

Lights out: practicing opacity in Estonian basements

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This essay engages with alternative regimes of invisibility by investigating the things that are kept, and the practices that take place in basements of eastern Estonia. The use of hiding infrastructures is here taken as part of wider claims about epistemic disobedience and resistance of any social control over our interiority. Ethnographic descriptions show the way placing things underground is an enactment of inattention at the intersection between different forms of value, temporality, and representation. The right to opacity is thus presented as a way of resisting the hegemonic terms of engagement, preserving diversity against the central modern gaze that constantly demands clarity and accountability.

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“The opaque is not the obscure... it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence”

Édouard Glissant (*Poetics of Relation*, 1997)

BASEMENTS ARE SPACES OF TRANSITION, AN INTERSECTION WHERE everything ends and begins anew.¹ Mobilized to conceal, basements contribute to regulate the amount of intimacy to be displayed upstairs, allowing a complex negotiation with the hegemonic system of permission and prohibition. That’s why they require invitation and are marked by a brink that not everyone can succeed in crossing – doing so might generate a feeling of intrusion. As spaces that allow a reversed order, basements appear to visitors as equally mysterious and intimidating.



Figure 1 – Dmitri Fedotkin opening his basement in Narva. Source: Francisco Martínez, 2022.

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By paying attention to how basements make room for alternative orders of value and regimes of visibility, we will re-read the postcolonial notion of “opacity” in the context of contemporary problems of exposition, transparency and attention. As posed by Édouard Glissant (1997), the “right to opacity” consists in letting things be in their otherness. In this vein, I claim the right to not be transparent and to not always make sense, preserving difference while contributing to the articulation of symbolic and material order.



For over four years, Anna Škodenko, Darja Popolitova, Viktor Gurov and myself have been conducting research in the basements of eastern Estonia investigating which things are kept and which practices take place therein.² Basements are not just passive containers, but technologies of the meantime; hiding places provide a dis-connection, allowing things, people and also non-human creatures to disappear (in a more or less durable way) while remaining linked.

Indeed, the earliest studio and the first museum happened in caves, carnivalesque spaces *par excellence*. The underground has been a hotbed for myths and stories for millennia, while the authorities recurrently attempt to remove or transform those dark corners into spaces of light.

There is something liminal about basements, allowing extra-territorial rites of initiation and stories to be invented while blurring the prevailing dichotomy between public and private (as noted by Patrick Lavolette in his response to this essay). The entryway is a liminal space, not unlike the symbolic border trespassed in hitchhiking while hopping into a stranger’s car. First of all because descending the stairs into a basement requires an invitation; secondly, because a space of trust and intimacy is automatically created; thirdly, because of the transformational potential of the experience (Lavolette 2021).

Basements materialize the possibility of a surplus of practices and interpretations. In doing so, they allow people to perform a hybrid identity and cope with the changing boundaries of our private space and the invention of new forms of “intrusion” and ways of “policing” them.

For example, in the 90’s, Dima’s storage booth in Sillamäe operated as a meeting point for friends. Then, he was younger and still living with his parents, so the *sarai* was the place where he chatted and eventually drank with his mates. Also, Alexei tells us about hanging out with his friends in “Disco 5”, a clandestine bar opened in 1992 in an unfinished bunker. Perhaps, these young people did not have “a room of one’s own” and 500 pounds (*à la* Woolf), but they found a corner of freedom and camaraderie in basements. There, they

2 The result is a four-artist installation, first exhibited in the show “Decolonial Ecologies” (Riga Art Space, 2022).

could tinker with language, visuals and materials, testing, exploring, and experiencing things with a less consequential nature, as in a laboratory.

Entering a basement requires a particular choreography, a slowing down of our pace so as to not fall or break something. Then you encounter a damp feeling, the smell of the underground, a darker interior. Not everything here has straightforward meaning either; one needs another form of attention to access what silently exists incognito and, eventually, mirrors the invisible. What goes on in a basement stands on the limits of knowing. Shadow areas such as basements can nonetheless be entered ethnographically, thereby gaining knowledge that is available only to insiders, or exploring the reversed side of relations. However, to practice research in the dark might challenge our believed ability to see knowledge, since it breaks down the anthropological method of participant observation. Therefore, in their responses, Hermione Spriggs and Mariana Tello Weiss foreground the alternative modes of attention that the invisible demands and develop a critique of homogenising forms of knowledge production.

The dualism light and darkness, as referring to knowledge and ignorance, is uneasy. Indeed, we did not meet any white rabbit beckoning us into Wonderland; reactions in the field were rather skeptical or even demeaning. For example, our posts in a series of Facebook forums, seeking access to basements, received laughing emojis as a response and comments such as that by Anele:

“And what is interesting about the basements of Ida-Virumaa? Sorry, I don’t really understand the purpose of this project... I went to check my shed in the old town hoping to find how this could be attractive for the Riga art space”.

But there were also cases in which local residents reconsidered the value of their basement after having a stranger showing interest in their stored things. Likewise, in some cases, our research acquired a performative aspect once a resident decided to clean the basement and stage a few objects before our visit. On other occasions, such as in Narva-Jõesuu, local neighbors thought that we were robbers checking what was where in order to steal it. And there were also instances in which we found ourselves in unpleasant political discussions with the people showing us the basements.

This was the case with Vladimir, who first impelled us to notice how clean the basements were, when he asked: “Are you interested in buying real state in Sillamäe? Because I also work as a broker”. Then, Anna observed a dozen large bottles of drinking water and asked if they were for an eventual case of war, a question that led Vladimir to tell us about “the truth” in Ukraine, arguing that we, the “young people of Tallinn,” are being manipulated by Western media. “The difference,” Anna stated, “is that here you can express these opinions,

but on the other side of the border you end up in prison for doing so”. Equally, we had some disagreement with Graf, a taxi driver in Narva, also in relation to the war in Ukraine. The paradox in this case is that he was actually a French citizen, born in Lille yet relocated to Narva after getting married with a Narvitan. “Who started the war? It is obvious, the country that is benefiting the most from it – America.”

