Intersections of Feminisms and Neoliberalism: Post-State-Socialist Estonia in a Transnational Feminist Framework

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The first European Feminist Research Conference took place in August 1991 in Aalborg, Denmark. Over 90 women from Eastern Europe were invited as well, including several women from Estonia, for whom this was their first trip abroad and their first encounter with international academic feminist circles. In an emotional interview,¹ a sociologist from Estonia recalled arriving at the conference center on 19 August to find Eastern European women crying. There was panic, fear and despair. She recounted that CNN was only showing news from Moscow and there was silence about what was happening in the Baltic States. The organizers were compassionate and trying to be helpful but did not fully grasp the circumstances. The contrast between the day and the night was indescribable: during the day, sitting among hundreds of European feminists, being taken aback by the variety of issues that seemed totally alien to her, and at night, sitting by the phone, trying to reach her loved ones back home in the heady days when Estonia re-gained its independence from the Soviet Union.

This scene from the oral history project that traces the various trajectories of Estonian feminisms since the 1990s evokes the turbulent context of postsocialist transformations in which feminism re-emerged in Estonia.² Building on this research, we are interested in exploring Estonian feminisms’ changing position within post-state-socialist period, characterized by a predominance of a neoliberal ethos in the political sphere.³ In particular, we anchor our discussion in the complex interplay of various localized feminisms and the country’s neoliberal consensus. The neoliberal framework has also shaped the development of alternative social philosophies and movements, among them feminisms which have largely focused on individual rights of women in the context that has discouraged economic and class-based critiques. This creates interesting parallels with recent US analyses on the emergence of neoliberal feminism and its role in the erosion of social justice.⁴ For example, Hester Eisenstein claims⁵ that feminist vocabulary of women’s personal empowerment has been used to facilitate neoliberal globalization. In Estonia, we suggest, the neoliberal context has created feminisms that have gradually expanded out of the narrow confines of ‘feminism-by-design’ that is aligned with the agenda of the neoliberal elites of the country towards eventually gaining a more radical voice to raise uncomfortable questions about economic inequality and global power relations.

As our opening story indicates, the re-emergence of Estonian feminism is inextricably interwoven with the narratives of Estonia re-gaining independence from the Soviet regime and it exists in a larger transnational context that both embraces and misreads it. We believe that focusing our discussion on the intersections of feminisms and neoliberalism in the Estonian context also raises a larger question of how to talk about issues at the level of the nation-state in the wider context of transnational feminist theory that has, from its inception, been committed to breaking from nation-centric visions of the world and to ‘destabilizing fixed geographies and seeing the intersections and hybridity of power.’⁶ While feminist praxis in Estonia has been enriched by international academic and activist knowledge-formation, it has at the same time remained very Estonia-centered and Eurocentric. The prevalent focus on the nation state and (Western) Europe has thus discouraged critical dialogues between Estonian feminists and transnational feminist theory. As a result, the
failure to engage with critical transnational feminist paradigms has cut feminist discourses in Estonia off from productive critiques of coloniality and neoliberalism, at least until recently.

Another broader issue we engage with is that most transnational feminist analyses have tended to marginalize the perspectives from post-state-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and thereby become complicit in erasing certain parts of the world, and ways of life, from the realm of relevant knowledge. According to Jennifer Suchland, for instance, the critical language of transnational feminism recreates Cold-war-era ‘three-worlds metageography’ in its articulation of place, difference, and power, conflating the ‘third world’ with the ‘transnational’. Suchland sees the reasons for the continued absence of CEE in transnational feminism in both the stereotyping of CEE women and the racialization of globalized women’s studies that equates non-West with racial difference. As Katarzyna Marciniak suggests, the inclusion of the perspectives from CEE is not important for the mere diversification of the range of references ‘to the list of other ‘worlds’ so that it [can] compete with them for attention.’ Rather, reflecting on the ‘discursive disappearance’ of the postsocialist world can productively guide a critical analysis of the Western gaze which has been directed differently in relation to various geopolitical locations.

Theorizing from the perspective of CEE thus presents us with the potential to trouble existing transnational epistemologies. Echoing Leela Fernandes, we explore the question what it might mean to locate feminist praxis in Estonia within a transnational feminist frame in the specific historical time and location, for both the local context and for feminist conceptions of the transnational. We suggest that the analysis of the intersections of feminisms and neoliberalism in the Estonian context would benefit from transnational feminist analytical frameworks, while the Estonian experience would in turn add complexity and depth to the critical engagement with neoliberalism within transnational feminist theory and praxis.

