (killing of animals). Land and seabed mining, agriculture, extractive and chemical industries, and global transport systems are behind increasing carbon emissions, air pollution (industrial cities in China, Pakistan, and India are some of oft-cited sites affected by air pollution),³ the release of heavy metals and poisonous chemicals into the soil, disposing of hazardous and radioactive waste by burying it underground⁴ and, last but not least, the destruction of freshwater and marine environments (White 2019). Environmental violence affects bodies of water: rivers, seas, and oceans,

all of which – while holding a particular environmental role – are also loaded with cultural meanings and accompanied by specific cultural imaginaries (Radomska and Åsberg 2021; Randell-Moon 2023; Shields and Guevara-Salamanca 2023).

Yet, apart from the environmental violence that directly translates into climate change, profound alterations of landscape and marine environments, and global-warming-related phenomena such as droughts, floods, and hurricanes,⁵ White (2019; 2023) also emphasises more specific drivers behind the loss of biodiversity, habitat destruction, and violence towards animals. For instance, deforestation – being one of the factors behind the destruction of ecosystems – largely results from the global focus on flex-crop monocultures and the growing markets for biofuels, primarily in the global North. In places like West Africa, deforestation is also linked to the financing of military conflicts (Brisman et al. 2015). However, as White argues, with the United Nation's focus on the reduction of carbon emissions linked to deforestation, which results in the special recognition of forests, there is a potential for other 'less-valued' ecosystems, such as savannahs, to be transformed into monocrop fields which also directly affects biodiversity. These processes go hand in hand with the overtaking of communal lands by private companies and corporations, this time primarily in the global South, like the land grabs in Cambodia by Vietnamese companies for the production of rubber (White 2019: 126; White and Hasler 2019). But the capturing of a territory for resource extraction – whether directly or indirectly – is also part and parcel of (neo-)colonial, neo-imperial, and (renewed) imperial land grabs and their attendant military aggressions. A prime example is Russia's occupation of the Ukrainian territories of Donbas and the south of the country, which are particularly rich in natural resources: oil, natural gas, coal, iron ore, rare earth minerals, such as lithium, and agricultural crops, such as wheat, barley, corn, and sunflower (Muggah and Dryganov 2022; Faiola and Bennett 2022; Tsybalyuk 2022a; Theise 2023). Military conflicts as such lead to large-scale environmental alterations, damages, and destruction, unfolding over short- and long-term scales.

Importantly, 'environmental violence' also refers to violence towards, maiming, and killing of nonhuman animals. As White (2019), in the context of critical violence studies, and other researchers, particularly in the fields of critical animal studies (Nocella et al. 2014) and feminist philosophy (MacCormack 2020) emphasise, animal suffering forms part and parcel of various modes of the everyday 'consumption' of animal bodies: not only in the form of 'food,' but also as clothes and other objects, or as a resource for science and technology (including

vivisection), and as entertainment or a source of pleasure. ‘Mass consumption is being matched by mass production – of death,’ as White argues (2019: 127). And still, the above-mentioned list of animal (ab)uses is not exhaustive. Here, one should not forget about the context of animal homelessness and related exploitation, the use of animals for military or policing purposes, animal trafficking, and the mass ‘production’ of animals, that is, breeding, to name a few (ibid.). As queer death studies scholars point out, some of these deaths are perceived as ‘not “worth enough,” not grievable enough, not even seen as “deaths” in the full sense of the word’ (Radomska et al. 2020: 82). Certainly, if discussions on environmental violence are to genuinely challenge the *status quo* of human exceptionalism, they cannot unfold while dismissing the problem of the abuse and killing of animals (not only in the sense of species, but also as individuals, groups, and populations).

On Ecocide

One particular form of environmental violence is ecocide. The term is used to describe ‘destruction, contamination and/or degradation of the environment to an extent that is measurable, serious and harmful to that environment, with detrimental effects on its biotic (living plants and animals) and abiotic (rivers, mountains) components’ (White 2023: 313). As a concept, ecocide was introduced in the late 1960s by American scientists as part of their critique of the use of herbicides as a weapon by the United States in the Vietnam War. The term received international recognition in 1972 when the Prime Minister of Sweden, Olof Palme, used the term ‘ecocide’ in his speech at the United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, directly referring to the Vietnam War. It was also at that conference where questions of environmental destruction were brought to international attention and acknowledged as a ‘transboundary’ problem which does not remain contained within specific political or geographical borders (Gauger et al. 2013). One of the direct consequences of the scientific critique and international discussions on the environmental consequences of that military conflict was the introduction of the US policy renouncing the use of herbicides in future wars (White and Hasler 2019; Zierler 2011).

Throughout the 1970s the discussions were ongoing within the UN on how ecocide might be included in the Genocide Convention from 1948. At the time many governments were questioning the effectiveness of the convention as such, since ‘[g]enocide was still a reality in many parts of the world and [the convention] seemed to offer little to those groups it was designed to protect’ (Gauger et al. 2013: 8). These doubts

served as an impetus for the work on potential revisions of the convention and it was during these revisional debates that issues of environmental harm were noted in the draft documents for the first time (Gauger et al. 2013).

