

Baggage Claim



Fictioning with Queer Balkan Past
that Nourish our Political Imaginary



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Baggage Claim: Fictioning with Queer Balkan Past
that Nourish our Political Imaginary

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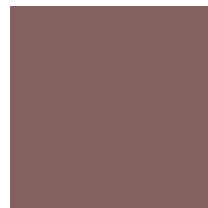
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Foreward

I (author) write about you (reader). To read this text, you have to trust me, it will not be easy. I need to tell you a few things before you proceed about whose work I'm building on and my use of language.

I, a white queer Serb living in the diaspora am behind the keyboard. I heavily rely on the ideas about archival knowledge and narrative of a black American author, Saidiya Hartman. I try to make sense of how her method of critical fabulation can be applied to a different medium and a land of an entirely different history and marginalized group, with respect to black noise. Her work is woven in with the works of Balkan thinkers such as Dubravka Ugrešić, Milica Bakić-Huyden, and Maria Todorova, (as well as gay/queer scholars from the regions of post-Yugoslav sphere and CEE) to make sense of the intersecting oppressions laid upon national and gender identity.

When the Balkans are mentioned, I am writing about a shared collective past, while when the nation is addressed, I am talking about a national (and isolated) history. I use terms in BCMS (Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian) because of an inherent untranslatability of these, usually colloquial, words. They're written in the Cyrillic alphabet to visually connoting difference. Indentation in the scope of this text functions as time travel.

Queerness is addressed from today's perspective. I'm reading the past through the lens of queerness as a

trespassing through norms of gender, sex and sexuality. Some of the examples from the past I write about, were not queer then, but might be considered queer now.

Lastly, this thesis is a portion of a larger work, a 3D game titled **Baggage Claim**.



"Are You Sure This is Your Passport?"



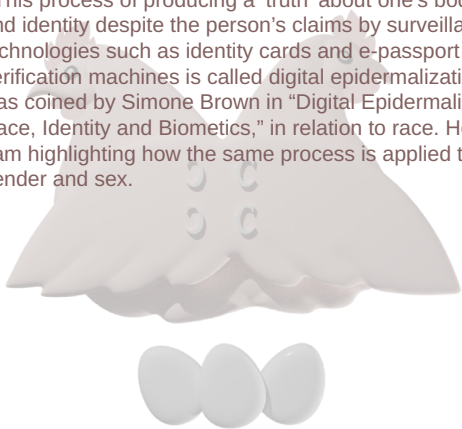
¹ Philosophy Tube, "AI is an Ethical Nightmare"

You go to the airport, preparing yourself to travel back for a brief family reunion to your land of origin, the mountainous region of the Balkans. As per usual, you get stopped at passport control. The worker glances at your passport photo, looks at you, frowns, shakes their head. They proclaim that you do not look like your passport photo. You bend into a question mark, remembering all such previous moments passport control was convinced you were fooling them. Instinctively, you explain how you've just lost weight, and just changed your hair, and besides you were only 15 in that photo anyhow. You don't ever mention the gender marker. Begrudgingly, they let you through.

When you go through the security check, the full-body scanners search for anomalies in your pockets. The airport security selects which sex you are on the small screen next to the scanner. They decide who you are as a result of the texture of the fabric you wear, your hair style that day and how aggressively you claim your private space by spreading your arms around you. This scanner's x-ray starts once the security personnel decides whether you are to be scanned as a 'man' or as a 'woman' through a click of a button. If your ambiguous appearance doesn't fully meet either category, you will get searched. If it isn't by the family or the nation, the airport is the place where your gender gets determined for you.

Abigail Thorn refers to the scanner as the 'Penis Detection Machine'.¹ This name sizzles down to the

² This process of producing a 'truth' about one's body and identity despite the person's claims by surveillance technologies such as identity cards and e-passport verification machines is called digital epidermalization and was coined by Simone Brown in "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics," in relation to race. Here, I am highlighting how the same process is applied to gender and sex.



³ M, K. "LGBT prava u SFRJ." gayecho.

fact that if you're for instance a pre-op trans woman, and the security clicks 'woman', the machine will register what it perceives as an 'anomaly' in your genital area. After that, you're supposed to get searched by the gender that they chose for you on the screen next to the scanner. 'Women' search 'women' and 'men' search 'men.' But I don't need to remind you of this.² You're trans, you know.

When in Montenegro, you hear your cousin speak about how it is in the West. You never asked what his perspective on this matter was, yet he is telling you about it.

