"The Beast from the East"

Mental Dis/Ability and the Fears of Post-Socialist Mobility in North American Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article analyzes characters in North American popular culture who migrated from the post-socialist world to the United States and other Western countries. It focuses on the Anglo-Ukrainian clone Helena in the television show *Orphan Black* (Space/BBC America, 2013–2017), the Russian girl Esther in the horror movie *Orphan* (2009), and the psychopathic Russian assassin Villanelle in the television show *Killing Eve* (BBC America, 2018–2022). All these fictional characters are orphans. Moreover, they all share the same pathology: a mental disorder or disability that predestines them to become ruthless killers. I argue that the fictional killers embody North American fears surrounding the mobility of the Cold War Other in the aftermath of the fall of the so-called Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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Mental Dis/Ability and the Fears of Post-Socialist Mobility in North American Popular Culture

Katharina Wiedlack

Meteorologists dubbed the threatening cold weather front that was about to hit Great Britain and Ireland in February 2018 "The Beast from the East."[1] I use the metaphor playfully as title for my analysis of three fictional post-socialist immigrant characters from television shows and cinema, for their arrival in North American popular culture created an equally chilling sensation, promising violence and destruction to normative Western (fictional) societies.

I focus on three popular characters that are representative for the most visible configurations of the embodiment of North American fears around mobility in the aftermath of the fall of the so-called Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union: the Anglo-Ukrainian clone Helena from the Canadian television show *Orphan Black* (Space/BBC America, 2013–2017), the Russian girl Esther in the U.S.-American horror movie and film script *Orphan* (2009), and the psychopathic Russian assassin Villanelle of the British television show *Killing Eve* (BBC America, 2018–2022). I include *Killing Eve* in my analysis of North American popular culture, since the show was produced for the North American market and features a North American actress in the lead role—Sandra Oh. I argue that these characters represent post-socialist mobility as the threat of corrupting or even destroying Western societies. The danger derives from the post-Soviet heritage that made them orphans, as well as from sharing a mental disorder or condition that predestines them to become ruthless killers. What amplifies their dangerousness further is that their pathology is not visible. Their able bodies and their whiteness allow them to "blend in" and move undetected in white-dominated (racist) Western societies. To save Western societies, the post-Soviet bodies have to become immobile. Interestingly, this de- or immobilization allows female heroines to emerge as main characters in the television-show and cinema examples discussed in my article.

I read these three popular culture examples of the embodiment of post-socialist mobility through a cripistemological lens, whose methodology emerged at the intersection of critical dis/ability and queer theory. Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer use the term "cripistemology" to signify that "thought and knowledge in twenty-first-century Western culture as a whole is structured—indeed, fractured—by an endemic crisis of ability and disability."[2] They developed their concept in dialogue with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which had claimed a primary position for fears around homosexuality at the core of nineteenth- and twentieth-century knowledge.[3] Accordingly, cripistemology privileges notions of dis/ability as their primary research interest. Johnson and McRuer understand dis/ability as constructed through various axes of oppression, compulsory able-bodiedness, heteronormativity, and racialization and use "crip" (an appropriation of the derogatory word "crip" by people with disabilities) as affirmative, yet provocative term to signify non-normativity.[4]

Following their approach, and adding neoliberal homonormativity to the list of oppressive forces that structure our knowledge, I want to find out how the crisis of dis/ability informs or co-constructs issues of post-socialist mobility in contemporary post-Cold War North American societies and vice versa. I build on scholars working at the intersections of mobility and critical dis/ability studies, who point out that access to mobility, in both the metaphorical and literal sense, is unequally distributed, and structured through white North/Western hegemony.[5] Zygmunt Bauman observed the "global hierarchy of mobility" to describe the emergent power structures that stratify and mediate social exclusion on a global scale since the end of the twentieth century.[6] Although Bauman did not explicitly identify "compulsory able-bodiedness" as part of this process,[7] historians such as Douglas Baynton and Penny L. Richards have done so.[8] They have shown that people with dis/abilities have not only historically been restricted from cross-border mobility, but also that immigration policies frequently used notions of dis/ability to create images of undesirable immigrants.

Based on these findings from mobility and critical dis/ability studies, and referring to the critical race and gender studies scholar Mel Chen,[9] I will ask what it means if different notions—the notions of post-socialist mobility, the orphan, the mentally dis/abled, the sexually traumatized/sexually non-normative—inform one another. Focusing on mental dis/ability at the intersection of geographical and temporal mobility, I will show how the post-socialist orphan materializes as a medicalized, sexualized, and ethnic trope that contains notions of hyperintelligence and arrested development, among others.

