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The Polish–Lithuanian borderlands, past and present: multicultural versus decolonial responses to local and state violence

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This article presents the case of the Suwałki Triangle region on the current Polish–Lithuanian border to demonstrate how local activists developed a "multicultural" interpretation of social relations to counter previously dominant nationalist narratives. It then contrasts this interpretation with a "decoloniality" framework to illustrate the limits of the multicultural approach. Decoloniality, developed by Walter Mignolo to theorize about Latin American historical experiences, finds continued hierarchies in the apparently plural social landscape, situates identity as a fluid response to these hierarchies, and privileges voices that are "delinked" from them. Decoloniality may explain the complex borderland identifications of the Suwałki Triangle – and potentially other territorialized communities – better than multiculturalism.

Keywords: Poland; Lithuania; Sejny; borderland ethnic conflict

Introduction

The stories we have been telling over the past few decades about Central Europe and Eurasia have increasingly been stories of multiplicity. Since the collapse of Communist rule in 1989, scholars and local historians have been reinterpreting previously nationalist-infused histories with an eye toward recuperating repressed local experiences. Marginalized groups such as Rusyns, Roma, and Karaites have developed their own activist organizations or have been the subjects of academic reinterpretations of their roles in history (Rusinko 2003; Kapralski 2012). The recognition of difference along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines has continued even while politically right-wing nationalism has surged, as it has notably in Poland and Hungary.

This article presents research on the representation of ethnically, linguistically, and religiously expressed differences in a small rural community in Poland near the Lithuanian border. The town, Sejny, has a long history of multiplicity. In the 2000s, Sejny had a majority of Polish speakers, with a significant minority of Lithuanian speakers, and the presence of Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, and Roma-speaking people. Together with the neighboring city of Suwałki, the Sejny region was a center of Jewish community life prior to the Holocaust. Sejny is also the home of the "Borderland Foundation," called in Polish *Pogranicze Sejny*, which advocates for understanding, dialog, and acceptance among Sejny's residents. In its activist practices, *Pogranicze Sejny* attempts to address

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the highly charged historical legacy created by past instances of border changes, military occupations, and ethnic violence, much of which is common to "borderland" regions.

Drawing on direct observation, interviews, regional archives, and recorded oral testimonies, this analysis of *Pogranicze Sejny's* activism demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of reconciliation work in the Central European context. It argues that the organization's approach is best viewed as applying a "multicultural framework" to social relations, and developing practices that "read" present-day and historical social dynamics through this framework. It contrasts the multicultural framework for Sejny with an alternative narrative that brings forward the asymmetry of power among people who have differentiated themselves culturally, ethnically, religiously, and linguistically. Finally, it argues for a "decoloniality" approach as one that captures this asymmetry more effectively.

Scholarship focused on borderland areas often tries to recover the particular experiences of minorities or ethnically multidimensional communities. Very little has been published on the Sejny/Suwałki region, but eastern Galicia – between Ukraine and Poland – has served as a rich source of scholarship that demonstrates what "borderland" approaches can offer. Omer Bartov's *Erased* (2007), Kate Brown's *A Biography of No Place* (2003), and Shimon Redlich's *Together and Apart in Brzezany* (2002) are prime examples. Each is an historical inquiry into social dynamics in regions that had been objects of contestation between nations, states, and empires prior to 1989 because of their proximity to territorial boundaries, but are today firmly inside Ukraine. However, these authors refuse to frame their historical inquiries as histories of "Ukraine" or even "Poland." Instead, each begins with ethnic and religious particularity, often "vehemently expressed," in Bartov's words (2007, 8) as the norm; the later development of a nation-state was never a certainty. These are "biographies" (Brown 2003) of specific places in which triggering events – often at the initiative of an external power – transform identity into a reason for violence. Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, and Germans are neither inherently conflictual nor inherently peaceful rural neighbors, an insight into ethnicized, multilingual social relations that is best grasped at this very local level.

In addition to the reframing of Central Europe and Eurasia as a persistent mix of group identities rather than as emerging nations, the scholarship based on the experiences of multiplicity moves us beyond the binary of the dominator and the dominated. In Redlich's study of interwar Brzezany, those identifying as ethnic Poles at times supported vulnerable Jews during the Nazi occupation, and at times did not; ethnic Ukrainians sought to oust Poles except when they did not; Jews were scrutinized by both Poles and Ukrainians for signs of loyalty to either group (Redlich 2002). Brzezany was not only a multiethnic, multireligious community, its residents utilized ethnic and religious identification variously. In other words, it was characterized by "multiplicity" in terms of the number of fixed identities, but it also exhibited what Bartov in his book calls "tenuous and fluid" links to those identities (2007, 8).

There are a range of approaches to conceptualizing "multiplicity" in historical context, if we define that term as the acknowledgement of diverse and variegated subjectivities within a region, tradition, or community. As the work cited above indicates, this diversity becomes most apparent when people self-organize into culturally distinct groups. A significant literature views cultural identity as a form of self-expression and thus, of freedom. In this view, democracies thrive when people can openly join identity-based groups without penalty (Kymlicka 1996), competition among groups leads to productive compromises (Dahl 1971; Lijphart 1999), and autonomous cultural groups limit the power of the state (Galston 2002, 2005). Another set of scholars find that a social consensus acknowledging the legitimacy of "different" value sets among cultural identity groups promotes justice for

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everyone (Young 2000; Song 2007). Parekh (2000) argues that cultural identity as expressed in groups provides an important element of belonging in a polity, potentially even enhancing the unity of a state.

In light of these normative appreciations of multiculturalism, we can view Bartov's *Erased* as part of scholarly and even personal projects of recuperation. Both Bartov's and Redlich's books are in part stories of personal post-Holocaust journeys. They can be placed with work such as Lehrer (2013), Hirsch and Spitzer (2010), and Meng (2011). These are researchers who seek to recover an understanding of how specific communities lived prior to the expulsion or mass murder of one or more of these cultural groups. Multiculturalism as a value and the historical recovery of a repressed past go hand in hand.

