



# Trauma, Violence, and Lesbian Agency in Croatia and Serbia Building Better Times

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*To the women who taught me  
to cherish and love the woman in me*

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# 1

## Introduction: In Lesbian Worlds

It has taken me time to arrive at trauma. I have been hovering around it for more than a decade, ever since I thought, perhaps somewhat naively, that sociology could help me to make sense of the way in which our lives got caught in a bewildering swirl of war and destruction. And although people say that trauma is a staple feature of our epoch, that we live in “trauma culture” (Kaplan 2005), this does not make my own less painful. Its capacity to occasionally overwhelm me at unbearable levels is not diminished—but often amplified—by the images of misery that inundate us on a daily basis. While trauma has pervaded the pages that I have written, I did not have the courage or the means for putting my finger on it—it has for long remained a stowaway in my texts, an invisible co-traveller waiting to be drawn to the surface, identified, named. It is only through years of psychotherapy and therapeutic feminist scholarship that I have now managed to take a better look at it, to approach it and *touch* it, and, to a certain extent, harness its colossal affective force. I could thus become more aware of how it colours numerous aspects of my existence serving as a thread that runs through generations of my ancestors and connects me—in still insufficiently recognised ways—with many of my contemporaries, extended family members and (former) conationals.<sup>1</sup>

This book is based on the idea that to be stricken by trauma means to *lose a language*, to witness a failure of and start looking for the primary instrument for engaging with the world (Caruth 1996). To be traumatised means to dwell in the barren fields of the incomprehensible, to be caught up in a loop of *suspended time*<sup>2</sup> marked by an experience that is not completely graspable, that is impossible to fathom. The affective nucleus of trauma is a “black hole” (van der Kolk and McFarlane 1996) which words cannot penetrate: as one goes around that verbal abyss, in search of relief or even healing, one understands that the traumatic is excruciatingly hard to pinpoint. Trauma is a spasm between the constraint of remaining silent, on the one hand, and the urgency to speak, on the other. While the wound struggles to reveal itself and get a shape through words and voice, it leaves us with an impression that we have *never really* said what we wanted to say, we are faced with a residue that compels us to try again. Due to its fundamental verbal impenetrability, trauma is a testimony that longs to be heard but can never be fully narrated (Caruth 1996).

## At the Crossroads of Trauma

The beginnings of the Yugoslav wars and the sprouts of homosexual desire coincided in my body in the early 1990s, triggering an immediate *evacuation of language*. A patriarchal body flooded by a homosexual urging is instantaneously *silenced*: it does not have the means for understanding itself because it enters a semantic void in which it has nothing to fall back on. Such a body cannot acknowledge what has never existed *here*, but if at all, invariably *somewhere there*, far from us and our capacity to name it without slowing down, lowering our voice, or expecting our facial gestures to make up for what words cannot do. Affected by a sudden *loss of language*, the homosexual body soaked in patriarchy slowly grows convinced of its fundamental unlovability—it starts to fidget in its effort to vanish, to become invisible. It is reluctant to meet the eye of the other because the eye is the primary “organ of shame” (Wurmser 1987; see also Droždek et al. 2006) and shame the primary feeling, the king that reigns in the suffocating kingdom of internalised homophobia.

An almost total international isolation of Serbia at the end of the twentieth century, intensified by the insularity of my provincial, strongly patriarchal town, paralleled an internal isolation, a sense of profound yet never fully articulable estrangement from myself and the people around me that looked as a combination of lived asexuality and desired bisexuality. Terrified by the possibility of rejection, by the earthquake through which it would come, and humiliated by the omnipresent expressions of *compulsory heterosexuality* in which there were some virtual, unavoidably derided gays, but never ever any lesbians (Rich 1980), I started living one new, entirely secret and energy-consuming life. The feelings of shame that encircled many of us because of the criminal government, which constantly went further down the spiral of evil, resonated deeply with the shame, guilt, and excitement of my wish to be with another man. Soon I realised that my body became a site of convergence, a crossroads where the traumas of war *and* homosexuality intersected their affectively charged trajectories. A sort of *meta-trauma* emerged through a simultaneous *explosion* of armed conflicts and an *implosion* of homosexuality—it appeared at the junction between the external and internal worlds, both of which were increasingly fragmented and dispersed.

It is in such circumstances of *suspended time*, of solitude that seemed to linger outside of time (see Hobbes 2017), that I noticed something surprising which would become a source of inspiration and colour my tortuous personal-professional paths. The more I looked for islands of meaning that would rupture the grim everyday reality of lies, destruction, and a general social devolution, the more I encountered women: Zagorka Golubović, Biljana Jovanović, Vesna Teršelič, Sonja Liht, Vesna Kesić, Žarana Papić, Svetlana Slapšak, Biljana Kovačević-Vučo, Vesna Janković, Borka Pavićević, Rada Iveković, Nadežda Čaćinović, Đurđa Knežević, Rada Borić, Vesna Pešić, Biljana Kašić, Nadežda Radović, Sonja Biserko, Vesna Pusić, Lepa Mladenović, Staša Zajović, and Nataša Kandić are some of those brave women who built and/or relied upon decades of (post-)Yugoslav feminist engagement to breach through the thick patriarchal membrane that lined public life in order to make it more breathable. (Much later, as I, already a migrant, started delving into that way of making sense of the world known as social theory, I learned about Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Wendy Brown, Esther Newton,

Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig and others, and I thought that it could not be by any means accidental that so many of those who offered us the instruments for navigating life would consistently or only in certain occasions refer to themselves as lesbians: arriving at social theory, it dawned on me, was a strategy of surviving and perhaps also of embracing lesbianity<sup>3</sup>/homosexuality.) Throughout the years I got to know many post-Yugoslav feminist (and) lesbian activists personally, became friends with some and took my distance from others, but regardless of whether I supported or criticised their work (or, more than anything, tried to support it through a structural, sociological critique), there has been for me no doubt that political resistance in our tortured space—the one that has been in most cases slow, unobtrusive, but resolute and persistent—has had a feminist *woman voice*. And it was through listening to this voice that I was also learning to speak.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important legacies that I inherited from the 1990s feminist mobilisations was that militarism and homophobia, both of which were tearing apart my adolescent years, stemmed from the same patriarchal root—they were two heads of the same monster. This was for me the beginning of politics, my fundamental *feminist* insight, a moment of articulation that allowed the personal and the political to touch each other in my mind for the first time. I was ready for this insight as a brother of two older sisters (the only, longed-for son!) who was aware of the patriarchal privilege that he was invited to enjoy, but could never feel like its proper claimant. It is through fear and self-loath that non-heterosexuality pulverises what patriarchy has to offer to a “real man”. However, some of that pulverised privilege remains, sticks to a male body in the same way in which the closet eternally returns transforming coming out into an infinite loop, making it necessary again and again...

## Towards an Archaeology of Lesbian Speakability

Although not all of the women who would call themselves feminists were equally vocal about homosexual liberation, I soon understood that the fusion of feminism and lesbianity was a locus of great emancipatory

potential, possibly the strongest challenge to my own hetero-reality, which was expecting me to take part in misogyny and homophobia/lesbophobia. I remember the effect which the thundering words of Charlotte Bunch (1972, online) produced upon me: “Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organised, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system”. It was only when approaching lesbian feminist activism that I saw the contours of less patriarchal worlds, horizons of *better times* (Nestle 1998)—devoid of hierarchies, injustice, and exploitation—in which I wanted to live. Often at the helm of resistance against the intersecting forces of violence<sup>5</sup> and destruction that have surrounded us, lesbian feminists have been for decades doing what I would mostly like to capture with this book, namely *teaching us a language*, expanding the domain of speakability (speak-ability). This has meant acting upon the urge and strengthening the capacity to speak, rendering difficult topics thinkable, utterable, and nameable, and thus, broadening the possibilities of what could be legitimately said (Cooper 2006). By enlarging the sphere of the *speakable*, primarily through calling themselves *lesbians* (see Mladenović 2016a, b; Radoman 2019), through appropriating the unutterable label of shame that still sounds “like a lash on the back” (as cited in Kowalska 2011, p. 330), lesbian feminists have been making some of the most decisive cracks in the monoliths of patriarchal silence.<sup>6</sup>

*New speech acts*, those that have not been up to then uttered or heard, lie at the heart of lesbianity’s—and, more generally, non-heterosexuality’s—politicality. Coming out, especially and firstly to oneself, means arriving at words, coming to *terms for* in order to start the recurring process of coming to *terms with* a sexual difference that at least temporarily defies the totalising regime of heteronormativity. The fog of shame and confusion crystallises around something that can be intelligibly pronounced. Coming out is political because it is an act done *in spite of* which brings about a change, it is a moment of potential, a temporal bifurcation point that marks the birth of a *language* with which one can learn to decipher the body, decode the basic grammar of desire, and help harness the traumatic impact of self-hatred. It is with this new language that one can retroactively rewrite one’s life with the view of giving it a more promising course and rendering some previously unknown paths more visible. One

can get in touch with the scattered pieces of unlived life, finally draw to the surface of comprehensibility expectations, promises, and memories archived in the recesses of the mind.

The voice of coming out is a link between internal and external worlds that both acknowledges and challenges the pervasive hetero-reality. In this regard, rather than intruding into the sphere of lesbian intimate experience, I have been drawn to those strands of lesbian public engagement that have operated as a *political force* which addresses both of these intricately interwoven worlds by destabilising their corresponding forms of denial. As coming out marks the end of an internal silence and constitutes a tectonic identitarian shift that invites for (but need not necessarily lead to) new modes of interaction, resisting the denial of family and partner violence as well as of nationalist violence that took place throughout the Yugoslav wars opens the space for imagining how our wounded communities could establish themselves on new grounds. It is thus by undoing silence and repression that lesbian feminism strikes at the heart of personal-social change. It helps us to see how resistance to both of these entwined denials is constrained by the reach of the *legal* discourse: in the same way in which the transitional justice endeavours, which should have (had) a much broader cultural scope and a deeper healing effect, have been reduced to their legal dimension (which is itself often obstructed) and therefore have not brought about a *clean slate*, a new meaning, a different kind of language, the vast majority of initiatives that aim at non-heterosexual and gender emancipation have been restricted to the field of legislation. Similarly to the most important war crime-related prosecutions that were externally stimulated and became a matter of diplomatic barter, the advancement of LGBT *rights* found itself in the centre of the European Union's conditionality<sup>7</sup> policies largely purged of progressive substance.<sup>8</sup>

It is, then, exactly here, in this atmosphere of impunity and illegality which sustains denial that feminist lesbian speakability appears as a manifestation of agency, a protuberance that resuscitates language and ruptures—however fleetingly—the *suspended time* of trauma. I understand feminist lesbian agency as an expression of *meaning-making* capacity which redoes the world by rendering it more bearable: it acts upon political values that strive towards redrawing the cartographies of

our community by encouraging us to be together through embracing difference and engaging with the local. Feminist lesbian agency is trauma's counterpoint, the axe that cuts through the frozen sea<sup>9</sup> of silence, victimhood, and exclusion. This agency sometimes passes through a strategic essentialisation (Spivak) to address us in the language of lesbianity rather than, for example, queerness because its speech act mobilises affect only if it touches the lesbophobic/homophobic core<sup>10</sup> of the Other, if it *speaks* in the way in which this Other understands it, in which the Other rejects it or hates it.<sup>11</sup>

With this in mind, it is not the purpose of my book to offer an exhaustive *herstory* of lesbianity or lesbian activism in Serbia and Croatia, or to, even less, “write lesbians into existence”. That would perhaps not be up to me to do—lesbian women have been doing so with courage, determination, and commitment making in such a way also this book possible. I am, rather, interested in what lesbianity *does* when it enters the public realm and I write from the position of someone who is addressed by its presence in the sphere of politics: how it comes to life and how it changes life possibly beyond those who intimately claim the lesbian label. I would like to offer a partial *archaeology of lesbian speakability*, an excavation of moments both in the past and in the present in which lesbian agency has guided desire not only out of the suffocating seclusion of a single body, but into the public space. It is through such operation of agency that trauma ceases to be solely a debilitating condition and becomes also an affective site that generates *wor(l)ds*, enables resistance, and proposes novel forms of being and of being together (Cvetkovich 2003). I would like this book to contribute to the dissemination of this productive dimension, of the ways in which lesbian agency manifests itself in the public field so that it can go beyond the usual lesbian and gay (activist) perimeter and do more justice to its own political potential.

In this regard, my book joins the initiatives that strive to recognise our shared experiences as traumatic, as chronically painful, by seeing them as physical, psychic, political, and social wounds that make it difficult for us to speak and repeatedly disentangle the visions of our common futures. I wanted to (finally!) start with trauma as a nodal point through which to *think and feel* the perplexities of lesbian/homosexual lives that inhabit the violent *afterlife* of Yugoslavia. This book is not *about* trauma—it does not

look for an enumeration of lost lives, disastrous events, or demonstrations of evil—it is rather *within* trauma, *from* trauma. Exactly because I dwell on agency and its strategies of surmounting paralyzing events, I approach trauma in a way in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians perform an Acknowledgement of Country: I would like to acknowledge my own lost country, with all of its achievements and contradictions, by allowing trauma to backdrop every ensuing chapter. Arriving at trauma opens the psychic-political space for constructing and crossing the *bridge*<sup>12</sup> between Yugoslavia and *post*-Yugoslavia. It enables a naming of the time that does not appear to pass and, by doing so, endows one with the possibility of rupturing the difficulties with *moving on* (Baraitser 2017).

## Talking Across Difference

Ever since Stonewall there has been an idea that gays do not really care much about lesbians. Garber (2005) argues that queer studies have been for decades reinvented as “male homosexual studies” and that sexism has driven many lesbians from non-heterosexual initiatives in the same way in which it has driven women from leftist organisations. In the Yugoslav space, the otherwise quite progressive lesbian and gay strands of the 1980s Ljubljana alternative “scene”, for example, were characterised by “a lot of machismo”, where a “vulgar sexist discourse was something common” (Mojca Dobnikar, Slovenian feminist activist, as cited in Lesničar Pučko 2015, online). This lack of gay men’s interest in lesbian issues sidelines crucial lesbian contributions to *our common* struggles. How many times have I attended an LGBT conference where after a man’s presentation, a lesbian woman would stand up saying “perhaps it was not really as you describe it” and go on to ask: “where are lesbians in your story?” This lady is one of those who are often “too much”, a disturbing element that makes eyes roll (Ahmed 2017, p. 228).<sup>13</sup> She is, I have to admit, sometimes a bit “too much” for me too, but I seem also to be drawn to that moment of interruption, of a sudden disorientation. I look at her thinking “how does a man know where lesbians are?”, “how would they like him to know?”

Although I understand that “men have set the historical record” (Garber 2005, p. 43) through their control of the world (of letters), I have never considered it sufficient to say that lesbianity has been constructed differently and that the supposed particularity of lesbian experience calls for a different set of methods, which would be tantamount to saying that it calls for specific—lesbian—scholars to take care of it. This “gotta run” attitude (Garber 2005, p. 33) acknowledges that the topic is important, but that there is not enough time for it, and often constitutes the maximum that feminism can exert in male-dominated queer circles. It may be an academic justification for neglecting women’s sexuality and its political implications, and it is little more than a strategy for perpetuating gay patriarchy and lesbian invisibility.

But if I have *as a man* over the years grown weary of patriarchal dominance, macho familiarities and complicities as well as of suffocating masculinity-related expectations that reign even in gay places, how frustrating must this be for women and especially lesbians who have tried to live or propose alternative—although not always inclusive—ways of being together? I understand that I am when writing this book not only led by the political cause of rendering lesbianity visible, but by having been for a lot of time an easy prey to the stereotype of lesbian intimacy. Exhausted by the ephemerality, superficiality, and hyper-sexualised nature of gay encounters arranged on social networks, I have been enchanted by the promises of the feminist ethics of care, of solidarity, and more than anything of a gentle *feminist touch* that I have sometimes felt or seen it being celebrated as a value among feminist lesbian activists/women.

(Touch is crucial whenever we are in the domain of war and/or sexuality-related trauma: both of these pose the urgent questions of “(how) would you like to be touched?”, “can you be touched?”, “can I touch you?”. Some of the most serious problems that I have with a lot of writing about Yugoslavia, about our (times of) trauma, is that it is often not aware of the power of its touch. Witnessing torrents of invasive physical contact, multitudes of bodies whose boundaries were violated, is a deeply visceral experience that heightens your sensitivity to being touched. Cvetkovich (2003, p. 51) argues that like trauma, touch has both physical and emotional, both material and immaterial, connotations; “it creates a continuum between the physical and the psychic, between the

sexual and emotional”. Insufficiently acknowledged non-heterosexuality is *touchy* in the sense of being delicate, fragile, perhaps even terrifying, hanging by a thread in anticipation of an undesired discovery, of a potentially violent touch. As internalised homophobia, the violence that one inflicts upon oneself does not enable *getting in touch* with oneself or the other; its hardships are worsened by occasionally finding oneself in depersonalised sexual situations, where one may end up being touched by someone one does not want to touch, one wishes one had not touched.)

I have, in this regard, wondered whether my interest in lesbian speakability in our times of trauma is not an intrusion, yet another manifestation of patriarchal privilege that I am allegedly rejecting, an expression of a male scholar’s power to touch without permission, to enter into the realm of marginalised women who inevitably withdraw in front of him. Is not my engagement with lesbianity an acknowledgement of my unreflected patriarchy, maybe even a *vicarious coming-out* strategy that is supposed to make me circumvent a potentially more painful frontal encounter with my own homosexuality/homophobia? Should I not be rather dedicated to the mobilisations of gay men—are they not a more “natural” target of my scholarship, a topic that requires sociological intervention and critique? And what is it at all that makes me work on the tortured Yugoslav space even though I have been a nomad, a wandering migrant for almost two decades? As I am “one of those who left”, should my political commitments not address the space in which I live? Am I not too distant not only geographically but also linguistically (writing primarily in English) and socially from many who have been unwillingly turned into the “objects”<sup>14</sup> of my texts?

However, it is with a sense of urgency and fascination that I have over the last 20 years returned home to try to contribute to the field of post-Yugoslav LGBT studies. The tragedy of Yugoslavia and its aftermath, marked by the capitalist evacuation of security, predictability, and future, opened a risky non-heterosexual breach.<sup>15</sup> The language which reached us through this fissure was not entirely ours—its supposedly universal message of liberation often needed to be translated by the cadres of “intermestic<sup>16</sup> modernisation” that appeared to rescue us from our backward pasts (Bilić and Stubbs 2016). Activist efforts intensified, provoking eruptions of homophobic violence and perhaps complicating

along the way heteronormative images of what male feminists may be interested in (Blagojević 2002).<sup>17</sup> Once the wars were over and many socialist achievements dismantled—especially those that tried to ascertain gender equality—the hatred reserved for *ethnic others* slowly spread towards *sexual others* who continued living within the borders of the new nation-states (Bilić 2019). The hardships of tolerating difference of one kind were complemented with the hardships of tolerating difference of another.

We as a community of more than 50 authors have been there not only to observe but to navigate and shape the intricate processes that started expanding queer, non-heterosexual, and gender non-conforming—that is to say *our own*—speakability. The volumes that we have so far published on the history and politics of anti-war and LGBT activisms (Bilić and Janković 2012; Bilić 2016a; Bilić and Kajinić 2016; Bilić and Radoman 2019) have been *in sync* with our time, articulating portions of the *here and now* which reflect not only our professional evolution but also—and more importantly—our efforts to *come to terms* with our sexualities and gender expressions, and better understand the ways in which they structure our social and political experience. If there is a thread that runs through these volumes, it is our appreciation of *diversity* and our willingness to *speak across difference*. Geertz (as cited in Newton<sup>18</sup> 1993, p. 16) claims that whatever motivates ethnographic texts, their purpose should be “enabling conversations over societal lines – of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race – that have grown progressively more nuanced”. Feminist sociology, or any other critical social science discipline, as an effort to reflexively engage with the world, is nourished by *difference*; it emerges from a tension and is supposed to make that tension speak and—perhaps even—the people involved in it speak across it. Our books are not “objective” sociological texts, as our encounters with violence are too visceral to afford us the luxury of “objectivity”. They are, rather, an exercise in and an invitation to prefigurative politics, to enacting political lives that we would like to live *right now* (Bilić 2019).

However, one of the staple features of the times of trauma, of the political emergency in which many of us have been longing for intimacy and healing, is that they render it difficult to *talk across difference*: the dangers of the world, its unpredictability and fragility, encourage us to stick

together to our own “communities”, to stay with those with whom we do not feel threatened. This fear translates into the realm of academia by the way of *epistemological insiderism* (Brubaker 2017), namely the belief that identity should (dis)qualify someone from writing with legitimacy about a particular topic. Although few people would explicitly claim that who we are should govern what we study (Brubaker 2017), I have occasionally encountered expressions of radical feminist/lesbian resistance to my work which I thought did not only essentialise lesbianity in a politically unproductive manner that obstructed rather than encouraged communication, but also produced me *as a man* in surprisingly novel ways (see Lo 2012). While some of this resistance was verbal and at times also aggressive, it more frequently came through disappearances, unanswered emails, or correspondence that would gradually falter before coming to a stop.

Epistemological insiderism, a symptom of repatriarchalisation and the upsurge of conservative values also within feminist groups, implies that only certain people, chosen on the basis of their stabilised identitarian features, could produce knowledge in certain areas. Is it not paradoxical that some of those whom I have approached sociologically/politically as actors that *expand speakability* would engage in the regulation of speech and argue in favour of an overlap between identities and academic domains? If feminist lesbian speakability comes to the world as *critique*, as an embodied act of resistance to patriarchal silencing, as a promise of transformation, if it is rebellious and turned towards freedom, is it not self-defeating and disappointing that it may also come as censorship and, invariably, self-censorship? If I stand—or rather if I am put—at that oppressive crossroads of self-censorship and self-colonisation, how am I to speak if not *critically*, if not at a great price, if not through recognising—again and again—that “the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent positions” (Haraway 1988, p. 584).

I could feel that both subtler and more open contestations of my personal-professional choice to deal with lesbian issues have had an affectively charged lining reminding me that I was going through the field of lesbian/women suffering. I am aware of the Radicalesbians’ (1970, online) shattering definition of a lesbian as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion”. And I am writing because I am taking that suffering/rage seriously, but at the same time refusing to succumb to the

paralysing effect that the resistance of those who claim it on behalf of *all* (lesbian) women could have upon me as an activist scholar. This book can appear only because I have decided to stay with the persistent sense of *trespasser's guilt*, cognisant that my writing may foreclose certain aspects of lesbian condition and lesbian public cultures, but also curious about those it may foreground.

Focusing on feminist lesbian engagement has given me an opportunity to dwell in that sociological *discomfort zone* which does not only make knowledge possible, but also enables affective links to be established across our painful fissures of difference. Discomfort zone *is* the scholar's habitat: it is where ethnographers reveal themselves as *snobs* by wanting to be in the skin of the "indigenous" all the while knowing that it will never be possible (Leiris, as referred to in Clarck-Taoua 2002). But to write from a discomfort zone, to find oneself under the weight of uncertainty, of suspicion, is both taxing and fascinating. It may perhaps testify to the strength of my professional ambition, but it also highlights the vitality of my commitment to and the depth of my need for the feminist project. And it is because of this commitment and this need that I am feeling some uneasiness about what may look like an excessive justification (especially now, more than three decades after Vjeran Katunarić (1984), a *male* Croatian/Yugoslav sociologist, published—as something "completely natural" (Katunarić, as cited in Duhaček 2009, online)—his *Female Eros and the Civilisation of Death*, one of the foundational books on feminist organising and theory in the Yugoslav region). This *delay*, this preemptive defence, is perhaps something non-heterosexual—a product of a myriad of short paralyses, a reflection of the fact that we "are primed to expect rejection" (Hobbes 2017, online),<sup>19</sup> a fear of being rejected by the rejected—it is ultimately a plea for acceptance.

I wanted to be close (both physically and emotionally) to those who demand survival and whose experiences—like many of my own—circulate around trauma. Perhaps it has been through writing about trauma that I have tried to qualify for writing about lesbians: trauma, my trauma, our trauma—a ticket, a tunnel into lesbian worlds. How could I as a gay gender scholar who lived through the dissolution of Yugoslavia, who witnessed floods of (male) violence, not be intrigued by lesbianity, which has

been for me one of the fundamental locations of anti-militarist engagement? How would I not be enticed by what it means—what it *may* mean—to be an *escapee* of heteropatriarchy (Wittig 1992)? How would I not wonder about what kind of knowledge-feeling is relied upon and produced in the both fragile and resilient sites of feminist lesbian convergence? What can that knowledge-feeling teach me/us about solidarity and creativity, about the courage to be, to speak? The political risk of *epistemological insiderness* within declaratively feminist groups of activists/scholars is that it may end up having problems with the (essentialised) category of *men* and thus inadvertently truncate feminism's own potential for meaningfully intervening into the world.

I am dedicating this book to lesbian speakability because I think that lesbian struggles are not only *lesbian* but universal as long as they are lesbian and therefore social and political; they point to and refract the way in which patriarchy modulates not only lesbian women's but also men's and all other lives. Many men, and especially gay men, realise that patriarchal privilege is a double-edged sword, so they are interpellated in feminist/lesbian struggles, drawn to feminist activism through their desire for a better, more dignified life. They “perceive the value of a feminist practice for themselves, and they advocate it not because it's politically correct, or because they want women to like them, or because they want women to have equality, but because they understand that male privilege prevents them not only from becoming whole, authentic human beings, but also from knowing the truth about the world” (Hagan 1998, p. 168).

## Twin Cultures: Comparing/Connecting

Even though many traces of Serbo-Croatian and pan-Yugoslav feminist meetings have fallen through the fissures created by the mutually reinforcing strategies with which the new nation(alist)-states produce their pasts, this has not obscured the resilience of the Serbo-Croatian feminist ties. Solidarity based on feminist values and the desire to intervene into the patriarchal tissue of everyday life has to a great extent, although

certainly not without problems, managed to survive the collapse of the Yugoslav “brotherhood” (Bilić and Radoman 2019; Lóránd 2018). For example, towards the end of the 1980s, in the atmosphere of ever more unrestrained misogyny, which Slapšak (2013, p. 255) calls “gender war”, three feminist biennial conferences took place at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik. As one of the participants (as cited in Mitrović 2014, p. 136) remembers:

The conference in Dubrovnik in 1986 organised by our colleagues from Zagreb meant first of all *a seal of alliance, Serbo-Croatian female alliance*, but there were also Bosnian, Slovenian, Macedonian girls at the conference, and one from Kosovo, I believe. There was a sense of belonging to the Yugoslav community that became a sort of a female network. Of course, this was due to a unique situation. Croatian women also found themselves in a difficult position with regard to their republic’s nationalists who were no longer feeling threatened, and were, in fact, growing in numbers. The same was happening in Slovenia, and after all, everywhere.

Given that the foundations of feminist organising in the Yugoslav space lie in (its progressive challenge to) the Yugoslav state, that rhizoid, transnational engagement cannot be understood through a mononational/mono-republican focus. This is all the more so in the case of Serbia and Croatia that constitute(d) not only the “axis” of Yugoslavism (i.e., of *coming together*) but also the complementary poles of the nationalist binary (i.e., of *moving apart*: one is a Croatian nationalist mostly *in relation to* Serbs and vice versa). In this regard, the term *twin cultures* is particularly well-suited for the Serbo-Croatian linguistic<sup>20</sup> and cultural space, as it underscores the importance of recognising how phenomena in any of the two national cultures develop in parallel streams and should be approached comparatively (Slapšak 2012). For example, as we will see in the following chapters, the Belgrade-based feminist group Woman and Society (Žena i društvo) was established in 1980 inspired by the eponymous Zagreb academic initiative which operated as a section of the Croatian Sociological Association from 1979. The SOS Helpline for Women and Children Victims of Violence (SOS telefon za žene i decu žrtve nasilja) had been active in Belgrade for almost two years before being formally

registered as an NGO in 1992, whereas Women's Group Trešnjevka (Ženska grupa Trešnjevka) started offering this service in Zagreb in 1988. The Centre for Women's Studies (Centar za ženske studije) was launched in Belgrade in 1992 and in Zagreb in 1995; the first Pride parades took place in Belgrade in 2001 and in Zagreb in 2002 (Kajinić 2019; Miškovska Kajevska 2017). In the context of our work on the politics of activism over the last seven years, which has tried to pay more attention to the operation of such organisations, the edited volumes (Bilić and Janković 2012; Bilić 2016a, b, c, d; Bilić and Kajinić 2016; Bilić and Radoman 2019) have perhaps lent themselves better to a general comparative overview zooming in on the post-Yugoslav "nation-states", whereas monographs (Bilić 2012a, b, c; Miškovska Kajevska 2017) have been more appropriate for capturing inter-republican interactions and have therefore led to *connecting* rather than strictly *comparative* accounts. Connecting narratives, while not negating conflict, appreciate how many of these parallel streams stem from the same institutional or organisational roots.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of twin cultures captures the proximity and intimacy of inter-related cultures<sup>22</sup> by appreciating their intertwined everyday realities firmly anchored in cohabitation (Slapšak 2012, 2013). By doing so it generates new paradigms and provokes paradigm shifts that are resistant to both nostalgic imaginaries which evacuate conflict and critical thinking, on the one hand, and patriarchal/authoritarian amnesias, on the other. Thus, the concept of *twin cultures* offers an analytical frame for reconstructing anti-war, pacifist, and feminist engagement as well as multiple other forms of anti-nationalist sentiment or mobilisation that were crucial for the development of critical perspectives in the post-Yugoslav states. Such a frame is useful for exploring discursive strategies through which twin cultures generate their "common" enemies, among which lesbians and gays—along with the Roma, Jews, Muslims, transgender persons, and others<sup>23</sup>—are most prominent (Slapšak 2012). This "common"/complementary<sup>24</sup> intolerance to non-heterosexuality and gender nonconformity was probably nowhere more evident than in the reactions of those who came to protest against the first Pride parades in Belgrade (2001) and Zagreb (2002) that had a major lesbian dimension (see Kajinić 2019). As one activist who took part in both events states (as cited in Dioli 2011, p. 128):

[At the Belgrade Pride] fascists and nationalists came to beat people. They all looked like men, like what traditional men look like. They were all referring to their national identity, and they were all referring to God. These are the three things that mostly stand together. They were shouting “Go to Croatia!” and “ustaše!”. When I went to the Gay Pride in Croatia, nationalists were shouting: “Go to Serbia!” and “četnik”, which is the same thing, but there. We could see the same pattern.

Scholarship that engages with marginalised groups offers an opportunity for forging transnational links on new grounds and may strive to eschew the nation-state as the dominant analytical framework. In this regard, the twin cultures perspective offers an alternative to the so-called methodological nationalism which treats the nation-state as the necessary representation of the modern society and establishes an equation between the sociological concept of society and the process of historical formation of the nation-state (Chernilo 2011; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). A *regional* critical lens stems from the *queer suspicion* towards the nation(alist) state that has been traditionally engaged in the often-violent regulation and (mis)management of non-heterosexual and transgender lives. Such a perspective foregrounds subnational and transnational regional political interactions, diffusions, and fissures that may be overlooked by the focus on the national scale of LGBT politics (Binnie 2016). A regional perspective has the potential to challenge the metrocentrism of queer studies and open itself up to the forms of queer/lesbian speakability articulated outsides of the major centres of political life (capitals). This is particularly important in semi-peripheral regions because of their political volatility which encourages state centralisation. Strongly centralised states are, in turn, characterised by serious urban-rural divisions that often have elements of class distinction and contribute to the (intra-state) dynamics of activist struggles.

## Notes

1. Scholars have differentiated between primary, secondary, and vicarious traumatisations. While primary traumatisations means that the person herself has been exposed to an existential shock, secondary traumatisations refers to the trauma being transmitted between family members

(e.g., transgenerationally), where exposure to traumatised persons is involuntary. Vicarious traumatising is used to describe the process through which trauma is transmitted in a professional relationship (psychotherapy, social work, or research) or through the study of emotionally demanding material (Maček 2014; Pearlman 2014). Doná (2014) proposes the concept of *intersectional traumatising* as an entanglement of primary, secondary, and vicarious traumatisings.

2. Baraitser (2017) argues that we no longer live with an expectation of a progressive future, but have quotidian experiences of *suspended time*: waiting, delaying, staying, remaining, enduring, returning, and repeating.
3. I opt for the word *lesbianity* to emphasise “experience and quality rather than a particular state or a problematic condition, which is the case with the more common ‘lesbianism’ – a word of either/both dismissive or/and medical connotations, which has its roots in psychiatric discourse” (Olasik 2015, p. 202).
4. Similarly, Ana Miškovska Kajevska (2017, p. 12), in her book on anti-nationalist and “nationalist” feminists in Belgrade and Zagreb, says: “It turned out that I knew the majority of potential anti-nationalist respondents. Without having ever cooperated closely, they had been my first teachers of feminism”.
5. There are no official data regarding the frequency of femicide in Serbia, reflecting the lack of interest of the state in preventing this practice. On the basis of newspaper articles, the activist organisation Women Against Violence reports that in 2017 at least 26 women were murdered by their husbands/partners or other family members (Lacmanović 2017). At least 20 women were murdered in the first half of 2018 (Lacmanović 2018). Only between 16 and 18 May 2015, seven women were killed in family or partner violence (Beta 2018). In the period between 2012 and 2015, women in Serbia constituted around 80 per cent of victims of domestic violence (Spasić 2018). Similarly, between 2012 and 2016, 72 women were killed by their husbands, partners, or other known men in Croatia, making femicide account for 25–30 per cent of all homicides in that country (Slobodna Dalmacija 2017). In Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, the frequency of femicide is higher than the European average (Burba and Bona 2017). These data cannot transmit the harrowing manner in which many of these women lost their lives: some were stabbed, strangled, or shot in front of or together with their children. In some cases this even happened at a social work centre (Stojanović 2018).

6. Žmak (2017, online) writes: “Today it is hard for me to describe how my own emotional state, my intimate life had looked like before I came out, probably because I never talked about these issues with anyone. No, not with a single person. I spent the first around twenty years of my life in an absolute silence about my sexuality. That is an aspect of my growing up which never ceases to fascinate me (...) it took me the whole of twenty five years to understand that I am attracted by women, to fall in love madly with one of them and to then immediately announce this to myself and to others. And years after I came out to myself and others, my narrative about that process was the same: no, I was not homophobic, yes, I knew that gays and lesbians existed, I went to prides, my best friend was gay, I knew that all of *that* existed, but I was not aware that I was a part of it, that I myself was actually a *lesbian*”.
7. The volume *On the Rainbow Way to Europe* (Bilić 2016a) highlights the problematic nature of *speaking* (about) homosexuality/non-heterosexuality in the Yugoslav space solely in the language of the European Union’s integration process.
8. Croatia, Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania, all witnessed a homophobic backlash in the post-EU accession period due to such a formalistic approach to LGBT liberation. For example, only four months after the accession (1 July 2013), Croatia changed its Constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. It thus effectively prohibited same-sex marriage with a national referendum (Bilić 2016b). See also Butterfield (2016).
9. Here I am referring to Franz Kafka’s idea that “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us” (as cited in Wolters 2014, online).
10. It is said that the Serbian theatre scholar Jovan Ćirilov was the first to demand decriminalisation of homosexuality when participating in the 13th Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1986. However, he never managed to do a coming out as a political act that would have introduced sexual difference in the public sphere. When confronted with the question of his (homo)sexuality, he would respond, “How could you know what I am when I myself don’t know?” (as cited in *Optimist*, 2014, online).
11. As it became obvious that Pride marches could not count on the state’s support and were running the risk of being violent, the Queer Belgrade Collective festivals (mostly organised by women activists) took place throughout the 2000s experimenting with the concept of queer.

Interestingly enough, the reliance on this concept (at the time relatively poorly known in the Yugoslav region) led to “a new kind of closet” which allowed activists to organise public events without provoking violent reactions. This lasted until 2008, when a Belgrade daily published the article *Hidden Gay Festival Again in Belgrade*, stripping queerness of its conceptual richness and exposing festival organisers to homophobic attacks (Bilić and Dioli 2016).

12. The *bridge* is never far away. We grew up with the idea that our space was a “bridge” (a hyphen) between the East and the West—a metaphor of our perennial in-betweenness.
13. Ahmed (2017, p. 228) says that lesbians have “to be too much” if they are “not to be brought down by what [they] come up against”.
14. During a rather tense discussion following my lecture on post-Yugoslav lesbian activism at the New Europe College in Bucharest in January 2017, a local lesbian activist who, along with a few others, came to the College to attend that event told me: “I am not comfortable with a man writing about me and using me as a research object”. However, critical feminist sociology has gone beyond such clear-cut “subject-object” divisions. Over the last ten years of my work with mostly women and LGBT feminist initiatives, I have made an effort to move from the “research *on* activism” paradigm to the reflexive “activist research” (for more on this see Bilić and Stubbs 2016). After the lecture, a lesbian friend, who was also there, told me that she has “to think about why she feels a bit embarrassed in front of radical lesbians”. I presume this may be because radical lesbianity attempts to universalise a specific way of being lesbian (similar to gay patriarchy’s effort to promote as desirable a certain kind of (macho) gay).
15. Recent LGBT advancements across the world make non-heterosexual struggles appear (entirely) supportive of rather than (occasionally also) subversive to neoliberalism, which does not only occlude their intersectionally sensitive strands but also obscure their leftist origins (e.g., Hekma et al. 1995). The coupling of non-heterosexuality and capitalism has sometimes made the (declaratively) progressive political groups assume a rather dismissive stance towards the social realities of lesbians and other non-heterosexual people (see, e.g., Bilić and Stubbs 2016).
16. The word “intermestic” (international + domestic) refers to domestic elites who, through their connections with international political actors and funding bodies, translate Western/EU policies into locally intelligible schemes.