Yet, the legal framing of ecocide is in a semi-direct way linked to the conceptualisation of and legal work on genocide. The term ‘genocide’ – etymologically grounded in the Greek words: *genos*, meaning ‘race’ or ‘tribe,’ and *-cide*, meaning ‘killing, destruction’ – was introduced in 1944 by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in his text *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944). The publication drew on his earlier points presented in 1933 at the International Conference for Unification of Criminal Law in Madrid where Lemkin strongly emphasised the importance of banning the ‘destruction, both physical and cultural, of human groups, invoking the linked concepts of “barbarity” and “vandalism”’ (Gauger et al. 2013: 6). Lemkin’s 1944 definition of genocide refers to both physical genocide or the killing of individual members of a nation or an ethnic group, and to cultural genocide, which is to say the undermining of a nation or ethnic group’s way of life. He saw the role of shared culture as crucial for a given social group and thus strongly argued for the inclusion of ‘cultural genocide’ in the draft of the UN Convention of Genocide. Despite Lemkin’s efforts, the final version of the adopted document excluded cultural forms of genocide, focusing exclusively on the physical ones. As Anja Gauger and colleagues – researchers in the Ecocide Project, hosted by Human Rights Consortium at the University of London – note, the omission of cultural genocide in the convention led to a ‘preoccupation, in legal and scholarly realms, with proving perpetrator intention rather than genocidal impacts, and to the popular (mis)understanding of the crime of genocide as simply racially-motivated mass killing’ (2013: 7). Gauger and her colleagues point out that the legal paths of cultural genocide and ecocide are parallel if not entangled.

The above-mentioned discussions on the revision of the Convention of Genocide unfolding in the 1970s thus focus on the inclusion of both cultural genocide and ecocide in the document (Higgins et al. 2013; Gauger et al. 2013). One of the markers of that work is the draft International Convention on the Crime of Ecocide, a document prepared by legal scholar Richard A. Falk in 1973, where he draws attention to ‘consciously and unconsciously inflicted irreparable damage to the environment in times of war and peace’ (1973: 93). Despite support for the idea of the criminalisation of ecocide, the document was deferred at the UN for unknown reasons.

The issue of the inclusion of ecocide and environmental damages into international law returns in the 1980s and 90s. UN’s International

Law Commission (ILC) focuses at the time on the possibility of including environmental crime in the Draft Code of Offences Against the Peace and Security of Mankind, a document which later became the Rome Statute of International Criminal Court (adopted in 1998, entered into force in 2002). The draft Article 26 of the Code stated that ‘an individual who wilfully causes or orders the causing of widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment shall, on conviction thereof, be sentenced...’ (Gauger et al. 2013: 9). The 1986 formulation mobilised debates on two interlinked issues: (1) the question of intentionality (representatives of several countries pointed out that environmental damages – especially taking place at the time of peace – were not necessarily motivated by intent; often they happened due to companies running after profit); and (2) unintentional severe environmental damage occurring in conditions of peace. Despite the fact that a special Working Group devoted to the issue of revisiting Article 26 was formed by the ILC in 1995, and that it offered a proposal for such a revision of the formulation of the Article in question, the sitting chairman of the ILC decided, in 1996, to remove Article 26 from the Code altogether, without putting it to a vote (Gauger et al. 2013: 10). In this way, ecocide was removed from the draft Code. Instead, what was adopted and is present in the Rome Statute today, is Article 8 on War Crimes, which delimits the mentioning of environmental crimes to “widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment” within a war context’ (Higgins et al. 2013: 261).

The consideration of environmental damage and ecocide in conditions of peace, which was included in the early drafts of the Code of Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind, did however make its way into some national laws. The first country to include ecocide into its penal code was Vietnam (in 1990); after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), ecocide was also incorporated into criminal codes of: Russia (1996), Armenia (2003), Belarus (1999), the Republic of Moldova (2002), Ukraine (2001), Georgia (1999), Kazakhstan (1997), Kyrgyzstan (1997), and Tajikistan (1998) (see Gauger et al. 2013: 12). As philosopher Tetiana Gardashuk (2022) notes, the timing of the adoption of ecocide law by former Soviet states may be linked to the political and environmental aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and other negative outcomes of the uses and abuses of nature in the former USSR.

The second decade of the twenty-first century – with advancing climate change and intensified planetary environmental disruption – forms the backdrop for the renewed attempts to include the crime of ecocide into the text of the Rome Statute. In 2021 the

United Kingdom-based Stop Ecocide Foundation, a charitable body linked to Stop Ecocide International, commissioned an independent panel of international experts with the aim of working out a legal definition of ecocide which could be included in the Rome Statute. In June 2021, the panel agreed on the following formulation: ecocide ‘means unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts’ (Stop Ecocide Foundation 2021). Such a formulation thus goes beyond the current limitations of Article 8 of the Rome Statute which mentions environmental damages resulting from war exclusively.

