

**6TH SWS INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE
ON ARTS AND HUMANITIES 2019**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

VOLUME 6

ISSUE 1



.....
**HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, ARCHAEOLOGY,
HISTORY OF ART, PERFORMING & VISUAL ARTS,
ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN, LITERATURE & POETRY,
LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS**
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26 August – 1 September, 2019

Albena, Bulgaria

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Published by STEF92 Technology Ltd., 51 “Alexander Malinov” Blvd., 1712 Sofia, Bulgaria

Total print: 5000

ISBN 978-619-7408-90-4

ISSN 2682-9940

DOI: 10.5593/SWS.ISCAH.2019.1

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**PERFORMATIVITY OF “RUSSIANS” AND “RUSSIANNES” IN THE
COLLECTION OF JANA EGLE’S STORIES “STRANGERS OR MILENKIJ
TI MOJ”**

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ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on the intersection of ethnic identity in the political discourse in ethnically binary post-conflictual (post-Soviet) territories, exploring it through the postcolonial approach to performativity, Judith Butler’s theory on performativity and its certain concepts in further performativity research.

Jana Egle’s book “Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moj*”¹ (*Svešie jeb miļenkij ti moj*, 2018) projects a specific interpretation of Russians, i.e. as a complex concept represented through speakers’ ethnic, political, social and language performativity. A collection of stories that virtually forms a plot-united composition focuses specifically on the determination of Russians as “strangers” simultaneously deconstructing many stereotypical markers of the concept “Russians” in Latvia.

By frequently using the elements of the Russian language in Latvian, the stories of the book argue that both the use of “Russianness”: Russian words and Russian cultural signs, are a common and widespread practice in the Latvian everyday language and household culture and that the image of Russians is an integral component of Latvian social and political discourse which faces clichés and different attitudes to Russians among Latvians in Latvia. Just like identity forms the foundation for the discursive significance of the performativity, the book by Egle dwells upon the question of what the inclusive or exclusive tactics of the definitions of the Latvian social identity and the ethnicity of “Russians” is in the process of construction of the Latvian identity.

Rather than providing a political reading of a character “Russian” and concept of Russianness, determined by the events and consequences of the Baltic annexation by the Soviet Union and the resulting colonial instrument – Soviet hegemony, the essay offers a critique of the representation of the stereotypical perception of Russians in Latvia and distinguishes different alternative cases that can be viewed through the lens of the concept of performativity. In this article, I investigate the linguistic performativity of everyday practices – doings and sayings – that work to constitute identities through different affective intensities. Examples of body performativity show body modifications of particular ethnicity representatives by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished.

Keywords: performativity, Latvian literature, Jana Egle, Soviet hegemony, Russianness discourse, ethnic stereotype

¹ Hereinafter, the abbreviated name of the story collection – “Strangers” is used. – M.B.

INTRODUCTION

Jana Egle's short story collection (formally this narrative is more aligned with the genre of a novel) "Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moi*" was published in 2018. The bilingualism applied for in the title of the book ("*Milenkij Ti Moi*" derives from the words of a popular Russian folk lyrical song-romance being translated from Russian as "you, my beloved") is not a new technique in the Latvian literature for the representation of a complex co-existence of Latvians and Russians. In 2003, Pauls Bankovskis published a novel titled "Sekreti. A Frontier Romance" ("sekreti" translated from Russian as "secrets"), where the author actualizes the girls' subcultural tradition of making aesthetically decorated little places or so-called "secrets" hidden from others. Both novels reflect on the tense relations between Latvia and Russia in the territory of Latvia during the Soviet and post-Soviet period, against the background of the complicated history of the 20th century.