17. In her essay *Three Cases of Male Feminists* Marina Blagojević (2002) categorises male feminists as those who *have a diploma, who respect, and who admire (their wives)*. In Blagojević's view, a man who declares himself feminist chooses the safest route for being "without any hesitation" considered liberal intellectual, "an exception that should be caressed and cared for, preserved as something very precious", "a man of the world" who "gets scholarships easily" and may even become "a feminist leader" (Blagojević 2002, p. 634). In spite of his supposed commitment, a *male feminist with a diploma* is a problem for (some) women feminists—he is not to be trusted, as he cannot possibly have access to the world of "women's worries, emotional intelligence, [and] intuitive relationship towards reality".
18. Esther Newton is the pioneering anthropologist of lesbian and gay communities in the United States who did ethnographic work with gay men. She (Newton 1993, p. 17) says, "important to my survival – I mean that quite literally – was the forceful advocacy for human variation, gender and otherwise, in both Mead's and Benedict's work".
19. "Gay men are", as Keuroghlian puts it, "primed to expect rejection". "We're constantly scanning social situations for ways we may not fit into them. We struggle to assert ourselves. We replay our social failures on a loop" (Hobbes 2017, online).
20. In late 1991, Aida Bagić, Biljana Kašić, and Vesna Janković, active in the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia, travelled with three activists from the Belgrade-based Centre for Anti-War Action—Zorica Trifunović, Lina Vušković, and Branka Novaković—around Germany in order to familiarise German activists with the anti-war efforts in their countries. Janković (as cited in Janković and Mokrović 2011, p. 102) describes this as "a traumatic experience" because "communication was almost no longer possible" towards the end of the tour due to the contextual and ideological differences among the activists. I am citing this here to highlight how the traumatic aspect of the encounter is associated with a loss of language. However, it was not only communication that was failing but their language itself. Repeatedly violated and impoverished, Serbo-Croatian soon became violent towards those who spoke it: Vesna Janković (as cited in Janković and Mokrović 2011, p. 104), a feminist anti-war activist, remembers how she felt after returning to Zagreb from this three-week-long tour: "I was shocked by the situation I found upon my return ... by the newspeak (novogovor) that invaded me from the

- television”. It is this loss of the Serbo-Croatian that contributed to paving the way for the armed conflicts which would profoundly damage the hyphen that connects its two components. More about the anti-war activist tour around Germany in Bilić (2012a, b, c).
21. What can be done sociologically with such a tricky issue is not only shaped by the biography of the author, but also by the dominant political discourses in any single country. Pervasive political narratives, like the one of the Homeland War in Croatia, constrain the topical perimeter in the institutional sites of sociological knowledge production. This has both reduced the space for the “twin cultures approach” in that country and increased its subversive potential.
  22. Slapšak (2012) argues that other cultural couples are possible, that is, necessary: Serbia and Montenegro, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia, and so on.
  23. Selmić (2016) shows that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country in which “enemies” live together or, at least, next to each other, non-heterosexual people are increasingly positioning themselves outside and beyond the ethnocentric political system that perpetuates the idea that ethnic belonging is the crucial criterion of political life. In this regard, she asks whether LGBT activist initiatives could encourage trans-ethnic networks of solidarity and support that would open up a path towards a different kind of polity in this profoundly divided country.
  24. Veljak (2005) proposes the concept of “antithetical solidarity” to describe opposed forces that end up supporting each other when having a “common” interest. This logic is applicable to the devastating political projects of Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman and can account for the trope of their “good mutual understanding”.

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# 2

## Coming Out: Announcing Lesbianity in Yugoslavia

Towards the end of the 1980s, Ljubljana, the hub of Yugoslav *new social movements*, was teeming with energy. After the death of its charismatic lifelong leader Josip Broz Tito, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia slowly became a shell purged of political substance: decades of its intricate experiments with state decentralisation, its ever more vocal critics, and tectonic geopolitical shifts sharpened the rift between official declarations and social reality to breaking points. The Party's "grip" on the country's politics, already appreciably weakened, reached its nadir, filling that extraordinary period<sup>1</sup> with peaceniks, punkers, feminists, environmentalists, anti-psychiatry activists, social thinkers, new agers, avant-garde artists, gays, and—a bit more surreptitiously—lesbians.

Well accustomed to pornography sold at kiosks<sup>2</sup> and screened in cinemas, the citizens of Yugoslavia lived in the only Eastern European country with a gay festival, called Magnus.<sup>3</sup> In 1987, one of its cofounders and the frontman of the band Borghesia—Aldo Ivančić, himself in a same-sex relationship—received an invitation to take part in a gay Pride march in Enschede, the Netherlands. In preparation for this event, he dropped by a meeting of Lilith (Lilit), a women's section of the Ljubljana Student Cultural Centre (ŠKUC-Ženska sekcija) established two years

earlier, to ask some of its members to join.<sup>4</sup> Three among them accepted to do so, but were faced with a dilemma: one was straight, one referred to herself as political lesbian, and one thought she might actually be lesbian, but was not yet ready to say it. Regardless of this hesitancy, the Yugoslav guests were welcomed to Enschede's Pride as pioneers of non-heterosexual emancipation in Eastern Europe. One of them, Nataša Sukič, overwhelmed by the intensity of the march, went through a galvanising transformation: on the way back, she decided to stop in Cologne at the 9th World Conference of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and register Lilith as its member (Sukič 2005). When doing so, Sukič was not sure whether this act would be approved by all members of the group given that a parallel could have been drawn between feminism and lesbianity, which had been already causing serious disagreements within the American women's movement<sup>5</sup> (Sukič 2005; Kuhar 2008; more about this in the chapter Speaking separately). Upon her return to Ljubljana, together with six other women, including Suzana Tratnik, who one year earlier, in 1986, had participated in the International Lesbian Information Service Conference<sup>6</sup> in Geneva and had already tried to gather lesbian women, they published a "lesbian manifesto"<sup>7</sup> (October 1987) in the Ljubljana weekly *Mladina* and established a lesbian section of Lilith—Lesbian Lilith (LL, January 1988, Mladina 2018). This was the first organised/collective activist lesbian coming out in Yugoslavia, representing a historic instance in which lesbianity entered into the Eastern European public sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Lesbians live in isolation where they have been pushed by a heterosexist society. If only heterosexual relationship is considered normal, other sexual preferences are barely thought about which, in turn, nourishes stereotypes and prejudices. Whenever lesbians fully accept their marginalisation, they also agree to self-isolation. We are not isolated only from the society, but also from each other. It is high time we got out of anonymity. Sexual preference must not be an obstacle to development and self-actualisation. For the latter, only a small incentive is sometimes sufficient. That is why we have come together in the activist lesbian group LL which operates within the women's section Lilith. (From the conclusion of the *Mladina* supplement; Suzana et al. 1987, p. 28)<sup>9</sup>

The story of Lesbian Lilith's foundation illustrates the vertiginous velocity with which lesbian and, more generally, non-heterosexual liberation started to expand in the Yugoslav space throughout the complex Eastern European 1980s. That act seized a particularly propitious political moment and encapsulated the yearning for non-heterosexual equality and justice that had been brewing under the public surface. Throughout the book I rely upon Fraser's (1990) concept of *subaltern counterpublics* to identify what in the words of Suzana Tratnik (as cited in Gržinić et al. 2012, around 3:10) were "spaces of freedom, variety, and diversity of sexuality and as well spaces of courage". In those milieus women discovered and experimented with their creative agency providing feminist ground for the announcement of lesbian existence and the subsequent emergence of lesbian activist endeavours in Croatia and Serbia. Feminism appeared as an ideological/theoretical "cushion" that softened the scandalous and potentially dangerous encounter between lesbianity, on the one hand, and pervasive heteronormativity, on the other.

Yugoslav feminist mobilisations arose in a political context that considered them redundant because the state claimed to have achieved gender equality. Wanting to problematise this fundamental assumption without undermining socialism, feminists widened the field of discursive contestation and took issue with the failure of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia to rise to the challenge of destabilising patriarchal values. Feminist activists underscored that the socialist regime did not manage to transform Yugoslav social culture which, in spite of progressive legislation, remained characterised by misogyny and homophobia. The official public sphere was constituted by significant—albeit not immediately visible/audible—exclusions of women, workers (see, e.g., Dević 2016, on institutional alienation of the working class), people of colour (e.g., Romani people), and non-heterosexuals.

In this chapter I explore how the ever more intricate network of Yugoslav feminist organising, developing along the line Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade from the late 1970s and more intensely towards the end of the 1980s, devised a language with which to complicate socialist (self-) perceptions of gender, sexual, and class relations. I argue that the embryos of lesbian speakability in the Yugoslav space cannot be detached from the feminist efforts to intervene into and blur the clear-cut, patriarchally

laden separation between the private and the public. Even though not all feminists were unequivocally committed to the lesbian cause, there was a tenuous (red) thread of agreement running through the Yugoslav feminist meetings that lesbianity was a feminist matter: feminist and lesbian struggles had the same basic structure and were to be fought hand in hand.

## Yugoslav Feminist Meetings

### Ljubljana

In the wake of the international feminist conference “Comrade Woman. The Women’s Question: A New Approach?” (Drugarica žena. Žensko pitanje: novi pristup?) that took place in Belgrade in October 1978 (more about this conference in the chapter “Speaking” separately), bringing together Yugoslav feminists for the first time and announcing the “second feminist wave” in Eastern Europe, feminist engagement is intensifying in the major centres of Yugoslavia’s social and political life. The academically oriented women’s group Woman and Society (Žena i društvo), spearheaded by the Croatian feminist sociologist Lydia Sklevicky, was operating since 1979 under the auspices of the Croatian Sociological Association. Soon after the establishment of this group, in 1980, as a result of intense intellectual and cultural interactions between Zagreb and Belgrade, particularly those encouraged by the feminist psychologist Sofija Trivunac, the federation’s capital witnessed a similar, although much more loosely organised, initiative. As two Belgrade feminists (Vušković and Trivunac *n.d.*) involved in the activities of the group state:

We wanted to avoid any sort of institutionalisation or hierarchy because we have seen the bad aspects of that in Zagreb where feminists were officially registered with the Sociological Association and had a president, a secretary etc. Therefore, our group was anarchist in the best sense of the word and very democratic. We constantly invested into building that democracy and struggled against authoritarianism in our heads that was inclined towards a leader. The difference between our group and the one in Zagreb had to do not only with the form of our work but also with the

content. The women in Zagreb were dealing with theory, writing papers, whereas we were mostly discussing, speaking about our experience and developing self-awareness.<sup>10</sup>

The operation of the Belgrade group, dedicated to public lectures, discussions, and workshops, subsided after a few years to be revived in 1986 by the feminist lesbian activist and counsellor Lepa Mladenović when the initiative was also called Woman and Society. Mladenović was a proponent of women-only activities (see the chapter “Speaking” separately) and it was under her guidance that the group started addressing the issue of female homosexuality in a more explicit way (Miškovska Kajevska 2017). This is to say that lesbianity appeared on the feminist activist agenda almost simultaneously in Belgrade and Ljubljana, but Ljubljana—further away from the centre of political power and generally less patriarchal—offered a more favourable institutional and social environment for its public announcement. What is more, Lepa Mladenović also travelled to Geneva in 1986 to attend the International Lesbian Information Service Conference,<sup>11</sup> where she met Suzana Tratnik for the first time. Mladenović (as cited in Gržinić et al. 2012, online) remembers this encounter in the following way:

I had a friend in Geneva who invited me to the conference. I was at that time still wondering whether I was a lesbian. I went there hitchhiking and upon my arrival I was told by the organisers that there was an official representative from Yugoslavia. That was such a big deal. I was really proud. I came from a hippie generation ... believe it or not I was still wearing a skirt ... something with small flowers ... and she (Suzana Tratnik) was all in black ... I did not get anything ... what it was all about ... what was the context ... how I should interpret that ... but it was fantastic ... and I was proud of there being an official delegate who came by plane ... it was after that, I understood, that she worked a lot to establish LL.

Such hippie and punk<sup>12</sup> threads of feminist mobilisation converged at the first Yugoslav feminist meeting which took place in Ljubljana from 11 to 13 December 1987, under the slogan “Let’s put cards on the table” (Položimo karte na mizo). In August of that year, Lilith’s member Mojca Dobnikar, one of the main organisers, sent out invitations to activists

across the country asking them to come up with issues that should be addressed at the meeting. During three days around 80 participants from Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina discussed the challenges facing women's organising in Yugoslavia and thought about the ways in which feminist networks could be developed and strengthened. They eventually drafted a public statement in which they said that various feminist initiatives across Yugoslavia were "legitimate and legal" and called upon women to join the existing feminist groups or establish new ones (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009).

The Ljubljana gathering connected diverse women's and feminist groups into a network and represented the climactic point of the period of "feminist learning", which the Slovenian sociologist Vlasta Jalušič (2002) captured by the title of her book *How We Went to a Feminist High School* (Kako smo hodile v feministično gimnazijo). One of the staple features of this learning process was the recognition and naming of violence against women as an urgent political issue in the Yugoslav social context. In this regard, the 1987 statement said that

violence against women is widespread in our country including rape in marriage<sup>13</sup> and outside of it, physical abuse of women and children, sexual harassment of women. We have agreed to arrange help and self-help for women victims of violence through SOS helplines, counselling centres, and shelters. We ask the relevant institutions to join our initiative because they have not dealt adequately with this issue so far.

On the basis of the surveys done with women in Belgrade and Zagreb and presented at the conference, the participants approached violence intersectionally by pointing to pronounced class differences among Yugoslav women. They argued that "lower and middle class"<sup>14</sup> women's status in a socialist country like Yugoslavia was not appreciably better in comparison to women living in other political systems: they were exposed to a "double burden" and high rates of domestic violence. Although the study registered the willingness of "lower and middle class" women to speak, the feminists understood that there were also other axes of oppression obstructing women's voices (see, e.g., Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 33).

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

This public naming of violence against women as a concern of general social relevance led to the establishment of SOS helplines for women victims of violence in Zagreb (already in March 1988), in Ljubljana (in 1989), and finally also in Belgrade (officially in 1992, but operating from 1990; Miškovska Kajevska 2017). These were the seeds of concrete feminist interventions that would, after ten years of mostly theoretical work, give Yugoslav feminism practical dimensions and develop into formally registered organisations, many of which are active until today.<sup>15</sup> What is, however, less known about such initiatives, both in the Yugoslav space and globally, is that they have often been sustained by substantial lesbian presence. As Lepa Mladenović (2016, online) remembers:

I came out as a lesbian in the feminist encounters at the end of the eighties in Yugoslavia .... At that time, some of us were passionate about ending patriarchy here-and-now and the first thing was to create women-only groups to empower women to get out of male violence. In Belgrade, we formed a feminist SOS Helpline for women and children survivors of violence in 1990, and we quickly realised that more than half of us were lesbians. There are similar stories from many places: Glasgow, Berlin, Bologna, Montreal.

Although (homo)sexuality did not figure prominently on the official programme of the 1987 Ljubljana meeting, the literary scholar Slađana Marković gave a pioneering presentation on (mostly Anglo-Saxon/US American) lesbian literature, which she referred to as a “country without

a language” (zemlja bez jezika).<sup>16</sup> In order, however, to give lesbianity a *language* within their own country, the participants declared towards the end of their statement that “lesbianity must become publicly visible” and that they would “organise the first Yugoslav lesbian festival”. They also encouraged women to form lesbian groups and even demanded “a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the equality of all women and men regardless of their sexual orientation” (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 16). This was an avant-garde request which would not find its legal materialisation across the region in the next two to three decades.

## Zagreb

Empowered and inspired by the Ljubljana gathering, Yugoslav feminists met again, this time in Zagreb, from 16 to 18 December 1988. Violence, reproductive rights, and women’s health were proposed as central issues by Biljana Kašić and Katarina Vidović on behalf of the Women’s Group Trešnjevka. This group started operating (without formal registration) in 1986 when a few activists decided to leave Woman and Society because of its overly academic and elitist nature (Miškowska Kajevska 2017). Trešnjevka was particularly dedicated to struggling against domestic violence and came up with the idea of establishing an SOS helpline for women and children victims of violence even before it appeared on the agenda of the Ljubljana meeting. Such an activity was institutionally supported by the Union of the Socialist Youth of Croatia (Savez socijalističke omladine Hrvatske) and could, in the beginning, count on the Union’s office and phone lines.<sup>17</sup> In the final statement, released after the meeting, the participants said that the Zagreb SOS helpline received 3000 calls in the first nine months of operation and thus enabled domestic violence to be recognised as a social problem (Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009).

Similarly to the Ljubljana statement, the Zagreb one also highlighted that the activists were “committed to creating a lesbian network of information and working on increasing the visibility of lesbian culture”. They demanded again that a new Yugoslav Constitution “guarantees complete equality of women and men regardless of their sexual orientation” (document available in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 46).

However, the “neatness” of both final statements and the decisiveness with which they embed the lesbian cause in feminist struggles flattens intra-group tensions and overstates the level of consensus and lesbian acceptance among Yugoslav feminist pioneers. Announcing lesbian existence and articulating lesbian-related issues was a burdensome task that was not welcome by all members of activist groups. In the words of Nela Pamuković (as cited in Marušić 2014a, b, online), one of the earliest Croatian lesbian activists:

The process of consciousness-raising among lesbians was not easy given that feminism itself was treated as a movement of “weird, eccentric women, lesbians and men haters”. Because of this, lesbians were not completely accepted within feminist groups, it was quite a complicated situation. Just joining a feminist group was in itself a big step for many women, but thinking seriously about lesbianity was too much. There was fear that all women’s organisations would be perceived as lesbian.<sup>18</sup>

Also at Trešnjevka many of those answering SOS helpline calls were lesbians who would soon start pondering the possibility of having their own section within the group. As Nataša, a lesbian activist (as cited in Dobrović and Bosanac 2007, p. 143), remembers:

We started working in shifts ... we had meetings of our women’s group and intense friendships were beginning to develop among us. It was there that many of us acknowledged that we were lesbians, so with time we decided to separate from the main group (...) not because we had an urge for separation but because we felt that there was some discomfort in one part of the group which was due to us being lesbians ... we isolated ourselves from them in order to protect them from that discomfort and so that we ourselves could feel better. Some women publicly stated that they were disturbed by the fact that there were lesbian members of the group, so we decided to protect ourselves from them and to protect them from us. (...) every second Wednesday there was a lesbian meeting and on other Wednesdays a meeting of the Women’s Group.

Nataša refers to Lila Initiative (Lila Inicijativa), the first lesbian activist group in Croatia, established within Trešnjevka by around 15 lesbian

women, many of whom were in one way or the other previously involved in feminist activities in Slovenia (Sagasta 2001). During the 1988 Zagreb meeting there was an anonymous public opinion survey pertaining to lesbianity which showed that some women thought it should be treated in a more open way. It was this survey that stimulated the emergence of Lila which in 1989 addressed the public with a leaflet<sup>19</sup> (document available in Dobrović and Bosanac 2007, p. 216) stating:

Given that in our city, republic and state women who love women are pushed into anonymity and live in isolation, we feel the need to unite and leave the silence in which we have lived until now. In the majority of Western and even Eastern European countries, lesbians have managed to break the barrier of silence and isolation by opening their clubs and creating a network of lesbian organisations. Lila Initiative is a section of the Women's Group Trešnjevka and it gathers girls, women, and sympathisers. Our different age and occupation should not at all be an obstacle to our common work.

The embryos of Lila could also be found in the 11th ILGA World Conference which took place in Vienna between 16 and 22 July 1989 when three activists from Croatia (Nataša, Majda (at the time living in Slovenia), and Ksenija) registered a lesbian group called Lola. Lola soon changed its name to Lila and came up with an ambitious activist agenda which included fighting homophobia; increasing the visibility of lesbianity and women's bisexuality; organising discussions, film screenings, and parties; encouraging research; establishing international contacts; and offering support to its members—none of whom ever appeared in public with their names and surnames.<sup>20</sup> Although this group relied upon the social atmosphere of the late Yugoslav 1980s that was “relatively filled with freedom, tolerance, and economic stability” and therefore open for new initiatives (Nela Pamuković, as cited in Marušić 2014a, b, online), it was a fragile endeavour that managed to survive for around a year. When summarising Lila's achievements, Andrea Špehar (1994, online), a lesbian activist who would become more visible during the 1990s (see the chapter “Times of Splits”), states:

Lila wanted to make lesbians and bisexuals visible and popularise women's culture. It was not able to achieve all of its goals, but there were some positive results: there was a place where women could be together and relax (there was no public place in Zagreb where lesbians could meet). The importance of Lila is best described by a member: "When my long love relationship ended, I was desperate and really alone. It was not possible to talk about this with my friends or my mother – I was a lesbian. When I came to the group, for the first time I felt that my problem was also a problem of these women, and that at least here, it was not a problem".

However, although lesbianity was announced in Croatian media by the members of Lila Initiative—with all the tensions that accompanied such an act—that was not the first time that a woman referred to herself as lesbian in a public event taking place in that Yugoslav republic. There were at least two other instances. The first one pertains to Marija Buretić-Bogović who was briefly mentioned during the 1987 feminist meeting in Ljubljana. After Suzana Tratnik presented LL, Lydia Sklevicky spoke about a woman who managed to attract media attention in the beginning of the 1980s by saying that she was a lesbian. She was then invited to a meeting of Woman and Society and asked to talk about her sexual orientation because members of the group were considering ways of introducing lesbianity as a socially relevant issue. Sklevicky (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, p. 30) continues:

I was shocked that she publicly talked about her experience and in the audience there were two friends of mine who are lesbians, who have been living together for a lot of time and carried that life orientation with certain courage, but who did not show solidarity with that woman. And here comes the question that I want to ask all of you who tonight talked about activist groups in Yugoslavia. It has to do with class. Class and women. Why? Because that woman, the one who came out with her opinions, with her confession, she was in terms of class inferior to those who were in the audience. That woman was a typist. And her name was Marija Bogović. I was so shocked because those two friends were sitting next to me. I told them: Why don't you say something? Say something! But they just chuckled and smiled. They are both very smart, articulate women, and they are able to carry the stigma of lesbianity because they, in one way of the other,

belong to the elite. One is the best Croatian poet and the other is an art historian, so they are present in public life (društveno profilirane osobe). Everybody knew that they lived together, they did so for ten years and perhaps they still do. (...) And here comes my question: have we in our engagement become aware of that class moment? (...) We are not reaching towards other women, those who are underprivileged, who don't have enough free time and therefore don't have the possibility to become aware of their own problems.

The same class element appears in the article *In Search of Yugoslav Lesbians*—one of the earliest to mention lesbians in Yugoslavia—published in *Out and About: The Seattle Lesbian Feminist Newsletter* in 1981 and reprinted in 1982 in *Off Our Backs*, an American radical feminist periodical active between 1970 and 2008. In this text, Olga (1982, p. 13), an American woman of Yugoslav origin, narrates how she travelled back to Yugoslavia “with a specific goal of finding about lesbian lives there”. Olga had never heard the word “lesbian” in the first 19 years of her life which she spent in the country of her birth and only came out within feminist and lesbian activist groups in the United States. It was there that she managed to get the names and addresses of two Slovenian lesbian women who were (supposedly) together at the 1970 World Figure Skating Championship that took place in Ljubljana. During Olga’s first short visit in 1978 she looked for them only to find out, to her disappointment, that one was living with her husband and the other was married to her ex-lover’s brother. Both of them denied not only their lesbianity but also knowledge of any other lesbians in their country. Armed with “the urge to visit Yugoslavia at whatever risks involved” and help Yugoslav lesbians “deal with isolation and homophobia” (p. 13), Olga returned in (around) 1980 to Ljubljana where she got to know women working on women’s issues, none of whom were ready to say they were lesbians. She then contacted a “womin’s magazine”<sup>21</sup> (p. 13) with the idea of giving an interview about her activism which although substantially edited by a “male editor”—made her get in touch with Marija Buretić-Bogović who was at that time living in Zagreb. The two of them finally met around a month after Marija attended the above-mentioned Woman and Society meeting<sup>22</sup> on the topic “Orgasm,

Yes or No?”, where she came out to an approving audience.<sup>23</sup> However, Olga (1982, p. 13) writes:

The problem for Marija was that she did not know any other lesbians who were willing or able to come out; she was feeling lonely and a lot of class differences with middle-class lesbians who were willing to meet at expensive night clubs or restaurants but not to discuss their lesbianism. (...) In meeting Marija and other working class lesbians I became painfully aware of existing class differences in Yugoslavia. All the feminists that I met in Yugoslavia were affiliated with universities and spoke at least one foreign language; via that knowledge they had the access to West European and American feminist movements: literature/thinking/actions. Marija had no opportunity to learn another language and yet has developed alone her own thinking on male dominance, based on her experiences. Feminists working at universities have two or three times higher salaries than a lesbian working (and putting in the same hours) on folding sheets and ironing in a hospital or working in a day care centre. A woman who moved from a Southern part of Yugoslavia to the north, was not only discriminated against because of her sex but also because of her darker skin, making a minimum wage. (...) These were some pretty hard realities for me to accept about the socialist country where women fought together with men for the liberation – 30 years later women’s lives have not been improved substantially, nor are lesbians free to be who they are.

Getting to know Marija, a working-class lesbian woman, offered Olga an insight into the unfulfilled (or only partially fulfilled) promises of Yugoslav socialism. In this excerpt Olga paints a striking portrayal of a nexus of discriminations in which misogyny, lesbophobia, classism, and racism are entwined. The Yugoslav nascent feminist movement led by middle-class women was slowly becoming aware of the intersectional nature of oppression and the ways in which class modulates other operators of power (gender, sexuality, race, etc.), but it was not at the time yet strong enough to practically come to grips with it. Sklevicky’s story shows that living lesbianity in coupledom can be a sign of class privilege in those circumstances in which feminist thought-action is insufficiently developed or socially relevant to sustain it (see how similarities could be drawn here with Serbia’s prime minister Ana Brnabić in the chapter “In Power?”).

Middle- and working-class lesbian experiences are fundamentally different as long as feminist engagement does not manage to generate policies of solidarity sensitive to class disparities and able to propose strategies for cutting across them.<sup>24</sup>

Along with Marija Bogović's isolated voice, another venue in which lesbianity was publicly announced in Croatia before its "official" emergence within the auspices of the feminist movement was the radio programme *Frigid Socket* (Frigidna utičnica), the only one dedicated to homosexuality in socialist Yugoslavia. It was created and hosted by the philosopher Sead Alić and journalist Toni Marošević in the spring of 1984, after Marošević attended the first Magnus Festival in Ljubljana. The show was aired on Youth Radio (Omladinski radio, later Radio 101, at the time audible only in Zagreb) which started operating (with financial support of the Union of the Socialist Youth of Croatia) in that year with the idea of benefitting from the "atmosphere that was very ... rather liberal in the 1980s" (Marošević as cited in Dobrović and Bosanac 2007, p. 233) and going beyond the usual topics of Yugoslav socialist journalism. *Frigid Socket*, a weekly four-hour-long night show had a part called "For boys who wear braids" (Za dečke koji nose kečke) with a "homosexual on duty" (dežurni homoseksualac), Marošević<sup>25</sup> himself, and "Corner for girls with good muscles" (Kutak za cure dobre muskulature) with "lesbians on duty"<sup>26</sup> (Renata and Gordana), all of whom answered listeners' phone calls that ranged from aggressive and vulgar to those more supportive. During the first show, Renata and Gordana said (as cited in Tomeković 1984): "We are not professional lesbians. We still have not made love, but this does not mean that we will not try it after the programme", stimulating listeners' curiosity about lesbian sex and meeting places. Unsurprisingly, *Frigid Socket* was considered inappropriate by the majority of Yugoslav media outlets (even though it did receive some politicians' support) and was taken off the air after only four weeks.

## Belgrade

The circumstances were already much different for the third meeting of Yugoslav feminists which, after Ljubljana and Zagreb, took place in

Belgrade between 30 March and 1 April 1990.<sup>27</sup> This gathering was organised by the Feminist Group Woman and Society coordinated by Lepa Mladenović at the Student Cultural Centre which was led by the art historian Dunja Blažević. In Serbia and Croatia,<sup>28</sup> the beginning of the 1990s was marked by growing nationalist tensions and demographic debates stimulated by low fertility rates among the dominant ethnic groups (Serbs and Croats, respectively). This, in turn, propagated anti-abortion campaigns and threatened, as it eventually did, to undermine not only the fragile achievements of (autonomous) feminist mobilisations, but the social and political status of women, more generally. As Staša Zajović (as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 74), a feminist activist who would soon become one of the founders of the feminist anti-war group Women in Black (see Bilić 2012a, b, c), stated:

Women are open territory in this war of demographics. All our republics manipulate us to divert social unrest into hatred of other nationalities. As feminists, we focus on understanding that differences can enrich us instead of dividing us. We reject the ideology that tells women we must bear more and more children. We won't allow any limits on abortion from any new party.

Such growing political polarisations that would soon endanger the federation and plunge its constitutive parts into an armed conflict were slowly also driving a wedge among feminist activists. In her opening statement for the Belgrade conference, Lepa Mladenović (as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 63), after drawing a parallel with the 1978 gathering organised in the same place (see the chapter “Speaking” separately), hinted more explicitly at the tensions that were growing within feminist groups:

With this meeting we want to produce public space for visibility, naming, and acknowledgement of the full meanings of women's experiences that have remained below the threshold of science, *language* (emphasis BB), history, and civilisation. I would be inclined to say here that we are concerned with all women's experiences, but around me there are other feminists who say that they are concerned with only some women's experiences. In other words, we are starting to understand how much we differ.

Surrounded by the ever more thickening ethno-nationalist sentiment that was spreading across Yugoslavia, the participants still managed to issue a public statement in which they said:

The third Yugoslav feminist meeting has confirmed that feminists of Yugoslavia do not accept the politics of national separations and nationalist manipulations promoted by both official institutions as well as by the majority of new nationally euphoric parties. (...) We refuse to be a passive electorate for whose votes new parties will fight through various kinds of manipulations. We do not accept the traditional leftist dogma that the women's question is subordinate to the issue of class. Feminist groups will articulate their own programmes of action in all spheres of public and private life: labour, politics, reproductive rights.

Although the Belgrade meeting made it obvious that feminists were not in agreement regarding the most effective strategy of countering the nationalist tide, some of them thought that a more concrete political intervention was in order. This line of reasoning led to the establishment of the Women's Party (*Ženska stranka*,<sup>29</sup> also known as *ŽEST*), which was officially registered in October 1990, two months ahead of the first multiparty elections in Serbia (Miškowska Kajevska 2017). In its programmatic Charter of Intentions (*Povelja o namerama*, as cited in Milić 1998, p. 82), however, *ŽEST* announced its integrationist position which could not be shared by all Yugoslav (or even Serbian) feminists<sup>30</sup>:

The party will uncompromisingly oppose and struggle to disclose any attempt to violently and intolerantly solve interethnic relations regardless of who proposes such solutions, and it will in the same way oppose any attempt to attack and endanger the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia or its republics.

While locating itself on one side of the ever more widening fissure “for or against Yugoslavia”, *ŽEST* was a strong opponent of war and would soon become a founding member of the Belgrade-based Centre for Anti-War Action (*Centar za antiratnu akciju*) (Bilić 2012a, b, c). It advocated new gender politics that would be based on partnership between men and women, but it was already too late for such an agenda. The results of the parliamentary elections that took place in December 1990 reflected the

full scope of the patriarchal backlash that had been underway for a few years: only 1.6 per cent of the elected members of parliament were women. The situation was somewhat better in Croatia where, after the first multiparty elections in April and May 1990, there were 16 women out of 351 members of parliament (4.6 per cent) (Šinko 2016). Similarly to their Serbian counterparts, some activists of the group *Trešnjevka* decided to participate in the elections with a programme that highlighted the urgency of fighting violence against women, but they did not win any seats (Miškovska Kajevska 2017).

In such an atmosphere, the relationship between feminism and lesbianity (probably due to the fact that Lepa Mladenović was one of the main organisers) figured more prominently than ever on the proposed conference programme<sup>31</sup> sent to potential participants in December 1989 (document available in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 54) as well as in the final statement issued after the conference:

Feminists consider lesbianity a feminist issue because a lesbian is above all a woman and think that the right to choosing a lifestyle and a partner is one of the fundamental women's rights that the women's movement is fighting for. Feminist and lesbian groups in Yugoslavia will fight for social visibility of lesbians.

This was the last time that Yugoslav feminists decided to offer lesbianity a nest within their circles. They would all come together once again in Ljubljana for the fourth meeting between 17 and 19 May 1991, just a month before the beginning of the Ten-Day War,<sup>32</sup> but there, stretched between opposing ideological options and political contexts, and probably painfully aware of the depth of their defeat, they could no longer agree on a final statement. The 1991 Ljubljana gathering thus marked the end of Yugoslav feminism.

## Conclusion

Towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Yugoslav socialism, already quite a dynamic political system that differed from one decade to another, went through a major—and final—transformation.

The until then unquestionable founding myth based on the People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba) against Nazism during the Second World War—and embodied in a socialist revolution that at least (and only) declaratively guaranteed the equality of men and women—started to lose its cohesive force unveiling the nationalist cracks that had been kept in check and that would soon turn into frontlines. This weakening of the Party, produced also by the growing disappearance of those who actually took part in the war, led to an unprecedented—albeit ambivalent—political moment: opened to both “East” and “West” and abreast of the latest theoretical developments, Yugoslavia experienced the emergence of a multitude of alternative political initiatives that contested a unified public sphere. Among these *subaltern counterpublics* (Fraser 1990), the feminist thread was particularly fruitful and would have a hard time finding counterparts in other Eastern European states. It was this movement that linked the principal Yugoslav urban centres—Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana—and provided the framework within which lesbian existence and lesbian desire could be announced and politicised.

The feminist counterpublic raised a range of issues that had been overlooked, suppressed, or considered resolved by the socialist regime. Activists demonstrated that the Yugoslav socialist public sphere, although by no means as rigid as it was in Eastern European countries under the Soviet influence, nevertheless was based on the assumption that interlocutors deliberated *as if* they were social equals (Fraser 1990). Even though the socialist system did manage to produce at least a partial diagonal cut through class hierarchies enabling rapid modernisation and achieving an unprecedented increase in the quality of life, it was based on a *single public* which by avoiding to acknowledge social, gender, sexual, ethnic, and “racial” inequalities engaged in a reproduction of patriarchal norms. While, in principle, not problematising the fundamental postulates of Yugoslav socialism and relying to a great extent on its infrastructure, feminist activists gradually arrived at the conclusion (in their 1990 Belgrade statement) that the question of women's emancipation could not be subsumed under the issue of class. By doing so, they rejected the idea of single public based on class struggle and of the ultimate victory of the working class that, in turn, led to a supposedly classless society. They

thus opened a channel through which they could become aware of their own social privilege and for the first time hear the frustration of those whose grievances had stayed below the public threshold.

Exposing unfulfilled socialist promises and thinking about how they could be adequately addressed meant taking a better look at and destabilising the dichotomy between the private and the public. Given that “the socialist revolution has not always been able to cross the threshold of the family” (Morokvašić 1986, p. 127), it is not accidental that the statements issued after feminist gatherings brought domestic violence and lesbianity together to the attention of the wider public. Both of these, named for the first time during feminist meetings, ceased to be strictly private matters and, in accordance with the guiding principle of second-wave feminism “the personal is political”, were treated as issues of general public concern. Domestic violence was no longer recognised solely as a marital or family question of sporadic heterosexual couples, but a systemic feature of societies characterised by male domination. This decisive look into the private sphere and its intense politicisation also meant that Yugoslav feminism started expanding its social base and added a more practical dimension to its already developed theoretical interests. Such an evolution was particularly visible with the establishment of helplines for women victims of violence where lesbian activists have played an important although insufficiently acknowledged role up to this day.

Moreover, subaltern counterpublics, like the feminist one in the Yugoslav 1980s, do not only dilate the private sphere or constitute arenas of discursive contestation, but also represent platforms upon which new identities are experimented, formed, and enacted. When broadening the scope of the speakable, activists struggle to convince others—and also themselves—that “what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern should now become so” (Fraser 1990, p. 71). In this chapter I have shown how feminist groups—albeit not without tensions—provided an environment and a *language* with which women could *come to terms* with and embrace their lesbianity. Feminist counterpublic was the scaffolding that helped lesbian desire out of anonymity and the seclusion of a single body in a politically productive manner. This infrastructural element and protection could go at least some way towards explaining why individual and distinctly courageous lesbian voices (which

due to class differences were not associated with the earliest feminist mobilisations) could not produce any politically relevant resonance even though they often unveiled the intersectional nexus of oppression operating below the socialist public surface. Only within a feminist counter-public was it possible for women to go through a process of associating first their names and eventually their names and surnames with their sexual orientation collectively turning lesbianity into a legitimate topic of public discourse.