As researchers within the field of green criminology – focused on studying environmental crimes – emphasise, the proposed amendment to the Rome Statute focuses on environmental harm and destruction in relation to the ways in which they affect the human (White 2023). Yet, ecocide may also be approached from an ecocentric perspective according to which the environment has its own value, rather than only having value as a resource or background for humans. Thus reframed, ecocide is examined from an angle that emphasises the importance of ecological integrity, the prevention and remediation of harm, the idea of Earth stewardship, and a conception of nonhuman entities (animals, plants, ecosystems) as potential rights holders and receivers of care (White 2023: 316). The ecocentric approach allows for an examination of environmental harm without immediate references to human experience, benefit, or detriment. As White and Olivia Hasler argue, causes of ecocide lie in ‘dominant systems of production and consumption,’ steered by late-capitalist corporations and nation states (2019: 317). ‘Consumption’ here should be understood in its broadest sense, as the consumption of liveable presents and possible futures (Radomska and Åsberg 2021: 1430), which becomes directly visible in the context of war-induced environmental harms.

Contemporary environmental discourses, co-created and shared by both academia and activism, have shown that the term ‘ecocide’ constitutes a crucial political and philosophical tool and reference point, even though it has primarily been formulated as a concept of legal meaning, importance, and weight. Thus, as White and Hasler (2019: 317) emphasise, the socio-political and cultural rhetoric of ecocide remains essential regardless of ‘whether or not new laws are passed.’

I outline here this historical background in order to better situate the variety of perspectives on the processes, materialities, and conceptualisations converging under the notion of ecocide, as well its multiple disciplinary reworkings and contextualisations. Certainly, in an

environmental humanities sense, ecocide is both historically or presently entangled with (neo-)colonial and renewed imperial violence, *and* a daily occurrence, activated by omnipresent processes of consumer capitalism.

The Somatechnics of Environmental Violence

Following environmental humanities scholar Rob Nixon (2011: 2), researchers dealing with environmental violence often see it as a ‘slow’ form of violence, ‘of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.’ Nixon introduced the term to address the often overlooked, insidious, unfolding in a long-term scale, consequences of human actions on the biotic and abiotic components of the environment. Slow violence penetrates the materiality of living bodies, of the lithosphere and atmosphere, of planetary waters. In her reading of Nixon’s take on environmental violence, feminist scholar Astrida Neimanis (2021: 339) argues that ‘slow’ versus ‘spectacular’ violence should not be seen as a binary opposition, as that could give one a false sense of ‘certainty’. Rather, Neimanis writes, there is ‘the need to eschew a temporality of slow violence as either dualistically distinct from the spectacular or as progressive and unidirectional, and pay attention instead to the tentacular tangles of time.’

One ‘nearby’ example of such a tangled form of violence can be found in the Baltic Sea, from a coast of which this article has been written. In the years following WW2, major military powers sank thousands of tons of chemical weapons and other munitions in the seas and oceans around the globe. One such dumping area was the Baltic Sea where at least 50,000 tons of chemical weapons (CW), containing approximately 15,000 tons of chemical warfare agents (CWA), and at least 200,000 tons of conventional weapons, were dumped post-1945, primarily outside of Bornholm and in the Gotland Deep according to the official records (CHEMSEA 2014). Current research indicates that there are also unofficial dumping sites, such as Slupsk Furrow and the Gdansk Deep (CHEMSEA 2014: 21). Following the Potsdam agreement of 1945, which marked the end of WW2 and commanded the complete disarmament and demilitarisation of Germany, the Allied powers took responsibility for the destruction of any remaining CW, CWA, and their production facilities. In line with a conviction, popular at the time, that ‘the vast amounts of water would neutralize the CWA’ (CHEMSEA 2014: 16), it was decided that a relatively low-cost and ‘safe’ solution would be to submerge the weapons in the seas and oceans.

But the idea of ‘washing away’ is an illusion (Radomska and Åsberg 2021). Placed at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, munitions and metal canisters containing CWA – such as mustard gas, Clark I and II, Lewisite and Adamsite – corrode and leak. Chemical agents are continuously transformed through their interaction with various environmental factors like salinity, temperature, oxygen depletion, and bacteria; however, the CWA derivatives are typically as toxic as the original substances (CHEMSEA 2014: 63). Researchers in such international projects as CHEMSEA (Chemical Munitions Search & Assessment) and DAIMON (Decision Aid for Marine Munitions) have demonstrated that the toxic – and harmful for both humans and the environment – substances continuously ooze, contaminating the seabed sediments, water, and tissues of organisms inhabiting the affected areas. The munitions also constitute a danger for fishermen, vessels, and various activities or infrastructures developed on the seabed. There are no ideal or ultimate solutions. The established joint strategy of dealing with CW submerged in the Baltic Sea involves the continuous monitoring of the dumping sites and the state of the sea, contingency plans, and containment strategies, primarily *in situ* (CHEMSEA 2014; DAIMON 2014). This has largely to do with the intrinsic uncertainty and unpredictability characterising the presence of the dumped CWA inter- and intra-acting with multiple physical and chemical factors of the milieu they found themselves in (CHEMSEA 2014: 82).

