Edited by Bojan Bilić * Marija Radoman

# LESBIAN ACTIVISM IN THE (POST-) YUGOSLAV SPACE

*Sisterhood and Unity*

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Bojan Bilić · Marija Radoman
Editors

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-77753-5 ISBN 978-3-319-77754-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018944361



Cover image: © Denise Crew/Getty

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Acknowledgements

A lot of care and support streamed through our electronic correspondence as we devised and completed this volume. We are grateful to our authors-friends for engaging with us in this endeavour and to Paul Stubbs for consistently strengthening our belief that issues of gender and sexuality must be kept high on our political agendas. Our Palgrave editor Amelia Derkatsch once again accompanied us gently, making sure that our cooperation always stayed smooth and pleasant.

We would like to dedicate this volume to Lepa Mlađenović, who is on so many of its pages, and other lesbian/feminist/queer activists that have inspired us over the years … their courage, support and solidarity have made our work and our desires possible.

# Contents

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# Introduction: Recovering/Rethinking (Post-)Yugoslav Lesbian Activisms

Bojan Bilić

In June 2017, halfway through our work on this volume, an unusual piece of news made headlines around the globe: Serbia, a highly patriarchal and post-conflict country, got an openly lesbian prime minister (e.g., Bendix 2017; Verseck 2017).[1] The decision of the newly minted president Aleksandar Vučić to give Ana Brnabić a mandate to form a new government was yet another steep turn on the centuries-long emotional roller coaster of regional politics.[2] As scholars of Eastern Europe who survived the turbulent 1990s of Yugoslavia's disintegration and lived through the confusions that preceded and followed it, both of us (Marija and Bojan as editors of this volume) thought that we could hardly ever again be surprised with the hybridities—loops, labyrinths, delays, and accelerated advances—that characterise our "semi-peripheral" existence and swing our personal and professional trajectories in directions which we cannot anticipate.[3]

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_1

However, in spite of this rather unfortunate habituation, we were nevertheless taken aback by the short temporal arch—of only 16 years—which separated disturbingly lesbophobic/homophobic imagery of the first Belgrade Pride Parade (see Kajinić, this volume; see also Bilić 2016a) from a poorly known official who not only assumed what is, at least nominally,[4] the most important executive position in the country, but also became the second openly lesbian head of government in world history.[5] Ana Brnabić "has risen from obscurity" (Wintour 2017, online) both within LGBT activist circles and in terms of mainstream political party membership to induce a profound shift within symbolic layers that shape the ways in which we imagine those who hold political power (Laufer and Jovanović 2017). This unexpected appointment not only made Serbia an exception among its East European neighbours, but "fast-forwarded" it to the ranks of countries with much longer traditions of (homonationalist) non-heterosexual emancipation.[6]

Thus, as is often the case in unstable environments, the domain of the inconceivable all of a sudden shrank to confront us with ambivalences which arise when the silenced, the marginalised, and the despicable rapidly climb the ladder of power.[7] And as if that were not enough, our surprise reached new heights just a few days later—the minimal amount of time necessary for completing preliminary "blood cell counts"[8] that are fundamental in the regions in which people supposedly dream of nationhood. Upon learning that Brnabić was neither more nor less than "one quarter Croatian" (B92 2017; T. P. 2017), were we not justified in fearing that all of our efforts to highlight the need for more intersectional accountability in both scholarship and activism (Bilić and Kajinić 2016; Bilić and Stubbs 2016; Radoman 2013, 2016) were at risk of evaporating in irrelevance?

Although—or exactly because—we were not immediately sure what to think about this "intriguing move" (Tanjug 2017, online) of the Serbian ultra-nationalist-cum-European democrat president, Brnabić's precipitous rise to global visibility convinced us even more that the time was ripe for taking stock of the achievements, tensions, contradictions, and emotionally laden processes of post-Yugoslav lesbian activisms. Through our own engagement with activist politics and friendships, we have been for years evoking a *more lesbian world*, a kind of world

that would, we thought, once and for all put an end to widespread misogyny and hollow illusions of masculine perfection. Our friend Lepa Mlađenović (2016a) refers to *lesbian nests* as welcoming shelters in which one can find refuge from unbearable patriarchal dominance that reaches its climactic points in violence, war, and environmental devastation. We thought that in spaces led by lesbians, which would be sustained by understanding, solidarity, and mutually recognised fragility, we would finally feel secure enough to slowly start doing away with secrecy and leaving behind that tiring need to offer multiple, quite different, accounts of who we are depending on how homophobic we feel our interlocutors—usually our own loved (and possibly not anymore loving) ones—could be (Huremović 2017; Radoman, this volume).[9]

How were we then supposed to reconcile this profound, unquenchable need *to be seen* in the entirety of our complex and fluid desires with one of the earliest new prime minister's statements that Serbia was not "that homophobic" (Tanner 2017, online)? How are we to understand and support a lesbian politician—that potential embodiment of our hopes—so willing to succumb to an authoritarian man who publicly says that the idea of taking part in a Pride March "does not cross his mind" and that he will do something "useful" instead (FoNet 2017, online)? How can we *be seen* with our sexual diversities, ageing bodies, physical incapacities, weaknesses and ever more strangling precarities by people who only two decades ago wreaked havoc on our communities and gambled on our futures? Is lesbianity[10] expected to mask—and does its visibility necessarily stem from—an uncritical integration of our region into the global capitalist system that asks us to relinquish our socialist past as an infantile utopia to which we cannot return (Gligorijević 2017; Maljković 2017)? To what extent is each and every one of us, even if unwillingly, complicit in the rapid dispersion of the leftist core of emancipatory non-heterosexual politics which begins with the contradictions that neoliberal capitalism inevitably pushes us into? If some of us are so willing to have an easy recourse to class privilege, how can we understand the ways in which our specific social and geographical positions seep into what we can possibly do with our gender orientations and sexual yearnings?[11] In these new troubling circumstances in which the cause of sexual liberation is being ever more increasingly

appropriated by nationalist and conservative forces, who can really claim to be an heir to the courageous revolutionary visions that inspired the very first instances of intersectionality-sensitive lesbian activism?[12]

## (Re)Politicising (Post-)Yugoslav Lesbian Activism

It is such intricate and painful questions that we encountered on our collective voyage into the largely uncharted waters of post-Yugoslav lesbian activist initiatives. Given that we enjoy travelling together—and only fleetingly come into existence as a nomadic microlocation that reconstructs, in novel ways, our shattered cultural space (see Bilić, this volume)—we have taken with us not only generations of scholars who made it possible for us to emerge in life/writing, but millions of voices that struggle with the darkness of oblivion to appear and poignantly speak to us of shame, fear, humiliation and regret. As we are waiting for meticulous *herstorians*[13] to "look through the margins, gaps, discrepancies, ruptures, and breaks" (Chou, as cited in Garber 2005, p. 43; see also Bennett 2000) that hide thick sediments of women silence in Eastern Europe (Herzog 2013; see e.g., Dimitrijević and Baker 2016), we turn to activists—those who, not without personal conflicts or clashing ideological commitments—guide lesbian desire towards articulation so that it can acknowledge and appropriate its own *name*[14] and find its way out of the suffocating seclusion of a single body.

While completing this volume in December 2017, we hear the echoes of feminist activists—our friends, teachers and co-authors—who exactly 30 years ago, in December 1987, gathered in Ljubljana,[15] the hub of Yugoslav "new social movements" (see Oblak and Pan, this volume), to imagine better futures for themselves and for us. Ironically, little could they know that very soon their country would be torn apart through a series of armed conflicts which not only produced incredible human casualties and enormous psychological and material damage, but also unravelled decades of women's emancipation efforts and challenged pan-Yugoslav feminist co-operations to breaking points (Miškovska Kajevska 2017).[16]

During three days of "discussions and laughter" (as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 22) at what would later be called the first Yugoslav feminist meeting, Suzana Tratnik introduced the recently established group Lesbian Lilith (Lezbična Lilit),[17] a subgroup of Lilith (Lilit), feminist section of the association ŠKUC (Student Cultural Centre) which was the host of the conference (Velikonja and Greif 2012; Plahuta Simčič 2012).[18] It was in the spirit of this new group that participants came up with a statement in which they intrepidly and promisingly concluded that:

> (…) Lesbianity must become publicly visible and we will organise the first Yugoslav lesbian festival. We use this opportunity to invite all lesbians to establish their own organisations around Yugoslavia. We demand a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the equality of all women and men regardless of their sexual orientation. (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 16)[19]

Although we would like our book to inscribe such liberatory gestures and their initiators deeper into the palimpsests of (post-)Yugoslav activist history, through all of the contributions presented here we, more or less explicitly, ask how we can fuse celebrations of our islands of freedom with a critical attitude that examines and re-examines who this malleable *we* really refers to (Cohen 1991). Summing up their impressions on the gathering in Ljubljana, four feminists from Belgrade published a text in *Student* in which they stated:

> The question arises as to how one can articulate [these] women's energies? How can frustration and rage be transformed into political actions? How can we create a different social context within which women could find their desires and needs and step out of their classic roles, isolation, and vacuum? To the question—who will speak on behalf of women workers, who will speak on behalf of Albanian women, who will speak on behalf of Roma women—the answer is clear. But many of them still do not have any social conditions which would allow them to speak up and it is necessary to create such conditions. (Staša Zajović et al. 1987, as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 28)

Even though our job is made easier through a greater but by no means taken for granted availability of data and the focus on still living actors that by calling themselves *lesbian* spare us discussions about who this "label" could retroactively be attached to (see Baker 2016), ours is not primarily a book on the *her-story* of (post-)Yugoslav lesbian activisms. Rather, we are here trying to circumvent strong temptations to "historicise merits from bygone times" (Lesničar Pučko 2015, online), and explore how the above-mentioned "conditions for speaking up" are created throughout the distinctly turbulent social transformations that our region has witnessed over the last four decades. We draw upon a multitude of our own positionalities, identifications, experiences, voices and perspectives to explore and take a stance on the range of ideological choices and political objectives that have shaped feminist/lesbian/queer activist endeavours.

What is more, at the Ljubljana gathering, one of the most well-known Croatian/Yugoslav feminists Lydia Sklevicky (1952–1990), told about a working-class lesbian who decided to *come out* during a discussion organised in Zagreb in 1981 by Woman and Society (Žena i društvo), a section of the Sociological Association of Croatia. On that occasion, highly educated lesbian women "who could afford to carry the stigma of lesbianism" because "they were in a way part of the social elite" (as cited in Spaskovska 2017, p. 137) did not show solidarity with a lesbian woman who worked as a typist.[20] The worker, Albanian, and Roma women that appear in the Belgrade feminists' text and Sklevicky's story remind us of social and racial cleavages that were subdued by the officially socialist regime only to explode throughout and after its collapse (Bilić, this volume; Baker 2018). Our chapters, therefore, revolve around this crucial question—as relevant today as it was over 35 years ago—about how we can make sure that new horizons of lesbian and, more generally, non-heterosexual/non-heteronormative liveability, which activist engagement strives to render possible, are not truncated by falling back on the "still so unfortunately resilient regimes of discrimination" (Maljković 2016, p. 224; see also Savić 2017), many of which hail from the solidified layers of European colonial "supremacy".

As was the case with our previous books (Bilić and Janković 2012; Bilić and Kajinić 2016; Bilić 2016b), this one is also traversed by Donna Haraway's (1988, p. 584) lesson that "the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent positions". If anyone does, it is women, lesbians, and lesbian activists who know that none of us live a single-issue life (Lorde 1984/2007): subjugation has numerous facets that are differently intertwined in our biographies and social realities (see Kurtić 2013). By treating emancipatory struggles as living spaces and exposing how they are themselves often imbued with social distinctions (Bilić and Stubbs 2016; see Radoman, this volume), we look at them critically (which is to say—respectfully) and structurally. Such an approach does not only acknowledge the hopeful fact that the political field remains radically open, but it also allows us to carve our own niche within it.

## Resisting/Transforming (Gay) Patriarchy

All of our volumes, this one included, reflect both the excruciating hardship of—and the urgent need for—conceptualising and practicing intersectionality-sensitive politics (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, 2015). In spite of the widely recognised potentialities of political engagement informed by an insight into the *matrix* that entangles, in contingent ways, multiple strands of oppression, we are continually saddened by Moraga's (1983/2015, p. 257) claim that the coalitional idea of (Third World) feminism "has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real life women". Although we cannot help feeling that traps of hierarchisation and unreflected privilege are waiting for us at every step, a collection of writings on lesbian activism is a way for us to escape the paralysing impossibility of addressing all of the combinations that interlocking discriminations can produce. Given that lesbianity intertwines both gender and sexuality as fundamental operators of power, the lesbian condition and lesbian activism can certainly teach us something about how one inhabits, survives, and problematises the crossroads of *misogyny and lesbophobia*. These two regimes of exclusion have deep, if contradictory, roots in our social, cultural, and religious

traditions and, by consequence, in the individual consciousness of each and every one of us. That is why, as Margaret Cruikshank (1980) argued approximately a decade after the Stonewall riots, announcing lesbian existence still remains a deeply political and courageous act.

Over the last years we have been shocked by unrelenting rates of femicide in the post-Yugoslav space (e.g., Istinomer 2017; Kovačević Barišič 2016). Hardly a day passes without deeply disturbing news of women being harassed, beaten, and killed by their husbands and partners, very often in the presence of their children. Decades of ethnically motivated conflicts, authoritarian traditions, impoverishment, omnipresent unemployment and devastated health and education systems have all converged to produce "violence which permeates our lives and informs our worldviews, our feelings, [and] our everyday actions" (Zaharijević 2017, online). Even though intense feminist/LGBT organising (Maljković 2016) and, more recently, Europeanisation pressures (Bilić 2016b) have dealt a blow to pervasive heteronormative attitudes, one should not underestimate the destructive potential of wounded masculinity. Blagojević (2013, p. 98; 2017) invites us to "de-essentialise and denaturalise" men both discursively and practically, so that they can have a chance to perceive themselves as gendered actors who are not only perpetrators but also victims of violence. The Gramscian "time of monsters" (Gramsci 1971, p. 276) opened up by conflicting gender regimes in which many men feel that they are losing their patriarchal anchors cannot but lead to confusions which put us at risk of slipping into male essentialisation. This is, we believe, an important point for lesbian activists who have been, as women with less emotional or financial investment in men, at the helm of confronting male violence in the domestic setting or outside of it (Mlađenović 2016b).[21]

While the operation of the explosive confluence between nationalism, militarism, masculinity, transition to capitalism, and revived religiosity in the post-Yugoslav space has been amply, although not sufficiently, theorised (e.g., Žarkov 2007; see also Echeverria and Sernatinger 2014), we are here also concerned with and intrigued by how patriarchal dominance travels from the heterosexual/sexist sphere to pervade

non-heterosexual activist enterprises which one would expect to be more sensitive to difference and exclusion. The silencing of lesbian (and other non-"typically"-male) voices is a discriminatory practice that has accompanied global contemporary efforts at non-heterosexual emancipation ever since their beginning, forcing lesbian women to devise separatist initiatives for their sexual liberation (Cvetkovic, this volume). Also in the Yugoslav space, patriarchy runs like a deep current under the last three decades of activist organising. Mojca Dobnikar (as cited in Lesničar Pučko 2015, online), for example, claims that "there was a lot of machismo" and that "a vulgar sexist discourse was something common" in the 1980s Ljubljana alternative 'scene' which otherwise had strongly progressive (lesbian and gay) strands. Similarly, but in 2014, Matea Popov (as cited in Marušić 2014, online), a lesbian activist from Croatia, stated that she decided to leave the Zagreb Pride organisation:

> (…) due to the hierarchical and patriarchal structures that put women and young people under a glass ceiling beyond which they cannot rise. Of course, there is always a possibility of entering into power fights and trying to win your own place. It is hard to explain these power structures and how firm they are, but at the end of the day (like everywhere else) it somehow turns out that women leave while men stay and that those programmes that are done by women are treated as "just some kind of workshops and friendships", whereas the programmes led by men are perceived as "rescuing the world and high politics".[22]

Although it is not easy to empirically "capture" manifestations of structural (gay) patriarchy given that they emerge over years in different, more or less pronounced, forms, our chapters show that male dominance has often obscured the crucial lesbian presence in non-heterosexual activist groups and thus intensified specifically lesbian organising (e.g., Cvetkovic, this volume; Oblak and Pan, this volume; Vuković and Petričević, this volume). We appreciate that every activist act—exposing one's body in the street, in the court, in front of television cameras or angry crowds—is an act of courage, but there can hardly be any doubt that gay (male) activists have received (or claimed) disproportionate

amounts of attention (see Maljković 2016) in spite of consistent lesbian engagement. As activist scholars we, of course, understand that destabilising patriarchy is a monumental task which, first and foremost, requires that we rein in the patriarchy that is in us.

Given that Yugoslav socialism showed that there cannot be a complete overlap between the "women's" and the "class" "questions", it is rather disappointing to hear today—yet again mostly male—leftist voices who invoke this state project without problematising its authoritarian, patriarchal and deeply sexist dimensions (see Bilić and Stubbs 2016).[23] Nada Ler Sofronić (as cited in Svirčić 2011, online), an activist from Sarajevo and one of the nodal points of Yugoslav feminism, acknowledges that Yugoslav women indeed were protected in the sphere of work and could count on social and health insurance. But she also states that:

> it was a huge subversion to claim that the socialist system swept under the carpet the key issues concerning women's existence. For example the fact that the women who were in the front lines of the socialist revolution were quickly marginalised after the victory, they were exposed to the feminisation of underpaid jobs, they were remunerated less than men and progressed in their careers more slowly… and that even a socialist state benefited from the unpaid work that women were doing in their families.

We have our own experience to testify that women's emancipation, lesbian/sexual liberation, and gender diversity cannot be reduced to exclusively class-oriented paradigms. Similarly, our non-heteronormative sexual desires should not be considered a "luxury" whose recognition is supposed to stay in the profit-oriented realm of neoliberal consumerist capitalism (see e.g., Dimitrijević, as cited in Konjikušić 2015). Complexities of sexual and intimate citizenship, instead of dividing us, should rather stimulate us to imagine new, more inclusive, gender- and sexuality-sensitive ways of being together (Kesić 2017). It is with this in mind that we have worked on our book—we would like to align this volume with the tradition of lesbian theoretical and activist interventions which have aimed to show that if activism is supposed to write us into life, then it is fundamentally a struggle against erasure and disappearance.

## Yugoslav Space—Lesbian Space

In other words, our *coming (out) together*[24] is a hopefully gentle, inclusion-oriented intervention into a *fragile her-story* of our activist/scholarly struggles which has innumerable departure points and constantly re-invents itself through multiple "first times"[25] and "historic achievements". In her speech at the third Yugoslav feminist meeting in Belgrade on 30 March 1990, Lepa Mlađenović (as stated in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 63), one of the most well-known Serbian/Yugoslav feminist/anti-war/lesbian activists, stated:

> I am one of those feminists who love to use the term "historic event" for feminist events – [the conference Drug-ca žena][26] was for me an historic event in the same way in which this one is that too… that gathering was a landmark point in my life […] at that occasion I did not understand anything. The majority of sociological and philosophical analyses of women existence were all Greek to me. But if someone asked me whether I was a feminist, I would respond YES, even though I did not have any idea about what that really meant.

The harrowing abyss that precedes us, the lesbophobia/homophobia that still surround us, and the neoliberal obsessions with efficiency that pervade us, all offer many opportunities for (repeatedly) pioneering enterprises. The intermittency of lesbian/non-heterosexual activisms that this book reveals reflects and refracts erratic trajectories of our own and others' non-heterosexual lives. "Queer failure" is first and foremost the impossibility of walking down the well-trodden paths of heteronormative temporal linearity (see Halberstam 2011; see also Dioli 2011).

In this regard, the disappearance of socialist Yugoslavia, which did not only leave indelible scars on the body, on the skin, but also on memory, could perhaps be considered a radical form of *queer failure*. The post-Second World War Yugoslav time-space as an experiment which—always declaratively, often concretely and contradictorily—tried to avoid binaries, devise alternatives, harness capitalist expansion, supply work, emancipate women, promote peace, problematise colonisation, encourage international co-operation, and interrupt long-term

divisions by embracing ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, all of this was perhaps too *queer* to live. It would be, then, an illusion to expect that time can smoothly survive the destruction of its corresponding space. As a space vanishes it leaves in its wake a temporal dispersion, conflicting and overlapping temporalities which blur distinctions between what was, is, and will be. The *(post-)Yugoslav* therefore does not refer to two separate historical realities—one before and the other one after Yugoslavia's disintegration—but, rather, highlights how these are inextricably intertwined in temporal loops that shape our personal/political circumstances and choices. As with our other volumes, in this one too, our fragile, *always* present, *already* failed socialist Yugoslavia stubbornly hinges on a feminist/lesbian/queer hyphen which connects trauma with promise (see Bilić and Dioli 2016).[27]

But if we accept the fact that Yugoslav socialism and its predominantly male leaders (one of whom was quite unquestionable) were less favourable to women than they officially declared, is it not a little bit paradoxical to realise that throughout the 1990s, it was the widely celebrated *brotherhood* that collapsed while the subdued *sisterhood* persevered?[28] Does it not seem peculiar that many of those who did not have "full access" to the Yugoslav socialist project continued to demonstrate—way beyond its painful disintegration—that it did indeed have a certain historical and cultural legitimacy and political substance in spite of all the divergences that it tried to encompass? Numerous accounts which have by now examined pan-Yugoslav feminist co-operations point to how much energy, understanding, and love was necessary to resist the nationalist-militarist avalanche that threatened, and to a great extent managed, to sweep away decades of being together (e.g., Bilić 2012; Kesić et al. 2003; Kesić 2017; Miškovska Kajevska 2017; Mlađenović 2012; Vušković and Trifunović 2008). "We greet you as sisters and can hardly wait to see as many of you as possible", say Katarina Vidović and Biljana Kašić (1988, as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 41), in their invitation for the second Yugoslav feminist meeting that took place in Zagreb in December 1988.

It is this surprising resilience of caring *sisterhood* that we would like to illuminate through our intervention into *brotherhood and unity*, the strictly patrilinear principle of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia which we as Yugoslavs were supposed to "protect as the pupil of the eye".[29] However, feminist/lesbian sisterhood cannot surface to assume its place

in this paradigm without profoundly transforming also the idea of *unity*: in contrast to illusory invocations of potentially authoritarian national(ist) monoliths, the *unity* of sisterhood is a space of both painful and enriching difference: it hybridises cultures, languages, and traditions to appreciate the multiplicity of women's worlds and acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of their needs and experiences. Our volume shows that (post-)Yugoslav women/lesbian activists have been for decades trying to *cross the lines*[30] and step over proliferating physical, political, ethnic, racial, social, and sexual borders (Kajinić, this volume).[31] Their nomadic, pan-Yugoslav, transnational, European, global friendships (Mlađenović 2012) testify to Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987/1987, p. 217) words that "to survive the borderlands, you must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads". This is particularly visible through the fragmented *herstory* of Lesbian Weeks that in 1997 started gathering lesbian activists from all of the post-Yugoslav countries (Cvetkovic, this volume; Dioli, this volume) as well as in women's (art) festivals which also, although less explicitly, act as spaces of post-Yugoslav lesbian belonging (Selmić and Bilić, this volume).

Finally, in the same way in which Yugoslav socialism and, later on, the wars of the Yugoslav succession were to a great extent a "male matter", their interpretations and histories which have led to hundreds of books, have also been in "male hands". Local, diasporic, and international social science scholarship has by now paid a lot of attention to elite layers of politics. Presidents, prime ministers, warriors, and war criminals—mostly male, heterosexual, and homophobic—not only fill the pages of scholarly analysis and newspapers on a daily basis, but keep offering us the same right-wing politics of division, authoritarianism, and impunity that scratches old wounds and hinders healing. Militarised patriarchy and extreme right-wing populism (in its various guises) which pervaded and destroyed the Yugoslav space pushed women and their political engagement to the margins of our collective remembrance. We have gathered in this volume to go in the opposite direction and illuminate the fact that the courageous feminist response to different forms of violence has always had an important lesbian dimension. It is by no means immediately obvious—and has to be explicitly stated—that the struggle for freedom in our turbulent region has also been woven with the tenuous but resilient threads of lesbian support, care, and love.

## Notes

1. Yugoslavia also had the first female prime minister of a communist country. Milka Planinc was the president of the federal executive council from 1982 to 1986.
2. Maljković (2017) draws attention to the fact that it was Aleksandar Vučić who "outed" Ana Brnabić when announcing her appointment on a TV programme. In such a way, the entrance of a lesbian politician into public space was "mediated" by a man instead of being also an act of activism that could have led to benefits for the general non-heterosexual population.
3. Blagojević (2009, p. 34) argues that "the semiperiphery is in its essence transitional, in a process of transition from one set of structures to another set of structures, and therefore it is unstable, and often has characteristics of the void, chaos, or structurelessness".
4. Pešić (2017) claims that Aleksandar Vučić decided to appoint Ana Brnabić in order to demonstrate his firm grip on the Serbian Progressive Party and Serbian political life, more generally. By choosing a relatively unknown figure willing to submit to his demands, Vučić remained the centre of political power even though he moved to a more ceremonial and representative office of the President of Serbia. What is more, by appointing a lesbian woman, Vučić not only strategically appreciated the homonationalist trend in European (Union) politics (Bilić 2016b; Puar 2007), but also challenged the members of his party to elect a candidate who would have never been elected had he not proposed her. For other standpoints in this debate, see also Dinić (2017), Stojanović (2017) and Gligorov (2017), among others.
5. Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir was first. She became the 24th Prime Minister of Iceland in 2009 and held that office until 2013. Before becoming Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić worked as Minister of Public Administration and Local Self Government.
6. Belgium, Luxembourg, and Ireland have had openly gay (men) prime ministers.
7. In 2010 a long-term gay rights activist and the former president of the NGO Gay-Straight Alliance Boris Milićević was elected to the Board of the Socialist Party of Serbia which had been established by Slobodan Milošević (B92 2010). Some activists/analysts saw this as a pinkwashing act of the Socialist Party that was supposed to "testify" to its liberal attitudes towards "sexual minorities". See e.g., Maljković (2014).

8. "Blood cell counts" (brojanje krvnih zrnaca) is a metaphor frequently used in the post-Yugoslav region to refer to the obsession with ethnic origin or belonging.
9. This sort of optimism is analogous to the belief that the victory of Barack Obama in 2008 heralded an era of a "post-racial" America. Instead of a new vision of "racially blind" American citizenship that should have followed in the wake of the brutality of slavery and racial segregation, institutional racism showed its unfaltering resilience throughout his rule, but especially during the second term (Joseph 2016). See also Smithers (2009).
10. I agree with Olasik (2015, p. 202) that although "such an item (lesbianity, BB) is unlikely to be found in a dictionary, it places emphasis on experience and quality rather than a particular state or a problematic condition, which is the case with the more common 'lesbianism' - a word of either/both dismissive or/and medical connotations, which has its roots in psychiatric discourse. (…) This conscious, though not popular, alteration remains my personal, political, and academic choice. I am thus appealing for discontinuance of the former term (lesbianism) (…) The alteration I suggest is my grassroots way of contributing to struggles for lesbian recognition. I believe that, as bell hooks put it, 'Language is also a place of struggle'".
11. Another blow came a few months later from Alice Elisabeth Weidel, a lesbian German politician who has served as leader of Alternative for Germany in the Bundestag. Alternative for Germany is a far-right, anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic party that does not support same-sex marriage or adoption. Lau (2017, online) claims that Weidel entered into a pact with the right-wing extremist wing of her party which could be summarised as: "You accept the lesbian and I'll shield you from the Nazi stuff, but don't go too far".
12. For example, in a statement published in April 1977, the members of the Combahee River Collective (1977, online) expressed their commitment to "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives".
13. However, although historical accounts of lesbian lives will surely follow, Garber (2005, p. 43) warns that: "Historians may never be able to construct for women the complete documented histories that are possible for

men who – in control of literacy, publishing, archival preservation, and even the very definitions of sexual desire – have set the historical record".

14. Butler (1991, p. 18) argues that naming oneself a lesbian also means making oneself a lesbian "in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being". Of course "declaring oneself to be a lesbian is not what makes one experience lesbian desire: tending toward women as objects of desire is what compels such a risky action of self-naming in the first place" (Ahmed 2006, p. 93). In this volume we perceive activists as those who struggle to make such—even if contested, unstable or overlapping—*naming(s)* possible.
15. The first Yugoslav feminist meeting took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, between 11 and 13 December 1987. After this, there were three more such meetings, one in Zagreb (16–18 December 1988), one in Belgrade (30 March 1990–1 April 1990), and the last one in Ljubljana (17–19 May 1991).
16. Sensing an imminent dissolution of the country, the Belgrade feminist activist Sonja Drljević, who participated in the third meeting, stated: "Everyone's expecting capitalism in which everyone will be a capitalist. I've never seen such a country. Certainly women will be second-class citizens. How bad will it get, if this inequality is so bad now under Communists, who are at least in principle committed to women's rights?" (as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 74).
17. The establishment of the group was announced in a supplement of the Slovenian weekly *Mladina* (published on 30 October 1987) which was entitled *Let's love women* (Ljubimo ženske) and which brought the manifesto of Lesbian Lilith, inviting lesbian women out of anonymity. Remembering this, Lepa Mlađenović (as cited in Spaskovska 2017, p. 136) states: "When we saw the supplement in *Mladina*, which we did not know was being prepared, we were very impressed. Of course, the coming into existence of the first lesbian group in Yugoslavia for us is a historic event which we celebrate… what some of us [in Belgrade] dreamed of and wished for was realised by our comrades from Ljubljana and we were really impressed/enthused".
18. In January 1988 this lesbian activist initiative separated from Lilith and was registered within ŠKUC as Lesbian Section LL (Lezbična sekcija LL), thus becoming the first specifically lesbian group in the Yugoslav and Eastern European space.
19. The original statement in Slovenian says that "lesbianity must become visible" ("da mora lezbištvo postati vidno"), whereas the Serbo-Croatian translation, provided by the participants, reads that "lesbianity should

become visible" ("lezbejstvo treba da postane vidljivo") (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, pp. 16–17). See also Spaskovska (2017).

20. This woman must have been Marija Bogović who at the time of the Woman and Society discussion had "three grown up children, [was] 41 years old and [had] recently been divorced from her husband" (Olga 1982, p. 13). Olga, an American lady of Yugoslav origin who in the early 1980s returned to Yugoslavia "in search of Yugoslav lesbians" states that after the feminist meeting "Marija got on her feet and told the audience why she is a lesbian and all about male dominance". Marija later wrote a "coming out letter to the newspaper, letting other lesbians know who she is and where they can get hold of her" (Olga 1982, p. 13). Although poorly known, perhaps Marija Bogović's public gesture could also be considered one "starting point" of Yugoslav lesbian activism. In 1996, the publishing house "Pavličić" published Marija Bogović's autobiographic book *Violets and a Whip: A Confession of a Woman Interested in Women* (Ljubičice i bič) in which she writes about her efforts to find a lesbian partner. Janković (2013, online) claims that this book, characterised by "nationalist rigidity", was at the time of publication "the worst selling book" in Croatia.
21. While violence seems to be most frequently discussed in relation to men, there is a growing amount of literature on violence in same-sex partnership, including lesbian couples, which claims that gays and lesbians are not less violent than their heterosexual counterparts. This is mostly related to internalised homophobia, higher risks of traumatic experiences, and difficulties with accessing health or counselling services. See e.g., Elliot (2008), Stiles-Shields and Carol (2015), or West (2002).
22. Another lesbian activist who did not feel welcome at Zagreb Pride meetings was Ana Brakus (2015). See also Zagreb Pride's (2015) response to Brakus' text in which she talks about what she found problematic in the operation of that activist group.
23. In this regard, Forca and Puača (2007, p. 73) claim that:

> it also happens that activists – radical in areas such as labour rights, direct actions and the like, succumb to the patterns of nationalist and patriarchal elitism and machismo. Such politics are manifested in glorifying their own success, work and actions and denying, belittling, degrading and aggressively attacking every initiative coming from elsewhere. Most such groups have never publicly distanced themselves from nationalism. Cooperation with them,

which is important because of a very small number of activists and huge social problems, is made very difficult due to aggressive communication, where one of the most successful ways of situation changing is – insisting on principles of nonviolent communication. Such groups, that often call themselves anarchist, concentrate their actions on 'starting a revolution' whereby they, more often than not, exclude the possibility of supporting antinationalist manifestations and actions, always finding ways to discredit organisers and deny their participation. Their 'revolution' mostly addresses labour rights, but neglects the fact that it is among this very working class, and quite often among them themselves, where nationalism, misogyny and homophobia are the most widespread.

24. Lewin and Leap (2002, p. 12) claim that "conducting lesbian/gay research is tantamount to coming out – whether one is actually lesbian/gay or not. Although doing research in New Guinea, for example, does not lead to the assumption that one must be a native of that region, studying lesbian/gay topics is imagined as only possible for a 'native'".
25. See, for example, how the Dutch lesbian activist Evien Tjabbes criticises the organisers of the 2017 European Lesbian* Conference in Vienna for saying that they convened *the first* international lesbian gathering. Tjabbes was herself among the organisers of the "first lesbian conference ever" that took place in Amsterdam from 27 December 1979 to 1 January 1980. As a matter of fact, that conference was followed by a series of international lesbian gatherings organised by the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS) that was founded within ILGA in 1980 and became a separate organisation prior to the ILGA Turin conference in 1981. ILIS ceased its activities in the 1990s. Tjabbes' intervention at the Vienna conference is available here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTzcOOoHFPU&t=3457s.
26. The international feminist gathering *Comrade Women: The Woman Question: A New Approach* (Drug-ca žena: žensko pitanje—novi pristup) took place in Belgrade in 1978. Even though the French feminist Christine Delphy, one of the participants, argued that "the word lesbian was not uttered during the whole conference" (as cited in Olga 1982, p. 13), the meeting was of fundamental importance for Lepa Mlađenović who would later become one of the leaders of lesbian activist organising in the Yugoslav, and broader European, space (see Bonfiglioli 2008; Delphy 1979; Mlađenović 2012).
27. Bonnie Zimmerman (as cited in Sayer 1995), a lesbian feminist and women's studies scholar, suggests that "space is a profound metaphor

for lesbian writers which has a lot to do with the fact that we were scattered in such a way that we must create a concept of space because that space is not given to us".

28. Jalušič (2002) shows that "sisterhood" and the "communal" had somewhat negative connotations in the 1980s' Ljubljana activist scene. See Oblak and Pan (this volume).
29. In the Serbo-Croatian original: "Čuvajmo bratstvo i jedinstvo kao zenicu oka svoga".
30. See Biljana Kašić's poem *Crossing the Lines*, written in 1994 during a watch at the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia. Feminist activist from Belgrade wrote: "Biljana was thinking of us when she was writing it. We are thinking of Biljana and our friends from Zagreb by publishing it" (as cited in Vušković and Trifunović 2008, p. 389; see also Bilić 2012, chapter 3).
31. Madina Tlostanova (2013, as cited in Kronotop 2013, online): "When you are the border, when the border cuts through you, when you do not cross borders in order to find yourself on either side, you do not discuss borders from some zero point positionality, but instead *you dwell in the border*, you do not really have much choice but to be a border thinker".

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# Yearning for Space, Pleasure, and Knowledge: Autonomous Lesbian and Queer Feminist Organising in Ljubljana

Teja Oblak and Maja Pan

Over the last three decades, Ljubljana has witnessed a series of autonomous lesbian feminist and queer feminist initiatives that have mostly grown in squats. In this chapter, we, both long-term activists, provide an overview of the development of the autonomous lesbian and queer feminist initiatives in Slovenia, primarily focusing on the Red Dawns festival collective, the Lesbian Feminist University group and the Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective Rog. We intertwine the political notion of autonomy with the practices of squatting because we consider both of them particularly relevant for the early and contemporary alternative/non-mainstream political organising. Autonomous organisations and groups defend our dignity and define our "active subjectivities" (Lugones 2003) against the oppressive and liberalist structures that produce unlawful citizens, peripheral subjectivities, and underground cultures. This is achieved through creating a space for the much

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_2

needed political content—by taking, or more precisely, re-appropriating it unlawfully—which is the case with lesbian and queer feminist squatting. Creation of such space is achieved not only by taking it physically, but also by occupying our own identities.

We consider our analysis part of the continuous autonomous feminist activists' struggle against hierarchical narratives that centralise, marginalise or exclude the most radical features of the movement itself. Drawing upon intersectional political affinities, we argue that the autonomous lesbian/queer feminist organising has made an impact on the development and the proliferation of feminist consciousness and actions that involve and engage all liberation movements and their subjects. Our text constitutes a celebration of these processes as well as an invitation for their continual rethinking.

## Feminist and Lesbian Groups Until 2000

Feminist movement appeared in Slovenia in the second half of the 1980s during a tumultuous period of the newly formed "civil society", within which there were peace, ecological, and gay initiatives (Jalušič 2002). Apart from the influence of punk and sufficient "softening" (Gržinić 2001) of the Party structures, the flourishing culture of experimental art enabled socialist youth organising to grow into a more liberal and critical structure such as ŠKUC (Student Cultural Centre) which is the oldest NGO in Slovenia, and where the first women's section in the former Socialist Republic of Slovenia was established (Jalušič 2002). After 1984, the majority of gay and lesbian cultural projects that exist up to today were founded in ŠKUC, such as Ljubljana Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (Tratnik 2001, p. 376).[1]

In April 1985, a founding meeting of a new women's group Lilith (Lilit) at ŠKUC-Forum took place in Ljubljana's alternative cultural club K4. Discussions covered women's sexualities and ended up with a party attended by more than 250 women (Jalušič 2002). Mojca Dobnikar, a Lilith activist, stated:

> It was one of the most important events in the lives of many women there. Everybody was so euphoric - the first women-only event in

> Ljubljana ever! A well-known male journalist from a liberal media journal wanted to enter, but was not allowed; afterwards, that journal kept on making jokes about feminists. (Oblak 2017; see also Jalušič 2002)

Further on Dobnikar explained:

> In the 1980s there was a widespread opinion that it is good to do something public, not only to go around your own private garden […] we were dissatisfied with what it meant to be a woman back then. (as cited in Jalušič 2002, p. 122)

Lilith activists were active critics of the system, but they also had the need to meet, socialise in new ways and politicise new women´s identities (Jalušič 2002). This is how Lilith remained a women-only group that held women-only events, and became a crucial junction and public space for other women- and feminist-related actions and initiatives in Ljubljana. Because of strong anti-nationalist stances and vivid transnational cooperation with other feminist groups, this eventually led to the now legendary four Yugoslav feminist meetings between 1987 and 1991 (see Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009) and also inspired efforts at fighting violence against women (Jalušič 2002).

In 1987, a separate lesbian group named ŠKUC-LL (Lesbian Lilith) originated from Lilith focusing on "lesbian activism", not feminism (Jalušič 2002). Some other lesbians that remained within Lilith and focused on "lesbian feminism" also carried on with their activism in separate groups. The main difference between "lesbian activism" and "lesbian feminism" relates to separatism: namely, "lesbian activists" did not agree with women-only spaces and chose to collaborate with gays to achieve their political goals, based on sexual orientation; feminism for them came only after sexual orientation or not at all (Jalušič 2002). Particularly during the 1990s, the majority of established "lesbian activists" oriented themselves more towards the West and less towards the former Yugoslav space where autonomous feminist lesbians were influential.[2]

In general, at the end of the 1980s, feminist and lesbian groups organised themselves at the margins of the new "civil society" (see Mastnak 1985), let alone society as a whole. As Jalušič (2002, p. 29) stated:

> Feminist initiatives were separated from this movement, partially by their own choice, partially because they were, along with other homosexual initiatives, the least welcome in the circles of "civil society".

At the turn of the 1980s to 1990s, it was prevalent in the media to call feminists in Lilith and other feminist groups "lesbians" or "men haters". One report about the Yugoslav feminist meeting got entitled as "That unpleasant smell of men", while Lilith was characterised as "divided into the thinking ones and the lesbian oriented ones" (Jalušič 2002, p. 50).

In September 1993, soon after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, groups and individuals from the new social movements of the 1980s squatted buildings of a deserted Yugoslav army complex at Metelkova Street in Ljubljana. Apart from pacifist and anti-war tendencies, the main "hunger" of Ljubljana's civil society in the late 1980s was having their own physical space (Babić 2013). In this respect, "in many ways, the subcultural movement […] was the historical subconscious of Metelkova. This subculture was an exceptional underground collision of art, culture, and politics", claimed Gržinić (2001) about the relation of the subcultural movements, feminist movement and squatting which were all indispensable in forming the unique features of the squat that has the longest tradition in Slovenia. Metelkova's collaborative functioning is based on assemblies, constantly resisting fierce pressures of evictions, legalisation, privatisation, and lately also an overflow of mass tourism (Pureber 2013).