Jana Egle's stories are united not only by the family ties of the characters they portray, but also through the fixation of a model of Latvian-Russian relations against the background of Latvian political events of the 20th and 21st centuries. J. Egle exposes the distortions of the Soviet politics regarding the representation of an individual's ethnicity by "erasing" the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of the occupied territories and the performativity associated with its representation. Egle's stories actualize the Latvian-Russian ethnic contradictions based initially on the ideological legacy of the Russian Empire's Russification policy in the territories of the present Baltic States and the subsequent unification of the Soviet population as "Russians" and equating Russian nationality with a non-ethnic "Soviet person", thus becoming a target of hatred on the part of other Soviet-occupied peoples and ethnicities.

Contrary to the official Soviet ideology of the enemy, which is searched for among other (non-Russian) ethnic groups because of their lower credibility to the Soviet authorities, a cliché of a Russian-Soviet man as an enemy and a cause of all destructive events has been established among the subordinate nations in the Soviet time. This perspective of colonial power and subordination of the colonizers is transferred to each individual and becomes historically inherited in the post-colonial situation as well. J. Egle portrays political performativity by delving into the notion of public space and its role in the representation of ethnic identity of colonizers and ethnicities to be colonized in the post-Soviet situation, with some ethnic representatives pursuing the previously established aspects of performativity of identity: speech, behavior, and other acts revealing ethnic identity. In the concluding part of the collection of stories "Strangers", the emotional registers of the reiterative practice of the opposition "ours – theirs" is offered as a desired future in re-encoding the arisen conflicts in post-conflict situation.

Preconditions of the Russianness Discourse in the Latvian Literature

The actualization of the Russian discourse in the contemporary Latvian literature is not a popular topic due to the border situation between Latvia and Russia and historically determined politically strained relations. The regions of Latvia have long historically been in the territory of the provinces of the Russian Empire. The territory of modern Latvia entered the territory of the Russian Empire during the Great Northern War (1700 – 1721). In 1721, Vidzeme, Latvia's formerly Swedish province, came under Russian control. The Latgale region (at that time the Infantry Voivodeship) came under Russian

governance in 1772, with the second partition of Poland. With the third partition of Poland in 1795, the last Duke of Kurzeme and Zemgale abdicated from the throne (having received rich compensation from Russia), whereas representatives of the Latvian region of Kurzeme signed an agreement with the Russian Empire under which Kurzeme (Duchy of Courland) was incorporated into the Russian Empire, where the territory of Kurzeme province was formed.

In 1889 the Baltic territory under the Russian Empire was affected by the introduction of the system of the empire government and Russification. Until the First World War, the fates of Latvians were determined by the governing bodies of the Russian Empire and the organs of self-government of the German-Baltic nobility. During the imperial rule, the Russian people formed and consolidated their perception of the territory of Latvia as their own space, and Russia's citizens actively took advantage of the territory of Latvia. One of such advantages is a wide access to the Baltic Sea, with the possibility to use the port and the seaside resort facilities. Railroad construction began in the Russian Empire in the mid-19th century to allow the citizens of the empire to enter their colonized Baltic territories.

“In 1838 transportation route from St. Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo was opened, in 1848 the line from Warsaw to Vienna was completed, in 1851 the railway connected St. Petersburg and Moscow, and in 1860 St. Petersburg and Warsaw were connected. Railway construction began in the middle of the 19th century in the Russian Empire. In 1858, work began on the Riga – Daugavpils railway line, which had to be connected to the St. Petersburg – Warsaw railway. As the construction of the railways continued, the Daugavpils – Vitebsk line was put into operation in 1865, followed in 1867 by its continuation to Orla and later to Tsaritsyno. The newly built railway connected Riga with the provinces of Russia” [2; 35 – 36]. The transport network created by the empire was an important framework for active mobility of the population. One of the most popular travel destinations for Russia's inhabitants was the Latvian resort of Jurmala and other small seaside towns: “[...] holidaymakers' nationalities corresponded to urban populations being mainly Russians, Germans, Jews and Latvians. In addition, until the First World War, the residents of Moscow and especially St. Petersburg felt at home in the resort of Vidzeme province. After World War II, Russian summer holidaymakers gladly resumed their visits to the Baltic States, and in particular to Jurmala [...]. [14; 148].