Contamination, the chemical and physical alteration of the ecosystem, and the penetration of organisms’ tissues with arsenic and other poisonous elements or compounds, amount to environmental violence that could also be understood as a multiplex and somatechnical assemblage. *Somatechnics*, a concept introduced by cultural studies scholars Susan Stryker, Nikki Sullivan, and Samantha Murray, refers to the ‘chiasmic interdependence ... of bodily being (or corporealities) as always already technologised, and technologies as always already enfleshed’ (Sullivan and Murray 2009: 3). In Sullivan and Murray’s formulation, the term primarily focuses on the problematic of human bodies (including their more-than-human aspects; cf Henriksen and Radomska 2015). Yet, the concept of somatechnics – understood as the inherent entwinement between ‘hard’ technologies of physical harm and destruction, combined with ‘soft’ techniques of power and discourse on the one hand, and with earthly biotic and abiotic bodies on the other (Radomska 2018) – provides a promising analytical lens. Applied in the context of environmental violence, somatechnics exposes the intimate interweavings of malleable mechanisms and techniques that penetrate, pervade, maim, wear out, or ultimately

annihilate the flesh of plants, animals, microorganisms, and their milieus. Physical technologies of poisoning, contamination, or slaughter, form part of the complex somatechnical machinery, along with softer discursive techniques that frame the procedures in question as control measures, management, or securing the economic interests of a given societal group. At times, 'management' means destruction and complete erasure. It might even appear as a 'casualty' or as part and parcel of imperial aggression. A *raison d'être* behind the euphemistic notion of management is control, containability, and the removal of uncertainty. However, what such procedures often engender is precisely a different kind of uncertainty. The dumping of weapons in the Baltic Sea has not resulted in the neutralisation of CWA as it had been hoped for. Yes, watery milieus transform toxic substances, but the neutralisation is only partial. Researchers emphasise that the CWA degradation products are not less toxic than the original CWA. Both the short- and long-term effects of CWA and their degradation products on the biota and the seabed milieu remain unclear, and require continuous monitoring (CHEMSEA 2014).

The question of uncertainty at many, including existential, levels is also inherent to the ecocidal violence forming part of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine unfolding since 2022. While the environment in the eastern parts of Ukraine, including numerous nature reserves, has had suffered from military activities since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded the eastern parts of Donbas, the full-scale invasion has opened trajectories for destruction and violence of a different kind, level, and scale (Gardashuk 2022; Solokha et al. 2023). Direct military actions and their indirect consequences, such as bombing of fuel depots or industrial facilities, result in air, water, land and soil pollution, destruction of ecosystems, and loss of biodiversity (Leclerc 2023; Wenning and Tomasi 2022). Many of the affected habitats form part of the national parks as well as biosphere and nature reserves. Many of those also belong to the pan-European Emerald Network. As of September 2022, Russia conducted combat operations on 1,24 million hectares of protected area, which is approximately one third of the territory of all nature reserves in Ukraine (Tsaryk and Kuzyk 2022: 103; EcoZagroza 2024). Attempts to violently erase the people and the culture mix with erasing the nonhumans and the landscape; the slow violence of war-induced environmental destruction entwines with the spectacularity of military technologies cutting through, altering, and maiming the flesh of the earth and of the multitudes of creatures inhabiting it. Violence ranges from the long-term aftermath of bombings (with white phosphorus munitions included) to the torturing and killing of animals

– for the sake of entertainment, to induce terror, or out of spite – by Russian soldiers (Mordowanec 2022).

Another chapter of maiming the landscape was launched in June 2023, when – as indicated by evidence – Russian forces blew up the Kakhovka dam, a 3-kilometre-long hydropower facility on the Dnipro River in the south of the country (Leclerc 2023). Pronounced the largest environmental catastrophe since Chernobyl, the destruction of the dam resulted in 18 cubic kilometres of water rushing downstream and flooding circa 620 square kilometres of land, including 80 settlements (Stone 2024). The disaster claimed the lives of humans and nonhumans; of pets, farm animals, and wildlife. As the media reported, approximately 150 tonnes of industrial lubricants alone were released into the Dnipro (Tsurkan 2023). Yet, the deadly stream also carried with it other toxic industrial and agrochemical substances, sewage, and dislodged land mines. Circa 90% of the Kakhovka reservoir has been emptied; what is left are around 500,000 tons of dead bivalves rotting in the desiccated lakebed (Stone 2024). Polluted waters ran down with the Dnipro River into the Black Sea, flooding nature reserves and rare habitats, such as Oleshky Sands National Nature Park, an 80-square-kilometre preserve near Kherson. A unique Dnipro sturgeon breeding facility located in Dniprov's'ke, southwest of Kherson, was destroyed too. Populations of many endemic or endangered species, such as the blind mole-rat (*Spalax arenarius*) may be gone forever (ibid.). Due to the ongoing aggression and Russian occupation, which includes the Black Sea Biosphere Reserve, and dynamically changing war, scientists have limited access to the endangered territories. The full picture of the damages around the Dnipro, in the Dnipro-Buh estuaries, and in the Black Sea will only emerge once the war is over. For the time being, uncertainty prevails and the insidious technics of destruction mould, disfigure, and penetrate the flesh of creatures, water bodies, soil, and the earth itself.

