

Can The Pushed-Back Speak? Tracing Narrative Agency of Enemised and Victimised Migrants in Poland

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Abstract

The pushed-back migrants are the main subjects of the humanitarian crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border; however their presence as public discourse producers are rather scarce. The aim of this research is to trace the narrative agency of these people and explore its link to their emancipation. Drawing on the postcolonial theory, we address the question of how the subaltern(ised) subjects produce their discourse. With the analysis of media content, literature, and artistic materials, we argue that the discourse production of pushed-back migrants in Poland is heavily limited, restricted, and often interrupted, however they manifest agency by manoeuvring victimisation and contesting the enemisation of themselves. Using these results, we conclude that the researcher's role during this crisis should be a mix of translation and representation of what the pushed-back said and were forbidden to say.

Keywords: narrative agency, emancipation, migration, enemisation, victimisation

Introduction

After two and a half years of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the research published on this issue includes the material traces of people on

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the move (Judzińska, Sendyka 2022a; 2022b), discourse on them (Pietrusińska 2022; Straczk 2023) and, finally, very limited examples of their own discourse (Pałęcka 2022; Traba, Kallouche 2022). This extremely small scope of the narrative agency of the main subjects of the crisis and our “awareness of voice and particularly of silence” (Johnson 2014: 13) led us to follow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1994) question of whether the subaltern can speak. As Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska noticed in her research on pro-refugee discourse in Poland, “speaking on behalf of subordinate others, representatives of the host society ignore the issues of audibility, representation and agency of refugees” (Pietrusińska 2020: 61). These reflections enhance us to draw on postcolonial theory (Spivak 1994; Said 2003; Maggio 2007; Gandhi 2019; Vijay, Gupta, Kaushiva 2020) which “offers a reckoning with injured life and communities of suffering” (Gandhi 2019: 189) without an orientalisation of the subalterns by making them speak but never being really concerned with them, “except as the first cause” of our own speech (Said 2003: 20–21).

Migrants’ absence as discourse producers is inevitably intertwined with the question on how a researcher can speak about them. On the one hand, this question can constitute a topic of a much profound separate research; on the other, each study on the topic of this crisis to some extent requires prior answer to this dilemma. The dilemma stems from what Patricia Collins, a Black feminist theoretician, pointed out that scholars need to experience what they research (Collins 1990) and this is echoed in the words of migrants themselves: “[n]o one can understand what they are going through except those of us who lived that same experience” (The New Humanitarian, 15.03.2022). However, at the same time, Collins writes about being accountable for the consequence of the research done – and we would add, likewise, for the research omitted and for the silence reproduced by this omission. Following Spivak, an Indian-born theoretician herself, we reject being “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresentor who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (Spivak 1994: 87) because we consider this as reproducing the silence leading to suffering. We have also to recognise our positionalities: the one of a Schengen passport holder and the one of a migrant himself.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, we argue that the narrative agency of migrants³ potentially subjected to pushbacks (i.e. there being agents producing the discourse) during their stay in a situation of humanitarian crisis (in the forest, in detention, or on the further move until the legal stay) is restricted, limited, and interrupted, however it brings some promising prospects for the emancipatory effort through manoeuvring victimisation and contesting enemisation of these people. We base our argument on three research questions: 1) what are the topics of migrants’ discourse and their self-presentation? 2) in which forms is their discourse being produced, conveyed, and

³ We use the term “migrants” as one encompassing all possible interpretations of human mobility across national borders.

consumed, and how do these forms reflect their agency? 3) how are the discursive practices of these migrants linked to their emancipation? In order to explore these questions, we analyse traditional and social media content, literature, and materials from some artistic actions.

This article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we theorise the production of discourse on migration which leads us to the quadruple matrix of migrants' discursive presentation according to their enemisation and victimisation. Next, we address the subalternity of migrants subjected to pushbacks in Poland in the context of their (lack of) narrative agency and the researchers' role in this matter, as well as briefly explain the methodology of the study and the selection of sources. In the empirical section, we present the examination of the narrative agency of the migrants themselves and we discuss the results of this exploration in the light of the selected theories. In conclusion, we summarise the emancipatory prospects of the scholarly discourse based on the narrative agency of people on the move.

Researchers towards the (lack of) narrative agency of migrants – postcolonial theory combined with discourse analysis

Emancipatory discourses and agency vs. enemisation and victimisation of migrants.

In this section, we address the implications of discourse on the migrants' lives and emancipation. Discourse can be seen as a "way of thinking and arguing" which involves "naming and classifying" and "has material outcomes that impinge on people's lives" (Seidel, Vidal 1997: 59). As Četta Mainwaring (2016) shows, migrants are often named and classified as victims or villains which can strongly impact how they get treated by societies and states. In the case of the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border, the migrants are often depicted by the Polish government as lacking agency: "instrumentalised" and "exploited" "tools" of the Belarusian regime (e.g. PAP 2021). This language of *victimisation* is combined with *enemisation* as migrants are presented to be exploited (weaponised) within Lukashenka's "hybrid war" against Poland (Krępa 2022) which makes them doubly subaltern – to the enemy and to the security system.

There could also be a low level of *victimisation* combined with a high level of *enemisation*. Within this discourse, the migrants are being presented as individualised cunning villains – with the presupposition of their "bad" intentions derived from their individual but general-law-like understood experiences. This is often manifested in the securitisation of migrants as "job stealers" or "welfare scroungers" (Mainwaring 2016) whose agency should be repressed for security reasons.

