



F E M I N I S T  
CRITIQUE

EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF FEMINIST AND QUEER STUDIES

6, 2025

F E M I N I S T  
CRITIQUE  
EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF FEMINIST AND QUEER STUDIES

**Special Issue**

Queer and Feminist Studies  
in Southeastern Europe – II

**Editors-in-chief**

Maria Mayerchyk & Olga Plakhotnik

**Editorial Board**

Masha Beketova, Ramona Dima, Olena S. Dmytryk,  
Oleh Kotsyuba & Anna Stepanova

**Guest Editors**

Anna Carastathis, Ramona Dima,  
Simona Dumitriu & Myrto Tsilimpounidi

6<sup>20</sup><sub>25</sub>

ISSN 2524–2733

**Критика феміністична: східноєвропейський журнал феміністичних та квір-студій** – науковий рецензований багатомовний онлайн-журнал вільного доступу. При покликанні на статі журналу вказуйте DOI статті.

**Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies** is a peer-reviewed, multilingual, open-access academic online journal. When citing an article, please include the article's DOI.

Website: <http://feminist.krytyka.com>

Email address: [feminist@krytyka.com](mailto:feminist@krytyka.com)

Editorial mailing address: P.O. Box 225, 01001 Kyiv, Ukraine

**Cover Design:** Valentina Petrova / Валентина Петрова

The collage on the cover features *The Kiss*, a graffiti artwork created by Gordon in 2016 in the center of Bratislava.

У колажі на обкладинці використано графіті *Поцілунок*, створене 2016 року Гордоном у середмісті Братислави.

**Layout Setting:** Oleksandr Boiko

The distribution of publications from the website and the journal *Feminist Critique* is permitted provided proper attribution to *Feminist Critique* and only for non-commercial purposes. Any commercial use of the texts or their parts is strictly prohibited.

Поширення публікацій сайту та журналу *Критика феміністична* дозволено за умови покликання на *Критику феміністичну* і тільки з некомерційною метою. Будь-які комерційні дії з текстами чи їх частинами заборонено.

## • Contents •

Anna Carastathis, Ramona Dima, Simona Dumitriu, Myrto Tsilimpounidi A Note from the Guest Editors .....	5
---	---

## • Articles •

Sofia Bempiza “The West Is (Not) the Best” – Anti-Gender Narratives and Queer-Feminist Struggles in Greece.....	7
---	---

Eirini Marina Dafermou Meeting With Ghosts: Telling a Story That’s Impossible to Tell.....	27
---	----

Andreea Moise “I’d Rather Be Homeful Than Homeless”: Homing Queer Corporeality and Uprooting Exilic Memory in Domnica Rădulescu’s “Exile is My Home” .....	39
---	----

Angie Pantzartzidi, Gregory Pritsas An Analysis on Autonomous Feminist and Queer Safe Spaces: The Case Study of PHYL.IS. A.U.Th.....	51
--	----

## • Feminist Collective •

Simona Dumitriu When Belonging is Not the Answer: An Essay about the Usage of Personal Experience in Daily Life Lesbian* Activism .....	69
--	----



Anna Carastathis, Ramona Dima,  
Simona Dumitriu, Myrto Tsilimpounidi

## A Note from the Guest Editors

**A**gainst reductive notions of commonality in Southeastern Europe (SEE), and essentialist notions of gender and sexuality, how can we queer the affinities that bind us together? This special issue includes work presented at the second international conference on Queer and Feminist Studies in Southeastern Europe (QueerFemSEE), which took place on 28–30 April 2023 in Athens, at the Feminist Autonomous Centre for Research (FAC).<sup>1</sup> The conference aimed to create a network of queer feminist solidarity across and against national borders in SEE. We sought to resist erasure, silencing, misrepresentation, tokenism, assimilation: to replace lost memory and counter the disappearance of queer histories. We sought community and connection: to listen to and learn from each other, have difficult conversations, disagree, laugh, and eat together. Queer feminist researchers working within and beyond academic institutions, activists and community organizers, and artists, came together for three unforgettable days in Athens. That ephemeral community and the relationalities we collectively created echo in the pages of this special issue.

Community is at the core of Angie Pantzartzidi and Gregory Pritsas' article. Drawing on challenges in building up and maintaining the students' union for gender and equality PHYL.IS in Greece, they show how such organic communities manage to create queer and feminist autonomous spaces while also pinpointing the vital role of having "uncomfortable" internal discussions.

Andreea Moise's contribution carefully looks at queerness and exile from a literary angle which intersects so many absences when it comes to queer culture in Southeastern Europe. Constructing its arguments and analysis starting from a play by Romanian-American writer Domnica Rădulescu, Moise reflects upon the process of queering exile, home, and finally, belonging itself.

Sofia Bemeza's article maps out the multiple transnational dimensions and national (Greek) reflections of those producing anti-gender discourse – from right-wing parties, conservative think-tanks and alt-right networks to

---

<sup>1</sup> The inaugural QueerFemSEE was held in Bucharest, Romania in 2017 and resulted in the special issue of *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*, guest eds. Ramona Dima and Simona Dumitriu, no. 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.52323/fc4>.

the church, ethnopatriarchy and the liberal control of reproduction. It also underlines local queer and feminist reactions, resistance and solidarization in the face of rising fascisms.

Simona Dumitriu looks at belonging from a queer angle and deconstructs the term through personal experiences woven with feminism, religion, queer activism and stories from the Scandinavian art scene. This essay traces the lines of how queer SEE migrants might find in each other's common struggles a sense of belonging whilst suggesting that the whole idea of belonging must be continuously scrutinised and adapted.

Sometimes, the violent realities in the region function as a strong catalyst for feelings, which trigger both activist responses and a sense of continuing the work and honouring the memory of people lost to border violence. It is how Eirini Dafermou sensibly constructs her intervention, starting from the femicide of three Afghan migrant women in 2018 which took place in Evros, on the Greek-Turkish border.

This issue is the result of specific sensitivities and experiences within and beyond SEE and offers ways of re-thinking how area-specific studies can enter into dialogue with different realities, activisms and ways of involvement in academia. It reflects some of the many important contributions punctuating the second edition of *QueerFemSEE* and makes us wonder, fear, and worry about so many futures. We hope to contribute with this conference and its proceedings to an archive of queer feminist resistance and commemoration.

## “The West Is (Not) the Best” – Anti-Gender Narratives and Queer-Feminist Struggles in Greece

On March 20th, 2024, Judith Butler introduced their new book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* at the LSE Event addressing how the fear of gender has become the common ground of reactionary politics in many countries around the world and described their experience of being portrayed as the gender devil while visiting the colloquium on “The Ends of Democracy” in Sao Paolo back in 2017. Butler themselves, in other words, gender scholars and therefore gender studies, seem to represent a threat (the evil danger) to the natural order of gender, sexuality, and the family, which causes despair and fear to many different social groups. Another two events, also in March of this year, had a marked impact on my research: A mob of young boys (ca. hundred persons) brutally lynched and also attacked two trans young persons on Aristotelous central square in Thessaloniki. Two days after far-right groups attempted to disrupt the premiere screening of Elina Psykou’s “Stray Bodies” at the Thessaloniki Film Festival<sup>1</sup>. Only the appearance of the film’s poster on social media (featuring a crucified woman on display) fueled numerous reactions from the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the right-wing nationalist spectrum in Greece. If it is so that the anti-gender movement gains more ground globally within the past years, I have to recall another biographical case of intellectual resentment against outspoken gender positionalities. One of my first encounters with the perspective that “Gender (theory) is an ideology” did not come from a religious, conservative, authoritarian, or even fascist context. It was a comment made by an art historian and media theorist, a cis male colleague at the University of Arts in Zürich, who situates his political stance within liberal democracy. Resonating the above-mentioned

---

<sup>1</sup> The documentary, a travelogue in medical stations of Italy, Malta, Greece and Switzerland, depicts the stories of three women who are denied access to abortion, in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and euthanasia. Film Review: <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/458570>

cases of anti-gender actors, my initial point relies on the necessity to analyze the current anti-gender narratives through a critical lens that looks primarily into white supremacist ideology and fatalist religious dogmas but also beyond those two obvious aspects. In other words, I wish to outline that the anti-gender ideology movements that lead to the growing backlash towards sexual and reproductive rights for cis women and trans people (and the ongoing pathologization of queer people) have to be analyzed in a broader spectrum (Goetz 2020, Fábíán 2023, Bempeza 2023).

In this paper, though, I will emphasize the patriarchal and racist hierarchies which lay at the core of the anti-gender arguments in the US and the European context, arguments that derive mainly, but not exclusively, from reactionary, authoritarian, and antifeminist ideologies. Both content directions resonate with my previous research of the cultural practices of the New Right and Alt-Right (Bempeza 2023, 2017) and my research of cultural activism, which gives account to the latest counter-queer-feminist struggles in Greece. Here, I am writing of the refused perspective of a social anthropologist, most notably through the embodied mind of a queer-feminist artist involved in queer-feminist cultural spaces, feminist institutions, and endeavours in Athens<sup>2</sup>. I am also writing from the position of a diasporic subject living in German-speaking countries for two decades. Therefore, my research is based on multilingual scholar resources and my own site-specific involvement within queer-feminist communities in Athens, Zürich, Berlin, and Vienna. As queer-feminist scholars and practitioners concerned with gendered oppressions and constitutive inequalities – from the anti-abortion activism to the alt-right manosphere and the organized transphobia and homophobia in conservative milieus – we need to foster intersectional analyses of gender and sexuality regimes and shed light on the multifaceted topic of the anti-gender actors.

### **“The West is the best” – white supremacy and the alt-right context**

*There is the crisis of constitutional democracy, identified above all with the ethnonationalist, authoritarian, or neofascist political formations taking hold in many established as well as newer liberal democratic nations worldwide. And there is the crisis of equality, expressed in unprecedented extremes of wealth and poverty, and in pitched battles over the present and future of racial stratification and imperial right, within and between nations and hemispheres. (Brown 2020)*

Today, authoritarian governors, neoliberal think tanks, and angry white male supremacists inspired by nihilist (Pinto 2017, Wimberly 2021) and fa-

<sup>2</sup> Since 2017 I am affiliated to the Athens Museums of Queer Arts, the Beaver Collective, Lesvies sta Prothyra, and the feminist editions A) Glimpse) of). I was co-founder and curator of the queer-film festival Aphrodite\* and a research associate at Diotima Centre for Gender Rights and Equality within the EU project PRESS on cyber gender-based violence.



talist concepts are leading to the dissolution of responsibility for us people and the planet, for human and non-human creatures. I am initially relating to Wendy Brown's analysis of the radical antidemocratic forces linked to neoliberalism to give a glimpse of the current challenges of constitutional democracy in different parts of the world. As argued by Brown, neoliberalism, and most prominently the inherently antidemocratic tendencies of the neoliberal reason, can be seen as a moral-political project that aims at protecting traditional gender, racial, and sexual hierarchies (Brown 2019, 28). Besides, to give another aspect of the contemporary challenges in social research, the framework of homonationalism (Puar 2007) highlights the ways in which the acceptance and tolerance of the LGBTQ+ in liberal Western democracies has become the barometer for assessing the capacity to exercise national sovereignty in non-western countries. Similarly, femonationalism (Farris 2017) proves the complexity of identity politics and, more thoroughly, how the "friendliness" of some far-right parties towards women's and LGBTQ+ rights is the outcome of a racist and anti-Muslim stance on ethnic and religious diversity.

"The West is the best" is a motto used by Proud Boys self-described as "Western chauvinists" which is a euphemism for white supremacism. As Dante Nero, a former leading figure of the group, states about its ideological background, this slogan is not far from advocating that, "white people are the best"<sup>3</sup>. Proud Boys were one of the prominent alt-right hate groups involved in the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC (January 6th, 2021) alongside the Patriot Movement, the anti-state militia group Oath Keepers, supporters of QAnon and other far-right groups such as the Three Percenters. Proud Boys stage extremist rallies in the US; for example, they marched at the "Unite the Right" white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (2017) alongside numerous radical-right groups<sup>4</sup>. Prominent figures of the group, such as Gavin McInnes glorify violence and manhood while favouring Islamophobic and misogynist rhetoric in social media to generate fear, rage, and resentment (Park 2022, 189). Besides, known alt-lite figures in the States and UK hold the belief that "the West is the best" as they make use of anti-democratic, racist, and gender discriminatory language in a provocative or relatively conforming mainstream version. Also, men's rights leaders like Paul Elam and conservative edge lords like Jordan Peterson advocate for the fundamental assumptions of Western civilization<sup>5</sup> and male supremacy.

To put it briefly, the proponents of the far-right and the alt-right come out as defenders of "white identity" and the Western civilization. To their perception, far-rights have to fight against numerous, heterogeneous 'oppo-

<sup>3</sup> cf. Zoe Chase. 2017. "Lost in Proud," White Haze, Radio broadcast in This American Life, September 22 <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/626/white-haze>

<sup>4</sup> Proud Boys is listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>

<sup>5</sup> Jordan B. Peterson, "12 principles for a 21st century conservatism" June 15th 2017, Lanark County. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyw4rTywyY>

nents' like feminists, gender and post-colonial studies, queer theory, Black Lives Matter and refugees/migrant movements, Antifa groups, the Islamic world (seen as a homogeneous monolith), as well as the so-called social justice warriors and cultural Marxism<sup>6</sup>. In a philosophical alignment with white supremacy, the alt-right and parts of the manosphere (including men's rights activists, pick-up artists, Men Going Their Own Way, the Red Pills, Incels, etc.)<sup>7</sup> celebrate the greatness of the European ancestors and glorify the universal perspective of white men. The Red Pill ideology<sup>8</sup> underlies much of the discourse among white male supremacist online communities that glorify Western culture and embrace misogyny in Greek and Roman literature. For example, Aristotle's theory of natural slavery and the inferiority of women is very attractive to the Red Pill (Zuckerberg 2018, 25) as it promotes the Western canon and the reactionary vision of the ideal white masculinity. Elsewhere, the poems of Hesiod and Ovid are used as reference for womanizers and pick-up artists to highlight the remarkably misogynistic tones in the ancient texts. So, one overarching narrative of the alt-right and the manosphere relies on a reductive use of the writings of antiquity to promote hegemonic masculinity and the cultural supremacy of the West. The latter, as expressed in reactionary platforms and white supremacist online communities, correlates with the systematic devaluation of cis and trans women, trans men, and nonbinary people. Male supremacism works in tandem with other systems of oppression such as xenophobia, racism, and antisemitism.

### Anti-gender arguments beyond borders

This article has been written to convey the following proposition: the anti-gender narratives in Western and Eastern (European) countries have profound social consequences that invoke both scholarly considerations and questions of agency and activist politics. The term gender ideology, perceived either as a cultural import or a totalitarian ideology, is used by right-wing, conservative governments and non-state actors, common people, and intel-

<sup>6</sup> The term Cultural Marxism has been used within the British and American humanities (80s/90s) as a synonym for cultural studies. It has been coopted by the alt-right and thereby refers to a conspiratorial term with antisemitic implications. See i.e. Mirrlees, Tanner 2018. "The Alt-Right's Discourse of "Cultural Marxism": A Political Instrument of Intersectional Hate", *Atlantis Journal*: 39 (1): 49-69.

<sup>7</sup> Terms: Men Going Their Own Way: a toxic male, anti-feminist ideological movement emerged in the 2000s as part of the manosphere in the UK and USA. The Red Pills: the red pill symbolism originates from the film *Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) and has been appropriated by the alt-right for mainstreaming right-wing and bigoted beliefs as the only true way to view the contemporary world. Incels: mostly young men describing themselves as "involuntarily celibate", part of the manosphere forums like Reddit, 4chan, etc.

<sup>8</sup> The Red Pill ideology (umbrella term) refers to white supremacist ideas and diverse masculinist phantasies circulating in social media communities and social networks that constitute men's rights activism. See also: Botto Matteo, Gottzén Lucas. 2023. "Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere". *Journal of Gender Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2260318>

lectuals that situate themselves *against* gender equality and feminist, reproductive, and LGBTQ+ rights.

The constant offensive rhetoric and the attacks on feminist and LGBTQ+ rights come from different political and cultural fields: from representatives of right-wing and far-right parties to right-wing think tanks and conservative political organizations, representatives of the Catholic, and the Orthodox Church and Christian pro-life activists. Anti-gender arguments derive also from the alt-right networks and the men's rights movement and are being widely disseminated among the pick-up artists communities, in Incel forums, and the extended Manosphere (Messner 2013, Corredor 2019). Global anti-feminism and gender conservatism have grown in the past decade in misogynist groups started on 4chan and Reddit forums, expanding into the mainstream social media in a new sort of culture war (DiBranco 2017).

The different actors mentioned above, in a more or less overt configuration, manifest hostility to women and LGBTQ+ people and the promulgation of rape culture. A common ground for legitimizing their misogynist dogma is the recognition of "Gender as Ideology", a term that stems from the Vatican's deliberations in the 1980s and the 1990s and is so far wide extended beyond its religious context (Case 2019, Vaggione 2020). The proposition of gender roles as a social construction has been condemned in different religious contexts that see gender diversity threatening the divinely mandated natural distinction between the two sexes. Pope Francis characterized the term gender as "one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations" (Mares 2023). For the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, gender and sexual freedom, women's rights, trans rights, and generally the rights of LGBTQ+ people are not only excessive, but also destructive – even diabolical. As Butler argues, "It is represented as a demonic force of destruction pitted against God's creative powers. This is one reason that gender is understood as exercising demonic powers – "a diabolical ideology" (Butler 2019, 4). To give only an example in the Christian Orthodox context: two outstanding figures for hate speech, former Bishop of Thessaloniki Anthimos and Archbishop Christodoulos have been declaring from the pulpit homosexuality as a sin (and "flaw"), they were by all means against sex education in schools, and they have been condemning the Pride Parades since decades.

Anti-gender policies are often adopted by local and national governments to maintain and strengthen the social and political hierarchies according to the white heteronormative cis-male norm. As shown in recent surveys on the understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement, in most cases, anti-gender actors do not share the same ideological framework (Denkovski et. al. 2021, 10). There are old and new allies, a fusion of right-wing positions, conservative and religious actors, but also social democrats, and some parts of the left capitalize gender status hierarchies and cisgender supremacism. What unites those different actors is "the ability to squeeze different discourses into one big threat and construct the gender/gender ideology as an attack on at least one of the three Ns, which

these actors claim to defend: nature, the nation, or normality” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 11). The affirmation of the three N-narrative is directed against social emancipation and the subject’s relative autonomy, against reproductive health care and sexual freedoms, after all, against fundamental democratic principles. The standard anti-gender arguments can differ among countries and geographical contexts (Western/Eastern perspective). As summarised in the transnational study *Power Over Rights*, the arguments that are mostly brought up by the anti-gender discourse are the following: “Gender equality is already achieved, and women’s rights are already protected. (...) Gender equality has not only been achieved, but it has also gone too far, men are in crisis and under threat from man eating, bra-burning feminists. (...) Gender is a dictatorship of political correctness, the domination of a loud minority over a silent majority (...). Gender/ homosexuality is a Western import and has no relevance and grounding in our society. Gender is something that technocrats in Brussels made up to control and manipulate the EU Member States. Gender is a totalitarian ideology - a Marxist, fascist, or a capitalist plot (depending on the cultural context). Gender is the ideology of a loud minority; we must defend the silent ‘normal’ majority.” (Denkovski et. al. 2021, 39–40).