Among squatters there were also lesbian feminists from the dissipating group Lilith. They occupied a part of the northern building complex and established the Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC) that consisted of many smaller focus groups: Modra, Ženska svetovalnica, F-IKS, Luna, Prenner club, and a first feminist lesbian group Kasandra (Dobnikar 1996). Grassroots activist Lili Vučenović from the group Modra remembers: "At that time there was no electricity, no heating, we sat by the candles, made flyers, invited women, we wanted to form a group of women" (Jalušič 2002, p. 218).

Lesbian feminists from Kasandra were instrumental in building and sustaining the AWC. They formed a lesbian social club named Lola, an info centre and a small library; activists organised meetings, discussions,

parties, literary evenings, creative workshops in women's writing, visual arts workshops, and exhibitions.

> I remember going to Kasandra for the first time in 1996 with my girlfriend under pretence of borrowing a Slovene feminist journal *Delta*. On the office wall there was the famous Man Ray's poster of sisters Mossé, underneath Dragana Rajković, the co-founder of Kasandra sitting in a big office chair, smirking. Although very honest, one needs to imagine this kind of aestheticism and seriousness quite at odds with others, generally dirty and messy areas of the squat. There was also a small library shelf, with a precious selection of Yugoslav and world feminist and lesbian literature. My fascination was sealed when we found out we all studied philosophy. (Pan, unpublished autoethnographic note)

The AWC represented what feminists from Lilith had yearned for: a public space of "one's own" for women's and feminist themes and actions. Symbolically and practically, this was made possible by the self-developed, intergenerational and transnational feminist knowledge transfer between Lilith and the AWC activists. A long-term activist at Metelkova, Nataša Serec, remembers: "Dragana from Kasandra was like a mentor – she introduced feminism to us many years before we conceived Red Dawns" (Oblak 2017; Hvala 2010a).

Moreover, the AWC followed Lilith's line of separatism and admitted only women.

> It stayed with me forever how fierce we were at 'throwing out' the unknown men who insistently imposed themselves at our parties in Lola. It was usually the one or even more likely the two of us, who were the nearest to the door that managed the intruder, since most of the time there was not someone delegated to do just that. If words did not suffice, such person got surrounded by many of us and carried out. For feeling so safe, we actually did behave (also sexually) way more freely than I remember women did elsewhere. (Pan 2017, unpublished autoethnographic note)

Based on this and other similar accounts we confirm that separatism was and still is crucial in enabling safer expression (of opinion or sexual)

that can lead not only to independence but to proper autonomy in political organising. In this respect it is worth noting that the lesbian feminist separatist space Lola was operating for years, precisely since the establishment of the AWC in 1993. While the lesbian club Monokel (also at Metelkova squat) that was established as a lesbian club as late as in 1998 (Cultural Centre Q 2017) by ŠKUC-LL—though intended for lesbian socialising—remained mixed and functioned only on special occasions as women-only or lesbian-only party venue.

In media presentations of lesbianity and homosexuality in the 1990s, Kuhar (2003) noted a shift towards de-medicalisation and depoliticisation of homosexuality: media discourse has been influenced also by lesbian and gay activists through their cultural achievements and by promoting human rights as a way of attaining "developed Europe". More broadly, "the new activists heightened the level of lesbian print, they introduced lesbian theory or lesbian studies and articulated political demands" (Jalušič 2002).

In contrast, lesbian feminist activists from Kasandra opted for building and expanding local communities in Ljubljana and across Slovenia as well as contributing to a transnational lesbian (and feminist) community, especially within the post-Yugoslav space. Between 1991 and 1994 Kasandra participated in organising the Women's Camps, which were, according to Dobnikar (1996), of great importance: "when places for public feminist activism were depleted, those camps represented women's islands, places of freedom, exchange of experiences, and inspiration for activities" (online). In the period after Slovene independence, the state engaged in varied processes of racialisation and ethnicisation, "erasing" residents from the former Yugoslav republics[3] and applying strict asylum policies for war refugees (Baskar 2004; Doupona Horvat et al. 2001). During that time, Kasandra consisted of lesbian feminists that were of non-Slovene national belonging or that nourished strong anti-nationalist and anti-war stances.

In 1992, the Fifth Feminist Yugoslav Meeting was not organised due to disagreements mostly around establishing umbrella organisation of all feminists from the ex-Yugoslav states (Jalušič 2002, p. 63). Nevertheless, the war did not lessen the feminist network in

post-Yugoslav space (Dobnikar 1996) and Ljubljana´s feminists showed solidarity with women in war zones (Mlađenović 2001). At the time, other mainstream lesbian and gay groups from Slovenia were rather unwavering in their orientation towards the "progressive Europe" and away from the "backward Balkans". This was and still is in concert with promotion of such orientation by liberal government in Slovenia which was striving towards accession to the European Union and the NATO, in order to become part of the "progressives", "the countries with proper human rights","the moral countries" and of "the future" (Velikonja 2005). In our opinion, that process started to change, especially for activist lesbians, only slowly, approximately 15 years after the country's independence. Importantly, this opinion contributes additional criticism to the thesis of the ongoing artistic and activist exchange as analysed on the example of the Gay and Lesbian film festival Ljubljana (Kajinić 2016, p. 76)—with the necessary observation that there was a time lap in between, significant also for the majority of the mainstream cultural politics of the state. The same strong non-assimilationism that was characteristic of the political autonomy of Kasandra, remained a signature feature also for the autonomous festival Red Dawns and other feminist and queer initiatives further explored in our chapter.

Probably one of the most visible and memorable events for all of the participants was a joint meeting of lesbians from the post-Yugoslav space, the "Lesbian Weekend", which was organised by Kasandra and Labris, a lesbian organisation from Belgrade, in 1997 in Pohorje (Markunova 2017). The influence of the post-Yugoslav lesbian feminist meetings (the last one held in 2015; see Dioli, this volume) originates from solidarity and sparking exchange of energy between "lesbian feminists" and "feminist lesbians" that had, according to Mlađenović (2001, p. 383), manifold effects:

> The most important achievement was that links were forged among lesbians from Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Serbia. The mood during the Lesbian Week fostered many ideas and new projects. This was a crucial moment and lesbians from Belgrade have afterwards decided to register the group and rent a space for lesbians only.

Kasandra activists occupied and fostered new public spaces for lesbians mostly through transnational and intercultural connections. The importance and domain of such work is lucidly expressed by Biljana Jovanović, feminist author and activist, who in 1993 stated (as cited in Lazić and Urošević 2016, p. 266):

> I keep thinking about how to culturally reintegrate this [Yugoslav] space in spite of it being fragmented into one hundred states, because this is more important than anything else.

A contribution to lesbian visibility during the feminist fight on violence against women could also be noted in the manifestations and actions in Ljubljana, from 1995 to 1997 organised by AWC. Maja Pan remembers (2017):

> Possibly the first rally I ever attended was at Dragana's invitation in 1996 in Ljubljana to fight violence against women. I remember seeing her on the street holding a banner with some lesbian content. There were not many women who wanted it but I grabbed it since I considered myself to be out, saying to Dragana that I hope my mother does not see me on TV smoking a cigarette.

Apart from non-assimilation which has been characteristic of lesbian feminist activists, Kasandra's intersectionality shows an example of squatting out of need for a space for activities critical of the norms or mores of the dominating society. By occupying the topoi that "we" (see Foucault in Rabinow 1984; Cohen 1991) do not inhabit or "are excluded from", such groups are performing a political gesture of self-liberating necessity. Consequently, a double effect takes place: the paradoxical liberation by occupation and secondly, the effect of autonomous lesbian feminist organising—prevention of the "colonisation of gender" (Lugones 2008). Kasandra did not understand squatting as a practice that would refer to "squatting" of our own personal identities, in a way that would indicate an autonomous use of these identities without possessing and legitimately owning them, as queer feminist autonomous organising could assume. Kasandra was closer to

understanding the categories of being a "woman" or "lesbian" as identities which we do not possess but which rather possess and occupy us. As opposed to the reflection of the later Red Dawns collective (from the third edition on) where, according to the above sense, the squatters became not only the occupied but the occupiers at the same time, Kasandra's agenda was clearly separatist, possibly also a radical feminist one in the materialist constructivist understanding of gender, but not a queer feminist one. In this sense, Kasandra was not in favour of the early inquiries into queer feminist theory and practice. After being decisive for a new feminist initiative at Metelkova and the feminist festival, the feminist-lesbian group Kasandra and AWC altogether ceased to exist by 2001 (Jalušič 2002).

## Red Dawns: Feminist and Queer Communist Bastard

From the very start Metelkova managed to sustain itself as a squat within which the majority of crucial positions were held and a bulk of work was done by women while their input remained invisible (Pan 2007a). As the co-founder of Red Dawns Nataša Serec (as cited in Hvala 2010a, p. 14) remembers:

> women at Metelkova were pretty sympathetic, we were prepared to work for free and were devoted to fight for preservation of Metelkova because at that time many things were uncertain. But when journalists came or if there was someone to be praised, there were always men who talked, our comrades, who liked to be exposed more than us.

In 2001 a lesbian feminist from Kasandra and another activist and artist from Metelkova came up with the idea of Red Dawns, a women's festival of alternative art. Serec (in Hvala 2010a, p. 14) recalls: "We wanted to give ourselves an opportunity to prove as organisers, activists, and artists". The expression "communist bastard" was coined by D. Rajković (Pan 2007a) to refer to the festival's clear leftist politics but,

on the other hand, the "bastard" aspect was used to indicate disobedience and staying on the margins or even out of law.[4]

Since its beginnings, the Red Dawns fiercely experimented with autonomy at squats and other spaces by following the do-it-yourself (DIY) principles of organisation (Pan 2007a), non-hierarchical mode of organising and community building (Babić 2013; Pureber 2013). The openness of the collective to new people and contents proved to be a contested issue for its long-term organisers, spanning emotions from enthusiasm and inspiration to fatigue (Hvala 2010a). Due to a generous and deliberate knowledge transfer and attraction of younger people, it has been possible to sustain such self-organisation for almost 15 years and to enable the kind of *puissance* (Babić 2013) that keeps the organisation going.

Lesbian feminists and lesbian activists were present in the festival's programme and organisation since its first edition as individuals and groups, such as Kasandra and queer feminists from the groups Ljudjeza.org (2017) and Alter Šalter (Hvala 2010a). Moreover, activists from the lesbian club ŠKUC-LL-Monokel at Metelkova squat joined in from the beginnings of the festival. Suzana Tratnik (in Hvala 2010a) explains: "We wanted to include lesbian subculture into broader women's initiatives" (p. 25). However, an activist of Lesbian Feminist University recollected:

> During the Red Dawns festival I enjoyed being in a community of predominantly women, which I had not experienced many times earlier at the lesbian club but I often wondered where the profiled lesbian activists and visitors of mainstream lesbian-gay parties were. That made me think a lot about the political passivity of lesbians and the narrowness of identity-centred politics and interests. (Oblak, unpublished; see also Merc, as cited in Hvala, 2010a, pp. 42–43)

The Red Dawns festival represents important feminist and queer counter-public (Hvala 2010b). Its influence covers various layers of feminist experience. In the words of the long-term organiser, Anna Ehrlemark (as cited in Hvala 2010a):

> Everybody who has been here is constantly referring to the festival as a high point of their own development within their organisational work or

> feminist struggle or art. The festival promotes a political, not an apolitical view of feminism. […] My general feeling is that the understanding of feminism by alternative and mainstream people in Slovenia is extremely banal and one-sided.

Until the present day, the Red Dawns festival has not had its own space. Though, by collaborating with Metelkova, Rog Factory squats and youth centres across Slovenia, they manage to temporarily occupy and reshape hosting spaces and communities and spread their influence to the contested area of "the queer".

## How Did Queer ("Kvir") Come Round in Slovenia?

It is due to the Red Dawns festival that the women's, feminist, and LGBT movement got introduced with the term and practice of queer, mostly by inviting queer and trans performers from all around and offering them an open, radical, and experimental space at the festival. The redefinition of the Red Dawns festival took place from the initial "festival of women's production" limited to Metelkova in 2000, to "festival of women", then "women's pocket festival", "festival without concept" to the "feminist and queer festival" in 2007 (Pan 2007a; Hvala 2010a).[5] When trying to theorise the decision of the organisers we made the following claim:

> To give up the relative gender marker 'woman' completely is like deleting the whole century of the fight for the liberation of women. Still, I am not claiming that we need to successively get liberated as women first to see our gender become relative. Both those processes should be simultaneous. (Pan 2007a, p. 76)

Approximately at the same time when the Red Dawns festival defined itself as queer feminist, some of the activists involved in its organisation formed the queer collective Alter Šalter in Tovarna Rog (Rog Factory) squat. In 2006–2007 they read about, researched and practised

queerness, but later moved back to lesbian activism due to their opinion that "Slovenia is not ready for queer activism!" (Hvala 2010a). Consequently, a new group named Vstaja lezbosov (The lesbos uprise) was formed, which made public actions, graffiti and video art aimed at greater lesbian visibility and reacted to lesbophobia in public spaces (Tratnik 2010).

Until that time one could feel a certain discomfort, even doubt and resistance towards the queer in the Slovene lesbian and gay movement. Only few activist theorists dealt with it (Tratnik 1995; Pan 2004, 2007b, 2010; Hvala 2012).[6] Queer emerged through a self-declaration of the individuals at the margin of the movement.[7] For example, earlier to those, the transnational queer feminist vegan group Ljudjeza.org (2002–2005) was operational in Slovenia, mostly in Ljubljana and Maribor (Ljudjeza.org 2017). This small autonomous affinity group of queer feminist intellectuals, artists and anarchists, focused on public and media activism that tried to intersect queer feminist, vegan and anti-capitalist politics. The basic novelty and uniqueness of this group was to consistently involve feminism, lesbian feminism, queer feminism and ecofeminism with animal rights and workers' rights, by the means of activist tactics and transnational anarchist networking while resisting various local and global manifestations of oppression. This and other fragile groups are much in line with what Lugones (2003, p. 6) called "active subjectivity"

> [which] does not presuppose the individual subject and it does not presuppose collective intentionality of collectivities of the same. It is adumbrated to consciousness by a moving with people, by the difficulties as well as the concrete possibilities of such movings. (Lugones 2003, p. 211)

This becomes particularly insightful when viewed with the background of the utopianism of the early Queer Belgrade Collective (see Puača and Marković 2006; Jeremić 2015; Bilić and Dioli 2016) with whom Ljudjeza.org was building an affinity (as termed in Haraway 1991).

The importance of the liminal character of the autonomous queer feminist groups emerging in a decade after the AWC can be further discussed by applying the concept of social liminality. It positions queer subjectivity as a space of invisibility where "lesbian" and "queer" are

rendered beyond the laws and regulations. Thus it becomes potentially liberating. A working-class lesbian, a Roma lesbian, a transgender lesbian, a migrant lesbian or a precarious lesbian is a person who has the experience of "moving across realities", and within each of them she is acting differently. As Lugones (2003) claims, this can be understood as liminal which is important because "when the limen is understood as a social state, it contains both the multiplicity of the self and the possibility of structural critique" (p. 61). This critique stems out of the subject's ability to experience herself as multiple (but not in a banal sense) and "as such, liminality is threatening to any world or any aspect of a world that requires unification, either psychologically, morally, politically, or metaphysically" (Lugones 2003, p. 61). However, as we will try to show, the subject can change the structure from the position of invisibility rather than simply visibility, too.

As a social state, liminality is liberating and can serve as a platform for creating solidarity not only in the cliché sense of "opening up the space" but more importantly for "taking up the space" to enable multiple, freer life and a mutual recognition of active subjects. However, it can be liberating only as long as it does not get instrumentalised which is what happens with the (neo) liberalisation of active subjectivities (see the section on the autonomous Anarcho-Queer-Feminist collective at Rog).

Apart from sporadic small groups, in the first decade of the 2000s, the DIY festival Red Dawns significantly reduced the gap in the area of continuous collective self-organising, which occurred after the cease of AWC at Metelkova (Tomasek 2011; Jalušič 2002). After 2010 it was the Lesbian Feminist University group that further enacted autonomous organising and carried on with particularly Kasandra's lesbian feminist politics.

## Lesbian Feminist University: Reclaiming Lesbian Feminism

Besides organising the festival, some of the Red Dawns organisers missed additional continuous learning within the collective. In her critique of knowledge production the queer feminist activist Urška Merc (in Hvala 2010a, p. 42) went even further:

> If you look at gender studies, the readers, you see, that there is focus on American literature, though every space has its own feminist herstory […] sometimes I think that even activism got swallowed up by cultural colonialism.

On similar grounds, in 2010 Lesbian Feminist University (LFU) sprang up at Metelkova from a profound wish to learn, reflect, and research. As Oblak (2017) remembers:

> I wanted more than just to read and be immersed into works of aristocratic lesbian writers of the 1930s Paris. I missed contemporary lesbian and feminist texts that would critically deal with our lives, bodies, partnerships, precariousness, lack of jobs, neoliberal capitalism, rising fascism.

For the LFU collective, to declare to be a university represents "an ironical gesture" (LFU 2017) by which the knowledge regularly mediated by pedagogical authorities in a rigid, conservative formal university is reclaimed and where activists can self-organise education (Antihistory 2017). As the long-term LFU activist Maja Kraljič argued from the very start:

"You can learn and acquire knowledge of just anything you want in this world, you just need to persist!" (Oblak 2017, unpublished).

For a long time LFU thought of itself as a group without predecessors since the Autonomous Women's Centre became practically invisible: the local feminist lesbian organising was repressed and forgotten (Jalušič 2002; Hvala 2010a). Thus, the long-term activist Merc (as cited in Hvala 2010a, p. 42) was further wondering:

> Why is Kasandra not part of the anthology about our lesbian movement /i.e. Tratnik and Segan 1995, our insertion/? This anthology pretends to serve as a reference for any future historical studies, which implies that Kasandra can vanish from memory and from the LGBT map of Slovenia.

These worries were especially founded in the pre-internet era's reliance upon printed sources. Apart from such worries the motivation of LFU was also related to making a strong claim for feminist practices since sexism was regular at lesbian parties and in the cultural scene:

> When my activist colleague, a feminine lesbian who dresses up according to the gothic subculture, went to party at a lesbian and gay club, two lesbians there scolded her and wanted her to go out to a straight place, because "such women" did not belong there as they couldn't possibly be real lesbians. (Oblak 2017, unpublished autoethnographic note)

Motivated by such experiences LFU continuously organised lesbian and feminist events and established a community of lesbians and women,[8] interested in lesbian feminism. Similarly to Kasandra, LFU does not deal with queer feminism. Still, to be occupying the "lesbian" topos for LFU bears the same meaning as in Monique Wittig's claim (1992): "Lesbians are not women" (p. 32). In the concept of the "double consciousness" of Lugones (1990), being a "woman" and being a "lesbian" are unstable, changeable and intermeshed categories, as she demonstrates by the case of ethnic minorities (see for example "American" and "negro"). As far as Kasandra was concerned, liberation through agential power, the "active subjectivity" is achieved (importantly via separatism) through emancipation of women, through autonomy that is primarily understood as economic independence and being free from gender-based violence (this includes also certain institutional autonomy). The same would hold for lesbians, who are consequently considered to be doubly oppressed, so sexual autonomy is added to the emancipatory imperative.

Due to communal needs LFU claimed safe(r) spaces opened to lesbians, women and trans-persons. Tadeja Pirih, a long term LFU and Red Dawns activist, remembers (in Oblak 2017):

> With a mixed audience, lesbians and women did not express their opinions loudly. That totally changed at the LFU meetings. They became almost impatient to talk and take part in a debate.

In the absence of "cis men" at lesbian and women-only spaces and feminist events (Tomasek 2011), feminist activists often expressed their personal need to have women-only spaces (Oblak 2017). Lóránd concluded when interviewing Mlađenović (as cited in Lóránd 2014, p. 297) that "safe space helps not only the consciousness-raising of women, but

even secures the learning environment significantly better than a mixed group". This is how LFU sought autonomy and release from power relations inside the squat and spaces, where they were hosted (Pureber 2013). LFU understands autonomy as an experimental practice of having agency in addressing those critical issues precisely within those spaces, for example at lesbian and gay clubs etc. Thus, it is not a physical space alone but radical openness that builds community. In relation to their group's strategies, a long-term LFU activist observed:

> When being open to new lesbians and all other women, supporting them to build their own feminism, to research about the potentials and the needs of everyone, to be productively critical without victimising or blaming, we can build a community. What I most remember from the LFU gatherings and what I also most enjoyed was joy and hope. (Oblak 2017, unpublished)

The method of hope proves to be one of the most important activist methods of reproduction, sustaining long-term feminist groups (Hvala 2015).

LFU activists also promote the principle of paying every lesbian and woman for her work and contribution to activism, at least symbolically, as a reaction to the "obligatory voluntarism and undeserving wages" in activist spaces (Pistotnik 2013). This is partially also a response to the regular imposition of voluntarism on younger lesbian activists (Oblak 2017). In movements for radical social change women do most of the invisible, unpaid work which is part of the broader reproductive work to sustain community and society that contributes to primary capitalist accumulation (Federici 2006). In their manifesto (Lezbično-feministična univerza 2017), LFU states:

> We revolt against the reproduction of groups and community to be delegated to the young, women, and other persons with less political power. In doing reproductive work we should rotate and share.

Beside small public spaces and squats, LFU and other lesbian/queer feminist initiatives created networks in order to utilise their politics towards community building also in other locations.

## Feminist Encounters in the Streets

After 2011, many people responded to the escalating general social devastation and reduction of gained social and economic rights (Stanojević 2014) by mass protests, uprisings and self-organised occupations in Ljubljana, Maribor and other cities across Slovenia (Brown 2013). During these protests the autonomous feminist initiatives built a common feminist block. As Pirih remembers the uprisings during 2011–2012 in Ljubljana:

> We, feminists, all stood behind one sheet on which we wrote 'Overworked and Underpaid'. Then some women came to us and praised the slogan, that this was totally true also for them and that it was so good someone finally exposed it. (Oblak 2017, unpublished; LFU 2013)

Besides emphasising violence of neoliberal capitalism against women, autonomous feminist initiatives started to expose sexism and misogyny at occupations and protests, enacted in the sexist use of language in slogans, chants and in overall power structures, similarly to exposures of feminists active in autonomous spaces in the past (see the motivation to initiate and maintain the Red Dawns at the Metelkova squat). Apart from coincidental connections, the lesbian/queer feminist community first bonded on the streets; by graffiti workshops and direct actions (LFU 2017) and then at the occupations and protests, where some new feminist initiatives were formed—such as the Revolt Social Workers.[9] They markedly contributed to public demarcation of mainstream, pro-capitalist lesbian and gay activism and more radical, lesbian and queer feminist activism. If Dobnikar (as cited in Jalušič 2002) stated in the past that "without concrete action there is no feminism" (p. 199), then such urban actions and protests resonated in Hvala's claim (2008, p. 2) that

> the need for feminist activism that will not only defend existing rights but will also establish the sites of personal and political emancipation in contexts where there is still no space for women and lesbians (and queers).

At first, lesbian and gay activists in NGOs approved of the "in-your-face" actions of the Revolt Social Workers. However, the group soon collided with public disapproval by some lesbian and gay activists when they carried out a direct action of throwing blood-painted sanitary pads at the neoliberal mayor of Ljubljana who made an official speech during the Pride Parade in 2013. The commentators interpreted this as a collision of identity and isolated anti-capitalist politics, whilst not taking into account the intersectional pro-queer feminism of the Revolt Social Workers (Narobe 2013). Thus, a striking demarcation between the pro-capitalist stream of the lesbian and gay movement that strives for personal and group capitalist achievements in the mainstream public, and a more marginal one marked as "radical" autonomous groups finally took shape.

The mass uprisings radicalised few initiatives and triggered feminist protests anew, such as the second Reclaim the Night! rally in 2014 (Reclaim the Night! 2017). Soon, similar radical politics was enacted by a new group, the Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at Rog that also (re)claimed its space.

## The Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at Rog: Feminist Coalition Struggling for Space

After the end of the Autonomous Women's Centre at Metelkova in 2001, the autonomous feminist groups lost their own space (Jalušič 2002). A wish to have their own space has been a dream of many feminists, of many generations. However, it is hard to obtain one's own space in a squat anew particularly where their users behave from the start as if "these spaces have been given away forever" (Babić 2013). During the ten years after the initial squatting in 2006 some important self-organised political initiatives, such as the Erased, the invisible migrant workers etc. got their refuge at Rog, the squatted space of the closed bicycle factory. In 2016, the municipal authorities tried to evict its users by force and to demolish the squat in the broader project of gentrification of Ljubljana (APL 2017). An important role in defending

and occupying the Autonomous Factory Rog that endured repression of the authorities was played also by the feminist coalition consisting of individuals from autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups and others with the same affinities. Intense collaboration in the occupation of Rog gave impetus to forming a new heterogeneous, non-hierarchical collective called the Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at Rog (Avtonomne feministke 2017) that soon sought to build its own space in the squatted area. Though they "earned" their own space at Rog by their own bodies during occupation, they were only invited to move to the former space of young lesbian and queer visual artists on the third floor of a high building (activist in personal communication with the first author, 2017). This possible unwillingness of the Rog assembly to comply with more accessible space for queers and feminists raises some questions regarding the influence of the sporadic and temporary feminist and lesbian/queer presence.[10] That is one of the reasons why the Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at Rog was formed—to demand and exert continuous and definite inclusion of feminist, queer, and anarchist practices into autonomous spaces. In their manifesto the collective demands:

> Feminism as a method of addressing patriarchal practices and thinking about structural relations in any fight and in any autonomy building, should be immanent to every self-organising group or movement. (Anarhistično-kvirovsko-feministični kolektiv v Avtonomni tovarni Rog 2017)

Apart from marking Rog with anti-sexist and anti-violence graffiti, zines, posters, workshops etc., and applying other anarchist methods (Dark Star 2012), they have actively summoned and took part in Rog assemblies, struggling to include debate on violence against women*,[11] lesbians, trans and queer persons in autonomous spaces. However, dealing with violence was at first objected to, but soon 'delegated' over to women*:

> At our space we sometimes temporarily accepted women* and trans survivors of violence at Rog that did not have anywhere else to go and searched together for solutions. But from then on, when any violence

> happened at Rog, everybody anticipated that we will take care of it. No, just everyone should respond! (Rog activist, personal communication with the first author, 2017)

The fact that the collective demands a response to violence against women* and its prevention from the whole Rog community reveals a new feature of the Slovene squatted spaces (Avtonomne feministke 2017). With survivors of violence at autonomous spaces, but also with other vulnerable people that seek refuge there (migrants, the Erased, homeless etc.) the collective actively practices radical social work (Hrvatin 2016). In comparison to formal services done by established women´s NGOs, radical social work of Anarcho-Queer-Feminist Collective at Rog seeks to explore community accountability and directly empower survivors (Crimethink 2013). Such an approach is visible from the statement for the rally Reclaim the Night! (2017):

> With a mass of our revolted voices and fists that are raised together in the air, we destroy the world's association of repressive apparatuses that suffocate us. With sister*hood and solidarity we build a community based on self-defence that will break through chains and free us all!

By introducing sister*hood and feminist comradeship[12] (Avtonomne feministke 2017) once again to the feminist scene, the autonomous lesbian and queer feminist groups in Ljubljana further distinguished themselves from women's and LGBTQA NGOs.

## Further Divisions Between Autonomous and Non-Autonomous Organising

The main connecting element in affinities mostly among women, lesbians, queer, non-binary, transgender persons, and gays, remains a struggle for freedom of all genders and sexualities, against patriarchy, capitalism, racism, fascism, neo-colonialism, violent European policies against migrants, and for freedom of life (Haraway 1991; Pan 2007a; Hvala 2010b; Hrvatin 2016). In this way autonomous struggles

differentiate themselves and criticise activism based on identity politics of the mainstream LGBTQA groups, especially those that remain relatively distant from the more general positioning within the anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist struggles. Such groups are limited to taking part in some of the more radical actions but only as long as they concern their own protection from violence while they tend to be critical towards the autonomous feminist groups if they interrupt or problematise the acquisition of isolated rights and privileges of their own group (see the Revolt Social Workers group and their contested intervention at the Pride Parade Ljubljana in 2013). However, autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups hold the political stance that there is no "difference among oppressions" (Lorde 1983; Mlađenović 2001). Thus, feminist groups support protests for the homeless people, the migrants, the precarious workers, the Erased etc. and try to respond to their imminent needs by experimenting with direct social work and cohabitation in autonomous spaces (Hrvatin 2016). The Anarcho-Queer-Feminist group and sister*ly affinity groups[13] problematise issues of genders, sexualities and gender-based violence in the antiracist and migrant organisings at Rog. Their potentially transformative practices with migrants and refugees differ from the racialising and ethnicising practices of the "tolerance", "multiculturalism" and "humanitarianism" characteristic of the liberal NGO's representative projects (Burcar 2013).

This way, it is inevitable that the smaller core of autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups gets formed from the persons who are most active in the initiative and contribute to the community action and community building—be it from the local and occasional supporters to the international activists, visitors and users to persons mobilised from the margins, like migrant women, precarious women, homeless women. As Pan (2007a, p. 77) claimed in the approach of the Red Dawns founders:

> Each person adds their own diverse feminist work, knowledge, and experiences, thus, each of them is already a sovereign feminist in both practical and theoretical sense. This way, understanding and contact with artists are more direct and deeper.

Close contact among such diverse people and experiences promotes mutual learning and self-transformation of individuals and groups as a whole, which can be seen in personal as well as in collective long-term transformations, for example within the Red Dawns festival.

There are also experiments in deliberate intergenerational knowledge transfer, such as the one between the authors of this article and among some aforementioned initiatives, such as the Intergenerational meetings between Lilit, Red Dawns and LFU (LFU 2017). These practices further increase group autonomy and freedom from the domination of the existing power relations that produce knowledge both within liberation movements and in the society at large.

Hereby individual circumstances and abilities to participate in activities of the group are taken into consideration. The ability to reproduce oneself and the movement is crucial for a long-term existence of self-organised movements for radical social justice (Federici 2006). By means of constant self-reflection and disclosure of possible hierarchies that prey upon a group despite its political awareness, autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups can maintain non-hierarchical and democratic decision-making processes. Opinion leaders or any hierarchical positions have to be contested through a plurality of opinions. Thus, lesbian/queer feminist autonomous groups differ from the so-called individual opinion leaders that the media promote as representatives and decision makers of the actual state of affairs regarding women or LGBTQAs.

In comparison to liberal LGBTQA or women's rights NGOs, we can draw another demarcation line regarding formal hierarchies, legally prescribed responsibilities, and leadership positions based on project and funds acquisition, which is a feature inscribed into the very body of the organisational structure and the neoliberal project management. Overall, NGO-isation leads to a de-politicisation of activist groups due to over-generalised and non-transformative project topics (Hemment 1998) whereas autonomous lesbian and queer feminist groups are responsive to the most acute social events, be it by organising a manifestation or an ad hoc action according to urgent needs. They do not follow any annual plans or strategies and do not immerse themselves only in short-term projects.

Despite difficulties posed by an increasingly gentrified and privatised city (APL 2017), the presence of autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups within the squats like Metelkova and Rog Factory represent a starting point and a base for activities, self-organisation and socialisation within affinity groups. Autonomy enables broad experimenting with the ways of production, of acquiring money, sustaining the community and reproduction (Federici 2006).

Anarchist tradition additionally influences autonomous feminist activities, namely their practices of self-organisation, transnational networking, alternative economy, and squatting (Dark Star 2012; Crnkić and Tepina 2014). This helps to explain a critical and negative relationship of autonomous feminist groups towards institutions. However, the groups demand institutional involvement when basic social rights are at stake, especially of those from the margins, for example, migrant, homeless, unemployed, and precarious persons. Moreover, assistance of the formal NGOs and minor funding by municipality or state may be considered a re-appropriation of one's own money paid by taxes which is used for fulfilling the needs of the community, rather than of authorities or elites.

The most noteworthy feature of the autonomous lesbian/queer feminist groups compared to women and LGBTIQA NGOs is their active refusal of the victim position. The first Red Dawns organisers illustrate this point:

> Not suppressed, though we are oppressed, exploited, humiliated, autodestructive women and hence typical victims, we want to promote the daring, self-confident, (self)ironical, witty and non-compromising woman that neither tries to be liked nor a coquette, and does not collaborate with the centres of patriarchal power. (Pan 2007a, p. 75)

By personal and communal openness and empowerment, sister*hood and comradeship, intergenerational support and knowledge exchange, activists and supporters of these groups are able to feel safe(r) and free(r), which sparkles humour, feelings of joy and pleasure in activism and being together.

We have here presented the politics and a brief herstory of recent autonomous lesbian and queer feminist groups in Ljubljana, but we are aware that in the meantime new initiatives and actions may have sprung up.[14]

## Conclusion: Occupation as Liberation

Drawing upon intersectional political affinities, we argued that an autonomous lesbian/queer feminist organising has made an impact on the development and the proliferation of feminist consciousness. Our text celebrates these processes and solicits their continual rethinking.

In the beginning of the 1990s an important autonomous lesbian and queer feminist tradition started growing in Ljubljana, especially in autonomous spaces. Unlike the identity movements, the autonomous groups we outlined here aim to involve diversity and community and seek pleasure in collaboration, actions, and self-organisation away from institutions. In other words, they tend to unite on the basis of political affinities and a radical critique of systemic inequalities and assimilation.

Due to structural invisibilities, it is important to archive and memorise such a critical and rich tradition and enable intergenerational and transnational transfers of knowledge. Since we have had the chance to witness ourselves how the same old challenges tend to (falsely) appear as new ones, such as facing and fighting the far-right and antifeminism, along with a re-patriarchalisation of women and sexual conservatism. It is because of this experience that we perceive such groups and communities as agents of utopian change.

In attempting to "read the resistance" of preceding fellow activists and understand our present ones, we apply Lugones's concept of "double-consciousness" of the colonised (2003, 2010) to theorise queer subjectivity; first in relation to building up material lesbian/queer autonomous spaces, and then towards the issues with liberal colonisation and intersectionality. We aim to begin understanding of current positionings in the sphere of lesbian feminist, queer feminist, trans feminist, and liberal lesbian and/or women activist movements, not only in Slovenia, but more generally.

As shown in this text, a strong political differentiation that is at stake in the contemporary lesbian/queer/trans/feminist activism, is probably a result of three or even more decades of feminist struggle. Constituting multiple and diverse subjectivities which are able to define and narrate themselves and act autonomously, away from the normativity imposed by the dominant regime, is a theoretical and political task that we recognise time and again.

What constructs the doubleness in Lugones' sense is an agency of inhabiting a "fractured locus" (Lugones 2010). According to our reasoning, to inhabit a fractured locus equals being occupied with a gender category and being its occupier. In theorising queer subjectivities and autonomous queer feminist groups, we took the notion of gender occupying the subject further: in return, the subject tries to occupy gender within their subjectivity and social manifestations.

Approaches to resist occupying, the "inhabiting" (or in Lugones' terminology "colonial") forces are manifold—here we opt for the concept of autonomy to contrast it with the politics of (neo/liberal) co-optation, institutionalisation and assimilationism. A tension that arises between the two is clearly set, embedded, and employed in a complex, dyadic subjectivity constituted through squatting. Such tension is not only ostensibly organised around the notions of being "given a space in society" as opposed to "taking up" one, but it also pushes the subjectivity precisely towards occupying a topos which one does not belong to or has not been provisioned for—in a structure (of oppression). When thinking about agency we used Lugones' (2003, p. 211) term "active subjectivity": "to make clear a possibility of resistance and its conditions". This is crucial since she contends that in the strict sense, the oppressed do not possess an agency anyway, thus, their resistance is at stake and is possibly futile and immoral:

> The subservient nature of the intentions disqualify the oppressed from agency in the first case. Lack of institutional backing disqualifies the resister from having agency. This "lack" is the crucial source of the possibilities of an alternative sociality. Since the modern conception of agency as autonomous subjectivity cannot countenance resistance by the oppressed, and since agency is a precondition of modern understandings of morality, resistance to oppression is conceptually disallowed as moral. (Lugones 2003, p. 211)

We see active subjectivity based on positivised lack as enacted (possibly performatively, i.e. with gender against gender) precisely in the capacity for resistance of autonomous organising. The alternative socialities that we are trying to create nowadays with(in) autonomous spaces are the "same" in a way as those in the past, but at the same time, they are also un(for) seen. If for a "woman" to desire another "woman" means in the first place a kind of squatting—occupying what legally is not and cannot become her/s, transgressing all that she is supposed to represent and to be, this urges against identifying as a "woman" (Wittig 1992), which we see at work in the LFU collective. The meeting of oppression and resistance or, as we defined, the collision of occupation and liberation is suggested.

In the first section we mentioned the notion of prevention from colonisation that is inherent to those squatting gestures that are not only occupying but are also acting as the occupied. Currently, the problem of lesbian visibility is that it is being instrumentalised in the public and then used as a liberal example of provisional and nominal equality. As such, further hierarchy is imposed within the pluralist identities, and a colonisation (or in our conceptualisation: the fact of being squatted) by a homogeneous, stable, and normalised identity becomes the most foreseeable subjectivisation model. During this process the lesbians of racial minorities, the trans lesbians, the precarious lesbians, the migrant lesbians do not become more visible. In such a context, the political struggle for the autonomous social and political spaces which perform this double squatting gesture is of utmost importance.

Nowadays, these sites of resistance can be understood and valued as squatting of the colonial, i.e. the heterosexist, the racist, the capitalist power domination from which our realities have to be captured and reinvented, precisely with and against those powers that constitute us.

## Notes

1. In Slovenia there is a continuum of people from the socialist youth movement and similar organisations who managed to transition to mainstream institutions during the late eighties, while some state bodies transformed themselves into non-governmental ones (Sanja Kajinić, personal communication with the second author, August 2014).

2. First such self-organised—but undocumented as autonomous event was the First International Yugoslav Lesbian camp on the island Rab, organised by M. A. Lužar and friends in 1988, which gathered thirty participants from around the world (Pan, personal communication with the organiser 2017).
3. The Erased is a group of at least 25,671 people who held legal residential, working, and social rights in Slovenia until 1992, when they were unlawfully deprived of those through an erasure from the registry of residents (Pistotnik 2007).
4. Compare this depiction to the depiction of the Ljubljana's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the oldest European lesbian and gay film festival, which is named as one of the most successful "child(ren) of the alternative movement" (Španjol, as cited in Kajinić 2016, p. 67).
5. For a discussion on intersectionality-related aspects of LGBT activist politics in the post-Yugoslav space, see Bilić and Kajinić (2016).
6. When working as a lecturer for kindergarten teachers in an educational module in 2002–2003, and later working as a human rights educator for pupils, I started expanding the notion "I am not a woman" to deconstruct not only the gender roles but the idea of fixation and self-evidence of identities themselves (Pan 2004).
7. Red Dawns has actively invited and hosted events on trans/gender issues carried out by trans feminist artists and activists, even before they were invited and accepted into the more mainstream cultural women´s festivals and before the emergence of trans activism. Due to recent development of the profiled NGO-associated trans* (transgender and gender non-conforming persons) activism and with the increased public visibility of trans persons, the majority of LGBTQA NGOs and spaces, e.g. the gay club Tiffany, publicly declared their allegiance safe(r) space politics and no tolerance for transphobia.
8. First, the LFU safe(r) space included "lesbians and women", though they were always inclusive of trans and non-binary persons. Recently, the LFU collective added "trans persons" to their declaration of safe(r) space and an asterix (*) to the notion of women.
9. A radical feminist group The Revolt Social Workers sprang up in 2012 to advocate feminism and direct social work. The group soon included and supported lesbian and queer feminist politics and advocated in favour of freedom of all genders and sexualities (see Vstajniške socialne delavke 2015).