However, multiculturalism is not the only mode by which the multiplicity of a community becomes manifest in social life. Its assumption that the group identifications are always apparent, clearly defined, and publicly articulated can be problematic. By proceeding from this assumption, multiculturalist approaches treat the existence of "Poles," "Jews," "Ukrainians," and "Germans" as given, functioning as the ground from which research (and conflict) proceeds forward. Theorists such as Connolly (1995) offer a different view of "the many," in which difference pervades social relations beyond (and before) cultural identity. For Connolly, not just allowing for but generating multiple subjectivities is valuable for a polity – pluralization is an "ethos" (1995). Identities such as "Jews" and "Ukrainians" should be recuperated, but they should not be interpreted as the fixed identity of a person or community. They are momentary, strategic expressions of differentiation. In this way, they cannot be the ground from which social relations proceed.

Connolly's view of identity draws from postmodern social theorists like Deleuze and Foucault. Both of these thinkers see identity categories as misleading, because they represent more unity than truly exists and because they position identity as a beginning point rather than the outcome of the interplay between domination and resistance. The category – expressed in language, everyday routines, institutions, and "invented" traditions – exists outside of the person. Judith Butler, a theorist in alignment with Connolly, argues that categories exist as "modes of address" prior to the person: "If, for instance, we think about gender assignment as 'being called a name,' then we are affected by gender terms before we have any sense of what they mean or any understanding of what kind of effects they have" (Butler, in Ahmed 2016). We can easily substitute "religious," "ethnic," or "linguistic" identity for gender to capture how this view of multiplicity differs from multiculturalism. Gentile Germans in the Third Reich became "Aryans" when they were summoned as such, via their newly acquired Aryan *Ausweis* (identity card).

Neither the multiculturalist view of multiplicity nor the "pluralization ethos" take into account the fundamental asymmetry in access to power, status, resources, or survival among communities in borderland regions (Gawerc 2012). Along with this asymmetry comes vulnerability, and neither approach can truly address the extreme brutality and violence that at times conditioned the emergence of identifications (or their suppression). Because much of Central European and Eurasian history unfolded in a context of empire – imperial centers building legitimacy and control, attempting to contain their multitudes, and reacting to their own declining capabilities – the actual source of recuperated experiences of "difference" is mediated through practices of submission and rebellion. The process by which one local community or social group came to view itself as different from another was not a freely chosen, unhindered path. Nor was the process by which groups came to speak about who they were. Expressions of identity such as "Lithuanian" were often either imposed by state authorities or carved out as acts of resistance against those authorities; this was particularly true for Central Europe and Eurasia, geographically

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at the center of competing religious, cultural, and political expansions. Identities carried the traces of the hierarchical contexts they were forged in.

Thus, along with the new attention to multiplicity has come the task of reconceptualizing the relationship of articulations of identity to empire and state. When historians write about "Poles," for example, are they using the label chosen by their subjects, or by the state; and if the latter, which state in which historical period? Does the descriptive language we use capture the political conditions that mediated the emergence of that particular identification? Should we simply use the language preferred by those we write about, even if that "preference" is situational and strategic? Much scholarly work has been done documenting the flexible, constructed quality of identity categories when, for example, peasants were illiterate and disconnected from elites (Stauter-Halsted 2001), linguistic choices determined solidarity more than anything else (Kamusella 2013), or ethnic identity offered a pathway of resistance to assimilation (Balzer 1999). What remains difficult to disentangle is the relationship of admittedly contingent identifications with the authoritative stories told about them.

This article approaches the problem outlined above – of how to represent historical subjects when their expressed identities are themselves the outcomes of power relations – by juxtaposing two interpretive frameworks for the case of Sejny and its larger region, the "Suwałki Triangle," a historically contested territory located where today's Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Kaliningrad/Russia meet. In the "multiculturalist framework," as noted above, identification is an unproblematic (if not perfect) alignment between a socially expressed category, such as "Ukrainian," and a personal sense of belonging. The second interpretive framework is that of "decoloniality." Decoloniality, developed by Walter Mignolo, is sympathetic to Connolly's "pluralization ethos," discussed above, but finds it impossible to pursue in practice without concurrent politics addressing the legacy of colonial violence. Mignolo views social relations as existing within layers of colonial forms, which function as a "matrix of power" (2000). Not only do social relations exist within colonial hierarchies, they continue to be sustained by them today. Any "pluralization" must contend with these already existing hierarchies.

The continued relevance of "coloniality" – as Mignolo would put it – is due to its founding role in shaping the construction of "Western" knowledge, an argument drawn from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). The starting point for a decoloniality approach is first acknowledging coloniality; the legitimation of any form of representation – either in the realm of culture or the realm of academia – is itself the product of a power relationship. Thus, where multicultural approaches begin with equal identities, decoloniality begins with empire. In this view, expressions of identity exist, but they arise from preexisting power relations as a reaction to those relations, and as a mode of turning away from them. For Mignolo, assertions of authority provoke "the formation of new subjectivities that emerge in the process of responding to new imperial/colonial conditions" (2011, 175). His main concern is with "delinking" these "new subjectivities" from their assigned place in the order of historical knowledge. The framework that looks for evidence of delinking is a decolonial one.

