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## **The Primeval Forest at the Belarusian Border in Poland: Constituting and Crossing Borders**

### Abstract

*On the border between Poland and Belarus a forest protection controversy intertwines with a border problem. Europe's last low-land old growth forest is on the border with Europe's last dictatorial regime, where a new border crossing opened between the two countries in 2005. This paper explores how the imaginative geographies of the forest and its minority inhabitants overdetermines the meaning of the forest at the border. I look at how this happens in the act of crossing the border in the middle of the forest when most tourist traffic flows towards Belarus and the Belarusian traffic consists of musicians entering Poland to perform for tourists. Constituting and crossing the borders are part of the same processes, processes that have the effect of linking marginal rural residents to the consumption habits of central Poland so that the most salient images for determining the border are those circulated by conservationists and tourists.*

## **Introduction**

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On the Polish side of the Bialowieza Forest (known in Belarus as Belavaskaya) a forest protection controversy intertwines with a border problem. "Europe's last primeval low-land forest" straddles the border with Europe's last dictatorial regime, where a new border crossing opened between Poland and Belarus in April 2005. The border crossing facilitates tourist traffic to national parks in Poland and Belarus. Here the European Union's new external border enables nature tourists, mostly urban Poles, to pass into a *primeval* forest zone dividing Belarus and Poland. The excursion is more an adventure into the Polish romantic past, in which Belarus figures prominently, than to a site of dynamic creative exchange one comes to expect at border crossings with trade, both legal and illegal. For residents living at the border it does not feel like a border town as they are not the ones crossing the border nor do they see

the actual border because of the materiality of the forest. Attention placed on the politics of nature consumes attention that might otherwise be directed on border politics. Yet forest politics transmogrify into the politics of Belarus as the minority residents are stereotyped as "Belarusian", a loaded signifier given Poland's new position in the EU and Belarus' status as the last dictatorship. The highly political nature of conservation politics on the Polish side of the border has recreated an old meaning for things "Belarusian" through contests over whether or not this is a *primeval* forest.

This paper will explore how this juxtaposition between relic nature and relic political system acts as an "imaginative geography" within Poland, one that simultaneously creates knowledge about the Polish side of the Bialowieza Forest, while casting the forest and its minority "Belarusian" population as passive, unintelligible entities to be acted upon<sup>1</sup>. I will argue that making an "us" and "them" at the Polish Belarusian border is not just the result of long standing relations between two ethnic groups at a state boundary, where a national landscape provides an arena to build and contest the nation, but that the "othering" also is actively created with the constitution of the forest by Poles in the activities of crossing at the forest border.

The first part of the paper examines representations of the forest, showing what kind of ideas and elements constitute this forest at the border. As the "primeval" forest of conservationists' discourse, the forest conjures a certain moral authority where the forest always represents an object of beauty and unrivaled uniqueness that demands protection from commercial logging. It is the primeval national park forest, not the commercial forest, that draws hundreds of thousands of tourists annually who come looking for a piece of European "wilderness", and a way of showing their Polish identity as a European one in the acts of travel and crossing. In theory, the new border crossing opened to facilitate tourist flow, as integration into the "apolitical" space of nature. I look at the specificity of those politics at the locality of the forest on the border with Belarus.

The second part of the paper focuses on movement. Who goes where? How does the new border crossing re-situate forest politics, especially when the only visible presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Said E., 1978, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House.

Belarusian nationals on the Polish side are musicians and crossing into Belarus is an action associated almost exclusively with tourism from Poland to Belarus? I also look at resident's use of the term "*tutejszy*" as a self-identification that means "from here", and contrast it with the label Belarusian to show how one term insists on a fluid identity and the other a fixed identity. And finally, I conclude the paper by considering how the imaginative meanings of the forest enacted through border crossings contribute to the stereotyping of minority inhabitants on the Polish side of the border.