Vladimir and Graf were behaving like a bad minority, remaining politically Russian and not speaking Estonian – the only national language officially accepted in the state; a conduct that does not meet the hierarchy of ethnicity in the country (Dzenovska 2018). The belief that there is more to the political reality than meets the eye has been widespread in the post-socialist world, prolonging the atmosphere of suspicion that characterized the Soviet regime through the circulation of rumours, conspiracy theories and unseen enemies (Gotfredsen 2016; Verdery 2018; Mühlfried 2021).

Since the restoring of its independence in 1991, Estonia, however, became an advanced digital society and is often presented as a success story in e-governance. This happened in parallel with extensive institutional efforts to establish a homogenous society based on a restricted understanding of the Estonian nation, in some cases contradicting the EU values regarding preservation of difference and multiculturalism in our societies.

Discourses of e-governance and e-citizenship have been an important part of the Estonian statecraft and policy (Mäe 2017; Kaljund 2018), unlocking “the entrepreneurial potential of every world citizen” (Kotka, Vargas Álvarez and Korjus 2016: 9). Nevertheless, the development of a transparent e-state and of digital entrepreneurship have failed to resolve two problems of invisibility in the country: 5,3% of the Estonian population still has an “undetermined citizenship”,³ a status that complicates getting a job and does not allow to vote in national elections. Likewise, every year, nearly 4000 people go missing, of which 86 are still unaccounted for by the police.⁴



At the beginning, Nikolai thought I was a secret police officer. Then, he relaxed and we ended up talking about drug consumption in Narva. Nikolai also described the fights he had with his neighbor. Since the basement was

3 According to Statistics Estonia (2021), there are over 69.000 people with undetermined citizenship presently living in the country, mostly elderly people in the region of Ida-Virumaa. The government uses the category “undetermined citizenship”, instead of “noncitizens” or “stateless people”, to refer to those who were living here in 1991 but failed to pass the required exam of Estonian language. This implies that citizenship is not absent, but yet to be determined (Martínez 2018a).

4 Out of a population of 1.33 million. See the website of the Estonian police: < <https://www.politsei.ee/et/teadmata-kadunud-inimesed> > (last consulted in march 2024).

communal, and after a series of disagreements, they both went to a notary to clearly divide which square meters belong to whom. Nikolai works in construction and repair. When someone dies, he clears the apartment. Sometimes, he puts aside some of the things he finds, hoping to sell them on the internet, though most of them end up in shoeboxes placed in his basement. There, he stores dozens of old mobile phones, dozens of bills and coins, several icons, as well as a bible printed in Юрьев (nowadays Tartu) in the Estonian language. “But are you able to read Estonian?”, a question to which Nikolai simply smiles.

Eastern Estonia is a liminal territory, standing as the border of both the European Union and NATO. Because of mass migration from the Soviet Union, this is a region with a majority of ethnic Russians in a country that only has Estonian language as official. As a result, Russophone Estonians deploy an ambivalent, hybrid identity, alas they are often taken as “semi-immigrants” and internally “othered” due to their enduring cultural ties to Russia (Vetik and Helemäe 2011; Martínez 2020).

“*Ну а че еще в Силке делать?*” (“What else can we do in Silki?”), reads a *graf-fiti* in a former military base of the red army, located at the centre of Sillamäe. It was a closed town during the Soviet era, which could only be accessed with special permits because of an uranium enrichment plant, thus pertaining to the paranoid reasoning of the Cold War (Marcus 1999). Still, nearly half of the population holds a grey passport and has an undetermined citizenship. In the last 30 years, Sillamäe has lost almost half of its population and those remaining don’t consider themselves absolutely Russian nor Estonian, neither half-Russian half-Estonian. They are just “Sillamäeans” (Montesquiou 2006).



In this essay, I point out the necessity for some spaces to be dark and for us to engage with ambivalence and the otherness that upsets modern planning. Nevertheless, and as noted by Tamta Khalvashi in her response, peripheral spaces and underground structures do not always guarantee self-expression, creativity and adventure. In some cases, they can also be fundamentally oppressive and show awkward continuities between Soviet modernity and neoliberalism (see also Khalvashi 2019).

The defence of not-transparent spaces is in opposition to the sight and the verticality of viewers that characterize modern ideals (Woods 2008), manifested, for example, in the use of glass in architecture (Vidler 1994). For instance, Le Corbusier (1923) talked of practicing a “law of whitening” (*loi du blanchiment*) to favour purity and cleanness in our physical surroundings.

Another example of this *ethos* is the Crystal Palace in Madrid, built in 1887 to house an exhibition on the Philippines in which aborigines from the then Spanish colony were exhibited as if it were a human zoo. Multiple objects were

brought from the Philippines for this event, including straw houses, canoes, and 40 people – the women pretended to be tobacco manufacturers and weavers, while the men performed agricultural scenes. As a result, the exhibition led to a hypervisibilization of the Other in terms of the central, normalizing gaze. It combined a denial of the Filipinos' capacity to represent themselves with a state of lack of secrets.

While visibility can signal recognition and empower those who had been previously marginalized, it can also imply an erasure of difference, turning transparency into a mode of display of the powerful (Ellis 2022). Hence, transparency does not simply show reality, but also participates in its construction. In its aim to eradicate the domain of suspicion and “indigenous” irrationality while making everything readable and measurable within the model of master knowledge (Taussig 2020), transparency ends up scorching alternative forms of temporality and otherwise ways of knowing.