This article seeks to illustrate what is at stake in choosing one of these two frameworks over the other by applying each of them, in turn, to Sejny in Poland, called Seinai by Lithuanian speakers and Synee or Seyni in Yiddish. Sejny is a fitting case for the issues around the conceptualization of identification in hierarchical contexts. Historically, its location on multiple borders means it has been a way station for movements of expanding and retreating empires, fleeing refugees, rebellious revolutionaries, and murderous paramilitaries. Today, it has a population of only 5640 (*Rocznik Demograficzny* 2016) but occupies a

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significant position in local histories of its many different linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups. Almost one-third of its residents do not identify as ethnically Polish, but do identify – strongly – with neighboring Lithuania. In addition, the town and the larger Suwałki/Suvalkai/Suvalk region of which it is a part had a significant prewar population identifying as Jewish, and smaller communities claiming adherence to, among others, Lutheran, Uniate, Old Believer, Islamic, and Russian Orthodox faiths, traces of which remain. Sejny's economy is based on tourism and agriculture, leaving it vulnerable to economic downturns and with significant pockets of poverty.

Sejny is also home to *Pogranicze Sejny* (also called The Borderland Foundation, at www.pogranicze.sejny.pl). *Pogranicze Sejny* has developed into a prominent actor in Poland's civil society, challenging Poland's dominant narratives about identity since the 1990s. Its publishing house first produced Jan Gross's *Neighbors* in Polish in 2000, a book that documented the murder of small town's Jewish population by their non-Jewish, Polish neighbors during the Nazi occupation. *Neighbors* had an extraordinary impact on debates about Polish anti-Semitism and the role of people in Poland – people identifying as non-Jewish Poles – in the Holocaust. *Pogranicze Sejny* has consistently offered space for writers and artists, from Poland and abroad.

In pursuing the argument that *Pogranicze Sejny's* multicultural approach can be challenged by a decoloniality approach, the article presents evidence gathered using mixed methods, with an emphasis on discourse. The section documenting the multiculturalist framework as practiced by activists relies on ethnographic fieldwork focused on direct observation of advocacy work, elite and participant interviews, and analysis of textual artifacts produced by *Pogranicze Sejny*, conducted in 2002, 2004, and 2016. This framework's assumptions about identity are illustrated through a comparison of *Pogranicze*'s interpretation of Sejny's past with that of the Museum of the Sejny Territory (*Muzeum Ziemi Sejneńskiej*), a local heritage museum that interprets Sejny as a site of hierarchical violence and resistance. The section on the decoloniality framework draws on different types of evidence. Decoloniality dismisses publicly legitimated manifestations of identity as vessels of a preexisting power relationship. It looks for perspectives that capture an experience delegitimated by coloniality. Thus, this section uses the oral testimony of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Sejny, voices that were the targets of first anti-Semitic violence, then the Nazi extermination project, and then the various Polish national narratives downplaying Poland's Jewish past.

Why is the decoloniality framework particularly pertinent to Central and Eastern Europe? The answer hinges on what "coloniality" is in the Central European and Eurasian historical setting. There has been some debate over whether "colonial" or "postcolonial" frameworks and concepts are helpful in understanding this region. In part, this is due to the nature of Imperial Russian, Habsburg, and Prussian rule, which differed in fundamental ways from British, Spanish, French, and Dutch colonial projects in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. However, I would argue that it is also due to area specialists' misinterpretation of the "colonial" element in postcolonial theorizing. For example, Claire Cavanaugh finds that Soviet control of internal and external Polish politics was colonial (2004); Carey and Raciborski reduce "colonial" to a powerful outsider "intervening at will with impunity," leaving behind the structures of those interventions when it withdraws (2004); Jan T. Gross uses "colonial" to simply mean "top down" (2014). Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez observes that politicians as well as scholars seem to use "postcolonial" to mean "after Soviet exploitation" (2010). Gerasimov and Mogilner use "postcolonial" to indicate a graduation from colonial dependence (2015).

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The overly instrumentalist and materialist interpretation of "colonial" leads these scholars to dismiss a potentially very productive set of questions. First, more accurate and helpful than "colonial" is the concept of "coloniality," which takes into account its epistemological as well as material manifestation. As Fanon (1961, 2004) argued so powerfully in the 1960s, the colonial impulse is experienced mentally as well as physically, and the subject of colonizing fantasies must resist both. The mind and body are fabricated by the colonizer as one in the creation of colonizing knowledge – a set of truths in which colonial rule is natural and the colonized are pure objects. On its surface, Fanon's colonialism does not match well with how Habsburg, Ottoman, Prussian, or Russian authorities viewed the ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities living within their (shifting) territories. These minorities were seen as subjects, not objects, and various attempts to assimilate them or purchase their loyalty attest to this. As Darius Staliūnas puts it in regard to post-1863 russification, "the aim of such a policy was to support those non-dominant national groups, which, in the opinion of imperial officials, were loyal to the empire and would thereby serve as a counterweight to a disloyal nation" (2007, 2). In contrast, the Belgians blithely cut off the hands of any Congolese child they wished to, because it was just an object (Hochschild 1998). Cortes' soldiers sliced off the breasts of local women to test the sharpness of their swords (Todorov 1984).

However, what Fanon brings to the forefront is the relationship between consciousness and force, and the ability to fabricate a reality that both the colonizer and colonized must live according to. This reality includes identity. In Eurasia and Europe while "the governed" were not subhuman to "the governing" (again with the exception of Nazi policy), autocratic empires and later states generated systems of knowledge that presumed and sought to shape identities. Power as coloniality emerges from decisions about who is self and who is "other."

Layered coloniality as historical context

Examples of scholarship that has explored how imperial politics conditioned identities include Bartov and Weitz's edited collection, *Shatterzones of Empire* (2013), Diener and Hagen's *Borderlines and Borderlands* (2010), Staliūnas's *Making Russians* (2007), and Kapralski's *Naród z popiołów: pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów* (2012). These texts ask us to question the associations we make with publicly claimed identities by communities that carry histories of violence. Are assertions of identity made in contexts of coercion, times of war, under duress, genuine expressions of selfhood? Are similar assertions made in solidarity with the wishes of state authorities somehow suspect? What about expressions of resistance? Is loyalty to a forbidden language a sign that such an identity is necessarily more robust or authentic, because it survives at great risk?