In the Greek context we can observe the influences of the more Western discourse of “Gender as Ideology”, the connection to the English-speaking manosphere (see antifeminist narratives, incel-communities, redpillers) and the ongoing right-wing agitation in favor of heteropatriarchy, that is portrayed through different actors (politicians, clerics, social media profiles, etc.). Here, it should be mentioned that due to its Christian Orthodox concept of heteropatriarchy and nationalism, Greece retains a vast resentment against non-conforming gender identities (Giannakopoulos 2006, Halkias 2004). The anti-gender arguments of the Western Catholic church fusions with the long-established hostility against women’s emancipation and LGBTQ+ rights within the Christian Orthodox framework. In the following pages, I will present some cases as part of my paper, that mainly use situated research methods.

## Anti-gender dynamics in Greece

The anti-gender campaigns, mainly led by conservatives, right-wing populists, and the far-right, have different forms of impact in autocratic or authoritarian states and more liberal states, as they push for legal and constitutional amendments for restricting the rights of women and LGBTQ+ persons. This paper, more than being proscriptive, diagnostic, or even normative, is meant to provide one perspective of the current reactionary dynamics and the anti-gender rhetoric within the Greek context. The framework of the analysis points out the embracement of ethno-nationalist narratives and the ongoing problematic regarding gender relations in Greece. With 53.4 out of 100 points, Greece ranks last in the EU on the Gender Equality Index (EIGE

data 2022) and has been stagnating since 2010, despite slight improvements in the sub-domain of care and social activities. The latest Human Rights Report (2022) sheds light on domestic/partner violence, crimes involving violence targeting members of national/racial/ethnic minority groups, and crimes involving violence or threats of violence towards LGBTQ+ persons. Greece displays many of the contradictions of both Western liberal values applied to a semi-peripheral European economy and the cultural conservatism related to the orthodox religion and the historical patriarchal structures in the society. This is to say, that we need a nuanced understanding of the varied cultural and political ideologies that legitimize the many facets of gender inequality and patriarchal heteronormativity as part of the dominant national narrative.

White male supremacist arguments that undermine women's and LGBTQ+ rights, are well represented within the discourse of the Greek far right and the moderate New Right. Research observations concerning the imports of right wings and alt-right networks in Greece refer to the spread of the alt-right aesthetics in social media (i.e. popular memes like Pepe the frog and KEK, incel memes, etc.) and the updated attitude of some right-wing Greek politicians appropriating Trampism and fake news, and white-supremacy rhetoric (Afouxenidis and Petridis 2021). The strategic imports of white-supremacist ideology are translated into the belief in the superiority of the Greek heritage (the antique past as the cradle of European cultural supremacy) and into claims of a homogeneous people. Moreover, the implementation of alt-right tactics such as disinformation, reversed identity politics, historical revisionism, fake news, fosters the amalgamation of ethno-patriarchy, misogyny, ableism, homophobic and transphobic violence in the Greek context. As reported in recent research on the dominant far-right tendencies in Greece, central elements that constitute the alt-right discourse, such as xenophobia, racism, islamophobia, misogyny, and a hostile attitude towards LGBTQ+ communities, have been widely disseminated in the public realm and in everyday expressions<sup>9</sup>. Over a long period of time, big parts of the public discourse in Greece seem to have been clearly shifting to the right. This happened regardless of the rise and fall of Golden Dawn and the reveal of its violent practices, and its racist and anti-democratic rhetoric – most notably after the imprisonment of the Golden Dawn leaders and other members in 2020. There has been an implementation of far-right ideology and alt-right (media) tactics in several far right-wing parties<sup>10</sup> that popped up after the dismantling of Golden Dawn, but also in the neo-liberal, authoritarian agenda of Nea Dimokra-

<sup>9</sup> Far Right Tendencies in Greece Research Survey 2022, Signal for Researching and Confronting the Far Right (ΣΗΜΕΙΟ), <https://simeio.org.gr/drasi/ereunes/ereuna-tou-simio-pou-vriskomaste-to-2022>

<sup>10</sup> Far-right and New-Right parties (examples): Greeks for the Fatherland by E. Kasidiaris, National Popular Consiousness (ELASYN) by Lagos, Spartiates by V. Stigkas, National Creation (Liberals, patriots, reformers) by F. Kranidiotis and T. Tzimeros, Patriotic Force for Change (PATRIDA) by K. Bogdanos, Christian Democratic Party of Greece, et al.



tia. Currently, we are facing the *normalization of the far-right discourse* in terms of social trends, both as a reaction to the global economic crisis and austerity policies (Vasilaki and Souvlis 2021) and as a counteraction towards democratic efforts that seek to consolidate social and political rights of the unvoiced and silenced, of the excluded and racialized people and/or marginalized communities.

In the aftermath of the normalization of the far-right discourse in Greece, the attack on reproductive and sexual freedoms and the antagonism regarding gender hierarchies are both characterized by the reinforcement of ideas of a homogeneous nation, biological sex dualism<sup>11</sup>, and gender normativity. The core narrative of the local anti-gender actors is very well based on the belief in the triad Nation, Nature, and Normality, which reads as complementary to the well-known “Homeland-Religion-Family”. In other words, intact heterosexual families constitute the necessary bedrock for a stable nation polity. For example, based on the romantic myth of a homogeneous Greek nation, the slogan “we come strong for our future, our country, and our children”<sup>12</sup> introduced by A. Latinopoulou and the newly formed right-wing party PATRIDA (Fatherland) promotes the natural reproductive duties of Greek women. Furthermore, the party turns against the so-called leftist political correctness and embraces the alt-right discourse against migration, people of color, Islam, LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. Its party of origin, also named PATRI.D.A (Patriotic Force of Change), was formed by the neoliberal alt-right edge lord K. Bogdanos, who formulated the motto *Homeland, Religion, Family and Economic Freedom* as its core political thesis. Golden Dawn women’s organization hold nearly the same position when it comes to women’s role. As the latter claims, feminism should not aim at equality, as this is against the laws of nature<sup>13</sup>. In that view, women’s liberation would lead to a departure from their true nature and their highest role, which is motherhood. Recently the Golden Dawn attacked the offices of the Colour Youth queer organization in Athens (after internet threads following an announcement of a financial aid party) (Colour Youth 2024) reaffirming the ongoing homophobic and transphobic hate of its members. Last but not least, the newest Democratic Patriotic Movement – Victory (NIKE) represents ultranationalist family values and has a clear agenda against women’s and LGBTQ+ rights. The anti-gender, far-right Christian party entered the parliament in the elections of June 2023. The NIKE party receives funds from Sportime newspaper, owned by the media group of shipowner Victor Restis (Maragkoudaki 2023) and is associated to Christian Orthodox brotherhoods. As in

<sup>11</sup> Meaning the recognition of the biological sex assigned at birth that fosters trans-exclusionary discourse and binary perspectives.

<sup>12</sup> The TOC Team, 2023. “Αφροδίτη Λατινοπούλου: Το κόμμα ΠΑΤΡΙΔΑ που θυμίζει Μπογδάνο, οι απειλές για μηνύσεις και το “πρόγραμμα” του νέου φορέα”, THE TOC, March 24. <https://www.thetoc.gr/politiki/best-of-internet/afroditi-latinopoulou-to-komma-patrida-pou-thumizei-mpogdano-oi-apeiles-gia-minuseis-kai-to-programma-tou-neou-foera/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.gr/>

other European countries, anti-gender activism, especially the anti-abortion campaigns, is funded by influential organizations and businesspeople that co-organize fundraising and donations. Far from being supported by individual donations, the anti-abortion movement in Europe relies mainly on wealthy conservative foundations, business leaders, and right-wing networks (Norris 2023).

Another significant aspect of the anti-gender movement is the attack on the idea of *wokeness*. The idea of getting (and staying) “woke” is associated with left-wing politics, feminism, LGBTQ+ activism, race equity culture issues, and social injustice. In the local anti-gender rhetoric, the so-called woke culture has evolved as a synonym for cancel culture and de-platforming, both seen as practices of censorship practiced by a so-called left-wing McCarthyism<sup>14</sup>. Once again, the theoretical deconstruction of the concepts of gender, race, and nation (as developed and refined by gender and critical studies) is being seen as a totalitarian threat to the hegemonic canon of the Western/Greek culture.

The anti-gender actors in Greece openly embrace heteronormative and patriarchal family models and have been of great influence in the recent governmental backsliding policies that undermine gender equality. In June 2023, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (established in 1985 and perceived as a victory of the feminist movement), has been abolished. In the new government’s presidential decree, the Secretariat is renamed General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights and the word “Gender” is removed from its title. As next, the General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights has been transferred to the newly established Ministry of Family and Social Cohesion. These crucial institutional changes set the tone of how the right-wing government perceives the contemporary social status of women in Greece. Following anachronist concepts of gender roles, women of Greek origin are encouraged to embrace mothering as their national duty<sup>15</sup>. A different role is ascribed though for same-sex couples and queer kinships (Chalkidis 2023). Same-sex couples have been excluded from the right to marriage and adoption till January 2024, when the Greek parliament approved the Act of Equality in same-sex Marriage and Adoption. This historical decision makes Greece the first Orthodox Christian country to legalize same-sex civil marriage. Nevertheless, the highly-anticipated bill still perpetuates multiple forms of discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons. The current bill leaves significant gaps

<sup>14</sup> The collective book *Woke: The universal deconstruction: Nation – Gender – Race* (ed. by G. Karampelias, 2023, in Greek) contains several texts based on identitarian-nationalist narratives while using left-wing arguments against globalization and neoliberalism. In this context, wokeness is described pejoratively as a hysterical tendency of Western societies, whereas “gender ideology” is accused of the destabilization of national identity and the crisis of the traditional family model, and the diversification of gender identity beyond the binary framework.

<sup>15</sup> For the historical concept of the Greek family in the service of the nation-state see i.e.: Halkias, Alexandra. 2004. *The Empty Cradle of Democracy: Sex, Abortion, and Nationalism in Modern Greece*. Durham: Duke University Press. ibd. 19-34.

concerning i.e. the legislation on the “presumption of paternity”, civil partnerships and medically assisted reproduction for LGBTQI+ parents<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, the fuelled public debates and opinion polls reveal the widening schism between so-called progressive social forces and conservative politicians and church leaders. Archbishop Ieronymos, the head of the Orthodox Church of Greece, condemned the law as a “new reality that seeks only to corrupt the homeland’s social cohesion.”

Further proofs of the anti-gender trends in Greece are the undermining of the #metoo movement shortly after its appearance and the role of institutional justice in cases of gender-based violence, and the anti-abortion or pro-life movement. The pro-life movement in Greece planned the *1st Panhellenic Conference on Fertility and Reproductive Autonomy* (Ioannina 2021), organized by the Orthodox Church and conservative state representatives. The conference was cancelled several months after due to the effective feminist outcry and wider social critiques. Upon the public appearance of the conference’s sexist advertising spot, feminist organizations and activists have been vocal on social media and in public discussions. This mobilization raised concern about the predomination of male conservative actors as speakers (doctors, clerics, etc.), the evident restriction of women’s rights on their bodies, and the anachronist approach to reproduction rights. The broader outcry even led to the cancelation of the participation of the Greek President of Democracy, who was also invited as a speaker. A further attempt to promote the abortion ban followed in September 2023, when the Holy Synod provided an Encyclical for the *ecclesiastical sermon* in the schools entitled, “On the protection of human life and the ban of abortion”. This action also faced harsh critiques and disapproval by the feminist movement.

Another terrain for the anti-gender actors arose with the Co-Parenting Law, which is a manifestation of male supremacy lobbying at the expense of women. The new bill contravenes the requirements of the Istanbul Convention, which requires states to take steps for the rights and safety of domestic violence survivors<sup>17</sup>. As noticed by many feminist networks such as *Diktymo gia tin Ypoxreotiki Synepimeleia* and feminist organizations (i.e. Diotima, 8th March, Mov), in many cases the recent Law 4800/2021 forces women to share custody of their children with their abusers and traps women/children in abusive environments for a long period of time. In response to the antagonism that emerged through the discussions on the Co-Parenting Law, the reactionary networks of Active Dads continue to target women, feminists, scientists, judges, and journalists who deal with the gender-based law regulations that affect survivors of domestic violence (Louka 2022).

<sup>16</sup> See: Key Comments of the ORLANDO LGBT+ Organization on the much-anticipated bill. <https://orlandolgbt.gr/vasika-scholia-toy-orlando-lgbt-sti-dimosia-diavo/>

<sup>17</sup> The Bill violates: The Istanbul Convention (Law 4531/2018) - Directive 2012/29/EU on the Rights of Victims (Law 4478/2017), The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (Law 4478/2017), and The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (Law 4531/2018) 2101/1992).

The anti-gender discourse in Greece is also very present in the cyberspace, where hate speech and gender-based cyberviolence spread out in social media and the Greek manosphere. Recently the public reveal of the doxing telegram portal used by heterosexual men for exchanging images of women and young girls points out the extent of gender-based cyberviolence (doxing, sextortion, revenge porn etc.) and its social parameters. An important hint towards the radicalization of cyber misogyny and its impact on young people has been the recent rally in support of Andrew Tate (Das Shanti 2022), the misogynist influencer who is accused of rape and trafficking. In January 2023, a few dozen young men, organized through social media by a local Greek YouTuber and entrepreneur, marched on Ermou street under the motto “Free Andrew”. It’s remarkable how the concept of freedom is used in this context. By reversing the roles between violators and gender-based violence survivors, the slogan expresses solidarity for the abuser. “Free Andrew” is meant to devalue both the justice system that supposedly harmed Tate and the vocal position of violence survivors and feminists who dare to speak up against his persona. This incident exhibits anti-gender activism and the misogynist rage in Greece, expressed in the amalgamation of alt-right, heteropatriarchal and neoliberal mainstreaming, and it can be related to the Incel hit-and-run practices worldwide.

Another significant aspect of the anti-gender dynamics in Greece is tech-facilitated gender-based violence (i.e. personal defamation and gendered disinformation) against intersectional feminists and queers. In the conjunction of anti-gender and far-right actors over the past years, we faced the targeting of Gender Studies scholars and university teachers<sup>18</sup>, and feminist educators in public schools. Through gender biases to undermine their civic, political, and educational agenda, queer-feminist scholars and educators are being targeted for getting threatened and possibly silenced. As experienced in many countries where women and LGBTQ+ persons are vocal about gender equality issues, hate campaigns and cyber-attacks follow similar patterns. For example, women politicians who fight to protect essential rights and democratic values represent a threat to authoritarians and conservative actors. Recent surveys prove that women in politics are mainly targeted in social media through hate campaigns and gendered disinformation<sup>19</sup>. Hate speech, and gendered and sexualized disinformation campaigns build on sexist stereotypes and very often have a thrilling effect on the persons targeted (Judson et.al. 2020). Anti-gender actors seek

<sup>18</sup> The Press Project, 2021. “To ακροδεξιό μέτωπο «ανησυχεί» για τις σπουδές Φύλου και στοχοποιεί διδάσκουσες – και όχι μόνο” (The right-wing front worries about Gender studies and targets female academics), The Press Project, March 15. <https://thepressproject.gr/to-akrodexio-metopo-anisychei-gia-tis-spoudes-fylou-kai-stochopoiei-didaskouses-kai-ochi-mono/>

<sup>19</sup> See i.e. the cases of public defamation of Agnes Kuhnhalmi (Hungary), Valeria Fedeli (Italy), Bochra Belhaj Hmida (Tunisia), Manuela d’Ávila (Brasil). Cf. Lucina Di Meo, 2023. Cf. Report: ShePersisted - Monetize Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women’s Rights and Democracy Globally. <https://she-persisted.org/>

to weaponize harassment on social media and create a hostile atmosphere against vocal queer-feminist advocates. What is called “flaming” is an aggressive, hostile, profanity-laced online abusive communication (O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003), which is always characterized by intimidating and/or insulting language, negative affect, and “typographic energy” such as capital letters, and exclamation marks. The hostile affect is produced by the visualization of a *loud shouting keyboard* as if an aggressive person would shout in your face.

One last comment, since we face the volatility of the anti-gender movement in many European countries: We need to stress, that besides the societal progress in different aspects of gender equality (i.e. Istanbul convention) and the achievements of the LGBTQ+ and feminist organizations regarding institutional policies of diversity and inclusivity, many progressive countries and human rights advocates spent considerable time without taking seriously the reflexes and institutional resonance of the anti-gender actors. Most importantly, believing in the liberal progress of human rights, democratic politicians and other social actors have not reacted adequately against institutionalized misogyny, male supremacy, and transnational anti-gender movements. This resulted, for example, in the loss of pivotal rights such as the complete ban on abortion in Poland (2020), the adoption of an abominable transphobic legislation in Russia (2023), the overturning of the historic *Roe v. Wade* decision by the US Supreme Court (2022). In recent years, transgender rights are facing a wave of attacks in the States – see the anti-trans bills passed in many Republican-controlled legislatures between 2021–2023. Finally, as in the case of Greece and elsewhere, neofascist, right-wing and conservative anti-gender actors not only perform their opposition to the “woke left” but they play a prominent role in creating and promoting bills related to state-funded social services, education and healthcare, causing severe institutional changes that increase economic and structural discrimination, vulnerability and precariousness.

### Queer-feminist struggles in Greece

*(...) a performative re-taking of sides, which derives its political power from taking up those prior, assigned registers of subjectivation in new and im-proper, potentially critical and agonistic ways. (Athanasίου 2021, 160)*

*(...) the fear of the Other arguably relates to a fear of losing the ‘glorious ancient’ national identity, as well as the Orthodox one (no matter how contradictory the two are) due to migration and subcultural and countercultural formations, especially ones taken to be influenced by foreign cultural leanings (such as same-gender, interracial and interfaith marriages, multiculturalism, spaces of worship for non-Greek Orthodox believers). (Anna T. 2021, 163)*

Power relationships regarding race, gender, class, and sexuality are asymmetrical and still, following Athanasίου, for unsettling those power configurations, we are (re)taking sides. As we take sides, we are performing



dissent, we are deviating from assigned lines of demarcation, we are making turns, we are standing in stasis vis-à-vis the present order (Athanasiou 2021). Struggling with (mis)conceptions of gender identities, surviving gender-based violence (domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, child abuse), facing institutionalised racism and internalised misogyny (Koulouris 2018), transphobia and homophobia (Carastathis 2018, Papadaku 2022), are embodied experiences of exposure and vulnerability. As counteracts, the queer performances of the Greek drag scene render toxic Greekness and re-encode vulnerability (Anna T. 2021). Drag performers alienate in the most bizarre way the national-orthodox archetype to upset gender roles and to re-work on collective traumatization and stigmatization.

The continuum of gender-based violence is persistent in the lives of women and LGBTQ+ persons related to their social status, age, origin, race, and economic condition. In Greece, the dominant approach to social norms serves stereotypes that fit into a traditional gender binary, whereas sexual harassment, gender cyber violence, rapes, and other forms of abuse and discrimination remain vastly secret and unrecorded – from harassment and discrimination at work/education/sports, etc. to domestic violence and physical/psychological abuses during displacement, flight, and encampment. A significant rise in domestic violence and femicides has been reported in the recent years, more thoroughly during COVID times (Papagianopoulou 2022, Kambouri 2020). Greece is counting 31 femicides in 2021 and 21 in 2022. However, there is no official apparatus responsible for the central collection of femicide data and the analysis of the social characteristics of femicide. Some data is collected sporadically by the Observatory of the Secretariat for Family Policies and Gender Equality and the Greek police<sup>20</sup>. Lawyers and activists demand the introduction of the term *femicide* as a separate criminal offence in the country's Criminal Code<sup>21</sup> and seek to contest the culture of (institutional) impunity around violence against women, that allows reduced sentences for the abusers/perpetrators (Gousetis 2021).

