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# Experimental ethnography and the experience of urban space. A case study of young Ukrainian migrants in Poznań

# Etnografia eksperymentalna wobec doświadczeń przestrzeni miejskiej. Studium przypadku ukraińskiej młodzieży w Poznaniu

**Abstract**

This article explores the potential of experimental ethnography in studying how young migrants from Ukraine resident in Poznań perceive and familiarise themselves with urban space. Drawing on sensory and reflexive anthropology frameworks, the text examines how alternative research methods, such as sensory walking or automatic writing, can capture the sensory dimension of urban experience. The author, sharing the same lived reality as her research partners, considers the perspective of a researcher who is *not quite at home*, combining autoethnography with a participatory approach. The article also critically reflects on the limitations and challenges of experimental ethnography, highlighting its potential and methodological pitfalls.
**Keywords:** experimental ethnography, sensory anthropology, urban space, autoethnography, migration, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

**Abstrakt**

Artykuł analizuje potencjał etnografii eksperymentalnej w badaniu sposobów percypowania i oswajania przestrzeni miejskiej przez osiadłych w Poznaniu młodych migrantów i migrantki z Ukrainy. Wychodząc z założeń antropologii sensorycznej i refleksyjnej, tekst bada, w jaki sposób alternatywne metody badawcze, takie jak spacer sensoryczny oraz pismo automatyczne, mogą uchwycić zmysłowy wymiar doświadczenia miasta. Autorka, funkcjonując w tej samej rzeczywistości co jej rozmówcy i rozmówczynie, przyjmuje perspektywę badaczki *nie do końca u siebie*, łącząc autoetnografię z podejściem partycypacyjnym. Artykuł podejmuje także krytyczną refleksję nad ograniczeniami i wyzwaniami etnografii eksperymentalnej, podkreślając zarówno jej potencjał, jak i metodologiczne pułapki.

**Słowa klucze:** etnografia eksperymentalna, antropologia sensoryczna, przestrzeń miejska, autoetnografia, migracja, pełnowymiarowa inwazja rosyjska na Ukrainę

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## Introduction

Experimental ethnography is a research approach that has been widely used in recent years, although it still raises many questions and controversies. Despite its flexibility and diversity of research methods, experimental ethnography often struggles with the burden of the term *experimental* itself. It is sometimes perceived as unreliable and lacking scientific value, hindering its full acceptance in the academic community. Nevertheless, the experimental approach in ethnographic research enables examining issues that are difficult to grasp using traditional ethnographic methods, such as multisensory experiences in urban space.

The article analyses the potential and methodological challenges of using experimental ethnography in research on the senses in urban space. The reflection is based on materials collected during field research in 2022–2024, focusing on young Ukrainians who settled in Poznań because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[1] This research focuses on the sensory and embodied practices used by Ukrainian youth in domestic, urban and digital spaces. In the research, I applied in-depth interviews, participant observation and experimental methods such as sensory walk (Pink 2015), photography (Banks 2001, Pink 2009), field recordings (Westerkamp 2001; Oliveros 2005; Stanisz 2014, 2017) and participatory art activities (Schneider and Wright 2005; Leavy 2018). My perspective as a researcher of Ukrainian origin (living in Poland since before the war began[2]) and experiencing the war from a distance provides additional context for reflection on the methodological and ethical aspects of the research. This study is part of a field of interdisciplinary analyses covering linked issues in the area of migration and youth (Ensor and Goździak 2016, Seeberg and Goździak 2016, Hlebova et al. 2023) and sensory perception and the city (Low 2015, Low and Kalekin-Fishman 2019, Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła 2024), showing the multifaceted nature of the problem studied.

The activity of young Ukrainians in Polish cities shows the complexity of the social processes resulting from the three-year war in Ukraine. During this time, many

[1] The collected material is part of a doctoral dissertation that I am currently preparing at the Doctoral School of Humanities at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

[2] In the following, I use the word "war" to refer to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. However, this does not mean that the Russian-Ukrainian war only started then. It dates back to 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and started the military operations and occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

people have managed to return to Ukraine, leave Poland or get used to their new life in Poland. The experience of fleeing a country in which young people grew up and felt at home has influenced not only their sense of home and perception of their own space but also their relationship with urban space, including movement and orientation in a new city and the creation of "their own" places and associations of the visual, aural, olfactory, gustatory and tactile kinds. Young people, often living far away from friends, family, school or university, try to continue life on the threshold of adulthood, facing the challenges of living in another country and uncertainty about the future. Facing a new, often unknown reality, they learn to function on their terms while searching for their place, be it permanent or temporary, in a space that is both foreign and potentially familiar.