10. For example, the queer collective Alter Šalter working at Rog in 2006–2007. Afterwards, especially in 2015–2016, the Revolt Social Workers, the Red Dawns and also the Lesbian Feminist University co-organised few events there (Oblak 2017; LFU 2017).
11. Asterisk (*) indicates that the term "women" also includes transgender, intersexual, and other gender non-binary persons (Anarhistično-kvirovsko-feministični kolektiv v Avtonomni tovarni Rog 2017).
12. "Feminist sisterhood" was also a claim of women's squatting movement in the 1970s in Western countries (Wall 2017). However, feminists from Lilith in the 1980s did not use it. Perhaps the reason for this discomfort lies in the use of similar terms addressing the masses, such as brotherhood etc. by the Yugoslav political apparatus at rallies and festivals. E.g., Jalušič (2002, p. 138) wrote about revolt and "feeling of totalitarianism" when encountering such calls to sisterhood and comradeship at an international feminist conference in Ireland in 1987. Nevertheless, the term "comradeship" is regularly used by some anarchist circles in Ljubljana.
13. E.g. the Group for inclusion of women migrants into community—is a self-organised group working at Rog. It practices safe(r) space open only to women and children due to the needs of women migrants and refugees in Ljubljana (Skupina za vključevanje migrantk v skupnost 2017).
14. The idea appeared that a yet unpublished chart (Hvala and Zajc 2014, following an idea of a chart of women's and feminist initiatives until 1995 (in Jalušič 2002, pp. 290–291)) of autonomous but also non-autonomous organising in the sphere of non-state operated feminism should work as an open online platform to which activists can add their own initiatives and by doing so create their own ascriptions to the historical timeline.

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# Cartographies of Fear and Freedom: Lesbian Activists in the First Belgrade and Zagreb Pride Parades

Sanja Kajinić

The history of lesbian organising in the (post-)Yugoslav region goes back at least to the very first feminist Yugoslav encounter in Ljubljana in 1987 (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, see also Bilić, introduction to this volume; Oblak & Pan, this volume). However, an important strand of political organising focused on visibility can be traced to two groundbreaking events for the LGBT communities in Serbia and Croatia—the first Pride parade attempted in Belgrade in 2001 but prevented by violent homophobic attacks, and the first Pride parade held in Zagreb in 2002 under close police protection. This chapter, based on my unpublished MA thesis (Kajinić 2003), builds up around the analysis of twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with women who took part in those events. My main research question was as follows: how do lesbians in Croatia and Serbia deal with the violent homophobia manifested at the Belgrade and Zagreb Pride parades?[1] This question shaped other decisions: interviewing women in Belgrade and Zagreb

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_3

who participated in those events, as well as trying to observe the issues of ethical feminist research. My positionality as a participant in both events, an activist and consequently a researcher, has deeply affected me and this text.

That the Pride parades celebrate the Stonewall rebellion as a historical moment of political resistance which started the contemporary movement for LGBT rights is simultaneously well known and easily forgotten. On the night of 27 June 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York in one of the routine violent raids of the bars with homosexual and transsexual guests, but this time the drag queens, lesbians, and gay men fought back. A month after that, on 27 July 1969, some 500 people walked in a first Pride parade to the Stonewall Inn. The lesbians, gay men, and transsexuals were joined by the members of the anti-war movement, the leftists, the feminists and the supporters of the civil rights movement (Brickell 2000; Kates and Russel 2001).

Since then, Pride marches have spread globally. In an important way, the annual Pride event has become a test for the strength of the local LGBT communities world-wide as well as for the degree of tolerance of the societies it takes place in. This becomes obvious in the case of the countries where a Pride parade is organised for the first time, and the events of the first Prides in Serbia and Croatia testify both to the excitement and the danger connected with organising such public manifestations.

Engaging in the process of making connections and learning from different Pride scenarios was an opportunity for reflection for my interviewees and me not only at the time of my research in 2003, but also now some fifteen years after, when the extent of the influence of these experiences on the local queer individuals and communities is still felt and important to acknowledge. Most of the Prides in Western countries seem to have taken the road of depolitisation by turning into carnevalesque celebrations of differences. This turn seems so steeped in the capitalist equation of consumerism and the freedom of choice that some Pride theorists talk of ‘resistance through consumption’ and ‘resistance to consumption’ as political choices available to the participants of such Pride parades (Kates and Russel 2001, pp. 1–18). There are, on the other hand, some Pride parades that still seem to balance between

the traditions of protest and of festival. For example, the annual LBGT Pride march in Johannesburg is 'unique in South Africa' in being 'simultaneously angry and carnevalesque' since it draws on the tradition of human rights protest marches and the marches of defiance which preceded the fall of apartheid, but at the same time also on the style and meaning of the carnevalesque tradition of the Pride march (Gevisser and Reid 1995, p. 278). On the thoroughly activist end of the spectrum are the Prides held in Zagreb and Belgrade, which are politicised because of the seriousness of homophobic violence their participants are confronted with.

In this research, the majority of the interviewed women both in Belgrade and in Zagreb were active in lesbian or LGBT organisations in their countries, and again, most of them were involved in the organisation of those Pride parades. From the six women I interviewed in Belgrade, four of them were activists of the lesbian group Labris, one was a former activist in the same group but had recently left it, and only one woman had almost no connections with it. The situation was quite similar with the interviewees in Zagreb—most of them were in some way active in either or both groups that organised the Pride, Kontra and Iskorak. From the six women interviewed in Zagreb, two have been actively involved with the Organising committee of the Zagreb Gay Pride, two were involved with the LGBT groups but not with the organisation of the Pride, while two of them had not been involved with lesbian activism at the moment of the Pride parade. It is also interesting that one of my Zagreb informants did not march with the Parade itself, but was on the other side of the fence, an important angle in itself.

Most of my interviewees talked of their lesbian, or in the case of two women bisexual or politically lesbian, identities in the context of the discussion of lesbian activism, process of coming out, and of visibility. Such emphasis on the public aspect of their sexual identities might be occasioned both by the majority of my informants being lesbian activists themselves and by the prism through which they narrated their identities: the public event of a Pride march. The activist self-understanding of lesbian identity as resistance resonates with the origins of lesbian (feminist) theory in women's and lesbian struggles of the 1970s and

with the seminal texts of lesbian theory such as Radicalesbians' definition of a lesbian as 'the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion' and of Cheryl Clarke's seeing lesbianity as an 'act of resistance' and 'rebellion' against 'a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture' (as cited in Gross and Woods 1999, pp. 561–564). However, my interviewees' complex narration of their identities also engaged with the essentialism versus constructionism identity debates overtaking lesbian and gay theory of the 1980s (see Esterberg 1997) as well as, to an extent, with the queer theory's disruption of the homosexual/heterosexual binary and any rigid notions of gender and sexuality (see Phelan 1997). The interviewed women narrated how their, for the most part, already formed identities were refigured and reformulated under pressure and as a reaction to both the publicity of homophobia and hate violence and to a relative surge of visibility of gays and lesbians at those Prides.

The relevance of this research could be connected with the way in which Lapovsky Kennedy (1998) explains her interest in collecting oral histories and analysing the ways in which pre-Stonewall lesbian history was constructed. She explains that the majority of lesbians she interviewed could not learn about homosexual life in homophobic society but were 'constantly creating their lives, developing a biomythography' (pp. 345–346). She points out that due to secrecy surrounding homosexual identities in contemporary societies, 'each gay or lesbian person has to construct his or her own life in oppressive contexts, a process that oral history is uniquely suited to reveal' (1998, pp. 345–346). It might be argued that the in-depth interviews with activists ideally function as opening up similar opportunities to reflect on the process of creating meaningful living in Serbian and Croatian societies. In a similar way, this for me was an attempt to engage in research which would reflect the way in which activists and Pride participants from Serbia and Croatia have thought of, invented, perceived, felt about the Pride parades in their countries.

Throughout the interviewing and writing process, I was also aware of the critical importance for this research of learning to listen better. Anderson and Jack (1998, pp. 158–165) warn that 'in order to learn to listen, we need to attend more to the narrator than to our own agendas,' and

that 'the processes of analysis should be suspended or at least subordinated in the process of listening.' Finally, relying on the qualitative methodology has led me towards a research project which both offers space for voices of women from Serbia and Croatia, and reflects the process of my learning to engage in the 'production of more feminist knowledge' (Reinhartz 1992, p. 17). This knowledge in the context of two post-Yugoslav first Prides is woven as a shared map of experiences and voices.

## The Context of the Belgrade Pride

On 27 June 2001, the first ever Gay Pride Parade in Serbia was supposed to take place at the Republic Square in Belgrade. Also some workshops, round-table discussions, a theater performance and a party were planned afterwards. The working slogan of the Belgrade Pride was 'There is space for all of us,' and the flyer optimistically suggested 'Behind the Rainbow might be right here'. It wasn't. At 3 p.m. at the Republic Square, there were some 20 'participants' of the 'parade' and about 1000 opponents—members of the neo-nazi movement Obraz, supporters of football clubs Rad and Crvena zvezda, skinheads, and supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church. They started to beat whoever looked different. Then a group of about 10 lesbian women coming from the Labris office, carrying colourful balloons, appeared at the Square not knowing what was waiting for them. The aggressive crowd started chasing them as the most visible targets at that moment, and then continued for several hours attacking men with coloured hair, 'suspicious' tourists, and finally policemen. Allegedly, more than 40 people were injured in the streets. Afterwards, the chief of the Belgrade Police, Boško Buha stated that Serbia is obviously not 'ready for such public display of deviance' (Labris 2001, p. 30). The crowd reacting against such 'deviance' were 'yelling nationalist and fascist paroles: "Faggots are the shame of Serbia"… "All faggots should be killed"' (Labris, p. 50), the onlookers were mostly indifferent, while the police stood by refusing to help until they were attacked themselves.

This single day influenced many lives. I was both at the Square when it all started and later in the office of a women's group, then at

one woman's apartment that turned into emergency headquarters where participants came for support. We phoned around incessantly, talked over fresh news, watched all TV-programs, and tried to help each other through the first shock. For many of the participants, Belgrade Pride violence was the most extreme head-on collision with homophobia they had ever experienced. The atmosphere was that of panic, fear, but also of extreme mutual support and caring made visible by this crisis. Afterwards, besides the media attention and streams of support mail the organisers received, also all of the participants in the Belgrade Pride were awarded the Grisly Bear Award by the International Lesbian and Gay Cultural Network. The lesbian group Labris devoted a whole issue of the fanzine they publish to the events, documents, and reactions of the participants and the media to the Pride. There was a round-table discussion and some self-help group discussions at Labris. Some ten women from Labris came and participated in the Zagreb Pride the following year. Inspired by what seemed to me politically creative aftermath of a violent event, my main objective in interviewing the women participants of the Belgrade Pride was to see how they dealt with the experience of homophobic violence, and understand the influences of this event on their lives two years after it happened.

## The Context of the Zagreb Pride

On 29 June 2002, the first ever Gay Pride in Croatia took place in Zagreb. There were about 300 participants and almost the same number of police and hired bodyguards who protected the participants from the mob composed of skinheads, Bad Blue Boys (fans of the Croatian football team Dinamo), members of the religious and political right and some other scandalised citizens. The Parade itself went on without major incidents (except from throwing of bottles, ashtrays, melons, and lighters at the participants), but after the event itself some 20 attacks on people connected with the Pride were reported. The opponents of the Gay Pride used the rhetoric of hate (for one thing, comparing non-heterosexuals to undesirable ethnic groups) to justify their outrage and stress the us/them divide. Thus, a group of skinheads yelled, 'Go

to Serbia!' while one Bad Blue Boy had a T-shirt on with a message: 'Faggots into concentration camps!'

However, the fact that the first Zagreb Pride actually occurred, the support of important persons from the public and cultural life, the protection received from the police, and the optimistic, charged atmosphere at the Parade all testify to the importance of this event for its participants but also for activism in the entire region. It seems that this very 'first chance to walk the streets as a lesbian' (Hela, personal communication, 2002) meant an enormous lot. It also seems that the LGBT visibility and public debate generated by the Zagreb Pride and by the ensuing lobbying for legal changes, brought a great deal of empowerment to LGBT persons Croatia.

I was part of the Organising committee, which met once a week for some three months before the Zagreb Pride to organise fundraising, safety, and other issues. As a participant, I also felt the fear of aggression that surrounded us, as well as the empowerment as speaker after speaker talked of tolerance and importance of respecting the human rights of all. I limited my project to interviewing women who had either helped organise the Pride, or participated in it in some way. I started this interviewing process with an aim to hear and document their impressions of Zagreb Pride and changes this brought into their lives.

## Mapping at Belgrade and Zagreb Prides

Already during the transcribing process, I noticed that the interviewed women were drawing maps all the time—either literally, with their gestures or verbally. It was all about spacing and timing—Lepa's drawings and arrows on paper showing where she was at what point of time in relation to the crowd at the Republic Square in Belgrade; Tanja K.'s pointing to the statue, to the zebra crossing, to the taxi-cabs; other Belgrade Pride participants' structuring of their narratives around what happened at the Republic Square, what happened at the SKC,[2] what happened later at the 'gathering places'—women's groups or private flats where some of the participants came afterwards. Then, Zagreb Pride participants' constant evoking of the shared spatial crisis outlines—the

shock at the beginning of the march, the panic at the Cvjetni Square,[3] the return to the safety of Zrinjevac[4] and the nervousness at leaving it, which all functioned as a communal imaginative redrawing of the Zagreb Pride's march route.

It was impossible to overlook the significance that my interlocutors attributed to their own and other's location in these webs of spatial and temporal relations and how helpful they found them for the processes of meaning making. Just in case I could miss it, Ljilja spelled it out for me. She was talking about her own process of recovering from fear after the Belgrade Pride and how helpful 'the immense amount of talking' and 'a sense of togetherness' with others was for her at this time. Then she said:

> We really talked for months about this. We would go out for a drink and (laughter) we would make maps – which woman had been where… Yes, we were making maps of which one of us was where in which moment, for how much time we missed each other… We talked about strategies that women (…) that each one of us used in that moment to survive. We joked about that – later of course. (Ljilja, personal communication, 2003)

Thus the mappability of experiences at those two Pride parades posited itself both as the most promising organising concept and a major dilemma. What if, when looking at the narratives of women who participated, we look at how different emotions—fear/confusion/pride/rage, emerge at different locations of the map, and at how emotions and narratives change depending on the spatial, temporal and identity locations of the participants? According to Jameson (2000), cognitive mapping enables us to perceive the global picture of the totality of class relations; the ability to perform cognitive mapping becomes an indispensable tool for envisaging and performing political action, and moreover, 'the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience' (Jameson 2000, pp. 282–283). While for Jameson the practice of cognitive mapping is an indispensable strategy of socialist politics, I would like to focus on the implications that could be read from the maps of the first Prides in Croatia and Serbia for the consequent activist and political strategies.

## Dealing with the Maps of Fear

Suzana remembers feeling 'in the body - that fear and stress we experienced.' However, that feeling lasted intensively only that day after the Zagreb Pride, while the 'fear passed after a week, and later it wasn't so (important).' She talked to her sister, talked and wrote letters to some friends, and 'so it passed somehow' (Suzana, personal communication, 2003). Tanja talks of 'panically' phoning around after the Belgrade Pride in order to see how her friends were and get more information. She also mentions going to Dragana's flat where a lot of women participants gathered afterwards:

> I know that I had a huge wish to see all those women at one place. And I knew that a lot of them would be at Dragana's place. So even with my hand which was hurting like hell I managed to assist Vesna (in a wheelchair) to the second floor. Simply out of this wish to see everybody, to know that everybody is ok, to hear also other stories – how we survived. (Tanja, personal communication, 2003)

Jelena tells of how she put 'the fear on the side for later.' During the Zagreb Pride, she felt responsible as an organiser for 'raising the energy,' so only after it all passed, she started feeling the consequences: 'for a week after the Pride I would not go into the tram,' and 'for days after that when I would hear some male voices screaming – I would freeze.' She feels that what helped her was talking with 'various friends who were completely aware of the problem, understood it and were ready to listen.' However, she tells of a particular problem she had afterwards:

> I think that I do not seem to people as if something could break me (…) And I did hold up pretty well in that period when others were in panic and I thought that we should be supportive. But when other people got over it, then they started joking and kidding. And I was sick; I was in total coma about it… And the people did not really get it, like – what now? Since they just got better, but I was still… (…) But there were friends who understood what I was talking about. (…) And I had (a need

> to talk) to those who would listen, who (didn't think that I was) made of steel (laughter). (Jelena, personal communication, 2003)

Nina also tells of the constant phoning after the Belgrade Pride, explaining to her family that she is alright, going to one's women's organisation, and then also to Dragana's flat to meet other women. She explains that

> it was really very important to me that I could spend the rest of that day with those same women and that I knew that each went somehow through it, that we are all together. It was really crucial to me to end that day with those women and that they were ok, more or less. I mean – ok in principle, nobody was killed, nobody was seriously hurt, and everybody got through. (Nina, personal communication, 2003)

She also tells of trying to be 'very very calm' and supportive in the days immediately after the Pride since she saw that 'the other women around me are upset, and I didn't want me to make a scene and scream although maybe I felt like (doing that).' However, when the situation started to 'calm down, to get more normal,' she tells of having to deal with 'bad paranoia, but really bad'—she was panicking about her safety especially because of a TV-interview she gave only a couple of months before the Pride. She explains how she was talking with her friends and 'telling the whole story again and again.' However, some of her feelings were more difficult to share; 'but about the tripping in my head I haven't talked until I talked to Lepa,' she tells about the event that finally led to a conversation that made her feel somewhat better:

> One day we had a meeting, I came to the Centre and I was trembling all over. Because I took a taxi, I was taking taxi all the time those days, even for short distances, like – I don't want to go on the street. I came into the taxi of some guy who had a cross, you know, on his mirror. And he started the conversation like – hey, bre, when are you going to escape? And I am like – what? To escape, why would I escape? And he is like – well, it is time to escape. In fact, he was thinking about the holidays (laughter). And I am like (laughter) – let me get out of the car, let me run away from here (laughter). And I go out of the taxi and go to the

> Centre like that, and I guess Lepa saw it since she asked if I wanted to talk. (Nina, personal communication, 2003)

Nina explains how that conversation as well as being on holidays on the seaside helped, but the main influence on her feelings was time—'time passes. So, all of this also passed.'

Petra tells of the intensity of the feelings she experienced at the Zagreb Pride and how she 'could only talk to' Vesna T., a feminist activist who was also the Pride program host, and after talking to her she was 'comforted in a way.' However, she also remembers the atmosphere after the Pride: 'I think that for a week after that we (my girlfriend and I) haven't talked about it at all, but—every noise produced by more than two people was really problematic' (Petra, personal communication, 2003).

Lepa tells of the whole day of phoning around when she finally came to the women's organisation in which she works, and making a 'list' of the attacks and 'incidents' of the Belgrade Pride: 'I was making a list which I still have somewhere – what happened to whom, and who saw what happening (…) In the end, some forty people were on that list.' Immediately after the Pride, she went to a conference in Amsterdam and describes arriving at the Amsterdam train station as:

> coming to a completely different world after this, you know – people totally different, the sun is shining (…) it really seemed like some heaven on earth – as if we came from some… underground, from nausea and violence and fear, mostly from fear – to somewhere where none of that exists, there were not even any signs of anything similar (…) I remember that as a complete contrast. (Lepa, personal communication, 2003)

Mima describes the two 'dominant feelings' that 'marked' the Zagreb Pride for her:

> (i)n fact, since I was in Zadar during the war, that feeling that you don't know will something hit you and from where it will come, and you walk on, and simply that fear in your stomach, that insecurity. That was the feeling that really coloured it for me. But at the same time that

> feeling (…) of some kind of satisfaction that we made something happen. (Mima, personal communication, 2003)

She also explains that talking to family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as writing were her primary methods of dealing with her Pride experiences. Tanja K. tells of being 'in shock' at the Belgrade Pride, so that only 'a couple of days after that, it all caught up with me.' She describes the influence of her emotions catching up with her on her behaviour:

> on the street, when I would see bald guys, I would immediately think – this one was there. After that I changed my behaviour on the street. I changed my whole story. When I say 'lesbian' I speak somehow in a more quiet way, so it can't be heard. (…) before that I was behaving completely normally thinking that it is all ok, also when you say words 'lesbian' or 'gay'. But after that I got quiet, completely – I didn't even dare hug any woman friend on the street. I was always thinking that somebody was watching, that somebody would comment. You cannot know anymore who is who…. (Tanja K., personal communication, 2003)

She also mentions talking with her friends a lot about the Pride events: 'and that talking lasted for a long time – even now it's mentioned every now and then.' In turn in Zagreb, Sara speaks of feeling excluded in a certain way because she did not participate in the 'parade' by walking in it, and of feeling isolation mixed with the fear especially during the time right after the Pride:

> I had a feeling – now all those who were in the parade are here and comforting each other and understanding each other, and I was on the side, and I don't belong here at all; I should go home, I can't be here anymore. I really fell apart there (…) then I went with that girl with her car, and in the middle of the way I already broke down – (told her) to let me out there (…) Then I was walking the dogs (laughter) (…) and there were our local skinheads whom we don't see often but they are there, and they were drinking. I was walking by them. I mean, I always walk by them. And then I thought – see, everything stayed the same (laughter). I mean, concerning that violence and panic – nobody will kill me, let's go on…. (Sara, personal communication, 2003)

She explains how difficult it was for her to talk to people who participated in Zagreb Pride about her feelings of not belonging, and of the relief she felt when a couple of days after the event she met two other gay persons who were participating from the outside:

> then all three of us talked about it and realised that all three of us who were outside have the same problem – a bit different but the same. We talked about it so much – we really got carried away. Then it was a bit easier for me – when I saw that others have the same problem – those who weren't in the parade. But we haven't solved it… you know, I haven't found a person with whom to talk who was in the parade – who would listen to me, so that I tell my part (…) Everybody had a bunch of their own problems, there was no time for that. And somehow I thought that it was completely unimportant – that I was feeling as if I don't belong, while the people are dying from fear. (Sara, personal communication, 2003)

She goes on to explain how her feelings got subdued with time, though not completely resolved:

> with time it wasn't solved, it just disappeared, got lost. Because, later, when (the organising) of the next Pride started, I didn't have that feeling anymore. It's only that even when I think about the (last) Pride now, I still don't feel it as something mine. It's strange, you know, it is not at all as important to organise something as it is to be in it - for the feeling of belonging to that group. (Sara, personal communication, 2003)

Ljilja tells of phoning around first from Labris, then from another women's group where they went because it felt safer than in Labris office. She remembers phoning and getting phone calls till late that night from people who participated in some way so that 'we arrived at a number of two hundred people who came to support us, maybe there was even more who didn't get in touch.' She tells about being afraid after the Pride that the group of women around Labris would 'fall apart – that we would be so much in fear that we wouldn't be able to work anymore, and that the women who come here would be so scared that they wouldn't dare to come anymore.' She then tells of her personal fears after the Pride and the ways she dealt with them:

> on the street, simply that fear of almost any man who looks suspicious to me. Then that unease when sitting in a café among men. The unease in the bus, on the street and so on. That is something that lasted for a couple of months. Also the fear when I go into a taxi which on that mirror has a cross hanging. So, everything that was some kind of symbol – anything – either men in football shirts or men with short hair. That lasted a couple of months. I, of course, worked on it, developed some mechanisms and it simply passed. And that fear that we as individuals, that I and many others as individuals, will go a couple of steps backwards. (…) that this what happened at the Pride would pull some of us back. That definitely has happened to me. I mean, again I lost a couple of months in fear and had to work on myself. And now, again – slowly, slowly, slowly. (Ljilja, personal communication, 2003)

She goes on to tell how tense the months after the Pride were both for her and for the Labris as a group, but that 'fortunately my fears mostly did not come true. So, nobody burst into (the office), the group did not fall apart, women continued coming here, I got over my personal fear of (…) men who look suspicious.' Talking about the first Zagreb Pride, Iva explains that she has 'in fact felt a lot of fear, which I haven't in any way resolved yet (…) and only now am I aware how much the Pride had influenced me.' She felt very positive about the workshops which were planned in connection to subsequent Zagreb Prides—on safety of the participants and on dealing with fear. She comments on not being so much a part of the LGBT community at the time to get enough support from it, but also questions if enough discussions within the community have happened after the first Pride.

## Identity and Self-Change at the Belgrade and Zagreb Prides

For Mima, the Zagreb Pride 'definitely catalysed' her change of attitude toward activism: she had doubts about efficiency and necessity of being involved in the LGBT organisations but 'realised that it is terribly important' and that she herself would like to get more engaged. She

talks of becoming aware that in an effort to make any sort of political impact in the struggle for lesbian or any other minority rights

> a group has much more energy than an individual (…). And simply, I have a need to react with some energy to everything that is happening. Not just in the safety of my room thinking that everything is ok, that we live in harmony. Because we don't! (Mima, personal communication, 2003)

When asked about the influence of the Zagreb Pride on her identity, she says that 'the Pride was crucial for me' in terms of 'definitely strengthening my activist tendencies.' She further explains how the Pride influenced her awareness of the need for more visibility of lesbians and gay men in Croatia, and also clarified the ways in which she would like to engage in activism. She explains this influence by emphasising that

> maybe if there weren't so much aggression against us from the others, maybe I wouldn't have such a need to get engaged in fighting that somehow. If it had all went as in some parade in New York or in San Francisco where everybody celebrates and all is great. After that, you probably come home full of positive energy and you don't have a need to change something. But after something like this, you definitely want the next Pride to be better. (Mima, personal communication, 2003)

Tanja K. thinks that no major changes or influences on her identity happened because of the Belgrade Pride—the only thing that changed is her 'opinion about this city, about the people who live here'. Ljilja also talks about how her experiences at the Belgrade Pride changed the way in which she perceives the people around her. She then explains how it was 'definitely' reflected on her identity:

> in a sense that I realised that I as a lesbian… that because I am a lesbian my life can be endangered. All that my life means – not only that, even my right to life. Of course I had information before (…) But it is different when you experience something and different when you get something as an information (…) But then again, this is simply a fact I have to live with and not something which should hold me back in my identity

> or (keep me afraid…) because my identity is endangered. This is simply a fact, not only for me but for many of us. (Ljilja, personal communication, 2003)

Petra talks of a major and disquieting impact of her experiences at the first Zagreb Pride on her sense of self and safety:

> some feelings, which I was building up for many years – of invulnerability, for example. You build a shield around you in a way, you protect yourself in different ways, with different mechanisms. And you think that you honed them to perfection at some moment, and that you always have some option. I think that this (the Pride) was the moment when absolutely all of my mechanisms were completely thorn down. You know, when you feel bare, weak, and helpless, as a target simply. This was simply an irresolvable situation, completely irresolvable. Then you fall apart – as if in fact some basis of your life falls apart, just like that all of a sudden. (Petra, personal communication, 2003)

She, however, also explains how her experiences at the Pride had a major influence on her sense of being a member of an 'identity group at all.' From her 'individualistic' self-perception she shifted to a feeling of '(b)elonging to something and feeling as a part of something – this is something completely new in my life,' and she talks about this as the 'biggest change' she went through under the influence of the Pride.

On the other hand, Boba explains how her experiences at the Belgrade Pride 'only pushed me more inside' and intensified the feeling she sometimes has of being in 'a completely hopeless situation' of not having any support from her environment. She, as some other women also, talks about the Pride experience as a crash course on the actual extent of homophobia in the society she lives in: 'it brought my attention to where I live. Although I knew all that – more or less. But this was really intensive; brutal.' She self-ironically explains how her Pride experience influenced her identity:

> it made me hide it (laughter). I mean, hide it from the wider population. (…) I don't know if I will ever in the future be ready to be politically active as a lesbian. (…) I don't think I will be. But again, I don't

> know, I say that now, but maybe in five years… maybe some other things will happen which will shake me up but… This is the biggest influence (laughter). (Boba, personal communication, 2003)

Jelena talks of how difficult it is to assess the impact of the Zagreb Pride on her—she is 'more cautious in some situations' but stresses that it is 'difficult now to say how much the Pride influenced the fact that when I see somebody who looks like a skinhead I do not feel like hugging with Petra exactly in that second when I am passing by him.' She would not go so far as to say that the Pride strengthened her identity, though she thinks that it in a way 'supported it' and what is most important for her—it didn't 'stop me in anything.' She explains that the real importance of the Zagreb Pride to her was in clearly showing the extent of hatred against gays and lesbians, and thus in a way legitimising the necessity of the struggle for the LGBT rights in the eyes of the wider public. She, however, also talks of the paradoxical and sometimes discouraging dynamics of this struggle:

> it is also very easy to get discouraged. On the one side, you get stronger because you see that you have to fight for some basic freedom because otherwise you cannot live like that. On the other side, it is like fighting with the windmills. You ask yourself are there ever and when are the changes going to come; how old are you going to be if you are even alive then. Of course that you think like that in some moments, but personally I don't get discouraged. We should continue. (Jelena, personal communication, 2003)

Lepa explains that the most important issues she had to deal with because of her experiences at the Belgrade Pride were connected with her feelings of guilt and responsibility because of her role as an organiser, and with her trying to understand her 'frozen fear' mechanism of distancing from fear and thus 'not getting some (important) information.' However, she emphasises that 'the whole sphere of my work on lesbian rights' and her 'attitude toward my lesbian existence' have not changed—she is still politically active and visible as a lesbian activist. Another long-standing activist, Sara remembers the moment at one anti-fascist demonstrations in 1999 when she became aware that

> those skinheads and all those rightists can hate me based on all the main points of my existence: because I am a woman, because I am a lesbian, because I am Jewish, because I have family in Serbia, you know – everything! Because then I was working for the Anti-war Campaign. Based on my work, sex, gender, family, anything. Anything I enumerated to myself – each of my identities. You know, there is not one to which they could say (yes) (laughter). (Sara, personal communication, 2003)

She goes on to explain that if she was to 'list my identities in some order' of importance, she would always prioritise her being a 'pacifist – always, and a peace activist' over other things, including her sexual orientation, since 'this is what makes me different in my own eyes from other people, and these other things don't, they shouldn't.' However, her experiences at the Zagreb Pride made her aware of the prioritisation of her sexual orientation over her other identities and she talks of this as 'terribly sad':

> I feel horrible when I see how it changes my whole life, how important it is. Because I think – why would my sexual orientation be important, why would it be interesting or important to anybody at all? I think I am much more than that – that this is just a question of whom I love and with whom I am. But then when I see how it influences my life, that everyday I have to lie or hide something, then it turns out that it is in fact the most important thing in my life. And everything – problems with parents and with the Pride and with everything – it turns out that it really is the most important thing in my life and that everything turns around it. I am really annoyed that this identity covers up all other identities. (Sara, personal communication, 2003)

She talks about how the Pride played a big part in her 'becoming aware of my fear' and realising 'how much in fact I feel like in prison. And the whole of Zagreb became prison after that.' Since, 'if it wasn't for the Pride I wouldn't have to think am I going to go in front of the cameras. Rather, I would live my life.' She tells of constant questioning of her 'priorities' and their validity for her: 'is it really important to do the work I love or is it maybe more important to be who I am?'

Tanja explains what effect the violence and aggression she experienced at the Belgrade Pride had on her:

> I had an enormous need, I guess from stubbornness, to yell to the whole world that I am a lesbian. Once I jokingly said that even if I was not a lesbian before, I would have probably become one after the Belgrade Gay Pride. If because of nothing else than out of rebellion. I think it only made me stronger. (Tanja, personal communication, 2003)

Suzana did not experience the Zagreb Pride as a major influence on a personal level since 'all those things connected to identity and coming out, I somehow went through them earlier, so it wasn't as tense for me.' The aspect that was new to her was the political dimension of public visibility achieved through the Pride:

> that I could walk the street with a banner, that was a new experience. I guess (the Pride) strengthened (my identity) – because we all went through all that together. It had a very important political significance, it was happening for the first time here, and it was very important for me to be part of that. For all of us to go out like that, I think we needed courage. (Suzana, personal communication, 2003)

Nina thinks that the Belgrade Pride made her more aware of 'where I live, with what kind of people I deal with,' but has not in any radical way changed 'my principles, my attitudes – after two years, everything is still in place, everything stands where it was.' She explains the influence it had on her lesbian identity:

> I cannot tell that because of it in any way I questioned my identity. But definitely, because I am a lesbian in this society, I was in fear for a certain time. I remember that for some time after the Pride I was letting my hair grow. I was doing that TV-interview before the Pride, but after the Pride I wouldn't do that anymore. So, radio is ok, TV is not, the newspapers are ok but not under my full name. I mean, forget it, it equals suicide. But on my identity as identity – no, I wouldn't say (it had influence). Now, two years after it, I would say it didn't. (Nina, personal communication, 2003)

Iva clarifies the significance of her choice to politically identify as a lesbian though 'technically I am bi- or if you want polysexual' by explaining that 'at the present moment in Croatia, it is very important to politically situate yourself in regard to feminism and in regard to sexual orientation.' She stresses that the Pride has 'strengthened' her political choice to express her identity 'as lesbian, though it isn't exclusively lesbian. You know, if (lesbian identity) weren't so problematic, there would not be such need to emphasise it'. She illustrates her opinion that it is 'really terribly necessary' to be publicly visible with one's marginalised identities by narrating:

> I encountered a lot of opposition to the Pride, a lot of people told me: well, in the same way straight people could organise their parade! I really do not see the logic in that argument. How can anybody even think of that? I mean – the first thing you think of is: do you think the skinheads would come? (laughter) Do you think somebody would throw bottles at you? Do you think you would need the police to protect you? What parade of heterosexuals? I mean, we have the parades of heterosexuals every day, hello! (laughter). (Iva, personal communication, 2003)

After critically warning against decontextualising of the influences of the Zagreb Pride by overvaluing them in relation to all the other influences on her identity (her process of coming-out, her engagement in other LGBT initiatives and organisations), Iva goes on to 'sort out' the particular change brought about by the Pride:

> now I can see that the changes are really possible. Sometimes it really seems that changes are happening so slowly. But the fact that I thought that the Pride won't happen for the next ten years, and it did happen, and that now another one will be organised – this all encourages me somehow. Although everything else is pretty much negative. But to the extent that I became aware that sometimes you have to start some action even when you think that the society is not ready – that this is the way to change the society, this is how the Pride helped me. This is why I wanted to get involved in all that and give my contribution. (Iva, personal communication, 2003)

## Conclusion

Both during this research and retrospectively, the first Pride marches in Croatia and Serbia stand out as groundbreaking events that ignited personal changes in their participants and far-reaching organisational changes in local and regional LGBT movements. For the purpose of this text, I looked at the history and significance of the Pride parades in general, as well as at the particular political and social backgrounds of the Belgrade and Zagreb Prides, arguing that the political 'origins' of the Gay Pride parades in the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 and the tradition of demonstrating for lesbian and gay rights tie in more relevantly with the first Belgrade and Zagreb Prides than the parallel tradition of the Gay Prides developing into the carnevalesque and commercial celebrations of differences. Also, the contextualising of the first Belgrade and Zagreb Prides with regard to the political moment and social atmosphere in which they took place helped cast light on their outcomes as well as on the similarities and differences between them. For example, the instances of hate violence and prevalence of hate discourse testify to the depth and aggressiveness of homophobia in both Serbian and Croatian societies; on the other hand, the lack of official political support in Serbia resulted in the lack of police protection which made possible such brutality at the Belgrade Pride which remained unpunished; while the relatively supportive political climate in Croatia mobilised efficient police protection of the participants at the Zagreb Pride though it could not lessen the loudness of the homophobic opponents or prevent the later attacks on the Pride participants. The analysis of the narratives of the interviewed women was structured around the spatial metaphor of cognitive mapping of their experiences at those Prides by looking at how different emotions emerge at different locations of their narrative maps, but also at how emotions and narratives change depending on the participant's spatial, temporal and identity locations.

Interesting spatial clarifications emerged from such reading, for instance the relatively hopeful expectations that led the Belgrade Pride participants to the Republic Square that day right into the hands of the homophobic mob. The readers followed the routes of their shock,

confusion and escape, and the narratives of their dealing with homophobia both right on the spot—at the Belgrade Pride, and later with its influences on their ways of behaving and thinking. Similar mapping traced the relatively more 'sobered' expectations of the Zagreb Pride participants significantly structured around the Belgrade Pride precedent of the previous year, and followed them on their substantively shared route of the Zagreb march—through its 'tunnel' when crossing the main Zagreb square, its crisis points, its coming back to the safety of the fenced-in space at Zrinjevac and continuation of the program, the tear-gas and risky evacuation at the end.

Since fear kept emerging in the interviews as a dominant emotion caused by the aggressiveness of homophobia and violence at those Prides, the interviewed women testified to the practical strategies of giving and offering support, writing, discussing at workshops, with friends or other important persons; as well as to the narrative strategies of dealing with the traumatic memories of homophobia: the interviewed women's use of irony and humour as distancing devices, as well as their drawing on the memories of solidarity and statements of shared cause for strength and support.

What also emerged from my interviewees' narratives showed the ruptures and refigurations which those Prides as points of pressure influenced upon the identities and self-perceptions of the interviewed women. The recurring red thread through Pride participants' voices is the insistence on the importance of visibility of LGBT people brought about and performed at those Prides, and their reiteration of the need for continuing or resuming with the practice of holding Prides in Serbia and Croatia. These two events, though fraught with painful emotions and difficult personal stories, ignited years of passionate activist politics in the post-Yugoslav region, Pride-related and otherwise. In particular, if asked what was 'specifically lesbian' about these Prides, I would highlight the strong participation of women—lesbian activists of Labris and Kontra, as well as the lived experience of feminist solidarity that changed our individual maps of participation into relationships that sustained us personally and transformed the means and the range of our activism.

What was implicit in many interviews and shared as activist knowledge by many participants was that the activists from Belgrade and Zagreb supported each other and that the Zagreb event was also—at least partially—conceived as a response to the violence in Belgrade the previous year. This was a recurrent thread in the first year of the work of the Zagreb Pride Organising Committee, and a strong motivation for activists who have participated in the Belgrade event or even just heard much about it, and the following year wanted to create a different and hopeful public street action for LGBT visibility in Zagreb. The connections and mutual influences of lesbian activists from both cities are to be found also in our communication between the two events, and the presence of some of the same women participants of the Belgrade 'march' the following year at the first Zagreb Pride (see Dioli, this volume). These are the collaborations, of friendship and politics, that encouraged me to see the first Prides in Belgrade and Zagreb as interrelated and powerful beginnings of an eventful decade in lesbian activism in the region, continuing the creative tradition of Yugoslav feminist and lesbian regional organising.

## Notes

1. This chapter purposefully zooms in only on the very first Pride marches in Croatia and Serbia. For reflections on consequent Prides' history in these countries, see, for instance: Bilić (2016) as well as our edited volume (Bilić and Kajinić 2016).
2. The SKC (Studentski kulturni centar) is a student cultural centre where the 'rest' of the Belgrad Pride program was supposed to take place but didn't. Some of the participants headed toward it after the violence at the Republic Square, and most of the crowd did also.
3. Cvjetni trg or the Flower Square is a square in the centre of Zagreb where the whole manifestation was initially supposed to take place. However, due to the lucky circumstances (i.e. a book fair was already taking place there), the Pride parade got only the permission to pass through the Cvjetni. This was fortunate because the Cvjetni turned to be the place where the police had most trouble keeping the Pride participants safe—there are many cafes there, the passage for the parade

participants was very narrow, there was the highest concentration of the attackers there etc. For these and other reasons, the interviewed women as a rule refer to the passage through the Cvjetni as a crisis point.

4. Zrinjevac is the name of the park in the centre of Zagreb in which the Pride actually took place—from where the march started, to where it returned after a bit more than half an hour of walking around a planned route in the centre of the city, where the speeches and the program were resumed, where the tear-gas was thrown amid the participants, and from where some of the participants were evacuated in police cars. Thus, Zrinjevac also constantly comes up in the interviews as a spatial landmark with different significations for different women. The situatedness of the Zagreb Pride at Zrinjevac is also symbolically important because of a murder of a gay French tourist that had taken place there three years before the Pride.