On Arts of Eco-Grief

The somatechnics of environmental violence also has a different side: the despair, grief, frustration, and anger of conservationists whose work is being lost or rendered impossible, the locals whose home landscape is being destroyed, and plainly, the onlookers aware that some species and populations may never return to a given site or might be lost forever. One can notice these affects implicitly or explicitly woven in the expressions of researchers working with the wounded landscape.

Environmental humanities scholar and artistic researcher Darya Tymbalyuk asks:

What does it mean to be an environmental researcher of Ukraine at the time of Russia's imperial war on Ukraine? What does it mean to be an environmental scholar when most of the places that you planned to engage with have become inaccessible because of landmines? What does it mean to research environments when entire ecosystems are being erased? (2022a)

These questions resonate with the ways in which researchers and writers speak about the existentially, physically, and emotionally challenging conditions of their work (Stone 2024; Dovzhyk 2023). What protrudes in such statements, testimonies, and writings are the ever-present traces of eco-grief. These traces unfold into creative literary and visual storytelling practices, reaching out beyond academia and demanding an ethical response.

The term of eco-grief describes experiences of grief occurring in relation to the present or anticipated ecological losses of species, ecosystems, and landscapes, resulting from severe anthropogenic environmental change (Cunsolo and Landman 2017). As an interdisciplinary field of study, eco-grief scholarship has its firm grounding in anticolonial, Indigenous, and environmental humanities perspectives. Focusing on the relation between eco-grief and extinction, environmental humanities scholars Owain Jones, Kate Rigby, and Linda Williams write,

biological and cultural extinction goes hand in hand with the extinction of hope: the hope of recovery, of reflowering (genetic resurrection or cultural reconstruction notwithstanding). The mass extinction of specific species – and specific elements of cultural ecology – is the mass extinction of specific elements of hope. But hope, biodiversity loss, extinction, and grieving are complexly intertwined through topological, temporal flows. (2020: 393)

Scholars whose work examines the consequences of climate change, settler colonial violence, and extractivism, point out the importance of discussing questions of eco-grief experienced by Indigenous Peoples and First Nations in different parts of the world. A substantial amount of situated eco-grief research focuses on the problematic of ecological mourning in the context of the lands forming part of Canada (Cunsolo and Landman 2017), Australia (Rose 2012), or South-East Asia (Chao 2022). These crucial works not only expose the social, cultural, ethical, existential, and philosophical dimensions and meanings of eco-grief, but

also shed light on its transformative, political, and activating potential, which directly translates into specific practices, such as the planting of bamboo by the Marind land rights activists in West Papua (Chao 2022).

Yet, less is being written on the experience of ecological loss in places that tend to escape the attention of international scholarship: the wounded landscapes of semi-peripheries (cf. Nikolić forthcoming 2024). In her research and artistic work – drawings, paintings, installations, and video essays – dealing with the environment and human-plant relations in the context of ongoing Russia’s war on Ukraine, Darya Tsybalyuk (2023a; 2023b; 2023c) gives a testimony to the multi-level workings of the somatechnics of environmental violence and the accompanying experiences of grief, loss, and erasure. Materially and/or affectively these techniques cut into the flesh of humans and their more-than-human environments. Tsybalyuk care-fully captures these workings in the following way:

There is a myriad of deaths in the Ukrainian woods these days. There is a dying of more-than-human worlds, of biotopes, of relations that form them, and of inhabitants that populate ecosystems. Many of these deaths hardly make the news. Most are not registered, and cannot be registered as we cannot access the places and as more-than-human deaths are not counted. Many deaths are yet to come even after the end of the war, when another land mine detonates somewhere deep in the woods, or when metals and toxins from weapons poison the water. These deaths also mean that relations and understandings of environments in Ukraine are changing, that the spaces we have known are not the same. They are never the same, of course, especially with the climate emergency and the sixth mass extinction—these spaces only exist in perpetual reassembling of relations. Yet, the war exacerbates the rupture of relations, cutting right through more-than-human worlds. (2022b: n. p.)