Neoliberalism and transnational feminist discourse

One aspect that makes the discussion of the post-state-socialist CEE complex within transnational feminist scholarship is the contested terminological terrain. Postsocialism is a complex term, first and foremost because of the continued presence of socialism in the 21st century political landscape (e.g., in Latin America) but also because of the debates about the scope and usefulness of the term. The fall of the Soviet Union introduced a new global socio-economic reality dominated by globalization and neoliberalist values all over the world. In this sense, ‘postsocialist’ should not be viewed as a geographical designation but a ‘contemporary historical condition’ or, in Susan Buck-Morss’ formulation, an ‘ontology of time’ that applies to all of us. Furthermore, postsocialism is habitually and misleadingly associated only with the former state-socialist countries in CEE and sometimes also with China, but never with the rest of the world, especially Western Europe and the USA. Therefore, in the present article, we prefer the term ‘post-state-socialist,’ rather than ‘postsocialist’, for its precision when referring to CEE.

Similarly, defining ‘transnational feminisms’ is less easy than the extensive use of the term suggests, especially when we also consider other related terms like postcolonial, third world or international feminism that it evokes. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest that transnational feminism should ‘address the concerns of women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple
patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies. In other words, feminism must attend to the material reality of women’s lives in different parts of the world in order to challenge the existing global power relations. The emergence of the term is parallel to the deepening of transnational interconnectedness via multinational corporations, economic globalization and the related spread of neoliberal policies which have had different consequences in different contexts. Transnationalism in feminist studies has thus meant the investigation of the ‘asymmetries of the globalization process’ and engagement in ‘anticapitalist transnational feminist practice.’

The emergence of transnational feminism coincides with the rise of neoliberalism which has also left its impact on feminist thought. While the economic and ideological effects of the rise of neoliberalism have been documented and critiqued widely, there has been less attention to the effect of neoliberalism on emancipatory social movements, despite a shift in the grammar of politics from arguments for economic justice to identity politics. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty sees special danger in feminist language where the political is being increasingly neutralized into ‘a privatized politics of representation, disconnected from systematic critique and materialist histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy.’ Others, like Catherine Rottenberg, speak explicitly about the emergence of a neoliberal feminism that transforms feminist political goals into individualist personal projects. This is not a trivial question for feminist thought. Although the argument that mainstream liberal feminism has been inadvertently seduced or even co-opted by neoliberal corporate capitalism is based on too broad generalizations about US second-wave feminism and today’s realities (and there is a difference between feminism being exploited by neoliberalism and an affinity between the two), we cannot dismiss it offhand, in view of the use made of feminist arguments in employing underpaid women in poorer countries or in justifying wars in the Middle East.

The (ab)use of feminism in the CEE during the transition period is also a case in point. For example, Kristin Ghodsee suggests that the importation of Western cultural feminism led to the downplaying of class-based analyses in the CEE and may have assisted the expansion of Western capitalism rather than the advancement of women’s rights. These cultural feminist practices that she calls ‘feminism-by-design’ do not challenge the neoliberal economic structures implicitly promoted by international aid agencies. Denise Horn, too, argues that NGOs dedicated to women’s rights in CEE did not so much serve the interests of the local women as the geopolitical aims of the donor nations, like the Nordic countries and the US. The aims of the latter, she believes, were primarily characterized by ‘neoliberal models of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility.’ It is in such a context that Fraser invites us ‘to be more historically self-aware as we operate on a terrain that is also populated by our uncanny double,’ neoliberalism.

Suchland reminds us that the challenge of neoliberal capitalism has been treated radically differently in the discussion of the second and third world after the end of the Cold War, with postcolonial and third-world perspectives perceived to be critical of neoliberal globalization, while CEE is believed to have uncritically accepted (Western) democracy in its movement towards European integration. This translates into ‘the common geideological assumption that the second world is pro-Western (lacking critical theory) while the third world is anti-Western (and the source of critical theory).’ This simplified vision ignores complexities of CEE’s engagement with neoliberalism. Viewing its adoption as mere imitation ignores the local realities and the
agency of local actors in the transnational dialogic process in which post-state-socialist reform, as a crucial living proof of the effectiveness of neoliberal economics, helped to solidify the centrality of those theories globally. The view that Western models, like neoliberalism, are simply passively adopted reproduces the colonial vision of non-Western backwardness and disregards local negotiations with the realities of neoliberalism.