Discursive antagonisms stimulated by the feminist challenge to the socialist regime promised to open new, unprecedented vistas of gender emancipation and sexual/lesbian intimacy in the Yugoslav space. Throughout the 1980s, Yugoslavia, which was in constant political and social flux, reached the apex of its liberties. However, instead of even brighter futures that its citizens were looking forward to, Yugoslav political space would abruptly shrink and come under a nationalist fire that would make it implode through a series of armed conflicts. Violence that feminist activists wanted to eradicate from the domestic arena would, to their shock, not only increase, but also spill over into the streets and ethnic communities. That unstoppable force of destruction would push feminist alliances to breaking points, count homosexuals among the main enemies of the emerging nation-states, and plunge the region into the *times of trauma* from which it has not yet recovered.

## Notes

1. Such a period was at least partially enabled by “a crucial generational shift: whereas in 1982, 58 per cent of the members of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia participated in the People’s Liberation Struggle, in 1986 only 24 per cent belonged to the partisan generation” (Spaskovska, as cited in Pulig 2017, online; Spaskovska 2017).
2. Probably the most interesting in this regard was the fortnightly magazine *Start*, read “by all, from truck drivers to PhD holders” (see more in Golubović 2018).

3. More about the Ljubljana Festival of Gay and Lesbian Film in Kajinić (2016). For example, the opening of the first Magnus Film Festival (24 April 1984) was accompanied by the second issue of the magazine *Viks* entitled *Homosexuality and Culture* and edited by a group of gays and lesbians active at ŠKUC. It brought the article “Pink Love under the Red Stars: Homosexuality under Real Socialism” (“Roza ljubezen pod rdečimi zvezdami: homoseksualizem pod realnim socializmom”, in which an anonymous author criticises the status of homosexuality in both Western liberal democracies and socialist countries (Dota 2018)).
4. That a man stops by a feminist organisation with the view of proposing a joint initiative should not be seen as representative of the 1980s sub-cultural “scene” in Ljubljana in which Aldo Ivančič was more of an exception. In her account of the first Magnus Festival, the journalist Vedrana Grisogono (1984, p. 25) wrote: “Another thing should be mentioned: the homosexual subculture excludes women in every respect; there was no mention of the relationship between homosexuals and women because, it seems, that is not important for them. Women are not an issue for homosexuals, the issue is how to find a male partner”.
5. Nataša Sukič (as cited in Kuhar 2008, online) says that this was not such a big problem for Slovenian feminists: “Certain members of Lilith, however, did have difficulties with including Lilith in ILGA. And those were precisely the women who encountered an inner dilemma, whether they were lesbians or not. During the debate at that time, fear was expressed that the public would set the equation between feminism and lesbianism. Based on this, we concluded that it would be smart to separate things, define them more and send messages separately to the public. Or, if need be, together”. Moreover, Mojca Dobnikar, one of the founders of Lilith, says that lesbians were welcome, but also felt frustrated with certain topics which were not so much of their interest (pregnancy, abortion, parenthood, etc.) (Velikonja and Greif 2012).
6. The International Lesbian Information Service Conference started within ILGA in 1980 with the aim to encourage international lesbian mobilisation. It decided to separate from ILGA before the 1981 Turin ILGA conference and operated until (around) 1998.
7. On 30 October 1987 *Mladina* published a supplement entitled *We Love Women* (Ljubimo ženske) which brought two texts that approached (women’s) homosexuality from the anthropological and psychological perspectives: the translation of the Radicalesbians’ manifesto “The

Woman Identified Woman”, an analysis of major stereotypes against lesbians, a chapter from the book *Our Bodies Ourselves* (originally published in 1970), as well as the basic information about Lesbian Lilith, including their contact details.

8. During the discussion in which LL was introduced, Lepa Mladenović (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, p. 29) stated: “I would like to say a few words as a representative of women from Belgrade. When we saw the supplement in *Mladina*, which we did not know was being prepared, we were very impressed. Of course, the coming into existence of the first lesbian group in Yugoslavia for us is a historic event which we celebrated ... In our Belgrade group 30 per cent are lesbian women ... we have not thought about publicly declaring ourselves as a lesbian subgroup or as individuals. What some of us [in Belgrade] dreamed of and wished for was realised by our comrades from Ljubljana and we were really impressed. We do not completely agree with some texts, but that is not important. Here I want, as a representative of Belgrade women, to entirely support LL and highlight the importance of that event”.
9. The *Mladina* supplement *Pogledi* that brought a series of texts about lesbian activism was at the time edited by Marcel Štefančič. All lesbian contributors used their names only, without revealing their surnames. As Nataša Sukić (as cited in Kuhar 2008, online) remembers: “I was finally confronted with this question by Nataša Velikonja in the second phase of Lilith’s work, when she became editor of lesbian and gay studies in the *Journal for Critical Science* (*Časopis za kritiko znanosti*). She told me it would be time to finally sign my name. Only then did it become clear to me that it was completely absurd to do all this activism, and at the same time to hide with pseudonyms”.
10. This will, however, change in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, with a new generation of Croatian activists influenced by more horizontally oriented approaches of the Slovenian new social movements; see Bilić (2012a, b, c).
11. The invitation to Enschede, participation in the gatherings of ILGA and ILIS, as well as cooperation with COC Amsterdam (operating since 1946) were a “sign of the growing integration of the Yugoslav feminist and lesbian movement into a globalising movement” (Lóránd 2018, p. 180).
12. For a comparative analysis of hippie and punk subcultures in Slovenia, see Tomc (2010).

13. At the time of the Ljubljana meeting, only Slovenian legislation recognised marital rape as a criminal offence (since 1977).
14. These are the terms used by feminist activists themselves and they are here translated literally.
15. The statement also highlighted that the participants opposed any sort of “demographic policies” (populaciona politika) and were instead in favour of the establishment of women’s health centres so that all women could have access to their reproductive rights and decide whether they are interested in giving birth. As we will see below, the “demographic policies” of procreation would, only a few years after the Ljubljana statement, become one of the major spheres of concern of the ethno-nationalist regimes in Croatia and Serbia.
16. This lecture was first given on 6 May 1987 at the Student Cultural Centre (Studentski kulturni centar) in Belgrade, where the above-mentioned group Woman and Society had its meetings. An extract of the lecture is available here: <http://gay-serbia.com/teorija/2006/06-09-24-uvod-u-lezbijsku-knjizevnost/index.jsp?aid=2463>
17. Due to a lack of proper space, however, the activists later squatted premises that belonged to the city of Zagreb. In order to secure housing, they registered their organisation under the name Women’s Help Now (Ženska pomoć sada). In the end of 1990, this organisation established the first shelter in Eastern Europe for women and children victims of domestic violence. The shelter was legalised only in December 2000 and it still operates today (Miškowska Kajevska 2017).
18. Even 25 years later, some of the earliest lesbian activists were still reluctant to talk about their engagement. When Antonela Marušić (2014a, b) tried to contact them for her historical overview of Croatian lesbian activism, they did not agree to an interview or to their names and surnames being published.
19. The coordinator of Lila Initiative, Nataša (as cited in Dobrović and Bosanac 2007, p. 216), says that this brochure was sent to the “love magazines” as a response to those ads in which women were looking for women. After this, both letters and new potential members started coming from provincial areas of Croatia (Split, Kutina, Varaždin, Vukovar, etc.).
20. The only person who appeared in public (only with her name) was Nataša, the coordinator of the group, who gave an interview to the journalist Mirela Kruhac in 1989. Kruhac asks Nataša: “Do you yourself have a lesbian experience?”, to which Nataša replies “Yes, one, it

- happened a lot of time ago, but it strongly influenced my life” (document available in I.L., 2014).
21. This is a deliberate non-standard spelling of the word women, used mostly by radical feminists to draw attention to the oppression of women and avoid the ending “-men”.
  22. At the time of their meeting, Marija was a 41-year-old, recently divorced, woman with three children. She worked as a typist for the Croatian daily *Vjesnik*.
  23. In an interview she gave in 1996 to Rene Bakalović (1996, p. 20) Marija says: “When I for the first time loudly stated ‘I am lesbian’, the audience greeted me with ovations. It was at a public forum organised by feminists Slavenka Drakulić, Rada Iveković and others. There was also an actress from Belgrade Rada Đuričin who read excerpts from Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*. Zagreb newspapers did not want to write about this, but those in Belgrade did. In their issue dedicated to 8 March, they published a big interview with me. After that I received 70 letters”.
  24. Marija (as cited in Olga 1982, p. 18) wrote to Olga: “We are a socialist country and that is fine. But this primitive society in which I live has forgotten that I too, as well as other lesbians, build this socialism”. During their Zagreb meeting, Olga and Marija tried to establish an “ongoing support group” with a few other lesbian women who turned out to be “overwhelmed with the fear of consequences of coming out or even affiliating with open lesbians” (Olga 1982, p. 13), so the initiative never materialised. In 1996, Marija Buretić-Bogović (1996) published a book *Violets and a Whip: Confession of a Woman Interested in Women* (Ljubičice i bič: Ispovijed žene sklone ženama) in which she wrote about the pleasures and the difficulties of her lesbian experience. Possibly due to Marija’s disappointment with the way in which women and lesbians were treated during the Yugoslav socialism and given the atmosphere in which it was published, the book also exposes Marija’s “nationalist rigidity” and her approval of Ustaša ideology (Janković 2013, online).
  25. Marošević died in severe poverty in 2013 (aged 68), mostly as a consequence of a distraint for an unpaid bank loan which he invested in the shares of Radio 101 that (temporarily) went bankrupt (Kerbler 2013; Kukec 2013).
  26. The programme also had a “philosopher on duty” (dežurna filozofkinja). The permissive atmosphere of the 1980s is visible from the first listeners’ question: “when will communism break down?” (kad će propast komunizam) (Toni Marošević as cited in Hrvatska televizija 2013, online).

27. The changes of the broader political landscape of Eastern Europe stimulated by the fall of the Berlin Wall also had their resonances in the weakening Yugoslavia. In the words of Sonja Drljević (as cited in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 75): “Everyone’s expecting capitalism in which everyone will be a capitalist. I’ve never seen such a country. Certainly women will be second-class citizens. How bad will it get if this equality is so bad now under Communists, who are at least in principle committed to women’s rights?”
28. In the case of Serbia, the problem was exacerbated by the birth rate disparities between Vojvodina and Central Serbia, on the one hand, and Kosovo, on the other. The question of imbalance in population reproduction was raised by the Serbian regime towards the end of the 1980s as the government pointed to very low birth rates in its northern province (1.8 per cent) and very high in its southern province (Kosovo), with its Albanian majority. The Serbian demographer and member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts Miloš Macura (as cited in Shiffman et al. 2002) raised public awareness about the issue in an article published in *Politika*: “The [Albanian] birth rate must be limited for the benefit of women, the family, and the local community in Kosovo, and the interests of relations in Serbia and Yugoslavia. I say this because, unfortunately, the contrast between high and low birth rates is beginning to make an impact on the political and ethnic levels, not only because of the emigration of Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo, but also because the great demographic pressures are beginning to extinguish the Serbian and Montenegrin population [there]”.
29. A political organisation called Women’s Party (*Ženska stranka*) already existed in the Serbian/Yugoslav political context. The first one was founded in 1927 and operated until January 1929 (Božinović 1996).
30. For example, a diverging opinion was voiced by the Belgrade Women’s Lobby (Beogradski ženski loby, as cited in Mladenović and Hughes 2001, p. 255), an *ad hoc* initiative launched by some members of the SOS Helpline: “We ask that the units of the Federal Army unconditionally withdraw to their barracks. The youth did not go to serve in the military in order to impede the separation of any ethnic group from Yugoslavia. A Yugoslavia maintained by force is useless to everyone”.
31. However, lesbianity does not appear in the letter sent by the Student Cultural Centre to various “work organisations” (companies) in Belgrade inviting them to financially support the event of “huge social importance” (document available in Dobnikar and Pamuković 2009, p. 56).

32. The Ten-Day War was an armed conflict between the Slovenian Territorial Defence and the Yugoslav People's Army that took place between 27 June 1991 and 7 July 1991, marking the beginning of the Yugoslav wars.

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# 3

## Times of Splits: Surviving the 1990s

Towards the end of 1990, an unusual gathering took place in the well-known Belgrade hotel *Moscow* (Moskva) in which, rumour has it, gays could occasionally be spotted drinking coffee. For the first time in Serbian social history, a group of homosexual men and women came together in public space with the view of getting to know each other and talking about how their sexual preferences shaped their lives. It was an exciting moment that put Belgrade on an ever denser map of European same-sex desire and constituted the foundation of the first Serbian gay and lesbian group—Arkadija (Mladenović 2010). The Student Cultural Centre, which had been the nucleus of the Belgrade “civic scene” throughout the 1970s and 1980s, refused to provide Arkadija with an office, constraining its members to meet in cafes and private apartments. Although activists hardly ever had an opportunity to address the public in any politically meaningful way, they did manage to organise a commemoration of the Stonewall rebellion, which happened at the Belgrade Youth Centre (Dom omladine) on 27 June 1991. The debate<sup>1</sup> unfolded peacefully and stimulated a lot of attention,<sup>2</sup> but it also, much to the disbelief of its organisers, coincided with the beginning of the Yugoslav wars: exactly on that day the tension between the Slovenian Territorial Defence and the Yugoslav

People's Army claimed its first victims inaugurating a decade of misery<sup>3</sup> which would render (non-heterosexual) existence and any sort of political opposition extremely difficult.

In this chapter, I take a look at how the emancipatory promise of the Yugoslav 1980s was disrupted and the vibrancy of its feminist lesbian mobilisations truncated—albeit never extinguished—throughout the wars of the Yugoslav succession. Faced with a strong patriarchal backlash that did not tolerate any diversion from the heteronormative nationalist canon, feminist/lesbian initiatives, like other alternative movements, were left without any infrastructural support. This pushed many activists into exhausting struggles for physical space, made them leave their countries, or retreat into the relative safety of private milieus. If feminist/lesbian endeavours were subaltern counterpublics (Fraser 1990) throughout the 1980s, they became even more so—both more “subaltern” and more “counter”—in the last decade of the twentieth century. Challenging the patriarcho-clerical consensus around the “national cause”, feminist/lesbian voices in Croatia and Serbia represented particularly precarious dimensions of the broader civic platforms that (with anti-war agendas) stood in opposition to the homogenising political regimes. Even though feminist organising was marked by deep and painful fissures conditioned by differences in political contexts and exposure to armed conflicts (Miškowska Kajevska 2017), articulations of such creative platforms that brought together multiple activist threads reflected polarised political fields, in which activists could assume clear and, sometimes, even life-threatening positions.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the “socialist generation”<sup>5</sup> that preceded them, the 1990s activists were less interested in “repairing the system”: rather, they responded to vertical patriarchal rigidities by—more or less successfully<sup>6</sup>—experimenting with horizontal/non-hierarchical organisational strategies: activist undertakings were seen as *temporary autonomous zones* (TAZ, Bey 1985), spaces of freedom in the immediate present that inserted alternatives into the constricted public sphere while avoiding direct confrontation with the state.

In such a situation, fragile lesbian initiatives were turned into “abeyance structures” (Taylor 1989), scaling down their scope of operation to the activities of core members to ensure survival of basic activist networks and continuity of ideas and identities. Taylor<sup>7</sup> (1989, p. 766) argues that

movement abeyance processes are sustained by those whose involvement in activism has already produced long-term biographical effects which enable activists “to do what must be done, regardless of personal rewards and sacrifices”. Activist groups exposed to hostile climates tend to become exclusive and prefer homogenous membership as that makes them more likely to endure. They centralise in order to strengthen their stability and sustain participation of their key members by providing a sense of security and meaning. Initiatives pushed into abeyance start revolving around ties of love and friendship as intimate personal relationships become entwined with the activist cause,<sup>8</sup> increasing individual commitment to the group. Although movements in abeyance may have little impact in their own time, they provide major organisational and structural bridges between two more publicly oriented periods of contestation (in our case the one before and the one after the wars). As they persist in politically inimical environments, such endeavours supply incentives for sharpening identitarian claims. In this regard, inhospitable periods can witness important transformations of the activist field and be followed by a rapid intensification of protest.

I keep in mind these dimensions of Taylor’s theory of movement abeyance when tracing precarious instances of lesbian speakability in Serbia and Croatia during and immediately after the wars of the Yugoslav succession. In the first two sections, I explore the emergence and operation of the first gay and lesbian initiatives Arkadija and Ligma which laid the foundation for exclusively lesbian activist groups appearing in the second part of the decade, namely Labris and Kontra. I pay attention to the draining dilemmas and tensions that accompanied lesbian and, more generally, non-heterosexual mobilisations in the context of belligerent ethno-nationalisms and profound realignments of the feminist activist scene stimulated by them. In the third section, pertaining to the period after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, I trace nascent efforts to suture broken feminist lesbian ties in the Yugoslav space and produce new forms of lesbian speakability that would be important for the diffusion of lesbian activism and the organisation of the first Pride parades. Throughout the chapter, I look at the joys and challenges of transnational lesbian cooperation in extraordinary political and social circumstances: on the one hand, I underline the potential of lesbianity and

feminist lesbian solidarity to surpass the suffocating milieu of war and destruction, but I also uncover emotionally laden misunderstandings and disappointments, caused by different political/geographical positionalities and/or deeply entrenched regimes of (racialised) exclusion.

## Serbia: From Arkadija to Labris

Dissatisfied with the way in which national authorities handled the issue of non-heterosexuality when preparing a new Slovenian constitution in late 1989<sup>9</sup> and determined to put it higher on the political agenda, members of Lesbian Lilith and Magnus united their forces to establish Roza klub (summer 1990). The primary aim of this new lesbian and gay initiative that defined itself as an independent political association was prevention of any sexuality-related discrimination and struggle for equality in all aspects of both public and private lives (Velikonja and Greif 2012). Although it was obvious by that time that their country would hardly manage to keep itself together, the activists of Roza klub relied on the existing networks and decided to send letters to their friends and colleagues in Serbia and Croatia inviting them to establish similar organisations. In Pančevo, a small town around 15 km away from Belgrade,<sup>10</sup> one of such letters reached a young (just 20 years old) and rebellious philosophy student Dejan Nebrigić who would soon become the first openly gay man in Serbia. Dejan liked the idea and phoned Lepa Mladenović, an already established name in Yugoslav feminist and lesbian circles, who was also among the recipients of the Roza klub letters, suggesting that the two of them initiate a meeting which would bring together Belgrade homosexuals. That is how they ended up in the café of the above-mentioned hotel Moscow, making up the core of what would, in January 1991, become the Group for the Affirmation of Lesbian and Gay Human Rights and Culture—Arkadija (Grupa za afirmaciju lezbejskih i gej ljudskih prava i culture—Arkadija).<sup>11</sup> Lepa Mladenović (2010, p. 4) remembers:

I already had experience with gathering in the feminist group Woman and Society, so it was not strange for me to sit with others around a political or personal cause. But this was something different. There were many men

and few women, just few of us. First we looked at each other, observing each other's looks, trying to see if people were smiling. The majority of us had never before met in one place – so many of *us* in our city! How exciting that was, we were not the only ones. I had seen something similar on pictures, in books, in New York, but not in Belgrade. (...) For the very first time four lesbians were talking to each other in public space.

This is how Arkadija started its tortuous and courageous trajectory in a climate in which (male) homosexuality was perceived as one of the main state “enemies”, an inevitable element of the then widespread Vatican-led “conspiracies” against Serbia’s interests. One of Arkadija’s founders, Boris Liler (1992, online, originally in English), wrote that, in the beginning of the 1990s, Serbia was

heading down the track of complete international isolation on the diplomatic, political, and economic levels because of its regressive policies (instigating armed conflict and military intervention in internal matters of the other republics of former Yugoslavia). To make its citizens “understand” the boycott by international agencies and to “justify” the total defeat of its current politics, the regime is launching its “Theory of International Conspiracy” [which especially involves] “powerful international homosexual organisations”. (...) In this type of situation, when a ruling party seeks “culprits” and “traitors”, particularly “sacrificial male goats” for slaughter, homosexuals are the ideal conspirators because in the everyday world already reigns hatred and scorn towards homosexuals. (...) Of higher concern at this moment is the drastic rise in the degree and intensity of political, media, and physical violence against homosexuals, and it is the same from the side of the authorities as it is from the side of the right-wing political parties, groups, and individuals.

As Liler also states in the rest of his text, homosexuals were not only state enemies, but homosexuality still was a criminal offence—preventing Arkadija from being officially registered in the year of its establishment. As it was not of federal concern, Yugoslav republics and provinces had the right to legislate independently in the area of criminal law which led to differences in terms of how homosexuality was treated. Decriminalisation bills were passed in Slovenia, Croatia, Vojvodina, and Montenegro already

in 1977, whereas a second wave of decriminalisation involved Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia in the mid- and late 1990s. Surprisingly, homosexuality was decriminalised in Serbia during the Yugoslav wars as a matter of a routine revision of the Penal Code and not because of Arkadija's engagement (Bilić 2016b). Jelica Todosijević (1995, online, originally in English), a member of Arkadija, sent an email to the ZaMir<sup>12</sup> network with a report on lesbians in Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup> She touched upon the decriminalisation issue:

On July 14th (1994, BB) our government adopted the draft of the new criminal law. Before, the old law was banning male homosexuality. However, lesbianism was never a part of that ban. The change came as a total surprise to the gay community. No one in the community "lobbied" for a new law, because it was beyond our power. Our guess is that the change came from someone high up in government.

There is no opportunity to influence legislation in Yugoslavia given the reality of our government. It would be dangerous and right now our government does not respond rationally (and for that matter does not work like a real government). Also, we have not yet developed a culture of lobbying and we probably won't until we have a government that responds to the people.

As we don't have a working government or a real opposition it is impossible for us to think of proposing any lesbian activists for the elections. There are very few real "opposition" candidates – even the opposition candidates are nationalist when it serves them. No candidate has ever come out in support of our rights and elections are far from "normal".<sup>14</sup>

Given that nationalism was entering into all pores of social and political life, including, as Jelica suggests, also oppositional parties, lesbians and gays could not have been spared. Such a sweeping force penetrated into the operation of Arkadija, marking one important intra-national split, but was put under control by the core members who were determined to establish their organisation on anti-nationalist principles. As Lepa Mladenović (n.d., online) states:

nationalism became the main issue of everyday life and, therefore, in the group too. The war divided people [...] That summer (1992) we had an open discussion and lots of quarrelling; some of us were firmly insisting on

a non-nationalist policy for the group. The people who were saying “I hate Gypsies and Albanians but I am gay and I want to be in this group” did not feel comfortable with us anymore. We stopped informing them about the meetings.

Arkadija clarified its ideological profile and consolidated itself by excluding nationalistically oriented members. Although the group struggled to be homogeneous in terms of political orientation (Taylor 1989), it was diverse in terms of class. There was a split among more visible activists linked with the 1980s feminist movement and the lesbian women who joined the group in the 1990s. This difference is captured by Zorica Mršević (as cited in Živković 2015, p. 32), active in Arkadija from the beginning of its operation:

One of the major characteristics of that modest space [shared at the time with the SOS helpline in Grčića Milenka Street] was that it gathered poor and really multiply marginalised lesbians. Some of them had an experience of being in mental hospitals, prisons, or completely homeless, some even participated in the wars as volunteers, some went through drug detoxification treatments, some worked as truck drivers or construction workers. Their problems and life experiences differed appreciably from the experiences of the majority of activists for lesbian rights who were educated, employed at schools, ministries, companies, had a house and were not rejected or traumatised to such an extent.

Unable to find a permanent office, the group kept moving from one place to another before ending up at the Centre for Women’s Studies (Centar za ženske studije), which started its experimental one-semester course on 8 March 1992. The Centre stemmed from the feminist group Woman and Society as an anti-war and anti-nationalist initiative offering an interdisciplinary feminist approach to women and gender-related issues. The fact that the Centre would share its space with activists of Arkadija was “an act of great public support which Arkadija received for the first time, enabling it to expand its activities” (Nebrigić 2000, p. 13). However, this period would be very short given that the Centre was located in the same building as the Project for Helping Refugees (Projekat za pomoć izbeglicama) which soon protested against Arkadija’s gatherings and requested

the group to leave the premises. The homophobic frustration of the Project representatives, backed by the Serbian Medical Society (Srpsko lekarsko društvo),<sup>15</sup> was mostly stimulated by the fact that Lepa Mladenović worked with victims of rape and domestic violence while being one of Arkadija's cofounders. As Jelica Todosijević (2003, online, originally in English) states:

Discrimination against lesbians is particularly strong in professions that involve work with children. At an April 1994 meeting of one of the humanitarian foundations in Belgrade, a group of Belgrade University psychology professors suggested that L. M., a lesbian psychologist at the Center for Women (Studies) and Children Victims of Violence, should be barred from working with young victims of rape and domestic violence because of her sexuality. These professors eventually managed to have Arkadija, a lesbian and gay organisation, prohibited from holding meetings at the Women's Studies Center because the group was "incompatible" with the refugee project on which they were working. "It is ironic," they said, "that we must share a space with perverts when people who really need help come here". (The true irony of this statement is that some of Arkadija's members are themselves refugees.)

The reaction of the Project for Helping Refugees and the Serbian Medical Society reflected pervasive lesbophobia that was captured in more detail by the survey, which the lesbian activists of Arkadija did with 50 Belgrade residents in October 1994. The survey showed that a large majority of the examined sample considered lesbianity a condition in need of medical treatment. Even 100 per cent of the "older women" respondents (average age 45) said that they would not allow their daughters to have a lesbian friend. Although in principle less homophobic than older survey participants, the younger ones also demonstrated many prejudices towards lesbian women (Todosijević 2003). Pronatalist policies and campaigns against abortion, which were announced already in the late 1980s, intensified with the portrayal of lesbians and homosexuals, more generally, as infertile beings unable to contribute to the reproduction of the nation.<sup>16</sup> Women appeared more homophobic than men, but men exhibited a voyeuristic attitude, prompting Jelica Todosijević (1995, online, originally in English) to conclude:

Being a lesbian in Yugoslavia means that you don't exist at all. You don't exist legally, you don't exist illegally. You are an offensive word, a bad character from a cheap novel or a heroine from the midnight porn on the Third Channel of Belgrade Television. Being a woman who loves women means to live hard and in fear. [...] A woman in Yugoslavia is validated by the man who she is with. If she chooses the way of living she desires, it means that she's condemning herself to the endless battle for her integrity. (...) If we hate ourselves, if we think we are the only one, if we die from cancers because we hate seeing the gynecologist, if we cannot call our struggle "human rights" and if nobody considers it to be a struggle for life, then how can we possibly survive?

One way of surviving led to even more activism: both cofounders of Arkadija strengthened their links with alternative initiatives through joining (and cofounding) broader anti-war activist platforms: both Dejan Nebrigić and Lepa Mladenović became active at the Belgrade-based Centre for Anti-War Action (Centar za antiratnu akciju), founded in mid-July 1991, where Nebrigić edited *Pacifik: Magazine for the Culture of Peace* (Pacifik: Časopis za kulturu mira). *Pacific* included sections on gay and lesbian topics which Nebrigić wanted to promote as a part of the universal corpus of human rights (Maljković and Mladenović 2000). However, the start of the war and omnipresent destruction pushed homosexuality-related issues to the margins:

In the peace movement, only the war and nationalism were topics of discussion – feminism and lesbianism were avoided. Many evenings after the hard work of counselling women survivors of war and violence, I would walk home, sometimes crying and then dropping by the Centre for Anti-War Action for an update on latest news. Women activists were working until late at night there, with great passion and dedication. "But no, not now about lesbians, let's not spoil the cause," was something that was unsaid among us. (Mladenović 2012a, p. 132; see also Mladenović 2016)

Frustrated by peace activism that perpetuated patriarchal models based on women's traditional role of consoling, caring, and supporting (Bilić 2012a, b, c), a group of women activists of the Centre, among them Staša Zajović and Lepa Mladenović, decided to separate from it and establish

Women in Black Belgrade: Women's Feminist-Antimilitarist Peace Organisation (*Žene u crnom Beograd: Ženska mirovna grupa feminističko-antimilitarističke orijentacije*). Dejan Nebrigić also joined Women in Black<sup>17</sup> in the beginning of 1993 and stayed an active member for three years. Although this group provided a much more favourable environment for lesbian women and a few homosexual men (see, e.g., Aleksov 2012), openly shown or even privately lived lesbianity was a source of serious dilemmas. In the words of Lepa Mladenović (2012a, pp. 132 and 134):

At times I would be making love to a woman and the transistor radio would announce the latest news from the frontline. The only news to listen to about the war were broadcasts from Prague, London, Paris. I would be in bed and not know what I should do, should I get up from the warm bed and leave my lover, turn off the radio and continue our pleasure? I am a lesbian, I am of Serbian name, how can I turn off the radio? Human beings, my neighbours are being slaughtered in my name and I must know about that. If I do not turn off the radio, there is no more lovemaking today, only my deep sadness at the terrible news from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I would light another cigarette in bed and make another coffee for both of us. Do I show respect to the dead by not turning off the radio? Is lesbian lovemaking in that very moment inappropriate? And why? I was torn by these feelings, these contradictions, my body was hurting all over. (...) I was split at the roots all throughout the time of war, and somewhere near the end of it, (...) I went through the beginning steps of integrating all my identities as a feminist lesbian. (p. 134)

Dealing with such issues was, to a certain extent, facilitated by the presence of international feminist lesbian activists who were visiting the region during the armed conflicts. "The gift of the international lesbian movement came to us", says Lepa Mladenović (2012a, p. 134), appreciative of both financial<sup>18</sup> and emotional support that international/Western activists offered to their local friends and colleagues.<sup>19</sup> For example, Ria Convents, a feminist lesbian lawyer from Belgium, was one of those who travelled to the region to do humanitarian work, but also offer lesbian and gay-oriented workshops. As Boban Stojanović (2012, online), another gay man and activist associated with Women in Black, writes:

Especially important about the workshops was their international character. Lesbian and gay identity was the starting point of empathy, solidarity and support. At one of the Women in Black's workshops, the activist from Belgium, Ria, indicates this clearly: "We, lesbians in Belgium decided not to forget our sisters at the time of war... Sometimes my heterosexual friends in the group warned me not to speak about my being lesbian, but this is not the peace movement as I imagine it. The ethics of the peace movement should be founded on the right of every woman and every man to publicly state and live their difference".

Ria Convents was also one of the lecturers within the shortly lived Lesbian Studies (*Lezbejske studije*) that lesbians of Arkadija launched in 1994. By that time it was obvious that there was a growing gender division within the group and that lesbians were much more active: this was probably due to the networking legacies of the Yugoslav feminist movement, but also to the fact that homophobia was much severely felt by gay men in times in which the social atmosphere was saturated by patriarchy and militarised masculinity.<sup>20</sup> Zorica Mršević (as cited in Živković 2015, p. 72), who was among the Lesbian Studies lecturers, noted that men of Arkadija:

normally did not attend our meetings [...] because those were Women's Studies and lectures on lesbian-related issues were not interesting for them. [...] the question of lesbian existence or its legal status etc was an entirely women's matter.

Given that the male part of Arkadija was diminishing also because many activists were leaving Serbia, in March 1995, the lesbian subgroup led by Lepa Mladenović,<sup>21</sup> Jelena Labris, Ljiljana Živković and others, decided to separate and establish its own organisation (for lesbian human rights)—Labris. This initiative, active in Belgrade until the present day, was named after *labrys*, a double head ritual axe, which was adopted by the international lesbian movement in the 1970s as a symbol of matriarchy and women power. In the beginning, Labris divided its activities into those that concerned the empowerment of lesbians and their self-awareness, on the one hand, and those, much less intense, that had to do with public

aspects of activist engagement, like publishing *Labris newspaper* (Labris novine), the first lesbian magazine in the Yugoslav space.

The presence of international lesbian activists was important also in this regard, even though it has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the historiographic accounts of the Yugoslav disintegration. The operation of Labris, and many other women activist groups, in its earliest years relied on the then emerging technology that enabled electronic correspondence. The US lesbian activist Kathryn Turnipseed played a major role in training tens of both Croatian and Serbian activists to use electronic mail and linking them into a network by cofounding the project Electronic Witches (Senjen and Guthrey 1996). Writing about her experience with working in the Yugoslav space, Turnipseed (1996, online) suggests that it could not be altogether accidental that lesbians were at the forefront of applying new means of informing the world about their activities:

Living in strongly heterosexist societies, lesbians are keenly aware of our invisibility in public life. Labrys, a lesbian human rights group in Belgrade, uses e-mail to publish reports of human rights violations, to link with international advocacy groups, and to further projects begun at international conferences. The international solidarity available over e-mail is critically important to minority groups as our advocacy for human rights and inclusion places us at odds, sometimes violently so, with the dominant culture.<sup>22</sup>

Nascent electronic correspondence was particularly useful for bridging the rifts between Serbia and Croatia and providing a sense of connection with the outer world and the international human rights movement. Sonia Jaffe Robbins (1996, online), one of the founders of the Network of East-West Women<sup>23</sup> (NEWW), reports the words of Jelica Todosijević, a Labris activist, who also became a NEWW e-trainer:

Now we are no longer imprisoned by state limitations and censorship... Since we are receiving so much information, we have a wonderful opportunity to collect other people's experiences and apply it in our work. Sometimes it introduces revolutionary ideas, which makes our work much easier, or gives us plenty of tips. Most of the time, though, learning about the successes of women-in-struggle itself gives us a lot of positive energy to go on.

Jelica's words testify to the feelings of isolation and entrapment that pervaded the Serbian social climate throughout the 1990s and point to the importance of activist links which had a soothing effect on the members of Labris. In my previous work (Bilić 2011), I have explored insufficiently recognised *therapeutic* dimensions of post-Yugoslav anti-war activism claiming that activists often perceived their engagement as “sanity maintenance” and a creation of islands of civility and creativity in what otherwise were rather violent political environments. Being with other likeminded people helped to reduce fear and increase empowerment, thereby giving meaning to the exhausting struggle in which state and para-state propaganda had to be confronted with insignificant resources.<sup>24</sup> Such emotional/psychological pressures could not have been managed without high levels of commitment to the activist cause that have long-term biographical impacts. In the words of two earliest members of Labris:

The beginning [of Labris] was for me very passionate and all-encompassing. I entered into a new world and I wanted everything: information, knowledge, conversations, intimacy, belonging... Maybe our feelings and needs are best described by Biljana who was a member of Arkadija and then Labris and who at one meeting said that Maja, Jelena and I looked to her like happy dogs. By looking at us she was feeling happiness and joy. It is impossible to forget such an exchange of emotions. (Ljiljana Živković 2010, p. 7)

In the beginning of the 1990s, when there was no more state, I simply started searching for places in which I could be free. I was pushed by an unbearable political (*građanski*) (and not only youth – as I then thought) need to satisfy my hunger for an unspeakable, invisible, untouched part of me whose name I simply did not know. Labris was the place in which I could find the name of freedom for myself. It would turn out that it was only the seed for a process within which I would become more aware of the fact that what was at stake was not just a persistent feeling, but a revival of my whole existence. (Sunčica Vučaj 2010, p. 21)

While Labris would over the following two decades diversify its activities and focus its efforts on legislative lobbying, it has up to today preserved its community empowerment component, which has offered many

women an opportunity to find words for “naming freedom”, for articulating, embracing, and being able to speak about their lesbian desire.<sup>25</sup>

## Croatia: From Lila to Ligma

In the summer of 1991, the Croatian public broadcasting company (Hrvatska Radiotelevizija, HRT) was hit by a peculiar scandal: soon after it started screening the second episode of the 1990 BBC television drama *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a coming-of-age story about a lesbian girl, the programme was interrupted. The interruption happened exactly when the teenage protagonist Jeanette was on the verge of surrendering to the advances of another woman who belonged to her Pentecostal community. The official explanation offered by HRT was that it experienced technical difficulties and that airing of the series would continue at a later date. However, 14 years passed before Croatian spectators were given an opportunity to see *Oranges* till the end—not on TV, but as a part of the third Zagreb Queer Festival (Radić 2005).

This temporal gap—opened by Antun Vrdoljak, film director, who was at the time head of HRT and a prominent member of Franjo Tuđman’s Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica)—is illustrative of a decade of conservative, clericalised, and misogynist public sphere which hardly tolerated anything that did not contribute to the imagined national cause (Pavlović 1999). If the Serbian 1990s were years of painful splits, the situation was even harder in Croatia which was directly (and not only indirectly, like Serbia until 1999) exposed to armed conflicts. Although this former Yugoslav republic suffered prolonged attacks by the Belgrade-controlled Yugoslav People’s Army, local Serb forces, and various paramilitary formations, its authorities, which tried to portray Croatia as solely a victim, also had expansionary aspirations and their reasoning, as we will see on the example of (homo)sexual politics, was not in structural terms too different from the one applied by the Serbian regime. Feminist initiatives developing towards the end of the 1980s were pushed through a “nationalist funnel” which drove wedges into the fragile activist scene and further truncated its political potential. In such circumstances, like in Serbia (see Jelica Todosijević’s words above),

being a lesbian woman became extremely difficult. As one activist stated (Špehar 1994, online, originally in English):

If you are a lesbian in Croatia today, you are forced to live in total isolation. We are not only isolated from society, we are isolated from each other.<sup>26</sup> In Croatia there is no public space where lesbians can talk and share their experiences, without prejudice. You cannot read a book based on lesbian themes, as there is no such thing in Croatian and books from abroad are few. The same is true for other media and scientific papers. The only thing you will hear about yourself from the public media is that you are a whore, or are ill, or do not even exist. In a direct, political sense, you are the destroyer of the state and all its moral values.