In Tsybalyuk’s work, textual and visual storytelling takes the lead: creative practice and expression powerfully shed light on experiences of eco-grief and particular situated ways of working with – and not against – it.⁶

What comes forward in environmental humanities and arts engagements with questions of crises and eco-grief is a unique potential of art and creative practices for attending to the sensorial, the affective, the ethical, and the experiential; for creating knowledge in ways that ‘touch’ beyond the borders of the academia, and that mobilise a personal ‘commitment.’ Some of contemporary artworks shift cultural understandings, significance, and meaning of death and grief. They question conventional frames of human exceptionalism, typically employed in philosophical discussions on death; they shed light on the

relational, ecological ontology of death; and they open up an ethical enquiry (Radomska 2023: 8). In other words, art often captures the uncapturable; it intimately activates questions, problems, and ethical responses in ways that are more effective and affective than a theoretical argument would ever do.

While Tsymbalyuk's scholarly and creative projects emphasise the powerful poetic entwining of the word and the image, I would also like to focus on artistic and eco-activist works that prioritise the visual (cf Iakovlenko 2024). One such example is Ukrainian artist Polina Choni's project *Black Soil*, developed during her residency at AARK, Finland. *Black Soil* consists of a series of mixed-media sculptures and images. Yet, the primary medium is bread: 'fragile, temporary, sensual material, similar to the human body or life itself', as the artist writes (Choni 2023). Bread in Choni's works becomes a space where cultural and symbolic values and heritage intersect with questions of temporality, history – including the scar of the Holodomor, the Stalin-engineered famine which killed over five million inhabitants of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1930s (Appelbaum 2017) – ongoing war, and the unfolding ecocide with its more-than-human scales. The bread dough, moulded into traditional symbolic patterns, is used to create objects/sculptures: bread masks, a tree with birds sitting on its branches, and wheat ears attached to a piece of charred wood. Some of the sculpted elements are burned and covered with ash: the birds and the wheat, painfully referring to the destruction and death brought by Russian shelling. One of the bread masks is placed in a box of soil, with grass pushing up through an empty eye socket. The piece clearly recalls the uncountable dead, both human and nonhuman – some named, most never recognised – laid in the earth, forever. The contrast between the softness, nourishment, and warmth we tend to associate with the bread itself, and the story of violence, death, and destruction presented in *Black Soil* leaves the viewer deeply moved by how poignant, yet accurate, this visual narrative is. While materially present in the exhibition, the titular black soil directly refers to chernozem, an exceptionally fertile type of soil, covering two third of Ukraine and presently threatened by the deadly military assault.

Following Ukrainian folk traditions, Choni also created paper cut outs dyed with inks made with substances scraped off burnt Russian military equipment.⁷ In this way, the cut outs also refer to her project *Chemical Reaction* (2022), which involves extracting colour pigments from various natural materials the artist found in Ukraine, making natural inks with them, and creating works with pieces of paper soaked in thus prepared inks. As Choni notes, these dyed paper strips, carrying

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Figure 1: Polina Choni, *Black Soil* (Photo: Polina Choni. Reproduced with the permission of the artist [2023]).



Figure 2: Polina Choni, *Black Soil* (Photo: Johanna Naukarinen. Reproduced with the permission of the artist [2023]).

chemical traces of the home country, are like pieces of a puzzle: an equivalent of feelings, memories, and experiences – a life which she tries to assemble together ‘into a new reality’ (2022). In Choni’s work, memory, cultural history, traditions, and material traces become interwoven with vulnerability, ephemerality, care, and intimate rituals of grieving the more-than-human, or life itself, presently exposed to senseless, brute, and murderous violence. Choni’s artworks provide a poetic and ethical visual landscape of remembering, feeling, hoping, and mourning.

These issues are also addressed in a different way in an art-activist botanical installation created by Lithuanian artists Eglė Plytnikaitė, Agnė Stirnė, and Oskaras Stirna, in collaboration with the Ancient Woods Foundation. *Invasive Species* was shown on the terrace of MO Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July 2023.⁸ The installation consists of a giant metal construction with dried Sosnovsky’s hogweed suspended from the upper part of the metal frames. The hanging dried hogweed evokes the picture of a war-scarred land; it alludes ‘to a devastated field in Ukraine, where the land has been scorched by artillery fire and tree trunks lay charred’ (MO 2023). The Sosnovsky’s hogweed is an invasive species brought to Lithuania, Ukraine, and other Soviet-occupied countries in the 1950s (Grzędzicka 2022). The spreading of the hogweed has a detrimental impact on biodiversity; and contact of the plant’s sap with the skin causes heightened photosensitivity, leading to severe burns when exposed to ultraviolet rays. The invasiveness of the plant and its impact on other life forms in its new habitat contribute to the likening the hogweed to the environmental violence unleashed through the actions of Russian forces in Ukraine ‘which will leave indelible scars on both Ukrainian land and the collective consciousness of its people’ (MO 2023). While one may be wary of the invasiveness metaphor in other contexts, it is impossible to ignore the light-shedding critical aspects of such a creative framing. Plytnikaitė, Stirnė, and Stirna, in a seemingly simple yet sophisticated, evocative, and affective way, tell a (situated visual) story of violence, destruction, loss, and deprivation. The work itself becomes a powerful gesture.

