

When Belonging is Not the Answer: An Essay about the Usage of Personal Experience in Daily Life Lesbian* Activism

The answer is not within belonging. A short conclusion-like statement to open and close this condensed essay, although an obscure one. The answer to what, you may ask. The question is harder to pinpoint, as it is not one, not always the same, it shifts its shape within a conglomerate: where do I place myself in a community, in a new configuration of borders, can one impose belonging onto others, and does the oppressed want to belong in the oppressor's world, or is *belonging*, here, not the appropriate name? Can I still find belonging in the word *queer*?

During the past years, while looking into my and my partner's – and our cat's – processes of adaptation and insertion in a new land, I defined the act of belonging as being naturally intrinsic to an environment, thus opposed to the acts of integration or assimilation often mentioned in processes of migration and adaptation to a new ground. The integration part of our migratory process was limited to the administrative realm – understanding the systems, the language, getting the right documents, vaccines, phone applications, memberships and social codes – while my personal experience and my outer expression belonged inherently, just by being there, by moving through and taking up space. As time passed, I came to understand that it was a form of dissent-belonging that I experienced and that my body and its expressions and presence were progressively less interested in finding some emotional release through compliant belonging. If, inside the realm of personal experience, one belongs by default, then the struggle is elsewhere, in the details of daily lives and in finding just solutions to the changes or aggressions one experiences.

Questions of belonging in Romania are complex and, therefore, rarely asked. Coming from an ethnically mixed land, produced after the governance of four or five imperia, we've lost count, coming from a national conglomerate bearing a racist history and a complicated relationship with ethnicity and whiteness partially specific to the Black Sea and to the Balkan regions,

a Romanian citizen's ways of belonging in their country and in the diaspora are continuously (still) repositioning themselves according to the caprices of nations and individuals.

When co-organising the second edition of QueerFemSEE in 2023 in Greece with FAC / Feminist Autonomous Research Centre in Athens, a question lingered in our conversations: what unites us, what translates from our different experiences inside the SEE conglomerate of countries and outside it, decentring the Western and North American world? Don't say *burek*, was one of the answers, jokingly, and we cannot. Turks, Greek Phanariotes, Russians, Hungarians, Germans, have been the occupiers, bringing forth a hundred versions of the salty cheese pie to the territories forming today's Romania: from the round to the square, from the pillow-like to the layered, from the snake-like to the dry, salty and flaky. Historical imperialists, in a cluster of divisible – and divided territories that concurrently enslaved its Roma inhabitants for 500 years.

A Bosnian friend reminisces of Lenin and Tito while washing dishes.
 I did not feel like a tourist in Greece, and neither did our warm, elegant companion, who once had slept on similar streets, somewhere else.
 I feel ownership of each space that I am in by the power I carry in the guilt of the oppressors.
 By not thinking that something is really mine.
 Unless it's a car a lavish apartment some gold rings and loud music;
 That means status, I will want a grave of marble although none in my family had that.
 Although some of them maybe wished it.

Years ago, I was a person whose lived daily life spoke against and interrogated various prejudices, while being informed by the stories inhabiting my body. I believe that the use of personal experience, lived or inherited experience, as well as the activism of daily life needs to take a special place, as a way of filling in some of the gaps between making history (within one's local LGBTQI+ movement) and making a life. This understanding of personal experience as activism has little in common with the second-wave feminist statement of the "personal is political". I am rather hinting at a lifelong process of daily, lived, small-scale lesbian* (or otherwise queer or trans) activism that limits itself to understanding and interpreting, sometimes publicly, one's lived experience and one's family history. Not as a self-absorbed gesture but rather as an ethical knowledge of one's place in the world – leading to a long process of learning, adjusting, speaking up, and sometimes unlearning what one must or may publicly state in the myriads of contexts that intersect one's life.

My various ancestors were a peasant, a salt miner, a witch, a slave, a communist, a fighter, a catholic, unbaptized, a racist, a heroine, gone to the gold rush, an illiterate, a lover of books, a powerful mother, a dead queer, many saints and some sinners. I take reference from a multitude of personal experiences that contradicted each other, denied each other, kept each other

secret and even lied about their reciprocal existence. I was born and raised by various conglomerates of feelings that deeply disliked each other and did not get along, and religion was one of their battle fields.

Noli me tangere, said Jesus to Mary Magdalen who, first among humans, saw their resurrected flesh in that garden shaded by olive trees. It means, simultaneously: touch me not, and I cannot be touched.

The various dimensions of personal experience as daily manifestations of activism are very present in trans activism and in the daily lives of trans persons, since their struggles are, in many cases, variously connected to most moments of their existence. To be an ethnically Roma and brown trans woman in the world, for instance, often means that your life is hyper-visible in the public realm, no matter how afraid, tired, hurt or happy you are. I look at the activism of many strong Romanian Roma trans women in awe, their power is almost as mystical and a subject of reverence as resurrected saints. As a stone, not extremely butch looking, trans questioning white lesbian* moving in various degrees of safer or less safe spaces throughout my life, I acknowledge the fact and privilege that this life, and my external presence, are not often hyper-visible. They have been for a long time invisible in the larger, cis gay male-dominated, local LGBTQI+ movement. While the personal experience I speak from is mostly negative during the first 38 years I spent on Earth, in the last 10 years I have enjoyed, together with my partner and, recently, wife, making a safe home together. This marked the entrance of my daily activism in a stage of queer home-making, where the pain was less than the joy and serenity, even the luxury of looking for kinship and dissent-belonging as a member of the Romanian diaspora in a medium-sized Nordic city by the sea.

