A less-than-human academia: the effect of disembodied encounters

The editorial discusses the impacts of the global pandemic to human agency, through the authors self-reflection of academic work during the past two years accompanied by two philosophical perspectives. First, we return to Chris Philo's (2017) conception of 'less-than-human geographies', and secondly, to Helmuth Plessner's (2019) conception of the sociality of human embodiment. What these perspectives have helped us to see is that people, including academic communities, need embodied encounters to fully experience themselves and others as humans – humans whose exceptionality is not about superiority over non-human nature but eccentricity that offers us possibilities to avoid inhumanity. In conclusion we note the value of embodied encounters as a constitutive aspec of humane social life, particularly in the current times of war in Europe.

Keywords: pandemic, embodied encounters, inhumanity, less-than-human, embodied existence, Helmuth Plessner

Most academics around the world have been working partly remotely for more than two years now, with two major outcomes. The restrictions assigned by states, local authorities and universities during the pandemic meant that we withdrew from physical social contact in our everyday working environments, scientific events, research sites and collaboration networks. Instead, we encountered our colleagues, students, research participants, stakeholders, and practical collaborators in virtual space. While the shift from physical to virtual working spaces has diluted our existing relationships, it has at the same time expanded the opportunities for people to attend conferences, seminars, teaching sessions, workshops, meetings, and other events regardless of where they are organized. In some cases, it is even possible to access these at our chosen time, through recorded and openly shared materials. In result, many annual events have registered record high audiences and the number of students missing from a lecture due to an overlap has dropped to the minimum. Paradoxically, the academic world has grown into a less present *and* a more accessible space.

This unintended development has received mixed reception among scholars, teachers, and students, as well as in academic and governmental institutions, as portrayed in our recent collection of short papers guest edited by Simon Tulumello and Kátia Favilla (2020). On the one hand, the flexibility offered by the new situation, the diminished need for moving and commuting, potential for

enhanced productivity through new technologies, and the ease of communication in virtual space has been found both appealing and enjoyable. Benefits are apparent to those scholars and students who were previously short of possibilities to participate in events due to lacking resources or logistical challenges. Institutionally, a reduced need for seminar rooms and lecture halls, as well as for personal and group working spaces, seem potential cost-saving features for universities. Similarly, when traveling to meetings and scientific events stopped (but attendance in them multiplied!), universities saved money and reduced their carbon footprint. Hence it can be expected that pressure to keep working remotely and virtually will outlive the pandemic.

The other side of the coin is less bright. Physical and mental health issues have increased, especially among students, and working primarily on the laptop is found exhausting and uninspiring by researchers, teachers, students, and administrative personnel alike. The distinction between work and other areas of life has become blurred when working from home, and for many the lack of variation in daily rhythms has dissolved days, weeks and months into an unending routine. Reasons and motives for attending events and meetings have grown fewer: what is left is the conference presentation as a performative act.

Yet it may be difficult to pinpoint what exactly has been missing or amiss. It is possible to start a virtual meeting with relaxed chatting to create a nice atmosphere (and if I don't feel like chatting, I can leave the camera off). I can easily grab a cup of coffee during the event (and exactly the coffee that I like to make), and even take a walk before the meeting (as if actually going to the place) should that make me feel good. Compared to on-site events, virtual space allows quick and flexible moving between lectures, group discussions and individual tasks. Participation is available not only through speaking and listening, but also by means of writing and drawing, and the camera transmits at least some aspects of non-verbal communication. What is it, then, that makes remote working in virtual space burdensome and unrewarding?

This question reminded us of Chris Philo's (2017) short editorial in *Political Geography* some years ago, portraying less-than-human geographies as "an approach alert to what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities, silencing its affective grip, banishing its involvements" (*ibid*., 257). Philo's writing offers an argument to the theoretical discussions where human agency is 'flattened' by relativizing it with other agencies. These approaches share the intention to strip down the anthropocentric notion of human exceptionality that links with the idea of superiority, and to emphasize human capacities to act as based on interaction with other species and non-organic actors. To bring in another angle, Philo recalls what may follow if human agency loses some of its core dimensions, specifically the *humanity* that distinguishes us from non-human animals. The theoretical argument is contextualized in a societal state of exception, not pandemic but war, where people become "stripped down; hollowed out, winnowed away; splintered, shattered, smashed; dis-assembled, dis-located, dis-membered; subtracted from, again, again, again" (*ibid*., 258).