The topic of young Ukrainians in Poland (Banar et al. 2020, Kryvachuk and Długosz 2022), especially in Poznań, was not widely present in scientific research before 2022. Currently, the literature is dominated by analyses focused on students in the education system (e.g. in the context of school adaptation, language barriers or cultural integration) (Herbst and Sitek 2023, Franczak and Lutz 2024, Sugay 2025), while individuals on the threshold of adulthood or young adults functioning outside the institution of school are rarely considered.[3] After 2022, these studies expanded to include issues related to mental health, but they still cover school-age children (De Alencar Rodrignes et al. 2022, Długosz 2023, Klymenko et al. 2024, Stratan 2025). Young adult migrants from Ukraine remain largely outside the scope of previous research, especially from the perspective of every day (Frąckowiak et al. 2024), embodied and sensory experience, particularly in urban space.

In this article, I attempt to understand how young people with the experience of migration from Ukraine perceive the urban space of Poznań sensually and what meanings and tensions are revealed through experimental ethnography methods. The article also reflects on the possibilities and limitations of experimental ethnographic strategies in the context of research on the senses. This interest leads to the formulation of the following questions: What sensory and emotional experiences of urban space are revealed in the actions of the research partners? How does the experience of migration and war affect the perception of space? To what extent do the methods used allow us to capture these experiences, and where do they prove insufficient? How does the researcher's relationship with the space and participants influence the course and interpretation of the study?

[3] Compulsory education for children and young people from Ukraine staying in Poland was introduced in 2024, linking its implementation to access to social benefits (Dz.U. 2024 poz. 645). Although this change was officially justified by the need to "integrate children into the education system", in practice, it ignores the diverse needs and experiences of children with refugee backgrounds. The law does not sufficiently take into account the fact that some Ukrainian children and youngsters continue their education in the Ukrainian remote system. Compulsory education, in this case, may not be suitable to their actual needs and plans.

## What is experimentation in anthropological research?

In this article, I use experimental ethnography as the theoretical and methodological framework for my research. This concept refers to an approach developed since the 1980s in response to the crisis of representation in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The primary goal of experimental ethnography is to challenge traditional research methods and seek new forms of presenting anthropological knowledge that incorporate reflexivity, processuality and researcher engagement.

Experimentation means being open to a variety of methods and interdisciplinary approaches, including the use of artistic or sensory techniques. This enables capturing complex social and cultural relationships that elude traditional methods. Dialogicality, i.e. the inclusion of research subjects in the process of knowledge production, and literariness, i.e. the conscious use of narrative means of expression in anthropological texts (Marcus and Fischer 1986), play a key role. An important aspect of this approach is also the crossing of the boundaries of ethnography, both on the methodological and representational level, which allows for experimenting with the form and structure of field research.

In experimental ethnography, significant importance is attached to the role of the body and the senses in the research process. Sensory anthropologists emphasise that ethnographic knowledge is not limited to observation and interviews, but also includes experiencing the reality under study through all the senses (Howes 1991; Pink 2009). This research method captures the intangible, affective and bodily aspects of the relationship between humans and space. In the case of research on migration and the city, this perspective allows for a better understanding of how sensory experiences influence the process of making a new place familiar and living in a local community.

This approach leads to a decentralisation of knowledge – the researcher is no longer the only interpreter of reality and the subjects of the study co-create the narrative. This makes it possible to reflect the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, which is particularly important in research on migration and the perception of urban space. This research model is also closely related to autoethnography, which is a method in which the researcher uses their own experiences as part of the analytical material, which allows for a deeper dive into the reality being studied and the development of more engaging ways of describing it (Ellis 1991; Okely 1992; Ellis and Bochner 2000).

However, experimental ethnography brings specific challenges. An exaggerated focus on introspection can lead to the dominance of the researcher's personal experiences over a broader perspective, and the formalisation of experimental methods risks transforming these experiences into a new canon, which paradoxically limits innovation (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Furthermore, while the inclusion of art in ethnographic research opens up new interpretative possibilities, it may also raise doubts about the scientific credibility of the results. Therefore, experimental ethnography requires a conscious balancing act between subjectivity and methodological reliability and a reflective approach to one's own research position.

In my research, experimental ethnography captures the sensory aspect of the city and explores young migrants' relationship with urban space. This approach allows us to go beyond the limitations of traditional ethnography, opening the field to sensory methods, autoethnography, and participatory activities. In addition, incorporating experimentalism into my work allows for a more dynamic approach to the relationship between the researcher and the research partners, where a shared process of exploration and interpretation of urban experiences replaces the traditional hierarchy.

## Co-creators of the study

The research group emerged from socio-political changes caused by Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022. The war led to a massive migration of people from Ukraine to Poland, including Poznań. According to estimates by the Poznań City Council, around 70,000 Ukrainian citizens lived there in 2022, representing a 50% increase compared to the period before the aggression.[4] The changes caused by the war and the accompanying migration processes created a context in which young people developed new ways of experiencing everyday life.