Discourses of and designs for transparency, which were originally supposed to hold public officials accountable, might also become a tool by the majority to erase differences, impose their agenda, and impede the possibility of alternative collective bonds and ways of life to emerge. Thus, transparency is not just a process and an outcome of modernity, but also a veil for the operations of power (West and Sanders 2003). Politics in practice revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it; hence, around who has the ability to speak and when this activity is performed (Rancière 2004). However, we often hear that transparency is a solution to all kinds of problems (Birchall 2014), an apolitical form of administration that can always be improved by experts (Sharma 2013).

Likewise, transparency is wrapped up in beliefs about the superior function of markets and digital networks that objectively measure social relations (Strathern 2000). In doing so, transparency is translated into quotidian acts of “knowing”, carried out by all sorts of administrators and cultural producers. It is in that context that opacity comes out as both a form of resistance and a side-effect of the ordering obsession of modernity. In the first case, opacity is practiced as a medium that resists the light of Western epistemology, while acknowledging the value of knowledges that have been rendered as residual or not relevant (Crowley 2006; Mignolo 2011). In the second case, opacity emerges along with ambivalence, as the waste-product of our incessant attempt to create meaning and maintain the world categorized (Bauman 1991).



Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) suggested that myths are important because they exemplify the way communities think. Following this logic, we can speculate that what we hide is important precisely because it exemplifies the way people

do not want to think though they still do. What we want to hide also makes us who we are. Overall, the gesture of keeping things in the dark plays an important role in the iterative ordering and adjustment of personal identity, family relations, and wider political and technological transformations. Yet any given system requires some sort of boundaries and separations to maintain it operational. So, where there is a basement, there is a system.

In the basements, we encountered a thick accumulation of layers and traces of living, instead of the clean historical representation arranged by the national state. For example, Irina reports feeling “ashamed” when throwing things away, but she also comments that she doesn’t want to pay to get rid of things. Then, when pointing at a bulky Soviet cupboard, she conceals being unable to throw it away successfully, explaining that she would need to hire someone “to take it out from here and to transport it somewhere else”. In some other cases, it was hard for tenants to throw things away without some transition that allows revaluation or temporal gap, which was provided by keeping things underground.

In our art installation, we included a brown leather bag used by Irina’s parents when on vacation in the Black Sea decades ago. She lives in Narva-Jõesuu, a town that was part of that map of holiday destinations that Soviet workers could enjoy. We also displayed an orthodox icon given to Irina 30 years ago. On the way out, she told us to hide the icon inside the bag so that no one notices she has given it away. Secrecy is a cultural practice in everyday life, something that everybody knows, somehow, but agrees not to talk about (Taussig 1999). We are referring to the production of non-knowledge, what Georg Simmel conceptualized as *Nichtwissen* (1906).

Basements, as a technology that protects, shelters and masks (Newell 2018), contribute to form a secretive kind of relations. They are grey zones at the margins of meaning and at the limits of knowledge (Frederiksen and Knudsen 2015). This argument, nonetheless, does not put the existence of knowledge in question, but rather raises awareness of the multitude of knowledge repertoires and regimes of (in)visibility that we encounter in everyday interactions. Following this thread, we can relate what exists in the dark with an ethnographic not-yet that cannot be fully understood (Glissant 1997; Martínez, Di Puppò and Frederiksen 2021), and approach basements as places that lean towards obscurity and where explanation as such holds limited value (Espírito Santo, Murray and Salinas 2023).



In another instance, I carried out an artistic performance to reflect about the way digital technologies transform the temporality of doing ethnographic research (Martínez 2018b). The experimental *mise-en-scène* consisted

in installing myself at a café in Lisbon and Tbilisi for 35 hours beyond the reach of smartphones and laptops and then do nothing. The meaning of doing nothing is indeed ambivalent: it can be understood as a form of inactivity and stillness, but also as a public performance of lack of purpose (Nafus 2008). During this exercise, time slowed, I experienced boredom and also the anxiety of being disconnected and of exposing myself in a semi-public space, seeing while been seen simultaneously.

I took doing “nothing” as an epistemological and ontological form of interaction that reveals a series of problems of exposition and attention. It was like hiding in plain sight, something like enacting Wally, a comic personage wearing a red and white striped shirt that has to be found by the readers within a crowd of people.⁵ Or like the main character of *The Invisible Man*, by H.G. Wells (1983 [1897]), who achieves invisibility through a science experiment, making then possible different forms of relating. There is another *Invisible Man* (1952), written by Ralph Ellison. It tells the story of a nameless black man, invisible because people refuse to see him, becoming a phantom in other people’s minds. The invisibility of this young Afro-American is due to the “poor vision” of those with whom he comes in contact. This socio-political allegory ends, however, with the man hiding out underground, occupying the basement not as a form of exception but as a way of survival. The novel has, nonetheless, an existential tone that reminds of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1994 [1864]). It is told through the monologue of an isolated man who tries to answer the question “who am I?” by engaging with obscure practices led by irrational human drives.

Slowing down is a condition of possibility for the emergence and recognition of both difference and indifference (Stengers 2005). It allows us to retrain our social experience of time (Bear 2016), while trying to build a more resourceful attitude to exposure and attention. It seems that there are things that we can only train away from a screen. As in, for instance, training oneself in slowness and inattention. The lack of technological mediacy helped my work of noticing, and triggered unexpected reflections about how I am noticed, since doing nothing made me available differently to those who surrounded me. This approach goes well with the idea of cultivating or enriching time, as it also happens in the basements, where other forms of value evolve, precisely because they are put on pause.

Alas, during the staging of doing nothing, sometimes I felt that I was in the middle of all of what was going on, while at others I felt unnoticed and redundant. Nowadays, visibility and attention are presented as a currency, and also as a resource that can be optimized, hence stretchable and plastic

5 Wally, Waldo, Holger, Jura, Valdík, Fallu, Walter, Willy, Gille, Hugo, Ali, Fodhouli, Valdas... his name has been translated into different languages.

