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"Grey is all that is depressing and dull": the chromatic landscapes of rooftop exploration in St Petersburg and the "grey spaces" of leisure in the Capitalocene

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ABSTRACT

'Grey spaces' have been adopted as a frame to understand the spatial and material impact of skateboarding in the Anthropocene (O'Connor, 2024; O'Connor etal. 2023), highlighting greyness as both a material and symbolic element in skateboarding praxis. This paper extends the 'Grey spaces' framework to explore urban exploration in St Petersburg, Russia, which has been shaped by material greyness including that of the country's (post-)socialist history, and the symbolic greyness of the authoritarian present. As well as examining these local cultural and political influences, I adopt the Capitalocene epoch as a framework to investigate how these spaces function in the Russian context, offering a nuanced lens to understand alternative spatial practices under oppressive systems (of both neoliberal capitalism and authoritarian governance). This approach not only enriches the 'Grey spaces' paradigm but also proposes new directions for research on leisure practices, spatial exploration and grassroots appropriation in the Capitalocene.

The practice of urban exploration can be described, in very general terms, as the discovery and exploration of 'TOADS (temporary, obsolete, abandoned, and derelict spaces)' (Paiva, 2008, p. 9). As Bradley L. Garrett (2013b, p. 1) has described, it is 'is a practice of researching, rediscovering and physically exploring temporary, obsolete, abandoned, derelict and infrastructural areas within built environments without permission to do so'.

While Garrett (2013a, p. 8) has written that 'the most well-trodden avenue into urban exploration is through a fascination with ruins', in Russia's second city, and former imperial capital, St Petersburg, young explorers have become interested in the city's rooftops. Here, the activity has been popularised as a significant part of the city's youth cultural scene, with practitioners exploring the liminal spaces across the city's rooftops, gaining access by trespassing through courtyards, stairwells, and attic spaces, and in extreme cases, freeclimbing. Rooftop exploration has come to occupy a central place within the city's leisure culture. As journalist Igor' Naidenov (2008) has written: 'An almost exclusively Petersburg pastime . . . they climb roofs everywhere, of course, but nowhere except Petersburg is it possible to move freely in the space between the earth and the sky'. Across the city, its practitioners are known as roofers, in Russian, *rufery*.

Urban exploration is a form of spatial critique, testing the boundaries of permissible practice within the built environment, while also reacting to the social and political experience of the

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postmodern city. Roofing, as with other urban exploration practices, is inherently linked to canonical spatial practices which engage with the city in a creative way, such as those employed by Walter Benjamin's flâneur (Benjamin c2002), or the Situationist International notion of psychogeography and the dérive, the embodied act of navigating the urban environment as a form of spatial critique (Debord, 2006). Consequently, the notion of urban exploration as a form of psychogeographic practice has been well-theorised (see, for example, Garrett, 2013a; Karas, 2024; Pinder, 2005). Urban exploration allows for a reimagining of urban spaces, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of the city's historical and social fabric. As a psychogeographic practice, roofing becomes a means of reclaiming urban space, challenging the normative perceptions and uses of urban landscapes. In this way, urban exploration challenges thinking about spatiality in the contemporary city and questions of power in urban life. In Russia, these issues have been compounded over the past decade by the country's descent, or return, into authoritarianism, which has been accompanied by growing ideological control exerted over the public sphere and urban spaces. As such, young people have sought to reimagine the potential of the city, creating alternative spaces for interaction and a ludic appreciation of the built environment – in St Petersburg, the rooftops have fulfiled this function.

Although contemporary activities are located within this history and theory of spatial practices and attempts to democratise urban space (Garrett, 2013b), detailed discussion of this heritage is beyond the scope of this paper and instead I elect to extend this discussion by adding grey spaces to the understanding of urban exploration and the experimentation it entails, as an embodied and sensuous engagement with the built environment. I examine how the critical capacity of the senses in relation to the built environment, and in the exchange between bodily and architectural form, creates a ludic appreciation of space that undermines the logic of the city and thus opens up the possibilities of the urban environment for those who inhabit these spaces.

My theoretical reflections on 'grey spaces' have emerged from my sustained interest in urban exploration in Russia, with a particular focus on the Petersburg context. This research began in 2017, with the majority of my fieldwork conducted during the autumn of 2019 and early 2020. When I began my study in 2017, my focus was on the accounts of eight young roofers in their twenties: young men born and raised in St Petersburg, growing up in Putin's Russia and coming of age during the country's shift towards authoritarianism. While this group remained the core of my study, I was introduced to additional participants through snowball sampling, a method that allowed me to connect with others involved in the practice of roofing, though my interactions with them were less frequent. While much of the fieldwork that underpins this study was completed at that time, it continued remotely in the 'digital' field afterwards. Nonetheless, in the years since, the city and country I describe here have undergone profound transformations – a global pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and its increasing isolation from the West have irreversibly impacted the lives of those within the city and reshaped my relationship with them. Consequently, this work can be read, in part, as a historical document: a snapshot of contemporary Russia during its descent into authoritarianism. Yet, much of what is presented here remains relevant, offering insights into the rapid changes that have unfolded in Russia over the past decade, employing this relationship between space and authoritarian rule as a means to enrich our understanding of 'grey spaces'.

