

Narrating feminisms: what do we talk about when we talk about feminism in Estonia?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on interviews with women who identify as feminists in Estonia, this article explores how the stories we tell about feminism and its past influence the kind of theoretical and political work we are able to do. Zooming in on the story of the emergence of feminisms in postsocialist Estonia which has not been thoroughly researched yet, this article calls upon feminists in Estonia to reflect critically on how they conceptualize feminisms, while at the same time building a framework to think about local feminism within transnational feminist context. Starting from stories of how women became feminists in Estonia since the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, I reflect on the gaps, chance encounters and tensions that my fieldwork revealed to narrate feminism differently, to bring forth new aspects of feminism in this context. In particular, I focus on two moments: the common imaginary of ‘real’ feminism as Western mass movement and the tensions between the local context and ‘Western feminism’. I complicate the narrative in the article through including interludes in between the main text to highlight how the incidents that happened outside and around the interviews shape my story of feminism in Estonia.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 July 2017
Accepted 1 March 2018

KEYWORDS

Becoming feminist; Estonian feminisms; local feminism; postsocialism; transnational feminism

On a wintery afternoon in 2015, my sister drives me to a village in South-Estonia so I can conduct an interview with an Estonian feminist scholar. During the interview, she sits patiently beside me and listens to the conversation, occasionally laughing along or making small remarks. When we drive back to Tartu later, she tells me enthusiastically how eye-opening this experience was for her and starts asking me how and why I became a feminist and why she does not know anything about the history of feminism in Estonia. The witness to the interview becomes the interviewer and the interviewer becomes the interviewee. In a sense, my sister and I are very different indeed: she is married and a mother of three, lives in the countryside in Estonia and works in retail; I’m a researcher in gender studies, without kids, living and working in Sweden. My sister has her astute observations about women’s everyday life experiences which she expresses with a sense of pragmatism. I would even say her attitude comes across as confident

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and fiercely feminist. I, on the other hand, feel like my feminist vocabulary that grew out of academic contexts in English remains somewhat obscure, abstract, hesitant in my attempts to tell her stories of feminism in Estonia. But in that moment in between the winding roads and forests we both arrive at an understanding that feminism in Estonia is something necessary, irrespective of the fact that we speak in different tongues. 'I would love to read a book that speaks about Estonian women and their lives throughout history. Isn't there such a book?' my sister demands.

Histories of feminism are necessarily interested stories which are invested with particular kinds of 'feminist attachments' (Ahmed 2004). The stories we tell about feminism and its past influence the kind of theoretical and political work we are able to do in the present. Therefore, our present understandings of the past have political and ethical implications on the future (im)possibilities of critical feminist thought and political practice in the academy and elsewhere.

Recent feminist theorizing offers us multiple ways to think about how we frame our stories of feminism and its past (Hemmings 2011; Scott 2011; Wiegman 2012; Ahmed 2017). Feminist theory in academy, at least in Western contexts, has gone from being marginal to being relatively established with its own apparatus of canonical journals, authors and texts. In other words, it has a 'past' which comes with a set of shared stories that shape our understanding of our disciplines and our role within them. For example, in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Clare Hemmings offers an in depth critique of the past forty years of such storied accounts and describes her purpose as to investigate 'how feminists tell stories about Western feminist theory's recent past, why these stories matter, and what we can do to transform them' (2011, 1). Among others, challenging the tendency to reproduce 'Western feminist' stories as yardsticks against which all feminist stories and imaginaries are measured has become a crucial question for many feminists writing from or about postsocialist feminist perspectives (Suchland 2011; Tlostanova 2012; Koobak and Marling 2014a; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2016). The notion of 'Western feminism' is problematic, yet it continues to be repeated in literature. I use the term here as a discursive presence in transnational feminist writing and therefore place it in inverted commas.