## **Forest as a Boundary Object**

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Ambiguity at borders is both commonplace and unsettling, especially so for nations with shifting twentieth century borders<sup>2</sup>. The reason for drawing the border is suspended in an anxiety about what might erupt from history. In Poland, like many nations of Central Europe, the current borders can only ever approximate an historical original. Defined against the Soviet annexation of a huge part of Poland's newfound territory gained after WWI and lost in the Yalta negotiations, the pre-war borders symbolize Poland's lost chance at a normal "Western" modernity, and further reinforce the importance and status of its current position as the guardian of the external EU border. While it may not have regained lost territories, Poland has returned to the "capitalist" trajectory it went astray from with the East/West distinction still a salient one. As with Daphne Berdahl's findings on the former border dividing East and West Germany, the border between Europe's imagined East and West conveys a built-in hegemony of the West so that those on both sides feel they should be moving in one

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<sup>2</sup> Krishna S., 1996, "Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India", in Shapiro, M., Alker, H. (ed.), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

direction<sup>3</sup>. The result in Bialowieza is a type of border confusion for Poles where the forest serves as a boundary object mediating historic social and class relations<sup>4</sup>.

By boundary object I mean that foresters, tourists, and conservationists might argue over what kind of forest this is but the idea of the forest in the general sense is consciously and unconsciously juggled by these groups in an association with things Belarusian. The forest inhabits multiple contexts yet still has a local and shared meaning so that all groups recognize it as the border space between Poland and Belarus, much as on the Finnish-Russian border of Eeva Berglund's research, where the Russian forests of Karelia have become an intense object of international scrutiny after the opening of the border between these two territories post 1991<sup>5</sup>. In both Bialowieza and Karelia the newest political-economic changes have not deterritorialized the forests from their respective sovereign nations, nor made them a-political but rather added new elements from older histories to localize the forests' meanings.

In Bialowieza, struggles over meaning for the border of Europe and Poland occur at the level of forest protection politics. Polish conservationists argue that current national park protection is not enough to stop the degradation of this rare and endangered ecosystem of European significance. Commercial logging exploits most of the Polish forest, and this logging is discursively linked with the idea of Belarus for conservationists, both because the state foresters and local politicians that support logging operate within the privilege and favoritism of the former socialist system (an embarrassing political relic conservationists ascribe to neighbouring Belarus), and because of the minority population, some of whom identify themselves as Belarusians, but many as *tutejszy*, "from here". Under this Polish imaginary of relic nature and relic dictatorship, the constitution of the forest border and movement at the border suggests that the Bialowieza Forest has become the object which is supposed to usher in a new type of normality for a European Union member country, a normality where some relics are treasured markers of continuity from the past and others are useless appendages better amputated for the sake of the body politic.

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<sup>3</sup> Berdahl D., 1999, *Where the World Ended. Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Bowker G., Star S.L., 1999, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

As far as the forest can "act" to produce this confusion, I go only so far as saying that the forest has a shape and form that is unlike a border at a river crossing, where you can see the other side, or a mountain pass with its "demarcated" ridge. It is a tangled, overgrown barrier and enabler between Poland and Belarus, a space of dense cover. That shape and form though is never outside of deeply held cultural imaginings about the forest, many of them nationalist in origin<sup>6</sup>. Because the forest in Poland is a space of multiple representations, ranging from valuable timber source to the historico-mythological, it becomes a flexible idea across which Belarusian and Polish, as well as European relationships are imagined. Thus, its ambiguity within different interpretations lends the forest a kind of unruly power which debating sides harness for their own ends and which refracts upon perceived differences between Poland and Belarus at the limits of the new Europe.

## **Which Forest? Which People?**

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The Bialowieza Forest's most frequently associated trait is its "primeval" character. Roots of alders reach their way out of rust coloured bogs. Towering spruce grow to their upper height limit to create perches for eagle owls or three-toed woodpeckers, or splay as huge rootplates next to majestic oaks. The preeminent symbol of the forest, the European bison, belongs to this portrait of ancient woodland. Imagining this forest only as a non-human collaboration of nature that evolved after the last ice age eight thousand years ago is not difficult under present circumstances.

Tours to the Polish section of forest, designated as the Bialowieza National Park Strict Nature Reserve (9 percent of the Polish forest area)<sup>7</sup>, provide the cultural transmission

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<sup>5</sup> Berglund E., 2000, "From Iron Curtain to Timber Belt: Territory and Materiality at the Finnish-Russian Border", *Ethnologia Europae*, 30, 2, pp.23-34.