I argue that the psychopathic post-socialist orphan can be understood as the twenty-first-century version of much older fears of East–West mobility that

emerged when the previously stable and seemingly impermeable border between the West and East became fluid. In their current version, earlier anxieties about "a flood of immigrants and refugees" to the West merged the undesired migrant with the historic fear-mongering fictional figure of the orphan—whose threat in these formations is exacerbated by their mental disabilities in combination with aggressive (homo)sexuality.[10] I use the term "post-socialist" to locate the origins of the fictional characters discussed in this article, rather than their nationality. I prefer this terminology because it emphasizes the undifferentiated gaze at post-socialist heritage in North American popular culture that mostly universalizes the cultural heritage of the broad territory of the so-called "former Eastern Bloc," including Eurasian post-Soviet spaces.

The Russian orphan has been part of North American epistemologies since the Russian Revolution. Analyzing feminist, Quaker, and Social Gospel humanitarian discourses between 1917 and 1933, the historian Julia Mickenberg shows the crucial role Soviet orphans and their adoption played in public debates aiming to form a U.S. national identity that feels responsibility for the positive development of the world.[11] U.S. media attention to post-socialist orphans spiked with the collapse of the communist bloc. From 1989 on, American news magazines on television and in print media began to report on the plight of an estimated 500,000 Romanian orphans as well as on the Soviet Russian orphans.[12] As the Soviet Union collapsed, the orphan population in institutions alone was around 300,000,[13] due to poverty, alcoholism, ethnic conflict, and HIV/AIDS. Reports emphasized the dire conditions of these orphans. Covering adoptions by American families, they increasingly focused on unexpected problems the new parents had to encounter with their often traumatized adopted children.[14] Media emphasized that the children, due to neglect or as a result of their birth parents' drug consumption, "suffer[ed] from serious mental disorders," showed "significant attachment disorders, or seriously problematic behavior," "brain injury and mental retardation[, and] post traumatic stress disorder."[15] Moreover, and in relation to that, they frequently showed extremely violent behavior. American studies scholar Claudia Sadowski-Smith argues that "US coverage of adoptions from the former Soviet Union [frequently] highlighted adoption failures . . . [,] emphasizing the adoptees' mental and behavioral issues. [Moreover, p]ublications on Eastern European adoptees tend to employ medical or psychological perspectives to focus on adoptee disorders," often revolving around individual cases of adopted children with personality and posttraumatic disorders.[16]

In what follows, I will locate the fictional psychopathic post-socialist orphan within the North American epistemology of post-socialist spheres and people. I will show how the individual figures' narratives create post-socialist mobility as threat to American society by drawing on ideas of the post-socialist space as a space of sexual

exploitation and trauma. Finally, I will explain how they support female heroines as defenders of (multicultural) North American societies.

North American Epistemologies of Post-Socialist Delay and Backwardness

Orphans as a literary and cultural trope signify a threat to white Western societies that can be easily attached to any cultural Other, hence is not specific to the post-socialist one. Part of this threat is their construction as figures without family, and without a place of belonging. Historically, orphans were seen as fluid and mobile characters, deprived of a sense of responsibility, moving across regions and countries.[17] The post-socialist orphan adds two threatening dimensions, mobilizing historical knowledge around post-socialist spaces and people as geopolitical threats to the "American way of life,"[18] and knowledge about the possible consequences of traumatic experiences as children. The clone Helena in Orphan Black, the child Esther in Orphan, and the assassin Villanelle in Killing Eve are just three examples of fictional post-socialist orphan characters with varying degrees of mental disorders and pathological character traits that started emerging after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Helena, Esther, and Villanelle embody North American fears around post-socialist subjects, circulating in popular culture and carrying notions of mental dis/ability as a post-traumatic post-socialist condition. These characters connect ideas around the dis/ability figure of the psycho-killer to the epistemologies of the post-socialist immigrant orphan, as well as other fears around post-socialist mobility, such as sex trafficking and organized crime.

Neither the figure of the pathological killer nor any of these traumatic experiences is culturally post-socialist per se. Critical dis/ability scholars have analyzed the long history of problematic dis/ability representations in film.[19] Especially figures in horror movies, thrillers, and crime stories represent dis/ability in a stigmatizing fashion.[20] These genres build on fears surrounding "spectacular disability," as they connect bodily and mental non-normativity to monstrosity, excessive sexuality, and sadomasochism while trying to elicit the emotional reactions of fright and disgust in order to call for the other's annihilation.[21]

I am especially interested in how ideas of post-socialist mobility intersect with ideas of (mental) dis/ability. I argue that the different notions of dis/ability and fears around post-socialist mobility often intersect in the longstanding Western notion of Eastern Europe and Eurasia as backward and/or developmentally delayed. American popular culture scholars such as Eliot Borenstein, Kimberly Williams, and myself have analyzed a trend in figures that represent post-socialist backwardness and developmental delay after the end of the Cold War.[22] They appear in comedies as

the post-socialist "yokel" who, "clinging to folkways and quaint but highly inappropriate behavior, [represents] the quintessence of foreign backwardness, to which no amount of goodwill or diplomacy can accord true subjectivity."[23] They also populate entertainment media as beautiful and naïve young women whose bodies and minds are not yet corrupted by the worst of capitalism.[24] The backwardness of these figures derives from the idea that the successor states of the Soviet Union were politically, economically, socially, and culturally developmentally stuck. In her exhaustive analysis of U.S. government discourses on Russia, Williams shows that 1990s officials, analysts, and political commentators understood the socialist period as "backward and frightening age" that forced Eastern Europe into a pre-Revolutionary state, when ideas about democratic nationhood and citizenship were still in the fledgling stage.[25] They saw the citizens of the new countries as "orphans of communism," and described Russia as not-yet developed or underdeveloped, using notions of orphanhood.[26]