As the preliminary studies of the re-emergence of feminism in Estonia since the 1990s (Koobak and Marling 2014b; Marling and Koobak 2017) show, it has been important to avoid talking about Eastern European feminisms in the transnational context as lagging behind 'Western feminism.' Likewise, it is important to be rooted in geo-politics and body-politics of knowledge (Tlostanova 2012), to know local stories of feminism. In order to do so, we need to analyze the local developments more carefully, without squeezing them into Western normative progress narrative. Since I identify as a feminist from Estonia despite the fact that I have not lived in Estonia for a long time, I dare to create, albeit unavoidably inconsistently, a 'we' platform in the title and throughout this article that at once calls upon feminists in Estonia to reflect critically on 'our' feminisms and at the same time urges a broader transnational feminist community to build a framework to think about local feminisms within the transnational feminist context.

This article thus contributes to the scholarly discussion of feminist stories that challenge the global/local binary. In her visionary book *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed argues that ‘if we start with our experiences of becoming feminists not only might we have another way of generating feminist ideas, but we might generate new ideas about feminism’ (2017, Introduction, Section 4, paragraph 7). Starting from collecting stories of how women have become feminists in Estonia since 1990s, I aspire to theorize the gaps, chance encounters and tensions that my fieldwork revealed to narrate feminism differently, to bring forth new ideas about feminism in this context.

In particular, I focus on two moments that emerged from the narratives I gathered from women who identify as feminists in Estonia. These include the common imaginary of ‘real’ feminism as ‘Western’ and tensions between the local context and ‘Western feminism’ as a mass movement. Through a specific focus on these moments, I highlight the challenges feminist thought and activism currently face in Estonia and pose questions that direct us to talk about feminism differently. I do so by complicating a narrative in the article with interludes – stories and reflections from and about my fieldwork – in between the main text to highlight how the encounters and incidents that happened outside and around the interviews shape my story of feminism in Estonia. Writing with such moments of embodied experience, animated by the everyday, helps us see feminism as open-ended thinking and action, not as something fixed and stable.

Theoretical maps and contexts

I must admit that my desire to map out feminist stories in Estonian context is marked by feeling a little homesick. After 10 years of doing doctoral and postdoctoral research in gender studies in Sweden, my so-called academic feminist home seems to be located in between the seemingly ungraspable time-space that is transnational academic feminism with its innumerable conferences, workshops, conversations and publications where my part seems to be to explore and mediate voices and experiences of women from postsocialist Eastern Europe, however problematic that might sound. I have felt rather uprooted there, dreaming of something more concrete to hold on to. This dream feeds on the desire to understand better the local developments in feminist thinking. Where do feminists in Estonia situate themselves within transnational feminism today? How did they get here? How do they move forward? I simply do not know enough of the local context because I have been looking towards the ‘West’ during my whole academic education. Why is that?

My notes, jotted down before embarking on this project, clearly speak of a yearning for an intellectual and affective-political feminist home that would be firmly rooted in the Estonian context. I dream of a map that brings together personal and collective stories of feminisms. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, ‘feminism as a collective movement is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others.’ (2017, Introduction, Section 2, paragraph 8) This raises the problem of representation which is something we confront often when attempting to grasp spatial phenomena, relationships and patterns.

My starting point for this map-making exercise that attempts to chart the contours of local feminisms in Estonia is the observation that along the changing local-global axis, the specificity of Eastern European positioning and the postsocialist condition in particular tends to disappear within transnational feminist theorizing (Koobak 2013; Koobak and Marling 2014a; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2016). In my experience, thinking about Eastern Europe is incredibly challenging. It tends to appear as an ambivalent, in-between, 'zeugmatic space' (Mudure 2007), a 'semiperiphery' (Blagojević 2009), a 'void' (Tlostanova 2010), sometimes referred to as the former Eastern Europe or non-Western Europe, the postsocialist space.