<sup>6</sup> Franklin S., 2002, "Bialowieza Forest, Poland: Representation, Myth, and the Politics of Dispossession", *Environment and Planning A*, 34, 8, pp.1459-1485.

<sup>7</sup> Seventeen-percent of the total forest area is managed as national park but not strict reserve, meaning that limited cutting is permitted outside of the strict reserve.

necessary to sustain this label. The required guides serve a powerful rhetorical function in promoting Europe's last wild forest, especially when nature elsewhere, as in the commercial forest, is set as a comparison. Nature of the commercial forest materializes as young and humanly touched. Roads transect the forest in even quadrants, where stacks of sectioned logs and educational signs enforce the idea that the Bialowieza Forest relies upon the forester's care.

To question whether the remaining forest is *primeval* for foresters administering this national resource (83 percent of the Polish forest) is to neglect their historical role in restoring what occupying forces and other foreign exploiters had destroyed. After 600 years of royal protection as a hunting ground by Polish and Lithuanian kings, and Russian czars, Germans systematically exploited the forest for the first time in its history, followed-up after the war by British Firm, The Century European Timber Corporation. In the years 1916-1922, foreign operators cut over 1/3 of the total forest area of what today is Poland and Belarus. For the forester, all forestry since has focused on recovery. The forest's vital importance lies in volumes of healthy trees used as disposable wood. Today's forest is part of a measured plan of total forest management aimed at human use where nature protection can be *actively* managed. Foresters during interviews spoke of the forest as "old", "historical", "a national treasure", but never primeval.

This debate between use and preservation consumes most of the resident community's attention, especially after several unsuccessful attempts in the last ten years to expand the national park over the whole forest. Through much of that campaign foresters organized a populist line of defense. They crafted the "local" as an extension of their agency's timber activities, partly due to their long-standing role as representatives of the state who organized economic and social life for nearly 85 years. State timbering during the Socialist period resembled the "company town". Whole communities worked only for state timber with labour forces drawn from Central Poland. Thus in the transition from a planned centralized economy to a free-market one the idea of a national park competed with the resource extractive timber model as routes to proper European modernity<sup>8</sup>. In this atmosphere local conservationists,

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<sup>8</sup> See Rajan S. R., 2006, *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Ecodevelopment 1800-1950*, New York: Oxford University Press for a historical overview of continental forestry as a path to national development.

made up mostly of biologists living in the forest communities and a handful of artists, journalists and writers, vigorously attempted to expose the "coercive" tactics of state forestry administrators, who were cast as hierarchical and communist-like. State forestry administrators emphasized the "elite" interests of conservationists, inferring that conservationists arrogantly thought of themselves as the new royalty who would have exclusive access to the forest while the locals were treated like second-class citizens. State forestry administrators adopted a language of "sustainable development" for the beleaguered local burdened by capitalist modernity, a point directly confounded with the meaning of things "Belarusian". These debates for a proper modernity are at their core debates about defining the periphery and claiming its "otherness" as an element able to be tamed in the modern Polish nation.

## **Proximity of Belarus**

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When the border crossing to Belarus opened in spring 2005 conservationists feared two things: 1) that car traffic posed a threat to wildlife populations by further fragmenting the ecosystem, and 2) that local politicians tightly connected with foresters' agenda were a little too accommodating to Belarusian officials, who exploited their side of the forest, the *Belaveskaya Puszcza*<sup>9</sup>, to a high degree despite its status as a National Park. The word "Belarusian" acquired a coded meaning amongst biologists and activists. It evoked Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus visible in family resemblance on the Polish side of the border. Fears that Belarus' regime might seep into Poland by way of a "passive" minority echoed amongst conservationists in private talk. The Bialowieza region (meaning several villages and the logging town of Hajnowka) was "little Belarus in pill form", where the alliance between foresters and the locals needed to be replaced by progressive thinking in order to properly protect rare nature.

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<sup>9</sup> Puszcza in Polish and Russian meaning ancient forest.