(Pedersen, Albris and Seaver 2021). In this vein, Yves Citton (2017) proposes that, instead of asking what we should be attentive to, we might also try to explore what to do with our attention, thus taking it as a form of action rather than a property.

But what is actually the intrigue behind the acts of hiding things and doing nothing? Perhaps red lights go off in our societies because it is a form of not disappearing properly, and because it provides us with time and space to explore other forms of knowledge and non-measurable value. However, the current corporate shift towards transparency, neoliberal notions of productivity, and overwhelming digital sharing are transforming attentional practices to the point that having time in public is a cause of social suffering (Zuboff 2019).

The ever-increasing datafication of everyday life across the world, with its tracking and mining, are also turning more difficult the decision to disappear, hide or be forgotten. Hence, the need to develop new techno-social infrastructures for digital sovereignty along forms of training for digital literacy (Herlo *et al.* 2021). We are talking of the capacity to navigate and keep our autonomy within global digital networks, which can hardly be the result of the absence of any work, or “inoperosity” (Agamben 2000), but a skilful oscillation between openness and closure, refusal and engagement.

Humankind has been trying to preserve knowledge by externalizing memory in forms that were not easily susceptible to alteration, like Sumerian cuneiform writings or Egyptian hieroglyphs (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). However, we have reached the point in which technologies have to facilitate forgetting. An example of this is the so-called “right to be forgotten” (approved by the EU in 2014), which relies on the legal idea that one can demand the removal of data about oneself that is accessible online, as a form of securing our digital privacy. The right to be forgotten can be placed along with the right to opacity and with the right to fail (Martínez 2019). This is because ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err and to change views are constitutive of human freedom (Morozov 2013). If we adapt too well to institutions, to markets, and to technological devices, our sense of adventure and the possibility of dissent become obsolete (Boym 2017). Because in these times of decreasing room for ambiguity, it has become more valuable than ever the capacity to say no and to do nothing.



In this article, I reconsidered the role of basements in negotiating the private and the public self in eastern Estonia. Storing things underground does not just refer to a displacement of stuff, but also to the relocation of certain meanings and actions away from plain sight. Things come to matter through our intimate relations with them, gaining a kind of value that is irreducible

to monetary worth and rather relates to personal and social history. But that intimate relation also comprises discard and putting things to sleep and apart for a while (Martínez forthcoming).

In this vein, we can conclude that the decision of keeping things in the dark is a way, among others, of curating knowledge, relationships, and social experiences of time. Further on, basements can be used in many ways: as a family archive, a material manifestation of subconscious desire, a playground of the repressed, a corner of self-expression, a room for historical and material density, and also a technology through which to rework regimes of (in)visibility and the social experience of time. They operate in the ongoing adjustments through which wider social and cultural changes are negotiated. They are a thermostat, a device that switches a motor on or off according to the temperature upstairs.

Alternative values and temporalities to those perceived as hegemonic find a location in the basements. Thus, we need the possibility of ambivalence and opacity despite being culturally challenging and socially anxious. They enact different ways of coping with the current hypervisibility, central accountability and hierarchical monitoring. By elaborating an argument to defend ambivalence and non-transparent spaces, we are foregrounding the right to opacity as a political project that resists the normalizing forces attempting to rule difference out and categorize relations.

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ETNOGRAFIAR LO SUBTERRÁNEO:
NOTAS E INSPIRACIONES SOBRE EL TEXTO
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El texto resulta sumamente inspirador tanto desde el punto de vista teórico como metodológico. El mismo propone una etnografía de los sótanos en Sillamäe, un pequeño poblado de Estonia oriental. Un pueblo que, por su historia – signada por la guerra y el establecimiento de una planta de uranio allí –, y por su ubicación en la frontera, ha sido durante mucho tiempo un pueblo en sí mismo invisible y liminar. A partir del interés por lo que se ubica en los sótanos y *bunkers* de Estonia oriental, el artículo reflexiona sobre lo subterráneo y su potencial para analizar otros aspectos de la vida social. Lo subterráneo, señala:

“is a zone of non-judgment, away from the eyes of others, filled with possibility but not certainty. Basements themselves are characterized by being undefined, intermediate, and even mysterious, existing beyond the realm of the visible, along with voids, absences and the hidden.” [el resaltado es mío]

Lo subterráneo aparece en esta etnografía como un objeto privilegiado para pensar las propiedades liminares de ciertos espacios, prácticas, tiempos. Lo intermedio, lo indefinido, lo incierto, aparecen en esos espacios, prácticas y tiempos como adjetivos que permiten caracterizar modos de existencia transicionales y más allá del dominio de lo visible. En este sentido el estudio contribuye a la elaboración de herramientas conceptuales para una aproximación etnográfica a ciertas figuras problemáticas desde el punto de vista de una etnografía heredera del positivismo en sus modos de conocimiento basados en lo visible, lo tangible y lo comprobable. Me refiero a aquellas figuras de la “falta” que – por (in)visibles – colindan con formas de la (in)existencia y ofrecen dificultades a la hora de la observación: los vacíos, las ausencias, lo oculto.

A partir de estas figuras de la falta que sólo pueden ser entrevistas, y para lo cual hay que desarrollar una sensibilidad particular, el autor busca nuevas herramientas analíticas que den cuenta de estos espacios intersticiales. La noción de opacidad, entonces, se vuelve central tanto desde el punto de vista del “juicio” perceptivo como desde el moral y el político. Los sótanos como lugares que alojan prácticas, tiempos y objetos que por distintas razones han

sido sustraídos de lo visible, son tomados en la etnografía de Martínez como lugares con valores ambiguos, maleables y, por lo tanto, buenos para pensar en su potencialidad.