The preceding discussion raises a larger question of how to address issues within the nation-state in the broader transnational feminist context? Some critics have pointed out that transnational feminisms’ dismissal of the national level may be premature because the majority of the population in the non-hegemonic countries does not have the luxury of disregarding the local. Ranjoo Seodu Herr makes a passionate case for the relevance of nation-states and nationalism for transnational feminism. Herr’s concern is that because of the disregard of the local, transnational feminism may be read as endorsing empty universalization disconnected from the lived experience of many people in the periphery, especially the most marginalized social groups. Without a clear definition and theorization of the local as well as national, transnational feminism may not prove to be as useful tool as it promises to be.

As Fernandes reminds us, post-national paradigms like transnationalism are also national as they stem from ‘the specific national context of the United States’ and thus cannot be totally detached from the current postsocialist geopolitical situation where challenges to other countries’ national sovereignty serve specific national interests of the USA. Although transnational feminism has produced important critiques of US hegemony, this connection between post-national imaginaries and global politics is not made often enough. Here we want to echo Janet Conway’s provocative question, ‘to what extent are many iterations of transnational feminism actually metropolitan feminisms, now thoroughly internationalized and multicultural, which are projecting themselves globally? Or to what extent are they constituted by activists rooted in and defined by the specificities of different world regions and the struggle for communicability and collaboration across difference?’ Such a struggle should insist on unsettling the dominant narrative of historical progress evident in neglecting a critical engagement with postsocialism as a global condition.

Transnational feminism has been heralded as collaborative praxis that becomes meaningful in local struggles. Post-state-socialist Estonia, we propose, offers a challenging case study through which to elaborate new perspectives on the intersections of localized feminisms and neoliberalism in transnational context. Importantly, the complex intersection of post-state-socialist neoliberalism and the European integration characteristic to present day Estonia has produced certain forms of feminisms while discouraging others, at the same time producing moments that put global power hierarchies under pressure.

**Positioning post-state-socialist Estonia**

Historically a borderland between Western Europe and Russia, Estonia gives immense significance to its geographical and geopolitical positioning in its national historical narrative. The largely unquestioning rhetoric of ‘catching up with the West’ has dominated Estonian society since the 1990s. The intent to restore Estonia’s ‘rightful’ place among Europeans has been achieved through a clear distancing from the Eurasian expanse of Russia. Estonia successfully sought membership in NATO (2004), European Union (2004) and the Eurozone.
As a result, Estonia likes to present itself as the ‘little country that could,’ a society of winners. \(^{36}\) Estonia’s economic success is often attributed to the fact that it is the ‘only one of the 15 [post-Soviet] countries that was consistently and unambiguously liberal from 1990 to 2000,’\(^{37}\) being from early on ‘programmatically oriented towards Westernization and liberal and quick economic reforms.’\(^{38}\) To use Manuela Boateă’s taxonomy, Estonia has desired to place itself among the hegemonic ‘heroic’ Northern European nations and to distance itself from the ‘epigonal’ aspiring CEE nations, to become part of the European Self, rather than its orientalized Other.\(^{39}\) This has meant that Estonia has been firmly committed to the EU but at the same time also to its alliance with the US, perceived as the only country that could protect Estonia against Russia. When the European project is critiqued, it is done from the perspective of nationalism that does not challenge European modernity, but rather criticizes Western Europe for losing faith in it.

Estonian experience with neoliberalism differs from that in the Western countries or those in the third world. The socialist experiment kept the Estonian society and markets separated from the socio-economic changes in the 1970s-80s that led to the rise of neoliberalism, but also allowed its critiques to emerge. Estonia entered the global marketplace of commodities and ideas in the early 1990s, at the very moment when neoliberal political forces were ascendant after the end of the Cold War. Estonia was seeking a definitive break with the Soviet past— which it defined as its unjust separation from the West— and neoliberalism provided the recipe, with its doctrine of individualism and free markets. Neoliberalism was not imposed on Estonia by IMF and other supra-national bodies associated with the aggressive spread of neoliberalism, e.g. in Latin America, but chosen consciously and with conviction by the young political elite who came to power in the 1990s with the slogan of cleaning up the house (literally, “Plats puhtaks!”).\(^{40}\) The neoliberal reforms indeed transformed Estonian society radically and swiftly, a change which made Estonia a darling of international observers (Estonia led the \textit{Wall Street Journal’s} world’s economic freedom index in 2000) and inside (international approval legitimated the policies in Estonia).\(^{41}\) Aet Annist points out that the link between personal freedom, market freedom and the national project has been very strong in Estonia.\(^{42}\) In turn, cases like Estonia have helped to validate neoliberalism’s viability.