As unbelievable as it may sound, these ideas resonated well before Russia started the war in Ukraine. While the pandemic experience hardly parallels the "*in*humane horror" of war that Philo takes up as an example of less-than-human geographies (which we are indeed witnessing in the current war in Ukraine), some *fundamental lack* characterizes the agencies we have come to perform during the pandemic. This lack is perhaps mostly related to embodied presence. Helmuth Plessner, a central figure of 20th century philosophical anthropology, portrays the centrality of embodiment to human existence as follows:

> The human being "is body, is in its body, and is outside its body as the point of view, from which it is both. An individual characterized positionally by this threefold structure is called a *person*. [She] is the subject of [her] lived experience, of [her] perceptions and actions, of [her] initiative. [She] knows and [she] wills. [Her] existence is literally based on nothing." (Plessner 2019, 272)

The eccentric dimension of our embodied existence, expressed in this minimal definition of humanness, makes it possible for us to relate with each other in spaces virtual as well as physical. Unlike non-human animals that form environmental relations directly through the dynamism between the lived and the corporeal body, the environmental relations of humans are mediated by points of view embedded in cultural reality and thus 'artificially' created through meaning-making. Even a young

child can therefore take part in a virtual environment by experiencing it *as* a reality that she performs with other people, whereas the family dog, however old and wise, cannot escape its actual living environment. We can walk virtual dogs, but dogs have no means of digitizing us.

The eccentricity of human existence is inescapably embodied: our only access to mediated realities is through the body that we both are and have. It is this embodied existence, we contend, that is being splintered, shattered, and even smashed by the prolonged existence in virtual space. Disembodying isolation curtails our capacities to be and act as humans. We both realized this vividly when giving our first in-person lectures at the university after a two-year break. Behind our masks, with several meters of distance in between, we experienced something odd: something said during the lecture evoked a little laughter that spread among the students. And as it happened, before even realizing it, we ended up chuckling along.

What the Plessnerian perspective helps to see is that we people need embodied encounters to fully experience ourselves and others as humans – humans whose exceptionality is not about superiority over non-human nature but eccentricity that offers us possibilities to avoid inhumanity. The current situation in Ukraine surely invites us to consider these thoughts further. Perhaps the isolation that people have gone through during the pandemic speaks to the cruelties taking place in Ukrainian towns and cities, the corrupt geopolitics behind these events, and the divergent readings in different countries of what is happening in Ukraine? On the other hand, when embodied persons are under threat and undergoing exploitation by the soldiers, some of whom seem to be "hollowed out and winnowed away" as Philo (2017, 258) describes their inhumanity, do we see the importance of humane solidarity more clearly? We hope that questions like these will encourage further attention to the importance of human social embodiment in critical political geographical scholarship warmly welcomed in *Fennia*.

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Content of the issue

This issue of *Fennia* is delayed. To us this disappointing result seems an expected setback. The pandemic time has been particularly harmful to academic work that people do by their own choice and desire; not because they *have to* but because they *want to*. In *Fennia*, all work is like that: authors, reviewers, editors, and the publisher alike contribute to the journal because they want to be part of and sustain a non-commercial, open access international journal dedicated to ethical scholarly publishing of high-quality research. Unlike in journals with commercial publishers, no-one can request this work from anyone. As the exceptional working conditions and other challenges that academics, among other people, have faced during the past years have narrowed down opportunities to use time and effort for such, *Fennia* accepts the situation as part of our ethical approach to scholarly publishing.