A similar overlap, or indeed co-construction, of the idea that the post-socialist individual is stuck in an earlier time, and the figure of the orphan can frequently be found in American popular culture. The orphan Esther in *Orphan* is a good example of how fictional characters embody notions of post-socialist backwardness.[27] The white American upper-middle-class couple Kate and John Coleman meet the Russian orphan for the first time in a Catholic orphanage. This place looks temporally displaced, as if the characters had traveled back in time to the Victorian age. More importantly, the mere existence of such an orphanage is out of time, since U.S. government policy started focusing on foster care and group homes in the second half of the twentieth century,[28] and today's boarding schools and adoption agencies are modern institutions that do not look like the orphanage in *Orphan*. Corresponding to the Victorian orphanage, however, are Esther's nineteenth-century doll outfit, her white porcelain complexion, dark braided hair, and her various accessories, which stand in stark contrast to the modern and casual clothes of her blond, blue-eyed, and rosy-cheeked adoptive siblings. This contrast is further underlined by Esther's accent.[29]

Equally anachronistic is the setting out of which the clone Helena in *Orphan Black* emerges. Cloned by a secret military facility in North America, Helena is just one of several clone sisters born in Canada, who are all played by Tatiana Maslany. After her birth, Helena alone was brought to Ukraine, where she spent most of the 1980s and early 1990s in a Catholic convent, while her sisters remained in Canada and other parts of the Western world. The nunnery, introduced in season five through recaps of Helena's traumatic childhood experiences, does not look like a twentieth-century environment, but rather like a nineteenth-century place.[30]

The notion of post-socialist spaces and people as developmentally delayed or backward goes back to the European enlightenment, as the historians David Engerman and Larry Wolff have shown.[31] In addition to her upbringing in a nunnery, where she had to wear a grey skirt, a white blouse, and a brown cardigan as school uniform, Helena has to wear a white Victorian-looking bridal dress when captured in season two. Drawing on Choi Chatterjee, I read these references to the Victorian era as manifestations of the long-standing American nostalgia for Russia's aristocratic past.[32] Although neither *Orphan Black* nor *Orphan* refers to aristocracy directly, they allude to cultural knowledge about Russian czars and nobility. The idea of arrested development in its romanticized version locates post-socialist societies —and here Russian immigrants societies, in particular—culturally in an earlier decade, the time of the great migrations at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although not as pronounced as in the other two examples discussed in this article, some of the places where the Russian assassin Villanelle, played by the English actress Jodie Comer, comes from equally refer to a romanticized post-socialist untimeliness. Villanelle's Russia is one of beautiful art deco interiors and snowy birch forests.

Whereas these aspects and figures signify developmental delay through romanticism, some other literary and popular culture figures such as the yokel and the "retrograde (i.e., uncivilized, abnormal, and traditional) baba, an evil grandmother figure," revert most directly to the backwardness of their countries of origin, through peasant-style traditional clothing, old-school values, and xenophobia.[33] Helena's backwardness is in some scenes closely related to the idea of the baba. In season four, she literally leaves civilization to hunt and gather in the forest. Hiding out in a snow-covered wood, surviving by hunting animals with bow and arrow, and covering herself in untreated animal fur, Helena represents post-socialist (archaic) backwardness, confirming climatic (snow) and environmental (forests) clichés about Eastern European spaces. In addition, her demeanor is almost animalistic, her survival instinct leads to brutality, alternating with a sometimes childish naïveté and passionate love for her sister Sarah's daughter. Her surroundings, her behavior, and her style stand in stark contrast to those sibling clones marked as North American, especially the queer and independent (good) scientist Cosima Niehaus and corporate (bad) scientist Rachel Duncan, who both reside in metropolitan areas, wear fashionable clothes, glasses, and hairstyles, and work in research labs made of glass and steel, featuring the most advanced technology.