The opposite strategy also brings insecurity: lowering the level of the *enemisation* of migrants is sometimes adopted together with their *victimisation* within an approach of human rights which assumes that the migrants to be secured “must perform as the depoliticized suffering subject incapable of action and necessitating rescue” (Mainwaring 2016: 290) and “helpless in the face of the European security complex” (Innes 2016: 264). As Joe Maggio puts it, “‘liberal anti-colonialists’ have essentialised the subaltern because of the romantic impulse to have the most ‘pure’ oppressed populace as possible” (Maggio 2007: 428) – subaltern to our rescue and aid.

As the above considerations suggest, emancipatory discourse must avoid both victimisation and enemisation but this is not enough. First, according to Claudia Aradau (2004: 204) it should also avoid presenting migrants as primarily or exclusively migrants but should describe them as diverse individuals within “a rupture from the assigned identity and a partaking of a universal principle”. Migration is not, therefore, constitutive to the identity of migrants but only to the oppression they face due to migration seen as “a particular interpretation of mobility [...] linked to the political-normative discourse of nation-states and the global political hierarchy” (Karagiannis, Randeria 2018: 232). Thus, the imagination of states and hierarchies “makes” migrants, not acts of human mobility. Emancipatory discourse should seek to speak beyond borders and nations.

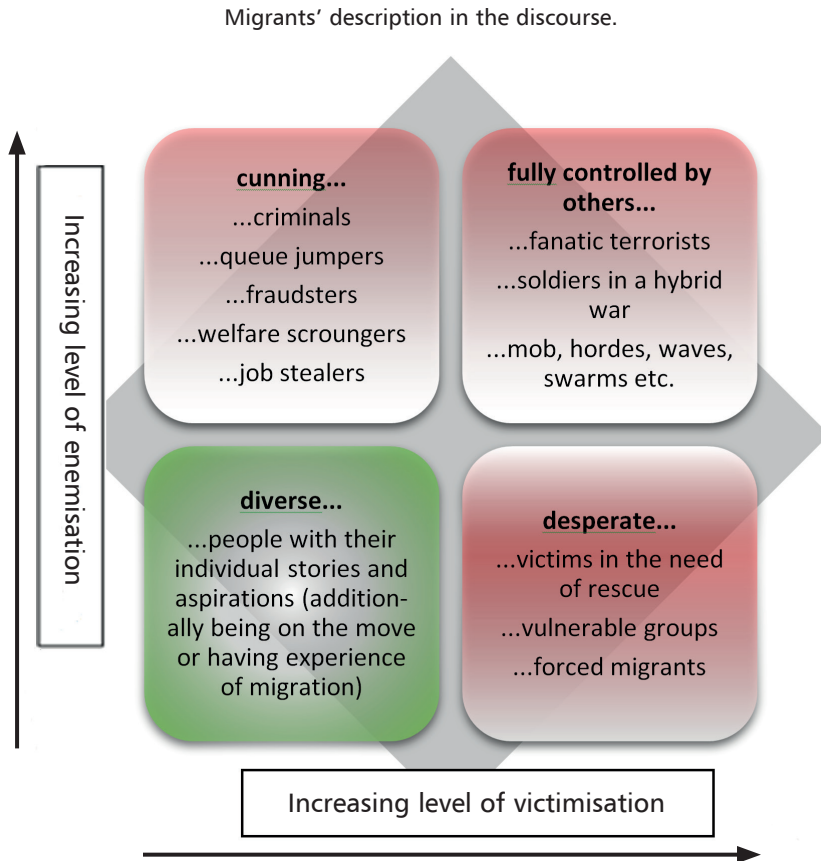
Secondly, migrants should not be idealised: they both can and cannot be dangerous – the reason is not that they migrate but that they are agentic individuals, and the same rule applies to all people, no matter how many features they share with us. Emancipatory discourse should, hence, aim at constructing “alternative knowledge for how to deal with migration” rather than at presenting migrants as non-dangerous and friendly (Aradau 2004: 397) because this leads to the production of pro-refugee anti-discourse “constantly negating the representations and topoi appearing in the anti-refugee discourse and creating counter-narratives and counter-representations” (Pietrusińska 2020: 52). Therefore, last but not least, emancipatory discourse must always be realistic because, as Pietrusińska (2020) argues, omitting difficult questions eventually strengthens the anti-migration stance.

The matrix of enemisation/victimisation levels in migrants’ descriptions summarising the above reflections based on the literature review is presented in the figure below.

How can we hear those who cannot speak? On translation and representation

After establishing the prerequisites of the emancipatory discourse on migration, we can embark on the question of who is to emancipate themselves and from what. Most of the migrants involved in the humanitarian crisis come from the Middle East and Africa through Belarus to Poland and on the route they both manifest agency in the relation to smugglers, state services, or activists and experience either suffer-

Figure 1.



Source: own elaboration based on Mainwaring 2016; Innes 2016; Aradau 2004; Pietrusińska 2022.

ing caused by natural hazards and state actions restricting their mobility or support from civil society (Grupa Granica 2021; Krępa 2022). Structures restricting human mobility through categorising people into different legal statuses did not appear out of nature or a globally agreed social contract. Rather, as Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018: 20) argues, they stem from “the orientalist and racialized practices of European colonialism and imperialism”. This leads to the notion of coloniality which is an “idea that the colonized population is fundamentally different and inherently inferior to the colonizer” (2018: 24). More precisely, restrictions impacting the migrants at the Belarusian-Polish border should be addressed through the prism of the (post)colonial relations between the countries where they come from and with Poland. Put simply, the relationship between Poland and the migrants in question could be argued to be an element of the relationship between the privileged part of the world and the rest which is often labelled “the Global South” seen as “various

social actors that consider themselves to be in subaltern(ized) positionalities of global networks of power” (Kloß 2017). Hence, in the simplest sense, the subaltern(ised) migrants are to emancipate themselves from their subalternity which brings physical and psychological suffering resulting from economic-political disadvantage and restrictions on their mobility.