Still, hundreds of women and LGBTQ+ people are coming forward, raising dissident voices against the deeply misogynistic male-dominated (Greek) culture, and most importantly, the activities of the queer-feminist movement have gained a new momentum in the last decade. The massiveness of the LGBTQ+ and feminist movement has steadily increased from 2016 onwards if we consider the wide mobilizations organized on November 25th (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), the feminist strike on 8th March and the Pride Parades in many cities. More thoroughly, two incidents, Zac Kostopoulos's murder in September 2018 and Eleni Topaloudi's

<sup>20</sup> A quantitative analysis is attempted by the Greek team of the European Observatory on Femicide and the platform [femicide.gr](http://femicide.gr).

<sup>21</sup> See i.e. Anna Michalakeli (DIOTIMA), Paper at Conference "Femicide: Findings, Questions and Questions", organized by the Centre for Gender Studies of the Department of Social Policy of Panteion University (14.03.2019), <https://diotima.org.gr/i-gynaikoktonia-sto-dimosio-logo/>

femicide in December 2018, set in motion numerous campaigns and protests, that increased the strength and visibility of the queer-feminist movement throughout the previous years.

The ongoing mobilization and the discourse against gender-based violence and police violence in the case of the HIV activist and Drag queen Zak Kostopoulos/ZackieOh<sup>22</sup> are indicative as forms of political action that are persistent. Queer resistance is an ongoing form of persistence that challenges gender normativity, and its modes of reproduction and reaffirmation within societal identifications of the given Natural, the National, the Normal. In that sense, the loss of ZackieOh upsets the certain and brutal truths of normality and opens different ways of producing embodied knowledges within vulnerability (Tzelepi 2020) and precariousness. Besides, the numerous political and cultural events followed Kostopoulos murder displayed the ongoing hostile sentiment of the Greek society against gays, lesbians, intersexuals, transgender and queers, and the discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS, and most notably the police hostility in Greece. The most manifold case of Zak/ZackieOh shed light on the intersection of HIV+ stigmatization, homophobia, and social and class background. The loss of ZackieOh marks a new era for the queer movement in Greece: the protests organized by Justice for Zak/ZackieOh and other queer-feminist alliance groups disrupted the normative perception of gender identities and challenged the trajectories of gender violence against LGBTQ+ people. Athanasiou writes on the challenges of social regulations of gender normativity and the possible ground for crafting queer resistance: "(...) the means through which gender normativity is established are also the condition of possibility for the emergence of gender resistance. Gender and queer resistance refer to forms of dissonantly relating to norms – the norms upon which our gendered and sexualized subjectivity, in all its pleasures and pains, critically depends" (Athanasiou 2012, 206). Justice for Zak/ZackieOh, as a movement in progress, turned up into a political action signifying the reclamation of public space via dissident bodies and claims.

Another significant period for the feminist movement started in January 2021, when the sailing champion Sofia Bekatorou shared her story of abuse in public and opened the dialogue on sexual harassment and gender-based violence in sports. Bekatorou's words initiated the Greek #metoo and set in motion other female voices to report rapes and many types of gendered abuse beyond sports. In the same year, the social outcry against the former director of the Greek National Theater Dimitris Lignadis – convicted for serial abuse and sexual harassment of minors, teenagers, and adults, made a strong case of the #metoo movement, and led to a vast number of protests within the cultural field and beyond. Besides, there have been numerous struggles against sexual violence, femicides, trafficking and police

<sup>22</sup> The initiative *ZackieOh Justice Watch* has been set up to monitor and record the trial which is still in progress (2024).

gender-based violence. Only in recent years (2022/2023) has the feminist movement followed quite many cases, which gained pregnant visibility. I can only mention a few examples. The prominent case of 24-year-old Georgia Bika, raped at a hotel party organized by high-profile figures in Thessaloniki, caused public outrage and led to mass feminist demonstrations in January 2022. Bika appealed to the European Court of Justice after the decision of the prosecutor of the Greek Supreme Court to file her appeal against the verdict of the Thessaloniki Plenary Council that acquitted the 27-year-old man of rape. She is determined to confront the lack of justice and the systemic omissions of the Greek authorities that failed to examine/report the rape in the first instance. Other significant cases are Caroline's femicide at Glyka Nera, who was murdered by her husband in front of her 11-month-old child, and the case of the 19-year-old woman at Ilioupoli, who was captured, tortured, serially raped, and exploited by a police officer who was her procurer. Finally, the most recent case of the 12-years-old girl at Kolonos, who was trapped in the trafficking network linked to the Greek Police Mafia network (Polychroniades 2022), shows the complexity of gender-based violence and the institutional support of trafficking and sexual abuse of women\*, young girls/boys, and children. Feminist solidarity networks (Open Feminist Assembly) for the young woman at Ilioupoli initiated the campaign "If you need help, come to me", and also took responsibility for covering the initial costs of the proceedings<sup>23</sup> and the immediate living expenses of the 12-year-old survivor and her family at Kolonos. The solidarity network around the case of the girl at Kolonos proved to be of crucial importance within the last year and during the trial of the child abuser. It's worth mentioning that the state prosecution's recommendation suggested setting the sexual abuser free of charges concerning offenses of repeated rape, pimping, and human trafficking and blamed even the 12-year-old survivor and her mother. This outrageous juridical support of the abuser and his trafficking networks provoked the vocal parts of the society and led to a vast march on March 14th in Athens (News 247 2024). Lastly, on the day of the court's decision, the gathering of solidarity networks on site increased the demands for justice for the young girl and her detained mother.

Overall, we can observe that despite the broader scope of the public debates on #metoo and the media publicity of femicides and other incidents of gender-based violence, a significant part of Greek society seems to legitimize

<sup>23</sup> As reported during the press conference on July 10th 2023: "The Greek state does not apply its legal obligations under the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and specifically Article 34 on sexual abuse and exploitation of children, as ratified by Law 2101/1992. The Greek state does not comply with its obligations under the Lanzarote Convention of the Council of Europe for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse of 2007, as ratified by Law 3727/2008. It does not implement international protective practices for minor victims and has not yet developed a national protocol for the management in response to incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation of minors." <https://www.facebook.com/allileggyisti12xroni/> ; <https://omniatv.com/853484916/synenteyksi-typoy-12xroni-kolonos/>

the various types of sexual harassment and gender discrimination within a normative framework<sup>24</sup>. On the one hand, gender-based violence is being discussed in mainstream (social) media, in working places, cultural spaces, among friends, etc. On the other, the dominant discussions leave aside the continuum of gender-based violence and the questioning of patriarchal genealogy in the intersection of gender, ability, race, and class issues. The public discussions and media coverage, with less exceptions, lack discretion and deontology principles and cause moral panic (Michalakea 2021). Instead of strengthening emancipatory practices and the initiatives for gender equality the dominant media reports contribute to the spread of gendered and racialized representations (i. e. stereotypical representations of the abusers and victims) and the re-traumatization of the survivors (victim blaming and slut-shaming). As seen in various media coverages in TV and online journalism, the survivors of gender-based violence are being harmfully exposed, and their experiences are denied or devaluated.

Our bodies, our gender identities, our existence are part of a contested arena (Bempeza and Manesi 2021) – and this has been the case for different feminist generations and movements. In her poem *Heroines* (1981) Adrienne Rich refers to the early feminists who spoke out against injustice in the 19th century and the astonishing continuity of women's imagination of survival and persisting through collective resistance against male (white) supremacy. Feminist history, especially the history of women of color and queers, is charged with meaning and knowledge practices, and this is the history/ies in all its respectable differences and divergences that we keep writing ourselves. As for the feminist and queer histories in Greece, characterized by decentralized perspectives and sides, non-linearity, and missing links, we should acknowledge the grass-rooted work that has been made so far to create awareness and craft empowerment concerning gender equality, sexual and reproductive freedoms, and racial justice. Throughout many decades (intersectional) local struggles keep up challenging the patriarchal discourse to confront violence and gender discrimination seeking to transform systemic oppression into an agonistic response.

Self-organized queer/feminist groups and cultural initiatives such as Lesvies sta Prothyra, AMOQA, Beaver Collective, FAC, MiQ, Kiouri@, Kamia Anohi, March 8th assembly, Sabbath, Witches of the South, Fyliky Ataxia, Medouses, Kilotina, Toxines, Tsouxtrés are active in Athens, Thessaloniki and many other cities. To provide an extensive view of their practices surpasses the capacities of this paper. Without intending to do less justice to all different activist/cultural practices, I wish to place an overall emphasis on the rich political activities and the strategies of reclaiming visibility in the streets, within public institutions and in the (social) media discourse, whereby the re-imag-

<sup>24</sup> See i.e. the report on gender-based violence of the EQUAL\_GEN Project (2023-2024), in the framework of the Active citizens Fund, implemented by Diotima Centre, with Emanates and Anasa Cultural Center as partners. <https://diotima.org.gr/ekthesi-gia-tin-prolip-si-tis-emfylis-via/>

ining gender positionalities (i.e. FAC, Lesvies sta Prothyra, AMOQA) and forcing new subjectivations (i.e. the post-migrant queer collective MiQ in Athens) also go beyond the historical identifications of gender and sexuality in Greece. In the last decade a lot of communal work is being made to establish solidarity networks, provide support for LGBTQ+ migrants/refugees (i.e. Emantes) and address migrant/refugee women issues and racialized violence (i.e. United African Women Organization, Melissa, Anasa). Also, a lot of collective work is being made against gender-based violence and for demanding trans/intersex rights and sex workers' rights (i.e. Diotima, Positive Voice/Thetiki Phone, Intersex Greece, Orlando LGBTQ+, Red Umbrella). In that sense, I place an emphasis on acknowledging those continuous efforts and political struggles that seek to preserve communities of care and solidarity – communities that confirm different types of traumatic experiences and vulnerabilities in their gender, ethnic, and racial configurations.

*To laugh compulsively, even violently, at the reasoning of Law, to gender as reason, is to expose its violence. It is also to risk being heard as the origin of the violence exposed. However the women's laughter is heard, it becomes contagious for those women in the courtroom who "get it." Their laughter becomes a feminist lead. They leave the courtroom.*

*Even if they are asked to leave, they walk out willingly, laughing with and to each other. (Ahmed 2014, 156)*

I wish to conclude with a noisy statement by Ahmed that reminds me that willfulness can be performed not only to persist as an individual, but also to express one's very loyalty to a culture whose existence is deemed as a threat. It also reminds me that *speaking out*, *speaking nearby* and *speaking from* a situated perspective are necessary steps for dissident responses, for challenging the normative view of the world and, most importantly, for achieving mutual understanding, empathy, and political action.

- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Willful Subjects*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Afouxenidis, Alex, and Petros Petridis. 2021. "Discourses and Politics of the far-right on social media." *The Greek Review of Social Research* 157: 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.27599>
- Anna T. 2021. "Drag resistance: Necropolitics, queer survival and a Balkan counter-publics." *Queer studies in media & popular culture* 2 (6): 159–174. [https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmcpc\\_00051\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmcpc_00051_1)
- Athanasiou, Athena. 2021. "Taking Sides: Theories, Practices, and Cultures of Participation and Dissent," ed. by Elke Bippus, Anne Ganzert, and Osabell Otto, 157–167. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Athanasiou, Athena. 2012. "Who is that name? Subjects of gender and queer resistance, or the desire to contest." *European Journal of English Studies* 16 (3): 199–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2012.735407>
- Bempeza, Sofia. 2023. "Just joking – just trolling? The Anti-gender Movement and the Cultural Tactics of the New Right." *Lesvies mou*, ed. by Lesvies sta Prothyra, 61–74. Athens: futura.



- Bempeza, Sofia. 2017. "Die Kehrseite der Medaille. Popkultur und «Subversion» im Kontext der Neuen Rechte." *Compared to What? Pop zwischen Normativität und Subversion*, ed. by Gerber T and Hausladen K, 62–78. Vienna: Turia+Kant.
- Bempeza, Sofia, and Diana Manesi. 2021. "Against the Bodies: Notes on Isolation and State Repression in Greece." *Transversal*, March. <https://transversal.at/blog/against-the-bodies>
- Brown, Wendy. 2019. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2020. "What's Left of Freedom?" Wendy Brown in Conversation with Zuzanna Ładyga. Conference of the European Association for American Studies (EAAS): 20/20 Vision: Citizenship, Space, Renewal. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZJ1v5DhJc>
- Butler, Judith. 2019. "What Threat? The Campaign against Gender Ideology." *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics, and Innovation* (3): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.12893/gjpci.2019.3.1>
- Butler, Judith. 2024. "Who's afraid of gender?" Talk at London School of Economics (20.03.2024). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=CbGGAds-GEFM>
- Carastathis, Anna. 2018. "'Gender Is the First Terrorist': Homophobic and transphobic violence in Greece." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 39 (2): 265–296.
- Case, Mary Anne. 2019. "Trans Formations in the Vatican's War on Gender Ideology." *Signs* 44 (3): 639–64. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701498>
- Case, Mary Anne. 2011. "After Gender the Destruction of Man? The Vatican's Nightmare Vision of the Gender Agenda for the Law." *Pace Law Review* 31: 802–817. <https://doi.org/10.58948/2331-3528.1785>
- Chalkidis, Pako. 2023. "Vanilla democracy: Sexuality, parenthood, and kinship in Greece," *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region and Beyond*, ed. by Dahl U., Mizielińska J., Uibo R, Sorainen A., 75–97. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola.
- Colour Youth. 2024. "Press release on the fascist attack at our space," March 3. <https://www.colouryouth.gr/en/2024/03/27/deltio-typou-gia-tin-epithesi-fasiston-sto-choro-mas/>
- Corredor, Elizabeth S. 2019. "Unpacking "Gender Ideology" and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement." *Signs* 44 (3): 613–38. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701171>
- Courtney, Mares. 2023. "Pope Francis: Gender ideology is 'one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations' today," *Catholic News Agency*, March 11. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253845/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-one-of-the-most-dangerous-ideological-colonizations-today>
- Das, Shanti. 2022. "Inside the violent, misogynistic world of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate." *The Guardian*, August 6. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/andrew-tate-violent-misogynistic-world-of-tiktok-new-star>
- Denkovski, Damjan, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz. 2021. *Power Over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement, Volume I*. Berlin: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy.
- DiBranco, Alex. 2017. "Mobilizing Misogyny," *Political Research Associates*, March 8. <https://politicalresearch.org/2017/03/08/mobilizing-misogyny>
- Fábíán, Katalin. 2023. "The Gender of Illiberalism: New Transnational Alliances Against Open Societies in Central and Eastern Europe", *Open Society Unresolved: The Contemporary Relevance of a Contested Idea*, ed. by C. Royer and L. Matei, 117–131. Budapest: Central European University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7829/j.ct-v2cw0rjr.12>
- Goetz, Anne Marie. 2020. "The New Competition in Multilateral Norm-Setting." *Daedalus* 149 (1): 160–179. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48563039>

- Judson Ellen, Asli Atay, Alex Krasodomski-Jones, Rose Lasko-Skinner, and Josh Smith. 2020. *Engendering hate: the contours of state-aligned gendered disinformation online*. London: Demos.
- Halkias, Alexandra. 2004. *The Empty Cradle of Democracy: Sex, Abortion, and Nationalism in Modern Greece*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kambouri, Nelli. 2020. Towards a Gendered Recovery in the EU. Women and Equality in the Aftermath of the Covid19 Pandemic. Gender Five Plus. [https://www.genderfiveplus.com/\\_files/ugd/530efa\\_ba5024aa406c4c309ca74f22177098c5.pdf](https://www.genderfiveplus.com/_files/ugd/530efa_ba5024aa406c4c309ca74f22177098c5.pdf)
- Koulouris, Theodore. 2018. "Online misogyny and the alternative right: debating the undebatable." *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 750–761. 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447428.
- Louka, Maria. 2022. "Co-Parenting Law – A year later everything is more difficult." *Ampa Lifo*, August 8. <https://ampa.lifo.gr/gunaikes/nomos-gia-synepimeleia-enan-chrono-meta-ola-dyskolotera/>
- Maragkoudaki, Danaï. 2023. "Nike and the group of Victor Restis," *We are Solomon*, June 24. <https://wearesolomon.com/el/mag/format-el/reportaz/sportime-niki-kai-omilos-viktora-resti/>
- Markou, Elena, and Iasonas Gousetis. 2021. "Gender Violence and the Loss of Life in Domestic Environments," *Hellenic League for Human Rights*, Athens.
- Meadhbh, Park. 2022. "Fight Club: Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys, and Male Supremacism," *Male Supremacism in the US - From Patriarchal Traditionalism to Misogynist Incels and the Alt-Right*, ed. by K. E. Carian, DiBranco A., E. Chelsea. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Messner, Michael A. 2013. "Equality with a Vengeance: Men's Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash." *Contemporary Sociology* 42 (3): 384–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306113484702d>
- Michalakea, Anna. 2021. "Spectacle, moral panic and the expansion of state authoritarianism: Three points for the Greek #Metoo." *ENA Institute for Alternative Policies*, 54–59.
- Mirrlees, Tanner. 2018. "The Alt-Right's Discourse of "Cultural Marxism": A Political Instrument of Intersectional Hate." *Atlantis Journal* 39 (1): 49–69.
- O'Sullivan, P., and A. Flanagin. 2003. "Reconceptualizing 'flaming' and other problematic messages." *New Media & Society* 5 (1): 69–94.
- News 247. 2024. "Υπόθεση 12χρονης: Οργή στα Προπύλαια – Χιλιάδες διαδηλωτές" [Case of the 12-year-old girl – Thousand protesters at Propylaea], March 14. <https://www.news247.gr/ellada/ipothesi-12xronis-ston-kolono-sillalitirio-sta-propylaia-kleistoi-dromoi-sto-kentro/>
- Norris, Sian. 2023. "Who is funding the anti-abortion movement in Europe?" *Verso Books Blog*, June 16. [https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/who-is-funding-the-anti-aboriton-movement-in-europe?utm\\_content=linktree&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=instagram](https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/who-is-funding-the-anti-aboriton-movement-in-europe?utm_content=linktree&utm_medium=social&utm_source=instagram)
- Papadakou, Yulie. 2022. "I didn't feel confident to tell anyone. LGBTQ+ youth school paths," *Routes of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Mary Leontsini, 159–190. Athens: Gutenberg.
- Papagiannopoulou, Matina. 2022. *Gender-based Violence in the pandemic period*. Athens: Centre for Gender Studies, Panteion University.
- Paternotte, David, and Roman Kuhar. 2018. "Disentangling and Locating the 'Global Right': Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Politics and Governance" *Politics and Governance* 6 (3): 6–19.
- Polychroniades, Babis. 2022. "Greek Police Mafia: Οργανωμένο έγκλημα από νόμο κατωμένο", *Reporters United*, November 21. <https://www.reportersunited.gr/10077/greek-police-mafia-bakogiannis/>

- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Heroines," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems from 1978-1981*, W. W. Norton & Company.
- Texeiro Pinto, Ana. 2017. "Artwashing – on NRx and the Alt right," *Texte zur Kunst*, July 4. <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/artwashing-web-de/?highlight=kritische%20Kunst#id43>
- Tzelepi, Elena. 2020. "In the political spaces of vulnerability and resistance," *Queer Political Public Memory*, ed. by A. Athanasiou, D. Papanikolaou, G. Gougousis, 121–128. Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Greece.
- Yannakopoulos, Kostas. 2006. *Sexualikotita: theories kai politikes tis Anthropologias* [Sexuality: Theory and Politics of Anthropology]. Athens: Alexandraia.
- Vaggione, Juan Marco. 2020. "The Conservative Uses of Law: The Catholic Mobilization against Gender Ideology." *Social Compass* 67 (2): 252–266.
- Vasilaki Rosa, and Souvlis George, eds. 2021. *The Normalization of Right-wing Discourse in Greece: Gender, Media, Armed Forces, Church*. Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Greece.
- Wimberly, Cory. 2021. "Propaganda and the Nihilism of the Alt-Right." *Radical Philosophy Review* 24 (1): 21–46.
- Zuckerberg, Donna. 2018. *Not All Dead White Men – Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

## Meeting With Ghosts: Telling a Story That's Impossible to Tell

### A letter to ghosts

Dear Fahima, Farzana, Rabea,

I heard about your assassination on October 11, 2018, from the newspapers and TV. Normally, you wouldn't have made it to the mainstream news, maybe only the local media would add your bodies to their (un)documented archive, out of obligation to October's empty front page. Normally, you would have reached the morgue of the coroner in Alexandroupolis, because of drowning, of hypothermia, of hardships, this is how refugees and immigrant women die in Evros, this is their normalized death –how did you find yourself chained and stabbed in the neck?

