

DISRUPTED (POST)IDENTITIES: MEMORY, PLACE, AND THE POWER OF THE 'POST'

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_Abstract

For a recent issue of the journal *Dialogues in Human Geography*, I was asked to write a response to an article that examined the use of the word ‘post’ as a heuristic to better understand places associated with ‘post’ ascriptions—in the case of the original article, post-apartheid (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). The post anchors a present-day entity to the past; it does so by opening and holding open a space of hope. This hopeful space is cruelly optimistic (cf. Berlant, 2011); it tethers identities to places and events of the past, while also carrying the promise of unattachment (Anderson et al., 2023). I concluded my response with a provocation drawn from Doreen Massey’s (1999) scholarship on the space-time regime, by asking: “Who uses that vocabulary most powerfully and to what effect?” (Drozdowski, 2021: 5) Thoughts on that question comprise the subject matter of this *_Essay*—what can the ‘post’ do? To think-with the power and effect of the ‘post,’ I draw from a range of examples: (post)conflict, (post)war, (post)Socialist, (post)national, and (post)disaster. Then, using case study examples from Poland, Germany, and Australia, I explore the politics of identity, place, and memory across spatial and temporal contexts to show how the post functions powerfully as a lexicon, while being simultaneously sanguine and banal in its application.

1 _Introduction

In a recent scholarly forum, I was invited to respond to a manuscript that explored the use of the prefix ‘post’ as a heuristic device, specifically in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.¹ This exercise prompted me to pause and reflect on my own deployment of the term ‘post’ across multiple registers in my research, particularly as it relates to my positionality in (post)colonial Australia and (post)war/(post)socialist Poland. The exercise was catalytic: it opened a space to interrogate the ‘post’ not merely as a temporal marker, but as a powerful discursive tool that shapes our understanding of memory, place, and identity.

The ‘post’ anchors the present to the past, often with a promise—frequently unfulfilled—of detachment and progress. It functions as a lexical adhesive that affixes identity to histories, events, and geographies. Drawing from that original forum and developing the ideas further in this *_Essay*, I argue that this tethering is imbued with what Lauren Berlant has described as “cruel optimism”: the hope for a better future that paradoxically hinders one’s ability to achieve it.² Taking stock of Massey’s³ assertion of the power of discourse and vocabulary, I put the term ‘post’ to use, alongside cruel optimism, to ask what does the ‘post’ do?

This *Essay*, then, reflects on that question through an embodied and place-based lens. Drawing from fieldwork in Poland, Germany, and Australia, I consider how identities are negotiated through memorial landscapes and commemorative practices. These examples illustrate how the ‘post’ operates simultaneously as a promise of progress and a burden of historical continuity.

2_Conceptual Framework: Thinking-with and Cruel Optimism

Grounding my analyses is my research approach, one that is rooted in feminist and constructionist epistemologies. I view identity as fluid, partial, and negotiated across multiple scales—individual, communal, national, and supranational. As a cultural geographer, I anchor identity in place, space, and memory. My own experiences—as a third-generation Australian Pole, a granddaughter of (post)war migrants, and a migrant myself—shape my research profoundly. Positionality, emotions, atmosphere, and the embodied experience of being-in-place are central to my methodology.

“Thinking-with,” as articulated by de la Bellacasa,⁴ and expanded by Askins,⁵ beckons us to engage intellectually, emotionally, and sensorially with the field. It involves crossing disciplinary boundaries and inhabiting the messy entanglements of body, memory, and place. In the practice of this research trajectory, I have used my body as a research tool. Using my body means recognizing its experience as an academic, mother, granddaughter of migrants, and migrant myself. My bodily experience is often more than what I can technically ‘know’ and thus ‘think’ about these topics. Rather, to know them, and know them differently, I have had to think-with my body.