Likewise, thinking about postsocialist Eastern Europe within the context of feminism is equally challenging. It prompts me to ponder upon and explore the role of 'metageography' (Lewis and Wigen 1997) in shaping feminist discourses. Transnational feminist studies have tended to exclude perspectives from the former second world, prioritizing the dialogue between the first and the third world and thus cementing a binary between the Global North and the Global South. Postsocialist space gets lost because it is 'largely presumed to be a process of democratization or Europeanization and thus uncritically positioned vis-à-vis the first world' (Suchland 2011, 839). This positions 'Western feminist theory' as something of a hegemonic discourse that continually regards Eastern Europe as its 'belated copy,' producing a 'lag' discourse that is framed by imperialist teleological progress narratives.

Even if we acknowledge that the terms 'Western' and 'Western feminism' or 'postsocialist' and 'postsocialist feminism' are not static and that they function in equally ambiguous, porous and often contradictory ways, we need to use them because we need to make sense of what we are doing using a common language. Despite the many problems with the notion of 'Western feminism,' it continues to persist in feminist texts because of the lack of a better term. No matter how diverse internally, the category of 'the West' functions as a name that designates those peoples and regions that appear superior to other peoples and regions either politically or economically (Ang 2001). These terms, entrenched in the asymmetrical power relations between the West and the rest, will have to function as a means of framing, a process that is at once impossible and necessary and needs to be constantly troubled.

Another problem is that while Eastern European scholars resent the lack of understanding of 'Eastern exceptionalism' in 'Western feminist' discourse, they are themselves ready to assume a unified and unproblematic feminist front in the West in the 1960 and 1970s (Hock 2009, 26). Many of them show little awareness of or concern for divisions, fractioned alliances and the impact of later backlashes that have characterized feminisms in the West. Furthermore, Allaine Cerwonka (2008, 821–822) points to the irony that much of the critique of 'Western feminism' derives its tools from selective reference to representatives of 'Western feminism,' in particular consistently excluding the work of women of colour, third-world feminists within the American academy and black US American feminists from the category

'Western feminist'. While postcolonial, black and women of colour feminisms have existed for a long time with their own important discoveries and original models and rich critiques of 'Western feminisms', it is still a challenge to build effective modes of open-minded, egalitarian and honest transcultural dialogue on gender between the global North, the global South and many spaces that do not fit this binary, including the postsocialist space. Each of the many feminisms has remained insulated and either theorizing in a way that is increasingly detached from reality, or particularizing the concrete contexts and local experiences without attempting to look beyond or initiate any coalitions.

What then constitutes a useful map for navigating feminisms in all of their local and transnational inflections? How do we maintain a transversal dialogue between and across the North and the South, the East and the West, and how do we make them hear each other and find their intersections? As I have elaborated elsewhere with my colleagues Madina Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (2016), one option is to make our own body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge transparent as one of the tools of successful decolonizing of gender, of thinking and of being. It means starting precisely with one's own positioning – I am *where* I think (Mignolo 2011). For me, personally, due to my shifting somewhat uprooted location, this has meant getting to know feminisms 'back home', in Estonia, in relation to my uneasy positioning in the Swedish feminist academia, bringing them closer to skin. Throughout, I am acutely aware of the importance of not falling prey to the familiar catching up discourses and playing according to the Western/Northern epistemic rules and not occupying a sealed localized position which rests only on certain type of victimhood. This would account for the local logics and specific conditions yet correlate with other voices of the world.

Collective portrait: methodological dilemmas

During the work process I realize that with my regular workload it is not possible for me to transcribe all the interviews in time. I turn to my sister who is willing to help me for a reasonable pay. It quickly becomes clear that with the kids and the full time job, she herself will not have enough time to help me and she invites her sister in law and the teenage daughter of a colleague to the rescue. All three helpers who consider themselves quite far removed from feminism tell me that the interviews open up a totally new world for them. Feminists suddenly become concrete people who sometimes have problems expressing themselves, sometimes use repetitive words, don't finish their sentences, jump from topic to topic, sometimes not responding to questions, sometimes using unfamiliar terms but still talking about things that are recognizable and relatable. 'I would love to listen to more of these stories, it's so interesting but after work I just don't have enough time,' my sister sighs. Doing feminism, thinking about it, is something that demands time that a working woman with kids might not always readily have. In this situation, a growing interest in feminism means that being transported into someone's story, experiencing it through headphones, is a lot more effective than reading an academic article. It requires a very different kind of attention.