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# Sisterhood Beyond Borders: Transnational Aspects of Post-Yugoslav Lesbian Activism

Irene Dioli

Our first stop on this voyage through transnational encounters in post-Yugoslav lesbian activism takes us to Bologna, 1998. It was Italy's third Lesbian Week attended by 10 lesbian activists from the states of former Yugoslavia. One of them was Lepa Mlađenović, who later described the event in a vivid account:

> About two hundred Italian lesbians gathered on a hillside next to Bologna – lawns, woods, terraces, halls…the old house of Mrs Guastavillani. This wise woman decided to allow 'ordinary citizens' to enjoy the villa that was previously only available to the rich and privileged. She left her hometown the house on the hillside. Thus, in recent years, the city authorities have created various initiatives to bring people together: children of war victims from Bosnia, women's organisations, ecological projects, then youths who reject to serve in the army and perform civil service instead, and those who love big weddings…

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_4

> This time, from 2 to 8 June, Villa Guastavillani was transformed into a lesbian city. The lesbians completely reorganised the exterior and interior spaces, exhibition halls, video rooms, lesbian bar…lesbians were setting up the equipment in spite of the old electrical network, installing their stereo devices, a room for conversations, debates, workshops, bedrooms, soccer fields…
>
> If we go back to the events that preceded this moment, then it is important to say that, two years before, the same venue had hosted the Second Lesbian Week, in which special guests were lesbians from three countries of the former Yugoslavia: 10 of us from Ljubljana, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Zagreb. This event was important to us – it was the first chance for lesbians from these cities to come together after the war and the new states. (Mlađenović 1998, online)

These words by Lepa Mlađenović evoke one of the many encounters shared by women and lesbian activists between the post-Yugoslav space and Italy. Over the years, long-term women activists from both sides of the Adriatic have exchanged views, invitations, and experiences in a number of meetings, events, and initiatives devoted to feminist and lesbian issues. When I read, watch, or listen to these accounts, as I have been doing while writing this chapter, I can see a history coming together, threads of a network stretching over the borders between countries and within the post-Yugoslav space.

In my own little, tangential way, I have been an explorer of these networks, a little dot hopping around this solid foundation of encounters and relationships for a few years. My own experience as an Italian student, then scholar, researching about gender and sexuality issues in the region, has led me to pass by and witness—at the beginning, almost by chance—crucial moments in the development of LGBT and queer activism in the region, a process in which lesbian and feminist activists have played a paramount role. On the other hand, it has also led me to interrogate, with the increasing awareness left as a gift by contacts and conversations with the protagonists of this chapter of history, the issues related to transnational encounters, cooperation, and organising—both within the region itself and between the region and its neighbours, at the institutional and grassroots level.

This chapter, through research and interviews carried out in different stages over the last ten years, seeks to explore some of the transnational dynamics involving lesbian activism of post-Yugoslav countries, in both their thorns and roses, including experiences of transnational solidarity and cooperation at the European level as well as regional post-Yugoslav networks and the Lesbian Week events.

## My First Conference: Thoughts About Lesbian (In)Visibility in Yugoslavia and After

Before I made my first trip to former Yugoslavia, I had never really come across the concept of privilege as it is currently used in social studies and activism, but one particular moment stood out to me, in a way loud and clear enough that it has stayed vivid in my memory, like a scene from a movie, and I started to get it before I actually learnt to articulate it.

It was October 2005. I was a student in a Master's programme on Southeastern Europe, and I was travelling from Italy to my first conference on gender studies, in Zagreb. I travelled alone, by train—someone from the organisation would pick me up at the station and host me for the days of the conference, and then I would move to Belgrade for my thesis fieldwork. It all felt like an adventure and—as I see it now—that kind of "just a little scary" that someone who has never actually had to fear for their life can feel. At the border crossing, I starkly realised that things could be very different as I watched the border guards give a hard time to a young (probably Roma) man in the same compartment as me, who was searched, manhandled off the train, and then returned with a snarl. As for myself, I did not even have the chance to show my papers, as the officers remained oblivious to my presence. I was white, 25, sporting an overall and braids, and clueless enough to blend into the furniture. Privilege made me invisible to trouble, so to speak.

A different kind of invisibility—now commonly referred to as "femme invisibility," not that I knew this was a thing back then—kept protecting me when I got to the Transgressing Gender Conference in

Zagreb. The Archbishop of Zagreb had made a few heated statements about "evil" arriving in town, and there was fear of attacks. People were worried about their safety, but as a foreigner of—again, so to speak—"standard" appearance I was little of a target. When organisers advised us not to go around the city on our own, to stay in groups, and take off conference badges outside the conference premises, I did get how serious the situation was, but I could not really feel that it was about me too. I thought of myself and found it almost amusing to be called "evil." But again, the Archbishop was not certainly thinking of me or people like me. The targets were people who were visibly "different" and visibly transgressed gender norms. Anyway, I would be moving on in a couple of days and be safe, flying under the radar—including, both fortunately and unfortunately, gaydars, as no one ever even wondered if I could possibly be a lesbian myself.

When looking into lesbian life in socialist Yugoslavia, oral narratives and the available written accounts point to invisibility as the defining element of lesbian existence, in both public discourse and everyday life. This was another kind of invisibility, though—less about individual invisibility and more about an identity the existence of which was not even acknowledged. For example, one of my respondents said, "lesbians were invisible, not only to the public, but to each other as well. Many of them thought that they were the only lesbians in their surroundings" (Mira,[1] personal communication, October 2010)—and several others articulated the same feeling. Within the country's dominant culture—not an exception to the repression and domestication of sexuality shared by communist systems—a rhetorical emphasis on hegemonic masculinity stigmatised male homosexuality as an expression of weakness, while a general erasure of female sexuality and pleasure virtually cancelled female homosexuality from the picture. The criminal code (30 June 1959) deemed male homosexuality illegal in the whole Yugoslavia, but made no reference to female homosexuality (see Hosi Wien 1984). The virtual invisibility of female homosexuality is exemplified by this short excerpt written by Jelica Todosijević for a Report on lesbians in Yugoslavia, published by the IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Committee) in 1995, suggesting how discrimination faced by lesbian women was directed to their non-married status rather than their sexuality:

> Being a lesbian in Yugoslavia means that you don't exist at all. You don't exist legally, you don't exist illegally. You are an offensive word, a bad character from a cheap novel or a heroine from the midnight porn on the Third Channel of Belgrade Television. Being a woman who loves women means to live hard and in fear. […] A woman in Yugoslavia is validated by the man who she is with. If she chooses the way of living she desires, it means that she's condemning herself to the endless battle for her integrity.

By the mid-to-late 1990s, homosexuality was decriminalised in all of the former Yugoslav republics. Decriminalisation bills had already been passed in Slovenia, Croatia, Vojvodina, and Montenegro in the late seventies, whereas a second wave of decriminalisation involved Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia in the mid and late 1990s. As a consequence, formerly clandestine organisations (e.g., Arkadija in Serbia) were able to become more visible. New organisations were also created. However, such legislative changes—often prompted by international pressure and adopted without Parliamentary discussion—did not affect society's overall attitudes, being neither the outcome of grassroots action nor the result of broad domestic consensus (Bilić 2016a). Thus, increased visibility stirred the violent reactions of conservative groups against LGBT activists and events, most often in the indifference of the respective governments.

In addition, the intensification of nationalist trends following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, together with economic crisis and social uncertainty, triggered a re-patriarchalisation process (see e.g., Naumović 1999; Bringa 2004). Against this backdrop, the adoption of conservative values influenced with particular intensity the sphere of family and gender roles (see Iveković 1996; Iveković and Mostov 2002). The strongly gendered violence of ethnic wars—a classic reminder of how sexual imageries of potency and invasion shape political and military violence and propaganda—brought normative gender enforcement to the surface of public discourse (Žarkov 2007).

In nationalist ideologies, people outside the gender binary and other than heterosexual are excluded from the canons of national identity (see Iveković 1996; Iveković and Mostov 2002): if men are cast as macho warriors and women as means to achieve the nation's continuity and homogeneity, homosexuals are left as traitors of the nation (see Bilić, this

volume, epilogue). Indeed, especially during the 1990s, homosexuality has been labelled as a foreign import: with the beginning of LGBT activism, often supported by Western European organisations, nationalists were able to use discomfort with non-standard sexuality to amplify hostility towards national and ethnic others, according to the other-phobic topos of a "pure" national character "corrupted" by the contact with the West—a constant within the nationalist discourse (Čolović 2002).

This was what I learnt, with great enthusiasm, in my MA course on gender and nation, taught by Rada Iveković, which was hugely significant for me—in fact, what was I going to present at my first gender studies conference in Zagreb was my paper for her course, devoted to "Female homosexuality, patriarchy, and nationalist communities". In a somewhat verbose manner, the paper argued that

> by asserting difference and the right to difference in the realm of gender identity and sexual orientation, as well as questioning the dogma of women's dependence upon men, female homosexuality testifies to the potential multiplicity of social and interpersonal relational models, thus contributing to questioning on the conceptual level the unchangeable character of authoritarian and hierarchical social structures.

I just—bravely—went back to look at that paper from 12 years ago, and I see that I never even used the word "lesbian", except for a couple of quotes from someone else's work. I find it funny now, that I was writing about the revolutionary potential of being a lesbian and I did not even dare to use the word. Activists like Lepa Mlađenović, instead, had reclaimed that very word to find community and solace in times of war and violence.

## Imaginary Feminist Lesbian International Community

After learning about the pervasive gender normativity of nationalism and ethnic wars, I also learnt how feminist and lesbian activists played a crucial role in the anti-war mobilisation of the 1990s, laying

the groundwork for human rights associations to develop for women, children, refugees, and minorities—and thus preparing a space for dealing with gender and sexual diversity as well, in a way perhaps analogous to what happened in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust, when human and civil rights discourses powerfully emerged within Western democracies (Bilić 2012; Churchill 2008).

In her "Notes of a feminist lesbian in anti-war activities", Lepa Mlađenović (2012) examines the role played by lesbian women in the peace movement, highlighting the process of coming out by lesbian peace activists as well as the way feminist peace movements like Women in Black made space for lesbian subjectivities in their workshops and politics. Her analysis further shows how lesbian perspectives found space and support in at least a part of feminist NGOs that embraced a comprehensive agenda against all kinds of discrimination (including sexism and homophobia), whereas this did not happen in human rights organisations, where a hierarchy of needs—with focus on ethnic violence—would push women's and LGBT issues to the side.

> One of the things we learned very early was that war creates a priority of survival needs. The right to be alive and the right to survive become the first priorities. This is a fact in war-torn countries: there is no social space for naming identities. The rule of nationalism imposes nationality as the only identity with political meaning. (Mlađenović 2012, p. 129)

Mlađenović's essay also provides a touching account of international solidarity, recalling how Western European lesbian volunteers and professionals provided support from their countries or travelled to former Yugoslavia to help. The image of a transnational lesbian community is vivid in these pages: the author "decided to write in English, as I made imaginary feminist lesbian international community my audience, and it felt safe" (Mlađenović 2012, p. 127). In her writing, and also during a conference on the history of lesbian movements in Europe (Von Känel 2017), Lepa Mlađenović remembered the vital support of fellow lesbian activists from all over Europe during the war, including Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and the UK.

> Yet in the midst of all this anger and brutality, the gift of the international lesbian movement came to us. All during the war, lesbians from many places in the world were in solidarity with the anti-war movements in the former Yugoslavia. First, we lesbians from Serbia longed to meet our sister lesbians from Croatia, Kosovo and Slovenia. There were only a few of us, but longing was deep and it was only at international conferences that we would embrace each other. Serbian borders became difficult to cross. Nevertheless, the lesbian support continually arrived at our addresses: letters, packages, gifts, coffee, chocolates with words of tenderness. Often from lesbians we had never seen and perhaps may never see, sometimes from women we knew. There were books, journals, newspapers from lesbians in France, Spain, Italy, and the United States that were sent to lesbians in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. Letters of support. The anti-war song Universal Soldier with the voice of Buffy Sainte Marie which we played a hundred times. Music cassettes of beautiful Cris Williamson and Lavender Jane were the most loved ones and were replayed in my kitchen again and again. Also funny lesbian stories by Kate Clinton. Enough to keep us tuned into the tender love of lesbian sisterhood and sometimes — in the midst of work with refugees and fascist politics — also reminding us that we were also lesbians.
>
> In addition, many lesbians from other countries supported the women's groups even though they never identified their support as lesbian. They came to our women's centres to volunteer, to witness our misery and courage and make us feel less alone. There is not yet a study on the high percentage of lesbians becoming international volunteers. But we surely met many of them in our region. (Mlađenović 2012, p. 134)

## We Don't Need No Education: Transnational Lesbian Activism After Yugoslavia

As Mlađenović's essay shows, in a context of domestic isolation and lack of support, lesbian activism sought strength and support in grassroots, transnational networking at the regional level. In September 2003, for example, a regional network was initiated by both individual activists and organisations from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro on the ground of shared history and language. Members met four times a year to discuss training in advocacy,

lobbying for public policy, and activist strategies. The network meetings were highly valued by groups and individuals in the region as a site of cooperation, support, and solidarity as well as of exchange of information, experience, and knowledge—a "safety net" for both new and long-time activists. In the end, structured activities slowed down and stopped because of lack of resources and energies.

However, also thanks to the development of online networks, lesbian and GBT organisations from across the former Yugoslav space have established bonds (e.g., communication and cooperation in the organisation of festivals) to overcome the isolation created by hostile domestic contexts. This is consistent with cosmopolitan interpretations of the international human rights activism that identify peace and transnationalism as its core values, countering a conflict between state and citizens with transnational, horizontal solidarity among citizens (Kaldor 1999). Given that traditional national identities are imbued with gender and sexual normativity, regional solidarity within the former Yugoslav space becomes even more significant in the case of lesbian and GBT activism. Indeed, many initiatives in this realm, especially festivals, have meant to cross national borders and offer solace in the regional community—for example, the imaginary *Queeroslavia* of the first Queer Beograd festival in 2004 (Dioli 2009b; Bilić and Dioli 2016; see also Selmić and Bilić, this volume).

Although, as this volume shows, there were non-heterosexual activist initiatives in former Yugoslavia, a more intense development of LGBT movements took place in the context of a global growth of the NGO sector after 1989 (Štulhofer and Sandfort 2005) and benefited from a number of transnational factors, including international funding and globalised attention to LGBT issues in human rights activism (Greif 2004). However, along with opportunities, international cooperation and globalisation also brought new conflicts. The international community played a role that varies in significance and effectiveness in the development of post-conflict NGOs, including LGBT endeavours. For example, some countries (e.g., Serbia and Croatia) already had an established network of activist organisations (including LGBT), whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to a leading LGBT activist, it was the very anti-war mobilisations that created the space for various

associations to develop (Dioli 2009a, b). On the other hand, the UN presence in Kosovo, bringing along a strong community of international workers, led—in the perception of my respondents—to significant international support for the local LGBT community. Legislation, for example, has been inclusive regarding sexuality issues since the formation of the state under the UN monitoring: the Kosovo Constitution includes an article forbidding discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and the anti-discrimination law is explicitly inclusive of sexual orientation (see Kosova Women's Network 2009). This certainly provides a more favourable framework for LGBT activisms, although legislative changes have all too often limited effects.

In 2009, after finishing my MA and going through a number of jobs for a few years, I finally got my first research post at Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso (now, Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa), an online media outlet and research center based in northern Italy and focusing on Southeastern Europe and the Caucasus. Unsurprisingly, my first personal project was a mini-series of interviews with lesbian activists and former activists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Kosovo, that sought to explore their views on LGBT activism and its relationship with the European and domestic contexts. In the years that had passed since my MA research, the European Union had gradually intensified its role through the application of conditionality policies (Bilić 2016b). As a consequence, sexual rights advocacy was also involved in the Europeanisation process, especially when, after remaining marginal in the beginning of negotiations, social issues and LGBT rights came to enjoy greater significance and attention (Deacon and Stubbs 2007). LGBT organisations became more structured and the development of NGOs provided some activists with a chance to become professionals—although my respondents were divided about such developments and some claimed that many NGOs were interested in perpetuating their own existence.

On the other hand, local activists interfacing international LGBT organisations expressed their concerns about top-down, "neo-colonialist" approaches (Butterfield 2016). As an activist from Bosnia and Herzegovina explained:

> If an international organisation is simply looking for a new place to implement a model or a strategy that has been applied to x countries in Western Europe without taking local specificities and contribution into account when planning a project, it is probably going to fail or be irrelevant or not sustainable and we are going to be the ones left to deal with the consequences after the international partner leaves.
>
> If an international organisation regards the local counterpart as an implementer rather than a partner, and if the work is not carried out in a participatory way from the beginning, the relationship and the work itself become problematic. Local activists need to be empowered, not directed. (Svetlana, personal communication, August 2009)

In particular, many concerns have been raised about international NGOs and LGBT organisations and their top-down, Euro-centric (as in Western-Europe) approach and disregard—or lack of awareness—of the specific problems of Eastern European women. For instance, here Jelica Todosijević from Serbia talks about the Vienna NGO Forum, a preparatory meeting for the UN Conference on Women in Beijing 1995:

> I was disappointed to discover that I was the only out Eastern European lesbian in the Lesbian workshop. I had a support of three other out Eastern European lesbians (two from Hungary and one from Yugoslavia) who were, unfortunately, fully engaged in other workshops and couldn't attend this one. Lesbians from Eastern Europe are not to be blamed for this poor showing, because they never had the chance to be there. Both money and lack of information kept them away. I myself was confused by what was expected of me at such a conference, but now I realise the importance of being involved in drafting language for these large conferences. If I hadn't been there, the language on lesbian human rights would not have addressed Eastern European Lesbians concerns at all. (Todosijević 1994)

Another widely expressed concern referred to a lack of understanding by international activists and organisations of the differences between their own context and working methods and local ones, which made working in the domestic context harder and more dangerous. For example,

activists pointed to the different relationships with local and national authorities:

> I was dismayed at the patronising and dismissive attitude of the ILGA representatives, lesbians who were leading the workshop on lesbian human rights. They have no understanding whatsoever of our problems because our problems are so different from theirs (If Eastern Europeans were better organised and more present at those thirteen ILGA's Conferences, something like that wouldn't have happened!). They kept asking for concrete suggestions with which I could lobby my government, not even realising that it is insane to suggest that anyone lobby the Serbian government. Fortunately, Rachel Rosenbloom, from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, was there. If they didn't respect me, at least they respected her, and she somehow understood that those of us from the East have different concerns. For example, I pushed hard for the inclusion of education as a goal, because that is the only means we have for reaching the public – demonstrations are out of the question! I also suggested that we include the language "lesbians, single women, and women who are not attached to men" because many Eastern European lesbians do not identify themselves as lesbians. We were able to get this language into the document, largely as a product of Rachel's efforts, but the final result was like we haven't done anything during those two days. (Todosijević 1994)
>
> In our country [Bosnia and Herzegovina], for example, where we are dealing with huge corruption and a weak government, activists have nobody to support them, for example in terms of political parties or government. The government is, in fact, your obstacle, which is not the case, for example, in the UK or France, where the government itself is pushing the change. (Svetlana, personal communication, August 2009)

Thanks to the insights of my respondents, I became more aware of the limits of thinking about LGBT issues in terms of linear progress. Later on, as I reflected on those interviews, I tried to avoid words and concepts like "influence," "impact," or "shape"—or any formulation implying a country or region passively "receiving" inputs from outside/above, or hierarchies between "advanced" and "backward". In this regard, however, things have changed and improved in some ways. If we look at the European Lesbian Conference of 2017, women from Eastern and

Southeastern Europe were included both as organisers (Biljana Ginova) and speakers (Lepa Mlađenović, Mima Simić, and several others from Poland, Ukraine, and Russia; Von Känel 2017, online). Some respondents mentioned the human rights approach as one of the differences between Western and Eastern European activism:

> Another problem I encountered during trainings with international partners involved different methodologies. For example, our approach is strictly connected to human rights, which fits the context we operate in. Everything we do, in terms of public policy, lobbying, and advocacy, is based on a human rights approach. The human rights platform gives you more leverage in our relationship with the institutions because even the government has to be accountable in terms of human rights, while not necessarily so in terms of, let's say, sexual diversity or feminism – which are problematic concepts in a traditionalist context. (Svetlana, personal communication, August 2009)

As highlighted by Svetlana, a non-identity approach under the umbrella of general human rights advocacy gives a less problematic leverage on conservative national institutions and may foster unity among different groups by allowing them to overcome the debates on sexual identities—as categories may be contested, but behaviours are more clearly identifiable (Mertus 2007). On the other hand, one limit of a human rights approach lies in its gender-neutral character that overlooks the specific position of women (Mercer 2004), possibly providing less visibility for lesbian representation, advocacy, and identity.

As mentioned earlier, lesbian activists from the region have kept creating occasions to meet and connect beyond national borders, on the basis of lesbian identity and solidarity. For example, for the purposes of this chapter, I was drawn by a suggestion of the editors to find out more about the Lesbian Week festivals that have taken place in the countries of the former Yugoslavia since 1997. Organised by regional lesbian associations, these meetings have gathered 30–60 regional and international participants coming together to share information, knowledge, and experiences, but also—and perhaps most importantly—to find mutual recognition, solidarity, and support beyond national borders.

## Lesbian Weeks: "Overcoming the Painful Borders Drawn by War and Homophobia"

While researching the Lesbian Weeks, I found out that they stemmed from a solidarity initiative between Italy and former Yugoslavia. In 1996—on the occasion of Italy's second Lesbian Week, in Bologna—Italian activists raised money to invite ten activists from former Yugoslavia to take part in the Italian Lesbian Week—in the "lesbian city" described by Lepa Mlađenović in the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. As stated by Lepa Mlađenović (as cited in Von Känel 2017, online):

> even though it was all in Italian, we were really happy, but what happened was that the lesbians from Slovenia came back and organised the first Lesbian Week for us.

The first Lesbian Week (Lezbejska nedelja) was organised in June 1997 in Pohorje, Slovenia, by Ljubljana's lesbian group Kasandra and Belgrade lesbian human rights organisation Labris, and attended by 45 participants (see also Oblak and Pan, this volume). Italian activists Anna Pramstrahler and Antonia Ciavarella—who invited activists from former Yugoslavia to Bologna in 1996—took part in the event and wrote about it in an article published in fall 1997 in *Towanda!*, the first lesbian magazine officially registered and formally distributed in Italy.

> About 50 lesbians from Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia found each other again after the dark years of war. […] The lesbians from Macedonia and Bosnia could not attend because the organisers lost contact with them, or they fled abroad, or they have no passport.
>
> Pointing out the difficulties in the organisation, the obstacles especially for Serbian women – e.g., they are not allowed to transit on Croatian territory – is not sympathy. We simply want to encourage reflection that lesbians can move on from the war only if other lesbians, of other countries, can give and receive strength and self-determination from the sisters marked by conflicts. Lesbianism must regain its international dimension. (Ciavarella and Pramstrahler 1997, pp. 10–11)

The article by the Italian activists contains an interesting quote by Dragana Rajković, a Croatian activist that decided to live in Ljubljana and was part of the core group that organised the first Lesbian Weeks. In this quote, language, used by nationalism as an instrument to divide, is reclaimed with the opposite function, in a form of active resistance to divisions created by wars:

> We, the Slovenians, want to keep speaking Serbian-Croatian to understand other lesbians, but we think that in ten years the younger generations will no longer do so. (as cited in Ciavarella and Pramstrahler 1997, p. 11)

However, war was not at the centre of the debates because, as explained by Barbara Berce, "war was the only artificial thing in our lives" (quoted in Ciavarella and Pramstrahler 1997, p. 11). "They would rather talk", commented the Italian activists, "about themselves and their life – which is, as we know, another way to talk about the world" (Ciavarella and Pramstrahler 1997, p. 11)—coming out, identity, visibility, sexuality, and creativity. As the final document illustrating the conclusions of the event ("Lezbejska prava su ljudska prava", "lesbian rights are human rights") reads, "it turns out that we have overcome national and state borders and met through the experiences of our lesbian existence" (Labrys 1998, p. 266). Also the accounts of the second festival—held in Sombor, Serbia, from 17 to 22 October 2000—treasured regional connections:

> Labris keeps on networking and overcoming the painful borders drawn by war and homophobia in the daily lives of lesbian women. (Vučaj 2009, p. 22)

Participation from the region became more comprehensive since the third Lesbian Week of September 2004—titled "Our network, our strength" ("Naša mreža, naša snaga"), that managed to gather 45 participants from a number of lesbian and LGBT organisations across the region, including countries that had not yet been represented, like Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Labris 2017). By 2011, when

the fourth festival was held in Belgrade, women from all of the former Yugoslav countries were present, with the exception of Kosovo, and were joined by participants from Sweden and Germany.

A highlight of the fourth Lesbian Week was the participation of scholar Joan Nestle and her partner Diane Otto, a moment that appears in more than one account as a source of inspiration:

> Experiencing the Lesbian Week is never a simple thing, to paraphrase J. Nestle […]. After her words, it is inevitable to evaluate the lesbian experience with new, far superior standards and to notice the importance of your participation in reality […]. After her words, shame is left as an empty cannon, and pride gets a new dimension. (Labris 2015)

Joan Nestle gave two speeches, one of which was filmed and is available on YouTube (see Roy 2012). Nestle shared her experience of coming out as a lesbian in the 1950s in the United States, and she told extensively about her experience of being perceived as "deviant," subject to state control (as the bars visited by the working class butch-femme community were consistently policed), but also embracing her own being "deviant" as a site of liberation. It is probably safe to say that these accounts powerfully resonated with the participants of the 2011 Lesbian Week, confronted with state homophobia, daily struggles with invisibility and coming out, and violent repression or policing of Pride Parades. Indeed, the end titles to the video from the meeting read:

> Beaming with passion and compassion, she spoke of her lesbian past, *how far lesbian desire can take us against the forces of the State* and why it is important for the community and every one of us to gather details from our lives and to found our own lesbian archives. (as cited in Roy 2012, online) [emphasis ID]

In summer 2017, I had the chance to interview Jelena (personal communication, August 2017), a younger activist from Labris, who was involved in the two most recent editions of the festival (Belgrade 2011 and Belgrade 2015). She told me:

> Initially, the Lesbian Week was used as a way to connect through all Balkan countries, to recreate the connections that were severed by the war. After that, the Lesbian Weeks were used to support lesbian movements in all Balkan countries and to create a platform for regional development of the lesbian movement.

When I asked how participation in the festival had evolved over the years, and what the event represented for her, Jelena (personal communication, August 2017) stated:

> The first couple of words are: empowerment, unity, power, sisterhood, multiculturalism. […] Over the years, what I noticed is that multiculturalism is becoming more and more visible, that we as lesbian community are evolving in all our diversity and it is the best possible way to accept all our identities. We are all different and that difference is sometimes challenging. The main thing that was challenging is that generation gap and the ways that different generations are perceiving the ways of engaging in the lesbian movement. […]
>
> The main change is that I have a great regional network with other lesbian activists. That gave me the empowerment in my personal life, the fact that I can rely on every single woman that I meet and that we are all there for each other is the most valuable thing that I took from the Lesbian Weeks.

The feelings of solidarity and empowerment in her words reminded me of what the Italian activists wrote about the first Lesbian Week of 1997, twenty years before, as an ending to their article:

> The songs of our sisters transmitted to us the strength of their memory, their many hugs reminded us that their history is our history. (Ciavarella and Pramstrahler 1997, p. 12)

While researching the Lesbian Weeks—exchanging conversations with both regional and Italian activists and watching the filmed testimonies of those encounters—I have witnessed and felt very vividly the notions of "sisterhood" and "unity" that lie at the foundations of this book and the pleasure of meeting and being together "beyond the painful borders

drawn by war and homophobia," and also beyond any hierarchical dichotomy between the East and the West.

## Conclusion

In 2005, when I moved from the conference in Zagreb to my research stay in Belgrade, I had very little familiarity with activism, even in my own country, and very little awareness of the complexities around and within activism itself. Over those months, I went from thinking of activism as something you could do in your free time to seeing people—most of them lesbian-identified, queer, or bisexual women—whose very existence was a form of activism, as being open about their identities was a statement and a daily struggle. Although activism in my country probably had a longer, more visible history, it was in Belgrade that I discovered the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989)—that had a long history in US feminist activism and theorising, but was still relatively foreign in Italian activism—as activists there had been using it to confront the multiple forms of oppression they experienced in a patriarchal, nationalist context. I realised at some point in my stay—and I am even more grateful about it now—how much patience and generosity those women showed me by letting me in. In this process, I understood how much coming in contact with lesbian feminists of the region, and witnessing moments of their work, became a learning experience for me.

One of the first people I met there was Zoe Gudović, a long-time feminist and lesbian activist and performer, member—among other things—of the Queer Beograd Collective, which I was interested in because I wanted to write my MA thesis about the Queer Beograd Festivals. I remember that, while walking to an event, she asked me: "how do you identify yourself?". The question was new for me—had been out to myself for what seemed forever to me, but I had very little awareness of identity politics—still, the answer came quick and straightforward: "female, lesbian." Many things have changed in these years—some of the people I met then have left the region, some left

activism, some probably identify in a different way than they did then (I, for one, have come to identify as queer). But in 2015, when I sat for lunch at a conference in front of Lepa and she asked me another blunt question—"Do you identify as a feminist?"—I was, again, taken a bit by surprise, but I said—"yes, of course." And, as new letters have been added to the LGBT acronym and queer and intersectional activism has provided a critical look at categories of identity, oppression, and resistance, my feeling is that "lesbian" remains an indispensable category for those who identify as feminists—by which I mean that we need this category to exist and be acknowledged, whether we personally identify with it or not—because of this very element of female solidarity beyond differences and borders.

## Note

1. The name is invented.

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# Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Activism in Macedonia

Irena Cvetkovic

In April 2013, along with a few lesbian friends from Skopje, we set up several banners on the most frequented overpasses, exits, and entrances to the city. The banners read: "Lesbians wish you a nice day!", "Lesbians wish you a safe trip!", "Lesbians welcome you!". At the time, we were not quite sure about what we wanted to achieve with this. We just wanted to have fun while being aware of the risks we were running in our homophobic society. The action was carried out at night, in the empty and sleepy capital. The next morning, photographs of the banners were all over the media, and the social networks quickly followed. However, even the most homophobic outlet covered our initiative kindly. We thought this was due to the fact that our action was just an apolitical attempt to make people like us. This changed as soon as the news was shared on a Facebook page that gathered LGBT people from Macedonia as the response we received there was far from expected.

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_5

One woman, who introduced herself as a lesbian, remarked that "the bad word" made the action distasteful. The word in question was: Lesbians! She explained that in spite of her sexual identification, she considered the term ugly and inappropriate for public use, suggesting instead a softer version, namely L-girls. Some other lesbian participants in the discussion supported her view and we understood that what appeared to be a safe exposure in public was in fact a significant political leap within our own community.[1] What we did was a visibility action, a cry and a modest attempt to publicly utter, hear, write, and read the word "lesbian". The naming became more problematic for the lesbians themselves than for the general public (see Bilić, introduction to this volume; Radoman, this volume).

Throughout Macedonian social history, lesbians have been invisible, hidden, nameless. The lesbian voice had been excluded from the political, social, and cultural sphere. Lesbian women who took part in the discussion following our public intervention were irritated by the politicality of our gesture because it opened a crack through which all of the concealed life stories, fears, experiences of shame, discrimination, and exclusion gushed out irreversibly. It was not the general public our banners managed to provoke, it was our own community. And that was good.

In this chapter, I argue that lesbian women, their everyday practices, experiences of violence and discrimination, their struggle for human rights are unheard, marked as socially unimportant or unworthy. The lesbian political voice has become more of an ornament in the two major political and social discourses: the gay rights movement and the women's movement.

I am aware that I cannot offer an exhaustive depiction of Macedonian lesbian activism because its *herstory* is fragmented and dispersed. I will, therefore, focus on a few instances in which lesbians made political claims. For that purpose, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven key activists, and I looked into media content and relevant NGO documents and publications. This chapter offers an insight into the early LGBT activism and the more organised feminist and women's initiatives, drawing attention to the role lesbians or lesbian issues have played in them. I associate early LGBT activism with the appearance of the first LGBT organisations (early 2000) working

mostly on HIV issues. Since it is not clear whether there is an organised feminist movement in Macedonia, I focus on the work of the biggest union of women organisations, the Council of Women's Organisations. I also discuss the first attempts at lesbian strategic separatism (with the appearance of the first lesbian and feminist group called LezFem) and the relations that lesbian activists have created with some of the key gay and women's political actors.

## Our Sisters Are Straight: Macedonian Women's Organising

The women's antifascist movement in Macedonia was politically relevant and laid the foundation for today's women's organising.[2] The first women's organisations were established after the country became independent from Yugoslavia in 1991. The Women's Organisation of Macedonia was founded by ten women from Skopje in 1994 and later became the Macedonian Union of Women's Organisations (SOŽM). (There was also the Association of Albanian Women operating for some time within the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity (Škarić-Murdževa 1996)). The Union comprised 23 local organisations whose efforts concentrated on different peace and charity causes (Škarić-Murdževa 1996). The president of the SOŽM Savka Todorova (personal communication, October 2017) pointed out that the then circumstances imposed these topics as priorities. The 1990s and the early 2000s were troubled by war in the region, with Macedonia facing an embargo imposed by Greece, which had a negative impact on the nation's economy. A series of armed conflicts destabilised the country and resulted in erupting nationalism, religious and ethnic hatred, and intolerance. In her analysis of the Macedonian women's organisations between 1990 and 1996, Škarić-Murdževa (1996, p. 9) concluded that "similar to the political parties, the criterion of ethnicity is visibly present in women's organisations as well".

In 2000, the Open Society Foundation—Macedonia, commonly known as the Soros[3] Foundation, developed a Women's program. Its

primary goal was to aid the development of feminist initiatives within the women's movement. According to the head of the Women's programme, Marija Savova (personal communication, September 2017), women's movements at the time were apolitical and non-feminist. The beginnings were characterised by an invisible, yet strong ethnic division among the organisations of the women of different ethnic communities. Instances of cooperation among Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and other women existed sporadically. Women organised in a political union remained mostly in their own ethnic community. Consequently, the early forms of and attempts at alliances, networks and coalitions focused on the different ethnic identities of the women comprising them. Sexuality and gender remained untouched, waiting for better days. Namely, discussion about different women implied solely different ethnicities rather than (also) different sexualities, thus reproducing a homogeneous image of "women".

The early 2000s witnessed an introduction of women's studies to the Macedonian scene, with 2000–2001 as the first academic generation. The studies were initiated by SOŽM as

> an alternative and addition to the scientific gap in the current educational system, designed as interdisciplinary studies on women's topics, a place for research and self-research, discussion, debate, and new initiatives and opportunities to affirm women's culture. (Women Studies 2001, p. 5)

Women's Studies were intended to contribute to the production of knowledge relevant to women as well as to strengthen the feminist position, and undermine discriminatory, exclusive, and offensive narratives of women's sexuality that were dominant in the academic world. However, the reading list included books of dubious scholarly value, such as *Psychology of Gender. Gender Identity and Gender Roles* by Olga Škarić-Murdževa, also used at the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. According to an analysis of this textbook,

> 80 per cent of the sixth chapter "Psychosexual Development, Disorders and Ethic Re-examination" is dedicated to proving that homosexuality and transsexuality are mental and social diseases to be eradicated, while

> the remaining 20 per cent deals with Freud's theory of sexuality as the "standard frame for healthy psychosexual education and development". (Vrangalova 2011, p. 265)

Vrangalova's analysis identifies the problematic assumptions of the author's chief premises, namely that "homosexuality is an unnatural and abnormal occurrence" and "stagnation of the psychosexual development at a low level," along with her assertions that heterosexuality is "1. Better for society; and 2. Healthier for the individual". She also brings attention to the "evidence" presented by Škarić in her book:

> religious and moral beliefs that homosexuality is wrong, increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases in homosexual sex, physiological incompatibility of anal sex (painful for most people), shorter life expectancy in homosexuals, pronounced promiscuity, higher suicide rate, more frequent exposure to violent sex, the collective homosexual fantasy that sexual violations and rape by a stronger, more powerful man are normal. (Vrangalova 2011, p. 265)

In other words, despite potentially good intentions, the Women's Studies programme continued to perpetuate pseudo-scientific beliefs that were discriminatory towards non-heterosexuals.

The negative connotations mainly referred to gay men. Lesbians were excluded from the homophobic rhetoric. SOŽM's president, Savka Todorovska, agreed that lesbians and other non-heterosexual people were treated unethically in the textbook, claiming that the issues in question were poorly known at the time and the Union was not aware of the positions in the textbook.[4]

Soon after Women's Studies were launched within the SOŽM, another organisation offered Gender Studies as an informal course. Namely, in 2002, the Euro-Balkan Institute from Skopje opened a School for Gender and Politics as an alternative educational institution offering short interdisciplinary courses with a focus on gender and feminist theory. The School succeeded in filling the void in the existing educational system (formal and informal) by introducing contemporary scientific perspectives on women with different sexual orientations. In fact, the School generated some of the key advocates for LGBT rights.

Even though lesbian involvement in women's organisations and initiatives was not formally banned, nevertheless, the movement's prevailing values made lesbians feel redundant or disinterested in active participation, until the emergence of certain feminist spaces (schools, workshops, actions) open to different women. Emergence of lesbian voices became possible through those spaces.

Addressing peace initiatives, Savka Todorovska noted that SOŽM members chose motherhood as the dominant advocacy position for pacifist values. They spoke of disarmament and withdrawal of the troops on behalf of concerned mothers. The political context imposed such concerns as the most powerful mobilising principles, so lesbian women did not actively participate in those initiatives. While SOŽM women who were most prominent in the public focused on initiatives for peace and coexistence, on the margins of social and political life Macedonian lesbian women initiated communication with lesbian activists from former Yugoslavia. Although rare and unsystematic (with the exception of the School on Gender and Politics), these cracks in the dominant terrains of women's organisation are worth analysing.

The early 2000s in Macedonia were marked by a military conflict, although military interventions in the region had ended and the development of democratic society was promptly on the way, as were lesbian and feminist initiatives. In the interview, Marija Savova recounted a story about her Slovenian colleagues who organised a Lesbian Week in Slovenia but did not manage to recruit participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia or Montenegro (see Dioli, this volume; see Oblak and Pan, this volume). They asked Marija to help them find at least one lesbian from Macedonia. "Where was I supposed to find participants with no outed lesbians or similar organisations in the country?", she remembers. Although Marija had been involved in women's organisations and the movement for years, she had never met a self-declared lesbian. The organisers of the Lesbian Week managed to find a Macedonian participant who agreed to participate only if no one else but Marija from the Foundation Open Society had access to this information. Upon return, the lesbian woman did not embark on any initiatives in the country. This woman later became a member of the first

lesbian feminist group LezFem, and agreed to an interview with me to which I return below.

Although the story in question could be dismissed as a memory of a seemingly simple visit to a lesbian event in Slovenia, these contacts became the first sparks of lesbian activism in Macedonia. In the meantime, the Women's Program within the Foundation provided activists from women's organisations with intensive training conducted by lecturers from Serbia. Lesbian topics were also discussed at the lectures. Remembering those years, Marija says certain topics and principles required meticulous interpretation. According to her, the organisations were dominated by older women whose values dictated that issues about sexuality were solely private matters. Marija (personal communication, October 2017) states:

> 'We can't interfere in private matters' reacted some women in response to the interest in lesbians within the women's movement. In our society feminism equalled lesbianity, such was the perception of feminism. Resistance was there, let me tell you, because after the trainings women would approach me, asking whether I was married, or whether I had children.

Therefore, feminism's entry into the women's movement led to gender and sexuality discussions and consequently the first information about lesbians, who started to be acknowledged as women on whose behalf women's organisations could speak or act. Although this rupture ensured that lesbian voices were heard, interest in lesbian lives and experiences was still sporadic, located only on the margins, and without continuity. Even though the potential was there, lesbian topics were silenced in women's organising.

Analyses of political and social rhetoric mostly focus on speakers, narratives, and visual and gestural elements of political debates. However, silence is also a rhetorical strategy,[5] not a mere absence of speech or thought. One of silence's functions can be ignoring an issue in order to deny its legitimacy or avoid it altogether (Anderson 2003). Failing to name, i.e. ignoring lesbian women and their problems and needs, is an act of avoidance, but also a gesture which portrays women's

community as homogenous and stable. The meaning of the term "women" has maintained a focus on women as mothers, women in the family, businesswomen, etc. As a performative strategy, silence implies an exclusion of identities which may problematise the idea of the heterosexual woman of "our ethnicity". The *absent presence* of sexually and gender non-conforming women is prescribed and materialised in the representation of reality by the relevant NGOs with silence as the key strategy. It allows the majority to enjoy the privilege of not having to acknowledge what it knows. Lesbian silence within women's political voice concealed lesbians from the community of women, and revealed the principal characteristic of a community considered homogenous: women are our straight sisters. Those who are not, i.e. lesbians, should find another space to belong to. Occupying a small and sporadic segment of the women's movement, lesbians were left with LGBT organisations, where they were expected to be recognised as members of a larger community of people joined together by their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, even in this larger group, lesbians remained silent for some time.