"Why don't we just move to Belarus?" a pro-conservation journalist joked to his deep ecology activist friend, both of whom lived in the forest. They were referring to actions of the mayor from a nearby town, a former secret police operative, that bussed in dozens of uniformed foresters to what was supposed to be a small meeting between an NGO and the mayor. The network on the Polish side of the forest was for conservationists tightly interconnected with the forest exploitation. Although fears of post-communist corruption existed everywhere in Poland, as evidenced by Lech Kaczynski's right-wing government's daily calls for investigations to expose former secret police and root them from their positions of power, here in Bialowieza, post-communist power was discursively linked with the Belarusian character of the area. The effect of this language stereotyped local inhabitants as a "beaten-down" and "passive" people easily coerced by the foresters' logic (and formerly communist logic).

Foresters in conjunction with Orthodox Priests and politicians claiming to represent the Belarusian minority tended to use a similar rhetoric about the mild mannered minority in need of paternal care. When foresters together with the "locals" protested against the conservationists' plans they used the argument that an expanded national park would destroy the Belarusian minority's chances for democratic development by locking them into a reservation like "Indians".

Belarusians served as an added attraction for the old forest for tourists. Two-hundred thousand tourists arrived by the year 2005, a gradual buildup clearly accredited to conservationists' multiple campaigns to expand the national park. I frequently heard remarks by Polish tourists such as "It really does feel exotic here, like I'm not in Poland, especially with the Orthodox Churches". Guide books and tourist information pamphlets featured the Belarusian minority of the forest region.

The "othering" was not without historical precedent, meaning that ethnic difference could be clearly marked<sup>10</sup>. However, Belarusian identity in Poland today is much more

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<sup>10</sup>The Lithuanian state of the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, to which Bialowieza Forest had belonged, used Belarusian as an official language. (See Woolhiser C., 1999, "Constructing National Identities in the Polish-Belarusian Borderlands", *Conference paper presented at fourth annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Nationalities*, New York: Columbia University.) A Belarusian nationalist movement arose in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against Russian domination and often with the support of Polish writers and poets. In 1918, Belarusian political agitators looked to

connected to the cities. The vast majority of rural residents, most of them Russian Orthodox by religion (rather than Roman Catholic), did not choose to call themselves "Belarusian". They considered themselves *tutejszy*, meaning "from here".

## **Crossing Borders Without Moving "From Here": Tutejszy**

When residents called themselves *tutejszy*, they employed the term with the effect of resisting the idea of borders. As Adrian Ivakhiv<sup>11</sup> has suggested, the term arose as armies and borders crossed people who remained in place. It is a proto-ethnic identity receptive to the ebbs and flows of borderlands. Yet Belarusian identity activists, along with some conservationists and foresters, often failed to embrace the creative potential of a hybridized subject, instead finding a dormant consciousness amongst the *tutejszy*<sup>12</sup>.

"I don't speak Belarusian. I speak *pa naszymu* (our own)", Marysia, a shop attendant in her late twenties, told me, "but when those Belarusians come to play music here and sing in that language, I feel like I belong to that culture". Musicians from Belarus seem to be the only type of Belarusian one can see in Bialowieza these days. A few years back, before Poland's entry into the EU, Belarusians frequented the streets of Bialowieza, usually selling merchandise out of the back of their cars. However, new visa requirements for Belarusian entry into Poland have both lessened and redirected the flow of mercantile traffic. Now

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Germany for support to establish independent Belarus against Stalinist Soviet Union. However, in Soviet Belarus communists agitated against Belarusian identity leading up to the Soviet murders of Belarusians from 1937-1941 at Kuropaty not far from Minsk, where an approximated 100 000 – 250 000 people were murdered in mass graves. Local lore exists about a Belarusian nationalist movement arising from a Bolshevik inspired labor movement in the sawmills of nearby Hajnowka in the interwar period.

<sup>11</sup> Ivakhiv A., 2006, "Stoking the Heart of (a certain) Europe: Crafting Hybrid Identities in the Ukraine/EU borderlands", *spacesofidentity*, 6, 1, on internet [http://www.yorku.ca/soi/Vol\\_6\\_1/HTML/Ivakhiv.html](http://www.yorku.ca/soi/Vol_6_1/HTML/Ivakhiv.html) (17/04/2007).