The political and economic prerequisites became an essential basis for the Russian and other USSR ethnic associations to consider Latvia as their own territory.

The Performative Discourse of Ethnic Difference: Latvia Case

The issue of ethnic difference in Latvia is inseparable from the issue of the social space through which this difference is performed. People in Latvia rarely utilize the official ethnic, national and religious labels to claim their identity. Although a model of a united nation is being promoted in the public sphere and various measures on integrating non-Latvians are being intensively implemented at the national level, Russian-speaking inhabitants with no skills of Latvian do partly exist in their information space focusing on Russian information channels similarly to the previously circulating information channels in the Soviet Union from the centre in Moscow to the Soviet republics. Similarly, many population surveys regularly point out that the contemporary Latvian

society is divided in terms of perceiving the historic issues by the principle of using the Latvian and Russian languages. As a result, Latvians and Russians in Latvia in their mutual perception have developed their own performative paradigms, where the fixing and stabilizing of difference is achieved precisely in and through this social space. Practice and repetitive actions of a language becomes a dependable marker of identity in ways that highlight the co-constituted relationship between language and identity.

The concept of performativity entered the discipline in the early 1990s building mostly on Judith Butler's influential theory on the performativity of gender. This line of inquiry was embraced by mostly post-structural and feminist geographers seeking to denaturalize different notions of identity such as race, gender, ethnicity and so on [15; 2014]. In Butler's work [4, 5], the notion of practice and repetitive actions take centre stage in explaining the concepts of identity and subjectivity.

Turning to ethnic discourse in Egle's stories, performativity analysis is based on Butler's theory for failing to account for vital capacities of corporeal life. The ethnic aspect of the performativity analysis focuses on the processes of constructions of identities as well as materialization that take the body as an active part in the very production of the social [6, 7, 11, 16]. Variations in affective and emotional intensities become crucial in structuring and guiding Latvians and Russians everyday socio-spatial practices demonstrated affective ethnicities in post-conflict (post-Soviet) territories. Rather than positing identity as a psychological aspect of an internal self, Butler acknowledges its relational and contingent nature as a product of (often unconscious) ritualized doings and enactments [11; 180], or, in Butler's words: "[...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" [4; 34].

Performativity is deeply tied with politics and legality. J. Egle's collection of stories "Strangers" demonstrates a series of specific language performativity acts of Latvian or Russian ethnicity representatives (social agents). "Agency in Butler's theory is always understood as a variation on repetition where both notions of hegemony and resistance are made possible through the same process of repetitive practices." [11; 191] J. Butler has noted that "social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" [3; 519]. According to Butler, "agency" already implies "social agency," which is to say that someone exhibiting agency is already publicly identifiable. Performatives are then "inserted in a citational chain, and that means that the temporal conditions for making the speech act precede and exceed the momentary occasion of its enunciation." [6; 176]

The language performativity of the social agents portrayed in Egle's works represents the deconstructed ethnic stereotypes of the Soviet ideology and their continuation in post-Soviet Latvia. "Ethnic stereotype" as a generalized concept foregrounds a range of issues "about physical, moral and behavioural traits characteristic to the members of an ethnos/ethnic group, development/creation of which is influenced by elements of self-identification, as well as by environmental, social and political circumstances defining experience of cooperation between the evaluator's ethnos and the ethnic group to be evaluated. It is a phenomenon emerging from reality and replacing it" [17; 56]. In Latvia's binary Latvian-Russian relations in the post-Soviet situation, both ethnicities have changed roles: during the Soviet period, Latvians were labeled as "strangers" in the area of the Soviet Union whereas in the post-Soviet situation in the independent