“Thinking-with the body,” then, means acknowledging how feelings and affective atmospheres shape our experiences of place. During a Dawn Service at the National War Memorial in Canberra, Australia, for example, the presence of cockatoos squawking overhead and the silence of the crowd created an atmosphere charged with affect (Fig. 1). My field notes from that morning trace these encounters—human and non-human—that collectively created a powerful sense of national identity and shared mourning:

Trees and leaf litter of the gum trees [scatter the ground] among [and between] the different war memorials [up Anzac Parade]. A pair of kangaroos hop across the road, probably wondering what all these people are here for. Possibly the most Australian sight possible.

Photo the gums flanking the main war memorial. The blue lighting illuminated them against a still starry sky. I can spy the faintly white figures of crested cockatoos in the gums, they are squawking softly but distinctively.

The cockatoos fly and squawk as the drums roll [...]. There is silence as we wait in the dark. The kids behind talk to their parents—they try and shush them [...] the service has started. As dawn beckons the cockatoos grow louder. They aren't staged but perhaps the most affective background noise.

The cumulative affect of the commemorative atmosphere was not only emotional but corporeal—an experience of landscape shaped by light, sound, and bodies gathered. The atmosphere was palpable—I remember these moments vividly, and my body remembers the light, sound, and cold crispness of the morning too.



Fig. 1: Kangaroos in the approach to the War Memorial along Anzac Parade, Canberra, Australia, 25 April 2018, © Danielle Drozdewski

But what does ‘thinking-with’ have to do with cruel optimism and the ‘post’? Well, my research profile has meant that I have spent a lot of time hanging around war memorials and commemorative events. A lot. A very common motivation of war commemoration is that in remembering the dead and honoring national sacrifice, we hope that present and future generations will not endure the same fate. We hope that war and conflict will not happen again, at least to us, to our kin, to our nation. We feel this sense of hope, collectively, and especially when it is staged at large-scale State-led events. We all remember together; we all hope together, too.

Hope as an “activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable.”⁶ Hope can also bring optimism. Hope, then, is a palpable aspiration we embody because the optimism that comes with this space of possibility is positioned as seemingly preferable to no hope at all. Moreover, we cannot know how something will turn out in the future, but we can have an aspiration of hope that it will go well. My grandparents, perhaps, hoped for a

better future in Australia, hoping for a postwar life free from the conflict and violence that had affected their childhood. But for their kin, those who chose to stay in Poland or who could not leave, the hope for a more trouble-free postwar existence, the optimism for the future, was experienced differently.

Hope can (also) be cruelly optimistic.

To develop Berlant's reasoning of cruel optimism further, alongside the notion of thinking-with, I have pondered how hope and optimism can inhibit and hamper, or fasten identities (individual, but here I mostly mean collective and/or national), to the pasts they have inhabited. That is, even with a desire to move forward, parts of a nation's collective past are inseparably tethered to present and future identities. As Berlant contended, optimism often relies on collective fantasies that obscure structural constraints.⁷ Those constraints may include working too hard in a relentless capitalist neoliberal system or living under a regime whose politics constrain our rights and movements. They may consist of affixing too much, too tightly to the pasts we have managed to overcome.

Cruel optimism can be sticky. Yet the stickiness, to borrow here from Ahmed,⁸ does not just get sticky on its own. Rather, I think that our collective use of the word 'post' has a rather strong and directive adhesive quality. Affixing 'post' to war, Socialism, nationalism, colonialism, and so on also affixes the discourses of those pasts, which we might otherwise very much like to move on from. They nonetheless remain 'posted' to our present and future. The post, I think, can be cruelly optimistic, as I explain below in a series of worked examples.

3_Case Study 1: (Post)war Warsaw and Commemoration

In this first example, I turn to research I conducted in 2014–2015 in Warsaw, Poland, where I investigated how memory is embedded in the everyday urban landscape.⁹ My focus was on the *Tchorka Tablice*—memorial plaques in Warsaw, located at sites of Nazi atrocities during World War Two (WWII). The plaques name the details of the event, and although the wording differs a little from plaque to plaque, the wording in the center of the cross, for the most part, is consistent. It states that "this place is sanctified by the blood of Poles in their pursuit of freedom for their homeland." These plaques anchor memory to specific sites; their texts, consistent in nationalist tone, sanctify each location by reference to Poles' blood spilt in the name of freedom.