Conceptualising grey spaces

O'Connor et al. (2023) have conceptualised 'grey spaces' in relation to the neoliberal urban paradigm, employing the material and symbolic associations of grey spaces as a framework for understanding skateboarding. I draw from this work, hoping to develop this agenda which envisages 'grey space' leisure practices as a response to or reworking of public space within the neoliberal city, by adding to this the conditions of authoritarianism (both contemporary and historical). I highlight the cultural specificities of grey leisure in the Russian context which has

been shaped by material greyness including that of the country's (post-)socialist history, and the symbolic greyness of the authoritarian present. The Russian context therefore serves as a heightened example of the authoritarian modes of policing public space that occur in the contemporary city and the exclusionary ways in which public space is constructed, thus creating a need to find 'grey' spaces for social interaction across the city, which explore critically the sensory qualities of urban space and how it is used and inhabited.

Although this paper engages with the qualities of greyness with which roofing interacts, this is not an attempt to theorise systematically colour in the Russian city, but rather to outline how young Russians who engage with St Petersburg's built environment in creative ways interpret the chromatic qualities of the urban landscape they inhabit. Although this is, of course, influenced by the semantic associations of colours. Instead, I understand greyness as both a sensory and spatial quality of the urban experience. While Middleton (2010, p. 585) asserts that there is 'an analytic distinction to be made between the embodied and the sensory', particular salience lies in the role of the body and how an understanding of place is produced by the senses through the corporeal experience of urban space.

Moreover, Paul O'Connor, has described the paradigm of grey spaces as 'a bond between the material and symbolic' (O'Connor, 2024; see also, Glenney, 2023). Following this, I conceptualise greyness as a descriptor of space in two ways: first, as a material quality of the urban built environment, examining the sensory experience of the urban chromatic landscape and the relationship between colour, climate, and the built environment in St Petersburg; and second, I investigate greyness as a quality of the spaces inhabited by the roofers. These 'grey' spaces have a symbolic and ethical value, representing ambiguity or a blurring of boundaries, through which the power structure of the city is disrupted. It is through embodied interaction with these spaces that the roofers are able to critique their position within the city.

This paper examines the function of colour and greyness as an aspect inherent to this urban exploration activity of roofing in the Russian city of St Petersburg; it explores the trope of greyness in the 'post-socialist' (a now much-debated term, see for example, Müller, 2019) city and the desire among young Russians to expand and critique the colour palette of the urban environment. Roofing challenges the experience of the city that is otherwise perceived (or at least presented by the roofers) as uniformly grey and monotonous. Adopting a multimethod approach, incorporating empirical research,[1] digital methods, historiography, and analysis of cultural sources, I investigate how the activity of roofing challenges the normative experience of St Petersburg and how expanding the chromatic scales of the city through the practice may serve as a challenge to the encroaching authoritarianism of Putin's Russia and the escalating social, economic, and political control that has come to define Russia's public sphere, and perhaps, more broadly, public space within the Capitalocene.

The grey spaces paradigm has been employed as an attempt to reconcile the practice of skateboarding with the environmental concerns framed by the Anthropocene (O'Connor et al., 2023). As O'Connor underscores, more generally, 'part of the trope of chromatic leisure [. . .] has tended to equate wellbeing and health with natural spaces, both the green outdoors and blue waterways' (O'Connor, 2024; See, for example; Britton et al., 2018; Evers, 2019b; King & Dickinson, 2023). However, as I will discuss, I suggest that within the discussion of the practice of roofing, and within the Russian leisure context, the concept of 'grey spaces' may more accurately be used to describe the crisis of capitalism in the Capitalocene, and the issues of capital and power in the contemporary city in which access to leisure and urban space has become increasingly uncertain for large groups of people (Moore, 2016).

The Urban Political Ecology framework, from which I am drawing here, views the processes of capitalist accumulation as a direct source for environmental catastrophe (Keil, 2003; Swyngedouw, 1997). Thus, Capitalocene, remains relevant for discussing the planetary effects of extractive capitalism, and environmental concerns such as pollution and climate change, within the grey spaces conversation, which scholars such as O'Connor et al. (2023) have attempted to capture, while

enabling an examination of the root causes of this environmental degradation and the social inequities it may produce (Moore, 2015; Tsing, 2015). I propose that the grey spaces paradigm may thus be useful as a means to understand the exclusionary mechanisms of the Capitalocene (which are evident in the roofers' experiences of urban space and the cost of leisure in the contemporary city) and the creation of autonomous or ambiguous spaces in reaction to these.