<sup>12</sup> Tutejszy is used by a vast number of rural inhabitants of the Ukrainian, Polish, Belarusian borderlands. (See Sadowski A., 1995, *Pogranicze Polsko-Białoruskie: Tożsamość Mieszkańców*, Białystok: Transhumana.)

Belarusians arrive in Białowieża as folk groups, choirs, and, in several cases, oppositionist ethno-rock bands. Any nearby location might be a suitable place for such concerts. However, the growing importance of Białowieża as a "must-see" tourist destination, combined with an assortment of EU funds to support "neighbourly" relations in the *Euroregion Puszcza Białowieska*, makes Białowieża an important site for Belarusian music that, like all things here, works its way into the conservation/use debate.

Poles from urban areas find it ironic that the most "Belarusian" parts of Poland neglect to admonish the dictatorship in Belarus. Belarusian oppositionists found a base in Warsaw for their anti-Lukashenko campaign in 2006, but in the Białowieża Forest, the Belarusian cultural center/museum of Hajnowka declined to show human rights films from Belarus in their auditorium fearing that it might poorly reflect on one of their employees who appeared in the film. Thus when one of the most popular underground musicians from Minsk, Todar and the WZ Orkestra, came to play a benefit concert to support the Białowieża International Solidarity Network (BISON), a grassroots conservation group, the concert challenged the status quo.

Local conservationists acted strategically in bringing Todar into their campaign. First, Todar sang in Belarusian (as opposed to Russian, the language of Lukashenko's Belarus) songs about "the independent bison", a symbol of both the *Puszcza* and a free Belarus. And second, all proceeds went to rebuild the elementary school that burned in a Christmas Eve fire. In the "free space" of ethno-rock music shop clerks, bed and breakfast owners, tourists, and conservation scientists gathered with foresters clearly absent. Todar created a climate where people attending did not feel like they needed to take sides in the forest debate even though the banner "*dzikie jest piękne*" (wild is beautiful) framed the stage, and the concert wrapped up an international day of action to protect the forest with several projected images of the day's protests. One of the concert organizers shared his strategy with me: locals would participate as long as they didn't have to be political actors, thus the connection of the concert with rebuilding the school. Their strategy was to gently coax the minority-local to their side of the debate by way of a concert benefiting the community.

People who might call themselves *Tutejszy* would not consider themselves passive. The word *tutejszy* referenced but did not directly correspond to Belarusian nationality for them. Its use acknowledged that people came from a family that settled many generations back and that they spoke the local dialect. Also, it meant loyalty to place superseded loyalty to nation. Many

of the rural locals avoided answering my direct questions about the forest conflict and often deferred the matter by saying that they were of a "*spokojne narod*" (a mild mannered people). Notably, several people brought my attention to the war in Iraq and how the "Belarusians" never invaded other countries.

In this suggestive self-description by way of redirecting my line of questioning, a strong national identity and political position about the border and forest politics is not so much absent as it is implicit. There is a sense of encroachment in these claims so that *tutejszy/Belarusians* do not draw borders, perhaps do not possess the power to draw borders, and distinguish themselves from me (the American anthropologist) and ethnic Poles, both of whom "invade" other countries.

Might the stereotypically inscribed "passivity" of rural people in Bialowieza be partially explained by the way of historical relations of production in a forest now divided by the Polish Belarusian state border? If "Belarusians" or "*tutejszy*" were still poor in modern Poland, with the larger region marked as one of the most underdeveloped areas of Poland, perhaps that partially reflects upon a long standing differential treatment of people by the Polish state, as represented in the region by State Forestry.

## **Roots of Forest Conflict**

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In the long period that Russians administered the forest from the end of the eighteenth century until the outbreak of WWI, the rights of the Polish gentry, which would have included the management of their large and forested estates in Podlasie, were increasingly encroached upon. Much of their lands were given over to Russian administrators, who converted the peasantry to Russian Orthodox Catholicism<sup>13</sup>. Czar Alexander ordered shut the forestry school in Warsaw, known as a bastion of discontent and organizing for the Polish national cause.

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<sup>13</sup> Kossak S., 2001, *The Saga of the Bialowieza Forest*, Bialydruk: Bialystok, p.311.