If only you knew the disturbance you have caused to the residents of Evros! They were so afraid, not for the lives of the refugees who are at risk at the border, no, this is a reasonable and normal thing to happen, like the river that floods during the winter or the storks that come in the summer. They feared for their own lives since they were sure and certain that a jihadist killed you.

Photos of ISIS fighters filled the newspapers, on every website you could read that the Turks are not guarding the passages, and the Greek army and police are not enough despite their heroic efforts and that 500,000 Afghans are waiting in Eastern Thrace to cross, so they find you everywhere, in the fields, in the villages, in their homes. They lock themselves in the houses and close the shutters “so you won't bust in.” But the violence they fear is the violence they cause, as Butler reminds us in *Precarious Life* (2004).

“It is still evening; it is always nightfall along the ‘ramparts’, on the battlements of an old Europe at war. With the other and with itself” (Derrida 1994).

Europe is at war again, with the other and with itself, and perhaps that is why it is full of ghosts that haunt her. She signs Holy Alliances, agreements, drowns and murders daily on the borders of her fortress. But no matter how many times you shoot a ghost, it comes back. And if I am writing this letter to you, it is because I want you to return, I am summoning you here, to the

exploration (or is it an excavation) of memory, to fulfill the promise, to grant asylum, to render justice.

When I asked Kostas, the journalist who published your names in July 2019, why he had been searching for a year without anyone asking him to do it, without anyone paying him to do it, he did not mention the word mourning. We often confuse this word, we want to say mourning and instead we say obsession, like Kostas, although he sought justice beyond the law, “I don’t care who the killer is, it was my morals that guided me. I wanted them to have a name.” Not even Zaharoula, the lieutenant general of the Greek Police who made it personal to learn your names, said the word, even though it was only when I showed her the photographs of your graves, that one time during the interview where she softened, she let go, she tear up, “two months ago I was dealing with the numbers they give to the dead bodies, the people who are not identified, and the relatives looking for the bodies of their own people. And because it was all fresh, I was overwhelmed”, she told me, while the journalist called it a duty “our job is to give voice to those who don’t have one – that’s why I did it.”

“One does not, for all that, bear any less of a responsibility, beginning at birth, even if it is only the responsibility to repair an evil at the very moment in which no one can admit it” (Derrida 1994).

And listen to what Kostas said, last sentence before I closed the recorder, “I did it, they got a name. Until that moment they were ghosts,” confirming Derrida, who said that mourning is the temptation to give ghosts an identity, to give a name to the grave and a location, to make sure they stay there. We fear, you see, haunted dreams.

Besides, why would I want to meet you so much? What is it that makes me carry your story for four years now, since that October, when only twelve people showed up at the open call made by my feminist collective to protest your triple femicide? I remember the disappointment. The despair with which we looked at each other in silence, the look that knows there are only twelve of us in an open assembly because a triple femicide of refugees at the border, no matter how horrible, mobilizes only a few of us, no matter how horrible, it is not a body of our own, it couldn’t be us. We are not in the same position.

Sarah, a journalist who lives and works in Greece, felt the same despair and anger, she carried you, likewise, every step of the way, haunted. For three years now she has been looking for your tracks here in Greece, in Turkey and in Afghanistan. She told me that by Christmas she would have published her research, and we agreed that when I finish mine, we would go for a coffee and talk about you, sort of like a memorial service.

(Maybe it’s called responsibility, the feeling of guilt, we killed you, we kill you every day, I mean whoever your killer is, is there a bigger murderer than closed borders?)

*Hamlet is “out of joint” because he curses his own mission, the punishment that consists in having to punish, avenge, render justice, and redress history; and what he curses in his mission is this expiation of expiation itself; “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!”. A call to put*



*time on the right path.[...] There is tragedy, there is essence of the tragic only on the condition of this originarity, more precisely of this pre-originary and properly spectral anteriority of the crime – the crime of the other, a misdeed whose event and reality, whose truth can never present themselves in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized.*

*One does not, for all that, bear any less of a responsibility, beginning at birth, even if it is only the responsibility to repair an evil at the very moment in which no one can admit it, except in a self-confession that confesses the other, as if that amounted to the same. (Derrida 1994, 20–21)*

I self-confess and confess the other; I call upon witnesses to testify a story that cannot be told, since you, the ultimate martyrs, cannot testify. I am traveling to Evros, I am looking for your traces, I am looking for your grave, to know where you are, not because I want to feel safe but in hope for a meeting, for the incalculable gift to cry over your graves, to mourn. And as if that amounted to the same, I will pull the threads on my hoop to stitch together traces, talks, interviews, photos, feelings, scraps of paper hastily written, to embroider a story, as if you would tell it, as if that amounted to the same. (A video by artist Tonia Ainot titled “A letter to ghosts” can be found on her YouTube channel).

**Ghosts will always find a way to return –  
“the future belongs to them”  
(Derrida 1994)**

I only managed to read again what I have written in my research on the triple femicide in Evros and on the archive, a few days before the conference QueerFemSEE in April 2023, worrying about my English, worrying about meeting them again, worrying about failing them again, not being able to make a safe passage in the afterlife for them. That night I received a phone call from a lawyer, whom I didn’t know before. She introduced herself as the lawyer of the one person who is in custody for the murder of Fahima, Farzana and Rabea. He was the lover of Fahima. He is not the killer, he is the survivor, the martyr, the one person who can tell the story, but no one listens. The subaltern cannot speak (Spivak 2018). The state won’t listen, the borders won’t listen, the judges, the police, in Greece, in Germany, in Turkey, no one will listen, except the person who is sharing with him the cell in prison. His fellow prisoner. He is the one paying for the lawyer. He is the only one who is listening. I guess, it takes one to listen to another.

The case is closed for just about anyone else, they have placed a person in the crime scene, he is Afghan, Muslim, poor, an illegal alien, he is alone, voiceless no matter how many times he raises his voice, and he is now in the hands of the Greek state in the town of Komotini, bare life (Agamben 1998), that’s all they need, case closed, filed, sealed, archived. This is Evros (Greek Council for Refugees 2023 & Human Rights Watch 2020), Europe’s wall, a state of

exception, a borderline. A location where necropolitics flood the crops under the eye of the cops. Case soon to be archived.

But if the archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events, as Foucault puts it in his archaeology, then it is the law of what is excluded as well, the surface where statements shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale (Foucault 1969). “Funny how you lose sight of some things and memory others,” mumbles Sethe in Morrison’s *Beloved* (Morrison 2020, 237). And the triple femicide of Fahima, Farzana and Rabea was barely seen in the horizon of our system. It has left no other trace, both in the archive and collective life, than their death register.

“The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise [...] an asterisk in the grand narrative of history,” says Hartman (2008, 2). Both the photographs and the objects that the coroner of Evros shared with me in his interview are the closest I got to a state archive during this research.<sup>1</sup> Evros is an open archive, a domain of sovereignty in which the rulers have the right to interpret and apply their interpretations to the public sphere. But if Evros constitutes a zone of exception in which sovereignty emerges anew, then the archive returns to its roots and, in defining them, determines what can and cannot be said, producing and reproducing sovereignty. Benjamin challenged Schmitt’s schema, in which the state of exception and normality are temporally and spatially situated and distinct. Instead, he argued, calling us to the present time, which “as a model of the messianic, sums up the history of all mankind” (Benjamin 2019, 721),<sup>2</sup> the situation we live in, in which the rule and the exception are not distinguished, is real. He will recognize, therefore, not a banality of evil, but a banality of normal. Like Venus of Saidiya Hartman (2008), an African girl tortured and killed while crossing the Middle Passage, like every life that leaves nothing but waste.

“Waste,” says Hartman, “is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large, that is, history as the tale of great men, empire, nation. It evokes the dull ordinary horror of what is vile, worthless, and contemptible – a pile of shit.

<sup>1</sup> Researching through a body of texts refereeing to the Archival and Emotional Turn and their interaction with feminist theory and practice in the study and perception of the archive, my thesis experimented on the techniques and technologies of the archive, for an impossible to tell story. The triple femicide of the Afghan women at the Greek borders in 2018, has left no other trace, both in the archive and collective life, than their death register. Employing research methods of post-colonial and feminist studies on the silence and the absence of the archive, like critical fabulation, and studying the biopolitical space on which the archive acts, an acquaint with the ghosts of the three women is attempted. Through a journey at the place of murder, talking to witnesses, memoirs and trauma excavation, an archive of feelings was made, hoping that (impossible) narration, vulnerable and incomplete archivization without arche, will contribute to the possibility of utopia.

<sup>2</sup> Sic, humankind

Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside of history and dissolved in utter amnesia” (Hartman 2007, 115).

Waste is the remnant of all the lives that are outside the archive, with a capital A, and as any other liminality, is included through its exclusion. In a Butlerian reading of Hartman, waste is what is produced through the repeated performance of dominant hegemonic ideals. The white Western body is produced at the very moment it expels non-white and non-Christian otherness from its normative domain, and the domain takes on a national character in this present conceptualization. The national is defined by what it expels within regulated frameworks. The production of waste becomes the constitutive condition of the Greek Orthodox nation. “When we set foot in another country, there is no immediate refuge for us. Today, we cease to be subjects. We become objects of negotiations! They see us as rejects and treat us like waste,” writes Parwana Amiri (2021, 35), a young refugee from Afghanistan, in her autobiographical notes from the Ritsona camp.

Butler (2008) calls what is excluded during the construction of the sovereign, the abject, which is pushed into the zone of the uninhabitability and constitutes the defining limit of the subject’s domain. “It will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life” (Butler, 2008, 45). A definition also for national borders, the river Evros, its islands, the Wall, the fascist interwar period inspired and never abolished law for “Preemption Safety Zone” within the villages of Evros, and every other point beyond which the culturally inconceivable body is repelled. From this site, the waste, the garbage, the abject, will disrupt with the same manic repetitiveness of the performativity – “I only managed to cross the borders on the third attempt”<sup>3</sup> – the regulatory violence that eliminates them. From this site, from Butler’s zone of the uninhabitability, the ghosts of Fahima, Farzana, and Rabea return as shadows to disturb the ultimately not so solid archival taxonomies.

### [They return] to provoke archival trouble

To set free the very future of an out-of-joint concept, torn between the real and the potential, between that which includes and that which tends to exclude. In the state archives there was waste, like that leather belt from west Africa, a charm that was worn around a body, for a safe passage, and now can be found at the archive of the coroner in Evros, but no stories that could resurrect the dead, except the stories that I was willing to narrate, to come up with, to fantasize.

*Fact is simply fiction endorsed with state power, to maintain a fidelity to a certain set of archival limits. Are we going to be consigned forever to tell the same kinds of stories? Given the violence and power that has engendered this limit, why should I be faithful to that limit? Why should I respect that? (Hartman 2020)*

<sup>3</sup> Oral interview excerpt with a woman refugee; interviewer: Eirini Dafermou.

[breathe]

Those I wanted to harm were not within my reach. Those I wanted to rescue were gone (Hartman 2007, 55).

[breathe, again]

Waste is the connecting line between life and death, it's the archival *entre les* of Derrida (1996), the dichotomy between life and death drive. Hartman's waste, Butler's abject, the ghosts. And what is a ghost if not the waste product or undesirable residue of *bildung*?<sup>4</sup> (Cheah 2003, 385) – and would it be fair to say, of citizenship? Derrida insists, however, on an incarnated materiality, “for there to be a ghost, there must be a return to a body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever” (1994, 26). The non-typical archive, the one built from the pile of debris before Benjamin's *Angel of History*, is the “artifactual prosthetic body” (Derrida 1994, 126) in which the ghost is incarnated and resides. This was also my attempt in this story, to build a body of an archive from everything I collected on my journey to Evros. “There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside,” (Derrida 1996, 28) and my own archival gesture, an exergue on the paths archived by the refugees of Evros, comes to tell a story that cannot be told. A memory of death. A rememory, as Toni Morrison said, a tale that comes after, belated because traumatic, haunted because of the needy dead, demanding a way out of my mouth, for the disremembered and the unaccounted for (Morrison 2020).

In Agamben's work *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (2002), he grapples with the problem of the witness (who can testify a memory of death?), the Jewish prisoners in the death camps of Nazi Germany, those who survived to testify the horror of the camps and speak for those who did not survive. “At first glance, we would say it is the man – the survivor – who testifies for the non-human, the *Muselmann*;<sup>5</sup>” the non-human who obstinately appears as human. Is it safe to say, the ghost? In the context of the above

<sup>4</sup> *Bildung* refers to the German tradition of self-cultivation (as related to the German for: creation, image, shape), wherein philosophy and education are linked in a manner that refers to a process of both personal and cultural maturation. This maturation is a harmonization of the individual's mind and heart and in a unification of selfhood and identity within the broader society (from Wikipedia, accessed 6.7.2024). Looking at the idea of *Bildung* from a national colonial point, as Cheah proposes in his book (2003), one can argue that it is the self-actualization within the borders of a national identity, rather than a cosmopolitan, and as such it constructs otherness at the periphery of its performativity. It produces the residue, the abject, the alien, which is not virtuous enough to receive communion of the global (colonial) European spirit.

<sup>5</sup> *Muselmann* (German plural *Muselmänner*) was a term used amongst prisoners of German Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust of World War II to refer to those suffering from a combination of starvation (known also as “hunger disease”) and exhaustion, as well as those who were resigned to their impending death. The *Muselmann* prisoners exhibited severe emaciation and physical weakness, an apathetic listlessness regarding their own fate, and unresponsiveness to their surroundings owing to their barbaric treatment (Wikipedia, accessed on 2/10/2024).

reasoning, the refugee from Iran I interviewed during my research, a woman who crossed Evros, survived and agreed to talk to me about her journey, testifies “instead of,” lends her voice to the non-human, to the ghosts of Fahima, Farzana, and Rabea, so that her testimony will be deposited, archived – not by herself in the end, but by me, as what would then be a testimony of three women – a practice that quite disrupts Agamben’s framework. It is perhaps Agamben’s anxiety, and previous to him, Levi’s, about who bears witness, who testifies, whose voice is heard, which carries within it an essentialist idea of the archive, to such extent that while it opens the door to ghosts, it ultimately does not allow the non-human to freely cross the threshold of narration without the responsibility of bringing evidence before the court of History with a capital H.

### But what if we trust ghosts?

Hartman (2007) grapples with the limits of the archive in her decision to trace the steps of those who were ensnared in the pathways of the slave trade and when they reached the fortresses of the colonizers on the shores of the Atlantic, they were already slaves. The dive she seeks into Africa’s past is linked to the persistent leverage in the work of what she calls the “afterlife of slavery,” the long-term impact of racism on the lives of black Americans: vulnerable, marginalized, and constantly exposed to death. She excavates the memory of slavery, building an archive of feelings from rememory, travel diaries, discussions, visits to monuments, photographs, and narratives, crafted by herself for those who can no longer speak. She rememories “at the intersection of personal experience and cultural or collective memory” (King 2000, 150).

And I, too, stitched together an archive for the triple femicide of Fahima, Farzana and Rabea, because of my desire to excavate the wound and transgress boundaries, to move into the position of the dispossessed, somewhat responding to the call of bell hooks (1990, 145): “Language is also a place of struggle.” Narrate a story that does not belong to me is my own journey, my movement (to), that requires “pushing against oppressive boundaries, set by race, sex, and class domination. Initially then it is a defiant political gesture. Moving we confront the reality of choice and location” (hooks 1990, 145). An archival gesture, from a white Western feminist, citizen of the state that murdered them, subject of rights precisely over their own embodied murderous border. Their dead bodies constitute my civil rights – and I desperately desire to move to a place of radical openness, politically resisting, in solidarity with the oppressed, to a site where transformation is possible.

Being aware of the possible violence inherent in even well-intentioned rhetoric – language is also a place of privilege – taking as much distance I can from any “empathetic identification,” as Hartman would put it, one can only hope to shed light on the positionality from which they write and offer their narrative, that of a feminist researcher, one can only hope to offer their

endeavor to those wishing to read it. From that place, I collected discourses, words, feelings, photographs, personal diaries, testimonies from those who survived, the martyrs, and interviews from residents of Evros, to trespass the borders of an absent archive,

**– an archive is never empty as it always remains open –**

seeking the recurring, the repetition, in testimonies and traces, forming an archive of feelings (Cvetkovich 2003), an im-possible narrative for the journey and the borders, so that I can speak the language of ghosts, so that I can critically fabulate the story of three women from Afghanistan who were murdered in Evros. Unapologetically unassimilated with the methods and methodologies of writing history, after all, who do we tell our stories for?

I am thinking that maybe this reconstruction of memory, such an attempt for rememory, comes as an act of resistance, the responsibility of doing my part, in an evolving and forever happening construction of an innocent future for Greece, where the past is absent or romanticized. Where killings at the borders and in camps, institutional racism and European policies of white supremacy, as well as everyday social violence against the bodies of migrants and refugees, will be recorded in the future by the assimilated survivors and their oppressors, banqueters in common events sponsored by some foundation, told as tragic stories, like the time when 700 people drowned in Pylos (Amnesty International 2023). They will go down in history as isolated unfortunate incidents but in no way as the systematic and systemic reconstruction of today's reality, in no way as the deliberate construction of a revised reality in which the segregation between bodies that matter and those that don't, the racist border regime, appears and is perceived as natural, normal, continuously produced and reproduced without interruption.

"This is not a story to pass on," Toni Morrison repeats again and again at the last two pages of *Beloved*. This is not a story to pass on, this is not a story to pass on, and the story she refers to is the aftermath of slavery, is the ever-persisting racism, that passes on and on and on, and maybe words, and books, and ghosts can make it stop, or at least reveal it to its reality. "Usually, slavery is an abstract concept. The purpose of making the ghost real is making history possible, making memory real" (Morrison quoted in Wyatt 1993).

Hartman is "forced" to invent the stories of African women, while she is taking the journey along the Atlantic slave route, as no autobiographical accounts of female captives' survivors of the Middle Passage has reached us today. It's the absent archive that leads to the inevitable return of Venus, as a ghost that haunts the present, as bare life. It is an attempt to unhook two girls from the violent narrative of their deaths, from the violence of the archive, exploring the im-possibility of producing another narration, another archivization. It is Hartman's need to create space for forbidden mourning. In Cvetkovich's words, "[A]t the heart of the archive are practices of mourning, and the successful archive enables the work of mourning" (2003, 271).



“The responsibility to repair an evil at the very moment in which no one can admit it, except in a self-confession that confesses the other, as if that amounted to the same” (Derrida 1994, 21), calls the ghosts of Fahima, Farzana and Rabea on stage, and I take upon the role of stage manager, a witness of rememory, of recollecting and remembering, of reassembling (Morrison 2019) what was left for me to find, “an imprint of painful events on the mind and on the world” (King 2000, 161).