These questions become even more complex (and compelling) given the overlapping nature of religious and ethnic hierarchies in the regions touched by the Russian and German state projects of empire. Communities in central Europe and Eurasia often experienced what might be called "layered coloniality." Layered coloniality describes a power dynamic that is not merely imperial, but that (1) acknowledges that more than one colonial project may be at work simultaneously and (2) anticipates – and thus evokes – counterclaims on the part of other actors. This dynamic is supported by Dolbilov's (2010) work on the Russian empire's use of shifting policies to influence local loyalties against larger rivals. Dariusz Staliūnas, another author in this vein, cites historian Kimitaka Matsuzato when arguing that Russia in the late 1800s could not fend off Poland in its western provinces "without protecting Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian peasants (and sometimes

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even intellectuals)" (Matsuzato in Staliūnas 2007, 13). Russian central authorities summoned a local ethnic identification in anticipation of the *future repression of that identification* by Poland.

Coloniality – as the production and rationalized legitimation of hierarchical difference – is frequently theorized as binary, in part due to Fanon's stark confrontations of settler and native and Said's "West" versus "Other" paradigm. Layered coloniality may capture the lived experience of Central Europe and Eurasia more accurately than the binary view. Historical actors in these regions are not oppositionists facing a colonizing enemy, but subjects who resist, avoid, and strategically comply with coexisting but distinct hierarchical projects. Examples range from Ukrainian Uniates attending Roman Catholic services in Polish to avoid incorporation into Russian Orthodoxy in 1905 (Blobaum 1990), to Protestant Lithuanian speakers in Memel choosing to align with the German state in 1920 instead of Lithuania (Fink 2004), Polish Jews pursued by Polish Catholic peasants intent on handing them over to the occupying Nazi Germans (Grabowski 2013), and Jewish Bundist women in Mińsk choosing adherence to the new Soviet state over their own revolutionary activism (Bemporad 2013).

From multiculturalist framework to multicultural scenario

Pogranicze Sejny is not alone in its mission to promote dialog among different groups in Poland. In parallel with academic scholarship, local activism in Central Europe and Eurasia has also increasingly organized itself around a story of past and present multiculturalism. This activism has been documented in the work by Fábián (2009), Meng (2011), Pettai (2011), and Lehrer (2013), among others, although rarely critically assessed, as Michlic (2014) has noted. The evaluation of advocacy outcomes is an ongoing question in social science (McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015). One of the few scholars challenging the "multiculturalization of the past" is Pasieka (2014, 2016). Pasieka observes that local identification is deeply conditioned by the position of the Catholic Church as an alternative to state-sanctioned discourses, such as (in 1948–1989) state socialism and then (post-1989) neoliberalism. To state that one is Catholic means many things other than religiosity. Furthermore, Pasieka points out the increasingly common tendency to interpret Poland's prewar multireligious and multiethnic territory as "multicultural Poland." Including both the First Republic and the Second Republic in her critique, Pasieka argues that this multiculturalist reading of history obscures the fact that Polish military expansion into weakened neighboring countries (or declining empires) is what accomplished the incorporation of most nonethnically Polish communities into the state, Poland. When different religious or linguistic communities did coinhabit a particular territory, their relations were often conflict-ridden, in part because of structural inequalities. While some may disagree with her emphasis on "hierarchy" at the expense of "pluralism," her work is singular in establishing "multiculturalism" as a representational project.

Instead of already existing cultural multiplicity, it may be more accurate to view multicultural advocacy as aspirational and even educational. This may be why such advocacy emphasizes public performance. However, the scripted nature of multicultural advocacy is rarely critically examined. One conceptual framework for assessing multicultural activism that takes into account its elements of public culture, performance, goals of social change, and the idealization of ethnic and religious tolerance begins with the notion that multicultural advocacy creates a "scenario." It scripts an organization of space that delineates pathways for specific subjectivities to emerge. It does so publicly, in the sense that participants are also audiences. It must rely on established meanings for context, but it is

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aimed at change, and so embedded in its enactments are futures. In a way, participants in multicultural events "rehearse" what it might be like to live out the values promoted by the activists.

Multicultural activism in the Suwałki Triangle

How does a multicultural scenario develop in practice? A micro-ethnography of a specific event can illustrate the dynamics at work. At *Pogranicze Sejny*, on a weekend in the 1990s, a group of 12 men gather for choral practice. They are preparing for a performance in the coming month. Prior to joining this singing group, most of these men had never spoken to each other, although they each lived and worked in a very small town of only 6500 residents. They have lived all their lives in an environment of "learned separateness," in which long traditions of mutual skepticism, suspicion, and resentment dominated everyday practices and collective memory. Most of the choir members identified as ethnically Polish and Roman Catholic. A significant number identified as ethnically Lithuanian, also Catholic. A few were Polish, but Lutheran. Two were Old Believers, an offshoot of Russian Orthodoxy. Also included were town residents who identified as Belorussian and Ukrainian, groups with small communities nearby. All were citizens of Poland and had been born on territory demarcated as "Poland."

The membership of the choir reflects the social landscape of northeastern Poland, only two kilometers from the Lithuanian border. Sejny is officially 30% Lithuanian. It also functions as the cultural center of the Lithuanian community in Poland, because many Lithuanians are dispersed and because Sejny has a symbolic significance in Lithuanian histories. Sejny is crucial to Lithuanian heritage, but Lithuanian heritage has rarely been viewed as crucial to Sejny, by the Polish-speaking majority and the municipal authorities. The language of the government, culture, and tourism are overwhelmingly Polish, and while Lithuanians in Sejny also speak Polish, very few Poles know any of the Lithuanian language. Fewer still acknowledge the presence of a very small group of Old Believers, a group considered anti-Polish in part because they speak a dialect of Russian.