The Polish foresters who arrived in Bialowieza in the 1920s brought a newfound sense of entitlement and a mission of Polonizing the Russified peasants, almost all of whom belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church at that time. This sense of historic destiny, of reclaiming the forest in the name of a newly established Poland, began a long chain of alliances among the forestry elite. Instead of relying solely on the local population, many under the influence of Bolshevik ideology where agitators sympathetic to the Soviet cause entered the wood factories in Hajnowka, foresters hired labour from Central Poland. Worker colonies sprang up everywhere with make-shift housing for the newly arrived men and new Polish Catholic parishes serving the national cause.

Many historians speculate as to why the border was drawn through the forest after WWII with few satisfactory explanations. The result on the Polish side was that ethnic differences were to be "officially" put aside. Those who felt Belarusian were given the opportunity to immigrate to the Soviet Union, as only a few of them did for even poor rural people feared the totalitarian power of Soviet Union at that time. Through intermarriages with the Polish workers many people converted to Catholicism, especially when worker colonies were situated close to primarily Orthodox villages.

A rowdy protest in the year 2000 catalyzed a populist notion of Belarusian identity in connection with the forest, marking the first significant public association that local Belarusians supported the forester's agenda. When the environmental minister arrived in Bialowieza that spring to announce that the whole area would be protected as a national park, foresters held banners in both Polish and Belarusian accusing key conservationists of causing local poverty. They threw eggs at the minister to make clear their opposition. Shortly following the protest, the minister quietly withdrew plans to expand the park and people in government and the press began to make the association that local Belarusians opposed the national park expansion.

Conservationists, many of them scientists at the three well-established research institutes in the village of Bialowieza, would not accept a democracy equal to populism. They insisted that protesters came from afar and that locals would not have thrown eggs. "Rational, participatory democracy" would solve both the social conflict and forest war, which implicitly endorses Polish culture as European culture. The biologists used their own science as an example of European rationalism, of what should be a proper European normality, connecting

themselves and their cause in the direction of Brussels, where they could file complaints against the careless treatment of nature. Yet for *tutejszy* the conservationist crusade frequently looked like a Polish national one rather than a universal or European ideal, further encouraging their avoidance in public debates and thus, their assumed support for the foresters' agenda.

## Imagined Geography of the Kresy at the Belarusian Border

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All along in the fight to protect the forest, conservationists proposed tourism as a mainstay to the logging economy. Naturally, most of those tourists were urban Poles taking advantage of new leisure time and disposable income when they visit the *Puszcza*. Polish tourists brought their imaginations about the *kresy*, or the Eastern province of what was once the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, a highly mythologized term that relegates Belarusians (among others, such as Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Cossacks and Tartars) to colourful characters of the former Commonwealth in a contemporary ethno-Polish Poland where these groups are but a memory<sup>14</sup>. This *kresy* imaginary arises partly through 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic novelists, such as Wincenty Pol, who coined the term in his 1854 novel "Mohort", but also in later day interpretations of Henryk Sienkiewicz and Adam Mickiewicz, both "native sons" of the Polish east, who wrote about the forest as an idealized portrait of gentry/peasant relations. School children in Poland to this day are required to recite lines from Mickiewicz's most famous epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz*, which intones:

*"Comrades of Lithuanian kings, ye trees*

*Of Swietz, Kuszelewo, Bialowieza*

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<sup>14</sup> In official counts minorities make up less than 3% in Poland, but many minority activists claim that actual numbers are much higher.

*Whose shadows once the crowned heads did cover"*

Mickiewicz's story of feuding Polish landowning families who unite in a forest hunt on the eve of the Russian partitions of Polish-Lithuanian lands inspired a themed hotel/restaurant, "Soplicowo", named after the manor in Mickiewicz's work. It opened in 2003, not far from the new border crossing to Belarus, with an ostentatious manor design. A two-storied, thatched roof manor with signature pillars hosts tourists who can entertain their fantasies at a rotunda diorama-like exhibit in the parking lot. There, they can peer into a poacher's cottage, with an unmade bed, snare traps, and a jug of home-distilled vodka. If the locals ever feared being on display for tourists, this exhibit incarnated the lengths the Polish national imagination could go to in naming and ordering the local for its own colonizing purposes, where Belarusian-like things belong to Poland. The village with a Belarusian minority was fast becoming a stage to perform notions of historical class relations with the strong inference that the lands in Mickiewicz's work would remain "Eastern" in the ethnic Polish tourist's imagination<sup>15</sup>.