Further, I believe that the use of the term 'Capitalocene', which locates climate change and ecological breakdown within the history of capitalism and colonialism is particularly relevant in the contemporary Russian context. This is not only due to the high levels of inequality experienced within the country (Novokmet et al., 2018; Remington, 2011) but in particular because of Russia's status as a petrostate and in light of its war against Ukraine, an explicitly imperial endeavour with wide-reaching environmental consequences (Goldman, 2010; Hendl et al., 2024; Kozak, 2024; Sousa et al., 2022). As Ukrainian scholar and artist Tsymbalyuk (2023) has written:

> Capitalism fragments information and knowledge into separate categories: climate breakdown, Russia's war on Ukraine, legacies of colonialism [...] But in reality, the global climate emergency and Russian imperialism are deeply entangled – and it's time to see them as such.

While this is not to equate the experiences of Russian neo-colonial-extractivist capitalism by Ukrainian citizens with that of citizens living in Russia, such as the roofers, I think it bears considering the ways in which the collapse of state socialism, as well as the legacies of both Russian and Soviet colonial extractivist policies, and the development of both neoliberal capitalism and the conservative neo-colonial state-ideology (with all the incongruities and contradictions that this has produced), have had profound sociopolitical and spatial consequences. Thus, I believe the proposed epoch of the Capitalocene has more utility than that of Anthropocene to our understandings of grey spaces, by incorporating the capitalist logic within which leisure practices such as roofing function.

'Muddy, windy, dark and dirty': St Petersburg's colourscapes

The material conditions of the urban landscape shape the relationship between the senses and place. Feld and Basso (1996, p. 91) argue that 'as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place'. In St Petersburg, this is evident in the ways in which the relationship between colour, climate, and the built environment has deeply influenced not only the experience of inhabiting the city but also the urban exploration activity of roofing.

The weather

While colour is typically understood as a visual phenomenon, to be experienced only with sight – as the eye picks up the ways in which light is reflected or emitted along the visible spectrum – I propose understanding greyness in St Petersburg as a multi-sensory experience. Greyness is a much fuller sensory experience of everyday life in the city, in which weather and climate is mediated through not only sight, but also sound, smell, touch, and potentially even taste. As Ingold (2007), s20) has written, '[to] inhabit the open is to dwell within a weather world in which every being is destined to combine wind, rain, sunshine, and earth in the continuation of its own existence'. While grey spaces have been conceptualised with regards to skateboarding as an activity that takes place 'below the knee' (O'Connor, 2024; Vivoni, 2009), this fuller sensory understanding of greyness is particularly relevant to the activity of roofing, which takes place on the rooftops, in the spaces between the city and the sky. As Nordström (2023, p. 563) writes in her work on rooftop urbanism in Peckham, London: 'Rooftop urbanism as landscape between earth and sky is mediated through movements of air, weather, and both human and non-human bodies connecting the realms above, below and beyond the roof'. In this way, roofing may also be understood as an invocation of Heidegger's (1978, pp. 354–60) notion of the fourfold, an expansion of the world – and the possibilities available

to its practitioners – through the merging together of realms: the sky, earth, divinities and mortals. In expanding the possibilities of the city through traversing the rooftops and changing how they interact with architecture in an embodied fashion, roofers are altering the sensorium, that is the sensory experience of the built environment. One roofer asserted, 'I'm so much more aware, I mean I have to be more aware, of my body when I'm climbing the roof . . . I feel everything . . . the wind on my skin and the metal under my feet . . . ' while another claimed that 'the air smells different on the rooftops' (26 February and 5 March 2020). This clearly follows from Heidegger's concept that pretty banal architectural forms, such as bridges or in this case roofs, can serve to expand the world and merge together different realms, allowing a person to transcend the everyday through the creation of a new critical (and ludic) understanding of the built environment.

Although, in reality, St Petersburg's continental climate is moderated by the ocean and so is milder than many other parts of Russia, it is also unusually wet and windy, which has led to associations with greyness. While, as I shall go on to discuss, greyness is often understood as a feature of the socialist city and thus inherited by contemporary St Petersburg from its Soviet past, the city has an association with greyness and gloom that predates this, thanks to the city's northern location and the strange light and weather phenomena it experiences as a result. Indeed, as Joseph Brodsky wrote in *A Guide to a Renamed City* (1987, 89): 'Everything can change in Petersburg except its weather. And its light. It's the northern light, pale and diffused'.

Weather and light are crucial to both the experience of life in St Petersburg and understandings of the city in the Russian cultural imaginary, as depicted and mythologised in the city's literary canon. As Kelly (2009) describes, the city's weather has become a 'standard' component of the Petersburg text, and these literary depictions have helped to construct local perceptions of the weather, influencing how Petersburgers experience both the city's natural light, or lack thereof, and its climate. In his 1859–64 poem *On Weather*, the poet Nikolai Nekrasov combined lyricism and realism, exploring the urban subject's sensory relationship to the Petersburg environment: as the narrator walks around the city, the weather is 'Muddy, windy, dark and dirty' (Nekrasov, 1981). Meanwhile, a description of the city's characteristic gloom and bad weather can be found in Dostoevsky's novella *The Double* ([1846] 1988):

> The night was dreadful, November-like, — wet, foggy, rainy, snowy, teeming with head colds, sniffles, fevers, quinsys, malaises of every conceivable kind and variety – in a word, teeming with all the gifts of St Petersburg's November.