He comments that who you are is not foreign to him ("Није ми страно"), as he's lived in the EU. He rambles on about the gay lobby, how they cause chaos with their loud demands. A person more well-adjusted than yourself would ask why is he telling you all this now—when you've come to visit after a decade of not being there? The familiar drone of this kind of argument settles into your skin without hesitation, after all, you've heard it before. From well- or ill-meaning friends or family members, news anchors, public priests, and medical professionals. "This sentiment is unfortunately pervasive," you think, and it's gotten a hold of him too.

A carousel of similar arguments, sentiments and assumptions flood your memory:

- * Conservative people thinking that homosexuality is a product of the "Rotten West" and an over-indulgent way of life (Yugoslavia).³
- * The nationalistic perspective which views trans people as "imported" or "someone else's" through

⁴ Ulićević and Brković, "Trans otpornost u Crnoj Gori", 34–53.

⁵ Ulićević and Brković, "Trans otpornost u Crnoj Gori", 34–53.

⁶ Bilić and Vidić. "Protiv rodne binarnosti," 54–90.

⁷ Žegura. "Trans saveznica," 122–149.

⁸ 24 minuta sa Zoranom Kesićem, „EuroPride. Peder gradom (ne)će šetati." The original quote was translated by me.

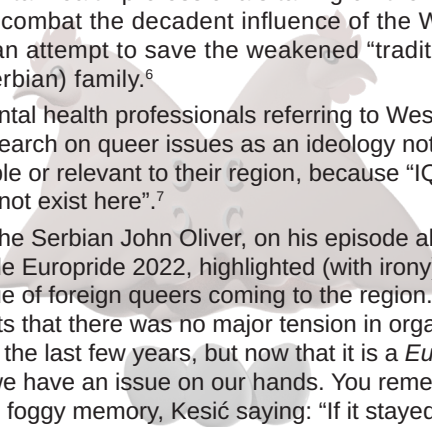


European integration and contact with the West (Montenegro).⁴

- * Online users disapproving transition being covered by health insurance by saying that funding bodies from the West insist on pushing an "agenda," and have a "lobby" for doing so (Montenegro).⁵
- * Mental health professionals taking on the mantle to "combat the decadent influence of the West" in an attempt to save the weakened "traditional" (Serbian) family.⁶
- * Mental health professionals referring to Western research on queer issues as an ideology not applicable or relevant to their region, because "IQ people do not exist here".⁷

Kesić, the Serbian John Oliver, on his episode about Belgrade Europride 2022, highlighted (with irony) the issue of foreign queers coming to the region. He pinpoints that there was no major tension in organizing pride in the last few years, but now that it is a *European* pride, we have an issue on our hands. You remember, through foggy memory, Kesić saying: "If it stayed in the 'family circle,' we would be fine, but a foreigner, worse, a western foreigner, may God protect us."⁸

Which brings you to a question: Why is queerness seen as something inherently western? And therefore, perpetually othered, foreign, not a local problem or concern? You decide to examine this narrative, to cut it apart and peer into what is there and what does it do to people like your cousin.



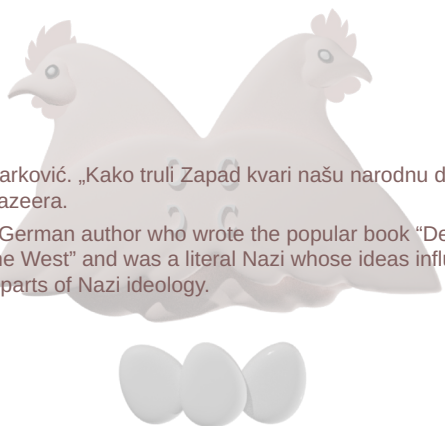
The Borders of Narratives Get Embedded within Us

⁹ Ugrešić. "The Confiscation of Memory," 26-39.

¹⁰ Marković. „Kako truli Zapad kvari našu narodnu dušu,” Al Jazeera.

¹¹ A German author who wrote the popular book "Decline of the West" and was a literal Nazi whose ideas influenced key parts of Nazi ideology.

¹² Richmond, *From Nyet to Da: Understanding the Russians*, 65.



You try to identify where these narratives came from...

You understand that in the context of the Balkans, memory has been confiscated and weaponized, and that a forced amnesia was mandated after the falling apart of Yugoslavia and the revitalization of nationalistic narratives.⁹ Each country needed to build its identity anew and sought to distinguish itself from its neighbors.