Missing so far in this story are two major characters: the German and Jewish communities, which were substantial prior to the war but have disappeared from this area altogether. Jews in particular made up almost half of Sejny before the war; Nazis first expelled them in 1939, although their experience was atypical, as will be developed further below. Remarkably, from among the very small number of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, the son of the town's main tailor survived. He became a well-regarded cantor in the US and came to Sejny in the mid-1990s to see what was left of his childhood home. His visit sparked a commitment to restore the Sejny White Synagogue, a large building in the very center of the town.

It was in this beautifully restored synagogue that the men's choir referenced above was to give its concert. Their playlist was intentionally crafted to reflect their separate traditions. The event was unprecedented: not only was it the first time current Sejny residents would enter this synagogue, or any synagogue, it was the first time each separate community would hear, live, the songs of the "other" co-communities in Sejny. In the days leading up to the performance, something unexpected occurred: in the midst of a rehearsal, the choral member who was Belarusian began to cry. He had never experienced a person from a culture that had dominated his – a Polish person – singing a song that was central to his heritage, not for him but with him. The act of singing was an act of profound recognition. It was an embodied commitment to join together with a person who was marked as different by dominant cultural understandings of identity, and to defer one's assumption of

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dominance – to spend energy and time modulating one's voice so that the other voice can be heard. This practice of deference and modulation would also celebrate each separate community in Sejny in turn. But the concert would not be a series of singular folklore presentations. Nor would it be an appropriation of a subculture by a dominant group. It would be the creation of a practice of recognition.

Pogranicze Sejny self-consciously uses Sejny's multicultural past and present as a foundational element in its identity as an organization. Its founders and directors are Krzysztof Czyżewski and Małgorzata Sporek-Czyżewska, artists originally from Poznan, a city in western Poland. As state socialism began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, the Czyżewskis looked for a way to develop their own organization, away from the crowded artistic field of Poznan. They traveled to what urban Poles considered a backwater area of Poland, the northeastern corner historically called the "Suwałki Triangle." They launched the Borderlands Foundation in the town of Sejny in 1991, lobbying the local government for funding and for permission to use a former yeshiva building, which had been taken over by the Communist government for use as a warehouse in 1948. The former yeshiva was attached to a large, white, rundown synagogue.

The effort to create intentional spaces for the multiple identities in Sejny to find each other, speak to each other, make music with each other, was one of *Pogranicze*'s main goals by 2001. In this, they hoped to transcend the attachment to a monolithic Polish Catholic national identity. They hoped to replace the singular Polish "Katolik" with a Poland of the many, in which elements from a variety of local ethnic and religious traditions are shared in participatory practices in the public sphere. Their vision of multicultural Poland focused on musical performance, theatrical performance, and visits from writers who were tackling some of the most difficult topics facing post-Communist Poland. Music is constant at their location, as artists and local young people come and go in a flurry of activity that goes into the late evening hours. *Pogranicze Sejny* has earned international recognition, increased funding, and a position as a model in Poland for its creativity in fostering reconciliation among divided communities.

What exactly is being reconciled in this space? Is *Pogranicze* creating a connection among essentially different people, or is it staging an enactment of a scene which addresses people via identity? Richard S. Wortman's (1995a, 1995b) two-volume work, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, is helpful here in its development of the notion of a "scenario." Wortman demonstrates the importance of the "symbolic sphere of ceremonies and imagery" to the ability of the Russian imperial system to persist over time (Wortman 1995a, vol. 1, 3). Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of symbolic power, Wortman documents the processes by which the nobility (and other groups) participated in generating, over and over, public and interactive scenarios that gave meaning to sovereign rule. These scenarios incorporate spatial elements through which, for example, the tsar aligned himself with or distanced himself from specific social groups, depending on his goals. At times, scenarios generated unintended meanings as well. They are enactments of a familiar and established milieu that represents a power relationship but also charges that relationship with new elements.

With this in mind, one could revise *Pogranicze*'s work as a multicultural scenario, similarly blending the familiar with newly constructed forms in a public enactment. The multicultural scenario summons individuals and communities according to modes of address that have been shut down in the past, but not only that. The multicultural scenario distributes its summons seemingly equally. The Belarusian stands next to the Pole and each sing the same harmony. In this sense, it has a liberating potential. It creates a space in which

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nonhierarchical forms of address can be practiced. The director of *Pogranicze Sejny* describes it this way:

> One way or another, by naming the upcoming age [of freedom in coexistence] we acquire an understanding that our future will largely be decided by the problem of our encounter with the Other. In this encounter, we are unsettled because it brings the potential for failure and endless cultural conflicts … That is why we need the culture of coexistence, forming an ethos for those involved in its creation […]. We need new cultural practices and new tools for constructing bridges of understanding […]. The encounter with the Other is an act of construction … Such an encounter is a craft. (Czyżewski 2014)

In interviews, Czyżewski frequently speaks of "entering into" the "Other's" experience, which he describes as risky. He equates it with entering into an unknown territory. Well aware of the brutal history between those who identify as Lithuanian and those who identify as Poles, he reminds us that just standing together in the same space is a possibility that must be crafted. For a region with a history of brutal and genocidal hierarchies, this establishment of equal pathways to public voice would of course be a relief to some and a release to others. It is not surprising that scholars as well as activists have taken to embracing it.