In Russia, literature has often been understood as a mirror, which both reflects and shapes reality. This is particularly the case in St Petersburg, because as Boym (2001, p. 128) notes, '[a]lmost immediately after its inception, the city acquired fictional doubles that began to affect its image and self-perception'. Brought into existence by the word of one man – created by fiat of tsar Peter I – the city began to be mythologised from its foundation. This mythologisation continued to develop, over the course of its 300-year history, through the spawning of its own particular genres of literature and urban folklore.

The local literature, including canonical 'Petersburg texts' of both fiction and poetry, has had a crucial impact on perceptions of the cityscape. One of the first to analyse the emergence of the 'Petersburg myth' that emerged from the literary canon of texts about the city, Nikolai Antsiferov, included in his pathbreaking discussion, *The Soul of St Petersburg* (c1991), a detailed description of the effect that the weather, and in particular the greyness and the gloom, had on the city's identity:

> Every year the appearance of the northern capital becomes darker and darker. Its austere beauty seems to disappear into the fog. Petersburg for Russian society is becoming, little by little, a cold, boring, 'barracks' city of sick, faceless ordinary people.

Moreover, Antsiferov proposed the creation of the Petersburg legend to no small degree influences both the events which take place in the city, and the 'psychological mood of society'. Petersburgers can identify with the literature about the city because they experience the sensory qualities of the urban environment daily. This is underscored by Tim Ingold (Ingold c2010, 115) who writes, 'the *experience of weather* lies at the root of our moods and motivations; indeed it is the very temperament of our being'. The city's greyness can thus be understood not merely as a figure of the city's literary canon but as crucial to the experience of life in St Petersburg, as evidenced by the assertion of one of my interlocutors that, in St Petersburg, 'even the sky doesn't try' (15 August 2020).

The built environment

The quality of dullness and gloom is not only associated with the city's climate but also bears architectural associations, in particular with the grey *khrushchoby* – blending of Khrushchev's name with the word for slums *trushchoby* – used to describe the five-storey concrete-panel apartment buildings built across the Soviet Union. This greyness 'points to a low colouristic culture, limited material resources, and a lack of required colour-carrying materials' (Griber 2018, 26). Greyness has been, undoubtedly, discursively coded as socialist. However, as Szemetova (2020) has argued, the stereotypical greyness that characterised the Eastern bloc was not just material, but was the product of the Western imagination, in response to its political landscape. These colour associations were discursively constructed in the Cold War era, through what Crowley and Reid (2010, p. 10) call 'the grey tinted glasses of the Cold War'. We must thus problematise the resulting East–West binaries that present the greyness of (post-)socialism as a signifier of an oppressive past and which may serve to other or uphold essentialising or orientalising categories that may be used continually to designate the countries that experienced state-socialism as other.

While there may, in reality, exist a more diverse palette in the post-Soviet suburbs than is often presented both discursively and in visual media, the roofers themselves speak in these terms, talking about the greyness and alienating qualities of the (post-)Soviet tower block as 'all that is dull, depressing, uninteresting' (17 November 2019). They view the featureless midrise Khrushchev-era block as a symbol of St Petersburg's post-industrial suburbs and the immiseration that occurred in these districts in the 1990s as the city's economy de-industrialised. This materiality has come to stand as a symbol for life in these districts, which the roofers view as lacking in opportunity. There is a bitter irony in the fact that, once built in an attempt to further the socialist ideology of constructing a new utopian communist society, now past their design life, the socialist housing blocks are associated with both physical and moral decay. While the materiality of the country's concrete housing blocks became a stand in for the oppression and misery that lay behind the Iron Curtain, it seems logical that these symbolic associations would re-emerge in contemporary Russia, as it has become increasingly cut off from the West under Putin's rule. This isolation holds particular significance in St Petersburg, which was established in 1703 when Peter I founded the city as Russia's 'window to the West'.

The experience of colour within the urban environment is subjective. People's experience and understanding of this colour is culturally constructed and may change across localities and across different time periods. This is underscored by archaeologists Jones and MacGregor (2002, p. 6), who highlight that while colour is 'an integral attribute', it needs to be considered within 'its lived and its social dimensions'. While state socialism is often discussed as being uniformly grey, shabby, and monotonous, this too is how the young St Petersburgers present life in the contemporary Russian city, and the possibilities available to them as they grew up in Putin's Russia and came of age during the country's evolution towards authoritarianism where 'it's all just one big, endless gloom and greyness' and 'it's all a bore, everything except roofing' (31 October 2019, 3 June 2017). One roofer even joked that 'in Petersburg, even the people are grey' (May 2020). Thus, while the understanding of the city's chromatic landscapes has been discursively produced by both the city's literary canon and by Cold War discourses, this colour is in constant reinterpretation, and greyness has,

undoubtedly gained new connotations in Putinist St Petersburg, coming to bear symbolic associations with the repression and restriction that they experience and witness in their daily lives.