A narration that arose from an encounter with nothing else but the sign of violence, a short story in which faces, inclinations and time alternate, forms, materials, feelings, Freud’s mystic writing-pad (2010), a game that wants to bring the past-present in the now, a game that keeps the archive open, like a promise, the method that Hartman pins as critical fabulation, Morrison as rememory, Cvetkovich as archive of feelings, and what Derrida calls utopia. The hope that an (impossible) narration, a vulnerable and incomplete archivization without arche, will contribute to the possibility of utopia.

It could open the possibility for “change,” not only by speculating about the future but by engaging ourselves in speculating the past, much like the biographical temporality for the populations that have been considered expendable, as Halberstam discusses in his book *In Queer Time and Place* (2005), carrying always in mind that those who left without a trace might willfully did so, might willfully defied any encounter with arche and history.

By pushing the archive to its limit (for when you strip away the power relations that hold the pen that writes, what remains of the archive if not the narration of the hegemony?), Hartman produces a counter-history at the intersection between novel and history, to shed light on what she calls the “afterlife of slavery.” She writes with and against the record, wanting to provoke trouble, attempts an im-possible writing, given that ghosts rarely speak, of a past that cannot be recovered, nor changed, wanting to imagine the in between, the *entre les*, to write a cultural history of captives while admitting it as impossible, to narrate what cannot be said, hoping to influence today, or as Butler put it, “The question she returns to again and again is: Did slavery ever really end?” (Hartman 2020). And what is slavery, she wonders through the words of John, in her book “lose your mother,” if not “when other people decide whether you live or die,” what is slavery if not the necropolitics of today’s fascism, what is slavery if not the immigration/refugee’s politics of European Union, if not the borders, camps and prison industrial complex?

[breathe]

When I said to Tonia I wish I had time and knew how to make a video for the letter, and she replied let’s do it, and she did it, in less than two days, I didn’t realize that we were adding a little bit more to this open archive, I didn’t realize until I saw the first sample, that now we can send this video all over the world,

I mean, I always said that as feminists we will never be alone, even in the darkest of times, we have comrades all over the world,

assemblies, squats, community centers, libraries, networks under the most oppressing regimes, grassroots festivals, journals, archives,

Fahima, Farzana and Rabea can now travel, the borders have opened, the fucking visa is granted.

[breathe]

Ann Cvetkovich concludes in her *Archive of Feelings*:

*Thinking of the archive as a memorial to the dead, one that must perform the work of mourning at a personal level, is yet another reminder of why, however respectable certain kinds of gay and lesbian archives become, there will remain a need for grassroots and community-based archives. The importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absences, so evident in queer documentary and other cultural genres, demands creative and alternative archives. In the case of both traumatic and gay and lesbian histories, grassroots archives and the archives preserved by cultural forms move past the impossibility of the archive articulated by Derrida toward collections of texts and objects that embody the sentiments and obsessions of archive fever. (Cvetkovich 2003, 271)*

That is to say, of resistance, of going against the grain, of survival and passion, of rabbia e amore, of *στοργή*,<sup>6</sup> with a capital O.

When it comes to the archive, the question will always be, what does it do, its modality, not what it is. And this archive wanted to tell a story impossible to tell. We have to imagine Fahima, Farzana and Rabea alive, it is an act of resistance against the violence of the Archive. That is against the violence of the bourgeois, racist, patriarchal state.

[breathe]

Cvetkovich writes that Hartman claims for a utopia, a politics that juxtaposes despair and hope, perhaps because organizing despair into (political) action is the only hope. Hartman's call to imagine the women of the slave archives alive, my response to it, to imagine Fahima, Farzana, and Rabea alive, the method of critical fabulation, rememory, and the attempt for an archive that renders justice to the vulnerable and the ephemeral, to the disremembered and the unaccounted for, is a call to exit from logocentric writing, a theory of bodies meeting outside the Archons' house. There, we will encounter bodies "trembling from the cold, this cold that pierces your bones,"<sup>7</sup> abandoned on islands, hidden in the thickets, waiting for the night. There, in the "out of," that does not care to prove itself to Authority, does not surrender to positivism, that "out of" which can write letters to ghosts,

<sup>6</sup> *Στοργή* reads Greek for affection and *οργή* is Greek for wrath, written like this *στοργή*, with a capital O, combining both words, encapsulates the feelings of an international feminist movement, that is filled with affection and wrath at the same time. In Greece, it was coined for the first time on September 2019 during the one-year commemoration of the killing of queer activist and drag performer Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh!

<sup>7</sup> Oral interview excerpt with a woman refugee; interviewer: Eirini Dafermou.

there, the stories that can be constructed are infinite, not for the future, but for the past. This territory of the past that refuses to be forgotten, “beyond the prescribed boundaries of the archive and is enabled to haunt the present in such ways as to open or reassemble possibilities (both present and future-directed) for other lives, for living otherwise” (Athanasίου 2020, 102).

If we consider justice based on the gift, as Derrida (1994) calls us to do, and before him Heidegger, beyond the law and its state, if we consider justice as a relationship with the other, justice as a relationship with the ghosts of three murdered women, then it becomes the thread that embroiders the *atrandedé*, the *entre deux*, with a needle passed on – was it a story after all? – from generation to generation, then it opens the im-possibility of a future, where justice will be rendered at the form of a shadow in lace-trimmed chests. Then justice is the archive that “pre-occupies the future,” as Derrida (1996) would put it, both a promise and a threat. The promise that this story won’t pass on and it will not be disremembered either (Morrison 2020). Instead of established regimes of truth, always ready to prove their power in document X, series Y, archive with capital A, let us imagine the archive as dispersion, wide, fragmentary, incomplete, gendered, racialized, and class-conscious. An archive that liberates archival gestures from anxiety proof (for whom?) and produces unapologetically low theory, multiple networks and relationalities, an archive that can coexist within, but primarily outside the House of the Archons, as a permanent threat and boundary.

Let’s imagine it vulnerable, full of wonders and scattered enchantments. In this archive fits the travel diary to Evros, the discussions at the café in the village where they were murdered, the letter I address to Farzana, Fahima, and Rabea, my tears over their graves, the embraces with the people who spoke to me, the storks I saw for the first time in my life, the war against refugees at the border, everything. Above all, their story, as I imagined it, after I gathered all my notes, my will to imagine them alive, so they could tell me how they crossed the river, what their lives were like, who they were. Themselves, alive. It fits the promise for tomorrow – meaning the messianic time of hope, the time of the specters. The future belongs to ghosts.

This is not a story to pass on.

*“Come back to our village,*

*I will come back to see the storks,*

*They will leave soon, you barely caught them,*

*I will come back next summer with the storks,*

*They are the only ones who come and sit, they honor us so much, they don’t think much about it, they have their nest ready, they will come back next year with their children.”*

(Our conversation’s end with Eugenia, in a village in Evros, the day I saw storks for the first time in my life, one of the few free creatures up there. Oh, if only I were a stork, if I didn’t care about borders, if I had my nest ready and no one asked where I came from)

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2002. *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive*. New York: Zone Books, Imp.
- Amiri, Parwana. 2021. *Ζωές σε αναστολή: γράμματα στον κόσμο από τη Ριτσώνα*. Θεσσαλονίκη: Ακυβέρνητες πολιτείες.
- Amnesty International. 2023. Greece: six months on, no justice for Pylos Shipwreck. AI, December 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/greece-6-months-on-no-justice-for-pylos-shipwreck/>
- Athanasίου, Athena. 2020. "(Im)possible Breathing: On Courage and Criticality in the Ghostly Historical Present". *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23 (2): 92–106. <http://doi.org/10.33134/rds.337>
- Benjamin, Walter. 2019. *Walter Benjamin Κείμενα 1934-1940, επιλογή*. Αθήνα: Άγρα.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: the power of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 2008. *Σώματα με σημασία: οριοθετήσεις του «φύλου» στο λόγο*. translation Πελαγία Μαρκέτου. Αθήνα: Εκκρεμές.
- Cheah, Pheng 2003. *Spectral Nationality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An archive of feelings: trauma, sexuality, and lesbian cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1996. *Η έννοια του αρχείου*. translation Κωστής Παπαγιώργης. Αθήνα: Εκκρεμές.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1969. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2010. Σημείωση για το μαγικό σημειωματάριο. *Αληθεια*, 4(5): 43–47.
- Greek Council for Refugees. 2023. At Europe's borders: between impunity and criminalization. *GCR*, March 2023. [https://gcr.gr/wp-content/uploads/GCR\\_Push-back\\_Criminalization\\_Report.pdf](https://gcr.gr/wp-content/uploads/GCR_Push-back_Criminalization_Report.pdf)
- Halberstam, Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe* 12(2): 1–14.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2020. How Saidiya Hartman Retells the History of Black Life (A. Okeowo, Interviewer). *New Yorker*, October 19. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/26/how-saidiya-hartman-retells-the-history-of-black-life>
- hooks, bell. 1990. *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Human Rights Watch. 2020. Greece: Violence Against Asylum Seekers at Border, *HRW* March 17. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/17/greece-violence-against-asylum-seekers-border>
- King, Nicola. 2000. *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Morrison, Toni. 2019. "I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free": an essay by Toni Morrison. *The Guardian*, August 8. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-remembering-essay>
- Morrison, Toni. 2020 (1987). *Beloved*. London: Penguin.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2018 (1998). *Μπορούν οι υποτελείς να ομιλούν;* Τρίκαλα, εκδόσεις Επέκεινα.
- Wyatt, Jean. 1993. Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *PMLA* 108(3): 474–488.

## “I’d Rather Be Homeful Than Homeless”: Homing Queer Corporeality and Uprooting Exilic Memory in Domnica Rădulescu’s “Exile is My Home”

“**E**xile Is My Home” follows the story of Mina and Lina, a queer East European couple who traverse three outlandish planets in search of a home before landing on the bigoted Planet America. The author, a Romanian-American writer currently living in the United States, where she arrived in 1983 as a political refugee from the communist dictatorship of her native Romania, is a lecturer at Washington and Lee University and the author of three novels, *Train to Trieste* (2008), *Black Sea Twilight* (2011) and *Country of Red Azaleas* (2016). *New York Theater Review* (2016) describes the eponymous play in Domnica Rădulescu’s anthologised collection (2020) as “a sci-fi, post-apocalyptic fairy tale, [...] the haunting story of Mina and Lina, a refugee couple from the Balkans travelling through the galaxy in search of a planet to call home,” as the play blends elements of “absurdist comedy, irony, and suspense to raise consciousness about the current international refugee crisis and the complexity of issues related to it.” The two middle-aged women are described as opposites as far as their personalities are concerned. While Lina is artistic and flamboyant, Mina is the more precise and pragmatic mind that perpetually strives to rationalise Lina’s flimsy endeavours. Both are *exilées* from ambiguously defined East European countries that become conflated into a “backward” unity of linguistic mutability (which nevertheless hints at a supposed commonality of grim suffering specific to Eastern Europeans since Mina is described as a citizen of “Lugubria”). Their intergalactic journey forces them to relive the excruciating circumstances that triggered a colossal memory loss and thus carries them to the shores and hills of eerie planets that demand the emotional work of remembering, re-encountering, and processing their traumatic past.

On *The First Planet*, the only survivor of a masculinist war that left the landscape in ruins, now become a ramshackle scenery of waste and debris,

is a young girl in her twenties who works as a massage therapist, offering her services to “tired bodies who have landed on her planet from Planet America, or from a West European country or an East European country” (Rădulescu 2014, 2). The war was started by men on grounds of phallic dominance, but the effects continue to be reaped by the remaining natives and immigrants (all of them women except for two male survivors), those “bodies of the population” who are now “in terrible shape, disjointed, out of whack, hunched over, crippled or twisted” (7) and in need of the young girl’s massage expertise. Touch becomes a mode of restoring bodies to health and momentarily reconnecting the community to a shared sense of humanity. However, its effects are short-lived since “the next day [the girl’s patients] start arguing again” (7). Similarly, the Girl on the First Planet’s massages are “rough,” but they promise to make one “as good as new,” for she “deliver[s] what [she] promise[s] and live[s] by [her] principles” (7). Lina and Mina contribute to the repopulation of the planet – a controversial (if not appalling) choice given the (already unstable) queer/lesbian nature of the narrative – as well as its urban reconstruction. Given the devastation of the country in the aftermath of phallic bloodshed, the duty of nurturing it back to health falls on the two women. However, the commodification of the lesbian body as a mere reproductive vessel can be likened to a phallic colonisation of non-normative lives.

On the Second Planet, a “mysteriously and alluringly fresh, sparkling and colourful” landscape becomes eerily edible under the force of nostalgia. The febrile act of remembering pieces of the past makes Lina throw a tantrum and childishly demand “a place to call [her] own” (13). Overpowered by an extreme sense of hunger, she literally ingests the natural landscape. This act figuratively renders what the institutional figures of the Men in White Gowns call a “condemn[ation] to death by yearning” (16), and they attempt to subdue Lina by administering tranquilisers.

The Third Planet is entirely and “deceptively white” in order to “attract lonely tired travellers” (Rădulescu 2014, 25). It is ruled by the Woman Who Eats Hearts, who prefers “the hearts of lonely travellers who fall asleep or show the emotion of yearning for a home on her planet” (25). She is likened to a female Minotaur perpetually craving human blood. While on her planet, Lina and Mina are reunited with their son, Billy. The final stop on their journey is Planet America, which takes the form of an immigration office.

## Exilic & homeful ontologies

The play engages with the traumatic memory of exilic displacement by casting its two queer female heroines as “intergalactic nomads in search of a place to belong” (Rădulescu 2018, 125). This quest frames notions of utopian belonging and radical female experience as political gestures. Through the accomplishment of an exilic utopia whereby individual banishment – either self-imposed or forced – marks the beginning of collective empower-



ment, the concept of nomadism becomes positive, as well as actively politicised and subverted. That is, even though the characters were exiled for a reason that they only elucidate at the end of the play, their nomadic ontology unfolds as a natural embodiment, since their bodies themselves are adapted to a rootless and peregrine existence. The characters come to embody a “nomadism of the mind” (Rădulescu 2014, 14) that seeks to universalise the “citizenship of the world” and never overlooks the social realities that ostracise and discriminate against refugees, immigrants, and exiles. The manifestation of their exilic consciousness is directly embodied; the two characters “each carry a miniature folding house that unfolds whenever they want to settle somewhere for the night,” and these backpack-sized houses are “equipped with everything they need to be modestly comfortable,” and they “also function as spaceships” (3).

I am interested in exploring the limits of the *politicisation* of exilic phenomenologies with regard to both the personal and collective dimensions of its unfolding within the play. The opening exchange features Lina’s statement that she “was born in exile” and that her affection towards Mina stems from the fact that neither of them was born “somewhere precise” (3). Instead, both women “were born in the air;” and their perpetual state of exile, as demanding on their memory as it may be, “is the best home there is” (4). By acknowledging exilic phenomenology as a driving conceptual force of the play, I remain in dialogue with Sara Ahmed’s well-known theorisation of queer phenomenology as rooted in the necessity of *orientations* which “shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies” (2006, 3). Since journeys are movements *from* one place *towards* another, the concept of exile begs the question of the existence of an inherent component of disorientation that need not necessitate a release of the tension therein. Existing in exile functions as a present continuous that moves Lina and Mina from one planet to another in search of a home whose materiality is constantly delayed. While the traumatic component of their life stories may force them to re-encounter memories that ultimately make Lina and Mina wish to *settle down* permanently as a way to manage their trauma and attempt healing, the eerie landscapes they traverse and reimagine as possible homes for themselves do not only rehearse the exilic condition of homelessness, but they equally mark exile as a positive state of discomfort and disorientation. Needless to say, the notion of “homefulness” that may be at times either sought or repudiated gains new *queer* meanings when one considers that the two travellers strive to contain, reverse, or subvert the realities of the planets, and, by the end of the play, Lina and Mina embrace an exilic *otherwise*, a new relationality that need not depend on earthly settings and the materiality of the domestic home.

On the one hand, homelessness is corporealised as a traumatic memory whose symptoms are symbolically displaced within the absurdist elements of the play (such as, among others, eating the landscape and devouring hu-

man hearts). Through their exacerbated physical reality and their symbolical concealment, these manifestations of trauma allow an intimate and empathic fashioning of nomadic ontologies in accordance with Julia Kristeva's (1991) notions of the *strangeness* of the immigrant and Sara Ahmed's (2000) theorisation of the "strange encounter" with the Other as being regulated by standards of their fetishist and often abject representation. On the other hand, the reality of "unbelonging" underlies its social and ideological components, which regulate rightful citizenship and engender patterns of women's oppression. It can be said that "Exile Is My Home" articulates the configuration of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari termed a *minor literature* whose narrow currency subsists on a deterritorialised vocabulary of the migrant (and by extension, exilic) minority, as theorised in their essay "What is a Minor Literature?" Its fashioning within the play actively questions what Homi Bhabha deemed *the unhomey home* (in "The World and the Home") that is perpetually projected onto the social reality of the world.

### Queer homes, queer homings

However, the feminist undertones equally contain a problematic and superficial treatment of the intricate power relations inherent to queer women's lives. "Exile Is My Home" articulates an attempt at configuring minor literature which – given its further compartmentalisation as a queer feminist performance – only represents gendered experience without considering the specific oppression faced by queer women. In this way, through the co-optation of lesbian/bisexual partners into the story of exile, Rădulescu attempts a reterritorialisation of exilic experience that would – albeit narrowly – include queer uprootings and alternative queer(ed) homings, but *how* this endeavour addresses identity politics remains questionable. Rădulescu adopts a lesbian/bisexual (or alternatively, sapphic) partnership for Lina and Mina without further consideration of the implications of this marker of difference for her characters' lived reality and their understanding of family/kinship as being interrelated with matters of alternative homings. In an unexpected and unsettling turn of events, the women conveniently acquiesce to contribute to the repopulation of the First Planet by having children with the two remaining male survivors. Lina is astonished by Mina's "curiosity" and "sly" willingness to accomplish this mission (Rădulescu 2014, 7), but she is met with the latter's rebuff: "I thought we always had a home and we didn't want a home, home in the traditional sense but more like a planet home, a universe home, something open and indefinite where we wouldn't get stuck in all sorts of sentimental memories of the hallway to the bathroom or the window giving out to a lumber yard or shit like that which people recount from their childhoods and never get over" (Rădulescu 2014, 8).

Mina's declaration of the "open and indefinite" mode of relationality (re) states – paradoxically and alarmingly – an intrinsic "queer" mode within what can only be understood as a reprise of heteronormative domesticity, namely

the “universe” home that is not “stuck” in romanticised upper-middle-class railway apartments and suburban homes overlooking spectacles of proletarian life. Lina’s desired monogamous lesbian family is annulled by her partner’s flimsy politics that strives to supposedly *queer* the already queer, and by so doing, lands within the same domain of heteronormativity. While this vision of mass repopulation through a process of the commodification of women’s reproductive function is reprehensible, it becomes aggravated by, on the one hand, Lina’s protests about their exclusive lesbian love for each other, and Mina’s curiosity, her dismissal of the queer home as a mere “adorable little mobile portable” (Rădulescu 2014, 8) indefiniteness of experience, and her sense of serving a higher purpose through – in fact – the reiteration of cisheteronormativity. While the political dimensions of exilic identity are subverted and reconciled, the exploration of queer identity might be seen as vacuous without an in-depth examination of the politicised nature of queer identity, unless one accepts a vision of exile as an inherently *queer* process whereby one “struggles” with being assimilated and recognised. The harmful intrusion of masculinity within the domain of lesbian life – part of a casual plot-advancement technique – might be put down to the author’s convenient and fleeting embracing of identity politics, but it remains an aggression against the lived reality of the lesbian figure as the one who contests and is positioned outside all spheres that include the male. As Sara Ahmed points out, following larger debates, lesbian feminism can be understood as a “wilfulness archive” in which its radical component defines “wilfulness” as “standing against” (2017, 223) because “to become a lesbian is to queer woman by wrestling her away from him” (224). Standing against male-centred narratives is what defines lesbianism, and, as Ahmed notes, is what makes them “queer before queer” (2017, 224).