Each of these modes of creating knowledge and engaging with the problematic of the unruly somatechnics of violence – Tsymbalyuk’s poetic and potent scholarly-artistic storytelling, Choni’s ephemeral yet affective sculptures and paper works, and Plytnikaitė, Stirnė, and Stirna’s poignant art-activist installation – activates a different kind of territory. It is a territory of reflection, of weaving complex enfolded and continuously unfolding ethical relations to the somatechnically-altered – maimed, poisoned, destroyed, or killed – landscapes, ecosystems,

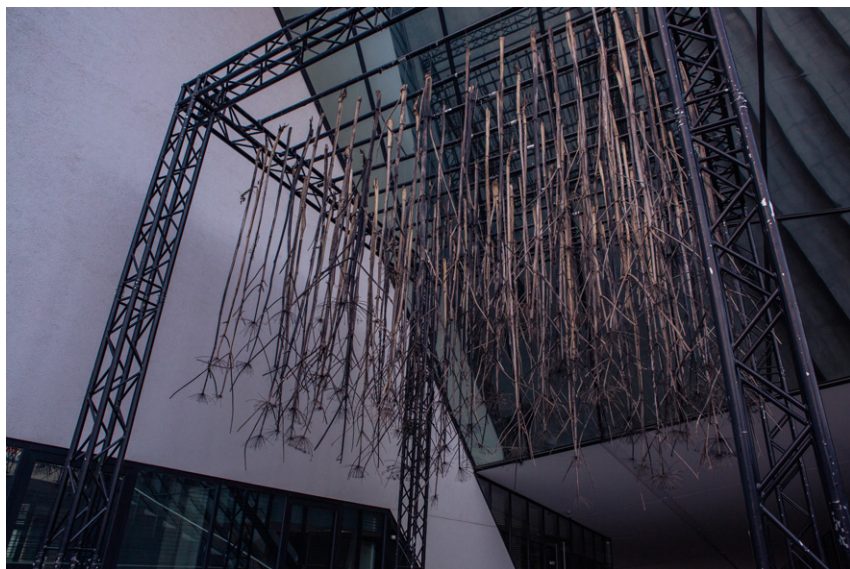


Figure 3: Eglė Plytnikaitė, Agnė Stirnė, and Oskaras Stirna, *Invasive Species* (Installation. MO Museum, Vilnius, LT. Photo: Denis Vejas. Reproduced with the permission of the artists [2023]).

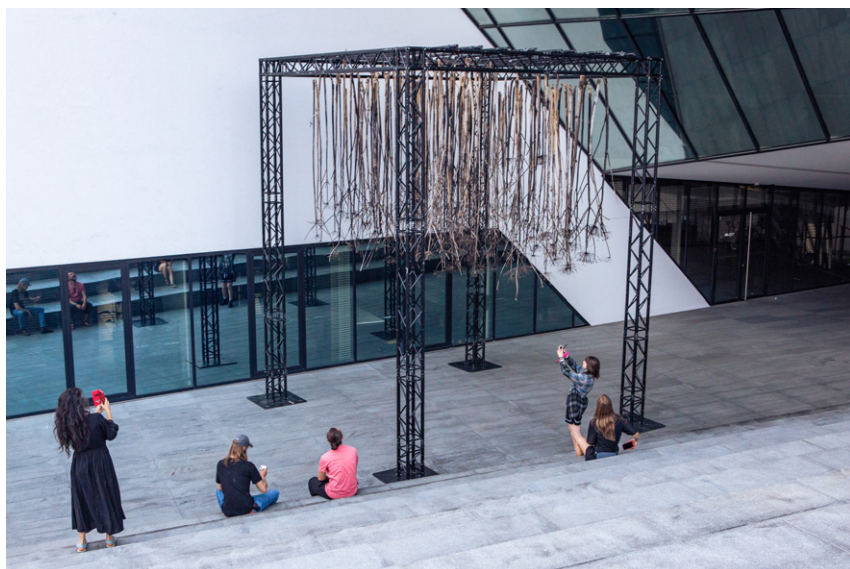


Figure 4: Eglė Plytnikaitė, Agnė Stirnė, and Oskaras Stirna, *Invasive Species* (Installation. MO Museum, Vilnius, LT. Photo: Denis Vejas. Reproduced with the permission of the artists [2023]).

species, and individual animals, plants, or places, remembered by a given individual or community. In these creative engagements, feelings of loss, grief, and mourning are woven through the tissues of words, and organic and inorganic materials. In an affective manner, they sensitise the audience to the suffering, death, and loss typically marginalised, insufficiently paid attention to, or not counted at all: the one that concerns nonhumans, be it domestic or wild animals, plants, ecosystems, or landscapes.