Moreover, the social and spatial meanings of the city's outlying housing estates are created in contrast to the city's central districts. This is, to a large extent, shaped by colour associations, with the pale yellows, pinks and blues of the stucco and gold domes of the city centre standing as a counterpart to the greyness of the dormitory suburb. It is precisely because the city's climate is so oppressively grey that the roofers' seek out the colour of the imperial-era centre. The contrast serves not only as a geographical marker but also as a symbolic representation of social hierarchy and cultural identity. This chromatic dichotomy reinforces the perception of the city centre as a place of vitality and vibrancy, in opposition to the monotony and uniformity of the suburban periphery. Over time, these colour-coded associations become ingrained, shaping how residents and visitors alike experience and interpret the city's spatial and social landscape.

For young St Petersburgers, the cost of spending time in the city centre is often exclusionary, and the roofers frequently comment on the high cost of leisure in the central city, from the cost of a coffee to a complaint that 'on Nevsky [the city's main thoroughfare], all there is to do is shop' (6 March 2020). There is a stark difference between the glittering departments stores and boutiques of the city centre and the grey concrete of the suburbs, where the roofers live. This economic marginalisation is underpinned, as discussed by Glasze et al. (2012, p. 1193), by the clear stigmatising effect of the 'discourse, which represented large housing estates as problem areas and synonymous with insecurity, violence, and the periphery of normalized social relations'. Indeed, critique of housing estates within former socialist states, has largely been focused on the quality of greyness, and 'has had a predominantly aesthetic, moral, psychological and environmental character, highlighting problems such as monotony, inauthenticity, alienation and low quality of life' (Krivý, 2015, p. 769). These traits are often discursively reproduced by the roofers, with the greyness of these districts re-emerging within the discourse on the alienating effects of Putinism, and the lack of opportunity available to young people in contemporary Russia (Karas, 2024). Indeed, the roofers talk about the greyness of the city, not so much in relation to the socialist era and a desire to distance themselves from this, as was common in discourse on housing estates in the 1990s – although they do of course have an awareness of this history (Krivý, 2015). Rather, this colour association is related to the failures of the promises of the post-socialist era and neoliberal capitalism, and the oppressive environment in which the roofers came of age.

The material and symbolic qualities of greyness are clearly a motivating factor in the activity of roofing, in that there are clear material, chromatic, and spatial differences between the areas in which the roofers live and the area in which their activities are concentrated. Although much of the practice is concentrated in the historic centre, noted for its imperial architecture, many roofers including the participants in my study live in the city's peripheral districts noted for their Soviet housing blocks and, as I have discussed, the associated greyness. Roofing allows the roofers to create a relationship with the city that they did not previously feel that they had, or rather, do not feel that they were permitted on its peripheries. The roofs which the roofers access and explore are outside their neighbourhood and in the city's central district. It is thus possible to view roofing as a double trespass: both into the forbidden space of the roof and out of the bounds of their neighbourhood. The roofers understand their own activities in this way, as an attempt to take greater control over the social production of urbanised space. Roofing allows the roofers to carve out a space for themselves within the centre: they see it as a means of 'seeking spatial justice' (Soja c2010), of taking greater control over the space of the city. In this way, roofing subverts the normative structure of the city by moving not only vertically from ground level to the roof, but also horizontally from the periphery into the centre creating opportunities that young Petersburgers may be otherwise denied and in doing so it expands the chromatic scales of the city.

Grey spaces of leisure in the Capitalocene

The St Petersburg cityscape undoubtedly provides a compelling lens through which to explore the concept of 'grey space', both symbolically and materially. However, to allow for a deeper understanding of leisure's complexities within this context, the frame of the Capitalocene provides a critical perspective from which to examine the entanglement of leisure with capitalist systems. Within this framework, the concept of 'polluted leisure' becomes central, as it reframes leisure activities as intimately tied to the grey materialities of the urban landscape: 'concrete, steel, asphalt, granite, grime and detritus of urban built environments' (O'Connor et al., 2023, p. 898; see also Glenney, 2023). As described by Evers (2019a, p. 424), polluted leisure entails 'the embodied, sensorial, emotional, intellectual, spatial, and technological emergence of pollution – material and social, harmful and nonharmful, actual and perceived – assembling with leisure'. Here, pollution is not merely an obstacle to be overcome but an active condition that shapes urban leisure practices, challenging participants to engage with and redefine (often post-industrial) landscapes.