Latvia, Russian people filled with the Soviet nostalgia with no skills of Latvian are considered to be “strangers”. In her collection of stories, Egle reflects on the ethnic borders of Latvia, which, according to Sunčana Laketa “[...] are not continuous and fixed along its path, rather it is shifting, ambiguous and differentially negotiated in social space. The boundary markings in social spaces are not always visible or known to the uninformed observers [...]” [11; 179]. Similar to many other areas in post-political conflicts, Latvia also has a historic setting, the contemporary socio-spatial landscape which is the product of war atrocities, competing nationalist ideologies, and a volatile political climate. Through repetitive daily practices the division is brought into existence as an ontological entity – a border. Further effects of these performative practices are solidification of ethnic difference and naturalization of identities. In Egle’s collection of stories “Strangers”, the divisions between Latvians and Russians, or “them” and “us” were narrated almost as facts they have grown up with to the point that they are considered natural. In addition to daily socio-spatial practices, different words, names and sayings are also a part of the quotidian enactments of identity through which boundaries are constituted and reinforced. There are numerous examples of linguistic clichés that testify to the performative force of speech.

Binary Reading of Ethnicity in Egle’s Collection of Stories “Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moi*”

Egle’s book, “Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moi*”, is a collection of eight interrelated stories. Through the perspective of the main characters in the stories, it is possible to view the dynamics of the development of Latvia’s social space in the 20th century. The stories are thematically united by a variety of traumatic experiences: not just the binary-read Soviet legacy and its determinative repetitive actions and everyday social practices. The genre of the book is framed by a hybridized metonymy of how the experiences of individuals form a unified binarity (Latvians – Russians; occupiers – the occupied; power – subalterns; center – periphery; the canonized – the unknown/the concealed; security - vulnerability, etc.). The poet and translator Ingmāra Balode names the collection of stories a novel: “Jana Egle’s “Strangers” is exactly with the title theme: ours – theirs, our intimacy – of every closest Latvian and every beloved Russian [...]. In the collection, the stories in a joint play form, I will dare to say, form a novel. The story string between us exists, even in the absence of a novel, and I would like to add, it plays directly into the author’s themes. Among Latvians and Russians, the poor and even poorer, lonely children of lonely parents and lonely parents of parents, whose seclusion and isolation have returned as a boomerang [...]” [1].

The issue of the book genre is also noted by the writer Ieva Melgalve: “While reading “Strangers”, I realized that naming a book as “stories” was, at the very least, misleading. None of the individual excerpts is a “story” in the full sense of the word – namely, a prose text with a beginning, main part and the end, and neither has it a shaped or deliberately open story line. Each individual “story” is a part of the whole book – a book that can’t really be called a “novel” because it lacks one main storyline. Rather, this set of stories is united by a spider web of various ties, a relative unity of time and space, as well as a common mood and message” [12]. The poet Maris Salējs also emphasizes the point of contact between the collection of stories and the novel: “I am very slowly going through Jana Egle’s latest book, a collection of stories that can be

read at the same time as a novel – “Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moi*”. Every word has a very deep sense in it and every word makes up the story in a very significant and very deep way.” [10]

The author Jana Egle, commenting on her own authorship strategy, notes that since her first collection of stories, “In the Light” (*Gaismā*, 2018), she has been focusing on themes that so far in the latest Latvian literature have been very correctly foregrounded through metonymy and metaphors. The author comments on the concept of the collection of stories in “In the Light” and the taboo subject presented therein as follows:

“My concept is to talk about the things that are nearby and that we pretend not to see. It binds all stories in a collection. We choose not to see – that’s what I wanted to say. We cannot pretend not to see, but we can choose not to see. My concept illustrates the problems of loneliness and aloneness, hopelessness, and how a person reacts to violence, both done himself and against him. [...]. Specific and very difficult things. My concept is as follows: to open those abscesses that may need cleaning, try to open our eyes. [...] We have to talk about everything!” [8]