When working, in activism, writing, art, in a community or in the school, from the depths of personal experience, there are a few questions which come with this methodology: Whose experience is one carrying along? How does it translate from one locality and its historical codes to another? And how can a dialogue about and of personal experiences between different queer, trans, or LGBTQI+ diasporas, for instance, surpass and elude the Western, Nordic, North American – centred world? How could the ideas of separatism, or dissent-belonging, be extended to include such dialogues?

Personal experience is a useful tool, because it has elastic margins that can be structured to encompass one's own life story and ancestry and cling less or borrow less from the generic pool of oppression in the world. It may help one to find their personal place inside generally applicable contexts such as "queer liberation" or "anti-gender movements". This is translated, in activist (grassroots organizing) terms, by allowing space to speak and be listened to the person whose personal experience is, in a specific situation, the closest connected to the situation. This seems evident, yet it is still done too little, and quite often the trope is that of people with partially adjacent or even remote experiences speaking *instead of* the persons who may benefit from centring

the dialogue on them. Classical examples are those of non-LGBTQI+ people speaking instead of LGBTQI+ people, gay or lesbian voices speaking instead of trans voices, middle-class people leading most of the queer movement, white feminists speaking instead of the persons they are racializing, or cis male leftists speaking instead of every oppressed minority. Thus, the question arises: whose experience are we carrying along? Is it our own, our mothers', our grandmothers', our lovers', or the one we read in a book, in a survey, on the bus coming home, or seen last year in a documentary, or heard mentioned once while walking by?

Imagine all this experience as elastic, as a thick, long rubber band you can lean on or wrap in. Where are its points of tension?

One can sense the truth of the statements mentioned above by reading classics of BIPOC (queer) feminism, where personal experience is used to bridge kindred oppressions, to establish generations and heritages of struggle, and, historically, to carve space within white-dominated places, institutions or discourses. This carving of space is less practiced today, when the pleasure of belonging is disappearing from the realm of politically taking up place and moving to the realm of emotional partaking in a community of feelings. Poet and non-binary activist Alok Vaid-Menon writes in their blog:

For years I sought solace in words. Analyzed, deconstructed, prescribed, pontificated. I became so good at speaking the wound, describing it. Became so good at saying "this is what's wrong," I forgot somewhere along the way to ask, "what do I need?" Discourse is not a hug. Analysis is not a home¹.

Analysis is not a home. I could extend this by saying that conventional activism, more publicly visible, goal and policy-oriented, is not a home. If you may feel it to be a home, you may be either the one making the projects and using the funds, or an instrument, a convincing living argument in their latest policy-making effort. Personal experience directs towards activism where generalisation is impossible, a kitchen-table, pot-pie-cooking activism that affects society in harder to quantify ways.

And so...

An invitation came to us, recently, from a newly met person living for a few months in the same Nordic city as us. A Romanian artist, presumably well-intentioned, who, upon discovering my partner and me as queer in a casual conversation involving other, closer friends, rang us the next day to invite us to take part in an impromptu queer soiree. An evening where we would read from my partner's book, eat something called "queer food," and eventually watch a film whose instrumentalizing of queer and disabled bodies we had been privately questioning. We asked the person, rather bluntly, from what position is she organizing such an evening, whether it was from a queer or otherwise LGBT position, and the answer generalized queerness to

¹ Vaid-Menon, Alok. 2021. "Discourse is not a hug." *Alokvmenon*, August 12. <https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2021/8/12/discourse-is-not-a-hug>.

the point of dissolution of belonging: the person identified her perspective as being queer, because “queer is a state of mind”.

From the standpoint of personal experience and daily lived activism, it is impossible to agree that *queer is a state of mind*. It reminds loosely of the 1970s and 1980s concept of *political lesbianism*, predating by many decades today’s TERF positions, a form of ‘radical feminism’ stating that heterosexual women should abstain from heterosexual intercourse, resisting it completely or replacing it with same-sex intercourse, to fight out of their patriarchal binds. The word *queer* was, once, a north American reappropriation of a homophobic slur as an alternative response to more established, heteronormative-leaning LGBT activism. It started being employed in early 2000s Romania, as a less recognised way of saying “gay” when the words *gay* and *homosexual* became largely known and used – thus too unsafe in public space and perhaps too specific. It was also used like an umbrella, or a kinder word instead of lesbian, as the harshness of the word lesbian in the Romanian language was a deterrent. It allowed for a transition towards non-binary identities, in some cases. But these historical, distinguishable codes of usage can feel almost melted in the foggy expression of *queer is a state of mind*.