Yet, while Evers (ibid.) writes that polluted leisure 'involves mutually shaping coconstituting processes, a multidimensional becoming-with pollution, which is processual, in flux, contingent, multiple, and ongoing', the grey spaces of roofing differ from those examined elsewhere as the roofers attempt to move beyond or overcome the greyness they experience within their local neighbourhoods through their trespass (venturing into the city centre and ascending up onto the rooftops). Moving from the manmade greyness of the suburbs to the expansive yet equally (albeit naturally) grey sky, roofing emerges as a transformative act, in which the city becomes a means for young people to reimagine their identities (both individual and collective). Through climbing, exploring, and inhabiting rooftops, these individuals forge embodied, emotional, and cultural connections to the city that transform their environment from a site of passive consumption to one of active engagement: the city's rooftop spaces are 'up for grabs' regardless of ownership (in an economic or legal sense), as the roofers consider the roofs to be '[theirs] for the taking' (17 October 2019). Leisure becomes a strategy to overcome the omnipresent greyness, offering moments of vitality and creativity that resist the monotony and reclaim a sense of agency within the urban landscape. Here, the greyness of the city is reinterpreted as something filled with possibility:

> It completely changes how you view things. Life's a drag and the whole point of roofing is to shake things up . . . and, it's not just about finding new places . . . I think about it all the time . . . where I'm going next . . . how I get there . . . and you start to notice things . . . not only about the city, but about yourself . . . how you see things in a new way . . . Here's what I've noticed: the colour palette of the roofs – grey, copper brown – the new sheets and the old, rusted ones . . . what can I say but wow . . . (15 August 2020)

In St Petersburg, the roofers talk about their activities in terms of the economic and spatial inequalities that exist across the city and their resistance to these, or attempts to address these through their trespass, drawing on tropes of the working class seizing power that are deeply embedded within the city's culture as the site of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution: 'we're taking back what should have always been ours . . . the right to move freely and see the city from every angle, not just the one they sell you' (15 June 2020). They are responding directly to the authoritarian environment of the Russian neo-colonial capitalist city, which may serve as a heightened example of the exclusionary policies and practices that shape places and spaces globally (Harvey, 2005; Foucault c1991). This is because Russian neoliberal capitalism and its associated state ideology have uniquely blended market-oriented reforms with a strong state presence (Dzarasov, 2013; Kolganov, 2022). In addition, the new Russian conservative-authoritarian ideological paradigm that has developed under Putin has seen a decrease in the freedom for political debate and cultural expression, alongside increased social and political pressure to conform.

Unlike Western neoliberal models, Russian neoliberal capitalism allows for significant state control and ownership over key sectors, a matter which has only intensified since 2022 with the strengthening of sanctions and the exodus of Western companies from the country (Connolly, 2018; Teplyakov, 2023). This duality has influenced the development of public space. In the post-

Soviet era, the amount of publicly owned space in the city decreased as property was privatised and commercialised. Additionally, spaces designated for public use, regardless of ownership, are now subject to surveillance and exclusionary policies that control who can and cannot access these areas freely (Karas, 2024; Zhelnina, 2011). Public spaces in Russia often reflect the priorities of both the state and large corporations (the two of which are closely intertwined), magnifying commercial interests and state narratives. The development of the Russian public sphere as a space that is subject to both commercialisation and political and socioeconomic domination, has allowed it to develop as a site for consumer culture as well as a site for political and economic elites to exert control over the population (Chebankova, 2011). Moreover, the degree of this control and regulation has escalated over the past decade, standing as a notable feature of Russia under Putin (since he returned to the presidency for a third term in 2012) but in particular, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Disciplinary power structures are inseparable from the organisation of space, controlling behaviour and the distribution of bodies within that space. Public spaces are permeated by subtle applications of disciplinary power exercised for the purpose of inducing certain types of behaviour within those who occupy certain spaces, maintaining social and economic inequalities through the organisation of space (Dovey, 1999, Foucault c1991; c2020; Massey, 2009). This is intrinsically linked to capitalist processes, as Heynen et al. (2006, p. 5) describe: 'Whether we consider a glass of water, an orange, or the steel and concrete embedded in buildings, they are all constituted through the social mobilization of metabolic processes under capitalist and market-driven social relations'. While, as Lefebvre (1991, pp. 9–10) has described, '[f]ew people today would reject the idea that capital and capitalism "influence" practical matters relating to space, from the construction of buildings to the distribution of investments and the worldwide division of labour. But it is not so clear what is meant exactly by "capitalism" and "influence"'. The concrete, asphalt, steel, and other materials that define grey spaces are not only products of industrial processes but also markers of an epoch characterised by environmental degradation and resource exploitation. These materials are physical manifestations of the Capitalocene, embodying the extractive and polluting practices that define modernity, as well as the urban condition. Further, power relations are materially embedded within the space, not just in the materials and labour used to create these spaces, but also through the placement of structures such as walls and fences that are used to control the movement of people around the city and promote normative behaviour. The city dictates a specific manner of use, prescribing rules for normative use by imposing how to interact in an embodied way with the built environment. Thus, space serves to promote conformity to ideologised standards of public order.