The ethnographic research I started in 2022 focuses on young migrants from Ukraine living in Poznań who came to Poland as a result of the full-scale invasion. I concentrate on young people aged 16 to 24 – a group that includes both teenagers and young adults who are making decisions about education, work, and everyday life in a new place. I have chosen this age range to capture moments of transition characterised by intense identity and social dynamics. The participants in the study do not form a coherent group: they differ in terms of their residence status, family situation, social class, region of origin, education, and migration trajectories. The participants of the study came to Poland at different times and under different circumstances related to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Some of them arrived here shortly after the full-scale invasion began in the spring of 2022. Others arrived in the second half of 2022 when Russia's intensifying attacks on critical infrastructure led to blackouts in many parts of the country. There were also those who decided to leave only in 2023–2024, often as a result of changing living conditions, prolonged uncertainty or the need to make long-term decisions.

The participants are diverse in terms of gender, although women are in the majority. Few young men took part in the study, which is partly due to the wartime regulations that prohibited men over 18 from leaving the country.[5] For some participants, crossing

[4] Simultaneously, the number of Ukrainian children in kindergartens and schools in Poznań increased from 3,900 in March 2022 to 7,300 in September 2024. "[…] while around 40,000 war refugees arrived in Poznań. The majority of the refugees were young women with children. More than half had a university degree […]. Initially, most of them planned to stay in Poland for a short time, but over time, more than a fifth intended to stay in Poland permanently" (Statistical Office in Poznań 2022).

[5] At the time of publication, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers had issued a decree (in late August 2024) permitting men aged 18 to 22 to cross the border, marking a change from the previous wartime travel restrictions.

the border was a symbolic and practical transition into adulthood: some turned eighteen after arriving in Poland, while others did so just before leaving. For some, it was also their first foreign trip in life, made under conditions of war and forced migration.

The participants came from various regions of Ukraine, both from cities and smaller towns. They live in various parts of Poznań: some in the central districts, others on the outskirts of the city, often in rented rooms (not so much in apartments), with host families. Some of them lived or live with their families, while others came alone or with their siblings. Some attended or attend local schools, others started studying or working, and some continued or continue their education in the Ukrainian online education system, trying to integrate into everyday life in Poznań at the same time. The study included both persons who plan to stay in Poland and those who consider their stay temporary.

Recruitment for the study was not institutional but rather relational and grassroots. I met most of the participants thanks to the grassroots MAF social initiative,[6] which I co-create with other Ukrainians. Some of the participants I met by chance during city events or social gatherings. Refusal to participate in the survey was rare and was motivated by fatigue with the topic of war, lack of time, or the need to maintain privacy. Besides the contacts made within the MAF initiative, I also met some participants through snowball sampling. I also tried to reach potential participants through schools, universities and foundations that support persons from Ukraine. However, this method turned out to be less effective, probably due to the overload of these institutions and limited access to direct communication. This experience showed how important trust, informal contact, as well as space in which the subjects do not feel represented by institutions but rather present on their own terms are in research conducted in the context of migration.

## Anthropology (not quite) at home – the position of a researcher-migrant and ethical implications

The identity of a researcher who is herself a migrant is not a neutral background in this study. It is the starting point, an interpretive filter, and an element participating in the research process. My position as a Ukrainian living in Poznań shaped both the trajectory of the research and the relationships with participants, as well as the interpretation of the data. My daily experience crosses with that of my interlocutors, although not in a symmetrical way. I move in the research space from the position of

[6] MAF (short for Ukrainian Mala Architektonichna Forma – Small Architectural Form) is a Ukrainian grassroots initiative running in Poznań since 2022, created in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It organises cultural events, such as film screenings, concerts, garage sales or meetings with Ukrainian artists. MAF's activities aim to promote contemporary Ukrainian culture in the local environment and create a space for intercultural exchange. I co-create this initiative with friends who have been living in Poland for years. The relationships that developed there as a result of joint activities eventually enabled conversations that became part of the research process.

both insider and outsider (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), suspended between closeness and strangeness, between belonging and a privileged position.

My research is part of the anthropology of home. However, is it possible to talk about home when I am a migrant? My research position is not straightforward. As a person of Ukrainian origin, resident in Poland for several years now, I am close to my 16- to 24-year-old research partners: we share everyday life in a foreign country, navigate the city that has become our new home, and are united by a common language (or even languages) and by being "in-between". However, there are also clear boundaries between us: social status, economic situation and different life trajectories. This ambiguous position: being both part of the community being studied and a researcher equipped with institutional support, academic language, and a different point of reference raises questions about research ethics, the limits of involvement, hidden power hierarchies, and responsibility towards those I am trying to understand and describe. On the one hand, I have access to this environment: I can move around it with some freedom and understand its contexts and nuances. On the other hand, this closeness requires attentiveness. One should not take for granted what needs, or does not need, an explanation. One should not speak on behalf of others but at the same time not erase one's own position. One should remember that one's perspective is always in between – never fully within, never completely from the outside.