The notion of post-socialist backwardness is further communicated through variations of language. While Helena's heavily accented and "simple" speech is admittedly not romantic, Esther uses elaborate, artificially polite, and submissive language, which seems "backward" in a romantic or nostalgic way. Both Helena's and Esther's language stands in stark contrast to the casual, yet eloquent language of their North

American counterparts. Although clearly marked as post-socialist (and backward), neither Esther's Russian or Estonian nor Helena's Ukrainian heritage are any further differentiated or marked by a national distinction.[34]

In my third example, Villanelle, the Slavic is exchanged for a French accent. While disguise is also part of her work, the viewer learns that Villanelle chooses the French accent over her Russian native one because she likes it better. French signifies, arguably more than the Russian language, a romantic backwardness as a form of sophistication. This aspect is further highlighted by Villanelle's knowledge about art and style, and her obsession with beauty and fashion. Her old-fashioned (or backward) mannerisms are shown as problematic in multiple ways. They make Villanelle even more attractive and allow her to lure her victims into her web. This aspect is heightened even more by the fact that she is able to fake her French heritage so perfectly that no one suspects the deceit.

Esther equally shows some of Villanelle's backward behaviors and attitudes, as well as styles, but her developmental delay is shown on a much more profound level: through her body. Esther has a form of proportional dwarfism that, with some small tricks, allows her to appear to be only ten years old, when in reality she is over thirty.[35] Her small features make Esther appear to be harmless and mellow, although she is extremely dangerous and vicious, allowing her to infiltrate American upper-middle-class society. Her medical condition mirrors the idea that Eastern Europe is developmentally delayed or backward and exacerbates the danger that post-socialist backwardness poses. The mental dis/ability of all three examples equally speaks to the fear of uncontrollability and invisibility of the threat, since these figures hide their pathological characters so well.

While Helena carries some visible signs of danger on her body (such as a huge mass of unkempt, nearly white curly hair, blood-red eyes, and an almost animal-like body posture), Villanelle and Esther show no outer signs of their mental condition. On the contrary, Villanelle and Esther are beautiful and sweet, and their untimeliness or old-school behavior is quite charming. Additionally, they perfectly mimic empathy and pretend to be compassionate, when in reality they are cold, brutally calculating, and blood-thirsty. Their whiteness supports their opaqueness and adds to the scare, since their otherness and danger is not immediately visible.

The Post-Socialist Orphan and the (Dis/ability) Crises of Western Societies

The orphans Helena, Esther, and Villanelle have varying, multiple, and mostly unclear mental dis/abilities. All of them show symptoms that can be associated with post-

traumatic stress disorder as well as with a reactive attachment disorder. These symptoms include forms of violence and a lack of social bonds or emotional attachment to other people. The idea that post-socialist orphans suffer from such disorders goes back to the 1990s, when, news of adoptions of Russian and Romanian children gone wrong or studies referring to such orphaned children as examples of brain damage due to institutional neglect established the cultural figure of the psychopathic post-socialist orphan.[36]

In the fictional North American and British cultures, the three psychopathic post-socialist orphans Helena, Esther, and Villanelle appear in moments of personal or political crisis—a corrupt secret service in *Killing Eve*, multiple family crises in *Orphan*, and a more general moral and value crisis connected to the ethics of science in *Orphan Black*. At the same time, they carry notions of a more profound social crisis, as already mentioned, the "endemic crisis of ability and disability."[37] This crisis of dis/ability, I argue, structures how political, social, and institutional issues are approached in cinematic, serial, and literary narratives. Moreover, the post-socialist figures Villanelle, Esther, and Helena allow for the hierarchical arrangement of a wide range of disabilities, where mental dis/ability occupies the place of uttermost danger yet becomes deferred from the (white) North American (and British) society through its assignment to the post-socialist Other.

Villanelle's mental dis/ability is a product of her post-socialist history of neglect as a child, her abuse by a teacher and her training as an assassin. Her dis/ability seems culturally produced, rather than biological, although the show does not directly address this question. Villanelle's invisible movement in Western societies is marked as a crisis, since a group of organized criminals use her to undermine Western governments and legitimate powers.

Helena's arrival in fictional Canada also signifies a crisis of Western societies, since she and her clone sisters are products of a rogue Western military project. With the exception of Helena and her able-minded sister Sarah, who were prototypes, all the clones are genetically defective and will die at a young age if a cure cannot be found. As bio-technological experiments, the clones negotiate the ethical boundaries of military warfare and power. As clones, Helena and her sister raise questions about human identity, individuality, and uniqueness. The psychopathic orphan clone Helena embodies the danger of extremely ambitious attempts to create super-weapons, violating laws of nature. Yet the fact that Helena's most traumatizing experiences—the root of her mental dis/ability—happened after she got out of the grips of the military units that produced her again signifies post-Soviet societies as a corrupting force. Helena's trauma was inflicted by the Ukrainian nuns, who severely abused her, washing her eyes with bleach etc. While the corrupt North American military pro-

duces individual tragedies—lovely young women dying from immune deficiency diseases—only the post-socialistically socialized clone Helena transforms into a Frankenstein's monster, inflicting violence and pain on others. Only her mobilization from North America to the post-socialist sphere transformed her into a threat to the North American society, not her being an unnaturally reproduced clone per se. In this way, Helena symbolizes the question what happens, if North American bio-technology falls into the hands of the "wrong" countries.