In 2018, Jana Egle won the Latvian Literature Prize for the book “Strangers”. One of the reasons for recognition is the author’s strategy of portraying the modern Latvian society, which, alongside the projection of Latvian-Russian binarities, also offers the possibility of replacing binarities with a balancing homogeneous discourse on totalitarian regimes that manipulate social identities (including ethnic ones) and whose victims are most oppressed. Jana Egle points out that she has deliberately chosen to reveal “uncomfortable” themes of history and their projection in the contemporary Latvian society: “I write about what I think is important and what I find interesting to write about. Yes, these are the topics that are not easy to discuss. Social exclusion, violence, stigmatization by various signs. Human behavior and reactions in non-standard situations, i.e. in the situations that threaten them as physical beings or emotionally vulnerable personalities. The characters in the stories are either ordinary people or, as you mentioned, outsiders.” [13]

Linguistic Performativity

The component of the Russian language and the Russian cultural text nominated in the title of the book “Strangers” in the performative discourse of the Latvian ethnic space is a reference to the practice of Latvians to integrate certain Russian words or expressions, quotes from well-known Soviet-era Russian or Latvian films and other cultural texts in everyday culture for the creation of speech colouration in emotionally expressive language styles (ironic, satirical, sincere, humorous, etc.). Such language modelling is determined by the long-term coexistence of Latvian and Russian cultures in the colonial paradigm, which by inertia also continues in the post-colonial situation. At the same time, Egle’s narrative is aimed at demonstrating that in the post-colonial situation a new model of Latvian-Russian ethnic coexistence is emerging and that traumatic experience of hegemony – subalternity relations must be replaced with interacting of ethnic catalysis.

The subtitle of Egle’s work “*Milenkij Ti Moi*” performs as a unifying guiding motif for universal human values, a folkloric one and outside the historical experience. The line of Russian lyrical folk song actualizes the full text of this folk song, which tells us that

only in one's own country one can feel "self" in one's place, not a "stranger", to belong to one's roots, family.

However, Russian lexicon in the book is less representative of the lyric performativity stereotypically attributed to the Russian people. The writer also labels the Russian language as an enemy or a "strange" linguistic performativity in the Latvian cultural space. I will highlight some of the characters and the excerpts in the book, which help the author to demonstrate the practices related to the performativity of the Russian ethnicity representatives in a vivid manner.

The Russian-speaking Alevtina after her husband's tragic death at the sawmill, is overtaken by indifference and inability to organize her life. Being addicted to alcohol, she doesn't care about her child and her Latvian mother-in-law takes over her custody. Since their first meeting, no good relationships have been established between them, which Alevtina explains by the language barrier: "My mother-in-law does not like Russians, the word "Russian" out of her mouth sounds more ferocious than the worst swearing of a Russian. Alevtina does not really understand why, but when she asks her husband about it, Oscar avoids a straight answer and always laughs and asks whether Alevtina intends to live with him or his mother forever. [...] He himself speaks Russian to Alevtina, but in the beginning, he does not know a word of Russian, either. Alevtina would speak Latvian if she had been taught. She tries to say at least "goodbye" and "thank you". Not more than this, and for Oskar it is easier to communicate in Russian, as at work there are also Russian men, or rather, Russian women. [...] At times, they laugh and wonder how come they met and got married without really understanding each other's language. But love doesn't need being interpreted." [9, 57]

Alevtina does not speak Latvian, but her mother-in-law, Veronica, does not speak (or, in Alevtina's opinion – does not want to speak) Russian (her hatred for the Russian language and the Russians is explained by being raped by Soviet soldiers in her youth). In such a situation, a child is a hostage of historically defined language boundaries, and also a challenge to overcome the political boundaries of the language. In the colonial situation, "Even now Alevtina reluctantly lets Veronica [Alevtina husband's mother, Adriana's grandmother] meet only once a few months – in the countryside, in her presence, and Alevtina needs to speak Latvian so that she understands everything. Alevtina thinks though that Veronica knows Russian, but obeys her." [9; 82].