What happens to memory in the multicultural scenario? Czyżewski has initiated many programs that bring forth memory formations, such as Sejny teenagers interviewing elderly residents about World War II (see Szroeder 2001). However, few of these are focused on revisiting past wounds; instead, *Pogranicze Sejny* aims to create new social relationships that transcend the past. As he notes in the long quotation above, for a new community of coexistence, "other" is needed. This exterior other is invited into the spaces of *Pogranicze Sejny*, but his or her exteriority is not, by this act, extinguished. A Belarusian participates in the concert as a Belarusian. If not, according to this view, the dominant Polish national hostility toward Belarusians cannot be challenged. Thus, the multicultural scenario does not denaturalize identity as "modes of address;" instead, it installs it as a precondition for entry into social dialog. It summons participants but creates the impression that participants simply have appeared, already invested in a specific identity. The multicultural scenario obscures the coercive processes shaping subjectivity – it presents itself as taking people "as they are."

The layered coloniality of interwar Sejny

An alternative way of understanding the process by which identities gain significance in Sejny begins with the layered coloniality of the broader region. The Suwałki Triangle, of which Sejny is a part, has a quality of "edgeness" when one takes a broad survey of its history since the 1700s. It is located in what today is the most northeastern region of Poland, only a few miles from the border with Lithuania, 300 kilometers from Kaliningrad and 300 kilometers from Belarus. When East Prussia dominated the area, Sejny was on its southern edge; when Russia did, Sejny was its far western "Suwalk Gubernia." For independent Lithuania, Sejny was a prize on its western border to be traded away for the valuable Vilnius. For independent Poland, Sejny was an eastern outpost from which to attack Russia. In September 1939, ambiguous maps led to Sejny's occupation first by the Germans, then the Russians, then the Germans again in the course of a few months. Sejny's location at times allowed it some distance from occupying powers. However, more often it became a center of rivalry. It had permanent barracks to be used by whatever army was in town.

The complexity of Sejny's experience under multiple imperial powers is difficult to review in brief. Two historians offer the most comprehensive narratives of the region:

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Łossowski (1996, 1997) is Poland's expert on the area between Poland and Lithuania, and Stražas (1996) is Lithuania's. Both agree that Lithuania's increasingly powerful national identity in the late 1800s had significant effects on "mixed" areas, that is, regions in which some residents identified with the Lithuanian language and others with Polish. The linguistic division was rendered more complex by Russia's russification policy after the 1863 uprising against Russian rule by the Polish elite. Imperial authorities banned the Lithuanian language in Suwałki but were more threatened by Polish speakers; Lithuanian could be written in Cyrillic. At the same time, those in Poland fighting against Russia for an independent Poland had in mind that Lithuania would fall under Polish rule as well, something those identifying as Lithuanian were well aware of. For a resident of Sejny in the late 1800s, either Russia or Poland would dominate the Lithuanian population; expressing one's identity as Lithuanian cannot be separated from an anti-colonial impulse.

As Paul Werth has documented, there were multiple religions actively practiced in the western provinces of the Russian empire in the late 1800s, including Old Believers who fled from Russia proper to Suwałki to practice in rural areas (2014, 14). The empire had an inconsistent policy toward faiths that were not Orthodox, hoping to use them to parse out loyalty and disloyalty, especially in the face of Poland's threat in the west. Polish Roman Catholic churches viewed the expansion of Orthodoxy into the region not as cultural diversity but as russification. Similarly, Protestant denominations increased in the late 1800s in part as a response to the growing demands of Lithuanians for alternatives to Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Conflict and expulsions in other parts of the empire brought Litvaks, Armenians, Karaites, and Muslims to the Suwałki region as well. For a resident of Sejny who identified as Polish, these shifts felt like an encroachment.

During World War I, the German army occupied the Suwałki region. Germany's conflict with Russia rendered the entire eastern borderlands places of dislocation, deportation, and violence (see Kauffman 2015). At this time, the Lithuanian independence movement and its consequent nationalism surged. Near the end of the war, the potentially independent states of Poland and Lithuania – really, their elites – aimed to seize the opportunity represented by a defeated Germany and weakened Russia. Each pursued independence. In Poland's case, a resurgent military presence focused on the territory to its east, led by Jozef Piłsudski, was at the core of this vision. This expansionist Poland was legitimized by its definition as a "return" to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), an idealized pre-partition Poland in which many different ethnicities ostensibly thrived under a Polish cultural umbrella. Lithuania, in contrast, recalled the Commonwealth as a union of two equal, independent political entities; independent Lithuania meant a Poland restrained to territories with Polish speakers and the retention of Vilinus/Wilno (which had a majority of Polish speakers) as Lithuanian.

Drawing on the context outlined above, we might approach the community of Sejny somewhat differently than the scenario offered by *Pogranicze Sejny* above. The event in Sejny's past held as most significant by its non-Jewish residents (and émigrés) is the 1919 Sejny Uprising. In 1915, near the beginning of World War I, Germany's hopes to gain support for its extended position led it to offer temporary benefits to communities around Sejny specifically: for a year in 1916, Germany designated Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Yiddish all official languages. In addition, local governing councils were required to have multiple ethnicities represented. This was unprecedented for Sejny. These policies were part of Germany's strategy of preventing any single national community from dominating the area, a strategy it ended in 1917 when it granted the Lithuanians more power than any other group.

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Germany's withdrawal at the end of the war was an opportunity for Poland to consolidate its control of the area; the Polish government sent in troops to support local Poles in Sejny with the aim of ousting the Lithuanians from power. This loss of control was bitterly contested by the Lithuanian local government and the Lithuanian local community. Indeed, the international powers setting the rules for Europe insisted that Poland withdraw its forces. In their view, Lithuanians were clearly the ethnic majority. However, local Polish militias resisted the "official" withdrawal. Sejny was part of Poland's larger strategy to build an expansive, multicultural Polish commonwealth. If Piłsudski could take Sejny for Poland, Lithuania would certainly realize it was defeated. Polish military forces invaded again and overwhelmed the Lithuanians in 1919.