I use the term *anthropology (not quite) at home* to reflect on myself, inspired by classical reflections on anthropology at home (Messerschmidt 1981; Jackson 1987; Cieraad 1999) and contemporary analyses of the complexity of the identity of migrant researchers (Bucerius 2013; Kassan et al. 2020; Carling et al. 2021). This concept does not refer only to the place of residence but also to the researcher's relational, dynamic position, situated at the intersection of community and otherness, proximity and distance. This ambivalence is clearly evident in my interactions with the research participants.

Common origin and migration experience facilitated establishing relationships and building trust, but they were also a source of tension. The participants asked questions that revealed their curiosity but also their need to understand my position: why I came to Poznań, how I "got stuck" there, and whether I have any friends. These were not just informational questions – they also tested my ability to understand their everyday lives and to fit into the urban space we were negotiating together.

The city – in this case, Poznań – is not just a background. It has become an active participant in the interaction: a space that is renegotiated every day, an area of confrontation of ideas and emotions. While some of the speakers described Poznań as green and friendly, to me it appeared grey, chaotic, overwhelming, dominated by concrete and devoid of natural spaces. I started asking myself questions: Does this difference stem from nostalgia for the (broadly understood) Ukrainian landscape? Or perhaps from a radical urban sensitivity? Importantly, in discussions about Ukrainian cities, my perception more often matched the narratives of my research participants, even when they

referred to negative aspects, such as poor infrastructure. I observed a clear emotional resonance and a sense of shared experience, also in the context of criticism, which deepened the sense of belonging and understanding of the perspective of the participants.

The dynamics of the relationship in the study were complex and based on co-presence, not hierarchy. I did not try to hide my identity, but I did not expose it either; I let the participants work out their own way of seeing me. I did not experience rejection, but rather curiosity, sometimes friendly neutrality. My age (I was slightly older than they), informal style of conversation, and lack of academic distance facilitated contact, especially with people who were wary of formal research roles. At the same time, however, I felt the tension resulting from my relative stability: in the eyes of some research participants, I was already "organised", "settled", and therefore potentially less sensitive to their uncertainty.

Mobility – both mine and that of my research participants – was an integral dimension of the research process, not just a logistical issue. Moving around the city, through various districts, environments and means of transport, became a way of gaining knowledge. Meetings took place in trams, parks, private flats (including my own), and cafes – in informal, shared and sensually experienced spaces. The city was not a static background but a dynamic space created in co-existence, in line with the approach of Sarah Pink (2015), who advocates understanding place as experienced, material, and relational.

One of the key elements of this process was co-creating the MAF initiative – a space for joint cultural and social activities. It was not a research recruitment platform but a place of everyday interactions, where the line between a "research conversation" and an informal exchange of experiences was blurred. Relations were born organically: from common action, conversations, and presence.

Awareness of one's privileges is a constant component of my methodological reflection. My long-term residence status, good knowledge of the language, and access to academic resources and institutions all distinguish me from people who came to Poland after the full-scale war in Ukraine under conditions of forced migration. I had time to settle in, build a support network and learn the cultural codes. My research participants often did not have that time. This asymmetry should not only be noticed but also treated as an ethical challenge. I do not want to account for it, but I want to understand better where and how I position myself in the research field.

Empathy, remorse and survivor's guilt[7] are feelings that constantly accompany me in fieldwork, along with a notebook and a recorder. Empathy is often a source of

[7] Survivor's guilt, or the survivor syndrome, is a difficult-to-define state, somewhere between a sense of guilt and constant tension. Living in Poland, in relative safety, while loved ones face daily threats, creates an internal conflict and a deep awareness of unequal fates. It is an unease that does not fade – a feeling that perhaps I have no right to peace while others fight for survival. This experience is not just about physical distance but about a profound sense of injustice that makes every action feel insufficient.

tension.[8] I enter a space full of stories about escape, fear and uncertainty; but I do it from a position of relative stability. War did not force me from my home, but it is not a stranger to me: I live with its presence, experiencing it at a distance, in media reports and conversations with family and friends. The survivor's syndrome means that my research work does not end when I turn off the recorder. Every interview leaves a mark – it reminds me of the difference between my (relative) calm and their everyday uncertainty. This emotional burden cannot be avoided entirely. After all, scientific distance does not mean emotional resistance.

In this sense, *anthropology (not quite) at home* is neither a weakness nor an obstacle. It is an opportunity for a more sensitive, honest and critical examination of social reality – provided that the researcher remains aware of her own situatedness and that reflection on position and affective entanglement becomes an integral part of the research process.