The figure Esther signifies yet another crisis of Western society through post-Soviet mental and, additionally, physical dis/ability. Before the viewers learn that Esther is not a child, but a grown women 'suffering' from a developmental delay, they meet the American adoptive family, the Colemans, who deal with multiple dis/abilities, addictions, and mental illnesses. Esther's adoptive mother Kate has a history of alcoholism, and her adoptive sister Max is deaf and mute. While not explicitly mentioned in the film, the script spells out that Max had an accident as a toddler, due to the neglect of her alcoholic mother. The mother's problem with substance abuse, in turn, might be connected to her husband's history of marital unfaithfulness and her recent miscarriage.[38] The crises that the Colemans face are tragic, yet ordinary problems of the American middle class. The focus on post-socialist migration shifts attention away from these societal crises—as the promotional campaign for the film reminds us, "There is something wrong with Esther."[39] The film depicts mental and physical dis/ability as a problem that might be produced by society but releases society from the responsibility for it. This idea becomes clearest in the juxtaposition of Esther to her four-year-old adoptive sister Max, who is mute and deaf. While Esther's initial sweetness morphs into dis/ability horror, the American girl Max remains sweet, smart, loving, and honest. She is the ideal target for viewer empathy, the good dis/ability figure. Realizing that her family is threatened, Max overcomes not only her fears but also her dis/ability. The American child Max will be the heroine despite her dis/ability, while Esther's (mental) dis/ability, imported from her backward country, is the threat to the American dream. While Max lives, the post-socialist migrant Esther becomes a dead monster. Here, the film communicates what feminist dis/ability studies scholar Alison Kafer describes as the most common understanding of dis/ability in contemporary North America, namely "a personal problem afflicting individual people, a problem best solved through strength of character and resolve."[40] What is wrong with Esther is not only that she is dis/abled, but also that she shows no will to overcome her dis/ability and that she hides it.

Crisis and the Role of the Female Heroine

While Max develops out of her passive dis/ability/victim state to save her mother from Esther, the character of Kate Coleman develops from an insecure, addicted,

and un-fit mother to a strong heroine and protector. Kate does not give in to her addiction, although she is struggling with the loss of a child, care labor for her other two children, and her professional career. Unsure of her actions, rather passive and reluctant in the beginning, she eventually grows immune to any deception or doubt and answers Esther's last attempt to trick her into feeling maternal guilt with a kick in the head that breaks Esther's neck. The good white North-American mother dominates over the bad Eastern European psychopathic single woman who tricked her and the viewer into thinking she was an innocent child.[41]

Following the logic of the film, the severe punishment is appropriate for the violence that Esther inflicted, killing not only a nun but also her adoptive father and brother. The death penalty, executed by the family mother Kate as representation for what is good and just, however, seems the answer to her most severe offense: that she hid her real post-socialist disabled self behind the mask of an innocent child. This ability to practice deceit and hide dis/ability is the most frightening aspect of the post-socialist subject's mobility.

The emergence of the American female heroine in the successful fight against the psychopathic post-socialist orphan is a common feature in all popular culture examples discussed in this article. Unlike their male North American or British co-characters, the female heroines are more resilient, less likely to be deceived, and more ready to use violence against the post-socialist migrant intruders who threaten their Western societies. I argue that the psychopathic post-socialist orphan as figure of dis/ability facilitates the emancipation of the female heroine, allows her to exercise extreme violence, represent authority, and socially "step up" to defend Western societies.

The white female heroines that emerge against the adversary Helena in *Orphan Black* are her multiple clone sisters, first and foremost the free-spirited and rebellious Sarah Manning, who fiercely fights and often hurts Helena, before they finally bond to challenge their enemies together. Although they are less the physical fighters that Sarah is, the soccer mom Alison Hendrix and the scientist Cosima Niehaus equally develop into fierce heroines in the course of the five seasons, defending society and themselves first against Helena, and later against other corrupt forces. These Canadian citizens are represented in positive ways, unlike Helena, who can never be fully trusted and is morally floating between animalistic instinct and human compassion. They represent the spectrum of white North American individualistic culture and liberal values that promotes female emancipation, individualism, gender equality, and sexual liberation. Most importantly, they are the stable and morally upright personalities who provide the social fabric that keeps the disabled post-socialist orphan Helena in check. By the end of season five, they are Helena's caregivers (or "managers"),

facilitating her slow recovery from her chronic posttraumatic stress disorder and her episodes of psychosis.

The assassin Villanelle of the TV show *Killing Eve* is yet another post-socialist orphan with mental disabilities that provides the potential for a female heroine to shine and exercise physical violence. However, Polastri's power and use of violence is represented in an ambiguous manner. She stabs Villanelle at the end of season one to immobilize her, yet this stabbing is rather awkward, occurring in a moment when the viewer expects the two women to engage in a sexual act rather than in a violent one. Arguably, what keeps Polastri from becoming an unchallenged executor of state violence is that she is not white, but of American Korean and British heritage.[42]

The Post-Socialist Threat—The Danger of Multiculturalism?