In the more complex sense, however, emancipation is to also be achieved in the case of discourse production. As Edward Said described in his famous work *Orientalism*, Gustave Flaubert subalternised the Egyptian woman because “she never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her” which allowed him not only to control her body but also narrative (Said 2003: 6, original emphasis). Thus, subalterns are not only physically dominated but also excluded from the discourse production: not only can they not present their postulates and stance on public issues, but they are even deprived of the possibility to represent who they are.

More depth to the understanding of subalternity within the concept of the “Global South” is provided by Alfred J. López, who noticed that [w]hat defines the global South is the recognition by peoples across the planet that globalization’s promised bounties have not materialized, that it has failed as a global master narrative. The global South also marks, even celebrates, the mutual recognition among the world’s subalterns of their shared condition at the margins of the brave new neoliberal world of globalization. (López 2007: 3)

In this conceptualisation, the important element is, firstly, the disillusionment that the ideology of neoliberal globalisation would not ameliorate one’s living conditions, and, secondly, stemming from this, agency as they would decide to improve their life on their own (cf. Innes 2016). The irregular migration which these people choose is seen as the way they contest the dominant political order while irregularity “is not [...] marginalization and powerlessness; it is also contestation, profoundly political and powerful” (Johnson 2014: 7). Thus, subalternity is being recognised and celebrated to be, then, overcome.

The irregularity of migration, due to each activity being beyond the legal framework, tends to be clandestine and, hence, proceeds in silence which should not be considered always harmful for the silent subject, because the agency can likewise mean the refusal to speak (Johnson 2014) and in this case, the silence serves to hide the irregular action. Yet, when the actions are being revealed by the state, i.e. the migrants are captured by border guards, the political dimension of silence is different. It can still protect the person against revealing more harmful information but it can also be harmful itself as it prevents these people from manifesting their will and, therefore, from 1) constituting them as a subject of the law (i.e. effectively lodging asylum application) and from 2) arousing public support which contests the oppressive practices of the state seen by Aradau (2004) as necessary for migrants’ emancipation. This is the trap – agentic irregularity leads finally to disempowering silence.

Therefore, to emancipate themselves, the subaltern(ised) migrants, should speak. The problem, however, is not as much about speaking as it is about being listened to by the dominant and privileged ones (Maggio 2007); and the question is about power on discourse production and distribution. But can the subaltern(ised) subjects force the dominant ones to listen? In some instances, they can, e.g. through demonstrations or graffiti. These are, however, accessible rather to labour migrants or asylum seekers who stay in open reception centres but not for those pushed back to Belarus, kept in detention, or staying *sans papier*. Therefore, the migration scholars in Poland are now facing a dilemma of whether to reproduce the silence or to convey the message of muted migrants – risking the accusation of being the privileged Western scholars who “always know more and create an implicit self-referent yardstick” to represent others (Vijay et al. 2020: 483). Criticism of this sort was addressed to Spivak herself, who wrote that women “cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved” (Spivak 1994: 84). Maggio (2007: 429) claimed that Spivak “cannot escape her elite role” but is academic publishing not an inherently elitist activity? Furthermore, Maggio argues that both speaking for the oppressed and passively letting them speak is, in fact, silencing them because while speaking they either remain the “exotic other” (2007: 427) or “speak in a ‘language’ that is already recognized by the dominant culture” (2007: 432). This somehow refers to Leela Gandhi’s “catch-22 of colonial governmentality”: that “those who don’t have politics can’t have politics until they have politics” (Gandhi 2019: 197). Aporetically, to be able to speak, the subalterns must first speak their own language and, moreover, be heard and understood.

What Maggio, drawing on Walter Benjamin, suggests as a solution to this predicament is the scholar who acts not as a representative but as a translator whose task “is to ‘echo’ the original in a way that helps illuminate the intended meaning” (2007: 432) and who “can express subaltern life with appropriate sensitivity and subtleness” (2007: 433). The translation covers all practices which capture, convey, and make the text accessible to the audience and in doing this the translator acknowledges that he or she “is constituted by the other, or the subaltern, and the subaltern is also constructed vis-à-vis its relation to the dominant groups” (2007: 437). Thus, according to Maggio, the best that the researcher can do for migrants’ emancipation is to remain a member of the dominant group and use her own power to make the migrant’s voice no longer “strange, mystifying, [or] puzzling” to the audience (2007: 437).

But a translator needs some *content* to be translated, apart from the *context* which can be a subject of translation likewise. The task of our study is to analyse the silence along with the voice, the content, and the lack thereof, which means examination of the whole communication process: discourse production, distribution, and reception. This leads to posing a question of to which extent the translation is possible, and we are going to address this issue with the results of our empirical analysis.

On the methods of tracing and examining the narrative agency

The most intuitive methods of studying how one speaks would be the interviews (for data collection) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (for data analysis). In this research however, we do not use interviews with migrants for two reasons. First, this could be unsafe for many of them or – if limited only to those for whom it is safe – would exclude the most vulnerable ones from the research. Second, given the gravity of the current situation at the Polish-Belarusian border, we must first address the question of whether the pushed-back can really speak. Inducing their voice by interviews would not serve to answer this question as it would deliver artificially provoked speech. Instead, our aim is to observe their discourse in the “natural” conditions, i.e. to trace all discourse instances and to analyse not only what the migrants say but also how, why, to whom, and with what result. Thus, we do not reject interviewing these migrants by other scholars. Instead, we intend to precede the research based on such interviews with the analysis of the whole picture of these migrants’ narrative agency which allows the scholars to design an interview-based study in a way that situates this effort within the complex machine of discourse production on this topic.