My academic interest in mapping the emergence of feminism in postsocialist Estonia began with the artist Anna-Stina Treumund and queer feminism. Treumund can be seen as the first queer feminist artist in Estonia who has continuously and systematically studied non-normative sexualities. Through an engagement with her autobiographic self-portraits (Koobak 2013), I came to address the question of how might we analyze her art critically in a way that would not reproduce the story of Eastern European time lag in relation to the West's great progress narrative of sexual modernization. This dilemma structured and drove my ambivalent desires to articulate postsocialist feminist imaginaries in their own right, as distinctly different from the Western hegemonic feminist frameworks. In short, I encountered the limits of the 'field imaginary' of feminist studies (Wiegman 2012). Eventually, these concerns brought me to a larger question: what does feminism mean in contemporary Estonia? How do feminists in Estonia see themselves? What are the questions they are interested in?

For this project that grew out of my personal interest and was entirely self-funded, I interviewed 24 women who identify as feminists in Estonia, among them scholars, artists, art critics, politicians and activists. I asked them how they became feminists and what feminism meant to them today. In particular, I was curious to find out what has changed since the 1990s. My interviewees are 25–58 years old since I wanted to include both feminists who became active at the beginning of the 1990s – after Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union – and feminists who became active later in mid-2000s. There is considerable variation among the feminisms of the women I interviewed with regard to how active they are at the moment: some of them used to be more active in the 1990s, some have become active only recently, for some of them feminism is their main activity, for others it is a position that informs their everyday life and work. The activities of these women form a spectrum of Estonian feminisms through several generations and different experiences with feminist activism, gender mainstreaming on the state level and feminist academic work. All of their stories help to open up various dimensions of the emergence of feminisms in postsocialist Estonian context and describe experiences with relating to postsocialist society and politics in transition.

My choices of whom to interview were undoubtedly guided by my own story of becoming feminist. Coming into feminism through a literature course on US American women writers in history as a student of English language and literature in Estonia in the late 1990s, took me eventually to study feminist studies across several geographical and disciplinary contexts and institutional settings in the USA, Hungary and, finally, Sweden, where I defended a PhD in interdisciplinary gender studies. My relation to feminism has thus largely been shaped by the English language and academic contexts. The fact that I know almost all the women I interviewed influenced the kinds of conversations we were able to engage in. Some of the interviewees have been my teachers, some of them are colleagues and friends I have worked with in various contexts, all of them are people who have been influential for the re-emergence of feminism in Estonia.

Among the interviewees, there is one Estonian-Armenian woman, one woman who grew up abroad and several women who do not currently reside in Estonia. However, it is not a coincidence that they form a relatively homogenous group: all women speak Estonian as their mother tongue, have higher education and could be said to belong to middle class. Due to our educational and experiential similarities, I belong to this group myself and even though I wish to avoid constructing an essentializing category of 'Estonian feminist,' the interviews confirm that feminist ideas are more prevalent among this group of women in the Estonian context than in other groups. While I am limited by being able to comment only on the stories of feminists who have played an influential role in my own journey to feminism, I also believe this personal dimension is a strength of the project. Yet talking to women whose mother tongue is not Estonian and to men who identify as (pro-)feminist would give a different perspective.

One of the biggest challenges of the project is the question of representation of the interviewees. Due to the size of Estonia and its circle of feminists, it is almost unthinkable to completely anonymize the interviewees, a question that we also discussed with all the interviewees. However, since in this article I am interested in creating a collective portrait and analyzing feminism as a phenomenon rather than zooming in on individual stories, I have anonymized all the quotations even though many of the interviewees did not mind being named. It is the intricacies of specific personal and political moments in the narratives of feminists that I am concerned with.