Eve Polastri, who is played by Korean Canadian actress Sandra Oh,[43] was born in the U.K. and holds British citizenship, which allows her to hold a British government job at MI5 and later MI6. Because she grew up with her Korean American mother in the US, she has a North American accent. Moreover, she is married to a Polish immigrant and took his Slavic last name. Although she is an agent of British authority, and as such stands for British society as inclusive, her otherness to normative white Britishness is marked and explained in the story.

I draw on Fatima El-Tayeb to read the highlighting of Polastri's diverse ethnic and cultural heritage, her North American English and Slavic last name, as a strategy in liberal multiculturalism that projects images of British society as inclusive and colorblind while at the same time marking non-whiteness and non-British heritage as otherness. Such multiculturalism recreates Britishness as normatively white "allowing to forever consider the 'race question' as externally (and by implication temporarily) imposed."[44] In other words, Polastri is marked as the racial and cultural Other to British normative society who is allowed to participate in society as citizen but is not its genuine or natural part. Her juxtaposition to another cultural and ethnic Other, the psychopathic assassin Villanelle, marks a crossroads for Polastri as this Other. She can either take the opportunity to remain on the path of law and order, continuing assimilation and becoming the model (immigrant) ethnic/racial Other that defends British state and society or she can follow the disturbingly tempting assassin Villanelle into joining her as bad (immigrant) ethnic and cultural Other.

Villanelle embodies the idea of the post-socialist space as ethically corrupt. Villanelle's lack of a moral compass is shown as pathology, deriving from her post-socialist heritage, and part of her mental condition. Accordingly, the potentially corrupting influence on Polastri is not only the threat of moral corruption through discourse, but it is also the threat of corruption through (the spread) of dis/ability.

Polastri is shown as a slightly non-normative character herself, socially awkward and pathologically curious. The fact that Villanelle threatens to amplify this non-normativity because it reinstates and emphasizes mental non-normativity and dis/ability as dangerous. Villanelle's heritage suggests that the post-socialist space does not only produce mentally dis/abled orphans but also cultivates them to carry out their sinister plans to destroy Western liberal democracies. Mobilized and unhindered by open borders, the products of post-socialist corruption might corrupt other segments of good Western society, as well. Polastri accordingly represents the societal segment most endangered by this post-socialist threat. As "desirable" (immigrant) ethnic Other, she has the potential to participate in the tolerant neoliberal state. She has the choice to make the "right" choice, against corruption and for humanitarianism, and become—or continue to be—the shining heroine of the story. Yet, since the story is unfinished, it remains unclear if she can resist her curiosity for "badness" and Villanelle's temptation.

The threat that Villanelle embodies as post-socialist force potentially corrupting Polastri is mirrored on the level of international politics in the story of the Polastri's boss, Carolyn Martens. Martens, head of the Russia Section at MI6, played by British actress Fiona Shaw, is corrupted as well, working against British interests. She secretly collaborates with her Russian counterparts, Villanelle's handler Konstantin Vasiliev, played by Danish actor Kim Bodnia, as well as Martens's Russian contact, the secret service employee Vladimir Betkin (played by Laurentiu Possa). Although this speaks to the danger of evil foreign powers' infiltrating government institutions, the post-socialist corruption goes beyond politics to a much more intimate level. Villanelle is particularly charming and sexually seductive, to all genders. She shares this poise and her mastery of the art of seduction with the two other corrupting Russians in the series. In contrast to Villanelle, whose allure is her beauty, arrogance, and sophistication, among other things, these men tempt through their charm and their patriarchal projection of superiority. All of them, however, show a clear decisiveness that has a sexual component, following their sexual desires without coyness and using sexuality to deceive and trick others. For example, Marten is corrupted in a political as well as sexual sense, having had sexual relationships with both men in the past, and she likely still has. Moreover, Villanelle's and Polastri's sexual chemistry is palpable through the three seasons of the show, and the latter's growing sexual desire for the former is mirrored in her increasing interest in unlawful acts.