Egle's portrayed Latvians' hostile attitude towards Russians and Russian-language users is based on the Soviet hegemony, which functioned in the Russian language. Collective political trauma is transferred to every individual who has characteristics of a colonizer, even if he has nothing to do with hegemonial processes and is a representative of future generations.

At the end of the book a dictionary is added – "Explanations of translations from English, Russian and German", where most of words are Russian barbarisms, vernaculars and slang words. It is a sign of a generation that no longer has a habit of knowing the Russian words that have circulated under colonialism or the signs of the Soviet household culture. The explanation of the English and German words, on the other hand, is a reference to the choice offered by Soviet schools to study one of these languages. The writer uses the addition of the dictionary as an extension of the narrative about the linguistic performativity of the colonial and post-colonial situation in Latvia.

Body Performativity

The concept of the body has a complicated status in Butler's theory. For example, in her highly influential "Gender Trouble" [4] body appears as a neutral surface on which culture is inscribed rendering the physical body as a practical impossibility. However, in Butler's subsequent work the materiality of the body becomes less static proposing "a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effects of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" [5; 9]. In other words, difference is not only imposed upon the body, wherein the body is rendered as a medium through which power operates. In the collection of stories "Strangers", violence is directed against both men and women as an act of demonstrating the Soviet military power.

In the story "Teofils", Egle portrays Teofils, who underwent compulsory service in the Soviet army during the Soviet era, when all new conscripts were subjected to various unauthorized humiliating tests by old-timers. Therefore, "[..] in the Russian army, he, being a complete rookie, was found beaten at the fence of a military unit. He did not know back then and he could never remember what had happened, who had beaten him and why." [9; 129]

The story "Veronica" depicts a village of the newly occupied Latvia after World War II. The locals have not yet learned Russian and are not aware of the impunity of the military people. Egle shows three Soviet soldiers raping a young girl Veronica. Veronica, not understanding their speech, fixes the performative acts of the aggressors - voices and phrases integrated in the Latvian published text in Russian: "*Pasš zakroj!*" (*Shut up!*) [9; 219], "*Paš, a ti ne buģeš?*" (*Pasha, would you?*) [9; 219], "*Dura ti, ģevčonka, dura*" (*You're a fool, girl*) [9; 220] and non-normative lexicon and defends herself from them by desperately singing a Latvian folk song during the rape. The following stories portray Veronica's hatred and the ensuing performative acts against every Russian ethnicity representative.

The fact that the violent military people speak Russian – the language imposed by the colonial authorities on the ethnicity of Latvia – transfers the hatred of the victims from individual social agents of the Soviet system to Russian ethnic agents in general. Language differentiation in this context is materialized as an effect of implemented practices.

CONCLUSION

Jana Egle's short story collection, "Strangers or *Milenkij Ti Moj*", demonstrates Latvian and Russian ethnic contradiction in the context of Latvian historical processes in the colonial paradigm discourse. The author portrays the linguistic and bodily expressions of the concepts "Russian" and "Russianness" and, through the central characters of her stories, as social agents, outlines them in the colonial and post-colonial (conflict and post-conflict) situation. Egle's book states that, in the post-colonial situation, an ethnicity in a subordination situation continues the performative acts created by the colonial situation and abandoning them is a much longer process than changes in the political and social system.

Using an analytical framework developed at the intersection of Butler's performativity theory, I have considered two social fixities in Egle's works: linguistic performativity and body performativity. This research has shown that these everyday sensitivities and moments of encounter are inseparable from the histories of past force relations

embedded in those spaces. From past relations of conviviality, to traumas of war and current politics of divisiveness block and bind communities together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication has been done within the framework of the USA Embassy Latvia's Small Grants Programme project "Political Perspective of the Cultural Canon", grant agreement no. S-LG750-19-GR-0003.

Views, conclusions or recommendations outlined here may not reflect the official position of the State Department.

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