Lila Initiative, which for the first time pushed Croatian lesbians out of silence in 1989, stopped operating, as its activists left the country or became dispersed across women-oriented, but not explicitly lesbian, undertakings devoted to lessening the consequences of war. While I will not trace the lines that fragmented Croatian feminist groups, as this has been done by Miškovska Kajevska (2017), it is relevant to say that some Croatian lesbian activists were supportive of the Croatian authorities' project of ethnic "revival". As Nela Pamuković (as cited in Marušić 2014a, online), active in Lila Initiative, remembers:

The society went through a drastic transformation in the 1990s with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and ascendance of the right-wing nationalist government, so Lila lost the space in which it held its meetings. Such uncertainty on all levels brought lesbian activism to a dead end. The social collapse hit and was reflected upon the lesbian community that had just started building itself. Some lesbians identified themselves with the right-wing nationalist authorities, others became passive, went into activist retirement and locked themselves up in their family lives. As a result of omnipresent economic insecurity, many women were pushed to the brinks of poverty, so mere existence and employment (for those who at all had it), became much more important than before. Exposing oneself in the media was risky, not only because of the sharp increase of Catholic fundamentalism (...) but also because the media were constantly searching for morally right and pure individuals and groups.

In principle, those lesbian activists, who opposed the regime in the sense of problematising ethnically based victim-perpetrator dichotomies<sup>27</sup> and believing that women victims of war violence (mostly of rapes in Bosnia and Herzegovina) should be primarily treated *as women* rather than Croats, Serbs, or Bosniaks, withdrew from public lesbian engagement and joined the initiatives such as the Centre for Women War Victims (Centar za žene žrtve rata). It was within these anti-war organisations that lesbian women found safe space keeping lesbian activist networks alive, but under the radar of the lesbophobic public. Once again, as in the case of the SOS helplines launched in the 1980s, lesbian women constituted an important aspect of anti-war and humanitarian work without necessarily being visible within it. In the words of Nela Pamuković (as cited in Marušić 2014a, online):

When the war broke out, some women withdrew for personal reasons, some because of the military atmosphere that was reigning. Simply it was impossible to do that kind of political activism, but some women became active in other organisations or initiatives. Within the Centre for Women War Victims, that stemmed from the Women's Group Trešnjevka and the Autonomous Women's House Zagreb (Autonomna ženska kuća Zagreb), there were many foreign feminists, but also lesbians who trained us to offer help to women. We received a lot of training, we learned about how to do individual counselling or organise support groups. So during the war we had our small closed lesbian community which included women who were coming from abroad to spend time with us. In the meantime we learned a lot about the movement itself. Therefore, even if there was a break in the work of Lila Initiative, after a few years some of its activists went back to lesbian activism.

Along with the anti-nationalist thread of lesbian engagement, which had direct links with the legacies of Yugoslav feminism<sup>28</sup> and went into abeyance (Taylor 1989) throughout the 1990s, there was an activist current which, on a different ideological basis, sought more publicly visible modes of operation. Within this current, activists aligned themselves more closely with the official government discourse (similar to the stance of those lesbians who joined “patriotic” feminist initiatives, but stayed largely silent in them): they were critical of Yugoslav socialism claiming

that it put a cap on Croatian prosperity and passivised women.<sup>29</sup> While being in favour of the Croatian national(ist) project, they considered that it did not keep its (declarative) promise of bringing about a democratic society in which human rights would be respected.

It is all right when we said – let's revive Croatian cultural identity as well as specifics of Croatian nation which were suppressed during Communism, but it could not be done in a way against individuals or groups whose different identity has no possibility to exist in such a close national state in which there is no place for any social alternative. Croatia is the state able to exist with its symbols, flags, tunes, and could be only heterosexual. (...) According to the spiritual values, we are accused that we were against the independent Croatia. That we do not love Croatia, and so on, and so on. While referendum on May 19 1991, we voted for the independent Croatia (as 94% of Croatian citizens), but we did not mean the state in which instead of democracy we have leaders, and instead of pluralism we have national ecstasy. (Lesbians in Croatia 1997, online, originally in English)<sup>30</sup>

The main representative of this activist thread was Andrea Špehar, at the time a student at the Zagreb Faculty of Political Science and a nascent activist who, disappointed with Trešnjevka and Lila, established contacts with lesbian activists from Ljubljana and was determined to do something about the marginalisation of homosexuality in the early 1990s Croatia. In an interview with Nataša S. Segan and Suzana Tratnik which took place in Ljubljana in the autumn of 1993, Špehar (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, p. 107) stated:

I did not take part in the establishment of the first lesbian group Lila Initiative. But once I went to one of their meetings. I was surprised that there were many feminists from Trešnjevka who used to say that they were not lesbians and did not want to talk to me (when Andrea met them for the first time in 1987 in search of support with coming out, BB). That made me very angry so I did not go back. In short, I did not want to work in that group. (...) [In the beginning of the 1990s] I thought that something had to change in the sphere of lesbianity, that girls should be informed and that an organisation was really necessary. Croatia was becoming more and more conservative and traversed by the Christian ideology. It was clear that if we had not done anything for ourselves we would have been completely buried.

Andrea felt empowered by her contacts with the Ljubljana lesbian scene and, in June 1991, joined forces with her gay friend Amir Hanušić to launch an initiative called Lesbian and Gay Action—LIGMA (Lezbijska i gej akcija—LIGMA). Like in the case of Serbian Arkadija, it seemed that a lesbian-gay alliance was a more effective strategy for reducing fear and confronting the inhospitable social climate. LIGMA started operating as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) from September 1992 with the logistical support (space, phone, computer) of the Italian Transnational Radical Party (TRP) which had a Croatian branch. TRP, founded in 1989, has been an unusual political actor functioning as an NGO and focusing on the issues of non-violence, human rights, and European integrations. At the time of LIGMA's establishment, TRP was probably the only formal entity that could welcome a publicly oriented lesbian and gay endeavour, even though LIGMA planned to cooperate with Croatian political parties<sup>31</sup> (Pavlović 1999). In the words of Andrea Špehar (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, p. 107):

Some [lesbians]<sup>32</sup> are irritated by the fact that they need to become members of TRP in order to become members of LIGMA. But it is true – it is hard to pay subscription today even if it is only ten Deutsche Marks. They are irritated by our public operation and think that they themselves would be exposed if they joined. There would probably be more people if our group were a closed circle which would not go public. In today's political circumstances everybody is terrified and at the same time very passive, not interested in anything anymore. The majority is preoccupied with their own life and they do not have either energy or will to struggle for rights. I was myself very disappointed with the state institutions because no one wanted to support us.

In contrast to Lila Initiative, where activists were anonymous or only used their first names in public, one of the main policies of LIGMA—and its major contribution to the history of Croatian lesbian and gay activism—was that its founders should always appear with their full names. Openly associating one's name with lesbianity/homosexuality in such an environment was a courageous act which destabilised the private-public polarisation and pointed to the political dimension of lesbian

desire. Highlighting political potential of lesbianity/homosexuality through activist engagement—only possible by means of preventing its retreat into an exclusively private domain—hits the affective nucleus of (internalised) homophobia and may produce frustration among those who do not want to be “represented”. Andrea also experienced this painful “intra-community” resistance:

Some lesbians thought that lesbianity was their private matter and did not need anyone to fight for them. They are convinced that they are not deprived of anything socially because of their lesbian orientation. Perhaps that is because they do not see in lesbianity anything more than sexual contact with a woman. Probably because they grew up without relevant information and simply do not know that there is much more than just a bed. They do not know lesbian culture and human rights struggles. They perceive an open lesbian and gay organisation as a threat to their double lives.

Aware that the state remained completely closed for their cause, the activists of LIGMA (similar to the activists of Arkadija who joined the Centre for Anti-War Action and Women in Black), which from 1993 operated as an autonomous association, approached the editorial board of *ARKzin*, a boldly critical magazine of the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia (Antiratna kampanja Hrvatske, ARK see Bilić 2012a, c). As a broad civic platform, led by the principle that the state of war does not constitute sufficient ground for suspending diversity and freedom of speech, ARK acted as an “incubator” for a variety of initiatives including, among others, pacifist, feminist, environmentalist, and anarchist<sup>33</sup> threads (Janković and Mokrović 2011, especially pp. 132–133). This diversity, to a great extent inspired by the *new social movements* developing in Slovenia<sup>34</sup> throughout the 1980s, made them look suspicious in the eyes of the nationalist authorities, prompting one journalist to claim that Serbs, leftists, feminists, and homosexuals were waging war against the war (Grakalić 1993). LIGMA representatives got in touch with *ARKzin* in an effort to strengthen their activist base and increase the popularity of their group. The idea was to launch a supplement which would be dedicated to homosexuality and inform the public (or better its very thin stratum that read *ARKzin*) about problems experienced by homosexual people in Croatia.

The preliminary number of the supplement—unsurprisingly called *Speak Out*—appeared in June 1994 with the 16th issue of *ARKzin* which was at the time still led by its founding editor-in-chief Vesna Janković. The content reflected the group’s sustained interest in the—perhaps somewhat less contentious—issue of AIDS prevention, but also brought contributions about homosexuality and faith, Gay Olympic Games, and human rights.<sup>35</sup> Explaining the rationale behind the establishment of LIGMA, one activist (Albini 1994, p. 3) stated:

As in everything else, also in the domain of homosexual human rights, we are 30 years behind the world. Our beloved [homeland]<sup>36</sup> declares itself to be a new democratic country which has signed a lot of human rights declarations as a condition for joining international institutions. Unfortunately, everything that has been up to now signed and ratified has stayed little more than a dead letter. The everyday practice faces us with a completely different state of affairs. The right to diversity has become a category of privilege – those who have power or who are rich enough to buy it with money. The others are offered the possibility of survival in this, as Krleža would say, “Balkan inn” (balkanska krčma). How much time will still pass before it is understood that homosexuals are not asking for anything impossible [...] LIGMA was established with the desire to break the year-long silence about homosexuals in our country.

LIGMA presents itself in this extract as a counterpublic dissatisfied with the authorities’ exclusively formalistic orientation towards human rights which, while supposedly positioning Croatia in the category of democratic nations, does not produce substantial emancipatory change. By pointing to what Blagojević (2009) would years later call *eventfulness*—namely semi-periphery’s constant reforms restricted to intense legislative production, which is rarely implemented in social life—LIGMA activists tapped into the rudimentary strategies of governmental pinkwashing that would become particularly relevant in the following decade marked by Europeanisation and the EU conditionality policies based on fulfilling formal(istic) criteria that often leave value layers of social life untouched (Bilić 2016a). Such a focus on human rights in the early 1990s reflected the accelerating integration of the region into the global capitalist system

simultaneously eclipsing class hierarchies which determine who can actually exercise the right to (sexual) diversity. We have seen in the previous chapter (with Yugoslav middle-class feminist lesbians) and we will also see in the following one (In power?) how class modulates lesbian desire and how social privilege eliminates or reduces the need for lesbian public speakability.<sup>37</sup>

Class distinction intersects with gender-related disparities generally and therefore also within activist groups based on lesbian-gay alliances resulting in tensions whose management requires a lot of activist effort. In this regard, LIGMA also experienced manifestations of gay patriarchy that would resurface in the following decades in the context of Zagreb Pride organisation.<sup>38</sup> In the words of Andrea Špehar (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, pp. 109–110):

There are twice to three times more gays (in LIGMA), but this does not mean that they are more active. We are making an effort to have equal relations regardless of gender. We work hard on that. But I think that a woman in my position needs very good nerves and a lot of perseverance – some gays invest more effort into achieving the status of group leader than into the group itself. Such things need to be handled and they take a lot of energy.

Weakened by such intra-group conflicts, the fact that the TRP left Croatia, and that one of its cofounders Andrea Špehar emigrated to Sweden in 1995, LIGMA disappeared from the activist scene in 1997.

## Kontra and the Lesbian “Proto-Pride”

Around the time of LIGMA’s slow withdrawal, Vesna Janković, one of the founding members of ARK, and Marko Strpić, a cofounder of the Zagreb Anarchist Movement (Zagrebački anarhistički pokret) came together to launch the Autonomous Cultural Factory—Attack! (Autonomna tvornica culture—Attack!). Similar to ARK, Attack was supposed to act as a broad civic platform encouraging and giving space to a range of alternative initiatives which otherwise would not have had

public access. Attack was not a homogenous group with a particular cause but rather a frame that, during “the years of lead in which social life almost stopped pulsating” (Vesna Janković, as cited in Janković and Strpić 2013, p. 17), welcomed a variety of attempts to transform values of solidarity and emancipation into concrete practice. In the words of Marko Strpić (as cited in Janković and Strpić 2013, p. 17):

At that time it was almost inconceivable that there would be a space open for “alternative” (...) it was inconceivable to talk about communication and cooperation with people from Serbia, it was inconceivable to openly criticise the authorities without, in the best of cases, risking a lawsuit for “emotional distress”. At the same time, the psychic space was contaminated with the beliefs such as “this is impossible” or “this is dangerous”.

In such social climate, people who gathered around Attack were interested in exploring how to sustain horizontal relations and produce an atmosphere of inclusion and participation independently from personal characteristics.<sup>39</sup> Its founders were particularly inspired by Hakim Bey’s (1985) theorising regarding *temporary autonomous zones* which were perceived as places of rebellion and creativity “attacking” the dominant culture in the non-violent form of “urban guerrilla”. Trying to circumvent official requirements which envisioned presidents, secretaries, and other administrative staff, Attack activists experimented with notions reminiscent of the Yugoslav self-management, like plenums, factory councils (tvornički savet), coordinators, or working teams (Janković and Strpić 2013).

Such an environment looked propitious also to a few former Lila activists who in the summer of 1997, once the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were over, started an informal lesbian group Kontra which offered a helpline “for women who love women”. Kontra was, along with (among others) *ARKzin*, ARK, B.a.b.e, Centre for Women War Victims, Zagreb Anarchist Movement, and Women’s Infoteka, in the first group of organisations that became collective members of Attack. The initiative would, however, acquire particular visibility towards the end of 1997: in November of that year, Attack, still without physical space, was refused a rental contract after the owner of the premises in question found out that

they would also be used by lesbian and anarchist groups. On the following day, 29 November 1997, Attack activists decided to turn their already planned Flea Market (Buvljak 2) into a protest (which took place in Hebrang's Street in front of the building they wanted to rent) called "I am an anarcho-dyke" (Ja sam anarho-lezbača, activists carried paper badges with these words) with the aim of supporting their lesbian and anarchist friends (Marko and Marko 1997). Vesna Janković (as cited in Janković and Strpić 2013, p. 25) states:

I remember the exact date of the protest because 29 November in SFRJ (Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia, BB) was the Day of the Republic and I could see how we would get the label of Yugo-nostalgics.<sup>40</sup> (...) It was great to see how both non-anarchist and heterosexual people showed solidarity with those who were stigmatised. I think it was one of the first symbolic actions from the repertoire of identity politics that happened in the region.

This nowadays poorly known "Croatian Stonewall", during which lesbian existence was announced in the streets of Zagreb for the first time, constituted a proto-Pride march, a harbinger of those that would take place in the following decades. As a spontaneous reaction of solidarity, undertaken by many of those who did not personally experience lesbophobic grievance, this gathering not only highlighted the political dimension of women's homosexuality turning it into an issue of public concern, but it also preceded a lot of NGO-isation-related tensions, misunderstandings, and disappointments that would characterise activist operation in the post-war period. In this regard, the 29 November protest, described by a journalist of *Nacional* as a "homosexual revolution", was an important feminist moment in the fragile history/herstory of the Zagreb subcultural scene (Kučinac 2017). Such a protest was possible because the earliest Attack activists like, for example, Vesna Janković and the women active in Lila Initiative and other women's organisations, were linked with the legacies of the Yugoslav feminist movement that reached them from the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, Attack—which today functions as the Autonomous Cultural Centre Medika—has gone through a generational shift that

reflects feminist depoliticisation, capitalist consolidation, as well as activist absorption of patriarchal/conservative values that saturated the social climate of the 1990s (Kučinac 2017). One of the consequences of these processes, which we will also encounter in the chapter on the Belgrade Lesbian March, is a repatriarchalisation of social life and the ensuing restoration of the private-public dichotomy that in turn sustains and reproduces gender binary. In the words of Marko Strpić (as cited in Janković and Strpić 2013, p. 30):

Gender equality, resistance to sexism, homophobia, fascism, capitalism... all of these were built into our everyday work (in Attack). From the position of observer or semi-active observer of Attack today, my impression is that the political component is a little bit forgotten, sometimes completely forgotten... To illustrate this, I would just mention the anecdote about the refurbishment of Medika in 2012 when activities were almost totally divided into those for men and those for women. Even though there was a reaction to that, the response was “you are making it up” (ma briješ). I don’t want to sound like an old man who claims that “it used to be better”, but something like that was certainly inconceivable during the first years of Attack.

## Again Together: Power of the Cunt Manifesto

The year 1997 is particularly important for lesbian activism in the post-Yugoslav space because it witnessed the first Lesbian Week (Lezbejska nedelja). This gathering marked the restoration of the transnational lesbian activist ties that had been severed or rendered tenuous during the wars. I will not examine the by now two-decade long herstory of the post-Yugoslav Lesbian Weeks (for a short analysis, see Dioli 2019) that towards the 1990s resuscitated dormant legacies of the Yugoslav feminist meetings. Instead, I take a closer look at the first two gatherings, the one in 1997 and the other in 2000, to explore what they meant for lesbian existence and lesbian speakability in those years characterised by violence, misogyny, and high levels of lesbo/homophobia. My aim is to show that the very first Lesbian Weeks represented intensely empowering events

that provided their participants with instruments for articulating, embracing, and speaking about their lesbian desire and feeling a part of a broader, regional, and international lesbian community. Activists invested a lot of energy into circumventing official nationalist discourses of suspicion and separation promoted by authoritarian (Serbian and Croatian) governments which in 1997 were still firmly in place.<sup>42</sup> By unfolding in milieus which were not shared with other activist groups and were not located in capital cities, these events also constituted important incursions into, until then, unclaimed portions of public space: they laid the foundation for diffusion of activist endeavours in provincial areas (see the next chapter) as well as for the first Pride marches that would be in both Croatia and Serbia spearheaded by lesbian activists in the beginning of the new decade (Kajinić 2019).

## Pohorje 1997

Between 25 and 30 June 1997, around 45 lesbian women from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and other countries gathered in Pohorje, Slovenia, during what became known as the first Lesbian Week, a manifestation that would more or less regularly take place until the present day. The organisers of the event called “Lesbian Rights Are Human Rights” (Pravice lezbijk so človekove pravice), which was instrumental for the establishment of Kontra in the summer of the same year (Marušić 2014a), were Labris from Belgrade and the Feminist Lesbian Group Kasandra that operated within the Autonomous Women’s Centre in Ljubljana (Oblak and Pan 2019). The idea for the gathering came during the Second Italian Lesbian Week which happened in Bologna in 1996 and was preceded by a fundraising campaign that would enable ten lesbian activists from former Yugoslavia to attend the event (Dioli 2019).<sup>43</sup> The gathering (financially supported by the Hamburg-based women’s foundation Frauen-Anstiftung) mostly consisted of workshops, sport activities, and parties and it—like the Yugoslav feminist meetings—finished with a final statement in which the activists said (Kasandra and Labris 1997, online):

We (...) gathered together in this unique way and for the first time in history in order to exchange our experiences. To strengthen our relations and lesbian solidarity among us. To awaken and discuss our knowledge of lesbian and feminist theories. To sustain new initiatives of lesbian engagement, especially in those places where they are still not present.

During these six days, we listened to each other, we heard different experiences regarding the complexity of lesbian existence in heteropatriarchal societies (...) we have gone beyond national and state borders and met each other through the experience of our lesbian existence.

The meeting in Pohorje left a strong impression on Dragana (1997, online), a *Labris* activist, who had never before left Serbia. Upon her return to Belgrade, she wrote a text for *Labris Newspapers* (*Labris novine*) in which she stated:

It is hard to say what I feel in a few sentences. (...) It all started just as a proposal we put on paper and then it turned into a wonderful dream, into something that has left a deep trace in every one of us. (...) We were all very excited ahead of our journey, mostly me because I had never had a passport or crossed the border. But when we entered the bus and set off, my fear started decreasing. I was in a group of lesbians that I did not know so well – however their presence imbued me with security. Whenever our bus was stopped by some weird armed officer, I realised that we were in fact one whole even though we did not know each other. (...) [During the event] I could not explain how come we had so much strength and energy, how come there were no language barriers, how come we communicated and functioned as if we had known each other forever. We did not know each other forever, but we felt great. (...) [Upon our return] I thought we would find a new, different Belgrade, but seemingly nothing changed: the same scenery, busy streets, but we are different, we bring with us strength and energy. We stick to each other: when we left we only knew each other's names and we returned as real friends.

Even though it was suggested in the Pohorje final statement that Lesbian Weeks would be organised on an annual basis, three years passed before activists managed to put together another meeting.

## Sombor 2000

The Second Lesbian Week took place between 17 and 22 October 2000 in a hotel next to Sombor, a small town in Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina. It unfolded in the context of commotion stirred by the Kosovo War<sup>44</sup> and the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (March–June 1999). Already destabilised in the preceding years, Slobodan Milošević was overthrown on 5 October through a protest which witnessed demonstrators enter the parliament and the public broadcasting company, one of the pillars of the regime. The fall of Milošević marked the end of a decade-long period of nationalist destruction, impoverishment, unbridled violence, and a general societal involution which stimulated ideologically heterogeneous threads of resistance (Bilić 2008). This memorable event raised expectations about a more democratic future of Serbia and imbued one lesbian activist Korana Koraksić (2010, online) with enthusiasm. Remembering the Sombor meeting ten years after it happened, she writes:

The so-called democratic changes had just happened. Euphoria, energy, pervasive joy and a feeling of boundless freedom – these are all omnipresent and unbearably contagious. An ideal timing for a gathering like ours. That whole year was filled with discoveries, trips, new people, great seminars, psychodrama... Not only is there no Sloba [Slobodan Milošević], but I also have the first real girlfriend after many years of being lost in the hetero world.

Similarly to the previous one, the gathering in Sombor was attended by more than 60 women from all of the former Yugoslav republics, many of whom in one of the parties sang “Yugoslavia” (Jugoslavijo) (Koraksić 2010), evoking and symbolically reconstructing their shattered cultural space. In such a joyous atmosphere, stimulated by singing and dancing, towards the end of the meeting the activists came up with a new kind of statement which they called the Cunt Manifesto (Manifest pičke):

Cunt looks for and speaks a new language.  
Lesbians recycle the heterolinguistic code.

They make their identities: whole, strong, valid, different. (...)

With its orgasmic scream, cunt destroys phallic idols. Liberation from homophobia is a process in which we need each other. (...) We spread lesbian solidarity.

It is important for us that we are different and that we carry thousand wonders with which we change the world.

Beautiful

Dear to ourselves

We woke up each other

Finally together

Lighter

The Cunt Manifesto stands at the end of the 1990s as a powerful testament to lesbian resilience and survival. It stems from a strong willingness to bring together dispersed and subdued fragments of the Yugoslav feminist movement into a series of gatherings that are no longer generally *feminist*, but specifically *lesbian*. A public declaration of lesbian activist principles, the manifesto unveils the results of a long period of identity construction which, most of the time, brewed below the surface of public visibility. As a response to the decade of silence, violence, and marginalisation, this statement inaugurates a new subjectivity determined to assume its proper place within the political field (Jovanović 2016). In this regard, it is not surprising that the manifesto highlights the profoundly linguistic nature of activist interventions into social reality: “cunt” searches for and addresses us in a new language, it is a generative force that creates new meanings by resignifying what used to be offensive, shocking, obscene and, therefore, unspeakable. The manifesto is, in other words, the climactic point of lesbian agency that transforms the world by disrupting the “heterolinguistic code” and offering new ways of speaking and being. Its empowering effect is evident in the words of two activists who attended the Sombor meeting:

I am walking down the street, looking at people and I feel somehow more upright. In my pocket I am carrying the Cunt Manifesto and I am reading it for the hundredth time while waiting for the green light. It is radical, but gentle. Manifesto. I have an impression that a new concept is being opened in my mind. Actually a whole string of new concepts initiated just by a

single one multiply used and abused word – CUNT. Liberated from its shackles, that word twinkles on the lips of the people who surround me. Everyday things acquire so many new meanings when looked at from a different perspective. Today I feel free to say: This is who I am. (Desa 2017, online)

I learned that cunt is not necessarily a bad word regardless of the fact that it appears so frequently in curses. I also learned that I could say and even shout “I am lesbian” and that that is something good. (...) Never before or after did I see so many lesbians in one place. Almost everything in harmony. Never before did I hear the words lesbian, cunt, gay, feminism, the personal is political, so many times. I have forgotten a lot in the meantime, but that feeling of belonging and genuine spontaneity and freedom stayed with me. It was one of those trips that is forever inscribed in every little part of my body, the place in which I look for the strength and answers that I may need. My life was no longer the same. And it should not have been. (Koraksić 2010, online)

New, stronger, visceral forms of lesbian speakability appeared at the very end of the 1990s reflecting what seemed to be deep realignments of the regional political scene. In the year of Milošević’s overthrow, the parliamentary elections in Croatia that took place on 3 January 2000 brought together the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske) and the Croatian Social Liberal Party (Hrvatsko socijalno-liberalna stranka) which managed to put an end to a decade of dominance of Franjo Tuđman and his Croatian Democratic Union. Tuđman died just three weeks before the elections<sup>45</sup> leaving behind a legacy of ethnic hatred, crime, and corruption for which he would never be held legally accountable.

While death prevented both Tuđman and Milošević<sup>46</sup> from facing justice, in the very beginning of the 2000s, it looked like much better times were looming on the horizon, so much so that some lesbian activists thought the moment was ripe for taking to the streets. Encouraged by the spirit of change and supported by their friends from Croatia and other former Yugoslav republics, the activists of Labris and Gayten LGBT<sup>47</sup> decided to organise the first Pride Parade in the centre of Belgrade in June 2001. As they could not count on serious police protection, the activists

went straight into the hooligan crowd that unveiled life-threatening layers of lesbo/homophobia which led to more than 40 injured participants (Bilić 2016b, c; Bilić and Kajinić 2016b; Kajinić 2019). Although the first 2001 Belgrade Pride went down in history as a “massacre parade” that forced activists, yet again, into less visible forms of engagement, it did strengthen Serbo-Croatian lesbian solidarities (Kajinić 2016) and accelerate the preparations for the first, much less violent, Zagreb Pride in June 2002.<sup>48</sup> Both of these manifestations stood at the beginning of a decade that would be characterised by intense LGBT legislation which would often be associated with the European Union conditionality policies (Bilić 2016a), creating a gap between advanced and insufficiently implemented laws, on the one hand, and patriarchal social practice, on the other. As announced by the lesbian gatherings in Pohorje and Sombor, the 2000s would also witness the expansion of lesbian activist engagement into provincial areas. I examine that process in more detail in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

In her account of the lesbian movement in Croatia written in 2001, Sanja Sagasta (2001, p. 358), a lesbian activist and poet, says that it would be “rather debatable” to use the word “development” when thinking about lesbian activist initiatives in the last two decades of the twentieth century. And she is right—hardly could one talk about any linear evolution, whereby later endeavours would build upon and extend those that were there before, broadening the scope of their political influence and deepening their anchorage into the public sphere. Instead of dealing with such an easily traceable sequence, one is here rather in the field of loops, repeated beginnings, assimilations, invisibilities, abrupt disappearances (Mizielnińska and Kulpa 2011), all of which are often poorly documented, intentionally erased, or simply forgotten under the burden of dynamic and complex political life.

Nevertheless, in this chapter, Taylor’s (1989) work on abeyance structure has inspired me to look for tenuous red threads which connected nascent lesbian initiatives throughout the wars of the Yugoslav

disintegration not only among each other but also with the legacies and vibrant currents of the Yugoslav and international feminist/lesbian organising. I have shown that, in particularly patriarchal and misogynist circumstances in which it was dangerous to announce lesbian existence, lesbian activists relied on broader, mostly anti-war activist platforms, which operated as alternatives to the ethnically homogenising publics. These secure niches of lesbian belonging—which would occasionally manifest themselves in public life—represented an important, although until now relatively invisible, dimension of anti-war/humanitarian activist enterprises that unfolded during the armed conflicts of the Yugoslav succession. They also offered an opportunity for doing (prepublic) emotional work, exploring various aspects of lesbian existence, and strengthening ties of international feminist lesbian solidarity: in such a way, although they may not have looked socially relevant in their own time, they acted as a bridge connecting not only two generations of activists but two very different epochs, and preparing the ground for the diffusion of activism and its more sustained incursions into the public space in the form of Pride/lesbian marches (see the following two chapters).

Faced with a violent patriarchal backlash that undid many of the achievements of Yugoslav socialism and the autonomous feminist engagement that took place within it, the feminist activist scene went through major transformations during the 1990s. What used to be privileged spaces devoted to feminist theorising done by highly educated middle-class women, who might not have had many incentives for revealing their lesbianity, turned into centres for women war victims that became more inclusive and oriented towards practical interventions into women's lives. Pressures of war, pervasive hatred, and frequent instances of domestic violence, put feminism to a serious test: it was no longer just a domain of ivory tower speculation, but also a force that cut through social divisions providing a value basis upon which transnational/anti-nationalist solidarities could emerge and last through and beyond the years of armed conflicts. We have seen, however, that this class-related expansion of feminist/lesbian activism should not eclipse the potency of right-wing politics to fragment the feminist sphere along nationalist lines and, in more or less explicit fashion, interpellate lesbian women in that process.

That the wars were the means for bringing about a counter-revolution, which would open the door to unbridled corruption, criminal privatisation, and rapid impoverishment, is also testified to by the instauration of human rights as the main language through which to articulate grievances and pose requests for equality and justice. While human rights are hardly anywhere to be found in feminist statements published throughout the socialist 1980s, they became omnipresent in the ensuing decades characterised by capitalist domination. The emergence of the human rights paradigm in feminist/lesbian activist work in the 1990s did not only signal its expansion in the global and, more specifically, European Union political arena but also underscored the authoritarian nature of Serbian and Croatian political regimes. Encountering institutions unwilling to do anything for their cause, lesbian activists were forced to turn towards alternative channels within which countries, as constitutive parts of a global community of nations, are held accountable against a set of supposedly universally valid criteria. The neoliberal insistence on human rights, which started in the 1990s and which would pervade the activist field in the 2000s—while understandable in the extraordinary times of war and the urgent need for transitional justice—would, however, inaugurate blindness towards ever more pronounced class inequalities. This would, in turn, reserve the exercise of such rights only for those who could afford what such rights have to offer (e.g., marriage, partnership, parenthood) dissipating along the way the potential of non-heterosexuality to help establish a broader emancipatory front imagined by those who were at the helm of the sexual revolution in the 1960s.

The globalisation of human rights, including global diffusion of activist tactics and strategies in the sphere of homosexuality, was surely enabled also by technological advances that witnessed some of their embryonic applications in the post-Yugoslav space. I have shown that international lesbian activists, who came to Serbia and Croatia in the early 1990s, were trailblazers of electronic correspondence helping to establish a *virtual counterpublic* that managed to circumvent the restrictions imposed by authoritarian governments in, until then, unprecedented ways. Such technological developments not only reconfigured activist networks by giving them transnational character, but they also broadened the scope of topics that could circulate and be talked about in the international

electronic communication sphere related to the Yugoslav wars, including feminist and lesbian threads of anti-war and humanitarian work.

All of these elements were entwined to sustain lesbian agency which, throughout the long years of Yugoslav tragedy, kept alive the idea that lesbianity was a dimension of human sexuality. However, the survival of lesbian/homosexual voice came at a traumatically high price: Dejan Nebričić, the cofounder of Arkadija and a prominent member of Women in Black was strangled by his partner in 1999 at the age of 29; Vjeran Miladinović Merlinka, the first Serbian trans activist who took part in the first Arkadija's debate, was brutally murdered in 2003 in a crime for which no one was ever convicted; Jelica Todosijević, one of the earliest activists of Arkadija, as well as Amir Hanušić and Andrea Špehar, the cofounders of Ligma, along with many others, left their countries; Lepa Mladenović, the other cofounder of Arkadija, stayed in Belgrade—nested in the feminist women's movement she helped create, Lepa continued to expose her body to more lesbo/homophobic violence with that inspiring lifelong determination to transmit the message of lesbian love to a new generation. These activists who, for the very first time in Serbo-Croatian social history/herstory, welded their names with homosexuality, courageous silence breakers who have looked for and tried to share instruments for speaking about important aspects of who they are, have posed the question of survival in the most radical form: "Perhaps survival seems too modest a political ambition. Not for some. Not at all. Survival becomes a political craft for those who, as Audre Lorde describes, 'were never meant to survive'" (Ahmed 2012, online).

## Notes

1. The participants were Lepa Mladenović, Vjeran Miladinović Merlinka, and Ljubomir Ljuba Stojić.
2. The debate unfolded without violence probably because homosexuality "had not been a public thing, so there were no enemies in the audience, it still had not occurred to people that they should be against something" (Lepa Mladenović, as cited in Mihajlović 2014, online). In the following year, Arkadija tried to organise another debate in the framework of stu-

- dent protests. However, the protest committee refused to announce the event and Arkadija's posters were taken off the walls. In the end, three theology students prevented the speakers from entering the room, practically marking the end of Arkadija's direct public engagement.
3. Zorica Mršević (as cited in Mladenović and Hughes 2001, p. 252), lesbian activist and legal scholar, provides a portrayal of this abrupt cut: "I have been a witness to how easily what has been (...) constructed can be destroyed. Within a few months practically everything was changed. All the rules of the game are now different. Institutions that we believed would exist forever don't exist anymore. All that I had invested myself in is worth nothing. We became miserable. In the previous time, we lived an easy life—not on a high standard, but somehow, everything was easy—to go on holiday, to get a flat from the institution where you worked, to buy new clothes, to eat whatever you wanted, to have fun, to visit restaurants, to travel abroad, to have free medical care. Now we spend practically all our earned money only for food. Our clothes and shoes, as well as our health and good moods, come from the previous time. The winter of 1993/1994 was the hardest in my life. We lived by eating only potatoes and beans, and we had to spend our life savings to buy that. Our salaries were between ten and twenty DM per month".
  4. In my previous book (Bilić 2012a, b, c) I drew upon McAdam's theory of recruitment to high-risk activism to show that those who remained active in anti-war contention in the nationalising and militarily attacked Croatia had been already involved in a dense network of activist ties created at least a decade before the beginning of the wars. Older activists overcame their biographical constraints by drawing upon their strong activist dispositions which rendered commitment to the activist cause a significant personal value.
  5. Generation is here treated as a sociological, rather than a biological, category: it is not a concrete group of people of similar age, but a social space within which activists share concerns, influences, and ideas (see Kuljić 2009).
  6. Although I agree that *processes* of inventing ways of being together are at least as important as concrete activist objectives—due to which activism stays outside of the neoliberal obsession with measurement, evaluation, and "success", my intention is to underline that such spaces often could not rise to the challenge of creating horizontal structures. Instead, they themselves reproduced practices of domination and silencing.