Looking at the sunny side of things, the pandemic – and perhaps also the present conflict situation in Europe – has made it ever more visible that journals like *Fennia* are not machines. Instead, they are a joint endeavor of the scientific community that exists only through the voluntary contributions of its members. The diminished activity of the community in the present situation cannot be explained merely rationally, by a lack of time or increased teaching responsibilities for instance. The lack of inspiration and an increased level of stress are also abating our agency. These stem from many elements in the exceptional conditions.

As the above editorial article indicates, the missing embodied encounters in conferences and seminars are one thing that has made academic communities weaker as *human communities*. Another absent element are the brief shared moments at common rooms and corridors, in our everyday working environments; while a coffee break at the home office can be relaxing, it does not offer similar opportunities to *experiencing ourselves* as independent academics. Even administrative meetings and teaching situations are places where *academic freedom* is often present; being there, in person, reminds us that our joint work is not merely about administration and teaching but always grounded in research. Now that opportunities to these encounters are opening up, their specific value deserves to be recognized, along with the benefits of digitalization that surely also exist.

Fennia is very much looking forward to the next phase of the pandemic that allows the scientific communities to start working face to face. At first instance, we place our hope in the twice-postponed Nordic Geographers Meeting, taking place in June 2022, in Joensuu, Finland. There, we hosted the next *Fennia* Lecture with Dr. Josefina Syssner as the invited keynote speaker. Together with the conference organizers, we are producing a special issue around the theme of her talk, tentatively titled *Depopulation and Shrinkage in a Northern Context*. We invite everyone interested in the topic to participate the discussion, in the different roles that we academics can choose to take, for example by writing a commentary to the special issue in our Reflections section. May this great event serve as a new beginning to the geographical scientific community that *Fennia* fully relies on!

This issue begins with Hilde Refstie's (2021) article based on her *Fennia* Lecture 2021 at the Finnish Geography Days in Oulu, an event that only the invited lecturers and conference organizers could participate in person. Titled *Reconfiguring research relevance – steps towards salvaging the radical potential of the co-productive turn in searching for sustainable solutions*, it presents an argument for critical and rooted 'slow research' that conjoins explanatory and actionable methods. Refstie's (2021) critique is specifically directed at the fashionable trend of co-productive research that involves citizens and others as co-producers of knowledge, apparently following participatory (action) research (PAR) traditions yet often failing to meet the fundamental aims of PAR. In the context of sustainability science, but also in other fields of research, such applied research carries the risk of serving 'fast policymaking' with a neoliberal agenda, should the participants of the project (including importantly the researchers) not be critically reflexive about their roles in these societally impactful processes. The article will be followed by commentaries from the conference and the open review process in the next issue of *Fennia*, and we invite others to join in as well, to discuss this topic that has relevance far beyond the discipline of geography.

The lecture-based article is followed by another four original research papers. The first one is *Spaces of the forest-based bioeconomy in Finnish Lapland and Catalonia: practitioners, narratives and forgotten spatialities*, by Diana Morales who analyses European bioeconomies through two case studies, one focusing on a Mediterranean context and the other on the northernmost edge of the EU. Recognizing that bioeconomy is taking very different formats regionally, she draws attention to the local practitioners who (should) play a crucial role in interpreting EU's policy narratives and implementing them. Morales' (2021) major conclusion is that, while these narratives tend to resonate strongly with economic growth narratives and thus connect bioeconomy policies with regional economic development policies, they do not work efficiently toward the green transition but may even hinder this development – concurrently overlooking the local knowledge of farmers, indigenous communities, and members of rural communities. The current situation where the EU is forcefully seeking to break off from (Russian) fossil fuel dependency toward sustainable energy production and usage, and where also wood imports from Russia are suspended, makes the paper extremely topical.

Edvard Huijbens and Karl Benediktsson's paper continues the theme of environmental sustainability, yet in a different policy context and geographically in other European locales. In their article *Earth, wind and fire: Island energy landscapes of the Anthropocene*, the authors introduce the concept of 'energy landscapes' in the context of the Netherlands and Iceland. Specifically, the focus is on natural and artificial islands where the countries intend to produce wind energy, to replace their use of fossil fuels. By 're-storying' the Anthropocene from a critical geographical perspective, the paper aims at a rupture in how the energy systems of the Netherlands and Iceland are perceived. Based on this reconstruction, a geographically nuanced vision of a future is charted, with which

Huijbens and Benediktsson (2021) offer insight into creating more just and sustainable energy policies and practices in Europe and beyond. They propose that the formation of new 'hybrid' energy landscapes in the present benefits from bringing together the past and the imagined futures to reveal both what is being *thought* to matter and what can *come* to matter.

