The Stories we Tell: Memory, Engagement(s), and Donbas

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ABSTRACT

This video essay presents the authors' critical-creative engagement with the testimonies of people recently displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Ukraine. Shifting between shadows of plants, drawings and words the video reflects on the ways experiences of displacement and war are narrated, and what kind of stories often remain untold.

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This video essay presents the authors' critical-creative engagement with the testimonies of people recently displaced from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Ukraine.

Drawings and interviews by Darya Tsymbalyuk, words and narration by Precious N Chatterje-Doody.

Palaeobotanical materials sourced from M.D. Zalessky and H.TH. Tchirkova, *Iskopayemaya Flora Srednego Otdela Kamennougol'nykh Otlozheniy Donetskogo Basseyna* (Leningrad: Glavnaya Redaktsiya Gorno-toplivnoy i Geologo-razvedochnoy Literatury, 1938);

Oral histories recorded by Darya Tsymbalyuk in 2015–2019.

TRANSCRIPT

Donbas: known to the world as but a backdrop. The site of a story about "proxy war" between Ukraine and Russia. But why privilege the tales told by states when we discuss war and conflict? What do we miss when we do that? What could we learn by engaging the public at the heart of our research? And, could more people benefit if we started presenting the stories that we uncover in more engaging ways?

More than 1.3 million people have been internally displaced from Donbas. Uprooted and transplanted elsewhere, their stories tell of Donbas not as a backdrop but an ecosystem. Like all of our lived environments, it has been cultivated over time out of communities' interactions with the landscape around them and with the other species that inhabit it. These interactions and their legacies persist through conflict and displacement.

So, what if we put aside the official "facts" and "figures" of conflict for just a moment? What if we consider how people live it in the everyday? As well as knowing the grand narratives of the "experts", what if we could hear, see, feel, and show the mundane realities of conflict as it is lived? People displaced by war tell us tales that highlight how people and plants sustain each other… how caring and cultivation can bring comfort and normality. This form of knowledge also matters.

And, with the grief of loss, everyday sensory experiences can somehow become more salient in memory. Memories full of casual observations about sights, sounds, and surroundings that betray how humans, insects and animals together create our lived environments—a cycle that continues through and beyond conflict.

For, even academic researchers recognize that emotions matter when studying war, conflict, and its impact. And, people's personal stories can show how far the emotion of grief stretches, beyond when human lives are lost. Its tendrils branch out into a million anxieties about plans disrupted, relationships cut short, communities scattered, and efforts unfulfilled… the realities of leaving your roots behind, of feeling that a part of your heart and soul cannot come with you. These are emotions that go on to shape lives, communities, and environments.

As people and plants are transplanted from their homes and cultivate another life elsewhere, their new environments maintain these links to other times, places, and communities. And, perhaps more links are to be made. By listening and watching, illustrating and narrating, thinking and feeling—not dispassionately, but by engaging—just maybe more people will have more ways of seeing more than just a backdrop.

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