7. It is probably not accidental that Taylor, as a lesbian scholar, has been dedicated to exploring how the American feminist movement survived through abeyance structures.
8. Taylor (1989) refers to this particular variable as “movement culture”.
9. A fully elaborated draft of a new Slovenian Constitution was published in April 1990.
10. About alternative organising in Pančevo, see Bilić (2012a, b, c).
11. It is often said that the group was named by Boris Liler after the region that was in Greek mythology celebrated as a place of wilderness and harmony. Perhaps some inspiration also came from the French homophile organisation Arcadie that was active from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s.
12. *ZaMir* was an avant-garde electronic network of peace activist groups in the Yugoslav space, set up primarily by Eric Bachman and Wam Kat.
13. This is the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Savezna Republika Jugoslavija), consisting of Serbia and Montenegro, which existed between 1992 and 2003.
14. This excerpt coming from a text which we will encounter again in the chapter was written in the midst of the burdensome 1990s. See how Jelica adopts a much calmer tone a few years later when rewriting the piece for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) (Todosijević 2003).
15. The Serbian Medical Society acknowledged that homosexual orientation was not an illness in 2008, 18 years after the World Health Organisation officially removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. This was done upon repeated requests of lesbian activists from Labris.
16. It was in the context of demographic “threats” that the idea of “homosexual uselessness” entered the affective core of lesbophobia/homophobia in the post-Yugoslav region. It is still perpetuated by right-wing political options like, for example, Dveri.
17. The operation of Women in Black was crucial for the cooperation that Serbian feminist/lesbian activists managed to establish with women from Kosovo throughout the 1990s. If defying Serbian nationalist and authoritarian government by means of maintaining contact with activists from Croatia (electronically, in third countries, and also in person like, e.g., in Medulin, Croatia, in 1995, see Miškovska Kajevska 2017) was courageous, being in touch with Albanian women from Kosovo was the climax of post-Yugoslav feminist solidarity. Igballe Rogova, who,

with her sister Safete, founded the feminist activist group Motrat Qiriazhi in February 1995, attended a Belgrade vigil of Women in Black in the same year, where she witnessed Lepa Mladenović being spat at by a passer-by. On the same day, in Mladenović's home, Rogova embraced her lesbianity—"This is my family. This is where I belong. (...) It dawned upon me: I am lesbian" (Rogova 2014, online)—opening up the way for a long lesbian friendship that would resist two particularly inimical social climates. See the letters they sent to each other: Rogova (2014) and Mladenović (2012b) on the occasion of the magazine Kosovo 2.0 issue dedicated to sexuality. As I do not have access to original sources in Albanian, I do not trace the development of Kosovo's feminist/lesbian activism. For an account of Serb-Albanian relations, see, for example, the book by the American feminist scholar Julie Mertus (1999), who, herself lesbian, acted as a link between Serbian and Kosovar women and travelled with Rogova to Belgrade in 1995.

18. For example, a lesbian activist from the United States financed the first issue of *Arkadija Bulletin*.
19. However, such transnational contacts were not always smooth, but sometimes rather contentious and painful for Serbian activists. Tensions were mostly due to the unwillingness of Western activists to become more intimately familiar with the social and political context that Serbian and, more generally, Eastern European lesbian activists came from. For example, Jelica Todosijević (1994, online) attended the Vienna NGO Forum, a preparatory meeting for the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, which took place in 1995. She states: "I was dismayed at the patronising and dismissive attitude of the ILGA representatives, lesbians who were leading the workshop on lesbian human rights. They have no understanding whatsoever of our problems because our problems are so different from theirs. (If Eastern Europeans were better organised and more present at those thirteen ILGA's Conferences, something like that wouldn't have happened!) They kept asking for concrete suggestions with which I could lobby my government, not even realising that it is insane to suggest that anyone lobby the Serbian government. Fortunately, Rachel Rosenbloom, from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, was there. If they didn't respect me, at least they respected her, and she somehow understood that those of us from the East have different concerns. For example, I pushed hard for the inclusion of education as a goal, because that is the only means we have for

reaching the public—demonstrations are out of the question! I also suggested that we include the language “lesbians, single women, and women who are not attached to men” because many Eastern European lesbians do not identify themselves as lesbians. We were able to get this language into the document, largely as a product of Rachel’s efforts, but the final result was like we haven’t done anything during those two days (...) The main problem [of Eastern European lesbians], being invisible in their own countries becomes even worse by remaining invisible in the women’s human rights and the Western lesbian community as well. (...) I myself was confused by what was expected of me at such a conference, but now I realize the importance of being involved in drafting language for these large conferences. If I hadn’t been there, the language on lesbian human rights would not have addressed Eastern European lesbians’ concerns at all”.

20. See, for example, the statement published by Dejan Nebrigić and Nadežda Četković (Radović) (Nebrigić and Četković 1991/1998) who was active in the Belgrade Women’s Lobby (Beogradski ženski lobi) (Bilić 2012a, b, c; Miškowska Kajevska 2017).
21. Before the establishment of Labris, on 16 November 1994, Lepa Mladenović appeared on the Belgrade TV Art Channel (in the programme *Incidentals* (Nus pojave)) together with Wendy Eastwood, British lesbian feminist and cartoonist, who was, at the time, living in Novi Sad, Serbia. This was the first time in the social history of Serbia that a lesbian activist appeared in a TV show in that capacity (Todosijević 1994, online).
22. The idea behind the *Electronic Witches* (n.d., online) project was to render public experiences of those people, mostly women, who stayed outside of the purview of mainstream journalism: “*Electronic Witches* is afforded the opportunity to meet women from divergent backgrounds who are pursuing a diversity of life and work ambitions and living under widely varying levels of state violence. This provides a rich view into gender relations, which cut across ethnic, class, and urban/rural divisions. Universally, women expressed frustration with the habit of the local and foreign media of making women visible only as symbols, victims or dependents. Rarely do journalists widen their view to include pictures of women in all our diversity taking effective action. We do not read about the lesbian who raised money to support a lesbian and gay human rights group; the woman who returned from exile to initiate a

- literacy program; or the woman who lives in a refugee camp and is learning to use computers”.
23. The Network of East-West Women (NEWW) was founded in 1991 to help women activists and women NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space influence public policy regarding women's lives. It brought together more than 1000 women in 30 countries and had its first meeting in June 1991 in Dubrovnik, Croatia, where the participants were addressed by one of the Network cofounders, Slavenka Drakulić. The NEWW US representative, Sonia Jaffe Robbins (1996, online), states that the Network was avant-garde in terms of its reliance on electronic correspondence: “E-mail was an idea for NEWW before it was a practicality. Some academic members of NEWW in the United States were just being connected to e-mail at our institutions and it seemed the ideal solution to most of our communication problems. If key women in each of the countries where NEWW members lived could only be connected to e-mail, we could break through many of the difficulties we faced and perhaps even create new ways for women activists to relate to each other internationally and non-hierarchically”.
  24. For example, soon after the establishment of Labris, four activists organised a night action of writing lesbian graffiti in Belgrade. They were attacked by three men, one of whom broke Lepa Mladenović's glasses shouting that he could kill them without anyone noticing (Mladenović 2012b). The activists then used email to inform their colleagues and supporters about the incident.
  25. For an exhaustive account of Labris activities in the first 20 years of its operation, see Živković (2015).
  26. Here one can observe the influence of the Lesbian Lilith's manifesto as the same sentence appears there too.
  27. A women-oriented organisation that insisted upon this dichotomy was, for example, the Multimedia Women's Centre, Nona (Multimedijski ženski centar Nona), established in Zagreb in 1993. One of its cofounders, art historian Nataša Jovičić (as cited in Marušić 2015, online) states: “Nona was dedicated exclusively to women... Above all, our women from Vukovar and women from Bosnia and Herzegovina... We cooperated with women's organisations which dealt with [the consequences of] the Serbian aggression upon Croatia and Bosnia. In contrast to some other women's organisations we already then took a clear stance as to who was the victim and who was the aggressor”. In this regard, the

cofounders of Nona were members and later cooperated with Kareta (established in 1990, one of its founding members was Katarina Vidović who appeared in the previous chapter), a “patriotically oriented” radical feminist group, which also gathered lesbian women who were not active publicly or agreed to join initiatives that would be done together with gay men (see Špehar, as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995). In an interview with Antonela Marušić (2015), Nataša Jovičić makes it clear that she was in a relationship with the other Nona’s cofounder, writer Đurđa Miklaužić. In all likelihood, Nataša Jovičić and Đurđa Miklaužić were the lesbian couple that Lydia Sklevicky referred to in her intervention at the 1987 Ljubljana feminist gathering mentioned in the previous chapter. In 1997, Nataša Jovičić went to study in Chicago, where there was already an initiative—Balkan Women Empowerment Project—which supported Nona and was also led by a lesbian couple Aimee Wielechowski and Susan Soric (Holden 1994; Marušić 2015; Yakub 1993).

28. Pavlović (1999) observes that, in the rapidly homogenising Croatia, the tradition of Yugoslav feminism was denounced as men hatred produced by Yugoslav and Marxism-oriented women. This is ironic because, during socialism, feminists were perceived as anti-communist and anti-Marxist. Such contradictory portrayals testify to the resilient misogynist currents running through both periods.
29. Instead of recognising how the nationally homogenising projects were based on a strong patriarchal backlash that marginalised women, the activists argued that the low representation of women in Croatian politics in the early 1990s was a consequence of socialism: “The 45 years of socialism had also its influence on the self-confidence of women, so the result is missing of women in government (in 1990, only 4% of women were present in the Parliament of Croatia), and their influence on the political events in the country is none. And politicians, legislators and priests continue with their practice not to care about the interests of women” (Lesbians in Croatia 1997, online).
30. While there is no author associated with this text, some of its parts appear in Špehar (1994), suggesting that Andrea Špehar may have written it.
31. How new and unexpected the question of homosexuality was for many representatives of the Croatian political parties is shown by a survey organised by a few women’s organisations with the members of the Croatian parliament. One of the questions in the survey was: “What do

you think about the freedom of sexual choice?” In the report sent to their international colleagues, the activists wrote: “It is hard to describe all the fun moments but one of them sticks out because it shows the gap that exists between us here, in the Balkans and Europe, a gap regarding the understanding of the most basic concepts. The question that was asked was about the freedom of sexual choice. Only two or three representatives (Radin, Kovacevic, Opacic) understood what the question was referring to, that is heterosexual or homosexual choice. The others thought we were talking about the right to choose your own partner instead of your parents doing it for you. It was very amusing listening to all the conservative representatives, including those from the ruling HDZ, approving that right ‘absolutely’. At least we can say that everyone agrees in Croatia that gays and lesbians should have all the rights (!)” (What Croatia politicians thinks of freedom of sexual choice! (sic), 1995, online).

32. There were around ten lesbian activists in LIGMA around the time of its beginning (Tratnik and Segan 1995).
33. As we will see below, the anarchist thread was particularly relevant for the survival and further development of the lesbian activist cause.
34. Vesna Teršelič, one of the cofounders of ARK, is of Slovenian origin. Also, Marko Hren, one of the most well-known Slovenian peace activists, acted as a “linking agent” between Zagreb and Ljubljana (see Bilić 2012a, b, c).
35. Both numbers of *Speak Out* are available here: <https://monoskop.org/Arkzin>
36. These are the first three words of the Croatian anthem.
37. This class aspect of one’s capacity to live lesbianity appears also in the article that Andrea Špehar (as cited in Sagasta 2001, p. 363) published in the magazine *Bread and Roses (Kruh i ruže)* in the autumn of 1991: “There are many reasons why lesbians are so rarely engaged in a specific homosexual/lesbian culture. When a lesbian openly speaks out about her sexuality to her friends, family or at her workplace, we say that she ‘came out’. Coming out in public for most lesbians is not simple, and the necessary requirement for it to be possible at all is that a woman/girl has accepted herself as a lesbian, and that she has started thinking about lesbianism in a positive way, which includes overcoming all the negative myths about lesbians as abnormal, immoral, perverse or non-existent, and has started to overthrow the influence of all the religious, social and

family stereotypes according to which there is something wrong with a girl until she becomes a wife and a mother. In order to protect themselves from their intolerant environment, women are forced to hide their sexuality, and in this not only the social pressure but also financial dependence plays an important part. (...) That is why all of us involved in LIGMA are trying to work on our own identity, and connect with each other to create a positive vision of lesbianism, and to fight for our political and cultural rights". *Bread and Roses* was published by Women's Infoteka (Ženska infoteka) founded in November 1992 by the feminist activist Đurđa Knežević. Infoteka acted as a resource centre for gender-related topics and was particularly important for the development of electronic communication among post-Yugoslav and international activists through *ZaMir* and *Electronic Witches* projects.

38. For example, Matea Popov (as cited in Marušić 2014b, online), lesbian activist, decided to leave Zagreb Pride "(...) due to the hierarchical and patriarchal structures that put women and young people under a glass ceiling beyond which they cannot rise. Of course, there is always a possibility of entering into power fights and trying to win your own place. It is hard to explain these power structures and how firm they are, but at the end of the day (like everywhere else) it somehow turns out that women leave while men stay and that those programmes that are done by women are treated as 'just some kind of workshops and friendships', whereas the programmes led by men are perceived as 'rescuing the world and high politics'". Another lesbian activist who did not feel welcome at Zagreb Pride organisation was Ana Brakus (2015). See also Zagreb Pride's (2015) response to Brakus' text in which she talks about what she found problematic in the operation of that activist group.
39. This was, of course, hard to put in practice. For a critical account, see Cvek et al. (2013).
40. Being labelled as "pro-Yugoslav" was one of the most widely used delegitimisation strategies of the Croatian authorities. Andrea Špehar (as cited in Tratnik and Segan 1995, pp. 110) also refers to it in her 1993 interview with two lesbian activists from Ljubljana: "we all know that there is a war and that there are huge problems. I think that LIGMA does not need also that label that we are pro-Yugoslav or something like that. The public certainly would not understand why we communicate with Belgrade, we would be constantly reproached and just add yet another prejudice to those which are already there".

41. For a discussion of the anarcho-feminist activist currents in the late 1990s and beyond, see Marjanić (2009).
42. In the winter of 1996–1997, there was a series of university student and opposition parties protests taking place in Belgrade against electoral fraud of the Slobodan Milošević regime. Even though Milošević was destabilised by these protests, it was only in October 2000 that he would be forced to resign.
43. In the words of Lepa Mladenović (as cited in Von Känel 2017, online), who travelled to Bologna: “even though it was all in Italian, we were really happy, but what happened was that the lesbians from Slovenia went back and organised the first Lesbian Week for us”.
44. See in this context, for example, the text by Igballe Rogova (2008), whom I mentioned in the section on Serbia.
45. It was only after these elections that Kontra was registered as a non-governmental organisation.
46. Milošević died in 2006, a few months before the verdict was due for his trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.
47. Gayten LGBT (now Geten) is a Belgrade-based LGBTIQA organisation established in 2001 as a successor of Arkadija.
48. Kajinić (2019) participated in and wrote about both marches on the basis of the interviews which she conducted with many lesbian activists. I will therefore not address these events here. More information about LGBT activism in the 2000s can be found in our volumes Bilić (2016a) and Bilić and Kajinić (2016a).

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# 4

## Away from the Capitals: Decentralising Lesbian Activist Engagement

Towards the end of her pioneering account of the Croatian “lesbian scene” published in 2001, Sanja Sagasta (2001, p. 370) laments that “the [women’s human rights] groups that keep their doors open for lesbian activists are those situated in Zagreb, while feminist principles of supporting all women regardless of their age, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. remain a myth for many NGO activists in the provinces”. This statement would have stayed Sagasta’s conclusion had she not, immediately prior to sending her essay to print, received a piece of news that made her add a new section to it: namely, in October 2000 a group of lesbian women gathered in Rijeka, around 200 km away from the capital, to establish LORI, the first legally registered lesbian (and, more generally, GBT) activist organisation in Croatia. LORI’s unexpected appearance marked lesbian activism’s departure from the centre of Croatian political and social life. This act constituted a counterpoint to the metro-normative “gay imaginary” (Weston 1995), which has “traditionally” portrayed provincial and rural places as intolerant and suffocating, celebrating at the same time urban milieus—namely capital cities—as accepting and progressive.

Although Butterfield (2018) has shown that narratives of non-heterosexual people living in Croatian smaller towns and rural areas do not unequivocally offer an image of their communities as hostile, many of them nevertheless testify to exhausting negotiations of sexual difference aggravated by less favourable economic circumstances. “Deep provincial closets” can become even deeper when considering the concentration of activist endeavours in the capital cities. Homophobia that obstructs activist recruitment as well as tensions provoked by activist professionalisation have led to high levels of (urban) activists’ alienation from their “constituencies” (as well as to the alienation of activists from each other, Bilić and Stubbs 2016). With this in mind, people—and especially lesbian/bisexual/transgender women—living in provincial/rural areas may not only be exposed to more conservative attitudes regarding gender and sexuality, but they are also more likely, both culturally and logistically, to stay out of the reach of capital-based activist engagement.

In this chapter, I explore the strategies through which lesbian activism started diffusing away from the Croatian and Serbian capitals in the wake of the turbulent 1990s. I am interested in how lesbian agency confronted the challenges posed by the marginalisation of provincial spaces (see more on this also in the following chapter) and the heightened sense of homophobia-related fear associated with villages and smaller towns. In order to do this, I take a closer look at the above-mentioned and still operating Lesbian Organisation Rijeka (LORI) as well as at the Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation (NLO), active from 2004 to 2015. Even though they are important regional centres, both Rijeka and Novi Sad are entangled in urban-rural/capital-province dichotomies due to strong state centralisation and the “hypertrophy” of capitals visible in both countries. Taking this into consideration, I present some of the initiatives through which LORI and NLO struggled to create non-heteronormative “counter-spaces” (Lefebvre 1991; Goldstein 2017) as a non-commoditised “alternative to actually existing ‘real’ space” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 366). By doing so, they (have) attempted to circumvent capitals’ overwhelming dominance characterised by highly bureaucratised and hierarchised forms of activist operation, and transform their towns/organisations into nodal points to which lesbian women and other non-heterosexual/transgender people living in their regions would gravitate.

Notwithstanding their differences, both LORI and NLO went through a developmental process similar to the one they endeavoured to stimulate in their “target population”. They started as small, low-key, and inward-looking initiatives turned towards the needs of lesbian/bisexual women in terms of their security and empowerment. After this initial period, their evolution unfolded in the context of sometimes overtly violent pride marches and the debates as to how these were to be organised. In this regard, both groups did not only broaden their programmatic spectrum, particularly towards the sphere of art, but they also performed a “coming out” in the sense of opening their activities to non-lesbian/non-homosexual audiences and launching LGBT-friendly sites embedded in publicly accessible space. When generating platforms for such “gay-straight alliances”, both LORI and NLO were led by the principle that homosexuality/lesbianity should not be solely considered a private/personal issue, but rather a public matter that counts on informed, responsible, and politically conscious citizens.

## Lesbian Organisation Rijeka (LORI)

The establishment of LORI in late 2000 was a harbinger of new political opportunities opened in the wake of Franjo Tuđman’s death and the 2000 parliamentary elections. LORI rode the wave of enthusiasm that was sweeping across Croatia in the early 2000s in which “Rijeka felt like San Francisco” (Kajinić, as cited in Bilić and Kajinić 2016, p. 2). Soon after the emergence of LORI, Sanja Kajinić (as cited in Sagasta 2001, p. 371), one of its founders, stated:

In Croatia, homosexuality is still not perceived as what it really is – a natural dimension of human sexuality. Nevertheless, we are witnessing positive progress. More people are breaking the silence about their homosexuality, collective consciousness about the importance of democratic values is developing and public opinion on homosexuality has become much more objective. LORI is aiming for further changes within our community by linking lesbians throughout the country, by banning ignorance and showing that our richness lies in diversity.

In the first period of its operation, LORI was primarily turned to the “community” and dedicated to creating a safe haven for lesbian/bisexual/transgender women. In contrast to their Novi Sad fellow-activists to whom I will turn below, LORI was supported by the local government which also secured space for it. The challenge they faced thus lay mostly in transforming high levels of both social and internalised homo/lesbophobia. Danijela Almesberger (as cited in Marušić 2014, online), one of the founders, remembers this exciting period in the following way:

We used to work in a locked office because of the possibility of someone breaking in and provoking us. There were also many unpleasant and offensive telephone calls. There was no “organised” pressure, but the atmosphere was different. At that time it was hard for us to go to a meeting with institutional representatives or even with other associations because you always had to think about how that person would react and whether they would immediately reject you because you were coming from a lesbian organisation. A big problem at the time was that it was not easy to be out, so even going to the post office to send a letter on behalf of LORI was an important ‘coming out’ experience for us – Rijeka is not a big town and it may often happen that you know someone.

Even though they occasionally experienced lesbophobic harassment, the support of the local authorities and the fact that they did not have to worry about office space gave LORI a firm starting position, allowing it to establish links with national and regional activist initiatives (especially those from Slovenia) and venture into the public more quickly. From 2000 to 2005, the group concentrated on following the way in which the national media were reporting about homosexuality-related issues. This focus was chosen because of the predominantly negative, superficial, or sensationalist representations of LGBT population across the Croatian media outlets in the context in which there was still no law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Already in 2002, less than two years into their existence, LORI launched an audacious nationwide campaign for non-heterosexual rights called Love is Love (Ljubav je ljubav). Financially sustained by the Global Fund for Women, Mama

Cash, and Astraea Foundation for Justice, the campaign included, among other elements (educational material, exhibition, video) billboards with photographs of (authentic) lesbian couples. The fact that the billboards were not destroyed but rather served as “blackboards” upon which citizens could express their views of lesbianity testified to the unexpected success of the campaign (Leszkowicz and Kitlinski 2013).

Over the years, increasingly supported also by the Croatian state, LORI has broadened its activities to include other non-heterosexual people as well as to expose residents and guests of Rijeka to queer art through their International Festival of Queer and Feminist Culture Smoqua. This festival, organised in collaboration with other activist and art collectives since 2017, functions as a counter-space, a “temporary autonomous zone”, bringing together both national and international artists and activists who question social norms around gender and sexuality. After the second, 2018 edition of the festival, the organisers (LORI 2018, online) reflected upon how they “queered up” Rijeka:

Through the programme we hoped to provide our audience with new knowledge, sensitise them, move the limits of our usual rationale and encourage development of the new ideas and emotions – with an aim of creating better society that nurtures acceptance and inclusion, community that is constantly moving forward and within which individuals develop, progress and grow. Smoqua’s main focus from the very beginning has been openness – it is a space opened for anyone interested, with a majority of the events and activities carried out in public areas: Korzo, the City Hall, cinema, cafes, clubs etc.

What is more, with the same objective of extending queer spaces, LORI activists have paid attention to the strategies for decreasing homo/bi/transphobia in Rijeka’s high schools. Since 2012, they have been working both with students and school psychologists (mostly in Rijeka and Opatija) familiarising them with the basic LGBT terminology. This project constitutes the first activist initiative in Croatia that cooperates directly with high schools and inserts LGBT topics into the curricula. By doing so, LORI has been providing students with an opportunity to problematise heteronormativity and start transforming schools into

places in which non-heterosexuality can be safely lived. When thinking about this engagement, the activists (as cited in I.T. 2014, online) stated:

We are actually surprised by how little they know, even though it may seem that discussions about the status of LGBT rights are all over the place. Somehow you can see that the thinking process is being put in motion and that [students] start considering that we should all have equal rights and a life with dignity in which they are not judged for their difference. It has happened that LGBT students approach us afterwards thanking us for being there and saying how important that was for them.

In recent years, LORI has been committed to problematising power hierarchies that exist also within LGBT “communities” and opening their programmes towards transgender and intersex persons. They have launched a regional online Trans Forum which operates as a source of information and an empowerment platform for transgender and intersex people.

## Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation

The Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation (NLO),<sup>1</sup> in many respects, represents an unusual occurrence in the activist history of the region. It was founded in October 2004 in the wake of the third Lesbian Week (see the chapter Times of Splits) which, under the slogan “Our Network, Our Strength” (Naša mreža, naša snaga), took place in Novi Sad one month earlier. The gathering organised, like the previous one, by Belgrade-based Labris, was attended by only few lesbian women from Novi Sad, pointing not only to the extent of lesbophobia in Vojvodina’s political and cultural centre but also to the distance of its residents from the lesbian activist engagement developing in Serbia’s capital. Among the local participants—also as a co-organiser—there was Biljana Stanković Lori who had already acquired feminist activist experience within the association Women’s Studies and Research (Ženske studije i istraživanja). Under the leadership of the linguist Svenka Savić, this group explored women’s history of Vojvodina with the view of improving their social status.

Throughout the 1990s, it supplied discursive instruments for its members' empowerment and operated as a safe place for non-heterosexual women, giving them an impetus for a more explicit activist mobilisation.

During its first meeting,<sup>2</sup> NLO decided to concentrate on fighting both internalised and social homo/lesbophobia and stay close to lesbian and bisexual women living in Vojvodina. The main objective was to increase non-heterosexual visibility through cooperation with local and regional feminist/lesbian groups and the promotion of lesbian art and culture. While working on this in the context of heightened homophobia and resisting cooperation with the state, NLO went through three developmental stages that coincided with three (physical) spaces they occupied in Novi Sad. In the first stage—ghetto—they operated as a community offering creative (writing, language learning, etc.) and counselling workshops that encouraged lesbian and bisexual women to embrace their sexuality. In the second stage—Black House—they decided to leave their privately owned milieu and move into the public space by joining forces with anti-fascist initiatives and intensifying their art-related activities. Struggling to eschew or transform more common bureaucratised forms of operation,<sup>3</sup> NLO entered its third and final stage—Mattera Mesto (Mattera Place), where various threads of regionally developing alternative culture were supposed to converge. In all of these stages, NLO activists were exploring non-hierarchical strategies for claiming public space within which non-heterosexual existence could be safely announced and recognised as an element of broader emancipatory fronts opposing systemic patriarchy and homophobia.

### Stage One: Ghetto

The famous feminist slogan “the personal is political” that has inspired a lot of regional activist organising seems particularly relevant for the earliest years of NLO operation, as the group started gathering in the private house of Biljana Stanković. The necessity to use private premises for developing a lesbian activist initiative probably points to the hardships that activists would have encountered in public or more institutionalised spaces, but the use of the private one also was not without problems.

Upon learning that her daughter was lesbian, Biljana Stanković's mother was determined to change the will of her parents who had left the house to Biljana and involved her in a three-and-a-half-year-long lawsuit over its ownership. The legal proceedings were finished in Biljana's favour in April 2004 and, only a few months afterwards, the house welcomed the first Vojvodina lesbian organisation, as Biljana thought that there was nothing "smarter or more interesting that could be done with it than create a safe space with other lesbians" (NLO 2015, online). NLO would stay in that house for the next six years initiating a process of feminist self-education and acting as a crossroads for a variety of lesbian/bisexual women's needs and biographies.<sup>4</sup>

Operating practically without any financial support in its first months, NLO, which was officially registered in February 2005, organised lectures and discussions on a voluntary basis, which were mostly led by Čarna Ćosić,<sup>5</sup> Biljana Stanković, and Jelena Anđelovski who came from Belgrade in March 2005 bringing to the group her experience of working at the Incest Trauma Centre and the Autonomous Women's Centre. One of the most popular activities at the time were the so-called Big Sister Weekends during which the house would be turned into a hostel for those who, for minimal fees, were coming to attend a series of workshops that also included two parties. Remembering this period, Biljana Stanković (Calem colloquium 2012, online) states:

Since 2004 there have been so many lesbians coming to our organisation and saying "I am not lesbian, but I am sleeping with women". Once we had 120 women [in the house], like women sleeping with women, coming to a party... four of us feminist lesbians were looking around and saying "We are the only lesbians here"... everybody was kissing, dancing... it was a lesbian party... so, come on... we need to learn to say the word "lesbian".

With first financial assistance, the group made an unprecedented excursion into the public space by launching one of its Big Sister Weekends at a local café already in the summer of 2005. By that time, NLO had already established contacts with lesbian/non-heterosexual activists around Serbia and across the post-Yugoslav space. The premises of the organisation also started to be used as a shelter for those who had to leave

their homes due to various forms of domestic violence. Such a level of dedication to the activist cause and an almost everyday exposure to painful personal destinies eclipsed the division between the private and the professional for the group's coordinator. In the words of Biljana Stanković (NLO 2015, online):

Until 2006, my private life was all over lesbian activism and the *ghetto*. I did not know anymore when I was working and when I was spending time with friends. All that was personal became shareable the moment it appeared. And I felt safe all the time. There [at the ghetto] I found myself, my Novi Sad chronology, and some completely uncommon feelings that I had never experienced before. That was the place where I was constructing some new families, those that were easier to make and much harder to leave.

Encouraged by the protective atmosphere of the NLO *ghetto*, Biljana felt that the time was ripening for its closer relations with the public and that its immediate neighbourhood should be the first stop on the challenging journey of opening the organisation towards non-heterosexual people. As she was aware of their neighbours' curiosity, she would go to "answer questions that they had in the eyes when they secretly peeped over the gate into our courtyard" (NLO 2015, online). Such mostly pleasant encounters initiated NLO's public engagement that would intensify over the years as more activists felt empowered to come out and establish cooperation with the media<sup>6</sup> (especially with the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina) and activist organisations in Novi Sad.

However, another dimension that was pressuring the core members of the group towards alternative forms of operation was the psychological exhaustion caused by long periods of emotionally draining activities. Given that NLO had an important "social work" component, the activists would often "overstep the limits of giving" (Jelena Anđelovski, as cited in NLO 2015, online), neglecting their own well-being. Managing tensions related to high levels of internalised lesbophobia was particularly hard in a space in which women were engaging in frequent and proximate relations. Reflecting upon the ambiguities of such activist spaces, Jelena Anđelovski (as cited in NLO 2015, online) states:

We used to work in a closed women's community and we were creating a ghetto – this is as important as it is complicated. A ghetto is an entire society, a smaller copy of it, highly concentrated. People support each other but they also come very close and can hurt each other. In a ghetto that is lesbian, women share similar experiences and issues – that is the basis upon which they come together and can be open to each other with all the problems that may entail. Thus, that is an environment in which women can speak and live (feel, care, and plan) also their love life. That is a safe place, but also vulnerable and can be destructive.

## Stage Two: Black House

After four years of pioneering work with lesbian/bisexual women which had counselling and psychotherapeutic elements stimulating them to embrace and find words for their lesbianity,<sup>7</sup> NLO activists decided to move their programmes into the public space.<sup>8</sup> They did not only want to share the responsibility for the status of LGBT population and creation of political alternatives with other activist actors, but to also render LGBT-related events accessible for Novi Sad residents and offer them an opportunity to be more informed about non-heterosexual subculture developing in their town (NLO 2015). The wish to leave the *ghetto* coincided with the intensification of conflict within the youth collective Black House 13 (now Omladinski centar CK13, hereafter BH) that was made up of more liberally and project-oriented group Kuda, on the one hand, and anti-fascist groups AKO and Kružok, on the other. The core NLO activists knew these organisations already from 2007 when one part of their festival Art for Action (Umetnost radi akcije) was hosted at BH. Following AKO's decision to leave, BH needed an injection of activist energy especially by a group with a critical political stance and long-term social engagement (NLO 2015). As NLO was looking for a space that would be open to public, it moved its activities to BH hoping that such a decision would eventually be approved also by the Novi Sad non-heterosexual "community". In this regard, Jelena Anđelovski (as cited in NLO 2015, online) states:

We knew that [moving to BH] meant entering into a new process and that the lesbian and gay community would have a hard time accepting public space as safe. But that was an important moment when we decided for the very first time to go a few steps ahead of the community's needs, to come out ahead of the community. As a responsible lesbian group, we considered that our responsibility and we believed that the community would trust us and with time recognise BH as a safe place. That is what happened.

Upon their entrance into BH, NLO launched a series of activities (such as LGBT cinema, feminist library, poetry evenings, performances,<sup>9</sup> feminist educational programmes, women's bazaar, etc.) using the house as a platform for connecting various threads of alternative politics and art in Novi Sad and Vojvodina. When doing this, the major objective of NLO activists was to render BH safe and acceptable for non-heterosexual people. This was especially important given that, after NLO joined, BH became more vulnerable because it was increasingly perceived as a "lesbian place" and its earlier activists were exposed to new, sometimes violent, forms of resistance. The symbiosis of NLO and BH activists was productive for both groups, but also exhausting given that BH activists did not seem to be sufficiently aware of the extent to which feminist non-heterosexual activism presupposes problematising unreflected patriarchy and hierarchy induced by it. In the words of Jelena Anđelovski (as cited in NLO 2015, online):

We went into that anti-fascist space, but the fact that it was anti-fascist did not mean almost anything. We were aware that antifa groups are above all dominated by men. Perhaps something is changing in this regard, but I don't see it... What does it mean a safe place for LGBT people? I believe it is a place in which one never wonders: is it safe or not? [...] For example, at BH, when we started working there, the people who were a part of the collective did not know almost anything about the existence, culture, political positions and struggles of the LGBT community. Does that sound like a safe space? But we were satisfied by the fact that the activists started learning on a daily basis. We never gave them any training or lectures, but we believed in their good intentions and our common work which brought us to an encounter: we were all there for each other. It was a compromise.

Although ready for compromise with groups with which they shared basic political values like anti-racism and anti-nationalism, NLO was cautious about patriarchy present in them, feeling that some BH activists would find it harder to say “I am gay” than “I am Roma/poor/a worker” (NLO 2015). In this regard, the organisation demonstrated its intersectional approach also through a consistent critique of gay patriarchy and the more pronounced willingness of gay men and Belgrade-based gay men-led activist organisations<sup>10</sup> to collude with the violent or pinkwashing-oriented state.<sup>11</sup> This was particularly relevant in the context of the contentious efforts to organise pride marches in Belgrade throughout the 2000s. NLO decided to distance itself from Pride parade organisation, as it wanted to avoid any possibility of being instrumentalised by the state.

Due to the behaviour of the Serbian state, NLO has not participated in the attempts to organise Pride Parades either this or in any previous year. NLO refuses to make compromises with the Serbian state which seriously violates human rights, especially of those groups and individuals with less power, including, of course, lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people. (Voxfeminae 2012, online)

However, the critical stance towards manifestations of gay patriarchy did not prevent NLO from cooperating with local gay (men) activists or made them think that lesbian liberation could be separated from the struggles of other non-heterosexual people (see Kurucz 2010). Welcoming a gay men-oriented group Izadi (Come Out) to BH in spite of political divergences and organising joint actions with them was an expression of NLO's politics of solidarity and non-hierarchical engagement. This attitude was also sustained by less differentiated “division of (activist) labour” and more intense personal ties developing in provincial environments in which there generally are fewer activists.

NLO considered these contextual features when entering into the experiment of integrating lesbian feminism with an anti-fascist youth initiative mostly led by men. While BH's more hierarchically and bureaucratically organised way of operating worked towards its duration and gave NLO a necessary logistical structure, it also affected activists' spontaneity, eventually reducing the number of thematic currents represented

within the house and weakening its capacity to react to the social reality of its surroundings (NLO 2015). Increasing isolation of BH from its political context intensified tensions around the question of how activist work should be reproduced. Such differences could not escape the authoritarian patterns of dominant politics ending up in personal conflicts and contributing to NLO's decision to look for an alternative space.<sup>12</sup>

### Stage Three: Materra Place (Materra Mesto)

Upon leaving BH, NLO entered its third and final developmental stage that lasted from June 2013 to March/April 2014. Supported by the Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna (Woman to Woman) with which they had already had a long-term cooperation, NLO activists rented the centrally located premises of Terra Film. The idea to use this mostly abandoned space came from its representative Želimir Žilnik, one of the most well-known directors associated with the Yugoslav Black Wave movement that reached its apex in the 1960s and early 1970s. NLO was eventually joined in this endeavour by the collective Improstor (Improstor kolektiv) and the bookstore Prostor which had around that time lost its original space. In accordance with NLO's earlier initiatives, Materra was supposed to act as a basis upon which various threads of alternative artistic production would converge with the view of promoting feminist and non-hierarchical politics and making it financially self-sustainable. In the words of Hanna Stein (as cited in NLO 2015, online), a German volunteer who worked both at BH and Materra:

Exhibitions, discussions, movie screenings, residencies, readings, book selling, concerts, workshops, drinking coffee in the yard, parties. Everything was happening. Every week. And during those events and in between there was so much space for socialising, for rethinking, for exchanging, for talking, for enjoying, for almost everything [...]. MaTerra Mesto became a place in Novi Sad that many people entered and left, mostly [...] with a good feeling and with new ideas and impressions. It was a clearly political place [but not] in a way of direct confrontation. Moreover it offered a platform for realising everyday politics, [for] necessary dealings with questions that we often forget to ask. And [for] answers that we wouldn't get anywhere else.

However, even though Materra's activities took a promising course, they were cut short by the decision of Terra Film to terminate the lease contract. Given that the reasons for this abrupt change were not clearly communicated, they left the activists with a sense of betrayal and disappointment (NLO 2015). After months of dedicated engagement that led to a qualitatively different political space in Novi Sad, it turned out that the unusual encounter between the non-hierarchically oriented NLO and the more market-conditioned film production company could not stand the test of time. Although Materra lasted for less than a year, it is remembered as an important achievement by those who participated in its foundation.

The place is not there anymore but at least it had been. And that a place or space is disappearing in our way of receiving and creating it, doesn't mean that the performative act of creation is over. [What is bad] is that the town of Novi Sad and the society around is lacking that space and that many people didn't even realise what it was about. Many people were not interested. Many people didn't even know it. Some people didn't see the potential of a place where women, sexual [...] minorities, animals and others could feel safe. Some didn't care about that. But we did and we created a space like that. At least for some time – for now. (Hanna Stein, in NLO 2015, online)

Soon after the Materra contract cancellation, in February 2015, NLO informed the public that it formally ceased to exist (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2015).<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The anthropologist Stef Jansen (2005, p. 151) claims to have grown interested in the interface between the urban and the rural in the post-Yugoslav space through “its relentless reappearance” during his fieldwork in Zagreb and Belgrade in the second half of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> When exploring strategies, which Serbian and Croatian activists and “ordinary citizens” devised to resist their strongly nationalising states, Jansen realised that hierarchically structured distinctions between the urban

and the rural lay at the core of a lot of anti-nationalist positionings which he encountered in the two post-Yugoslav capitals. Adjectives and nouns available to underscore urban (capital city) origin were so pervasive in everyday interactions to make Jansen (2005, p. 154) conclude that “the urban/rural format probably constitutes the most widely shared non-nationalist framework for understanding events in the region”.<sup>15</sup>

The urban/rural (capital/provinces) line complicates the national matrix by, on the one hand, traversing the nation-state and separating supposedly anti-nationalist “sophisticated urbanites” from nationalist “primitive villagers”, while it, on the other, “unites” the capital cities on the basis of the “urban habitus” supposedly shared by those living in them. Constructing “intra-national Others” along such affectively charged urban/rural polarisations is performed on the basis of the most easily accessible indicators, such as accent, taste, or style, but it is also—somewhat more latently—intertwined with the levels of non-heterosexual acceptance. Homophobia is believed to follow the same urban-rural trajectories and to constitute one of the markers of urban belonging (Hodges 2016) making it harder for those living away from the capitals to have a meaningful connection with activist engagement developing in the centres of political and social life. Such intra-national representations intersect with regional and transnational hierarchies regarding openness to sexual difference (Butterfield 2018).