Lithuanians immediately responded, relying on citizen militias and sympathetic townsfolk, in a series of battles called the Sejny Uprising. Almost every single male in the town who identified as Polish or Lithuanian took up arms. By August 1919, Sejny Poles, backed by the Polish government, overcame the Sejny Lithuanians. Its occupation forces implemented brutal reprisals against ethnic Lithuanians in the short term and installed an ethnic Polish local government.

The climate of heightened violence, confusion over authority, the economic deprivation of war, the importance placed on ethnic numbers by the larger European powers, and the illusion that more power for one's own national group was just around the corner, had two effects. First, it gave two highly militarized local communities – the Poles and the Lithuanians – incentive to continue the conflict on a local level. Second, it rendered the other groups in Sejny – Jews, Belarusians, Germans, and those in mixed families – extremely vulnerable to coercion and violence, as they were pressured to choose one side or another.

The Polish–Soviet war (1919–1920) only exacerbated these issues. As Soviet troops moved toward Warsaw, they aimed to deny Poland access to this region; to do so, they "gave" Sejny back to local Lithuanian militias to govern. This move made Sejny again a battlefield between the local Polish and Lithuanian civilian communities. Both Lithuania and Poland appealed to the League of Nations. Using ethnicity as its guideline, the League accepted Polish claims for a majority. Thus, the border between Poland and Lithuania was experienced on the ground as changeable and contested. The external foreign powers made clear that expressed ethnic identity would be their measuring stick, creating a reality in which identity was highly charged. Their policy ended any possibility for nonethnic identification.

The disavowal of identity in the Suwałki region

The municipal museum in Sejny (the *Muzeum Ziemi Sejneńskiej*) is the official keeper of Sejny's history. It is located on one of Sejny's two main avenues, directly across the street from *Pogranicze Sejny's* offices, in a modest, undistinguished building attached to local government offices and private apartments. The museum is a series of rooms and hallways, converted from a home. Established in 1989 to protect local monuments and other heritage objects (Statut 2010 [2016]), it self-consciously makes a case for the significance of Sejny in Poland's history. Like institutions in most countries assigned the task of preserving heritage, it uses a series of formally organized displays with extensive accompanying commentary to tell a story about the past in which selected material objects "from the past" are employed in the service of narrative (see Harrison 2013). It is the center for decision-making regarding conservation, commemoration, and documentation of local heritage. While it has few drop-in visitors, its staff is called upon frequently for commemorative

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events and it offers a well-developed website hosting historical commentary (www.muzeum.sejny.pl).

The material objects comprising the collection throughout the 2000s represent two interconnected stories: the eastern campaign of Poland's military commander in 1919, Jozef Piłsudski, and the Sejny Uprising. The local paramilitary ethnic conflict is inserted into the larger war between Poland and the Soviet Union, and in this way justified as an expression of courage and patriotism. Supplementing the objects in glass cases are several remarkable posters from the interwar era, in vivid colors. These are calls to arms in Polish ("Do Broni!"). Illustrations include a lone soldier in a blue uniform holding back a monster or a monstrous person, or a group of civilians with rifles shooting into the wilderness (including a woman in an apron). Other posters with large font text explain the events of the Uprising as a Polish attack on *Soviet* as well as Lithuanian forces. The series of battles are depicted as simultaneously a courageous attack on Lithuanian forces and a defense of the "fatherland" from "Bolsheviks."

The historical essays on the website reflect even more ambivalence about the ethnic brutality of Sejny's past. Under the heading "Sejny Uprising," the main text begins by claiming the equivalence of the Sejny Uprising with other revolts undertaken by ethnic Poles on the territory demarcated as Poland:

> The uprising for independence, which we were not allowed to speak of!! It was permitted to talk about the uprising of "greater Poland," or the Silesian uprising, and such talk was even encouraged, while on the other hand the Sejny Uprising has been a deep secret since the end of World War II. On the 80th anniversary of this event we commemorate the independence of the inhabitants of Sejny. (Buchowski n.d.)

In contrast to the museum posters, this statement hesitates to completely ethnicize Sejny, using "inhabitants" rather than "Poles," a practice repeated throughout the text. Sejny's "inhabitants" are presented as attempting to restabilize a region that foreign powers had exploited and thrown off balance: "[t]he goal of the uprising was to control [*opanowanie*] Sejny and terrain that had been occupied first by the Germans, and later [given by them to] the Lithuanians." In this view, it is the prime minister of Lithuania, visiting Sejny in August 1919, who stirs up Lithuanians in Sejny and urges them to defend their land "with axes, pitchforks and scythes" (Buchowski n.d.).

The statement seems to speak from a shared consciousness that outsiders would not understand. It affirms a collectivity ("we-ness") in opposition to places "where such talk was permitted," that is, central Poland. The creation of an interior perspective that sees international relations from the position of an excluded other, but which does not accept that position as natural, is a move that Mignolo would read as resistance. It is an "outside" that is well aware that its exteriority is actually a function of state/imperial power. To resist being reduced to only this exteriority, the Sejny historian composing this text asserts a counter-interiority. Identity is inflected with coloniality but also resists it.

Resistance and identity in a decolonial mode

Decoloniality asks us to view the social relations of hierarchy through the worldview of the subjectivity the hierarchy would hope to marginalize. This differs from simply the "perspective" or "experience" of "the victim." Instead, the decolonial approach invests the entire world order imagined by the would-be subaltern with legitimacy. It asks, who had to disappear for the Suwałki borderland to be labeled a site of Polish–Lithuanian conflict? And what does the Suwałki narrative look like when the disappeared are returned to voice? To apply decoloniality to the conflicts outlined above, one must go outside of authorized

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historical sources; in this case, the oral testimonies and memoirs of the Jews expelled and threatened with death provide a compelling example of the approach.