Unlike the grandeur of state-led memorials, these plaques are encountered in mundane settings—on market halls, beside shops, and near apartment blocks. Given their locations, they also connect past traumas to present everyday places, reinforcing a national narrative of suffering and resistance in these same places. Yet, I wondered whether the repetition of the plaques in an already heavily memorialized landscape risks rendering them invisible. Or does it?

One such everyday location, Hala Mirowska (a market hall), became a field site where I examined how residents interacted with these memorials in their daily lives (Fig. 2). My interview and observation data revealed that while residents did not always read or engage with each plaque in detail, their presence in the landscape provided cognitive reminders of Poland during WWII. For example, one respondent noted:

This cross, the shape of a cross. I remember there are other plaques with such a cross [...] I just don't remember what those are about. I rather remember the outline (of the plaque) than the inscription. But those are all connected to WWII, [they] commemorate executed people [...]. (Respondent 15, 19 May 2014).



Fig. 2: *Tchorka Tablice* on the wall of Hala Mirowska, Warszawa, Poland, © Danielle Drozdzewski

Massey reminds us that language and spatial inscriptions shape hegemonic common sense, a point echoed in the previous participant's quotation that specified that they did

not remember what this specific plaque commemorated, but recalled its overall purpose.¹⁰ Through memorialization, the past remains a potent part of the ‘postwar’ everyday landscape. Their banality, however, was hard for me to shake. Girls were sitting on the steps of the small plinth below the *Tablice*, selling flowers. People stopped, chatted, smoked, dropped cigarette butts, and moved on. The reminder of a traumatic past in that location was deeply uncomfortable for me, as my fieldnotes below show. I felt this discomfort and jostled with that feeling alongside what I knew about the wider memorial landscape.

The discourse of ‘post’ here positions the spatial location in question in an ‘after’ state. The memorial binds this discourse to certain types of political entities, “conceptualizing them as having a specific relation to space.”¹¹ Death, murder, and execution happened here—in the past. The memorial commemorated that past, and now, in this postwar present, that commemorative action suffices. Or it should do?

Perhaps this feeling of being uncomfortable tells me something about monument that is also conveyed in the fact that they are all mostly [written] in Polish. That is, that you are supposed to know about this history, it is history embedded in place, it is irresponsible not to know it. By stopping I show that I must not know it, that I am foreign, which then begs the question of what would I want to take that picture for anyway. I feel uncomfortable knowing this happened here, I feel uncomfortable that I am interested in the fact of knowing that this happened. (Fieldnotes from Hala Mirowska, June 2, 2015)

4_Case Study 2: *Stolpersteine* and the Berlin Streetscape

Similar dynamics are present in Berlin, where Gunter Demnig’s *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) mark the former residences of Holocaust deportees and victims. Often positioned within the sidewalk pavement, these brass plaques also become part of the streetscape. At this field site, the streets of Mitte in Berlin, the placement of sites of (national) memory in the everyday landscape is purposeful and demonstrative of a politics of memory.¹²

Thinking-with the body is part of how I, and other ‘viewers,’ encounter these stones. Ingold has argued that “locomotion, not cognition, must be the starting point for the study of perceptual activity.”¹³ Following his reasoning, by walking past, over, or on the stones, the passerby is afforded the opportunity to think on, and of them. Indeed, to encounter a *Stolperstein*, one must walk near one. But walking does not necessarily guarantee contact. Their compactness and positioning below our feet mean that, more often than not, passersby do not notice them. They do not necessarily stop. Rather, they

walk past, over, or even on the stumbling stones. But when noticed, because of their position in the pavement, a passerby must bow their head to engage physically with the stone. That bowing action is in itself a commonly recognized act of commemoration, used strategically here in the Berlin streetscape.