In this chapter, I have scratched the surface of lesbian/non-heterosexual activist mobilisations away from the capitals by taking a look at the operation of the Lesbian Organisation Rijeka (LORI) and the Novi Sad Lesbian Organisation (NLO). Rijeka and Novi Sad represent the first loci towards which lesbian activist engagement “travelled” from the respective capitals marking the beginning of the expansion of activist endeavours and also sensitising capital-based organisations about the status of those living in provincial and rural areas. I have shown that, although networked with them, NLO and LORI cannot be simply considered offshoots of activist endeavours in Belgrade and Zagreb, but are rather locally developed initiatives stemming from and addressing their own sociopolitical contexts. Starting as closed groups oriented primarily

towards lesbian/bisexual women, they have over time turned into visible social actors dedicated to broader sexual and gender emancipation.

In this regard, both LORI and NLO have, in principle, demonstrated heightened intersectional sensitivity in comparison to their more prominent capital-based counterparts. While, as we will see in the next chapter, certain threads of lesbian activism have operated with overly restricted gender categories ending up in transphobic and misandric discrimination (see the chapter *Speaking separately*), LORI and NLO have over the years embraced the transgender cause turning their organisations into safe places also for transgender people. Such a transfeminist position along with their other antifascist alliances may have been prompted by the lower level of activist differentiation/division of labour in provincial environments; it is also related to the proximity of activists/their belonging to ethnic/“racial” minorities (especially Hungarians and Roma in the case of NLO and Italians in the case of LORI) as well as to the activists’ own experiences of geographically based exclusion or marginalisation.

While more positive portrayals that put in question discursive constructions of “deep closets” in provincial areas can be useful in the sense of problematising linear Western narratives of “coming out” (Butterfield 2018), they should not eclipse the still patriarchally marked gender norms and quite homo/transphobic realities of those living further away from the reach of activist endeavours. Dedicated to building fragile politically active sites, both NLO and LORI have underscored the complex links between (homo)sexuality and space. While their operation has, on the one hand, reflected the hardships that (especially) the non-heterosexual population has with secure/securing housing (see, e.g., Marušić and Bilić 2016), it has, on the other, imbued activists with enthusiasm, showing how “creating a space means having incredible power in one’s hands [as] the potential is enormous” (Jelena Anđelovski, as cited in NLO 2015, online). Through their queer politics that foregrounds solidarity and non-competitiveness, NLO and LORI have reinvented themselves as counter-spaces (Goldstein 2017) providing a model of how freedom could be imagined and practised in precarious circumstances.

## Notes

1. The acronym of the organisation NLO is also a play of words: in Serbo-Croatian NLO stands for unidentified flying object (UFO). With this in mind, Maja Pan (2018, p. 210), a feminist lesbian activist from Slovenia who attended many NLO events, stated: “Creation of new spaces, temporalities, imaginations. That is what NLO was already from its foundation and through the act of its foundation: more than a reflection of social oppression and erasure, already with its name it symbolically tried to achieve that unknown and distant, but also internal, that about which we can fantasise, what we can hope for – somewhere in the vicinity of the Earth; that is the space in which we live, but not completely because we were banished from it or we ourselves decided to leave it”.
2. As was the case with some other feminist lesbian endeavours in the Yugoslav space, especially those in Macedonia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lepa Mladenović (see the chapter Speaking separately) also helped with the initial NLO meeting. The fact that both Labris, that organised meetings in Sombor and Novi Sad, as well as Lepa Mladenović, are based in Belgrade, shows that certain feminist organisations and activists are, in principle, more aware of the need to de-centralise activist engagement.
3. Commenting upon the gap between the externally funded “projects” and concrete activist actions, Biljana Stanković states: “we are working in mud, if we want to be in the streets, if we 90 per cent have guerrilla actions, [we] lie to donors that we are doing advocacy and blah blah blah, we [are] still providing psychological support to lesbians in their transition to coming out and being out” (Calem colloquium 2012, online).
4. For example, given that Hungarian is one of Vojvodina’s official languages, NLO’s logo also had a Hungarian version of the organisation’s name serving as an invitation for Hungarian-speaking lesbian women to join them. Over the years, NLO supported activist mobilisation of Vojvodina’s Romani women, especially the group Rromnjako Ilo from Zrenjanin, which has been, since 2007, dedicated to empowering multi-marginalised/lesbian Romani women to open up dialogue on gender and sexuality in their communities.
5. Čarna Ćosić (1974–2006) was a poet, performer, and feminist lesbian activist from Novi Sad.

6. Given that they were particularly concerned about safety in the early stages of work, the activists adopted the strategy of informing the media only after their activities had taken place.
7. Summarising their approach to working with lesbian women who came to the *ghetto*, Biljana Stanković stated: “[Our principle is] say what you want even if your voice is shivering... [...and] look at me as (if) you never saw a woman before. Why? Because if men are looking at a woman like me in Serbia... what the hell... I cannot be me... so, we ask lesbians, we let lesbians, we want lesbians to feel free as women... to look at women without shame of loving them... we want to rip off their shame” (Calem colloquium 2012, online).
8. “We never liked the word ‘users’. But that is how donors called them in their applications. By not accepting that word, we did not want to be in a position of superiority towards them [...] and we were making an effort to involve as many women as possible in our programmes and to encourage them to think about what they could do” (NLO 2015, online).
9. Biljana Stanković was performing in two feminist theatre companies: FENS theatre from Novi Sad and ACT women from Belgrade.
10. For example, Boris Milićević, Lazar Pavlović and his Gay-Straight Alliance (Gej strej alijansa).
11. In the words of Biljana Stanković (Calem colloquium 2012, online): “we decided to go through mud, to be in the street, not to go many high levels further as some gay men and only gay organisations can do, showing in such a way a wrong picture of the context we are living in... being highly mainstreamed and very good friends with politicians [...when] you can feel [that] the war [is still] in the air”.
12. BH published a reaction to this decision (CK13 n.d.).
13. The NLO founder Biljana Stanković has, in the meantime, emigrated to Finland, where she is associated with the performance collective Able Art Group (Anđelovski 2018).
14. One striking illustration of this is a twitter exchange that Vesna Pešić, a Serbian sociologist, politician, and one of the leaders of the movement against Slobodan Milošević had with the journalist Daško Milinović who does not live in Belgrade. Irritated by Milinović’s opinion on the reconstruction of Belgrade streets, Pešić said: “You don’t live in Belgrade, why should we waste energy on provincial mentality” (Espresso 2019, online).

15. Intense post-Second World War urbanisation of what used to be distinctly agrarian societies that made up Yugoslavia (Bilić and Stubbs 2015) and later war-related (1990s) population movements were both perceived (also) as villagers' "invasions" of urban space and culture.

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# 5

## Speaking Separately: 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March and Its Antecedents

After a contentious and often-violent decade, 2015 proved to be an *annus mirabilis* in Serbian and post-Yugoslav non-heterosexual and trans activist organising. That year not only witnessed a relatively smooth unfolding of the Belgrade Pride Parade but the streets of the Serbian (and former Yugoslav) capital also welcomed, until then unprecedented, Lesbian March and Trans Pride. This surprising diversity testified, on the one hand, to the vital currents of LGBT activist engagement that survived, among other unfavourable circumstances, high levels of both institutionalised and socially widespread homophobia. On closer inspection, though, such an abundance of activist endeavours concentrated in a relatively short period of time pointed to an emotionally charged “underworld” of tensions, frustrations, and challenges that local activists faced in their efforts to advance the (heterogeneous) cause of LGBT emancipation.

In this chapter, I draw upon a variety of empirical sources to reconstruct the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March exploring how lesbian separatism—the most radical form of lesbian activist organising (done “by women for women” and therefore excluding men)—entered the Yugoslav space. I contextualise this unusual public gathering, the first of its kind in

the post-Yugoslav region, both in the history of Yugoslav feminist/lesbian organising as well as in the broader, Anglo-American history of lesbian (and GBT) activism. The latter exerts worldwide influence as strategies of protest are propelled from the United States and incorporated—through a troubled translation process (Clarke et al. 2015)—into the logic of domestic (semi-peripheral) political structures.

I argue that the 2015 Lesbian March was conceptualised as an instance of what Della Porta (2018) calls *cracking*: it was supposed to represent a sudden rupture of routine with the aim of challenging the established order and producing a momentous effect. The March constituted an *act of lesbian speakability* prompted by a general marginalisation<sup>1</sup> and insufficient visibility<sup>2</sup> of lesbian activists as well as by the widespread lesbophobia and misogyny in the post-Yugoslav sociopolitical context. As a protest *crack*, the March was an extraordinary event that increased lesbian presence in public life underscoring the resilience of lesbian activist ties across the regional and European borders. On the other hand, however, this manifestation unveiled deep fissures among activist groups and individual activists, pertaining to the way in which the organisers went about including or excluding (lesbian) women, men, and trans women. The March as a street protest, which did not allow male participants (but was heavily “protected” by policemen) disrupted the *public* nature of public space<sup>3</sup> resolving the question of the role that men should play in feminist struggles in a radical form.

In the first part of the chapter, I offer an overview of the ideological background of the March by discussing some of the most important dimensions of lesbian separatism as it developed in the United States. I then turn to the 1978 Belgrade international feminist gathering Comrade Woman (Drug-ca Žena) claiming that it constituted an important gender “bifurcation point” which—albeit implicitly—introduced the idea of lesbian separatism and women-only initiatives in the Yugoslav space. At this conference, the issue of male participation served as a bone of contention separating the attendees along the capitalism-socialism line. Such a cleavage reflected ideological divergences conditioned by participants’ different social realities (i.e., living in a socialist or in a capitalist state) which have in the meantime become more similar through the global expansion of capitalism, rapid dismantling of socialist achievements, and

the general weakening of the welfare state. These tectonic political processes have, in turn, opened the space for (an uncritical application of Anglo-Saxon) activist strategies that keep reinventing the “second feminist wave” and thus prevent some portions of the regional feminist “scene” from embracing the potential of local emancipatory heritage.

What is more, the third section of the chapter brings an empirical account of the March organisers’ rationale as well as the emotionally charged reactions of those who thought that the cause of increasing lesbian visibility could have benefited from alternative approaches. I mostly follow the debate that the March announcement and its subsequent unfolding stimulated among Serbian/regional LGBT activists at the publicly available Google group *razotkvirivanje*.<sup>4</sup> Arguing that lesbian separatism has been a more or less strong but consistent ideological thread that guided lesbian activist endeavours in the (post-)Yugoslav space over the last four decades, I conclude with the implications that this activist strategy may have for lesbian and non-heterosexual liberation, more generally.

## Lesbian Separatism: A Rebellious Pariah

Lesbian separatism emerges in more explicit forms throughout the 1970s in the wake of global student mobilisations (around 1968) which also included the so-called sexual revolution. One of its first definitions comes from the 1970 statement *The Woman Identified Woman* by Radicalesbians (1970, online), a New York City-based activist group, which called on women to focus on “the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution”. This was taken up in 1971 by Lois Anne Addison who, together with her partner, started publishing an underground newspaper *Spectre* within which they referred to themselves as “revolutionary lesbians” striving for “a non-exploitive communist society”. They advocated in favour of “working directly only with women” in a short piece entitled “How to Stop Choking to Death”, published in the second issue of their magazine.<sup>5</sup> Trying to combine both political theory and concrete feminist practice, lesbian

separatism was perceived by its promoters as a *process* of privileging women and lesbians, a way of being in and interacting with the world (Enszer 2016) which “promised its practitioners a life of radical rebellion and feminist empowerment” (Levy 2009, online).

The separatist fervour reached its apex with the appearance of the communal radical lesbian group known as The Furies Collective (consisting of 12 women) which started publishing its monthly *The Furies* in 1972. In their manifesto, they stated: “We are angry because we are oppressed by male supremacy. We have been fucked over all our lives by a system which is based on the domination of men over women, which defines male as good and female as only as good as the man you are with. It is a system in which heterosexuality is rigidly enforced and Lesbianism rigidly suppressed. It is a system which has further divided us by class, race, and nationality”. This document identified the most salient separatist issues: it pointed to lesbianity as a necessary *political choice*—a political imperative—for feminists by claiming that it was an identity appropriate for all members of the women’s movement in a male supremacist society in which heterosexuality was, as they argued, a political institution. A particularly prominent member of the Collective Ginny Berson (as cited in Valk 2008, p. 143) said that “Lesbians must become feminists and fight against woman oppression, just as feminists must become Lesbians if they hope to end male supremacy”. The manifesto also highlighted the failure of the “straight women’s movement” and the “male left” to address lesbian concerns insisting on the necessity for lesbians to develop a “common politics” of “lesbianism as a political issue”.

In this regard, rather than refusal, lesbian separatism was perceived by separatist activists as a site of politically productive experimentation within women-only communities. Adrienne Rich (1981, p. 88), in her capacity as co-editor of another separatist magazine called *Sinister Wisdom*, stated that:

An act of separation, separateness, can also be an act of connection. An all-female space is not definable simply as a space from which males are excluded. It can also be – though it is not always – a space where women who have not heard each other before *bear witness* (Sarah Hoagland’s phrase) in each other’s presence and describe themselves to each other, forging new strands of trust and new possibilities of movement.

One of the earliest and most widely known events in which lesbian separatist reasoning was put in practice was the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest) founded in 1976 and active for 40 years until 2015. This festival, produced exclusively by women, was a life changing experience for many of its participants, but it was not without controversy. The most contentious issue, namely attendance of trans women (who were never admitted as the Festival was organised for "womyn-born womyn", McConnell et al. 2016; Trigilio 2016), has accompanied lesbian separatism from its beginnings not only in the United States but across the world. Even though many subsequent separatist events have become trans inclusive (as was, at least declaratively, the case with the Belgrade March), lesbian separatism consistently ends up raising the question of how "woman" should be defined.

With this in mind, separatist politics encountered serious criticism even within feminist circles already in the 1970s. This critical stance mostly came from black feminists (which does not mean that there were no black women who identified with separatism), particularly from the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist lesbian organisation active in Boston between 1974 and 1980. The members of this group considered lesbian separatism a racist ideology arguing in their A Black Feminist Statement (Combahee River Collective 1978, online) that men must not be excluded from progressive activist struggles.

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

(...) we reject the stance of Lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se – i.e., their biological maleness – that makes them what they are. As Black women we

find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether Lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

Whereas the earliest white US American lesbian separatists declared themselves communist when imagining women-only communities, the members of the Combahee River Collective defined themselves as socialists arguing in favour of a socialist revolution which would be both feminist and anti-racist. Regardless of whether there may have been any ideologically relevant ways in which activists differentiated between communism and socialism, American radical feminist lesbian organising throughout the 1970s had a clear leftist orientation. Its radicality was strengthened by heterosexual feminist activists, such as Betty Friedan, one of the founders of the US National Organization for Women (NOW), who believed that inclusion of lesbians in the women's movement would hamper its capacity to bring about social change (see Levy 2009). At the 1969 NOW meeting, Friedan used the term "lavender menace" to label lesbianity as a threat to the feminist movement interested mostly in securing economic and social equality between women and men. This attitude imbued lesbian activism even more "with a countercultural connotation so potent that women were drawn to it by ideology rather than by desire" (Levy 2009, online). Stimulated by the feminist resistance, a group of radical feminist lesbians appropriated "lavender menace" as a name and organised a zap during the Second Congress to Unite Women which took place in New York City on 1 May 1970. It is generally considered that this protest marked the beginning of lesbian feminism (Jay 1999).

Moreover, lesbian separatism emerged not only as a response to lesbians' invisibility within the women's movement, but also to the idea that *gay* failed to act as an umbrella term for gay men, lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual people. Instead of constituting a common denominator, since the 1970s, *gay* mostly revolved around the male homosexual as its normative subject (Trigilio 2016). A strong association of anti-AIDS activism with men throughout the 1980s AIDS epidemic and the appearance of the term *queer* in relation to it yet again eclipsed

those submitted to intersecting oppressions and marginalised lesbians and lesbian communities.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1990s, mainstream Pride marches became increasingly white middle-class men-dominated, professionalised, overly sexualised, depoliticised, and commercialised, threatening to reinforce gender asymmetries within the movement (Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani 2009; Kates and Belk 2001).

In order to counter this trend, a few lesbian groups led by the Lesbian Avengers of New York City, an activist organisation founded in 1992, decided to launch a separate lesbian march as a part of the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. Reportedly, 20,000 women participated in this lesbian march, which was not the first lesbian public protest in North America, but was the first that managed to generate a movement (Podmore 2016). That particular demonstration would, in the following decades, act as a model for lesbian activists and inspire similar gatherings across the United States, North America, and (Western) Europe. After this one, lesbian marches started taking place before the official pride events; they remained demonstrations with political claims rather than tourist-oriented parades or highly sexualised parties. In many American cities, organisers contested institutionalisation by refusing to gain official permits or police permissions to go into the streets. Lesbian marches, thus, draw upon the logic of the American pride movement based on the idea that activists should temporarily disrupt heteronormativity by making “private” sexualities public through taking to the streets (Branner et al. 1994; Podmore 2016). These manifestations are supposed to be an alternative to Pride and to succeed there where lesbian activists believed that Pride parades failed—to be *inclusive* spaces that contest patriarchy, capitalism, consumer culture, professionalisation, and intense depoliticisation of LGBT issues (Ghaziani and Fine 2008).

## Turning Point: 1978 Conference Comrade Woman

Trajectories of lesbian separatism in the Yugoslav space lead to an event that happened almost four decades before the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March. From 27 to 29 October 1978, Belgrade welcomed a group of

international feminist scholars and activists who, along with their Yugoslav hosts, mostly academics from Belgrade and Zagreb, attended the conference *Comrade Woman. The Women's Question: A New Approach?* (*Drugarica žena. Žensko pitanje: novi pristup?*). This gathering (which like the Lesbian March was seen as an extraordinary international event that strengthened the links among regional activists) marked the beginning of the post-Second World War autonomous Yugoslav socialist feminist movement<sup>7</sup> and the entrance of the “second wave of feminism” in Eastern Europe. It constituted an unprecedented opportunity for feminists living in two different politico-economic regimes, namely socialism and capitalism, to exchange views about the status of women (the so-called woman question) in their respective contexts. As one participant remembers (Dragan Klaić, as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 54):

it was the first conference type of event with a feminist agenda, trying to bring people from Belgrade and Zagreb and elsewhere in Yugoslavia together, plus a lot of people from abroad. There were some eighty people there in these two days. So the core feminist group was trying to go from this very small intellectual circle a little bit broader, bring some younger students and get some media attention. It was an exploration and an agenda setting meeting, and much of networking... and it was fascinating to get all these people from abroad, all of quite different orientations. It was dynamic and polemic, but of course all slowed down by translations.

This tension between the Yugoslav hosts and their international guests, especially in the beginning of the conference, was mostly due to the fact that the progressive legislation of the Yugoslav socialist state had already provided (some of the key) emancipatory measures for which autonomous feminists were mobilising in Western Europe. For example, abortion was allowed and regulated in Yugoslavia since 1952 (with the idea of decreasing illegal abortions which at the time resulted in high mortality),<sup>8</sup> whereas it became legal in Italy in May 1978—the year of the conference—thanks to the long-term engagement of feminist activists, some of whom attended the event. In other words, it seemed that the international guests were not sufficiently informed about the socialist

regime's decision to put women's emancipation high on its political agenda. Already the Article 24 of the 1946 Constitution of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia (as cited in [worldstatement.org](http://worldstatement.org), online) introduced at least legal (and not necessarily equally known and fully implemented) provisions that still have not been achieved in a lot of today's advanced democracies:

Women have equal rights with men in all fields of state, economic and social-political life. Women have the right to the same pay as that received by men for the same work, and as workers or employees they enjoy special protection. The state especially protects the interests of mothers and children by the establishment of maternity hospitals, children's homes and day nurseries and by the right of mothers to a leave with pay before and after childbirth.

Lacking familiarity with the Yugoslav political context, the visiting feminists generally had a hard time understanding their hosts' attempt to articulate a leftist feminist critique of the patriarchal aspects of the Yugoslav self-management without questioning—but rather affirming—its fundamental postulates.

We were not criticising Yugoslav self-management socialism as such. We were criticising the sexist elements of the Yugoslav system with which we identified in general. In that sense it wasn't a radical critique of Yugoslav socialism... and when you look at all those people, they were all then and they all remained – I don't think there is a single exception – opposed to nationalism. (Dragan Klaić, as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 100)

The tension between the guests and the hosts reached its climactic point in relation to the participation of men in the conference and, more precisely, the intervention of the (Croatian/Yugoslav) sociologist Slobodan Drakulić who irritated foreign participants with what Christine Delphy (1979, p. 131), a French lesbian feminist activist and scholar, called “a true caricature of a masculine speech”.<sup>9</sup> This prompted a participant from Germany to interrupt him after which Drakulić asked for patience and continued stimulating an even stronger reaction from the international

part of the audience: “Assez! Basta! Enough! In what language should one say it?” (Delphy 1979, p. 131). Although this episode is remembered in different ways, for Lepa Mladenović—30 years later (as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 92)—it was Christine Delphy who told Drakulić to stop:

[A] *turning point* [emphasis BB] for me was Christine Delphy, when Delphy told a man: “You can walk out, you stop now”. There were a few men participants who wanted to be cleverer than us. This was a young leftist sociologist. He wanted to tell us... he went on and on and on, and Christine just said “you know, you just stop now”, or “you can even walk out”...something like that. It was a huge scandal! [she laughs] The daily *Politika* wrote: “feminists have thrown men out of the conference”!

Delphy, in her account of the conference written immediately upon her return to France, does not mention the central role she (supposedly) played in silencing Drakulić, but she does say (Delphy 1979, p. 131) that “in that commotion, the director of the Centre took the microphone to protest against such a ‘discriminatory’ attitude”, adding angrily that “we are in any case not going to make distinctions here between men and women.” and meeting with the approval of other Yugoslav participants.

While I do not question the purpose of interrupting what may have indeed been a masculinist speech, I am interested in how the insistence of the organisers that there should be “no distinctions between men and women” reflected the socialist effort to universalise (rather than particularise) women’s experience by approaching it as a social issue of general concern. This line of thought could be followed ever since the abolishment (in 1953) of the Antifascist Front of Women<sup>10</sup> (*Antifašistički front žena*), which is sometimes interpreted also as the ultimate patriarchal conquest that put a cap on the process of women’s emancipation in Yugoslavia. Vida Tomšič (1980, p. 80), a well-known Slovenian communist, partisan, and activist, stated that the abolishment of the Front took place:

in the belief that [its] further existence as the comprehensive and sole women’s organisation, evenly organised from bottom to top, would [...] tend to keep women from taking part in the joint efforts to solve social problems,

maintain[ing] the false idea that women's status was a separate women's issue and not an issue of our social community and of all the fighters for socialism.<sup>11</sup>

Although the 1978 conference unveiled differences in the ways in which “the woman question” was articulated in Yugoslav socialism and Western European capitalism and constituted the foundational moment<sup>12</sup> for the Yugoslav post-Second World War feminist movement (generating a string of more or less formal initiatives in both Serbia and Croatia, e.g., the groups Woman and Society), it also—perhaps inadvertently—became one of the multiple beginnings of the Serbian/Yugoslav lesbian activist mobilisation. The encounter between Christine Delphy and Lepa Mladenović, “the little baby of the conference” (Mladenović, as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 90) who was 24 years old at the time, had a transformative impact on the latter. Remembering Delphy, Lepa (as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 91) states:

[I was] trying to understand her. She was totally different than anyone in my street, that's the point. She was totally different [...] where does this woman come from, from what world? I was not really aware... something attracted me ...she was not a married wife. She walked down the streets not paying attention to male eyes. This was a difference I named later on.

The “difference” that Lepa Mladenović observed in Christine Delphy's behaviour was particularly prominent in the way she behaved in restaurants in which the participants would gather on a daily basis after finishing the formal parts of the conference.<sup>13</sup>

If I wanted to choose whom I would look like, I would say her. Not because of what theoretically she was saying. This lightness, I felt she was walking in a men's world in a different way; autonomous, she is self-contained, she does not depend on this heterosexual validation when entering spaces and every space is a misogynist space. I felt she would feel that every space is her place. And I only caught it as an energy... she did not expect waiters to validate us, she did not intend to explain to all these men in restaurants who we are. Usually, women around me tried to excuse themselves or to court with men... she did not spend energy on it... you don't spend energy

on it (...) and this is your world, even though you know it is not. In that sense she was crucial as a model. She was clever, she had already interiorised feminist principles, and that's what I was really sensing, how do you live up to feminist principles.<sup>14</sup>

This meeting was an important point in the *herstory* of Yugoslav lesbian mobilisations and would have profound effects in the following three decades as Lepa Mladenović would become for many (post-)Yugoslav lesbians and feminists the inspirational figure that Christine Delphy was for her.

Practically it was so intense for me and many of us that it was never the same, me myself I. It was the first moment that we women organised an event for ourselves. For me that was totally new, that we take ourselves seriously in our daily life, private life and in theory. It totally changed how I see myself in daily life and how I see what I can do one day. If I want to research on something I can seriously research on women, I never thought of that before. And the whole history of organising in Yugoslavia really started after that meeting. (Lepa Mladenović, as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 93)

Over the next four decades, Mladenović would become the most widely recognisable face of (post-)Yugoslav feminist lesbian activism. A truly Yugoslav activist, a *linking agent* (see the chapter *Away from the capitals*) in the sense of covering the entire territory of the former state and reaching towards other parts of Europe and the United States, Mladenović has untiringly gathered and empowered women while also promoting the politics of women/lesbian separation. In 1986 Mladenović argued in favour of women-only<sup>15</sup> activities within the Belgrade group *Woman and Society* (Miškovska Kajevska 2017), in 1993 she cofounded the Belgrade-based Autonomous Women's Centre (Autonomni ženski centar), and in 1995 she was instrumental for the establishment of the first lesbian organisation *Labris*, created through a separation from the first Serbian non-heterosexual activist group *Arkadija* (see the chapter *Times of splits*). Also, she has encouraged a lot of lesbian activist initiatives that took place around the region. As Cvetkovic (2019, p. 124–125) writes:

the lesbian group [that was a part of] MASSO started organising workshops and events on different topics, mostly in collaboration with Serbian and activists from the other former Yugoslav republics such as Lepa Mladenović. Lepa visited Skopje quite often to support her Macedonian sisters and *insisted that the lesbian women separate from the general LGBT organisations* [emphasis BB]. Encouraged and motivated by these meetings, Gordana and several other girls formed Women's Alliance, the first lesbian organisation in Macedonia.<sup>16</sup>

It is therefore primarily through the figure of Mladenović that women/lesbian separatism could be traced through numerous episodes of (post-)Yugoslav feminist engagement over the last four decades, culminating with the 2015 Lesbian March. Speaking at the (first) European Lesbian\* Conference that took place in Vienna in 2017, 39 years after Comrade Woman, Mladenović (as cited in Von Känel 2017, online) stated:

When I think of lesbian history, lesbian movement, we started with women's movement. And we started with women's movement which in fact is a separatist movement because we had to move from men to meet each other, to understand who women are after three thousand years of patriarchy... at least that was in Yugoslavia and in many other countries... out of women's movement, we formed feminist politics... strong feminist politics... then some of us became lesbians inside the women's movement... like me... then we made another separatist movement which was a lesbian movement... for lesbians only [...].

## 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March

The Belgrade Lesbian March took place in the framework of the Lesbian Spring,<sup>17</sup> a four day manifestation organised<sup>18</sup> in April 2015 by a group of activists from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It brought together lesbians from the Yugoslav region as well as their international friends and supporters associated with the Feminist Caravan (Caravana feminista) that crossed Europe between March and October 2015 (stopping both in Belgrade and Zagreb) with the aim of documenting women's struggles for equality. The programme of the Lesbian Spring consisted of

a series of workshops and panels and ended with the Lesbian March. According to Zoe Gudović, one of the organisers, the main objective of the March was drawing public attention to the discrimination that women and lesbians are exposed to in everyday life. She (Gudović, as cited in Telegraf 2015, online) stated that:

By taking to the streets we show that we have not been imported from the West, we exist in this country, we are citizens and we build this society and we are doing an effort to make it get used to changes. Such changes will take place when people realise that political oppression of women and especially lesbians is omnipresent. Today we stepped out of it and we said that we do not want to be part of a system that exploits us: we are aware that by doing so we have become a threat. With this event today and with the whole programme (of the Lesbian Spring, BB), we have demonstrated our strength and the fact that we are totally able and ready to change social conditions. That is, of course, not easy, but the road lies ahead of us.

The March was also seen as an opportunity to engage in an alternative form of activism that would constitute an implicit critique of Serbian/regional gay and left-wing initiatives, which are perceived as overly patriarchal and male-centred. For example, Ana Pandej (as cited in Telegraf 2015, online), one of the Lesbian Spring organisers, stated:

The Lesbian March represents the culmination of the Lesbian Spring programme which we organised because lesbians are multiply invisible in our society. We are here, we take part in protests, but that is not acknowledged. We participate in workers' protest, in women's protests, in Pride... But there are never any lesbians, always some other groups are in the forefront. It is extremely important that women generally, and above all, lesbians – followed by other women comrades, including those who are heterosexual, bisexual, or queer, claim public space by themselves.

In this regard, one of the March announcements refers to the voluntary nature of the organisers' engagement. By doing so, it presents the event as a counterpoint to the predominantly professionalised forms of activism which results in a pronounced detachment of activists from the LGBT population they represent (see, e.g., Bilić 2012a, b, c; Butterfield 2016;

see the chapter “Away from the Capitals”). The organisers (as cited in Labris 2015, online) stated:

We are a group of *grassroots* lesbians, friends, activists from various groups from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and we want Lesbian Spring to flourish this April! Our work is based on feminist principles and is done on a voluntary basis. Our intention is to stand in the way of patriarchy and lesbophobia, and mark 25 years of the lesbian movement in Serbia!<sup>19</sup> We are all aware that social circumstances are extremely negative when it comes to lesbian rights – we are confronted with constant lesbophobia, attacks on lesbians are frequent and it’s potentially dangerous to hold hands in public places or show affection.

The March took place on 19 April and started in the Pioneers Park (Pionirski park), crossed the streets Kralja Milana and Resavska and ended at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju), probably the key location of the Belgrade alternative “scene”, closely associated with the anti-war initiative of Serbian intellectuals called Belgrade Circle (Beogradski krug, see Bilić 2012a, b, c). A video of the March made by activist Myriam Fougère (Solanas 2015, online) shows a group of women who, prompted by Zoe Gudović, chanted the slogan “We are all lesbians and we are proud of it” (Lezbejke smo sve zato ponosne smo bre!). This slogan was the central part of a longer performance which also included the following lines:

They keep telling us  
These are not your streets

They keep telling us  
To stay within our walls

They keep telling us  
No to you and your dirty orgies

They keep telling us  
These are not your streets

But listen today I will say it loud  
We have opened our closets

The chanting of Gudović's song marked one of the most important points of the March as the participants acknowledged the lesbophobic nature of their social environment and turned the event into a moment of empowerment which enabled them to engage in a *collective coming out*. This act constituted an explicit expression of *lesbian speakability* given that the departure from *the closet* was done in a clearly articulated and even rebellious fashion ("listen, today I will say it loud") exposing the streets of Belgrade and the Serbian public sphere to the until then unprecedented lesbian presence.

Among the most prominent banners that the activists carried was the one *Lezbijke uz lezbejke – Hr ♥ Sr* meaning "lesbians with lesbians/lesbians support lesbians", where the first word is spelt in Croatian and the second one in Serbian. Lesbian agency thus appeared as an anti-nationalist and anti-violence force that highlighted the "twin cultures" aspect of these two post-Yugoslav countries. This simple and effective banner pointed to the decade-long resilience of the Serbo-Croatian feminist ties underscoring the capacity of feminism to circumvent highly homogenising regimes and preserve the region as a space of common political struggle. The March had not only regional but also more widely transnational character, as slogans were chanted and banners written in several languages (among others Arabic, Albanian, French, Spanish), emphasising the need for international women's/lesbian solidarity.

However, along with these positive features, the organisation of the March was accompanied by tensions from its beginning. The first announcement sent to the group *razotkvirivanje* with the aim of encouraging participation stated that "the march is lesbian, and therefore intended only for women. The march celebrates the lesbian movement in Serbia and promotes feminist politics". This part of the organisers' invitation stimulated a debate among group members, prompting the well-known Serbian gay activist Dušan Maljković to say:

It is really unbelievable that in 2015 a political protest is organised which excludes one sex. My first impression was surprise and incredulity. Why is

this being done? I have tried to find an answer [in the sentence which says that the march is lesbian]. That kind of argumentation (which is essentially lacking) is apparently self-evident, but it is fundamentally contradictory – if the march is lesbian, why is the invitation sent to all women, that is to say also to non-lesbians? I would have understood if it were a private event or a kind of psychological workshop in the framework of a public manifestation, but that someone is advised not to attend [a protest] in public space on the basis of sex is for me scandalously repressive. Let me not even comment on how politically counterproductive it is to exclude male supporters of the lesbian movement, such people exist and I consider myself one of them.

The decision of the organisers to exclude men from participation was surprising also in the light of the fact that the protesters had to enter the cordon of policemen who moved with them along the whole trajectory of the March. It was stated in the invitation that the organisers registered the March with the police but did not inform the media about it. This is a strategy that LGBT activists sometimes employ in order to decrease the probability of violence by not giving right-wing group members sufficient time to organise a potentially aggressive response. The police cordon (which has become regular for certain, “unpopular” protests like those done by Women in Black) effectively creates a membrane that separates activists from the public resulting in what some activists involved in the subsequent discussion called “four walls outside”. While this strategy, on the one hand, assures safety, it highlights the tension between the March participants and its observers because it produces an “activist enclave” that exoticises the protest and interferes with what may be *public* about the public space. Contrary to their intention to have a protest that would be free of men, the marchers remained within the patriarchal paradigm of being protected by the predominantly male police force of the homophobic state that has been, in the Serbian/Yugoslav space over the last decades, associated with violence against LGBT people and those taking part in political dissent.

Although the March had a huge symbolic significance by being the first of its kind, its form, constrained by a heavy police presence, limited its capacity to go beyond an *incident*, a crack or a non-heteronormative

moment that could spread towards those who were not explicitly invited or personally interested in the cause. While not announcing the protest and thus truncating its *public* dimension is an understandable decision from the point of view of avoiding violence, it has come with a high cost because it restricted the March to the narrow circle of the organisers highlighting activism's distinctly urban features. As one particularly critical participant (Aleksa, 18 May 2015) in the *razotkvirivanje* debate stated:

Radical feminists are fascists. There is no kidding with that. This is a form of fascism regardless of whether it is taking place in the streets of San Francisco or in the streets of Belgrade. In any case, who goes to those marches and prides here if not those who are in a very privileged position? Such events are attended by people who live 100 m from that park [Pioneers' Park in Belgrade, BB] and who have all the privileges. 99% of men in this country are more discriminated and in a far worse position than any separatist who takes part in the march or the so-called parade of the so-called pride.

The major strands of lesbian (and gay) activist initiatives in Serbia stem from Belgrade-based civic activism that intensified throughout the 1990s mobilising “the most articulate segment of a widespread [...] urban [and] cosmopolitan cultural identity” (Dević 1997, p. 156). This engagement, which drew upon a lot of already existing social and symbolic capital, emerged also as a strategy of staying in the *urban middle class* that was rapidly disappearing under the burden of impoverishment and international isolation. Many activists<sup>20</sup> went through the process of NGOisation substituting grassroots initiatives with “projects” whose implementation comprised managing (unequally distributed) donations that turned into a source of tension and frustration. Even though the March organisers said that they were “independent” and did the March-related work voluntarily, the list of organisations supporting the event shows that the majority of them were in one way or the other associated with the Belgrade-based human rights NGOs (some of which also manage larger sums of money and act as “meta-NGOs”, gatekeepers for women-oriented projects, which decide what will and what will not be implemented). Competition for scarce resources generates profound inter-organisational cleavages that lead to duplications of initiatives and

repeated “first” events within which non-urban environments get sidelined.<sup>21</sup> As one activist (personal communication, May 2015) stated:

It was not altogether clear what the objective of the march was when so few women knew about it in the first place. It seems that the whole event was organised for the organisers themselves as they did not make an effort to inform those women who are not associated with their organisations. Such a decision had a particularly negative effect on lesbian women living in provincial towns because it could have been an occasion for showing them that they were not alone.