In his treatise *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff reminds us that Enlightenment era intellectual mastery over Eastern Europe rested in describing people of the East at the same time it mapped geography. The geographical domain Western Europe has exhibited over Eastern Europe arises in relational representation. It would be a mistake however to think that imaginative inscriptions exist only in the minds of those inventing them. Wolff writes, "The project of invention [of Eastern Europe] was not merely a matter of endowing those real lands with invented or mythological attributes. The work of invention lay in the synthetic association of lands, which drew upon both fact and fiction, to produce the general rubric of Eastern Europe. It is in that sense that Eastern Europe is a cultural construction, an intellectual invention, of the Enlightenment"<sup>16</sup>. Thus, I would argue that the people who engage in the fantasies of the Soplicowo hotel exercise a new-found yet historical entitlement to this heritage of making Belarusians an exotic other.

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<sup>15</sup> Belarusians in Belarus also consider Mickiewicz one of their own, but Mickiewicz wrote on behalf of the Polish national cause, which considered the Belarusian lands a province of Poland.

Mostly people who stay at Soplicowo consist of well-off urban Poles who can afford the 75 plus Euro per night rates. Some of the guests I spoke to in the attached tavern, named after *Pan Tadeusz's* Jewish character, Jankiel, had used the new border crossing in the spring of 2006, a year after its opening. The crossing itself is a former royal road, transversed for hundreds of years by entitled retinue moving between Brest and Vilnius, and limited to military and some family crossings during the Socialist era.

Once in Belarus, all tours require a guide and lead along newly paved road in the forest. Thus, tourists can not wander and contemplate in their sampling of the Polish and Belarusian *Puszcza*. In a sense, there is no "free space" of "wild", "primeval" nature for tourists then, neither in Poland nor Belarus where Lukashenko permits commercial logging, wolf and bison hunting within the national park. Crossing the forest border and entering the restricted space of nature occurs under supervision. Polish tourists who participated in the tour to Belarus spoke of the experience in comedic terms laced with astonishment at the backwards behaviour of Belarusians. All tours of the primeval forest consist of a visit to the home of Belarusian Santa Claus *dziad moroz*. For these tourists the "capitalist" enterprising of the Belarusian government as it strictly polices and parades tourists through the forest to the Santa Claus site appears as a failure of "European" modernity, a laughable imitation of modernity within the draconian dictatorial state of Belarus.

It might be argued that crossing the border for Polish tourists is an act of claiming their Polish identity as European. People on the move are the quintessential cosmopolitan citizens<sup>17</sup>. "*Taka bieda*" (such poverty!), I heard from the tourists, "but what a beautiful forest. You just can't see that kind of nature on the Polish side". These tourists' imaginative projections of Belarus as a not quite European space are confirmed through the tour of the Belarusian forest, in the same way that their projections of the "primeval forest" are through a similar process on the Polish side.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolff L., 1994, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.356.

<sup>17</sup> See Nagengast C., 1991, *Reluctant Socialists, Rural Entrepreneurs: Class, Culture, and the Polish State*, Boulder (Colorado): Westview Press for a discussion of class relations that lingered from the pre-communist period.

Both the Polish forest and the resident communities on the Polish side remain safe exoticisms, brought closer to the idea of Europe through the practice of cultural/natural tours. Many tourists sometimes add that tours and tourism deliver resident communities from rural poverty through the revenue tourism generates. The new economy enables the formerly rural inhabitants to obtain exposure to people from Central Poland, a place more in tune with Western Europe, primarily in the practice of "consuming" the other. Residents can thus also travel, if they wish, with the added income.