Urban exploration practices generally, and roofing in particular, reject these mechanisms of political and economic control in the city, and over the built environment, by seeking to create grey, ambiguous sites, where control may be suspended or challenged. As a reaction to hegemonic control, the experience of exploring the built environment becomes a collective and subversive set of acts which operate against the perceived spatial dominance in which their actions and movement may be prescribed or proscribed by the constructed order (Lefebvre, 1991, 1996; Zukin, 1995). Indeed, in his work on urban exploration in London, Bradley Garrett (2012, p. 6) argues that the primary motivation for urban exploration is the 'right to spatial freedom in response to [the] escalating securitization of everyday life [and] perceived subjugation'. This same motivation drives St Petersburg's roofers, who see their navigation of city spaces as both the discovery of overlooked and unused areas of the city's spaces and the appropriation of sites not yet subjected to capitalist appropriation and repackaging for the market, which has significantly restricted access to urban spaces in the post-Soviet era: 'every climb is a way of saying the city isn't just for those who built it or own it' (15 August 2020).

As a practice that engages with the city in an innovative way, roofing is undeniably a strategic mode of practice that pushes at the boundary of what is possible and what is permitted through the creation of illicit, and inherently ambiguous, spaces on the city's rooftops. O'Connor et al. (2023, p. 898) attempt to outline grey space as a 'schema of greyness, an ambiguous in-between zone of

shading, ambivalence, nuances, liminality, contradictions and paradoxes that put questions to social power arrangements'. This is particularly relevant to the practice of roofing which occurs in both the ambiguous space of the city's rooftops and in the grey areas of legality and ownership over urban space: 'The best spots are the ones that don't look like anything special ... they don't belong to anyone but us and they don't cost anything' (3 March 2020). Roofing raises questions as to who exactly the marginal, functional 'grey' spaces within the city belong to, and how this relates to and determines who has the right to occupy such spaces. Unlike parkour or skateboarding, where practitioners move through city spaces used by the other inhabitants of the city, participation in roofing does not disrupt everyday life for the city's other residents. Thus, the practice of roofing functions as a performative shift in which its practitioners are able to negotiate their role in and towards society, and the power structures that govern it, in an invisible liminal space. Further, their relationship with the roof is marginal in temporal as well as spatial terms: they inhabit it for short periods of time, and do not risk confusion with *bomzhi* (an acronym taken from Soviet policing, *bez opredelennogo mesta zhitel'stva*, meaning those 'without a defined place of residence'), criminals, or social outcasts. Thus, roofing is a practice which centres on the creation of liminal – or 'grey' – spaces.

By ascending to the rooftops, explorers engage in a recontextualisation of these often-overlooked areas of the urban environment, transforming them into sites of alternative social interaction and individual freedom. In contemporary Russia, where public spaces and expressions of dissent are frequently surveilled and controlled, the creation of grey spaces on the city's rooftops embodies a subtle yet potent form of resistance as the roofers 'look for any cracks that [they] can exploit ... poking at everything until something gives way' (3 March 2020). The 'grey spaces' on the city's rooftops function as symbolic spaces within the city outside of dominant control, in which the rules that govern social interaction and how the city should be used are suspended. The materiality of the city customarily dictates that the roof is a forbidden territory, however it is one which the roofers are attempting to make accessible through their trespass: 'We make the rules of the game. They say that it is impossible to climb there, but it is possible. There's no stopping us ... ' (13 June 2017). In doing so, the roofers create this new type of ambiguous space which has different conditions to those encountered during normative interactions with the city: ambivalence, liminality, 'greyness' as per O'Connor et al. (2023, p. 898).

Within these grey spaces, it is possible to understand a synthesis between the roof and the roofer, facilitated by the ambiguity and dissolution of structure within the liminal space of the roof. Exploration of the city's rooftops involves a much fuller corporeal engagement with the space than exploring the city down at street level as they must scale walls and avoid obstacles to traverse the city skyline: the relationship between body and built environment becomes both intimate and dynamic allowing for creative experimentation. As Deriu (2016, p. 1050) has written in his work on rooftop photography: '[b]y reclaiming a liminal space on the edge, rooftoppers subvert the symbolic power relationships between the tower and the street, and use their own bodies to assert a fleeting mastery over the city'. In this way, the rooftops give practitioners a degree of control that they may otherwise be denied to the regimes of control and surveillance that have become emblematic of not only the neoliberal city, but also Russia under Putin:

> People talk about discipline and being hard-working and how this leads to success ... so, what success? What does that even mean? The only success I care about is what us guys achieve up here ... no one else can do that ... they're all being swallowed up by the system, but we're taking control of it for ourselves ... that's what roofing really is. (8 March 2020)

Drawing on research on Kampala, Uganda, and Nairobi, Kenya, Jon et al. (2024) describe how 'urban youth are at the center of continually reinventing and reshaping the world in which they jointly inhabit' in order to create a more 'humanistic' city within the Capitalocene. Adding to this the Russian example, I propose the creation of autonomous 'grey' spaces as a means for young

people to contest the modes of production and domination of the Capitalocene through their leisure practices, creating new, more inclusive possibilities for the city.

