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**Bodily Autonomy and Identity Politics:
Feminist Approaches in the Era of Global Political Changes**



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Editors' Note

We live in an era of global strengthening of right-wing and neo-fascist movements and witnessing a general social shift to the right on a worldwide level. The strengthening of anti-gender movements in the last few decades led to the abolition of a whole series of hard-won human rights of women, LGBTIQ+ people, and minority groups around the world. Neoliberal commodification of identity and right-wing strategies of using identity politics against women and oppressed minorities divide feminist and other civil rights movements and undermine the potential for alliance building. On the other hand, we are also witnessing the resistance and activistic tendencies toward united action by all those who advocate for basic feminist principles and values. These tendencies are present and visible through artistic work and social media campaigns, and they are expressed through activist and academic conferences and activities that illuminate problems and point to possible solutions and strategies for struggle and resistance. Our intention for this special issue of the *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* was to offer a platform for voices that are rarely heard in public discourse, and to present topics that are of great importance primarily to the feminist and queer communities, but also to the society as a whole – because no one is free and safe until we are all free and safe. Collected papers in this issue deal with feminist and queer topics belonging to various social contexts.

The main topic is divided into three thematic units. The first unit comprises texts describing feminist and related progressive movements. Marija Radoman examines the experiences of queer students during the 2024/2025 student protests in Serbia, with a focus on how solidarity and identity were negotiated within the broader mobilization. Berceste Gülçin Özdemir analyzes #SusmaBitsin social media movement in order to question the male-dominated perspective on the female body in the digital public sphere from a feminist perspective with a focus on Turkey. Text co-authored by Vanja Petrović, Jana Kujundžić, and Nina Čolović uses the theoretical framework of abolition feminism and critical feminist discourse analysis to develop the critique of the overreliance of the mainstream feminist advocacy on the police and criminal legal system as the solution for femicide and gendered violence in the contexts of Croatia and Serbia.

The second thematic unit focuses on anti-gender movements and transfeminist resistance against them. Aleksa Milanović examines the growth of the trans activist movement in the post-Yugoslav space and its regional connections, focusing on the fight against anti-gender politics. Ana Marinković employs visual discourse analysis

of three case studies to analyze the intersection of feminist resistance and anti-gender movements within contemporary media art, explicitly focusing on algorithmic bias and bodily autonomy. Nađa Bobičić analyzes the discourse of anti-gender actors using the news section of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography of Serbia website.

The third thematic unit is dedicated to the feminist and queer analyses of various artistic formats. In her paper, Katarzyna Ewa Stojičić draws on theoretical frameworks from Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Naomi Wolf, Deborah Ferreday, and Angela McRobbie to argue that glamour should not be understood as either purely oppressive or liberating, but as an ambivalent and dynamic practice that continues to evolve in dialogue with feminism, queer theory, and contemporary performance culture. Dara Šljukić uses the conceptual lens of queer utopian hermeneutics by José Esteban Muñoz in order to analyze two post-Yugoslav literary texts. Her analysis reveals that queer futurity is inextricably linked to the knowledge of the past, specifically of local anti-fascist heritage, offering a distinct regional perspective on the concept of queer time. Bhavya Sinha's and Aditi Dirghangi's text analyzes Indian Netflix miniseries *Ghoul* (2018) to examine the intersections of gender, religion, and social politics within the theoretical framework of Foucauldian analyses of power and identity, Said's *Orientalism*, and Crenshaw's intersectionality, and finally in her paper Jelena Mišeljić explores the intersection of phenomenology and trans cinema through Jane Schoenbrun's films, arguing that their work evokes the lived, sensory experience of in-betweenness and liminality.

In the section Artist Portfolio visual artist based in Serbia – Citero presents multimedia art project *Shine a Life* which depicts an aspect of gender nonbinary, trans and queer people's lives that we rarely see.

In addition, this issue has two more texts in the section Beyond the main topic. Rafael Marino writes about Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and his crucial role in constructing a Brazilian image of art in the world. The issue concludes with Nađa Pavlica's review of Paul B. Preciado's book *Can the Monster Speak?*

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Marija Radoman

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Fragmented Solidarity? Reflections on Queer Participation in the 2024/2025 Student Protests in Serbia

Abstract: This article examines the experiences of queer students during the 2024/2025 student protests in Serbia, with a focus on how solidarity and identity were negotiated within the broader mobilization. Drawing on eight narrative interviews with LGBTIQ+ students, the study uses concepts from the social movement and identity control theories (ICT) to analyze the interplay between political participation, recognition, and identity verification. Findings suggest that queer students experienced solidarity in fragmented ways. While the student identity emerged as a strong unifying factor, the expression of LGBTIQ+ identities was more complex. A shared student role often fostered a strong sense of belonging, but solidarity was not uniformly experienced. Although based on their sexual or gender identity within the student movement many described a strong sense of belonging, queer identities were sometimes sidelined – particularly when they were not explicitly acknowledged in protest actions, slogans, or symbols such as banners and flags. Solidarity, in this context, should not be understood as a fixed or purely political ideal – it is shaped by lived experiences and structural conditions in the Serbian society. This research is significant for exploring the position of marginalized groups within the Serbian protest movement and for informing future queer engagement in collective action.

Keywords: queer students; student protests; Serbia; solidarity; identity verification; social movements.

Introduction

This article explores the experiences and positionalities of queer individuals within the student protests that took place in Serbia during 2024 and into 2025. Drawing on a small qualitative sample of eight participants who self-identify as part of the queer community, the study adopts a reflexive, narrative-based approach, highlighting themes of solidarity and belonging within broader social movements.¹

¹ This research is part of a broader project initiated by the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, titled *The Wave of Student Protests in Serbia: Blockades 2024/2025*. The subsample presented here, which focuses on queer students participating in the protests, was designed and conducted by Marija Radoman (Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade) and Aleksa Milanović (Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade).

The collapse of the railway station canopy in the Serbian city of Novi Sad on November 1, 2024, resulted in the deaths of 16 people. This event sparked a wave of student and citizen protests against corruption and institutional failure. To this day, the political crisis remains unresolved, and the protests have grown into the largest the country has seen in recent history. Students have been at the forefront of this mobilization, marked by their distinctive organizing strategies, acting independently from the opposition political parties and their communal living on occupied faculties.

This research explores how queer students relate to the current student movement in Serbia. It draws on concepts from social movement and identity theories. Examining the dimension of solidarity within these protests adds to the traditional social movement theory by centering the meanings of queer individuals in the political action.² Additionally, researching the identity dimensions of queer students contributes to the identity control theory (ICT), which connects the study of social structure and individual agency.³ This study is guided by its main research question: *What are the possibilities for solidarity and visibility of queer students within the broader social movements that unfolded in Serbia during the 2024–2025 protests?* Ultimately, the article argues for a more nuanced understanding of the queer participation in the collective action, politics of identity and the politics of visibility in post-socialist societies.

Identity theory and queer perspectives in mainstream social movements

The version of identity theory has evolved into a systematic research program over the past decades.⁴ From the perspective of the identity theory, an important shift has occurred in how different bases of identity are understood, including the incorporation of emotions as an integral part of the identity processes and the identity research.⁵ Queer identities have gained visibility alongside more established bases such as ethnicity, race, and gender, and today they are among the most contested, resisted and highly politicized,⁶ particularly in the face of attacks from far-right and anti-gender movements.⁷

² Mary Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1997): 531–65; Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke, "Get Up, Stand Up: Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Blackwell, 2004), 262–93; Shaeleyad Miller, Verta Taylor, and Leila J. Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016), 44.

³ Peter J. Burke, "Identities and Social Structure: The 2003 Cooley-Mead Award Address," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2004): 5–15; Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "The Development of Identity Theory," *Advances in Group Processes* 31 (2014): 57–97.

⁴ Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe, eds., *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Miller, Taylor, and Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," 444.

⁷ Mauro Cabral Grinspan, Ilana Eloit, David Paternotte, and Mieke Verloo, "Exploring TERFnesses: Editorial," *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 10, no. 2 (2023).

The theoretical framework for understanding one's identity encompasses not only structural conditions and social interactions during times of crisis and state repression, but also micro-level processes and the lived experience of the self,⁸ referring to the concepts of identity verification, solidarity, and the relationship between individual and group identities.

Some identity theorists raise important questions about how the self is constructed if we analyze certain established theories about identity, such as George Mead's interactionist perspective.⁹ Rather than focusing on what identity *should* be it may be more important for social science researchers to understand how identity is shaped within specific contexts, how society and culture shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and how these self-perceptions subsequently influence their behaviour. According to the Identity Control Theory (ICT), identity-related meanings, whether tied to roles, group memberships, or personal attributes, are formed and verified through interaction with others. These meanings are shaped by cultural processes, and at the same time are embedded within the broader social structure and reflect the cultural definitions that make identities intelligible. It is important to note that these meanings are not universally fixed; rather, "to a certain extent, however, meanings are very often local", as they depend on the specific social and cultural settings in which identities are enacted.¹⁰ In the case of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Serbia, such meanings are shaped within a particular legal and cultural context – one marked, for example, by insufficient legal protection for trans and gender-variant persons, and the absence of legislation recognizing same-sex partnerships.¹¹

The identity theory focuses on how individuals seek to verify their identities and align their self-perception with a shared identity standard.¹² This verification process plays a key role in how people understand and maintain their identities within social contexts and interactions. As a concept, identity verification is significant because it explains the dynamics between group belonging and the internal processes involved in understanding one's own identity and the emotions that accompany it. An important aspect of identity verification is the interactive process through which individuals behave in ways intended to align others' views of them with their own self-concept.¹³

⁸ Jan Stets and Peter J. Burke, "The Development of Identity Theory," *Advances in Group Processes* 31 (2014): 57–97; Stets and Serpe, eds., *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*.

⁹ Sheldon Stryker and Richard Stryker, "Does Mead's Framework Remain Sound?" in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016), 31–57.

¹⁰ Burke, "Identities and Social Structure," 7.

¹¹ Marija Radoman, "Istopolne porodice u Srbiji u vreme epidemije KOVID-19," *Sociologija* 64, no. 3 (2022): 378–400.

¹² Shaeleyad Miller, Verta Taylor, and Leila J. Rupp, "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity," in *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Jan E. Stets and Richard T. Serpe (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

This interplay between the internal identity processes and the external recognition is particularly evident in the formation of collective identities within social movements. Participation in a social movement requires developing a collective identity that connects group members. This collective identity is important because it unites members around common interests, with some scholars highlighting solidarity's key role in its construction.¹⁴ Solidarity and collective identity within social movements are built through shared actions and meanings, as members define who belongs to the group by emphasizing both commonalities with insiders and distinctions from outsiders.¹⁵ This is evident in the case of the student movement, where collective markers such as protest slogans and chants highlight a clear opposition to the authoritarian system,¹⁶ reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and belonging. Moreover, the movement appears to be inclusive in the sense that, through protest banners and statements, it calls upon various social actors to engage in a broader struggle against the system.¹⁷

Collective identity theories explain how participation in the LGBTIQ+ movements can offer identity verification to queer individuals, helping to shape queer identity through involvement in collective actions. However, there is limited research on how queer identities are negotiated within broader, mainstream movements.¹⁸ This topic is important for several reasons: how to find a common ground for action, how solidarity is built and what it is based on, whether compromises are made and what is their nature, and how individuals perceive this relationship, especially if they feel their identity is not fully recognized within the mainstream movement. Based on the social movement literature, the collective identity is understood as an ongoing, ever-evolving process that functions dynamically within social movements – raising the question of who 'we' are.¹⁹ It should be noted that the insights from the existing literature cited in this article, which are largely based on Western contexts, cannot be fully applied to the post-socialist formation of queer movements and the dynamics between

¹⁴ William A. Gamson, "Commitment and Agency in Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 6 (1991): 27–50. Miller, et al., "Social Movements and the Construction of Queer Identity."

¹⁶ Nemanja Zvijer, Aleksandra Marković, and Marija Radoman, "Svi u blokade! An Analysis of Slogans during the Student Occupations in Serbia 2024/2025 [Svi u blokade! Analiza parola tokom studentskih blokada u Srbiji 2024/2025]," *Sociologija*, 2025, manuscript submitted for publication.

¹⁷ The student protests received support from a wide range of social and professional groups across Serbia. Healthcare workers, university professors, schoolteachers, and high school students actively participated, often alongside parents of students. Cultural workers, journalists, and IT professionals also voiced their support. Legal professionals – including judges and lawyers – stood in solidarity, along with small business owners, farmers, and segments of the mining and public sectors. This broad backing reflected widespread dissatisfaction across society.

¹⁸ See more about how individuals negotiate the relationship between their self-understanding and participation in social movements: Sheldon Stryker, "Identity Competition: Key to Differential Social Movement Participation," in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, ed. Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens, and Robert W. White (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21–40.

¹⁹ Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma," *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (1995): 390–407.

broader mainstream civic and student movements and LGBTIQ+ participation in the Serbian context. This particular movement is historically significant, as it provides a unique opportunity to examine how queer individuals navigate and integrate their place within these collective spaces.

It should also be noted that movements based on queer identities often challenge and destabilize identity politics²⁰ and even the very movements grounded in them. This is difficult to fully assess outside the empirical reality, especially when external perceptions frame LGBTIQ+ individuals as seeking special rights based solely on identity.²¹ At the same time, from within the community, some LGBTIQ+ individuals argue for a critical approach to gender and sexuality – emphasizing that these should be questioned but not erased. Much of the critique of collective identity and minority identity comes from within the LGBTIQ+ community itself, often from an anti-essentialist position, despite the fact that such identities are typically constructed in a public discourse around fixed collective categories.²² These perspectives are not easily separated, and they both shape how identity is negotiated within social movements.

Solidarity, in this context, should not be understood as a fixed or purely political ideal – it is shaped by the material and structural conditions of the society in question. Economic, political, and social shifts influence how solidarity is practiced and perceived. In particular, the transformation of the European welfare state and neoliberal reforms, from collective responsibility toward individualization, have challenged solidarity as a principle of social cohesion and policy. On an individual level, precarious working conditions, widening class inequalities, and the erosion of the middle class have created fertile ground for the rise of authoritarian tendencies and populism.²³ According to international assessments, Serbia ranks near the bottom among countries labeled as “flawed democracies”, moving closer to the category of hybrid regimes.²⁴ Especially after March 15 and in light of the police repression since July 2025, many observers now describe the situation in Serbia as an increasingly authoritarian government.²⁵

Such global political changes also open space for the targeting and instrumentalization of marginalized groups. In unstable social conditions, LGBTIQ+ movements are sometimes accused of weakening broader social struggles by focusing on individual identities and fragmenting collective goals. These accusations often

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Marija Radoman and Irena Petrović, “Unveiling Homophobia: A Study of Attitudes in Serbian Society,” *Sociologija* 66, no. 3 (2024): 407–28.

²² Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?”

²³ John Fossum, “In What Sense Does Right-Wing Populism Pose a Democratic Challenge for the European Union?” *Social & Legal Studies* 32, no. 6 (2023): 930–52.

²⁴ EUI, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/>.

²⁵ The Lancet Regional Health – Europe, “Serbia Is in Crisis,” *Lancet Reg Health Eur* 55 (August 2025); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/16/violent-clashes-escalate-anti-government-protests-serbia-belgrade>.

produce anti-gender rhetoric, where gender politics are framed as the concern of privileged groups and detached from material or structural demands. However, data on homophobia²⁶ in Serbia indicate that the position of LGBTIQ+ individuals remains precarious, highlighting that the integration of politics for marginalized groups will likely need to find a more explicit place within broader social movements. Additionally, the dynamics between broader social movements and LGBTIQ+ individuals in Serbia unfold within a context marked by institutionalized homo- and transphobia, as well as wider social non-acceptance, which shapes the possibilities and limits of integration. This raises the question of how willing the broader movement is to include queer participants and whether the student movement itself is inherently more progressive than society at large, based on data on public attitudes.

Research approach and methods

This study combines semi-structured interviews with contextual analysis. This approach is particularly important, as marginalized subject positions are often denied visibility within dominant theoretical frameworks and heteronormative currents in the social sciences. Emphasizing a queer perspective that shapes not only the interpretation, but the very research process represents a form of engaged scholarship – *a politics of change*.²⁷ It seeks to foreground voices that are always shaped by relations of power and often remain invisible, even within scientific frameworks that claim objectivity.²⁸

The research is based on qualitative interviews with 8 participants who identify as queer students (although they do not necessarily use the *queer* label for themselves, but instead various identity categories). The sample was purposively selected and expanded using a snowball sampling, facilitated primarily through contacts from a Belgrade-based organization working with the TIRV (trans, intersex, and non-binary) community. Interviews were conducted during April and May 2025. All data have been anonymized in accordance with ethical research standards: participants were later assigned different names and identifying details have been altered. Most participants identify as trans and use a variety of gender pronouns (he/him, she/they, all pronouns, she/her, etc.). While the sample size in this study is relatively small, it was sufficient to capture key patterns and experiences within the student movement. Additional interviews could potentially reveal perspectives from other segments of the community, such as students from rural areas which might nuance the findings further. Nevertheless, the current sample provides meaningful insights into the main dynamics of solidarity, activism, and the challenges faced by marginalized groups within the movement.

²⁶ Radoman and Petrović, “Unveiling Homophobia.”

²⁷ Jones and Adams, “Autoethnography is a Queer Method.”

²⁸ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage, 2005).

The interview guide was organized into thematic blocks aligned with the study's focus. Particular attention was given to emotional and embodied experiences during student protests and blockades, participants' reflections on identity and belonging, and their views on organizational practices within the student movement – especially in relation to the LGBTIQ+ identities. These dimensions were selected to better understand how personal experiences and broader political dynamics intersect in shaping participants' relationships to collective action and self-identification.

The interviews were conducted by two researchers – one identifying as a trans masculine person, the other as a queer woman. Their identities were disclosed to participants in different ways. For some, the identities were already known due to the communication channels used to arrange the interviews. For others, the researchers explicitly stated that they identify as members of the LGBTIQ+ community. This decision to be transparent was a deliberate methodological choice, not something left implicit or spontaneously revealed. This approach aimed to create a space of greater trust and openness, based on the expectation that such conditions would allow for deeper and more nuanced insights.

This research is driven by both academic and personal concerns, as I identify as both feminist and queer. My perspective as a researcher was further shaped by my active engagement in the protests and reflections on my positionality as a queer academic within the university context, where I was partly an outsider due to my faculty role, yet often shared common ground with students, particularly queer participants. This position enabled me to closely follow the dynamics and experiences of the queer community within these protests.

This positionality informs a reflexive methodological stance that foregrounds affective and embodied knowledge, emphasizing the significance of *intersubjectivity*²⁹ within queer and feminist research frameworks (*queer methodologies*³⁰). From a research perspective, it was challenging to set aside my own perceptions and previous experiences in various leftist and activist initiatives, which often made me skeptical of the idea of a uniform experience of solidarity. From my subjective perspective, it always seemed that significant compromises were made by individuals within mainstream movements in order to support a particular political goal or idea. However, this may not fully reflect the experiences of newer generations – some LGBTIQ+ students perceived the student movement as inclusive enough to allow space for diverse sexual and gender identities, at least in certain contexts.

²⁹ Plummer, "Critical Humanism and Queer Theory."

³⁰ Jones and Adams, "Autoethnography is a Queer Method."

On solidarity and belonging: queering the student movement

Background to the movement

On November 1st, when a concrete canopy at the railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people and seriously injuring one, it was not easy to anticipate that this would spark some of the largest protests in Serbia's recent history. In the days that followed the event, people organized symbolic actions, standing in silence for 15 minutes to express their collective grief. But things quickly changed. Students were the first to react more openly, and soon the protests began to spread. What started as a response to a tragedy became a much broader social and political movement, revealing the corrupt deals behind the collapse of the structure. Soon, the protests expanded beyond the university spaces and spread to all segments of society. The protests quickly exposed much deeper problems: the widespread corruption, breakdown of institutions, and the erosion of democratic values. So far this year (2025), protests have taken place at least once in more than 516 cities and municipalities across Serbia.³¹ The escalation of violence since mid-2025, along with continuous attacks on the university and the undermining of its autonomy through the introduction of police into campuses and faculties, indicates that the social and political crisis shows no signs of abating. These developments, and the repeated resort to force, suggest that the government has effectively lost both legitimacy and public trust. Students demanded the release of all documents related to the construction, as well as the resignation of those politically responsible. They also called for answers regarding the violent attacks on students by unidentified individuals, who were later revealed to have ties to the regime. In addition, they demanded the calling of the early parliamentary elections. To this day, no one in power has taken responsibility for the collapse.

In the early weeks of the protests, there was a strong sense of energy and hope, especially among young people. From the very beginning of the protests, and throughout their development, these events gave rise to broader expressions of solidarity among different social actors. While it remains open to debate how long a system can rely on pressure and various forms of violence without undermining solidarity, it is clear that, from the early stages of the student movement, solidarity has stood out as one of the most defining features of these protests.³²

Fragmented solidarity?

In this context, our research team found it particularly important to explore the notion of solidarity from a different angle – that of queer students. This focus was especially relevant given that solidarity might be experienced differently across

³¹ "Mesta u kojima su održane akcije posle rušenja nadstrešnice," *Arhiv javnih skupova*, February 2, 2025, <https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/01/gradovi-u-kojima-je-odrzana-akcija-zastani-srbijo/>.

³² Iva Gajić, "Probudila se solidarnost kod ljudi": Odjek studentskih protesta i van granica Srbije," *Radio slobodna Evropa*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/odjek-studentskih-protesta-srbija/33301854.html>.

generational lines. In our case, the researchers were, on average, around twenty years older than the interview participants. Different generational backgrounds raised important questions for us even before fieldwork began, and the ways in which solidarity would be articulated and understood proved to be a puzzle throughout the research process.

What emerged from the interviews with one group of participants was a sense of general and pragmatic solidarity, one shaped by the urgency of collective goals. For Luka (first-year student, University of Belgrade), identity-based divisions were seen as a potential threat to the unity of the movement: “We can’t afford to split into leftists, right-wingers, liberals, anarchists – we all need to stay together, otherwise the whole movement will collapse.” This emphasis on cohesion sometimes placed pressure on queer students to downplay individual or group-specific concerns in favor of a broader, more unified front. Even symbolic choices, such as which flags were visible at protests, were interpreted through the lens of preserving unity: “I’m okay with the Serbian flag – we’re Serbian students, we study here. But when those far-right flags appear... it leads to fragmentation, and that will ruin everything.”

While student protests were primarily directed against government corruption and broader social injustices, they also provided a space where queer participants could navigate questions of visibility and safety. The presence of far-right symbols or actors heightened the precarity for queer individuals, making their participation contingent not only on shared political goals but also on careful negotiation of personal and collective risks. In this sense, solidarity within the movement was shaped both by pragmatic concerns for cohesion and by the ways in which queer identities could be acknowledged or constrained within a wider, often heteronormative, activist space.

Lori’s (final-year student, University of Belgrade) perspective on community and solidarity reflects a nuanced understanding shaped by her own position as a queer student. She stresses that, despite differences in identity, a person remains the same and should not be rejected because of who they are. Lori does not plan to undergo any medical transition but believes that if more openly out individuals took initiative and publicly affirmed their presence, it would have a stronger impact in social movement, especially student: “If we all stood up and said ‘I am here’, then that would make a difference.”

Regarding the relationship between the student movement and the LGBTIQ+ individuals, she believes everyone is united by a common goal regardless of political stance but recognizes that experiences vary across faculties regarding queer persons – for example, between the Faculty of Philology and her own natural sciences faculty. Lori is somewhat pessimistic about whether the movement will maintain its focus on differences after the blockades end, since everyone is currently united around the same cause. She highlights the importance of ongoing communication within the movement to foster understanding, saying: “I am the same person as I was during the blockades, and you communicated with me normally and respected me without knowing, so why should that change now that you do know?”

Mika (fourth-year student, University of Arts, Belgrade) emphasizes a strong sense of community and belonging within the protests, highlighting the importance of collective action. She says, “There is that feeling of togetherness, that you are part of something bigger, not just an individual. You see it at the plenums because at the plenum you are not just an individual, we are together in this struggle. So, that idea of community is key for me, and I would also connect it with the queer community.” She reflects on how, during Pride when the info center was active, small groups of people came together, and similarly, at the protests she found many trans people, communicating and meeting queer individuals. “That feeling that we have built something – that is the most important part of the protests. Those small things, how people come together.” Mika also shares a personal experience: “I am out as trans, and one of my friends came up to me and said, ‘You seem cool, do you want to hang out?’ Even though I have met many people, I always end up hanging out with queer people (laughs).”

While Mika acknowledges some challenges, such as instances where someone’s gender identity is not respected – like when a colleague’s gender was discussed behind her back – she notes that “generally, everyone tries to be respectful, even though there is a lot of right-wing opposition. The bigger problem is that people are not vocal enough to oppose it.” Openly trans and having changed her name, Mika is committed to being visible and vocal: “I don’t want to hide. I am here, I am loud, and I want to help other trans people come out.” She stresses the importance of the faculty being a safe space for trans people – something she did not have when she first started studying.

Danilo (third-year student, University of Belgrade) reflected on his experiences within the student movement: “There’s a lot of homophobia, misogyny and sexism – some truly awful things – but I did hear that some people reacted against it, which is a good sign [...] Speaking specifically about my faculty, the plenums³³ and the whole visual identity of the blockade felt very patriarchal, very macho and masculine. I kept saying that from the beginning. I had a few people I could talk to about this – saying that we need to feminize all of this somehow and I mean in a substantial way. Especially now, with this distancing from representative democracy, there’s a real opportunity to create non-patriarchal politics. But that’s not what’s happening.”

Danilo’s frustrations highlight the presence of voices within the student movement that seriously question the acceptance of queer students. His experience reveals layers of the movement where heteronormative and patriarchal structures, as well as non-progressive tendencies, persist. These voices underscore the tension between participating in collective action and protecting one’s personal identity, while also pointing to the challenges of creating an inclusive and progressive space within the movement.

These responses highlight the complex balancing act queer students navigate – between asserting their identities and maintaining solidarity within a movement that is presented as “apolitical,” yet shaped by deeply political tensions and symbolic

³³ In the context of the Serbian student movement, the term plenum refers to an open assembly where decisions are made collectively and horizontally.

struggles. When looking at the broader context of the protests, LGBTIQ+ themes were largely absent from the public discourse surrounding the movement. Pride symbols and rainbow flags were not present, except during the March 8 demonstration, which was led by activist groups. Protest banners, one of the most visible markers of the movement, did not include messages or slogans referencing sexual orientation or gender identities outside the cisnormative frame.³⁴ Although many participants described a strong sense of belonging within the student movement, queer identities were at times sidelined – particularly when they were not explicitly acknowledged in protest actions, messages, or symbols.

Powerful space for identity verification

The concept of identity verification helps explain the dynamics between internal self-perception and the need for recognition within a broader collective. In the context of these student protests, participants' narratives reflect how personal identity is not only affirmed but reshaped through interaction and shared experience.

As Luka reflected, the most emotionally intense moments came during protest speeches: "There are people who truly believe in us students, who want change, who speak on behalf of all of us... I started crying because you could feel that sense of unity." These moments of collective recognition served as powerful forms of identity verification – affirming a place within the movement regardless of gender identity or societal norms. In the context of a broad and cohesive mobilization, it is expected to observe the consolidation of a dominant student identity, as it offers the most widely accessible and least contested basis for unity across diverse individual positions.

Additionally, this emotional connection was particularly meaningful for those who might otherwise feel excluded. Luka noted: "Even though I'm a trans person – someone who, in the Serbian mindset, isn't supposed to belong here – I still feel like I belong to these people, to my peers, to my faculty, as a student." Such statements show how strong the shared identity of "student" became, capable of overriding narratives of exclusion and creating a verified sense of belonging.

Belonging was also tied to interpersonal closeness, including familial metaphors: "Tomorrow, someone from my family could be under that awning – I don't want that to happen." Luka described transformation in how he related to their surroundings: "I thought I'd stay withdrawn, not talk to anyone. But during my first night shift at the blockade, I met seven new people. Now I'm part of the working group for the blockade, meeting new people every day, forming new friendships, building new relationships. That group is something I can consider – if not quite family – then people I can count on." Participation in the movement thus became a context in which personal confidence and social identity could be affirmed: "My self-confidence has grown. I want to socialize more. I even feel uncomfortable being at home – I have to go to my faculty. It's become my second home; I only come home to sleep and shower."

³⁴ Marković, Zvijer, and Radoman, "Photographic Archive of Student Protest Banners."

These accounts highlight how the student protests provided not only political motivation but also, for some participants, a powerful space for general identity verification – where individuals' sense of self was affirmed through shared struggle, peer recognition, and emotional connection. The interview leaves somewhat unclear as to what extent the trans identity itself gained increased significance in this context.

Similar experiences were described by another student. Sasha (second-year student, Academy of Arts in Novi Sad) explained how his sense of belonging and self-acceptance grew significantly during the protest, particularly through continuous interaction with other students. Initially, he saw his peers as “some foreign body” and didn't feel the faculty was a safe space. However, the experience of being “forced to communicate with people” helped him feel part of a collective: “I finally started to see my peers as peers.” He recalls moments when his anxiety was challenged by necessity: “I had to get over my anxiety because it was so important to say what I had to say.”

Through bodily experience and shared routines, such as sleeping in occupied spaces, Sasha was pushed to confront and renegotiate his personal boundaries. “At first, I couldn't imagine sleeping in the same room with people. Now, it's so normal I can't believe it was ever a problem.” These embodied interactions were not only about proximity, but about building a new kind of physical and emotional safety with others. This process deepened his trust: “I've realized how much I can rely on people for different things.”

From his perspective, the atmosphere of mutual care also affected how queer students were treated: “I know three trans people who are involved, and their pronouns are respected – people treat them normally.” Even practical aspects reflected this shift: “I like that the bathrooms are now unisex – we live together, there's no need for separation.”

Lori describes how her sense of self shifts through interactions with others who affirm her identity, which directly influences her feeling of belonging from a non-cis-gender position. “I feel more like myself in that sense – when I found a network of people during the blockades. It's enough for me to have even one person there during the day who accepts me, and I feel relaxed, and I don't care what anyone else thinks.” She also recounts a moment of unexpected recognition: “One colleague told me that, based on how I wrote in the anonymous Telegram group, she assumed I was a guy” (laughs). Lori interprets this as a form of affirmation – an instance where the masculine aspect of her non-binary gender identity was acknowledged, even in a seemingly trivial interaction.

Recognition and affirmation of identity within the student movement is particularly important given the broader social and political context in Serbia. The position from which queer individuals participate in broader social movements in Serbia is often already marked by institutionalized homophobia and transphobia. Many participants are not fully out, which shapes how they navigate their engagement and the degree to which they can express their identity. Unlike organized queer groups in some Western contexts, where participation may be visible and politically marked, queer

individuals in Serbia often join from a precarious position, balancing personal safety, social and family pressures, and activist commitments. This pre-existing vulnerability significantly influences both their visibility and the ways in which their participation is recognized within wider movements.

Conclusion

The 2024/2025 student protests in Serbia were marked by a strong emphasis on solidarity as a core value. However, this research reveals that solidarity within the movement was not experienced uniformly, particularly by queer students. While the student identity often served as a unifying factor, expressions of gender and sexual diversity were sometimes sidelined. Protest banners and slogans, for instance, rarely included queer symbols or references, despite the visible participation of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Additionally, some of the students we interviewed were not openly out about their queer identities within the movement.

Findings suggest that solidarity was fragmented and shaped by multiple factors, including the institutional context, prior (activist) experience, and being out among peers. It seems that queer students experienced solidarity in different ways – the sense of togetherness was strong when built around the student identity or role, but more complex and often problematic when approached from the position of being an LGBTIQ+ person. This suggests that solidarity did not carry a uniform meaning but was instead fragmented – experiences varied depending on personal identities and previous experiences. The impression of research is that some students managed to reconcile these two experiences by balancing between them, usually prioritizing the student identity as more dominant and widely accepted. This balancing was easier to maintain for students who had positive experiences during the blockade. The general impression is that even when students face discrimination, they cope better if they have support and are open about their identities.

Future research could explore generational differences in the understanding and practice of solidarity within student and broader social movements. Expanding the study to include participants from other cities, as well as a wider spectrum of the LGBTIQ+ community, could provide a more comprehensive picture of inclusivity and marginalization. Newer investigations, particularly around the announcement of the Pride Parade in Belgrade in September 2025, might reveal emerging dynamics, tensions, or solidarities that were not captured in the current study. Comparative studies with other post-socialist societies would also be valuable in contextualizing these patterns and understanding how different cultural factors shape activist practices. Additionally, longitudinal approaches could shed light on how solidarity and activism evolve over time within these movements.

This research highlights that queer students are highly present and engaged within student struggles, standing behind the collective goals and actions of the movement. For a future Serbian protest movement to foster safe and inclusive spaces

where LGBTIQ+ individuals can participate without compromising their identities or experiences, it is essential to build broad-based coalitions that recognize and actively include gender and sexual minorities – without reproducing antagonism or marginalization. As Lori, a final-year student at the University of Belgrade, states: “*We need to awaken awareness that we are everywhere and that we simply exist. Everyone should have a chance to fulfill their potential.*”

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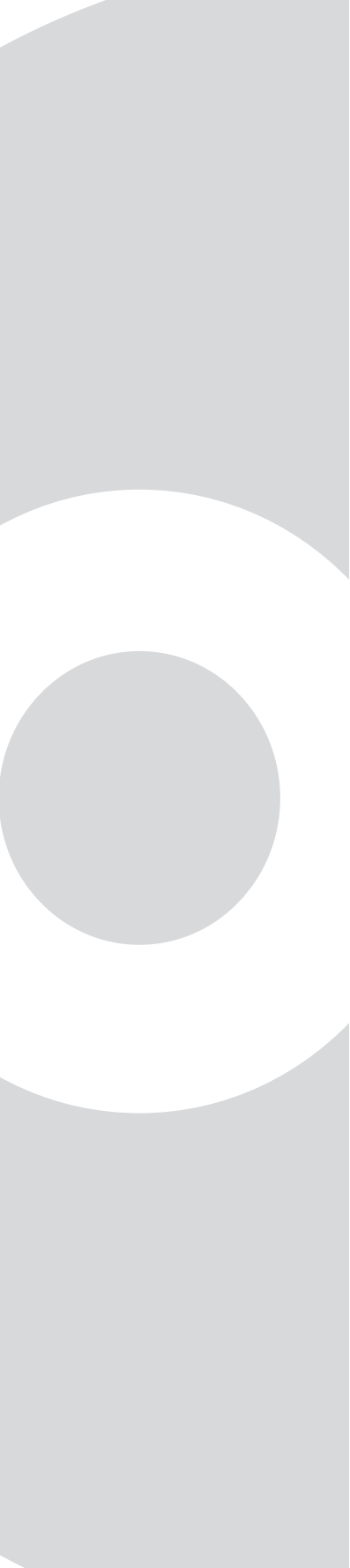
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The Feminist Digital Movement That Started With #SusmaBitsin

Abstract: In 2018, an incident of sexual harassment on the set of a TV series in Turkey became one of the events that played an important role in the development of digital activism in the media with the hashtag #SusmaBitsin (#SpeakSoItEnds). A female actress who stated that she had been sexually assaulted and insulted by a male actor on the set of the TV series *Yaşamayanlar* (Alphan Eşeli, 2018) filed a lawsuit against the male actor for “sexual assault” and “public insult”. The fact that a female actress courageously shared the incident of sexual harassment in the public sphere and said that she stands behind the case by filing a lawsuit caused quite a stir in the media in Turkey. There have been many reports on the issue in both traditional and social media. The struggle of the female actress by risking the difficulties she may experience in the public sphere has been effective in raising feminist consciousness not only for female actors but also for women working in the public sphere, in general. This study questions the male-dominated perspective on the female body in the public sphere of social media movements in the digital public sphere from a feminist perspective with the approaches of feminist theorists and with a focus on Turkey. The feminist movement that started with the hashtag #SusmaBitsin (#SpeakSoItEnds) about sexual harassment on the sets in Turkey and the discourses that these posts reveal are presented as a case study on the issues underlying the study.

Keywords: Feminism; #MeToo; #SusmaBitsin; female body; public space.

Introduction

Since the transition of humanity from matriarchal to patriarchal societies, women have been subordinate in public and private spheres. Even in the 21st century, this masculine domination continues to manifest itself. Man is a changing and developing creature. However, despite all the changes the world has undergone, one of the unchanging realities is the oppression and masculine domination over women. In this study, the presentation of a harassment case, which is the subject of a public debate in the public sphere, is analyzed from a feminist perspective by associating it with the body. This analysis is formed within the framework of the philosophical trajectory of Simone de Beauvoir’s sentence in *The Second Sex* (1949): “The body serves

as the instrument through which humans grasp the world, thereby influencing their perception of it. This notion has prompted extensive research into the data, as it is believed to hold the key to comprehending the essence of womanhood.”¹ The phenomenon of human connection with the world is rooted in the relationship with the body. Therefore, it becomes imperative to interpret the role of women in the public sphere through the medium of the body. Čičigoj reminds us again that de Beauvoir emphasizes that what is considered universally valuable depends on us and in this context, the material conditions for ethical life can be secured.² Ensuring the sustainability of an ethical life is realized through women’s solidarity.

The manifestations of masculine domination exhibited in the context of television shows and cinematic productions have undergone a diversification process over the course of time. Within this social structure, women are subject to various forms of abuse, including mobbing, sexual harassment, violence, and manipulation. These practices persist, underscoring the need for effective remedies and interventions to address and prevent such violations. It has been documented that a number of situations were reported in which female actors had been subjected to harassment or mobbing, resulting in their subsequent exclusion from the on-set participation. Furthermore, there were instances where female actors were threatened by male producers over the course of their careers. These experiences are indicative of the challenges faced by women in the media industry. Sets, the brightest area of public spaces, have shown that they are not as bright as the camera lights illuminate them. The #MeToo movement initiated by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 is an important turning point for feminist theories and feminist consciousness in this context. The #MeToo movement, which constitutes one of the most significant impetuses of the fourth wave of feminist mobilizations worldwide, has initiated feminist mobilizations not only in Hollywood and Europe but also in numerous other regions globally. With harassment cases coming to the agenda worldwide, organizations that oppose masculine domination have gained momentum. In 2017, the #MeToo movement experienced a notable strengthening due to the revelation that prominent Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had perpetrated acts of harassment against numerous female actors, which ultimately led to his conviction. The #MeToo movement, which provided women with courage to share their experiences, led to the formation of the Time’s Up movement and the emergence of a novel form of organizing aimed at combating sexual harassment. The integration of social media metrics into data collection facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals engage with news content on these platforms.³ This discourse points to the significant diffusion of the impact of digital activism.

At the 2018 *Cannes Film Festival*, Cate Blanchett delivered a speech on the red carpet, addressing the inequitable treatment of female stars in comparison to their

¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Books, 2010), 66.

² Katja Čičigoj, “Beyond Sovereignty and Particularism: for a Truly Universalist Feminism,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 14 (2017): 103.

³ Thomas Poell and José van Dijck, “Social Media and Journalistic Independence,” in *Media Independence: Working With Freedom or Working For Free?*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (Routledge, 2014), 188.

male counterparts. In this speech, which was attended by actresses such as Kristen Stewart and Salma Hayek, gender inequality in the film industry was emphasized on behalf of women working in this field: “We are 82 women representing the number of female directors who have climbed these stairs since the first edition of the *Cannes Film Festival* in 1946. In the same period, 1,688 male directors have climbed these very same stairs,” the two-time Oscar winner said.⁴ (see image #1). Women who have experienced material and moral injustices have expressed significant challenges in their attempts to produce works in the cinema, particularly in comparison to their male counterparts. These women have also reported being subjected to various forms of harassment. A concrete example of various types of harassment against women in the media after the 2018 Cannes protest is presented to the audience in the film *Bombshell* (Jay Roach, 2019). The film’s representation of women as objects of desire can be seen as meaningful at this point. The portrayal of harassment experienced by women in public spaces, even within conventional Hollywood narratives, reflects a subtle yet significant shift in the representation of women from a feminist perspective. This shift not only highlights gendered power dynamics in popular media but also resonates with broader theoretical frameworks concerning marginalization. As Gayatri Spivak argues in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), women in colonized contexts face profound difficulties in accessing their collective memory due to the pervasive influence of imperialism. Spivak identifies them as doubly oppressed: subjected both to gender-based discrimination and to structural forces that effectively silence their voices. The depiction of such struggles in mainstream media, therefore, can be read as an instance of increasing awareness of these intersecting forms of oppression, signaling a move toward more nuanced and socially conscious representations of women. In this film narrative, women are ironically the announcers and public speakers, but they are the ones who hesitate to speak out even when issues related to their private sphere come up in the public sphere. This is because the shadow of power, which is also spatialized in the space they live in, looms everywhere.⁵ The female characters, therefore, can be read as emblematic of actresses who, in real life, write feminist manifestos on the steps of Cannes – performing acts of visibility and resistance within a space that is simultaneously enabling and constraining.

From the inception of cinema to the present day, the portrayal of women as objects of desire has remained pervasive across all areas of the media. The male-dominated gaze in film has persisted, reinforced by harassment and the marginalization of women on set. In response, many women working in television and cinema have begun to challenge these practices and to question their positions within the media by organizing meetings and collective actions. In this context, digital activism has emerged as a significant tool for raising awareness and fostering change.

The male-dominated codes of social order must be challenged through a

⁴ “Cannes 2018: Female Stars Protest on Red Carpet for Equal Rights,” *BBC News*, May 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-44095914>.

⁵ Gayatri C. Spivak, *Madun Konuşabilir mi?* trans. Dilek Hattatoğlu, Emre Koyuncu, Gökçen Ertuğrul (Dipnot Publication, 2016), 65.

transformation in the ways women are perceived in public spaces. Public spaces are inherently political arenas where language, social indicators, cultural politics, sexual identities, body politics, feminist discourses, and activist mobilizations converge to create the conditions for collective engagement and assembly. Hannah Arendt's definition of the public sphere as the space where "everything can be seen and heard by everyone and has the widest possible publicity" can be understood in this context.⁶ In the digital age, when debates in the public sphere unfold on social media platforms, the critical questioning that began in the global village continues in diverse forms, with women organizing and coming together across various fields. Women's online movements have become important for the visibility of digital feminism.⁷ The development of digital activism not only facilitates the emergence and growth of feminist organizations but also has the potential to accelerate and render women's mobilizations more visible. Awareness-raising activities present stories to a diverse audience in online environment. When posts on X are shared with the #MeToo hashtag, they bring out common feelings such as relief and protection.⁸ These common feelings facilitate collective action. Hashtag feminism is an opportunity for those who are not seen in the mainstream media discourse to gain discursive power.⁹ In the interviews that they conducted for their study, Greta Olson and Elisabeth Lechner reported that digital platforms provide spaces for feminist mobilization and community building. They also noted that these spaces are constrained by capitalism and visibility policies.¹⁰ Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalyn Keller found that solidarity among women often evolves into feminist consciousness among participants in hashtag campaigns, leading them to recognize sexual violence not as an individual problem but as a structural issue. They further observe that the perception of discussing feminist issues on X as being easier than engaging in such discussions in offline contexts underscores the significance of digital platforms in fostering both individual and collective feminist awareness, as well as in locating and sustaining support for feminist perspectives.¹¹ However, digital feminism also confronts several challenges. Examples of harassment experienced by women in digital spaces include hate speech, non-consensual sharing of sexual photos, stalking, doxxing, name calling and insults,

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *İnsanlık Durumu*, trans. Bahadır Sina Şener (İletişim Publication, 2018), 92.

⁷ Müge Öztunç, "Digital Activism in Turkey: Istanbul Convention as A Symbol of Women's Movement," *The Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication* 13, no. 2 (2023): 411.

⁸ Jessamy Gleeson and Breanan Turner, "Online Feminist Activism as Performative Consciousness-Raising: A #MeToo Case Study," in *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, ed. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), 64.

⁹ Gina Masullo Chen, Paromita Pain and Briana Barner, "Hashtag Feminism: Activism or Slacktivism?" in *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research*, ed. Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke ve Ingrid Bachmann (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018), 212.

¹⁰ Greta Olson and Elisabeth Lechner, "#Feminist – Naming Controversies and Celebrating Points of Connection and Joy in Current Feminisms," *European Journal of English Studies* 26 (2022): 2. Olson and Lechner, "#Feminist – Naming Controversies," 314.

¹¹ Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller, "#MeToo and The Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture Through Digital Feminist Activism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25 (2018): 240.

impersonation, and public shaming.¹² Despite the distinct characteristics of rape in physical and digital spaces, cyber-perpetration can be experienced as genuinely intrusive, violent, unethical, and controlling, much like rape in physical space. Although physical rape and cyber sexual violence may not always directly impact the body, they inflict significant harm on the self associated with that body.¹³ On the other hand, there are also cases where victims are blamed in the virtual spaces. For this reason, it is recommended that communities be created where comments are monitored and online security can be ensured.¹⁴ In re-examining cyber feminism, it is pointed out that the internet economy reproduces oppressive workplace hierarchies that are deeply rooted in the global political economy.¹⁵

On the other hand, constructive critiques of digital feminism underscore key strategies for advancing the women's movement in the online sphere through hashtag activism. In a report authored by writers, activists, and educators engaged in the digital feminist arena, online feminism is acknowledged for its role in motivating political engagement but is critiqued for insufficiently connecting to broader organizational efforts. The report emphasizes the need to address challenges such as developing media strategies, fundraising, managing organizational finances, navigating conflict, criticism, and disappointment, and providing peer support.¹⁶ If a universal organisational structure is established in digital feminism and consensus is reached on a joint decision-making mechanism, these negative aspects will also disappear.

Feminist uprising in digital public space: #SusmaBitsin

From the historical concept of the topos to the present day, spaces shared collectively on Earth have been characterized as public spaces. Social space, as a domain shaped by social and political forces, functions as an instrument of control and domination.¹⁷ Within social space, prevailing ideologies reinforce the male-dominated power structures of the public sphere. Mental space, in contrast, emerges as the domain of philosophers and mathematicians, further deepening the divisions between mental, physical, and social realms.¹⁸ The interrelationship among these spaces both reinforces and transforms an individual's relationship with the social order and cultural context in which they exist. In this regard, social media platforms can be understood as analogous to mental spaces, serving both to reflect and mediate these

¹² Jane Im et al., "Women's Perspectives on Harm and Justice after Online Harassment," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6 (2022): 355:3.