The issue of non-heterosexual identities and practices in the early days of the country's independence was almost inexistent. From a legislative point of view, until 1996, sex between consenting adult males in Macedonia remained a criminal act punishable by imprisonment. As a result of the obligations that the country had to meet in the context of its admission to the Council of Europe in November 1995, male homosexuality was silently decriminalised in 1996. Nevertheless, lesbians remained invisible even in the eyes of criminal regulation of sexuality and prosecution of "wrong" sexual desires. On the one hand, this protected them, but on the other, it revealed the lack of interest in female homosexuality. However, the emergence and first attempts to launch an LGBT movement caused certain shifts among the lesbian community in Skopje and Macedonia, more broadly. The following section discusses early LGBT organisations from which a specifically lesbian activist organisation would later emerge.

## Our Community Is Male: Lesbians in the LGBT Movement

Organised LGBT activism in Macedonia was set in motion in the early 21st century. Namely, the first NGO to focus on LGBT rights was established in 2002. This was the Centre for Civic and Human Rights (CCHR), an NGO that chose not to explicitly refer to itself as an LGBT organisation. In a promotional publication, the CCHR declared that it was opposed to all forms of discrimination and violence, advocating free expression of one's "sexual choice, as part of the body of fundamental human and civil rights" (as cited in Miškovska Kajevska 2016, p. 83). When asked about this stage of LGBT organising, key Macedonian LGBT activists defined the period as "non-visible activism". Namely, CCHR's strategy was to practise silent and non-visible LGBT advocacy under the umbrella of human rights. Fear from negative reactions on the part of the state, the general public, as well as the LGBT community itself imposed the need for low-profile activism. The early 2000s actualised the issue of non-heterosexual identities in a complex

> multicultural national context [with] several cultures with homogenising and essentialising tendencies, a constellation of constant panic of threat and uncertainty of the country's national identity, a transitional period that has been marked by recent establishment of the country as independent, as well as by the inter-ethnic conflict of 2001. (Being LGBTI in Eastern Europe 2017, p. 9)

As one would expect in such circumstances, democratisation was suppressed by state- and nation-building processes. Consequently, the social and political influence of the church continually expanded, with traditional value systems rooted in gender asymmetry becoming increasingly dominant. The non-heterosexual issue, particularly the lesbian one, remained almost invisible or represented as a phenomenon threatening the nation's wellbeing, i.e. the nation's reproduction embodied in the nuclear heterosexual family (see Dioli, this volume).

In 2003, the first organisation with an open reference to LGBT rights in its name was established in Skopje. This is the organisation EGAL—Equality of Gay and Lesbians. Despite its declarative orientation towards activism for the rights of gay men and lesbians, EGAL focused on sexual health of gay men and men who have sex with men, including those who identify as gay or bisexual, distribution of safe sex supplies, voluntary and confidential HIV testing, and targeted international and state institutions working on public health. The LGBT issue was introduced to the public, in this case, by the health domain, i.e. protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Once again, lesbians were excluded since safe sex-related issues and HIV ranked lower on their agenda.

The first officially declared LGBT organisation Macedonian Association for Free Sexual Orientation (MASSO) was established in 2004. MASSO was founded by a gay man, Kočo Andonovski, and a lesbian woman, Gordana Trpčevska. Kočo Andonovski was the first gay man in Macedonia to come out on national television. Gordana Trpčevska was active in the organisation but avoided public appearance. Consequently, lesbians, contrary to gay men, lacked public representation and the lesbian issue and activism remained invisible even in MASSO. The Association stopped operating in 2008, and immediately afterwards, the first lesbian organisation, the Women's Alliance, was founded. The Women's Alliance is almost unknown to the public, even within the LGBT community. The organisation maintained the strategy of early LGBT low-profile activism, focusing on self-help grassroots activities. The Alliance remained silent when it came to the adoption of laws and policies clearly concerning lesbians in Macedonia.

Instead of Women's Alliance, the political issues relevant to lesbian women, gay men and other non-heterosexuals were later advocated by the Coalition Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalised Communities (Coalition SHRMC).[6] The Coalition SHRMC made the first serious attempt to incorporate women's initiatives in the mainstream gay movement through joint programmes with the non-profit organisation "Akcija Zdruzenska" and the Euro-Balkan Institute in Skopje. On several occasions, the Coalition SHRMC organised events or published

texts on feminism, lesbian feminism, and gender studies to serve as the groundwork for the struggle against homophobia and transphobia. These three organisations unsuccessfully engaged in fund raising for a long-term project intended to bring the gay and women's movement closer together. Lesbian organising, and lesbian activism remained underground and invisible until the LGBTI Support Centre in Skopje was opened in 2012 and the first lesbian-feminist group LezFem was formed as part of the Centre. LezFem was the first informal lesbian group to engage in visible and politically distinct lesbian activism. As one of the founders, I maintain that there were two crucial reasons for a lesbian feminist group within the LGBT Centre, the invisibility of the lesbian issue and the need for a feminist perspective to transform lesbian activism from inward-looking and focused on self-help initiatives to public and political.

A study on discourses, power and sexual minorities during the transition period (the 1990s and the early 2000s) showed internal differences within the gay community:

> There is still a deep division in the gay community between lesbians and gays, and still a considerable lack of communication. Some of the interviewed women emphasised the greater degree of closeted-ness of the lesbian community in comparison to the male gay community. Another difference that was pointed out was the manner of communication. Namely, lesbians in Macedonia do not use Internet social forums frequently, such as Gay Romeo for men. Their communication is mostly based on smaller networks between friends. A 24-year-old woman stated that her identification with heterosexual women is stronger than with gay men. Almost all of the interviewed women noted that the debates around homosexuality are exclusively focused on male homosexuality, which as they pointed out, is best illustrated in media where images of lesbians are very rare to be found when homosexuality is discussed. (Dimitrov and Kolozova 2011, pp. 161–162)

The fact that the participants in the quoted research referred to the media is crucial in understanding lesbians' status in Macedonian social reality, i.e. their invisibility and silence. The lack of lesbian identities

and issues represented by the media can be interpreted as an investment in a policy of invisibility of non-heterosexual women. In this regard, Dimitrov and Kolozova (2011, p. 174) argue that:

> in the greatest number of texts published, the photographic material included represents mostly naked men, groups of naked men in saunas, gay pride frames of half-naked men, men in leather, or with other fetish requisites. An important aspect of the representation of non-heterosexual practices and identities in Macedonian media is that mostly male homosexuality is represented. Not only that the texts written are referring in the greatest number to male gay issues, but also the iconographic material used is almost always representing gay male couples.

Dimitrov and Kolozova (2011) refer to this representation strategy as masculinisation of homosexuality. This masculinisation of homosexuality, defined here within media representation, is replicated throughout the social, political, and cultural representations of lesbians.

## Emergence of Lesbian Voices Within the LGBT Movement

Yet, this silence is far from absolute. Lesbian women managed to breach cracks from which to articulate their voices. These cracks, as I mentioned before, were sporadic and unsystematic but powerful and important. *Orgasmic Letters*[7] from 2007 was the first short stories collection to explicitly deal with lesbian sexuality and love published in the period before the political organising of lesbians and lesbian feminists. As the author, in the first rush of public interest, I received dozens of letters from girls, telling me how important they found the opportunity to read about experiences they could identify with. Most of the letters mentioned hiding and passing the book from hand-to-hand among young lesbian women from the interior of the country. I see this as a small, but important attempt to bring lesbians together in environments where being a lesbian was considered not only a sort of personal curse, but also public danger.

While the lesbian question remained invisible in the public, lesbian women began organising themselves on the margins of cultural production, media discourses, and other activist initiatives. Analyses of the general context in that period (the pre-organisational life of lesbian women) state that

> the high rate of violence and discrimination LGBTQ people suffer on a daily basis, the lack of non-discrimination laws and hate speech regulation, as well as other non-discriminatory legal provisions are some of the main reasons why queer people developed an "underground" culture and do not speak of their sexual and intimate lives publicly. (Dimitrov and Kolozova 2011, p. 156)

In this context, lesbian voices were even less audible than the general LGBT i.e. gay men voices. Activist initiatives perceive sexual identity as collective[8] and use it as a strategic construction that should enable political resistance.[9] And yet, an analysis that would exclude lesbian voices from LGBT activism before the formation of LezFem would not be fair. Such an approach would impoverish the knowledge on lesbian activist beginnings and networks, despite the negligible public response. The lesbian share in sustaining non-heterosexual activist enterprises in Macedonia cannot be ignored. It is for this reason that I asked my respondents to elaborate on the spaces for sharing and issues important to lesbians in that period, as irrelevant as this information may seem to them from the present perspective. At first, many of the interviewed activists claimed that the period before LezFem was insignificant from a lesbian aspect but in the course of the interview it gradually became clear that these humble beginnings led to the first lesbian activist initiatives with long-term effects.

The information I received on the inclusion of lesbian voices in the LGBT movement was mostly gathered in interviews with three key lesbian advocates, active from the very beginnings of the LGBT organisation. Biljana Ginova (personal communication, October 2017), founder of LezFem, Jana[10] (personal communication, September 2017), member of LezFem and Gordana Trpčevska (personal communication, October 2017), founder of MASSO and the Women's Alliance. The

three women embarked on activism in the infancy of LGBT organising, i.e. with the activities of the first organisation dealing with LGBT issues—the CCHR. Activism for them is a personal and emotional political position rather than simply a profession or occupation.

Jana is a lesbian from Skopje, born in 1970. She says that she spent her youth lonely. She fell in love for the first time when she was 15 or 16, at an age when she knew nothing about sexuality and women's sexual orientation. Jana states:

> Nobody spoke about it, there weren't any activities, unlike nowadays when I can always go to the Centre [LGBTI Support Centre in Skopje] to a party and meet people, chat… There was literally nothing, which was difficult for me because I withdrew and fantasised about my love interest, about how I was a boy, and wooed her, how she became my girlfriend. That's how I imagined myself, not as a girl with another girl.

The lack of socialising spaces for lesbian women, the lack of information and knowledge, and finally the lack of a lesbian community created an environment where young lesbians felt lonely and grew up in fear of being the only ones in Macedonia. Jana made her first lesbian friends in a women's football club, where this type of sexuality was also forbidden. Two girls were suspended from the club for being in a relationship. One of the girls introduced Jana to lesbian women from Serbia where she made the first contact with lesbian activists. Lepa Mlađenović was mentioned in all three interviews as a key figure, inspiring Macedonian lesbians to commence with activism or learn about it. These contacts provided Jana with the opportunity to be the first Macedonian to attend the Lesbian Week in Slovenia, where she met lesbian activists from the region. Jana remembers that time as "the best days of my life". She spent the late 1990s and the early 2000s in frequent communication with lesbians from the region. She was particularly impressed by the fact that some of those initiatives had institutional support and that the mayor of Ljubljana opened one of the events. As Jana recalls, it was the first time she witnessed support from someone from the political establishment.

Serbia and other countries of former Yugoslavia symbolised progress, freedom, and equality for Jana. There she socialised with other lesbians and bolstered her political knowledge, learned about activism and enjoyed lesbian solidarity. However, the euphoria proved premature when she participated in the 2001 Belgrade Pride. The violence against the participants taught her that lesbians could enjoy freedom and equality only in closed spaces and events where members of the community were the only participants (see Kajinić, this volume). She discovered that many other post-Yugoslav places were as homophobic as Macedonia. She returned home with this knowledge and joined MASSO several years later, where she kept in touch with lesbians from the region. MASSO embraced these contacts and jointly organised closed events, trainings, workshops, where mostly Serbian lesbian activists shared their knowledge with the aim of developing a lesbian activist movement. Although they did not quite manage to do this, the meetings and contacts gave birth to the idea that one day lesbian women could articulate their political agenda independently.

Moreover, Biljana is a lesbian from Bitola, born in 1980. Being a lesbian in a small town from the interior is an altogether different experience in comparison to living in Skopje. Early LGBT organisation of the community in Bitola was fostered by MASSO when they opened a chapter there, appointing a local lesbian woman as coordinator. The space provided the lesbian women with the opportunity to receive and share knowledge via film screenings and debates on feminist issues. Unfortunately, any potential the office had to offer was destroyed with MASSO's termination. Soon after, EGAL opened an office in Bitola, focusing on gay men and men who have sex with men. Biljana remembers how, at the time, she substituted the lack of lesbian topics and spaces in her hometown with active participation in a web forum, a virtual space created within MASSO's official website allowing lesbians throughout the country to socialise and network. Although Biljana jokingly refers to the forum as a great place for finding a girlfriend, the fact should not be disregarded. Namely, the lack of physical space where homo or bisexual women could get together was compensated for through virtual/online encounters where those women could debate,

exchange information, and perhaps agree on a meeting. The forum also acted as a venue for people who wanted to spread homophobia or provoke. The chief premise of such hate speech was that homosexuality is an illness, but this only boosted solidarity among lesbians. After MASSO's chapter in Bitola was closed, Biljana moved to Skopje. Several years later, together with other feminists, lesbians and political lesbians, among whom was Jana, she founded LezFem, the first feminist lesbian group in Macedonia.

Gordana is from Skopje, born in 1971. She claims she became an activist out of spite. Namely, in the early 2000s, Gordana lacked any ambition to become an activist. However, being a lesbian in Skopje, she realised that girls like her have no place to socialise or hang out. So apart from her job, Gordana decided to manage bars and organise lesbian and gay parties. One night, the CCHR's team decided to host a closing party of a conference in a new bar that Gordana was to manage. Once the word spread about the type of bar being opened, the police showed up and the party was interrupted. At that moment, realising that the bar was closed due to unwanted patrons, all she could think was "this is getting to me. I won't back off, even if you threaten me with a public beheading. That's when my personal struggle began". Gordana met an expatriate working and living in Sweden, interested in the failed attempt to open a gay and lesbian bar. He offered funding for establishing an organisation that would advocate against all forms of homophobia and human rights violations on behalf of the LGBT community. Gordana immediately accepted the offer under one condition: "I will not come out publicly." She was joined by Kočo Andonovski and so began the story of MASSO. Gordana was determined never to speak out in public. She listed personal reasons, mostly the fear of how it would affect her family, which was going through hardship. "I tried to smooth things over at home, not to add fuel to the fire by publicly coming out".

Nevertheless, the lesbian group Gordana managed in MASSO started organising workshops and events, mostly in collaboration with activists from other former Yugoslav republics. Lepa Mlađenović, for example, visited Skopje quite often to support her Macedonian sisters and

insisted that lesbian women should separate from the LGBT organisations. Encouraged and motivated by these meetings, Gordana and several other women formed Women's Alliance, the first lesbian organisation in Macedonia. According to Gordana, the context dictated an inward-looking approach focused on empowerment and support. The absence of lesbian voices in political debates weakened the position of the LGBT community, particularly regarding the adoption of the Law against Discrimination. However, the Alliance's decision to turn towards the community and offer services to alleviate lesbian lives filled a visible void in the social, health and cultural system in the country. Thus, instead of strengthening the lesbian political voice, Women's Alliance decided to cooperate with EGAL and HERA, health service organisations, and introduced lesbian-specific services such as gynaecological exams and psycho-social support. There are different consequences of lesbian separatist organising (see Oblak and Pan, this volume). Some of the positive ones are empowerment and safe spaces, but we should not exclude the risk of isolation. Consequently, as Gordana confirms, the number of people attending the events organised by Women's Alliance never increased. Women's Alliance kept in touch with around 20 lesbian women and did not recruit other participants. Later on, things changed when the Alliance created a website (Queer.mk) offering contents on LGBT rights, and managed to sensitise the general public, and inform lesbians and other LGBT people.

The beginning of LGBT activism also marked the beginning of lesbian organising which at the time aspired towards networking and establishing communication with lesbian activists from the region, in addition to reinforcing the community as a precondition for a more public engagement. The founder of MASSO, Kočo Andonovski (personal communication, September 2017), stated that MASSO through him and other male peers was more focused on EU integrations, especially since 2005 when Macedonia gained the status of EU candidate. Kočo and other activists used this as an entry point for advocating legal changes of the status of the LGBTI. While gay men advocated for public policies and legislation, focusing on EU integration, lesbians turned inward and concentrated on enabling collaboration and international

communication channels. And so, just like a traditional heterosexual family, gay men took care of politics and the public sphere, while women looked after themselves and the family, i.e. other lesbians.

Even though nascent LGBT organising remained within the patriarchal matrix, it did introduce a certain emancipatory potential for lesbian women, which resulted in awareness and motivation for initiating a political, feminist movement. It gave birth to LezFem, an activist group that voiced the lesbian question in the public sphere.

## Emergence of Lesbian-Feminist Voices: LezFem

Seven of us, members of different LGBT initiatives, used to meet at different activist events. All of us well-educated and already involved in activism. The most important thing we had in common was our interest in politics and belief that we can contribute to social change. The opening of the LGBTI Support Centre brought a new social space where we could meet and discuss the need to create a lesbian political voice. Together we embarked on the established of an activist group called LezFem, the first lesbian feminist initiative. We spent many nights deliberating why and how we could create a lesbian movement and finally shared our story with the public. We produced a leaflet to represent our goals:

> LezFem originated from the gatherings and long conversations held by several girls who identify themselves as lesbians, political lesbians and feminists. Our goal is to increase the visibility and political relevance of lesbian and feminist activism and promote fresh resistance strategies against the dominant ideological concepts upheld by patriarchy, chauvinism, heteronormativity, nationalism and clericalism. We strive towards creating an authentic political voice, in search for different past women's experiences while we build upon their knowledge and continuity today, as well as towards political articulation of daily experiences and social relations among women, not just emotional but also economic, friendly, professional and family. It is specifically in these female realities, rather than fictional life styles, that LezFem locates the source of knowledge, values, energy and power.

At the beginning of the chapter, when discussing the action "Lesbians wish you …", I stressed the importance of naming. As Ainley (1995) argues having a language to describe yourself means that you exist. Being a mute segment of the LGBT movements or an invisible element of the women's movement implied feeling—yet not articulating—the specificity of the lesbian voice. Feeling the potential which the lesbian community carried within went hand in hand with a lack of necessary tools for naming such an experience. Naming the lesbian community was the first step since naming implied acquiring legitimacy (Brandão 2009, see Bilić, introduction to this volume). The next step was inscribing the political views in the public sphere and creating alliances and coalitions with our feminist sisters.

The early 2010s brought fresh voices to both women's and gay initiatives. Young lesbians and feminists offered a critical introspection of these two movements and created new informal feminist groups. LezFem found sister-allies in the feminist activist groups "Bori se ženski" (Fight like a woman) and "Tiiit ink". The collaboration and support resulted in several important events, actions, protests, and publications. The women from LezFem, joined by feminists, spoke out about the law on pregnancy termination, how women's participation in the anti-fascist struggle was erased or ignored, etc. The feminists included lesbian voices and topics in their initiatives such as the feminist festival "First born girl" (Prvo pa žensko). Together they organised the first lesbian regional forum "Sisters Outsiders"[11] where lesbians and feminists from the former Yugoslav states got together, learned from each other and built international alliances. The reinforcement of lesbian-feminist voices was closely related with generating forms of being together based on solidarity and political values instead of shared identities (Haraway 1991; see Oblak and Pan, this volume). As a result, lesbian women looked up beyond themselves and, rather than being isolated in their validation and support groups, they created a political voice, imposing it as relevant in the public sphere. Nowadays, LezFem has partly returned to the beginnings of lesbian organising, offering different ways of empowering the community by providing a safe space where women can learn, socialise and articulate ideas for new activist endeavours.

## Conclusion

The road of lesbian activism in Macedonia has been rocky, but the movement has managed to transform invisible subjects into political voices. Traversing the two main terrains of women's and gay movements, lesbian women discovered spaces and topics to help them articulate their needs, problems and experiences. Lesbian activism and feminism introduced significant changes in the women's and gay movement, bringing gender and sexuality in their focus. "Flawed women" (Ženi so feler), as they used to be called in the early years of the women's movement, today are a source of knowledge and fresh resistance strategies, with broader social implications. Although this is just the beginning, the acquiring a voice was the first major step our sisters made. The slogan "silence = death" established by US AIDS activists taught the community an important lesson: lesbians in Macedonia broke the silence by embarking on a struggle for life, equality, and freedom.

## Notes

1. The term community in this chapter describes lesbians as a group with shared sexual orientation in the Macedonian political and social context.
2. The dominant purpose of the women antifascist movement after the Second World War was to enable access to education to Macedonian women and other interventions that would stimulate political and social inclusion of women. The literature on the French Revolution, human rights and the European social democratic movement came to Macedonia via Thessaloniki and influenced women and women emancipation initiatives. There are many written documents on this influence, but the most obvious proof is the establishment of the numerous women's organisations and societies in the mid-nineteenth century, most of them led by female teachers: Kostur Women's Association, Secret Women's Association (one founded in Struga and one in Bitola), Women's Association, Women's Biblical Association etc.

3. The Foundation Open Society—Macedonia (FOSM) was established in 1992 as representative office of a foreign entity, and was registered as national legal entity—foundation—in 1999, pursuant to the Law on Citizens' Associations and Foundations. FOSM is part of the Open Society Foundations' global network, founded by the US philanthropist George Soros. When Macedonia was hit hard by the severing of economic ties with the rest of Yugoslavia and an economic embargo imposed by Greece, the Open Society foundation in Macedonia provided a $1 million grant for medical supplies to Macedonia's hospitals and clinics; helped set up an internet connection for universities and NGOs; supplied educational, health, art, and cultural institutions with computers, copy and fax machines; and awarded scholarships to graduates from Macedonia's universities. With Macedonia's economic woes unabated, tensions grew between Slavic Macedonians and members of the country's Albanian minority. The foundation worked to help establish Macedonia as a democratic state for all of its citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins or religious background.
4. However, in 2012, SOŽM and Savka Todorovska together with the LGBTI Support Centre and other non-governmental organisations organised a Tolerance March under the motto "Against Homophobia, Misogyny, Transphobia!".
5. One of the most paradigmatic cases of using political silence is Ronald Reagan's silence on the HIV epidemic during his presidency (Perez and Dionisopoulos 1995; Altman 1994). Reagan's silence was not an "absence" but rather a political strategy that demonstrated the importance the epidemic had for the Republicans at the time, i.e. the importance of not allowing it to gain legitimacy in the public eye.
6. The Coalition SHRMC is now known as Coalition Margins.
7. *Orgasmic Letters* is a collection of short stories on lesbian love and sexuality, written by me. The short stories were first published on an anonymous blog called Alena. One of the stories was selected as a winner in one competition for young writers called Novite (The new ones). The stories were gathered in a book and published in 2007 by Gjurgja (Cvetkovic 2007).
8. In traditional and conservative societies sexual identity is based on biological, psychological, and gender binary attributes. Creating a sense of self is guarded by binary logic where the lesbian question is always

perceived through the homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, normal/abnormal oppositions.

9. Lesbian group identity initiates lesbian activism and conversely, lesbian activism creates and maintains lesbian political/group identity. Therefore, the absence of a publicly declared lesbian obstructed the possibility for lesbian mobilisation and activism.
10. For the reasons of privacy, this activist will be named Jana in this chapter.
11. The title is inspired by Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) collection of essays and speeches called *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.*

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# Searching for a Lesbian Voice: Non-Heterosexual Women's Activism in Montenegro

Marina Vuković and Paula Petričević

We accepted an invitation to write a text about lesbian activism in Montenegro with pleasure, having in mind that we are both fierce advocates of lesbian rights. At the same time, we feared that, yet again, some other voices would talk about lesbians, instead of themselves. Because of this emotional "dissonance," we made an effort to approach our lesbian respondents in a friendly and sisterly manner and relate to their experiences, problems, and dilemmas, but also appreciate joys, longings, and enthusiasms that guide their activism. Simultaneously, we endeavoured to keep distance from them, so that we could take a critical look at their engagement and the emancipatory perspectives that may be opened in the future.

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_6

The shadow under which lesbians in Montenegro live is much thicker than it appears at first sight. Although the first LGBT non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the country—Slobodna duga—was founded in 2003, and five Pride parades have been held so far, there is no NGO that gathers only lesbians—this is not even done by the only women LBTQ organisation—KvirA[1] which was in the focus of our research. KvirA represents an informal and independent group of activists who operate within Queer Montenegro, an NGO that deals with the promotion and protection of LGBT human rights since 2012.

Currently, there are no publicly outed lesbians in Montenegro, nor outed queer or trans woman who would be prepared to be indisputably associated with the movement for emancipation of non-heterosexual women.[2] Homophobia and patriarchy are recognised as the key obstacles to the improvement of the position of non-heterosexual women, and the combination of these two factors has a considerable influence on the absence of a public person who would declare herself as an LBT woman, which is considered by our respondents as one of the major problems of lesbian activism, i.e. activism of non-heterosexual women.

The interviews[3] we conducted with women during summer and autumn 2017 unambiguously show that the female part of the rainbow spectrum in Montenegro needs a real and recognisable face. However, not one of them, at least for the time being, thinks that her face could be the one. We conducted four in-depth interviews—two with the foundresses of KvirA, one with a KvirA activist and one with an activist who does not participate in the work of this organisation, as well as a focus group with seven KvirA activists.

Starting from the principle that *the personal is political*, we wanted to gain an answer to the questions that regard not only social and political activity of KvirA, but also pertain to the way in which our respondents understand lesbian identity, patriarchy, and feminism. On the other hand, we wanted to gain an insight into the motives for KvirA's foundation, steps through which KvirA has gone in the process of its empowerment, as well as the challenges that it has faced along the way. We were also interested in the extent to which KvirA is satisfied with the achieved results, who is perceived as an ally and an enemy in its activist battles, as well as in the manner in which solidarity networks function among lesbians and organisations dedicated to human rights

in Montenegro and in the region. Finally, we wanted to shed light on the plans for further development of KvirA and identify advantages and risks entailed in different visions of its future.

We began our interviews with a somewhat naive question—When have the lesbian voices started to dissociate from the rest of the Montenegrin LGBT movement?—assuming that lesbian activist engagement has become distinguished through the process of KvirA's formation. However, this was not the case given that the lesbian voices "have never really dissociated themselves," as one foundress of KvirA says (Ema, personal communication, July 2017).[4] The idea of KvirA was to establish a group which was not exclusive in any way and which offered a space for all women's identities (Ema, personal communication, July 2017), including lesbians.

It is hardly surprising that lesbian feminism in Montenegro does not exist if we take into account that feminists are few and far between. There are no consistently offered Women Studies programmes (there was one organised by Anima—the Centre for Women's and Peace Education from Kotor) and courses regarding these issues are given sporadically at the Montenegrin faculties where they are mainly reduced to one-semester modules within post-graduate studies, sometimes with questionable intentions and quality (Petričević 2011). Due to the lack of a referential place where such knowledge would be produced and disseminated, and which would establish links with similar centres in the region, stereotypes related to feminism go largely unchallenged, and some may even be recognised in the attitudes of the interviewed activists.

## LGBT People in Montenegro

In order to better understand the context in which non-heterosexual women activists work, we will take a look at the NGO "scene" (NGOs)—focusing on LGBT organisations—as well as at the challenges they face in the fight for LGBT rights. According to official data, 4 805 non-governmental associations and 150 foundations were registered in Montenegro in September 2017, most of which act in the field of culture, protection of human and minority rights as well as in the field of arts (Ministry of Public Administration 2017). The most recent

publicly available, although incomplete, data show that 766 people were employed in the non-governmental sector at the end of 2015, which amounted to 0.37% of the total number of employees in Montenegro (Velat 2015).

The largest number of NGOs in Montenegro is focused on resolving problems in local communities and struggling with both human resources and financial means to implement key ideas (TACSO 2016). NGOs often lack expertise in the areas in which they operate, as well as computer literacy. On the national level, there is a small "core" (TACSO 2016, p. 39) of profiled organisations with many years or even decades of experience in the fight for human rights, the rule of law, and good governance. While European Union (EU) funds represent the largest source of funding for their activities, complex bureaucratic procedures often take a considerable amount of time, putting the purpose of implementing projects behind and leaving insufficient space for the freedom of political action. It also seems that the existing legal framework contributes to the narrowing of perspectives when it comes to the modalities of citizens' associations because it does not recognise informal associations as a form of organising. These data are especially important for our research, since KvirA is an informal group that nevertheless operates within a non-governmental organisation.

The focus of a smaller number of human rights organisations is precisely on LGBT rights. These organisations have played an important initiators' role, not only in the process of shaping public policies in order to improve the position of LGBT people in Montenegro, but also in organising key events aimed at increasing their visibility, primarily the Pride Parade. In 2010, the informal Coalition Together for LGBT Rights was formed upon the initiative of the NGO Juventas. The Coalition prepared a proposal of the first Action plan for the improvement of the situation of LGBT individuals in Montenegro, which served as the basis for the preparation of the first governmental strategy in this field. The first Pride Parade was organised by the LGBT Forum Progress[5] in the municipality of Budva in 2013 and was marked by violence against its participants. Four years later, the fifth consecutive Pride Parade organised by Queer Montenegro in Podgorica was held without

incidents, and according to the organisers' estimates, gathered a larger number of LGBT people compared to the previous parades.

Furthermore, it seems that under the pressure of growing expectations coming from the EU, the government of Montenegro is more willing to improve the legislative and strategic framework in the field of LGBT rights. After many years of efforts on the part of Queer Montenegro for the Law on Registered Partnership to find its place on the government's agenda (Queer Montenegro, 2013, online), the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights has established a working group for drafting the law, with three representatives of LGBT rights organisations involved.[6] The adoption of this law, which LGBT activists expect will "improve the quality of life of LGBT people" (Kalezić 2016, online), is planned for the end of 2018.[7] In November 2017, this Ministry also issued a call to interested members of the public to submit comments on the 2018 Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy for improving the position of LGBT Persons (2013–2018) (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights 2017, online).

Despite evident progress aimed at improving public policies, the five Pride Parades held, and the LGBT people's courage to come out of the closet on the eve of this year's (2017) Pride Parade, it seems that the same key challenges for the LGBT community remain. We are particularly concerned by the results of the last public opinion poll on discrimination in Montenegro, which was dominated by the respondents' attitude towards LGBT people as "sick", "derided, abnormal, and unnatural" (Centre for Civic Education (CCE) 2016, p. 13). Moreover, every other citizen believes that people of different sexual orientation "are so harmful that efforts should be made to fight against this phenomenon by all forces" (CCE 2016, p. 14). It is indicative that 14% of the respondents consider that physical violence against LGBT people is justified (CCE 2016). The results of a public opinion survey conducted in 2015, in which 54% of interviewed LGBT people reported that they were verbally mistreated or abused, while 28% were victims of physical violence, are therefore not surprising (ILGA-Europe 2016). Also, LGBT people "as individuals and as a group represent the main target of hate speech in Montenegro" (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance—ECRI 2017, p. 15).

The problem of violence against LGBT individuals and activists is explicitly pointed out by the European Commission in 2016 report on Montenegro (European Commission 2016).[8] However, the absence of public information on cases of violence against lesbians and transsexual women contributes to the creation of a misleading impression that violence against them actually does not exist. However, one of the KvirA members, a woman we spoke with, indicated the serious proportions of this problem. She spoke about the consequences of her choice to be what she is, in the following way:

> I do not think at all. I have probably been beaten 65 times, but I cannot really, I cannot think about whether something will happen to me. It's easier for me to do what I want to do. (Sonja, personal communication, October 2017)

NGOs recognise the practice of treating a majority of reported cases of violence against LGBT persons as a misdemeanour according to the Law on Public Order and Peace, although there is often evidence of more serious criminal behaviour, including hate crimes (ECRI 2017, p. 18).[9] Human rights bodies also point, with concern, to the limited prosecution results in these cases and warn that this can "send the wrong signal to the public and create a culture of impunity" (ECRI 2017, p. 18). An illustrative example of a permissive relationship to the culture of impunity can be found in the case of the temporarily banned, and in the end never held Academic Walk of Pride in the Municipality of Nikšić, planned for 2015. The police explanation that the cause of the temporary ban was related to a high security risk[10] showed that the state "capitulated under the threat of football fans" (Gorjanc Prelević 2016, p. 49) and indirectly encouraged violent behaviour instead of prosecuting violators (Gorjanc Prelević 2016).

It is, therefore, clear that LGBT NGOs must take advantage of the current process of Montenegro's negotiations with the EU in order to more decisively demand changes with regard to the attitude of institutions towards LGBT people. Otherwise, a solid legal framework and well-written action plans remain useless, as long as there is no budget

for their implementation. Isolated examples of sensitised civil servants dealing with LGBT rights in their institutions are not sufficient and systemically viable, especially if there is a lack of sensitivity coming from the heads of these institutions. Five Pride Parades in Podgorica remain in the shadow of the Walk of Pride in Nikšić whose ban calls into question the purpose of the state institutions competent to preserve citizens' security, respect them and protect their right to freedom of assembly and expression.

Therefore, it is slightly surprising that the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights was rewarded by the NGO LGBT Forum Progress for its contribution to the visibility of LGBT people in 2017, despite the fact that the promotion and protection of human rights is actually its key responsibility. Without intending to discourage institutions to work more responsibly and in the interest of LGBT people, it seems that this approach might contribute, not only to the further passivisation of state institutions, but also help the existing political regime to collect points in the complex process of fulfilling interim benchmarks on its EU accession path. Giving awards to state institutions in the setting of accumulated economic and social problems could be understood as a legitimisation of their often questionable results in terms of the protection and promotion of fundamental rights of LGBT people.

When it comes to the role of NGOs in the Montenegrin society, our impression is that the ideal of social initiatives and movements that "are protesting vociferously and often very creatively against systems that are clearly not working for their societies" (Taylor 2013, p. 5) is most present within women's rights organisations. These organisations are most radical in expressing dissatisfaction with the current policies of the Montenegrin government in different aspects. Some of them, albeit a smaller number, do not want to give legitimacy to the current political regime by participating in different working groups and other working bodies established by the state administration. Such decisions are not an expression of contempt for the way in which state institutions function, but are based on an often negative experience of cooperation across several years over which NGOs' criticism of the government and responsible ministries has steadily grown.

The largest number of women's rights NGOs is focused on gender-based violence and limited but precious cooperation with state administration and local self-governments has been achieved in that domain. The slowest and most difficult measurable progress is certainly the one related to changes in the patriarchal cultural patterns which continue to shape the Montenegrin reality. The clearest and most defeating indicator of this situation lies in the percentage of women who own real estate (6%) or the percentage of women who own enterprises (9, 6%) (Montenegrin Employers Federation 2013). Montenegro is also at the top of the list of countries with the highest gender imbalance between new-born boys and girls due to a prenatal choice of sex, i.e. a practice of selective abortions used as a tool to provide a "male heir", which leads to a demographic masculinisation with a ratio of 100 born girls versus 109 boys.[11] This practice has resulted in the lack of 3000 women of reproductive age in Montenegro. Moreover, according to forecasts, 8000 less women than men will be living in Montenegro in less than 20 years (Centre for women's rights 2017, online). Keeping in mind the above, it is clear that Montenegro provides an inhospitable context for lesbian and women activism.

## Place for Two: A Non-Formal Activist Group of Non-Heterosexual Women (KvirA)

From the perspective of one of its foundresses, the process of establishing KvirA started spontaneously:

> There were no plans. I am a coordinator for LGBT community building in Queer Montenegro[12] and I also work at the Drop-in centre of the NGO Juventas[13] as a host from 5 to 9 pm. So I started making acquaintances with people from the LGBT community and wondered why the number of women was not higher than it was at that moment. There were only about fifteen women. Then I organised the first gathering, a small party, in a flat we rented. Some new women appeared there and we started throwing parties once a month or once every two months.

> The number of women today is around 140. (Eva, personal communication, July 2017)

KvirA was founded in 2014 and its foundresses have substantial experience in LGBTIQ activism and in the non-governmental sector, more broadly. Some of them have also played a key role in shaping public policies concerning LGBTIQ people, as well as in raising awareness of decision makers through engagement in other LGBTIQ or human rights organisations. What united and encouraged them to establish an informal group of activists was the need to speak in their own name, so that exclusively male voices would no longer speak for them. Today, KvirA is a diverse group of women with a wide range of abilities, skills, and expertise, from design and photography to project writing, medicine, and advocacy. As expected, these women come from all parts of Montenegro, since KvirA is the only activist hub of non-heterosexual women in the country. There are also writers among the women, whose works found a place in the collection of queer stories published by Queer Montenegro. However, one of the foundresses points out that there has not been much research into their creative potential so far and explains the reasons for that:

> Somehow I would not like to go into a more serious story as long as I know that I cannot give something… I think the knowledge that will be given to our members (referring to the project they have been granted) at one point will result in women having the feeling that they can give us something in return, in the sense – that if there is some chance for a contest for queer stories to be launched one day, that we have some reward, some symbolic moments… a moment of returning what is given to us is symbolic, it's terribly important to me because I think that activism in Montenegro takes a lot while giving back a little…. (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

Ad hoc activities have been implemented so far by KvirA, including street actions of writing graffiti with the titles such as "Women, Mothers, Lesbians", "Gay is OK", "Places for two", "Gay zone". An exhibition linked to anti-fascist monuments, whose pieces were painted

with rainbow colours was also organised. Through this kind of engaged art, they wanted to point out that lesbians were also among the liberators during the Second World War anti-fascist struggle.[14] The foundresses claim that out of 140 members, 40–50 try to be involved in organising all activities. KvirA has its own football team and periodically participates in competitions with lesbian associations from the region. The organisation also managed to collect funds to implement a project aimed at improving the level of knowledge on queer and feminist theory as well as policies, among their members in the upcoming period.

There is also a psychological counselling centre that is opened to KvirA members three times a week. No special SOS line for lesbians exists, but one of the KvirA foundresses is fully available. She explains her relationship with the members in the following way: "The SOS line for women is not there, but everyone can get my phone number and ask any question. I am in daily contact with 140 women" (Eva, personal communication, July 2017). This grassroots "bottom-up" approach is inherent to informal groups and as such represents an exception to the scene of predominantly project-oriented activist organisations alienated from their constituency.

Also, the Drop-in Centre, which has been made available by the NGO Juventas free of charge, is important for KvirA members and their heterosexual friends as a main venue for their gatherings and a place where they can "be silent and talk" (Svetlana, personal communication, October 2017). However, the impression is that members are missing more input from the KvirA activists, especially in terms of psychological empowerment, and feel that this is especially important for new members.

> Someone who is an LGBT person feels lonely too often, there is plenty of coffee drinking, waiting for Godot, more work is needed. This is a much more serious story than one may think. (Zoi, personal communication, October 2017)

She further emphasizes that the results of KvirA work would have been much more tangible if the organisation had focused on specific activities on a daily basis, not just during the organisation of Pride Parades, "just seven days a year" (Zoi, personal communication, October 2017).

## Challenges of Sisterhood and Unity in KvirA

As for their allies in their struggle for LGBTIQ rights, KvirA's foundresses recognise the NGO Juventas and Queer Montenegro because they provide them with both technical and professional support. Cooperation with women's rights organisations has not yet developed, which can be partly explained by the fact that KvirA's activities are still not sufficiently present in the public sphere. Although KvirA selected a certain number of organisations as sources of future support when it comes to the promotion of feminist policies and women's activism, it is interesting to note that, apart from Anima—the Centre for Women and Peace Education from Kotor, there have not been open calls for joint action by other women's organisations. The reasons for the absence of such an initiative by organisations with a lengthier service on the public scene can be numerous. The criticism of one of the foundresses illuminates one of them related to the narrow and potentially lesbian/bi/transphobic view regarding what is understood under the term "woman":

> Lesbians are women too. LBT women are women. If we are going to talk about women, let's talk about them, why are they omitted? There is a constant talk about faggots (when I say faggots, it's not a bad word to me), but still no one remembers to say that these lesbians are also endangered, just as faggots are…. (Eva, personal communication, July 2017)

If we come out of national frameworks and focus on the analysis of relations between KvirA and relevant organisations from the region, it is noteworthy that KvirA has a developed network of contacts in almost all countries of the post-Yugoslav space. They, for example, cooperate with an amateur LBT FemSlam group from Belgrade, which deals with sports and with other organisations from the region, dominantly in the realm of their project activities aimed at regional exchanges of knowledge and experiences. The transformative nature of such gatherings for its members is illustrated by one of the foundresses:

> Every time they meet people who are not from Montenegro and are very specific, there are changes in their minds in regard to what they would

> like to do when they return home. What they would do with their lives when they return to their rooms, into their four walls. And the moment when they realise that the change occurs when they get involved is very interesting, when they realise that they can learn something from it, to get something for themselves and that is what matters. (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

Another aspect of cooperation that came to light in the previous period was the exchange of experiences with activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Croatia, regarding the content of the drafted or existing legislation in the areas of gender identity and registered partnership in these countries and the effects of its application. KvirA's foundresses closely follow the comparative legal solutions in these areas and, based on the abovementioned consultations, they have participated in giving comments on proposals of legal solutions drafted by Juventas, Queer Montenegro and the Institute for Legal Studies. Regarding the law on gender identity, there has been a particularly valuable transfer of knowledge from Croatia,—which is, according to one of the foundresses, relevant in the light of the tendency of the Montenegrin government to rely on Croatian legislation and transcribe Croatian laws. Nevertheless, Eva explains that cooperation with organisations from Croatia is rather limited due to the challenges of financial sustainability faced by these organisations (Eva, personal communication, July 2017).