Even though women from smaller Serbian towns did take part in the activities of the Lesbian Spring, it seems that more than three decades of feminist engagement in Serbia still have not managed to destabilise the perception that emancipatory struggles are exclusively an urban phenomenon reserved for middle-class women.<sup>22</sup> As Savić (2017, online) writes in relation to the 2017 Women’s March against Fascism (that took place in Belgrade and also started in the Pioneers’ Park probably gathering many of the activists that appeared as the Lesbian March participants), which she calls “a reality show of solidarity”:

Engaging with feminism in Serbia is a class privilege of white, educated women who are mostly from Belgrade. It is hard to do that if you are poor or you work at the National Cash Register (NCR) – which is a privilege in itself – [...] an exploitative firm [...] where you do crazy day and night shifts which last the whole day and sap your energy to such an extent that you don’t have the strength to take a look at the letters written on a piece of paper [...] let alone use your computer to get informed about what is going on around you. [...] Feminism has not showed any special interest in including women employed at the NCR, let alone some other less “fortunate” women. It does not offer any particular solution to the NCR women. [...] [Such women] are not interested in the academic leftist feminism of white women. What Althusser said could perhaps be useful for them, but they don’t have the strength or the time to read it, to learn about it.

This “liberal imaginary”<sup>23</sup> (Kurtović 2012) constituted by elitism, anti-nationalism, and anti-patriarchy immersed in urban-rural distinctions

and sustained by the policed activist “enclave” does not only strengthen the activists’ perception of speciality and difference from the broader public that they are addressing with the aim of bringing about social change, but it can be ironically reminiscent of the orientalist tropes of “Balkan backwardness” which are frequently mobilised in Western (US American and European Union) interventions into the post-Yugoslav political space (Bilić and Stubbs 2015). In this regard, activists appear as intermestic actors which can hardly be done without recreating hierarchies and divisions (Bilić 2016; Bilić and Stubbs 2016). That is also why, in the online debate, some participants raised the issue of “being informed” about the March as a *fait accompli* rather than being invited to take part in the discussion about how it should be organised. As Jelena Vojvodić (*razotkvirivanje*, May 2015) stated:

[The Lesbian March] shows that LGBT activism, including [therefore] its lesbian component, consistently fails the exam of feminism and democratic decision-making. The thing is not that you inform me as a lesbian in a *top-down* manner that the event will be *women-only* (not even lesbian only), but that you should ask us whether all of us (a majority) in the community agree with the politics that is implemented on our behalf. What we are talking about here is a public political event and not a private party or a sex club [...] at least 100 of us did not come because of such politics.

This element of the online debate highlights the hardships of conceptualising and practising democratic prefigurative politics in authoritarian and impoverished environments. The *leader-oriented* style of governance is often reflected within activist circles resulting in a lack of meaningful dialogue and an easy dismissal of alternative or dissenting opinions (see Bilić 2012a, b, c).<sup>24</sup>

However, perhaps the most patriarchal aspect of the March which exposed the paradox inbuilt in lesbian separatism is its replication and essentialisation of gender binary in public space. Those lesbian marches organised, like the Belgrade one, “for women only” cannot avoid the challenge of (at least implicitly) defining who qualifies as *a woman*. While on the one hand, radical feminism struggles against the “patriarchal” impositions regarding how women *should look like*, it may, on the other,

end up embracing the most widely available definitions of womanhood (Jasmina, *razotkvirivanje*, May 2015). As Dušan Maljković (*razotkvirivanje*, May 2015) stated:

Lesbian march is an exclusive manifestation that for a few hours in a delimited space demonstrates a traditionally patriarchal dimension of power and that is – sexual exclusion (it just reverses the excluded<sup>25</sup> sex without changing anything in the form of power that is being demonstrated) and it turns public space into private while an inclusive manifestation would, on the other hand, actually deconstruct patriarchal power by opening up the space for building political equality, acknowledging the universality and democraticity of public space.

Taking into account all of these dimensions of the March, it is no wonder that it ended up as a highly divisive event which put many women off participation. As Lepa Mladenović (*razotkvirivanje*, May 2015), who took part in the March stated after it:

A discussion within the broader community was missing, sufficient information or clarification was not supplied by the organisers, there was no negotiation or agreeing [...] I understood there were numerous organisational failures, so that is why there are many hurt activists (aktivistkinja i aktivista) all over the place and I am very sorry about that.

Every identity-related activist initiative encounters what Gamson (1995) called the “queer dilemma”, namely the paradox that fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression as well as for political power. While undermining particular identities may perpetuate discrimination and be politically damaging, essentialising them may contribute to furthering the structural conditions that make such discrimination possible. With this in mind, activists are often locked into an identitarian catch-22 which is hard, if not impossible, to escape. The fact that some of the Lesbian March organisers (like e.g., Zoe Gudović) years ago were involved in experimenting with the notion of *queer* within the Belgrade Queer Collective (Bilić and Dioli 2016) shows not only that queerness—which generally underscores identitarian fluidities problematising viability of

fixed sexual identities—may not have lived up to its political promise (leaving the space for temporal loops within which more essentialising approaches coexist (and sometimes compete) with those that are more de-essentialising) but that the question needs to be raised—always anew—about how identities are to be temporarily and strategically stabilised in a way which would assure that struggles based on them do not end up undermining themselves.

While negotiations of that kind require long-term political work<sup>26</sup> and creativity, it is for sure that a radical resolution of the “queer predicament” that would consist of explicitly excluding people from events happening in public spaces, cannot transform the participants’ enthusiastic “this has never happened before” to more sustainable and more widely available life repertoires. Through such a discriminatory strategic choice that promotes a clear-cut gender binary, the “activists’ enclave” becomes not only physical, delimited by a police cordon, but also identitarian. In the same way in which a physical enclave exposes the tension between the participants and the observing public, the identitarian enclave constitutes a border-patrolled box that necessarily implodes (through infighting) as it is never wide enough to contain “difference”—that is, the variability of women’s/human experience. In this regard, Kathy Rudy (2001, p. 200), in an account of her own participation in radical feminist lesbian groups in the United States throughout the 1970s and 1980s, shows that

the strength of our community was built on the very vulnerable assumption that being lesbian was enough to hold us all together. By claiming the shared status of victim in male, heterosexual culture, we thought we could overlook or deny racial, ethnic, religious, class, geographic, and many other differences... it was a world that marginalised itself with its hypertrophied attachments to lesbian identity... by the late 1980s the peaceful ideal of a unified woman-loving-woman world had all but fallen apart.<sup>27</sup>

The same fate of ever-growing and often insufficiently acknowledged/processed difference that consistently increased its fragility was met by the community of the Lesbian March organisers, as the group was marked by conflicts before and was dissolved after the March.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The international lesbian march that took place in Belgrade in 2015 was a courageous expression of lesbian speakability. Never before had the streets of the Serbian/former Yugoslav capital witnessed such a manifestation of lesbian agency that broadened the borders of normative and lesbophobic sexual citizenship. As a collective coming out, the March pointed to the fragility of emancipatory achievements in the time of rising populism drawing attention to the resilience of patriarchal attitudes not only in the general population but also within activist endeavours that declaratively aim towards (non-hetero)sexual liberation. However, by forbidding men's participation, the March became a *double symptom* of this intense repatriarchalisation: on the one hand, its *form* based on a clear-cut gender binary inverted the roles (women excluding men from public space) without destabilising, but rather reproducing the patriarchal mechanism of exclusion; and, on the other, in its ideological and affective *content* stemming from continued marginalisation of women's rights. Therefore, the form of the event was a telling reflection of the grievance that made it possible.

By excluding men from their gathering, the organisers of the March—perhaps inadvertently—undermined the *public* nature of the public space as well as the contestatory function of subaltern counterpublics which their engagement occasionally had in the previous decades. Although they may involuntarily end up being enclaved, insofar as they wish to claim public space, they cannot be conceptualised as enclaves. Counterpublics, in principle, tend to militate *against* separatism because they assume a *publicist* orientation (Fraser 1990), showing interest in interacting with other actors in the public arena. This is to say that however subaltern they can be, members of a counterpublic perceive themselves as a part of a potentially wider public which they address and want to influence.

This exclusionary strategy also made the March organisers rediscover the paradox that lies at the heart of a lot of lesbian separatist organising: while activists tend to declaratively embrace an ideology of inclusion, the march ends up serving as a vehicle for celebrating a much narrower identity that cannot be shared by all (non-heterosexual) women or other potential supporters of the non-heterosexual cause. Even though most

contemporary dyke marches as public events with longer traditions are trans inclusive (e.g., the Los Angeles Lesbian Love March), those marches that exclude “the other gender”,<sup>29</sup> gender transgressive, or non-conforming groups tend to perpetuate the gender binary system that constitutes the core of gender-based oppression (Trigilio 2016).

With this in mind, the March provided a striking illustration of the processes through which feminist knowledge has been evacuated after Yugoslav socialism. In this chapter, I went back to the 1978 conference *Comrade Woman*, as one of the crucial points of feminist organising in the Yugoslav space, to demonstrate that the progressive heritage of the socialist regime, which the Yugoslav conference participants simultaneously criticised and acknowledged, was not mobilised to counter the March organisers’ decision to prevent men from participating in a public event. The activists did not rely on their socialist predecessors to question such a strategic option from the point of view of universal human struggles that take place in public space—there was no socialist feminist to say, like many did almost four decades earlier, that such a strategic choice would not only constitute an act of discrimination but would in the end turn out to be self-defeating.

The March’s reification of gender binary, associated with high rates of transphobia across the contemporary world (and also within supposedly feminist circles),<sup>30</sup> unveiled the counter-revolutionary character of the post-Yugoslav “transition” marked by a triumph of identity politics that can occur in the context of neoliberal capitalist domination. On the one hand, gender binary was problematised from the earliest stages of Yugoslav socialism through the effort to constitutionally equalise the political, social, and economic status of men and women (which destabilised but did not eradicate deeply entrenched patriarchy), whereas it has been, on the other, a staple feature of modern capitalism crucial for the way in which it organises division of labour. It is for this reason that the unrestrained capitalist expansion and sweeping repatriarchalisation have proceeded “hand in hand” after socialism’s fall: capitalism strives to reduce labour costs by systematically reproducing patriarchy and downgrading the rights of women keeping them in a position in which they are dependent on men, while granting only to some the privilege of enjoying the benefits of the liberal order (Jandrić 2018).

Given that lesbians are especially threatened when the status of women is declining, it is no wonder that a *women-only* lesbian manifestation signalled the systemic and multidimensional nature of the social change that took place in the Yugoslav region over the last three decades. Through a reversal of “deep premises of social life” (Sztompka 2004, p. 171), the post-Yugoslav space has been incorporated in the “Western time of sequence” (Mizelińska and Kulpa 2011, p. 15) that flattens precapitalist temporalities and eclipses socialist achievements. Such a practice invisibilises the accomplishments of previous generations pushing activists back into the “second feminist wave” and imbuing them with a sense of pioneering importance as they are nowadays compelled to engage in and repeat the struggles which had been, to a great extent, won decades ago.

However, the theoretical vacuum created by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the weakening of its feminist traditions, which I will explore in more detail in the following chapter, could not have been so quickly filled by feminist knowledge and activist strategies developed in the Western states of advanced capitalism (e.g., Pride marches, lesbian march) had there not been a prominent concern with patriarchy in both capitalist and socialist systems. The post-Yugoslav region has not just been “invaded” by separatist (lesbian) ideologies that flourished in the United States throughout the 1970s—such an argument would undermine the agency of local actors. Instead, separatist ideological options counted on local activist undercurrents which over the last decades became more or less visible depending on particular contextual circumstances. In the wake of socialism, they could re-emerge with radicality which such ideological preferences had largely lost in the places of their origin: the intensification of trans activism has in the meantime unveiled their discriminatory dimensions opening—once again—a way for progressive politics espoused by *all* of those in favour of the LGBT cause. In this sense, the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March was not merely a “one-time” manifestation hastily put together by a group of “independent activists”. It was, rather, an event that, by happening in public space, uncovered a resilient strand of (post-)Yugoslav feminist engagement whose effects of enthusiasm, empowerment, and freedom are marred by the pains of misandric/transphobic division and discrimination.

## Notes

1. For an account of gay patriarchy in Macedonia, see Cvetkovic (2019), in Montenegro, see Vuković and Petričević (2019).
2. As Maljković (2016, p. 221) asks: “is it not true that the majority of leaders of the activist organisations in the wider region are (gay) men? Labris, a lesbian group from Serbia, and Kontra [...], lesbian organisation from Croatia, are exceptions in this regard or should I rather say, they represent a reversal of the same principle that insists on exclusively female membership and does not really problematise sexual dichotomies. This by no means suggests that there is no ‘factual’ discrimination of women or men, but does not this widespread reasoning sometimes sustain the logic of the sexual binary and does it not, at least indirectly, exclude the possibility for ‘intersexuality’ to emerge or for sexuality to be perceived as a scale”.
3. Podmore (2016) analyses two separate lesbian/dyke marches that took place in Montréal, Canada, in the summer of 2012, drawing upon Nancy Fraser’s notion of counterpublic. She shows that performances of lesbian “right to the city” (see also Bilić and Stubbs 2015) tend to be far from the unified ideal present in Fraser’s work, given that lesbian counterpublics are contested, multiple, and divisive.
4. There were 52 posts following the March announcement.
5. Looking back at her life decades later, Lois Anne Addison (2004, online) stated: “I ceased to be a lesbian separatist when partner left me to have an affair with a male attending at Duke. I had a very hard time and it was the staff at work that took care of me. This certainly forced me to re-evaluate my position. They were wonderful years – because my politics and that I was a lesbian were all out in the open”.
6. For example, Cvetkovich (2003, p. 158) argues that “once again lesbians, many of whom came to Act Up with considerable political experience, seem to be some of the first to disappear from Act Up’s history”.
7. Such initiatives would get to be known as “new feminism”, given that they marked the appearance of a new political subject different from the one operating with the institutions of the Yugoslav state (“state feminism”). Nadežda Radović (2013) claims that the representatives of new feminism did not sufficiently acknowledge the way in which it relied upon and continued the progressive currents of women’s mobilisations in the inter-war (Petrović 2018) and (post-)Second World War

(Dugandžić and Okić 2016) periods. For example, in April 1919, Croatian and Serbian women founded the Secretariat of Women Socialists (Sekretarijat žena socijalista), which operated within the Socialist Workers' Party (Socijalistička radnička partija). See also Božinović (1996), Petrović (2018), Sklevicky (1984).

8. However, all Yugoslav women were not equally informed about such legal provisions. Bonfiglioli (2008) shows that, during the conference, the Italian participants talked about abortion with a woman from Kosovo, who told them that abortion was not allowed in Yugoslavia. On hearing this, Žarana Papić (Iveković, as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 84) one of the organisers, said: "What are you saying? What, it is not allowed? Of course it is allowed". This exchange points to the fact that Italian activists engaged in abortion struggles were not familiar with legal developments in what used to be their neighbouring country, but it also highlights how patriarchy modulated and effectively inhibited access to progressive state measures. Like a lot of LGBT legislation that would appear decades later in the post-Yugoslav states, the access to what law rendered possible was restricted to mostly urban, middle-class layers. (Most of the 1978 Yugoslav organisers/participants were children of famous partisans or, in one way or the other, related to the (male) representatives of the communist establishment: e.g., Dunja Blažević is the daughter of Jakov Blažević, who was the president of the presidency of the People's Republic of Croatia between 1974 and 1982; Žarana Papić was the sister of Žarko Papić, a member of the Executive Council of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia; Sonja Drljević was the daughter of Savo Drljević, national hero and the Yugoslav People's Army official; Borka Pavićević was the daughter of Vuko Pavićević, partisan and professor at the Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy, etc., see Radović 2013.) More than anything, constricting legislation to its formalistic and declarative purposes testifies to its *fragility*: the abortion provisions were among the first to come under attack in the highly homogenising Serbia and Croatia in the early 1990s, LGBT emancipation in Croatia was curbed by the 2013 Constitutional referendum, and the like.
9. Translations from the French are mine.
10. Neđeljka Neda Božinović-Radosavljević, a prominent member of the Front, would, in the early 1990s, join many initiatives of the feminist anti-war group, Women in Black. Her name also appeared in the

*razotkvirivanje* debate on the Lesbian March as Zorica Mršević (*razotkvirivanje*, 14 April 2015) reported that Neda Božinović (although not lesbian herself) was instrumental in gathering the documentation necessary for the formal registration of the lesbian group, Labris.

11. Vida Tomšič (1988/1990, online) also addressed this issue in her J. P. Naik Memorial Lecture on women's development and the non-aligned movement, which took place in New Delhi in 1988. She said: "There was a strong tendency to separate the problem of the status of women as a specifically 'women's' issue which women discuss for women, and which is in essence directed against the 'male' society. The neo-feminist movements, particularly in the Western countries did to a large extent take this position. There were even those who said that the efforts for the establishment of the New International Economic Order did not concern women, since it does not say anything at all about them".
12. Rada Iveković (as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 86) says: "Before the conference we did not exist. We happened during that conference".
13. "Every night we went to the restaurant as women groups. It was a crucial moment; it was the first time in my life that ten women would enter a restaurant and men would say: 'Look, they are alone'. And we would say: 'No, it is the ten of us'. For the first time I was going to the restaurant with ten or twenty women only. This was a second turning point for me, the new experience of myself in male space – restaurants. And we had great discussions there... I was out of my mind, I was really happy" (Lepa Mladenović as cited in Bonfiglioli 2008, p. 90).
14. Delphy (1979, p. 132) also mentions this saying how when going out with the (especially younger) conference participants she would "find again the atmosphere from the beginning of the movement, the excitement that was apparently disproportionate to the actual adventure".
15. For a more detailed account on the history of women—only feminist organising in Yugoslavia, see Lóránd (2018) and Oblak and Pan (2019).
16. This former Yugoslav republic changed its name during my work on this book. It is now called Republic of North Macedonia.
17. There is a reference here to the Arab Spring or the Prague Spring—where spring is a metaphor of revival, new beginning, and emancipatory change. The poster of the event also included a fist as a symbol of resistance frequently used by social movements, also prominently employed by the group Otpor that brought down the Milošević regime.
18. Lesbian Spring was organised by a group of activists supported by the foundation Rekonstrukcija ženski fond as well as in cooperation with

other activist groups or initiatives including V(j)eštice, BeFem, Labris, Autonomni ženski centar, Skuvarice, Foto studio Novi dirižabl, Zvučna etnografija, and People's Hostel.

19. Some invitations stated that one of the reasons for the March was to celebrate 20 years of lesbian activism in Serbia, taking as the point of departure the official registration of the lesbian group Labris in 1995. Other activists thought that this decision erased at least four years of lesbian activist engagement that preceded this formal registration.
20. NGO-isation was also a process that divided and narrowed the activist “scene” as some activists did not want to continue their engagement in the new circumstances (see Bilić 2012a, b, c).
21. In the online debate about the purpose of the March, gay activist Predrag Azdejković (*razotkvirivanje*, 15 April 2015, online) said: “A general problem of Serbian LGBT activism is that it likes to put the number 1 in front of many things. Because of this, only last year we had three first regional LGBT conferences!”
22. Women in Black have been dedicated to problematising the urban-rural distinctions in the Serbian political space and there are ever more feminist projects that are done outside of the capital. See also Aleksov (2012).
23. Kurtović (2012, p. 220) writes that, in the context of besieged Sarajevo, urbanity was synonymous with humanistic and cosmopolitan ideals distrustful of institutional politics and insisting upon creative expression as a counterpoint to “patriotism, national pride or tradition”.
24. As Bojan Aleksov (2001, online), an activist in the Belgrade-based Women in Black, stated after Milošević’s fall in 2001: “The main focus of our discontent, Milošević, disappeared, leaving behind less visible, but almost unaltered, structures and mindsets that kept him in power for so many years. The question arises, how much did we change the existing patterns and relationships in society? Were we able to use the power we found in ourselves and in our groups to empower others and to influence decisions about important issues in public policy – and even more importantly, in our everyday lives? Or did we exhaust our new-found power on ourselves?”
25. Some activists who participated in the debate argued in favour of a differentiation between separatism and exclusion. While separatism would be practiced by groups with less political power (e.g., lesbians, black people), exclusion is the privilege of those with more political power (e.g., men). However, this discussion ends up in deadlock if it ignores Yuval-Davis’ (2011) suggestion that an inter-categorical approach to

- oppression (lesbians, gay, blacks, people in wheelchair, etc.) should be complemented with an intra-categorical approach (not *all* lesbians are equally oppressed, not *all* heterosexual men are privileged, etc.).
26. In our volume on Europeanisation, Stubbs and I (Bilić and Stubbs 2016) have argued in favour of a regional (Yugoslav) annually rotating pride along the lines of the Baltic Pride that moves between the capitals of the Baltic states. We also listed at least some benefits that such a manifestation would have. After the experience with the 2015 Lesbian March, perhaps one could imagine such a regional Pride march which would, along with its geographical rotation, have different thematic/identitarian foci that would annually change, so that marches would be, in turn, predominantly lesbian, bisexual, trans, with the same activists appearing in all of them.
  27. Perhaps it is not accidental that Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, once radical lesbian feminism had declined. Butler (as cited in Rudy 2001, p. 208) claims that “an uncritical appeal to the system which constructs gender for the emancipation of ‘women’ will clearly be self-defeating”.
  28. For example, one of the contributors to the online discussion said: “I was in the organisers’ team, but I am not anymore” (Nina Đurđević Filipović, *razotkvirivanje*, 19 May 2015).
  29. Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani (2009), who examined the organisation of the 2003 Chicago Dyke March, highlight the tension between the discourse of an inclusive march, on the one hand, and “dyke” as a signifier for a white, urban lesbian identity, on the other.
  30. For example, during the 2018 London Pride, a group of around ten participants waved signs saying “Trans activists erase lesbians” and distributed leaflets stating that “the trans movement with the complicity of LGBT politics is coercing lesbians to have sex with men” (Southwell 2018, online). What is more, in January 2019, the US Supreme Court allowed President Trump to enforce his policy of banning certain transgender people from the military (BBC 2019).

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# 6

## In Power? Ana Brnabić, Abjection, and Class Privilege

During a parliamentary debate held on 23 December 2016, Aleksandar Martinović, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party caucus, engaged in a homophobic diatribe targeting another member of parliament Marinika Tepić for supposedly opposing the nomination of Danica Marinković for the Anti-Corruption Agency Board solely on the basis of her being a married woman with two sons. An aggressive tirade would not have been anything particularly surprising for a former prominent official of the far right-wing Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*) had he not been interrupted by his party colleague and president of the National Assembly Maja Gojković, who was so determined to prevent him from speaking that she turned off his microphone. In the ensuing commotion Gojković, forgetting that her own microphone was still on, awkwardly whispered “Ana is here”, trying to make Martinović understand that his hateful speech was not appropriate in the presence of Ana Brnabić, who in August of that year became the first openly lesbian member of government in Eastern European history (Petrović 2016, online).

By proposing Brnabić, an influential businesswoman, as minister of public administration and local self-government, the then prime minister Aleksandar Vučić inaugurated a series of unprecedented events that

would—it looked like—shake the Serbian political landscape. Already in June 2017, once Vučić became president, unconstitutionally shifting the centre of political power towards that position, Ana Brnabić was, upon his nomination, elected the first woman *and* lesbian prime minister, putting Serbia alongside such implausible companions like Belgium, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Ireland, all of which had already had openly gay premiers. The string of unexpected developments did not stop there given that in February 2019, Brnabić's partner, with whom she would occasionally appear in public, gave birth, making Brnabić the first non-heterosexual prime minister on the global scale to become a parent while in office.

The vertiginous rise of Ana Brnabić to global visibility, along with supplying a platform for outpourings of lesbophobia, drove yet another wedge among Serbian LGBT people/activists. Both what she has done and, perhaps more importantly, what she has missed to do over the last years have made it challenging to sustain an even minimal reserve of political support that one would be ready to consider offering on the basis of shared non-heterosexuality. Paradoxically perhaps, by not showing an interest in furthering intersectional LGBT emancipation, Brnabić has underscored its inherently political nature, breaking along the way the cherished illusion of some LGBT activists that a lesbian woman in power—solely by virtue of being lesbian—would bring about a change in the rules of the (patriarchal) game.<sup>1</sup> While the bone of contention revolves exactly around the question of how much power she *actually* has, Brnabić's interviews and public statements have slowly become frustrating even for the most sympathetic members of the Serbian feminist camp: she has relativised some of the riskiest feminist struggles fought over the preceding decades. Thus, already in July 2017 (Wintour 2017, online), in one of her very first interviews as prime minister, Brnabić stated that she did not “think Serbia is that homophobic”, whereas only a year later, in November 2018, she was adamant in denying that the 1995 Srebrenica massacre had been an act of genocide (DW 2018). In this regard, Brnabić has not only provoked a somersault of the Serbian political scene by being a lesbian politician supported by those who used to instigate hatred against non-heterosexual and non-ethnically Serbian population, but she has herself become a symptom of the broader

processes through which (post-)Yugoslav feminism has been purged of its political—and more concretely *socialist*—substance.

Throughout this chapter, I draw upon the notion of abjection to explore how Brnabić, as an “incident” in Serbian political history, stirs affectively lined layers of prejudice across the political spectrum. Discussions surrounding her private and public life, as well as her own statements, generate “abject figures” that uncover profound fissures of the political field which is increasingly becoming characterised by authoritarianism and a lack of meaningful dialogue. Public actors, both those from the state and those from the non-governmental sector, seem to be entangled in a *loop of abjection* which, while comprising gender, sexuality, “race”, and the body, reflects strong patriarchal undercurrents as structural features of Serbian politics.

More specifically, in the first section, I take a look at how Brnabić’s physical appearance, not conforming (especially in the beginning of her mandate) to the widespread depictions of feminine beauty, as well as her unhidden sexual orientation, perturbed the symbolic strata that envelope deeply anchored ideas about the social world being *compulsorily heterosexual* (Rich 1980) and divided into two genders. Regardless of her homonormative stance or any political legacy that she may leave behind, Brnabić’s looks in and of itself carried the potential to destabilise clear-cut gender dichotomies and broaden the collective imaginary of women representations. Given that her presence in political life challenged some of the most resilient patriarchal conceptions about how a woman should behave and look like, one of the striking ways in which the ensuing frustration was released into the public space was through a racialised “abject figure” capable of bringing Brnabić “to order”. This frustration, shared by both those in favour and those against the ruling party, has been partially managed in two ways: through Brnabić’s own efforts to demonstrate her allegiance to the national cause by, for example, mobilising “savage Albanians” as one of the primary “abject figures” of Serbian nationalism as well as through numerous paternalistic interventions of President Vučić—who, while trying to contain and transform lesbophobic abjection, truncated not only Brnabić’s political agency, but any emancipatory project that may have been more closely associated with her lesbianity.

In the second section of the chapter I examine how members of the Serbian LGBT activist “community” and other supporters of the LGBT cause negotiate their expectations from and disappointments with Brnabić’s prime ministership. I show how Brnabić’s openly lived lesbianity and lesbian parenthood, for which (as of November 2019) there is still no legal basis in the Serbian political context, become a matter of class privilege when they are detached from (the legacies of) the feminist movement. Through decoupling lesbianity from feminism—and therefore subverting decades of feminist work, of which she is also (at least partially) an accomplishment—the case of Brnabić highlights the intersectional insight that what is possible in the domain of gender and sexuality is fundamentally interlocked with class distinctions. By publicly allowing patriarchal dominance into the sphere of lesbian speakability, Brnabić underscores how the painful process of the region’s “transition” from socialism to neoliberal capitalism was also predicated on a severe marginalisation of the feminist voice. This happened through impoverishment, precarisation, and professionalisation of feminist activist engagement as well as through an intense repatriarchalisation within which some of the more visible feminist threads have not managed to escape discriminatory language of misandry, thus feeding into the loop of abjection that has framed the negotiations of Brnabić’s capacity to be a relevant political actor.

## “Humanising” an “Abject Lesbian”

Soon after Ana Brnabić became prime minister of Serbia, social networks and various internet forums were inundated with sexist and lesbophobic comments which traversed political divisions, stemming both from those who oppose Vučić’s authoritarian rule and from those inclined to support it. Among such unbridled expressions of hatred that united otherwise polarised political camps, there was one that frequently accompanied Brnabić’s picture (e.g., see comments in Blic 2018), summarising a substantial portion of frustration caused by her appearance. The refrain of Ljuba Aličić’s widely known folk song “you do not look like any woman among so many of those I have met” (“Ti ne ličiš ni na jednu, a

puno sam žena sreć”), originally meant to underscore the special character of the woman with whom the singer finally found love after a series of merely erotic affairs, has been reappropriated to highlight Brnabić’s evident departure from the standards of feminine beauty. By positing that she does not “look like any (other) woman”, this caption, often supplemented with other sexist comments, such as “ugly boy”, “mutant”, and “Pantela”<sup>2</sup> (Blic 2018), positions Brnabić in contrast to the normative ideal of gender binarism, suggesting that her looks are unintelligible—that she is a “mutant”, an outlier—within the hegemonic reference system informed by patriarchal perceptions of gender dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> Brnabić has, in other words, come to occupy a liminal state that has a hard time being subsumed under the dominant, heteronormative, and cisgender arrangement.

Wondering whether there are ever any humans who are not “always already gendered”, Butler (1990/1999) argues that it is exactly the mark of gender which qualifies bodies as human bodies, allowing them to assume a place in one out of two neatly delimited groups that form a community of humans. However, those bodily figures who cannot be unproblematically categorised into either of these “fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanised and the abject” against which the human itself is defined (Butler 1990/1999, p. 142). What is more, the exclusionary matrix of heterosexual privilege “requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subject” and who represent the “uninhabitable” zones of social life” which in turn delineate the frontiers of the subject’s domain (Butler 1993, p. 3). Abjection operates as a social dynamics which aims at dehumanising and expelling those who do not comply with the patriarchally established criteria of bodily recognition and acceptance. The abject appears as an element that “disturbs identity, system, order”, remains in the murky fissure between being and non-being, and threatens to disrupt the boundaries that give life meaning and stability (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). When exposed to an abject being, one is suddenly flooded by “the in-between [and] the ambiguous” (Kristeva 1982, p. 4) that unsettle the spatio-temporal coordinates of everyday social interaction and our sense of belonging to the world (Tyler 2009). An “abject lesbian” thus imbues one with uncanniness and produces disgust

because there are no sufficient symbolic resources which would convert her into a culturally intelligible figure.

One—supposedly the most “effective”—way of resolving such a disgusting “in-betweenness”, of stripping an abject lesbian of ambiguity and making it possible for her to enter into the sphere of cultural articulability and legitimacy, is to involve her or, rather, force her, into a heterosexual encounter with the view of eventually transforming her into a heterosexual being.<sup>4</sup> Widely popular lesbophobic comments based on the idea of “corrective rape”—such as, for example, “Ana Brnaba, take it, get pregnant” (*primi ga, zatrudni, Ana Brnaba*), shouted by Red Star fans ahead of football matches (e.g., *FCRedStarBelgrade 2019*), reached their violent apogee with the incident involving Željko Veselinović, president of the United Trade Unions of Serbia (*Ujedinjeni sindikati Srbije*). Veselinović, who is also associated with the current, supposedly European Union-oriented opposition to President Vučić (gathered around the Alliance for Serbia that was founded by Dragan Đilas<sup>5</sup> in September 2018), was exasperated by the support that Brnabić offered to Željko Mitrović, a controversial entrepreneur whose media company has powerfully backed the regimes of both Vučić and Milošević. In a tweet, posted on 20 September 2018, which addressed the prime minister directly, Veselinović stated that he wished Brnabić “was locked by Mitrović in a room without a key and with a well hung Afro-American just released from prison” (“*želim ti da te taj isti Mitrović zatvori u četiri zida bez ključa sa jednim obdarenim Afroamerikancem tek puštenim iz zatvora*”) (*Espresso 2018*, online). Veselinović believed that after such “a show which should last for a few months” (*Espresso 2018*, online), Brnabić would reconsider her decision to defend Mitrović’s editorial policy.

This slur, which draws upon the well-known homo/lesbophobic tropes of “the four walls” and “corrective rape” that are supposed to bring the world back in balance by reinstating patriarchal dominance over women and public space, stands out among other insults thrown Brnabić’s way because of its explicitly racist dimensions. The appearance of a highly potent black man whose libido, strengthened through incarceration, would inevitably be discharged by means of sex with Brnabić regardless of her lesbianity, has passed unnoticed by numerous, mostly government-related critics of Veselinović’s intervention who focused on vulgarity, lack

of education, or repetitive invocations of democracy and human rights. Brnabić responded to Veselinović's post asking the leaders of the opposition whether such verbal abuse was a reflection of the way in which they perceived "the highest European standards" (izgradnju društva po najvišim evropskim standardima) (Kurir 2018, online). Without referring to the Afro-American<sup>6</sup> man from Veselinović's tweet—also an abject figure that had to be put in jail and banned from the community of humans—she stayed in the domain of "racial" imaginary when wondering if offensive interventions of that kind were supposed to "protect citizens from the atmosphere of lynching" (zaštita građana od stvaranja atmosphere linča) (Kurir 2018, online). Brnabić's response thus gave this exchange an even more surprising twist, as a representative of the people who suffered from the excruciating practice of lynching was once again constructed as a perpetrator<sup>7</sup> involved in harming a white person.

The failure of Veselinović's critics to see the black man, to register such an obvious "elephant in the room", testifies to the thick layers of racial discrimination which have stayed normalised and discursively "untouched", as there is no political power to push them into articulation and problematisation. Glossing over the racialised process through which a black man is transformed into a violent sexual predator of a white lesbian woman points to the lack of conceptual instruments for reading "race" and decentring whiteness in the local/regional political and cultural discourse (Pražić 2018). Such conceptual tools have been largely evacuated in the wake of the Yugoslav socialist project which intended to rupture colonial hierarchies and encourage international cooperation (mostly) with Africa and Asia through the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Veselinović's post ties into a nexus two abject figures, on the one hand, a white, non-feminine-enough lesbian politician in need of "heterosexual rectification" and a "lustful black man", on the other, throws into relief structural affinities between racism and homo/lesbophobia as two regimes of exclusion emanating from the same discriminatory core that aims at erasing difference.<sup>9</sup> Similarly to the restoration of gender binary and the conditions for gender-related oppression provoked by the fall of Yugoslav socialism that I explored in the previous chapter, the disregard for "race" and the structural inequalities that perpetuate "racial" distinctions were also given free rein by the

dismantling of socialist policies<sup>10</sup> which geo-strategically provincialised the region<sup>11</sup> and exposed it to the mercy of former colonial empires, gathered in the European Union,<sup>12</sup> whose conditionality policies have clearly neo-colonial overtones (Bilić 2016; Kulpa 2014).

One aspect of such EU accession-related interventions stems from the rise of homonationalism, which has over the last years marked a capitalist reconfiguration that has not only allowed certain, mostly white middle-class non-heterosexuals into the national community, but increasingly constructed domestic(ated) and coupledom-based non-heterosexuality as a criterion of democratic citizenship. This process has, at least in the case of Brnabić who, as we will see below, does not take issue with but promotes neoliberal policies, highlighted the capacity of abjection to be also transgressive by providing an opportunity for witnessing and engaging with other bodies (Butler 1993). A frontal experience with an “object lesbian”, a figure until then unseen in the role of (prime) minister, can offer an emancipatory space within which one can be encouraged to broaden the repertoire of legitimate bodies. This is what Jelisaveta Blagojević (as cited in Laufer and Jovanović 2017, online) has in mind when claiming that Brnabić’s appearance acts as “a provocation”—I would add a “contained” provocation—which carries huge symbolic potential that cannot be reduced to the pinkwashing strategy of Aleksandar Vučić. Blagojević (as cited in Laufer and Jovanović 2017, online) argues that “what [Brnabić] stands for, how she looks and behaves, does not resemble anything to which power tends to be attributed” in the patriarchal milieu of today’s Serbia, thereby possibly stimulating reflection, modifying ways of speaking about women and lesbianity, and in the long term changing or at least adding to the common portrayals of those who hold politically relevant positions, at the expense, of course, of releasing sexism, misogyny, and lesbophobia.<sup>13</sup>

However, in the same way in which European Union homonationalism is imposed by means of conditionality—leveraged pedagogy (Kulpa 2014)—policies that not only often fail to bring about the desired results but also lead to a lot of resistance, the nomination and election of Brnabić cannot be detached from—and are actually critically dependent on—the incontestable role that Aleksandar Vučić has as the president of Serbia and the Serbian Progressive Party. Brnabić appeared as an adequate

candidate for taking over as prime minister once Vučić became president primarily because she was at the time a non-party figure who could not threaten him through the party infrastructure. On top of that, she had an additional feature which, in the context of homonationalism and the operation of the highly professionalised LGBT “movement”, worked in her favour: she is an openly lesbian woman courageous enough to absorb the homophobic onslaught which she knew her visibility would trigger. This formidable task has been rendered possible through “absolutism” with which Vučić has normalised Brnabić’s homosexuality, dampening along the way—at least temporarily—the strength of the lesbophobic tide. By putting a cap on overt expressions of homo/lesbophobia among his party and coalition ranks, many of whom undoubtedly are staunch opponents of LGBT emancipation,<sup>14</sup> and securing full support for his nomination of Brnabić, Vučić has not only made a historic move that brought the first lesbian prime minister to Eastern Europe but also performed an impressive demonstration of his political power and transferred the hot potato of unrestrained lesbophobia to his opposition which one would expect to be much more LGBT-friendly.<sup>15</sup> Vesna Pešić (2017, online) cogently summarised Vučić’s reasoning when claiming that he practically sent a message to the parliamentary majority in which he said: “you will elect the one you would never elect because I want you to do so”.