While carrying out the above-pictured task, we are inspired by two approaches. The first, on which we draw in the case of data collection, is the studies of Natalia Judzińska and Roma Sendyka (2022a; 2022b) on the material traces of the humanitarian crisis in question. As they (2022b: 29) write, “[m]igration scholars can thus effectively infer from [...] material clues while building a model of humanitarian crisis research which would be supportive and safer for the most vulnerable migration actors, and therefore more ethical”. We agree on the ethical dimension of this method, as it enables prior examination of what the migrants already exposed to the audience before the formulation of questions that could be asked during the interviews. Material traces could be used to design representation in the safest possible way:

speaking with things and about things in the case of humanitarian crises is a potentially allied act towards [its] subjects. It has the advantage of hiding the personal details of people on the move, thus ensuring their fragile security. In addition, it does not interfere with the (often deadly) dangerous route and does not divert attention to other actors of the crisis. (Judzińska, Sendyka 2022a)

In our study, we attempt to transpose this understanding to discursive traces, however with the awareness of the difference between material and discursive world.

The second inspiration, used for data analysis, is Norman Fairclough’s (1992) model for CDA which consists of three inter-related stages of examination: 1) *text analysis* (the meaning of the content), 2) *discursive practice analysis* (means of which the content is produced, distributed and consumed, and 3) the *social practice analysis* of socio-historical conditions which govern these processes and the impact of the texts on them. The relation between discourse and other social practices (as also

between the practices and structures) is dialectical which means that discourse both shapes other practices or structures and is being shaped by them (Fairclough 1992). Therefore, this analysis enables an examination of how the migrants are triggered to speak or denied the right to do so but also (however, to a limited extent) how their speech transforms the world they live in. As Fairclough (1992: 72) puts it, the central objective of this kind of CDA is “to trace explanatory connections between ways [...] in which texts are put together and interpreted, how texts are produced, distributed and consumed in a wider sense, and the nature of the social practice in terms of its relation to social structures and struggles”. Thus, within this methodological framework, both oppression and resistance (agency) could be unearthed.

The agency can be partially derived from the types of forms of the traces. Judzińska and Sendyka construct their typology of camps enacted by migrants in the Białowieża forest and differentiate their functions in which one finds alternating scopes of agency – some camps are shaped by migrants themselves, while the others (e.g. “pushback camp”) emerge by the intrusion of services which can decide what objects the migrants can take and what they must leave. The same can be said about discursive traces and the aim of the analysis of narrative agency is to examine how these traces both shape and are being shaped by power relations. This, we believe, is the emancipatory dimension of this research.

Thus, tracing narrative agency leads to uncovering deeper power relations. Fairclough notes that the researcher can

neither reconstruct the production process nor account for the interpretation process purely by reference to texts: they are respectively *traces of* and cues to these processes [...] something which people actively produce and make sense of on the basis of shared commonsense procedures. (Fairclough 1992: 72, emphasis added)

This is the difference between the discursive and natural world: in the domain of nature, there are fixed “procedures” of physical laws and chemical reactions while in the social sphere, these procedures are contingently constructed through power relations. Material objects left in the forest “enter into a relationship with their immediate environment – nature, transforming into habitats for new organisms” (Judzińska, Sendyka 2022b: 26). The forest cannot ignore the textiles, plastic, paper, metal, chemistry and so forth left inside it but people, unfortunately, can pass by indifferently both material and discursive traces, even the most striking ones, or they can use their power to hide and silence these traces. This is the task of representation – not to produce the proxy traces in someone else’s name but to highlight the already produced ones and reconstruct destroyed ones, making them vivid, conspicuous, and vexing to the point that they transform the world.

To explore the narrative agency of migrants subjected to pushbacks, we pose three research questions based on Fairclough’s model. The first concerns what the

migrants speak – what are the topics of their discourse and their self-presentation regarding the matrix of enemisation and victimisation. The second is about their discursive practices: in which forms their discourse is being produced, conveyed, and consumed, and how these forms reflect their agency. Finally, the third question addresses the context: how the discursive practices of these migrants are both shaped by and shape the social structures within which they occur and the associated practices with regard to emancipation in particular. Given the scarcity of the research material, the following extensive selection of sources was used. Apart from literature review (Pałęcka 2022; Traba, Kallouche 2022), the internet was reviewed with the use of browsers and key words of “Polish-Belarusian border crisis”, “migrants on Belarusian border” and “asylum Poland Belarus border” which revealed twenty-seven releases containing speech of migrants in the context of the crisis in question. Furthermore, the contacts with activists were used to gather information on the migrants’ speeches published in social chains by activists, and on artistic actions with migrants’ participation⁴. The time span of the material was from the beginning of the crisis in August 2021 until the end of March 2023. We are aware of the limitation of this study stemming from the fact that potentially pushed-back migrants can speak without revealing that they were subjects of the crisis (e.g. publishing on the blog on non-migratory topics)⁵, however we consider this is not that probable in the crisis situation. Last but not least, to strengthen the voice of migrants as much as possible, we decided to provide a considerable vast number of quotations, however the paper’s limitations did not always make it possible to provide likewise information on who exactly was the author of the given words. As the research is focused on the discourse, we consider this justifiable. In some cases, the data of the migrants are not accessible or hidden for their own security’s sake.

Manoeuvring victimisation, contested enemisation and stolen emancipation – empirical analysis results and discussion

“The way chose us” but “we have decided a decision” – ambiguous agency of pushed-back

In this section we present the results of empirical analysis in line with the three-dimensional model of CDA offered by Fairclough (1992). In the first sub-section, we focus on the examination of the texts’ content – the topics of migrants’ discourse and their self-presentation, regarding the issue of agency in particular. We use the

⁴ We are especially thankful to Joanna Sarnecka for sharing with us materials of “Postcards from Przemysł”, an artistic action based on messages from migrants detained in the detention centre in this city.