Interested in encounters with Second World War commemoration in the everyday landscape, at selected sites, I placed GoPro cameras at street level to capture how passers-by encountered—or failed to encounter—these memorials (Fig. 3). The varied responses highlighted the unpredictability of everyday memorial engagement. Many people stepped over the stones without noticing them, while others paused, read the inscriptions, and reflected.



Fig. 3: Stolpersteine on Gipsstraße, Mitte, Berlin, © Danielle Drozdewski

Cruel optimism here in the postwar Berlin landscape is about how memory-work tries to address a gap left after WWII. A gap that was created by the forced deportation (and in many cases murder) of tens of thousands of former residents. Knowing the postwar landscape in the streets of Mitte, as elsewhere, involves knowing through absence—that gap recorded in the stones—and through our encounter with absence as we go about our daily routines.

Dates are inscribed to mark events and turning points, from one era to the next, with the expectation that everything afterwards is inevitably “post”. There are dates on the

stumbling stones, dates on the *Tchorka Tablice* too. Other dates mark the end of the war, the end of communism, the beginning of the postwar era, the post-socialist period, and so on. But when I was standing before a particular *Stolperstein*, I wondered what that same place looked like on the date of deportation marked on it. What were the sounds, the feelings, the atmosphere? Echoing my thoughts when standing at those stones about the dates on them, Koselleck reasons that “there is no experience that might be chronologically calibrated—though datable by occasion [...] all experience laps over time; experience does not create continuity in the sense of an additive preparation to the past.”¹⁴ Does commemorating what happened at this location ever change the fact that it happened, *ex post facto*?

5_Case Study 3: (Post)socialism and the Refugee Crisis in Poland

Shifting now to another ‘post,’ post-socialist, the next case study takes us back to Poland. In 2017, I undertook sabbatical research in Wrocław and Berlin. Given my previous research on memory, place, and identity in those same national contexts, the research pursued the same threads but amidst the then unfolding ‘refugee crisis.’ I wanted to know “how a politics of memory operates in, on and with (re)productions of places and identities and for what purposes?” in the context of the changes in both nation states to actual¹⁵ and perceived threats to citizens from the proposed influx of refugees. The responses of the citizens interviewed were framed within the politics of memory of that nation state.

I was interested in how the Polish nation, which had so many times before relied on the cosmopolitan solidarity of other nations to shelter its emigres, and for which the postwar reality had meant further occupation, responded to such a humanitarian crisis. The ‘post’ here is both postwar and post-socialist, but with the caveat that the almost 50-year period of Soviet-socialism meant that Poland was overwhelmingly ethnically Polish and Catholic in demographic composition. These ‘posts’ have rendered the Other palpably but also experientially different.

In Poland, the return of the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*-(PiS) led government in 2015 was propelled by renewed grievances surrounding national sovereignty. Within a mandate to protect the nation, the legacy of socialist-era demographic homogeneity created a sense of safety tied to sameness, a crucial factor in defining the PiS government’s program of ‘national protection.’ The refugee was rendered Other not

just through constructions of difference, but through their perceived disruption of postsocialist stability. Citizens were asked to feel this sense of safety personally and to ‘think-with’ their bodies and the nation together.¹⁶ Rather than expressing empathy by drawing on Poland’s own history of occupation and dispossession, the majority of citizens I interviewed for my research aired their suspicion of difference and expressed a version of insular nationalism.

So, when I asked participants about their opinion of refugees coming to Europe, the vestiges of the homogenous postwar society maintained during socialism were referred to as a source of safety, notwithstanding the fact that socialism itself was something they longed to leave in the past. I draw on Anderson et al.’s framing of cruel optimism here as one possible explanation for these responses, in that “the scarcity of attachable promises means that subjects cling to fraying promises inherited from past social-spatial formations.”¹⁷ In this example, the postnational locates the idea of the ‘nation’ as an idea that emerges after the nation’s historical reality, in ways that are not immediately reconciled with the image of the nation inherited from the past.