Aquello que se localiza en el subsuelo no tiene ya en el valor negativo que se le adjudica a lo oculto desde una política de la hipervisibilidad, sino una potencia resistente a ésta. La opacidad – entonces – es elevada a la categoría de derecho en un mundo donde “lo bueno” – la buena política, las buenas prácticas – es asociado con el sentido moderno de transparencia, no dejando margen a no ser vistos y suprimiendo en ocasiones las diferencias.

Otro punto de relieve de esta etnografía es su descripción de aquello que albergan los sótanos. *In the basements*, dice Martínez:

“we encountered a thick, opaque accumulation of layers and traces instead of the clean historical representation arranged by the national state. In this sense, basements are contact zones where the past takes space and where ambiguity is stored.” (Bhabha 1994, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge)

Los sótanos aparecen en ese contexto como espacios de exterioridad e interioridad. Palimpsestos, estratigrafías desde donde analizar, por un lado, lo escondido a los ojos del exterior, de los grandes relatos. Por otro, hacia el interior – de las familias, de los condominios – los sótanos cobijan los resabios de un pasado que gravita entre la memoria y el olvido, entre el archivo y lo residual. Las cosas que alojan los sótanos constituyen una herencia confusa, cuyas causas de conservación tienden a desvanecerse junto con aquellos que decidieron almacenarlos originalmente.

Por lo tanto, los sótanos son espacios que albergan capas de diferentes pasados, rastros escondidos o subestimados, pero también dispuestos a reemerger en caso de que ese pasado deba ser traído a la superficie debido a las necesidades del presente. En este sentido, estos espacios otorgan materialidad a lo que Michel Pollak llama memorias subterráneas: memorias subestimadas o que se oponen a las oficiales, que circulan fuera de los espacios públicos dispuestas siempre a reemerger. Lo subterráneo cobra, así, un sentido resistente.

Ahora, quisiera plantear algunas preguntas al texto. La primera en relación a la productividad política de lo oculto y del desconocimiento, desde una perspectiva comparativa. Proveniente de un país del Cono Sur, donde las desapariciones de personas fueron sistemáticas durante la década del 70, no puedo menos que interrogarme sobre la otra faceta, la siniestra – y no ya resistente – de las faltas, de lo oculto, de las ausencias.

En mi propio trabajo de campo en torno a los espectros que rondan los lugares donde se ejerció la represión durante la dictadura argentina, los sótanos, túneles y otros espacios subterráneos tienen un importante papel. Por un lado,

los sótanos fueron espacios donde se alojaron personas durante su secuestro en centros clandestinos de detención, situados en edificios antiguos como los ingenios azucareros del norte del país o algunas dependencias policiales. Por otro, una gran parte de los cadáveres de las personas desaparecidas en la dictadura se suponen en la tierra, enterradas en fosas clandestinas. Por lo tanto, los espacios subterráneos ocupan un lugar central en el imaginario de los destinos que sufrieron las personas desaparecidas y, centralmente, sus cadáveres. En esta tensión entre lo que se ve y lo que no se ve, entre lo que se ha encontrado y lo que no, los sótanos funcionan como cavidades que alojan un terror encarnado por los espectros que allí aparecen. Siendo cavidades en la tierra, clausuradas total o parcialmente, tapiadas, los sótanos aparecen como contenedores donde las almas han quedado atrapadas debido a su mala muerte y sus cuerpos insepultos. Asumen, asimismo, la imaginación sobre espacios oscuros, inaccesibles, ocultos que, al caminar sobre ellos, inciden en la vida social y en los modos de habitar esos espacios.

En muchos casos, además, los sótanos y túneles de donde provienen las manifestaciones espectrales forman parte de un espacio legendario más que físico, una suerte de inframundo desconocido donde se alojan los cadáveres que han sido intencionalmente ocultados y de donde emanan sus espectros, como un espacio de muerte abierto, al decir de Taussig. La existencia de este inframundo, confirmado o sospechado, impone ciertas vivencias del lugar particulares, marcadas por la disolución de los límites entre lo sagrado y lo profano, entre espacios de vida y de muerte, entre lo visible y lo subterráneo, entre lo familiar y lo extraño que – en palabras de Freud – conforman la experiencia de lo siniestro (*unheimlich*).

Me pregunto, entonces, en diálogo con el texto de Martínez, por la posibilidad de una etnografía de lo (in)visible y de lo ausente. Por el trabajo de campo en espacios donde reina la oscuridad de un modo físico pero también epistemológico, ya que existen porciones de aquella experiencia que nunca llegaremos a conocer. ¿Cómo, en la práctica etnográfica, accedemos a los dominios de lo invisible, de la opacidad, de lo que ha (des)aparecido, de lo informe? ¿Qué “formas de atención” son requeridas para este tipo de estudios? ¿Qué sensorialidades? ¿Qué éticas? Y si, como señala el texto “What goes on in a basement stands on the limits of knowing”, ¿Qué desafíos implica escribir sobre ello?

WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO WITH/IN HOLES?

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“Where is a bunker?” This question started to haunt many of us in Georgian cities when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Quest for bunkers, basements and shelters, for spaces of both opacity and safety, was drawn from the possible spillover of this conflict onto Georgia that itself had been at war with Russia in 2008. Feelings of fear and anxiety snapped so strongly that they prompted us to introspect our cities from below – in search of spaces for survival.

What our renewed inquiry for bunkers revealed was that many underground spaces of Soviet blocks were not as opaque, secretive or even valid anymore. Indeed, basements in Soviet apartment buildings were intended to preserve sealing and waterproofing, and in an emergency to be convertible back to shelters. But today, in Tbilisi for instance, most of these dark spaces were reformed into privatized areas of relation, becoming small shops, big supermarkets and banks, or even beauty salons instead. Since Soviet buildings did not have much



Figure 1 – Basement mirage. Source: Photo by author.

storefront spaces due to the restrictions on private businesses, new shops and stores have, imaginatively, popped up in these once hidden spaces.