Queer has been appropriated and colonised, and it may be time to limit its usage, at least in daily activism. It once was mighty and a cry of war, yet now it looks to have entered extensively into the possession of hetero people trying to find generic ways out of their own heterodome. A pretext for various persons in search of a soft name to impersonate a struggle that may not always be theirs, or that they may not always have an experience of, however remote. I lick hairy pussies, finger up holes, have been threatened with death, banished by friends, corrective rape was attempted on me, I went through religious pray the gay away processes (twice), I lied to my mother for 30 years, I hid to protect me and to protect lovers, and I often used the word queer in order to make myself a lighter burden in public space than the one carrying the experience briefly mentioned above. Evidently, one does not need to go through similar experiences to claim a right of belonging to the realm of queer, and I wish that no one ever has to experience the hardships of queerness. Yet this is but one of the many examples of what types of loaded personal experiences words can carry, unbeknown to an interlocutor in an average conversation. And even in the happiest of cases, queer is a state of body rather than a state of mind – otherwise, one risks ending up eating fish with an involuntary gag. I married my lesbian partner of ten years in a church after moving over half a continent to a so-called “post-queer” society and losing my mother in the process. I contributed to making a home out of nothing not to feel less afraid or less guilty, because it may be too late for that, but to be able to feel less generic and more stone, top, gold star, hairy, unsubtle, and to recant the word *queer*.

How does personal experience translate from one locality to the next, beyond the concept of belonging? After leaving Romania, traversing a few borders inside the EU for some quite unsteady and underpaid work, we ar-

rived in Sweden and soon became aware that none of the codes we knew from *back home* could be applied here. I remember seeing an event when scrolling along on Facebook, perhaps one year ago. A Swedish cis-identified artist's PhD workshop inviting like-minded people to join in searching for belonging deeper than the (forever) colonial present. She writes: "*where do I (we) come from?*" and "*where do I (we) belong?*" *Aiming beyond the settler colonial present, we will reach down into the ground below, calling hibernating origin stories into emergence*².

I wondered then, where was she looking to run from Sweden's colonial history? The artist is sensitive, an ally, a carer, a feminist voice. Someone presumably not at ease in a country that is making a devastating right-wing turn. Yet, someone who was born here has a right to land and already is, by default, a priority of the right-wing government, contrary to many others affected by daily racism and xenophobia. I do not mean to fathom the artist's personal experience and ancestry but cannot help bending her questions around. From a personal experience that may not translate that clearly in the Nordics, my thoughts were that digging deeper may not always lead to discovering a kind indigenous spirit or ancestor. A comparison comes to my mind, albeit the identification processes belong to two quite different positions, one of privilege and one of periphery: digging deeper often brings to the surface nationalist pillars lost in the fog of time, as is the case with some Romanians who, despite two thousand years of migration and being under various empires, are still looking to nationalistically embody a long-gone Dacian ancestry. If such an impetus is partially explainable in Romania by decolonial theories (which are hard to apply to the Black Sea / Balkan context, but make for an interesting and unending discussion), what would explain a colonialist's similar urge, when a colonialist's belonging to the colonized space is always the undisputed norm, and often imposed to the detriment of others. Is an un-belonging process possible, and if yes, how could it unfold?

When I started to look for a spot in the "we" that the artist's questions enunciated, I sensed their power of generalization and got reminded of how the word *queer* could be used.

If, by a multitude of examples from my own existence, I came to the conclusion that I have no tools of translating the thick of the body of my former reality into the hegemonic bits of my current reality, simultaneously I found out that my experience has elements of common language with people who trace their ancestry outside the Western, Central, Nordic, North-American conglomerate of histories, ambitions and schools of thoughts. Such as a friend who understands the grain of salt toward her diaspora as well, while our parts of the world lay thousands of kilometres away from each other. Another friend who understands the dissipation and lack of urgency in Malmö's grass-

² Nyberg, Lisa. 2023. "Utan til' / By Heart – calling hibernating origin stories into emergence." *UmArts*, Umeå University, June 17. <https://www.umarts.se/programme-item/utan-til-by-heart/>.

roots queer activism from understanding how it feels when it is urgent. In the depth of my dreams, corners of the world that almost never converse directly with each other, but are always mediated by the Western paradigm, will find ways of peeling away that paradigm and creating a congress of heroes and saints. The feeling of strange happiness that many declared during Queer-FemSEE in Athens and in Bucharest many years ago, relates to this: to finding each other suddenly in the comfort of a complete absence of the West, sharing an incomplete knowledge of each other, and unpreoccupied with processual belonging. And meeting each other from familiar positions of privilege or resistance again, once more mindful of how our personal experiences and heritages intersected.

Noli me tangere had said, in Latin translation, Jesus to Mary Magdalen. It may be so that I am affected by the experience I carry, enough to look twice at who might be touching it. Or that this experience may be too personal to be touched, and it only dwells in ever so small details and observations, like a hand lightly touching by accident the very edge of someone else's coat. Or that I don't really exist.