## Sensual theoretical and methodological framework

The experience of urban space, which lies at the centre of my considerations, is a concept that requires preliminary clarification. I understand experiencing urban space as a sensory, embodied, affective and socially embedded process in which individuals enter into relationships with their surroundings, giving them meaning through movement, action, memory and emotions. Inspired by sensory ethnography proposed by Sara Pink (2015), I consider space not as a neutral background for actions but as a dynamic environment co-created by bodies, things, sounds, smells and effects. In this view, a place is not a permanent location but an event constituted by social, material and political relations. Instead of perceiving the city as a collection of objects and structures, I focus on how it is experienced – how individuals create a place through movement, familiarisation, coexistence and narrative. In this context, places are flexible and open, at the same time local and intertwined with global trajectories (Massey 2005), gathering various elements of everyday experience (Casey 1996) and emerging at the intersection of many paths – both human and non-human (Ingold 2000). Understood in this way, experiencing urban space allows us to grasp the complexity and multi-layered nature of the relationship between the body, senses and social structure in the urban context being studied.

During the analysis of the sensory dimension of urban experiences, I do not focus on individual senses in isolation. Instead, I treat them as interdependent aspects of perception that together create a coherent, multidimensional relationship with urban space. As David Howes (2003:45–46) notes, different cultures construct sensory hierarchies in different ways, examining the priority of one or several senses depending on the social and historical context. For example, in Western cultures, sight is often dominant, while in other communities, hearing or touch may be more important. In this way, the sensory experience becomes not so much a biological universality but a culturally

[8] On emotional engagement in ethnographic research, see Hovland 2007; Monchamp 2007; Stanisz 2011.

conditioned construct. At the same time, Tim Ingold proposes a more integrated view, arguing that the senses do not work independently of each other, but constantly interact in a simultaneous experience of reality. In contrast to Howes's approach, Ingold emphasises that perception is embodied and holistic – we do not perceive the world through separate sensory channels but through an integrated experience in which all senses work together, creating a unified whole. As a result, although sensory hierarchies may be a social fact, perception itself remains inherently multidimensional and inseparable.

Applying these concepts to urban experiences, it should be noted that senses not only enable the reception of space, but also co-create its meaning. Walking around the city, we experience sounds, smells, tactile sensations and visual elements that together make up the way we perceive and interpret our surroundings. Therefore, understanding urban perception requires taking into account this interdependence of senses and reflecting on how different approaches – both Ingold's and Howes's – allow us to grasp these complex dynamics.[9]

However, capturing these multisensory dynamics is a methodological challenge., In *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*, Michael Herzfeld emphasises the difficulties associated with capturing sensory experience in anthropological research. This issue arises primarily from the dominance of verbal and visual forms of communication in social sciences, which do not fully reflect the bodily, embodied dimension of perception. Senses are often difficult to analyse because their registration and interpretation are both subjective and culturally determined (Polish translation: Herzfeld, 2004:331). Furthermore, Herzfeld points out that differences in the hierarchy of senses in different societies can lead to distortions in their study – for example, the dominance of sight in Western culture means that other perceptual modalities are often marginalised. As a result, sensory anthropology faces not only methodological but also epistemological challenges: How can we describe something that often escapes language and is experienced in an ephemeral and subjective way?

In the face of these challenges, it is crucial to find methods that will allow us to capture the sensory dimension of urban space in a way that goes beyond traditional research tools. The experimental approach to ethnography that I use in this study is not an attempt to invent new methods, but a conscious adaptation, modification and

[9] The debate between Tim Ingold and David Howes on sensory perception and its role in anthropology began with a text by Sara Pink (*The Future of Sensory Anthropology/The Anthropology of the Senses* 2010), which became the starting point for an exchange of views between the two researchers. Ingold emphasises the phenomenological and embodied nature of perception, whereas Howes treats the senses as a cultural construct subject to social and historical hierarchies. This discussion was developed in the pages of Social Anthropology in 2011, where both authors published their responses (Ingold 2011; Howes 2011). Their polemic offers valuable insight into different approaches to sensory research, and reading these texts allows for a better understanding of the key differences in interpreting sensory experience in anthropology.

verification of their effectiveness in a specific research context. Each of the methods I used – sensory walk, sound walk, automatic writing and photographic walk – was transformed and enriched with original elements inspired by contemporary artistic practices. Each of these methods was implemented in the form of separate workshops, which I organised in collaboration with the municipal cultural institution Pawilon in Poznań.[10] The study aimed to create an open form of participation in which the structure of the group changed depending on the specific workshop. Some participants took part in several workshops, while others only attended one; this allowed for capturing various ways of interacting with urban space and avoiding the homogeneous perspective of a closed research group. Workshops were an essential element of the fieldwork, and their structure and content were developed based on previous in-depth interviews and observations. Thanks to this, the workshops were not only exploratory, but they also responded to the previously identified experiences and needs of the participants. All workshop participants were informed during the registration process and at the meetings that the meetings were part of a research project. Participation in the study was completely optional – people could participate only in the workshops without engaging in the research part or decide to participate in both the workshops and the research. Ultimately, no one refused to participate in the study as well. Such an approach not only allows for exploring the multidimensionality of the city, but also opens up space for reflection on how alternative forms of research can reveal aspects of perception that escape more conventional techniques and methods.