⁵ We are grateful to Weronika Kloc-Nowak for this remark.

already presented quadruple matrix of migrants' discursive presentation to argue on manoeuvring victimisation and contesting enemisation by migrants.

The dominant topic of the public discourse of migrants subjected to pushbacks is their route as well as suffering and humiliation resulting from it. Migrants share their personal stories and emotions. Ibrahim, a Syrian refugee who reached Germany, expressed his anger that the media called the crisis "a hybrid war". He wrote in the text published by *The New Humanitarian*: "[t]hey did not look at how we were suffering" during the migration process (The New Humanitarian, 15.03.2022). Adam Aliksandar (a nickname of a 33-year-old Kurd) wrote in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "Why were we treated in such an inhumane way here? So humiliated?" (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022a). Ako Majeed, in the same newspaper, stated about life in the Bruzgi camp in Belarus that it "was so hard that it hurt the soul" (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022b).

This anger is aggravated by the comparison with the warm welcome of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Some of the migrants underline the injustice of the discrepancy between the treatment they and Ukrainians receive and claim equality for all people. Ibrahim writes: "I'm very sympathetic to the Ukrainian people. [...] But the difference in treatment just hurts so much. The blood that comes out of all people is the same colour" (The New Humanitarian, 15.03.2022). One migrant appealed in the message to activists' hotline: "Only give them food / Hot water / You are looking at them while they are dying? Would you do the same thing if they were Ukrainian?" (Pałęcka 2022). Aliksandar wrote about the humiliation stemming from the racism of Polish society: "[w]e, people of a different skin color, do not even have as much value to them as a dog or a cat. [...] Hypocrites! You make people prefer to become pets" (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022a). Thus, the personal stories mix with more general observations about social reality.

The suffering is even more visible in the content which, initially, was not intended to be published but was a part of the communication with either authorities or the activists. In requests from detention centres, one can read: "I feel very depressed and my mental health is very low" (Egala, 02.01.2023), "I am suffering here again" (Egala, 08.02.2023), "I feel vulnerable and suffer from panic attacks" (Egala, 18.02.2023). In the artistic project "Postcards from Przemyśl" (a town where one detention centre is located), the following message was displayed: "[o]ur bodies are weak due to nutrition, teeth deteriorate due to lack of vitamins. [...] Closed camps are dark nightmares [...] I'm tired, I cry every day" (Postcards from Przemyśl, 23–24.09.2022).

Similarly, suffering is an important topic of communication with the activists who provide help. As Alicja Pałęcka (2022) from the "Ocalenie" Foundation notes, the requests for help are often preceded by the words "we are dying" or "I don't want to die". Pałęcka summarises her observations by stating that the migrants use "various soft tools to pressure aid providers" – i.e. the reference to humanitarian values, presenting themselves as deserving compassion or sending photos of children. However, it varies how much the migrants talk about suffering. In the interview given

to an Arab-language *YouTube* channel *Black Box* and then translated by Krzysztof Traba and Yasmine Kallouche (2022), a young man, Ali, explains in detail his journey through Belarus and Poland to Germany but rarely mentions suffering. Talking about one's own suffering can have different functions and it is highly risky to judge why it was used in a particular instance of communication (see Anonymous 2023). We do not negate both the need to share emotions and the agentic calculation of what the message receiver would like to hear. Therefore, this topical focus on suffering suits the victimisation narrative, however it should be remembered, as Pałęcka noted, that it can be itself an example of the agency of migrants.

The complicated interplay between agency and the lack thereof is also seen in the migrants' presentation of reasons for fleeing their countries of origin. The migrants often emphasise that they were forced to leave: "we have left against our will" (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 03.01.2023), "I cannot go back" (vsquare.org, 04.11.2021), "[m]any people and many circumstances forced me to emigrate to Europe" (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022b). Sometimes, instead, the migrants put emphasis on their own decision-making, however, often also depicting the consequences of the options they had: "[t]hey told my mother that if she wanted to see me again, she had to control me. That's when we realised it was time for me to go into hiding. [...] I decided to go to Belarus" (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023) or "my stay in Egypt was one big wait from which nothing came. So I decided to go back to Russia" (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022). In some cases, as in the interview with Ali, we can find a mixture of the sense of being forced with the subsequent acts of decision-making:

Why did I migrate? As a society, we are deprived of the basic necessities of life. Everything is missing [...] So what can we do? Why should one stay in this country? There is no other solution. We tried to make a change but we couldn't. [...] I was thinking about emigration even before the route via Belarus opened. But there was no opportunity, and once it arose I thought: I'll try. (Traba, Kallouche 2022)

The same maneuvering sense of agency can be observed when the migrants present their route or detention. They depict different factors which they consider to force them to behave in a given way, both natural and human-made: "[m]y current situation right now is forcing me to do it [hunger strike] and I have lose all my appetite" (Egala, 08.02.2023), "if you try to go out, they [Belarusian border guards] beat you up, they hit you [...] they made me understand that from there, you don't get out. If you want to get out, you have to pay", "[t]hey told us to walk and we had no choice. [...] The swamp got too deep so we had to turn back" (HRW, 24.11.2021), "[w]e don't make fires at night because they would see us" (pap.pl, 18.11.2021), "[w]e were tired and we decided to rest for 3–4 hours [...] there was no other way, we couldn't just let ourselves die out there" (Traba, Kallouche forthcoming). Sometimes, again, the sense of their own decision-making is being mixed with external factors: "I refuse to eat because I have been imprisoned by the Polish Border Guard" (Egala, 18.02.2023),