An important feature of this European identity for Poles is the ability to travel, not just as migrants looking for work, but as tourists. The nineteenth century romantic literature on the Polish east always provided its readers with the vantage point of gentry who traversed these lands in their visits to family manors or in military service for Poland's "honor". This point would have been especially valuable during the Socialist period when people read Mickiewicz's and Sienkiewicz's work to remember the Polish national cause of independence and to travel as a reader to far away lands<sup>18</sup>. The new Polish leisure class is exercising its right to travel freely, beyond the borders of its own state, but this is also an exercise in nation building, to the internal and unexplored frontiers of its own country. They are gentrifying and taming the borderland, in effect. They are moving it out of its peripheral status to a pilgrimage site to see the small patch of what they are told is "primeval nature" and be in the Polish memory of the *kresy*. Those geographical imaginings are very much a part of the ambivalent project of Europe-making at Poland's scale of the *kresy*, which wishes on the one hand to bring Belarus into the sphere of "democratic" Europe (Polish style), while wanting it to remain "other" so that urban Poles can occupy a positive identity by comparison.

## **Conclusion: Unmarked People and Nature**

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<sup>18</sup> Both Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and Sienkiewicz's *Ogniem i Mieczem* were made into major motion pictures in the early part of the twenty first century, breaking box-office records.

Early in the paper, I emphasized that the most frequently represented image of the forest was its primeval character and wish to return to this point for my conclusion. In many European cultural accounts the spaces of wild nature are depicted as free, redemptive, places for contemplation and leisure, a set of common idealizations<sup>19</sup>. This is the apolitical notion of a forested and national park border area. The issue in regard to the Bialowieza Forest is how the imaginative geographies of the forest and its minority inhabitants overdetermine the meaning of the forest at the border at least in the official sense; how this happens as marginal rural residents (*tutejszy*) become more connected to the consumption habits of central Poland.

These are heterogeneous strategies and practices and it is clear that all actors are involved to a lesser or greater extent in reinscribing these imaginings. Forces beyond the state, beyond the national policing of the border at the border are creating new types of subjects on the Polish side of this borderland that keeps Belarus at a distance from Europe, what Edward Said elaborated on in *Orientalism*, borrowing from Foucault's notions of knowledge and power when he said that "European culture gains strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even undergrounded self"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the elusive *tutejszy* and the forest that visitors wish to know by keeping it unknown (primeval) can be ruled without breaching the purported autonomy of those things. Their imaginative meanings stay in place for tourists even if the locals might attend pro-conservation rock concert and/or throw eggs at the environmental minister.

What is striking in the case of the Bialowieza Forest is the ability of things European and things Belarusian to command the present and future space of the borderland while neglecting explicit attention to the ethno-historical and class histories that constituted the current forest use/protection debate. When only tourists are crossing into the Belarusian forest, and only Belarusian performers crossing into the Polish forest, the forest symbolically transforms into an idealized space that only ever lives up to those expectations through the practice of tours, and thus tourism.

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<sup>19</sup> Harrison R.P., 1992, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>20</sup> Said E., 1978, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, p.3.

This place making at the border is led by situated actors<sup>21</sup> who might seem to be mutually excluding one another, but they exclude each other through "othering", through imagining the forest space that constitutes the border as a space of backwardness, some kept as a positive relic, such as the primeval forest, and others admonished as a relic that needs to move into history, such as the dictatorship in Belarus and the charge that foresters and their political allies are Communist-like.

What I have attempted to show in this collage of forest and Belarusian imaginings is that the images most salient for determining the meaning of the border are a mixture of those circulated by conservationists and Polish tourists rather than those of foresters and the *tutejszy*. This is not because these tourists and conservationists have the most power at the local level. Rather tourists and conservationists possess the most vivid conceptualizations. These are conceptualizations that can travel outside the region, where they gain added potency. Tourists lured by the image of primeval nature do not care so much about the authenticity of that nature or getting to know something about Belarusian culture, as they do about being within the presence of the other. Much to the conservationists chagrin, this has not resulted in one large trans-boundary national park that would put nature protection above all other human uses. Instead, the power of this nature imagination, when connected to the nationally powerful *kresy* image results in a borderland where the local people (their Belarusian-like character) and the forest remain too unruly to know. Keeping people and nature in this unknowable category consigns them to objects that can be acted upon, and has the effect of making the border a slippery object within the new socio-economic regime that also transforms nature, place, and borderlands.

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<sup>21</sup> Haraway D., 1997, *ModestWitness@SecondMillennium. FemaleManMeets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, New York: Routledge.

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