The Post-Socialist Sexual Other

Aggressive sexuality has been a constant in popular culture imaginations of international espionage for both genders and across national and ethnic boundaries, at least since James Bond. Scholars studying the representation of post-socialist women in

North American and Anglophone popular culture have long noticed, however, that the focus on the sexuality of (post)socialist figures, particularly female ones, goes beyond the idea of "sexpionage" and the spy thriller genre.[45] Particularly Villanelle confirms the common images of post-socialist women as exceptionally beautiful sexual objects and cunning femmes fatales due to her overt sensuality and seemingly endless sexual appetite, on which she acts to gain power over others.[46]

Helena and Esther equally bring forward the issue of increased sexual desire. While sexual desire and activity is shown as somehow pathological in all three cases to varying degrees, the connection between sexual desires and mental dis/ability is particularly pronounced in the horror movie *Orphan*. Esther, who is not really the poor orphan girl from Russia, but a 32-year-old mental patient, wants to lure the Coleman husband into having sexual intercourse with her, after she killed his son. When he refuses, she stabs him. The Coleman mother, Kate, learns about Esther's pathological character at the very moment when it is too late to save her husband. Talking to a doctor of the Estonian mental institution where Esther was held until she escaped to the United States, Kate learns Esther's real name and age, and that she has a disorder that causes proportional dwarfism.

Esther's sexuality could be considered "normal" for a 32-year-old woman, but her obsession and her violence directed at the rest of the Coleman family and others challenges such an evaluation. Instead, her sexuality is part of her horrifying mental dis/ability, further evidence that "there is something wrong with Esther." This pathologization of Esther's sexuality through the connection to her mental dis/ability and her bodily appearance is very ableist, exoticizing and othering. In the film, the Estonian doctor explains that she has a rare hormone disorder that allows her to pass as a child and that she has infiltrated and killed several families that way. He also emphasizes that Esther made sexual advances toward other family fathers, and that she killed after being rejected. To the doctor's voiceover, Esther removes all the props that allow her to appear younger, bursting into a violent fit. In addition, the scene shows the scars inflicted by a straightjacket she had to wear because of her violent acts in the Estonian asylum.

Orphan does not verbally address the sexual abuse of minors, but seeing the sexual advances of a child toward an adult man evokes such discourses. I argue that knowledge about the sexual exploitation of minors haunts the film. What is just insinuated through the visual in the film is made very explicit in the film script written by David Leslie Johnson. The script has the Estonian psychiatrist explain that Esther had been "molested by her father and sexualized at a very early age," inducing a trauma that caused her mental dis/ability. As an adult woman, she had been "passing herself off as a child [to] work . . . as a prostitute for years, catering to wealthy pedophiles," before

hiding herself in an orphanage from persecution by the police.[47]

Sex trafficking is historically part of ideas around post-socialist mobility in the North American imagination. Williams shows that contemporary cultural ideas about post-socialist women as sexually exploited trafficking victims go back to two historic cases of sex trafficking from Ukraine and Russia, which lead to the design and passing of the U.S. "Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)" in the fall of 2000.[48] As cultural and political figures, the women who have been trafficked are mostly victimized, while sex work is always shown as a morally wrong and degrading activity.[49] In that way the notion of sex trafficking connects a female figure so strongly to sexual violence (which leaves mental and often physical scars) that it leaves no other form of sexuality thinkable–except if the victim of sex trafficking is mentally broken to such a degree that she becomes a dangerous mental case, as in Esther's case.

While connecting her to more general ideas about post-socialist women as victims of sexualized violence, Esther's story in *Orphan* aligns her figure very concretely with the case of Mariya Yashenkova. Although Warner Bros. insisted that the story of the movie was purely fictional,[50] it is hard to believe that Johnson came up with a story about a Russian orphan with a story of sexual abuse without being inspired by Yashenkova's case at a moment when it was very present in the media in 2008, the exact year the script was written and the film produced. Yashenkova was five when she was adopted from a Russian orphanage and brought to the U.S. in 1998. She was sexually abused and exploited over a span of several years.[51] After her liberation, Yashenkova was featured on television, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the CNN show *Nancy Grace*.[52] Her case flared up again in 2008, when her second American adoptive mother was brought to trial for neglect and abuse.[53] Arguably, Johnson connected pieces of Yashenkova's story to another real case, the four-year-old orphan Alex from St. Petersburg. In 1996 Alex, who had been adopted by a piano teacher from Wheaton, Illinois, tried to stab his sister and his mother. "He screamed at [his father] that he hated him and wished he were dead. He told [the family] he'd burn the house down, he'd kill [them]."[54] In *Orphan*, the mother is a piano teacher and the Russian adoptee burns down several houses and stabs his father to death.

Piecing together elements of news stories, *Orphan* reaffirms the connection between post-socialist heritage and sexual trauma in the figure of the Russian orphan. Through the introduction of dis/ability in the form of proportional dwarfism and mental disorder, the film re-introduces the figure of the (sexually) traumatized perpetual child that refuses to grow up to the notion of postsocialism. Esther embodies two migrant figures, which U.S.-American discourses refer to in fighting the New Cold War: the sexually abused woman and the disabled orphan. The film turns both figures of pity and care into a threat to U.S. values and people. This threat,

signified through aggressive sexuality and physical violence, needs to be immobilized and removed to reestablish the original order, which, in turn, is confirmed as good, just, and worthy.