¹³ Martha McCaughey and Jill Cermelle, "Violations of Sexual and Information Privacy," *Violence Against Women* 28, no. 15–16 (2022): 3965.

¹⁴ Emily Wright et al., "Victim Blaming," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2025): 21.

¹⁵ Jessie Daniels, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s)," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 37 no. 1/2 (2009): 118.

¹⁶ Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti, "#FemFuture: Online Revolution," *Barnard Center for Research on Women*, 8 (2012): 24.

¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Mekânın Üretimi*, trans. Işık Ergüden, (Sel Publication, 2024), 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

abstract, intellectual domains. However, the masculine rules and patriarchal perspective underlying these spaces emphasize male dominance in public spaces. Therefore, it can be said that the issues of equal and fair wage distribution and equal opportunity in the public sphere still serve the masculine order. In the *Declaration of Sentiments* published in Seneca Falls (1848), it was reminded that women were kept away from gainful work and it was underlined that they could not receive equal wages with men in return for the work they did and that women were therefore forced to live a life of dependence.¹⁹ Similarly, Sheila Rowbotham, over fifty years ago, addressed the exploitation of women's domestic labor, the underpayment of women working in the public sphere compared to men, and the grueling conditions faced by working-class women, who were compelled to work excessively long hours for low wages and without social protections.²⁰ However, the fact that the wages of male actors on sets are higher than the wages of female actors is still a matter of debate, even though years have passed since the discussions commenced. This is because, in the social spaces described by Henri Lefebvre, the rules regulated by the patriarchal perspective apply. On the other hand, according to Arendt, the public sphere is conceived as a space possessing a quality that transcends the temporal limitations of mortal existence.²¹ Public spaces, which are not only planned for the living, build a world where a common spatial language for humanity is developed and which includes all sexual identity characterizations. A world where Arendt's theoretical explanation can be applied in practice in everyday life is not being built today. One of the most important forces that will ensure the existence of this world is the creation and sustainability of public spaces where discussions, inquiries, and activist discourse take place in a concrete manner, such as in the digital public sphere. Some scholars have argued that hashtag feminism is a powerful practice in the politics of visibility, an activism that can change the way we represent, interpret and react.²² As the visibility of hashtag activism grows, Arendt's conception of the public sphere is increasingly taking concrete form within the digital public sphere.

In Turkey, the once-silent cries of women have begun to resonate more widely through academic articles on various websites, independent writers' discussions on sexual harassment, podcasts addressing masculine violence on film sets, YouTube conversations about the necessity of fair and equal pay policies, and public testimonies from individuals sharing their experiences of harassment. This digital awakening, initially propelled by hashtags, has evolved into tangible, in-person gatherings, demonstrations, and marches. Such activist mobilizations echo the libertarian feminist spirit of 1968. Reflecting on this trend, the feminist online platform Çatlak Zemin documented the history of feminism in Turkey between 2010 and 2020 through tweets,

¹⁹ Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Teori*, trans. Aksu Bora, Meltem Ağduk Gevrek, Fevziye Sayılan (İletişim Publication, 2009), 23.

²⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Kadının Gizlenmiş Tarihi*, trans. Nilgün Şarman (Payel Publication, 2011), 98.

²¹ Arendt, *İnsanlık Durumu*, 81.

²² Rosemary Clark-Parsons, "I See You, I Believe You, I Stand You': #MeToo and The Performance of Networked Feminist Visibility," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 364.

photos, and videos, and highlighted the significant growth of digital activism in the country. Prominent feminist hashtags during this period include: #BenimBedenim-BenimKararım, #BacaklarınıTopla, #YerimiİşgalEtme, #DirenKahkaha, #HandeKadereSesVer, #TecavüzMeşrulaştırılamaz, #ŞuleÇetİçinAdalet, #KadınlarBirlikteGüçlü, #Ölmekİstemiyorum.²³ Following the murder of Özgecan Aslan, individuals began sharing their personal experiences and witness accounts of harassment and sexual violence using the #sendeanlat hashtag. Concurrently, initiatives were launched to enhance legal protections for women, exemplified by the #ÖzgecanYasası campaign.²⁴ This collective action has accelerated women's engagement against gender-based violence within the digital public sphere. Consequently, the number of harassment scandals that were exposed and publicly discussed in the media has increased. Within the framework of the #SusmaBitsin movement, tweets shared from the movement's official account not only revealed instances of harassment and mobbing against women in the media but also facilitated women's collective organization and mobilization. These movements illustrate how women have operationalized the mental spaces described by Lefebvre, while simultaneously enacting Arendt's conception of public spaces as arenas of equality between men and women. Therefore, the pursuit of gender equality across mental, physical, and social spaces is gaining momentum through digital feminist activism. These developments not only reinforce digital feminism but also support broader women's movements in digital public spaces, fostering their constructive use. Continuous visibility is further maintained through ongoing social media activity. Updates concerning continuing harassment cases within the legal field were periodically disseminated through the #SusmaBitsin account, thereby maintaining their public visibility. "New year, new meeting! Our call to all women working in the cinema/TV industry! A call has been made to women working in the field via Twitter."²⁵ "As long as you try to normalize violence with flowery words and emotional narratives, and attempt to portray men as 'victims', you will find the real owners of those stories standing before you – us."²⁶ Some of Turkey's most famous female actresses have made statements drawing attention to the concept of sexual violence, which were made visible through posters. "The behavior of the victim of sexual violence cannot be used as an excuse for sexual violence. Sexual violence is the crime of the perpetrator. Creating excuses is victim blaming and feeds into the idea that 'some people deserve sexual violence' instead of no one deserves sexual violence. #öyledeğilböyle."²⁷ "Sexual violence is not related to what the survivor wore, their profession,

²³ Delta Meriç Candemir, "Hashtag Feminizmi," *Feminist Bellek*, April 2, 2021, <https://feministbellek.org/hashtag-feminizmi/>.

²⁴ Alikılıç Özlem and Şule Baş, "Dijital Feminizm: Hashtag'in Cinsiyeti," *Fe Dergi* 11 (2019): 1.

²⁵ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), "Our call to all women working in the cinema/TV industry!" Twitter (now X), December 30, 2018, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1079380706151809024>.

²⁶ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), "You cannot romanticize the murder of women," Twitter (now X), December 19, 2023, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1737139575623966802>.

²⁷ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), "There is no excuse for sexual violence," Twitter (now X), November 20, 2019, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1197144395381907456>.

gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. These are beliefs that imply that the survivor ‘deserved’ the sexual violence, that they were deficient or made poor decisions. Sexual violence is the perpetrator’s crime. #öyledeğilböyle.”²⁸ “Sexual violence is not a joke! Using sexist, sexual violence-normalizing, and condoning expressions under the guise of jokes is a threat of sexual violence. Sexist jokes, profanity, and discriminatory expressions fuel violence. Change begins with language. #öyledeğilböyle.”²⁹ “Sexual violence within marriage is a crime and is punishable by law. Regardless of the nature of the relationship between individuals, whether they are married, dating, or cohabiting, consent is required in every relationship. Any act without consent constitutes sexual violence. #öyledeğilböyle.”³⁰

It was observed that users generally refrained from commenting on tweets shared via the #SusmaBitsin account. Nevertheless, posts that included calls for collective action received substantial visibility. For instance, a tweet regarding the case of a prominent female singer who was physically assaulted by a well-known male actor was viewed 207,600 times, retweeted 635 times, and received 1,700 likes. “Who will clear the perpetrator?”³¹ This post received the highest level of engagement on the #SusmaBitsin account primarily because a case of violence brought two nationally prominent figures into the spotlight.

Gizem Bayıksel, a participant in the #SusmaBitsin movement, provides an account of the movement’s evolution and related processes in Turkey, while also highlighting the forms of solidarity among women within the sphere of digital activism:

We published the #That’sHarassment videos made in the US with Turkish subtitles. These are videos that describe very well how women are subjected to harassment in work environments, even if it is not necessarily harassment or rape. The subtitled versions are now available on #SusmaBitsin’s Instagram and Facebook accounts. In collaboration with the *Istanbul Film Festival*, we also screened these videos before the films in the *Flowers Don’t Want It* section. We want to make our own videos in the future.³²

²⁸ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), “Sexual violence is the perpetrator’s crime,” Twitter (now X), November 21, 2019, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1197464954548490241>.

²⁹ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), “There is no joking about rape threats,” Twitter (now X), November 22, 2019, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1197783101218414592>.

³⁰ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), “If there is no mutual consent, there is violence,” Twitter (now X), November 23, 2019, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1198140410092281858>.

³¹ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), “Who will clear the perpetrator?” Twitter (now X), January 5, 2025, <https://x.com/susmabitsin/status/1875893390975640046?s=46>.

³² Gizem Bayıksel, “Stop Shutting Up We Demand Non-Masculinized Sets,” *Altyazı Fasikül*, July 5, 2019, <https://fasikul.altyazi.net/seyir-defteri/susma-bitsinin-sesi/>.

It is stated that digital activism, with the influence of the fourth wave, has increased anti-feminist rhetoric and misogyny.³³ Victim blaming, triggering trauma, on-line attacks, and cyberbullying are examples of hostility towards women that women encounter in digital activism. The issue of online violence against women is being carefully examined by the United Nations. It is recommended that international organizations take a leading role in preventing online violence against women and that this issue be given political priority in terms of preventing hate speech and harassment.³⁴ Despite the challenges women face in digital activism, women working on film and TV series sets, film critics, and many women working in civil society organizations continued to hold meetings to ensure the sustainability of this movement. In the *Susma Bitsin Online Psychiatry Panel* (January 2021), meetings were organized to discuss the processes and disclosures experienced by women who were sexually harassed in the cinema, television and theater sector.³⁵ The incident that prompted the emergence of the #SusmaBitsin hashtag involved a male actor who was alleged to have harassed a woman and was subsequently acquitted in February 2021. “Bringing together women from the cinema, television, and theater industries, #SusmaBitsin is organizing an online psychiatry panel to discuss how we can protect ourselves at work and in our personal lives, and how we can draw strength from one another.”³⁶ A call for solidarity was made via X with a tweet. However, this solidarity process, which started in 2018, has not lost momentum over the years and different forms of organization have emerged. On March 8, the *International Women’s Day*, Pera Museum participated in this solidarity by organizing a film screening program under the slogan *Strong Together* (2022).³⁷ At *Sinematek/Cinematheque*, a space dedicated to screening films from both the world and the Turkish cinema history as well as to hosting cinema-related panels, members of the #SusmaBitsin Platform – established to combat sexual harassment and discrimination on film sets – gathered with cinema enthusiasts to hold discussions under the hashtag “#WillWeRemainSilent? We Say No!” in 2022.³⁸ The most recent meeting of the #SusmaBitsin platform was called *We Come Together!* (2025) with the slogan “We come together to say #SusmaBitsin against harassment, sexual assault and mobbing in our workplaces and to listen to each other.”³⁹ (see image #2).

³³ Esra Gedik, “Dünyada ve Türkiye’de Dijital Feminizm İncelenmesi: Gençlerin Dijital Aktivizm Deneyimleri,” *Journal of Social and Cultural Studies* 5 (2020): 133.

³⁴ Kim Barker and Olga Jurazs, “Online Misogyny: A Challenge for Digital Feminism?” *Journal of International Affairs, Dynamics of Global Feminism* 72 (2019): 100.

³⁵ “Susma Bitsin Online Psychiatry Panel,” January 10, 2021, <https://www.istekadinlar.com/susma-bitsin-online-psikiyatri-paneli-10-ocakta>.

³⁶ Susma Bitsin (@SusmaBitsin), “Susma Bitsin is launching online panels!,” Twitter (now X), January 8, 2021, <https://x.com/SusmaBitsin/status/1347615612546265088>.

³⁷ “Strong Together,” *Pera Müzesi*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.peramuzesi.org.tr/basin-bultenleri/pera-film-8-mart%E2%80%99i-birlikte-guclu-programi-ile-kutluyor-/3650>.

“Will We Remain Silent? We Say No!,” *Sinematek*, April 4, 2022, <https://sinematek.kadikoy.bel.tr/etkinlikler/sinematek-gunleri-23-04-2022>.

³⁹ Susma Bitsin (@susmabitsin), “We are coming together!,” Instagram, March 5, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/susmabitsin/p/DG0osd2NgS9/>.

Feminist movements deconstruct the signifiers attributed to the female body, allowing for the transformation of gender codes in the public sphere as well as guiding the transformation of identity politics. Hashtag feminism constitutes a paradigm through which feminist theoretical frameworks are translated into practice. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (1987), argues that the sex-gender system is a socio-cultural construction. The existence of phenomena such as identity, value, prestige, kinship position, status in the social hierarchy in the representation system shows that gender representations will be loaded with the meanings carried by these phenomena.⁴⁰ Transforming male-dominated norms in the public sphere facilitates the deconstruction of patriarchal structures by challenging the categories traditionally ascribed to women's bodies. In this process, the possibilities offered by the digital public sphere can be harnessed, enabling feminists to assume a more active role and thereby enhance their contributions to digital feminist activism.

Erasing the traces of masculine domination on the female body

In the digital age, public spaces have largely shifted to social media platforms. In this context, the platform can be understood as a political concept in terms of speaking and being heard.⁴¹ Women around the world who participate in movements such as #MeToo and #SusmaBitsin – and who organize themselves by drawing inspiration from these initiatives – mobilize against masculine violence and challenge male domination over their bodies. In patriarchal systems, the female body is often constructed as an object of desire, a commodity, or even a piece of meat; simultaneously, women are frequently rendered invisible in digital spaces where they attempt to speak out. This framing, in which both nature and the body are treated as objects of manipulation and observation, undermines the meaningful recognition of women's existence.⁴² Observers positioned within the panoptic gaze often seek to silence women's voices. Nevertheless, women's acts and interventions in asserting their own existence constitute practices of resistance against masculine violence. As Monique Plaza argues, women function as signifiers through their entire existence and should be considered independently of culturally specific notions of femininity or prescribed categories of sexuality. Non-essentialist feminist theory facilitates an understanding of the female body in relation to women's holistic and spiritual development, rather than as a mere object defined by patriarchal frameworks. According to Mary Ann Doane, however, the dualism of soul and body needs to be reformulated and its relationality questioned. The body is not only the essence, it also explains the construction of

⁴⁰ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction: Theories of Representation and Difference* (Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.

⁴¹ Tarleton, Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 6.

⁴² Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 126.

the essentialism of femininity.⁴³ Feminist practices developed against the patriarchy, which wants to prevent the development of this construction, remind the patriarchal order every time that the woman's body should be treated in accordance with the woman's own decision. In Turkey, feminist consciousness, which gained momentum with the #SusmaBitsin movement, continues to strengthen, playing a crucial role in challenging and transforming the categories historically attributed to women's bodies. On the other hand, the dominant discourses produced by neo-liberal policies are being implemented. Alison Phipps points to the strong coalition of neoliberal and neo-conservative frameworks when questioning the political sociology of women's bodies, with key debates such as sexual violence, gender and Islam, sex work and motherhood.⁴⁴ What is fundamentally at stake in neoliberal policies is a pronounced interventionism.⁴⁵ Political decisions regarding women under global neoliberal policies often exclude women's own perspectives. In Turkey, the influence of neoliberal paradigms is evident in decisions made on behalf of women, reflecting the fact that rules and laws intended to secure women's presence and rights in the public sphere have yet to be fully introduced or made accessible to the public.

Politics is not defined by the establishment of a distinct sphere apart from the processes of life's reproduction, but rather by a particular configuration of coexistence between the private and the public, one that simultaneously incorporates and excludes the body. Roupa states that it does not seem possible to maintain the rigid separation between the body and politics that Arendt adopts. For, "the public sphere does not emerge through an act of exclusion (the literal exclusion of the body and its processes from the political sphere), but through a double gesture of exclusion/inclusion that creates the impression of an irreconcilable opposition but conceals an underlying interdependence".⁴⁶ Decision-making mechanisms that act on behalf of women hinder the practical implementation of feminist body politics. Additionally, the absence of a feminist perspective in media representations of the body complicates the understanding of body politics. At this juncture, considering the close relationship between geography and the body, it becomes necessary to reconsider how ethnographic relations intersect with the body in the structuring of public spaces.⁴⁷ Perceptions of the body in public spaces are shaped by geographical and cultural contexts. In Turkey, as a predominantly Muslim country, a more conservative approach is evident in both the public representation of women's bodies and their display in everyday practices, compared to non-Muslim countries.

⁴³ Janet Walker, "Psychoanalysis and Feminist Film Theory: The Problem of Sexual Difference and Identity," in *Multiple Voices, in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch. (Minnesota Press, 1998), 82–92.

⁴⁴ Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Polity Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Ankica Čakardić, "Down the Neoliberal Path: The Rise of Free Choice Feminism," *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 14 (2017): 36.

⁴⁶ Vicky Roupa, "Bodies in Public Spaces: Questioning the Boundary Between the Public and the Private," *Critical Horizons* 23, no. 4 (2022): 354.

⁴⁷ Hester Parr, "Feeling, Reading, and Making Bodies in Space," *Geographical Review* 1/2 (2001): 158–67.

Therefore, in the sexual harassment case that became the focus of the #SusmaBitsin process, the female actor's ability to speak out should be seen as an important step for other women to speak out. However, in this masculine order where the body is identified, a woman's speaking out has not been visible in many areas of traditional media. In this context, Adrienne Rich's emphasis that the body constitutes subjectivity and bears the traces of the social and power relations in which it is constituted comes to the fore again.⁴⁸ Dislodging the signs of the male-dominated rules of the social order on the body is important in this respect. Geena Davis Institute's sentence "If they can see it, they can be it"⁴⁹ foresees a change in the perspective that takes into account the existence of women for female characters who will serve as role models for women in media representations. Only with change and transformation will the masculine mechanism labeling women begin to dissolve. In Frances McDormand's award speech in 2018 (Best Actress Oscar Winner, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*), she emphasized the importance of the inclusion rider while calling for more representation of women in films.⁵⁰ The public discourse of prominent actresses such as McDormand can catalyze transformative steps within the existing order. When well-known actresses at Cannes in 2018 spoke on behalf of women and highlighted issues of masculine violence, they contributed to challenging the patriarchal perspective in character representation. As a result, the conventions of classical narrative cinema no longer strictly adhere to traditional Hollywood codes. Even in films that use traditional narrative structures, the presence of strong women comes to the fore. In the TV series and movies that appear on svod platforms, titles with the theme of "strong female heroes" have started to be seen. Instead of savior Batmans and Supermen, *Wonder Women* have started to appear before the audience. The importance of the Alison Bechdel Test emerges at this point. According to this test, the presence of female characters in film narratives becomes important. Some film festivals have mandated that only films that pass this test can participate in the competition. It is only by putting such approaches into practice in the field of media that the masculine language in films and the scopophilic, voyeuristic gaze that serves the male gaze begin to break down.

The outcomes of women's solidarity, collective organizing, and the rise of feminist consciousness have necessitated a shift in the portrayal of stereotypical female characters in media representations. Acting together in the public sphere, taking action, and raising their voices have gradually dismantled male-dominated codes, fostering the emergence of new perspectives. The struggle of the victimized female actress in Turkey, who found support with #SusmaBitsin, has moved from the court to digital public spaces. This case, which was given meaning by the public as a public

⁴⁸ Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "Experience, Embodiment, and Epistemologies," *Hypatia* 2/21 (2006): 182.

⁴⁹ "About Geena Davis Institute," Geena Davis Institute, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/>.

⁵⁰ Jacob Stolworthy, "Inclusion Rider: Frances McDormand's Oscars 2018 Best Actress Speech Explained," *Independent*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/inclusion-rider-what-is-frances-mcdormand-oscars-speech-2018-best-actress-a8239776.html>.

case, broke the phallogentric mechanism of the man who has the power to make decisions over the body of the woman who is seen as passive. Hartsock believes that in order to develop an alternative depiction of the world, both power relations need to be changed and subjectivities based on the experiences of the dominated and marginalized need to be developed. Noting that women are thought of as a set of negative qualities, Hartsock argues that women should be included in the historical, political and theoretical process.⁵¹ In this context, the #SusmaBitsin platform constitutes one of the building blocks paving the way for the construction of an alternative world. Women's solidarity in Turkey, which started with the slogan #SusmaBitsin, continues to this day. Women who come together both through calls on social media and face-to-face meetings continue to discuss the harassment against them in public spaces and make plans on what to do. The most important achievements of the platform are the sexual harassment and mobbing cases won in favor of women. This makes the impact of the power of women's organizing visible in the public sphere.



Image 1: “We are 82 women representing the number of female directors who have climbed these stairs since the first edition of the Cannes Film Festival in 1946. In the same period, 1,688 male directors have climbed these very same stairs,” the two-time Oscar winner said

⁵¹ Nancy Hartsock, “Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory,” *Cultural Critique, The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division II* 14 (1989): 32.

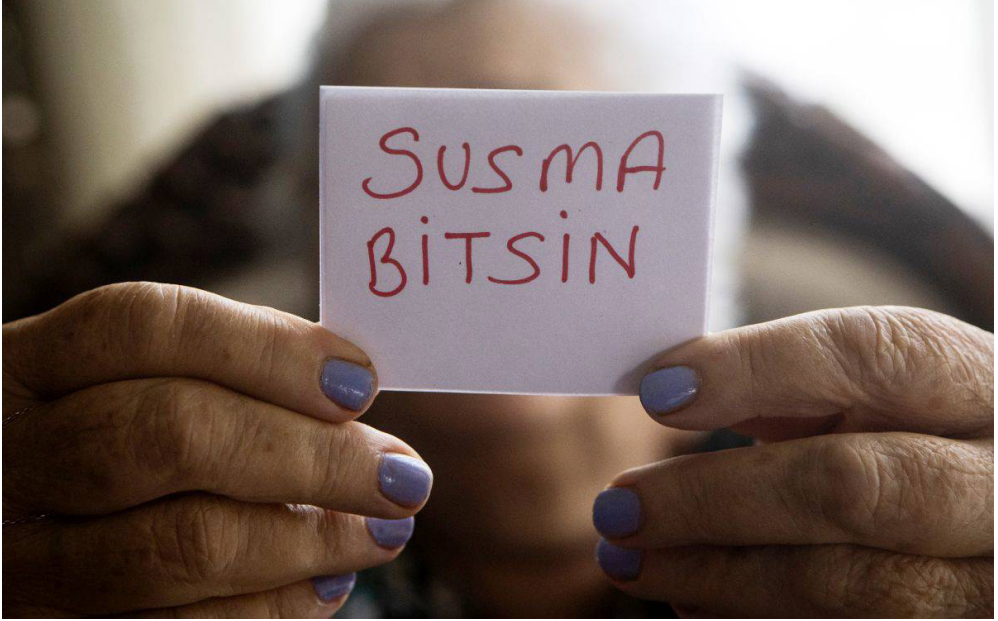


Image 2: “We come together to say #SusmaBitsin against harassment, sexual assault and mobbing in our workplaces and to listen to each other”

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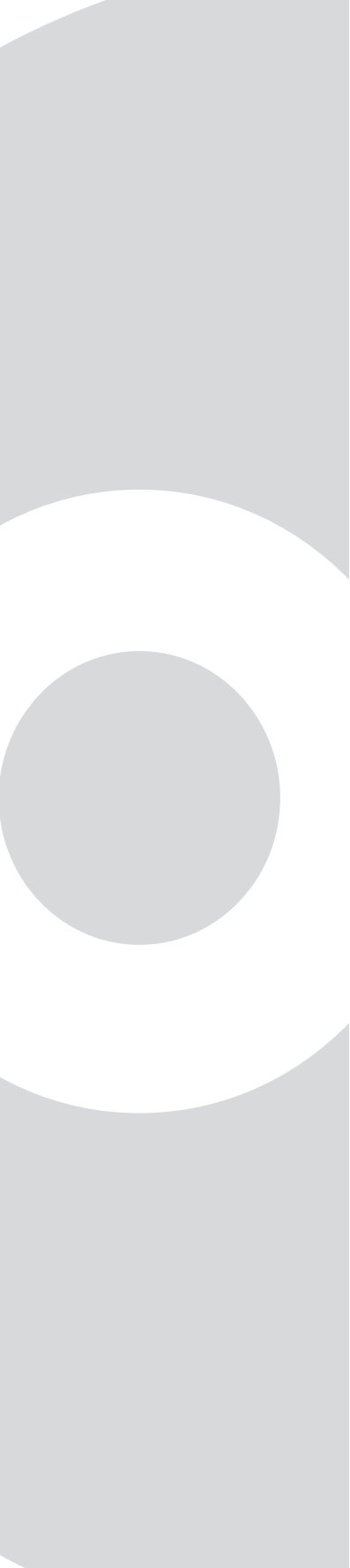
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The Neoliberal Feminist Divestment from Care in Domestic Violence Prevention Advocacy in Serbia and Croatia

Abstract: Drawing on abolition feminism and critical feminist discourse analysis, the article critiques the overreliance of the mainstream feminist advocacy on the police and criminal legal system as the solution for femicide and gendered violence. Our article aims to investigate how carceral politics constructs the ways in which domestic violence is understood and approached in Croatia and Serbia, and how such politics constrains and conditions material care for survivors. During the last few years, we trace the path of local feminisms in becoming increasingly immersed in the interests of the punitive state, and the implications for the lives of the people they claim to represent. Analyzing recent research and policy documents from Serbia and Croatia, we are committed to documenting these tendencies and to their critical consideration.

Keywords: material care; feminist advocacy; violence; post-Yugoslav region; survivors; carceral feminism; abolition feminism.

Carceral feminism in the post-Yugoslav context

Carceral feminism refers to a framework that construes expanded law enforcement, legal prosecution, and incarceration as the central response to addressing violence against women.¹ Initially coined by Elizabeth Bernstein,² it has evolved to define

¹ Maja Solar, “Dekolonijalna feministička teorija nasilja,” *Slobodni Filozofski*, November 29, 2022, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://slobodnifilozofski.com/2022/11/dekolonijalna-feministicka-teorija-nasilja.html>.

² Elizabeth Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism,’” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2007): 128–51.

the strong reliance of feminist groups on coercive state institutions, such as prisons, police and the criminal justice system, for punishing sexual and gender violence. Over the last fifty years, carceral responses to domestic violence and rape, developed and honed in Western countries, have become accepted as common sense globally, but have also experienced noteworthy pushback in the form of abolition feminist organizing.³

Contemporary feminist history in former Yugoslav countries has witnessed extensive organizing against domestic violence. Since the late 1980s, feminist organizations have been operating domestic violence hotlines (known locally as SOS telephones), women's shelters and campaigning against sexual violence. As the institutional support for domestic violence survivors was deemed insufficient,⁴ these initially grassroots efforts were recontextualized in the state-run system and the institutionalization of feminist activism consolidated campaigns for higher sentences and the introduction of new offences. A crowning achievement of the said recontextualization and institutionalization came in 2024 when the Croatian government introduced "femicide" as a separate criminal offence in its new amendments to the criminal code. This came about after years of lobbying by feminist and women's NGOs, fueled by the logic that the legal recognition of femicide creates conditions for combating violence against women as a social issue.

Kristin Bumiller has made the case that neoliberalism has appropriated the feminist movement against sexual violence,⁵ and we see this manifest in the case of the former Yugoslavia. A potential way to understand how this came to be is through Adriana Zaharijević's analysis of the evolution of Yugoslav feminists as citizens under distinct citizenship regimes.⁶ Zaharijević's analysis reveals how, following the Yugoslav Wars, local feminists "accepted their situatedness", ceasing to be the disloyal citizens they were in the 1990s, and, for the first time, viewed their respective states "in the Westphalian frame" and "as the principal addresses of feminist demands".⁷ Feminists became committed to contributing to creating working institutions and gender mainstreaming, including as pertaining to the issue of domestic violence, and their efforts began to resemble those of their European counterparts. In doing so, local mainstream feminism became increasingly carceral, reinforced and sustained by a dependence on funding coming in large part from the Western countries and a

³ Brittany Pearl Battle and Amber Joy Powell, "We Keep Us Safe!': Abolition Feminism as a Challenge to Carceral Feminist Responses to Gendered Violence," *Gender & Society* 38, no. 4 (2024): 523–56.

⁴ Stanislava Barać, "Feminističke sveske' (1994–1999): Između ženskog iskustva i feminističkog znanja," in *Feministički časopisi u Srbiji. Teorija, aktivizam i umetničke prakse u 1990-im i 2000-im*, ed. Biljana Dojčinović and Ana Kolarić (Filološki fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2018), 81.

⁵ Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence* (Duke University Press, 2008).

⁶ Adriana Zaharijević, *Being an Activist: Feminist Citizenship through Transformations of Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Citizenship Regimes* (The University of Edinburgh, 2013).

⁷ Ibid., 18–19.

need to produce what Kristen Ghodsee defined as “feminism-by-design” programs.⁸ Additionally, Zaharijević shows how the dominance of Western feminism as the assumed universal model has obscured socialist feminist traditions in Yugoslavia.⁹ This has worked to reinforce neoliberal carceral logics while foreclosing Marxist, anarchist, and socialist alternatives. Neoliberalism has, therefore, appropriated the efforts initiated by disloyal feminist citizens in the 1990s, such as the grassroots organizing against domestic violence, framing and mobilizing them in neoliberal terms. Still, emancipatory possibilities are present in feminist spaces, for example, in advocating for people on the move, travelling the so-called “Balkan route” and organizing against border regimes. These initiatives are important as they demonstrate a movement away from carceral solutions and can provide roadmaps for future organizing around other social issues important for the feminist movement, such as ending domestic violence.¹⁰

In the Western context, the emergence of carceral feminism is closely tied to the withdrawal of the welfare state and the shift towards the neoliberal carceral state.¹¹ The post-Yugoslav transition to neoliberalism cannot, of course, be characterized as a shift from the welfare state to a carceral one. Still, the *de facto* impact on survivors of domestic violence was comparable. Where there was once a social protection system that guaranteed a whole slew of rights and means to support survivors leaving violent situations, there was now a void. Additionally, social issues created by poverty, marginalization, etc., have come increasingly to be dealt with via carceral means, i.e., via debt collectors, forced eviction, and increased surveillance and criminalization. Our aim in this paper is to examine how hegemonic liberal understandings of feminism individualize harm by honing in on individual acts of violence. Additionally, we aim to understand how Serbian and Croatian NGOs have contributed to reproducing carceral logics, thereby displacing material care, which we understand to be at the core of abolition feminist organizing.

⁸ Kristen Ghodsee, “Nongovernmental Ogres? How Feminist NGOs Undermine Women in Postsocialist Eastern Europe,” *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 8, no. 3 (2005).

⁹ Adriana Zaharijević, “The Strange Case of Yugoslav Feminism: Feminism and Socialism in ‘The East,’” *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2017): 135–56.

¹⁰ The authors of this text are also part of a collective called the Regional Abolition Feminist Collective. Since 2023, the collective has been organizing an abolition feminist summer school; first in collaboration with the Feminist Autonomous Center for Research in Athens and later independently. In 2025, the collective published a booklet with a collection of abolition feminist texts that attempt to grapple with the complexities of thinking non-carceral solutions in the region. The booklet is called *Abolition Feminism Perspectives in a Global Context: Dispatches from Novi Sad*.

¹¹ Elizabeth Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism,’” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2007): 128–51.

Conceptual framework

Drawing on Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Mimi Kim,¹² we understand that carceral solutions to gender justice obscure the socio-political determinants of violence, such as poverty, state borders and racial oppression. Carceral feminism diverts the attention from neoliberal cuts to social welfare programs that allow survivors to escape harmful situations. It also discourages alternative responses to gender and sexual violence, including community accountability and transformative justice. Abolition feminism is concerned with dismantling all forms of oppression, notably prisons and policing, from a historical and structural vantage point.¹³

As Leigh Goodmark argues,¹⁴ advocating for more law, more prosecution, and increased police presence strengthens the carceral system, which in turn will result in more women behind bars. Furthermore, research consistently shows that higher incarceration rates are not associated with lower violent crime rates.¹⁵ Most importantly, decades of mainstream feminist advocacy for harsher custodial penalties have not resulted in rape being any less prevalent in society, nor have they generated greater safety and direct support for survivors.¹⁶

Alison Phipps¹⁷ argued that, as a product of neoliberalism, carceral feminism adopts the logic of individual responsibility, according to which the structural problem of hetero-patriarchal violence is pathologized as a behaviour of deviant individuals. In the same way, material care is positioned as an individual responsibility following the retreat of the welfare state. Studies have found that in countries where carceral feminist legislations are passed, in the form of harsher penalties for perpetrators, women are less likely to report domestic violence.¹⁸ The consequence of being the sole carer and provider for the household, in the absence of state economic support, is felt by many women as a coercive reason to stay with their abusers.

We have defined material care based on the definition proposed by Chatzidakis et al. in *The Care Manifesto*: “Care as a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life.”¹⁹ We understand that the current care crisis stems from neoliberal restructuring of social reproduction, which reassigns the responsibility for care from the welfare state to personal

¹² Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Haymarket Books, 2016); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (Haymarket Books, 2022); Mimi Kim Kim, “Anti-Carceral Feminism: The Contradictions of Progress and the Possibilities of Counter-Hegemonic Struggle,” *Affilia – Journal of Women and Social Work* 35, no. 3 (2020): 309–26.

¹³ Angela Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (Haymarket Books, 2022).

¹⁴ Leigh Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage: Domestic Violence and the Legal System* (NYU Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Don Stemen, *The Prison Paradox: More Incarceration Will Not Make Us Safer* (Vera Institute of Justice, 2017).

¹⁶ Alison Phipps, *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

¹⁹ Andreas Chatzidakis, et al., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso Books, 2020), 5.

responsibility and charity.²⁰ What we understand as material care, specifically related to the research focus of this article, is related to the material needs of survivors of violence: food, shelter, healthcare provisions, childcare assistance and economic security.

Methodology

As feminists living and operating in the region, we come to this analysis from a standpoint of having been disillusioned with (neo)liberal feminist and NGO organizing against domestic violence. Our aim with this critique is to open up space for exploring possibilities of transformative justice. In this paper, we have employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a feminist materialist lens²¹ to examine the reproduction of neoliberal carceral logics in Serbian and Croatian feminist activism against domestic violence and to investigate how this approach obscures the possibilities for developing material infrastructures of care that would constitute a more supportive and transformative response for women who have experienced violence.

We analyzed content that would be representative of feminist advocacy for femicide prevention in Croatia and Serbia. A two-part report titled “Social and Institutional Response to Femicide in Serbia” was published by FemPlatz, a well-regarded, and highly active feminist think tank from Serbia that has called on the Serbian government to establish a Femicide Watch body. In the Croatian context, we have looked at the study by Dunja Bonacci Skenderović, called *‘If I Can’t Have You No One Will!’ An Analysis of Croatia’s Intimate Partner Femicide 2016–2023*, and the publication *Examination of Coercive Control in Intimate Partner Relations* by Autonomous Women’s House (AWH) in Zagreb. Both were created with support from Solidarna Foundation, a philanthropic organization, with one of its major funds dedicated to covering costs of accommodation, food, and other immediate needs of the survivors of domestic violence. Given that Croatia has already criminalized femicide, this comparison between nation-states allows for a broader view of the carceral policies that could come about in neighboring countries.

The Autonomous Women’s House in Zagreb is actively involved in drafting legislation on the domestic and international levels as a part of activist networks and institutionalized advocacy entities on gender issues (e.g., the European Women’s Lobby). By working directly with survivors and managing scarce support systems, Solidarna and AWH have established themselves as experts, contributing to the understanding of domestic violence, and preferable responses to it, as a question of expertise. Bonacci Skenderović also lays claim to this professionalization of labor emerging from political and economic struggles. She is, for example, introduced as “an expert for gender equality” on the official website of Croatia’s ombudswoman. At the same time, on her LinkedIn account, she describes herself as an independent consultant specializing in the elimination of violence against women, with a focus on intimate partner femicide.

²⁰ Ankica Čakardić, “Who Cares? Neoliberalism, Informal Labour, and Life-Making,” *Sociologija* 64, no. 4 (2022): 503–18.

²¹ Michelle Lazar, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

A data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following a six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke.²² In coding our data, we determined the main themes in relation to our focus on material care. These themes are an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection.²³ Themes were then reviewed, defined and named. Broader thematic categories were examined from the perspective of argumentation and thesis-building. Following CDA,²⁴ we were interested in how analyzed texts produce meaning; from morphosyntactic and lexical relations to (inter)textuality.

Our analytic approach can be defined as deductive since we came to the data with preconceived themes, based on abolition feminist theory. Considering terminology, when discussing the above-mentioned publications, we are utilizing concepts used by the authors of the publications, such as “perpetrators” and “victims”, but since our research is grounded in abolition feminism in our discussion we prioritize terms like “people who cause harm” or “people who have survived harm” to destigmatize and humanize those involved.

Analysis: social and institutional responses to femicide in Serbia

FemPlatz’s “Social and Institutional Responses to Femicide in Serbia”

The first part of the publication disentangles theoretical premises and offers research on juridical practices. The second requires these responses to become stricter and clarifies what should be delegated to which institution, from police to clinical pathology departments. It offers research and NGO assistance to the state for the regulation of domestic violence and therefore domesticity. By delegating the responsibility for addressing violence to the very structures that produce it, in both parts, the monograph conceptualizes “care” as something that can only be created and enforced by more laws and more repression. It positions care as a vertical process that ascends from the state authority to the individual whom the state professedly protects. Material care for survivors is nearly entirely absent from the report, save for parts of the discussion that analyze the work of NGOs focused on domestic violence prevention.

The publication engages in the analysis of sixty-five court cases for the criminal offences of murder, aggravated murder, grievous bodily harm qualified by death, manslaughter and domestic violence with fatal outcome, which refer to the cases of violent deprivation of life of women by men. Special attention is paid to the method of committing murder, with several categories assigned to the method utilized: suffocation and strangulation; using a firearm; hitting with fists, feet, use of various objects and tools capable of serious bodily injury and severe damage to one’s health; stabbing with a knife, ax and other sharp objects; multiple ways of execution using multiple means of execution. Within the framework of the method of execution in certain

²² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2022).

²³ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (SAGE Publications, 2016).

²⁴ Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (SAGE Publications, 2015).

cases, the authors of the publication concentrate on the behavior of the perpetrator after the crime has been committed, which they claim, “together with the method of execution, shows special ferocity, cruelty and insensitivity towards the victim”.²⁵ These court cases serve a function of showcasing the need for severe punishment for men who cause harm and calling out the perceived inadequacies in the legal system, which has failed to punish them appropriately. They also contribute to the individuation and decontextualization of violence, which we elaborate on later in the paper.

The authors also conducted a limited perpetrator profiling with the limited data available from the court verdicts. What is interesting from the abolition feminist perspective is the fact that there is an acknowledgement of the futility of prison sentencing for those perpetrators who have previously been in prison on account of committing domestic violence. The authors even directly quote from one verdict, which explains that the perpetrator “has been convicted a total of seven times in the last 10 years, for committing the most serious crimes and that he was not affected by prison sentences”.²⁶ There was also special attention paid to the perpetrator’s primary family, criticizing the lack of data on the ‘completeness’ of the primary family, child abuse and the perpetrator’s youth deviant behavior from the court judgments. This conservative focus on the ‘complete’ nuclear family and child abuse comes back again later in the paper, where the authors have conducted interviews with five incarcerated men who have committed femicide.²⁷ Each interview included the question, ‘How was your childhood? Did your parents abuse you?’ The ethical justifications for posing such questions are dubious, as is the overall adversarial tone in which the interview responses are analyzed alongside the court judgments to ‘catch’ these men in their lies and to show the irredeemable monstrosities of their acts. A closer look at each of the five interviews reveals the underlying aspect of material and economic issues in the lead-up to the fatal violent act. The rising economic inequality, destruction of living conditions, devastation of social protections, and lack of communal care and cohesion are all conducive to gendered violence. This greater context is disregarded in the analyzed publication, which adopts the logic of individual responsibility, according to which the structural problem of hetero-patriarchal violence is pathologized into deviant individuals.²⁸ There is a lack of acknowledgement of the privatization of care, which is the family’s most fundamental feature.²⁹ This absence of critique towards the nuclear family reflects a broader failure to challenge state institutions outside of a reformist context. Sophie Lewis³⁰ argues that the family is a state institution that perpetuates violence. Therefore, to combat gender violence, the focus needs to be on collectivizing care.

²⁵ Slobodanka Konstantinović Vilić, Nevena Petrušić and Kosana Beker, *Društveni i institucionalni odgovori na femicid u Srbiji I* (Udruženje građanki FemPlatz, 2019), 117.

²⁶ Ibid., 147.

²⁷ Konstantinović Vilić, Petrušić and Beker, *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji I*, 304–44.

²⁸ Phipps, *Me Not You*.

²⁹ Kathi Weeks, “Abolition of the Family: the Most Infamous Feminist Proposal,” *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 433–53.

³⁰ Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso, 2022), 9.

The authors did briefly acknowledge the importance of the social status of victims in connection with femicide. The importance of victims' social status, which largely depends on their occupation and employment, was identified as a condition for a proper analysis of the phenomenon of femicide. However, there is no subsequent critique or analysis of the current neoliberal economic system, which devalues women's reproductive work. Nor does it mention that most measures offered to survivors of domestic violence in Croatia and Serbia are deeply gendered and low-paid, such as the governmental incentives to hire survivors as carers for the elderly (Serbo-Croatian: gerontodomačice).³¹ This makes women more vulnerable to domestic abuse because they are pushed into economic precarity and financial dependence on other family members.

The study's recommendations focus on improving perpetrator programs, advancing women's societal position, dismantling stereotypes, eradicating patriarchal patterns, integrating gender perspectives in state policies, and preventing discrimination against women. However, specific steps to achieve these goals are not provided. The emphasis is on law implementation, stating that effective femicide prevention requires adequate resources for enforcing laws and supporting domestic violence victims, especially in underdeveloped areas. While advocating for state budget support can be seen as care for survivors, it also reinforces the carceral state. These demands may not be feasible within a neoliberal system that privatizes and individualizes care.

The second part of the publication is split into two major sections, the first consisting of analyses of questionnaires distributed to members of the police, public prosecutor's office, health institutions and centers for social work and of open-ended interviews with activists associated with and employees of NGOs focusing on violence against women and the second consisting of a contribution on how to gather data on femicides. Throughout, a case for greater NGO involvement is being made. One of the first questions participants were, for example, asked was "To what extent does continuing education influence the effectiveness of your institution in preventing domestic violence, violence against women, and femicide?" NGOs would, presumably, be involved in some capacity in this continuing education as the participants were soon asked to react to the statement "Collaboration between women's organizations and your institution is crucial for the successful prevention of violence against women and the prevention of femicide." The report also cites the Istanbul convention, but only as it pertains to the centrality of NGOs.³²

Abolitionist theory is not ambivalent when it comes to NGOs and has clearly delineated the sector's inherent carcerality, dubbing it the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). Dyland Rodriguez and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have explained the extent to

³¹ Valentina Šipuš, "Uloga programa 'Zaželi – program zapošljavanja žena' kao oblika deinstitucionalizirane skrbi," *Marsonia: Časopis za društvena i humanistička istraživanja* 2, no. 2 (2023): 61–74; Željka Zelenović Vuković and Tatjana Mijušković, *Podrška nacionalne službe za zapošljavanje ženama koje su preživjele nasilje u porodici i žrtvama trgovine ljudima* (Autonomni ženski centar, 2023).

³² Nevena Petrušić, Natalija Žunić, and Vida Vilić, *Društveni i institucionalni odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II* (Udruženje građanki FemPlatz, 2019), 17.

which the NPIC is intertwined with the prison industrial complex (PIC), which serves to represent dissent while the NPIC manages it through incorporation into the state.³³

The activities of women's organizations are elaborated in considerable detail, offering insight into various operational aspects. The language used to describe these organizations is notably favorable and affirming. Women's organizations are portrayed as entities that "provide support," in contrast to institutions such as the police or the prosecution service, which are described as "institutions responsible for handling cases of violence." This rhetorical distinction contributes to a humanized and empathetic portrayal of the NGOs, underscoring their supportive and survivor-centered role. Such linguistic framing is absent from previous sections of the text, where no comparable description is provided for the work of the police, the prosecution, or, paradoxically, even the healthcare institutions. This suggests a narrative asymmetry in the representation of institutional actors involved in the prevention and response to gender-based violence.

Additionally, care for survivors is absent from much of the second part of the publication, except in relation to NGOs, whose activities are outlined and elaborated in great detail. The publication emphasizes the devotion and altruism with which NGOs approach this work, which is emblematic of the sector's origins in charity work carried out by upper- and middle-class women, which had for centuries been unpaid and not seen as work at all.³⁴ NGOs are also positioned as central to domestic violence response. The report contains one particularly illustrative example involving the work of a women's organization from southern Serbia, in which the NGO organized meetings, printed and distributed materials, and even educated stakeholders on their responsibilities.

The police were thrilled. That was where we found our space. Things started moving faster and getting resolved more quickly.³⁵

This positioning of NGOs as mediators and coordinators of the state's domestic violence response is rooted in what Mimi Kim has dubbed as the advocacy-law enforcement collaboration model.³⁶ The authors appear to favor deeply carceral Community Coordinated Response (CCR), which envisioned that domestic violence could be dealt with through the reform of state systems if survivors and advocates were placed at the center of change³⁷. This never came to be, and instead, CCR is limited to cooperation with law enforcement alone.

³³ INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (South End Press, 2007), 9.

³⁴ Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back* (Bold Type Books, 2021), Chapter 5.

³⁵ Petrušić, Žunić, and Vilić. *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II*, 88–89.

³⁶ Mimi Kim, "Abolition and the Renewal of Community: from Carceral Feminism to Collective Self-determination," *Community Development Journal* 59, no. 4 (2024): 696–715.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 701.