You understand that many politicians in the Balkans, and Eastern Europe more largely, have propagated this idea of the 'rotten West.' According to Marković, the youth of the romantic movement in the 19th century was already spreading the ideas that the West is tarnishing the "natural", uncorrupted people of the Balkans.¹⁰ As stated by Marković, these ideas were not ones they came up with, but they were handed down to them by the movement of Slavophiles and Oswald Spengler.¹¹

Slavophiles advocated for a rejection of the West and an embrace of traditional Slavic (read: Russian) values and doctrine. A turn away from individualism, Western rationalism, and industrialization, towards collectivism, Russian mysticism, and protecting a version of the commons, were some of the ideas it featured.¹²

This ideology manifested itself in the Pan-Slavic movement, which advocated for the unity and integrity of all Slavs, and was particularly popular in the Balkans, a region which was historically dominated by an avalanche of different empires (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Byzantine, Venetian). Nowadays, Pan-Slavism is a divisive topic, especially after Rus-

¹³ Wire and Poolovadoo, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Is Just the Latest Expression of Pan-Slavic Authoritarianism."



¹⁴ Todorova, „Introduction Balkanism and Orientalism,” 1–20.

¹⁵ Đurić, “Trans kvir život u Jugoslaviji i kasnije,” 112–121. Đurić wrote about her experience of joining peace organizations protesting Milošević’s regime, as a way to avoid being recruited into the army. She wonders now whether being a social worker would have been possible if she was openly trans and admits this created a rupture in her and enforced self-abandoning mechanisms.

sia’s escalation in Ukraine leading to a full-blown war. Many Slavic nations severed their ties to Russia, and by extension, to the idea of Pan-Slavism.¹³

Spengler considered one of the ‘high cultures’ cultures to be ‘Western’ or Faustian. There’s a range of difference now when people mention the West, but it largely encompasses the territories of the Northern America, Western and Northern Europe, and Australia. The West doesn’t describe a physical border, although the West often uses borders, fences, and walls as leveraging power to keep the ‘other’ out.

The version of West you have heard of is the one which your neighbours bring up when they refer to you as the ‘European’ one, on your visits back. This is something you had to read about to make sense of. Todorova pointed out that the Balkans have historically been written about as a kind of borderlands stuck between East and West—culturally, economically, geo-politically.¹⁴

But how has this affected queer people? You know of activists in the 90s who joined the anti-war movement and waited for a better time to address queer issues.¹⁵ You know that certain issues, like staying alive, having a roof over your head, and not contributing to genocidal actions, take precedent.

In the context of Serbia, queerness was vilified and pathologized historically:

¹⁶ Stolić, "Od muželoštva i ženske malakije do protivpravnog bluda i patologije," 17–21.



- * During the rise of Christianity as a sin that is simply unchristian (**мужелoштво**).¹⁶

When I think of you as one of my ancestors during this time, I imagine you didn't read the scripts the priests held containing the prescriptions of crime, but you've heard about them, at the church, at home, at prayer, in whispers, in bed. You know that a man laying with another man is considered a crime, that a woman laying with another woman is a sin. That a woman taking on the role of a man is punishable, as well as any form or fashion of anal sex. You don't think about the scriptures of writing that proclaim who you must be, but you strive to be this person anyway.

I assume that you live under the oppressive thumb of knowing that if you do not confess that your love is real (even if it is considered wrong), God will most likely still know. When you confess, you are most likely punished without a registry, I have not found your name anywhere.

I do not know much about you, yet I can't help but run simulations of your life in my head. I see you looking at the sky, the trees, your neighbors—seeing the God that condemned you in everyone, and still blaming yourself.

Recently, I talked to an activist who told me that an Orthodox Christian religion teacher (**вероучитель**) noted that there are church archives with registries of same-sex unions (similar

¹⁷ From a talk over the phone with Vasa from Arkadija Arhiv, who was referring to one of the trainings they lead with secondary school teachers.



¹⁸ Boswell. "OFFICE OF SAME SEX UNION," 363–370.

¹⁹ Ugrešić, "Confiscation of Memory", 26-39.

²⁰ Ivanić, *Erotska, sodomijska i skatološka narodna proza*, quoted in Dota, "PUNISHING HOMOSEXUALS IN THE YUGOSLAV ARMY," 129–143.

²¹ The Ottoman empire ruled from 14th–19th or 15h–early 20th century depending on the territory.

to marriages).¹⁷ Despite living in the far future, I don't expect to ever get a hold of this archival information. For me, glimpses into your life remain on the level of rumor, gossip, **рекла-казала**.

Following this thread, I found this same sentiment in "Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe." The author, an American gay scholar, worked on proving same-sex unions akin to homosexuality existed in medieval times. I read the Serbian Slavonic church liturgies from the 14th century, which were translated, and to a degree, interpreted. In English, they talk of same-sex unions, yet in Slavonic the word **братими** is used. A word I now understand to mean brotherhood; a bond which could be a partnership, but could equally be a friendship, a commitment to protect, or share land. I read the paragraphs asking upon the two people to kiss and commemorate the union, and I wonder whether I have any ethical ground to stand on in hoping that this was a queer practice, a step outside of the norm, a strive towards a future not set on reproduction.¹⁸ I remind myself, and by extension you, that "things with a past, particularly a shared one, are not as simple as they might appear from the perspective of the collector."¹⁹

* During the Ottoman empire as the "Turkish vice or custom"—a perversion and abuse from the side of the oppressor.^{20 21}



²² Hajduci were bandits and freedom fighters, some of whom fought Ottoman oppression. In Serbian history lessons, they are often glorified for their courage and sacrifice in the battle for independence.