The eternal giving birth to 'real' feminism

'At first I thought that feminist were...I have only encountered those nastiest ones somewhere on Twitter or Facebook and so my understanding of feminism was not quite acceptable...,' admits the 18-year old high school student in an online chat conversation when spontaneously commenting on her progress with transcribing my interviews. She is sincerely enthusiastic about the stories of the younger activists I collected and marvels at how some academic feminists sound very articulate to her. When reading her transcriptions, I sometimes have to go back to the recordings in order to make sense of the text transcribed. This doesn't always help because the excerpts that I am interested in are sometimes muffled by everyday sounds and background noise which distort the words completely. Some words simply disappear.

In Estonia, it is still not very common to position oneself as a feminist. As one interviewee suggested, 'According to my logic, if you are educated and intelligent and you understand theory and you are a woman, then you are definitely a feminist. But it's not like this. Why isn't it?' (1) People are afraid of being misunderstood, of stereotypes about feminists, the flood of angry online comments. When people do identify themselves as feminists, it is not rare to hear them sigh that there is no 'real' feminist movement in Estonia.

Why is feminism in Estonia seen as eternally being in the process of being born, as not actually existing? One of the interviewees reflects:

There are no such crazies who would burn bras, no. They exist only in very large national contexts. Probably there is just no critical mass. If you take some other criteria, Estonia is a very innovative country, so on the basis of that, one might ask why this [supporting the emergence of feminism] doesn't happen (1)?

In other words, women who identify as feminists and the broader public seem to associate feminism with a critical mass of people and often also with the activities of second wave feminists in the US. Even though feminists in Estonia are highly aware of the different kinds of feminisms and the variety of positions within Western feminist context, in particular the image of feminists as 'crazy bra burners' persists, which itself is a media created myth around the protest organized against the Miss America competition in 1968. These myths about feminism clash with the post-Soviet reality of Estonia because they represent the interests of mostly educated white middle-class US American women. The hegemonic image of feminism differs clearly from the questions, problems and cultural, academic and political practices in the local context. As one of the interviewees described it,

We imagine that there should be somehow a big [political] party or a movement. Things just don't work that way in Estonia, there are only very rare historical moments when people get mobilized (2).

Likewise, the image of feminist waves indicates another point of comparison with the West. For example, in a recent radio programme, the host asked the editors of the feminist web journal *Feministarium*, whether Estonia has already reached the forth wave of feminism. The metaphor of the waves, which is a very common way to describe the different stages of the feminist movement in the US and more widely, is often used as a measurement of the progress of feminism in places where feminist thought and movement has come about differently. Taking into account the argument that the wave metaphor discards certain types of feminisms or makes them 'less' feminist (van der Tuin 2009, 10–11, 21), we should ask how might telling stories of feminisms with other trajectories look like? How would that complicate the cartography of feminisms, break the hegemony of the wave narrative?

In addition to postcolonial feminist critique that has explored these questions (Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988), studies of feminist movements in Eastern Europe have pointed out that very often feminism is seen to have failed in Eastern Europe because there has been no large mass mobilization around topics concerning feminism and gender equality. For example, Regulska and Grabowska (2013) have convincingly argued that gender inequality works on very different levels in different areas in postsocialist countries and therefore resistance has been extremely pluralist and decentralized. Many scholars claim that most people in postsocialist countries reacted to forced collective action during communism by turning to individualism after the fall of communism (see e.g. Szelenyi and Wilk 2013). Thus it is not uncommon to interpret the fragmentariness of women's activism that does exist as lack of mobilization.