Basements and bunkers have even taken a form of individual homes, or home-like structures, for those who have not been able to afford rising real estate prices in residential buildings in Georgia. Even those bunkers in Soviet building blocks where once domestic trash was disposed, have been cleaned, renovated, privatized and rented out as homes to students in search of affordable housing. These barely breathable spaces (without proper ventilation or lightning) are occupied by people precariously positioned. Those who are forced to seek inexpensive shelters in basements and bunkers – refugees, homeless, students and the evicted, are trapped in these abject temporalities and opacities of holes seemingly *ad infinitum*, or in a standby regime.

A basement is a minor infrastructure, one related to the concept of opacity that Martínez proposes as an alternative to live beyond transparency, while questioning what conditions of existence are worth pursuing, and what political projects have to be defended to preserving them. That is why staying with opacity endangers a critique of social and political arrangements of transparency, and perhaps also calls for their capacity for social rearrangement and restructuring.

I take Francisco Martinez's call for "the right to opacity", as first posed by Édouard Glissant (1997), seriously. But I also would like to ask how can we achieve this right in places that are stripped of the "right to the city" (Harvey 2012) altogether? What is the promise of right to opacity in cities, saturated not merely by the current regimes of visibility, transparency and discernability, but by the machines of war, destruction and privatization? What kind of promise can the right to opacity, to invisibility, or indeterminacy hold out to those whose lives are entangled in repressive powers of market and war, themselves recruiting opacity on transparency's behalf?

Looking at the city from its holes revealed, at least in Georgia, that it is made up with cleaves of not just unnoticed underground spaces, aesthetic experiments and alterative knowledge, but with an opaque set of privatizations, dispossessions and destructions. It revealed that staying with those ex-centric and peripheral spaces such as holes and underground structures does not always guarantee self-expression and adventure. For these basements often emerge as guarantees of prosperity for hegemonic order of capitalism itself resting on abject spaces, bodies, and infrastructures. It is like living in the city of Omelas, whose thriving life depends on the perpetual misery of a single child trapped in darkness and filth, as depicted by Ursula Le Guin in her short story "The ones who walk away from Omelas" (1973).

It is at this disjunction that the right to opacity may seem more complex and more multifaced for those who do not just stay with the hole, but are stuck in/with it. And although this insistence on opacity through holes is crucial



Figure 2 – Looking from below. Source: Photo by author.

in a time of hypervisibility and hierarchical monitoring, I wonder what if we think about it together with the right to the city as elaborated first by Henri Lefebvre (1996) and later by David Harvey (2012)? The right to the city is a collective ability to change ourselves by changing our urban surroundings and to be able to imagine and govern the city beyond the market forces. Bunkers, basements, and shelters – these dark corners of architecture – embodying structures of both oppression and creation, are now superseded by an ideal of private property that has emerged as a new form of state and capital capture in Georgia. It impedes the possibility to live otherwise, to enjoy opacity as a way of creativity. So, I wonder, what would it mean to think of these basements as a way of uncovering opaque muddle of post-socialist capitalism along, those that absorb bunkers and basements as sources to expand their lives?

To defend the right to the city is to insist against the threat of one-sided, linear story of post-Soviet neoliberal development. It is to subvert those conditions that sustain such opaque promises. When routed through this way, opacity emerges not as a technology of resistance for those with little power, but it becomes a mode of being in its own right – a condition of existence. It emerges as an active force, rather than a passive reaction. It is this active force that promises to expose the hegemonic regimes of visibility, market and war, making us aware that falling into a hole is no single person's fault, but the structural condition. As Martínez aptly demonstrates, holes, then, can incite

both claustrophobic and permissive affect, which may be evoked in a *graffiti* left behind by Soviet soldiers in their military shelters: “What else can we do in *Silki*?” To put it differently, “What else can we do with/in the hole in which we are trapped?” In my experience, there is something fundamentally oppressive in holes, but the message that Martínez leaves us with is that we may dissociate them from structural precarities that discipline our lives and invent our own technologies of invisibility, the one that expands our ability to change the very terms of living.

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FROM BASEMENT TO DE-BASEMENT? A PROBING RESPONSE TO OPACITY

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“The opaque is not the obscure” (Glissant 1997: 191). So begins Fran Martínez’ text on basements, which he approaches as spaces of opacity that can nonetheless be entered ethnographically.

The apparent paradox that Martínez sets up appears to be a problem with relations of power, wrapped up in the expressly visual coding of “observer” and “observed”. As inherently dark places, basements present a particularly fertile ground for exploring and reversing these relations, and – I suggest – for challenging our own ethnographic reproduction of language that links the ability to see with knowledge possession.

Basements as places that reveal through their withholding: one might assume that on entering such reticent spaces, the ethnographer’s job would be to find the means for “illuminating” objects and social relations, bringing them “to light”. But this is not what Martínez is proposing. Instead he offers opacity as “a medium that resists the light of (Western) understanding in order to preserve diversity”. How, then, to probe the shadowy spaces of others without rendering them transparent? The compound noun “cellar door” comes to mind as a sympathetic point of entry. Regarded by many as the most satisfying English phrase purely in terms of its sound, “cellar door” creates an aperture into the darkness and slowness of basements that also pays heed to the underground’s recalcitrance¹.