Yes, [we went] because we knew that if we tried to cross the border again, in the same place, we would be caught again. So we decided to return to Minsk [...] when the drones flew away around five in the morning, I decided to get myself together. (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022)

Also, the migrants depict how they manifest their agency negotiating with other actors, sometimes with serious consequences: “[t]hey [smugglers] replied: ‘OK, but for such money, we can only take you to Vilnius’. I agreed” (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023), “I asked her [an activist] to meet me in another park and I asked her to bring some sandwiches too” (Traba, Kallouche 2022), “I had no choice so I played by their [The Red Cross in Russia] rules, and one time I asked straight out: How long are we going to play like this?” (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022), “I asked them [Belarusian guards] to show us respect and because I did, I was kicked, punched, tasered, and pepper sprayed” (HRW, 07.06.2022). More often however, the migrants depict how they beg or plea: “I begged them [Polish border guards] to take her to hospital”, “I begged and pleaded, I cried like a baby, I begged them not to split up my family”, “[w]e pleaded and cried for them [Belarusian border guards] to let us go”, (HRW, 24.11.2021), “he got [a call] from the Red Cross, so I begged them to help me too” (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023) and numerous other examples.

Last but not least, the suffering often stresses the agency, as the migrants depict how strongly they overcome all difficulties: “I tried to be strong for my children and I just kept walking” (dziendobry.tvn.pl, 25.01.2022), “[w]e are followed by tragic stories that only men of iron can endure” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022b), “[w]ar teaches you things. The pressure it puts on you forces you to change, sometimes in good ways” (The New Humanitarian, 15.03.2022). Thus, the migrants often victimise themselves, however it is not unambiguous – in the midst of the whole suffering, they also emphasise their agency and it can be found vividly in the words announcing a hunger strike: “So we came illegal, because was no other way to come legal, we didn’t choose the way, but the way choosed us [...] Sir, after ignorance we are being faced, we have decided a decision” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 03.01.2023).

“With all respect and love we hope you are good and doing well” – contested enemisation

The words quoted in the title of this sub-section open a letter written by Hamid, an Afghani refugee, to the head of the detention centre in Przemyśl (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 07.01.2022). The pushed-back migrants contest enemisation of them which characterises Poland’s government’s discourse on migration. Sometimes they fall into victimisation mode like in the words: “[t]he migrants were not aggressive, they did not use violence, they were the victims controlled by the Belarusians” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022b) or “[p]lease be gentle to the families in the forest, tired,

hounded” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022a). However, they often try to avoid victimisation and, instead, they depict themselves in line with the emancipatory discourse: “[t]hey are people just like you, they have souls, feelings, and dreams too” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022a), “I was judge [...] I have a 10 month’s daughter” (oko.press, 29.05.2022). The migrants assure: “I’m [not] attending to break any rules” (02.01.2023), “[w]e are not terrorists, we are families and friends” (vsquare.org, 04.11.2021), “I am not criminal – I am not murder[er]” (oko.press, 29.05.2022), “my friends and I are not criminals” (Pałęcka 2022), “[w]e are not here to hurt anybody or to make any problems” (POLITICO Europe, 08.12.2021).. This is however, an extremely limited scope of emancipation, as being a migrant subjected to push-back is never separated from oppression.

Moreover, the migrants cannot freely decide on their identity, an identity which can be deadly dangerous. Ali says: “I thanked God for that [a talk with a stranger] because this way I didn’t look like a migrant. I didn’t tell the girls I am on the move” (Traba, Kallouche 2022). They remain trapped in the enemisation because the very fact of migration makes them enemies in the eyes of anti-migrant parts of society.

Besides the overt contestation of enemisation, the migrants attempt to present their “normal” life lived before and during the migration process which is a considerable emancipatory tool. However, this is rather scarce among the topics of migration and suffering: “this... (shows his hand) is my dad’s name. I got them tattooed four years ago [...] In Sri Lanka, the most important thing for me was my dad. And football came second” (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023), “I am a civil engineer, my friend is an agricultural engineer, and the other is a pharmacist, etc.” (Pałęcka 2022). Thus, the migrant/refugee identity seems to involuntarily dominate the personhood of these people: “[a]lthough only one of us spoke good English, we could all say, ‘I am refugee’” (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023). There is also an interplay between the claim for universal and particular rights as migrants often emphasise that they “are humans” (thenationalnews.com, 01.04.2022; Postcards from Przemyśl, 23–24.09.2022) and that they want to be treated accordingly: “[w]e are willing to stop eating [...] till we feel we are human being” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 03.01.2023). At the same time, they emphasise the fact of being a refugee (Egala, 18.02.2023), and that they claim asylum which they often write on the sheets they display to the press while encountering the Border Guard. The migrants send the message that they are not going to hurt anyone, and they demand treatment in line with human rights declared by the European Union. This, however, often meets refusal:

I told them [Polish border guards] clearly, but they said they are not for asylum applications. They said I crossed the border illegally, so now I have to sign these papers and then I will be taken abroad. I pleaded for my rights – to no avail. (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022)

When the border guards came, we asked for asylum and showed them papers where we had written “asylum” in Polish and English. They told us “You don’t need those papers” and threw them away. (HRW, 07.06.2022)

We asked them for asylum [...] we insisted and kept asking. She responded “ok ok”, asked us to sit down and wait. Then she left. We were full of hope that we will receive asylum but nothing happened. (Border Emergency Collective, n.d.)