The persistent hegemony of Western thought patterns requires rethinking the paradigms of social movements so that also the forms of women's activism that

do not fit the Western liberal understanding of gender equality could become more visible. Breaking the hegemony of Western epistemologies also involves articulating analytical frameworks that would take into account numerous more or less visible, more or less effective local political activities and mobilizations against sexist, racist and homophobic practices (Lovin 2013, 192). The complexities of feminist activism in postsocialist countries cannot thus quite be explained within the framework of liberal project of emancipation (Funk 2004). Attempts to describe women's mobilization there have been more successful through concepts like fragmentation, plurality and hybridity (Sandoval 2000; Desai 2005; Lovin 2013; Regulska and Grabowska 2013). In the postsocialist context, this means taking into account the social and economic status of women heavily impacted by the legacies of the Soviet era and the various forms of feminist thought and activism that have emerged as a result. Addressing these questions represents the current reality and 'realness' of feminism in these contexts.

Syncing with the West

The first European Feminist Research Conference takes place in 18-22 August in 1991 in Aalborg, Denmark. Among others over 90 women from Eastern Europe are invited, including several women from Estonia for many of whom this is their first trip abroad and at the same time their first encounter with international academic feminist circles. The range of topics covered is so broad and diverse that many Eastern European women feel overwhelmed. The gap between Eastern and Western women seems enormous so that some workshops even break down due to great misunderstandings on both sides. When a feminist sociologist from Estonia approaches the conference center on 19 August (the Soviet *coup d'état* attempt that day ultimately led to the re-establishment of the independence of the Republic of Estonia), she finds Eastern European women crying. Nobody knows exactly what is happening. There is chaos, panic, fear and despair. CNN is only showing news from Moscow and there is silence about what is happening in the Baltic States. The organizers are compassionate and trying to be helpful. They even offer to arrange exile but that is not an option. She desperately wants to go back home to her family, her children, the youngest of whom is just two months old. Phone connections work only at night and besides her family doesn't have a phone anyway. The contrast between day and night is indescribable: during the day, sitting among hundreds of European feminists, being taken aback by the variety of issues that seem totally alien to her, and at night, sitting by the phone, trying to reach her loved ones back home.

As this emotional story demonstrates, the re-emergence of feminism in Estonia in the 1990s is clearly intertwined with narratives of Estonia regaining independence from the Soviet Union, producing various kinds of tensions and misunderstandings between 'Western' and 'Eastern European' feminists.

Historically a borderland between Western Europe and Russia, Estonia is often represented as a success story in its transition from Soviet socialism to capitalism. This has largely been made possible due to the unquestioning rhetoric of 'catching up with the West' that has dominated Estonian society since the fall of the Soviet Union. The intent to restore Estonia's 'rightful' place among Europeans has

been achieved through a clear distancing from its Soviet past and the Eurasian expanse of Russia, reclaiming the historic homeland and reconnecting with the 'Western World' following five decades of enforced isolation (Rosengren, Lauristin, and Vihalemm 1997). A sense of an imagined and perceived 'lagging behind' discourse has been contained in Estonian nationalist imaginary since the national awakening in the nineteenth century and with a persistence that has largely been unproblematised. However, the 'catching up with the West' mode perversely produces a troubling relationship to feminism. In many ways, the narrative of Estonia is a post-imperial narrative and as such, it is overdetermined by ethnicity rather than gender as a ground for and a mode of protest.

The stories I collected in my project highlight that in postsocialist Estonia feminist ideas primarily emerged from an interest in theory and concepts as well as from critical cultural and art practices rather than being grounded in any particular social and political issue. Unsurprisingly, the more critical voices that have had wider resonance in the society can be found in the visual arts rather than academic publications. One of the examples of feminist art from the early 1990s is Mare Tralla's iconic video installation *So We Gave Birth to Estonian Feminism*, first exhibited at 'Est.Fem' exhibition in 1995. The video mixes representations of women and men from the artist's childhood (herself as a pioneer, working Soviet women, male politicians) and pornographic clips from the West. The self-irony in this work points to how feminism in the Estonian context feels imported but at the same time contains elements from the Soviet equality propaganda as well as critique of women's objectification in the mass media that arrived together with capitalism.