Figures 1 and 2 – stills from the film Earth Swimmers

1 Available at <

In response to Martínez' critique of hypervisibility as a normalising force and his call for re-training our embodied practices of attention, I'd like to propose three further lines of inquiry into the opaque:

- i. a recrafting of “participant observation” into “observer participancy”;
- ii. a shift away from visual towards sonic modes of encounter and description;
- iii. an ethics of reciprocal (de)basement; of mutual unboxing in the context of ethnographic encounter.

Regarding the first point, basements are places where things are stored, stashed and possessed, and places where one becomes vulnerable to possession by one's stashed away things. Basements fill with objects that take on lives of their own – possessions and associated rituals whose potency ferments like illicit moonshine. The traditional anthropological method of participant observation breaks down in this context, not only because the conditions for visually-coded observation are blatantly absent in the dark, but also because basements are themselves, as Martínez puts it, “opaque” accumulations of traces and layers: their interiority resists exposure, and through this resistance their contents become charged. With opacity, therefore, comes agency and enchantment – in Alfred Gell's idiom, aesthetic power which intensifies by the *inability* to trace or comprehend the techniques of its production (1999). Basements vibrate with the potential to debase conventional relations, including those between the observing anthropologist and the nonhuman field of observation – things that are stored in basements take on an uncanny ability to observe us back. In quantum mechanics, “observer participancy” refers to the ability for observation to change its subject of attention and vice-versa; that is, the observer creates and is created by her local reality (Frieden 1998; Pitty 2000). In short, our basements make us just as we make them. With this in mind, “observer participancy” more aptly describes anthropological encounters in opaque spaces than “participant observation”. In basements, as Alberto Corsin-Jiménez (2015) writes of other creative autonomous zones, we are “called forth into existence. We are experimented into the world”.



As Martínez suggests, basements are theatrical spaces in which their occupants find themselves free to explore obsessions, perversions and expressions of radical difference. Basements are also productive places for reimagining what anthropology itself might be (a dark anthropology?), because in the absence of vision, alternative modes of sensing and knowing the world are drawn to the fore.

I recently made a “dark film” myself in collaboration with a professional mole catcher (Spriggs 2021).² I tasked myself to use my camera (my tool for observational capture) in a way that responded and adapted to Nigel’s own set of tools and techniques for accessing the subterranean world of the mole. This mimesis worked while I tracked his above-ground movements, assessing the arrangement of molehills and feeling with his heel for the subtle “give” in the earth that signifies a mole’s underground tunnel. But then Nigel used his mole catcher’s probe (a long, slim, metal pole with a bulb at one end) to penetrate the run, gleaning tactile, vibratory knowledge of the soil’s composition and the depth and direction of the tunnel. At this point the ground’s surface blocked my camera lens, and the mole’s world retreated into obscurity. I responded by revising my toolkit and came back with my own form of probe, a contact microphone made from a small piezo plate that picks up sonic vibrations directly from the earth.

Rays of light bounce off a surface, sound travels through. And while things can be seen in an instant, sonic perception occupies time. Sounds travel through things (soil, rocks, traps), and the materials they pass through infect their sonority such that sounds become carriers for nonhuman “voice”. And while distance is necessary for visual comprehension, sonic vibrations enter the body with an intimacy akin to touch. Attending to things acoustically therefore slows down observation, “cultivating or enriching time” and “returning sensation” (see Martínez, in this volume) by attuning the listening body in new ways. This affects the observer/prober’s perspective to such a degree that subject-object relations form in an altogether different way (see Spriggs PhD thesis, forthcoming).

In the vibratory world of mole catching, “deep listening” (*cf.* Oliveros 2005) reveals an animated landscape of more-than-human subjects, mutually tracking and responding to each other in “a skilful oscillation between openness and closure, refusal and engagement” (Martínez *ibid*). Sacrificing my own visually-oriented toolkit in order to lean into this language of vibration granted me partial access to the mole’s own dark cosmology. I followed Nigel as an anthropologist of Other Animals, attendant to nonhuman worlds that retain their right to opacity (as Nigel says, moles “can never really be known”), but can nonetheless be entered and felt (Spriggs *ibid*).



Watching Ulrich Seidl’s film³ makes me feel like a mole – the creepy kind that spies. But in the long frontal shots of this documentary portrait of Austrian

2 Hermione Spriggs, 2021, *Earth Swimmers*.

3 *In the Basement (Im Keller)*, 2014.

basement culture, Seidl's protagonists seem completely at ease with the turning inside-out of their own private spaces, their most intimate rituals meeting the camera's unflinching gaze. A victim of domestic abuse is shown in her basement enacting an elaborate BDSM relationship. "It sets my mind free," she explains during a frank and frontal interview in which she speaks naked whilst tightly bound in rope. In another vignette, a woman cradles and coos at a naturalistic newborn doll that she lifts from a cardboard box amidst dozens of other boxed-up sleeping babies. In a third, a grey-haired man toasts to the Third Reich in his museum of Nazi paraphernalia. After the film I'm left with a sense that I've seen far too much of these people's hidden lives, their opacity compromised, without any reveal of the filmmaker's own. And yet, as the BDSM protagonist states, her debasement is a form of personal liberation that could only take place in the basement, thanks no doubt to its withdrawal from the gaze of the outside world. The right to both debasement and opacity is negotiated in the tensions that Seidl sets up. As a hinge between the public and private, inside and out, the basement presents as a "knot" of non-Euclidean space (Kuchler 1999; Le Guin 1982): it is host to that "which cannot be reduced" (Glissant *in* Martínez in this volume).

Martínez' own relation to his basement is arguably missing from his text. That said, the idea of turning out my own boxed-up histories in this context makes me cringe. Unpacking our vulnerabilities and intimate obsessions is not what we're taught to do as anthropologists, such that doing so here feels like a taboo. Do we as researchers also retain a right to our opacity, as Martínez claims? Or is mastering the art of self-exposure a discomfort we should practise on an ethical basis if we seek to attend to the basements of others (Martínez in this volume, *c.f.* Donald 2012)? Could controlled practices of personal de-basement offer liberation within academic contexts that remain awkwardly bound to homogenising forms of knowledge production?