The third research paper in this issue of *Fennia* is by Mark Rhodes who introduces another landscape analysis, from urban and cultural geography perspectives entwined with memory studies. In *Cardiff and the contentious landscapes of postindustrial, urban, and transnational memory work*, he takes us to Butetown, which is a historically multicultural docklands community in the city of Cardiff in Wales, the UK. Moving between the present cultural and political development and the historical landscape, Rhodes' (2021) presents a particular mixed-methods analysis drawing from archives, interviews, performance, and discourse, in the spatial patterns of Welsh identity. The analysis reveals that the recent economic development of the city has buried underneath, or caricatured, many of the culturally significant elements of Butetown, through which spatial identities are established and maintained, and places continue as lived realities. While he finds that local people are capable of adaptation and change both for and against the capital development and its socioeconomic impacts in places like Butetown, Rhodes argues that such top-down urban renewal, post-industrial displacement, and racially charged discourse and planning are efficiently changing urbanities in an inequitable manner.

Our last original article is by Taylor Garner, Nadia Mansour and David J. Marshall, continuing the memory work theme. *Intergenerational intimacy geopolitics: family interviewing and generations of memory in occupied Palestine* is mainly a methodological contribution to the study of intergenerational geographies, bringing new insight into how ethnographic research in the geographies of children, youth and families can be carried out beyond the categorical adult/child binary. The paper can however be found useful by a broader range of scholars, in geography and beyond, who share an interest in deconstructing the social category of age, and who seek novel approaches to studying (post)conflict societies. Critical scholarship has thus far focused more on gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality, than age, which similarly is part of the power-laden social order that has significant implications to the agency of differently 'aged' people. Garner, Mansour and Marshall (2021) present findings from two separate research projects in Palestine, both of which examined the relations between older and younger Palestinians through multi-generational interviewing. They suggest that facilitating intergenerational dialogue though family interviews and focus groups with age-based cohorts brings to the fore shared experiences, in these cases of national struggle and resistance punctuated by geopolitical moments, however, intertwined with family stories and generational orderings. The method hence provides opportunities for narrating collective memory and organizing generational cohorts, which is a novel approach in generational and memory studies.

In the Reviews and Essays section, we have another methodological contribution by Gertrude Saxinger, Alexis Sancho-Reinoso and Sigrid Irene Wentzel. In the review article *Cartographic storytelling: reflecting on maps through an ethnographic application in Siberia*, they portray an ethnographic mapping method combining quantitative and qualitative elements, developed in a case study at a remote region of Northern Europe, specifically Siberia. The online portal 'Life of BAM' can be used for visualizing the stories that local people and researchers co-produce, which connects this article with the previous two papers through focus on "memories and stories of lifeways and social phenomena that are of concern to local people in their everyday life, and their political practice and positionality" (Saxinger *et al*. 2021, 243). The paper also links with Refstie's (2021) lecture-based paper, yet in this project the empowering elements of participatory co-production are emphasized. The introduced cartographic mixed-methods storytelling approach is embedded in a social justice perspective that acknowledges the views of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Instead of 'fast policymaking', it is used for a productive impact on civil society, education, heritage work and policy making, in a socially sustainable manner.