The previous narrative is shared across much of CEE. What distinguishes Estonia is the acceptance of neoliberal ideology by the country as a whole. There were no large-scale protests against the aggressive economic policies in the 1990s or the recent austerity measures where Estonia maintained its commitment to neoliberal principles (Estonia has emerged from the recent recession with the very low public debt of 10% of GDP in 2013, compared to 91% of the Euro area, 76.9% of Germany or 127% of Italy (Eurostat 2014)). Left-of-center parties have been unable to come to power. The failure of the socialist experiment has led to embracing neoliberalism as its antidote, as the ticket to the select club of developed western nations. Neoliberalism has been associated with freedom, its critique with socialism’s curbs on freedom and this simplified association has made Estonians skeptical of social democracy, government interference in the economy, unions, or left-wing critiques, despite the failure of the economic miracle to appear to the majority of the population (Estonian drop in the GDP during the recent recession was the most dramatic in the EU). Estonians have voluntarily subjected themselves to neoliberal policies and been re-electing neoliberal politicians
for the past 20 years.43 After the March 2015 parliamentary elections, Estonian Social Democrats entered into the coalition with neoliberals.

Perhaps one measure of the effectiveness of neoliberal ideology is the relative lack of critiques or even analyses of neoliberalism from Estonian academics. Its rise and effects on Estonian village life have been analyzed by Aet Annist44; Baldur Thorhallson and Rainer Kattel have addressed the ways in which neoliberalism made Estonia vulnerable to recessions.45 Following Annist, Estonia might thus be one real example of the ‘actually existing neoliberalism’.46 Differently from other contexts, where neoliberalism is being contested by other social ideologies, it has ruled virtually unchallenged in Estonian public discourse for over two decades and thus affected all social discourses.

The re-emergence of feminist thought and politics in Estonia

It is the centrality of neoliberalism for all social projects that makes Estonian feminism’s relationship with neoliberalism such a relevant case study for transnational feminism more broadly. Neoliberalism has been the inevitable political context and climate of opinion within which feminisms in Estonia have had to operate after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Although the Estonian society of the early 1990s experienced nostalgia for single breadwinner families, with women relegated to the merely reproductive role, the realities of globalizing economy and low incomes proved that vision unviable. Both men and women were to compete in the new neoliberal marketplace, where ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ were clearly distinguished.47 Feminism in this context was treated with ambivalence and also many misperceptions.48 The Soviet period had denounced feminism as a bourgeois relic or labelled it a medical term (e.g. the Estonian Soviet Encyclopaedia defined feminism as the appearance of female traits in a man as late as 1987).49 Gender issues were debated in public discourse and literature, but they were not associated with feminism.50 These negative associations have had a long-lasting effect on the rather slow emergence of more critical feminist thought and praxis in the Estonian context.