Great emphasis is placed on the role played by gender stereotypes in the prevention of domestic violence, while other factors, such as class, poverty, and marginalization are almost entirely sidelined, except when discussing Roma women. Several problematic statements are made with regards to what the authors describe as the “living culture and customs of Roma women”, who are said to be “socialized – through Roma culture and customs – to respect their husbands, while their husbands often do not reciprocate that respect”.³⁸

Croatian studies and perspectives on femicide

Dunja Bonacci Skenderović's publication *'If I Can't Have You No One Will!'* *An Analysis of Croatia's Intimate Partner Violence 2016-2023 and Examination of Coercive Control in Intimate Partner Relations* by Autonomous Women's House (AWH) rely on the existing theoretical considerations in Anglocentric research, which they uncritically apply in elaborating on their findings. Bonacci Skenderović cites Rachel Louise Snyder's *No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know about Domestic Violence Can Kill Us* and Jane Monckton Smith's *In Control, Dangerous Relationships, and How They End in Murder* as primary resources in constructing her own analysis of domestic violence in Croatia. Both Bonacci Skenderović and Autonomous Women's House publications draw heavily from the work of criminologist Evan Stark,³⁹ who is credited with coining the term “coercive control”. Stark defines “coercive control” as a harmful tactic that subjugates women through violence, intimidation, isolation, and control of resources.⁴⁰

In his books and other aspects of public engagement, Stark advocated for the integration of coercive control into the Australian, English, Welsh, and Canadian legal systems, which became the models that other countries (including the post-Yugoslav countries) strived to mimic and build upon. While Bonacci Skenderović is more careful in her conclusions, Autonomous Women's House states at the end of their research report, titled “directives and recommendations”, that it is necessary to “introduce specific laws that recognize coercive control as a separate criminal offense. These laws should be clearly defined and enable an effective legal response to this form of violence.” At the moment, these two studies are among the first, but represent a strong pull in a carceral direction.

Bonacci Skenderović connects coercive control to femicide through Jacquelyn Campbell's “danger assessment model,”⁴¹ which evaluates the risk of lethality in inti-

³⁸ Petrušić, Žunić, and Vilić. *Odgovori na femicid u Srbiji II*, 54.

³⁹ Evan Stark, “Coercive Control,” in *Violence Against Women: Current Theory and Practice in Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence and Exploitation – Research Highlights in Social Work*, edited by Aisha Gill, et al. (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013); Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Stark, *How Men Entrap Women*, 15.

⁴¹ Jacquelyn Campbell, Daniel Webster and Nancy Glass, “The Danger Assessment: Validation of a Lethality Risk Assessment Instrument for Intimate Partner Femicide,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 24, no. 4 (2008): 653–74.

mate partner violence. Stark likens coercive control to kidnapping due to its routine violence often resulting in severe injury or death. Both models suggest that predicting the escalation of violence to lethal outcomes is possible. This perspective is echoed by the Croatian AWH, Solidarna Foundation, and Skenderović. The development of femicide predictive models underpins criminal profiling and state responses to reproductive roles in nuclear families, an area overlooked by both radical and liberal feminisms.

AWH's and Bonacci Skenderović's studies concentrate on "intimate partner violence", framing domestic abuse primarily within romantic partnerships. Their reliance on Stark's 'coercive control' and Campbell's 'danger assessment' emphasizes recurring behavioural patterns that can be mapped, anticipated and ultimately criminalized. These frameworks, originally created to support survivors in assessing immediate risks, are repurposed as tools for state institutions, transforming psychological assessments into legal ones. Both studies conclude with policy recommendations that call for deeper integration of feminist agendas into state institutions, particularly through police training, social work and legislative reform. Bonacci Skenderović, for instance, stresses the need to strengthen institutional protection of victims and prevent femicide by recognizing coercive control as a legal category, while AWH proposes ten recommendations exclusively centered on legal and institutional interventions.

This approach narrows domestic violence down to the interpersonal level and reduces it to a set of behaviours enacted by 'aggressive male bodies.' Violence is framed as natural impulse, either to be corrected via education or incarceration, rather than a social relation embedded in capitalist reproduction. By naturalizing men as perpetrators and women as victims, violence is treated as ahistorical, explained not by structural conditions but by individual pathology. The family is presented as a neutral, unproblematic unit threatened only when violence becomes excessive, obscuring its role in organizing women's reproductive labour for the market.

The emphasis on 'predictability' and pattern recognition produces the illusion that violence can be brought under control through carceral means. Yet psychological models, while useful for describing interpersonal dynamics, are a poor substitute for deeper political and economic analysis. They detach domestic abuse from gender as a structural regime and from the ways capitalist states rely on women's reproductive labour. In this optic, prevention becomes synonymous with criminalization. Carceral feminism thus reproduces the very cycle it claims to break by offering either state intervention or charity, while avoiding questions about economic precarity, social reproduction, or the conditions that sustain women's vulnerability to violence.

Both studies channel feminist engagement towards bolstering state power. Their frameworks reaffirm the state as protector against violent men while sidelining any vision of alternative forms of care, solidarity, or collective resistance. This is not a challenge to structural violence but a reinforcement of institutional logics that perpetuate it.

Conclusion

In this article we have identified several themes stemming from our analysis of the above-mentioned studies from Serbia and Croatia. These topics include lack of material care for survivors, individualizing and pathologizing violence, invoking more law for the prevention of domestic violence, positioning NGOs as central to prevention with expert consultants specialized in domestic violence and conceptualization of care as a top-down, highly-regulated process informed by carceral logic.

The delegation of responsibility for responding to violence onto legal institutions and carceral structures is emblematic of carceral feminist thinking, which has resulted in mainstream feminist and LGBT+ activists support for hate crimes legislation, demands for harsher prison sentences for those who commit sexual assault and advocacy for more “community” policing within the politics of the anti-violence movement.⁴² However, legal feminist theorists and especially abolition feminists have criticized the reliance on laws to solve social issues.⁴³ Additionally, these kinds of alliances with the punitive state ignore the historical legacy of the state’s criminalization of gender non-conformity, as well as the reproduction of violence, power, classism, and colonialism inherent in the system. As Anna Terwiel put it, to “see policing and punishment simply as feminist solutions is an act of bad faith,” considering the many injustices faced by individuals disproportionately affected by the punitive state.⁴⁴

In the analyzed studies, violence is individualized and pathologized, while the wider neoliberal context of precarity and artificial scarcity is ignored. Carceral feminism diverts attention from neoliberal cuts to social welfare programs that allow survivors to escape harmful situations. In this sense, it sidelines the material reality of domestic violence survivors. The consequence of being the sole carer and provider for a household, in the absence of state economic support, is felt by many women as a coercive reason to stay with their abusers.⁴⁵ It also discourages alternative responses to gender and sexual violence, including community accountability and transformative justice.

In conclusion, we pose the question, “What about the material reality of the survivor?” as a starting off point for future organizing against domestic violence. Abolition feminism urges us to envision responses to gendered violence beyond punishment, centering material care as a collective, life-affirming practice. This is what Marieme Kaba⁴⁶ calls the “jailbreak of the imagination.” Carceral punishment repeats the same patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial dynamics that produce violence

⁴² Sarah Lamble, “Transforming Carceral Logics: 10 Reasons to Dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex Through Queer/Trans Analysis and Action,” *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Eric A. Stanley, Nat Smith, and CeCe McDonald (AK Press, 2011).

⁴³ Leigh Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage: Domestic Violence and the Legal System* (NYU Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Anna Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020): 422.

⁴⁵ Goodmark, *A Troubled Marriage*.

⁴⁶ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

and abuse. Grounded in solidarity and mutual aid, material care challenges the state's claim to be the sole guarantor of safety and reframes prevention as the creation of social conditions in which violence cannot easily take hold. By material care we mean concrete provisions of housing, income support, healthcare, childcare, and community infrastructures that allow survivors not just to escape violence but to live with dignity. Such practices shift the focus from criminalization toward sustaining life and redistributing resources, recognizing that violence is rooted in economic precarity, patriarchal family structures, and state abandonment.

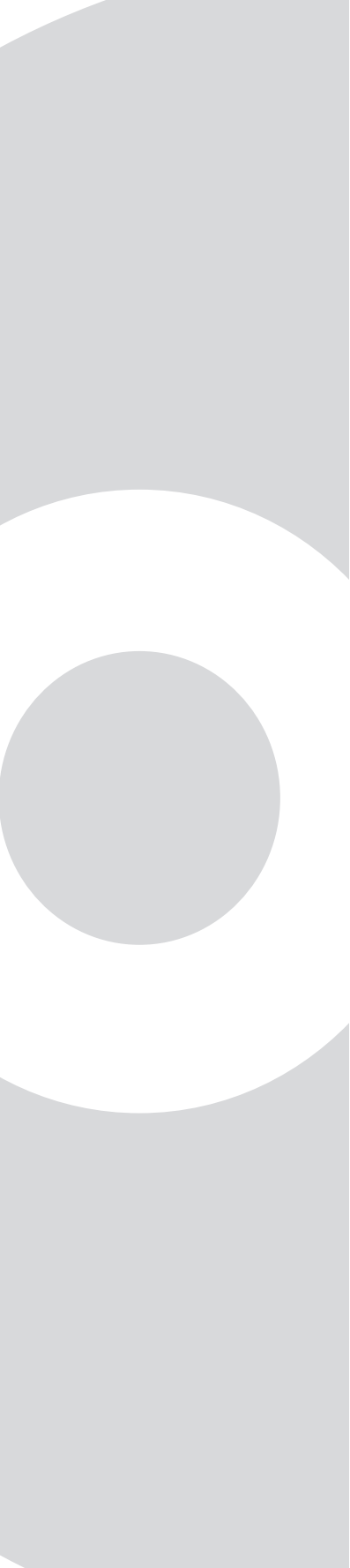
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Regional Trans Activism in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Towards Trans-feminist Activism

Abstract: This paper examines the growth of the trans activist movement in the post-Yugoslav space and its regional connections, with a focus on the fight against anti-gender politics. The movement itself emerged and developed in this region over the past two decades; however, its organization and goals have evolved over time. Connecting the community at the regional level is facilitated by shared history, culture, and particularly by language similarities. The creation of a regional organization (Trans Network Balkan) in 2014 contributed to the strengthening of these ties. Also, in the last ten years, regional connectivity has become increasingly necessary due to the emergence of anti-gender actors that operate in very similar ways in this region, leaning on dominant conservative societal attitudes and institutional practices, and already prevalent transphobia, gender-based oppression, and discrimination. The struggle for trans rights has expanded to many more fronts than before, as activists who call themselves feminist and claim to fight for women's rights, and some leftist groups have started to propagate very strongly anti-gender and anti-trans narratives. In response to this phenomenon, trans activists must focus on strengthening the existing alliances and gaining new allies to prevent further growth and strengthening of transphobia, which could lead to the total degradation of human rights for trans and gender nonbinary people. One of the resistance strategies is to create and strengthen the trans-feminist movement in the region, which involves the joint action of activists from various civil rights movements based on feminist values and principles of inclusiveness.

Keywords: trans activism; anti-gender politics; trans-feminism; other feminisms; Trans Network Balkan.

The intention behind this paper is to introduce a topic of great importance to the trans community into the academic discourse and to contribute to reducing the gap that exists between academia and activism, as well as between the knowledge produced within academia and the knowledge produced through activist practice, particularly in relation to trans issues. I have been involved in the trans activist movement for almost twenty years. I began my academic work with the intention of connecting transgender studies with the community to which I belong and contributing to the informed production of knowledge in this domain in this region. For that reason, this paper also provides an account of my personal activist experiences and insights, as

I actively participated alongside other activists in the construction of regional trans activism.

Over the last two decades, trans activism in the post-Yugoslav space has undergone a series of transformations, resulting in both socio-political changes and the emergence of new communication technologies and media. Socio-political changes were and still are conditioned by the process of accession to the European Union¹ which, among other things, implies that the states that intend to become members must fulfill the conditions regarding the promotion of the rights of sexual and gender minorities. This implies the amendment of existing laws and the adoption of new laws in the field of human rights, as well as the introduction of specific measures aimed at reducing discrimination and improving the position of LGBTIQ individuals. As a consequence of this, pride parades began to be held in the region starting in 2001, and the LGBTIQ community started to gather in an organized manner, forming non-governmental organizations to advocate for their rights. In the beginning, trans activism was part of the broader LGBTIQ movement, and the trans topics were mostly treated sporadically, while the primary focus was on the rights of sexual minorities. Then, in the early 2000s, isolated initiatives were launched by LGBTIQ or queer collectives that introduced trans topics into their programs and projects, and began to gather trans individuals, advocating for changes in law and the institutional regulation of medical and legal transition.

The development of these programs created the conditions for the emergence of activist initiatives, which began to appear in the post-Yugoslav region in the early 2010s and were initiated by transgender people themselves. This was also positively influenced by the development and rapid advancement of new communication technologies, the ever-faster Internet, and the emergence and proliferation of social networks, which made it possible for transgender people to connect more easily, exchange experiences, information, and resources, and mutually support each other.² Over time, small-scale activist initiatives and informal groups grew into organizations whose primary goal is the fight to improve the human rights of transgender people. The activist work carried out by these organizations included, and still includes, the implementation of various programs of psycho-social support for trans, intersex and gender variant (TIGV) individuals, informing and sensitizing the general public about the problems faced by the TIGV community, advocacy and cooperation with various institutions in order to improve the rights of TIGV individuals, empowering the TIGV community to engage in activist work, raising the visibility of the TIGV

¹ Except for Slovenia, which applied for EU membership in 1996, all other countries of the former Yugoslavia did so between 2003 and 2016.

² Numerous research studies have shown that online spaces are places where the TIGV community connects and empowers: Christian Compare, et al., "The Power of Connection: Resource and Responsibility in the Virtual Community Experience of Italian Trans and Gender-diverse Activists," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2024); Sabrina Cipolletta, et al., "Online Support for Transgender People: an Analysis of Forums and Social Networks," *Health and Social Care in the Community* 25, no. 5 (2017): 1542–51; Avi Marciano, "Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 (2014): 824–38.

community, as well as a whole series of other activities aimed at improving the social position of TIGV people. However, a small number of trans activists at the national level did not manage to cover all existing needs for support within local communities and simultaneously educate the public while participating in all advocacy activities. There was a considerable need to create a support system for trans activists as well as to empower more people from the TIGV community to engage in activism. Accordingly, in 2014, a group of trans people, including me, launched an initiative to form a regional organization that would focus on providing this type of support and empowerment by connecting people from different countries of former Yugoslavia.

Connecting in the region and activist organizing

The regional connection between trans people was first conditioned by the need for information related to medical transition. Due to the lack of legal-administrative regulation of medical transition, as well as the insufficiently developed system of trans-specific health care in the entire region, trans people were referred to each other for all information and procedures in this matter. Consequently, they developed a network of self-support and shared important information among themselves. What is also specific for this region, especially during the first decade of the 2000s, is that trans people from the entire region were directed to Serbia when it comes to medical transition, because the only medical team specializing in the process of medical transition and gender reassignment procedures was formed in Belgrade in the mid-1980s.³ Being directed to only one health center had a significant impact on making and strengthening connections between people from different countries in the region. Those of us who live in the capital of Serbia have often been contacted by people from the region, asking us to help them find a place to stay when they visit and to assist them in getting in touch with the medical team in Belgrade. That personal support expanded to mutual empowerment, facilitating the initiation of activist organizing in other countries in the region. Some local activist organizations and individuals recognized the need for a stronger organized regional connection of trans people. They focused some of their projects on organizing seminars that brought together the trans people from different countries. Three such gatherings were of great importance for the launching and development of the initiative to establish a regional trans organization. The first one was organized by the lesbian activist organization LORI from Rijeka in 2011⁴ and included trans people from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second gathering was held in Sarajevo in 2013,⁵ at the initiative of a local trans activist, Aleks Gosto from Bosnia and Herzegovina, while

³ Svetlana Vujovic, et al., "Transsexualism in Serbia: A Twenty-Year Follow-Up Study," *Journal for Sexual Medicine* 6, no. 4 (2009): 1018–23.

⁴ Lezbijaska organizacija Rijeka "LORI", "Put u proSTRANStvo," accessed May 10, 2025, <https://lori.hr/put-u-prostranstvo-info/>.

⁵ Vanja Cipurković, "Trans Community (Self)organizing in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Community (Self) organizing of the Transgender Movement in Western Balkans Region* (Asocijacija Spektra, 2020), 49.

the third gathering was held thanks to the already established trans organization from Croatia – Trans Aid, and the feminist organization Ženska soba, which in 2014 organized an international trans activist symposium called Transposium.⁶ Immediately after the latest gathering, the Trans Network Balkan (TNB) was formed, operating in eight countries of the region since 2014.⁷

Since the period of initial development within LGBTIQ organizations and during the first phase of self-organization, trans activism at the level of individual countries has primarily focused on psycho-social support and the formation of self-support groups, but also on advocacy for changes in legislation and the introduction and/or improvement of trans-specific health care. Over time, the number of activist programs of some organizations increased, developed with the goal of significantly raising the visibility of TIGV people, creating publications and research that focus on topics of importance to the TIGV community, developing the artistic creativity of TIGV individuals, and strengthening the capacity of the organizations by empowering and educating a new generation of trans activists. On the other hand, in some countries, trans organizations and informal groups were established significantly later, or they stagnated in development and even disappeared. The reasons for this are numerous, but one of the most significant is the underempowered community that is interested in and educated about activist work, and that, through its engagement, would contribute to expanding the capacity of activist organizations and thereby enable their survival. At the same time, it is important to point out that the size of the community is not a decisive factor, but rather it is the willingness of people from the community to engage in activism, and this implies the importance of the empowerment of the community to engage in the activist work and a certain level of knowledge to carry out that type of work. Additionally, it is essential to have ongoing support and assistance from other activist organizations and individuals with relevant experience. In Croatia, the trans organization KolekTIRV (formerly Trans Aid) was created and developed thanks to “the exchange of knowledge and skills, and by providing a space for organisational growth and community engagement.”⁸ The Association Spectra in Montenegro was established with the support of the Queer Montenegro organization following the Transposium held in Podgorica.⁹ In North Macedonia, the LGBT organization Coalition Margins in 2011 “created a space and hosted the formation of

⁶ Amir Hodžić, J. Poštić, and Arian Kajtezović, “The (In)Visible T: Trans Activism in Croatia (2004–2014),” in *Intersectionality and LGBT Activist Politics: Multiple Others in Croatia and Serbia*, eds. Bojan Bilić and Sanja Kajinić (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47.

⁷ Trans Network Balkan is formally registered in Croatia but operating in eight different countries (Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Slovenia and the North Macedonia).

⁸ Hodžić, “The (In)Visible T,” 45.

⁹ Jovan Ulićević and Čarna Brković, “The resilience of Trans Existence through Solidarity in Montenegro: (Non) pathologizing Narratives of Transgender Lives,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 45.

the first trans group that in 2018 would become an activist collective, TransForma¹⁰ which is still operating in cooperation with Coalition Margins. According to Martin Gramac, trans activism in Slovenia “draws upon the support and resources of the lesbian and gay as well as feminist movements.”¹¹ In support of the claim that the size of the community does not play a decisive role in starting initiatives and that, without the support of other organizations, it is not possible to create a sustainable movement, we can use the example of the situation in Serbia. Proportionally to the population count, Serbia has the largest trans community in the region. However, until 2020, Serbia did not have a trans led organization at all, but trans activism was represented as part of the program of the existing LGBTIQ organizations. Despite the large community connected through online platforms and a self-support group, the basic conditions for self-organization were not met.¹² Hence, the first trans led organization dealing with the promotion and protection of the rights of trans people in Serbia was founded owing to the support of the Trans Network Balkan.¹³

Unlike organizations that focus their activities on the territory of the country where they were founded and create their programs in accordance with the needs of the local community, Trans Network Balkan was devised as an organization that spans eight different countries in the region. Since its inception, its focus has been on raising the capacity of local organizations and individuals who want to engage in trans activism, as well as creating a common online platform for sharing information important to TIGV people from the entire region. Shortly after its establishment, Trans Network Balkan took over the organization of the Transposium from KolektIRV in accordance with the vision of organizing this gathering in different countries of the region and with the aim of creating stronger connections between communities and allies from the entire region. Shared history, culture, and especially language similarities, as well as very similar societal attitudes toward trans issues, and similar institutional practices, discrimination, and oppression of trans individuals in all post-Yugoslav countries, are the basis for making strong connections, sharing experiences, knowledge, and resistance strategies between people from the region. From 2015 onwards, in addition to Zagreb, Transposium has been held in Podgorica (Montenegro), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Belgrade (Serbia), and Skopje (North Macedonia).¹⁴ In 2020, the

¹⁰ Slavcho Dimitrov, “Transgender Lives in North Macedonia: Citizenship, Violence, and Networks of Support,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 35.

¹¹ Martin Gramac, “Tortuous Paths towards Trans Futures: The Trans Movement in Slovenia,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 141.

¹² Aleksa Milanović, “Trans Activism in the post-Yugoslav Space: Resistance and Inclusion Strategies in Action,” in *Transgender in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Lives, Activisms, Culture*, eds. Bojan Bilić, Iwo Nord, and Aleksa Milanović (Policy Press, 2022), 190.

¹³ Kolektiv Talas TIRV, “Kako smo ustalasal trans aktivizam u Srbiji”, u *Postjugoslo/avenski TRANS životi aktivizmi kulture*, ur. Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović (Multimedijalni institute Zagreb, 2022), 290-297.

¹⁴ From October 9 to 12, 2025, Transposium will be held for the first time in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the city of Tuzla.

event was organized online due to the pandemic. The concept of planning and organizing this event is designed so that it is hosted by a different local trans organization every year, in cooperation with and under the mentorship of the Trans Network Balkan. In this way, local groups acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to organize such events, while increasing their visibility and fostering community building. In addition to Transposium, Trans Network Balkan's activities include various trainings for trans activists, as well as mentoring work with local organizations and providing advice and knowledge necessary to strengthen the organizations' capacity. Strengthening trans activism remains one of the organization's top priorities. However, over time, the need for activities that would comprehensively address the problem of the increasingly aggressive actions of anti-gender actors in the region emerged.

Alliance building in response to anti-gender movements in the region

The anti-gender movement is a global phenomenon whose initial development can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when the Catholic Church began to develop strategies to combat what they called "gender ideology", which is a term initially created to oppose women's and LGBTIQ rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality.¹⁵ The mid-2000s are characterized by the first phase of mobilization of anti-gender actors united around opposition to the adoption of laws on same-sex partnerships and/or marriages in Italy, Spain, and Slovenia, and the beginning of the introduction of sex education in schools in Croatia. The next phase of this mobilization was significantly stronger and affected Western, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as South America. In 2012, it manifested in the form of mass demonstrations in France and Poland, intensifying in Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia.¹⁶ Anti-gender actors around the world, despite their national, ethnic, or religious differences, very quickly connected and gathered around the same goals, and they structured and organized their actions using identical mechanisms and strategies. In less than two decades, local anti-gender campaigns have produced a global phenomenon that can most accurately be defined as anti-gender politics, in which promotion is not only carried out by social movements and individual actors, but also implemented as part of state politics.¹⁷ Organizations that advocate for anti-gender politics are also connected through numerous

¹⁵ David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, "Gender Ideology' in movement: Introduction", in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, eds. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 5.

¹⁶ Maja Gergorić, "Anti-rodni pokreti u 21. stoleću," *Analitičko društvo: časopis za politologiju* 17, no. 1 (2020): 150–51; Nađa Bobičić i Marijana Stojčić, "Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji," *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 53 (2023): 3–31.

¹⁷ Eszter Kováts and Andrea Peto, "Anti-gender Discourse in Hungary: A Discourse Without a Movement?," in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, eds. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 117–31; Cenk Özbay and Ilkan Can Ipekci, "State-led Anti-gender Politics, Islamism, and the University: Experiences of Gender Studies Scholars in Turkey," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 20, no. 1 (2024): 89–110.

transnational forums, networks, and umbrella organizations, and together they form a global network of right-wing extremists lobbying for the same set of goals.¹⁸ Through joint work, investigative journalists from several countries have determined that there is close cooperation between anti-gender activists and politicians from different countries working together to undermine women's and LGBTIQ rights.¹⁹ They also determined that the same network is involved in Croatia's conservative NGO – In the Name of the Family, and Serbia's right-wing political party – Dveri, which had previously been identified as having attended the World Congress of Families together.²⁰

In the last decade, anti-gender actors have become increasingly vocal, assertive, and more organized in the post-Yugoslav space, opposing reproductive health rights, the organization of LGBTIQ pride marches, laws on same-sex partnerships, laws on gender equality, and even the introduction of gender sensitive language in public discourse.²¹ Increased visibility of trans people, which occurred primarily in the West but also in the post-Yugoslav space in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, was followed by increasing transphobia, and it also resulted in focusing anti-gender actors on transgender people more. The emergence of trans organizations and greater visibility of trans activists was accompanied by the emergence and strengthening of anti-trans rhetoric and anti-trans narratives that were increasingly spread by numerous influential individuals, groups, and activist initiatives throughout the region.²² Some of these actors belong to traditionally conservative or ultra-right circles, and their appearance was not surprising or unexpected. However, alongside them, groups and initiatives emerged that in the past did not spread transphobia, nor were they expected to do so. Of particular concern is the fact that some of these groups are supported by academia and parts of the public that do not belong to conservative and right-wing circles. For example, in Serbia, the spread of anti-trans narratives appeared

¹⁸ Their connection is illustrated by the example of an organization called Agenda Europe, which serves as an umbrella organization for over 300 organizations and individuals from more than 30 European countries. Members of this lobby group are ultraconservative NGOs, European politicians and officials, conservative academics, far-right political groups, United States Christian Right actors, and American far-right and Russian propagandists. Neil Datta, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009–2018* (European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights Brussels, 2021).

¹⁹ Based on leaked emails, journalists from Croatia, Poland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Sweden have uncovered information indicating that activists and politicians from the organization Agenda Europe were also developing joint strategies. Hrvoje Šimičević, "U mreži Agende," *Portal Novosti*, March 30, 2024, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-mrezi-agende/>; Hrvoje Šimičević, "Istina o Agendi," *Portal Novosti*, March 23, 2024, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/istina-o-agendi/>.

²⁰ Sven Milekic, "Croatian, Serbian Rightists Join Forces at Family Conference," *BalkanInsight*, May 25, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/05/25/croatia-serbia-groups-on-controversial-world-family-conference-05-24-2017/>.

²¹ Angel Dimitrievski, *The Anti-Gender Movement as a Threat to Democracy in the Western Balkans*, The German Marshall Fund, 2025; Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia's Church Protests Gender-Related Laws," *BalkanInsight*, June 29, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/29/north-macedonias-church-protests-gender-related-laws/>.

²² Aleksa Milanović, "Uticaj štampanih i onlajn medija na širenje transfobije u Srbiji," *Sociologija* 64, no. 3 (2022): 474–77.

in some feminist and left-wing groups, but also in academic circles. There have been initiatives and groups that claim to be feminist but advocate for strongly anti-trans views. In addition to them, an activist organization appeared that advocates for LGB rights and claims that being transgender is a cover for the “forced conversion” of lesbians and gays. In November 2019, the Institute for Sociological Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, organized a conference titled *Feminism and the Left*, with a conference program committee consisting of scholars from Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This conference included panels on trans rights and trans activism without any trans speakers, and with some of the panelists and audience advocating transphobic attitudes and trans-exclusionary visions of feminism and the left.²³ In December 2020, the Center for Women’s Studies in Zagreb appointed a new director who publicly expressed trans-exclusionary attitudes on social networks, which caused condemnation and criticism from feminists in other countries in the region. However, in response to those criticisms, a letter of support appeared, signed by numerous regional feminist organizations, some of which were previously considered allies of the trans community.²⁴ Those events prompted the mobilization of regional, intersectional feminist, and trans-inclusive movements to collaborate and strategize on how to respond to anti-trans reactionary politics in the region.

Although the anti-gender movement actively targets LGBTIQ rights, the trans community has turned more towards building alliances with feminists. To a large extent, that is the consequence of distancing trans activism from identity politics and refocusing on a broader trans-feminist context, which weakened collaborations of the trans community with most of the mainstream LGBTIQ organizations. Those alliances still exist, but the trans movement does not insist on them at any cost and does not make a great effort to foster closer connections and cooperation. In the past two decades, the LGBTIQ movement in the region became professionalized, and most of the LGBTIQ organizations could be labeled as mainstream activism that focuses largely on organizing pride parades and advocacy for same-sex partnerships. Even though the trans community is seen as a part of the broader LGBTIQ movement and in some cases LGBTIQ organizations contributed to trans organizing, it has been shown many times over the past two decades that the LGBTIQ movement has repeatedly failed the trans community in various ways. Trans people are mostly invisible and under-represented as part of the broader LGBTIQ movement. They are often tokenized and used solely to create an image of inclusiveness, as confirmed by the fact that they are not part of leadership or decision-making positions. Aside from the fact that the cis gay activists in particular are not sufficiently sensitised and informed about trans issues and are often transphobic, with the rise of anti-gender movements and their focus on trans people, sometimes they see transgender movement as detrimental to gay rights. Also, in general, activist organizations that are engaged in advocacy for

²³ Feminizam i levica nekad i sad, accessed May 2025, <https://feminizamilevicakonferencija.wordpress.com/>.

²⁴ Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović, “Uvod: u postjugoslovenskim trans svetovima,” u *Postjugoslo/avenski trans životi, aktivizmi, kulture*, ur. Bojan Bilić i Aleksa Milanović (Multimedijalni institut, 2022), 13.

LGBTIQ rights actually work exclusively or predominantly on issues regarding homophobia and same sex partnerships while leaving trans issues behind. For example, in 2009 in Serbia, when the anti-discrimination law was being advocated and the Serbian Orthodox Church insisted on deleting a portion of the law regarding gender identity, LGBTIQ organizations complied with the decision, with the justification that it was better to achieve victory for some than for no one. When in 2015 activists in Slovenia advocated for same-sex partnerships, LGBTIQ organizations tried not to problematize the anti-gender narrative spread by anti-gender actors so as not to lose the support of the majority population and opted for a soft activist approach “based on portrayals of lesbian and gay people as nice and kind, similar to heterosexual and cisnormative people.”²⁵

Trans-feminist movement in the post-Yugoslav space

In 2021, Trans Network Balkan launched two connected activist projects, which were carried out in collaboration with local trans-led organizations from Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia. The first project, titled *Nurture Trans(formative) Dialogue*, was structured around gathering TIGV and feminist activists from the region to collaborate on shared interests. This primarily involved creating a safe and inclusive space for sharing experiences and learning from one another, thereby preparing the ground for developing a joint, trans-inclusive feminist strategy in the region. Thus, the Trans Feminist Platform (TFP) was formed, and within a few months, it had gathered more than 50 individuals from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The communication between the members of TFP took place via a Discord server, mailing list, and live meetings, with the primary goals being networking and capacity building for trans-inclusive feminist movements. Most members of TFP are people active in academia, feminist, leftist, peace, queer, and other social justice movements in the region. Many of us collaborate on activist and academic projects that introduce trans and queer topics into scholarly discourse, striving to bridge the gap between theory and practice and attempting to reconcile academia and activism to create conditions for these two spheres to effectively communicate and collaborate. The results of this collaboration include the involvement of trans activists in academic projects, such as writing texts for books dealing with trans or anti-gender topics or participating in academic conferences that address these topics. It is also essential to involve academic scholars in activist projects, including informal educational programs and artistic endeavors.

The second project, titled *Towards Intersectional Feminism in the Balkans* was oriented towards strengthening and expanding the Trans Feminist Platform and increasing collaboration between feminist and TIGV movements in the region. Some of the objectives were to raise awareness about the importance of intersectionality and the inclusion of TIGV issues in feminist activism, map anti-gender actors in the

²⁵ Gramc, “Tortuous Paths towards Trans Futures,” 137.

region, discuss strategies for responding to anti-gender politics, and increase the participation of TIGV individuals in feminist, peace, leftist, and antifascist movements in the region. Project activities included regular online meetings as well as organizing panel discussions and in person meetings in different countries. Among the first important outcomes was launching a multimedia magazine – *plaTForma*²⁶ – which became an educational resource and place for making connections between transgender and broader feminist issues. In 2023, Trans Network Balkan published the first *Transfeminist Playbook*²⁷ covering the topics of the origins of the anti-gender movement, its basic principles, mechanisms of action, and communication. In this publication, the authors summarize the main anti-trans arguments produced and disseminated by actors in the anti-gender movement in our region, providing both counterarguments and alternative perspectives, along with detailed explanations of their narratives to reveal their true intentions and the harm they cause. The second part of the publication comprises six case studies from three countries: Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, in which the authors analyze specific key events, actions, or campaigns initiated by anti-gender actors that have occurred over the past few years. In 2024, Trans Network Balkan piloted the first Queer Praxis School – an educational program focused on transgender studies, feminist studies, critical theory, and fascism/anti-fascism. The program aims to foster greater connection among people from the region and to educate participants about issues relevant to the TIGV, queer, and feminist communities, equipping them with skills in research, writing, knowledge presentation, and civic engagement.

Through all the aforementioned activities, Trans Network Balkan began to build a regional trans-feminist movement focused on connecting and empowering TIGV individuals and feminist allies, working closely on joint strategies to challenge anti-gender politics. Accordingly, the regional trans movement in the post-Yugoslav space has offered a new definition of trans-feminism that differs significantly from the initial definition of *transfeminism* provided by Emi Koyama in her essay “The Transfeminist Manifesto” in which she emphasized that transfeminism is “primarily a movement by and for trans women.”²⁸ Koyama also states that the movement is open to a wide range of queer and trans identities, with a particular focus on trans women. However, in the case of post-Yugoslav activism and building of a new regional movement, the emphasis is on connecting the entire trans and feminist movement to make strong alliances which will work together on topics of common interest, and on forming a united block against patriarchy, fascism/neofascism, capitalism,

²⁶ Trans Mreža Balkan, *plaTForma*, accessed May 2025, <https://transbalkan.org/platforma/>.

²⁷ Aleksa Milanović, Marija Jovanović and Jovan Džoli Uličević, *Transfeministička kuvarica* (Trans Mreža Balkan, 2023), accessed May 2025, <https://talas.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/transfeministicka-kuvarica.pdf>. This publication was translated into English and published in 2025 by the Office of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy, 2025, accessed May 2025, <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/05/12/transfeminist-playbook>.

²⁸ Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Northeastern University Press, 2003), 245.

neoliberalism, and other oppressive systems that (re)produce misogyny, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and racism. The need for a strong connection between regional trans and feminist movements is conditioned by the fact that local trans communities in the post-Yugoslav space are relatively small and therefore lack the capacity to provide an adequate activist response to oppression, especially in the context of the increasing expansion of anti-gender politics in the region. Of all the civil movements, only the feminist movement and movements with feminist values at their core have provided an adequate response to the strengthening of anti-gender politics. It is the only movement that the regional trans movement shares its values and foundational ideological positions with. Over the last five years, the regional trans movement, led by Trans Network Balkan, has focused its work and activities on socio-political issues that concern not only the trans community, but with the broader scope, such as addressing societal consequences of neoliberalism, and criticizing the rise of populism, neo-fascism, and autocratic regimes in the region and globally, adopting intersectionality as a significant analytical framework in feminist theory and directing the trans movement towards activist work that addresses broader social issues. In the words of Jovan Ulićević Džoli, one of the most visible and leading trans activists in the region, and executive director of Trans Network Balkan:

We perceive feminism as a set of values, which is not tied exclusively to sex and gender, but a type of alternative action that aims to transform our reality, which is oppressive along various lines and in relation to all parts of our lives. In relation to that, we experience intersectionality not through the prism of the diversity of our identities; in that sense, we very much run away from intersectionality, which easily becomes tokenization and competition among victims. We look at intersectionality and feminism as empowering values, through which we contribute in various fields, so we and our associates deal with feminist perspectives within the framework of anti-fascism, decolonialism, and workers' struggle. In this way, we fight against the relativization of quite important, powerful, and transformative concepts, and against the emptying of their meaning. For us, feminism is the creation of an order that respects solidarity and equality, the equal distribution of resources.²⁹

It is increasingly clear that insisting on identity politics will keep the trans movement focused on the specific problems in national contexts, reinforce the self-victimization of local communities, and facilitate the tokenization that the trans community is often subjected to in the broader LGBTIQ movement. All of this would be very counterproductive for trans activist work, and most importantly, it would distance the struggle of TIGV people from a myriad of other local civil rights movements in

²⁹ Mirta Maslač, "Recepti za solidarne prakse" (intervju), *Kulturpunkt*, April 8, 2024, <https://kulturpunkt.hr/intervju/recepti-za-solidarne-prakse/>.

the region that share trans-feminist values and from developing broader cooperation with other regions (e.g., the global South and the broader Balkan region). Instead of isolating trans movement from other social movements and focusing on narrowly specific problems, Trans Network Balkan strives to build alliances and cooperation with different social movements, and above all, with the feminist movement. Those alliances helped to build a trans-feminist movement in the post-Yugoslav space, with goals, strategies, and a general approach to activist organizing that differ entirely from mainstream feminisms. By all characteristics, the trans-feminist movement that we created belongs to the corpus of feminist movements that Firoozeh Farvardin defines as *other feminisms*.³⁰ The concept of other feminisms encompasses movements that originate from the Global South, areas considered geopolitical peripheries, and those founded by marginalized populations. They are characterized by a holistic approach to working on social change, the development of long-term strategies that will lead to structural and systemic changes, implying much more than achieving gender equality. Regardless of whether these movements are oriented towards local problems, they are characterized by an intensive connection with feminist movements worldwide and the exchange of knowledge and experiences with them. One of the essential features of these movements, which the trans-feminist movement we are building in the post-Yugoslav space also strives for, is offering a vision for the future and opening up space for various collaborations and actions through which we will create a better society for all.

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³⁰ Firoozeh Farvardin, "Other Feminisms: A Subversive Gift to the World," in *Beyond Molotovs: A Visual Handbook of Anti-authoritarian Strategies*, eds. International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies and kolektiv orangotango (Transcript Verlag, 2024), 286–95.

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Feminist Data as Resistance: Algorithmic Bias and Bodily Autonomy in Contemporary Media Art

Abstract: This paper analyzes the intersection of feminist resistance and anti-gender movements within contemporary media art, with a specific focus on algorithmic bias and bodily autonomy. Through case studies and discourse analysis of three artworks, the paper highlights how the right-wing actors exploit technology to dismantle bodily autonomy through tools such as surveillance, reproductive monitoring and the digital weaponization of meme culture. The analysis addresses three core research questions: How do anti-gender actors exploit digital technologies to enforce oppressive gender norms? In what ways can feminist artworks function as counter-systems to algorithmic bias? What strategies enable effective transnational feminist resistance in digital spaces? Methodologically speaking, our study employs visual discourse analysis of three case studies: Caroline Sindere's *Feminist Data Set* (algorithmic resistance), Mary Maggic's *Open Source Estrogen* (biopolitical hacking), and @the.hormone.monster's meme activism (cultural subversion). Through these cases, the analysis reveals how feminist artists appropriate surveillance tools, medical technologies, and viral media to both expose systemic harms and prototype liberatory alternatives. The primary contribution lies in theorizing feminist media art as a *dual-action resistance*, simultaneously deconstructing oppressive technologies while building emancipatory infrastructures. The findings demonstrate that such artistic interventions offer concrete pathways to reclaim bodily autonomy from anti-gender techno-politics. The future of bodily autonomy lies in treating data as a tool for collective liberation, demonstrating how feminist media art can fuel large-scale resistance to anti-gender technologies.

Keywords: feminist resistance; anti-gender movements; media art; algorithmic bias; bodily autonomy; transnational solidarity.

Introduction

There was a case in the United Kingdom in 2023 when a transgender man tried to access public services and was locked out by a government facial recognition system that refused to recognize his gender. This was not an isolated incident. Just last year in New York, a Black transgender woman was misgendered and detained by the police when an algorithm flagged her ID photo as “suspicious” – a perfect storm of racial and gender bias baked into the code. Unfortunately, this was not a glitch, it was

an example of how algorithmic systems codify discrimination into everyday life.¹ This case mirrors what Ruha Benjamin calls the “New Jim Code”, where the way technologies, despite being framed as objective, actually reinforce old biases.² Facial recognition technology ignores nonbinary and transgender identities, effectively making them illegible to the state, as it only supports male and female classifications.³ This type of erasure is not accidental, it is deeply rooted. Silvia Federici calls it the “body as a terrain of accumulation”, where marginalized populations are disciplined through mechanisms of categorization and control.⁴

These technical failures mirror broader political agendas. As Graff and Korolczuk show, anti-gender movements strategically weaponize technology to enforce their regressive policies.⁵ When Poland’s “Life and Family Foundation” lobbied for their state-sponsored pregnancy app, they framed it as “protecting women’s health”. In reality, as gynaecologist Dr. Marta Szuta testified, it created a backdoor for authorities to monitor miscarriage patterns.⁶ This is a biopolitical tactic that aligns with what Paul Preciado describes as the “pharmacopornographic era”, where states regulate bodies through techno-medical interventions.⁷ Similar to this, Hungary’s biometric ID laws, which mandate gender markers matching birth certificates, institutionalize what Jasbir Puar identifies as the “right to maim”: systems that inflict bureaucratic violence on transgender communities by denying them legal recognition.⁸ These cases show how anti-gender regimes work with corporate surveillance infrastructures transforming personal data into tools of exclusion.

Feminist media artists are fighting back by hacking these systems that exclude them, by treating data as a site of resistance. Good example for this is Caroline Sinderson’s *Feminist Data Set* (2017) that directly challenges AI’s logic by crowdsourcing alternative datasets that prioritize queer and nonbinary identities which ultimately forces AI to see what it has ignored.⁹ Her work resonates with Donna Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble”, embracing messy, collective redefinitions of identity that defy

¹ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018), 45–48.

² Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity Press, 2019), 33–36.

³ Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (Feminist Press, 2013), 112–115.

⁴ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004), 89–92.

⁵ Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2022), 72–75.

⁶ Marta Szuta, “Oświadczenie w sprawie aplikacji ‘Moja Cięża’ jako narzędzia inwigilacji kobiet” [Statement regarding the “My Pregnancy” app as a tool for surveilling women], *OK.press*, May 12, 2022, <https://oko.press/app-moja-ciaza-inwigilacja>.

⁷ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 115.

⁸ Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), 54–57.

⁹ Caroline Sinderson, “Feminist Data Set, 2017 – Current”, *Caroline Sinderson*, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://carolinesinders.com/feminist-data-set/>.

algorithmic capture.¹⁰ Similarly, Mary Maggic's *Open Source Estrogen* (2015) that turns hormone data into a public resource, reclaiming it from corporate laboratories.¹¹ This practice mirrors Hito Steyerl's conception of art as a "poor image" – a deliberately degraded, widely circulated form that undermines what she describes as the elite "class society of visuality" enforced by high-resolution systems. Just as Steyerl's poor images sabotage conventional hierarchies of originality through distributed networks, these projects create insurgent data flows to disrupt surveillance capitalism's obsession with clarity and control.¹² These projects do two things at once: they expose how standard datasets reinforce harm while building liberating alternatives.

Bodily autonomy, the simple right to control what happens to your own body, is undermined by what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism", where personal data is collected and weaponized.¹³ Marginalized groups suffer the most: predictive policing targets racialized communities,¹⁴ reproductive apps sell fertility data to anti-abortion groups¹⁵ and AI-driven systems reject disabled applicants.¹⁶ Even with all this data, feminist resistance persists. Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk document how transnational coalitions, like Poland's All-Poland Women's Strike, leak surveillance app data to protect abortion seekers, as Silvia Federici's taught us – reclaiming bodily autonomy requires collective struggle.¹⁷

To trace how this resistance operates across technical, biological, and cultural registers, this paper analyzes three feminist media art projects through a critical technoscience lens. Methodologically, the case studies – Caroline Sindere's *Feminist Data Set*, Mary Maggic's *Open-Source Estrogen*, and @the.hormone.monster's meme activism – were selected for their dual capacity to expose anti-gender technologies while prototyping alternatives. Drawing on Ruha Benjamin's "reparative critique", the analysis examines primary artworks, artist statements, and activist networks like #StopDigitalViolence to map how feminist praxis disrupts surveillance capitalism at the level of data, biology, and cultural production.

¹⁰ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 101–103.

¹¹ Mary Maggic, "Open Source Estrogen (2015)", *Maggic*, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://maggic.ooo/Open-Source-Estrogen-1>.

¹² Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg Press, 2012), 31–45.

¹³ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019), 210–15.

¹⁴ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018), 1–5, 135–37.

¹⁵ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 195–200, 210–15.

¹⁶ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 54–57, 146–49.

¹⁷ The All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) happened in 2016 as a decentralized feminist movement opposing total abortion bans. The movement enforced "data poisoning" tactics by flooding government surveillance systems like the pregnancy app "Moja Cięża" (My Pregnancy) with false information to protect abortion seekers from state monitoring. Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 120–25.

This paper maps the escalating battlefield where anti-gender movements weaponize technology – from biometric surveillance erasing trans existence to reproductive apps enabling state control – and argues that feminist media art generates insurgent counter-data to reclaim bodily autonomy. First, I dissect how anti-gender regimes collaborate with corporate and state actors to hardwire oppression into digital infrastructures, analyzing cases like Poland’s pregnancy surveillance app and Hungary’s biometric ID laws through Jasbir Puar’s framework of the “right to maim”. Second, I demonstrate how artists like Caroline Sindere and Mary Maggic hack these systems, creating what Ruha Benjamin terms “abolitionist tools” – datasets that center queer epistemologies (Sindere) and DIY bio-labs that circumvent medical gatekeeping (Maggic). Their work materializes Hito Steyerl’s “poor images”, exploiting low-resolution, distributed formats to sabotage surveillance capitalism’s demand for legibility. Finally, I interrogate transnational feminist networks like #StopDigitalViolence that prototype decentralized infrastructures, asking how their tactics – from encryption lullabies to zombie server attacks – might scale resistance without succumbing to neoliberal co-optation. Across these sections, the paper contends that feminist media art does more than critique: it engineers alternative techno-social formations where accountability flows not to capital, but to collective care.

How anti-gender movements weaponize technology

It is no accident that the apps we use to stay connected and organized are being twisted to control and exclude us. Right-wing movements have gotten increasingly good at hacking technology to undermine bodily autonomy, exploiting various techniques like surveillance, biased datasets and viral misinformation campaigns to gain control over marginalized communities.¹⁸ These systems that are often sold under the guise of being “progressive” are actually reinforcing the oldest forms of oppression.

Facial recognition and gendered surveillance

The facial recognition technology has found its way into numerous sectors, particularly the law enforcement, where its use has been targeting marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community. In Hungary, law enforcement agencies have employed AI-driven facial recognition systems to track and monitor LGBTQ+ activists.¹⁹ This type of surveillance supports existing patterns of systematic discrimination. This ultimately transforms surveillance technologies from instruments of safety into instruments of oppression.²⁰ These algorithms are often trained on historical data that include biases related to race, class and gender, hiding under the parole of neutrality

¹⁸ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 195–220.