In order to contain the lesbophobia unleashed by Brnabić’s increased visibility, Vučić understood that he would have to engage in an intense process of humanising an “abject lesbian”. Therefore already in 2016 in the speech at the National Assembly in which he introduced the members of his cabinet, he said that the government would also include “a minister who publicly declares herself as a person of homosexual orientation. Ana Brnabić [...] is a member of gay population. She does not hide it and proudly speaks about it. She is so nice and sweet (ona je toliko fina i ljupka) [...] and I know how hard-working and dedicated [she is] [...]” (Blic 2016, online). By invoking “gay pride” that Brnabić supposedly exhibits given that she is “not hiding”, Vučić, for the very first time, establishes affirmative discursive links with the LGBT movement and positions Brnabić in the framework of civic efforts that aim at broadening the range of those who have legitimate access to human rights. Not only is the new member of government referred to as a “person”, but she is also

immediately feminised as someone who is “nice and sweet”. Once her gender is no longer a matter of contention and her sexuality even turned into a source of pride, Brnabić’s presentability—supposed to appease the disturbed electorate—is solidified through the image of a “hard-working and dedicated” professional who—in all likelihood—would not pose a serious threat for the Serbian gender order (Aničić 2018).

In this regard, as a close collaborator and follower of President Vučić who, as she said, was supposed to “act as a mentor in the first few months of her premiership” (Danas 2017, online), Brnabić has not missed opportunities to demonstrate her allegiance to the “Serbian cause” which, once again, could not pass without racist connotations. Thus, in late May 2019, when commenting upon an unfavourable report of the European Commission regarding the status of democracy in Serbia, Brnabić referred to the representatives of Kosovo authorities saying: “My fear is that we have to deal with the worst kind of populists, with people who literally came out of the woods” (as cited in Trtworld 2019, online). Although Brnabić had in mind the guerrilla character of the Kosovo Liberation Army leaders, her incautious and inappropriate statement quickly “activated” racist discourses about Albanian people, which have constituted a particularly resilient thread of political thinking in Serbia (Stakić 2019). This statement provoked not only a strong reaction of the Kosovo government but also a wider online campaign that aimed at ridiculing what was perceived as an expression of Serbian racism towards Albanians.

As on numerous other occasions, starting with his speech in 2016, on this one Vučić defended Brnabić praising her for her commitment to Serbia’s political and economic advancement. In all of these instances, however, patriarchal hegemony, embodied in such a paternal figure, triumphed over lesbian speakability. Both when introducing her as a new minister and when nominating her for the position of prime minister, Vučić silenced Brnabić, spoke on her behalf, and outed her without using the word “lesbian” (see Mladenović 2019a).<sup>16</sup> The overwhelming dominance of the more acceptable “gay”—which Brnabić herself prefers (e.g., in Wintour 2017)—in media reporting about the prime minister points to the limits of Vučić’s pinkwashing strategies and underscores the affective residues of lesbophobic disgust that escape such top-down

emancipatory measures. The word “gay” used to refer to a lesbian woman, especially when this is performed by an authoritarian man who was highly positioned in a radically right-wing political organisation, also testifies to the resilience of gay patriarchy and the way in which the supposedly universal achievements of the non-heterosexual movement are modulated by gender. By agreeing to be outed through Vučić’s mediation Brnabić has willingly subjugated herself to patriarchal authority (Gligorijević 2017; Maljković 2017), which has not only truncated her agency but also distanced her from the feminist engagement and limited the capacity of her open lesbianity to be framed as an act of activism that could have (had) broader progressive implications. The primary objective of “humanising” Brnabić and containing lesbophobia that has accompanied her public visibility arrived at a high price: it depoliticised her lesbianity by pushing it into the existing patriarchal structure and, to a considerable extent, purged it of its potential to bring about social change—at least one that would make the word “lesbian” more frequently audible and therefore more easily sayable.

## Class Privilege and Legal (In)Visibility

If Brnabić’s readiness to submit to patriarchal power constitutes one aspect of her distance from the legacies of (Yugoslav) feminism, the other one has to do with her unreflected class privilege which, like the previous one, diminishes her ability to act as an agent of social change. Born in Belgrade and with a master’s degree from the United Kingdom, Brnabić’s professional career has developed within the corporate sector, including international organisations, American consulting firms, and foreign investors operating in Serbia. Thus, for example, immediately before becoming a minister, she led the company Continental Wind Serbia managing a 300-million-dollar worth investment in building wind power stations (Gligorijević 2017). Such professional background sets her apart from the vast majority of profoundly impoverished and rapidly aging population<sup>17</sup> in a country in which the average monthly salary, as of June 2019, is around 500 US dollars. It is therefore not surprising that in an ad hoc survey regarding expectations from Brnabić’s ministership, one

lesbian woman from Belgrade (Teodora, as cited in Vice 2017, online) stated that there was a disparity

between her and the LGBT community [as she is] not aware of the problems which queer people in Serbia encounter on a daily basis. How could she be when she does not belong to the 98 per cent of LGBT people who are not so lucky to study abroad, engage in matters of state, and swim in money?

Indeed, as a member of the government of Serbia, Brnabić left little doubt about the course that she would pursue in her effort to render public administration more efficient. Thus, in May 2017, speaking about the necessity of reforming Serbia's educational, health, and social protection systems, she said that "the number of employees in the state administration has been sufficiently reduced", that "the state will have to shut down schools with one or two students", and that changes in the sphere of education "will go in the direction of decreasing the number of teachers". On the same occasion she referred to her negotiations with respective trade unions emphasising that "unfortunately agreement will not be possible with all of them" as "a political decision will have to be made" which may stimulate protests (NSPM 2017, online). Referring to such and other similar policies as a form of "Serbian Thatcherism", Dinić (2017) argues that Brnabić has to a great extent disregarded the interests of the most vulnerable segments of the population. In an effort to make Serbia an attractive destination for foreign investments, the government has over the years consistently undermined the economic status of workers and Brnabić has continued and strengthened that trend (Marks21 2017).<sup>18</sup> That such painful interventions are even more harmful for people exposed to other kinds of oppression is recognised by another lesbian woman who took part in the above-mentioned survey. She (Asja, as cited in Vice 2017, online) stated:

The fact that the prime minister is lesbian does not mean much when one takes into account the kind of policies she will be implementing and whom she will be obedient to. It is quite well thought through to put someone belonging to a minority in that position with the view of making them

further apply neoliberal measures which in a patriarchal and homophobic society disproportionately affect those same minorities. It is, of course, clear that she does not share experiences with an average woman and/or lesbian in Serbia, that is why she has the possibility to be where she is now.

Brnabić's class-related distance from "an average lesbian woman in Serbia" turned out to be even greater on 20 February 2019, when it was announced that her long-term partner Milica Đurđić gave birth to a boy. It was the first time in global history that a partner of a prime minister involved in a same-sex partnership becomes a parent (Stubley 2019). While on the one hand, this event provided yet another opportunity for explosions of lesbophobic aggression,<sup>19</sup> within which Brnabić was frequently "heterosexualised" as a "father" who put little effort in getting a child (Pisker 2019), Brnabić also received unambiguous expressions of support, mostly—yet again—from those who only a few years earlier would have been extremely unlikely to offer it. Thus, President Vučić was quick to congratulate Brnabić (Kurir 2019a), whereas Zorana Mihajlović, his party colleague and a member of government, underscored that children should not be instrumentalised in everyday political confrontations (Kurir 2019b). In spite of many negative reactions, those coming from the highest state officials show that Serbia has gone a long way since March 1995, when Jelica Todosijević (1995, 2003 online), a lesbian member of Arkadija, wrote her impressions about the hardships of lesbian motherhood in a country in which lesbians had to hide both from the state and from their families.

In the homophobic atmosphere in which we are living, it is impossible to even hope that anybody would try to understand a lesbian mother who claims her right to obtain custody of her child. Lesbians are considered to be immoral, irresponsible, mentally disturbed, and dangerous. [...] In constant fear of being discovered, lesbian mothers are in a "double closet" – hiding their sexuality from the state but also from their parents, children, colleagues, and friends. Many lesbians in Serbia have children, but they live as quietly as possible, often sacrificing themselves for their children.

Although the decision of Brnabić and her partner to have a child inaugurated a change in the way in which portions of Serbian and regional

public thought about same-sex relationships, realising that there were also those who did not “live as quietly as possible”, some of Todosijević’s major concerns from 1995 remained pertinent 25 years later. While Brnabić does not have to hide from the state (which she actually represents) or suffer financial sacrifices when raising the child born in her relationship, this is not the case with the vast majority of homosexual couples/lesbian mothers in the country. They, instead, have been “trying hard to invent creative answers to overcome endless questions about *two moms*, or invent impossible acts to resolve the legal barriers in taking care of their children” (Mlađenović 2019a, online), as there is no legislation allowing same-sex partnership/marriage, artificial insemination for same-sex couples, or LGBT adoption. In other words, more than two years into Brnabić’s prime ministership, there is still no legal basis upon which Brnabić would be to Đurđić more than a roommate or have a legally binding connection with the new-born child. Even though Brnabić and Đurđić stimulated unprecedented media coverage about lesbian parenting, all other same-sex partnerships and children growing up in them stayed legally invisible; similarly, same-sex couples desiring a child are still discouraged from having one through the absence of relevant laws and/or the necessary financial means for doing so. This peculiar situation in which a lesbian prime minister exposes and participates in discrimination against the “minority” to which she herself belongs while openly enjoying the privileges afforded to her by her class status prompted the activists of Labris (2019, online) to issue a statement saying that

Serbia remains a country in which the prime minister, regardless of being congratulated by the authorities, cannot be registered as parent, enrol her child in kindergarten, take him on vacation abroad or visit him at the hospital as a family member. Labris [...] hope that [Brnabić and Đurđić] will soon be also legally recognised as parents.

While this statement indeed refers to a series of parenting-related actions that Brnabić would not be *formally* allowed to do without the necessary legislation, it overlooks the fact that Brnabić and Đurđić were already in an extraordinary position which enabled them to circumvent the law. Their case shows that in the context of pronounced social inequalities and

inconsistent law implementation, such actions would actually be possible for some of those willing to take them.

However, despite Brnabić's decision to avoid more intense (legislative) engagement that would divert the sensationalist attention from her private life towards policy issues and improve the legal status of LGBT population, there are threads of lesbian activism which still consider that Brnabić, by virtue of being openly lesbian prime minister, is doing important political work for many lesbians living in less favourable circumstances. In this regard, Lepa Mladenović (2019b, online), for example, states:

All of us who have girlfriends in small towns know how much two lesbians tremble when holding hands in the street. All of us who care about every single lesbian know how many cannot even say the L word (...) So, it is not all the same to me if the prime minister is lesbian or not when I know that she is the bright spot for many girls living in difficult conditions. Their parents vote for those who are now in power and then it is easier for the daughters to discuss with them their erotic choices. Thus, it is not all the same to me whether there is in the place of prime minister a fat sexist white man (*debeli beli muškarac seksista*) or a socially privileged (*klasna*) white lesbian even though I am completely against the politics of the ruling party. And exactly in that total lack of logic, it is courageous to be a lesbian mom outside of legally recognised arrangements. Then we know that the day of more just laws is coming closer.

The last decades of Serbia's turbulent history have witnessed a string of white sexist men frequently holding unrestrained power. Such a painful legacy of patriarchal dominance and its consequent oppression could go a long way towards explaining Mladenović's preference for a lesbian woman in a politically prominent position even in those cases in which she is devoid of real influence, championing a conservative political cause or remaining socially distant from the majority of lesbian population. While this reticence towards powerful men is understandable, it is not altogether clear why one would assume that they are inevitably also "fat", especially when such a representation of a sexist man is coming from feminist circles committed to problematising social hierarchies based on

physical ability or appearance. Mladenović's words substitute one regime of exclusion for another and draw upon unreflected prejudice against "fat people" to couple obesity with sexism in order to underscore sexism's unacceptability. In this regard, Meadows (2018) argues that obesity-related antipathy is so endemic that even those to whom it is addressed may not recognise it as stigmatising. When analysing research on interventions to reduce such exclusionary feelings, Daniélsdóttir et al. (2010) found that the majority of the campaigns were not successful demonstrating the strength of psycho-social mechanisms that underpin them. With her text which touches upon misandry, Mladenović added a "fat man" to the panoply of abject figures—including an ugly lesbian, a lustful black, and a savage Albanian—entangled (with possibly some others) in the affectively saturated discussions surrounding Brnabić's prime ministership.<sup>20</sup>

The hateful language that has accompanied Brnabić—along with the one which she herself uses and promotes—testifies to the fact that the Serbian openly lesbian prime minister has indeed, as was expected, struck a particularly sensitive nerve, stirring along the way deep layers of normalised oppression. She has not done this only as a lesbian, but through an unusual combination of being a socially privileged lesbian woman sustained by a patriarchal man who is closely associated with an ultranationalist party. A lesbian woman who "even" has a child with her partner in a legal vacuum that does not recognise same-sex partnership, Brnabić stepped onto the public scene in a delicate moment in which the European Union has been turning a blind eye to the rising authoritarianism of President Vučić, counting on his supposed willingness to come up with a solution to the perennial Kosovo problem. Instrumentalised as an indicator of democracy and respect of LGBT rights, Brnabić has found herself in the midst of a highly polarised public sphere in which oppositional voices have been increasingly marginalised and treated as anti-systemic. Although never really known for its culture of dialogue or compromise, Serbia's political life has roughened over the last years as fragile democratic achievements have retreated in front of the intractable resilience of partocracy that aims to penetrate into all spheres of social life. Certain feminist interventions into the debate regarding lesbian parenting stimulated by Brnabić reveal the

extent to which they are saturated by prejudice and show that the language of lesbian feminist activism developing (or rather going through periods of development and regression/exhaustion) in the atmosphere of patriarchal dominance is constantly at risk and has a hard time remaining impermeable to its potent discriminatory structures.

## Conclusion

Ever since their establishment in October 1991, one of the guiding principles of the Belgrade-based feminist anti-war group Women in Black has been: “Let us not be deceived by our own” (*ne dajmo se od svojih prevartiti*). This powerful slogan has stood as a warning against the rigid and violent circumscriptions of the “we” produced by homogenising machineries of nationalist ideology that have operated in the Yugoslav space over the last decades. Such an ethical stance which presupposes the courage to dissociate oneself from the essentialised and pervasive community of crime at high personal costs has consistently underscored that who “ours” are is not so much a matter of shared identities, particularly not of ethnic belonging, as of shared politics. The appearance of Ana Brnabić, an openly lesbian woman who has—at least formally—assumed some of the highest positions within the ranks of Serbian executive power, has posed the question of feminist and identity-based solidarities in a novel and challenging form. She has complicated the discriminatory nationalist matrix by adding to it the axes of gender, sexuality, and class, provoking tensions and frustrations on the political scene.

The accelerated manner in which Brnabić as someone who does not hide her non-heterosexual orientation has climbed the ladder of political power in a patriarchal and homophobic context of today’s Serbia cannot be detached from the semi-periphery’s capacity to occasionally produce surprising, albeit contentious and volatile, advancements (Blagojević 2009). This feature of semi-peripheral political life—“a constant ‘knotting’ and ‘looping’ of time(s)” leading to coincidental (“all at once”) rather than sequential developments (Mizielnińska and Kulpa 2011, p. 15)—is thrown into relief when post-socialist and post-conflict Serbia is compared with other countries (Belgium, Iceland, Luxembourg, and

Ireland) which have up to now had openly non-heterosexual prime ministers. In all of them, lesbian and gay premiers, as accountable political leaders carrying primary responsibility for proposing and enforcing legislation, have emerged as culminations of long periods of LGBT-related advocacy. Such an intense mobilisation, unfolding also through (but not being restricted to) decades of Pride marches, has not only resulted in laws which equalised the political status of heterosexual and non-heterosexual citizens but also managed to substantially decrease the levels of homophobia. Thus, for example, same-sex partnerships have been allowed in Luxembourg since 2004 (marriage since 2015), preceding for almost a decade Xavier Bettel's prime ministership which started in 2013. Similarly, the percentage of Icelanders in favour of same-sex marriage or lesbians' right to assisted pregnancy (82.3 per cent in 2005) was very high (87 (2004) and 82.3 (2005) per cent, respectively) before Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became prime minister in 2009 (Digoix et al. 2016; see also Stojanović 2017). Consistent activist engagement has not only rendered non-heterosexual politicians in the highest positions possible but also provided a framework within which legally enabled social change could be absorbed and at least partially consolidated across the social field. In this way, homosexuality has come to be increasingly stripped of its morally negative connotations, making it clear that it is not inherently associated with any ideological affiliation and therefore allowing solidarities and political alliances to be formed on the basis of ideology rather than identity.

On the other hand, there is hardly any direct correlation between Brnabić's rise to power and the operation of the mostly professionalised feminist and LGBT activist initiatives fractured along political, organisational, identitarian, and personal lines. As was the case with the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1994, yet another major development concerning non-heterosexual lives in Serbia was not explicitly linked with the "movement",<sup>21</sup> but was rather a matter of a top-down imposition performed by an authoritarian leader who is far from having non-heterosexual emancipation at heart. Dispersed civic engagement, which in the majority of cases declaratively strives to destabilise while often unreflexively perpetuating exclusionary patterns inbuilt into the foundations of regional social life, could not have produced a lesbian prime

minister dedicated to the feminist cause. Nevertheless, two decades of intense, if tortuous, LGBT mobilisation, through often physically and almost always verbally violent loops and labyrinths, have managed to maintain elements of non-heterosexual visibility in public sphere providing a cushion which softened the undoubtedly hard impact of Brnabić's nomination. Even though she is not "the merit" of the "movement" in the sense of not stemming from or being associated with it, she would not have been conceivable as prime minister had homonationalist dimensions of European Union integrations not intertwined with various forms of local activist engagement that has increased Serbian people's habituation to non-heterosexual bodies.

Once Brnabić found herself in that unexpected position, her prime ministership prompted the question, lined with hope and longing, as to whether she could bring about and consolidate practices of intimacy different from those that shape heteronormative social arrangements. What is the extent to which Brnabić, an unprecedented "event" in the social history of the region, could contribute to Serbia becoming a less homophobic and less misogynous country? Soon into her mandate, it became obvious that rather than a harbinger of emancipatory change immersed in long-term policy strategies, she was an illustration of how rapidly political potentials of non-heterosexuality/lesbianity could capitulate in front of dominant social forms and be co-opted by those who had been for decades the target of feminist critique. The fact that Brnabić could *afford*—both in spite of the law and literally, financially—to have a child in a lesbian partnership is, in that regard, not so much a temporary privilege that will be rectified through upcoming legal solutions,<sup>22</sup> but a reflection of profound structural inequalities embedded in neoliberal capitalist relations that have been firmly set in place after decades of devastating privatisation accompanied by impoverishment and corruption. That there is an openly lesbian woman symbolically marking the end of that painful "transitional process" is less surprising when considering Sears' (as cited in Sernatinger and Echeverria 2013, online) argument that portions of gay and, to a lesser extent, lesbian population have managed to advance "at a time when most movements seeking change were pushed backward". Homosexuals able to count on certain amounts of financial and/or social capital and ready to enter into homonormative social formations based

on coupledness and consumption have made gains in the context in which life has become increasingly uncertain though precarisation of the sphere of work (including fragmentation of trade unions and diminishment of workers' rights), rising levels of racism and populism, as well as a general commodification of social relations leading to ever more pronounced inequalities. This “counterintuitive” advancement took place, of course, due to the commitment of gay and lesbian activists, but it turned out to be possible only in those domains that were “most compatible with capitalism” (such as coupledness, marriage, certain workplace benefits, lifestyle; Sears, as cited in Sernatinger and Echeverria 2013, online).

As we have seen in the previous chapters, global processes of capitalist solidification are not incompatible with but can be smoothly grafted upon strong patriarchal undercurrents that have evacuated the legacies of socialist feminism from the political arenas which nowadays in the post-Yugoslav space correspond to the nation-states coming out of the wars of the Yugoslav succession. During socialism which was suspicious of autonomous feminist engagement, living lesbianity in coupledness was a manifestation of class privilege of which feminism, then primarily positioned in the sphere of the middle class of what declaratively was a “classless society”, was slowly becoming aware. Living lesbianity, rooted in domesticity, consumption, and parenthood, has yet again become a class privilege, this time, however, in the context of ever more pronounced social inequalities induced and normalised by neoliberal capitalism within which the feminist challenge has been appreciably weakened.

In this regard, Brnabić's close association with—and even submission to—patriarchal authority has revealed the extent to which regional feminism has been depoliticised through institutionalisation, professionalisation, and parochialisation of activism. Rather than herself being a *missed opportunity*, Brnabić could be perceived as a result of post-Yugoslav feminism's missed opportunity to articulate non-heterosexual struggles in an intersectionally sensitive way that would include but also operate outside of the legal frame. As there has been no feminist infrastructure to channel and articulate until now inexistent impulses of lesbian speakability provided by Brnabić, she will probably stay only an “incident” which briefly expanded the repertoires of women representations in the Serbian political context. Having in mind the resilience of lesbophobic/homophobic

regimes and the fragility of emancipatory change in semi-peripheral environments (Blagojević 2009), it is not unimaginable that the implicit activist effects of Brnabić's open lesbianity could backfire, especially considering rising frustration and resistance that Vučić's rule has been causing. In such a way there will be no political force to consolidate same-sex partnership-related legislation, so it will, for the vast majority of the relevant population, remain yet another hollow indicator of Serbia's democracy and its "readiness" to join the "European" community of nations.

## Notes

1. That there is no direct affinity between lesbianity and progressive policies is testified also by Alice Weidel, a German politician and leader of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany in the German Parliament. An openly lesbian politician and former employee of Goldman Sachs, Weidel argues in favour of "traditional families" and opposes immigration and same-sex marriage (Ma 2017).
2. Pantela is a nickname of the Serbian football player Marko Pantelić. In 2017 he made a statement about the lesbophobic campaign against Brnabić based on the idea that she resembled him saying that he did not find "such jokes funny at all" (Piplmetar 2017, online).
3. There were also numerous sexist and lesbophobic comments stimulated by the text that Lepa Mladenović wrote for the internet portal *e-novine* in which she accused Professor Čedomir Čupić of misogyny. For example, one reader said: "If the lady on the picture is the one who wrote the text against Professor Čupić, we are absolutely not surprised because such women (and I am talking about the looks) are disturbed and offended by everything. Ridiculous" (Stevanović 2016, online). Debates regarding physical appearance have also accompanied Marija Šerifović, a popular singer who in 2013 released a documentary in which she talked about her relationships with women.
4. The idea of "curing" lesbians entered into the Serbian public space much before Brnabić. Probably the most (in)famous in this regard is the poem of the Bosnian Serb leader and war criminal Radovan Karadžić who is also a psychiatrist. Boasting about his virility Karadžić says: "I used to cure lesbians of their sweet fallacy" (Ja sam lečio lezbejke iz zablude im divne) (Sense agency 2005, online).

5. In the context of the 2009 Belgrade Pride preparations, the then mayor of Belgrade Dragan Đilas said that sexual orientation was a private matter and should stay within the four walls (Petrović 2009). Later on, Đilas revisited this statement saying that he understood it was offensive and that his intention was rather to highlight that LGBT activism should not be reduced to a once-per-year event (Jovanović and Mihajlović 2014).
6. One could wonder why Veselinović opted for the rarely used “Afro-American” (Afro-Amerikanac) instead of the more common “black man” (crnac). This word choice probably has to do with the idea that Veselinović was aware of the racist character of his statement and wanted to “soften” it by taking recourse to the politically correct way of referring to a black person. In this regard, Žižek (e.g., in Rasmussen 2004, online) claims that “African-American as a term is the worst example of apparent political correctness” masking untouched reservoirs of racist hatred and leading to “tolerance” predicated on “the Other” not coming too close.
7. Although the gap in absolute numbers seems to be shrinking, at the end of 2017, there were still 40,000 more black than white prisoners in US prisons. In 2017 black persons represented 12 per cent of the US adult population but 33 per cent of the sentenced prison population. At the same time, white persons accounted for 64 per cent of adults but 30 per cent of prisoners (Gramlich 2019).
8. The interest in the issue of “race” in the Yugoslav space has recently intensified as it is becoming clear that “the Yugoslav region has been as entangled in global ‘raciality’ as any other part of the planet” (Baker 2018, p. 1).
9. A particularly painful example in which a black man was “paired” with unbearable difference that could not be humanised and had therefore to be eliminated is the kidnapping and killing of 20 civilians in Štrpci, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, in February 1993. A group of Bosnian Serb soldiers, commanded by Milan Lukić, entered a Belgrade-Bar train at the station of Štrpci looking for Muslim passengers. Among those who were eventually abducted and killed were 18 Muslims, 1 Croat, and 1 black man, who was never identified (HLC 2017). See also Buden (2012).
10. However, criticisms of Brnabić’s speech themselves abounded with hateful and misogynist language (e.g., Milošević 2019).
11. There were thousands of African and Asian students studying at Yugoslav universities in the framework of Yugoslavia’s non-alignment-related entanglements (Baker 2018).

12. Bjelić (2016, p. 220) argues that the European Union presents itself as “a new political entity without previous history. It somehow deserves a clean slate after formally denouncing colonialism and anti-Semitism, and the right to shift the ownership of its colonial histories to former colonial subjects”.
13. Zorica Mršević claims that the presence of Brnabić in public life may be particularly important in the sense of decreasing lesbophobic violence. In her email to the Google group *razotkvirivanje* on 22 June 2017, she states: “if a minister and prime minister can be ‘like that’, then perhaps one fist will stay in the air, one threat ‘now I will show you’ may stay unsaid, and maybe one ‘get lost from my house’ may be reverted”.
14. Taking a look at possible sources of resistance to Brnabić’s nomination within his party and coalition partners, Vučić (B92 2017, online) stated: “I understood their concerns about my popularity rankings. One wonderful man whose father is a priest told me that it was something hard for him to accept, but I asked him to do so, and he said he would do it for me and vote for Brnabić. Ana is a good creature, a good person, somebody who knows how administration works ... I told (Dragan Marković) Palma that I do not agree with him. Palma respected (bio je korektan) the government of Serbia and I hope that he will change his position. I beseech him to do that. I can understand (Marijan) Rističević who told me that he would never be in favour of Gay Parade. I told me he would never see me there, that is not my world, but it has to be allowed”.
15. This, of course, does not mean that Vučić has managed to achieve absolute silence or, let alone, genuine acceptance of homosexuality among government members. For example, in May 2016, minister Nenad Popović, concerned about Serbia’s demographic loss, tweeted against illustrated booklets (prepared in Croatia) on same-sex parenting: “We have to stop those who are trying to convince us that it is fine for Roko to have two moms and for Ana to have two dads”. Ana Brnabić said that the minister’s statement was not in the spirit of tolerance that the government wanted to promote and that there was no correlation between birth rate and homosexuality (Besanvalle 2018).
16. However, Vučić did refer to Brnabić as lesbian on one occasion. After a meeting with the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church which took place in May 2019 in the context of the Kosovo crisis, Vučić said: “When I told some bishops that what they were claiming was not in the Resolution 1244, they asked me why I put a lesbian as prime minister.

- That lesbian has done more than many great Serbs” (Parlament 2019, online).
17. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe estimates that 654,000 people have left Serbia since the beginning of the twenty-first century, mostly in the age category of 15–24 years (B92 2019).
  18. Over the last 12 years, 440 workers in Serbia lost their lives in the workplace (Bukvić 2018).
  19. The lesbophobic comment that received most attention was probably the one by the actor and one of the opposition leaders Sergej Trifunović who, on his Twitter account, stated: “Children in Africa are starving, while Ana Brnabić’s kid is splurging on four tits” (“Deca u Africi gladuju, a dete Ane Brnabić se rasipa sa četiri sise”, Pisker 2019, online).
  20. This is particularly striking in the light of lesbian movements’ efforts to problematise negative representations of obesity. For example, Elana Dykewomon, a US American lesbian activist, is known for her “fat feminism” and “The Real Fat Woman Poems” published in *Sinister Wisdom*. In her essay “In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman”, Dykewomon (2014, p. 1) argues in favour of “more literature foregrounding fat lesbians and women as ‘heroic,’ worthy of inclusion in every canon”.
  21. Brnabić’s erosion of affinities between lesbianity and feminism in oppressive circumstances of homo/lesbophobia is quite different from, for example, the case of Nataša Sukić, a lesbian activist from Slovenia, who in 2014 was a candidate for the mayor of Ljubljana on the list of the oppositional United Left.
  22. Given that Serbia is still, at least declaratively, committed to becoming a member of the European Union, it is to be expected that same-sex partnership legislation will be adopted in the near future.

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# 7

## Conclusion: Against the Burdens of the Unspoken

From January to June 2019, I occasionally abandoned writing to take part in protests against the increasingly oligarchic regime of Aleksandar Vučić that in ebbs and flows spread across Serbia. Given that the circumstances seemed eerily similar to (and in many respects even worse than) those from the late 1990s, I looked again for the whistle that I used 20 years earlier, when as a high school student, I took to the streets, joining many of those who impatiently awaited the fall of Slobodan Milošević. And while I was taken aback by the extent to which these demonstrations resembled each other, bringing together ideologically disparate and often incompatible threads that could hardly herald any longer period of institutional order, one slogan was strikingly new: “Vučić is a faggot!” (Vučiću, pederu). That the crowd would, among more substantial political demands, intermittently refer to the president of Serbia by calling him a “faggot” pointed, I thought, both to the ever more prominent presence of homosexuality in public life and to the thickness of homophobic layers that more than three decades of activist engagement managed only to graze. Casting my eyes down in embarrassment, I—that hated faggot, an imperceptible intruder—plodded along as I shared the pavement with hundreds

of those impoverished, disappointed, and exhausted by the perennial postponement of better futures.

However, there might have been more to that homophobic slur than the usual untrustworthiness and the weak character of gays, those who would readily betray any patriotic cause. On closer inspection the slogan reveals a startling trajectory that turned an ultranationalist politician, whose party inflamed the formative years of my generation, into a staunch supporter of an openly lesbian woman. Reflecting the global potency of right-wing incursions into our sexual/intimate lives, the appearance of Ana Brnabić announced that the (post-)Yugoslav feminism—a theoretically informed practice of generating alternatives in the distinctly hostile, violent, and protracted transformation from socialism to capitalism—has come full circle. Sustained by an authoritarian man, Brnabić has provided a rare opportunity for a look into the homonationalist and homonormative mechanisms of social hierarchisation which operate at numerous and intricately intertwined scales. She has thus laid bare class disparities and the unjust ways in which they modulate gender and sexual experience, drawing attention—once again—to the fundamental locus of the feminist effort to make the world a better—or at least more bearable—place.

## Lesbian Rhizomes

In the preceding chapters I have followed the tortuous, four-decade-long line that connects the very first collective efforts of Yugoslav women to embrace their lesbianity in the 1980s with a lesbian woman assuming, at least nominally, the most important executive position in Serbia in the late 2010s. That line stretches like an arch over the region's multiple painful transitions testifying to the resilience of lesbian agency and the commitment with which activists have pursued the promise of lesbian liberation in highly unfavourable circumstances. By tracing how embryonic initiatives starting in socialist Yugoslavia have developed into full-blown lesbian activist organisations, this book has not only underscored their entwinements with (post-)Yugoslav feminist engagement but also uncovered a *rhizome* of unyielding lesbian activist ties that challenge

borders and extend across and beyond the Yugoslav space. Growing horizontally and connecting various activist nodes, such a transnational network has constituted one poorly known layer of the crowded political landscape of disintegrating Yugoslavia. As this “subterranean” activist web has now been exposed with many of its affectively charged and occasionally controversial threads, it can finally start assuming its proper place in the mosaic of sociological/anthropological accounts that have, for a lot of time, had strong patriarchal and elitist dimensions.

Intrigued by the difficulties of saying “I am lesbian”, that is, of articulating and announcing sexual difference, I have throughout this book approached activism as a *speaking practice*, as an effort to acquire and share a *language*. International LGBT politics, with a strong US American stamp, has frequently been conceptualised in terms of a struggle for *visibility*, for coming out in public space and being “openly” non-heterosexual. However, most of the time coming out is a *speech act*, an announcement that entwines *speaking ability* and visibility rendering both of them possible. In patriarchal and homophobic environments in which the cause of non-heterosexual emancipation seems to be restricted to a small group of mostly capital-city-based activists, visibility may, nevertheless, become detached from or run fast ahead of speaking ability. Often under the influence of externally driven (European Union) conditionality policies, LGBT activism may periodically occupy public space without necessarily increasing non-heterosexual speaking ability of those they address. Visibility which is not accompanied by speaking ability is a reflection of an activist “community” that is unhinged from its constituency leaving strong heteronormative structures largely undisrupted.

With this in mind, I have explored the strategies with which activists have resisted (and sometimes also succumbed to) the entrenched social matrices to encourage lesbian women, those who “travel incognito” (Nestle 1978, online), to acknowledge, appropriate, and find words for naming their desire. This has been a particularly painful process in the context of Yugoslavia’s dissolution within which lesbian women and other non-heterosexual/“minority” people, more generally, have found themselves under the burden of multiple silencing forces that stem from the same patriarchal root. I have proposed *trauma* as a name of that convergence point of manifold silences, as a notion that captures experiences imbued with an

affective residue that obstructs their articulation pushing them into a loop within which they are constantly relived. The loss of socialism, war crimes, widespread domestic violence, and homosexuality become *traumatic* through an *evacuation of language*: they are enveloped in silence by a force that mercilessly breaks social connections, undermines human dignity, and impoverishes life.

Lesbian agency protrudes—sometimes at huge personal costs—through the strata of patriarchal silencing sending out shoots of speakability towards the public surface and redesigning along the way the boundaries between the private and the public. In that disorienting forest of tongues, symbols, and incompatible grammars that stayed in the wake of Yugoslavia, feminists and feminist lesbians appeared as “polyglots” (Braidotti 1994), agents of translation determined to counter dogmatic thought and resist lethally dangerous illusions of ethnic, gender, or sexual “purity”. Engaged in an effort to construct a “common language” (Rich 1978), activists have repeatedly sutured broken ties offering new cartographies of belonging, those that went above and beyond the logic of national allegiance. Feminist activism has thus been not only an antidote against powerful amnesias of patriarchy, but a therapeutic scaffolding structure, a strategy of survival. Tenuous feminist lesbian trajectories can be traced across post-Yugoslav traumatic discontinuities exactly because of the existential importance they have had for those committed to building them as “nests” (Mladenović 2016), as places of healing.

## Feminist Parrhesia

Even though such a reference to “feminist lesbian agency” may lead to an impression of ideological uniformity, this book is based on the idea that feminism withers away through claims of exclusivity. As our experience has already taught us about socialism, sometimes feminism too has to be rescued from those who wish to appropriate it, to entrap it and present themselves as its “authentic” custodians. The preceding chapters have shown how easily hybrid patriarcho-neoliberal patterns creep into feminist endeavours purging them of their progressive substance and leading to misunderstandings, frustrations, and

divisions. While feminisms are always multiple, I struggled to point to those feminist threads that run the risk of perpetuating essentialised gender and sexual categories, and by doing so come dangerously close to erasing difference.

Looking at the Yugoslav tragedy through the lens of feminist lesbian mobilisations has not only provided me with an opportunity to treat women's experience as *universal* rather than particular but also tempered some of my idealisations of lesbian intimacy. As a queer sociologist and survivor of Yugoslavia, I did not want to let destructive conflict gain the upper hand: my objective was rather to illuminate reservoirs of utopian energy and demonstrate that activism, however fragile and susceptible to distortion, is more than anything a *desire for better times*. I have been led by the idea of giving space primarily to those for whom activist engagement approaches *parrhesia*: "speaking truth at the expense of inflicting damage upon oneself" (NLO 2015, online; Maxwell 2019).

The rebellious, revolutionary practice of truth-telling in our region that has repeatedly collapsed under the burdens of patriarchal silence (war crimes, domestic violence, homophobia, corruption, etc.) is ever more important at a time when capitalist greed obscures our socialist legacies and fragments our communities by granting privileges to some while excluding others. Deep ruptures of the social structure that we have witnessed over the last decades have truncated the emancipatory promise and the centripetal force of post-Yugoslav feminism, but they have also provided an impetus for its resurrection or, rather, its *queer reincarnation*. The most vital, intersectionally-sensitive activist currents that stream through the pages of this book are evidence of the power of feminist agency to recreate the world by turning suffering into a source of political change.

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