Post-state-socialist Estonia re-encountered feminism in the 1990s, at the time when feminism in many Western countries that Estonia saw as its ideal was facing a conservative backlash.51 Ironically, thus, Estonia seemed to develop anti-feminism before feminism. The feminism that entered Estonia in the 1990s was, in other words, already inflected with neoliberal emphases. The situation in Estonia resembled that in other post-state-socialist CEE countries where feminism entered the public discourse through the initiatives of Western aid organizations, NGOs and intergovernmental initiatives that favoured feminist initiatives in harmony with the neoliberal status quo.52 The 1990s did not encourage the development of local grassroots feminism because the most pressing needs – as the public discourse of the time emphasized – were the re-establishment of national independence and re-integration into West. There was no pressing call to rally around gender for the Soviet period had seemingly already given women all the equality that was needed. Estonia, like many post-state-socialist countries, had high educational attainment and employment rates for women and it seemed, on the surface, that feminism was unnecessary and broader feminist critiques of patriarchy, capitalism and nationalism were incompatible with the contemporary developmental goals.
In this context, the Nordic model that aims at equality between men and women in both the public and private sphere was adopted selectively on the policy level, with focus on the public sphere. Conceptions of women’s rights that emphasized self-sufficiency and individual responsibility were in a better alignment with the neoliberal tenets of the country’s dominant political discourse. Such understandings of women’s rights were also in alignment with the EU gender policies. Gender equality has been written into the EU’s founding Amsterdam Treaty, yet what exactly is meant by gender equality is less clear. Lombardo and Maier suggest that the EU texts, especially those on family policy, are not informed by feminist thought at all and do not challenge tacit male norms. Thus, in the Estonian context EU’s policy aims in the field of gender equality were reconcilable with the neoliberal-nationalist dominant of Estonia, although not without friction. For example, the debate about the Gender Equality Act, a condition for EU accession, was one of the longest and most emotional parliamentary debates until the discussion of same-sex partnerships in the fall of 2014. The debate revealed, among other things, deep-seated essentialist conceptions of gender among the predominantly male MPs who believed that women’s primary social role was reproductive. Neoliberal politicians feared regulation and supposed threat to meritocracy. These two strands of critique dominated in the debate and alternative voices had more limited access to the discussion, cementing the vision of gender equality as a non-issue in Estonia that had to be accepted as yet another bureaucratic requirement from the EU.

Describing Estonian feminism in this context is challenging. There has been no widespread public support for feminist agendas and thus not all women’s activists necessarily call themselves feminists. For the sake of clarity, therefore, the following discussion will focus on scholars and activists who choose to call themselves feminists: academic feminists (active from the early 2000s to today) and the so-called Facebook feminists (active approximately from 2010 to today) who have gained a voice through discussion groups in social media. Thus, we will leave out groups who were instrumental in setting policy agendas (the so-called state feminists at the gender equality bureau at the Ministry of Social Affairs) and the various NGOs that have pursued projects related to the wellbeing of women (campaigns against trafficking, domestic violence, prostitution, etc.). Many of the women have not publicly identified themselves as feminists and thus we do not consider it ethical to attach the label to them. This limitation of our material will focus our examples to conscious and explicitly feminist negotiations with the neoliberal community of opinion in Estonia. There is to date no formal research on the contemporary history of feminisms in Estonia; one of the authors of the present article is currently collecting oral history material on Estonian feminisms.

Another important aspect to consider is the relative precariousness of the situation of Estonian feminism. While US American society, for instance, has a fair share of casual anti-feminism, feminism also has wide public support. There are innumerable women’s, gender and feminist studies programs, women’s and LGBT centers that may be underfunded, but they are funded and give feminists an institutional presence and professional security. In Estonia, there were no academic positions explicitly in gender, women’s or feminist studies until 2014 when 2 part-time positions were created. Estonian academic feminists thus have had to negotiate a niche for themselves inside traditional disciplines, with potential professional costs. Estonian academic feminism has developed sporadically around and within different academic disciplines thanks to a handful of dedicated individuals who explored feminist perspectives out of their intellectual curiosity that
gradually grew into a political conviction of the necessity of challenging power hierarchies within academic knowledge production and the society at large. Thus to a great extent, being a feminist academic in this context has actually meant being a feminist activist. The only peer-reviewed Estonian gender studies journal that enters its fifteenth year has never had stable funding and has to solicit funds for every single issue from different donors.

The so-called state feminist institutions, by comparison, have existed since 1996 and in addition to a gender equality department at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonia also has a Gender Equality and Equal Treatment Commissioner (since 2005); a national gender equality council (since 2013). Due to the early institutionalization at the level of state bureaucracy, state feminism in contemporary Estonia often evokes EU gender mainstreaming projects and gender equality policies, not all of which are informed by feminism. Such initiatives have been funded from the national or EU budget and have thus had most visibility. NGOs depend on funding from the EU or national programs, but also from different international funding agencies. Because of this, the work of the NGOs is highly dependent on the priorities of the donor nations. The precariousness fostered by the neoliberal climate in the NGOs and academia has made both focus on topics that are related to gender equality/gender mainstreaming initiatives, in harmony with EU policies, or with the priorities of international funding agencies, many of which promote neoliberal agendas, even if indirectly.