¹⁹ Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 112.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 47.

and efficiency.²¹ By facilitating the identification and monitoring of individuals based on their gender identity, these technologies threaten not only people's personal safety but civil liberties as a whole.

Reproductive surveillance

Another alarming example of technological exploitation is reproductive surveillance. Period-tracking apps, for instance, gather highly personal data that could fall into the hands of anti-abortion groups, posing a serious threat to women's bodily autonomy.²² These technologies function within a biopolitical framework – one where efforts to regulate reproductive health are quietly woven into digital systems that erode privacy. The assertion that “Big Tech turns bodies into profit streams”²³ critiques the commercialization of personal information at the cost of women's autonomy and decision-making power.

In Eastern Europe, particularly in countries like Poland, state-backed technological initiatives have been weaponized to impose rigid reproductive controls.²⁴ Government-approved apps, for example, could monitor women's health decisions, especially regarding pregnancy and abortion. The growing reach of reproductive surveillance reveals a dangerous fusion of technology and political control. These digital tools – originally promising empowerment – now serve as instruments of coercion, bending to authoritarian agendas. What emerges is a disturbing paradox: the very systems that could protect women's autonomy are being twisted to remove it entirely. This is not just about monitoring; it is about power – about who gets to decide what happens to women's bodies.

Anti-gender meme warfare

Beyond surveillance tools and reproductive apps, anti-gender movements have hijacked digital culture through memes, transforming humor and absurd imagery into weapons against feminist progress. Platforms now host meme warfare, where viral propaganda attacks feminist and LGBTQ+ advocates.²⁵ The result? Online spaces morph into ideological war zones, where viral content does not just spread – it inflicts real harm. This disturbing trend forces us to confront digital platforms as contested territory, where laughter gets weaponized against inclusion. An example for this is the “#DeleteDatingApps” campaign that spread through Polish far-right networks last year.²⁶ At a surface level, it appeared to be about privacy concerns. But leaked

²¹ Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018), 36–40.

²² Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 45–48.

²³ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8.

²⁴ Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 122.

²⁵ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 195–220.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

Telegram chats revealed organizers specifically targeting apps popular with LGBTQ+ users, flooding them with fake profiles and hate reports to trigger algorithmic suspensions. Meanwhile, research into platform dynamics has shown how anti-gender groups weaponize recommendation algorithms like those used by YouTube.²⁷ They would seed seemingly benign videos about “family values”, knowing the platform would autoplay increasingly extremist content. These are not just jokes; they mainstream sexism and transphobia while radicalizing new opponents to gender equality.

These three fronts: surveillance, reproductive tech, and cultural manipulation, reveal a coordinated technological assault on bodily autonomy. When existing inequalities shape technology, the outcome is predictable: systemic discrimination amplified. The solution demands more than awareness - it requires dismantling and rebuilding how these tools are designed and deployed.

Feminist art as counter-data

In response to the weaponization of technology by anti-gender forces, feminist artists and activists have emerged as vital counteragents, appropriating the very tools of oppression to dismantle structural biases and materialize emancipatory futures. This methodology aligns with a core strategy in feminist media art, the one that scholar Legacy Russell theorizes as the “intentional error” or “glitch”, a deliberate misuse of technological systems to expose their biases and create space for queer and non-conforming identities.²⁸ This creative resistance operates at the intersection of Ruha Benjamin’s “abolitionist tools”²⁹ and Silvia Federici’s historical analysis of bodily dispossession,³⁰ leveraging art not merely as representation but as *infrastructure* for systemic change. Their interventions expose how supposedly neutral technologies encode patriarchal violence while modelling alternative epistemologies rooted in collective care rather than control. Benjamin’s concept of “abolitionist tools” becomes tangible in these artists’ workspaces. Benjamin’s framework helps us see how these artists transform the “master’s tools” into what Federici might call *weapons of the weak*, not just disrupting systems but rewriting their very grammar. When Sindere’s algorithm fails to categorize a nonbinary participant, that moment of breakdown becomes pedagogical, revealing what Haraway calls “the cracks where worlds collide.”³¹

As seen, Sindere annotates training data with the same care Federici describes in medieval witches’ herbals – both are acts of reclaiming classificatory systems. When an algorithm struggles with nonbinary faces, she does not simplify the input but expands the system’s capacity, embodying Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble”

²⁷ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1–5, 92–95.

²⁸ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso Books, 2020), 13–17, 27–31.

²⁹ Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 89.

³⁰ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 163.

³¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 34.

through iterative, imperfect solutions. This mirrors Noble's observation that "the master's tools can dismantle the master's database".³²

Case Study 1: Caroline Sinderson, Feminist Data Set – Archival Resistance

Caroline Sinderson, *Feminist Data Set* (2017), constitutes a radical re-imagining of AI training protocols, confronting what Safiya Noble calls "algorithmic redlining"³³ through crowdsourced feminist texts. Unlike corporate datasets that flatten gender into binary categories, Sinderson's project constructs a living archive where intersectional narratives, particularly those of Black feminists, queer theorists and disability activists, are centered as primary knowledge. The project's methodology embodies three critical interventions: epistemic justice, opacity as a defence and labour visibility. By prioritizing writings from Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and Sara Ahmed, the dataset literally rewires machine learning systems to recognize non-hegemonic experiences as authoritative. Following Jasbir Puar's work on surveillance,³⁴ the dataset incorporates intentional "noise" (poetry, fragmented testimonials) to disrupt predictive policing algorithms seeking clean behavioural patterns. Each contributor is credited and compensated, rejecting the extractive practices of Big Tech where marginalized voices are mined without reciprocity. Sinderson's dataset reveals fascinating tensions when put into practice. During a 2021 workshop, participants debated whether to include Judith Butler's academic texts alongside Black trans sex workers' oral histories. As Sinderson noted, "The messiness is the point – we're teaching AI that gender knowledge doesn't come neatly cited." This became clear when the model was tested: it started recognizing nonbinary identities in protest photos but struggled with polished corporate headshots – a happy failure that exposes the limits of professional respectability. As Sinderson acknowledges, the project confronts the question: can any dataset, even a feminist one, escape the imperialist impulse to categorize? This tension manifests when the project's GitHub repository is used by corporations for "diversity washing", underscoring the need for ongoing ethical guardrails.

Case Study 2: Mary Maggic, Open Source Estrogen – Biopolitical Hacking

Mary Maggic's *Open Source Estrogen* (2015–present) materializes Paul Preciado's theorization of the "pharmacopornographic regime" through DIY bioassays³⁵ that democratize hormone testing. In kitchen labs and community workshops, participants learn to: extract estrogen from urine using open-source protocols, map

³² Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 154.

³³ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 137.

³⁴ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 72.

³⁵ Bioassays are laboratory methods measuring a substance's biological activity (e.g., estrogen levels) through its effects on living cells or organisms. This project includes urine hormone tests and environmental toxin mapping using open-source protocols. See Mary Maggic, *Open Source Estrogen* (2015), bioart project documentation; and Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 211–15 on the politicization of endocrinology.

endocrine disruptors in urban water supplies and 3D-print makeshift centrifuges from recycled plastics. This hands-on praxis achieves what Preciado's writing only hypothesizes: it decouples hormonal agency from medical gatekeepers, enabling trans women, menopausal people and others to literally *recompose* their bodies outside institutional control. Preciado's pharmacopornographic regime manifests starkly when participants compare DIY hormone readings with clinical results. One trans woman found her estrogen levels were dangerously high despite doctors declaring them "normal" (a discrepancy Zuboff would attribute to "surveillance capitalism's" profit-driven healthcare). The project's "Estrofem Lab" toolkit, distributed via guerrilla zines and TikTok tutorials, exemplifies Federici's argument that "the body is the first factory", reclaiming reproductive labor from capitalist exploitation.³⁶ The confiscated hormone kits exemplify Zuboff's "division of learning" where corporations may harvest data, but marginalized communities are barred from producing knowledge.³⁷ Maggic's workshops reclaim what Preciado terms as "the right to know one's own flesh", turning kitchens into rogue laboratories.³⁸ However, limitations persist. As Maggic notes, the same GitHub repositories enabling hormone literacy are monitored by anti-abortion groups, illustrating Shoshana Zuboff's "surveillance capitalism". In a recent interview, she described how customs officials in Germany confiscated her DIY hormone testing kits as "medical devices", while multinational pharmaceutical companies ship similar tools freely. This double standard reveals what Preciado meant about the pharmacopornographic regime – it is not about safety, but about who gets to control bodily knowledge. The project now incorporates cybersecurity workshops, teaching participants to encrypt their biodata, a necessary evolution in our current political climate.

Case Study 3: @the.hormone.monster – meme as shield and sword

The Instagram platform @the.hormone.monster (2019–present) weaponizes the absurd humor of meme culture to enact what Hito Steyerl calls "the wretched of the screen's revenge" through viral formats like: "*Which HRT Gel Flavor Are You?*" (quizzes satirizing medical infantilization), "*Trans Joy vs. TERF Tears*" (image macros contrasting community resilience with hate group rhetoric) and animated gifs reappropriating 1950s hygiene films to show DIY hormone safety. This account performs dual resistance: it fosters trans solidarity through laughter and comic memes while algorithmically "poisoning" anti-gender hashtags with subversive content. This mirrors Noble's findings about Google search biases, but in reverse. Here, marginalized users flood oppressive digital architectures with disruptive joy.³⁹ However, the rebellious power of this warfare is inherently unstable. As Jack Halberstam suggests, the radical potential of "low theory" is constrained by its reliance on the very corporate platforms

³⁶ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 201.

³⁷ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 98.

³⁸ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 211.

³⁹ Noble, *Algorithms*, 92.

it tries to disrupt.⁴⁰ Instagram's unpredictable algorithms and changing community guidelines can quickly transform a space of resistance into a site of risk, making marginalized communities vulnerable to being silenced. This dilemma is further deepened by what artist-theorist Zach Blas calls "informatic opacity", a strategy of using ambiguity and encryption to protect vulnerable groups.⁴¹ While this creates vital safe spaces and strengthens community bonds, it may also, restrict how effectively its political message reaches and influences a wider audience. These constraints do not lessen the project's importance, instead, they situate it within the challenging reality of digital capitalism, where resistance is an ongoing struggle rather than a final win.

Limits and possibilities: solidarity under late capitalism

Neoliberal co-optation: the girlboss trap

The commodification of feminist art manifests acutely in what Graff and Korolczuk identify as "faux-powerment" marketing, a process where radical demands are stripped of their political context and repackaged as products for individual consumption. This artistic 'critique-turned-commodity' is a key strategy of what Shoshana Zuboff terms "surveillance capitalism", which seeks to predict and modify behaviour for profit.⁴² For instance, Sinderson's dataset terminology appears in LinkedIn's "Inclusive AI" white papers, where its Marxist-feminist foundations are replaced by corporate-friendly diversity rhetoric. Maggie's biohacking imagery sells \$98 "Estro-Glow" supplements at Sephora, transforming a tool of communal care into an individual luxury good. Likewise, @the.hormone.monster's aesthetics are copied by NGOs promoting "polite trans visibility". This mirrors Federici's warning about capitalism's ability to "metabolize dissent".⁴³ When feminist tech critiques get rebranded as corporate DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, the radical edge is dulled into individualist consumption. In response, feminist media artists and activists have developed tactics that resist easy co-optation by operating outside digital capitalist frameworks. This method echoes the material, hand-made practices of many media artists who work offline to create embodied community archives. These networks embody Puar's "assemblages of security" in reverse using low-tech tools like embroidery because, as one activist noted, "thread cannot be hacked".⁴⁴ Their adaptability proves Benjamin's claim that "the most vulnerable communities innovate the sharpest survival tools", demonstrating how feminist art practices directly inform and strengthen durable activist infrastructures.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 10–15.

⁴¹ Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 3 (December 2016): 325–30.

⁴² Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics*, 155.

⁴³ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 189.

⁴⁴ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 146.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 197.

Transnational feminist networks: #StopDigitalViolence

Countering this, movements like #StopDigitalViolence (founded by Polish and Argentine collectives) exemplify Benjamin's "reparative technologies".⁴⁶ Their tactics include: crowdsourced maps tracking spyware attacks on abortion providers, encryption lullabies (folk songs teaching PGP keys through melody) and "Zombie Server" protests where activists overwhelm anti-gender websites with feminist content. These methods reject neoliberal "lean-in" feminism, instead building what Puar calls "affective infrastructures" – transnational care networks that treat technology as a shared immune system against oppression.⁴⁷ The power of these methods lies in their grounding in Silvia Federici's principle of "collective reproduction" – they transform individual risk into shared security using accessible tools, ensuring the work can continue even when single nodes are compromised. The #StopDigitalViolence network's "encryption lullabies" offer a brilliant case study in accessible tech education. Argentine activists set abortion pill instructions to the tune of popular nursery rhymes, creating melodies that help memorize PGP keys. As sociologist Paula Soza notes, "They're weaponizing cultural memory - what the state can't erase, because it's literally stuck in people's heads." This tactic embodies Hito Steyerl's concept of the "poor image" – prioritizing circulation and accessibility over high-resolution fidelity – to create a form of knowledge that is both viral and resilient. These efforts, however, face real challenges. During Poland's 2020 abortion protests, activists discovered their Signal groups were being infiltrated within hours of creation. This digital whack-a-mole game forces constant innovation. Yet, this pressure fuels a cycle of innovation that mirrors Donna Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble", where each security breach leads to more adaptable and community-rooted solutions, ensuring the movement's evolution outpaces its opposition.

Conclusion

We live in a paradoxical moment in which technologies designed to foster connection are increasingly weaponized for control – monitoring reproductive health, enforcing gender norms and pushing propaganda through digital spaces turning them into tools of ideological enforcement. Yet, as the case studies of Caroline Sindere, Mary Maggic, and @the.hormone.monster demonstrate, feminist media artists and activists persistently explore the cracks in these systems and turn them toward emancipatory ends.

Caroline Sindere's intervention demonstrates this: when confronted with AI's failure to recognize non-binary identities, she did not merely critique the system but built an alternative dataset rooted in feminist epistemologies – from Audre Lorde's essays to protest signs from the Women's March. Similarly, Mary Maggic's DIY hormone testing kits, @the.hormone.monster Instagram account and Polish activists creating

⁴⁶ Benjamin, *Race*, 214.

⁴⁷ Puar, *Right to Maim*, 118.

false period tracker data to flood surveillance systems. These cases, however, are not without limitations, their impact is often limited by the very structures they challenge and their tactics risk being appropriated most notably in the neoliberal reframing of feminist resistance into depoliticized “diversity” initiatives.

The broader implication for media art discourse lies in recognizing that such interventions, while vital, need to be paired with critical examinations of the platforms they operate within. Initiatives like #StopDigitalViolence highlight the necessity of alternative infrastructures, but scaling these efforts requires confronting the material and ideological constraints of surveillance capitalism. The central theoretical contribution of this analysis is its demonstration of how feminist media art bridges tactical disruption with the urgent need for post-capitalist techno-social formations, the ones that prioritize collective autonomy over market logics.

Future research and practice must extend these artists’ work by examining how decentralized models can institutionalize resistance without replicating the predatory systems they oppose. The challenge is not to hack the existing systems but to establish infrastructures intentionally designed to resist the centralized powers that sustain gendered and capitalist violence.

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Anti-gender Discourse between “Cult of the Family” and “Traditional Values”

Abstract: This study develops a feminist critical discourse analysis of the official discourse produced by the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography of the Republic of Serbia, from its establishment up to the year 2025, spanning the mandates of three ministers: Ratko Dmi-trović, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, and Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski. Manually coded, the corpus includes 616 articles published on the website of the Ministry in the News section – from the first one published on March 9, 2022, until April 16, 2025. This research contributes to the expanding body of the critical scholarship on the anti-gender discourse and its actors, while offering a fresh perspective by examining the language employed by the state institution responsible for population policy, an area that remains a central focus of the right-wing discourse. From this perspective, the analysis explores the official rhetoric on the crossroads of anti-gender ideas about the “traditional values” of the cis heteronormative family, stereotypical gender roles, and “great national” demographic interests.

Keywords: “cult of the family”; “traditional values”; anti-gender discourse; Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography; feminist critical discourse analysis.

State institutions under right-wing governments, in cooperation with religious organizations and supported by conservative intellectuals, have been the key actors in generating the anti-gender discourse both globally and in Serbia.¹ This paper is a continuation of the previously carried out research on anti-gender actors in the context of Serbia I have done with my colleagues Marijana Stojčić² (the analysis of the media discourse through key anti-gender phrases such as “defence of the traditional family and values”) and Vanja Petrović³ (mapping of the anti-gender actors in the 1990s in

¹ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Macmillan Publishers, 2024); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2022); Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

² Nada Bobičić and Marijana Stojčić, “Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji,” *CM: Communication and Media* 18, no. 1 (2023): 3–31.

³ Nada Bobičić and Vanja Petrović, “The Neverending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender,” *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 59, no.1 (2025), online: 134–53.

Serbia). Also, this paper is part of the ever-expanding body of research on anti-gender policies and discourses that has been published in the post-Yugoslav region in recent years.⁴

A topic that stood out in these studies time and again is the fascination of the right-wing anti-gender actors with population policies and demographic ideas about the birth of new generations that will maintain the national continuity. These ideas, especially in Serbia and the broader post Yugoslav region, gained momentum during the 1990s.⁵ As Vanja Petrović and I have shown more elaborately in the paper “The Never-ending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender” (2025), The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), then led by Slobodan Milošević, passed a resolution focusing on the “population renewal” titled *Warning* (Serbian: *Upozorenje*) at its second congress, which took place on October 23 and 24, 1992. The document dealt with the topics of “uneven and unbalanced” demographic development between different regional, ethnic and social groups. In fact, the document is based on militant, racist, and nationalist ideas on how the Serbian people are slowly dying out because of depopulation, while the then-perceived “enemy” such as the Albanian, Bosnian or Roma populations are enjoying a demographic boom. Three years later, the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), Patriarch Pavle, added fuel to this symbolic fire. In his 1995 Christmas message, he accused women of being primarily responsible for the so-called “white plague”, which is a symbolically charged term used to explain the demographic decline of the Serbian population as a threat to the nation. At work was the ideological synergy of the right-wing anti-gender actors who claim that at the top of the world is God, while the power on Earth belongs to an authoritarian ruler with the traditional family as the cornerstone of one’s private life. The role of the woman in such a vision of the world is to give birth and raise children, to be the “mother” of the nation.

The ideas “planted” during the decade of wars and destruction, sustained by the continuity of conservative political elites in power, have remained dominant to this day. In that regard this text is not just complementary to the previously carried out research but adds a new perspective as it focuses on the language used by the state

⁴ Roman Kuhar, “Changing Gender Several Times a Day: The Anti-Gender Movement in Slovenia,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*, ed. Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Adriana Zaharijević, “Spaljivanje u 21. veku – šta stoji iza ‘rodne ideologije,’” *Kultura* 163 (2019): 28–45; Tea Škokić, “O radnoj i rodnoj ideologiji,” *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 67, no. 2 (2019): 247–63; Adriana Zaharijević and Katarina Lončarević, “Rod i ideologija: O pobuni protiv jednakosti,” in *Rodna ravnopravnost – od jednakih prava do jednakih mogućnosti*, ed. Tibor Várady and Marijana Pajvančić (Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2020), 29–44; Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021; Irena Cvetković and Manja Velichkovska, *Who Is Afraid of Gender? Analysis of the Key Narratives and Strategies of the Anti-Gender Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia*, trans. Julija Micova (Coalition MARGINS, 2022); Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš, “From Gender Re-Traditionalizations to Anti-Gender Mobilizations: Care for Family in Serbia and Croatia,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 38 no. 2 (2024): 662–81.

⁵ Jelena Čeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš in their paper “From Gender Re-Traditionalizations to Anti-Gender Mobilizations...” illustrated how heteronormative family models and right-wing “protection of the family and children” have been imposed since the 1990s, connecting these ideas to gender re-traditionalization and militant nationalism during the collapse of the socialist Yugoslavia, which was built around the themes of “declining birth rates and dying out of the nation”.

institution of the ministry in charge of population policy issues. It is important to note that the goal of the research is the analysis of the anti-gender language in institutional announcements, and not the analysis of the policies of the Ministry itself, because that would require a different disciplinary framework and entering the field of the demographic science. In accordance with this goal, the methodology of the feminist critical discourse analysis was chosen, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

First, it is important to include basic information about the Ministry. The Ministry without Portfolio in charge of Demography and Population Policy was established in 2016 as a part of the government led by the conservative Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).⁶ The Ministry was led by Slavica Đukić Dejanović, who has been a member of the previously mentioned Socialist Party of Serbia since 1990. It is the same party that published the document entitled *Warning*.

Four years later, in 2020, The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography was established, making it one of the youngest ministries in Republic of Serbia today. The Ministry consists of four sectors, the internal audit group and the Secretariat of the Ministry. So far, it has been led by the following ministers: Ratko Dmitrović (October 28, 2020 until October 26, 2022), Darija Kisić Tepavčević (October 26, 2022 until May 2, 2024), Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (May 2, 2024 until April 16, 2025) and Jelena Žarić Kovačević (April 16, 2025 onwards).

According to the Law on Ministries, the domain of this ministry is defined as follows:

“The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography performs state administration tasks related to: family law protection system; marriage; population policy; family planning, family and children; improvement and development of demographic policy, birth rate policy, quality of life and life extension, reproductive health and internal migration; drafting of national documents and preparation and implementation of campaigns related to demographic policy, as well as other tasks specified by law”.⁷

Sample description and methodological notes

This analysis includes 616 articles published on the website of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography in the News section – from the first article published on March 9, 2022 (in the fifth month after the establishment of the Ministry) until April 16, 2025 when Jelena Žarić Kovačević started her term. The discourse sample was chosen because its analysis gives an insight into how different ideological currents

⁶ SNS has been in power since 2012. Aleksandar Vučić, a central figure in the party, was also an active politician in the 1990s as a prominent young member of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party. In 1998, he was appointed Minister of Information in the government led by the coalition consisting of SPS and Yugoslav United Left (JUL). The SNS party has gone through several phases in its thirteen years of rule, but ideologically it represents a mix of conservative nationalist ideas that have been dominant since the 1990s with neoliberal policies rooted in the widespread and systemic state corruption.

⁷ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 128/2020, 116/2022 and 92/2023.

are reflected through the bureaucratic language of the Ministry due to changes in personal solutions of those who lead the ministry and the attitude of the ruling group that elects them. During the initial phase of constructing the media text corpus, the aim was to exclude news content that did not explicitly address population policies. However, it was found that even media reports primarily concerned with other areas of the Ministry's activities included statements related to population policies and were therefore incorporated into the corpus.

The corpus was manually coded, as its limited size did not require the use of online coding systems. Also, this method was useful because it provides the possibility of in-depth reading of the entire body of texts. In addition, manual coding allowed the identification of differences in the ideological 'colouring' of the discourse among different ministers, even though they all come from the same political coalition.

The subsequent section offers a chronological overview of the news published during three ministerial terms. The fourth term has just started in 2025, therefore it was not included in the corpus. Particular attention will be given to those segments of the media corpus in which different ministerial approaches to the issue of depopulation in Serbia, and to other aspects of the population policy, are articulated at the discursive level. The emphasis is on the discursive differences, because analysis of this layer reveals a relatively wide spectrum from centrist to far-right ideologies in language and symbols used by ministers.

In relation to the discourse analysis, the theoretical framework used in this text is the feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). This is the framework I used in my previous research as well⁸ to detect the key phrases and ideas utilized by local anti-gender actors in relation to their international allies from the East and West. Michelle M. Lazar, who developed FCDA as a distinct approach within the broader field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), explains how the definition of feminist does not only refer to gender as an object of analysis, but implies the introduction of feminist epistemology and practice:

"Feminist CDA is a political perspective which investigates the complex and diverse ways by which gender ideologies that entrench power asymmetries become 'common sense' in particular communities and discourse contexts, and how they may be challenged. This includes discursively sustained assumptions and inequalities, ranging from overt to increasingly subtler forms of sexism. Focusing on social justice and transformation, the objective of the FCDA is to demystify and challenge discourses that continue to buttress gendered social orders in various ways, which harm and foreclose socially progressive possibilities for individuals and groups."⁹ Complementary to the FCDA are the ideas of Heiko Motschenbacher's¹⁰ queer linguistic analysis

⁸ Bobičić and Stojčić, "Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji."

⁹ Michelle M. Lazar, "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. J. Flowerdew and El Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 372.

¹⁰ Heiko Motschenbacher, "Sexuality in Critical Discourse Studies," in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. J. Flowerdew and El Richardson (Routledge, 2018), 372.

regarding the critique of homonormativity, and the questioning of hegemonic, stereotypical and essentialist discourses on gender identities.

The framework of the CDA and queer linguistic analysis allows us to unpack the layered topics that underpin the anti-gender discourse targeting gender equality. “Common sense” ideas about cis heteronormative family as “traditional” or even as the only type of family which is acknowledged at all; sexist views on stereotypical gender roles in private sphere; conservative perspective on the role of woman as mother whose main task is to give birth to new offspring for the “nation”; disproportionately large role given to the clergy regarding their discursive influence on population policies. As content analysis below will show, this kind of discourse is maintained and recycled through the bureaucratic language of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography.

Overview of the corpus and discussion

1. The term of Radomir Dmitrović (October 28, 2020 – October 26, 2022)

We have lost the cult of the family, and the family once held a sacrosanct position in Serbian society.¹¹

This is an existential matter; to be or not to be.¹²

In 2020, the newly established Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography was initially headed by Radomir Dmitrović from the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS).¹³ Before that, Dmitrović was known as a conservative journalist, who was a news correspondent or worked in mainstream media such as *Politika* and *Nezavisni nedeljnik NIN* (in the 1980s), and Radio Television of Serbia (early 1990s). After that, he was the initiator or a member of the newsrooms of several right-wing media outlets, and the editor-in-chief of *Novosti* from 2013 to 2017.

It is important to note that the minister was not elected from within the expert community familiar with demographic issues. Rather, the leadership of the newly established ministry was entrusted to a member of a coalition party whose professional background lies in a different domain—the media sphere. Additionally, the public actor in question was previously known for his extremely conservative views. This choice signalled that the population policies were approached in a populist manner, and that they were seen as a domain for maintaining right-wing ideas about the family.¹⁴

¹¹ *Izgubili smo kult porodice, a porodica je u srpskom društvu imala kultno mesto.*

¹² *Ovo je pitanje postojanja; biti ili ne biti.*

¹³ The party under the leadership of Aleksandar Šapić, which at the time was part of the broader coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

¹⁴ Which is already noticeable in the name change from the more neutral ministry for *demography and population policy* in 2016 to explicitly focusing on *family welfare* in 2020.

During his two-year term, 164 news items were published on the ministry's website, all of which were included in the corpus. Dmitrović closely cooperated with the then Secretary, Milka Milovanović-Minić, and Assistant Minister Aleksandra Čamagić, both of whom occasionally addressed the public alongside the Minister in his official appearances. The discourse of the Secretary and Assistant dominantly remained in the realm of bureaucratic language that focuses on specific policies of the Ministry, and whose establishment is explained by strategic reasons with the aim of improving family-legal protection and demographic conditions in Serbia, especially as part of the "Serbia 2025" program.¹⁵

In one of his addresses, Dmitrović interprets demographic problems and appropriate measures for their solution in the following way:

"If money was the deciding factor, countries in the north of Europe would have a birth rate above three, and no one has a simple reproduction rate of 2.1 – said Dmitrović. He added that even in Albania, which until recently had a level of simple reproduction, that rate fell below 2.1 percent. The birth rate is a complex problem that requires the solution of economic and infrastructure problems, but it also affects the value categories brought about by the modern way of life, said the minister. 'We have lost the cult of the family, and the family once held a sacrosanct position in Serbian society.'"¹⁶

He expressed similar ideas in his speech during the discussion about the amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children: "It is a very complex problem that is affected by several elements, some of which are in the sphere of our relationship to the absolute priorities in life. Once upon a time, it was children, as the greatest wealth and meaning of life, but that has not been the case for a long time. The acquisition of material values in the modern world is high above biological values, above children and people in general. This is evidenced by the fact that, in Serbia (as well as in the rest of Europe), families with very modest incomes tend to have the highest number of children, while extremely affluent, rich and extremely rich families each have one, possibly two children. We must look at the reasons why this is so and see what we can do so that children are again the greatest asset we can have"¹⁷; [...] This is an existential matter; to be or not to be"¹⁸.

¹⁵ "Državna sekretarka Milka Milanović-Minić za Studio B: Prava deteta i unapređenje brige o porodici," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 18, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/drzavna-sekretarka-milka-milovanovic-minic-za-studio-b-prava-deteta-i-unapredjenje-brige-o-porodici/>.

¹⁶ "Ministar Dmitrović u radnoj poseti Prokuplju: Natalitet ne zavisi samo od novca," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 29, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-dmitrovic-u-radnoj-poseti-prokuplju-natalitet-ne-zavisi-samo-od-novca/>.

¹⁷ "Usvojen Zakon o izmenama i dopunama Zakona o finansijskoj podršci porodici s decom: Porodiljama najmanje 'minimalac'," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 06, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/usvojen-zakon-o-izmenama-i-dopunama-zakona-o-finansijskoj-podrsци-porodici-s-decom-porodiljama-najmanje-minimalac/>.

¹⁸ "Saopštenje povodom Svetskog dana Stanovništva," *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 10, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/saopstenje-povodom-svetskog-dana-stanovnistva/>.

Aleksandra Čamagić, the Assistant Minister at the time, spoke in a similar way, calling for the promotion of “family values”: “If material conditions were the sole determining factor, countries like Denmark and Norway would have the highest natural population growth, but this is not the case.” In addition, she nevertheless draws attention to the position of mothers with small children, and to the necessity that they have support in all spheres of life, from affordable kindergartens to the fair attitude of employers towards them. It is suggested that flexible working hours would make it easier for mothers in this situation.¹⁹

This kind of discourse achieved the following: a) the situation in Serbia is compared with the situation of the most developed countries in Europe; b) it is mentioned that (competing) neighbouring countries do not have a much better situation in this matter; c) the problem that the minister himself describes as “complex” boils down to a simple thesis about the “values” of the modern way of life versus the “cult” of the family. In another address, the same minister stated that the problem of depopulation was not a daily political issue, but “the scale of personal values is disrupted”.²⁰

To sum it up, the problem is not limited to Serbia, because everyone else has a problem, one could even say that we can “comfort ourselves” because in some respects we are at least comparable to the developed north of Europe. Then, the solution to the low birth rate is not seen in the improvement of social policies, which are reduced to “money” issues, but instead a conservative “fairy tale” is constructed about the cult of the family, on which the discourses about the cult of respect for the dominant religion and the nation are built.

In the words of Minister Dmitrović:

“When it comes to fostering political values in modern Europe, only in Islam is the family very important and it is taken care of – the Minister pointed out, noting that even in Orthodoxy, families with a large number of children are, as a rule, very religious families.”²¹

“‘The family is the basis of the nation and society, without it, demographic renewal is not possible, and therefore we must do everything to preserve and maintain the family, with all the *traditional values* that it carries with it, Patriarch and Minister Dmitrović agreed’ during a visit to Patriarch Porfirije.”²²

¹⁹ “Pomoćnica ministra Aleksandra Čamagić: Olakšati teret mladim majkama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/pomocnica-ministra-aleksandra-camagic-olakšati-teret-mladim-majkama/>.

²⁰ “Dmitrović: Demografski problem nije dnevno-političko pitanje,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, October 5, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/dmitrovic-demografski-problem-nije-dnevno-politicko-pitanje/>.

²¹ “Problem demografije je nastao kao bolest koju na vreme nismo prepoznali,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 3, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/problem-demografije-je-nastao-kaobolest-koju-na-vreme-nismo-prepoznali/>.

²² “Ministar Dmitrović i patrijarh Porfirije: Porodica je osnov nacije i društva,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, February 11, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-dmitrovic-i-patrijarh-porfirije-porodica-je-osnov-nacije-i-drustva/>.

It is interesting to note a certain shift when it comes to the attitude towards members of other religious communities. The discourse of the Minister is no longer openly militant as was the case in the documents like *Warning* published in the 1990s. Today, broader conservative anti-gender religious coalitions are made, as the “common enemy” is projected on to the gender equality topics and LGBTIQ+ communities. On the other hand, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) has maintained a privileged position in Serbia, as it will be seen even further in the media corpus regarding the term of Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski.

During Dmitrović's term, in addition to cooperation with the UN institutions, interstate meetings were held with representatives of Germany and Hungary. It is stated that Minister Dmitrović and his colleague Minister Katalin Novak, from Prime Minister Orbán's government, which is recognized as one of the key anti-gender actors in the European Union, “emphasized the common position that the family must be preserved and nurtured at all costs”.²³ Continuous cooperation with the Hungarian ministry will be maintained during the next two mandates as well.

2. The term of Darija Kisić Tepavčević (October 26, 2022 – May 2, 2024)

*The family represents the foundation of every society and the greatest asset an individual can possess.*²⁴

*Women are the ones who propel their families forward, and by extension, the entire nation.*²⁵

Darija Kisić, formerly Kisić Tepavčević, a doctor and university professor, became known to the general public during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. Subsequently, her political career commenced under the auspices of the SNS coalition. From October 2020 to October 2022, she was the Minister of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs in the government of Ana Brnabić, while Dmitrović was the Minister for Family Welfare and Demography. Later, Darija Kisić succeeded him as part of the next government. During her mandate, 305 news items were published on the Ministry's website, all of which were incorporated into the corpus of interpreted texts.

Darija Kisić Tepavčević used a gender-sensitive form of the word minister and was signed as a woman minister in all the news. In addition, her mandate coincided

²³ “Sastanak ministra Dmitrovića i ministarke Katalin Novak: Porodica se mora očuvati,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, Septembre 08, 2021, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/sastanak-ministra-dmitrovi-ca-i-ministarke-katalin-novak-porodica-se-mora-ocuvati/>.

²⁴ *Porodica je osnov svakog društva i najveće bogatstvo svakog čoveka* *The family represents the foundation of every society and the greatest asset an individual can possess.*

²⁵ *Žene su te koje guraju svoje porodice napred, a samim tim i čitavu zemlju.*

with the period when the Law on Gender Equality adopted in 2021 was in force. In the meantime, the Constitutional Court, in a legally unfounded manner,²⁶ suspended the law in its entirety in June 2024 due to an article that specifically referred to the gender-sensitive language.

Unlike her predecessor, who focused on the “cult” of the family and “traditional values”, the first female minister of the newly established ministry paid much more attention to gender equality and the position of women in society, as well as the harmonization of professional and parental responsibilities.²⁷ Also, as a highly educated woman herself, she emphasized the need to help women balance their business and private roles:

“Being a woman is a great privilege, but also a great obligation and responsibility. Being a mother, wife, sister and businesswoman at the same time shows us how much we know, how much we can and are capable of. Women are the ones who push their families forward, and therefore the entire country.”²⁸

Beyond this principled stance, in other statements Kisić Tepavčević dealt with specific groups of women such as female students. As a particularly valuable policy initiative she notes out support for women who decide to become mothers during their studies. In this period, the position of female entrepreneurs was also in the public spotlight since they were unequally treated in the Health Insurance Act as mothers in labour (the injustice was corrected later, in 2024). The Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography participated in amending the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children, which enabled female entrepreneurs to use maternity leave for the duration of the entire year when they give birth to their third and each subsequent child.²⁹

For Minister Kisić Tepavčević, support for gender equality includes both genders: “When we talk about gender equality and family, we shouldn’t highlight only women, because men also have an important role – not a greater one, but an equal and fair one.”³⁰

Although it looks like a shift in relation to the conservative ideas of her predecessor, the idea of a successful businesswoman who is also accomplished as a mother could not be characterized as particularly progressive either. This viewpoint most closely aligns with what is known as Lean-In feminism. It is a type of feminism that was particularly popular in the last decade, the canonical text of which is the book

²⁶ Grupa autora. “Otvoreno pismo stručne javnosti Ustavnom sudu,” *Peščanik*, September 19, 2024, <https://pescanik.net/otvoreno-pismo-strucne-javnosti-ustavnom-sudu/>.

²⁷ “Porodica – najveća i najjača institucija,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, February 24, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-najveca-i-najjaca-institucija/>.

²⁸ “Podrška ženama da pokažu koliko znaju i umeju,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 12, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrskazhenama-dapokazu-kolikoznaju-i-umeju-2/>.

²⁹ “Nove zakonske izmene stupile na snagu – podrška ženama preduzetnicama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, August 1st, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/nove-zakonske-izmene-stupile-na-snagu-podrskazhenama-preduzetnicama/>.

³⁰ “Podrška ženama je direktna podrška porodicama,” *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 2, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrskazhenama-jedirektnapodrskaporodicama/>.

Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead by Sheryl Sandberg.³¹ Lean-in feminism is based on the idea that women should be encouraged and “assert themselves” in a man’s world, in order to occupy positions that were previously denied to them. It is a version of liberal, or more precisely, neoliberal feminism, intended for highly educated and successful women, who come from privileged communities. As explained by Catherine Rottenberg, this type of feminism was fundamentally hypocritical, as it overlooks structural inequalities in capitalism and contemporary colonialism, focusing on a small group of women who reproduce the system of inequality.

This approach remains within the set neoliberal rules, asking the system to improve a little bit, while maintaining the status quo. Hence, what is certainly a continuity with her predecessor, and with future ministers (see below), Minister Kisić Tepavčević sees cis heteropatriarchal family as an unquestionably positive concept and the “basic cell” of society. In that context, she often compared family to the greatest wealth in her statements:

“I want the entire year of 2023 to be marked by that – for more babies to be born, for there to be lots of happiness and joy in families, for us to have more time for our families, because they are our greatest treasure.”³²

During her mandate, the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography organized a conference on the Family “Serbia – Our Family” for the first time. On that occasion she declared that the Ministry is “strategically ready to support and strengthen the institution of the family, as the most valuable national resource, in every sense of the word.”³³ Although as a minister, unlike her predecessor Dmitrović and her successor Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, Kisić Tepavčević officially congratulated all religious holidays, even during her mandate, the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church received “special treatment”. At the Second National Conference of the same name, Patriarch Porfirije’s vicar, Bishop Ilarion of Novo Brdo, stated “that the family is the most sacred institution and that we should all return to our original identity and healing, both personal and that which includes the family, when we feel that we are part of a whole.”³⁴

³¹ For a critical overview of this feminist movement, see in more detail Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³² “Porodica i deca najveće bogatstvo”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, November 22nd 2022 at <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-i-deca-najvece-bogatstvo/>; “Ministarka Kisić sa sedmočlanom porodicom u Crnoj Travi”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 14, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministarka-kisic-sa-sedmoclanom-porodicom-u-crnoj-travi/>; “Podrška porodicama od velikog značaja”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, December 20, 2022, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/podrska-porodicama-od-velikog-znacaja/>; “Ministarka Kisić obišla prvorodenu bebu u 2023. godini u porodilištu ‘Dr Dragiša Mišović’”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, January 1, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministarka-kisic-obisla-prvorodjenu-bebu-u-2023-godini-u-porodilistu-dr-dragisa-misovic/>.

³³ “Srbija – Naša porodica”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, April 3, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-nasa-porodica/>.

³⁴ “Druga nacionalna konferencija ‘Srbija – naša porodica’”, Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 4, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/druga-nacionalna-konferencija-srbija-nasa-porodica/>.

In addition to the SPC as an influential traditional right-wing actor, during Kisić Tepavčević's term the project "Leap into the Future – Serbia Expo 2027" also began to be mentioned. What was the "Serbia 2025" program under the previous minister is increasingly becoming an Expo during the two years of her mandate. Once again, the corpus highlights the alliance of the right-wing actors consisting of the SPC, the capitalist and political elites, as it was explained in greater detail in my previous research with Vanja Petrović.³⁵

When it comes to international cooperation, during this term, Darija Kisić Tepavčević met with colleagues from Azerbaijan (several times), Hungary (also several times), the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey. She was also present at several international events, such as a conference in Kario (Egypt), a summit in Budapest (Hungary) and the plenary session of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Geneva (Switzerland). At the summit in Budapest, she addressed the panel next to the ministers of Hungary, Turkey, Qatar, Morocco, Bahrain, Slovenia and Kazakhstan.³⁶ As in the case of the previous minister, the continuity of the anti-gender international cooperation is maintained during this mandate, where Serbia sees its place next to the countries that are committed to an extremely conservative approach to family and population issues.

3. The term of Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski (May 2, 2024 – April 16, 2025)

*Serbia is a family made up of all Serbs in the world.*³⁷

*This is a fight we must fight together.*³⁸

Minister Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski was appointed after Daria Kisić Tepavčević. Her choice not to use a gender-sensitive form for the title of her position aligned with her ideological stance as a far-right politician. Her political career began in an opposition party as a young conservative leader during the previous decade, after which she transitioned into the SNS ruling coalition, serving as Minister for Family Welfare and Demography. During her term, 165 news items were published, which, as in previous cases, were all included in the analysis corpus.

Despite being the youngest and representing the so-called millennial generation, her ideological background is closer to Minister Dmitrović than to the previous minister Kisić Tepavčević. However, even in comparison with his public statements, discourse introduced by Đurđević Stamenkovski has moved further to the right. Therefore, she brought back the phrase "white plague" from the 1990s as a symbolic

³⁵ Nađa Bobčić and Vanja Petrović, "The Neverending 90s in Serbia..."

³⁶ "Veći broj beba rezultat populacionih mera," Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 15, 2023, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/veci-broj-beba-rezultat-populacionih/>.

³⁷ *Srbija je porodica koju čine svi Srbi na svetu.*

³⁸ *Ovo je borba koju moramo voditi zajedno.*

image for the problem of depopulation.³⁹ Her ultranationalist discourse on population policies was characterized by frequent use of war and battle metaphors: “fight for posterity”;⁴⁰ “the fight we must fight together”;⁴¹ “The fortress that today, in the 21st century, we all need to defend and protect together is the family”.⁴² This is symbolically complemented by a biologicistic language, such as describing the family as a “matrix”, “source”, “nest” or “our roots.”⁴³ This conservative vision of the world is rounded off by ideas about “domestic and family Serbia” and “family, traditional values”⁴⁴ that “need to be nurtured”⁴⁵:

“Family values are the only path to the spiritual and cultural revival of our people [...] This is a fight that we must fight together. Serbia, that is, the citizens of Serbia, must also recognize their role in that fight, because it is about our survival. Whatever we do, we must keep in mind that we will only win if there are enough of us, if we continue to exist.”⁴⁶

This version of the family is the key discursive thread that, despite the other ideological differences, connects all the previous ministers of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography.

When it comes to the Western Balkans regional cooperation, particular emphasis was put on cooperation with the Bosna and Hercegovina’s entity Republic of Srpska. The number of activities on this line of cooperation is greater than in previous two terms, the language is no longer courtly-bureaucratic, but filled with nationalist images of

³⁹ “Društvo kojem je porodica na prvom mestu, ima zagarantovanu budućnost,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 28, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/drustvo-kojem-je-porodica-na-prvom-mestu-ima-zagarantovanu-buducnost/>; “Dani porodice Srbije i Srpske u maju u Višegradu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, March 27, 2025, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/dani-porodice-srbije-i-srpske-u-maju-u-v/>.

⁴⁰ “Saradnja Republike Srbije i Republike Srpske na polju porodice i demografije se podiže na najviši nivo,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 7, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/saradnja-republike-srbije-i-republike-srpske-na-polju-porodice-i-demografije-se-podize-na-najvisi-nivo/>.

⁴¹ “Vlada Republike Srbije želi da promoviše obnovu domaćinske i porodične Srbije,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/vlada-republike-srbije-zeli-da-promovise-obnovu-domacinske-i-porodicne-srbije/>.

⁴² “Porodica je tvrđava koju treba svi zajedno da branimo,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-je-tvrđava-koju-treba-svi-zajedno-da-branimo/>.

⁴³ “Đurđević Stamenkovski: Da nam se rađa što više dece sa obe strane Drine,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 19, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/durdevic-stamenkovski-da-nam-se-rada-sto-vise-dece-sa-obe-strane-drine/>; “Srbija i Republika Srpska su jedna porodica,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-republika-srpska-su-jedna-porodica/>.

⁴⁴ “Vlada Republike Srbije želi da promoviše obnovu domaćinske i porodične Srbije,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 13, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/vlada-republike-srbije-zeli-da-promovise-obnovu-domacinske-i-porodicne-srbije/>.

⁴⁵ “Delegacija Ministarstva za brigu o porodici i demografiju boravila u Belorusiji,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 14, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/delegacija-ministarstva-za-brigu-o-porodici-i-demografiju-boravila-u-belorusiji/>.

⁴⁶ “Porodica kao temelj budućnosti: Svečano otvoreni ‘Dani porodice’ u Perlezu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 7, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/porodica-kao-temelj-buducnosti-svecano-otvoreni-dani-porodice-u-perlezu/>.

cooperation across the river Drina: “The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are one big family” [...] The Drina River will not divide our children, it will not separate our families, we will always gravitate towards each other and cooperate”.⁴⁷ And: “The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are one family, one household. We are two lung wings”.⁴⁸ The same pattern is repeated in the case of the Serbian communities from Kosovo and Metohija: “The preservation of Kosovo and Metohija is a shared national duty of Serbia and Srpska. The Kosovo Covenant is the cornerstone of our identity”,⁴⁹ and the Orthodox Serbian minority from Montenegro.

In a secular society, influence of religious institutions should have no role in population policy, yet during Minister Đurđević Stamenkovski term it increased even further. On the official website of the Ministry, it was inappropriately announced that Minister Đurđević Stamenkovski met with Patriarch Porfirije with whom she discussed changes to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children. She also visited the patriarch for his birthday in her official capacity.⁵⁰ This position is also consistent with the fact that during her time in the office she did not congratulate any religious holidays to different faith communities except the Orthodox ones, unlike Minister Darija Kisić Tepavčević.