The second review article continues the discussion in *Fennia* on the geographical impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Kallio *et al*. 2020; Tulumello & Favilla 2020). Paria Valizadeh and Aminreza Iranmanesh's critical review of mitigation strategies against the pandemic within urban contexts, titled *Covid-19: magnifying pre-existing urban problems*, focuses on strategies that restrict movement

and interaction, and those concerning digital space. Identifying various dimensions of state-led authoritarianism on one hand, and bottom-up social solidarity on the other hand, they consider the impacts of the new governing measures and the citizen practices, to the socio-spatial organization of cities and their long-term planning, design, and policymaking. Alongside with obvious risks and inequal developments, Valizadeh and Iranmanesh (2021) recognize in the present crisis possibilities for constructing more humanized urbanisms through reorganising existing socio-spatial structures – including extant market relations, a return to use-value, collective forms of consumption, and communal ownership of resources. Hence in conclusion they suggest using the changes emerging from the pandemic to the democratization of urban space.

In the Reflections section, we introduce two new ways to publish in *Fennia*. Since we began the Reflections section in 2017, it has published short interventions that engage with research articles published in the journal. These interventions speak back to research articles in *Fennia* and take them in new directions, and in many cases, they are written by the reviewers of the published article, providing an outlet for the unseen and unpaid academic labor of reviewing articles. The first new concept that will become part of Reflections, is to attend to books published in the discipline of geography and related fields. Yet rather than creating a book reviews section, in the spirit of dialogical and open processes that retain critical engagement – which the journal has become known for – we are building review forums on a contemporary issue or theme that a book highlights. The second initiative is to reanimate and offer further visibility to an old initiative we had (see Niemi 2019), which is for early-career researchers to showcase their work by publishing a written version of the *lectio praecursoria* (a short presentation given by a doctoral candidate about their research as part of a doctoral defense) in the Reflections section of the journal. This publication format is common in Finnish scholarly journals, which we hereby wish to internationalize.

Our first Reflections essay in this new issue of the journal is written by a reviewer of a research article published in the previous issue of *Fennia*. This dialogical process continues to be a fruitful and critical exercise, providing new ways to engage with published work and to build caring yet critical dialogue on a particular area of geography. In a commentary to Pawliw, Berthold, and Lasserre's (2021) article on the role of cultural heritage in the geopolitics of the Arctic, which focuses on Franklin's lost expedition, Marie Mossé highlights the role of Inuit knowledges and oral history. She suggests that the Franklin myth endows Canada with a founding story, a colonial gaze which perpetuates the imperialist representation of perilous Arctic exploration. An avenue for future research that Mossé (2021) refers to is a "recomplexification" process of Arctic myths, through the integration of Inuit testimonies and knowledges in political discourses and in cultural, artistic and literary productions, in other Arctic or circumpolar countries.

In the first book review forum published in *Fennia*, as part of a new initiative, Lieven Ameel's (2021) *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning: Plotting the Helsinki Waterfront*, is the book that provides the starting point for dialogue. In two extended case studies from the planning of the Helsinki waterfront, the book applies narrative concepts and theories to a broad range of texts and practices involved in urban planning. Robert Beauregard (2021) kicks off the forum by adding a material perspective that treats planning documents as actors in planning practice. The vibrant matter of these hidden texts also weaves narratives, as planners produce documents before they tell the public stories. While narratives told and repeated through social media platforms that cannot be subject to procedural and institutional boundaries, are described by Mark Tewdwr-Jones in a second review. These too are examples of narratives of place-change. Tewdwr-Jones (2021) emphasizes also centers wider democratic and polarizing issues. These issues cannot be separated from narratives of place shaping, planning, and urban growth and decline. In response, Ameel (2021) addresses the material aspects of planning practices that take place in increasingly digitalized environments, and storytelling to which the public is not invited, attending to narratives developed by planners in their cloistered world, opening the forum to potential future research.

The final Reflections essay is also part of a new initiative, which is the publication of written versions of *lectio praecursoria*. Our first of these relates to the anti-mining movement in Brazil in the previous decade, presented as part of a doctoral defense at the University of Eastern Finland on 5 November 2021 by Mariana Galvão Lyra. It sheds light on the key challenges faced by groups fighting for

environmental and social justice, focusing on two case studies, and anti-mining activism, mining history, the sociology of mining, and mining policy (Galvão Lyra 2021). This emphasis upon detailed ethnographic fieldwork with local communities is certainly an inspiring place to end this editorial after the major disruptions experienced by early-career researchers in recent years.

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