



*MA Thesis Report*

*Linda Dedkova*

*More-than-human cohabitation: gentrification, displacement and belonging*

MA thesis presented by Lindi Dedek is ambitious, innovative – methodologically as well as conceptually and is clearly engaging with issues of today. The issue of gentrification and privatization of a public space, especially in large urban metropolis, has been discussed for a while (this is not to say that the take is passe, only to situate Dedek’s thesis against larger theoretical and political debates), however the author frames their perspective through feminist ecology and care for more-than-human lives and communities. This particular perspective needs to be appreciated also in the context of Czech gender and feminist studies as well as anthropology/ethnography. One of the leading question of the thesis is “How we can tell stories of gentrification from a more-than-human perspective?” (p.4.), or how to narrate the story from the perspective of the culture/nature, specifically concrete (Btw. I feel there is a slippage in terminology between ‘concrete’ and ‘cement’ at times?)

To answer that, the author designed a multi-faceted case study of Karstadt at Hermannplatz in Berlin that involved multiple interviews, the author’s own observation, art project etc.. The author collected their material over period of several years (2020 to 2023). I am confident that the author will speak to their data at the defence – I will thus only provide my commentary: I really enjoyed the mixed voiced that were given space in the work – the mixing happened partly by accident and partly by the author positioning themselves at the centre of the social space and approaching people that frequented that location. That allowed the author to provide an imperfect, but ‘authentically enough’ reflection of the social dynamic at that social intersection. The café of the Karstadt department store is in that sense well-chosen space. Space from which the author ponders Haraway’s agenda to learn and strife for ways in which “worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently.” (cit in p.7) I really enjoyed to hear from ‘old’ and in some cases disabled women that frequented the café space. These are juxtaposed with declarations of the protesters against the proposed reconstruction of the department store, and occasionally by voices of the people that inhabit the Hermannplatz for work (stall market) or as home... These voices do not come through as strongly as the voices of the retired women or younger (often queer) people coming to the café. The defence and the discussion of the work might allow for highlighting of some of their reflection and affective relations to the place and life on the ‘Platz’.

The thesis attempts (and I believe that successfully so) to arrive at a layered ethnography that takes into account sensory and affective perceptions and experiences of different social groups, as well as ethnography of non-‘living’ materialities. The author terms their interpretative method as discursive analysis. This, I find unnecessary and not really illuminating. They sure do engage with discourse/s, as any interpretative work does, but the analysis of discourse is not

at the forefront of the work and does not need to be. Contrarily, they do amazing job contextualizing and historicizing their subject matter. The story of Hermannplatz and one of its prominent buildings – the department store Karstadt that the author offers as part of their anthropological work is an incredibly well-researched and written map of power dynamics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, colonialism, the roaring 20s, the financial crisis and the post-WWII history of the city divided in two. This allows the author to chart longer legacies of the present, as well as draw parallels between the urbanization of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current gentrification battles.

One last comment on methodology: I appreciated the author talking us through their ‘failures’, or more precisely, how they thought about their own inhabiting the space, their being (not) able to use other data: “I engaged not only my vision but also other senses (such as smells, noises) as well as my emotions. I challenged myself to look away from conceptions of Nature, binary thinking, and looked for ways to engage with non-human agents.”, or their attempts to record noises, as well as their reflection on the im/possibility to include reflection of bodily perception such as smell, taste, touch – senses that are often the openings to our more acute engagement with the more than human lives. For the defence: I would like to invite the author to reflect on the methods and talk to the committee about these im/possibilities.

The two larger interpretative chapters raise clever and important questions that are clearly grounded in the topical conceptualisation of the ambivalences of today. Chapter 3 is inspired by Latour’s warning that often professed ‘green values’ or supposedly ecological policies can lead to harmful changes at larger ecologies sedimented in the spaces and relations. And what and how gets ‘displaced’ in the process – in this example one of the network of relations that is endangered is the women’s circles in and with the café, and “the diversity and number of people in this community that make it possible for a department store to exist.” Here too, the author goes beyond the “human”: “it also encompasses the displacement of sounds, materials, infrastructures and non-human animals.”

The chapter 4 speaks to the more readily recognisable aspects of ‘more than human’ cohabitation and satisfies the tickled interest in of the reader of how to narrate from the perspective of cement, or concrete. Here, I want to come back to the minor note of the difference between cement and concrete – since both have different materialities do their perspectives, their histories and ways in which they interact with the ecology of Hermannplatz differently? The focus on cement/concrete is not a fancy manoeuvre – it conveys a political and a feminist perspective, concrete is, as many studies have shown one of the most distinct layers in the Anthropocene and thus a very ambivalent presence and agent in the cohabitation. How can we work with this ambivalence, hold it and learn from it in the current debates about less hurtful and more sustainable materials? I raise this question for defence and discussion since the author touches upon it in the text and I believe that it carries relevance to debates beyond Hermannplatz.

I have learned from the thesis offered by Lindi Dedek, I have enjoyed reading it and thinking with it. I recommend the thesis for defence with the ‘excellent’ evaluation.

Mgr. Kateřina Kolářová, PhD.

In Prague, September 14, 2023