Also, the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography participated in the traditional Family Days, which took place in the first week of September, when Belgrade Pride was also organized. In response to the public criticism that Family Days were created as a right-wing reaction to the LGBTIQ+ gathering, she stated:

“The family cannot be against anything, because it is at the core of the identity of each individual and we believe in it the most, because it is in it that we realize ourselves as people and that is why we celebrate it [...] I emphasize this because we are an Orthodox society and we consider it to be the defence of the family and the defence of the Christian civilization, but on the other hand, we will have allies in the defence of the family in the representatives of other religions, who know that there is no survival of humanity if the family does not survive and if experiments are carried out on it, and such attempts [...] The family is the last line of defence of the European Christian civilization, this is a fact that is spoken about by both the European and world authorities”.⁵¹

⁴⁷“Đurđević Stamenkovski: Da nam se rađa što više dece sa obe strane Drine,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 19, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/durdevic-stamenkovski-da-nam-se-rada-sto-vise-dece-sa-obe-strane-drine/>.

⁴⁸“Srbija i Republika Srpska su jedna porodica,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, May 25, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-republika-srpska-su-jedna-porodica/>.

⁴⁹“Deklaracija Svesrpskog sabora temelj nove epohe strateškog povezivanja Beograda i Banjaluke,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 9, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/deklaracija-svesrpskog-sabora-temelj-nove-epohe-strateskog-povezivanja-beograda-i-banjaluke/>.

⁵⁰“Ministarka Đurđević Stamenkovski se sastala sa Patrijarhom srpskim G. Porfirijem,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, July 22, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/ministar-durdevic-stamenkovski-se-sastala-sa-patrijarhom-srpskim-g-porfirijem/>.

⁵¹“Đurđević: Porodica nikada ne može biti kontra bilo čemu,” Vesti, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 09, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdevic-porodica-nikada-ne-moze-biti/>.

Comparing this statement with the ideas from the 1990s, a certain shift can be observed when it comes to the right-wing actors. While at the same time Đurđević Stamenkovski in her other statements calls for “across-Drina” connection among Serbs, she now sees allies in other religious communities when they have a common “enemy” that is reflected in the LGBTIQ+ communities, and their struggle for social and privacy equality. In her view, the family as a “cult”, “greatest wealth”, “last line of defence” is attacked by those who “experiment”. That is why her position is pragmatically oriented towards unprincipled alliances: “No matter how different our policies or ideologies are, we should at least have a social consensus about the values we are fighting for—and is there a greater value for us than the survival and future of our descendants?”⁵²

Cooperation with international anti-gender actors started in previous terms of office continued during the term of Minister Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, who herself comes from the milieu of far-right parties. Cooperation with representatives of Iran, Belarus, and the United Arab Emirates has been carried out. Towards the end of her term, in February 2025, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski addressed the election rally of the far-right German party Alternative for Germany (German: Alternative für Deutschland),⁵³ not officially as a minister but in the gray zone “on behalf of her party”.

Also, in front of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography, she met with the Hungarian ambassador, when she “brought forward the initiative to sign a Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of promoting family values with the relevant Hungarian ministry...”⁵⁴ In a similar tone was the statement within the framework of the Ministerial Conference “Generations together for a more competitive future” held in Budapest (Hungary):

“Serbia and Hungary have shown a strategic determination to take care of the family, support parents and children, and take care of motherhood and parenting. Our common interest is a European family and the restoration of traditional values, because this is how the conditions of survival for our families and nations are created in the future. Hungarians and Serbs are two brotherly nations, and we are not only partners in the political and economic sense, but true neighbours and brothers who share the same view of the role of the family in society and the need to preserve essential values.”⁵⁵

⁵² “Đurđević: Kada porodica dobija, niko ne gubi!”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, September 23, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdjevic-kada-porodica-dobija-niko-ne/>.

⁵³ Iva Martinović, “Podrška iz Srbije desnoj Alternativi za Nemačku: U čije ime govori Milica Đurđević?”, *Slobodna Evropa*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/nemacka-krajnja-desnica-srbija-zavetnici-ministarka/33323038.html>.

⁵⁴ “Srbija i Mađarska zajedno na liniji odbrane porodice i njenih vrednosti”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, June 21, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/srbija-i-madarska-zajedno-na-liniji-odbrane-porodice-i-njenih-vrednosti/>.

⁵⁵ “Đurđević u Budimpešti: Mađarska i Srbija prirodni saveznici u borbi za očuvanje porodice”, *Vesti*, Ministarstvo za brigu o porodici i demografiju, November 15, 2024, <https://www.minbpd.gov.rs/djurdjevic-u-budimpesti-madarska-i-srbija-prirodni-saveznici-u-borbi-za-ocuvanje-porodice/>.

Variations of similar phrases such as “family values” or “traditional values” indicate an anti-gender discourse that is characteristic of areas dominated by the Russian conservative influence, which, unlike the Western variant, uses the word *gender* less explicitly. Regarding this, loosely speaking “division” of the sphere of influence, the discourse of Minister Milica Đurđević Stamevski coincides with the findings from the quantitative analysis of the media in Serbia, which show the dominance of the Russian/Orthodox sphere of influence.⁵⁶

Conclusion

When diachronic perspective is used to compare the terms of three ministers: Ratko Dmitrović, Darija Kisić Tepavčević, and Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, nuanced differences emerge. On the one hand we have one openly conservative minister (Dmitrović) or one that uses alt-right rhetorics (Đurđević Stamenkovski), and on the other we have a neoliberal approach to gender equality (Kisić Tepavčević). But, in all three cases the authority of SPC, and SNS political dominance stay the same. Similar is the choice of conservative international partners regarding the population politics. Different personal solutions slightly change the discourse to the Left or to the Right, but the Ministry stays true to its name focusing on “cult of the family”.

The corpus of articles published on the website of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography analysed in this paper shows how anti-gender rhetoric merges with the bureaucratic language of the neoliberal conservative government that governed Serbia in the last five years. Looking through the lens of the FCDA methodology it gets clear that state institutions have a significant role in the broader ideological process of normalization of reactionary ideas. Ministers travel all around the country and attend international conferences. Their voices are heard through the mass media. The Ministry oversees both the fund allocation and policymaking. Taking all that into account, if the official communication of the Ministry is based on the premise that heteronormative family is a basic cell of society and populational policies are intertwined with the ultra-nationalistic and clerical ideas of SPC, than it can be said that anti-gender politics have strong allies in the institutions of the currently ruling neoliberal system in Serbia.

⁵⁶ Bobičić and Stojčić, “Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji.”

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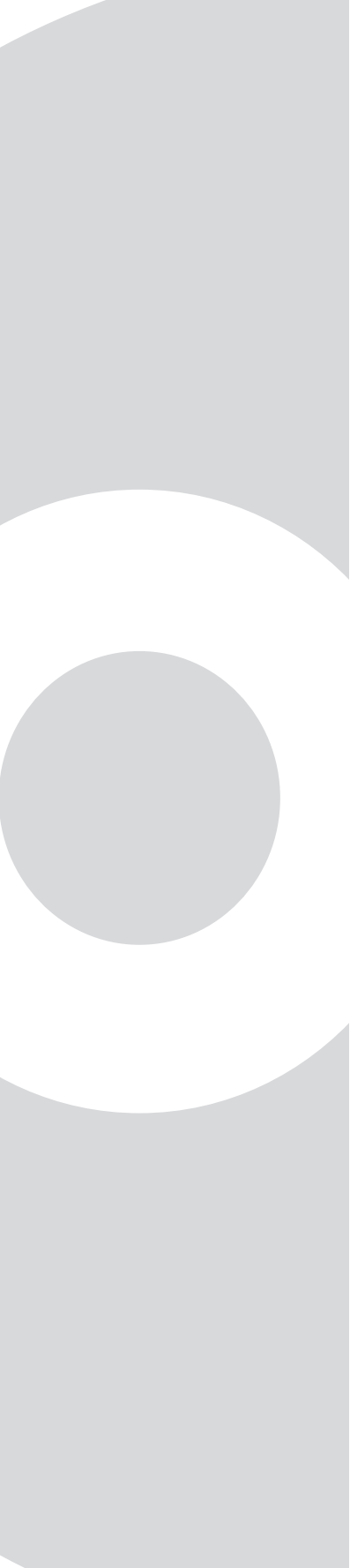
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The Aesthetics of Glamour in the Subversive Art of Burlesque¹

Abstract: This article explores glamour as a complex and contested cultural phenomenon situated at the intersection of aesthetics, gender politics, and feminist critique. While glamour has traditionally been associated with the spectacle of the female body and framed as a patriarchal tool of control, contemporary feminist and queer theories highlight its disruptive potential. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Naomi Wolf, Deborah Ferreday, and Angela McRobbie, the article examines how glamour operates as a visual code that oscillates between accessibility and unattainability, discipline and emancipation. Special attention is given to the performative practices of neo-burlesque, which reappropriate glamour through parody, exaggeration, and camp aesthetics. Performances by troupes such as The Velvet Hammer, queer reinterpretations of Cabaret, and artists including Perle Noire, Dirty Martini, and Moira Finucane illustrate how glamour becomes a site of negotiation between patriarchal beauty norms and feminist reclamation. In contrast, the highly stylized burlesque of Dita Von Teese highlights the persistence of the traditional glamour aligned with the heterosexual male gaze. By analyzing the inclusivity, gender fluidity, and political agency of neo-burlesque, this study argues that glamour should not be understood as either purely oppressive nor liberating, but as an ambivalent and dynamic practice that continues to evolve in dialogue with feminism, queer theory, and contemporary performance culture.

Keywords: glamour; burlesque; feminism; camp aesthetics; gender identities.

Introduction

When telling the story of glamour and the so-called goddesses, it is difficult to escape the metaphor of a butterfly: although it pertains to the sensual, alluring, and eroticized female body, paradoxically, what comes to mind is the image of a colorful, delicate creature hovering above the ground. Glamour is not merely an aesthetic category, but a concept imbued with symbolic meanings, deeply rooted in social norms, feminist redefinitions cultural representations, and mechanisms of power. By feminist reclamation of glamour, I mean the conscious reappropriation of visual codes historically tied to the patriarchal control – such as makeup, costuming, and stylized performance – and their redeployment as strategies of parody, critique, and empowerment.

¹ This paper is part of the research conducted for the author's doctoral dissertation. It was presented as a lecture at the conference Aesthetics, Art, Style, organized in Belgrade in 2024 by the Aesthetic Society of Serbia.

In the neo-burlesque and queer performance, glamour is not used to reinforce normative ideals of femininity but rather to destabilize them, making the glamorous body a site of irony, resistance, and agency. Glamour functions as a dynamic visual code, shaped through historical, economic, and artistic processes, simultaneously seductive and unattainable. From the early days of Hollywood to contemporary performances such as the neo-burlesque and digital aesthetics, glamour has been a subject of fascination as well as controversy. Its allure lies not only in external beauty but also in its ability to create an illusion – an illusion of luxury, power, and perfection. However, much like the figure of a butterfly, glamour carries an inherent ambiguity: on the one hand, it acts as an empowering feminist narrative (for instance in queer or neo-burlesque reinterpretations), while on the other, it often becomes a patriarchal tool of control and a mechanism enforcing normative of femininity. As a phenomenon inseparable from the representation of the body, glamour has long been tied to the ideas of desirability and spectacle. Depending on the historical and cultural context, it has served either as a form of feminist reclamation or strategy of subjugation. It is precisely in this contradiction, and in its ongoing negotiation between patriarchal and feminist perspectives, that the reason for its enduring presence in various artistic and media forms lies. Contemporary culture continues to reshape the meaning of glamour, raising new questions about its role in identity construction, female subjectivity, and the visual economy of desire.

This paper analyzes glamour as a complex aesthetic and cultural phenomenon, exploring its symbolism, historical evolution, and significance in the contemporary social context. Rather than treating it as a stable category, I approach glamour as an unstable and contested concept, constantly negotiated between patriarchal constructions of desirability and feminist attempts at reclamation. To outline a framework for interpretation, I propose between two interwoven variants of glamour. First, glamour can be understood as a costume and aesthetic style that relies on artificiality and exaggeration to create an impression of refined feminine allure. Its attributes include distinctive makeup, a carefully styled hairstyle, a feminine costume such as a tight dress, and a series of behaviors interpreted as seductive - traits which, as feminist critics have pointed out, are themselves shaped by patriarchal norms that position femininity as passive, ornamental, and sexually available. Second, and of primary importance to my analysis, glamour as a visual code that emerges in media and performance contexts and governs spectators' desires through a dialectic of accessibility and unattainability. As Kay Siebler² observes in her study of neo-burlesque, performances that exaggerate or parody the codes of glamour may simultaneously reproduce and subvert patriarchal expectations, exposing the fragility of the illusion. Glamour, therefore, enhances the appeal of an object by operating paradoxically: it simultaneously suggests accessibility to the viewer while emphasizing the unbridgeable distance between the observer and the observed object. The glamourized female body becomes not only an object

² Kay Siebler, "What's So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers? Neo-burlesque as Post-Feminist Sexual Liberation," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 54–68.

of desire but also a subject of controlled visual consumption and a carrier of social aspirations – a spectacle and a commodity that represents the dream of a better life and the contradictions of gendered representation. Research on actresses subjected to glamourization, positioned within the tension between desirability and propriety, shows that while glamourization aims to produce an attractive yet “safe” femininity, achieving this effect requires decontextualization, which in turn results in the ambiguity of the glamorized woman’s position – at once celebrated and constrained.

Reducing glamour to a mere tool used for disciplining, exploiting, and taming the natural corporeality and sexuality of women would be an oversimplification. This perspective disregards the complex and contradictory role of the glamorous body in the history of women’s emancipation. At the same time, I acknowledge that glamour cannot be regarded as a universal means of emancipation, as it carries dark aspects and an undeniably oppressive dimension within itself. Women who have “voluntarily subjected themselves to glamourization” have often sought to harness the emancipatory potential of this aesthetic. A similar process is evident today in the performative genre of the neo-burlesque, where glamour takes the form of gender excess – an open and defiant illusion that deconstructs the socially normalized stereotype of the “attractive woman”. As Siebler³ notes, neo-burlesque performers navigate the tension between reproducing patriarchal scripts and subverting them, highlighting how glamour can simultaneously serve as spectacle and critique. The history of glamorous women, therefore, is not only a history of containment but also one of expanding the definitions of femininity and female agency, often operating in spaces that patriarchal culture sought to marginalize.

The exclusion from the category of the so-called respectable women widened the sphere of influence for glamorous women, allowing them to transcend the cultural limitations imposed on their gender. The public visibility of glamorous women also ensured that their transgressions would be noticed by other women, thus fostering emancipatory aspirations. In the case of a phenomenon that is, by definition, relational and spectacular, its potential to either disrupt the existing order or, conversely, reinforce disciplinary involvement in a dominant, gender-oriented ideology is always determined by the context of a specific performance. The meaning and tone of performing glamour can shift radically depending on the medium used – this is often seen in the neo-burlesque performances, where the emancipatory power of glamour is primarily shaped by the theatrical situation. Glamour can amplify neoliberal discourse with sexist undertones, but it can also disarm it – raising the question of whether simply exposing rigid and “established” norms is already a step toward their re-evaluation.

The feminist perspective on glamour has evolved in response to the political and social conditions of women and the dominant concept of female subjectivity within the feminist movement. The first wave of feminism’s struggle against actresses and dancers who employed glamour on stage perfectly reflects the early emancipators’

³ Ibidem.

distrust of the subversive and liberating potential of the female body – historically perceived as a factor preventing women from participating in public life. Thus, the goal was to render the female body transparent, erasing the stigma of Otherness, so that women could achieve equal social and political rights alongside men. From the suffragette perspective – who did not shy away from acts of aggression in their fight for equality – the ideal of beautiful femininity was effectively dehumanized, infantilized, and viewed as a tool of female incapacitation, reducing women to helpless and mindless bodies. The second-wave radical feminism discredited glamorous femininity as a form of false female consciousness that conceals and oppresses the true female identity, which was defined by biological specificity. Further emancipation, in this view, depended on women's internal transformation and the cultural reevaluation of what truly constitutes male and female characteristics. Here, glamour appears solely as an oppressive strategy that traps the authentic and militant female subject beneath the glassy surface of perfection. In this case, the apotheosis of the female body was highly selective – simplicity of appearance was interpreted as a natural state, a source of truth and liberation. In contrast, the third-wave feminism rejected previous theories and, in doing so, recognized the disruptive dimension of glamour. Feminist perspectives on glamour have shifted in response to changing political and social conditions, as well as to debates about female subjectivity within the movement. Early suffrage activists, for example, often expressed suspicion toward actresses and dancers who employed glamour on stage. They feared that the eroticized female body, long framed by patriarchal culture as an obstacle to women's public participation, would undermine the seriousness of women's demands for equal rights. As a result, many activists aimed to render the female body politically “transparent,” stripping it of its glamorous associations so that women could more easily claim recognition as citizens. It is worth noting that the term *suffragette* – still sometimes used in cultural memory – was originally coined by patriarchal media to belittle these activists; they themselves identified as *suffragists* or *suffrage activists*.

Certain strands of radical feminist thought, such as those articulated by Andrea Dworkin⁴ and Catherine MacKinnon,⁵ later positioned glamorous femininity as a form of “false consciousness” that masked women's oppression by presenting ornamental beauty as empowerment. In their view, glamour operated as an oppressive strategy, concealing the authentic, militant female subject beneath a glossy surface of perfection. Within this framework, simplicity of appearance was interpreted as a natural state and as a source of truth and liberation.

By contrast, more recent feminist and queer perspectives recognize the disruptive potential of glamour. Neo-burlesque, as discussed by Siebler,⁶ exemplifies this shift: performances that exaggerate glamour's codes can destabilize patriarchal expectations of femininity, demonstrating how the very aesthetic once condemned as

⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books, 1981).

⁵ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁶ Siebler, “What's So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

oppressive may be reappropriated to challenge gender norms. Instead of being treated as a linear progression of “waves,” these divergent feminist voices show that debates about glamour and female sexuality have always been plural and contested, ranging from rejection to strategic reclamation.

Theoretical frameworks

The aesthetics of glamour is a multilayered phenomenon that can be analyzed through various theoretical perspectives, including feminist theory, performance theory, visual culture, and camp aesthetics. To fully grasp its dimensions – from its subversive potential to its role in the reproduction of patriarchal gender norms – it is essential to rely on key concepts offered by contemporary theoretical frameworks. One of the fundamental premises in the study of glamour is its function as a visual code that governs the desires of spectators through the dialectic of accessibility and unattainability. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,⁷ analyzes the ways in which the female body is glamourized within patriarchal visual culture and popular media, simultaneously becoming an object of desire and control. This ambiguity makes glamour an ideal field for examining power relations in the context of gender representation.

When talking about the framework of the gender performativity theory, Judith Butler emphasizes that gender is not an essential category but is produced through a series of repeated acts.⁸ In this sense, glamour can be understood as a gendered practice – a visual and aesthetic construct that allows for the reconstruction and redefinition of femininity. The performative nature of glamour is particularly evident in phenomena such as neo-burlesque and drag culture, where glamour is used as a tool for parodying and deconstructing gender norms⁹.

The concept of camp aesthetics, first theoretically articulated by Susan Sontag in her essay *Notes on Camp*,¹⁰ is crucial for understanding glamour in the context of exaggeration and stylization. Camp aesthetics prioritize form over content, irony, theatricality, and deliberate artificiality – all characteristics that make glamour a distinctive visual phenomenon. According to Sontag, camp disrupts patriarchal mandates by reassigning traits culturally coded as “feminine” – such as passivity, softness, or ornamentality – to unexpected bodies and contexts. Within this framework, glamour within camp aesthetics functions as a subversive tool, allowing women to play with stereotypes of femininity in a way that both affirms and parodies them. The neo-burlesque, as an example of camp aesthetics, employs exaggerated representations of femininity

⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

⁹ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 275–92.

to undermine the norms that dictate what constitutes “true” female beauty.¹¹ This artistic performance of femininity not only expands the boundaries of gender expression but also creates a space for a feminist reappropriation of glamour. Glamour is often viewed as a tool of objectification and sexualization of women, particularly in the context of popular culture and the fashion industry. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, argues that women, through idealized images of beauty, are subjected to aesthetic norms that simultaneously constrain and appear to liberate.¹² This ambivalent status of glamour reflects an internal tension within the feminist theory – while some see it as a strategy of discipline and control, others interpret it as a form of resistance and female empowerment.

Deborah Ferreday offers a different perspective on glamour, suggesting that it can also function as a tool of feminist subversion.¹³ Neo-burlesque and glamourized performative practices provide women with opportunities to reclaim control over their bodies and the ways they are represented in the public sphere. This opens up a space for empowerment through aesthetics, where glamour becomes a means of expressing individual identity rather than merely an instrument of social control. In this context, Diana Crane’s work *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* is particularly relevant. Crane examines fashion as a mechanism of social differentiation, shaping identities through class, gender, and cultural codes.¹⁴ When applied to glamour and burlesque, her analysis becomes especially useful in understanding the relationship between aesthetics and power, as well as how clothing and bodily stylization can serve as tools of both emancipation and control. Crane emphasizes that fashion cannot be seen purely as an aesthetic practice but rather as a complex social phenomenon that simultaneously reflects and reproduces power hierarchies. In this sense, burlesque as a performance art can be interpreted as a playful engagement with fashion codes, where glamourized bodies take control over how they are displayed and perceived. By doing so, burlesque not only employs aesthetic patterns of glamour but also deconstructs them, creating new possibilities for identity expression beyond the dominant norms often present in fashion and visual cultures.

The feminist understanding of glamour has developed and transformed in response to shifting historical and cultural contexts. Many early feminist voices – especially those aligned with suffrage activism and strands of radical feminism, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon,¹⁵ largely rejected glamour as a patriarchal strategy that reduces women to objects of desire. Radical critiques emphasized that glamourized femininity functioned as a mask concealing women’s oppression

¹¹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (SAGE Publications, 2009).

¹² Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (William Morrow and Company, 1991).

¹³ Deborah Ferreday, *Online Belongings: Fantasy, Affect and Web Communities* (Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁴ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books, 1981) and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

by idealizing ornamental beauty as empowerment. However, with later feminist debates, glamour began to be reinterpreted as a potential tool for empowerment. Angela McRobbie argues that contemporary feminists have recognized how glamour can serve as a means of redefining female subjectivity and autonomy.¹⁶ In this view, glamour is no longer seen solely as a mechanism of oppression but also as a potential instrument of feminist reclamation. The neo-burlesque, which reinterprets traditional gender roles through conscious exaggeration and humor, has become a symbol of this shift. These performances simultaneously parody and destabilize patriarchal codes of femininity, demonstrating how glamour can function as a platform for exploring identity, sexuality, and power. The aesthetics of glamour is therefore a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to either an instrument of oppression or emancipation. Its analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating feminist critique, performance theory, visual culture, and camp aesthetics. While glamour can operate as a tool of social control, it simultaneously allows for subversive reinterpretations of femininity and creates space for new forms of gender expression. In this regard, the study of glamour extends beyond its aesthetic dimension to encompass its political, cultural, and social implications.

Burlesque between subversion and the reproduction of gender norms

How does the trajectory of neo-burlesque and striptease intersect with emancipatory processes that have been unfolding since the second half of the 19th century? Can burlesque be considered a feminist genre? Or, conversely, does it reinforce traditional gender paradigms by objectifying the female body—perhaps even more so in the case of striptease?

The trajectory of burlesque and neo-burlesque must be considered in relation to both historical and contemporary emancipatory processes. While striptease has often been criticized for reinforcing patriarchal paradigms by presenting the female body as an object of consumption, feminist and queer reinterpretations of burlesque complicate this picture. As Siebler¹⁷ argues, neo-burlesque performers use parody, excess, and irony to destabilize conventional notions of “female beauty” and to reclaim control over how femininity is displayed. Groups such as *The Velvet Hammer* in Los Angeles, as well as queer re-stagings of *Cabaret* on Broadway, exemplify how glamour can be reappropriated as a feminist and queer strategy of resistance. These performances highlight the tension between spectacle and critique: while they borrow from the vocabulary of striptease, they transform it into a space where marginalized identities articulate alternative forms of subjectivity. In this sense, neo-burlesque does not resolve the ambiguity of glamour but makes that ambiguity visible, turning it into a site of political and aesthetic negotiation.

¹⁶ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

¹⁷ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

The etymology of *burlesque* traces back to the Italian *burlesco*, meaning “playful, amusing,” derived from *burla* “joke, prank, absurdity, trifle.” According to *The Dictionary of the Theatre* by Patrice Pavis, burlesque is defined as: “A work that employs exaggerated forms of comedy, presenting elevated and noble themes in a direct, sometimes vulgar manner; a kind of grotesque pastiche that transforms serious genres into the mundane, rendering even the most solemn subjects bizarre and entertaining”¹⁸. Notably, the dictionary does not address the “gendered dimension” of burlesque – yet it is an explicitly feminine-coded performance form, with its femininity serving as the primary vehicle of its transgressive nature. It is worth noting that burlesque experienced significant revivals at key moments of societal crisis – first at the turn of the 1960s into the 1970s, and later in the second and third decades of the 21st century. These were historical moments marked by two major shifts: first, an increased presence of women in the labor market, leading to greater financial independence; and second, a growing awareness among women, particularly regarding their ability to influence their surroundings through appearance and bodily performance. Burlesque operates in a liminal space between subversion and complicity in traditional gender norms. On the one hand, its theatrical exaggeration of femininity, humor, and self-awareness allows for a playful deconstruction of patriarchal ideals of beauty and desirability. On the other hand, its reliance on the spectacle of the female body can be interpreted as reinforcing the very gendered expectations it seeks to challenge. This duality makes burlesque a particularly complex and ambiguous cultural practice, one that invites continuous reinterpretation through feminist discourse.

Stereotypical images of femininity form the foundation of neo-burlesque – they serve as the basis for performers’ stage identities. Scholars of neo-burlesque argue that it is possible to “use the oppressor’s logic to undermine his regime,” which is precisely the case in the neo-burlesque. By exploiting feminine clichés through tactics such as parody and hyperbole, the neo-burlesque challenges traditional gender norms while simultaneously reveling in them. It is essential to recognize the connections between the neo-burlesque, camp, queer identities, and critiques of heteronormativity. The category of camp proves particularly useful in capturing the interplay of femininity and glamour that is integral to neo-burlesque. However, camp remains an elusive and contested concept, subject to ongoing theoretical debates and competing claims over its ownership. Its inclusion within the framework of so-called women’s studies is still often regarded as a borrowed concept from queer studies.

Camp represents the triumph of the aesthetic over the moral, viewing the world exclusively as an aesthetic phenomenon – not in terms of beauty, but in terms of *technical execution* and stylization. In camp, style dominates over content. It is consciously superficial, and it is precisely this self-awareness that makes it glamorous, ironic, and deliberate. As Sontag¹⁹ observes, camp disrupts patriarchal mandates by reassigning culturally feminized traits – such as softness, ornamentality, or passivity – to unexpected bodies and contexts, thereby destabilizing conventional gender codes.

¹⁸ Parice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du Théâtre* (Éditions Sociales, 1980), 5.

¹⁹ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, 275–92.

When observing the neo-burlesque and, more broadly, glamour through the lens of camp aesthetics, we notice a highly self-aware performance that plays with existing conventions, gender stereotypes, and expectations. A particularly significant aspect of contemporary burlesque is that it is a genre dominated by women – not only on stage but also in the audience, where women typically make up around seventy percent of attendees. Moreover, the most engaged spectators actively participate in the performance, engaging in dress-up and following the *dress to impress* rule. This distinctly feminine nature of the performance, the active audience's role as co-conspirators, and the feedback loop of fantasy – where the aesthetics of the performers are mirrored in the audience and vice versa – are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of the neo-burlesque. Femininity in the neo-burlesque is performed and enacted according to the expectations of a female audience, which fundamentally shifts the meaning of gestures and stage actions inherited from the early 20th century *theatre of the absurd*. Performers of the neo-burlesque embody fantasies of women imagined by women, primarily for a female audience. Firstly, in creating their performances, neo-burlesque artists do not conform with the fantasies of male spectators. Instead, they draw upon their own imaginative projections and seek an *alternative* femininity. Secondly, their performances construct a kind of meta-fantasy – one of a woman fully aware of her worth, who embraces her body without shame and is unafraid of her own sexuality. In other words, she is not ashamed to *desire* or to *be desired*.

One influential example is *The Velvet Hammer*, a Los Angeles-based neo-burlesque troupe active since the 1990s. Their shows combine traditional burlesque aesthetics-corsets, feathers, high heels-with parody, humor, and irony, explicitly highlighting the artificiality of glamour. Unlike conventional striptease, these performances are designed for a predominantly female and queer audiences, turning spectators into collaborators who dress up, cheer, and often mimic the aesthetics of the performers. In this way, *The Velvet Hammer* creates a collective space where femininity is exaggerated to the point of absurdity, exposing its constructed nature while simultaneously reclaiming its pleasures.

A particularly striking case is the most recent revival of Cabaret (London 2021; Broadway transfer 2024), staged as an immersive Kit Kat Club experience. This production foregrounds the queer and neo-burlesque aesthetics, transforming glamour into a tool of solidarity among marginalized identities rather than a lure for the heterosexual male gaze. Here, glamour is no longer used to seduce an implied heterosexual male spectator but is instead mobilized to create solidarity among marginalized groups. Costuming, staging, and performance emphasize the performativity of gender and the instability of beauty norms, making the audiences acutely aware of how glamour can shift its meaning depending on the context. This re-staging highlights how glamour, when combined with the camp and queer politics, becomes a strategy of resistance rather than submission, offering new models of desire and subjectivity beyond the male gaze. The dual nature of glamour – as both a tool of control and a means of liberation – reflects and deepens divisions within the feminist thought. For

many, the glamorous woman is primarily a victim, a symbol of objectification and the exploitation of an exaggerated corporeality that serves patriarchal culture. However, with the emergence of the performative perspective within feminism,²⁰ this viewpoint began to shift, moving away from an exclusive focus on victimization. Glamorous femininity came to be understood as a performance of commentary on gender itself, revealing that femininity is not an essence but a series of stylized acts. While the public enactment of glamour may not necessarily be revolutionary in itself, it often challenges the supposed immutability and validity of dominant gender paradigms. The body of the glamourized actress, subjected to patriarchal power, simultaneously becomes a key site of resistance. The neo-burlesque explores the fluid meanings of femininity's ambivalent accessories-cosmetics, elegant lingerie, artifacts of seduction-striving to develop a new model of femininity with which contemporary women, familiar with feminist thought, can identify without guilt. This serves as a potential resolution to what may be an *apparent* contradiction inherent in contemporary womanhood, as expressed in the statement: "*I am a feminist, yet I love to feel beautiful*". The practice of fashion and beauty no longer disguises a "true" femininity but is instead used to construct and perform female identity. In this sense, the neo-burlesque can be seen as a form of practical exploration of female fantasy, where the role of *woman* is performed by *women* – similar to the drag queen phenomenon, but without cross-dressing. Glamour, within this framework, can be understood as a contested feminist strategy. This includes reclaiming the right to love, pleasure, and – on a linguistic level – the reclamation of language itself, particularly the *guerrilla reappropriation* of words once deemed vulgar when describing female corporeality.

Stage inclusion

Burlesque, as an artistic and performative form, is one of the rare spaces in contemporary visual culture where the body is not subjected to rigid patriarchal ideals of beauty, youth, or binary gender categories. While traditional models of glamour often function through exclusive aesthetic standards – shaping desirable, normative forms of femininity and masculinity – the neo-burlesque expands this definition, allowing diverse body types, sexualities, and gender identities to become part of the spectacle of glamour.²¹

One of the key aspects of the neo-burlesque is its inclusivity regarding age, body shape, and gender identities. On the burlesque stage, performers of various body types can be seen – from slender to fuller figures, from young to older performers – thus challenging the dominant notion that glamour is exclusively the privilege of young, highly stylized bodies that conform to conventional beauty standards.²² Burlesque celebrates bodily diversity not by concealing specificities but by elevating them

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

²¹ Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²² Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (Speck Press, 2004).

through the aesthetics of exaggeration, irony, and deliberate theatricality. In this context, it functions as an artistic practice that affirms bodily diversity and rejects socially imposed standards of the “perfect” appearance.

Moreover, neo-burlesque has long been a space of gender fluidity and experimentation with identities. Cross-dressing performers, drag queens and kings, as well as individuals who do not conform to traditional gender categories, find their place on the burlesque stage, making it a site of subversion and deconstruction of heteronormativity.²³ In this sense, burlesque serves not only as a venue for artistic expression but also as a political space where gender identities are shaped and reinterpreted beyond rigid binary divisions²⁴.

Performers such as Moira Finucane in Australia or Jett Adore from the Chicago-based troupe *The Stage Door Johnnies* exemplify how the neo-burlesque incorporates drag and gender fluid performance into its repertoire. Similarly, shows like *Dragula* – a competition celebrating drag, horror, and burlesque aesthetics – demonstrate how the stage becomes a platform for queer creativity that both parodies and redefines glamour. These examples illustrate how the neo-burlesque is not limited to reappropriating femininity but also destabilizes the very notion of gender itself, turning glamour into a shared language of experimentation across identities.

Katherine Liepe-Levinson highlights that burlesque and strip performances allow performers to take control over how their bodies are presented and perceived, positioning burlesque as a platform for reaffirming bodily autonomy.²⁵ This openness to diverse bodily, gender, and age identities points to burlesque’s potential *democratic* character. Unlike other forms of performing arts that often favor specific body types and normative aesthetic standards, burlesque creates space for expression for anyone willing to participate in its aesthetics of exaggeration and symbolic play. By doing so, burlesque not only pushes the boundaries of traditional glamour but also emphasizes its potential to become an inclusive, emancipatory, and liberating practice.²⁶

At its core, the (neo)burlesque is an artistic form that demonstrates that glamour is not reserved solely for those who fit conventional beauty ideals. Instead, it can serve as a powerful tool of expression and empowerment for anyone who steps onto the stage. Within its spectacle, *any* body can become a body of glamour. The burlesque stage, therefore, can be seen as a space where the exclusivity of visual desirability is dismantled, and glamour becomes an accessible and subversive art form for all.

In contrast to the inclusive and experimental practices of the contemporary neo-burlesque, the work of Dita Von Teese highlights how burlesque can also function as a celebration of traditional, highly stylized glamour. Drawing on the iconography of Old Hollywood, Von Teese performs a meticulously polished femininity

²³ Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁴ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

²⁵ Katherine Liepe-Levinson, *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (Routledge, 2002).

²⁶ Lara Nielsen, and Patricia Ybarra, eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

centered on corsets, sequins, and fetish-inspired elegance—an aesthetic often aligned with the heterosexual male gaze. While she has framed her artistic control over staging and branding as a form of agency, her performances generally reproduce patriarchal beauty norms and exclude the bodily diversity embraced by queer and feminist burlesque communities. This juxtaposition underscores the ambivalence of glamour: it can serve as a mechanism of commercial spectacle rooted in normative ideals, or as a feminist and queer practice of subversion, where gender, body type, and modes of self-expression are radically expanded.

Glamour and feminism: between liberation and judgment

The history of glamour is inseparable from the history of feminism – at once excluded as a narrative of the ornamental female body and reclaimed as an alternative story of emancipation. In contemporary contexts, this relationship remains marked by ambivalence. Today's feminism is not a singular discourse but a plurality of feminisms, each offering different conceptualizations of agency, desire, and emancipation. Within the neo-burlesque, glamour is reimagined through parody, irony, and exaggeration, becoming a feminist and queer strategy of visibility, yet it remains haunted by the persistent suspicion that any cultural practice centered on female corporeality must inevitably reproduce patriarchal logic.

The examples of inclusive burlesque festivals, queer cabaret, or feminist performers such as Perle Noire and Dirty Martini demonstrate how glamour is being reshaped as a democratic and accessible aesthetic, no longer reserved for bodies conforming to narrow ideals of beauty. At the same time, figures like Dita Von Teese embody the continuity of traditional, highly stylized glamour – aligned with the heterosexual male gaze – reminding us that burlesque oscillates between reproduction and subversion of gender norms. This tension underscores the ambivalence of glamour: it destabilizes even as it seduces, it liberates even as it reproduces structures of power.

Rather than asking whether glamour is simply oppressive or emancipatory, it may be more productive to see it as a space of negotiation – between patriarchy and feminist reclamation, between commercial spectacle and queer resistance, between exclusion and inclusivity. The trajectory of the neo-burlesque suggests that glamour will continue to evolve in dialogue with shifting feminist and queer discourses, opening up new possibilities for agency, pleasure, and collective identity. What remains at stake is not whether emancipation can take place outside the body, but how bodies themselves – on stage and beyond – can become sites of reimagining desire, subjectivity, and power.

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Queering Time through Queer Desire. Futurity in Two Post-Yugoslav Novels

Abstract: The present article approaches two post-Yugoslav literary texts, *Zovite me Esteban* (*Call Me Esteban*) by Lejla Kalamujić (2015) and *U zoni* (*In the Zone*) by Lamija Begagić (2016), through the conceptual lens of queer utopian hermeneutics by José Esteban Muñoz. Focusing closely on a few moments/chapters from the texts, it aims to sketch out one way of recognizing futurity and hope in post-Yugoslav literary narratives. At the beginning, the article explores how queer desire produces ecstatic moments in the chapter/story “Bella Ciao” from *Zovite me Esteban*. Remembering the ecstatic moments further nurtures the narrator’s utopic imagination, as well as her emotional recovery, propelling the narrative forward. In the next section, the article analyzes how queer desire generates joys of gender dissidence and the pleasures of collective belonging, serving as glimpses of future in the present in the novel *U zoni*. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that both texts suggest queer futurity is inextricably linked to the knowledge of the past, specifically of the local anti-fascist heritage, offering a distinct regional perspective on the concept of queer time.

Keywords: futurity; queer time; post-Yugoslav hope; post-Yugoslav literature; Lejla Kalamujić; Lamija Begagić.

In this article, I draw on José Esteban Muñoz’s seminal work, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* in approaching two post-Yugoslav literary texts, the prose collection *Zovite me Esteban* by Lejla Kalamujić (2015) and the novel *U zoni* by Lamija Begagić (2016). The impetus for this analysis is a broader shift towards studying futurity¹ and ‘positivity’, for example positive remembrance in memory studies,² and a recognition of the analytical and political value of reparative approaches, specifically to post-Yugoslav literary texts. In her famous essay on paranoid and reparative reading, Sedgwick had criticized the dominance of the ‘hermeneutics of

¹ For example: Amir Eshel, *Futurity. Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (Verso Books, 2013); Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (Yale University Press, 2015).

² For example: Ann Rigney, “Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic,” *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 368–80; Dijana Jelača, Danijela Lugarić Vukas, and John Frederick Bailyn, eds. *The Future of (Post)Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives* (State University of New York Press, 2018); Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Jessica Ortner, “Introduction: Memories of Joy,” *Memory Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 5–10.

suspicion' in scholarly work and its equation with critical inquiry as such.³ Paranoid readings, Sedgwick argued, are practices in cultural studies marked by a suspicion towards the object of study, characterized by "subversive parody" and "an anticipation of hidden patterns of violence".⁴ As such, they are just *one* way of seeking and organizing knowledge and are thus limited and sometimes misleading.⁵ For starters, paranoid approaches will obscure the reparative aspects of cultural practices.⁶ Translated into my two examples, without the reparative approach, the hopeful and the future-oriented aspects of the two texts would remain insufficiently acknowledged, obscured by the narratives' despair or relegated to the sidelines.

Dijana Simić has shown the fruitfulness of the reparative approach to the same two texts.⁷ Relying on Sedgwick and Felski, she argues that the two queer narratives offer readers a space for recognizing and understanding their own queer identity, and that they, at the same time, thematize recognition within the text. Thus, she claims further, they are "breaking the silences" about marginalized queer lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina and are establishing a queer counterpublic, the process being deeply reparative to the (queer) readers. The present article builds upon these insights, focusing more narrowly on what is *within* texts, and specifically on their utopic imagination, rather than concepts of recognition and reparation.

Other than Simić's essay, there are only a handful of articles in post-Yugoslav literary studies that employ a form of reparative reading (even if they do not refer to this concept) or focus on futurity in literary works.⁸ Apart from discussing different authors than I do here, they all rely on concepts that predominantly belong to memory studies (such as nostalgia and trauma) and do not engage with queerness. This does not render them irrelevant to my research; on the contrary, I propose that there is an interpretative treasure to be found in bringing together memory studies and theories of queer temporality. However, the scope of this article does not allow for tapping into this analysis.

A recent study that reparatively approaches queer literary texts through the concepts of mourning and melancholia is Vladislav Beronja's article on Dino Pešut's *Daddy Issues* and Espi Tomić's *Your Love is King*.⁹ Beronja examines how these texts

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁷ Dijana Simić, "Recognizing Better Selves: A Reparative Reading of Contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian Queer Literature," in *Affective Worldmaking: Narrative Counterpublics of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Silvia Schultermantl, Jana Aresin, Si Sophie Pages Whybrew, and Dijana Simić (Transcript Verlag, 2022).

⁸ Ajla Demiragić, "What Remains of Mostar? Archive and Witness in Marsela Sunjić's Goodnight, City," in *Post-Yugoslav Constellations*, edited by Vlad Beronja and Stijn Vervaeke (De Gruyter, 2016), 129–48; Maria Mayr, "The European Future of Postsocialist Nostalgia in German-Language Literature about Former Yugoslavia," *Colloquia Germanica* 51, no. 3/4 (2020): 325–44; Sanja Ivanov and Michel Mallet, "Recollecting Fragments, Rethinking the Future: Saša Stanišić's Assemblages of a Transnational Europe," in *Postsocialist Memory in Contemporary German Culture*, edited by Michel Mallet, Maria Mayr, and Kristin Rebien (De Gruyter, 2024).

⁹ Vladislav Beronja, "The Drama of the Queer Child: Melancholia and Mourning in Contemporary Queer Narrative in Croatia," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2 (2022).

shift the politics of queer mourning to social class (and not only sexuality) as a category of historical injury, inflected with the post-Yugoslav and post-war context.¹⁰ The successful *Bildungs*, and the openness to the future, come with the intergenerational working through historical trauma, which happens by an integration of difference and (national/ethnic and class, and not only sexual) otherness into a new self.¹¹ The same framework could be productively applied to *Zovite me Esteban* and *U zoni*, and the results would be complementary to the results I aim to reach in this article, particularly concerning the reimagining of an unstable subjectivity. However, while Beronja focuses on melancholia and mourning to end up in recognizing text's futurity, I aim to focus on the positive in the text, on the hopeful or ecstatic – even if it is never disconnected from the negative and mournful – to show how structurally important the hopeful moments are to these texts.

My article also partly joins Mijatović and Willems's call for the temporal turn in post-Yugoslav (literary) studies as the best way to counter sequential temporality – linear chronology that purposefully confuses causality and succession – imposed by ethno-nationalist and neoliberal elites. The authors propose exploring the co-existence of multiple post-Yugoslav timelines and thus a recognition of the post-Yugoslav condition as an ongoing process.¹² In a separate study, Mijatović proposes a temporal structure of post-Yugoslav literature as “asynchronous simultaneity”, which would entail engaging with the fragmented, overlapping, heterogeneous temporal layers.¹³ To a certain degree, their conceptualization of post-Yugoslav time is similar to queer time, not simply because it is non-linear, as not every non-linear time is queer time, but because at its center is the goal of deconstructing stable subjectivity and reimagining relationality.¹⁴ The goal of critical (post)-Yugoslav studies, according to Mijatović, is not to explicate a common identity across national/cultural/linguistic borders nor to create a new hybrid identity, but to recognize and explore “a non-coalescing mutuality, a crosscutting of switching-points, and adjacency without adherence”.¹⁵ This view of subjectivity and relationality aligns with Beronja's above argument that openness to the future comes from an integration of otherness into the self in a way that resists closure or fixed belonging. Even though it also aligns with my interpretation of the two texts, I do not extensively rely on these insights due to my narrowed focus on the processes of queering time, specifically through queer desire, and on locating *hope* in the narratives.

¹⁰ He relies here on Natalija Iva Stepanović's argument that in Croatian queer *Bildungsroman*, the queer protagonist's marginality does not depend solely on non-normative sexuality, but also on other categories such as national/ethnic origin or class. Natalija Iva Stepanović, “Iz ormara na police: o odrastanju i izlasku iz ormara u hrvatskoj Književnosti,” *Umjetnost riječi* 64, no. 1–2 (2020): 52.

¹¹ Beronja, “The Drama of the Queer Child,” 20, 25.

¹² Aleksandar Mijatović and Brian Willems (eds.), *Reconsidering (Post-)Yugoslav Time. Towards the Temporal Turn in the Critical Study of (Post)-Yugoslav Literatures* (Brill, 2022), 1–17.

¹³ Aleksandar Mijatović, *Temporalities of Post-Yugoslav Literature. The Politics of Time* (Lexington Books, 2020), 6–8.

¹⁴ Also suggested in the Carolyn Dinshaw, et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 187.

¹⁵ Mijatović, *Temporalities*, 7.

Muñoz presents a case for a utopian reading that aligns with Sedgwick's reparative hermeneutics.¹⁶ He claims that the present time, *straight time*, is toxic and impoverished for queers and other people who do not have the privilege of a majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations.¹⁷ The present state is a state of siege.¹⁸ Muñoz argues that hope as a critical methodology is a necessary tool in countering this present state of siege and the disabling force of political pessimism.¹⁹ A critical mode of hope for Muñoz is "a backward glance that enacts a future vision", which is putting the past into play with the present, and thus calling into question the tautological nature of the present, enabling us to see what is not yet here.²⁰ A critical mode of hope is double-layered: it is Muñoz's approach to objects of study, but it is also the temporal movement that these objects themselves exhibit. In other words, the interpreter uses this methodology to show it (the method of hope) at play inside the artwork. Relying on Ernst Bloch, Muñoz argues that hope can and often is disappointed, and is thus "vulnerable to charges of naivete, impracticality, or lack of rigor", but that is no reason to abandon it "as a critical thought process".²¹ He formulates the concept of queer utopian hermeneutics as a much-needed counternarrative to political nihilism, which is dominating the academic climate and bringing critical imagination into peril.

By political nihilism, Muñoz refers broadly to Sedgwick's take on paranoid readings, but more specifically, and primarily, he relates to queer negativity that had taken hold in queer studies. The most influential work on the antisocial thesis, and Muñoz's primary interlocutor, is Lee Edelman's *No Future*, which argues for embracing queerness' disruptiveness and negativity and rejecting all futurity, symbolically tied to the figure or the cult of the Child, which is always necessarily reproductive and hetero/homonormative. Queer negativity thus represents not an oppositional identity or a stable position, as queerness can never possess an essence, but an opposition to the politics of reproductive futurism, to which mainstream gay politics subscribe as well.²² Muñoz is equally critical of the "identitarian logic" of the pragmatic LGBT agendas, which aim solely for queer community's assimilation into "a corrupt and bankrupt social order", but he also argues that the antisocial approach ended up in "a

¹⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27. Muñoz here takes the concept of straight time from Jack Halberstam and is in general indebted to Halberstam's understanding of queer time as time outside of the heteronormative logic of paradigmatic markers of life experience, such as birth, marriage, reproduction, death; time which contains potentiality of a life unscripted by these markers. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), 1, 2, 6.