In this way, the notion of *home* as an ambiguous site of tension could be endowed with more productive meanings and analysed within a larger social context of (mis)belonging if one upholds the queer component of the characters’ lives. This is something that the author explores only partly — and perhaps accidentally. The home has a multifaceted significance within the play, as it is at once intimate and collective. The opening statements of the play set a nostalgic tone to the uprooted identities of Lina and Mina, who are both embodiments of global nomadism, having been “born in the air” (Rădulescu 2014, 4). In queer narratives, leaving the natal home is associated with the permitted plenitude of embodying one’s homosexuality in a haven away from home, a “coming out” that occurs at the same time as the “moving out” (Brown cited in Ahmed et al. 2020, 115). As the queer individual relocates their self elsewhere, they accomplish a homing that imparts “some kind of ontological security” (Ahmed et al. 2020, 115). Lina and Mina initially embody different attitudes to their birthplaces and homing desires; whereas Lina longs for a childhood landscape that represents much-sought domestic settledness, with its “regular house” near a “blue pond with a red flower in the middle” (Rădulescu 2014, 5), Mina aspires to perpetual “role-playing” (14), a perpetual

and free-flowing search for “new roles that we can put on and take off like silk dresses, like butterflies” (15).

Given the fact that the characters are queer women, the play brings to mind degrees of awareness of the childhood home as an oppressive site that refutes queerness. However, the reasons behind the characters’ migration are devoid of a queer – and specifically lesbian – contextualisation, even though it may be argued that their exile was not prompted by the desire to find a home elsewhere or to find a (queer) *otherwise*. In a different reading, Sara Ahmed reconsiders queer migrations as being not only opposed to the concept of the childhood home, since they could alternatively come across as attempts at salvaging, and therefore recasting it in a different light (2020, 116). This vision suggests the “double-life model,” which presupposes an opposition of *the natal home* – a place of unquestioned cisheterosexual and normative values, the “home as not-home” – with *the queer homing* – often a radical and rose-coloured apotheosis of the individual’s arrival at a *new destination* that reclaims their difference and comfort within the non-normative limits of their identity (Ahmed et al. 2020, 120).

The two approaches to the concept of *home* reflect themselves in the characters’ desires. On the one hand, Mina differentiates between her real and legal births: her immigrant mother had “crawled in the desert with [Mina] in her fruit bag,” a child “born in the country of Lugubria” (Rădulescu 2014, 5) but later accepted as a citizen and thus legally birthed “on the way to the market” (4). In this way, Mina’s birth in “the fruit bag” transposes a strenuous existence within the initial home that troubles claims to recognition and comfort. On the other hand, Lina’s yearning for a permanent home – as she miserably declares that she is “tired of homelessness” (13) – mirrors a *lugubrious* nostalgia that remains distinct from homesickness and her desire to return. As Roberta Rubenstein notes, homesickness stands for “a spatial/geographical separation,” whereas nostalgia is a “temporal” locus that stems from the idea of the birthplace as an idealised and creative site of memory (2001, 4). Lina’s sentimental memory of the house where she grew up, with “a potato garden and a blue pond with a red flower in the middle” (Rădulescu 2014, 5), is an overly domestic site that complicates her process of remembering the reality of the war that prompted her departure, and it suggests the workings of memory as a bittersweet negotiation of the tender and the traumatic. At the very beginning of the play, Lina and Mina repeatedly pose the same question to one another: “What do you remember?” (4). This torturous exchange, which features the same call to a stable answer – and by extension, the same demand for “remembering” a stable and unitary memory of childhood – is taken up time and time again throughout the play, and it morphs into a veritable chorus. In this way, Lina and Mina are revealed as lacking the awareness of their natal roots, which leads to a feeling of subjective and sentimental exiling – rooted in an insufficiency of memory – that contrasts with their legal war-imposed exile. In the end, Lina understands that a genuine home is one to which the individual craves to return and one that is willingly and clearly remembered (38).

## Staging unhomely affect and homeful bodies

Initially, Lina's homeland resides in "a Balkan song," a symbolical representation of "a place of my own that I can eat and where I can feel its sweet juices fill my mouth," with the final request that she "want[s] [her] mama" (13). Following Bob Cant, Sara Ahmed argues in favour of understanding queer migration as a movement that allows the re-processing of the childhood home, and she privileges "two-mindedness," which can be understood as a sense of "an openness, however fraught, about the multiple belongings that one negotiates in one's life," as well as the opportunity to consider forms of belonging that do not compartmentalise identities (2020, 120). According to Rubenstein, the matter of belonging must be grasped as a "relational, reciprocal condition" in which "connection and community" are prioritised because the desire to belong intrinsically requires the desire for "not only being taken care of but *taking care*" (2001, 4; emphasis mine). This shows how the image of the natal home inhabits the genealogy of domesticity, as Mina, too, defines her origins within a *lugubrious* maternal loss, and the two women undergo the revelation of their real homelands after their reunion with their vanished son, Billy. While the children birthed on the First Planet are not paid any proper narrative attention (in the same way that the lesbian body acts as a mere physical vessel for reproduction), Lina and Mina's son haunts the narrative as an affectual trigger for their overpowering nostalgia. It can be said that maternal affects are rendered pathological through various techniques of forcing the characters to embody their trauma at the same time that both their home and memory are ever-uprooted. Therefore, the very memory of the original home is permeated by symbols of lost nourishment. For example, the fruit bag that serves as Mina's birthplace contains guavas and oranges (taken as spiritually-endowed symbols of "sweet" and "juicy" abundance, yet betraying a "lugubrious" dimension of Eleusinian loss and rebirth inherent to their seeded flesh). Similarly, flowers are ever-present throughout the narrative as ephemeral and Ophelian symbols, for the women carry portable flower-houses on their backs. And on the Second Planet, Lina's overpowering begins with the "delicious" sight of red blossoms in the desert.

Initially, Lina and Mina's knowledge of their homeland represents a collective understanding of Eastern Europe as a depository of stereotypes, the place where "they always start wars" (Rădulescu 2014, 5). The Balkans are reinforced as the locus of "a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian" (Todorova 2009, 3), where different countries are conflated with one another, since Lina announces that she is "Finnish and French and a little bit Slovakian or maybe Slovenian, it's almost the same" (Rădulescu 2014, 10). Regardless of geographical specificity, Eastern Europe is symbolically taken as the locus of the same *lugubriousness* that pervades the borders of all its national constituents, even extending its reign over Finno-Ugric and Slavic languages. Lina and Mina are the "most ethnographic women in the

galaxy” due to their intricate roots (Hungarian, Polish, Finnish, French, Slovakian, Slovenian, among others), which bears testimony to their desire for “role-playing,” equated with merely “another way of being nomadic” (14). The Balkan home as a romanticised place where – according to *The Girl on the First Planet* – “[her] grandmother [...] used to always sing sentimental Balkan songs to put [her] to sleep” that “made [her] yearn for something but [she] didn’t know what” (9) alternates with the same Balkan locus as war-ravaged and hostile. As she recounts, “those sentimental Balkan songs – the soldiers sang them in all kinds of sinister wars as they were massacring entire populations and raping women in rape hotels and getting drunk and slobbering all over their drinks to the sound of sentimental songs” (9). However, what is remembered as a nostalgically domestic place that underscores personal affect and maternal attachment becomes globalised as a site of oppression. In an interview for *New York Theatre Review*, Rădulescu explains that Lina and Mina were “chased from a planet earth ravaged by wars, apocalyptic climate destruction, mass rapes, famine, disease and hatefulness,” but that their intergalactic journey is beset by their nostalgic longing for the abandoned home. It is important to note that exile is revealed throughout the play as an ambiguous journey, a push-and-pull movement that is bound to remain within the parameters of an unstable – and perhaps naïve – yearning. Sara Ahmed discusses this process as hinting at *the double orientation of the home* because the intimate home and its familiarity remain a static “site where things and subjects stand still, and it is there to be left behind or desired” (2020, 116). Even more, leaving behind is never entirely devoid of the desire to return.

This being said, the home perpetually haunts the exiled subject. Exile implies an often alienating and provisional *homeostasis*, a vacillation between ancestry and the ambiguous destination. For Kristeva, the immigrant or exiled condition is that of a *fugue*, a condition including “an otherness barely touched upon and that already moves away” (1991, 3). Rădulescu’s own concept of the “nomadism of the mind” can be understood in a similar way as a condition of inhabiting and being inhabited by plurality: “We have always been nomads, haven’t we? We have been Bedouins and Gypsies, and travellers, we have always been walking, riding, crawling, swimming and running and then putting up our folding houses at night. We have always forgotten everything we remember, haven’t we?” (Rădulescu 2014, 14). Lina and Mina’s status of “intergalactic” wanderers marks them as “fanatic[s] of absence” (Kristeva 1991, 5) due to the traumatic memory which impels them to travel yet constantly remembers their *home* as a nostalgic origin.

The “absence” is experienced both on the corporeal level – as symbolically displaced injuries – and the collective level – as social realities that force dislocation and movement. Their exilic ontology is visible on their own bodies, which function as equipment that facilitates movement. Rădulescu clarifies that prior to the metaphorisation of exile in literature and philosophy, “exile first existed in and through the body,” and this is a testament to the series of either positive or negative traumatic effects and symptoms that displacement



has on the *exilée's* body (2002, 189), such as extreme hunger, depersonalisation, and fatigue. As she underscores, "like Dante's souls in hell, exiles are "doomed" to remember and to relive their traumas" (2002, 201). In "Exile Is My Home," trauma is poignantly physical, as Lina and Mina's journeys on different planets allegorise symptoms as tasks to be completed in a quest. On the Second Planet, Lina's yearning for a home manifests itself as extreme hunger: "I'm hungry. I'm hungry for home, I'm hungry for dirt, for earth dirt, birth dirt, native dirt. . . I'm going to eat everything. I'll eat everybody. I'll eat you all until I have a home" (2014, 17). Her overpowering appetite can be likened to the immigrant's pursuit of alternate homings in a foreign country and the consequent refusals and betrayals that this process entails. According to Kristeva, hospitality "begins with a food fest: . . . A meal, a nutritive communion. The one confesses he is a famished baby, the other welcomes the greedy child; for an instant, they merge within the hospitality ritual" (1991, 11). This represents a utopian "banquet of hospitality" which serves the migrant with "the cosmopolitanism of a moment" within "the brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences" (Kristeva 1991, 11), but it feigns permanence even in the face of the immigrant's awareness of its transience (12). Lina's hunger becomes a frenzy that seeks to "sink one's teeth" into the native's phenomenology and seize it as a personalised reality that legitimises belonging. Alternatively, "eating away" at the foreign landscape traces the outbound route to one's homeland. To quote Rădulescu, "the memory of the exile has to *feed on itself* to some extent, to keep creating and re-creating itself in order to replace that which has been lost in the physical realm" (2002, 189; emphasis mine). Exile itself is described as "doubly. . . more greedy" for the newly encountered reality of a foreign country (2002, 200). For Hélène Cixous, too, appropriating a life in a foreign country implies a linguistic overabundance that mirrors an intoxicating fullness: "I fled [German], I spit it out, I vomited. I threw myself into *languelait* <...> so as not to see how the letters <...> reappropriate the blood of the tongues between their paws, their claws, and their teeth" (1991, 22).

### Hunger is political

Rosemary Hennessy advances a productive discussion of the ways in which vital needs – such as hunger, thirst, or shelter – are rooted in the socialised dimensions of human life, and while they may reflect the conditioned hierarchies of importance within capitalist society (free access to healthcare, for example, may be seen as essential in certain societies, but not others), they remain within the sphere of historical – and historicised – collective practice (2018, 210). Following Marx, Hennessy argues that it is essential to acknowledge how hunger is "disciplined in the organization of labour, monitored by the state, expressed and made meaningful through culture-ideology" (214). For this reason, Lina's fevered hunger for the landscape and her feverish grasping at it with her bare hands – that is, uninhibited by social norms of proper etiquette – may be seen as an a-historical and implicitly queer reap-

propriation of the standards of appeasement within strict capitalist modes of production and consumption, as much as it is, too, a corporealised greed for a phantom childhood home.

The visual image of eating as a first-person experiential pursuit of ontological satiety is also paralleled with Lina and Mina's encounter with the Woman Who Eats Hearts, a despotic devourer of souls who rules over a pristine snow-covered planet. In the snow on the Third Planet, one can find "throbbing human hearts that writhe, cry, sing and talk" who "live just like miniature human beings" (2014, 18). Eating now acquires the violence of being consumed, in stark contrast with the planet's translucent landscape, which can be interpreted as a rendering of loss in visual and symbolical terms. Rădulescu notes that exile is both a "'within the body' and an 'out of the body'" experience, as well as a manifestation of both "fullness and of loss" (2002, 199), often concomitantly. The planet is also traversed by "other creatures [who] move across the snow or freeze in a pose, the memories and ghosts of devoured travellers" (2014, 18). Both manifestations of trauma might underlie what Julia Kristeva theorised as the foreigner's "aloofness," depersonalisation that "amounts to plain brutality" as the uprooted subject retracts into their "painless core [...] of humbleness" (1991, 7). The immigrant's internalisation of their unbelonging manifests itself as fatigue and lethargy, but it also includes a hypervigilance that can amount to self-torment. On the Third Planet, immigrants themselves are nothing but units of labour – they are abused and "consumed" by the despotic capitalist, in a metaphorical shift that understands human hearts as the affectual work put in by the immigrant before being swallowed by a system that renders them ghostly.

While on the Queen's planet, Lina and Mina are reunited with their son, Billy. Initially, the revelation of his name triggers an ethereal flashback of a "little boy in a sailor's outfit . . . playing with boats in a little pond" in a "colourful garden," together with "younger versions of Mina and Lina" (2014, 22), a poetic reproduction of an idyllic homeland. However, this idealised image suddenly evaporates as "frightening sounds of shooting and cannons are heard" while soldiers equipped with machine guns ravage the garden, abducting Billy and abusing Lina and Mina (Rădulescu 2014, 23). This prompts the couple to remember that Billy was "raised by Bulgarian Organ Thieves and Torturers," only to be later placed in American foster care by her adoptive American mother, and it equally makes them recall their Croatian identity (26). Quite relevantly, their epiphany occurs when Lina and Mina attempt to explain to Billy who Ophelia "is, [...] was" (23), and this can be most appropriately explained by the author herself, who highlights that "one remembers one's gender through the body as one remembers the ties with one's birthplace and family" (Rădulescu 2002, 189). In this way, Rădulescu connects the corporeal and intimate anthologies of symptoms and traumas which mark the immigrant's body with the social reality – the female cult of mourning symbolised by Ophelia – that engenders what Homi Bhabha termed the "unhomely," an alienated recognition of the home as uncanny (1992, 141). As

he explains, displacement merges “the border between home and world,” as it signals the “social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocation” (141). Sara Ahmed, too, notes that the foreigner appears as an *unmarked body* because it “appears contained, enclosed and separate” or because it can be seen as a body that is “*at-home* or *in-place*” within a national boundary that safely incorporated it along lines of difference and trespassing (2000, 46). Migration or exile represents ways of rethinking dislocation and appropriating nomadism – the existence without a fixed and singular home. Yet Ahmed argues for a rethinking of the journey of exile as a movement starting from familiarity and arriving at strangeness, as home itself carries degrees of strangeness due to how it stages “encounters between those who stay, those who arrive, and those who leave” (2000, 88). Often, home is delimited by the maternal presence, and “returning home” may be a return *to* the mother, in the same way that leaving may be a painstaking abandonment *of*. Along the same lines, the homing process unfolds within the parameters of the relationship between the mother and the daughter as well, since the death of the mother triggers a need in the daughter to recreate homeliness and the home within an alternative family or community (Ahmed et al. 2020, 121). Through exile, the body becomes politicised through a lugubrious notion of female experience that blends it with the world. Rădulescu confirms that, in Jean Baudrillard’s tradition of the original, she is interested in “‘the territory’ and not ‘the map’” (2002, 257). This intended purpose of rewriting the “radically feminist” – following bell hooks’ call for integrating the “margins” into “a space of radical openness” (cited in Rădulescu 2002, 266) – into the relative mainstream of exilic experience mirrors Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisation of “minor literature” as a “deterritorialised tongue suitable for strange, minor uses” (1983, 16). The final utopian staging that confirms the citizenship of the world as a reaffirming “passport” – that subverts violent and genocidal practices against immigrants – consolidates nomadism as a state of existence rooted in communal and political existence. In the process of migration, the home itself is queered through its existence as an in-between space, a “site of struggle with multiple injunctions of being and ‘fitting in’ that comes from ‘here’ and ‘there’” (Ahmed et al. 2020, 125).

In conclusion, “Exile Is My Home” visualises a nomadic ontology which corporealises the *exile* into a lugubrious anthology of traumatic memory and gendered uprootedness. Queering exile is a matter of politicising the motions of attachment whereby the nostalgic childhood home is contrasted with the relations of power that may complicate and, in turn, lead to the *queering of the meanings of belonging itself*.

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Routledge.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Ahmed, Sara, Claudia Castada, Anne-Marie Fortier, Mimi Sheller, eds. 2020. *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1992. "The World and the Home." *Social Text* 31/32: 141–153.
- Cixous, Helene. 1991. *"Coming to Writing" and Other Essays*. Trans. Sarah Cornell et al. Harvard University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1983. "What Is a Minor Literature?" *Mississippi Review* 11(3): 13–33.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. 2018. *Profit and Pleasure. Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. Routledge.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1991. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- New York Theatre Review. 2016. "An Interview with Playwright Domnica Rădulescu and Director Andreas Robertz on *Exile is My Home*", *New York Theatre Review*, 7 May. <http://newyorktheatrereview.blogspot.com/2016/05/an-interview-with-playwright-domnica.html>. Accessed 20 June 2022.
- Rădulescu, Domnica. 2018. "Balkan Dreams/Western Nightmares – An Exploration of The American Dream/Nightmare In Plays By Romanian Women Playwrights." *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai - Dramatica* 2: 111–132.
- Rădulescu, Domnica. 2014. "Exile Is My Home," *Exile Is My Home: Four Plays*. Lulu.com.
- Rădulescu, Domnica. 2002. "Dream in a Suitcase: An Immigrant's Transformative Journeys to Imperfect Homes." *Imperfections. Studies in Mistakes, Flaws, and Failures*, ed. by C. Kelly, J. Kemper and E. Rutten, 251–278. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Rădulescu, Domnica. 2002. "Theorizing Exile." *Realms of Exile. Nomadism, Diasporas, and Eastern European Voices*, ed. by D. Rădulescu, 185–204. Lexington Books.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. 2001. *Home Matters. Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Todorova, Maria. 2009. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.

# An Analysis on Autonomous Feminist and Queer Safe Spaces: The Case Study of PHYL.IS. A.U.Th.

## Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the creation and preservation of an autonomous feminist and queer safe space utilising the case study of PHYL.IS. A.U.Th (The Student Union of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for Gender Equality). This essay attempts to examine and answer a series of questions raised during our active time as members of PHYL.IS. Please take note that a part of this paper will discuss a distressing incident of gender violence and sexual violence that impelled us to take action by creating PHYL.IS.