## The Sensory Walk

The sensory walk (Pink 2009; Vergunst & Ingold, 2016), prepared in collaboration with performance artist Olha Skliarska, combined elements of performance art with exercises in bodily awareness. The participants were asked to listen to the soundscape of the city, move around with their eyes closed, and experience contact with water and movement. The goal was to shift the focus from the dominant visual channel to a multisensory experience of the city. Instead of documenting the workshop in real time, I took an active part in it as a co-participant. The only exception was spontaneous audio recording during the walk, which was intended to capture the soundscape of the city and the participants' natural reactions to environmental stimuli.[11] From a methodological perspective, the sensory walk also became for me a form of practising anthropology

[10] The workshops took place in autumn 2024 thanks to the support of the municipal cultural institution Pawilon, a department of the Municipal Arsenal Gallery in Poznań. It provided the space where they were carried out, the writing materials, and support in distributing information about the event.

[11] The recording available on SoundCloud captures the soundscape of the sensory walk, reflecting both the participants' voices and the city's acoustic layer. The rhythm of the steps changes depending on the surface – a distinct tapping on the cobblestones, dull impacts on the concrete, and the crunching of small stones. In the background, the street noise, fragments of conversations and ambient sounds

"not quite at home". The walk was not only a tool for sensory exploration of the city, but also an opportunity to reflect on my own roots – physical, emotional and social – in the space we shared (Photo 1). My participation in the exercises, shared silence, and focusing on the bodily experience allowed me to observe how my presence co-created the space of open and non-hierarchical interaction.

Photo 1. A moment from the sensory walk during an exercise focused on repeating shapes and patterns observed in the urban environment. Photo: Olena Martynchuk, 2024.

intertwine, creating a multi-layered audial space. Audio note – Sensory walk, https://on.soundcloud.com/1ouuCLQeDuEcyR4w6, 3 Feb. 2025.

The reactions observed – embarrassment when performing exercises or uncertainty resulting from the open-ended nature of activities – were clear to me, and I took them seriously. Each person was informed before the workshop began that they could withdraw at any time, decline to participate in exercises or activities, without having to provide a reason. In a few cases, participants actually refused to perform specific tasks. These decisions were fully respected by me and had no consequences for the further course of the meeting. At the same time, these situations prompted me to rethink the form of activities. In the following workshops, I introduced more flexibility and the possibility of familiarising oneself with the exercises in advance, so as to increase the sense of security without compromising the experimental nature of the work.

The final element of the workshop was the exercise "Letter from My Body to Me", which was intended to prompt participants to reflect on their relationship with their bodies. In silence and concentration, they could write or illustrate their feelings, paying attention to how the body reacts to the environment, signals or needs, as well as how often these signals remain unnoticed. Some participants decided to share their letters, pointing out the lack of self-care, which became an important discovery for them. After the exercise, the conversation naturally turned to topics related to mental health, physicality and experiences of discrimination.[12] The atmosphere became increasingly intimate, the workshop smoothly transforming into a space for a free exchange of experiences. At the end of the workshop, there was a joint reflection on the city experience, in which participants shared their observations, emotions and opinions on how the walk influenced their perception of the space.

## Automatic Writing

The second workshop, led by the artist Dmytro Krasny, was based on writing and drawing without conscious control (Breton 1969). Instead of drifting in physical space (Debord 1956), participants were led through a process of "inner walking" in which they recreated and transformed their urban trajectories through writing. Some of the exercises included changing the dominant hand, creating fictional dialogues in the space of Poznań, and marking places that cause discomfort.

Maps and records were subjective, often fragmentary, and non-linear. The body and senses appeared indirectly through images of smell, light or texture. Some fragments revealed affective traces of verbal aggression, tension, the need for control or protection. There were also elements of criticism of urban space – its illegibility, excluding norms, or the symbolism of power. Although the method was not intuitive for all participants

[12] Due to the participants' request to maintain their privacy, I will not develop the topic of these conversations or quote individual statements. Although this decision limits the scope of the analysis, it is in line with the ethical commitment to the research participants and an expression of respect for their boundaries.

and there were moments of frustration, uncertainty and confusion, I made it clear at the beginning of the workshop that every element was voluntary. Participants had the full right to opt out of the exercise at any time, without having to justify their decision. Similarly to the sensory walk, I did not keep any ongoing documentation intentionally, so that I could fully focus on the dynamics of the group and my own involvement. This experience also made me realise that the form of the workshop, although opening up new ways of expression, requires prudent management and sensitivity to the level of participants' readiness to work with their own experience. Ultimately, the participants placed a symbolic "key" on their maps – an object that opens new paths or leads to a place they would like to reach. This was a way to capture not only the city they know, but also the city that remains in the realm of desires and imagination (Photo 2).