Outro

While environmental scientific and political efforts are crucial to analyse military violence and mobilise legal and reparative work, writers and artists do intervene into worldviews, individual and shared affects, horizons of thinking, feeling, and imagining. These interventions touch on shared – human and nonhuman – vulnerability, with a reflection on which this article has started. Cultural expressions and art mobilise individual and collective concern and care, responses and actions, and thus, should not be ignored.

Environmental violence lays at the core of the Anthropocene, a set of multiple crises, altering all the Earth's sub-systems: biosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and atmosphere.⁹ Along with ecocide, environmental violence has fuelled legal and political discussions worldwide, each time brought to attention in the aftermath of deadly events: the Vietnam War, the Chornobyl disaster, the Persian Gulf War, and now, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Changes in legal frames and formation of appropriate juridical bodies are vital for righting the wrong. Yet, environmental violence and ecocide also constitute a cultural and societal challenge. It is there where cultural, philosophical, literary, and artistic engagements with ecocide become crucial for both coping with the loss and for reimagining our relation with the environment in a more care-full manner.

In this article, I have examined the theoretical framing and history of environmental violence and ecocide, and their material unfoldings in what I see as my own spatio-temporal, and familiar location: the watery and earthly multispecies communities of Northern and Eastern European regions. Scarred by both slow and abruptly unravelling environmental violence, the stories of these spaces and their more-than-human inhabitants come to light through the textures of scholarly, literary, and poetic writings, and the fibres of artistic objects and installations. These works simultaneously queer (Radomska et al. 2020) the notions of grief and mourning: it is no longer the (normative) human exclusively who is mourned and worth of concern and care. Remembering,

commemoration, and grief take various shapes. The concept of somatechnics demonstrates how technologies of violence cut through the flesh of the world. But grief is a permeating force, too. Affective engagements with art assist us in experiencing and comprehending the more-than-human loss and eco-grief. By doing so, they *oblige us* not only to witness, but also *to care*. As philosopher Patricia MacCormack writes, ‘Care is a logic. Care is an ethic’ (2020: 184). Telling visual and textual stories of ecocide acknowledges the gravity of violence, allows us to mourn, and activates different, more caring ethical imaginaries.

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Notes

1. The correspondence – translated from Italian to Polish – was reprinted in the Polish newspaper *Wyborcza*, forming part, along with *La Repubblica*, of The Leading European Newspapers Alliance: <http://www.lena.news/>. All the links included in the article were last accessed on 15 March 2024.
2. Some widely recognised examples include novels, such as Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993); films, like recent Netflix hit *Don’t Look Up* (2021); and art projects by artists such as Brandon Ballangée.
3. See also: UNEP Air Quality Monitoring Programme (<https://www.iqair.com/unep>). It is sobering to look at air pollution ‘closer to home,’ that is, in the context of the European continent and, in particular, its central, eastern, and northern parts. According to a study on air quality in Europe, published in *The Guardian* and based on models provided by the research project Expanse (<https://expanseproject.eu/air-quality-must-improve-quickly-to-protect-citizens/>), circa 98% of inhabitants on the continent breathe air containing concentrations of PM2.5 – airborne particles produced through the burning of fossil fuels – that substantially exceed the annual average concentration limit listed by WHO in their guidelines. Air pollution is linked to public health problems, including excess deaths. The areas especially affected include Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Poland, Romania, Albania, Slovakia, Hungary, and Northern Italy. Researchers emphasise that the data points to ‘environmental injustice’ within Europe, where the most affected areas and countries are primarily those with the lowest income. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/20/revealed-almost-everyone-in-europe-breathing-toxic-air>. See also Nina Lykke in this issue.
4. In the context where nuclear energy is counted as one of ‘sustainable’ solutions by, for instance, the European Union, questions of safe disposal of spent nuclear fuel become increasingly urgent. Finland and Sweden appear to be at the forefront of building final repositories for spent nuclear fuel, designed to safely store nuclear waste for at least 100,000 years. See for instance: <https://group.vattenfall.com/press-and-media/newsroom/2023/finland-to-open-the-worlds-first-final-repository-for-spent-nuclear-fuel>. The storage of nuclear waste opens questions of scales, temporalities, and deep futures (Keating and Storm 2023).

5. Such disasters – regardless of whether they occur as immediate consequences of human actions, long-term results of human activity, or seemingly natural catastrophes – create conditions for further human-on-human violence (White 2019: 123).
6. See also Tsybalyuk's other projects: <https://daryatsymbalyuk.com/Creative-projects>.
7. See: <https://www.titanik.fi/kreuger/>.
8. See: <https://mashable.com/video/artists-installation-invasive-species-lithuania-war-ukraine-russia>.
9. The assumed 'Anthropos' and the idea of humanity encapsulated in the concept of the Anthropocene have been critically discussed by humanities and social science scholars over the past fifteen years. See, for example: Schneiderman 2015; Davis and Turpin 2015; Stiegler 2018.

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