It is evident that there is a significant space for intensifying KvirA's cooperation with organisations from other post-Yugoslav countries. Nevertheless, KvirA's focus on the local context and local challenges may challenge its readiness to react to cases of injustice outside its own yard. One of its foundresses openly speaks about the lack of "transnational solidarity" (Bilić and Janković 2012, p. 74) amongst lesbians and lesbian organisations in the region:

> People do not seem so much concerned with what is going on in the region. I do not know, I am using my own example, I'm not affected by the things that are happening in the region because I think that those things are also happening here, I just do not have a reason to be affected…. (Eva, personal communication, July 2017)

Another stumbling stone for building or revitalising 'sisterhood and unity' in the post-Yugoslav space is reflected in the way individual activists from the region perceive the position of transgender women:

> Radical feminist policies know to be exclusive. I personally do not like to hear them say that a trans woman is not a true woman and that she therefore cannot be a part of this story because she had a male privilege for a while… On the one hand, I agree that these women had a male privilege but, on the other hand, I know they didn't, because it is a completely different story compared to a cisgender man. They may have been raised in that sense and very guarded, cuddled, and cherished in a way that female children may not be. However, they also experienced a hell from the moment they became aware of their other gender identity… I am just not sure to what extent we will be understood, we are not exclusive in that sense. For example, we consider that an experience and, primarily the experience, the lives we live, this kind of "core", are something that can only enrich this story and thus do not in any way detract from what feminism is. And that is equality, and that is important for all who did not live from the very beginning as a woman. It is especially important for them to feel accepted, welcome, part of the community, which knows to be very exclusive in certain moments. It is quite possible that we will have these contentions and debates with our colleagues from the region. We have already had some clashes regarding the exchange of opinions, especially during Lesbian Week, which happened in December 2015, where I just heard such statements that transsexual women are not women, and that transsexual men were actually lesbians all their life. And I experienced a nervous breakdown at that moment because it is already an oppressive policy… Each of us has this oppressive experience and it is absolutely unacceptable for me that someone who called herself a radical feminist puts into question someone's femininity. Anyone who will problematise it in our further work will not be able to cooperate with us. So it's a red card for me, the moment we begin to produce something we are actually fighting against. (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

The answers of our interviewees to the question about the relation towards feminism demonstrate a broad range: from a superficial and stereotyped acquaintance to an informed and well-founded relation.

Above all, there is an understanding of feminism as an "anti-masculine" theory and movement:

> Everything that moves toward the extreme end is bad, and feminism that moves toward the extreme end is particularly bad, since it starts as something positive, it starts like – we advocate for the equality of women and all that – and then suddenly you realise at the next moment that the message is – let's conquer men, cut their genital organs off and throw them to the lions. (Roza, personal communication, July 2017)

There is also an opinion that "if I am a feminist, I have to grow hairs" (Kora, personal communication, October 2017). Of course, different perceptions are also present, similar to the attitude of one of the participants in the focus group:

> Given that we are women, it is completely logical that we are on our side. Every woman thinks that it is completely logical to be a feminist, because on whose side you will be, if not on your own. And that is it. I cannot think of anything worse than when a woman says that she does not support feminism. (Lena, personal communication, October 2017)

One of the interviewed activists is on the same page when she asserts that feminism is "like a litmus, you propose a topic to people to see if they will slide or not, there are topics where you measure whether a person is an intellectual or not, these topics simply have to exist" (Zoja, personal communication, September 2017).

What is concerning is that a significant number of respondents understand feminism through radical feminism,[15] and radical feminism through TERF—trans-exclusionary radical feminism, i.e. a movement which insists on the substantialisation of gender, and which considers as women only those who are born as women, promoting in this manner transphobia grounded on the essentialist foundations, which is far from the spirit of feminism, as understood by the authors of this text.

Beside several exceptions, the impression is that the activists of KvirA obtained the first more meaningful information about feminism precisely from transphobic radical feminists which turned them away from

further research about the ways in which feminism, along with the theories and policies that originated from it, may be conceptualised. This has implications for the position of women not only in the LGBT community, but also in the general society, as well as for the potential of political imagination formulate responses and devise strategies for undermining the hetero- and cis-normativity pressures that they are exposed to.

## Visibility of Lesbians and Lesbian Activity in Montenegro

Elusiveness and incapability to name a female character, voice, and subject in the Montenegrin social and political space has a long and, in fact, versatile history, but in this text, we will not move further from decriminalisation of homosexuality which took place in Montenegro in 1977. The legal framework that preceded the abolition of the criminalisation of male homosexuality did not prohibit "female sexuality" (Brković and Kalezić 2016), which remained "under the radar" of the legislator of that time. This position of an untenable lesbian subject—neither named, nor forbidden (Butler 1991)—is, therefore, present from the very beginnings of the fight for equality of LGBT persons in the Montenegrin society. Forty years later, non-heterosexual women that we interviewed about the conceptualisation of lesbian identity and its position in the Montenegrin society and LGBT community, testify about invisibility similar to the one described by Butler:

> Lesbian identity is not understood in the society at all (…), lesbians do not exist, they are always the ones who seek the attention of men, to join them in the entire story, if possible (…) this is something that happens to women and then passes, of course, in the end they choose "the natural". (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

Non-existence that she speaks about is, in fact, the absence of comprehensibility, i.e. cultural intelligibility (Butler 1991) of lesbians in a conservative society, certainly related to the patriarchal

conceptualisation of woman: "I have never heard more talks about marriage and children than among those women who love women", asserts one of the foundresses of KvirA, and then continues:

> Why? Because they consider that in this manner they will satisfy some other, someone else's criteria, but not their own. I think that this is one of our really big problems – instead of working on the love for themselves, being honest toward themselves, they are very often led by a completely different motive, to satisfy their families, to make sure that their families are fine, not to let themselves be the cause of stress and problems. […] "One day I will have a husband, I will have to have a husband" – is a sentence, which is very indicative of certain attitudes that people have about their own life, and these are young women. (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

Deep rootedness in patriarchal imperatives is evident through a large number of LBT women who do not question marriage. As a matter of fact, many of them are entering into a heterosexual marriage, on the one hand, as a way of responding to the expectations of the environment and, on the other, due to the wish to become mothers, which is something that many of them indeed want. The situation changes with time: the impression of our interviewees is that this was the case more often before and that, as they become better informed, women also start considering other forms and modalities of partnership and parenting.

One of the reasons for the absence of publicly declared lesbians and their remaining in "transparent closets" is the lack of readiness to expose their personal lives to the homophobic and hostile public, and the fear that such a type of visibility would consume the manner in which they have been perceived in the public until that moment, through their vocation, professional achievements or some other form of activism and that, by this act, they would turn their sexual orientation into the primary identification and eventually "profession":

> I think that they all feel what I feel, that suddenly everything is forgotten then, this is the only interesting thing, and whatever else it is that you are doing is completely neglected, (…) this is the only thing that matters, and it is not that easy, I think that is not simple if you have a professional

> life of your own, and it means that you would have to be a human rights activist deep down and then to mix everything together in some way, and I think that it is not easy. (Zoja, personal communication, September 2017)

Invisibility of lesbians in Montenegro that still persists is caused both "externally"—by the general inhospitality of the homophobic environment towards disruptions of traditional gender roles, expressions, identities, and sexual orientations, and "internally"—through a deeply internalised customary norms and homophobia, on the one hand, and the ethics of care that places inter-human relations in the centre of moral acting, on the other. This may be recognised in the way in which our interviewees talked about disclosure—outing as a deeply personal and simultaneously political act. In that sense, it is important to emphasise the care about partners, present or former ones, with whom these women decide (or not) to enter into the process of disclosing their sexuality. The reason for which outing is avoided or limited to a narrow circle of friends lies not only in the lack of understanding or potential rejection by parents and the closest environment, but also in the fear of the consequences that our actions would have for other people, regardless of how much we may be convinced of their propriety (see Bilić, this volume):

> You know what, now that Marija is here, I twitch on that, I cannot say that I would dare to expose her, she is not somebody who grew up with this and I am a huge step out for her, she is, you know, hetero totally – was (laugh), so I have to protect her, I must not expose her to the situation in which somebody reproaches me and then drags me through the newspapers and so on… That is what I have to keep in mind. (Zoja, personal communication, 2017)

There is also a certain transformative potential that outing may have on a person in front of whom it is performed. One of the interviewees perceives it as a gift of confidence, on the one hand, and of gratitude and accepting differences, on the other, which broadens and deepens our experience and our understanding of human relations. This is the gift that changes and enriches by making people closer one to another.

The members of KvirA quote the pressure of their families after outing, the request that this should not cross their doorstep, as a common problem they face: "It is enough that I know this about you, nobody else needs to know" (Eva, personal communication, July 2017). Support "among four walls" is the best reflection of ambivalence between the need to empower and accept the loved ones emotionally, and the necessity to preserve the impression of "normalcy" in front of the environment, not to "make waves", as stated by one of them. This reflects the need to stay protected by family members in a generally homophobic environment and points to the mechanism of "transparent closet"[16]:

> In the majority of cases, the narratives of acceptance rest on the idea 'you are still my child', which implies that homosexuality is nevertheless something negative. This is in line with Fields' argument that those parents who respond to a child's homosexual orientation by destigmatising the identity nevertheless rely on a conventional understanding of gender, sexuality and parenting, and thereby paradoxically help perpetuate heteronormative conceptions of normalcy. (Švab 2016, p. 1354)

In these terms, outing represents "a constant struggle against those who, on the one hand, accept the disclosure, and then, on the other, refuse to accept its implications" (Davies, as cited in Švab 2016, p. 1354). The intensity of this pressure is confirmed by a comment of one of the KvirA activists: "This is like you need to say that you have cancer" (Ema, personal communication, July 2017)

Although it may be unexpected for long-term activists, in their answers we often come across the joint "don't ask, don't tell" strategy in terms of disclosure/outing to parents, where sexual orientation does not represent a problem, given that it is never openly posed as a question:

> I never came out like I sat my mother and father down and said – Mom, dad, I… (…) I do not have a problem regarding them (parents), it is not a problem for me to tell them, but they do not ask me about this and I cannot find space for myself to talk about this with them, since they do not ask anything about this, whether I have a boyfriend or a girlfriend or not. (Eva, personal communication, 2017)

> My friends know, my sister and her husband as well, parents still do not know, but they assume something (…) we do not want to qualify this in any other way except as a roommate yet, I think that this is fine for now, I think that the moment will come when I feel the desire to unmask this – roommate, yeah right… some things are not completely invisible, but we do not talk about this in a completely open way. (Ema, personal communication, 2017)

They are convinced that parents assume and (up to a certain point) accept their sexual orientation, but not openly. This policy of hushing up in which they participate and persist consciously is mainly unrecognised as a form of internalised homophobia, massively overpowered by honest, enthusiastic and relentless work in connecting and empowering LBT women.

When it comes to lesbian identity perceived as a basis of association and joint action, the interviewed activists mostly do not think that it is either necessary or needed as a prerequisite of effective political intervention, and/or that it is a weak common denominator not only for activism, but also for socialising or going out for some of them, with one exception:

> I think that it is – now. (…) And I think that it is a good concept, to be a "political lesbian" is not that bad, not for me, and it is not important whether I am a lesbian, it is not of significance, but I will be, at the moment when I should change things by what I will be. And it is important only for this reason. (Ema, personal communication, July 2017).

This approach represents a "strategic essentialisation" (Spivak 1988) of lesbian identity, used as an answer to homophobia and discrimination, and targeted above all at finding and including the largest possible number of female supporters in the process of non-heterosexual women's emancipation in Montenegro. A strong critical attitude towards the concept of "authenticity" as a condition for dealing with activism is visible; belonging to LGBT community as an identification factor and closed, essentialist attitude that we "have to belong to LGBT community in order to talk about LGBTQ rights, is unbelievable"

(Ema, personal communication, July 2017). Lesbian identity is mostly understood as an unnecessary essentialisation and in any case insufficiently strong and consolidating basis for producing social and political changes.

Categorical refusal of one's individual identity or a number of identities linked to sexual orientation perhaps represents the most stable and distinctive characteristic of KvirA's work. They connect with each other on the basis of the fact that they are women, moreover non-heterosexual women, who seek and produce social change. However, it may be assumed that even such an openness and heterogeneity of the group, as much as it is impressive, has a negative impact on its cohesion, visibility, and mobilising potential.

In spite of the consensus regarding the most important problems for non-heterosexual women in Montenegro, three years as of KvirA's establishment, male voices still dominantly talk about them, their rights and the challenges they face. Matilda, a member of KvirA talks openly about this issue:

> I hate the fact that our LGBTIQ community is led by gays. It looks like gays are doing everything, because he [referring to the Executive director of Queer Montenegro] shows up and, you know, "he is a fag". It really looks like they are doing everything, and they are not, we are doing a lot of things for our community. It really gets on my nerves. (Matilda, personal communication, July 2017)

This is confirmed by the attitude of one of the foundresses of KvirA: "Nobody ever talks about the fact", she states, "that every Pride organised so far has been prepared by women" (Eva, personal communication, July 2017), although she is resolute when she says that there is no discrimination of lesbians among LGBT persons. In the opinion of the majority of our interviewees, there is a connection between traditional understanding of gender and discrimination of lesbians. However, our interviewees mainly refer to the practice of questioning traditionally perceived genders and the related discrimination. The answers are mainly focused on the high level of hatred and violence trans persons are exposed to, as they are considered the most

vulnerable group by all our interviewees, without exception. The "concept of 'real' man and 'real' woman is something that absolutely defines the manner in which somebody will treat us", claims Ema (personal communication, July 2017), and therefore "a butch lesbian will be more likely attacked than a femme lesbian. The one with short hair, wearing almost male clothes, will be more likely attacked than the one with long hair, who looks like a 'real' woman, which happened before"—as testified by the majority of the respondents.

Besides, they point out that more intensive animosity is present toward men who do not behave in line with the traditional gender expression, than in case of women who do the same thing: "It is harder to be a brave gay than a brave lesbian" (Hana, personal communication, October 2017), they assert, confirming in this manner that demasculinisation of men, alienation, and sacrilege (by feminisation, for example) of their "male essence" is the most serious problem for a patriarchal homophobic environment (see Bilić, introduction to this volume). Having in mind that they mostly consider that it is easier for lesbians, they find it difficult to explain the fact that there is no public person who identifies as such.

## Perspectives: Informal Versus Formal Activism

KvirA activist Roza summarises the current KvirA position in the following way:

> For now, we're OK. As a swing, we are waiting for the right moment to spring into action and create chaos. (Roza, personal communication, July 2017)

Thus, KvirA's development perspectives are branching into two different directions and our interlocutors oscillate between: informal activism, on the one hand, and the formalisation of engagement that would allow greater access to donor funds, on the other. The key to their success so far lies in the gathering and empowerment of the "community". "An organisation without a community is nothing", explains Roza (personal communication, July 2017). Therefore, a formalisation of

the organisation presents a risk and calls into question the survival of a peculiarity of their grassroots approach—"you listen to them anytime day and night" (Roza, personal communication, July 2017), which was also recognised by activist groups from the region:

> The model that has been developed here by us is to communicate with each individual separately. People feel honoured, respected, and this is a model that has been shared with activists in the region. This was not the case before, and now everyone gets a special message leaning on him/her, which makes people feel invited to make a contribution. (Eva, personal communication, July 2017)

From the perspective of one of the foundresses, the initial KvirA vision was to develop into a resource centre that would be available to all activists and from which everyone would gain something. She is also very aware that informal action gives freedom which non-governmental organisations do not offer within the existing legal framework. It seems that informal action goes hand in hand with the sensibility and political beliefs of KvirA's foundresses that are based on the abandonment of hierarchy and animosity towards the positions of leaders, directors, managers, etc. KvirA does not have strategic or action plans as activities are implemented spontaneously, when it is deemed necessary. There is a certain resistance towards formalisation of their actions among the foundresses. This is understandable since NGO-isation often represents "the transition from a rather loosely organised, horizontally dispersed and broadly mobilising social movements to more professional, vertically structured NGOs" (Lang 2013, p. 62).

However, during the conversation we had with KvirA's foundresses and activists, the dominant view was that KvirA formalisation nevertheless represents the key to its sustainability. Two out of three participants of in-depth interviews considered a formalisation of the group fundamental for its development. For one activist, an informal group is just "a fistful of people gathered on the street" (Roza, personal communication, July 2017), which corresponds to the division into "serious/professional NGO work" versus "less serious activism" (Butterfield 2016, p. 24). This can partly be explained by the dominant logic of the NGO scene where informal activism is marginalised in relation to the

NGO activism and, in a sense, undermined. The current legal framework that does not recognise informal groups certainly contributes to this attitude.

NGO-isation is also "often accompanied by increased institutionalisation and professionalisation" (Paternotte 2015, p. 390) which require not only the development of appropriate expert knowledge and above all the technical and administrative skills of activists, but also the willingness to cooperate with the authorities (Paternotte 2015). As such, it represents a necessary prerequisite for obtaining financial support by donors. Practical examples demonstrate that focusing on professionalism carries the risk of neglecting the "community" and permanent consultations with its members, as well as putting the "community's" interests behind. Thus, "the idea of a small group of people changing the world" is lost in the process of "strengthening organisational capacities" (Bagić 2004, p. 222). Finally, professionalisation often entails the loss of those who leave the activist scene because they do not want that writing of reports or project proposals in accordance with dictated donor priorities, the preparation of applications, and the 'strengthening of capacities' become their everyday life (Bilić 2012).

Although they are making fearful steps towards what appears to be certain—the process of formalisation—it is worth noting that KvirA is already using some available funds to apply for funding as an informal and independent group within Queer Montenegro. One of the projects that has been approved and which is focused on queer and feminist politics, will be tackling the issue of KvirA's formalisation. Within the scope of this project, it is planned that a discussion will be opened, focusing on the advantages and disadvantages of formalisation among the members, which will require coming out of the transparent closet. But not only that—the intention is to determine if there is a critical mass of women who are willing to deal with LBT activism "as something that is a part of their lives" (Ema, personal communication, July 2017). Obviously, there is uncertainty among KvirA's foundresses regarding the sufficient number of women to initiate a group motivated by the will to change the situation of lesbians in Montenegro. Despite the apparent readiness of a certain number of members to emerge more strongly in the public sphere, many are not ready for compromises that,

in their opinion, come with it. Nora explains that, unlike her publicly-exposed colleagues, she is not in the mood for 'diplomatic relations' with decision-makers, which, in her opinion, automatically makes her 'unsuitable' for public action.

Whichever form of action they opt for, the further work of KvirA will require space for a new, fresh energy. KvirA's foundresses are aware of this and also openly express the need for the existing "set of people" to be changed (Ema, personal communication, July 2017) so that KvirA does not suffer from the "founding syndrome" that is otherwise present in the non-governmental sector in Montenegro (TACSO 2013) and the region, more broadly (Bilić 2012). Although they have different conceptions of non-heterosexual activism, what it should be and how it should develop in the local context in the future, KvirA activists, as a rule, give priority to their personal example.

> For all types of activism, I think that means that you demonstrate by your actions what you are fighting for. No advocacy and nonsense, there will never be a stronger message than your personal example. (Hana, personal communication, October 2017)

Therefore, the emphasis is placed on individual action through a personal example rather than a collective, organised action that would potentially have a transformative effect on the "community" itself. This shared position stands in sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker tension with the almost certain formalisation of the group's further work, and represents an important issue that KvirA members will have to consider in the near future.

## Conclusion

Informal group KvirA, as the only form of non-heterosexual women's organising in Montenegro at the moment, sways between a couple of key ambivalences: the one between informal acting and formalisation of the work motivated by the need for sustainability, security, and availability of donor funds, but also the one related to understanding of feminism, perceived by a significant number of respondents through the radical glasses of trans-exclusion.

If it is easier to be a courageous lesbian than a brave "fag", how come there is no publicly outed lesbians, who would represent the movement for the emancipation of non-heterosexual women in Montenegro, having in mind that the majority of LGBT activists are themselves women? Is it possible for one to embark on the adventure of dismantling homophobia and patriarchy without forging a stronger relation with the international feminist heritage? May we even understand this obstinate absence without relying on feminist theories, like the one of Judith Butler that speaks about "abjectivity" of lesbians and non-sustainability of the lesbian subject in the rigid regimes of hetero-normativity? Cannot a massive and insufficiently questioned domination of patriarchy, which prevents forming and visibility of lesbian and LBT subject in the Montenegrin context by a number of complex mechanisms, account for this absence, pointed at by all of our interviewees?

In the situation in which these questions are hardly problematised, longing for "normal" life outside of the oppressive and "hetero-normative concepts of normality" (Švab 2016) often results in a superficial mimicry or—in somewhat happier circumstances—leads to a "transparent closet" within which non-heterosexual women in Montenegro mostly remain. "I do not want to leave my life in the foundations of an abstract state", says Zoja, remaining, not without remorse, in her own and often group isolation, and not succeeding to move "into the metaphysics of presence, speech and cultural visibility" (Fuss 1991, p. 4) with her not-meant-to-be "sisters".[17]

Since women NGOs in the country have been recognised by the activists of KvirA as "natural" allies, then the exchange of knowledge, experiences and inclusion in the joint activities would represent a necessary step toward untying a knot in which Montenegrin lesbian activism is entangled. Not one among the women we interviewed mentioned sisterhood or referred to it in any manner, and the big question is whether we may achieve "cultural intelligibility" (Butler) of lesbians without the sisterhood and the policies founded on it.

On the other hand, one should not neglect the potential of KvirA's identification with the insufficiently explored and complex term "queer" to contribute to spreading (popularising) of the membership, having in mind that this phenomenon as such "surpasses the rigid

boxes of LGBT or straight sexuality and allows the 'privilege' of self-definition" (Queer Beograd Collective, as cited in Bilić and Dioli 2016, p. 151). KvirA's current "hiding" under a mysterious "queer" umbrella may serve, at least temporarily, as a mechanism of protection against violence (Bilić and Dioli 2016; see also Selmić and Bilić, this volume), as long as there is a scarce understanding of this concept among the broader community. However, all of those interested in furthering the non-heterosexual cause must keep in mind the regional experiences pointing to the challenges of transferring this fluid concept to new socio-political contexts (Bilić and Dioli 2016) through which it acquires new political interpretations and meanings, both inside and outside of the LGBTIQ "community".

## Notes

1. The word 'KvirA' stems from an effort to feminise and slavenise the word 'queer', into 'KvirA', emphasising intent to (re)present LGBT identities as something ever-present and really existing in Montenegro, not as something "imported" from the West. The processes of appropriation and translation into local context characterised both visual identity and messages of the Montenegrin Prides in continuation. Leaving capital 'A' letter at the end of the word 'KvirA' highlights gender aspect of the group, shifting towards identity politics that the word 'queer' supposed to problematise and overcome.
2. This certainly does not mean that there are no lesbians, queer or trans women in Montenegro who are out. Just before the Pride 2017 one part of the advertising campaign were video spots in which parents of non-heterosexual women publicly supported their daughters' sexual identification. Moreover, two women came out as bisexuals in a video promoting LGBT rights on the eve of the 2017 Pride Parade, while two declared themselves as members of LGBTIQ community. One person, declaring as lesbian, also spoke against violence in the video, with darkened body and face and changed voice.
3. We would like to thank Itana Kovačević, psychologist, for her help with formulating questions for our in-depth interviews. Her long-term

counselling experience improved our understanding of the everyday lives of our interviewees.

4. All the names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.
5. Website of LGBT Forum Progress: http://lgbtprogres.me/en/.
6. Selected NGO members are: Jelena Čolaković (NGO Juventas), Danijel Kalezić (Queer Montenegro) and Bojana Jokić (LGBT Forum Progress).
7. According to a statement of executive director of the Queer Montenegro, LGBT individuals currently do not have the right to legally visit their partners in the hospital and get information on their health status. Furthermore, they cannot exercise the right to health care on the basis of partner's insurance neither can they inherit pension or property in case of partner's death.
8. The latest publicly known case of violence against LGBT individuals is about a Montenegrin LGBT activist who decided to seek asylum in Sweden after being physically attacked by a group of men. Although the attackers were arrested, he did not believe that he could exercise the right to a fair trial in Montenegro: "I was literally forced to leave Montenegro and look for a safer future. My decision was additionally strengthened by the fact that I faced problems with the police while filling complaints. I had problems with courts and prosecution and I think that I cannot have a fair trial in Montenegro" (CdM 2017, online).
9. According to data provided to ECRI by NGOs, "only one criminal indictment was filled for the serious bodily injury during the Pride Parade in Podgorica, while proceedings related to charges for misdemeanours are being concluded by imposing fines of 100 to 700 euro" (ECRI 2017).
10. This decision was confirmed in the second instance by the Director General of Directorate for security and protection affairs and oversight in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Constitutional Court confirmed a judgement of the Administrative Court rejecting an appeal of the Walk of Pride organisers. Organisers submitted a constitutional appeal against these decisions in November 2016 (Gorjanc Prelević 2016, p. 46).
11. Instead of 101 boys, which would represent a natural ratio between newborn boys and girls, according to the UN Population fund from 2012.
12. Website of NGO Queer Montenegro: www.queermontenegro.org.

13. Website of NGO Juventas: www.juventas.co.me/index.php/me/.
14. Just a year earlier, the municipal committee of the Communist Party of Nikšić advocated for the prohibition of the abovementioned Nikšić Walk of Pride, with the support of other actors of the activist scene, as well as academic institutions.
15. Radical feminism is also relatively poorly known and often misunderstood.
16. "The transparent closet seems to be a sort of mechanism that prevents relationships among family members from being destroyed so that, after the coming out, everything appears normal and unchanged on the surface" (Švab 2016, p. 1352).
17. "To be out, in common gay parlance, is precisely to be no longer out; to be out is to be finally outside of exteriority and all the exclusions and deprivations such outsiderhood imposes. Or, put another way, to be out is really to be in—inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible" (Fuss 1991, p. 4).

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# (In)Visible Presences: *PitchWise* Festival as a Space of Lesbian Belonging in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Adelita Selmić and Bojan Bilić

On 7 September 2017, a group of mostly women activists walked around the streets of Sarajevo and staged a protest at the Alija Izetbegović Square, one of the city's central locations (Ženskaposla 2017). They were carrying crosses, green slates, and huge obituaries which contained elementary biographical information about women murdered by their husbands or partners. Such a multi-confessional/multi-ethnic funeral performance was supposed to draw public attention to the alarmingly increasing and insufficiently addressed rates of femicide in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (see also Bilić, introduction to this volume; Radoman, this volume). This mournful event also marked the beginning of a new edition of what has otherwise been a joyful celebration of women's friendship, support, and solidarity that goes way beyond the country's profound political cleavages.

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_7

*PitchWise* Festival of Women's Art and Activism (Festival ženske umjetnosti i aktivizma *PitchWise*), that takes place in September, has over the last 12 years gathered women—nationally, regionally, and internationally—to create a safe-haven, a women's space of encounter which has always had a lesbian dimension.

In this chapter, we employ a range of empirical sources, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, as well as documentary and video material, to point to *PitchWise*'s somewhat subdued, but consistent lesbian aspect. We claim that this manifestation can provide us with an insight into the ways in which lesbian identities, communities, and activist endeavours are articulated in spite of the socially unfavourable circumstances marked by high levels of lesbophobia/homophobia. In the absence of a specifically lesbian activist organisation, such as those that exist in other countries of the region, *PitchWise* constitutes an ephemeral network of friendships and affective ties that promote lesbian belonging. More specifically, this manifestation performs a double function: on the one hand, it operates as an intimate—and perhaps also therapeutic—gathering for its women/lesbian participants while, on the other, acts as an important sensitising agent that feminises the public sphere and visibilises lesbian existence within it. Both of these functions locate lesbian liberation in the domain of affective, intersectionality-sensitive, and regionally/transnationally-oriented feminist politics.

In the first section of this chapter, we take a look at some of the most prominent features of women's and feminist activist organising in BiH. Even though there were individual feminist voices before the 1990s armed conflicts, it is only after the war that feminism becomes a stronger principle of BiH women's engagement which also considers sexuality as a political issue. Here, we discuss the challenges of the present-day LGBT initiatives and zoom in on the position that lesbian women/activists assume in them. Finally, we draw upon the words of its organisers, contributors, and visitors to illuminate the ways in which *PitchWise* welcomes lesbian women and activists and promotes the freedom of lesbian sexual expression.

## Feminist and Non-Heterosexual Activist Initiatives in Post-Dayton BiH[1]

After the Second World War, women's history in BiH which, of course included the operation of the Anti-Fascist Women's Front (see Dugandžić and Okić 2016), was to a great extent overshadowed by the political developments and more innovative feminist currents occurring along the line Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade in the late 1970s and 1980s (Helms 2013; Kajinić, this volume; Oblak and Pan, this volume).[2] A woman from Sarajevo, Nada Ler Sofronić was among the initiators of the 1978 Belgrade conference *Drug-ca žena* which represents an important point in the history of Yugoslav feminism (see Bilić, introduction to this volume; Bonfiglioli 2008). However, apart from scattered initiatives that had a prominent academic aspect, it seems that

> we can talk about women's associations and activism as an important segment of civil society, but not about a feminist movement in BiH. To the extent to which they are present, feminist movement and feminist activism can be reduced to exclusively individual efforts that have never manifested themselves as an organised social force. (Ždralović 2013, p. 13)

Even though the upsurge of militarised patriarchy throughout the last decade of the twentieth century dealt a hard blow to the already fragile and fragmented BiH women's history, it also intensified women's organising across the increasingly impermeable borders and served as a basis for feminist initiatives in the post-war period (Bilić 2012; Mlađenović 2012). Feminists across the region were the first to meet and assist refugees and returnees, often showing courage and jeopardising their own positions in the ethnically homogenising spaces (Popov-Momčinović 2013).

After the armed conflict, in a profoundly reorganised, repatriarchalised, and impoverished post-Dayton BiH, ethnic belonging established itself as the pre-eminent criterion of political life (e.g., Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017).[3] At the same time, in the dominant political discourse, European Union integrations have remained the

only viable option for the region, which brought an insistence on the improvement of non-heterosexual people's status (Bilić 2016a; Kulpa 2014; Selmić 2016). However, the divided ethnic communities seem to share intolerance towards sexual diversity: a recent survey conducted by Popov-Momčinović (2013) found that citizens of BiH show high levels of distance towards non-heterosexual people and are also poorly acquainted with non-heterosexual sexualities. For example, 42.2% of the examinees consider it unacceptable to have a homosexual person for a neighbour, colleague, or boss. Moreover, 56% of respondents think that homosexuality should be cured and 74% are against seeing two men kissing in the street (Selmić 2016).

In such an ethnocratic and homophobic context, human rights have remained one of the last resorts upon which mainstream activists draw to go beyond ethnicity and promote gender equality, women's rights, and sexual liberation. As has been the case in other post-Yugoslav republics, the human rights paradigm has gone hand in hand with a professionalisation of activist networks that are almost exclusively dependent on international funding. As Bilić and Kajinić (2016, pp. 14–15) argue:

> Operating in straitened circumstances, characterised by fear, existential uncertainty, poverty and competition for (in certain periods more available, but still) limited foreign donations, the major part of the activist "scene" quickly professionalised, making it increasingly difficult to envision forms of engagement that would stay outside of the NGO frame. Professionalisation and bureaucratisation pressures, induced by foreign donors, favoured the thin urban "layer" that already counted on substantial amounts of social and symbolic capital. This led to a rapid "division of labour" through which organisations, while declaratively prioritising cooperation over competition, specialised in certain areas.

As a result, non-heterosexual existence, not unlike what occurs in many other settings, is almost exclusively a matter of legal debates and legislative interventions which are rarely reflected in real life (Knauer 2012). In this regard, Europeanisation-induced improvements of the legal framework that have been introduced over the last two years indicate

that sexual orientation is ever more a category which counts on legal protection (Selmić 2016). According to the latest reports of the relevant national and international NGOs, progress has been made in terms of anti-discrimination policy and hate crime regulation:

> The anti-discrimination action plan published in April was the first national level policy of its kind to explicitly name LGBT people. The language in the existing federal anti-discrimination law was clarified, and sex characteristics were also added to the list of protected grounds in all spheres of life. (ILGA-Europe 2017, p. 4)[4]

Nevertheless, BiH is still marked by public outbursts of homophobia and different forms of violence and discrimination against LGBT persons.[5] Particularly disturbing is the increase of domestic and peer violence motivated by sexual orientation or gender identity as well as pervasive instances of homophobic and transphobic views in academic institutions (Bošnjak et al. 2017).[6] Many sources also point to continuous discrimination against LGBT persons in terms of partnership and family life as there is no legal measure that would protect same sex unions. In spite of the European jurisprudence and trends, BiH (and its constitutive entities) still have not considered legal solutions that would allow couples to register same-sex partnership (Tanić 2016).

The atmosphere of political ambivalence in which legal improvements are mostly a matter of international pressure rather than of a genuine local interest in acknowledging sexual diversity,[7] cannot really put an end to fear, secrecy, and entrenched institutional homophobia.[8] As one would expect, many activists living and working outside of the country's capital in which there are a few activist organisations, describe the position of LGBT people as even more difficult. For example, Lana Prerad, a former activist of the Banja Luka Association of Queer Activists [BUKA—Banjalučko udruženje kvir aktivista], states:

> As the activities and influence of the association grew, pressures also grew, as well as the number of threats and attacks on members of the association which ceased to exist after two years. Most of the members moved abroad and the ones who stayed continued with individual or cultural

> activism… the LGBT community usually gathers in one café, which is the only place that accepts diversities, including queer identities as well. (personal communication with the first author, October 2017)

## Fragile Lesbian Activist Voices

Women/lesbian activists have been at the helm of non-heterosexual organising in BiH ever since 2004, when the Association Q (Asocijacija Q), the first formally registered LGBT initiative, was established in Sarajevo. Svetlana Đurković,[9] Slobodanka Boba Dekić, Emina Trumić, and Alma Selimović were, among others, involved in strengthening the LGBT "community" (Bavčić and Delić 2014; Kajinić 2008). They operated "under the auspices" of queerness—a concept and organising principle which can give activists more manoeuvring space (and possibly "postpone" violence) because the broader public is less familiar with it (see e.g., Bilić and Dioli 2016). In an interview with Dioli (2012, online), Svetlana Đurković states:

> For myself I use the word queer, and I'll tell you why. While society identifies each one of us by sex, gender, and sexual orientation, the layers of my self-identification are far more complex and break the norms on more than one level. So, the combination of the parts of my identity and my activist and research work are oriented towards queer theory. Queer theory deals with the construction of sex, gender, and gender norms. On the other hand, as a human rights activist, I am engaged with defending the rights of LGBTIQ individuals that are alone in this country and I believe every identity is entitled to visibility. In my country, where most people have some kind of segmented identity based on religion and nationality, everyone is easily read by their name or language. So people don't ask, they assume who you are. Our organisation works specifically on the rights of each person to self-define and self-identify, even when those identities do not fit social norms and common understandings.

The trend of lesbian/bisexual women's presence in BiH non-heterosexual activist endeavours has persisted up to today. In this regard, Emina Bošnjak (personal communication with the first author, October 2017), the executive director of the Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC), states:

> What is interesting, is that lesbians/bisexual women are actually the most visible persons of the LGBT movement… they are usually the first ones to react, either in the public space, on the street, in the media or in other settings.

However, given the socio-political climate that we sketched above, it is hardly surprising that lesbian women have not up to now managed to overcome the burdens of (at least) double discrimination and articulate a more explicit lesbian activist agenda. Azra Čaušević, a member of the Sarajevo-based activist organisation Okvir, states:

> In 2011 there was an initiative to organise a lesbian group Viktorija… there were a few lesbian parties and the girls also had a Facebook profile. At that time there was also a club in which a lesbian woman was working. They never registered their organisation because the initiative simply was not serious enough and to do something like that there should be a group of people who would take such a task seriously. There was another attempt at a later point… two girls wanted to form a radical lesbian group… Lepa [Mlađenović] connected them with us and we offered them space, but in the end nothing happened. (personal communication with the first author, October 2017)

In spite of consistent support offered by lesbian activists from the region (see also Cvetkovic, this volume), articulating lesbian solidarities has to a great extent remained a matter of private networks.[10] As Emina Bošnjak (personal communication with the first author, October 2017) states:

> There is not a single lesbian group, but rather several groups linked by different interests or perhaps age, and most probably the complex network of romantic, intimate, and friendly relationships. Those are groups of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and rarely trans women. Activism is usually not high on their lists of priorities.

Bošnjak's statement shows that many lesbian women seem to be distant from the existing LGBT activist organisations regardless of the fact that there are prominent lesbian activists in them. The problem

of representational responsibility and the detachment of local non-heterosexual population from activist initiatives are quite widespread in the region (see Bilić and Stubbs 2016; Selmić 2016). This is mostly due to the fact that in all of the (post-)Yugoslav republics, although in different periods (male) homosexuality was decriminalised through a revision of the respective penal codes rather than through grassroots engagement or a wider societal consensus on human rights claims. In this regard, there seems to be a temporal inversion in comparison to the more firmly established Western LGBT activist organisations in the sense that highly professionalised post-Yugoslav activist groups precede (instead of following and stemming from) spontaneous instances of protest that would articulate and be a reaction to local grievances (Bilić 2016a, b).

In difficult social and political circumstances in which homophobia was never really problematised, more mainstream women's organisations do not seem to be interested in associating themselves with lesbian initiatives. What is more, foreign donors are reluctant to engage with the lesbian cause because they consider it already covered by other groups working on sexual emancipation. With this in mind, Bavčić and Delić (2014, p. 243) claim that

> it is evident that, apart from Cure Foundation, almost no women's organisation is dealing with these issues. Moreover, women's organisations seldom support formal initiatives such as those for signing petitions and press releases against violations of lesbian human rights. Interestingly enough, neither donor organisations, which are guided by their own policies and priorities in BiH, show interest in strengthening the lesbian movement in BiH.

## *PitchWise*: Practising Feminism in BiH

Even if one acknowledges the predominance of the human rights paradigm and the intense juridification of non-heterosexual politics, one would be mistaken to reduce emancipatory non-heterosexual efforts to them. There are vital currents of activist engagement which usually stay below the radar of law makers or temporarily disrupt sometimes

impersonal, professionalised forms of activist operation. In this regard, the Foundation CURE (Fondacija CURE 2010, online) has been an innovative actor on the BiH "civic scene" since 2004. It presents itself as

> a feminist-activist organisation that promotes gender and sex equality and works for positive social change through educational, cultural and research programs. By organising affirmative collective actions, CURE celebrates the strength and power of women, and helps to empower individuals to become initiators of social change in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the world. The feminist activism has created a safe space where women are strong, fearless, competent, and united with all their differences. CURE is an organisation of professionals and volunteers who take to the streets to protest against violence, discrimination, violation of laws and basic human rights.

The appearance of the Foundation CURE marks a stronger feminist turn within BiH women's activism which addresses the needs of a younger generation of women.[11] As one of the CURE initiators, Jadranka Miličević (as cited in Gušić 2017, online) states:

> I was also one of the founders of the civic association Women to Women (Žene ženama) in the bygone March 1997 and I think that we initiated many social changes. We were preoccupied with supporting women who belong to different strata: returnees, displaced, local, survivors of war violence, refugees… but there was an increasing recognition of the issue of young women (those who are no longer girls and not yet adults)… that is why some of us who were the founders and members of Women to Women decided to establish the Foundation CURE. […] we also wanted our name to be intriguing and different. The majority of organisations and associations devoted to women issues have something like women and us (žene i mi), so we decided to come up with something different and until then unseen in our civil society.

An integral part of this activist strategy that tries to leave behind forms of organisation which do not intervene into the deeply entrenched patriarchal patterns is related to artistic practice. *PitchWise*,[12] a festival of women's art and activism has been annually organised by the

Foundation CURE since 2006. Reflecting upon its beginnings, the activists (Fondacija CURE 2016, online) state that:

> the festival has grown out of the need to take derelict and neglected areas and transform them for a meeting which will bring together socially engaged artists, activists, theorists, feminists and all others interested in women's issues in BiH and the region.