In *Orphan*, sexuality functions as an element that increases the danger that the post-socialist psychopath poses due to his/her reactive attachment disorder. What makes these figures' mental dis/ability exceptionally dangerous is that their whiteness and (relative) ablebodiedness allows them to conceal the threat that they represent. Sexuality is yet another aspect that makes the figures frightening, not just because their sexuality is aggressive and has the potential to corrupt others, but also because it is equally invisible at first. This aspect of dangerous, yet invisible sexual threat connects the Russian figures to the history of North American homo-, queer-, and transphobia that signified the sexual and cultural Other as threat to the Future, with capital F—the continuation of human kind.[55] Like other queer figures, they have the ability to blend in, manage to infiltrate North American and British societies, and destroy them from within.

The notion of danger connected to sexuality is particularly interesting in *Orphan Black* and *Killing Eve*. Both shows represent a diverse spectrum of gender and sexual identities and desires: *Orphan Black* has multiple gay characters, such as the clone Cosima Niehaus and Sarah Manning's foster brother Felix Dawkins, and one clone who is a trans*man; *Killing Eve* features several bisexual characters, among them Eve's friend (and boss at MI5) Bill Pargrave as well as customers of a Berlin fetish studio (in season one). All of these figures' non-normative sexualities are represented as acceptable, even the hardcore fetish one that includes sex work. The psychopathic post-socialist orphans Helena and Villanelle, however, stick out in relation to the other sexually non-normative characters of their respective shows, as their sexuality seems inseparably connected to their post-socialist heritage and their mental dis/ability, corruptness, and dangerousness.

I want to relate this notion of ethnic otherness to Jasbir Puar's work on neoliberal Western societies' inclusion of some lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, and queer subjects to claim inclusivity and progressiveness in the new millennium.[56] Puar argues that the partial and strategic inclusion of previously excluded queer citizens in the protective state allows the same hegemonic powers to exclude other subjects that might even have been included previously, such as racialized migrants, religious minorities, and, I would argue, migrants with dis/abilities. Moreover, these unwanted individuals and groups become represented as dangerous to the "good" queers to legitimize their exclusion.

Killing Eve and *Orphan Black* show the discursive ideology of LGBT inclusion that Puar describes. In their juxtaposition with other, socially included and "good" queer

subjects, the almost animalistically sexualized Helena and the sexually aggressive bisexual Villanelle are not only noticeably othered as disabled and migrant; they are also represented as threats to these queer subjects. Villanelle is a threat to Eve Polastri and kills the bisexual Bill Pargrave, among other queer figures, while Helena is dangerous to her clone sister Cosima, Felix, and others. Queer figures, in this regard, represent the vulnerable subjects that call for a violent immobilization and the removal of the psychopathic post-socialist orphan that illegally migrated to North America to corrupt and/or destroy it from within.

Conclusion

Through my cripistemological reading of three fictional figures, I have tried to show how popular culture addresses dis/ability at the intersection of anxieties about post-socialist mobility and sexuality to create stories of suspense and thrill. As embodiment of fears of mobility, open borders and global movements of people, the post-socialist orphan's invisible mental dis/ability signifies danger, and makes danger understandable and palpable. The use of the orphan trope amplifies these fears not only due to its historic signification of "the threat to the identity of the dominant culture, [their] interests and values," but also due to the historical attachment to Soviet and post-socialist orphans in American society.[57] What makes these sociopaths particularly frightening is that the threat to North American and British societies and people is not immediately visible, and that they are able to infiltrate and corrupt these spaces and destroy them from within.

The post-socialist orphan figure reinstates a West–East hegemony as a response to fears about mobility and cultural encounters, as the figure's mental dis/ability is explicitly produced by the post-Soviet experience and carries notions of post-socialist trauma, developmental delay, and threatening sexuality. Notably, all three psychopathic post-socialist orphans discuss in my article pose a threat not to an idealized homogenic white society, but to ethnically, sexually, and gender "diverse" societies. Even the horror figure Esther is not simply juxtaposed to the all-American white nuclear family, but to a family with a mute and deaf child, who is the sidekick to her heroic mother. This idea of Western nations as ethically and culturally superior due to their progressive stances toward gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism is a fragile construct in the age of Donald Trump and Brexit, where homophobic and anti-emancipatory forces have gained significant ground again. Yet, especially in *Killing Eve* and *Orphan Black*, ideas about female emancipation, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ inclusion are still visible. The post-socialist mentally dis/abled intruders threaten these inclusive societies. Their non-normative sexuality is part of the threat and is clearly distinguished from "acceptable" non-normative sexualities via its connection to post-socialist corruptness and dis/ability.

As evil adversary, the psychopathic post-socialist orphan allows emancipated heroines to emerge and legitimizes their use of violence. These heroic female characters immobilize and extinguish the post-socialist threat, thereby solving multiple crises of Western societies, from unethical military experiments in *Orphan Black* and comparably banal personal crises such as alcoholism in *Orphan* to the crisis of international crime in *Killing Eve*.

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Notes

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