How is a safe space founded? What do members of a community reap? Are there any problems or obstacles when participating in a queer and/or feminist community? What impact does living in a hostile and conservative environment, shaped by patriarchy, capitalism and racism have on these communities and on their members? Do we need to, or even can we meticulously tend to see how such a community can have a guaranteed longevity? Or maybe we think of the future too much? These are some thoughts and questions we tried to address and discuss during our roundtable. This paper attempts to further debate and offer possible answers to the research questions. Having that as a starting point, we will try to frame the current article around the main question of establishing and maintaining a safe space, by delineating what a safe space is and what it encompasses.

The analysis stands on numerous axes. Firstly, we present the beginning and foundation of PHYL.IS. as a recourse to a sentiment of hopelessness. The idea of PHYL.IS. originated during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Greece, all while the feminist movements were going mainstream due to a rise in femicides and domestic violence (Geniki Grammateia Oikogeneiakis Politikis Kai Isotitas Ton Fylon, 2021)<sup>1</sup>, along with the concurrent start of the greek #Me-

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to highlight that, up until the end of the lockdowns, no autonomous organisations had access to raw data regarding gender violence statistics to our knowledge.

Too movement (Chroni and Kavoura 2022) that brought feminism into the limelight. In this context, PHYL.IS was one of the feminist groups that came into life to satisfy our need for a safe space of resistance, where we, as feminists and queers, would shape the discussion around these issues ourselves. Secondly, we discuss the lived experience of participating in and actively shaping a community of people with shared interests and goals. An investigation of such practices inevitably leads to the experience of both positive and negative outcomes: the knowledge that we received and simultaneously personal and institutional obstacles and hardships when trying to struggle for the longevity of a community. Finally, we share some of our thoughts about the future of the Union, as well as why these thoughts should not be unidirectional in regard to what happens in the present. Nevertheless, it is a concept of humanity that the formation of such communities is inadvertently linked to their longevity.

All the sections above lead to the final one which contains our conclusions. These conclusions are not only derived by our own lived experience but also by commentary on the external factors and people that have been in touch with us and our actions. In addition, our conclusions aim to be addressed to our fellow feminist and queer communities, which possibly face similar struggles and obstacles (to be extended beyond the scope of PHYL.IS., in regard to all autonomous safe spaces within the feminist and queer movements of resistance).

At this point in the article, we feel the need to elucidate and reflect on our backgrounds and positionalities. The writers of this article are a cis lesbian woman who participated in the Union from the very start as a co-founder and a cis gay man who joined PHYL.IS. during its first months of action, both greek and brought up in middle-class families. In these four years of participating in this community, we witnessed the transformative power of autonomous feminist spaces first-hand. We experienced successful acts of community resistance, as well as failures and disappointments and were empowered but also traumatised after going through numerous tensions and burnouts, individual and collective. Along with all members, we found ourselves learning more and more about feminist and queer theory but also about resistance praxis. Most of all, however, we found ourselves changed, and despite the hardships we encountered, we would repeat it all from the beginning without a second thought.

This article is, above all, not just a recounting of our lived experiences in PHYL.IS., but also a love letter to all autonomous feminist and queer safe spac-

---

As a result, this rise was evident through data accessible only to the General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights. As a governmental body, the General Secretariat takes into account only those incidents reported to the police. However, state violence, police brutality and systemic racism, sexism and homotransphobia are factors that eradicate the possibility of finding protection against gender violence through the justice system road and have rightfully cultivated distrust of authorities amongst survivors of gender violence. It is, therefore, obvious that many incidents of gender violence were never included in the aforementioned reports of the General Secretariat.



es, those that exercise their power towards justice, those that try to support and protect their members from discrimination and harassment, and especially those that survive by overcoming the adversities created by systemic state violence and sociopolitical discriminations.

## The beginning of PHYL.IS.

PHYL.IS. was founded by eight students at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in the fall of 2020. During that time, the second wave of lockdown measures against the pandemic of COVID 19 was imposed in Greece. Therefore, this was a time of anxiety and uncertainty, a time that found us watching the news in what felt like powerlessness and invisibility. This feeling was not new for us, as all of us were women, some of us queer as well. While we were spending our days and nights in confinement, away from our friends, chosen families and support systems, we started noticing a rising tendency in incidents of gender-based violence, something that enhanced our need to fight back, not only as students who did not have a voice within the university, but also as women and queer people within the conservative greek society. While greek media started covering the aforementioned cases of gender-based violence and the subsequent debates with more intensity, queers and feminists from all around the country started to organise themselves into new feminist groups, aiming to redefine this conversation that, up until this point, was echoing only liberal feminist stances<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the feminist movement gained unforeseen momentum, despite being obligated to confine itself to social media and online discussions, due to the pandemic.

The starting point for our discussions was the media coverage of the trial for the femicide of Eleni Topaloudi (Feminist Fight Back, 2020). Eleni Topaloudi was a 21-year-old student residing in Rhodes who was raped and battered in November 2018 after denying the sexual advances of two men. After her assault, the men ultimately dragged her almost unconscious body to a cliff and threw her over it, thereby leading her to a torturous death. What followed was one of the most popularised criminal investigations and subsequent trials. Eleni Topaloudi's femicide compelled us to discuss the times we experienced sexual harassment. The most recent example that came to mind was the harassment by our professors at the university, a space where we are supposedly able to belong without feelings of insecurity. We felt our anger rising but had no place to express it, since all our personal endeavours to shed light on such issues had no result at all; sometimes, it even resulted in our public branding as "hysteric" or "deluded". Instead, we choose to see ourselves as "killjoys" in the sense that Sarah Ahmed describes it (Ahmed 2023). We kept, and we still keep objecting to being patronised about our feelings

<sup>2</sup> A clear example of the predominance of liberal approaches to feminism in Greece at the time is apparent in the way greek media enhanced and supported demands of stricter penal punishments for perpetrators of gender-violence related crimes, demands that the right-wing government later satisfied with changes to the greek Penal Code (Stilianidou 2021).

and our right to speak freely about grave issues that occur literally next to us. Without hesitation, we decided that, since a community that would promote our feminist and queer fights for visibility, respect and freedom in academia and in society as well, did not exist, we would try to create one.

It is essential to highlight that, at that time, none of us had any experience in forming safe spaces. The first form of PHYL.IS., as it was initially moulded, was a result of endless online calls, of ideas that were tested and failed, and others that seemed to have the potential to morph PHYL.IS. into something larger than what we initially imagined. Indeed, during the first months of shaping our Union, we came to the realisation that the students that had the same need we had, the need to explore ways of feminist and queer resistance, were many more than we thought. As they joined the Union, it slowly started to change, according to its people and the way they experienced their own vulnerabilities and expressed their feminist and queer identities. Therefore, there was the need to solidify that our community would be a safe space for all people who shared the same values and wanted to participate in our actions or be a part of our community. Suffice it to say that we made clear from the beginning that homo/bi/transphobic rhetorics, racism, misogyny, heterosexism and ableism would never be welcome in our Union. Establishing such a community is not an easy goal but is rather a bet, especially for autonomous communities trying to shape themselves and exist in authoritative environments and societies that promote state violence and heteronormative politics.

Indeed, such communities cannot but be flexible and adaptive to the needs of their members and the challenges that will undoubtedly arise during their course of action. This is exemplified in the way the shape of PHYL.IS. was transformed, even as a legal entity. Starting as an association without a legal personality, we quickly realised that one of our goals, namely providing support and assistance to students harassed by professors within academia, was not going to be accomplished safely (for us as well as for the survivors) if we retained this legal entity. Thus, we opted for the conversion of our legal entity to that of a Union. Regardless, the fabric of PHYL.IS. remained unchanged as a space aiming to protect and empower those oppressed to fight against their oppressors, mostly within universities but additionally outside academia.

All these experiences that have run across these last two years and a half are also a vital part of this communal structure. We started as a group of just 8 female students, but quickly, in a matter of 6 months, our efforts were joined by 800 people, the vast majority of them students as well, of various gender identities, sexual orientations and ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, each of them bringing their own experiences and concerns in regard to sexuality, gender, society and politics. Admittedly, this astonishing number of members was partly a result of what we might call “quarantine ennuï”; during the lockdowns, everyone’s activities came to a sudden halt, and, being confined to our houses and having nothing else to do than to survive, all our ways of communication, expressing ourselves and fighting for our rights had to exist solely within the online world. Within a community with such a high

number of members, creating and strengthening interpersonal bonds is an almost impossible task. This task seemed even more utopic when our only means of bonding were online video calls and chat groups.

We propagandised our actions and events through the internet since our spaces were in total lockdown, and we believe that these very lockdowns were an incentive that drew more people in; we all were confined in our personal spaces, while a lot of issues relevant to us were breaking out around us, as stated before. Hence, we believe that our online events, roundtables and open discussions with themes revolving around feminism and its numerous expressions in several aspects of our lives filled a gap in the university public sphere.

However, as our political and ideological fermentation progressed and simultaneously, our needs were pressing since the lockdowns ended and we could be actively present in the university, things changed rapidly. As a community that refuses to be sponsored by the state, the university or institutions that we believe contravene our goals and practices, we had to turn inwards for funding and be an automated community. This was not met with unanimity, and at that point, we realised that some of our then members did not actually share our goals and values as they became clearer after the lockdowns. Instead they approached feminism from an opportunistic, liberal stance and were dipped in individualistic aims, specifically including participation in PHYL.IS. for respective career pursuits. When reflecting upon that, we are more than happy to say that we are a self-funded community. Our members nowadays are far more solid in their reasons to belong in our collectives, albeit being less than back in the lockdown era.

Currently, PHYL.IS. counts approximately 180 members, a number easier to navigate that leaves room for us to create strong bonds of solidarity. Many of these members have joined PHYL.IS. recently, others have been members since 2020 and are now happy to assume coordinating roles. We can now safely say that people in PHYL.IS. connected, exchanged information and found new and more intricate ways to care for each other, by queering knowledge and experience; that is, queering in the sense of unlearning things we took for granted and learning them together from scratch.

### **What we learned through PHYL.IS.**

As stated before, at the time PHYL.IS. was being formed, we found ourselves amidst moral, hygienic and scientific panics and at a moment in time when Greece was suffering a streak of femicides. A lot of people, who joined at that same time, felt similar sentiments in the sense that PHYL.IS. fostered a sense of belonging. Back in 2021, PHYL.IS. was a community at the dawn of formation, struggling to shape its communal structures and position itself somewhere among the vast greek political and feminist/queer landscape. Creating an autonomous safe space calls for time for its members to find a pace. Nowadays, we can safely state that our members don't feel that initial

struggle anymore; on the contrary, we feel like we've come a long way since. We firmly believe our political stance is getting gradually stronger, albeit remaining dynamic. Although our political stance had ideological foundations, it would be arrogant on our behalf to admit we were omniscient in those early years. Therefore, we had to correspond with other groups, communities and assemblies with shared values in order to accomplish larger political and ideological fermentation, and we still remain quite acceptant of political circulation. A primary deduction stemming from our correspondence with queer and feminist comrades is the assertion that safety and solidarity can only be acquired by a) strengthening the bonds between the people that comprise the space and b) aligning our needs, interests and objectives by forging allyships with other groups that share our principles. However, we needed to find out how to accomplish these goals.

We attempted to create work groups in order to conduct workshops, seminars and presentations related to feminist theory, queer theory and their intersections. On the aspect of socialisation, our online calls (back then there was no other way to communicate) also operated as social hangouts where people can assemble and converse on several topics, including their personal issues and, therefore, forging new relationships. These relationships essentially became the ones that made our Union survive throughout the years. Afterwards, we contacted other groups which ventured into the same spaces as we aspired to do. For example, at that point, a lot of artists' unions assembled in order to process the burgeoning #MeToo crisis in early 2021. Our exposure and cooperation with such groups helped us understand similar situations better and gain their insights about the way they survive the hostility of the conservative greek society, a society ready – or even glad – to succumb to extortions and power displays by powerful harassers<sup>3</sup>.

Later, when the lockdowns came to an end, we decided to actively take action in our university spaces. A first example that comes to mind was an anonymous collection of messages that we labelled “what would you like to say to your abuser”. We posted an anonymous form in our social media and concurrently we carried a ballot box in campus, where people could throw pieces of paper with messages from students. As members of the student community ourselves, we knew that the harassment rate on campus, especially from high-ranking professors, was extremely high, with students unable to report it, fearing they would get stigmatised and persecuted by the complex bureaucracy system that inevitably clears the abusers from all charges. Afterwards, we printed all digital responses and posted them, along with the physical ones, everywhere on campus for anyone to see. This was an attempt

<sup>3</sup> To provide a concrete example of the readiness of greek society to “punish” those who break the silence instead of the perpetrators, we would like to highlight the infamous attempt, aided by the greek orthodox church and various governmental bodies, for a “1st Panhellenic Fertility Conference” to be held, in order to promote a duty to procreate and oppose bodily autonomy (Gill 2021) and the adoption of a new family law bill, influenced by anti-feminist lobbies (Human Rights Watch 2021).

to raise awareness around the harassment issue, and it operated also as a direct message to the oppressors: “We’re here, and we know who you are”.

Another example of an event through which we learnt a lot, was the feminist festival we organised in the spring of 2023. It was a two-day event brimming with discussions and workshops. We reference it here because we believe that a discussion held on the second day was a mind-changing experience. The discussion was titled “Queerness and disability” and the keynote speakers and hosts were disabled persons that are also our members. This discussion was another occasion where we were “forced” – in a good-hearted yet difficult fashion – to look directly into our able-bodied privileges and remain silent in order for their experiences to be heard loudly, something that does not occur often. This instance helped us realise once more that our oppressions can be intertwined, and that only by listening to our comrades’ experiences can a true allyship and sense of solidarity be forged.

Last but not least, we specifically recall coming together at a campus patio to create a feminist banner from the ground up. On the banner, we wrote all the names of women and femininities who had been victims of femicide throughout 2021 up to that point. We remember that day as particularly emotionally challenging since we were boiling with anger for our murdered sisters; the decision to punch through our anger and use it to our advantage and for our resistance was a silent yet unanimous consensus.

All these actions and activities taught us new ways, theoretical and practical, of working together towards resisting, but most of all, they taught us that unity of the oppressed is the only way to dismantle the power of the oppressors. These experiences strongly reflect the writings of Audre Lorde: *“Without community, there is no liberation ... But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist”* (Lorde 1984, 112).

The understanding of the differences Lorde spoke of, is a necessary condition for any space to be regarded as “safe” and one of the biggest strengths of communities of queer and feminist resistance. These differences are the essence of intersectionality. As mentioned above, and just like any safe space, PHYL.IS. is essentially its people. Collectively, and through the mix of each of their own feminist and queer experiences, all of them different from ours, our members are the ones that shape the Union and lead it to new paths. This is also one of the most significant things we personally gained through our participation in such a community. Every new member carried a new way of perceiving life through feminist and/or queer experiences and participating in feminist and queer fights. When discussing the differences and intersections in our feminist and queer identities, we expanded our personal understanding of feminism as a movement and inserted feminist analyses of issues many of us had never even considered before, such as the way public spaces systemically feed inequalities or the way language can be used as a tool of feminist and queer liberation. By intersections, it needs to be specified that during the formation period of the Union, not all the people included were

knowledgeable or aware of their individual positionalities and intricately interwoven privileges.

Since universities in Greece are – as of 2024, when this article was being written – public and without fees<sup>4</sup>, there is a tremendous level of class diversity among the student community; people who started helping us build a community and students who were not members but attended our first events during the lockdowns belonged to a wide pool, including working-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Therefore, there was an additional amount of labour to be done, as we all needed to reflect upon our own backdrops and realise our lack of privileges in university spaces or, with a higher level of difficulty, realise that some of us were more privileged than others. Specifically, we remember a discussion between us where one person could not understand why we insisted on including female refugees and immigrants in our analyses because they believed that an anti-racist group would be more suitable to talk about respective issues. This very discussion operated as a Kickstarter for self-educating circles between us to comprehend that feminism does not pertain to white people only and how such kinds of arguments make clear that the people delivering them have to work through their own web of privileges in order to acknowledge them and see beyond them.

People constituting a community are of utmost significance. Through PHYL.IS., we found out the importance of inclusivity and diversity. By those terms, we certainly do *not* allude to their neoliberal and shallow manifestations. Contrarily, we mean that we came in contact with people and bodies that are rendered invisible in heteropatriarchal society: queer bodies, trans and non-binary individuals, immigrants and disabled people. We need to clarify that they are not hereby referred to as a means of tokenism, rather than people who helped PHYL.IS. become an even safer space. At this point in the article, we feel that it is a good spot to reconsider our own backgrounds and positionalities, as stated in the introduction, and add that both of us are currently; we therefore do not claim to speak on behalf of our non-binary and trans siblings, or other individuals that are less privileged than us.

It is unfortunately true that a lot of these people's experiences are easily erased in everyday life, therefore normalising abusive use of language even in humorous fashion. Especially when talking about disabled bodies, it is crucial to search for ways to include them in a community's activities and discussions. That can only occur when people are allowed to talk about their lived experience which we often – regrettably – omit. Similar things can be said for immigrant FLINTA (Female, Lesbian, Intersex, Trans and Agender) people, who are institutionally and systemically more oppressed due to the interrelations of their identities. Finally, autonomous safe spaces cannot be deemed neither feminist nor queer if they cannot include trans experiences in their

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that an unconstitutional legislation allowing the establishment of private universities in Greece is now in effect. This legislation is another example of the neoliberal tactics of oppression of the right-wing greek government, tactics that serve as means to enhance plutocracy and further marginalise those without power.

analyses. It is vital for a trans person to feel included in such a community if they can exist as their genuine selves.

Another important thing we gained through PHYL.IS. is empowerment in its most liberating form. Many of us found power in unity, a power that made us feel more able to not only survive in an environment that was built to destroy us but also break our silence and participate more actively in acts of resistance at a personal and a collective level. This unity also helped to liberate us from shackles that kept us down in our personal lives because we knew we could expose ourselves and discuss our experiences with issues such as eating disorders without being judged. On the contrary, we would be heard and supported. This made many of us less afraid to be vulnerable despite living in a society that condemns vulnerability<sup>5</sup> and sees it as a lack of productivity, as the latter is situated in its capitalistic and heteronormative form (Coyle 2013). Breaking the norms that wanted us to feel powerless and alone, needing to hide, was possible only through a collective safe space, built upon feminist and queer values (Gear 2013). Belonging and participating in a feminist and queer community like PHYL.IS. made us realise that vulnerability is not a synonym for inadequacy. On the contrary, we found out that vulnerability is a strength, a source of power, a weapon that can be used to promote unity in our fights against systemic violence. After all, interdependence is a strengthening factor within our spaces, where the state and authorities fail to respond to our vulnerabilities, our communities are those who step up and offer us our much-needed support and care.

This realization proved to be an essential part of the evolution of our community but also of each member personally. Additionally, it led us to a search for ways to implement teachings of collective care in our community practice. In the context of our spaces, collective care takes the form of “mutual aid” (Spade 2020), meaning a symmetric relationship where all members are taken care of whilst taking care of others (Kavada 2023). The first step towards this can be as small as sharing our experiences of systemic, patriarchal and / or heteronormative violence, a step that immediately opens us to lessons from the experiences of others. Discussing the sources of our struggles and pain, but also of our sources of happiness, builds trust within our communities and paves the way towards developing methods of intercommunal support that can range from group talks, picnics or movie nights to self-education workshops, events for financial support.