In fact, many Estonian feminists describe Estonian feminism that emerged in the 1990s as mostly an academic-intellectual and cultural project. Since the pre-Soviet local genealogies of women’s struggles had largely been erased, it is no surprise that in the wake of the country’s overall rush towards ‘returning to the West’ Estonian academic women turned to Western feminism as a role model, often uncritically. As one Estonian feminist academic pointed out in an interview, ‘there would be no feminism in Estonia without Western feminism.’ Other feminist academics have suggested that contemporary feminism in Estonia is predominantly an intellectual project because women’s rights have not been curbed dramatically. However, due to the fact that the re-emergence of feminism coincided with the period of restoration of independence from Soviet Union when Estonia busied itself with re-establishing its place in Western Europe through a pronounced rejection of the Soviet past, the main strand of feminism that gained predominance was the liberal kind. For instance, there seemed to be little space for reflecting on class struggle or issues of economic inequalities, thereby being in line with the country’s master narrative that promoted the need to adopt Western values, free markets and capitalism. This is also characteristic to many other postsocialist countries where women were often very willingly ready to “start from scratch with the massive indoctrination of Western feminism (supported by grants and accompanied by particular ideological demands) as a new kind of mind-colonization”, with ‘self-orientalization and self-negation as a result’. Furthermore, since the feminism of the 1990s has its roots in Western feminist theory and intellectual endeavors, mainstream feminism in Estonia has become closely associated with academic context and elitism. On the one hand, such intellectual elitism speaks in a language that is not accessible to many and on the other hand, there is a certain unrecognized blindness towards privilege.

However, the more subversive forms of feminist thought and activism do exist and can most often be found in the local art scene. For instance, the first outwardly feminist exhibition Est.Fem which took place in
1995 provided an early platform for the local artists to engage with various feminist perspectives, with now well-known feminist artist Mare Tralla's video installation *So We Gave Birth to Estonian Feminism* (1995) as its central piece. The video, which mixes representations of women from the artist's childhood (herself as a Soviet pioneer, working Soviet women, male politicians) and pornographic images from the West, plays with self-irony since it simultaneously references the imported nature of feminism in the Estonian context as well as the local historical context that influenced the emergence of feminism at the time. Journalist Barbi Pilvre, a self-appointed feminist watchdog of Estonian media since the 1990s, wrote on the occasion that 'feminist art reached Estonia both too early and extremely late – early because theoretically founded and objective feminist view of society does not yet exist in Estonia, and late due to the fact that in the rest of the developed world the entire feminist discourse has already become an institution that devours its young.' By now when feminist perspectives have become more prevalent in the Estonian art world, local feminist artists, art critics and activists alike are attempting to reconfigure the dominant models of exchange and transfer between globally and locally/regionally disseminated knowledges.

More radical forms of feminist critique in the public sphere have been conspicuous by their absence until the very recent years. Queer feminist thought has lately generated some attention and is gaining ground both in the art circles and the activist contexts (and the intersections of the two). Also, an interesting case in the current scene of (more) critical feminist voices in Estonia is a feminist Facebook group 'Virginia Woolf sind ei karda!' ('Virginia Woolf is not afraid of you!'), which grew out of a small radical queer/lesbian feminist reading group and which turned into a lively forum of about 4,500 members interested in gender issues (though most of them are far from identifying as queer feminists or even as feminists). With certain reservations, this group can be seen as a form of social activism for it has taken up the role of a media watchdog and launched campaigns against sexist advertisements. Although it has allegedly lost some of its radical touch due to its popular expansion, it nevertheless serves as a consciousness-raising platform for the wider public.

Mainstreaming, however, comes at a cost. In a critical interview, some more radical members of a younger generation of leftist feminist activists pointed out that the new group of so-called Facebook feminists represent ‘crudely put, an elite club of heteronormative feminists: ethnic Estonians, middle class, straight, educated, in other words, quite blind to intersectionality.’ More recently, ecofeminist activist initiatives have also surfaced, although their primary focus is on seeking alternatives to consumer capitalism, rather than engaging in theorizing.