Last but not least, it is striking with how the migrants often construct their discourse with no enemisation of the whole Belarusian or Polish societies but with dignity which can be found e.g. in the words: “[!]et them arrest us and kill us, but don’t let them kill us slowly” (vsquare.org, 04.11.2021), “I respect you / But Tell me / Where is humanity?!” (Pałęcka 2022) or with despair: “I think suicide is better. Please don’t leave me alone” (Postcards from Przemyśl, 23–24.09.2022). The pushed-back people openly express their demand for dignified treatment, and they uncover European hypocrisy, however still being eager for contact with all people of goodwill. This is a glimmer of emancipation in the darkness of humiliation and pain, a celebration of subalternity to, then, overcome it.

Limited, restricted, interrupted – discursive practices of pushed-back

In this sub-section, we examine the discursive practice – how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. We differentiate five sorts of discursive instances of migrants within this crisis: short messages displayed on sheets, interviews, requests from detention, help hotline messages, and artistic actions. These forms manifest different levels of agency of their creators however, again, it is not free from ambiguity.

The short messages are examples of desperate shouts displayed by migrants when encountered by the Border Guard. They contain very short messages, typically “I want asylum in Poland”, limited by the materials possessed by migrants. We do not know who initiates using these signs, but they obviously serve to claim the right to apply for asylum. Therefore, their only role is protection against pushback (sometimes effective), and they reduce the identity of their producers to only the role of an asylum seeker. Theoretically, the migrants can write whatever they want on the sheets, but they write almost only asylum claims and if the Polish authorities obeyed the asylum law, this discursive practice would disappear. The audience are the services but also the press and the general public.

The interviews give much more agency within discourse production, however, as the analysis shows, they are dominated by the topics of journey and suffering. We do not know how often the interviewee initiates the interview, however, often they express such will: “[w]hat was most important to me during this humanitarian crisis [...] was my human and journalistic duty to be the voice of migrants and refugees” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 20.06.2022b). In some interviews, the whole communication is displayed while others present only quotations in the materials authored by journalists or researchers or use reported speech. The interviewees are asked, and

they answer, however often they freely make digressions. Rarely do the interviewees ask questions themselves or even make requests:

“[the journalist:] – Are you tired?

[the interviewee:] – Yes, but I have a request.

– I’m listening.

– Will you eat something with me? I don’t want to eat alone” (wyborcza.pl, 30.01.2023).

In summary, this discursive practice assumes asymmetrical power relations of a questions-and-answers form, and this is the author who finally edits the interview and publishes it.

Sometimes the journalists and researchers decide to hide or change some details to ensure the security of the interviewee (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022; Traba, Kallouche 2022) or the interviewees themselves express that they decided to hide some information: “[n]ow I’m in a safe place. That’s all I can say” (oko.press.pl, 09.04.2022). Hence, this communication is also heavily impacted by the subaltern(ised) positionality of the migrants, however it gives them much more opportunity to produce emancipatory discourse because the migrants present their life apart from the crisis.

Requests from detention centres are formal letters that follow some formal conventions such as the opening and closing addresses. However, they provide the migrants with the opportunity to write everything they want and to decide whether it will be published or not. In one case, the complaint was written by another migrant who expressed his reservation about it in the *post scriptum*: “I have been asked from that young man to just write for them this complaint. I have no hand at all in this” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 03.01.2023). The migrants often ask questions in these requests: “What are our sin? [...] Why no one think about us?? Why no one even want give us clear answer to our clear questions???” (bialystok.wyborcza.pl, 03.01.2023), however, elsewhere they admit that these questions remain with no answers: “[w]e tried and wrote several requests to improve the food, but unfortunately we didn’t get any responses” (Postcards from Przemyśl, 23–24.09.2022). Hence, it seems that this is not communication in the proper sense because there is no obligatory answer. The pushed-back can speak in detention but not necessarily be heard.

In the case of the help hotline, the situation is complicated by the fact that it is not a public source as such but it was published by the journalists (vsquare.org, 04.11.2021) or the researcher (Pałęcka 2022), however some migrants expressed such will: “i will show these messages to everyone and publish it on social media”, “[w]e hope that you will help us [...] to deliver our voice to the whole world and through all the newspapers” (Pałęcka 2022). Similarly to the requests from detention centres, the migrants initiate the discourse production in this form, and they shape the content, however in this case, they are being answered which also impacts the content production. This is an instance of true communication, but the decision about broadening the scope of the audience was not taken by the discourse producers but

by the initial recipients. Moreover, the audience got to know only some excerpts of this discursive form, chosen by the publishers. Similarly to the short messages and requests from detention, this form would not appear unless the crisis occurs. However, although the role of the migrants is to ask for help, this form of communication provides them with the agency as they can to some extent shape the kind of help received (Pałęcka 2022) and, as one activist notes, they also “use this space to fulfil the basic human need to become subjective and to be noticed” (Anonymous 2023).

The last analysed form, the artistic actions, probably provides the migrants with the highest level of agency, as they can shape the content more freely than in the interviews (however, in cooperation with other actors) and they can broaden the topics apart from the journey and suffering (however, they choose these themes more frequently). The action “Postcards from Przemyśl” gave the detained migrants the possibility to interrupt the communication blockade: “[e]verything is restricted. Difficulty communicating with family or the outside world”. Even when suffering is still a dominating theme, the migrants can express it in a less restricted and even poetic form: “I’m a child and the torment is killing me”. However, even in this form, the migrants express that they cannot freely say everything they want, probably because of the limited conditions of the action (time of record, exhibition space etc.) or because some issues are too difficult for them emotionally to be said: “I didn’t mention many things”. The art seems to be the space where the pushed-back can safely dis-identify with their oppression for a moment providing psychological rest and this is its empowering dimension. Also, it gives a similar possibility as the interviews – to present to the audience the image of a person similar to other people, not necessarily only playing the role of an asylum claimant, but a detainee writing a request or a help recipient.

Stolen words of emancipation – what do we want to hear within this crisis?