Very few Jewish residents of Sejny survived the Holocaust. Max Furmansky was one who did, and his memoir is notable for how it represents ethnic identity in the region. He writes,

> All the other groups shared one common cause: hostility towards Jews. [...] During my time, the only help we had was the hatred the various Gentile nationalities had for each other. Many times, the distrust between them outweighed their hatred of Jews. (Furmansky 1988)

The specificity of "Polish" or "Lithuanian" does not merit any mention, because "hostility toward Jews" is the most important quality of most of the Sejny residents. Ethnic hatred is a greater determinant of social relations than any specific national claims. Furthermore, the multiplicity of Sejny is for Furmansky reduced to "variety," because it does not generate anything productive.

As Furmansky recalls it, he was 15 when the German army invaded Lithuania in October 1939 and "expelled all Jews from Sejny." Other memoirs and *yizkor* books present a more complex picture, in which German soldiers harassed Jewish families over a series of days (see Kagan 1961). All Jewish sources treated the invasion as a disaster overshadowing any other historical event, including the Sejny Uprising. The initial Nazi occupiers brutally beat and humiliated Jews out in public, demanded food and payment, and required the local Jewish council to turn over a list of all Jewish residents. After some resistance, Jewish families turned over significant amounts of wealth, unaided by non-Jewish neighbors. Because of the ambiguity of the border agreement, the Germans withdrew in mid-October and the Soviet army arrived as occupiers. However, after a few weeks, the Soviets left to be replaced by Germans again. This time the Nazis were more brutal, issuing an order for Jews to leave the town. Many left to take the short journey to the Lithuanian border. At this time, the Soviets had granted Lithuania independence and Jews hoped to be taken in as refugees.

Lithuanian border guards refused to allow the Sejny Jews through, although a few families crossed the border illegally. The Nazi occupiers refused to allow those Sejny Jews who had fled to the border to return to their homes, so groups of Jewish residents – including the elderly and children – simply wandered through the region between the town and the Lithuanian border for weeks, sleeping in open fields. Poles and Lithuanians variously helped and victimized them; ethnic identity was no guide to behavior. Within a month, German soldiers picked up all remaining Jews and deported them to slave labor camps and killing centers.

Harold (Zvi) Brenner, a Jewish man from Suwałki, also survived (Brenner 1997). He vividly recalls harassment of Jews by ethnic Poles (rather than Lithuanians or other groups). The treatment of Suwałki's Jews was tied, for Brenner, to the increasing role of National Democratic Party policies in Warsaw. He also recalls specific instances of heightened violence and an evening in which Jewish businesses were looted, which resulted in the Jewish community organizing itself to resist. "We ambushed the hooligans, [...] we beat up a couple of Poles" and ended the harassment. For Brenner's community, it was crucial to be aware of the structure of Polish ethnicity (i.e. its attachment to the nation and state of Poland).

Brenner also recalls a well-institutionalized and diverse Jewish community. He notes the presence of Zionist and socialist groups, hospitals, schools, social welfare organizations, and recreational clubs. However, in 1933 when Hitler became the leader of Germany, Suwałki felt it. Anti-Semitism on the part of Polish youth increased again. Many Jewish young adults emigrated to western Europe. Brenner notes in his testimony that most

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Suwałki Jews were very aware of the Nazi agenda, but that Suwałki's location placed them in even more danger. "We saw right away that Hitler would take this corridor [the strip of land that Suwałki is part of] away from Poland." Brenner invokes the geopolitical awareness of all residents of this particular area: "We lived in a triangle between Germany and Lithuania" (Brenner 1997).

In Brenner's narrative, the Poles drop out by mid-1939. He confirms that the German army expelled the Jews of Sejny in October. They went on foot to the Lithuanian border. He adds that many crossed the region's lakes on boats and some "snuck into Lithuania through the woods." Brenner affirms that Sejny Jews were trapped in a "no man's land between Lithuania and Germany," reinforcing the geopolitical over the ethnic. Brenner's story continues as a series of near-death experiences, harrowing escapes, brutal treatment, and trauma.

A decolonial approach would point out that Brenner's moral and material universe took coloniality into account but was not defined by it. The actions of Poland and Polish citizens, and of Lithuania and Lithuanian citizens, are measured by their inability to maintain the integrity of Sejny's community. Indeed, the Polish "hooligans," so potent in the interwar period that they had to be addressed with violence, do not even exist in the 1930s portion of the narrative. Sejny is a "no man's land" in which no ethnic claims matter.

Conclusion

This article uses the case of multicultural advocacy in Sejny, a small town on the Poland–Lithuania border, to assess critically the assumptions of this type of advocacy about identity and difference. While multiculturalism is a welcome alternative to nationalist exclusion and discrimination, it is, like nationalism, also a project for social change. One fruitful way to explore the multicultural project is to view it as a scenario, that is, a scripted enactment with embedded narratives about past, present, and future power relationships. The multicultural scenario has influence in the 2000s in particular because of its alignment with European-wide discourses of progress and tolerance for "others," especially "minorities."

Imperial histories tell us that Sejny was part of the Suwałki Triangle/Suwalk Gubernia, fought over by Prussian, German, Russian, Lithuanian, and Polish state authorities at various moments from the 1700s onward. The multicultural scenario seeks to restore recognition to the multitude of religious and ethnic communities that these state powers sought to silence. However, for Sejny residents, any type of ethnic identification is an ambivalent offering. Identification emerged erratically, in response to a layered coloniality infusing all possibilities. An assertion of religious or ethnic identity could lead to an embrace or a deportation. At times, it was a defense, created as much by the colonial situation as by anything else. In other words, identity is only decipherable to the extent that it emerges from and against a ground of a preexisting imperial and even epistemological hierarchy. Decoloniality requires of us greater skepticism of the ideological frame in which identity categories order and manage one's humanity.

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