Several interviewees who position themselves as feminist since the mid-1990s agreed that one of the reasons why feminism in Estonia is still a rather academic and cultural project is that we have not had such divisive political questions such as the abortion issue in Poland. This means that 'we don't have anything so terrible where you feel that women's rights have been as if driven over by a tractor.' (3) Or as one interviewee active in the field of arts since the 1990s commented:

It would have to be something very radical. To be honest, I believe and think that if in Estonia something... if for example they would try to ban abortion, then I somehow believe there would be people who would go to the streets. At least I hope so (2).

Speaking of feminism in Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s, one of the interviewees explained: 'Feminism came from the developed Western world, we were not developed. We were totally an agrarian society, the Soviet Union was actually not a modern society.' (4) This means that the shortcomings in the economic development of the time greatly influenced women's lives in the Soviet Union. In a self-sufficient economic context many people had to take care of themselves because certain services and goods were simply not available. Without the economic development of the state it was difficult for feminism to emerge because women spent most of their time on sustaining themselves and their families.

In other words, understandings of the arrival of feminism in Estonia are tightly linked to the narrative of general progress and modernity which were not seen

critically at all during the transition period of the 1990s. The overall direction of the society was towards fixing the deeply felt general 'lag' and thus it also became necessary to package feminism as an import article that 'we' need in order to synchronise with the West again. Several women who came to academic feminism in the 1990s point to 'Western feminism' as an important catalyst for the emergence of feminism in Estonia:

I think there would be no feminism in Estonia without Western feminism. Full stop... If feminism hadn't been mainstream in the West, there would have been no hope for it to develop here. Because there is very little of such self-generated passion in Estonia (3).

Catching up with the West has meant prioritizing economic development and achieving a socio-political order that revolves around (Western) European principles and liberal capitalism. This direction has been seen as self-evident both on the state level as well as among many feminists who came to feminism in the 1990s: 'If you want to develop, it is natural to look towards the more developed ones' (4).

The interviewees brought up a general tendency to set Western theoretical frameworks as a model to be followed rather than trying to create and support solidarities with other postsocialist states that have sometimes been viewed in a patronizing way. As one interviewee pointed out: 'The attitude is more like Latvia is postsocialist, nothing will come from there.' And she adds: 'I don't know how they [in Latvia] have it with feminism, but they are clearly weaker... so we don't have much to be ashamed of' (1).

Furthermore, it was a certain type of Western feminism that was taken as a model, namely liberal, middle class feminism that was not at all focused on class relations. In this respect, the historical memory had its role to play because the totalitarian Soviet Union suppressed and obliterated or sealed off in archives and special collections of libraries all the information about women's movements and feminisms prior to the Second World War. This so-called memory gap made borrowing from the West a logical strategy.

As one of the interviewees pointed out, it is unimaginable that feminism would have re-emerged on its own in Estonia in the 1990s, so that 'someone read Lilli Suburg [an Estonian journalist, writer and feminist active at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th] and became a feminist' (3). She added that the fact that feminism came to Estonia from the West was inevitable and it would be absurd to idealize the possibility of self-generative and alternative options because 'how many self-generative and alternative ways of thinking can there be?' (3). Western influence should not necessarily be seen as negative though because even if theoretical frameworks have come from the West, the question is:

how to inculcate a way of writing in Estonia, a theory that would come from below and this cannot be done without knowing history. I think this cannot be just taken from thin air and also not just like that from social issues. Because the analytical tools need to come from somewhere (5).

In other words, the arguments that are translated and adapted from other contexts can be used in different fields and they are necessary for raising certain feminist

questions. Even if sometimes there has been a lack of sensitivity to the context from where theories have been adapted, most academic feminists in Estonia have been critical towards the essentializing kind of 'Western feminism' since the 1990s. For example, an interviewee who became active in the 1990s emphasized:

As a critical person, I have also raised questions about feminism, been critical. There were many problems with American feminists who came here and I was as if in their way. I did not let them come here with ideas that this was as if an empty place, as if it was like the 1950s in the US. Because the Soviet Union did do a lot of things, because the level of employment was high, other rights and other topics. The situation was entirely different, we can't just transport [ideas], practice has shown (6).