Since its foundation, *PitchWise* has offered a space for encounters that go way beyond legal improvements and give precedence to affective ties, solidarities, and support. Given that these ties are feminist in nature, *PitchWise* problematises deep political divisions in the country and endeavours to gather women regardless of their ascriptive features. In the words of one festival participant:

> *PitchWise* is for me a celebration of women's solidarity, women's support, especially in this time that is catastrophic for each and every one of us… and not only for us personally, but also for our environment, more generally… it is a safe space where at least a 100 women of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, religious or ethnic origins, gather for three or four days and enjoy conversations, information and experience exchange, chat, love, singing, emotions. (Selma Hadžihalilović, as cited in Fondacija CURE 2015, online)

Moreover, *PitchWise* strives to devise its programmes intersectionally and is particularly open to different socially marginalised groups. With this in mind, two *PitchWise* organisers Jadranka Miličević and Taida Horozović (as cited in Đorđević et al. 2013, online), state:

> We provide a space for everyone who represents the other, as well as to groups which are considered minorities or which are marginalised. These include: women who make up the majority of the population, persons whose sexual orientation conceptually or literally differs from the hetero-patriarchal norm, persons with disabilities, men who are fighting against gender-based violence; as well as men advocating peace and nonviolence; environmentally conscious persons and groups, as well as a number of other alternatives to the boring and violent society which imposes on us the bonds of taboos and stereotypes.

In accordance with the programmatic politics of the Foundation CURE, *PitchWise* pays special attention to a younger generation of BiH women. For many of them, this festival represents the first opportunity to meet feminist activists. As one young participant/organiser states:

> *PitchWise* was an eye-opener… I randomly ended up seeing one exhibition there and within half an hour I met a huge number of wonderful women… in four days I realised that everything that I had been doing up to then was called feminism. In that regard, *PitchWise* was for me the beginning, the first step into that feminist story that will stay with me. (Marija Vuletić, as cited in Fondacija CURE 2015, online)

## *PitchWise* as a Space of Lesbian/Queer Women Belonging

Given that the feminist orientation of the festival initiators is not only limited to the issues related to gender, but also encompasses sexuality, *PitchWise* appears as a space which welcomes non-heterosexual women.[13] It is quite exceptional in this regard because there is no other organisation that specifically addresses the needs of non-heterosexual women in the BiH socio-political context.

> *PitchWise* is a very important moment because it is public and for everybody's eyes, so it increases the visibility of LBT women and women of other different identities. Every year we think about something for LBT women, for example, an empowerment workshop led by an activist from the region… in any case, we make sure that there is a space for women to express themselves and feel free with their identities. (Marija Vuletić, as cited in Velagić 2015, online)

Along with the idea that it renders lesbian existence visible and allows it to enter into the public space and start sensitising the heteronormative environment in a way which is not "intrusive" (like, for example, a Pride March), *PitchWise* also offers an opportunity for non-heterosexual women to meet each other and embrace their sexuality.

> As I have been organising *PitchWise* for three consecutive years, I have to say that for me a space for LBT women is extremely important. The festival is huge and dedicated to all women and it leaves a space for all the multiply marginalised groups such as LBT women. It is very important that there is a safe space because some of the women who attend have never had an opportunity to meet other LBT women… Unfortunately there are women groups which do not recognise lesbians, so it is good that a space opens up for these women to link with each other, exchange experiences and sometimes also get to know themselves better. (Marija Vuletić, as cited in Velagić 2015, online)

Such initiatives can be particularly significant for women who do not live in Sarajevo as they have very few other opportunities for articulating and living their sexual desire. Thus, the festival enables affective ties that open sexual/political possibilities and promote learning. In the words of one of the organisers:

> I am happy to see women from smaller communities bring new lesbian women to *PitchWise*… it has always been a secret place of gathering… the majority of workshops that we have organised end by people coming out to me and telling me painful stories about how they cannot come out to their parents… they need more empowerment and being together, so that they can feel what it means to be in a community… when we are not out, we are very lonely… I felt a need to meet other lesbians when I came out to myself… I had a pile of questions… first regarding sex, and then many other issues. (Vildana Džekman, personal communication with the first author, October 2017)[14]

In this regard, some of the most prominent feminist and lesbian activists in the region have regularly contributed to the festival by conducting feminist workshops for (lesbian) women.[15] For example, Lepa Mlađenović has been a frequent visitor. She states:

> Sarajevo is my grandmother's city and I promised that whenever I could, I would come to Sarajevo to offer experience workshops as a gift to women – that is the debt I have towards you for the war that you had to

> survive. All those who have wars in their past are in need of tenderness and love. (Lepa Mlađenović, as cited in Mixer 2014, online)

Similarly, in 2012, the organisers arranged a panel discussion related to lesbian activism within the feminist movement, where activists from Serbia, Croatia, and BiH—Biljana Stanković Lori, Matea Popov, and Berina Džemailović—talked about their engagement. Particularly, Matea Popov is a frequent participant who contributes to lesbian-oriented aspects of the programme. Reflecting upon her involvement in *PitchWise*, she (as cited in Velagić 2015, online) states:

> It is for sure that there still are some forms of feminism and some feminists who are openly or implicitly homo/transphobic… the lesbian question, as well as the status of bisexual and trans* women, are issues that should be of every feminist's concern, regardless of her sexual orientation or any other identity. At the same time, many LBT women are an important part of feminist circles and very often they represent their fighter's, adamant, strong, and courageous aspect which speaks and yells, which is heard and leaves a trace. It is hard for me to imagine being involved in a feminist (or any other) initiative which does not recognise LBT women… such kind of feminism would not make any sense to me… I see *PitchWise* as a space which acknowledges and respects LBT identities, just as it does this with any other woman and/or feminist who comes to the festival.

Also, the feminist-lesbian choir from Zagreb, Le Zbor,[16] performed at the fourth edition of the festival in 2009.

> One of the performances that definitely drew public's attention was the dynamic choir from Zagreb – Le Zbor. What characterises them is a combination of activism and innovative feminist politics and they share a talent for something they are truly excellent at – namely singing. (HRH Sarajevo 2009, online)

In the September 2017 edition, which was attended by the first author, two panels were related to women's sexuality, homophobia, and

different forms of resistance against patriarchy. The 2017 event took place under the slogan The World is Our Canvas—Every Woman's Experience is Equally Important (Svijet je naše platno—svako iskustvo žene je važno) and gathered numerous international visitors and participants, many of whom were from the Yugoslav region. Thus, the festival yet again highlighted the idea of activist regionalism as the guiding concept of feminist/queer/LGBT movements in the post-Yugoslav space (see Dioli, this volume). Those "annual meetings", as one participant puts it, provide a chance for the common cultural, linguistic, and political legacies and issues to enable novel, more inclusive, forms of being together. Kajinić (2013, p. 21) notes that those who take part in feminist/queer/LGBT festivals in the region: "imagine the previously shared geopolitical space in different terms, but co-create its queerness through intensive networks of representation". In other words, regional activist gatherings[17] construct a form of Queeroslavia which embodies a "post-Yugoslav longing for queer transnational citizenship" (Dioli 2009, p. 2) and intertwines reminiscences of Yugoslav socialism with invocations of a common cultural space that would be open to sexual diversity and non-heteronormativity (Bilić 2016a, b; see also Dioli, this volume).

Moreover, consistent engagement of the *PitchWise* organisers has over years increased the number of women who attend this kind of discussions and especially the proportion of those who actually live in BiH. For example, during the 2010 festival, one of the participants noticed something about the queer and feminist events in the region:

> There is no in-flow of new people! That is the biggest problem – also at *PitchWise* Festival! When we went to Sarajevo for the *PitchWise* – it was us: everybody from Belgrade, everybody from Ljubljana, everybody from Zagreb. I say: where are the local people from Sarajevo? They are not present! How can you do a festival in the middle of Sarajevo without them? (Gabe 2010, as cited in Kajinić 2013, p. 214)

However, the latest edition of the festival, with all the familiar faces of regional lesbian and feminist activism, gave the impression of exactly the opposite—the in-flow of new people, and many of them from Sarajevo. The audience was still rather diverse, especially in terms of age

and linguistic background. Even though the performers were mostly from the region, younger generations of participants from Sarajevo and other BiH cities, seemed to comprise the majority of the crowd at the festival's venues. One regular participant and a feminist activist involved in LGBT initiatives in Sarajevo stated:

> there are no other events of this kind in BiH. Also, there are not many organisations left dealing with the women's rights, let alone with lesbians. *PitchWise* is the only festival with an evident lesbian presence, even more now than it was before. (Vanja Matić, personal communication with the first author, September 2017)

## Conclusion

Over the last years, LGBT-related initiatives, mostly embedded in the European Union integration and human rights discourses, have increasingly become a relevant element on the BiH activist landscape. As efforts for recognition and legal protection of non-heterosexual individuals take place in the distinctly complex post-Dayton political system, where the burdens of the past are combined with serious socio-economic and political issues, LGBT activists and people face constant struggles when finding their ways through the state institutions and different domains of public and private life. With this in mind, our chapter represents a nascent ethnographic study of the *PitchWise* Festival of Women's Art and Activism, showing that there are innovative activist currents which draw upon feminist principles to problematise donor-dependent forms of operation and devise activist endeavours that give precedence to intimacy, solidarity, and support.

Although not necessarily announced as such, *PitchWise* has for more than a decade been a site of lesbian belonging in the still highly lesbophobic/homophobic BiH. "Through art we can touch taboo topics that are difficult to talk about", states one of its organisers (Valdana Džekman, as cited in Zulić 2017, online). An important objective of the festival has been creating a space attentive to the linkages between sexual politics, patriarchy, and violence. Starting from the premise

that feminism must take into consideration non-heterosexual women, *PitchWise* has enabled many lesbian women to articulate and appropriate their lesbian desire. This has been mostly achieved through political engagement that creates new forms of collectivity at the cross-roads of the private and the public. While keeping its events (in principle) open, but not opting for more confrontational activist strategies, *PitchWise* constitutes a semi-public intimate sphere located in a political context in which more overt forms of lesbian/non-heterosexual sexuality still cannot emerge. The intimate sphere, Lauren Berlant (2008, p. 10) argues,

> carries the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies. A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in phantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans.

As a place that is traversed by affective ties of its participants, which may perform not only emancipatory, but also therapeutic functions, *PitchWise* brings lesbian women in closer contact and offers them a platform upon which their experiences can be shared. It also points to lesbian existence in BiH and presents lesbian/women's sexuality as a political issue. By doing so, it slowly increases lesbian presence in public life while trying to avoid and minimise the probability of lesbophobic violence.

However, *PitchWise*'s insistence on women, their concerns and identities, resurfaces the old tension between universalising and minoritising activist projects (Cvetkovich 2007) and highlights temporal loops that (post-)Yugoslav non-heterosexual activist engagement has been caught into (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011). Given that the first BiH non-heterosexual initiative, appearing in the early 2000s, already drew upon the liberating potential of queerness which by that time became more widely known, it could not share immediate ideological affinities

with the more separatist feminist/lesbian groups emerging in Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s (when the activists still were not familiar with the idea of queerness). Such a temporal arrangement may make it look that it would perhaps not be necessary to go "back" to a specifically lesbian initiative in the context in which queerness has already been employed as a principle of activist organising. Although it "might seem like an anachronism, a return to the period before queer culture", the need for *PitchWise* shows that BiH has over the last three decades witnessed a patriarchal backlash as a result of which women, and especially lesbian women, have remained unrepresented.[18] This makes it possible for queer and more identitarian (LGBT) discourses to co-exist or be intertwined in visionary activist endeavours. *PitchWise* is queer in the sense that it is an alternative which not only imagines but also enacts "utopian possibilities" (Cvetkovich 2007, p. 466) "that exist in the here and now […] include hardship and violence […] and offer strategies for survival" (p. 467).

Even though it combines queer and more identitarian elements, *PitchWise* may not have always managed to avoid exclusion which—as one of the fundamental patriarchal principles—seeps into the majority of post-Yugoslav activist initiatives (Maljković 2016). Even though lesbian/GBT/queer engagement can problematise and even foreclose some—namely ethnic—lines of division, it may produce other, those related to gender or sexuality. As one observer of the Sarajevo activist 'scene' notes:

> I wonder why there was not so much fuss[19] over the *PitchWise* 2008, organised on 11-14 September 2008. It was a festival of women's arts. What is the difference, in terms of arts, between the two events? Both are social groups, both do arts and both exclude "those they do not have everything in common with". *PitchWise* excludes those who do not have a vagina, while Queer Sarajevo Festival excludes those who do not have a partner of the same sex. (Ikic-Cook 2008, online)

While the extent to which some men may feel excluded by the programmatic strategies of the *PitchWise* organisers probably varies, this festival is nevertheless a reminder that feminism as a value system which

strives to affect all social relations, is crucial within the fragile public sphere that develop after wars and political violence. Feminist activism which operates at the confluence between academic, activist, and artistic practice could offer a more inclusive, citizen-oriented approach in the context of deeply ethnocratic politics. BiH, "as a society of the others,[20] of the missing, and the remaining ones" (društvo ostalih, nestalih i preostalih, Husanović 2012, p. 13; see also Touquet 2015) already counts on numerous strands of a transformative feminist agenda that struggles with "the ethno-religious tripartite division or the gender bipartite division" (Popov-Momčinović 2013, p. 218). Such an approach could not only help overcome numerous limitations of the highly convoluted BiH political system, but it could also embrace, and perhaps even celebrate, the role which sexuality plays in private/public life in this post-Yugoslav/post-conflict country.

## Notes

1. The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (also known as the Dayton Agreement or Dayton Accords) was reached in November 1995 and formally signed in Paris in December 1995.
2. For an account of women history and organising in BiH before the Second World War, see, for example, Spahić et al. (2014).
3. The dominance of the ethnic principle in political life was challenged by the protests and plenums during 2013 and 2014 in bigger cities across the country. The protesters required their efforts to be understood as a form of civic disobedience without reference to political parties or the government. As argued by Milan (2017, p. 1358), "plenums did not only constitute acts of resistance that disrupted routines, as did the 2013 protests and the simultaneous occupation of the square in front of the National Parliament building, but also represented acts that prefigured a new socio-political paradigm that challenged the existing one established by the Dayton arrangement". See also Malewski (2014).
4. Hate crime regulation is now equable on the entire territory of BiH and crimes committed on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender

identity are acknowledged by the Criminal Codes of both entities. The relevant amendments were adopted by the BiH Parliament in April 2016, and entered into force in June 2016 (OSCE 2016).

5. The media coverage of LGBT related topics has increased in the last two years. According to the SOC, 1299 articles have been published in all the media during 2016. In the same analysis, it is found that "the majority of texts were neutral in their tone (399), followed by positive (112), and then negative (35), which is the lowest number of negative texts recorded since SOC monitors and analyses media reporting" (Bošnjak et al. 2017, p. 47).
6. For example, the president of the University of Sarajevo Student Parliament Haris Zahiragić, made anti-LGBTI remarks, by claiming to have conducted research that found that "homosexuality is a systematic and contagious disease" and "that LGBTI people should be separated from the rest of society" (ILGA-Europe 2017, p. 3). It was only after a year that the Senate of the Sarajevo University reacted to complaints made by the SOC and condemned the mentioned statements, but no further sanctions were taken against Zahiragić.
7. In the domain of political parties, the support to sexual minorities is mostly limited to the multi-ethnic party Naša stranka (Our Party) (Selmić 2016). In May 2015, the Youth Forum of SDP (Social-Democratic Party) adopted the Resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity, which states that all members are committed to advocate rights of LGBT population. The precedent in the work of institutions of BiH was a thematic session of a Joint Commission for Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH on the rights of LGBT people held in May 2015, the event that indicated the beginning of somewhat different and more positive political climate regarding the LGBT cause.
8. For instance, a public gathering that was supposed to take place on the International Day against Homophobia (IDAHO) in May 2017 was cancelled because the cantonal Ministry of Transport failed to respond to the request of the organiser, SOC. In March 2016, an LGBT-friendly club Art Cinema Kriterion in Sarajevo was target of the homophobic attack, when a group of young men entered the club and attacked one of the staff, while shouting homophobic assaults. The attack was soon condemned by the Minister of Justice of the Sarajevo Canton, Mario Nenadić, but even a year later, "the attack has yet to

be brought to trial and the police are still carrying out an investigation without any visible results" (Bošnjak et al. 2017, p. 9).

9. "Svetlana Đurkovic was a guest in a variety of TV shows in almost all of BiH media outlets. Eventually she became the front of the LGBT community and also the first queer person who came out and was known to the general public" (Spahić and Gavrić 2012, p. 113).
10. Zimmerman (2000, p. 2) argues that "through private rituals and creation of separate social spaces and fictive kin networks, lesbians in varying regional contexts have established the sense of community and solidarity needed for collective action".
11. Naida Kučukalić (as cited in Oslobođenje Portal 2017, online), a feminist activist from Sarajevo, states: "Feminism is still a bad word in BiH". Similarly, as Spahić-Šiljak (2012, p. 238) notes, "being a feminist means being in the minority, with a meaning from the socialist period that connected feminism with bourgeois heritage, radical feminism, lesbians and a 'suspicious code of conduct'".
12. The name of the festival (pičvajz) is a play of words: on the one hand, it refers to a slang Serbo-Croatian expression used to describe a mess, a disturbance, a traffic jam, a fight or a party, while on the other hand, it also invokes the derogatory word for the female genitals (pička).
13. A similar festival—*Blasfem*—was organised for the first time in Banja Luka in June 2017. See Isović Dobrijević (2017).
14. The organisers are aware that in the audience there may be lesbian women reluctant to come out. That is why one of them states: "When it comes to lesbian identity, it has always been important for us to boost this topic while implementing feminist workshops. We never know who is sitting in the audience and we want to make lesbian participants feel good" (Vildana Džekman, personal communication with the first author, September 2017).
15. One of the participants in these workshops states: "In 2009 I attended a two-day Pitchwise workshop with Lepa Mlađenović. There was around 20 of us women and girls, coming from all over the region, all walks of life, of different ages, sexual orientation, life experiences. We had an exercise where we were divided in pairs and were asked to share our feelings about traumatic events that happened to us. I remember talking to this perfect stranger candidly about my life and then turning around to look at other women. All of them were engaged in their conversations, listening to each other, sharing their stories, some of

them crying and hugging each other for support. This was the first time in my life that I truly realised how much in common we all have as women, and how important it is to have safe spaces where we can share our deepest thoughts and feelings, knowing that we are among our sisters" (Vanja Matić, personal communication with the first author, December 2017).

16. Le Zbor is the first lesbian-feminist choir in Croatia and the wider Yugoslav space. It was founded in November 2005 as a women/feminist/non-heterosexual initiative that gathers around 15 singers.
17. Events contributing to the production of the queer space and time of feminist and queer art in the region and beyond include, among others, Red Dawns (Rdeče Zore) festival in Ljubljana (see Oblak and Pan, this volume), Merlinka in Belgrade and Sarajevo, Queer Zagreb since 2003 and Vox Feminae in Zagreb since 2007. There was also L'art pour l'Action lesbian festival in Novi Sad organised by the now inactive activist group NLO—Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation.
18. In this regard, one of the *PitchWise* organisers talks about fear as the main reason for the lack of formal gathering of LBTQ women in BiH. "The goal is to empower LBT women – so they could perhaps launch an organisation. We did not come to that yet and I think that the reason for that is fear" (Vildana Džekman, personal communication with the first author, September 2017).
19. The Queer Sarajevo Festival in September 2008 was the first larger-scale public event related to LGBT population in BiH. It took place at the Sarajevo Academy of Fine Arts and was attended by around 300 people. However, the festival was interrupted by groups of football fans and religious activists who attacked the participants (Grew 2008). Organisation Q, the organiser of the festival, was active until 2009, but Svetlana Đurković, its central activist, immigrated to the United States soon after.
20. Interestingly enough, LGBT individuals are increasingly becoming trans-ethnic citizens, positioned beyond the insistence on ethnic belonging. Research that encompassed 545 persons ranging from 15 to 54 years of age, conducted by the SOC (2013), has shown that 73% of LGBT examinees did not want to declare their ethnicity. LGBT persons constitute the "Other" to all three main ethnic groups (see Selmić 2016).

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# Conclusion: Discovering the Lesbian in Us—On Our Ongoing, Never-Ending Struggles

Marija Radoman

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing number of studies on lesbian sexuality, women who love women, lesbian desire, construction of lesbianity, lesbophobia, lesbian identity, lesbian partnership—it looks like a lot has been already written about 'the lesbian' among/in us (Dunne 1997; Zimmerman 2000; Irvine 2003; Clarke and Peel 2007). Nevertheless, in my own research, as I interview women who are both emotionally and sexually devoted to other women (Radoman 2015), I seem to repeatedly encounter one basic issue: 'how difficult it is to say 'I am a lesbian". I used to think that this was a feature of societies with a long-standing neglect of women's homosexuality in which 'lesbians remained invisible even in the eyes of criminal regulation of sexuality and prosecution of 'wrong' sexual desires' (Cvetkovic, this volume; Dioli, this volume). Perhaps, this was related to the fact that the word 'lesbian' (lezbejka/lezbijka) in Serbo-Croatian—along with signifying same-sex oriented women—has a distinctly negative and derogatory connotation.[1]

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_8

A lot of energy, cultural redefinitions, appropriations, and resignifications will be needed until this term starts being associated with pride, with our love to be lesbians and with the possibility to accept and enjoy the way in which we refer to ourselves and in which others refer to us (see Bilić, introduction to this volume).

However, for someone like me who lives in Serbia and shares the painful experience of numerous cancelled or banned pride parades (Radoman 2016), violence, and repression against non-heterosexual and queer people (Labris 2017; Asocijacija Duga 2017), it is becoming clear that the problem of pronouncing 'I am a lesbian' has deep causes and that their examination takes us straight to the entanglements of post-Yugoslav political developments with our desires and identitarian articulations—entanglements that are hard to disentangle. Constant social rejection, homophobia, and various other, interlocking discriminations (Bilić and Kajinić 2016) combine to produce the conditions in which lesbians, gays, and other non-heterosexuals live in the post-socialist countries that once belonged to Yugoslavia (Cvetkovic, this volume; Ivanović 2014; Kajinić, this volume).

In this regard, in her account of internalised homophobia/lesbophobia, the Croatian writer Jasna Žmak (2017, online), who in her work devotes a lot of attention to lesbian sexuality, wrote:

> Today it is hard for me to describe how my own emotional state, my intimate life had looked like before I came out, probably because I never talked about these issues with anyone. No, not with a single person. I spent the first twenty years of my life in an absolute silence about my sexuality. That is an aspect of my growing up which never ceases to fascinate me (…) The majority of us start absorbing self-homophobia in childhood because it actually represents the homophobia that we as children internalise along with a range of other stupid things we are exposed to (…) some already in the family, others in school, in the church, while working out or engaging with the media. A lot of strength and awareness is needed to root it out. And time, very often we need a lot of time.

Stories about coming out as well as those about internalising guilt and shame still have not been adequately told—they are inhabiting fields of

silence regardless of whether we are looking at Serbia with its history of failed and violent pride marches (Kajinić, this volume), Bosnia and Herzegovina in which pride still has not happened (Selmić and Bilić, this volume; Selmić 2016), Montenegro with hardly any outed lesbian activists (Vuković and Petričević, this volume), Macedonia with its profound political instabilities (Cvetkovic, this volume), or Croatia and Slovenia which have laws on same-sex partnership, but still a lot of homophobia in schools[2] and the public sphere, more generally.

> In the post-war 90s in Croatia, nationalism was the dominant ideology so everyone who threatened the great project of establishing the independent Croatian state was the enemy: feminists, queers, Serbs, atheists were all not proper Croatians. To be Croatian has for a long time been synonymous for being Catholic, heterosexual, and patriotic; and sometimes I feel it still is. I never knew any queer people while growing up. I don't recognise myself in the rhetoric of 'knowing I was gay since I was born' because I didn't know one could be anything other than straight. I believe I became a lesbian when I found the words and language for it thanks to the LGBTIQ+activism I saw around me in Pride marches and on TV. (Marta, personal communication, January 2018)

Cultural definition of lesbianity is a necessary political fight that is helping us to build something new on the level of politics and—very importantly—on the level of our own selves. Valerie Jenness (1992, p. 67) wrote about the significance and urgency of articulating lesbianity as a social category that can serve as an 'interpretative scheme' for the understanding of our experiences:

> The construction of a lesbian identity is firmly located in a developmental process that begins with an awareness of the social category 'lesbian'. Regardless of how the category is understood, an awareness of the social category lesbian must be present for a woman eventually to categorise herself as a lesbian and adopt a lesbian identity. If the woman is not aware of the social category, she cannot assess her experiences in terms of that social construct and its affiliated identity.

Without such cultural and historical models, we find ourselves in a sort of 'cultural vacuum'—which for many non-heterosexual people translates into relationships and strategies that are fragile and sustainable only in certain—their own—ways and not without costs: sometimes heterosexual patterns are appropriated and adapted, on other occasions completely new and innovative existential modes are created and tested. In such a way, a lack of cultural models for non-heterosexual people could be understood as 'a negative factor with potentially positive effects' (Weeks et al. 2001, p. 112).

This volume stems from our idea to take stock of the efforts that have been invested into the building of something 'new' over the last more than three decades of lesbian activism in the post-Yugoslav space. There are few written traces of the earliest initiatives in the sphere of lesbian rights, but recent collective academic-activist efforts (Bilić 2016a; Bilić and Kajinić 2016) are rapidly filling this lacuna and our own book constitutes their further advancement and extension.

> In the majority of post-socialist societies, scientific interest in everyday life and culture of gays, lesbians and other queer people and communities has a much shorter history in comparison with the one in Western societies and is quite often limited to individual researchers and NGOs' projects that aim at understanding, respect, and equal rights for LGBT population. (Ivanović 2014, p. 120)

What guided Bojan and me as editors of this book through the whole process of its creation was the wish to include in it the highest possible number of participants and active figures of the regional lesbian/queer movement. It is for this reason that one part of this concluding chapter brings excerpts from the interviews/electronic correspondence that we conducted/had with Marta Šušak (Croatia), Miloš Urošević (Serbia), and Lejla Huremović (Bosnia and Herzegovina), all feminist activists who have helped us to further problematise the questions raised by non-heterosexual activist engagement in the post-Yugoslav space.

## Lesbophobia in a Post-Socialist Context

Whenever it is talked about violence against LGBTQ people, images of gruesome physical attacks—explicit and direct threats on someone's physical integrity—seem to dominate. There is much less talk about violence within LGBT circles or invisibility as a form of violence—'to live a gay or lesbian identity publically is an exception that undermines the rules of 'normal' social life instead of being accepted as a norm guaranteed by the right to be different' (Ivanović 2014, p. 121). As a matter of fact, even in those instances in which there is no direct violent experience, the imagined risks may have a palpable influence on everyday choices regarding the ways in which we manage our identities and decide to live our lives.

Recent data on the violence against non-heterosexual people suggest that the levels of homophobia and heteronormativity are still rather high in our region. Regardless of the legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender expression, the rights of many non-heterosexual people are violated on a daily basis. This is evident in a general social climate in which the freedom of non-heterosexual people's movement is often unguaranteed and their public expressions of sexuality encounter one or the other form of discrimination. For example, public surveys still show that a huge number, at least 50%, of Serbian citizens consider homosexuality a disease (RTS 2014), while 80% would not like to have an LGBT person as a family member (Socijalno uključivanje 2018). But also, for the new generations of women who love women, we can say that we have much more space for lesbian love:

> Through activism we create spaces to live our own desires, spaces in which we can be free and who we are. And we allow those after us to have choices that we did not have. Already now, the situation is a bit easier for girls who feel excited about girls than it used to be 30 years ago. (Lepa Mlađenović, as cited in Čaušević 2014, online)

The problem is that violence is most of the time reported by organisations rather than by individuals who have suffered it and there is a lack of centralised documentation and statistics about the number of crimes motivated by homophobia and transphobia (Labris 2017). The existing strategies of documenting homophobic crimes do not allow us to understand how many of these involved gays, lesbians, or trans people specifically. This practice is reflected in the fact that public surveys usually do not differentiate between homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia, so gays, lesbians, bi, and trans people tend to remain invisible in them. Research has shown that respondents have different attitudes and express varying degrees of stereotyping depending on whether they are asked about lesbians or gays (Herek and Capitanio 1999; Herek 2004). This is to say that for the time being it appears quite hard to talk about regional levels of lesbophobia with any certainty. If we zoom in on the legislation, most discrimination is still present in the sphere of partner relations and family with a tentative exception of Croatia and Slovenia.[3] According to Marta Šušak, one of the co-founders of the first student LGBTIQ+initiative AUT at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, she started getting in a better touch with her identity only upon leaving Croatia:

> Because of the context I grew up and came out in, where there were only a handful of people who were publicly out, my lesbianity has always been more of a political than a personal identity. So ever since leaving Croatia and moving to Berlin, I have been feeling a kind of freedom which was out of reach for me back 'home': the freedom to explore my sexuality and relationships without the constraints of a homophobic society holding me back. The toll on our relationships and private lives is enormous when we're constantly fighting against a system that doesn't want us. Moving out of Croatia made me realise just how much energy I was spending just trying to survive and fight back in a country that still lives in the past and therefore offers very little future for new generations. (Marta, personal communication, January 2018)

The invisibility of lesbians is a particular form of lesbophobia equally present in both academic and activist realms (Kajinić, this volume;

Vuković and Petričević, this volume). Some authors start from the assumption that lesbian sexuality has been historically less visible because there are different histories of the ways in which men and women have been constructed as social categories.

'Access to employment and an independent income has been both easier and more profitable for men than for women and, in criminal law, homosexuality has been constituted almost exclusively as a masculine proclivity' (Jagose 1996, p. 45). Also, it is assumed that 'female homosexuality does not occupy the same historic positions as male homosexuality in the discourses of law or medicine' (Jagose 1996, p. 13). So, structurally observed, unequal position imposed on women extends to lesbians, while heteronormativity means their *double discrimination*. According to Teresa de Lauretis, heterosexuality is:

> intimidated as heterosexuality, in the sense that women can and must feel sexual in relation to men and imposed as heterosexuality in the sense that sexual desire belongs to another, begins in other. In this standard framework, shockingly simple, yet authoritative, always renewed, unfortunately also in feminist theory, whatever women feel towards other women cannot be sexual desire, unless it is 'masculinisation', usurpation, or mimicking the man's desire. (De Lauretis 1994, p. 123)

Women's homosexuality has stayed invisible because women's sexuality has stayed invisible and often been interpreted as 'innocuous' because women supposedly have 'weaker' sexual desires than men and tend to be associated with reproduction (Hupperts 2011). Women's sexuality loses its autonomy through a frequent equalisation with its reproductive function. Given that a man is often perceived as the initiator of a sexual act,[4] there are frequent representations of women as romantic and essentially asexual.

> Ideology limited the possibility for even an attempt at scientific definition of lesbianism. But even more important, the social position of most women militated against the easy emergence of a distinctive lesbian way of life. (Weeks 2012, p. 144)

Nevertheless, the question remains as to how we in our own time approach these phenomena—what does the history of homosexuality tell and can teach us about gay and lesbian lives in contemporary world? We need *(her)stories* of the 'marginalised', of those who have been banished from the official 'masculine' histories if we are to develop an awareness about the ways in which culture has shaped both gender and (homo)sexuality in our own space. In this regard, research on lesbian practices in the former Yugoslav countries is still missing and it would, as our book also does, surely point to a whole range of ambiguities, contradictions, and conflicts that are inbuilt in this engagement.

The *herstory* of lesbian organising in Croatia illustrates a general trend that has prevailed in other republics too—the problems lesbians have in articulating their position within the feminist movement, and the fear of feminists in the 1980s that all women's organisations would be labelled 'lesbian'. According to the Croatian feminist activist Nela Pamuković:

> the process of raising the level of awareness of lesbians was not easy because feminism itself was treated as a movement of *weird, eccentric women, lesbians, and haters of men*. For this reason, lesbians were not fully accepted within feminist groups, this was a rather complicated situation. (Nela Pamuković, as cited in Marušić 2014, online)

Also, the wars on the territory of Yugoslavia during the 1990s further slowed down the empowerment of lesbian organisations—'There was simply no possibility for such a type of political activism' (Nela Pamuković, as cited in Marušić 2014, online).

With a distance of almost three decades, Marta offers her own perspective on the lesbian movement and her position within it:

> As an activist of the younger generation who has only been active in the LGBTIQ + movement since 2010, my knowledge of lesbian activism in the region is only fragmentary, gained mostly from my personal experience and the limited exchanges I had with lesbian activists of the older generation. I am aware of the informational discontinuity of lesbian

> activism in Croatia and the region and the need for younger generations of activists to be more aware of the history of our L(GBTIQ) movement. The legacy of ex-Yu lesbian activists is enormous and their influence on the today's LGBT movements in the region is indisputable: they were the first ones to break the silence around non-heterosexual identity and desire in the region, establish lesbian spaces and spaces of lesbian exchange and give non-heterosexual women the personal and political tools to come out first to themselves and then publicly. (Marta, personal communication, January 2018)

What is more, we cannot neglect the impact that traditional religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) have had on perceptions of homosexuality in the post-Yugoslav space. In the 2011 census, around six million Serbian citizens said that they were Orthodox Christians, and even though all of them may not be particularly observant, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church is quite strong, if for nothing else than because its vitriolically homophobic statements get a lot of media attention (Ivanović and Radulović 2014). The overwhelming presence of the Catholic Church in Croatian political life has cemented conservative movements that oppose same-sex marriage, but also encourage resistance struggles. In this regard, Marta states:

> The strong influence the Catholic Church has over state politics and the shame and guilt I was forced to feel while growing up has also made me the activist I am today. I remember the kiss-in protest organised by Zagreb Pride in 2013 in front of the Zagreb Cathedral, which marked the beginning of the fight against the rise of neo-conservatism in Croatia. Under the Christian motto of love and acceptance Love the neighbour, a couple of dozen of us activists were surrounded by a few hundreds of anti-protestors who were yelling 'You are not Croatia!' and 'Faggots!'. In the following months we had to deal with the homophobic referendum on marriage, which eventually defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman in the Constitution, and the ever growing backlash on LGBTIQ+, reproductive and women's rights we thought had been secured a long time ago. (Marta, personal communication, January 2018)[5]

The political background of homophobia in the post-Yugoslav space cannot be dissociated from the interpretations of homosexuality as an 'inherently' Western phenomenon that threatens 'our' traditional national and religious values (Sremac et al. 2014; see also Bilić, epilogue, this volume). The dissolution of Yugoslavia left in its wake ethnocratic parties and stimulated a proliferation of right-wing groups, all of which are based on the principle of exclusion and intolerance towards non-heterosexuality (Selmić 2016). In this regard, the history of Belgrade Pride parades (Bilić 2016b), for example, demonstrates important linkages between the state and the activity of right-wing/hooligan groups which started during the Milošević regime and persevered way after its fall in October 2000 (Petakov 2017). It is, therefore, important to keep in mind the resiliency of right-wing politics and its capacity to adapt to regime changes and modern democratic rhetoric. This 'versatility' can obscure its links with fascist legacies and extreme nationalism (Kuljić 2002).[6]

It is with this in mind that we cared to show in this volume that an analysis of lesbian activism cannot be detached from a broader political context.[7] One of the questions that has been touched upon—but which will need to be taken up in much more detail in future research—has to do with the way in which non-heterosexual, and especially lesbian activism, positions itself in the context of neoliberal capitalism, increasing populism, and the assault of right-wing groups. This issue draws attention to the tension between, on the one hand, predominantly 'liberal' and 'leftist' activists/political positions, on the other. It remains to be seen whether these differences that create ideological fissures also in other areas will keep doing so in the future. For the time being, it seems that important segments of lesbian activist initiatives are geared towards a critique of neoliberal capitalism:

> Identity politics like, by the way, any other idea with an emancipatory potential has been co-opted by neoliberal capitalism which has made of it its own tool for social stratification and domination. Although it is often not easy to assume a precise position on these issues, I have come to a conclusion that communitarian ideologies carry the potential (along with risks and traps, especially for women) to strengthen a class-bound group

> with solidarity principles based on shared living experience. Power may come from a socially informed alliance within which there, of course, are different identities that will not be manipulated by neoliberal promises. (Lejla, personal communication, December 2017)

Undoubtedly, the invisibility of lesbians in this region is part of the structural repression that shapes their existence, but that also includes the activity of lesbian activists, an important point that the authors emphasise in all of the preceding chapters. Historically, this story is not new—Suzana Tratnik (2001, p. 375) describes the position of 'lesbian' in her talk on the history of the lesbian organising in Slovenia:

> Visibility is a kind of declaration of the 'reality' of lesbian existence (…) Compared to male homosexuality, lesbianism was almost unknown/unacknowledged, unrecognisable and enigmatic; even today its existence is under question in many places. This explains the public curiosity: the requirement for uncovering and the constant popping up of questions such as 'What do lesbians look like?', 'What do they do together?'.

In this regard, lesbian feminism appears as one of the key guiding principles of lesbian activist engagement in the post-Yugoslav space:

> Since we live in a patriarchal society (in which even most gay men often perpetuate patriarchal patterns of behaviour) lesbian feminism is crucial. Lesbians are still struggling for visibility in the public space. Take, for example, the media coverage where gay men are still dominant. Because of this, I believe that lesbian feminism has great potential... apart from contributing to visibility and reducing violence against marginalised people, it can generally contribute to a better life of lesbians. (Lejla, personal communication, December 2017)

Marta explains important differences in the (self-)perception between younger and older generations of homosexual women enabled by the possibility of meeting other LGBTQ persons. This invites us to reflect upon the ways in which forms of activism/visibility and naming construct our own understanding of lesbian space(s).

> Lesbian and women-only spaces have been slowly dying out ever since I came to activism: places and spaces such as the lesbian archive and library LezBib, whose address was secret and given upon request only, that served as the primary place of exchange between non-heterosexual women, were replaced by more public spaces where LGBTIQ + people could meet, such as clubs, parties and Pride marches. There is still a need to celebrate the often neglected L in the acronym: for instance, through the initiative Zbele na Tron, that organises cultural events and parties for lesbians, bisexual and trans women and the event Lesbian of the Year held once a year to mark queer women's contributions to activism and art. The Centre for Women's Studies has also remained an important place for feminist and lesbian exchange. I would also argue that there has been a change in discourse and ideology when it comes to lesbian identities: many of the activists of my generation would not call themselves lesbians or lesbian feminists and would instead embrace queer as an umbrella term for their activism and desires. (Marta, personal communication, January 2018)

Miloš Urošević, a long-time activist of the Belgrade-based Women in Black[8] describes the importance of lesbian presence within the feminist movement:

> Lesbian activists were those women who at the first feminist gathering held in Ljubljana in 1987, have pledged to open a SOS help-line for women and children who were victims of male violence, and they managed to open shelters for women who were trying to flee from male violence and managed to organise lesbian groups and they were successful. Lesbian activists were part of the anti-war movement, demanding to stop killing, demanding to establish an international Women's Court for war crimes committed against women. Lesbian activists, among other feminists, organised the first female march Bring night back to us, in Belgrade in 1995. Lesbian activists organised the first Lesbian march in the Balkans, which was held in Belgrade in 2015. (Miloš, personal communication, November 2017)

Some aspects of lesbian activism remain particularly neglected. The role of personal care, burnout, and awareness of one's own position in the wider context of precarious work and capitalist labour conditions

are essential for building solidarity in activism. Lejla speaks about this aspect, pointing out that our actions and emotions are linked to the context in which we live and work:

> We often forget to take care of ourselves, about us, about our psychic health, about our capacities and possibilities. About how much we as individuals can and must. We should not fall into the trap of everyday life that is patriarchal, heteronormative and which requires certain rules of behaviour and achievement from us. I think that we are in constant danger from the ease of seduction of these patterns and that our own awareness, daily functioning and struggle can make it difficult for us. Of course, this is just one of the problems that the activists face, but from my current experience I consider it an important issue. (Lejla, personal communication, December 2017)

The position of trans persons is a topic that is increasingly talked about lately and it opens up one of the important and sometimes burning issues of LGBT activism, especially lesbian activism. In contrast to the notion of the existence of trans-exclusionary radical feminism in lesbian activism (see Vuković and Petričević, this volume), many feminists emphasise the importance of a non-essentialist approach that goes beyond identity politics and passes the boundaries of LGBT activism (see Oblak and Pan, this volume). Lejla opened this question:

> I wouldn't say that trans persons only contributed to a common battle and dynamics in recent years. They are present all the time, but often they were not accepted as equal and remained invisible. That's exactly why it's important to talk about it because I do not consider it necessary to separate each identity, but accept it and give everyone space. It does not matter if we are talking about lesbian or gay, trans, bisexual, intersex, queer, and everybody else. I think it is very important to have awareness of the privileges and positions where we are. And that's certainly the duty of the feminism we live. (Lejla, personal communication, December 2017)

On the other hand, Miloš (personal communication, November 2017) talked about the importance of lesbian-only spaces, emphasising the difference in relation to the gay and trans movements:

> Lesbian activism has been hit by the queer and trans movement and now, as was the case in the beginning, we must defend the idea of only women's spaces, which is important as such, because it is the idea that it is possible to have oases without male supremacy (…) lesbian activists have the right to separatism, separation from those who are not women. Exclusion and separatism are not the same thing.