Acts of collective care function as a source of empowerment and, ultimately, create a feeling of a powerful, unifying feminist and queer joy, a feeling that cannot be experienced otherwise. Removing care from its capitalistic, patriarchal and systemic signification (Nadasen 2021) and re-defining it within the framework of feminist and queer spaces essentially renders it an act of

---

<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that vulnerability is a concept mainly used in bioethics and biopolitics, belonging and participating in a feminist and queer space like PHYL.IS. proved to us that the embodied experience of vulnerability, wherever it may arise for each of us, has a certain unifying and transformative power when lived in a communal way.



resistance. Collective care is unequivocally connected to the aforementioned interdependence that stems from human vulnerability, and, as such, is a solid method of building resilience against systemic forces.

## Obstacles

It is needed to remark that building a grassroots, autonomous feminist and queer community that aims to support its members while retaining the element of safety in its environment is a difficult task that needs the active engagement of each of the people participating. Undoubtedly, PHYL.IS. faced some struggles, some of them coming from within and others pertaining to the hostile systemic structures of greek society. As mentioned above, the students who began shaping the Union initially had no clue about how a community like that could function, leading to trials and errors. This became more intense after the lockdown measures regarding the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted in Greece. Our Union was brought to life online, and up until that point, it retained solely an online presence<sup>6</sup>. Transferring this space into the real world at first felt like an impossible goal. Indeed, at first our online seminars and workshops did not attract the same amount of people as they did in our first year when everybody was restricted. This led to initial frustration about what we wanted to confer, but gradually and collectively, we decided that we had to adapt. After all, the universities which were our original starting point were active again, and students were not attending classes online anymore. Therefore, if we wished our platform to be communicated, there would be a need for extraversion. We found available classrooms in various departments of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, and we were able to meet people in person for the first time. Many members met each other for the first time a year after PHYL.IS. was founded. The classrooms also functioned as spaces where we could hold our seminars/workshops/etc. in person, while also preserving the online version for people who could not reach us physically. It is significant to maintain that power lies in unity, and by uniting, the people of PHYL.IS. made it possible for it to exist as more than an online community.

Another collective struggle that inevitably changed the fabric of the Union was the emergence of a great number of reports of sexual harassment incidents within the greek universities. As a students' Union, we started to receive many messages from FLINTA students who had been through discrimination and/or harassment by their professors, and their pain became our collective pain, as many of us ourselves had also similar experiences. We realised that the way universities dealt with these complaints was not only inadequate but practically non-existent since it was created in a way that helped the perpetrators hide their accountability and promoted that breaking the silence was not an option for the survivors. This made us eager to shout even more and demand that the perpetrators be held accountable for

<sup>6</sup> Funnily enough, many of the co-founders hadn't even met in person until that point.

their actions and the university authorities stop hiding the incidents under the rug and pretending to care about the well-being of their FLINTA students and members of staff. Further problems started to arise after the greek government announced the installation of police forces within the university campus, on the pretext of protecting students against supposedly dangerous anarchist groups that were established and predominantly active within the university<sup>7</sup>. Given that PHYL.IS is, first and foremost, a students' Union; this development felt threatening and scary and had huge impact on the collective identity of PHYL.IS., since its members, themselves part of the academic environment as individuals, protested and fought with even more intensity against the threat of police suppression and the authoritative forces within our spaces. During the subsequent occupations of various university faculties, our group chats were used mostly for raising awareness, uniting to join protests and support events of the occupations, and protecting each other by informing our members about imminent police attacks. Unquestionably, this extreme situation brought us even closer together and made us realise that resistance is best accomplished with the aid of our communities.

Both above-mentioned developments led us to question our own stance, not only individually, but as a community, within the academic environment. Undoubtedly, the latter is a place where systemic inequalities thrive and where power relations lead to countless cases of discrimination. We had therefore to openly position ourselves against the university authorities that enabled the suppression of our fights, whilst still noting that we were a part of the academic environment and questioning our participation in it. To do that, we have published a lot of manifestos online through our social media and website that clearly situated us against the authoritative powers within our campuses. Additionally, since 2021 when the university was not in lockdown, we have participated in plenty of events, discussions and roundtables in university squats, hence bluntly disputing the academic regime.

Apart from practical and institutional obstacles, there are also personal issues that emerge when participating in a collective like this. Firstly, engaging actively in such a space demands a huge amount of time dedicated to the enhancement of the community. This also means that many of us ended up feeling exhausted, experiencing a so-called "activism burnout", mainly due to us being informed about an enormous number of triggering incidents of gender violence almost daily. This ever-continuing awareness, needed for our efforts to demand that these incidents be addressed as what they are, incidents of gender violence, can be extremely stressful and mentally exhausting. At times, when some of us experienced this peculiar exhaustion, others were always there to support us.

Equally important to remember is the following: coordinating with comrades as members of a community with shared intentions, sometimes we

<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the aim behind this fascist legislation of the greek government was to create obstacles for the politicisation of students.

have to overcome our own vices or share them with other members in order to collectively work through them. Different personalities may clash on a lot of aspects, and different people may have individual agendas. Therefore, being a member of a community comes with harsh realisations. A significant example would be the importance of personal time as a vector of participation. Different people have different personal lives and issues at hand, so it is clearly impossible for everyone to forfeit the same portions of time and energy for the community. Such discrepancies are also often the source of feelings of sadness, disappointment, bafflement and perhaps anger. It is necessary to take into consideration that we all process things and situations at a different pace. The understanding of these disparities, their open communication and management are all crucial for the preservation of the autonomous safe space.

On the same page speaking of difficulties, another cruel realisation is the level of corrosion that neoliberalism and individualism has inflicted upon us. By that, it's explicit that we mean that, as mentioned before, we have been occasionally approached by individuals or groups that only *pretended* to share our concerns. It is not uncommon that a lot of people have attempted to participate in the Union because they believe that it will benefit their personal goals, whether they be academic or career-oriented (like strengthening their CV) or drenched in an individualistic sense of ambition. It's always difficult when we realise it, but it is equally necessary for this agenda to be addressed. That's when the aforementioned community network relationships and care practices are advantageous in comprehending how different people have different needs and timetables. These resolute relationships between members of a community possess the capability to "spot odd ones out" (to crudely describe it). By that, we mean that people who have their own individualistic agenda and do not care for other members the way we all try to, eventually leave, because sooner or later they themselves realise that their mindset is not tolerated within a grassroots community that embodies affective structures, meaning that their individualistic goals will not be met by them relying on these structures.

In addition, it is highly probable, or perhaps even inevitable, that tensions and conflicts will arise within a community of a significant number of people, despite their shared views and struggles. This matter is a sensitive one, seeing that each member leads their own life, facing individual obstacles that are often rooted in the same sources as our collective ones. Conflicts between members need to be approached firstly with discretion by people of the community that are trusted by all parties. We also find it essential to underline that any conflict resolution should not be guided in a judgmental light, but always move towards one aim: that of guaranteeing the element of safety within said community. Conflict resolution within autonomous feminist and queer communities cannot share means – such as punishments or "trial" procedures – with carceral justice because the latter is formatted upon patriarchal structures that promote state violence; therefore, a community

that follows the patterns of “imposed penalties” cannot be a feminist one. Our communities cannot assume the role of courts by using methods of asking for evidence or witnesses and issuing judgments. On the contrary, they should rely on their inherent power to educate their members whilst offering them protection and support, thus preserving their identity as safe spaces.

It is needless to remark that all the above are sometimes easier said than done, as we ourselves got to experience, especially when the conflicts that arise are extremely grave. When our community was faced with such conflicts, we had to find a way to manage the situation by prioritising the needs of the person who survived the incident whilst simultaneously moving away from carceral roads of deciding between “guilt” or “innocence”. This led us to search for ways to collectively implement caring and anti-authoritative teachings of abolitionism in our own community. After our readings of various strategies and tactics of communal and transformative justice<sup>8</sup>, we compiled a harassment report management protocol based on consistent communication, primarily with the survivor, whose needs will guide the process and determine the possible outcomes (for example they will be the ones to decide which members will aid as a community-led de-escalation team, whether they would like to talk to the perpetrator themselves during the process and whether the rest of the members will be notified about the harassment report), but also with the perpetrator, by trying to promote self-accountability. We firmly believe that such grave incidents must be dealt with by communicating extensively with all parties, without making the ones responsible feeling judged or under trial, but trying to make them realise that they have to take accountability for their actions. In case self-accountability is not achieved – and always according to the survivor’s needs – the perpetrator’s participation in PHYL.IS. will be either paused temporarily, until further discussions take place between them and the de-escalation team to explore ways of re-education, or suspended indefinitely, if the perpetrator is escalating their reaction to the harassment report. The process has as a goal of protection of the survivor and the perseverance of safety within our community, whilst not ignoring that the logic of penalties and trials is inconsistent with the nature of feminism and the possibility of re-education must always be explored, as we will try to further highlight below.

## Predictions for the future

Although the inauguration of a community like PHYL.IS. is inevitably linked with long-term goals and ambitions, we gradually realised that obsessing with the future is not always helpful. Futurity is something we don’t tend

<sup>8</sup> Transformative justice has intersectional foundations; it acknowledges that harm, discrimination and abuse of any kind stem from oppression as a systemic mechanism. Consequently, the main aim of transformative justice is to offer protection and simultaneously cultivate healing and accountability at a communal basis, whilst avoiding the creation of new cycles of violence.

to ponder about constantly because therein lies a trap; sometimes, we may find ourselves caught in a fixation on an imaginative figure of the future and neglect what is at hand right now. Autonomous safe spaces do oscillate on various temporalities, but it is very important that comrades feel they can express themselves now rather than concentrating on what will occur in two years (or more). This way, we can examine more attentively on our present needs and purposes.

That being stated, our goal for our community is to keep growing and encompass more people who share our purposes and are seeking a safe space to identify with. Our aim for PHYL.IS. as a safe space and a community is that we continue to exist, reshape and reinvent ourselves in the coming years. We are optimistic and believe that this goal will be accomplished. We believe in the relationships we formed over these years and in the experiences, we gained that changed the way we perceive what feminist and queer resistance really is.

Lest we forget, we want to envision - naively so - university spaces without cops, without abusive professors and re-traumatizing structures. Therein lies a foundational contradiction; how do we keep operating within a university that's systemically authoritative? Do we undeniably accept being part of such an environment? The answer is complex. On one hand, it's simply impossible to disregard the institutional ills of a space that we are part of. Therefore, the need for such a community was born. On the other hand, being in contact with institutions inevitably brings forth a guilt of complicity, even if a community cannot be held accountable for others' faults and misdoings. Our recommendation is simply to not leave it all to them without a struggle. Universities are, first and foremost, ours to mould, not platforms of harassment and exploitation of our knowledge and bodies. That is the reason why we are here; to queer.

We need to add a note regarding the futurity of not only our community but of all communities in the feminist and queer resistance movements. Within our spaces, there is a heavy shadow that, at some time, will need to be addressed, that of the lack of proper ways to deal with incidents of harassment perpetrated by members of a community against members of the same or other communities. As aforementioned, when our community was confronted with this issue, we tried to compile a protocol to ensure that the paths we take to resolve it and guarantee the safety of the survivor, as well as of all members, and we are always eager to discuss further and accept remarks, in order to find ways to ameliorate the process. However, there have been many examples of complaints regarding incidents like these in many feminist and queer spaces that were published online, creating chaos in our spaces. This chaos is the result of our collective delay to open an honest discussion about accountability that transcends the closed environment of a union or a community and expands throughout the whole movement. This creates opportunities for abusers to hide in our supposedly "safe spaces" and to escape being held accountable for their actions. Yet, their actions hurt our communities in

very intricate ways by disempowering our unity, leading many of us to turn away from our movements and filling us with distrust. Because, if we cannot be protected within our very own communities, what kind of safety is the one that defines a “safe” space?

The answer is given in a circular manner; our communities need to be open to discussions regarding our own accountability by a) learning to give as well as accept constructive criticism, b) educating ourselves – on a community basis but also individually – on admitting and transforming our wrong-doings, c) protecting our members by ensuring that our space remains safe for them and d) dealing with members that may or may not be ready to accept the harmful nature of their behaviour. Therein lies a trap magnified by popular culture wars, the “cancelling” culture. We do not adopt the term lightly because in most cases of “celebrity cancelling” it was merely a *trompe l’oeil* employed to distract the audiences from the roots of such problems. When discussing intra-movement incidents, we believe that outright cancelling without exceptions is no solution at all. On the contrary, we need to conduct in depth assemblies and discussions to comprehend how the incident was allowed to take place in a supposedly safe space and then castigate the person(s) responsible. “Punishment” is also a mentality we do not embrace since we struggle to approach abolitionism. As hinted previously, we support exploring ways to (re)educate instead<sup>9</sup>, for the person(s) to comprehend the ills of their ways, if that is possible. “Cancelling” and ostracization may create more problems than expected, since the person(s) responsible in this case are able to simply find another space and repeat their actions. This is why we believe it is worth it to spend as much time as needed on discussions with all members involved, making sure that they take place according to the survivor’s wishes. Needless to say, their wishes must be prioritised in order for any space to be actually “safe”. Therefore, any process that aims to resolve issues of harassment and ensure the safety of the survivor has to leave room for their guidance, specifically in regard to whether the process will remain confidential or public and whether it will include a discussion between them and the perpetrator, with the possibility of the facilitation of a community de-escalation team. In addition, the survivor’s needs will ultimately determine the possible outcomes; if the survivor deems it necessary for their safety, the harmful person must be removed from the community. However, even in this case, members of the community will have to participate in discussions with the perpetrator, to try to make them recognise their wrongdoings, for them to refrain from repeating them to other spaces in the future. To summarise, safe spaces are preserved while being active and healthy only by communication between members, about any issue at all, especially crucial and difficult ones.

At this point, we must note that it’s not only communication between members that is essential but also between communities. This might sound

<sup>9</sup> Re-education, of course, excludes extreme cases such as allegations of rape, physical assault.

pessimistic or exaggerating, but we believe that our movements are at war, attacked by anti-feminist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist and racist analyses that infiltrate our spaces. All the aforementioned rhetorics are gaining traction as there is an emergence of alt-right politics and hate speech all over Europe. Hence it is more than ever necessary for our communities to demand that all our members are safe and respected within our movements. This therefore means that we need to speak loudly against TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists), homo- and fem- nationalists, and ableists that insist on imposing rules on who will be included in our movements, who we will fight for and who is not “worth” to join our fights for liberation. If we do not demand visibility of those that remain invisible to this day, firstly within our own spaces, how can we fight for our collective visibility on a wider societal level? If our movements keep replicating the power structures used by our oppressors for the sake of assimilation, how can they pave the way to a future where we can actually unite against state violence, classism, racism and patriarchy? These are wider discussions that need to finally open amongst our communities, especially those located in environments like those of conservative states, that leave no options for FLINTA, disabled and immigrant bodies other than to live marginalised, oppressed and stigmatised. Because in these environments, we have no support systems besides the ones we ourselves create.

## Conclusion

To conclude, an autonomous feminist/queer safe space is comprised of all aforementioned elements: love, compassion, understanding and politicisation. Love and compassion for each other, understanding our mutual and interrelated oppressions. The politicisation of our fear and anger is what brings us together. When participating in such a community, people may face a lot of situations; both joyful and dire. We discover several things about ourselves, and we may find ourselves in a happy place where we can finally express ourselves contrary to what we’ve been taught. We learn to cooperate with other people, listen to them, care for them. Additionally, we may have to come to terms with rough qualities of ourselves when trying to amalgamate with other people. We need to address that we may be confronted with challenges such as external obstacles (institutions that have to maintain the status quo in favour of themselves) or internal community struggles (possible harassment, as mentioned above).

What we have experienced, though, is that a probable answer would be the junction of feminist and queer analysis. Queering our experience with ways that subvert the expectations, ways that undermine the norms we’ve been running away from, is our everyday purpose. Additionally, queering our experience encompasses queering our spaces. By this we mean those spaces that are inherently built upon the need of safety and visibility, those spaces that tend to be our support systems when everything else makes it too hard for us to survive. In order to make these spaces actually safe, we need to



unlearn what we have been institutionally taught about vulnerability, understand intersectionality and re-establish how each of our different vulnerabilities can be a source of resistance. We need to approach confrontations within our spaces by distancing ourselves from carceral paths and simultaneously enhance our collective demands of respect, inclusion and visibility within our movements. Finally, we need to keep questioning our own personal and collective positionality (and therefore our privileges) and realise that the only way our fights can be enhanced is through the help of our own communities. Hence, for all of us whose identities are inherently threatening to the oppressive structures of the neoliberal state, reconceptualising care, vulnerability and resilience through a collective framework is the ultimate tool of survival, and our communities, those founded upon our collective trauma as well as our common feminist and queer joy, our most important means of protection and source of power.

- Ahmed, Sara. 2023. *The Feminist Killjoy: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. New York: Seal Press.
- Chroni, Stilianani Ani, and Anna Kavoura. 2022. "From Silence to Speaking Up About Sexual Violence in Greece: Olympic Journeys in a Culture That Neglects Safety." *Frontiers in psychology* 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.862450>
- Creative Interventions. 2021. *Creative interventions toolkit: A practical guide to stop interpersonal violence*. AK Press.
- Coyle, Sean. 2013. "Vulnerability and the liberal order." *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics*, ed. by M.A. Fineman and A. Grear, 61–75. New York: Routledge.
- Cullors, Patrisse. 2018. "Abolition and reparations: Histories of resistance, transformative justice, and accountability." *Harvard Law Review* 132: 1684–1694.
- Feminist Fight Back. 2020. "Let Justice Prevail: How The Case Of The Rape And Murder Of Eleni Topaloudi Set An Important Precedent In Greece." *Feminist Fight Back*, May 20. <https://www.feministfightback.org.uk/let-justice-prevail-how-the-case-of-the-rape-and-murder-of-eleni-topaloudi-set-an-important-precedent-in-greece/>
- Geniki Grammateia Oikogeneiakis Politikis Kai Isotitas Ton Fylon. 2021. *2i Etsia ekthesi gia ti Bia kata ton gynaikon*. <https://isotita.gr/2h-ethsia-ekthesh/>
- Gill, Omaira. 2021. "Ovaries and outrage: how social media took down Greece's fertility conference," *Media Diversity Institute*, June 29. <https://www.media-diversity.org/ovaries-and-outrage-how-social-media-took-down-greeces-fertility-conference/>
- Grear, Anna. 2016. "Vulnerability, advanced global capitalism and co-symptomatic injustice: locating the vulnerable subject." *Vulnerability: Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics*, ed. by M.A. Fineman and A. Grear, 41–60. New York: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. 2021. "Greece: Custody Bill Puts Women, Children at Risk," *Human Rights Watch*, May 6. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/06/greece-custody-bill-puts-women-children-risk>
- Kavada, Anastasia. 2023. "Project Democracy in Protest Camps: Caring, the Commons and Feminist Democratic Theory." *Feminism and Protest Camps: Entanglements, Critiques and Re-Imagings*, ed. by A. Bartlett and C. Eschle, 76–194. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

- Kim, Mimi E. 2021. "Transformative justice and restorative justice: Gender-based violence and alternative visions of justice in the United States." *International review of victimology* 27 (2): 162–172.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110–114. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
- Mingus, Mia. 2022. "Transformative justice: A brief description." *Fellowship* 84 (2): 17–19.
- Nadasen, Premilla. 2021. "Rethinking Care Work: (Dis)affection and the Politics of Caring." *Feminist formations* 33 (1): 165–188.
- Spade, Dean. 2020. *Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next)*. New York: Verso Books.
- Stilianidou, Christiana. 2021. "Extensive critique levelled at law 4855/2021 and the changes it makes to the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure," *govwatch*, December 1. <https://govwatch.gr/en/extensive-critique-levelled-at-law-4855-2021-and-the-changes-it-makes-to-the-penal-code-and-the-code-of-criminal-procedure/>

## 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 home<sup>1</sup>.*

*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

<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>.

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-

<sup>2</sup> 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.