Photo 2. Participants during the exercise *Walking on maps*: they move freely on the maps, stepping on them and discussing their impressions. Photo: Olena Martynchuk, 2024.

## Discussion

Although the participants of the walk were men and women who came to Poland after the start of the full-scale Russian aggression on Ukraine, during the workshop they rarely directly referred to traumatic experiences or memories from their homeland. Their way of living in space was focused on the "here and now" – on what was

knowable, possible and familiar. The conversation after the walk was dominated by the need to move forward and focus on the positive aspects of the new life. To many people, Poznań seemed almost an ideal – a place of new opportunities, freedom and peace. Such a narrative can be understood as a defence mechanism: instead of returning to destabilising memories, the young people chose to settle in the present and give places new, safe meanings. Strategies of avoiding the past and focusing on the present can be interpreted as a form of building psychological and identity resilience in the context of forced migration. In the study by Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2023), resilience is not viewed as an individual trait but rather as a dynamic process of managing one's biography by selectively including or excluding elements of the past, present and future. In this context, the present becomes a space of relative agency. A similar mechanism can be observed in the attitude of the participants: idealising the city as a place of peace and freedom serves as a protective function against a destabilising past.

Sara Ahmed's (1999) approach, which demonstrates that the migratory experience of space is saturated with affect–tension, disorientation, but also the desire for belonging, is worth recalling in this context. Ahmed emphasises that the migrant's body "does not adhere" to the space – his/her presence can cause discomfort, and the space itself is sometimes perceived as cold and alien. Meanwhile, the walk, as a form of mindful movement and shared presence, allowed the participants to temporarily reverse this dynamic, grounding themselves physically without fear or judgment. A sensory walk in the centre of Poznań, a place that is potentially expositional and full of unpredictable interactions, allowed for a temporary suspension of the feeling of strangeness. Although both the participants and I had previous experiences with discriminatory behaviour (e.g. verbal aggression towards people speaking Ukrainian), the workshop created a framework in which the city was perceived as accessible, familiar and explorable through the body. Exercises involving closing the eyes, slowing down movement and exploring sounds evoked uncertainty, but not fear. The statements mentioned "relaxation", "ability to walk freely" and "focus on oneself". One of the participants said that it was "the first time they have walked around the city and did not feel like they were being watched". This experience can be interpreted through the lens of Sarah Pink's (2008) concept, for whom walking is a practice of co-creating a place by means of the senses, body and social relationships. The walk of the participants was also a form of place-making (Pink 2008), in which space is transformed through affective and sensory presence. Poznań, previously perceived as potentially stressful and unfriendly, has become a place of temporary relaxation and physical grounding. In this sense, the walk complements Sarah Ahmed's approach, showing the possibility of temporarily suspending affective tension and experiencing communal presence in urban space.

This walk made me re-evaluate my methodological assumptions. I was too optimistic about the participants' openness to reflection on sensory memory and emotional roots. Meanwhile, their needs were different: focused on the present, on relationships

and on novelty. As Pink (2015) notes, sensory research requires a willingness to abandon theoretical frameworks in favour of attentiveness to the rhythms of participants – rhythms that do not always fit into expected models of reflection. It is precisely these discrepancies between the researcher's concept and the subjects' experiences that become crucial moments, as they bring us closer to the real ways of experiencing the city.

The participants rarely referred to the past; their way of moving and talking about the city indicated the building of a new sensory map, rooted in current experience. The focus was on the rhythms of walking, on fatigue and on sounds. According to Edward Casey (1996), a place is an event constituted by the body and relationships. The sensory walk was thus a practice of grounding through action, not through reconstructing the past. The maps created by the participants indicated a connection to everyday places, such as cafés, parks or the homes of acquaintances, rather than to representative points on the city map. The absence of the Warta River, despite its physical dominance in the city's landscape, was significant here. The map was not a document, but a narrative of embodied life. This aligns with the perspective of Michel de Certeau (1984), who views space not as the result of abstract representations, but rather as the product of everyday practices of movement.