Many of these issues will surely stay points of contention in political debates and activist initiatives both regionally and internationally.

## Making a Book: Sisterhood, Anxiety, and Joy

Along with the effort to include in our book as many activists/voices as possible, which—truth be told—was not always smooth or successful, we endeavoured to 'capture' our authors' impressions regarding our cooperation and their contributions to it. We did this by asking them to reflect with us upon their writing once their chapters were complete. Writing is more often than not a seclusionary practice that isolates us both as authors and activists who work with 'others' and it is frequently accompanied by questions, doubts, and uncertainties. We thought that our anxieties, feelings of loneliness, and fears should also have an opportunity 'to speak' because they are an (often poorly visible) integral part of the contexts in which we work and which shapes our everyday strategies of action and resistance. In this regard, our authors have showed us innovative, intimate, empathic ways of entering into a collective writing enterprise which recognises 'living' people, their emotions, psychological states, and exhaustive, courageous struggles in which they have been involved for a lot of time. Our intimacy does indeed render us more vulnerable, but it can also be an instrument upon which we can rely to create new solidarity nets—and we hope that all of the preceding chapters testify to that. As Adelita, a co-author on the chapter on Bosnia and Herzegovina and the *PitchWise* festival, states:

> the most interesting part of the research was correspondence and conversations with women who organise *PitchWise* and participate in LGBT

> activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina… it is this that constitutes the basis of our empirical material. What made it relatively easy and fun for me to do all of this was the fact that networks, friendships, and all sorts of casual and intimate relations have been intertwined in this project. This made my own engagement as a researcher both comfortable and gratifying.

The majority of our authors perceive their participation in this volume as a contribution to a pioneering endeavour of writing an up to now inexistent political analysis of (post-)Yugoslav lesbian activisms.

> This volume represents an untold herstory of lesbians in the post-Yugoslav space and it is the first time that something of this kind is published. (Adelita)

We wanted this book to go beyond a 'sheer' political dimension or expand it by visibilising aspects of writing that reflect the conditions in which activist work is frequently done. For example, many of our authors mentioned that producing their contributions was a challenge because they were confronted with deadlines and exhaustion. Paula stated that 'regardless of the fact that the whole process was challenging and inspiring, I believe that a similar adventure will not be repeated any time soon', whereas her co-author Marina claimed that 'writing is never just a pleasure, it is indeed a never-ending process'. For Irene,

> writing this chapter has been my most 'personal' academic endeavour so far. It has been also the hardest, both because of the autoethnographic direction taken by the chapter and because I was writing while being basically burnt out. Thanks to the caring support of the editors, I am glad to say it has also been the most satisfying – not only because of the final result, but because I felt part of a community of soul as well as of intellect.

The authors counterpose their involvement in the making of this book to the general invisibility of lesbians which gave them the feeling of doing something they had not done before. 'The experience of working on this volume was rather different from any research projects I had

been working on' (Adelita). Writing about lesbian activism or about lesbians in our region still belongs to the domain of 'alterity' and our book opens up a space for further social and cultural legitimation of this topic.

> Writing on lesbian activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country in which women make up the significant part of the LGBTIQ social engagement, but do not have their own (lesbian) organisation or any written history, meant that we had to start from our own observations, experiences, and ideas, and turn them into valid documentary and ethnographic material. During this process, I sometimes received casual comments on how lesbian activism in BiH does not exist. Yet, our goal was not only to acknowledge that lesbian activism does exist, but to capture its forms, ideologies, manifestations, and anything that makes it vivid, however hidden it may seem. (Adelita)

Similarly, Irena also perceives her work in and on lesbian activism in Macedonia as a means of puncturing the frontiers of heteronormativity in research:

> The process of writing the chapter showed that we, as a society, lack archives on lesbian lives and activism. We lack studies and research on this topic that would fill the gap on non-heterosexuality in our national production of knowledge. (Irena)

For Teja, writing about the lesbian movement in Slovenia also was an important personal and political experience:

> Working on the chapter was a source of profound joy and euphoria – to make a memory and analysis of otherwise under-represented or hidden lesbian/queer feminist groups and to make this information available to broader audience out of our Ljubljana circles. (Teja)

It looks like the most precious aspect for all of us engaged in writing this book was the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other women through empathy and listening.

> The interviews we conducted with our respondents were transformative in multiple ways, not only in the sense of what I thought I knew or what I would hear and learn about them, but also concerning the way in which I would feel and behave during and after them. The hardest thing for me was resisting the temptation of entering into an argument with them – the 'unnaturalness' of that position was a constant nuisance, but the need to listen without directing them or intervening into what they wanted to say and considered most important eventually prevailed and I am immensely grateful to all of them for their trust, for the 'gift' as one of them said, that they gave me, for the strength with which they live, for the sorrow that they allowed me to take a look at. (Paula)

This 'transformative' effect of our authors' encounters with their respondents made us think about feminist epistemology's emphasis on 'socially located knowledges,' which draws attention to reflexivity and the role of the researcher in constructing knowledge (Doucet and Mauthner 2007). All of the contributions struggled to appreciate a 'plurality of perspectives' as we were all led by the belief that 'marginalised groups hold a particular claim to knowing' that should be embraced and encouraged (Doucet and Mauthner 2007). This way, in-depth interviewing from feminist perspective is particularly interested in arriving at experiences that are often hidden and still waiting for articulation (Hesse-Biber 2013). Irena applies this feminist approach when she bridges the differences and positions of the researcher and her respondents:

> I really enjoyed the interviews and the willingness of lesbian women and activists to share their personal stories of discrimination, but also fight for dignity and rights. The women were very sincere and open and the conversation with them was a process for both of us (me as a researcher and them as respondents) to re-think the past struggles from a distance, evaluate our common activities and goals and, what was most important, to find motivation and hope for the future. (Irena)

For some authors, working on their chapters was particularly challenging because they had to revisit their research done ten or 15 years ago. Sanja, for example, draw upon the data she collected in 2001 and 2002

while participating in the first prides in both Belgrade and Zagreb. She then wrote her MA thesis on the basis of that material—a document that has been widely used, but only now published. Sanja returned to those valuable data from a different perspective, with new knowledge, and richer experiences:

> I am aware that now – 15 years later – I would have approached that topic somewhat differently, especially the analytical part…so as I worked on the chapter, I tried to link interview excerpts with theory while struggling to avoid writing a new text. (Sanja)

Maja describes a similar experience:

> Now the stuff we wrote about is ten, fifteen years away, I reached additional distance due to the fact that I have lived abroad for years. Apart from distance, the most important question for me was how to place one's own insight as objectively, that is as critically but sympathetically as possible, while at the same time remaining invested. (Maja)

It is interesting to see what happens with interviews and empirical data as well as how the researcher's perspective matures through time. We are glad to have in our book also that kind of 'theory' which experiments with time and repositions older data in new circumstances in which those 'past' voices are still present as subjects, as activists involved in our ongoing struggles.

Writing in co-authorship was also an aspect that many authors commented upon offering us an insight into the dynamics of 'collective' work that is normally stimulating and enriching.

> Since I procrastinated so much with making this text (there were two attempts earlier but I did not manage), it occurred to me that the most feasible thing might be to work with a co-author who would place my initial intentions 'out of joint' – simply by the means of there being two of us. (Maja)

> What made it interesting and inspiring was a diversity of ideas and thoughts both of us came up with and integrated into the text. (Marina)

Solidarity and the need to meet tight deadlines gave another dimension to the joint enterprise of Teja and Maja:

> However, this work was sometimes coupled with urge or anxiety due to other engagements. I felt real sister*hood when my co-author was really open to my time and working constraints and accepted them with patience and love. In spite of similar political viewpoints, our different theoretical, practical, and generational background definitely led to richer analysis in conclusions. (Teja)

Working on 'political' texts gave our co-authors an opportunity to enjoy the overlap over their ideological positions and attitudes:

> We knew each other's political presuppositions beforehand, those matters were debated rather quickly as we were on the same page. What we saw as a really special chance was to theorise and to express our mutual frustration with the self-historicising types of activism which are especially bothering in small environments like Slovenia. It is hard to resist, I mean the self-historicising, as I was just about to write: we are probably the first authors in Slovenia to write about this. (Maja)

What adequately describes the efforts of lesbian activism in space of former Yugoslavia, which occurs between invisibility and continuous action, is the awareness and strength of the activists who see themselves in these processes as significant subjects:

> Lesbians uncompromisingly were changing heteronormative patterns of behaviour, not hesitating to take over risk. (Lejla, personal communication, December 2017)

At the end, we believe together with our respondents and friends, that lesbians continue their struggle, changing themselves, building on old victories and winning some new and unexpected spaces, and perhaps also common—Yugoslav—spaces:

> I was lucky to have been able to break that silence early on and come out to myself as a lesbian in my teenage years. This however did not happen

> in a vacuum: thanks to the efforts and struggles of the earlier generations of activists who started the Yugoslav and later Croatian LGBT movement so I could be as out as I am today. This meant that there was some discourse on homosexuality in the media while I was growing up in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, which was rarely the case in the early post-war years in Croatia, where silence and shame were the name of the game. Thanks to the Pride marches that happened every year in the centre of Zagreb ever since 2002, when I was 10 years old; queer people who were out and loud about it and the Internet, which helped me connect with other queers and learn about our identities; I was able to turn my newfound lesbian identity into a political one. (Marta)

Having in mind that the *herstory* of the lesbian movement in the post-Yugoslav space is so poorly documented, that some women who have been there from the beginning are still active today, but many are not—our collection starts a narrative about their complex and interesting engagement and will hopefully serve as a source of inspiration for future writing on this topic. There may be in our accounts new perspectives, new directions for all of us who are here *now*, living our lesbian realities and taking part in our ongoing, everyday struggles.

## Notes

1. Similar to the word 'faggot' (peder), but also different in the sense that homosexual men would more likely refer to themselves as 'gay' (gej), circumventing thus in their self-identification some of the homophobic charge contained in the word 'faggot'.
2. Croatia is fighting homophobia and especially transphobia in the education system. The problem is that even in lower grades children are so introduced into a heteronormative way of thinking (male and female sports, before and after puberty) that it is later difficult to come up with a 'corrective' (Zelić 2016, online).
3. Institutional barriers to LGBT partnerships have not changed much in the last few decades. In 2002, the position of lesbians and gays was found to be bad in all the countries of former Yugoslavia, with the exception of Slovenia: 'No state has an anti-discriminatory article in its

Constitution that explicitly refers to sexual orientation as one of the criteria of discrimination. Secondly, no state allows the possibility of legal regulation of same-sex partnerships. These facts have consequences, a greater social vulnerability of the lesbian and gay population, and greater exposure to violence, stigmatisation, and social isolation' (Labris novine 2002, online).

4. When we ask the question regarding the difference between male-male and female-female sex, one should remember the heteronormative perception that the only 'real' sex is one in which there is a penetrative intercourse i.e. something that men 'do' to women (Weeks et al. 2001). This perception 'takes away' the legitimacy of the relationship between two women, because it implies that if lesbians do not possess a penis, there is an absence of sex (Weeks et al. 2001). Richardson (1992, as cited in Weeks et al. 2001, p. 138) suggests that as a consequence, women do not have access to a language that can be used to describe, discuss, and negotiate sex: 'although there are numerous terms to describe sex from male perspectives, there are far less to describe sex from female perspectives, and even fewer from the perspective of sex between women'.
5. An important recent activist victory concerns Marta's partner Mima Simić, who sued Željka Markić, the leader of the conservative and homophobic non-government organisation *In the Name of the Family*, for defamation (Voxfeminae 2018). This victory is significant because Željka Markić is at the helm of the organisation which promotes marriage as exclusively a union between a man and a woman (Voxfeminae 2018).
6. According to Kuljić, 'contemporary ideological jargon (the general reference to the rule of law, the division of power and democracy) is often successful at blurring deeper goals of political movements and makes it difficult to recognise their basic orientation. Right-wing extremism also successfully adapts to current political rhetoric and manifests itself in different, often hidden ways, and almost as a rule denies any connection with unpopular fascism' (Kuljić 2002, p. 124).
7. The way in which we perceive and talk about violence against non-heterosexual people/lesbians speaks volumes about our political orientations. Regionally known dramatist Olga Dimitrijević always emphasises her queer, feminist, and left-wing position when criticising the existing concept of Pride Parade in Belgrade:'Violence is enormous, legal rights are minimal, and rarely applied, fear is also very present. To me, it is a terrible problem that one Pride is openly flirting with nationalism, and

the other, considered the main Belgrade Pride, has openly proclaimed the death of politics. This year, there was almost no political banner or message, and the speech was held by a man from Amsterdam's Pride who complained to us that they didn't have a prime minister at Pride Parade or a lesbian prime minister. Nothing, nothing about the fight…' (Dimitrijević 2017, online). When it comes to Ana Brnabić (see Bilić, introduction to this volume), my opinion is that Brnabić's appointment will probably contribute to the visibility of lesbian identity among the general public (at least at the symbolic level), but this choice should not be viewed separately from political motivations, intentions, and above all, nationalist and neoliberal politics that are there behind it.

8. Women in Black's webpage: http://zeneucrnom.org/index.php?lang=en (retrieved on February 5, 2018).

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# Epilogue: Collecting Fragments—Towards (Post-)Yugoslav Activist Archives

Bojan Bilić

In *Night Soldiers*, a novel which meticulously reconstructs the atmosphere of Europe at the verge of being plunged into the Second World War, Alan Furst (2009) attributes to Leon Trotsky the famous saying: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you". Those of us who lived through the (post-)Yugoslav 1990s know what it means to become an object of war's interest. Even if a war, as was my privileged case, enters into your life only "laterally"—through whispers of your worried parents, commotions of your neighbours, or new terrified classmates who stay for a few weeks before moving on to other countries and sometimes even continents—it nevertheless fills all of life's pores: hardly anything manages to flee from its implacably totalising logic. War is in its nature omnipresent: it spreads like a fluid, seeps into all social relations, and drives a wedge between colleagues, friends, siblings, children and parents, marital partners… war destroys external and internal worlds, it cuts through the hemispheres of the brain, it splinters the chambers of the heart…[1]

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2_9

As a manifestation of unharnessed evil, war obscures justice and sidelines law to give the stage to the corrupt who are eager to benefit from the proliferating shortcuts that lead to fame and wealth. War confronts us with those willing to "take advantage" of an "opportunity", those who, up to then silent and reserved, "suddenly begin to walk upright, whose bodies become, in their new visibility, important and powerful" (Kašić 2012, p. 270). Beyond destroying life in its purely, preciously biological substance, war shatters the moral values upon which sociability thrives. Its dehumanising machinery pulls the social structure out from under our feet, detaching our biographies from their spatial anchors[2] and leaving us suspended in midair, fragmented and confused.[3]

Repeated encounters with death and suffering that we—as (former) Yugoslavs—have experienced over the last three decades strip ethical dilemmas of theoretical speculation and pose them in front of our eyes with a new, particular urgency. Political projects that seminate destruction while instrumentalising our intimate history/herstory and a tentative sense of cultural, linguistic, or even ethnic belonging, demand a response and stimulate new forms of being together. Fragile oppositional currents inevitably emerge and start moving in various directions in an effort to resist the impoverishment of language and thought, and counter warmongers' longing for "purity" and only one, prescribed, "our" "truth". An expression of courage and a message of life, activism stems from the emotional crucible in which shock, anger, frustration, fear, and love are all entwined. It draws from this affective well to bring relief, provide shelter, and preserve vestiges of civility and collectivity from which better futures will hopefully sprout. At the heart of activist mission intersect myriad of ways of recognising the other as nothing less than a fellow human.

However, as dissenters, heretics, rebels, sceptics operating (and not necessarily *co*-operating) on the margins of history, activists are rarely concerned with or capable of documenting the present. Also, there is no or little space for them in official, "clean," and often disturbingly linear narratives of national victorious pasts and supposedly millennial common dreams. The fact that activist engagement as a "life-changing journey" (Janković 2012, p. 226) usually makes an indelible biographical

impact, does not render it less porous. Given that it clashes with the domineering "masters of oblivion" (Ugrešić 1998, p. 6), activism can hardly be more than an ephemeral practice—with time many of its protagonists, achievements, visions, and artefacts slip through our fingers like sand.

This epilogue stands at the end of our fourth collective volume on the politics of activism in the (post-)Yugoslav space (Bilić and Janković 2012a; Bilić 2016; Bilić and Kajinić 2016a). Over the last six years, more than 50 authors have come together to form an *affective-epistemic community* which has documented, analysed, and perhaps offered new perspectives for inclusion-oriented/left-wing activist initiatives in the post-Yugoslav countries. Even though the unfortunate fall of Yugoslavia requires a theoretical reaction commensurate with its depth—already testified to by hundreds of books that have been written about it—the rate with which this group has grown both horizontally and vertically has by far exceeded my expectations. This convergence, however fleeting or profound individual encounters within it may have been, is a resource for responding to a traumatic experience that we share.

## Privileges and Pains of Survival

Our books first and foremost show that the privilege of survival does not come without a price tag: it carries the burden of remembering and leads to the urgency of (illusory) understanding. For me as someone who is often drawn to re-living the death of Yugoslavia both psychically and professionally, there is hardly a more poignant account of its devastating impact than the incomplete paper of the Belgrade-based Yugoslav/Croatian/Serbian sociologist Silvano Bolčić. Engaging with the reasons for which Yugoslav sociology failed to give a clearer indication of the forthcoming "internal war", Bolčić (1992, p. 24) abandons writing and leaves his paper unfinished upon learning that his son Ninoslav "stepped out of life". Afflicted with the overwhelming loss of a child, Bolčić nevertheless summons the strength to say:

> Due to certain "personal circumstances", this paper will stay unintentionally, "unnaturally" and unprofessionally interrupted. However, the reason for this interruption at least partially has to do with the issue of war that I have addressed on the preceding pages. This "time of war", prepared and transferred into our homes in the summer of 1991, took in the winter of the same year my son Ninoslav "abroad" and was then complicit in his tragic and irreversible stepping out of life on 12 August 1992. His "time of war" thus came to an end. […] I faced the question: should this paper be subsequently, or for that matter ever, completed and published. I carried in me the initial motives for writing as well as the scarce conviction that there still was both a need for and a meaning in publishing this "sociological essay" about the war in Yugoslavia that I had started last summer. I have decided to publish it in this incomplete form in the memory of my Ninoslav. I am not sure about the validity of this act or of such an ending of a professional text. I am perhaps inserting a personal moment there where it by no means belongs. Nevertheless, I am taking this liberty and all the risks that go with it, because I want to show the pain I feel for the tragic loss of my son and to say how sad I am because I, either as a father or a "sociologist", did not manage to do anything to prevent that ominous "time of war" from coming to Yugoslavia which all of us, Nino, me and my family could not see in any other way but as our country. Now, so pensive, I am looking at the immense sky in which all of our questions and answers disappear and I wonder: why did all of this happen? I know that this question is not only mine.

Like any trauma, the dissolution of Yugoslavia is a recurring event for and in those of us who lived through it—it looks incredibly recent, asks for attention, wants to be talked about, absorbed, and—alas—integrated. Hardly any present-day development in regional politics can be explained without a reference to it.[4] Hardly could a pleasant childhood—perhaps, mostly Adriatic—memory be evoked without a painful realisation that our space was destroyed in bloodshed and that an alternative to it was surely possible. How could one today walk down the streets of Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Vukovar, Dubrovnik, Prishtina, or even Belgrade without noticing bullet holes, destroyed buildings, wounds, and exhaustion? How could one take a look at the Mostar Bridge without being reminded by its shiny and uncannily smooth new stone of the

incomprehensible evil that went into the destruction of the old one?[5] Ethnocratic noise unleashed through the disappearance of Yugoslavia still reverberates in its successor states and successor generations. It seems impossible to come up with incentives that would make so many of those Krleža-esque (1938/2012) "model-patriots" (uzor-rodoljub) abandon their lucrative duties: they prefer to stay freezed in a speechless *intermezzo*—like the Bosnian and Herzegovinian anthem without words—and keep us in it.[6]

However, the need to *live*, *think*, *and speak* through, in the aftermath, and in spite of gruesome political violence has made many of us who have gathered in these volumes—social scientists. We have entered into sociology and its proximate disciplines not necessarily because we were in search of a life-long *profession*—although that may not be immediately visible to many of our colleagues positioned in Western European and US American centres of academic excellence. How many times have I over the years in frustratingly impersonal conferences that reproduce hierarchies of the world heard my former fellow Yugoslavs talk about their own country/ies and struggling to envelop agonising experiences in academic lexicons that would attenuate their affective charge and make them join the group of "objective" scholars? They wanted to talk of loss, but they ended up talking about democratisation.

Rather than led by professional concerns, we entered into the social sciences because we could not have done otherwise. It would have been a luxury to work on anything else when our communities are so deeply wounded through an eruption of death, hatred, and evil that is inevitably accompanied and sustained by ignorance. Our books show how much we yearn for intimacy, pleasure, and knowledge, and for sociological interventions that would dissolve identitarian reifications with lethal potentials. In all of these four volumes, we have relied on concepts like on pillars, *survival scaffoldings* that give our scholarly and personal feminist engagement therapeutic dimensions. War was surely not given to us like a "theoretical issue which we can now explore peacefully, without misery or desperation" (Golubović 1992, p. 5). It intruded and still intrudes into our realities, homes, families, loves with a force that recalibrates moral standards, increases tolerance thresholds, and perpetually silences voices of reason, compassion, and co/existence. That is why

many of us have approached the social sciences in a way in which an exhausted pilgrim hopes to find relief upon stepping into a long-awaited temple.

What is more, along with a relatively unimpaired/functioning body, the privilege of survival grants to its holders a specific *epistemic position*.[7] A huge number of those who may have been born in the same room, but in different state formations over decades or even centuries cannot but afford an insight into—or at least stimulate curiosity about—the seismic nature of semi-peripheral spaces. By virtue of contingency rather than by will, one is from very early on exposed to the fragility of institutions and can witness both the labour that goes into the establishment of social order as well as the velocity with which it is periodically unwoven. Life itself offers a daily lecture in social constructionism by unveiling the mechanisms of history and providing an often intellectually and emotionally overwhelming encounter with social change.

In this regard, the fall of Yugoslavia cannot be reduced to a mere disappearance of a state that left in its wake numerous border disputes: on a more profound level this event constitutes an *ideological turning point* that rocked the foundations of the socialist regime, undid, and proscribed many of its achievements to clear the way for the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism. Such social earthquakes that are felt through generations not only supply and infrequently impose rules that attempt to redefine how we are to relate to each other, but they also constitute fertile ground for intellectual projects and conceptual advances that can go way beyond the borders of the Yugoslav space (Blagojević and Yair 2010). We have worked on our volumes also because we believe that developments occurring in semi-peripheral spaces are not irrelevant for the politics of the "centre", but that insights drawn from them may have broader political implications.

> Post-Yugoslav societies are an excellent place to interrogate the concepts of European and Western modernity. [I]t [is] an important strategy to resist studying or analysing the Balkans against a set of supposed "European" norms. […] the gap between such "norms" and what is happening on the ground [is] a fruitful place to begin to theorise socially productive forms of practice that are otherwise glossed as failure, apathy,

> anti-politics and corruption. If we understand that the contradictions and tensions embedded within contemporary European imaginaries are being worked out at Europe's Balkan margins, the study of post-Yugoslav societies may have something to teach us about democratic, capitalist and nationalist forms as such, and not just about their "Balkan" versions. (Gilbert et al. 2008, p. 11)

However, many of those who came to take a look at the convoluted ruins of Yugoslavia were not messengers of peace. Our experience and our lives all of a sudden found themselves in the midst of an academic/political market-place in which our losses are repeatedly and never conclusively measured, identities set in stone, guilts attributed and revoked, and scholarly merchandise sold at high prices. How painful can it be to hear that the promising and beautiful cities of your childhood, sites of interrupted futures, have been not only increasingly referred to but actually turned into "laboratories of citizenship", platforms for political, economic, and social experimenting that are hardly ever sufficiently sensible to affective vibrations which have for long resisted forces of destruction (see Bilić and Stubbs 2016). As Svetlana Slapšak (2012, p. 40; see also Bilić and Kajinić 2016b) says, there is

> a certain international shadow – a colonial attitude [which] consisted of grabbing, banalising the "hot" topics, treating them with sometimes open ignorance and disrespect for local sources, sometimes with arbitrary and shallow and/or unreliable choice of local data. And on top of all this, this colonial situation was often served and helped to grow by the locals, ready to display the attitude of the colonised. This is a very serious problem in the region, because the "wisdom of the colonised" is effective – almost deadly – in restoring conservative "values" imposed as liberation from socialist ideological constraints, and imposing nationalist discourses and practices instead, initialising forced silence and other anthropological signs of power being distributed through new channels.

It is also with this in mind that we wanted to speak from and offer our epistemic position(s) to the pool of analyses to which many international scholars, our friends, and colleagues who came as messengers of peace, contributed over the years with care and dedication. Ever

since our first volume, we have been led by the idea that de-colonising efforts are based on cooperation and have to be intimately bound with local engagement and local knowledge production (Bilić and Janković 2012b). Our texts are evidence of our attempts to recognise and counter the oppressive force of (cognitive) colonisation which interacts with our fears and insecurities to inhabit us in the form of self-balkanisation (Kiossev 2011). Such a system of values traverses us with the intention of keeping us in a place in which our freedom is constricted and our possibilities foreclosed.

Writing in English has, thus, hopefully provided us with an opportunity to avoid ethical compromises that semi-peripheral scholars face in their desire to let their work surpass national borders (Blagojević and Yair 2010). In all of our books-archives, we have tried to expose Yugoslav activist struggles to international audiences, contribute to the subversion of deeply entrenched paradigms that consistently hinge on ethnic belonging, and enrich the normative "centres" of scholarship with a multiplicity of our embodied perspectives (Bilić and Kajinić 2016b; Mizielińska and Kulpa 2013). Our English is not only the English of professional scholars, but also a language that can speak volumes about demographic dispersions caused by profound social upheavals. On the other hand, our policy of translation, the awareness that our texts need to be accessible in our own languages, has consistently broadened the number of people included in our projects and allowed our insights to return to the communities from which they stem.[8]

## Soothing Effects of Feminist Friendship

War is a machinery of exclusion. As the most destructive expression of patriarchal-masculinist violence, war is enabled by, thrives on, and leaves in its wake potent mechanisms of enemy production. Žarana Papić (1992, p. 79), a pioneer of Yugoslav feminism, rightly noted that the results of democratic pluralisation which supposedly took place in Yugoslavia towards the end of the 1980s were "by no means pluralist." They were, rather, celebrations of ethnic belonging which across the Yugoslav space unravelled socialist legacies and shared

scepticism towards women and their political engagement. The first multiparty elections led to 13% of women members of parliament in Slovenia, 4.5% in Croatia, 4% in Montenegro, 3.3% in Macedonia, 2.8% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the incredible 1.6% in Serbia (Papić 1992). These figures make it clear that in spite of all of its progressive legislation, Yugoslav socialism never managed to problematise entrenched patriarchal patterns which constantly truncated women's political subjectivity (see also Bilić, this volume).

Ethnic "others" represent the tip of the militarist iceberg that marginalises women and separates "our community" from those who "contaminate" it because they cannot be smoothly included in the fundamental process of national(ist) reproduction. When masculinity becomes one of the primary principles of political life, an alarm bell rings for those who are not constitutive parts of the heteronormative canon. In such circumstances, "lavender scare" looms large on the political horizon and the homosexual becomes an epitome of treason, a figure that cannot adequately respond to the challenges of the historical moment.[9]

> It was almost a rule that every politically tolerant current, turned towards dialogue and understanding, would immediately be "marked" as an expression of *soft*, insufficiently tough, and non-male political behaviour with openly aggressive allusions to the proscribed and "weird" homosexuality of its representatives. For the dominant, aggressive, "justly" belligerent and violently virile masculinity, such an allusion was an effective instrument of political disqualification. (Papić 1992, p. 86)[10]

Over the last six years, our volumes have captured the emotionally saturated processes through which *ethnic "others"*, now mostly living in "their own" post-Yugoslav republics, have been substituted with *sexual "others"* living *within* the borders of the newly formed nation-states.[11] The dissolution of Yugoslavia to an important extent coincided with the intensification of non-heterosexual politics on the global scene as well as with the expansion of the European Union and its insistence on sexual rights advancement. This is why we paid attention (Bilić 2016) to the ambivalences with which yesterday's sexual "outsiders" have not only been allowed access to the nation, but are also increasingly seen as a

measuring stick of democracy and progress, at the expense of other, still "unfavourable" "minorities" (Kulpa 2014).[12]

When engaging with the political and emotional realignments occurring in the Yugoslav space, we have consistently relied on the potential of feminist theory to make us vigilant about the political developments that intervene into and try to guide our intimate lives, and protect us through the politics of feminist solidarity and friendship. We have been inspired by the legacy of American black people's struggles against racial subordination and have drawn upon the intellectual work done by black feminists to expand our intersectional awareness and politicise our desires, so that those who are multiply oppressed could emerge in our texts (Bilić and Kajinić 2016a).

> Our survival, our continued resilience, and our continued efforts for social justice are direct threats and challenges to systemic oppressions. We must, at all costs, do whatever we can to lift up and protect one another in our interconnected struggles for liberation. (The Audre Lorde Project 2014, online)

As activist-scholars and scholars-activists, we have wanted our books not only to reflect and preserve affective dimensions of (transnational) activist co-operations, but also that the process of their production serves as an extension and amplification of such activist encounters. We have been led by a wish to make feminism a greater political force in both public and academic spheres[13] and employ methodological techniques that would depart from the usual genres of academic collections and do more justice to the complexity of our embodied experiences.[14] Our volumes are an exercise in prefigurative politics: currents of care, commitment, and friendship that stream through all of them are an attempt to enact political life and collectivity that we desire for ourselves and would like to transmit to those who are coming after us so that they can inherit a world better than the one which was given to us.[15] "After everything that has happened here, and in front of what I am afraid is still to come, the imperative of friendship is our only categorical imperative" (Konstantinović 1997/2011, online).[16]

While broadening our networks, soliciting, and writing our contributions, we have over the years observed a generational shift within anti-war/feminist/LGBT/queer activist groups in the post-Yugoslav region. The fragility of activist pasts—the fact that they are scattered in private archives, partly lost through frequent moving and lack of space, or left without any material trace—has given our work a dimension of urgency. As I am completing this epilogue towards the end of December 2017, I have learnt about the death of Sonja Drljević, another pioneer of Yugoslav feminism (Voxfeminae 2017). This news brings to my mind the memory of many others who have helped and supported us along the way, and points to the importance of the words of my friend and our author Ana Miškovska Kajevska (as cited in Marušić 2015, online; see also Miškovska Kajevska 2016, 2017):

> After finishing my dissertation, I started telling everyone to save their archives, it has become my political mission to raise consciousness by saying that information is being lost. Tomorrow someone will ask again "where have you been, what have you done". […] I learned feminism from those women… […] and as a way of thanking my – as I call them – feminist mothers, I wanted to do my best to rescue at least a part of our history in my thesis.

## Conclusion: Archives—Places of Healing

If we are as a community of authors indeed reflexively committed to activist research rather than to either activism or merely research on activism (Bilić and Stubbs 2016), then such a personal/professional—and inevitably political—orientation presupposes an effort at striking the right balance between the sometimes reductionist passions of the activist and the illusorily "impartial" scepticism of the scholar. To be truly *activist*, our scholarship must not remain *only activist*—it has to be pushed out of activist circles where one is nowadays more at risk of engaging in self-celebratory practice or dis-engaging from scholarly analysis. Our books are, rather, meant to act as rhizoid bridges, hybrid academic/activist mediators between the politically electrified spaces of

activism and the highly heteronormative (and therefore pseudo-de-politicised and even homophobic) milieus of regional academic and political institutions which are still suspicious of multidisciplinary feminist approaches (Kašić 2016) and within which sexuality seems to be an exclusively private matter.

While no one expects that our books will in the foreseeable future enter official university curricula in our region, we hope that they make it a little bit harder to claim that the upsurge of destructive forces which we ourselves witnessed was not challenged by oppositional currents of solidarity and support. By documenting courageous activist initiatives, we testify that they really happened and transform them into a *legacy* which can now be transmitted (Cvetkovich 2003). Our books-archives, in which we have assembled fragments of personal testimonies, documents, leaflets, fragile activist publications as well as fears, disappointments, hopes, and joys of activist encounters, are evidence that certain things were done and certain persons—us included—existed. Perhaps, the struggles that we try to remember and analyse are not important to *many* people, but to those to whom they matter, they do so in particularly profound ways. Our books show that writing—that specifically human capacity to inscribe life in and create history/herstory—is by far the greatest privilege of survival.

However, even if they are now deposited in libraries around the world in which memory of the humanity is preserved, our volumes-archives are—like all human enterprises—imperfect, fragile, and radically incomplete. They need to be cherished and revised and, in spite of our intentions, cannot possibly give an account of all of those who should be in them. We have, of course, written in order to make possible books (Foucault 1971/1944) that will supplement and go beyond our own. In this regard, we count on the *good will* of our readers to recognise our wish to be inclusive to the best of our abilities as well as on the capacity of this wish to placate the frustration of those who perhaps should, but may not find themselves in our texts as they currently stand. While working on our volumes, we have been led by the belief that archives ultimately are—in Joan Nestle's (Monahan 1978/2010, online) words—"places of healing".[17] If that is true, then they, along with documents and feelings of the past, always supply stimuli for further and better

academic, activist, life endeavours. Rather than dusty repositories of bygone times, archives are breathing spaces which contain seeds of the future.

## Notes

1. The cover of the regional (Serbo-Croatian) edition of our volume on intersectionality and LGBT activist politics (Bilić and Kajinić 2017) shows a severed human heart inserted among dispersed slogans "Migrants/faggots/lesbians/trans… are the heart of Serbia/Croatia". This unsettling representation—which was not favourably received among all of our authors—inverts and points to the devastating consequences of the widely popular nationalist principle "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" (Kosovo je srce Srbije).
2. Writing about Dejan Jović's book on the myth of the Homeland War in Croatia, Munjin (2018) mentions that in 1990 there were 4752 name change requests in this post-Yugoslav republic. The number of these requests grew to 14,616 in 1992. One could imagine the extent of psychic suffering caused by the impossibility to bear one's own name.
3. Finishing the acknowledgements section of her monograph on contemporary clientelism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Čarna Brković (2017, p. xi), our friend and co-author (Kalezić and Brković 2016), says: "My parents never quite learned how to deal with ambiguities of life in former Yugoslavia, and I am grateful for that". Many of us feared that our parents might learn how to navigate that ambiguity "better".
4. The disappearance of Yugoslavia and the ruptures, ambiguities, and hybridities that it provoked are, for example, still alive in the name with which Macedonia became a member of the United Nations and other international organisations. "The former Yugoslav republic" has been there as an unavoidable description of this country since 1993. "They forcefully put on your shoulders the burden of late Yugoslavia and then they keep telling you that you should turn to the future", states Skopje-based scholar Biljana Vankovska (as cited in Drobnjak 2017, online).
5. Svetlana Slapšak (2017, online), one of the nodal points of (post-) Yugoslav feminist social history and theory, states: "I remember how a small group received that news [destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, BB] in our living room, I remember who was there,

I remember that some of us had heart palpitations, that all of us swore, some got drunk, and we all cried: that's what happened on the local-personal level. Symbolically, that was the end of a world, of that small and unimportant world. Everything else, much bigger and worse, lasted longer – but that was a symbolical minute, perhaps even less".

6. On 6 January 2017 a group of Serbian public figures published an Appeal for Defence of Kosovo and Metohija (Apel 2018, p. 31) in which they stated: "A frozen conflict (like the one in Cyprus and elsewhere) is the only sensible decision".
7. Blagojević (2009, p. 57) claims that the condition of semi-peripherality is characterised by the intersection of various oppositions which may look like a "location of a discursive void": "white/non-white, European/noneuropean, postcolonial/nonpostcolonial, citizen/noncitizen, and gender/nongender". Increased awareness of our community of authors that we, as inhabitants of semi-periphery, may not be unproblematically considered "white Europeans", made us more sensitive to the ways in which racist discourses may pervade both activist endeavours and our own scholarly work. In that regard, some authors raised concerns about the whiteness of the women represented on this book's cover. In spite of our incessant efforts, we did not manage to receive a chapter about Roma lesbian activists in Serbia. This may well point to the limits of solidarity bridges that can be built over distinctly different social, political, geographical—or simply personal—positions. For an account on Roma lesbian women in Serbia, see Kurtić (2013). For a discussion about the notion of race in the Yugoslav space, see Baker (2018).
8. In our introduction to the volume on intersectionality, we reflect upon epistemic approaches visible in the region and say: "we insist on a longer-term ethnographic immersion which presupposes at least an active interest in, if not a full command of local language(s), critical engagement with the local knowledge production, theoretical sophistication that appreciates ambiguity and hybridity above and beyond (Western) normative impositions, methods that tap processes which do not operate solely at elite level, sensitivity that recognises emotional burden created by decades of (armed) conflicts, uncertainty and unpredictability as well as a policy of translation that allows sociological and anthropological accounts to be absorbed by local communities from which they originate" (Bilić and Kajinić 2016b, p. 6).

9. I am here, of course, referring to some of the characteristics of the dominant discourse which divides the political field into "patriots" and "traitors". This is not to imply that there were no prominent women politicians, women soldiers or non-heterosexual people who supported the nationalist cause on various sides.
10. One would be hard pressed to find a more explicit example of this "politics of exclusion" and national fear than the article published in *Slavonski magazin* in 1993, entitled "Serbs, leftists, feminists, and homosexuals are waging a war against war?" See Grakalić (1993).
11. Bosnia and Herzegovina is an exception in this regard. Selmić (2016) shows that a majority of non-heterosexual people in this post-Yugoslav republic are reluctant to report their ethnic belonging. See also Selmić and Bilić (this volume).
12. Ahmed (2015) has argued that *love* for the nation often disguises *hate* towards Others, those who threaten the nation's supposed health and purity, turning this hate into the primary organising national affect.
13. Over the last six years, our volumes' co-editors have always been feminist women scholars/activists: Vesna Janković from Croatia, Sanja Kajinić from Bosnia and Herzegovina/Croatia, and Marija Radoman from Montenegro/Serbia. This approach has not only traversed the post-Yugoslav space, highlighted the presence of women academics in still patriarchal environments, but it has also enabled us to count on the co-editors' specific activist-academic positions in order to continually broaden the pool of contributors to our books.
14. All of our volumes have an important autoethnographic component, but this method was particularly explored in, for example, Aleksov (2012), Mlađenović (2016), Hura (2016), or Bilić and Janković (2012b).
15. Stubbs (2013, p. 138) captures this already in our first volume (Bilić and Janković 2012b) when stating: "The book has set a marker for more research on and by activists in the post-Yugoslav space, building on the many collaborations, some obvious, others less so".
16. In many activist accounts (see e.g., Bilić 2012), the dissolution of Yugoslavia is associated with the inability to rescue friendships. For example, Biljana Jovanović asks: "How can we remain a whole if we lose friends?" (as cited in Gudžević 2007, p. 397).
17. "The Archives room is a healing place; it is filled with voices announcing our autonomy and self possession. The roots of the Archives lie in

the silenced voices, the love letters destroyed, the pronouns changed, the diaries carefully edited, the pictures never taken, the euphemised distortions that patriarchy would let pass… but I have lived through the time of wilful deprivation and now it is our time to discover and to cherish and to preserve" (Monahan 1978/2010, online).

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B. Bilić and M. Radoman (eds.), *Lesbian Activism in the (Post-)Yugoslav Space*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77754-2