¹⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 4, 28, 86.

²¹ Ibid., 9, 10.

²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

romance of singularity and negativity”.²³ Iva Dimovska points out that an important difference between the two conceptualizations of queer temporality is precisely in the issue of subjectivity (Edelman’s focus) versus collectivity (Muñoz’s focus).²⁴ Dimovska, however, also makes an insightful point that both models of queer time ultimately share a utopian understanding of queerness as a rejection of normativity and linear temporality. For Edelman, queerness is embedded in the present and its enrichment, and its ability to reject the passing of time, while for Muñoz queerness is precisely in the movement between past, present and future.²⁵ The following analysis will show how these temporal movements, as well as the aspect of collectivity, are crucial for *Zovite me Esteban* and *U zoni*. This is why Muñoz’s queer utopian hope speaks to the two narratives more than queer negativity, but also more than related takes on optimism in conjunction with temporality, such as Lauren Berlant’s *cruel optimism* or Michael Snediker’s *queer optimism*. Both concepts reject futurity in a nuanced way, though differently: cruel optimism posits desiring for something unattainable (variations of ‘a good life’) as an obstacle to one’s flourishing in the current “impasse” moment, in the stuck present marked by perpetual crises,²⁶ while queer optimism is equally non-promissory, embedded in the present, yet arguing against queer pessimism.²⁷ Snediker’s queer optimism, even though non-futural, is complementary to Muñoz, as it emphasizes affirmative and sustaining optimism, present amidst and along much more recognized and recognizable loss and despair, as key to queerness’ survival.

The political and cultural nihilism in the post-Yugoslav context, against which I am arguing for a Muñozian approach, encompasses wider long-lasting disappointments with the transition to capitalism and democracy and post-war reconciliation processes, political apathy and distrust in political systems, as well as a pervading sense of loss of values and ideals.²⁸ Narrowing down to the immediate context of my analysis, and identifying the primary incentive for this analysis, nihilism is saturating the post-Yugoslav literary field. It weighs heavily on the literary imagination in the region. “The dramatization of loss and despair”, to rely on Muñoz’s words, is still the dominant approach of post-Yugoslav authors, without any “critical modality of hope”.²⁹ The two texts I am focusing on in this article are rare examples of, while incorporating loss and despair, trying to move beyond it. They seek an opening, a step

²³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10.

²⁴ Iva Dimovska, “Queering Time in Modernism and How to Read it: James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2021). Dimovska’s thesis examines how queerness produces particular temporality of the modernist narrative (*Ulysses* and *The Waves*), and how an ambiguous modernist temporality in turn participates in the construction and representation of a queer sexuality.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41–43.

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1–4.

²⁷ Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16, 23.

²⁸ For more on this, see Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat, “Introduction: Radical Politics in the Desert of Transition,” in *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism. Radical Politics After Yugoslavia*, ed. Igor Štiks and Srećko Horvat (Verso, 2015).

²⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 111.

beyond representing the dystopian present. In this way, they “nourish our sense of potentiality and [do] not reinforce our feeling of disappointment”.³⁰

The two texts are further selected because they narrate queer love and are formally alike. Although *Zovite me Esteban* is officially a short story collection, it can be read as a coming-of-age novel due to the significant narrative and character progression throughout the stories or chapters, as will be clear from the following analysis. *U zoni* is officially a first-person coming-of-age novel, made up of 24 short chapters; however, the chapters can function as relatively independent short stories.³¹ This provides a basis for my approach, which focuses closely on one specific story/chapter from each book to explore the possibility of more comprehensive readings of the two narratives through utopian hermeneutics. The thematic aspect makes the texts additionally well-suited for Muñoz’s queer utopian hermeneutics, though I would argue this approach applies to literary texts that do not thematize queer relationships and/or identities. Likewise, both novels can arguably be approached through a critical methodology of hope that does not center on queer identities, even though they should never be ignored. While focusing on the queerness in the two texts, my interest is primarily in the futurity of the narratives.

This aspect has already been recognized and briefly discussed in relation to *Zovite me Esteban*. In his overview of innovative themes and styles that seven women writers introduced in contemporary B&H literature, Ivan Šunjić portrays *Zovite me Esteban*’s narrator as a “spokesperson for an entire generation” in her thematization of losses which are felt as both personal and collective, and in her unique use of Yugoslonostalgia as “mourning for the future”.³² Lamija Begagić, further, connects the issue of futurity with queerness, claiming that the hopeful ending of the novel arrives through the narrator’s reconciliation of separated halves of her identity, which is inextricably linked to her queer identity.³³ In “Notes sur Lejla Kalamujić”, Slaven Crnić similarly claims that *Zovite me Esteban* transforms symbols of personal and collective loss, such as the typewriter that belonged to the narrator’s mother and is a socialist remnant, into objects of hope. Queerness is not insignificant in this constellation, because it is queer love and resistance to patriarchal norms that are nurturing hopefulness.³⁴ In this article, I aim to further explore these insights by applying Muñoz’s framework to the analysis of the two books.

Finally, I chose the two novels because they are relatively ignored, particularly in academic writing, and especially *U zoni*. Begagić’s book has yet to be translated into English, and even in the post-Yugoslav region, it has remained marginally recognized,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Simić has already made this claim. Simić, “Recognizing Better Selves,” 153.

³² Ivan Šunjić, “Narrative Strategies in the Works of Contemporary Female Writers of Bosnia & Herzegovina,” *Transcultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 51–53.

³³ Lamija Begagić, “Prikaz knjige ‘Zovite me Esteban’: Šta je meni moj život?,” *Lgbti.ba*, July 24, 2016.

³⁴ Slaven Crnić, “Recouvrer l’insaisissable: notes sur Lejla Kalamujić,” *Balkanologie* 18, no. 2 (2023).

mainly within the local queer cultural sphere.³⁵ Kalamujić's *Zovite me Esteban* has garnered international attention, receiving numerous positive literary reviews;³⁶ however, a more comprehensive analysis is still lacking.

Queering time through ecstasy

Straight time, Muñoz argues, is the autonaturalizing temporality; it is a closed-off here and now, a linear time. Queer time, on the other hand, is stepping out of that linearity, it is a sort of temporal unity of the past, present and future. Very often, this unity is established through ecstatic moments – queerness's time is the time of ecstasy.³⁷ Ecstasy represents a specific type of “affective excess” that is present in the quotidian, in the everyday, and that opens up the space for futurity. Analyzing James Schuyler's poem titled *A Photograph*, Muñoz recognizes the importance of moments of ecstasy recounted in the poem as central to its meaning and its utopic dimension. Schuyler's recounting of moments of queer relational bliss, ecstasies, represent an affective enclave that staves off the perils of the present.³⁸ The anxiousness and fear that characterize straight time for subjects without majoritarian belonging are denaturalized and overcome by an invocation of a future without the feelings of nervousness and fear. Desire is central to Muñoz's understanding of queer time, as it is through desire experienced in the past and recalled in the present that queer futurity is brought up.³⁹ Asking for and longing for another space and time while living inside straight time, claims Muñoz, “is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer”.⁴⁰ We can speak of a very similar utopian impulse present in *Zovite me Esteban*, particularly in the chapter titled “Bella Ciao”.

Zovite me Esteban lyrically recounts the narrator's losses in pre- and postwar Sarajevo, from the personal loss of her mother to the degradation in and ensuing from the Yugoslav wars: the collapse of industry (the symbol of the typewriter in the first chapter) and public infrastructure (“From Locomotive to Locomotive”), the splitting of family through wars (“The Four Seasons”), and the loss of solidarity (“Das ist Walter”). In “Bella Ciao”, the narrator remembers a woman (Bella) from her neighborhood in Sarajevo who aroused new feelings in the narrator as a girl and helped her feel less lonely. The narrator's memory is filled with ecstatic moments. For example, the moment of meeting her immediately strikes the narrator; Bella becomes almost like an obsession for the girl: “I couldn't shake the memory of you: the next day, the day

³⁵ Nera Mešinović, “Roman ‘U zoni’: Lezbejska ljubavna priča sa zeničkih ulica, oživljena u sjećanju,” *Lgbti.ba*, March 31, 2017.

³⁶ Begagić, “Prikaz knjige”; Carola Ebeling, “Die Kunst des Verlierens,” *Zeit Online*, September 22, 2020; Tobias Kraus, “Prägender Zerfall,” *Untergrund-Blättle*. July 27, 2021.

³⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 187.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

after that, the days that followed.”⁴¹ Some years later, when they meet again, and Bella greets the eager and shy narrator, “Something had thawed in me,” she writes.⁴² “I emphatically proclaimed the sunset beyond compare.”⁴³ Filled with self-aware humor, the narrator describes her unmatched excitement and happiness that night, all the more striking for the seemingly banal interaction that transpired between Bella and her.

Why is Bella so important to the narrator, or why are these ecstatic moments important for the narrative? The narrator herself gives a response at the end of the chapter, speaking to Bella: “Bella, ciao! [...] I swear to you I’ll remember you madly [...] Because you must know, you being there made it easier for me. Know this, too: people will pass by. They’ll come better and braver than I”.⁴⁴ Similarly as in Muñoz’s interpretation of Schuyler’s poem, we have here an invocation of a future “without nervousness and fear,”⁴⁵ a future of “better and braver” people. It is the memory of the past happiness and past desire, the memory of Bella, that gives grounds for and fosters this hope for the future. An additional aspect is present in Kalamujić’s chapter: the memory of “queer relational bliss” is here at the same time a memory of both a *predecessor* and a *comrade*. Bella is a predecessor to the narrator, a lesbian woman⁴⁶ whose presence in the narrator’s life made the world slightly easier for the young narrator. There is also a sense of comradeship: the chapter title signals it quite explicitly – “Bella ciao” is the title of an old Italian song widely famous contemporarily as a song of resistance against oppression. Queer relational bliss here transforms into or merges with a sense of comradeship. A sense of comradeship staves off the perils of the present and subverts the straight time, pointing towards and calling for another space and time.

This aspect does closely relate to an important part of Muñoz’s thinking. According to Muñoz, queer desire is not and could not be a desire for an isolated future for the individual, but a desire for “a collective futurity”, a collective *we* beyond the existing forms, a social order that is not-yet-here, as it could be and should be.⁴⁷ In “Ciao Bella,” the narrator’s personal and intimate ecstatic feelings towards Bella are inextricably linked to imagining a future of “better and braver” people. The desire for Bella fuels the desire for a collective that is not-yet-conscious. Likewise, the narrator’s

⁴¹ Lejla Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban* (Sandorf, 2017), 57. “Ne mogu te zaboraviti: sutra, prekosutra, dani prolaze.” Lejla Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban* (Sandorf Passage, 2021), 63.

⁴² Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 58. “Nešto se u meni otopilo.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 65.

⁴³ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 58. “Pričam na sav glas kako je večerašnji zalazak sunca bio ravan spektaklu.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 65.

⁴⁴ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 60. “Ciao, moja Bella! [...] Kunem se da ću te ludo pamti. [...] Jer moraš znati: zato što si ti bila tu, meni je bilo lakše. A znaj i ovo: prolazit će ljudi. Doći će bolje i hrabrije od mene.” Kalamujić, *Call me Esteban*, 67.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

⁴⁶ Kalamujić’s narrator does not explicitly identify Bella as a lesbian woman, but this can be assumed from her identification with Bella and the identification of Bella with queer subjects the narrator recognizes on the streets of Sarajevo. I also rely on Simić’s interpretation that the narrator uses the language of silence to signal Bella’s lesbian identity (“Recognizing Better Selves,” 152, 161).

⁴⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20, 26.

anxiousness and fear, though deeply personal, are still considered shared, not hers exclusively. The narrator encounters people on the streets of Sarajevo in whom she recognizes both Bella and herself, in whom she recognizes loneliness and fear.⁴⁸ At the same time, as Simić has argued for the same point in Kalamujić's text, encountering and recognizing oneself in other queer lives is deeply reparative.⁴⁹ Queer hope emerges from these affirmative feelings of reparation, and vice versa; reparation is fostered by queer hope. Snediker similarly recognizes the affirmative powers of queer desire and the ecstatic, even though he frames ecstasy as a sustaining and enduring ardor in the present, and not a transient and transcendent moment, which corresponds to his non-futural orientation.⁵⁰ Such a reading of *Zovite me Esteban* would underscore the reparative dimension of the queer desire; however, it would also render invisible the chapter's very crucial orientation to the future and collectivity.

A futural orientation of the chapter through the ecstatic moments further stands out in the context of the whole novel. Almost precisely in the middle of the book is a chapter titled "Molba za Elizabeth" ("An Appeal to Elizabeth"), where the narrator recounts the escalation of her depression and its tipping point, leading to her hospitalization. After this chapter, a process of recovery begins with a romantic relationship and culminates in the narrator's ultimate acceptance of loss, free from feelings of guilt or overwhelming sadness. "Bella Ciao" comes near the beginning of this recovery process, right after the two chapters on the romantic relationship. In other words, remembering this "queer relational bliss" in remembering Bella represents one of the key moments of the narrator's recovery. The utopic impulse pushes the narrative forward.

The utopian impulse of "Bella Ciao" and *Zovite me Esteban* does not have much to do with banal optimism or cheerfulness. The narrator "writes from a depressive position [...] but reaches beyond the affective force-field of the present".⁵¹ This understanding of the utopian impulse is aligned with Terry Eagleton's definition of hope as "complex, able to recognize nuances in the world",⁵² as opposed to optimism. Hope arises from a profound understanding of the situation's severity; it is filled with reason, recognizing bleakness, desiring what is yet not there but is attainable.⁵³ Lisa Duggan and Muñoz have also argued that *educated* hope comprehends fear and risk and exists in close dialectical relation with hopelessness.⁵⁴ This double-layered hope is what I argue characterizes Kalamujić's narrative – it is neither pure optimism nor melancholia.

⁴⁸ Kalamujić, *Zovite me Esteban*, 59.

⁴⁹ Simić, "Recognizing Better Selves," 154.

⁵⁰ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 65.

⁵¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

⁵² Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, 33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁴ Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 275–83.

“Our spaces of freedom.” Glimpses of queer future

The protagonist-narrator of Lamija Begagić's *U zoni* recounts growing up in Zenica during the breakup of Yugoslavia, the rise of nationalism, the repatriarchalization of the society, violence, and economic collapse. The city is filled with ghosts of the past “which stride through this city as if through a postapocalyptic set of a cheap Hollywood production”.⁵⁵ She remembers one summer during her youth in Zenica when “Mujahedeens” appeared in the town and policed the teenagers who were kissing in public, chasing them away with stones and shouts.⁵⁶ She recounts her homophobic cousin's violence that almost broke apart the extended family.⁵⁷ Going to the doctor's office brings back the memory of a Serbian doctor who was taken away and executed during the war.⁵⁸ This then further brings up memories of her Serbian school friends leaving the town and Muslim refugees arriving.⁵⁹ Throughout the novel, the narrator paints a picture of the collapsed industry and economic hardship. For the young narrator and her girlfriend, the city's reach was “ubitačan” or murderous: “Zenica would always catch up with us that year, no matter where we ran”.⁶⁰ The narrator eventually gets the chance through her sports career and runs away from Zenica, “This suffocating city that [...] counts our touches as traffic violations”.⁶¹ In the midst of this world, the narrator and her teenage love would hike up to the mountain Smetovi next to Zenica, hiding away from the city. “That whole summer Smetovi were our only space of freedom.”⁶² “We licked the sweat as wounds [...] secretly dreaming of walls [...] one room and one bed.”⁶³

Stepping out of Zenica for the young lovers is stepping out of straight time, out of the stultifying here and now. Spaces of freedom are also actively conquered – Smetovi turned into spaces of freedom through the young lovers' practice of freedom, through their defiance to the majoritarian heteronormative culture. “The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support”.⁶⁴ A utopian impulse or a surplus that functions as an illumination of utopic (of the not-yet-here) can be present in the

⁵⁵ “[...] kakvi ovim gradom koračaju kao kakvim postapokaliptičnim setom jeftine holivudske produkcije.” *U zoni* is not translated into English, therefore all translations are mine. Lamija Begagić, *U zoni* (Fabrika knjiga, 2016), 96.

⁵⁶ Begagić, *U zoni*, 63–68.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 97–102.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 103–109.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 84. “Znala nas je Zenica te godine sustizati, ma gdje bježale.”

⁶¹ Ibid., 94. “Učmali grad što [...] broji nam dodire kao saobraćajne prestupe.”

⁶² Ibid., 84. “Cijelo su to ljeto Smetovi bili naš jedini prostor slobode.”

⁶³ Ibid. “Lizale smo znoj kao rane [...] potajno sanjajući zidove [...] jednu sobu i jedan krevet.”

⁶⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 91.

quotidian. The ordinary, the everyday, can be laden with potentiality.⁶⁵ Small gestures, such as sharing joy and love despite a hostile environment, speak to what is not-yet-here and point out that the present state is not all there is. These small gestures represent glimpses of the whole, i.e., glimpses of queer future in the present.⁶⁶ The utopian function of art for Muñoz is precisely in these glimpses, in moments of “anticipatory illumination” that “cut through fragmenting darkness and allow us to see the politically enabling whole.”⁶⁷ The teenage story in the novel does not have a happy ending, as it concludes with the narrator leaving Zenica and her lover ultimately too afraid to defy the conventions. “[...] I am also running away from Aida and her no, no, Alma, I can’t, family is more important than us”.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the story is ultimately also about a moment containing a relational potential worth holding onto. The story is about the desire itself, the daring of it, and the performing of it, which is, despite loss or disappointment, a utopian and queer desire. It is “a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.”⁶⁹ Even if Aida ultimately comes to accept that which is not enough, Alma, the narrator, indeed does not.

Muñoz’s queer futurity is “not an end but an opening or a horizon.”⁷⁰ Utopia is not a fixed schema; it is not and can never be prescriptive of futurity.⁷¹ Here, Muñoz primarily relies on Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the gesture, which he relates to Bloch’s idea of the not-yet-here. The gesture is not the coherence or totality of movement, nor a monolithic act directed toward an “end”. As such, it is exemplary of the politics of ‘means without ends.’⁷² “The gesture is utopian in that it resists the goal-oriented tautological present.”⁷³ The moments of intimacy that the lovers share in the mountains above the city are *gestures* laden with potentiality, illuminating a possibility of a different world, and moments that step out of straight time.

Queering of time in this scene, similarly as in *Zovite me Esteban*, contains an additional layer through the reference to the partisan monument in the mountain. The lovers would lay down at the foot of the Monument to the Fallen Partisan Detachment from Zenica. “All we had was the pale yellowness of the burnt grass beneath us and the washed-out redness of the once bright five-pointed star that looked down on us from the tall monument, the only witness to the consummation of our love. We

⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 55, 61.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁸ “[...] bježim i od Aide i njenog Ne, ne, Alma, ne mogu, preča mi je porodica od nas,” Begagić, *U zoni*, 94.

⁶⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 96. Muñoz here relies on Adorno’s understanding of utopia as intimately close to critique or negation. For Adorno, utopia is a firm negation of things as they are, as the negation points to how things should or could be. Ibid., 27.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91

⁷¹ Ibid., 97, 100.

⁷² Ibid., 89, 91.

⁷³ Ibid., 162.

looked, when we weren't eating each other with our eyes, at that star, keeping our eyes high, trying to ignore the city below us."⁷⁴

Queer desire and moments of joy are linked to the defiant remembering of local and regional anti-fascist struggle. The monument and the red star are symbols of the past that the majoritarian society in the here and now wants to erase. "Queer time disrupts the forward flow of time in the narrative, and usually this forward flow is represented by an inevitable social progression towards marriage and reproduction", claims Iva Dimovska.⁷⁵ We see in this scene that the inevitable social progression that the narrator is problematizing is not just towards marriage and reproduction, but also to the post-socialist transition to capitalism and the post-Yugoslav transition to (ethno-nationalist) nation-states. The present time, straight time, is inflected not only by patriarchal gender and sexual norms, but also by, and in connection to, the rejection of the anti-fascist heritage and a "normative force of the neoliberal progress".⁷⁶ Queer time redefines future "as something that does not simply lie ahead, understood as a linear extension of the past and the present."⁷⁷ Beronja argues that Yugonostalgia can be coded as queer insofar as it disrupts "the homogeneity and inevitability of the post-socialist present" and opens up alternative modes of living with difference.⁷⁸

Gestures or moments similar to the one above are dispersed throughout the novel. Daydreaming about a space of freedom for queer love is thematized in another chapter detailing the narrator's later relationship. This time, the two lovers have their private space, but it is precarious: small, lacking in heating.⁷⁹ It is also costly for them, as suggested by the opening sentence of the novel, which refers to electricity bills.⁸⁰ "Space of freedom" is also a collective of fellow table tennis sportswomen who are all either gay or gay allies. The narrator remembers the feeling of community and freedom they all shared in the tennis club, growing up in the 1990s in Zenica. It was the seemingly tedious chores, such as folding and unfolding tables, that specifically brought up these feelings of communality and ownership of their own space. It is a subtle yet suggestive contrast to straight time, which is the time of ethno-nationalist tensions and economic and industrial collapse amid wide-scale privatizations.⁸¹ Close

⁷⁴ "Sve što smo imale bilo je blijedo žutilo od spaljene trave pod nama i isprano crvenilo nekad jarke zvijezde petokrake što nas je gledala sa visokog spomenika, jedina nazočivši konzumaciji naše ljubavi. Gledale smo, kad ne bismo pogledima jele jedna drugu, u tu zvijezdu, držeći pogled visoko, trudeći se ignorisati grad pod nama." Begagić, *U zoni*, 84.

⁷⁵ Dimovska, "Queering Time in Modernism," 238.

⁷⁶ Vladislav Beronja, "Yugoslavia with Strings Attached. Boris Kralj's *My Belgrade* (2011) and Dubravka Ugrešić and Davor Konjikišić's *There's Nothing Here!* (2020)," *ARTMargins and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (2023), 53, 54. Beronja here analyzes two photography collections as unique approaches to the past critical of practices of historicizing and musealizing socialist heritage and thus consigning it to the past and stripping it of its subversive powers in the present.

⁷⁷ Dimovska, "Queering Time in Modernism," 238.

⁷⁸ Beronja, "Yugoslavia with Strings Attached," 54, 61.

⁷⁹ Begagić, *U zoni*, 89.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30, 38.

to the novel's end, there is another gesture of queer desire that is queering straight time. The narrator and her partner, Ivona, share an intimate moment in public, invisible to everyone else. Alma reads desire in Ivona's eyes, and Alma communicates it back to her. They exchange a secret language of looks, a communicative physical gesture that Muñoz argues throughout his study "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude".⁸²

"In her thoughts, her lips descend on my shoulder, kiss it, then bite it, here and now, in the midst of this already full garden. [...] She smiles and winks at me. She knows everything, she understood everything [...] Ivona still understands well that secret language."⁸³

The gesture does not erase the reality of having to hide their love in public, nor is it an explicit, full-fledged fight against the conventions of those around them. A gesture is not a coherence or totality of movement, nor a monolithic act directed toward an "end".⁸⁴ However, it does "transmit and amplify the pleasures of queerness, the joys of gender dissidence", in the exact moment as it transmits the pains of queerness. As with queer futurity and radical hope in general, a gesture can contain "both positive and negative polarities simultaneously".⁸⁵

The scene preceding this one highlights the significance of the described moment of intimacy. Shortly before this exchange occurred, the narrator was reminded of an event that had taken place two and a half decades earlier, next to the same sports hall. She vividly remembers two boys, fellow sportsmen, whose father was beating them in full view of everyone.⁸⁶ The moment of warmth and care between the two lovers contrasts with the one from Alma's memory, highlighting the queer gesture as a kernel of utopia in the present, as an anticipatory illumination of another world, outside of "the crushing heteronormative tide".⁸⁷ There is arguably a certain distancing, if not an outright critique of reproductive futurism, suggested by the juxtaposition of scenes which underscores the patriarchal heteronormative violence against children. Still, I would argue that the narrative critiques heteronormativity on the basis of its *harm* to the Child, thus demonstrating a particular investment in the future. This is further evident in the narrator's hopefulness attached to her friend's teenage daughter, whose rebelliousness and resistance to the mainstream values recall Kalamujić's hope (here even realized!) for "better and braver" people to come. The teenage girl, symbolizing a newer generation, fosters the narrator's and ultimately the narrative's hope.⁸⁸

⁸² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 200, 65.

⁸³ "U mislima se njene usne spuštaju na moje rame, ljube ga, pa grizu, ovdje i sada, u sred ove već sasvim pune bašte. [...] Smiješi mi se i namiguje. Sve zna, sve je shvatila [...] Ivona još kako razumije taj tajni jezik pogleda." Begagić, *U zoni*, 125, 126.

⁸⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 89, 91.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁶ Begagić, *U zoni*, 124.

⁸⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 74.

⁸⁸ Begagić, *U zoni*, 75–79, 125.

Conclusion

Zovite me Esteban and *U zoni* in many ways start from dismantling cruel optimism, the optimism which the ethno-nationalist elites have been selling to the (post-) Yugoslav peoples since the 1990s: that finally ‘good life’ is available in capitalism, in nurturing religious ‘family values’ and sticking with one’s own ethnic group. They poignantly express the impasse of the present moment and the futility of all hopes for progress that were promised with the fall of socialism and the independence of national states. What I hoped to have shown in the analysis, however, is that the narratives look for optimism acutely aware of its’ *cruel* trappings. In the stuck present, thus, hope can only appear through glimpses, ecstatic moments, gestures. They are exceptional, Muñozian moments which open up the present to the not-yet-here, however there is permanence to them in the way Snediker understands ecstasy: they foster a sustainable, enduring vision of the past-present-future, deeply tied to “knowledge” and “rigorous thinking”.⁸⁹ It is knowledge that for Snediker distinguishes queer optimism from utopian optimism, and perhaps it can be seen as a distinguishing marker between cruel optimism and hope. In the two novels, this knowledge —the component that makes the optimism complex and nuanced —seems to be the knowledge of history, of queer ancestors, of the local anti-fascist struggle, industrial heritage, and of the process of its destruction. However, it is precisely this knowledge that is not only the source of despair that disrupts cruel optimism, but also a source of futural orientation, of hope that things might be better, as they used to be or could have been. The knowledge of queer ancestors and their resilience, inflected with the knowledge of anti-fascist ancestors’ resilience, provides courage to the narrators, and from this courage grow relational potentials in the present and thus hopes for even “better and braver” people. Hope in the novels, similarly to how Dimovska understands Muñoz’s utopia, “is not the antithesis of negation, but rather it is the critical means of working through and with negation”.⁹⁰

The knowledge is not a simplistic rationality, as it comes inextricably from queer desire – queer desire propels the utopian impulse, arousing ecstatic moments and generating joys of dissidence, which are in turn strengthened and sustained by knowledge. This doubleness of utopic imagination, matched by the doubleness or ambivalence of hope itself (hope-despair, hope-negation), is related to the narrators’ multivalent otherness. The narrators’ queer closets are multiplied, as Stepanović and Beronja notice in other post-Yugoslav queer narratives – their marginalization is due to other categories next to gender and sexuality, in this case national identity, ideological identity and, to an extent, class identity. It is from this multilayered position of otherness that the future is conceived of, the future built upon the heritage of the past. Queer desire for non-normative love spills into a desire for a different future, inflected by (forbidden) memories of the past.

⁸⁹ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 2, 3.

⁹⁰ Dimovska, “Queering Time in Modernism,” 43.

Symmetrically to the otherness and queer desire, the reparative potential of the two literary texts is multilayered. It is, as Simić has sharply argued, in the recognition of queer life stories through queer perspectives, but it is also in their utopic imagination and nourishment against the impasse.

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From Assimilation to Resistance: Body, Identity and Intersectionality in *Ghoul* (2018)

Abstract: This paper critically examines the intersections of gender, religion, and social politics through the character of Nida Rahim in the Indian Netflix miniseries *Ghoul* (2018). Through the protagonist, it analyzes a struggle for bodily autonomy and identity in a dictatorial State, problematized further by the subtext of supernatural invasion. A close reading of the text with the theoretical backing of Foucauldian analyses of power and identity, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, reveals the series' attempt at proposing resistance to the authoritarian powers through the media representation and portrayals. The recognition and the acceptance of power imbalances, and a gradual resistance to generalized and prejudiced perceptions for various sections of the State population, form the core of the series. The paper analyzes the processes of assimilation in a militarized State and the dangers it poses against one's individual and collective identity.

Keywords: identity; power; intersectionality; body; women; religion.

Introduction

Popular media produce cultural outputs that feature various embodiments of the intersections of religious debates and nationalism. These representations get imprinted in the collective identities of marginalized sections of society. Often positioned in different groups, bodies, and identities, nationalism and political fervor in a State use the beings and bodies of that state's inhabitants to engage in power struggles. Social realities and media representations thus have a reciprocal impact on each other.

With the advent of video streaming platforms and the evolution of the culture of film and television in India, a shift in the traditional viewing practices can be observed. The accessibility of media, ease of consumption, binge-watching practices, etc., are a few of the many aspects of the emergence and rise of OTT platforms in India. Platforms like

Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Hotstar provide a wide range of options for films and TV shows, both mainstream and regional, suited to individual viewership. As the preferences for audience diversify, OTT content providers find themselves competing with mainstream media productions, bringing marginalized and unrepresented voices to the forefront. OTT platforms are quick to adapt to changes in social attitudes and trends, reflecting cultural evolution and broader ideological shifts in society.¹

The Netflix miniseries *Ghoul* (2018) utilizes the intersectional identity of a Muslim woman working as an interrogator at a military detention center, amid supernatural beings and interventions to carry out a social commentary about the State and religious politics. The series is set in a dystopian future in India, focusing on Nida Rahim's character, played by Radhika Apte, navigating her position in the State during a civil crisis. What this study tries to do is to trace the global strengthening of movements that are neo-fascist in nature and the subtle but relentless resistance to them. This series is a cultural product of the same nature, where the intersection of a gendered and marginal identity offers forms of resistance to the hegemonic powers.

The story takes place in a geographical location distanced from the general public, a Foucauldian panopticon² with the prisoners being surveilled at all times and the bounds of morality and humanity being forsaken. "Meghdoot 31" is the name of the military detention center where anti-national elements of the State are imprisoned for 'Advanced Interrogation'. It has 12 officers, including Nida Rahim, who use violent apparatus to interrogate the prisoners in order to get to the 'truth'. The detention center becomes a microcosm of a dystopian militant State and forces Rahim to confront her ideals, her convictions, and her decision to denounce her father to a fascist government, basing it on her belief of him having committed an act of treason against the State.

Rahim's character and the analysis of her actions and decisions in the series paint a larger picture of the way women, their bodies, identities, and choices are regulated and controlled in the process of the functioning of the State. The trajectory that the development of her character follows also hints towards a myriad ways such contested identities fight against the system of oppression. It highlights identification, resistance, and resolution of the processes of marginalization of a group and suggests media, film, and television as tools to voice social concerns.

An auteurist analysis of the series reveals how Patrick Graham focuses on the outcomes of practicing extremism. As a British filmmaker distanced from the Indian political landscape, he blends various aspects of the universal tropes of horror cinema and creates the protagonist of the series, Nida Rahim, as a complex character navigating the dystopian Indian future.³ Dystopian narratives have often served as political allego-

¹ Devdas Menon, "Beyond Binge-Watching: How the OTT Video Streaming Platforms Have Transformed Indian Television Culture," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, December 19 (2024), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2024.2442863>.

² Foucault's panopticon is an extension of Jeremy Bentham's model of a prison with a central surveillance system in place, a metaphor for the exercise of power in a State through constant surveillance.

³ Sonali Srivastav and Shikha Rai, "Metanarratives of Identity in Web-series: A Narrative Analysis of Netflix's *Ghoul* (2018)," *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy* 4, no. 2 (2019): 50–59.

ries that reflect collective global anxieties. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are popular examples of dystopias that work as political allegories. Shows like *The Hunger Games* and *Alice in Borderland* can also be analyzed as dystopian explorations of social and moral crises. The non-specificity of the location of Meghdoot 31 and the temporal ambiguity add to the dystopian world-building that inevitably makes the viewers expect the absurd and unfamiliar.⁴

Militarized state and intersectional identity

One's experiences are affected by the various ways in which different parts of their social identity intersect. Overlapping categories like class, caste, gender, religion, and sexuality produce varied lived experiences for different societal groups. A culmination of these intersecting experiences dictates the position we occupy in the social structure we are a part of. In her work on Intersectionality Crenshaw critiques reductionism and challenges single-axis thinking that overlooks the complexities of one's identity.⁵ As a Muslim woman in a militarized State working for the majoritarian government, Nida Rahim experiences the space of the Advanced Military detention center differently from her coworkers.

Rahim is taken to the detention center blindfolded. It is explained that the location of the center is classified and must remain so. Her arrival in the unit, therefore, strips her of sight, both literally and metaphorically, as she observes the doctrine of violence and power at the center. The officers exclaim how they have music playing at all times, windows blackened and curtained, to keep the prisoners from knowing the time of day. The control over the temporal realities of the inhabitants also serves as a tool of discipline and control in the center. An officer explains to Rahim the blacked-out windows, indicating that the temporal distortion affects the body clock of both the prisoners and the officers. This contorted sense of self and the world can be further understood in the way Rahim navigates her identity in the detention center.

As a woman in a male-dominated space, Rahim is constantly required to prove her loyalty to the State by carrying out her duties as an interrogator against political prisoners. The detention center is portrayed as a hypermasculine environment where violence is the norm and expectation, and the only way for Rahim to assimilate is to participate in the violence being carried out against prisoners. She informs the militants of her father being involved in 'anti-national' activities, and it is this act that possibly paves the way for her as an officer in the detention center. She has been recruited to interrogate the leader of a terrorist sect, Ali Saeed Al Yacoub. Rahim is compelled to constantly affirm her patriotism in order to integrate into the institution. She is expected to be hyper-violent towards the political prisoners and demonstrate

⁴ Manidip Chakraborty and Shubham Bhattacharjee, "De-Familiarizing the Familiar: The Strategies behind the Dystopian Narratives in the OTT Platform in India," *International Journal of Cultural Studies and Social Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2024): 82–88.

⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

her dedication and loyalty to the Nation. What needs to be analyzed is whether her introduction in the unit carries transformative potential or further constrains her individuality.

Conforming to the manner in which the State violence controls Rahim and orders her belief systems, she becomes a part of the State and exercises disciplinary power over her father. On her way to the detention center, Rahim tells her father how their community has always been taught the wrong ideas. While her father, Shah Nawaz Rahim, played by S.M. Zaheer, refers to Muslims as his people, she distances herself from her communal identity. She refers to herself as a Nationalist who places her belief in the government and the repressive steps being taken to tackle anti-national elements. In the miniseries, Rahim is portrayed as someone who challenges this stereotypical portrayal of a Muslim woman that helps her assimilate with the militant government. The rise of the neo-fascist movement not only makes her compromise elements of her religious identity but also her gendered identity. She becomes a part of a system that runs on conformity of identity, and her community is seen as alien, invasive, and 'other'.

The collective demonization of Muslims in the dystopian State becomes evident when the fear and paranoia intensify in the detention center. Rahim realizes that despite her acts of service and loyalty to the State, her religious identity and the generalizations about her community will render her a suspect in times of crises. Edward Said's framework of *Orientalism* focuses on bracketed categories that serve to formulate an image of the "Other": the incomprehensible, exotic, and alien category as opposed to the cultured, mannered, and familiar Occident.⁶ Said's work focuses on the manner in which power acts and dominates through reductive stereotypes and is important in understanding how the othering of a community takes place. Rahim's identity pushes her to the margins, where she is the enemy, a suspicious traitor. Said observes how Orientalist narratives overlook any form of complexity in one individual identity. Hazel Simons elaborates on the sexualization and objectification of Muslim women throughout history and how contemporary societies still observe constant policing of women's bodies and identities.⁷

When Rahim joins the workforce, Major Laxmi Das, played by Ratnabali Bhattacharjee, objects to her presence. She urges Colonel Sunil Dacunha, played by Manav Kaul to imprison her remarking that they know "all about her people and her religion". In another instance, Das asks her if "her people will be a problem". Even though she has displayed her loyalty to the regime, Rahim is constantly reminded that she doesn't belong. She is talked about as the other, as a part of the community that is understood to be anti-State. In the area assigned for lunch, Rahim is seen sitting alone at a table as everyone eyes her movements. It is only Das that approaches her which would hint on how her being a woman is also a part of her other-ed identity. She joins her not to give her company but to interrogate her further on how she feels about inflicting violence

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books, 1995).

⁷ Hazel Simons, "Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects,'" *Al-Raida Journal* (2002): 23–32.

on the prisoners and if she is capable of doing it. It is not only a question that probes at her religious identity, but her gendered identity as well.

There are various instances of similar patterns of generalizations that can be observed throughout the series. In an instance where Rahim is required to change into an official uniform, Das overtly exclaims how women in Islam favour covering themselves and examines Rahim's hesitance or lack thereof to resort to the way of dressing required for her job. What can be observed from both Das's remark and Rahim's generalizing of her religious community by saying she doesn't comply with the way it treats women is the way a particular religious expression is criminalized in an authoritarian State. Sanjeev Kumar comments on the construction of a unified Nation in popular media, with the Muslims being viewed as the distinct 'other' by mannerisms of being, attire, and strict adherence to the Islamic codes of conduct.⁸ Rahim's character is a part of a larger net of constructed representations where the characters carry markers of differentiation, alienation and threat. Her subjection to a constant policing of the different aspects of her identity reflects broader patterns of behavior observed in the power structures around her.

Bodily surveillance and struggle for autonomy

Women and their bodies have historically been a point of contestation. Their bodies often become an embodiment of the State to inscribe ideologies on, to control and govern, and make a spectacle out of. In a neo-fascist State like the dystopia created in the series, women, their sexuality, and bodily autonomy are challenged. Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi emphasizes how "fascism acts against the interests of the masses, and particularly against those of women, when it imposes on them a social, political and intellectual practice which forces them to submit immediately to exploitation".⁹

Following the concept of the panopticon, Foucault notes how the subject being watched becomes "an object of information". Colonel Dacunha, sits in his control room, watching over the inhabitants of the detention center. A system of surveillance is in place that makes Rahim, the other prisoners, and officers subjects of the panopticon gaze. It is not only the inhabitants of the detention center but also Dacunha being controlled by the larger power systems in play. As a disciplining mechanism, the detention center enforces power over both the loyal and the rebellious agents in the State to ensure not just the physical but ideological control of the subjects.¹⁰ Bodily control and subjugation are tools of power, dictating the relationship between the State and the bodies of its inhabitants. Judith Butler suggests that bodies endure and live within regulatory schemas and are not independent of constraints and regulations.¹¹ The

⁸ Sanjeev Kumar, "Constructing the Nation's Enemy: Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim 'Other' in Bollywood Cinema," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 459.

⁹ Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, "Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology," *Feminist Review* 1, no. 1 (1979): 71.

¹⁰ Chakraborty and Bhattacharjee, "De-Familiarizing the Familiar."

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), xi.

power structures that give shape to these regulations also determine the definitions and meanings ascribed to these bodies under power. Rahim's identity and body are contested arenas of constant struggle for autonomy and reflect the militarized control of her being. Her experiences, thus, are produced as a symptomatic result of the power imposed upon her in the detention center.

To analyze the bodily struggles further, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the dystopia imagined in the series features very few women amid the many male officers and prisoners. The two officers present, Rahim and Das, are both components of a fascist regime. They are also categorized overtly into the two religious identities of a Muslim and a Hindu. The choice of characters and names seems symbolic of the way totalitarian States lack spaces for women to articulate themselves as separate from the power structures in place.

Das deviates from the conventional definitions of femininity by adopting an overtly violent attitude and internalizing the misogyny prevalent among her male counterparts. Her character is also representative of how fascist regimes require and function on a severely violent and hyper-masculine social structure. Das believes that violence against political prisoners is the only way one can attest to their loyalty to the State. Rebecca Tapscott explains how "national-level authoritarian power is produced and diffused into society through gendered local encounters."¹² Through the concept of militarized masculinity, Tapscott tries to explain the difference between unaccountable violence and regulated discipline. The entire series is rampant with instances of bodily heckling and violation. Rahim's body is a victim of both the state and the patriarchal social structure. Constant manhandling of her body by the interrogators and officers is internalized by her as she deems it important, rather necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of the power structures.

The series also incorporates supernatural elements that further complicate the ideas on body politics and bodily autonomy that are central to feminist discourse. The series features the invocation of 'Ghul' or Ghoul, a monster of Arab origin that feeds on human beings. The introduction of a being as a Ghoul adds further layers to the social commentary that the series undertakes. The supernatural Ghoul speaks in an indiscernible language, is nameless, feared, and arouses suspicion about its identity. It is alien and threatening, locked in a cell to torture. The series begins with an unfamiliarity with the character of the Ghoul, and as the story progresses, it comes to mirror the framework within which the 'other' is imagined and created.

It is essential to note that the emergence of the Ghoul triggers the transformation within Rahim. It is when she is treated like the Ghoul itself that she questions the power being inscribed on her identity. The summoning of the Ghoul is also a result of an act of violence on one's own body. Invoked by blood sacrifices, the Ghoul preys on the guilt and fear of the people, assuming the face of the last person it feasts on. It further complicates the various ways in which bodily violence plays out in a totalitarian regime and, in the process, creates and subjugates its subjects.

¹² Rebecca Tapscott, "Militarized Masculinity and the Paradox of Restraint: Mechanisms of Social Control under Modern Authoritarianism," *International Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2020): 1565.

The authoritarian control of the body in a militarized State is not restricted only to the institutions of confinement and policing but also pervades domestic spheres. Colonel Dacunha's physical abuse of his wife traces a continuity of bodily control and violence and how it organizes both public and intimate relationships. In his confrontation with the Ghoul, it is revealed that Dacunha's wife is fearful of the war-hero persona he carries. Her resentment towards him and the violence inflicted upon her as a punishment for dissent mirrors the treatment of the enemies of the State. Another instance reveals how an inmate's wife and child were tortured and killed in front of his eyes to extract confession. Bodily control and violence thus emerge as the primary tools of control in an authoritarian Nation, following Foucault's understanding of the body as the primary location of the inscription of power.¹³

Reclaiming autonomy and identity: a tale of resistance

Being a woman, it is not just her religious identity that Rahim struggles with, but bodily autonomy, assertion, and finding space in a gendered, hyper-masculine military confinement. Her identity is fixed on the margins. She takes over professional roles that are stereotyped as categorically and conventionally masculine, as she struggles with the need to position herself in an environment hostile to her being.

In a setting that suspends all belief systems, where everyone is in danger, and where the enemy imitates their own, Rahim is required to defend her identity continuously. She complies with this subjectivization by power, often claiming that it's good for the welfare of the State. It is only when she is transformed into an object of terror, confined in a cell as a traitor, an identity both supernatural and alien, that she questions the very system she had been upholding. The introduction of the Ghoul in the detention center exacerbates Rahim's already precarious intersectional identity, deepening its instability. She is locked away in a room that connects to the interior of the detention center through a tunnel and to the exterior through a locked door. With her are the other political prisoners in a struggle to affirm their identity as human beings.

The space and Rahim's identity in it can be connected to what Gloria Anzaldúa termed as "Nepantla" or "Nepantleras".¹⁴ An expansion of her work on hybridity, which she describes as *Mestiza Consciousness*, being a nepantlera means existing in the middle, without having to favour specific parts of your identity. With Rahim gradually realizing that she wronged her father and her beliefs faltering, the space of imprisonment transforms into Nepantla – a site for change, a place where the old self dies and the new self, or the Nepantlera, is born. Anzaldúa describes it as an identity that's changing and denies any definition. Rahim's stance changes in that space as she attempts to escape out of that room with a prisoner who is rendered mute as a trauma response to witnessing the killing of his wife and children at the hands of his

¹³ Ann J. Cahill, "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 43–63.

¹⁴ Martina Koegeler-Abdi, "Shifting Subjectivities: Mestizas, Nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa's Legacy," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 38, no. 2 (2013): 71–88.

interrogators. The room works as a space that suspends Rahim's trust in the system as she notices bullet marks and belongings of the prisoners piled away in a corner. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau talks about the objects and stories connected to them carrying transformative potentials.¹⁵ Finding old glasses and purses of the people who were killed in the detention center transforms Rahim's character. It forces her to look and think beyond what she has always believed in. As she evades the attack of the Ghoul, she also leaves behind her former complicity with the system and begins to question the power that surrounds her. In a physical struggle with Das, Rahim bites off her ear and questions the incessant suspicion directed at her in the center. The act signifies a disruption in the power dynamics at the institution. She not only questions the power imposition on her identity but also manifests it in a physical act of resistance.

Her character's trajectory follows a path from compliance with the authoritarian State to becoming part of the collective struggle of her community and resisting assimilation into oppressive systems. The realization that her appointment as an officer in the center was a result of Ali Saeed taking her name compels her to reassess her father's critique of the State's narrative of patriotism. From being someone who reports her father to the State for indulging in forbidden and anti-regime literature to someone who recognizes the marginal, intersectional position she occupies Rahim, through the story, explores her faith, her identity as a woman, and as a member of a marginalized group. In a final collective confrontation of the officers with the Ghoul, Rahim decides to side with the supernatural. She proclaims faith in her father's ideals and resorts to helping the ghoul eliminate the officers in the center.

Rahim's resistance to the regime is not stark. It is gradual and slow, a subtle change in thought until it festers into a self-inspection. It is at the intersection of gender, religion, and national identity that her resistance and agency take place. She stands as a sole resistance to the entirety of the detention center and, by extension, the State. Sara Ahmed describes 'willful subjects' as those who refuse to yield, who do not submit to the regime, who "might be striking in her appearance not only because she (they) disagree/s with what has been willed by others, but because she (they) disagree/s with what has disappeared from view." This can be seen in the instance where Rahim stands alone in the end, with her gun pointed at Dacunha, whom she claims to be the Ghoul. She is targeted by the army and is seen as a traitor, following which she is taken to jail. She appears alone, but alarmed and clear of her understanding of her place in the State.