6_Case Study 4: Anzac, (Post)colonialism, and the Australian Nation

In my final worked example, I return to Australia and to an event, Anzac Day, celebrated annually on April 25. This commemoration offers an example to think-with the ‘post’ through nationalism and colonialism. Anzac Day marks the fateful landing of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) at Gallipoli, Turkey, in 1915, as part of a British-led military campaign during the First World War. The landing was a tactical disaster. As troops exited their small landing boats onto the beach, they were met with a rain of bullets fired by the Turks positioned on top of the escarpment above the beach. Amid the carnage, a narrative of Australian heroism was forged about a small but brave nation that ‘dug in’ and showed courage and mateship among the troops. A nation that, though democratically formed in a peaceful federation in 1901, later took this day in 1915 on a foreign battlefield as its symbolic birth.

The politics of memory are acutely visible in Australia’s Anzac Day commemorations. Though the Anzac landing at Gallipoli was a military failure, it has been mythologized as the birth of the Australian nation. This narrative is deeply gendered, racialized, and exclusionary. It privileges Anglo-Australian masculinity and marginalizes Indigenous and multicultural war experiences. To be technical with the

term ‘post,’ Australia was already ‘postcolonial’ in 1915, as by that time it had attained the status of an independent federation. Yet, even now as we continue to celebrate Anzac Day as a day representative of the nation’s ideals and character, and join in that exercise of collective hope (articulated in the commemorative phrase “Lest we Forget”), the question of what constitutes the nation we are commemorating is still unclear. I am reminded of Porter’s argument that we are not really capable of being postcolonial. She has stated that “to be ‘post’ colonial is to be always and forever implicated, though in constantly shifting ways, in colonialism’s enduring philosophies.”¹⁸

The Anzac narrative exemplifies this entanglement of past/present/future in the use of the ‘post’ prefix. It demands collective national identification, while excluding those whose identities do not align with its myths. The politics of difference, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁹ is central to understanding how belonging is negotiated in postcolonial contexts. Anzac Day reveals that Australia may be federated and multicultural, but it is not yet postcolonial in practice; not least because of these firm attachments to its colonial past that overwrite Indigenous accounts of conflict and neglect the complex realities of post-WWII refugee arrivals. Even in a nation that styles itself as multicultural, the ‘post’ remains aspirational, unfulfilled, and exclusive.

7_Conclusion: What Can the ‘Post’ Do?

The ‘post’ is seductive. It implies progress, closure, and new beginnings. But as this *_Essay* has shown, its application often obscures the complexities of historical continuity, the politics of memory, and embodied memory. Whether in Warsaw, Berlin, Wrocław, or Canberra, the ‘post’ does not erase the past—it reframes it, often in ways that reinscribe existing power structures.

While markers of economic growth and social policy may be put forth as evidence of change and progress, the ‘post’ does not erase difference(s), and it certainly does not see difference as a value of and in itself. Its appendage overlooks and/or simplifies the complex social, cultural, and political entanglements and relationships that characterize histories, identities, and memories of place. It does so because the space-time regime of ‘post’ flattens the “life out of time.”²⁰

To think-with the ‘post’ necessitates that we remain vigilant about its promises and its pitfalls. To resist the latter, we must stay attentive to how memory, place, and

identity are lived, felt, and contested. The ‘post’ can open up hopeful possibilities, but only if we remain critical of the futures it imagines, for whom and at what cost. It is not enough to attach ‘post’ as a signal of advancement—we must interrogate what remains, what was before. As I reflect on my positionality and the diverse field sites I have walked, listened, and dwelled within, I am convinced that the work of memory and identity must always contend with the residues of the past. However, I maintain the view that these pasts must not necessarily constrain and restrain possible presents and futures. In exercising this hope, perhaps we can create more generous futures—ones not just haunted by and attached unwillingly to the past, but accountable to history and capable of moving to new presents and futures.

Endnotes

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