Feminist theorizing and praxis in Estonia has thus developed in this complex socio-discursive setting of anti-feminism, nationalism, neoliberalism and EU policies. Feminisms engage with these discourses strategically and are inevitably shaped by them as can be seen from the interview data cited above. Perhaps most notable among the strategic interventions is the use of the positive self-image of Estonia as a ‘Western’ nation in fighting for gender equality, for feminist/gender studies courses or legal rights for same-sex couples. For instance, throughout the debate on the Gender Equality Act the feminist activists and politicians supporting the law emphasized how gender equality was a sign of a ‘developed’ Western nation and lack of it a symptom of continued backwardness. Estonia’s progress was measured on the basis of international indices and its low placement shamed against its Nordic neighbors. The public shaming strategy was Eurocentric, but
it brought gender issues into the public discourse as a legitimate topic that non-feminists could identify with. A parallel example has been the employment of meritocratic neoliberal language in critiquing the gender pay gap and the glass ceiling.

This is in line with Maria do Mar Pereira’s argument who, while acknowledging the silencing effect of global hegemonic epistemologies, also demonstrates their strategic use in semiperipheral contexts. She reminds us that habitually ‘the unequal status of WGFS [Women’s/Gender/Feminist Studies] scholars and scholarship from countries of the center and periphery is framed in terms of loss and constraint; in other words, the focus is often exclusively on what becomes repressed, made invisible, and excluded through—and because of—the hegemony of Western Anglophone feminism.’ This acts as a means of downplaying local agency and opportunities created. On the one hand, indeed, the local is silenced by hegemonic Western feminism, but on the other it is the prestige of the hegemonic center that makes feminist thought and practice speakable and respectable in the local settings. This does not deny the huge international power imbalances in knowledge creation, but rather invites a more nuanced discussion of the travel of ideas that recognize the agency of local interpreters.

Rethinking the intersections of feminisms and neoliberalism through transnational feminist frame

Our aim in this article has been constructive rather than deconstructive: we have attempted to go beyond simply mapping Estonian feminism or observing the limits of transnational feminism and to point to ways in which transnational feminism can serve as a productive approach to feminist thought in the local post-state-socialist context. More ambitiously, we hope that this project can open up paths towards the critique of regionalism, universalism and methodological nationalisms especially in regard to constructions of the so called West in relation to a stereotyped and marginalized post-state-socialist CEE and more broadly, in relation to geopolitical power relations. We suggest that this can be done through encouraging analysis of how the gender/race/class system in one location is politically and economically linked to that of another, how the local is constituted in relation to global systems, and how such systems must be understood in their particular locational inflection. This will allow us to avoid what Rachel Lee has, with regard to the category of ‘women of color’, called ‘the seduction of nonterritoriality’ that may arise in abstract discussions of transnationality. Along similar lines, Leela Fernandes has suggested that the transnational feminist privileging of ‘new spaces’ not tied to ‘the territoriality of the nation state’ has resulted in the habit of critiquing the nation state and celebrating border-crossing. This results in specific ‘regimes of visibility,’ that ‘discipline the feminist imaginary, even if differently, than older nation-based paradigms.’ This limits feminist engagement with the world, and simultaneously limits the reception of transnational feminist theorizing in contexts, like post-state-socialist Estonia, where its critical vocabulary would be especially productive.

While many of the strategies used by Estonian (mainstream) feminists may be seen as entering into an alliance with Eurocentrism or neoliberalism, we suggest that in the Estonian context these have not been simple cooptations, but rather strategic localized uses of transnational feminist practices adapted to the situation on the ground. The value given to the West – the desired aim of European Union or the neoliberal
model of the USA – allowed feminists achieve some of their goals in Estonia without the presence of a large-scale grassroots feminist activism. Similarly to the situation in Portugal, described by Pereira, Estonian gender studies scholars, for example, were able to use the epistemological advantage of the Western academia to argue for the creation of gender studies courses and gender research.78

This strategy, needless to say, is not without its dangers: feminist and gender theories have for decades seemed foreign, not local or even domesticated. The affinity with neoliberal policies that have, first and foremost, sought to maximize women’s (often underpaid) participation in the labor force has also slowed down the emergence of local critiques of EU gender policies or ‘market feminism.’79 Furthermore, the enduring post-state-socialist paranoia about equality discourses80 has also discouraged feminist engagement with poverty, and its intersections with ethnicity, rural location and age, not to speak of local critiques of Eurocentrism. It is worth noting that Ariadne Liin, the Estonian journal of gender studies, published its first serious analysis of neoliberalism in only 2015.81

However, transnational and intersectional feminist theorizing has been instrumental in the recent politicization of Estonian feminism, manifested in the emergence of left-wing and ecofeminist groupings, public engagement with the mainstreamed liberal feminist discourses in feminist blogs and publications and networking efforts across national borders. While early post-state-socialist period filtered out left-wing ideologies, today’s Estonian socio-political climate has created a local need for critiques of neoliberalism. This has also opened a door for a productive and mutually enriching dialogue with transnational feminist paradigms.