Rahim's invocation of the Ghoul toward the end of the series can be observed as a metaphor for inherited resistance. The series, at various junctures, foregrounds the trope that 'the enemies are among us', further fueling the communal conflicts prevalent in the State. This political instability in the State is materialized in Rahim's body, represented through the climactic act of her drawing a blade from her mouth – a symbol of self-sacrifice, self-assertion, and the pursuit of knowledge in the manner of her deceased father. By aligning her body and self with the supernatural, she transforms

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), 118.

her state from being a passive member to an active participant in the struggle for self and collective identity. The Ghoul, as a fantastical intervention conjured by Rahim, substantiates her stance as a counter to the absolute power being exercised in the State.

The series highlights Rahim's journey from assimilation to resistance, from an observed and exercised distance from her community to an understanding of the workings of absolute power. It draws attention to various tools of bodily control and subjugation and the counters that can be offered against them. *Ghoul* as a series offers an exemplary critique of the global systems of authoritarianism, policies of control and subjugation, and the repression of critical voices. It also brings forth the way in which women, their bodies and voices are governed and regulated, pushing them to the peripheries of social and political order.

Conclusion

As a media-text, *Ghoul* serves as an example of the way cultural outputs reflect the mechanisms of society. Women and their bodies are contested sites for power and struggle, and in a world observing a global rise in right-wing fascist tendencies, they become furthermore vulnerable and precarious. Resistance to doctrines of absolute power can be observed in the form of social movements, activism, and media campaigns worldwide. Popular culture also serves as a tool of resistance, highlighting the social and political shifts in society.

Nida Rahim's character undergoes a transformation from a myopic viewpoint of her surroundings to a broader and nuanced understanding of the power structures that dictate her position in the State. The paper follows her contribution to the systemic villainization of a group to her gradual resistance to it. It emphasizes her struggle for autonomy and the individual and collective identity of her community. The series serves as a condensed representation of the larger social structure, but Nida's character reflects the broader struggle of various groups of people, battling their own beliefs and ideas to reach an understanding of their position in the world. Her character suggests the possibilities of reclaiming bodily autonomy and agency and urges a critical articulation of the world around us.

Ghoul as a series opens up avenues of enquiry with the likes of horror and dystopian fiction being potent genres for studying social and political crises, inviting a re-imagination of bodily agency and autonomy. The critical frameworks offered through the narratives in the series urge the viewers to question and dismantle the structures of oppression and marginalization across the globe.

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Review Article

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Phenomenology of In-betweenness: The Shimmering Images in Jane Schoenbrun's Films

Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of phenomenology and trans cinema through Jane Schoenbrun's films, arguing that they evoke the lived, sensory experience of in-betweenness and liminality. Drawing on theories by Sara Ahmed, Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, and Eliza Steinbock, I contend that Schoenbrun's cinema privileges affective resonance, haptic visuality, and temporal ambiguity over narrative resolution. Through digital textures, tactile imagery, and fragmented timelines, these films invite viewers to inhabit uncertainty and somatic disquiet as ongoing, *shimmering* events. Such cinematic approaches offer resistance by sensitizing audiences to new understandings of embodiment and identity in an era of contested bodily autonomy.

Keywords: trans cinema; phenomenology of cinema; shimmering image; Jane Schoenbrun; in-betweenness.

Introduction

“What you know, you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. There's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there.”

Morpheus, *The Matrix* (1999)

Recent debates about trans representation in cinema provoked the question of appropriating transition narratives. Multiple awarded Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Pérez* (2024), a musical following a Mexican cartel leader's gender transition, exemplifies this tension. Despite its Cannes acclaim, critics¹ have condemned the film as a “profoundly retrograde portrayal” that recycles harmful tropes: the conflation of surgery with moral absolution, and transition framed as a “death” of one's former self. *Emilia Pérez* in this discourse is an example of how mainstream cinema prioritizes representational narratives, reducing transness to a metaphorical rebirth rather than an

¹ GLAAD, “*Emilia Pérez* is Not Good Trans Representation,” GLAAD, November 15, 2024, <https://glaad.org/emilia-perez-is-not-good-trans-representation/>.

embodied, ongoing process. These debates, situated within broader social and political contexts (particularly those concerning trans and gender self-determination rights) inspire this paper's exploration of critical cinematic language that moves beyond conventional representation. This reflects a call to understand trans identity as more complex and fluid than traditional biological or socio-political definitions allow.

The film phenomenology, as a branch of the film theory, investigates the experience of viewing: building on the ontology of the cinematic image, theorists in this field have sought to establish a framework for understanding film at the level of sensory, and bodily experience. The body, often imagined as fixed and predetermined by birth, becomes the subject of phenomenological inquiry, but does everybody experience the world in the same way? This question increasingly preoccupies scholars concerned with bodies that resist easy categorization – bodies with disabilities, female bodies, trans bodies. Among the most influential interventions is Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which poses a question of how orientation – both sexual and spatial – shapes our experience of the world. And how are those experiences interpreted in cinema?

Building on phenomenological theories of cinema, this paper argues that Jane Schoenbrun's films *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021) and *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) construct the world of trans experience (rooted in their own *egg-crack* experience of gender transition). By privileging sensory disorientation over narrative resolution, Schoenbrun invites viewers to feel the somatic uncertainty of dysphoria, through the world of what Eliza Steinbock terms *shimmering images*. In this paper, I will analyze films precisely through the lens of the aforementioned theories, which emphasize the importance of the film language through which the idea of nonlinearity and anti-conventional narratives is communicated. Where films like *Emilia Pérez* fixate on transition as a narrative event, Schoenbrun evokes the lived phenomenology of in-betweenness.

Although themes of liminality, dissociation, digital hauntings, and the porousness of reality are not only related to trans experience and resonate across many subjectivities, they are also undeniably shaped by trans *knowledge*. As Eliza Steinbock writes, "Culturally, trans has a privileged relation to an aesthetics of change, particularly in comparison to the often negative framework for change emerging in relation to ageing or illness."² By rejecting the demand for explicit trans visibility and the event of transition, Schoenbrun's haptic aesthetics (digital textures, distorted audio) invite viewers to feel dysphoria's disquiet rather than consume it as a cinematic spectacle.

² Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019), ix.

Trans cinema: a phenomenological approach

When discussing trans or transgender film, recent studies emphasize the need to first redefine the concept of trans film (such as *Transgender Cinema* by Rebecca Bell-Metereau or *Trans New Wave Cinema* by Akkadia Ford). What is particularly notable in these studies is that the authors seek solutions by proposing an expanded scope for films that do not necessarily have to include explicit representations of trans identities' manifestations in cinema that are defined through "cross-dressing, drag, and other intersexed or nonconforming gender categories, genderqueer behaviour, or identification."³ These studies raise an exceptionally challenging question, especially considering Bell-Metereau's observation that "because one inherent feature of trans experience is the blurring of boundaries, the task of delineating categories of sex and gender presents an almost paradoxical challenge. Setting limitations or rigid definitions may distort rather than reveal the lived experiences of transgender people."⁴ Akkadia Ford similarly notes that Trans New Wave Cinema represents "an era of a profoundly new cinema centralizing the lived experiences of transgender embodiment and sexualities"⁵ in which "filmmakers are continually creating, adapting, and improvising cinematic strategies to relate trans narratives"⁶ beyond representation and mainstream cinema tropes.

In a particular cinematic universe of Jane Schoenbrun's films, the meaning of "trans cinema" exceeds the representational framework and explores the world of the *experience* instead. Schoenbrun's films focus on adolescents immersed in the virtual world of media: in *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, the protagonist faces a challenge on social media, while in *I Saw the TV Glow*, the protagonists identify with a popular television series that haunts them. Schoenbrun deliberately eschews the exploitative tropes that have historically plagued trans representation in cinema – such as narratives culminating in trauma, fetishized medical transitions, or reductive "coming out" dramaturgy. Instead, their work employs a queer allegorical mode, reframing trans experience as a phenomenological reorientation. This idea corresponds with Sara Ahmed's conception of queer orientation as a disorienting "twisting" of bodily and spatial relations:

Life itself is often imagined in terms of 'having a direction' which decides from the present what the future should be [...] Indeed, it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is what we are. The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the 'toward' marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present.⁷

³ Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Transgender Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 3.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Akkadia Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema* (Routledge, 2021), 33.

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 20.

Schoenbrun's films approach transition not as a discrete narrative event but as a metaphorical rupture in normative temporality and embodiment. Thus, the idea of representation does not unfold within the conventional frameworks of trans cinema but plunges into deep emotional and psychological processes of questioning identity and belonging to the world, best understood through a phenomenological approach. This emphasis on lived experience, sensory engagement, and intercorporeality makes phenomenology a particularly resonant methodology for analyzing trans cinematic aesthetics, which often foregrounds themes of bodily transition, dislocation, and affective dissonance. Vivian Sobchack's foundational work, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), situates cinematic spectatorship as an intercorporeal exchange between the viewer and the film's expressive *body*. She argues that both film and viewer share a common structure of embodied intentionality, which allows the viewer to "feel" the film through their own sensing body. For trans cinema – where bodily presence, dysphoria, and shifting corporeality are central – this intersubjective field of sensation is crucial. This phenomenological attention is further extended in Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), which theorizes *haptic visuality* – a mode of watching in which the eyes function like organs of touch. Especially in an intercultural cinema, she argues, images often seek to touch the viewer, generating affect not through clarity but through texture, opacity, and proximity, "the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imaged."⁸ Marks writes, "While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image."⁹ This mode is essential to trans films that seek not to explain or represent transition, but to evoke its sensation.

Writing specifically about trans cinema, Eliza Steinbock builds on these ideas in *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019), where they argue that trans cinema often disorients visual mastery and offers an aesthetic of becoming. Steinbock draws from phenomenology to conceptualize how trans bodies are not simply represented onscreen, but felt as unstable, in motion, in tension. The "shimmering" image becomes a metaphor for fluid embodiment: "The world-making practice of film in the transfeminist perspective of shimmering opens a line of escape from thinking in set binary oppositions by grasping the ongoing event of differential becomings."¹⁰ In trans cinema, phenomenology allows us to feel gender not as identity but as event, encounter, and unfolding:

[...] transgender and cinematic aesthetics alike operate through the bodily practice and technological principle of disjunction. More radically, within practices of filmmaking, delinking and relinking across the cuts,

⁸ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke University Press, 2000), 163.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, 4.

gaps, fissures take place in the normal course of cinematography, rather than being exceptions. This makes it the art form most suited to a politically advantageous comparison with transgender forms of embodiment. Moreover, approaching embodiment through film reroutes the emphasis on sex/gender difference through aesthetics.¹¹

This connection between phenomenology and trans cinema also offers a way to rethink *temporality*. Conventional film narratives often rely on linear time. But Schoenbrun's films frequently disrupt this structure, foregrounding temporal ambiguity, memory, and delay. This intervention is deeply connected with the phenomenological category of time as duration – Merleau-Ponty wrote in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that time is not simply a sequence but an experience of duration. Schoenbrun's *We're All Going to the World's Fair* and *I Saw the TV Glow* disentangle in fragmented time, where moments stretch and resonate across multiple timelines, mirroring the nonlinear temporal experience. Those films intricately weave together haptic visuality, disjunctive temporality, and somatic spectatorship to materialize the affective and sensory dimensions of non-belonging.

Ultimately, phenomenology provides tools for attending to what often escapes mainstream cinema's storytelling purposes – the sensations, atmospheres, and corporeal intensities. It resists the demand to fix or define gender visually and instead honours the ways trans films move us – somatically, affectively, and ethically. In this context, Eliza Steinbock's concept of shimmering images provides a transformative framework for understanding trans cinema through an aesthetic of change, where gender transitions are mediated not by static representation but through a dynamic, emergent formal cinematic approach.

Shimmering worlds: *We Are All Going to the World's Fair* and *I Saw the TV Glow*

Steinbock's phenomenological conceptual framework finds a parallel in Schoenbrun's cinema, where the experience of in-betweenness is explored through stories that foreground liminality. In their films, the allegory of liminality conjures an alternate world – mediated by the internet or television series – that promise new perspectives and possibilities for life. The entanglement of space, where the body is both embodied and resistant to fixed meanings, becomes a pivotal moment in storytelling. In Schoenbrun's own words, their films are about “something I think a lot of trans people understand [...] The tension between the space that you exist within, which feels like home, and the simultaneous terror and liberation of understanding that that space might not be able to hold you in your true form.”¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Holden Seidltz, “Jane Schoenbrun finds horror close to home,” *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/jane-schoenbrun-finds-horror-close-to-home>.

At the heart of *We're All Going to the World's Fair* is Casey, a teenager whose participation in an online horror challenge becomes a vehicle for exploring the porous boundaries between her corporeal self and her digital persona. To join, she performs a strange ritual and begins recording her experiences, posting unsettling videos that blur the line between reality and performance. As Casey goes deeper, she starts to feel her sense of self unravel, unsure if the changes she describes are real or imagined. The film explores her growing isolation and vulnerability, especially as she forms a tense online connection with a mysterious older man who claims to have initiated the game of challenge. Rather than offering a narrative plot and resolution, the story immerses us in Casey's emotional world, highlighting her search for identity, the dangers and allure of the internet culture, and the confusion of adolescence.

As the film unfolds in a haunting and ambiguous formal cinematic space, it focuses less on supernatural horror and more on the psychological impact of loneliness and the desire for transformation. Therefore, the film's aesthetic strategies (webcam footage, low-resolution digital images, and close-ups of skin pressed against glass) evoke Marks's haptic visuality – a mode of seeing that privileges tactile intimacy over optical distance. Marks writes that “the act of viewing is one in which both I and the object of my vision constitute each other”¹³, dissolving the distinction between seer and seen and rendering the act of looking itself a form of touch. Schoenbrun's use of webcam rawness and digital artefacts is not merely a stylistic choice but a means of materializing dissociation: when Casey presses her fingertips into her skin in front of the webcam, or when she watches the influencer gently touches the lens in a video designed to lull the viewers into a relaxed, almost hypnotic state, the audience is invited to experience the protagonist's disembodiment as something tactile, as if the screen itself becomes a permeable membrane between bodies. The camera's proximity (overexposing or distorting Casey's face) mirrors the instability and ongoing negotiation of her selfhood. These moments resist the cinematic impulse toward clarity, foregrounding instead the ambiguity and fluidity of identity. Much of the film spaces are lightened by the glow of computer screens and low-resolution digital haze, which gives the images a soft, flickering, almost ghostly texture. Recalling Steinbock's theory – this is not just a visual effect, it reflects Casey's uncertain sense of self as she navigates the blurred boundaries between the online world and her reality. The film uses this shimmering aesthetic to evoke the feeling of being in between states: not fully one thing or another but suspended in a space of potential change. Scenes shift between stillness and sudden movement, darkness and bursts of light, echoing the emotional instability and longing for transformation that Casey experiences. The screen itself becomes a metaphorical surface where identity is both reflected and distorted, where the desire to escape or become something new is both alluring and unsettling.

The sound landscape of the films further destabilizes the viewer's sense of bodily boundaries. Muffled whispers, glitchy audio, and ASMR-like sequences operate as sensations that are registered not through narrative comprehension but through

¹³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 183.

visceral, bodily response. During Casey's late-night rituals, the static hiss of the microphone and the rhythmic cadence of her breath become somatic triggers, mirroring the physiological unease of dysphoria. Sobchack's assertion: "Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved"¹⁴, illustrates the notion of how the film's sensory strategies implicate the viewer's own body in the protagonist's alienation.

While *World's Fair* explores digital liminality through bodily and haptic instability, *I Saw the TV Glow* extends shimmering into the realm of temporality and memory. *I Saw the TV Glow* is also a coming-of-age film that explores the disorienting passage from adolescence to adulthood through the lens of media obsession and repressed identity. It follows Owen, a shy teenager in the 1990s, who becomes captivated by a mysterious late-night TV show introduced to him by an older classmate, Maddy. Their obsession with the show, *The Pink Opaque*, fractures their grasp on linear time and corporeal coherence. As their bond deepens, the line between reality and the show's fictional world begins to blur, reflecting Owen's internal struggles with isolation, longing, and self-realization.

Schoenbrun manipulates narrative time through recursive editing, repeated scenes, and VHS footage, creating a temporality that refuses straightforward progression. The phenomenological notion of temporal thickness – the experience of time as layered, non-linear, and affectively charged – helps to elucidate these strategies. Rather than moving cleanly from childhood to adulthood, Owen's journey is marked by repetition and slippage, reflecting the non-linear, recursive dynamics of dysphoria and memory. For Owen, time becomes a loop in which past and present collapse, rendering existence not as a linear journey, but as an ongoing reorientation. In one emblematic scene, Owen watches the final episode of *The Pink Opaque*: the protagonists, Isabel and Tara, have been captured by the series' villain, Mr. Melancholy, who buries them alive and promises they will live forever in the Midnight Realm. "It's such a wonderful, wonderful prison", he says, while showing the water globe with Owen's figure inside, watching TV. This scene is crucial for understanding the allegory. At the same time, it operates on the haptic level: the static vibrations and bends in the TV picture mirror Owen's bodily disquiet. This moment of distortion exemplifies Sobchack's notion of embodied intentionality, in which "film also presents the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence *as the film*."¹⁵ The screen becomes a kind of membrane, a boundary through which Owen's dissociation is somatically transmitted to the audience.

The mediated realm (internet and television) operates as both sanctuary and prison, a duality that complicates prevailing narratives about the liberatory potential of online spaces for trans subjects. In both films, mediated spaces – the internet in *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, and television in *I Saw the TV Glow* – function

¹⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

as zones that simultaneously enable and destabilize identity formation. Rather than offering stable mirrors for identity, these mediated realms exist between recognition and alienation, intimacy and estrangement. Casey's online performances blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, self and avatar. Her videos are not confessional truths but relics of affective instability, resisting stable interpretation. Similarly, Owen's relationship with *The Pink Opaque* becomes a site of deferred becoming – a space where identity is glimpsed but never fully attained. Both films thus resist the narrative of digital or televisual spaces as purely emancipatory. Instead, they foreground the double-edged nature of mediated existence: its capacity to open new modes of becoming while also amplifying dissociation and alienation.

Conclusion

Schoenbrun's films exemplify cinematic capacity to destabilize vision and reconfigure spectatorship as an embodied negotiation of uncertainty. These films refuse the demand for trans stories to "make sense" within cis frameworks, but also Hollywood narratives. As Steinbock asserts, trans cinema is a reflection of the notion that "trans ontologies are process-oriented, rather than object-oriented"¹⁶. Schoenbrun's films approach in a certain way aligns with the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999), which Lilly Wachowski later acknowledged as an "unintentional trans allegory".¹⁷ Like Neo's awakening to the desert of the real, Schoenbrun's protagonists navigate liminal spaces where identity fractures and reforms through haptic textures that reject the cishnormative visual mastery. Both worlds leverage speculative fiction to allegorize the experience, but where *The Matrix*'s red pill metaphor risks oversimplification, Schoenbrun's films dwell in the unresolved realm of "there's-something-wrong-with-the-world", treating dysphoria not as a problem to solve, but as a somatic language to inhabit. As we testify, our world and time are marked by the climate of immense fear of self-identification narratives, because the new understandings of trans identity are dismantling the position of political control over the body. Jane Schoenbrun's films quietly protest - by abandoning basic mainstream definitions and embracing narratives that align with feeling, experience, and humanity.

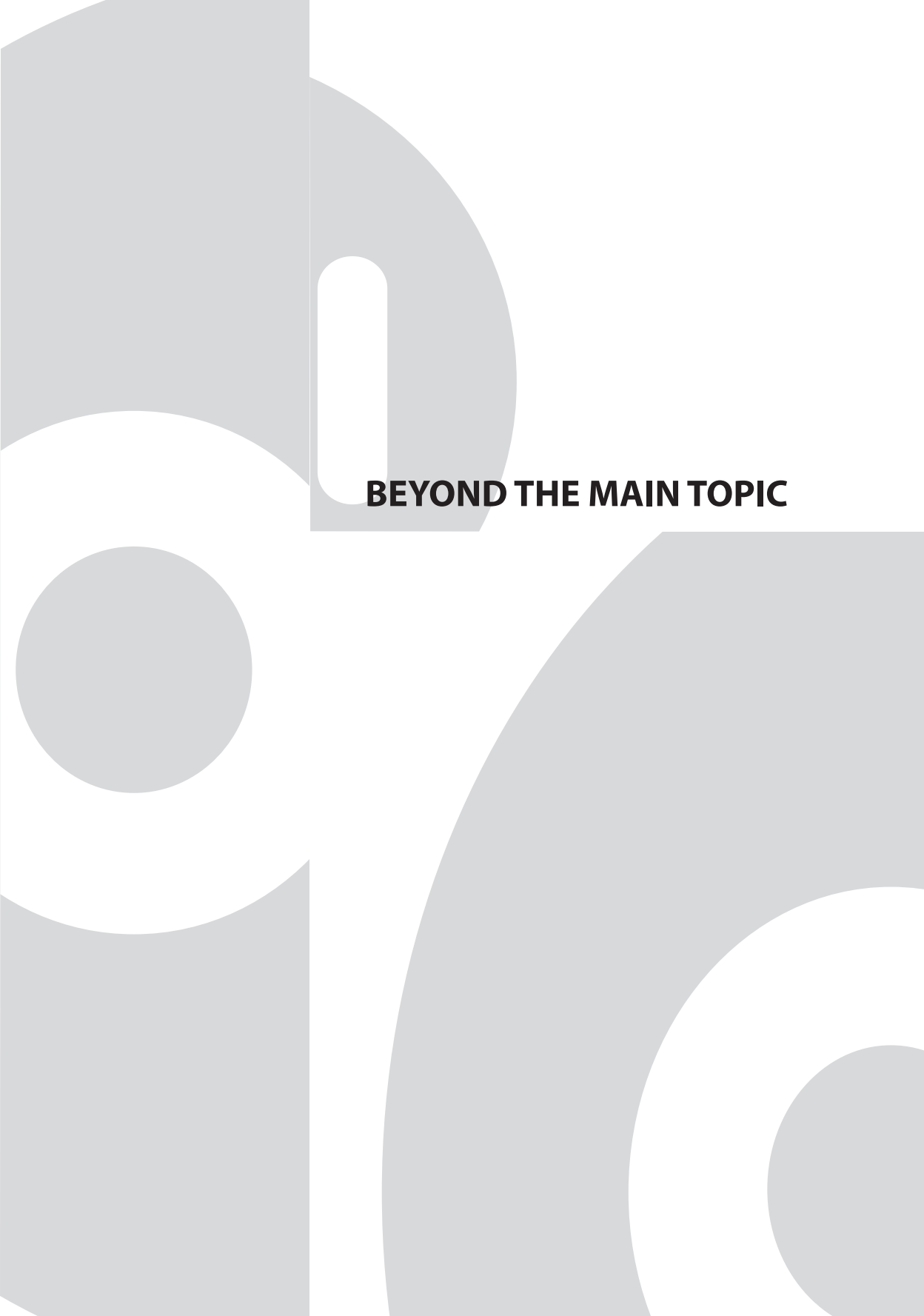
¹⁶ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 12.

¹⁷ "The Matrix is a 'trans metaphor', Lilly Wachowski says," *BBC*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53692435>.

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BEYOND THE MAIN TOPIC



ART+MEDIA

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The Paths of Hélio Oiticica: Exoticism, Brazilian identity, and Popular Culture

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The Paths of Hélio Oiticica: Exoticism, Brazilian Identity, and Popular Culture

Abstract: This article aims to highlight how Oiticica engaged with significant issues surrounding the political and aesthetic challenges of underdevelopment, popular culture, and the formation of a Brazilian artistic system. To this end, we will revisit some of his works, specifically: (i) *Metaesquemas* (1956–1958); (ii) *Relevos espaciais* (1959–1960); (iii) *Núcleos* (1960–1966); (iv) *Penetráveis* (1961–1980); (v) *Bólides* (1963–1979); (vi) *Parangolés* (1964–1979); and (vii) *Tropicália* (1967). We suggest that Oiticica played a crucial role in constructing a Brazilian image of art in the world, although this process was not without contradictions.

Keywords: Hélio Oiticica; constructive project; contemporary Brazilian art; popular culture; exoticism.

Political-aesthetic elements

The Neoconcrete rupture, the *Opinião* exhibitions (1965 and 1966), *Propostas* (1965 and 1966), and, most notably, the collective show *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (New Brazilian Objectivity) in 1967 were milestones in the development and circulation of Hélio Oiticica's work. During this period, the developmental dream of aligning Brazil with more developed nations came to an end. Consequently, artists who had previously focused on providing Brazil with an autonomous constructive art, referencing Mondrian and Malevich, became increasingly motivated to pursue a form of new realism. This new realism was rooted in a more direct contact with the public, engagement with the country's pressing issues, and the creation of a Brazilian visual language that acknowledged underdevelopment.¹ In other words, by creating art, many of these artists believed they were engaging in a form of resistance to the processes that would ultimately lead to the military coup of 1964.

Neoconcretism, in contrast to Constructivism, turned toward the invaluable vector of art: expression, sidelining Constructivism's scientific rigor and rationalist exacerbation. Instead, it introduced a humanistic notion of the individual, viewed as a

¹ Maria Morethy Coutor, "Arte engajada e transformação social: Hélio Oiticica e a exposição Nova objetividade brasileira," *Estudos Históricos* 49, no. 25 (2012): 72.

being in the world, in its entirety, rather than a mere mechanical agent. From a spatial perspective, Neoconcretists sought to experiment with space, understanding it phenomenologically rather than merely sensorially, thus rejecting its rigid and passive apprehension. This opened opportunities for engagement in the social realm intending to deconstruct the canonical system of art and the dominant ideology that permeated it. Such an attitude significantly politicized the Brazilian artistic field and, according to some critics, laid the groundwork for contemporary Brazilian art.

If the “Manifesto Neoconcreto” was published in 1959, its consequences and criticisms of its ideology and practice would become common touchstones in the Brazilian artistic scene in the years that followed. Drawing from some ideas already developed within neoconcretism, artists such as Oiticica and Lygia Clark brought to the forefront works that showcased the state of Brazilian avant-garde art to the world, surpassing what had been accomplished by previous ‘isms’ and challenging the artistic status quo of the time. Exhibitions like *Opinião* and *Propostas* served as important moments to refine these endeavors, but it was in the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (1967) that the disruptive results of earlier experiments were witnessed. Held at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ) in 1967, the exhibition featured around forty artists, including Sérgio Ferro, Nelson Leirner, Antonio Dias, Lygia Pape, Oiticica, and Clark. Most of the works presented had an object-oriented character and critiqued both traditional artistic codes and “the effective power of social transformation attributed to abstract art, particularly the constructivist movements, until the late 1950s.”² Furthermore, it is important to note that the exhibition was organized into two modules: one focused on a retrospective of object art in Brazil, aimed at showcasing the constructive impetus of national productions, and another dedicated to the manifestations of the period.

To elucidate the main lines of this moment of critical renewal, Hélio Oiticica published the written statement “Esquema geral da nova objetividade” in the exhibition’s catalog, which is crucial for understanding this movement and its impact on the art field. In this text, Oiticica asserts that new objectivity is neither a dogmatic nor an aesthetic movement, as was the case with cubism and other ‘isms’, but rather an ‘arrival’ at the state of Brazilian art composed of various trends. Thus, this lack of unity of thought would become an important characteristic of the movement, “the unity of this concept of ‘new objectivity’ being a general recognition of these multiple trends grouped into broader tendencies observed therein.”³

New objectivity, however, being a typical state of Brazilian art in general, would stand in opposition on the international stage to the *Pop*, *Op*, *Nouveau Réalisme*, and *Primary Structures* movements. It would have six main characteristics: i) a general constructive will aimed at providing the country with avant-garde art; ii) a tendency towards the object, surpassing the traditional easel painting; iii) the bodily participation of the spectator, intended to critique transcendental contemplation and propose

² Ibid.

³ Hélio Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* (Rocco, 1986), 84.

total engagement; iv) a stance on political, ethical, and social issues, with the aim of modifying them through transformation of consciousness; v) a tendency toward art and collective propositions, influenced by popular cultural and street manifestations, contributing to the abolition of ‘isms’; vi) a reformulation of the concepts of anti-art, in an attempt to justify the emergence of a Brazilian avant-garde understood as a collective progression of the country through effective popular participation. According to Fred Coelho, Oiticica’s project was rooted, precisely, in the strategic use of popular culture and mass culture as a space for subversion (rather than passive alienation).⁴

With this characterization in mind, the works “Caixa de Baratas” by Lygia Pape, “Máscaras Sensoriais” and “O Eu e o Tu: Série Roupa-Corpo-Roupa” by Lygia Clark, and “Tropicália” by Oiticica are paradigmatic examples included in the 1967 exhibition. The latter work left an indelible mark on the exhibition and the artistic field, perfectly embodying Tropicalism in the visual arts and even propelling other artistic areas of this movement. Nonetheless, one more interesting factor concerning Oiticica’s work and writings during this period is their connection to anthropophagy. During this time, Oiticica advocated for anthropophagy as part of a broader constructive will aimed at providing Brazil with a distinct cultural identity, separate from that of the Global North. In this way, anthropophagy would serve to reduce external influences on national art models.

To better understand Oiticica’s trajectory, particularly how he approached issues such as popular culture and Brazilian identity, we will clarify how he appropriated Oswald de Andrade’s concept of Anthropophagy.

The idea of Anthropophagy, an ancient phantasmagoria of the colonizers, was revisited by various actors in the early twentieth century. Travelers’ literature, such as that by Hans Staden, Francisco López de Gómara, and André de Thevet, was read and discussed. Dadaists placed *Cannibale*, the name of one of their magazines, as a touchstone for revising and critiquing bourgeois morality. Mário de Andrade, upon reading a book by Theodor Koch Grünberg, also addressed the same theme, and Tarsila do Amaral painted “Abaporu” (the man who eats people) as a gift for Oswald. Oswald de Andrade launched his Manifesto Antropófago (Anthropophagic Manifesto) in 1928, in which a unity between aesthetics and politics is observed.⁵ It was aesthetic because it aimed to forge a model of Brazilian national and cultural formation that would create friction with the duality of imported (European) versus local (national), opening the way for a radical avant-garde art contrary to the conventionalism of “civilized fine arts”. It was political because the Modernist from São Paulo viewed Brazil’s history through the lens of the oppressed indigenous anthropophagi, criticizing colonial violence and façade civilization. In this context, it is possible to understand its libertarian character, whose critique of religion, morality, and repressed sexuality brought to light the utopia of a humanity based on the unrepressed, technicized barbarian,

⁴ Fred Coelho, *Eu, brasileiro, confesso minha culpa e meu pecado* (Civilização Brasileira, 2010).

⁵ Bruna Della Torre de Carvalho Lima, *Vanguarda do atraso ou atraso da vanguarda?* (Alameda Editorial, 2018), 122.

contrary to the decadent bourgeois civilization. Throughout the manifesto, one can note both a praise for the so-called marks of Brazilian backwardness, transfigured into civilizational outputs for the world, and a certain irrationalism, which condemned hegemonic intellectual ideas and constructions – understood as colonized, *bacharelescas* (pedantic/overly academic), and the fruit of bourgeois moralism.⁶

In this sense, Anthropophagy should be understood not merely as an aesthetic achievement of great importance, but rather as a symbolic artifact systematically revisited and utilized to reflect upon and contest the meaning of decisive and constitutive notions for the political and social spheres in Brazil, such as: national identity, the configurations of society and its ‘people’, the social and political construction of Brazilian arts, and the place Brazil holds or should hold among the concert of nations. We assume that Anthropophagy is systematically revisited by contemporary authors and artists because it elaborates on essential and contradictory elements of colonization and Brazilian social formation, as well as the effects stemming from the colonization process. Thus, through the anthropophagic *mobile*, they could elaborate and create friction between such dyads as local–cosmopolitan, Brazilian–foreign, white–indigenous, Afro–Brazilian–European, civilized–barbarian, repressed–liberated. One of the artists who revisited it was precisely Hélio Oiticica, whose use of the anthropophagic *mobile* was concerned with the miscegenated construction of the Brazilian nation and culture.⁷

In our view,⁸ the understanding of Oiticica’s Anthropophagy stems from two important texts, namely: the “Esquema geral da nova objetividade” (General Scheme of the New Objectivity) and a text from March 4, 1968 – subsequently collected in the book *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* (I Aspire to the Great Labyrinth). In both, for distinct yet complementary reasons, the figure of Oswald de Andrade and his Anthropophagy are central.

In the “Esquema geral da nova objetividade”, Oiticica states that New Objectivity is more of a state composed of various tendencies, or rather, an arrival marked by a lack of unity among its components rather than an organized movement. Be that as it may, one of the main points uniting these diverse orientations would be a general constructive will – based on an attempt to provide the country with a Brazilian avant-garde and cultural solidification – whose starting point was Modernism itself in 1922 and, more specifically, Oswaldian Anthropophagy. Anthropophagy, in his judgment, gave structure and direction to the most radical moments in national art. From this text, we can infer three elements highly important for understanding Anthropophagy in Oiticica’s thought: i) Anthropophagy would be a way to reduce foreign influences to national models; ii) these national models, forged anthropophagically from external influences, would be foundational for a national formation project

⁶ Rafael Marino, “Rubem Valentim, Hélio Oiticica e o tropicalismo: dois caminhos para a antropofagia na arte brasileira,” *Novos Estudos* 40, no. 2 (2021): 335–56.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rafael Marino, “Usos da antropofagia: canibalismo caleidoscópico,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 37, no. 110 (2022): 1–24.

by endowing Brazil with an unprecedented cultural solidity; and iii) Anthropophagy would present itself as a defense that protects us from the cultural imperialism and colonialism of Europe and the USA, and as a material filter that would allow us to autonomously and creatively reuse foreign aesthetic and cultural influences, enabling us to erect a Brazilian culture.

In the text of March 4, 1968, we find a greater deepening and refinement of the role of Anthropophagy in national culture and formation. According to the Brazilian visual artist, “at the beginning of the text on New Objectivity, I invoke Oswald de Andrade and the meaning of anthropophagy (before it became fashionable, which happened after the staging of *O Rei da Vela* (The Candle King) as an important element in this attempt at national characterization”,⁹ whose most conscious result was precisely his work *Tropicália* – which aimed to impose a Brazilian image upon the world. The genealogy of the work “*Tropicália*”, still according to Oiticica, should be seen from the first “*Parangolés*”, in the experience with popular samba, in his visit and discovery of the *favelas* (*morros cariocas*) and their organic architecture – this popular organicity could also be seen, according to the artist, in the stilt houses (*palafitas*) of the Amazon. With one difference: the *Parangolés* still maintained a level of universalist ideas, such as the return to myth and sensory incorporation, whereas in *Tropicália*, the intention was to create an artistic and Brazilian avant-garde language that would give structure to the country’s cultural scene. In this Brazilian image exposed to the world, Oiticica ultimately intended to create a myth of miscegenation, understood as the construction of a Brazilian culture and arts in which the Black and indigenous elements and heritage would anthropophagically devour the European element:

That is why I believe that *Tropicália*, which encapsulates this entire series of propositions, came to contribute strongly to this objectification of a total Brazilian image, to the overthrow of the universalist myth of Brazilian culture, which is entirely based on Europe and North America, in an inadmissible Aryanism here: in truth, with *Tropicália* I wanted to create the myth of miscegenation – we are Black, Indigenous, White, everything at the same time – our culture has nothing to do with the European one, despite being subjected to it even today: only the Black and the Indigenous did not capitulate to it. Whoever is not conscious of this should fall away. For the creation of a true Brazilian culture, characteristic and strong, expressive at least, this damned European and American heritage will have to be absorbed, anthropophagically, by the Black and Indigenous heritage of our land, which are in fact the only significant ones, since the majority of Brazilian art products are hybrid, intellectualized to the extreme, empty of their own meaning.¹⁰

⁹ Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 106.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

Subsequently, Oiticica asserts that Tropicalism, which should have served as a project of a miscegenated Brazilian art radically against the damned European and American heritage, became fashionable. A consumer article among “bourgeois, sub-intellectuals, and cretins of all kinds preaching tropicalism, *tropicália*”¹¹. It should be noted that, in the quoted excerpt, the ideas of miscegenation and hybridity are juxtaposed: the former would signify the creation of a non-colonized Brazilian art, and the latter would precisely mark a Brazilian art still with universalist and intellectualist pretensions. We should also recall that, in an earlier passage, the visual artist had already pointed out that the origin of *Tropicália*’s transformation into a fashion trend occurred after the staging of *O Rei da Vela* by the Oficina theater group. But why, for Oiticica, could Tropicalism have become a consumer article? According to Oiticica, the direct experiential element of art could not be consumed by bourgeois voracity, since experience and existence would not be possible for the bourgeois sectors, given that their culture was overly universalist and concerned with the discovery of exotic folklore. The image, in turn, opened space for an understanding of Tropicalism as superficial consumption. That is, what Oiticica called the supra-sensorial would be the most essential element for a non-colonized Brazilian avant-garde, and, at the same time, the non-marketable aspect of art, given that it was existential and not universalist. In truth, the supra-sensorial would be precisely the means to overthrow intellectualist universalism. Furthermore, only in this way could Tropicalism carry out its deepest and most critical project, which is: by noting that the tropicalist myth went far beyond banana trees and parrots, one would see that it is the “consciousness of a non-conditioning to established structures, therefore highly revolutionary in its totality. Any conformism, whether intellectual, social, or existential, escapes its main idea.”¹²

It is interesting to consider two internal elements of the Tropicalist movement. It is known that the movement’s name came, as indicated by Caetano Veloso,¹³ from a suggestion by filmmaker Luís Carlos Barreto for the opening track of Veloso’s solo album, recorded in 1967 and released in 1968. This music was, in turn, inspired by the eponymous art installation by Hélio Oiticica, exhibited in April 1967 at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ). In any case, despite the musical and artistic spheres having significant convergences – such as an avant-garde impulse that utilized modern trends in Brazilian art and music to create something radically new,¹⁴ and the concern with forging a global image of Brazilian culture as a miscegenated construction of the nation and culture against American and European purism¹⁵ – here is an essential distinction (which will not be fully developed here

¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹² Ibid., 109.

¹³ Caetano Veloso, *Verdade tropical* (Companhia das Letras, 2017). 51.

¹⁴ Antonio Cícero, “O tropicalismo e a MPB,” in: *Finalidades sem fim: ensaios sobre poesia e arte* (Companhia das Letras, 2005), 54–72.

¹⁵ Marino, “Usos da antropofagia: canibalismo caleidoscópico,” 14.

due to space constraints). According to Basualdo,¹⁶ there is a significant disagreement between Hélio Oiticica and the duo Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, which relates to their stance on the relationship between the arts and what might be called the Culture Industry. The latter two believed that there was a democratizing and even disruptive potential in integrating music with the culture industry, as it could both become less provincial by receiving external influences from international pop music and could effectively reach the masses. Oiticica, as seen in his texts explored above, was more suspicious of the possibilities within what Basualdo called the culture industry, arguing that it would strip Tropicalism of its supra-sensorial meaning and retain only a marketable image of Tropicalism.

It must also be noted that Anthropophagy was mobilized by Oiticica when, during his period in New York, he came into deeper contact with the rock music of Jimi Hendrix and Mick Jagger. The artist indicates that, unlike Brazilian samba, rock does not require initiations, dispenses with a connection to territory, and its dance is created not through choreography, but from what each person makes while listening to it.¹⁷ Be that as it may, rock would allow for a total and anthropophagic synthesis of various cultural tendencies, which would mark a rupture with what he conceived as the elitism of styles like jazz and would decisively mark the American cultural fabric.¹⁸

Now, we will proceed with a detailed analysis of Oiticica's works throughout his career.

Works and developments

In his “Metaesquemas”, we see works that engage strongly with the geometric abstractions of the *Grupo Frente* (1954–1956) and the *Grupo Neoconcreto* (1959–1961), which had a significant influence on the still relatively young Oiticica. Thus, these productions by the artist demonstrate a strong impetus for concrete-abstract investigation, materialized in numerous rigorous painting exercises marked by variations and combinations of geometric shapes, their positions, spaces, optical games, and a select number of colors, such as black, blue, red, orange, yellow, white, and green. The materials used were gouache and cardboard, with dimensions of around 40 x 60 cm. It is noteworthy, however, that from the very first “Metaesquema”, Oiticica had already begun to break away from the orthogonal primacy characteristic of the concretists who influenced him, thereby imparting a particular gestuality and rhythm to his abstraction exercises. In addition to this, Oiticica was also revolutionizing symmetries, which opened space for more fluid and dynamic formalizations.

¹⁶ Carlos Basualdo, “Vanguarda, cultura popular e indústria cultural,” in: *Tropicália: uma revolução na cultura brasileira* (Cosac Naify, 2007), 11–31.

¹⁷ Hélio Oiticica, “Um mito vadio: entrevistado por Jary Cardoso,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 05 nov. (caderno Folhetim), 1978, 7.

¹⁸ Vivian Crockett, “War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica,” in *Hélio Oiticica: a dança na minha experiência*, ed. A. Pedroso and T. Toledo (MASP, 2020), 135.

While the early works from this stage of the artist's career still exhibited a certain rigidity, emphasizing diamond and rectangular shapes scattered as if emerging from the core of a recently exploded point, later card works embraced formal diversification where bulging shapes coexisted with more linear geometries and structures with recesses. Within this context, the thicker edges and rougher figures, which became common since mid-1958, did not ossify the paintings; instead, through optical and pictorial games and subtle approximations, they imparted a vibration whose rhythm gave them a dancing quality. Their balances, when present, seemed to threaten to give way¹⁹, which brought a particular choreographic tension to the works.

If it were possible to establish a temporal continuum between the early and later “Metaesquemas”, it is remarkable how the forms increasingly seem to want to leap from the space and emerge from the surface of the paper cards. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to recall the analysis made by Favaretto,²⁰ who argues that through this exploration of spatial possibilities, Oiticica was already foreshadowing the future developments of his works, such as his “Labirintos” (Labirints), “Relevods espaciais” (Spatial Reliefs), and “Pentráveis” (Penetrables). Regarding dance, it is worth noting, echoing Conduru's²¹ analysis, that it is not only present in the dancing plastic arrangement of the “Metaesquemas”, but in the very invitation to movement that they extend to the observer. This occurs because some of Oiticica's abstraction exercises contain metallic microparticles, which ‘turn off’ or ‘turn on’ as the audience moves in front of the artwork, thereby creating a particular choreography.

In “Núcleos” and “Relevos espaciais”, the desire to occupy space beyond the pictorial gains full citizenship. It is not difficult to see, embodied in these works, the neoconcrete impetus to surpass the exacerbated rationalism of constructivism and to create almost-corpus works, which resemble organic bodies endowed with their own phenomenological reality. In “Núcleos”, one can observe how the abstractions present in “Metaesquemas” are liberated and gain space beyond the canvas. The colors, now freed from gouache on paper, extend outward from the surfaces and acquire a three-dimensional spatial dimension of their own. However, the transformation of colors does not only occur in space in “Núcleos”; it is also of a temporal order: the color, through various brushstrokes and layers of pigment that introduce subtle differences and vibrations in an apparent repetition, gains duration and acts upon viewers, making them active participants in the artwork. Thus, for Oiticica, the structure of the productions comes together with their color; that is, there is no a priori structure, as it is constructed “in the very action of color-light”²². The wooden plates, supported by thin nylon threads, invite the spectator-activator to circumnavigate and, when possible (as in the case of “Grande Núcleo”), to enter them as if navigating a labyrinth. In the work “Núcleo n.01”, the presence of a mirror on the floor below the artwork

¹⁹ Rodrigo Naves, *A forma difícil* (Companhia das Letras, 2011), 248.

²⁰ Celso Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica* (EDUSP, 2015), 52.

²¹ Roberto Conduru, “Metaesquema, metaforma, metaobra,” *ARS* 15, no. 30 (2017): 70.

²² Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 17.

amplifies chromatic conflicts, creating the sensation of two wooden bodies dancing in space. By incorporating the movement of the spectator, Oiticica not only “attributes to color the time of the movement of one’s own body, a movement that causes subtle changes in the perception of color”²³ but also opens spaces for the rhythms and choreographies specific to the audiences. Therefore, there would be rhythms and dance in the colors, in the wooden plates, and in the people.

In the “Relevos espaciais”, this color-light that is active and possesses duration is also present. Unlike in “Núcleos”, where a grouping of geometries is present, the “Relevos” are specific, abstract forms shaped through the overlay and composition of wooden plates. The color, as observed in “Núcleos”, constitutes the very structure rather than being a part of it, and reveals itself in various ways, through smooth and continuous transitions between pigments or shades of the same color. Their recesses, in relation to them, open other reliefs and worlds to be explored. These diverse ways of looking at the “Relevos” also invite the participation and bodily movement of the audience, whose circulation opens new perspectives on the creation and even ‘creates’ other works. In this manner, these complex bodies floating in space build rhythmic and choreographic possibilities for themselves and for others that break with the present.

In relation to the “Penetráveis”, we focus on the analysis of “Penetrável n.01”. This is a construction made with movable wooden panels, larger than those seen in the “Relevos” and “Núcleos”, erected on the floor and composed of warm colors. It was common for Oiticica to combine a series of “Penetráveis” in exhibitions, creating large environments from this combination. One such environment, highly relevant to contemporary art, was *Tropicália*, which made its first appearance in the exhibition *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* (1967). Nonetheless, the chromatic-phenomenological experiments of Oiticica acquire another dimension with this production: the activating audience participates in the work by entering it, where they experience color (and its changes) around and through their bodies. This, according to Nunes,²⁴ informs an authentic aesthetic of involvement and movement. The “Penetráveis”, due to the way they exist in space, integrate more radically with the environment, such that the very traditional notion of a work of art is shaken: space becomes ‘organized’, quotidian life is aestheticized, and the artistic production ceases to ‘exist’ without the activation of subjects.²⁵ This aestheticization of everyday space, which blurs more rigid ideas of inside and outside – from its color-structures saturated with chromatic tensions to the choreographic activation of the participating public – opens escape lines for a rhythm that disrupts the monotony of life.

The “Bólides” are small constructions made from materials such as wooden panels, pieces of colored fabric, glass vases, mirrors, sand, sawdust, iron, nylon, plastic bottles, and tulle. With their openings, recesses, bulging shapes, stackable objects,

²³ Braga, “A cor da música: há uma metafísica em Hélio Oiticica,” *ARS* 15, no. 30 (2017): 55.