To push this a little further: might assuming the researcher's own right to opacity in fact foreclose an ethical responsibility, even unwittingly reproduce a form of hegemony and/or repression, if we take stock of the ethnographic truth presented here that basements themselves tend toward debasement – "de" meaning both "from the bottom/below", but also "right to the bottom", as in "totally" or "completely"?⁴ What does it mean to cling to the opaque when the completion of basement is in fact a de-basement, when basement (noun) and debasement (verb) are knotted together, holding down while emptying out, creating spaces of freedom through underground exposure?

What sort of dark, vibratory places might host this kind of anthropological transformation?

4 Available at < <https://www.etymonline.com/word/de> > (last consulted in February 2024).

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WHERE THE STORY BEGINS ANEW

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Francisco Martínez starts his essay with a quotation by Édouard Glissant. He might just as easily have chosen something from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1958) or Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light* (1988) to introduce what lays on the other side. Indeed, when evoking opacity and the suspension of time through concealment, the socially embodied imaginary is never very far away. Neither are the minor key details, as described by Rebecca Solnit in *Orwell's Roses*: "What exists 'without any wish to change' is static; it's before the story begins, before the fall from grace, or after it is concluded with reunion, rectification, or some other form of repair" (2021: 191).

So there's a lot of reading between the lines when reflecting on Martínez' essay. Here, the unsaid could be understood as mirroring the invisible. Moreover, what is renamed, rediscovered and revalued are important factors. As in the case of Eric Blair, who "rechristened" himself George Orwell in 1936, and planted roses in the garden of a small, rented cottage in Wallington. Eighty years later, Solnit travelled to the English countryside and found those rose bushes, establishing a living connection between past and present joys.

Drawing a covert analogy with minor things that might become problematic, we are to assume that holes and basements are disruptive forces – ones which are good to fall into – good to think with. In this sense, they are paradoxical,



Figure 1 – Mini-fridge, Kreuzberg Berlin, 2023. Source: Photo by the author.

ideological and heterographic. To some extent, one might say, they are even dystopic spaces of our human impact on the Earth... of the Anthropocenic in other words (Laviolette and Argounova-Low 2021).

Now, when Martínez writes: “the underground has been a hotbed for myths and stories for millennia”, the imagination of many people will likely revisit their school philosophy classes. In doing so, they will likely recall something of the allegorical teachings of caves, fire, sun, shadows and the surrender of finding hiding places – with a discussion between two philosophers on the experience of prisoners who are forced (or have chosen) to solely gaze upon the opposing wall (Plato 1906).

Again, in terms of the unsaid and the invented, many readers will possibly associate Martínez’s own artistic experimentation with doing nothing in public cafés in Lisbon and Tbilisi with Marina Abramović’s work in 2010 *The Artist Is Present*. In this long-term public performance, Abramović was sat at a table across from an empty chair, waiting for visitors to take turns in sitting opposite her and stare into her eyes. Over the course of a full working day of eight hours, for almost three months, she greeted thousands of strangers, as well as a few familiar faces. This included a profound, if rather “staged”, moment when she was confronted with her ex-partner and collaborator Ulay – Frank Uwe Laysiepen (1943-2020). Brought to tears, she reaches across the table and they grasp each other’s hands. After repeat encounters of this sort, during an extended period of divorce procedures and legal lawsuits over contract disputes, the pair continued to patch up some of the holes from their past, until Ulay’s death in 2020.

Indeed, Martínez draws on Michael Taussig’s notion of secrecy as well as Georg Simmel’s idea of concealment/non-knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) to illustrate how basements are ultimately both relational spaces and spaces of relationships (Martínez in this volume). Yet in considering death explicitly, one could wonder why basements in the context of the liminal are not made analogous to a literal and symbolic rite for burying unwanted things.¹ Perhaps Martínez feels that such a comparison is too simple or obvious to make. Nonetheless, from my point of view, what is maybe most conspicuously absent from his contribution, is a conceptual frame in which to make sense of his project’s acts of subterranean excavation. Here, an “archaeology of the contemporary past” approach is rather taken-for-granted, so that there is little by way of systematic descriptions of what is actually found in these basements (Buchli and Lucas 2001). The examples that are given, dozens of plastic water bottles for instance, do evoke many topical learnings and geo-political concerns – ranging from fear over Russian invasions of former Soviet nations, to rising awareness for global climate change issues.

1 See Danny Boyle, *Shallow Grave*. Glasgow: PolyGram, 1994, 92 mins.

Regardless, I would certainly agree with Martínez's observation that basements are a type of concealed cultural landscape capable of reproducing "a complex entanglement between the private and the public self". There are many comparisons that we could make here, whether cross-cultural, or cross-temporal. Indeed, he makes one of the former types of comparison with some of his own work in Georgia, creating a typology of holes in Tbilisi (Martínez 2019). In such work he argues that holes are both symbolic and structural, an invitation to escape or to reveal something hidden. To peek through, or simply to break on through to the other side, to a place where the story begins anew.

Bringing in my own research of car cultures for a moment, we could easily imagine how the inner landscapes of motor vehicles also blur this dichotomy between public and private, as well as between the individual and the dividual (Laviolette 2020). The similarity exists because both descending the stairs into a building's subterranean storage spaces and stepping (or hopping) into a stranger's car are moments of trust that mostly require an invitation. And one of the differences relates to the visibility factor that Martínez so aptly makes in relation to submerged or underground environments. They are more or less concealed from view, yet lurking not far beneath the surfaces of our past, present and future. It is in this sense, as underworldly spaces, that they are architectural technologies of our consciousnesses, identities and memories.

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