The Estonian relationship with neither neoliberalism nor Western feminism has been simple, but it is important to note the agency of local translators of transnational discourses when attempting to destabilize the internal hierarchies (between the first and the second, first and the third) prevalent in transnational feminist thought. We need to attend to the related silences, but also the opportunities to speak. So we want to make the case for an argument that although transnational influences are dramatic all over the globe, the local needs to be maintained as an analytical tool, necessarily in a de-essentialized form. For that, we need to know our own feminist stories. We need to own these stories, live through and with these stories, in order to create changes locally. The stories, like the one we recounted at the beginning of the article, allow us to both see the transnational connections and their local interpretations. Without the latter, the narrative remains hollow and abstract. Transnational feminist discussion will, in turn, benefit from more critical voices from post-state-socialist CEE to continue to de-center the hegemonic position of the USA and the West within its critical but thus far still limited geography across borders which certainly allows for further rearticulations of feminist imaginaries.

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Notes

1 The interviews with Estonian feminists mentioned here and throughout the article were conducted by Redi Koobak in 2014-2015 as part of an ongoing oral history project and all references are anonymized to protect the identities of the interviewees.

2 For further discussion, see Redi Koobak, “Millest me räägime, kui me räägime feminismist Eestis?” Ariadne Lõng no. 1/2 (2015), 49-69.

3 Basic neoliberal tenets have been embraced by political parties in power, although a recent commentary proposes a shift towards national liberalism, with some social liberal inflections. See Tõnis Saarts, “Neoliberalismist rahvusliberalismi,” Sirp, 5 December (2014), http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c9-sotsiaalia/neoliberalismist-rahvusliberalismi/ (accessed December 29, 2014).


7 Ibid., 837.


9 Suchland, “Is Postsocialism,” 838.

10 Ibid., 852.


12 Ibid., 37.


26. Fraser, “Feminism”, 114.
27. Ibid., 848.
30. Ibid., 22.
35. This can also be seen in some recent history textbooks in which the Nordic crusades are resignified as the beginning of Estonia’s integration into Western Europe and Estonia’s becoming the borderland between Europe and Russia. See e.g. Heiko Pääbo, “Constructing Historical Space: Estonia’s Transition fro Russian Civilization to the Baltic Sea Region,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45, no. 2: 196.
36. This phrase has also been adopted by some Western scholars, e.g. Horn, “US and Nordic”, 59.


39 Boateča, “Multiple Europes”.


41 Annist, *Otsides*, 89


43 Annist, “Losing,” 89.

44 Annist, *Otsides*.


48 To give an example from a magazine from the 1990s, cited in a very schematic opinion piece on feminism in Estonia: “Feminism would humiliate Estonian women. It is not for us. It is difficult if not impossible for a feminist to love another human being. She loves herself above all.” Karin Hallas, “Difficulties with Feminism in Estonia,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 17, no. 2/3 (1994): 300. This article is puzzling for there were feminist scholars working in Estonia at the time, like Eve Annuk or Katrin Kivimaa, the latter of whom also published strong pieces on the question of feminism in Eastern Europe. Katrin Kivimaa, “Manufacturing the Other: Eastern Europe and Feminism,” in *Women’s Studies and Gender Research in the Baltic and Nordic Countries: Mapping the Situation* (Riga: NIMS, 1999): 7.


52 Ghodsee, “Feminism-by-Design,” 731-734.


57 The first published results of the larger oral history project can be found in Koobak, “Millest,” 49-69.
60 For example, in the early 2000s many of them worked with issues of human trafficking or women’s entrepreneurship, activities preferred under the US Northern European Initiative. See Horn, “US and Nordic,” 65.
62 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 628.
74 Ibid., 649.
76 Fernandes, *Transnational*.
77 Atanasoski and Vora, “Postsocialism and the Ends of Revolution”.
78 See Koobak and Marling, “Eesti.”
80 Papp, “Eesti,” 182.