In the final sub-section of the empirical part, we would like to discuss the results of the previous steps of analysis and the whole context of pushed-back migrants’ narrative agency regarding their emancipation and the role of researchers. We argue that the emancipatory voice of migrants is often distorted by the government. First of all, the pushback is a violent interruption of communication, a physical erasure from the state territory, the ultimate act of exclusion legally feasible in a liberal state.⁶ Ken Booth (2007: 160) wrote that the oppressed are not “physically voiceless” but “politically silenced” and that silencing them is a way of making them subaltern. However, the pushbacks make the migrants’ bodies no longer exist in the communicative

⁶ Apart from the death penalty – however, it is debatable if countries enforcing the death penalty are still “liberal”.

space of the state – they are, indeed, both politically silenced and physically voiceless in some sense – subaltern and subalternised in this vicious circle which can be broken only with the sometimes-risky operations of discourse production. Moreover, Polish state services were trying to disrupt the communication of activists and the press with the migrants in Usnarz Górny by siren alarms emitted from the cars or covering the people who were using hand signals⁷, and later the state restricted any access to the border zone.⁸ Thus, the communication with the pushed-back is distorted and limited and even the translation offered by Maggio (2007) cannot fix it: the pushed-back can ask or be asked a question but disappear from the state before they answer or are answered. How can one translate content which is forbidden to occur?

Second, an exhaustive analysis of how migrants' discourse impacts reality is not possible with the accessible data. Certainly, the short messages often make the border guards accept the asylum application lodging because this will be publicly displayed. Hotline communication ensures aid provision while requests from detention often remain without an answer. In the case of interviews and artistic actions, it is difficult to say how these forms impact the audience.

Third, the migrants' words of emancipation are often stolen by the government. The Polish Border Guard claims that migrants present different things to journalists and to the guards, willing to claim asylum in other countries and it is doubtful if they were provided with necessary information allowing them to decide consciously (Krępa 2022). The words of the oppressed can result from internalised oppression if the people are made to believe that their suffering is justified or do not understand their legal situation. Representation, then, serves to enter into partnership with the subalterns to make them capable of using "their *own* understanding" of their situation and possible alternatives (Booth 2007: 13, original emphasis). Only then, can they reclaim their stolen words to speak with their voice and not merely echo the voice of the oppressor.

Thus, the non-occurring words of absent speakers cannot be translated, they must be represented and, hence, we go back to Spivak. However, this was criticised as in the case of the hotline messages published by Pałęcka. An anonymous activist wrote that this publication "could harm both the aid structure and the migrants themselves, who are currently viewed negatively enough by public opinion", however the core of the criticism was not about publishing itself, but about limited sources and (over)interpretation (Anonymous 2023). In this research, we abstain from interpreting the intentions of the discourse producers and we analyse all the collected materials. Moreover, we argue that the process of representation can, and indeed should, be enriched. We see the method offered by Vijay et al. as useful in this regard method, who called for "an ethical disposition [which] resists sanctioned ignorance arising

⁷ The post on the Facebook account of "Ocalenie" Foundation, 20.05.2022.

⁸ We are thankful to Nina Boichenko for this remark.

from privilege” (2020: 491) and “a critical, expansionary work of registering absences and exclusions in our archives” (2020: 492). Audre Lorde (1984: 123) famously stated that “the true focus of revolutionary change is [...] that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us”. The social practice analysis of the narrative agency of the pushed-back shows that we have to analyse not only how they speak but also how we (do not) listen to them.

In this sense, we agree with Pałęcka to publish the hotline communication as well as with the anonymous activist to refrain from overinterpretation. In summary, we do not pretend to either claim what the migrants should have said or to give them space to speak freely because such a space often cannot be created within this crisis. The migrants’ narrative agency must be represented properly with its whole diversity instead of producing, simplifying or victimising a pro-refugee counter-narrative (Pietrusińska 2020; 2022). Otherwise, it will be lost in the silence which reproduces subalternity and suffering.

Conclusions

In this research, we drew on postcolonial theory to present how the migrants subjected to pushbacks can speak within the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border. Our analysis shows that their discourse is heavily limited, restricted, and interrupted, and their emancipatory words are often distorted. However, they are able to produce some emancipatory discourse: in manoeuvring with their victimisation (to claim their rights) and contesting enemisation (to “peel off” the migrant identity). We concluded that the scholars must acknowledge their power over narratives of subaltern(ised) because the pushed-back can speak but they have little power over whether they will be heard and understood. This power is diffused among *inter alia* researchers, and they are accountable for what they do with it.

To understand the pushed-back migrants, we need to first understand our own power, i.e. understand that the escape from patronising practices often leads only to silence while emancipation requires communication. As Spivak (1994: 80) noted: “there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation”. Representation is obviously a power relation but even empowerment is always a deed of merciful power bestowal⁹. One needs to be aware that refraining from using researchers’ power does not automatically make the migrants create their own power from nothing. Power seems to be always born by power (e.g. political from physical or ideological). The pushed-back are in too difficult a situation to make a revolution; the only power

⁹ We are grateful to Katarzyna Czarnota for pointing this out during a monthly seminar of the collective *Researchers on the Border* in Świnoroje.

possible to be exercised by them is to establish relations with Polish society through communication which could lead to the dis-identification of Poland's citizens with oppressive practices of their state.

Because of that, the researchers should not boast of pretending to fade into the background and give a voice to the subalterns; instead, they should meticulously collect and convey the traces of migrants' scarce narrative agency making sure that they are being heard. It is exactly because the subalterns are not the cause of the problem – those who cannot hear them are. "The subaltern speaks all the time: We are simply unable to hear them" (Maggio 2007: 437). Maybe it is because hearing the pushed-back people would bring a vexing requirement to answer why we agree with their suffering?

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