Senses, although not present in graphic form, appeared in language, narratives, onomatopoeias and rhythms. Their scattering and unnaming can be read from the perspective of C. Nadia Seremetakis (2018) as a form of sensual presence – one which is hidden and which operates beyond literal expression. Sensual memory, immersed in daily practices, is susceptible to fading, both in migration conditions and, as shown by Seremetakis (2018), in the context of socio-economic transformations. Senses as carriers of emotional memory fade in the face of experiences that are too intense or culturally unprocessed. The map then becomes a transitional space – a place between experience and its representation. From Seremetakis's perspective, the senses are not passive recorders, but active carriers of memory, time and history. Their "silence" (i.e. the lack of graphic presence on maps) does not mean inaction, but rather indicates a different mode of presence: bodily, emotional, internalised. Despite this, the maps and the statements of the participants revealed an alternative way of getting to know the city, one that was not visual, but intuitive and bodily. Advertisements, slogans and fragments of infrastructure were not only perceived as background, but also as signs of an affective "reading" of the city – tender gestures of presence and, at the same time, tactical criticism of dominant spatial narratives.

The described experiences demonstrate that establishing oneself in the new space does not occur through spectacular identity acts, but through everyday, relational practices: being with others, rebuilding rituals, and maintaining bodily presence in the city. As Magdalena Lopez Rodriguez (2010) demonstrates, the pursuit of "normality" is often an internalised adaptive mechanism – a culturally developed way of functioning that enables a person to envision a better future. However, this "normality" is always

negotiated by avoiding destabilising topics, adjusting rhythms, and redefining the sensual landscape of the city. In this context, the participants' reaction was not withdrawal, but the creation of an alternative order, one in which migratory status is just one layer, not the definition of their presence. This is also confirmed by workshops, which show that young Ukrainians do not primarily define themselves as "migrants" or "refugees". Forced migration is an element of their biography, but not its axis. As the report *Seeking a New Language*: *Narratives on home, (forced) migration and identity of newcoming Ukrainian youth to European cities (IDI preceded by a photo task research report)* also shows, the position of a person with migration/refugee experience is ambivalent: on the one hand, it allows the context of their situation to be understood, on the other, as a social label, it is limiting and insufficient to them (Frąckowiak and Martynchuk 2024:25).

## Conclusion

The experiences of participants in the sensory walk and automatic writing workshop demonstrate that the urban space is not merely a physical backdrop to the migrant's daily life, but becomes an emotionally and sensually saturated field of negotiation of safety, belonging and corporeality. The strategies employed by the individuals under study revealed a grounding in the present, focusing on bodily rhythms, relationships, daily routines and micro-practices that allow for a temporary suspension of the tensions resulting from forced migration and war experiences. The city, even if it is sometimes foreign, can be tamed, even for a moment, through joint action and sensual presence. Poznań thus becomes an ambivalent place: a place of potential safety, yet also one that harbours a hidden uncertainty. For the subjects, this city is unknown, but not hostile; complex, but tameable through the rhythms of movement, familiar routes, relationships, and the tender practices of everyday life.

The methods used – sensory walk and automatic writing – allowed for the capture of fragmentary, embodied ways of experiencing urban space. The study participants noted moments of relaxation, disorientation, and a focus on the body, as well as specific places that evoked fear, discomfort[13] or, conversely, a sense of familiarity or homeliness.[14] Emotions were not an addition to the space; they co-created it. Despite this, sensory and emotional elements often appeared indirectly, dispersed and encrypted, requiring careful and non-obvious interpretation. Experimental methods proved valuable but insufficient – not every participant was able or willing to enter a state of deep introspection and some aspects of the experience remained beyond the reach of the tools used.

[13] For example, the streets in the city centre, where there are many bars and where in the evenings one can meet aggressive persons, or the Jeżyce district, associated with danger because of the night shops selling alcohol, where one may encounter some drunks.

[14] The most frequently indicated places are the districts where the study participants and/or their friends reside (mainly Centrum, Jeżyce and Łazarz) and parks.

My presence in the field, as a migrant and researcher, also influenced the dynamics of the relationships and the interpretation of the data. My position *(not) quite at home* made me feel both close to and outside of the group, which required constant reflection on the boundaries of involvement, privileges, and responsibility. Common migration affiliation did not mean automatic agreement; instead, it invited attentiveness and redefinition of what was "common" and what was different. I do not treat the methods used as an end in themselves or as neutral tools of knowledge. Their choice and course were burdened with assumptions, limitations and unexpected tensions. Rather than idealising the experiment, I acknowledge its partial effectiveness and draw knowledge from it; I perceive it as a source of information on how to capture the multi-layered relationships with space and where these relationships escape analysis.

Experiencing the city by young migrants is revealed as both a sensual and strategic act – it is a process of continuous familiarisation, negotiating presence, and creating a new daily routine without the need to discuss the past. Places are not pre-existing here – they are created through action, physicality, emotions and relationships. In this context, experimental ethnography in urban space is not just a research method, but a way of being in the city – one that is attentive, bodily, and relationship-based. It allows us to get closer to what cannot be expressed in language, but it does not guarantee a complete grasp of the sensory dimensions of the experience.

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