²⁴ Nunes, *Lygia Clark e Hélio Oiticica* (FUNARTE, 1987), 42.

²⁵ Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica*, 67.

secret compartments, doors that open, and unexpected openings, they sometimes resemble miniatures of the “Núcleos”; at other times, they evoke small houses reminiscent of those in Anna Mariani’s photographs and, in other situations, everyday objects like plant pots and colored bottles. Oiticica’s chromatic experimentation takes on a different scale in his “Bólides”, becoming more concentrated and smaller. This, in fact, is not a drawback, as it opens diverse possibilities for activation, in which the participating audience spins around, walks around, displaces objects, opens and closes compartments, explores recesses, discovers escape routes, hidden spaces, and experiences subtle variations in pigmentation. Therefore, as previously mentioned, it is a pity that the audience has not been able to fully experience them, particularly due to their established significance.

With “Bólides”, the playful takes on a new prominence within the body of works by Oiticica. In the manner of the threshold toys described by Benjamin²⁶, the “Bólides” suggest, even and especially to those who are no longer children, the childhood experiences of engaging with what is deemed useless by capital and with a temporality whose duration is not measured by the empty time of the clock. It is worth remembering that Oiticica was a devoted reader of Bergson. From this perspective, it is possible to notice similarities between these works by the artist and the subversively unclassifiable Odradek, as depicted by Kafka in the short story “The Cares of a Family Man”²⁷. Both are movable, colorful, irresponsible, modest in scale, and made from waste and materials declassified by society. Moreover, both, in one way or another, reveal aesthetic and historical virtualities that transcend bourgeois commitments to conservative rituals and capitalist productivity. In other words, they point to alternative ways of life distinct from those of petty-bourgeois morality.

The politics of the “Bólides” do not stop there. We can see direct indications in them of the repressive scenario experienced in Brazil during the mid-1960s and 1970s. We refer here to “B 33 Bólido Caixa 33 ‘Tributo a Cara de Cavalo’”. This work, in the form of a box open at the front and top, is made from wooden panels painted black on the outside and featuring collages of newspaper images inside that depict Manoel Moreira, known as Cara de Cavalo, lying dead with numerous bullet wounds on his body. A red tulle completes the work stretched diagonally, extending under the edges of the “Bólido”, and a bag of pigment on which is written: “Here it is/ and it will remain/ contemplate/ its/ historical/ silence.” Straddling the line between a tribute-protest and a tombstone, the “Bólido” recalls the death of the first victim of the Le Cocq Squad. Cara de Cavalo was also honored by Oiticica in one of his banners – a silkscreen on fabric, more specifically – entitled “Seja Marginal, Seja Herói” (Be Marginal, Be a Hero), which had one of its first appearances in the political happening “Bandeiras”, which took place at General Osório Square in Rio de Janeiro in 1968 and featured the participation of various experimental artists.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Reflexões sobre a criança, o brinquedo e a educação* (Editora 34, 2009), 81–89.

²⁷ Roberto Schwarz, *O pai de família e outros estudos* (Companhia das Letras, 2008).

The “Parangolés” are somewhat amorphous capes and garments to be worn by people. There are also those made in the form of flags, banners, standards, and tents, such as the “Parangolé Estandarte” and “P03 Parangolé Tenda 01”. Their materials, as in the artist’s previous works, are quite varied: different fabrics, pieces of wood, plastics, tulle, nylon, newspapers, vinyl, and more, which are crafted into layers, intersections, recesses, and spaces to be discovered. The name of this collection of works by Oiticica is revealing of his intentions, as the word “Parangolé” was found written by him in a makeshift dwelling constructed from plastics, string, and leftover materials. Characteristics that his “Parangolés” elaborated upon.

The “Parangolés” only truly come into existence when they are worn, manipulated, danced, transported, and interpreted by the public, who, in an even more radical manner than in the previous works, become active participants in the art. While the “Parangolés” ‘exist’ with the activation of individuals, participants can perceive these creations as a kind of new sensory organ attached to them, allowing them to perceive a collective wave of Dionysian celebration.²⁸ The “Bólides” and other works discussed above, although they possess their own rhythms and create shared, spontaneous choreographic scores with their activators, are still marked by a certain contemplative introspection. In contrast, the “Parangolés” exhibit research into colors, where pictorial experimentation occurs through and within the movement of dancing bodies.

The maturation and conception period of these creations coincides with two important elements in Oiticica’s trajectory: his involvement with the Escola de Samba Estação Primeira de Mangueira (where he served as a dancer) and the concerns arising from his readings of Nietzsche. From the second element, the visual artist began to desire an art of incorporation in which the Dionysian celebration could facilitate a transvaluation of the prevailing aesthetic and political values. Mangueira, in turn, seems to have prompted Oiticica to develop a greater sensitivity – or an expansion of it – towards what he perceived as the religious, corporeal, festive, musical, and choreographic elements of the popular universe of Mangueira hill.

This attempt at a radical Bacchic transvaluation stemming from Mangueira yielded various fruits in Oiticica’s art. Such an impulse can be distinctly observed in two of his “Parangolés: P17 Parangolé Capa 13 ‘Estou Possuído’” (I Am Possessed) and “P15 Parangolé Capa 11 ‘Incorporo a Revolta’” (I Incorporate the Revolt)”. Both phrases, with titles embroidered and printed on some of their material layers, reference the Afro-Brazilian political and religious universe. For Oiticica, it was as if, by activating these “Parangolés”, people could close off their bodies and resist the obstacles of everyday life, the prevailing values of petty-bourgeois morality, political repression, and the conservatism of artistic circuits. Thus, it is possible to interpret, following Oiticica’s intentions, that the people, the “Parangolés,” become carriers (as steeds) of the transvaluation of everyday life and institutions, bringing art and life closer together and ultimately tying everything to celebration. It is also interesting to

²⁸ Paula Braga, “Hélio Oiticica and the parangolés: (ad)ressing Nietzsche’s Übermensch,” *Third Text* 17, no. 1 (2003): 56.

recall various photographs in which the residents of Mangueira themselves appear activating the “Parangolés”, which, according to Conduru²⁹, indicates Oiticica’s political and emotional interest in the condition of the people from the hill.

The Dionysian incorporation of the “Parangolé” was imbued with a radicality grounded in an engagement with all forms of social dissent – from organized movements, such as revolution, to dispersed and individual acts, like the banditry of Cara de Cavalo – and in Oiticica’s experience on the Morro da Mangueira, which was unsustainable for the artistic and cultural institutions of the time. Evidence of this is found in the fact that, as previously mentioned, Oiticica, along with several other dancers and members of the Estação Primeira de Mangueira, was prevented from entering and activating the “Parangolés” at the *Opinião 65* exhibition held at MAM-RJ. This event perfectly embodies Oiticica’s idea that the “Parangolé” would serve as a form of subversive anti-art, opposing the traditional divisions between art and life, as well as the rigid distinctions within the institutionalized artistic field.

Oiticica, in his work “Tropicália”, aims to create a tropical environment – complete with gravel, macaws, palm trees, sand, and “Penetráveis” – that resembles what he referred to as the organic and fantastic constructions of the favelas and the experience of walking through their alleyways³⁰. In this setting, he sought to construct a comprehensive Brazilian image and, more importantly, an extrasensory existential experience, countering intellectualist culture and established structures. Ultimately, “Tropicália” consisted of a penetrable space through which the spectator/participant entered barefoot into a tropical setting filled with buried poems, strong-smelling roots, plastic objects, and more. This journey culminated in a television that was turned on, imbuing a total Brazilian imagery into the state of global art and fostering a consciousness of non-conditioning to established structures.

Critics received “Tropicália” as a landmark in Brazilian art, not so much for its construction and manifest images – which would be the obvious interpretation of the tropical – but more for its profound agency. Brett³¹ argues that the tropical appearance should be contrasted with its deeper meaning, endowed with sensory images, such as that of a television turned on in complete darkness, producing intimate confrontations that could change individuals. Favaretto,³² in turn, assesses that what is hidden in the work is what is most manifest about it, with the agency of behaviors, languages, and figures that shatter any total image or representation of Brazil, forming a critical language of the dominated against colonialism and its petrified images. Penna,³³ furthermore, sees in Oiticica’s work a profoundly anticolonial sense, and using the Aristotelian distinction between simile (comparison between two elements) and

²⁹ Roberto Conduru, “Índices afro na arte no Brasil nas décadas de 1960 e 1970,” in *Arte não europeia: conexões historiográficas a partir do Brasil*, ed. C. Avoletse and P. Meneses (Estação Liberdade; Vasto, 2020), 145.

³⁰ Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 99.

³¹ Brett, *Brasil experimental* (Contracapa, 2005).

³² Favaretto, *A invenção de Hélio Oiticica*.

³³ João Camillo Penna, *O tropo tropicalista* (Azougue, 2017), 235–36.

metaphor (replacement of a component by another), argues that the trope, or the tropical figure contained in the work of Oiticica, consists “precisely in the transportation – in the Greek sense of metaphor – of a figurative meaning that replaces the literal meaning, thus introducing a kind of void of ownership.” In other words, one would see in such work “a movement of figurative transportation, anthropographic”, in which “the black and indigenous heritages, the ‘only significant ones’” – as we noted in Oiticica’s quotation in the second section of this chapter – should occupy the void of significance previously assigned to Brazilian art, imposing a Brazilian image on the world. In other words, the “tropical trope would consist of this anthropophagic devouring of our own void, installing in its place the Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian figure, the ‘Brazilian state of art.’” According to Oiticica, with this work, he aimed to create the myth of miscegenation within Brazilian art.³⁴

Considering the above, we will now make brief comments on a specific debate regarding Oiticica’s artistic trajectory and his relationship with Afro-Brazilian and popular cultures and arts.

Exoticism, ginga, and Brazilian art

In the essay “O Hélio não tinha ginga” (Hélio did not have ginga), Asbury accuses the creation of a populist myth surrounding Oiticica and his work, which he argues is based on an overvaluation and reification of Oiticica’s relationship with the favela and the Escola de Samba Mangueira. Consequently, the criticism suggests that the “discovery” of the popular and samba became the driving force of the visual artist’s entire trajectory. This attitude resulted in an inflation of works, such as the “Parangolé”, revealing an effort to politically correct multicultural inclusion of a Global South artist in the world art circuit, based on his supposed Brazilian cultural difference. Asbury presents evidence for his argument, including elements such as: the incorporation of other influences in the structuring of Oiticica’s creations, like the pictorial research and the readings he conducted of Bergson and Nietzsche; the analysis of works created after Oiticica’s departure from Brazil; and the use of photographs of the artist dancing samba in Mangueira, which he claims illustrate Oiticica’s Herculean effort to perform the ginga, and therefore his non-belonging to the community. We suggest, while nuancing Asbury’s critique, that the ginga, rhythm, and incorporation of the popular were present in Oiticica’s work from its earliest stages, which, far from being merely a tropical exoticization by critics, were decisive for a considerable portion of the creations of Oiticica and for his overall trajectory. Antonio Cicero himself argued that one of the great discoveries in Oiticica’s work was its use of a certain exoticism to ironize the stereotyped manner in which the tropics were understood.³⁵ This incorporation, however, did not occur without contradictions.

³⁴ Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 108.

³⁵ Antonio Cicero, “O construtivismo brasileiro,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 27 nov. (caderno Ilustrada), 2010.

To demonstrate this in practice, we will make a quick comparison between Oiticica's "Tropicália" and the work of artist Rubem Valentim.³⁶ Herkenhoff³⁷ emphasizes the proximity between Oiticica and Valentim in their use of geometry to dynamize the plane with graphic rhythm and their references to Afro-Brazilian religiosity.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Herkenhoff distances the aesthetic experiences of Modernists from those of Valentim, given that while the former's references to indigenous cultures are destined for the Other, the latter's work in relation to African heritage stems from his personal experiences. This metric is not, however, applied to Oiticica, whose approximations with Afro-Brazilian culture, in truth, also configured a kind of journey to the people – that is, to an exterior popular sphere that was not part of his initial formation. Note, in this sense, that Oiticica, in a text about the *Parangolé*, will state that this work could be understood as the basic structural search for the constitution of the world of objects, an interest, "therefore, in popular constructive primitivism"³⁸ – the opposite of Valentim's perspective.

This, in itself, cannot be understood as an aesthetic critique, as the 'primitivisms' of Dalí, Gauguin, Klee, Tzara, Matisse, etc., based on a rejection of official art and an impulse of evasion toward the Other of the West,³⁹ produced unavoidable aesthetic results. However, we argue that in the cases of Oiticica and Valentim, this difference ultimately yielded distinct aesthetic results.

In this sense, we disagree with the analysis of Dardashti,⁴⁰ for whom Oiticica and Valentim's aesthetic treatment of the repressed Afro-Brazilian culture would be similar. Furthermore, we also distance ourselves from the perspectives presented by Conduru⁴¹ and Asbury,⁴² for whom criticism and reception would have rendered Oiticica's relationship with the *morro*, the samba school, and popular elements as something romantic or exoticized. For us, in fact, this exoticization was present in Oiticica's own works and writings.

Rubem Valentim, as previously stated, invested in a universal language, but with a Brazilian character: a Brazilian *riscadura* (ritual mark-making), in which the primary source would be the living, requalified Afro-Amerindian-Northeastern-Brazilian iconography. Subsequently, through his European and Senegalese experience, where he encountered a rich Afro-diasporic visual language, the aforementioned iconography was transposed into a contemporary language without falling into

³⁶ Marino, "Rubem Valentim, Hélio Oiticica e o tropicalismo."

³⁷ Herkenhoff, "A pedra do raio de Rubem Valentim, Obá-pintor da casa de mãe senhora," 422.

³⁸ Hélio Oiticica, "Bases fundamentais para uma definição do parangolé," in: *Hélio Oiticica: a dança na minha experiência*, ed. A. Pedrosa and T. Toledo (MASP, 2020), 291.

³⁹ Mario de Micheli. *As vanguardas artísticas* (Martins Fontes, 2004), 55.

⁴⁰ Abigail Dardashti, "Negotiating Afro-Brazilian Abstraction: Rubem Valentim in Rio, Rome, and Dakar, 1957–1966," in: *New Geographies of Abstract Art in Postwar Latin America*, ed. by M. Alavarez and A. Franco (Routledge, 2019), 85–86.

⁴¹ Conduru, "Índices afro na arte no Brasil nas décadas de 1960 e 1970," 145.

⁴² M. Asbury, "O Hélio não tinha ginga," in *Fios soltos: a arte de Hélio Oiticica*, ed. P. Braga (Perspectiva, 2011), 27–52.

folkloric or caricatural visions, thus avoiding a sub-kitsch typical of exoticizing tropicalisms.⁴³ This position shaped almost the entirety of his production, as we have already seen.

In view of this, and in light of Herkenhoff's analysis, the difference between the reformulations made by Oiticica and Valentim, based on Afro-Amerindian experiences and iconographies, is striking. Here, we can see differences in the very form and mediations through which both artists transfigured them into art. Thus, while Oiticica directed himself to the Other, Valentim sought to give form to what was intrinsic to his own experiences and perspectives, which ultimately helped to shape distinct aesthetic results. Not least because, as Veloso explains,⁴⁴ part of Tropicalism's relevance came from its tendency to "make Brazil exotic for both tourists and Brazilians", since the eccentricities of this tropical Catholic monster could not be neutralized.

In a comparative analysis, while Oiticica sought to construct a violently exotic Brazilian image for both foreign avant-garde artists and Brazilians, Valentim sought to forge, from the inside and through a radical anthropophagic experience of decentralizing and devouring the abstractionist language of the capitalist center, a universal language solidified from the Afro-Northeastern-Amerindian Brazilian experience. In short, while Oiticica created an exoticizing work that had a critical purpose, Valentim circulated Brazilian-Afro-Atlantic constructions forged as a universal language, which, incidentally, explains Valentim's critiques of tropicalisms. While Oiticica practiced an art based on an external, foreign gaze upon exotic characteristics of Brazil, Valentim, from a peripheral viewpoint, destabilized and criticized the European norms imposed by imperialist power relations, demonstrating their incompleteness and particularisms, which the Afro-Amerindian-popular Brazilian iconography would correct.

Despite the notable presence of popular culture in Oiticica's experience, one cannot overlook the way in which the visual artist relates to popular and Afro-Brazilian cultures and arts. There are numerous instances in which Oiticica refers to the Mangueira favela as a kind of exotic repository of life, creativity, and spontaneity, rendering, as Crockett⁴⁵ pointed out, the favela is a malleable signifier subject to external projections. Oiticica's quest for "popular constructive primitivism"⁴⁶ and for an art that resembled the "beauty of the mulata sambando"⁴⁷ thus approaches a kind of escapism and an exoticizing search for the Other – like significant trends in modern avant-garde art. While this critical observation does not intend to discredit Oiticica's work, it cannot be neglected for historiographical purposes.

⁴³ Rubem Valentim, "Manifesto ainda que tardio," in *Rubem Valentim: construções afro-atlânticas*, ed. A. Pedrosa and F. Oliva (Masp, 2018), 133–34.

⁴⁴ Veloso, *Verdade tropical*, 264.

⁴⁵ Crockett, "War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica," 135.

⁴⁶ Oiticica, "Bases fundamentais para uma definição do parangolé," 291.

⁴⁷ Oiticica *apud* Crockett, "War heroes: por uma poética da negritude em Hélio Oiticica," 136.

In this regard, the critic Teixeira Coelho⁴⁸ noted that, as a cultural habit, the *Semana de Arte de 1922* is viewed in Brazil as the founding moment of Brazilian art. However, international manuals, “authored by unknowns or stars like Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, overlook the week: for many of them, Brazilian art only begins with Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.”⁴⁹ From a different analytical perspective, Naves observes something similar in the international reception of Oiticica and Clark. According to Naves, the distinction and discussion between modern and contemporary art are extensive; however, a common differentiating feature in this debate is the “defense, by contemporary critics and artists, of a strong rapprochement between art and life, in a movement that opposes the modern claim for the autonomy of art.”⁵⁰ Continuing Naves’ reasoning, since the late 1960s, *Pop Art*, *Minimalism*, *Arte Povera*, *Happenings*, and *Neo-Expressionism* have focused on this connection between art and life. During this time, an ideology has developed those contrasts with the so-called formalism of modern art and its defense of the formal autonomy of the work. This constellation of concerns, critiques, and works is what has brought remarkable notoriety to the works of Clark and Oiticica. Also crucial to the enthusiastic reception of their works was an expectation from international critics for the exotic. That is, using Asbury’s categories critically, they were perceived as having more “ginga” than art produced in the Global North.

Although potentially advantageous in allowing for entry into the international art scene, the paths of exoticism can sometimes act as a steel cage that suppresses other grammars and aesthetic solutions in the Global South. As a result, when artists from the Global South exhibit their art, critics from the Global North and their audiences often expect elements of an Edenic tropic or solutions to issues unrelated to the artistic field in which the artist operates. In our view, Oiticica adopted an ambiguous stance, both denouncing and participating in such a movement.

⁴⁸ José Teixeira Coelho, “22 e o final (feliz) da arte brasileira,” *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 11/02/2012, S8.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rodrigo Naves, *O vento e o moinho* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007), 202.

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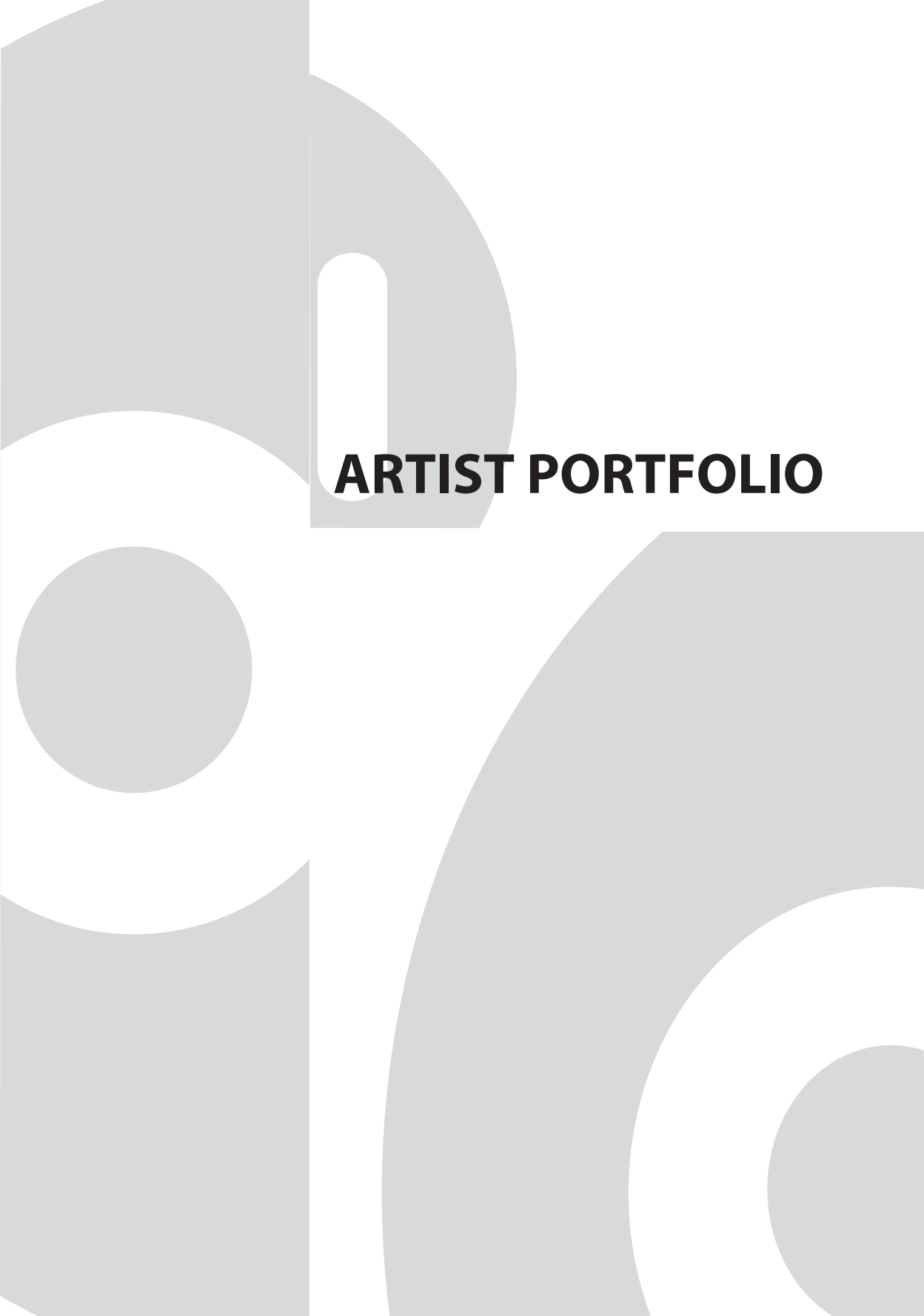
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ARTIST PORTFOLIO

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Multimedia Exhibition *Shine a Life* (2023)

The art-activist photography exhibition *Shine a Life* (in Serbian *Obasjaj život*) was designed as a project activity performed by the non-governmental organization Kolektiv Talas TIRV from Belgrade, Serbia. The entire concept of the exhibition, as well as the included photographs and videos, is under my authorship since at the time I was the art and culture coordinator in Kolektiv Talas TIRV. The exhibition was presented to the public on August 21, 2023, in the NGO Hub gallery in downtown Belgrade. The exhibition comprised 18 photographs and 1 video, featuring 15 trans and non-binary individuals from Serbia who participated in this project as models in both photographs and video.

Only during the writing process of this essay did I understand the origins of this exhibition. Saturated with exhibitions that showcase a series of portraits of queer people year after year, conveying one or another variation of the “we’re human after all” message to the audience, with *Shine a Life*, we aimed to explore motives that are often unspoken to the public. The ones our queer lives revolve around.

I remember that as a queer community we often spoke of unfairness and loss and grief in a way that acknowledged them as an integral part that threads our lives together into shared queer existence, as something we needed to share amongst ourselves to keep recognizing each other’s reality. We were each other’s mirrors. We were weightlifters unburdening ourselves whenever we met. We internalize these things and label them as queer culture when we speak of it because we need to see them outside our individual selves and make others look and gasp at the weight of it with understanding. We want proof that there is meaning and cause-and-effect to them.

So, there was an agenda to *Shine a Life* that I only semi-recognized at the time. An agenda for participation. We took that weight, sliced it into ‘slice of life’ motives that spoke candidly of queer life, and maybe for the first time, we played with them, not as a burden to be lifted but as a gift to be shared. We would soon be seen.

The original plan for the choice of motives was slightly thwarted by the gruesome murder of a trans woman by the name of Noa that happened during the development of our project. We focused even more on motives that would heal us, rather than showcasing our edginess and performativeness.

I’ve divided motives based on locations I previously scouted. For the series of pictures – “On this side of fire” – we went to nature, forest, and grass plains, dressed in fur, plain white dresses, and robes, and danced around the fire at night in circles. It was a joy to see people who are socially disenfranchised from their Slavic folklore

and othered from patriarchal cisgender heteronormative tradition, reclaim the meaning of past customs and tales through role-playing. We found a forest clearing, built a pyre-like pile, and set it ablaze. We played folklore music, and I told them to dance barefoot in circles around rising flames. The results were photographs titled: “On this side of fire”, “New Roots”, “Dance against dying of the light”, “Ancestors dance”, and “Fairy’s circle”.

For our second location, we visited Glinara, a protected area on the outskirts of Belgrade, reminiscent of prairies, and famous for its small cliffs. Our original plan to rent a retro classic car and have a photo shoot with props was at odds with our budget and the inaccessibility of the terrain. The location was beneficial to us because it had blue skies filled with bright, low clouds, as if part of some planned scenography, so we used most of it. One of the significant motives we covered was the notion of queer time, which refers to a passage of time in the lives of queer people that is disjointed from all normative, cisgender timelines. For many queer people, even in times of societal stability, things, people, and events like the first kiss with someone we like, steady employment, family celebrations, lived authenticity, engagement, and marriage are scattered through their lives seemingly without a fixed, pre-planned position. Something that most normies go through in their teens and early 20s, queer people feel secure enough or discover only in their 30s or even later. The time it takes to realize, unlearn, and learn anew, reassessing your life to act on it, can consume chunks of our lives, leaving us yearning for the ‘wasted’ or ‘best’ years that went by. “Queer time” photo shows that reality. A group of people with their lives in order stands at the edge of a cliff, holding items that symbolize the passage of time. They look down upon a drag queen in mid-run who reaches after them with the contents of her suitcase spilling out in an arc, in empty space between her and the people on a cliff. The distance between them might as well be miles long. The photo “It happens all the time in heaven” was inspired by a poem of the same name written by Hafiz. The poem itself speaks about the beautiful universality of romantic love and the promise of its return to earth. In the photo, a queer person on a bent knee offers the bride a bouquet. Queer love is rarely allowed such a simple gesture of love to the point that they rarely consider making it. “Pride Supernova” was all about capturing a ‘perfect’ moment of queer celebration. We charged the scene with the right timing, which delivered an explosion of laughter, shouting, jumping, running, and non-degradable confetti, which we later had to clean up. Other photos that celebrated us were “Queer Joy” and “Charge towards the clash of the worlds”.

Taken on a building with an open roof, the photos “People are safe spaces” and “Sights” diptych offer more intimate moments inside a queer friend group. Half-nude acts of cis and trans women from the back show comfort with one another and sensuality over sexualization of identities. Some of the locations were streets. “Transpotting” showcases life in action, with characters running through the streets in a manic-like fashion, similar to the movie *Trainspotting*. Although fun and dynamic in its aesthetic, its inspiration comes from minority stress. Anxiety-powered functioning

in a society that's dozing you with subtle stressors, which you internalize and keep in your body. Gender non-conforming people can be especially susceptible to minority stress, which is a consequence of living in a society that offers no safety to those who differ from the norm. Other more playful photos from the city location are "Tribe", "Cheers", and "Lost in supermarket".

We truly collaborated on this project. Half of it turned out to be just capturing spontaneous moments instead of blocking the shots and scenes. We gave models authorship freedom without letting them know by giving them simple tasks, which, over time, invited more and more spontaneity. All that was left to do was to capture it. The goal with *Shine a Life* was to share ourselves with the world, which knew nothing of our lives beyond what it allowed itself to acknowledge, which was not much. Our lives were briefly illuminated and continue to remain as such in photographs. From queer time and the search for belonging, from planting, replanting, and knitting together our roots to rediscovering a sense of belonging, from minority stress, a cost of personal freedom and pride, to the joy we feel when, together, revealed publicly, we are seen, and it is healing to our world.



Photo #1: "Novi koreni" ("New Roots")



Photo #2: “Kvir vreme” (“Queer Time”)



Photo #3: “It happens all the time in heaven”



Photo #4: “Kvir radost” (“Queer Joy”)



Photo #5: “Pogledi” (“Sights”)

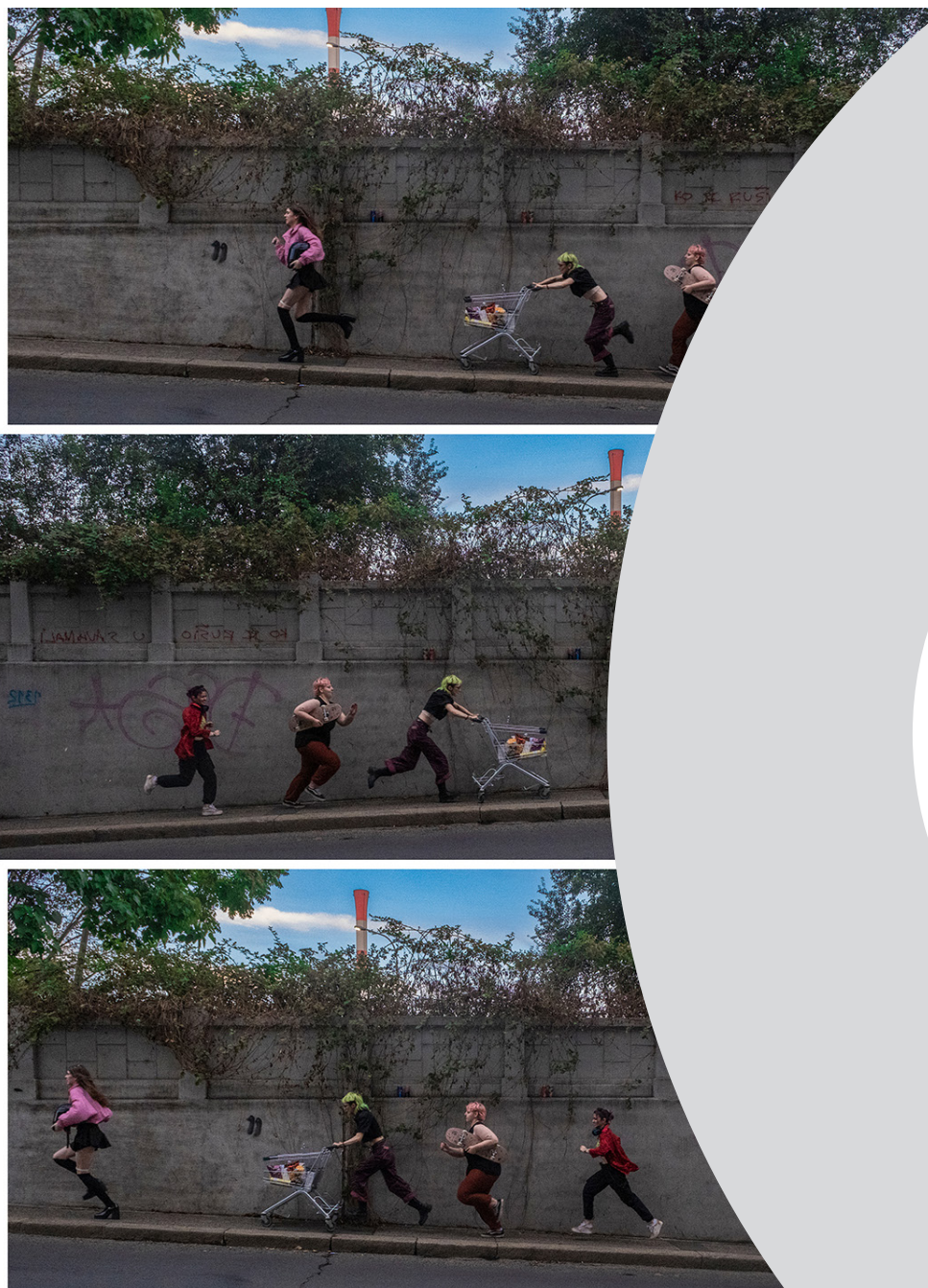


Photo #6: “Transpotting”



BOOK REVIEW



ART+MEDIA

Nađa Pavlica

Can the Monster Speak Back to Psychoanalysis? Paul B. Preciado's
Can the Monster Speak? Book Review

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Can the Monster Speak Back to Psychoanalysis? Paul B. Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* Book Review

Paul B. Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* (2020) is a fusion of memoir and radical political performance. Framed as a “report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts”, the book records the speech Preciado delivered to 3,500 Lacanian psychoanalysts in Paris in 2019. In that setting, he explicitly assumed the persona of “the monster”, a rhetorical-political stance that turns psychoanalysis's gaze back upon itself. Citing Kafka's 1917 “Report to an Academy”, Preciado likens himself to Red Peter the ape, who only gained human language by accepting the “cage” of human norms, flipping this colonial metaphor onto the psychiatric profession. This posture positions the speaker as a subaltern subject demanding to speak from within the clinic, “not as a patient, but as a citizen, as your monstrous equal”, establishing a scene of contention and campaigning for epistemic justice.

Preciado's main target is not merely institutional prejudice but the epistemology of psychoanalysis. He traces Freudian and Lacanian theory back to nineteenth-century Europe, asserting it as anchored in obsolete patriarchal and colonial assumptions. He argues that Freudian psychoanalysis was conceived as a mechanism for regulating the psyche, fundamentally trapped within a colonial understanding of sex, gender, and sexual difference. In Preciado's view, psychoanalysis has never been a neutral science of the psyche; rather, it is an ethnocentric myth that enshrines the privilege of a colonial “universal man”. He argues that the epistemic binary regime of sex, gender, and sexual difference, which psychoanalytic theory deems universal, is neither an empirical reality nor a metaphysical symbolic order but has been in crisis since the 1940s due to the discovery of new data (morphological, chromosomal, biochemical) that renders binary assignment highly contentious, if not impossible.

Rejecting this legacy, Preciado issues a radical call: Set Oedipus free. He insists on a feminist and queer rereading of sexual difference, arguing that psychoanalysis, far from being liberating, provides a technology to normalize deviations from male/female roles. For Preciado, escaping this cage requires a transformation of clinical practice itself, one that sheds the colonial patriarchy at its roots. The analytic challenge is profound: even if progressive clinicians offer liberating care, Preciado notes that the deep cultural inscription of psychoanalysis still features a conservative discourse

regarding gender theories. He points out that the success of his own extensive analytical experiences depended entirely on the analysts' infidelity to their foundational theoretical framework, their creative ability to step outside the "cage" and listen to a non-binary person without immediately resorting to diagnosis, critique, or cure.

Preciado elevates the monster as the protagonist of his manifesto, positioning the figures of the monster and Kafka's ape as ancestors of the trans/non-binary subject, thereby refusing fixed categories and exposing the arbitrary nature of dominant norms. Closely linked to this critique is his framing of gender transition as an act of embodied resistance and knowledge-production. He introduces the concept of the "somatheque": a living political and cultural archive. Distancing itself from the classical notion of the body (as nature or corpus), the somatheque is defined precisely as a "dense, somatic, stratified, organ-saturated apparatus managed by different biopolitical regimes". This concept benchmarks against preceding post-structuralist ideas (Foucault's docile body, Butler's incorporation of the norm) by newly capturing the contemporary, hyper-pharmacological environment of gender modification, the pharmacopornographic age, and insisting on techniques for the desubjectivation of the somatic apparatus.

All these arguments are woven into a broader intellectual critique. Preciado draws upon feminist, queer, and postcolonial thinkers (Monique Wittig, Sylvia Wynter, etc.) to show how even sexuality and identity have been historically constructed. He reminds us that long before Freud, Western anatomies knew a one-sex model in which female anatomy was simply an internalized male body. The notion of fundamentally different sexes is a recent binary epistemology born under colonial capitalism. In this register, normative masculinity and femininity (and even heterosexuality) are essentially powerful, fabricated social constructs. Preciado's trans figure thus embodies an unlimited range of ways of being beyond those artefacts. By foregrounding bodies and lives outside the psychoanalytic paradigm, he insists that knowledge itself is at stake: who is allowed to speak, to define experience, and to be counted as a legitimate subject?

The theoretical importance of *Can the Monster Speak?* lies in these interventions. For gender studies, it overturns a core canon (Freud/Lacan) and recasts transition as knowledge-making. For media studies, it models a performance that leverages digital publicity and visual culture (the viral speech, the "monster" persona) to disrupt power. Preciado's refusal to accept any fixed identity (male, female, patient) highlights how subjectivity is mediated by discourse and technology. Indeed, he argues that the emerging epistemic shift around gender is comparable to a scientific revolution: psychoanalysis must choose between defending the old "cage" or mutating into something new. In the epilogue, he even appeals for a mutant psychoanalysis, a paradigm shift that will allow new bodies and voices to speak.

Can the Monster Speak? is unmistakably of its time. It speaks into contemporary debates on trans rights, #MeToo critiques of patriarchal violence, and the decolonial turn in knowledge. At once performative memoir and theoretical tract, the

book demands that media and cultural scholars ask: how do narratives about sex and identity get made? Who is labelled a *monster* and who gets to tell their story? Preciado's work does not answer these in a single key; instead, it insists that the coming epistemological shift will depend on listening to those very “monstrous” voices that psychoanalysis has so far silenced. In doing so, it offers timely and incisive insights for any contemporary scholar pondering the politics of gender and knowledge.



BIOGRAPHIES



ART+MEDIA

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Nađa Bobičić (PhD) is a research associate at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Political Science. Her main research interests include anti-gender discourse in the region of former Yugoslavia, as well as historical and contemporary alliances between left-leaning feminisms and the LGBTIQ+ movement. Her 2020 doctoral thesis examined socialist feminism in Yugoslavia from 1975 to 1990.

Nina Čolović (1989) is a researcher in the social sciences and humanities at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb. Her work explores the history and mechanisms of linguistic regulation, as well as the potential for developing methodologies in critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, critical pedagogy, and social semiotics. She engages with a wide spectrum of debates on social and economic justice, particularly through the lenses of Marxist, anarchist, feminist, and queer praxis.

Aditi Dirghangi (1990) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi-NCR Campus, India. She earned her PhD in English Literature from the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Rourkela, where her research focused on feminist retellings of Hindu mythology, specifically exploring the marginalization and silencing of female figures in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Her academic interests include Mythology Studies, Indian Writing in English, Postcolonial Theory, and Comparative Literature. She has presented her work at several national and international conferences and has published in peer-reviewed edited volumes and conference proceedings. Her scholarship engages with questions of voice, identity, and representation in literary and cultural narratives. She is currently involved in interdisciplinary projects that intersect literature, gender studies, and cultural history.

Jana Kujundžić (1989; Zagreb, Yugoslavia) is an Associate Professor in Criminology and Sociology at Northumbria University, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the socio-legal structures and institutional power dynamics of gendered violence as well as abolitionist feminist responses to state violence. She obtained her PhD in Criminology in 2022 from the University of Essex, Department of Sociology. She holds two MA degrees, one in Gender Studies from the Central European University and the other in Sociology from the University of Zagreb. She has written for feminist and regional leftist portals such as Libela.org, Voxfeminae.net and Lefteast.org. She is a long-term grassroots organizer and member of queer, feminist and anti-fascist collectives.

Ana Marinković (1997; Belgrade, Serbia) is a multidisciplinary artist and researcher whose work combines conceptual inquiry with personal narrative to examine how identity and technology are negotiated within contemporary art and its institutions. Her practice spans installation, drawing, and video, often blurring the boundaries between critique and immersion. Currently, her theoretical and artistic

research focuses on bodily autonomy, identity, feminism and social structures and hierarchies that shape contemporary art. Alongside her artistic practice, she engages in art criticism and cultural writing. Ana holds a BFA and an MA in Sculpture from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade and is pursuing a PhD in Transdisciplinary Studies of Art and Media Theory at the Faculty of Media and Communications. She is also an Affiliate Scholar at The New Centre for Research and Practice and an art journalist for Radar, a Serbian political weekly paper.

Rafael Marino is currently a researcher at the Center for Law and Democracy at the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (Núcleo Direito e Democracia do Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento – NDD-CEBRAP). He was a postdoctoral visiting researcher at the Centre de recherches sur les pays lusophones (CREPAL) at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3) from 2024 to 2025. He holds a PhD (2024) and an MA (2019) in Political Science from the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH - USP), where he also earned his BA in Social Sciences.

Aleksa Milanović (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Media and Communications in Belgrade and the author of *Representation of Transgender Identities in Visual Arts* (2015) and *Media Construction of Other Body* (2019). He holds a PhD in Transdisciplinary Studies of Contemporary Arts and Media from the Singidunum University in Belgrade and an MA degree in Theory of Arts and Media from the University of Arts in Belgrade. He is engaged in scientific research work in which he mainly deals with body studies and gender studies in the field of transgender and queer studies, theorizing the discourse of different, non-normative genders by analyzing representations of transgender and other gender bodies within mass media, visual arts and popular culture. He has been involved in trans activism since 2008, when he volunteered for numerous activist organizations and informal activist groups working to promote LGBTIQ+ rights. He participated in the founding of a regional organization Trans Network Balkan in 2014, as well as a local collective in Serbia, Kolektiv Talas TIRV (Collective Wave TIGV) in 2020.

Jelena Mišeljčić is a film producer and a scholar. She completed her undergraduate and master's studies in Production at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, where she is currently engaged as a lecturer in film history and theory. She earned her doctorate in Transdisciplinary Studies of Contemporary Art and Media at the Faculty of Media and Communications in Belgrade. As a producer, she has worked on several internationally awarded films. Her research is based on experimental cinema and contemporary film and media practice and published in international journals and volumes.

Bercesta Özdemir (1984) graduated from the Istanbul University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Radio Television Cinema in 2006. She double majored at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Public Administration, Istanbul University. She received her master's degree from Bahçeşehir University, Department of Cinema-Television in 2009, and received her PhD from the Istanbul University in 2016. Özdemir is the author of several books: *Women Directors of Turkish Cinema Speak: Interviews with Women Directors with Standardized Open-Line Interview Method*, *Discussions on Independent Cinema in Turkey: Thoughts from the Field*, *Women Directors in Turkish Cinema and the Representation of Sub(object)ivated Woman in Space*, *An Examination of Characters and Spaces in Film Narratives in the Context of Panopticon and Chronotope within the Framework of Narratology Theory*. Özdemir teaches at Istanbul University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Cinema as an Associate Professor and her academic research interests include feminist film theory, psychoanalytic film theory, film criticism, film philosophy, independent cinema, digital cinema.

Nada Pavlica is a Master of Communication Studies whose thesis, “The Potential of Comics as a Medium for the Development of Philosophy and Social Theory: Superman Among the Stars,” explores comics as a philosophical and theoretical medium. She works as a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Media and Communications in Belgrade, where she teaches courses on popular culture, ideology, media literacy and philosophy. Her research field encompasses critical theory of thought, postcolonial and anticolonial theories, feminist studies, as well as comics theory - a field still marginalized within the Serbian academia, which she aims to promote and provide it with institutional recognition and a theoretical framework.

Vanja Petrović (1987) is a nonbinary community organizer, activist, and PhD candidate in social policy and social work at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science. Her research is interdisciplinary, spanning across gender and queer studies, social policy, and activist practices. She is one of the founders of an abolition feminism collective in Novi Sad. Before becoming an activist, she worked as a journalist, editor and translator.

Marija Radoman is a Research Associate at the Institute for Sociological Research, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. She earned her degree in sociology at the same faculty, where she also completed her PhD in 2019 with a dissertation on same-sex partnerships in Belgrade. Her professional background includes over a decade of research experience in the fields of gender studies, youth value orientations, LGBTIQ rights, and research methodologies. She has a strong interest in feminist and queer theory, as well as in the study of social values, with a particular focus on the rise of right-wing movements and authoritarian tendencies.

Sara Sarić Citero was born in Užice, Serbia. After finishing art high school in their hometown, they completed graphic design at The Academy of Applied Studies Polytechnic in Belgrade. Citero works on set designs for movies, commercials and tv shows. Since 2024 they has been working as a part time videographer at the Belgrade based media – ZOOMER, shooting and editing interviews, podcasts, and documentary films (*Andrej* 2025). As a creator and screenwriter of the TV show *Rainbow Gravity* they completed the Series Launch program in Prague and Tallinn in 2023 in MID-POINT Institute which operates under the auspices of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and presented the TV show at the Black Nights film festival. Citero is the screenwriter of the short sci-fi film *Solskin* premiered at the Sarajevo Film Festival 2022. From 2021-2024 they worked as a coordinator for culture and arts at the Collective Wave TIGV where they created and coordinated projects, shot and edited video campaigns, photo and video exhibitions and sometimes gave lectures and workshops on photography, videography, movie history, and video editing. Citero is the author and coordinator of the audio-visual exhibition ‘Shine a Life’ premiered at Endžio HAB in Belgrade and later exhibited in the Parliament building in Podgorica, Montenegro (2023). With their short story *No One Goes to Heaven No More* (2021) Citero won an award at the Love is the Law competition.

Bhavya Sinha (1998) is a PhD research scholar in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Christ University, Delhi-NCR, India. She is a postgraduate from the University of Delhi, and her academic interests pertain to Cinema and Literature Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Visual Studies. Her current research topic broadly explores Bollywood horror films, posthumanism, body-horror, and body politics. She is also interested in reading and writing poetry and has an original collection of poems published in her name. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1663-1644>.

Katarzyna Ewa Stojičić is a cultural studies scholar, researcher, PhD candidate, and lecturer affiliated with the University of Arts (Univerzitet umetnosti) in Belgrade, Republic of Serbia. She is a graduate of the University of Silesia and Jagiellonian University. Her research interests focus on the anthropology of fashion and costume studies.

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Thesis and dissertation:

Mihwa Choi, “Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008).

Choi, “Contesting *Imaginaires*.”

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