The relevance of the Capitalocene framework becomes apparent in understanding how these dynamics shape young people's responses to the built environment in St Petersburg. The Capitalocene emphasises the centrality of capitalism in restructuring ecological and social systems, highlighting how economic inequalities and environmental degradation are deeply intertwined with the logics of capital accumulation. In St Petersburg, the roofers' practices reflect an embodied critique of these processes, as their trespass and occupation of rooftop spaces challenge the commodification and surveillance of their urban environment. Their actions confront the spatial manifestations of Russian neoliberal capitalism, where public and semi-public spaces are increasingly enclosed, surveilled, and tailored to serve corporate and state interests. This entanglement of economic and political power underlines the city's evolution as a neo-colonial (in that it has developed and is situated within historic and contemporary Russian colonial practices) capitalist space, where access to the urban landscape is mediated by hierarchies of privilege and control. By occupying rooftops – spaces that exist at the margins of regulation – these young people enact a form of resistance that not only critiques the authoritarian, exclusionary practices of the city but also reclaims a sense of agency within the Capitalocene's oppressive structures. Nonetheless, while beyond the scope of my analysis here, it is worth considering how practices such as urban exploration may also play a role in processes of exclusion across the city, in particular, through the privileging of a certain masculinised form of spatial engagement. Indeed, understanding the interdependent relationship between patriarchy and capitalism is essential to understanding the dynamics of power in contemporary Russia under Putin, as well as the 'mutually reinforcing system and dialectical relationship' between class and gender relations (Eisenstein, 1999).

If we understand grey spaces as liminal or alternative spaces that suspend the modes of control and surveillance in the contemporary city, then they may serve to foster a more equitable distribution of power within the urban environment. However, while these spaces may serve to critique the power structures within the contemporary city through the assertion of extremely localised spaces of autonomy, this is not to overstate the revolutionary or liberatory potential of these spaces given that, as I have described, they are marginal in both spatial and temporal terms, and not used or even seen by the majority of the city's residents. Nonetheless, roofers articulate their practice in terms of its democratising potential, underscoring the symbolic value that the grey spaces created on the city's rooftops have for participants. Thus, through the creation of 'grey spaces', roofing enables young people to challenge the power structures that dominate the public sphere and reclaim a sense of control through the creation of inclusive spaces within the urban landscape. They see the city as a site of possibility, 'as it could be rather than how it is' (February 2020). This dimension of roofing transforms it into a form of resistance. By appropriating and reinterpreting the liminal rooftop spaces, roofers gain the power to influence the power dynamics within the urban landscape (albeit in a limited way).

Conclusion: expanding the grey spaces framework

It is evident that the idea of 'greyness' in contemporary St Petersburg is shaped by overlapping understandings of space and place that have a local inflection, deeply influenced by the specific relationship between colour, climate, and the built environment. As an embodied practice, roofing expands the notions of the city through creating new sensory experiences of the built environment. We can understand the chromatic landscape of St Petersburg as being discursively produced, shaped over time by perceptions of the city's climate, architecture, history, and political experience, but it is nonetheless experienced in both a sensory and embodied manner by those who inhabit the city. Within this local context, greyness functions twofold, and roofing as both a sensory and embodied practice engages with this dual quality of greyness: material and symbolic. The spaces created on the city's rooftops serve as a liminal arena, allowing the young people who engage in the

practice of roofing to create a ludic appreciation of space through the reconfiguration of both bodily, sensory, and architectural form. This is especially relevant in authoritarian settings, where surveillance, securitisation, and policing exist as key aspects of city governance, limiting citizens' opportunities to voice opposition or express dissent in public spaces. In this context, spatial exploration and grassroots appropriation becomes increasingly meaningful. By examining the practice in this way, the phenomenon of roofing serves as a powerful lens through which we can understand the constraints faced by young people in the city and their strategies of cultural resistance to these.

While O'Connor (2024) has offered 'a conceptualisation of grey spaces as a material and symbolic paradigm that embraces nuance and ambiguity to capture the complexity and specificity of skateboarding culture', I have proposed a reorientation, shifting focus from 'below the knee' up to the rooftops. By doing so, I have demonstrated the analytical use that this paradigm may have beyond that particular niche, as historically and culturally situated understandings of greyness and grey spaces may help us to extend the framework and increase its utility as an analytical lens through which to study chromatic leisure and the spatiality of leisure practices.

Grey spaces, as an analytical concept, emerged from situated discussions on skateboarding and pollution in the Anthropocene, and while, in this paper, I have retained much from this conceptualisation – the interaction between the material and the symbolic, the understanding of greyness as a quality of ambiguity or nuance – I propose expanding the paradigm to other activities and geographies, attempting to give local context to a more global phenomenon (that is, the effects of extractive capitalism). Through this approach, I hope to have illustrated the analytical power of 'grey spaces' while, at the same time, underscoring the importance of a locally situated understanding of chromatic leisure, influenced by specific understandings of place and space (here focusing on the particularities of the Russian, authoritarian city). This reorientation may help to develop the possibilities of this paradigm, opening up potential channels for future research on the grey spaces of leisure in the Capitalocene and the ways in which capitalist logic is intertwined with the environmental, social and spatial dynamics of leisure.

Note

1. REC2 Ethics approval granted by CUREC, number: R64109/RE001.

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