Ethnologia Polona, vol. 46: 2025, 261–264
PL ISSN 0137 -4079, DOI: 10.23858/ethp.2025.46.4264

REVIEW OF *MUSHROOM SPOTS* BY DARYA TRAYDEN, MIANE NIAMA 2025, ISBN: 978-83-971348-9-8

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Mushroom Spots is an autofiction novel set in post-2020 Belarus. The author, Darya Trayden, is a writer, artist and documentary filmmaker. Her first book, a collection of stories titled *Crystal Night*, received the Debut Award in 2019. *Mushroom Spots* is not positioned as an academic text, but several aspects would make it worthy of scholarly attention. It is a rich and engaging reading on life-making in the face of disruption. Those interested in studies of Belarus, particularly in issues of gender, sexuality, post-Soviet transformations and the autoethnographic method, may find this book particularly interesting.

Dealing with heartbreak, the narrator purchases and restores an old, empty house in a Belarusian village. Over thirty-one chapters, the book recounts the narrator's formative childhood memories, placemaking in a village, healing after a breakup and finding a new family. As the story is situated in Belarus after 2020, the narrator observes how more and more people she knew decided to leave the country. Simultaneously, the bars, clubs and restaurants that were connected to memories about her lost lover close down. As some relationships with humans dissipate, the narrator builds new ones with the landscapes, trees, bodies of water and flowers. The "big exodus" happening in the background, coupled with endless house repair works and financial precarity, creates a distinct sense of temporal liminality. The liminality does not end, yet eventually the house gets finished, a garden blooms and a new love is found.

Wacquant offered the term "eclipse of ethnography" to describe the limited access for studying life inside prison (2002). Vazyanau (e-mail exchange, May 2023) proposed that the issue of scholarly access to Belarus since 2020 can be understood as such an eclipse. The issue of safety, both for study participants and ethnographers themselves, most likely contributed to the growing number of studies focusing on the diaspora. This eclipse of ethnography increases the value of Trayden's work, conveying the perspective of a person who stayed. Observing the "big exodus",

the narrator realises that not only loved ones constitute our social fabric, losing people one dislikes can also magnify a sense of disruption. At the same time, she challenges the dramatised narratives populating the public discourse, especially in the diaspora. She resists the construction of Belarus as emptying place, as well as discursive divide between here and there. In the description of trips to EU countries, the humiliation during the border crossing is accompanied by the somewhat pleasant discovery that her friendships have now become transnational. Having friends scattered across Europe extends her possibilities to travel, even with rather limited finances.

As a social anthropologist, I am less interested in defining the exact genre the book belongs to. However, the connection to the feminist autotheory tradition is apparent. "I came to theory because I was hurting," bell hooks writes in her famous essay "Theory as Liberatory Practice" (hooks 1991, 1). Trayden's method seems to take inspiration from hook's idea that critical reflection can be used to imagine "a place where life could be lived differently" (hooks 1991, 2). Although the book is written in clear and accessible language, the bibliography at the end shows how the author traces rich intellectual and literary lineage. Anna Tsing's seminal work on the matsutake mushroom is listed as well, and since the book is titled *Mushroom Spots*, reading it with Tsing's theory in mind seems particularly interesting. Whether Trayden writes about the consequences of the 2020 protests crackdown[1] or the misleading promise of Western culture, spread after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the notion of ruin is consistent with Tsing's restrained optimism. For Tsing, neither disruption nor ruin is necessarily tragic. As something left behind when the promise of progress was not fulfilled, ruin becomes a home for emergent collaborations (Tsing 2015, 18ff). Moreover, there are so many ruins that there is no other way but learning to live within them. With the book built around the process of old house reconstruction, it goes full circle and ceases to be a metaphor. The house becomes both the space and the framework for imagination. Leaving the city is not an act of escapism, but a search for a healing and liberatory place, away from the state's gaze and custody. It is a journey to discover what kind of lives could be lived in a ruin.

The love story is important too. Writing about lesbian love is a deeply political act in today's Belarus, where the violation of LGBTQ+ rights is systemic and new discriminatory laws against the LGBTQ+ community are being introduced (Legal Initiative 2024). What does it mean to become partners when not only is your partnership not legally acknowledged by the state, but even announcing it entails risk? In *Mushroom spots*, not living together, but working together to make a place liveable, becomes a sign that relationships have grown into something beyond "seeing each other".

If autoethnography is about placing oneself in a particular social context, then for social scholars, it could be useful to think about the autoethnographic aspects

1 The protests are not mentioned in the book. This is my interpretation. Disclaimer is needed here, both for the sake of clarity and for safety reasons.

of *Mushroom Spots*. Trayden manages to weave together the sensory and affective with the societal and political. Shrubok writes in her study of older Belarusian women in rural areas and their relationships with plants that caring for gardens, or "cultivating love", helps them negotiate identity and social status (2023). Trayden's book provides a "native" account of the same process when she is evaluated by the older neighbour based on the amount of effort invested in her garden. Further, she writes about dealing with state bureaucracy in a rural setting: "My whole body is begging for the deal to be registered." This embodied desire to own a house, even a very old and uninhabitable one, is contextualised through her childhood memories and the internalised understanding of social stratification developing in post-Soviet Belarus. She shows how children of different social backgrounds would still go to the same school. The poor ones would figure out early on that "normality" is ascribed to a certain gendered and class position. Trayden examines this intuitive understanding of the need to camouflage family poverty and the way certain ideas about femininity could be mobilised to achieve that.

The lack of personal space experienced by a queer teenager is then connected to Belarusian policy on a minimum living space per individual, inevitably linked to social position. But even though a person in a rural area is entitled to more space, privacy continues to cost money. A temporary toilet in the house does not have walls, as building them is expensive. When guests are staying, going to the bathroom requires a collective agreement not to listen to the sounds accompanying the process. The author's attention to the temporality of precarious living, where a lack of money defines the decision-making horizon, is particularly valuable. The money is always lacking, but when the narrator finds some, she spends it on books or other "impractical" things. Later, she reflects on the role this class gap could play in her relationship with her former lover.

Inevitable self-censorship can be seen as an important element of this writing. Some references require certain positionality to be registered, and others may reveal how one's positionality may be shifting. I spent most of my life in Belarus, and one of the personal lessons I got from reading *Mushroom Spots* is that, after five years in exile, I lost an intuitive understanding of what is safe to say or write. At some point, "February" is written in the text. Whether one would understand that it refers to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fully depends on the positionality of the reader. War appears in the book as an embodied reaction happening behind the silence: the delayed menstruation as a response to the shocking news.

Understanding the need for a certain level of self-censorship makes it harder to articulate criticism. One major aspect that seems lacking in the book is the issue of language. *Mushroom Spots* is written in Russian, while the first book by Trayden was in Belarusian. Belarusian writers who choose to write in Russian might have a privileged position in some respects but they also experience a lot of pressure and exclusion from the Belarusian writers' community. Therefore, I would never criticise the choice of language. Can a writer use two languages and switch between

them without the need to explain herself? Moreover, can it be that writing this particular book in Russian felt safer? Was it a question of money, too? I wish the nuanced reflection around these questions were present; however, it may be too much to ask from a book that already deals with so many issues.

In summary, *Mushroom Spots* presents a vulnerable and reflexive exploration of various topics, from love, home and identity to family violence and poverty. Darya Trayden's writing on finding safe(r) spaces in an authoritarian country is both deeply sensual and theoretically informed; it could teach a lot about what can and cannot be said about queer life in Belarus and beyond.

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