She brought as an example of such patronizing attitudes a remark made by Czech feminists in the 1990s about American feminists who came to Eastern Europe: 'they came here and started studying [us] as if we were aquarium fish and then they made their silly observations' (6).

Feminism in Estonia can thus be described as fragmented, multiple and by no means separate from 'Western feminisms'. It is intertwined with influences from the West and it is in frequent dialogue with 'Western feminism'. At the same time, it cannot be divorced from Estonian historical context and the eagerness of the local political elite to incorporate liberal and neoliberal ideals, its desire to be reunited with the West and identify with the Western European culture more broadly. This desire is also reflected in the practices of many feminists and women's organizations during the transition of the 1990s. Critique of 'Western feminism' does not mean a naïve search for a mythical local position but points to the need to articulate the problems of identifying with the often subconscious desire to become Western.

How do we talk about feminism differently?

Where do our feminist stories come from? How do they create different meanings to different people? What kind of worlds or ways of being in the world they presume and allow? What kind of power relations do they facilitate? Who is in the picture and who remains invisible? Who is more vocal, whose words count? Where and how do we find ways to articulate feminist imaginaries differently, without reproducing mainstream genealogies? How do we communicate viewpoints that would be more attuned to the geo-temporal realities of each local context, without relying on universalizing maps?

As feminist researchers, activists, artists, critics, teachers, politicians, and agents for change, we are both map-users as well as map-makers. Maps help us navigate through the complex theoretical, methodological, ethical issues that arise in our work for change. They are our guidelines, support and sometimes even a helpline. But we also need to remember that we do not have to passively consume and adapt to someone else's view of the world condensed in their maps but we can create our own maps that work for us. Not only can we create our own maps, but we have to.

The stories of how women in Estonia have become feminists since the 1990s show that even though feminist thought and practice in the Estonian context has largely been influenced by Western academic and activists practices, it has remained very Estonia-centered and focused on one certain social group: well-educated middle class women whose mother tongue is Estonian. Little or no parallels are drawn with the experience and situation in other Eastern European countries. More visible actions rarely go beyond EU gender equality policies. The focal point of feminism in Estonia has revolved around Western Europe and its main concerns have largely been affected by a mix of antifeminism, nationalism, neoliberalism and EU gender mainstreaming rhetoric (Marling and Koobak 2017). This is a clear point of reflection for feminists on the local level.

In this article I have also circled around narratives which complicate the perceived belatedness and im/possibility of feminist research, activism and praxis in Estonia. I was prompted to mention the women who helped me transcribe the interviews but who do not identify as feminists because my encounter with them brought out troubling aspects in the stories I had collected from women who do identify as feminists. The remarks these women made about my interviews highlighted clearly the close association of feminist thought in Estonia with academia and elitism, which some of the interviewees also mentioned. Involving in the transcription process women who consider themselves rather far away from feminism made me aware of the painful distance between academic and non-academic women. I became acutely aware of how feminism in the form I know it in only speaks to a very limited group of women in Estonia. I became aware of how I myself have naturalized academic feminist discourses and what kind of troubling questions that raises. These reflections highlight the limitations of current approaches and demand further reflection on the kinds of barriers that are created through keeping feminism within academia. This is an issue in both the local and the transnational context.

As Sara Ahmed (2017) underlines, feminism is not just about participating in protests or writing theory in the academy but it is indeed about *how to live*. In light of these concerns, I 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 interviews with feminists in Estonia and critical reflection around them constitute first steps towards sketching feminism's changing position within a postsocialist context and its complex interpretation of the intersections between feminist, liberal and neoliberal discourses. We need to do the work of building new embedded and embodied knowledges that are more attuned to our local geo-temporal context, experiences and subjectivities, always beginning with ourselves, with our bodies, with our geopolitical locatedness.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the journal editors, special issue editors and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and constructive feedback during the editing process. Special thanks also go to my research participants and in particular the transcribers who made a difference to the fleshing out of my argument.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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