²³ Škokić, "Ljubavni kôd. Ljubav i seksualnost između tradicije i znanosti," quoted in Dota, "PUNISHING HOMOSEXUALS IN THE YUGOSLAV ARMY," 129–143.

You I've only read about in one text. Yet, I'm presuming that you've only heard about the acts you do as public acts of violence, as taking over the bodies of men without question. I don't know if you ever dared to mention what makes you feel as though you are one of them.

I morph you into the history lessons I've been taught in primary school. I've never encountered you on the pages, but I let myself get carried away by the thought that during winter you house all the **хајдуци**.²² You sacrifice your safety for the possibility of a change. You do what you can to make up for that which you do not speak about. Admittedly, I allow myself to read into your life by assuming you might relate to those who had no other option but to hide.

It is known to me, that in your time in Balkan folklore, homosexuality was 'attributed to those who are "above" or "different" : people higher up on the social ladder, people from a different religion or ethnic group, the "other".'²³ The 'other' here becomes the Turk, the Muslim, the 'oppressor' or the 'traitor.'

I wonder how much you knew about this, or whether there might have been a chance that you were accepted—that no one blinked an eye.

Years later, Herzog, a psychiatrist in Zagreb, would write that in the newly found Kingdom in parts that were ruled by the Ottomans just decades before, homosexuality was "quite widespread and, so to say, rather common, without encountering any opposition

²⁴ Herzog, "Primjedbe k projektu kaznenoga zakonika sa strane psihijatrije", 19-25.

²⁵ Dota, "PUNISHING HOMOSEXUALS IN THE YUGOSLAV ANTI-FASCIST RESISTANCE ARMY," 129-143.



²⁶ Djilas, Wartime, 126-127.

²⁷ Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe A twentieth-century history*, cited in Dota, "PUNISHING HOMOSEXUALS IN THE YUGOSLAV ANTI-FASCIST RESISTANCE ARMY," 129-143.

²⁸ Broz, "Materijali Pete konferencije KPJ održane novembra 1940. u Zagrebu, Referat druga Tita 'O dosadašnjem radu i zadacima Partije'", 57-95, cited in Dota, "PUNISHING HOMOSEXUALS IN THE YUGOSLAV ANTI-FASCIST RESISTANCE ARMY," 129-143.

or moral condemnation."²⁴

- * During the Partisan times as vice committed by the bourgeoisie.²⁵

After your comrades find out that you are involved in homosexual acts, you get a chance to die honorably in battle. It is acknowledged that your seducer, a man from the bourgeoisie is the one to blame. Some in higher ranks, have not been as fortunate as you have.

I've read about you described as a "Muslim, good soldier and zealous Communist" somewhere in the region of Sandžak. Your superior, Djilas, wasn't sure what is to be done with you as "Marx and Lenin never wrote about such matters."²⁶ You were seen as the one who fell prey to an overindulgent class. You had to admit to this and were expelled from the Communist party as a result.

More broadly, the need to police party members' lives, came about because of the European conservative and fascist political parties' attempt to portray communists as "sexual offender, libertines, promoters of 'free love' and abortion, and destroyer of traditional family."²⁷

Your leader, Josip Broz Tito, established a rule for the Party to "keep track of each members intimate conduct."²⁸ To me, your life has never been solely your own, not under a magnifying glass, and not in the quarters of your bedroom.



Another you, a high-ranking official working in military intelligence are ordered to die, because as a homosexual you are easy to blackmail. To avoid the possibility of your life falling apart and damaging the movement and the nation, you are to be removed. Your name will no longer be uttered by fellow comrades.

You start of as a radio operator, an expert in wireless transmission, steadily working towards being a communication officer and then later, a captain. Once it was discovered you were involved in homosexual acts, it takes three days for the General Staff to court-martial you towards punishment. Your name was Josip Mardešić, and you were charged with "staining the honour of all the officers of the People's army who rightfully deserved the respect and admiration of the whole wide world" and "abusing your rank and position to have unhealthy sexual relationships with your subordinates, and by doing so, taking advantage of their naivety and youthful innocence." I interpret the blurry pixels of the verdict you've been given, and imagine the avalanche of turmoil you must have been under to see your own life come to an end only at the age of 24. They describe your sexuality as '**настрана**,' a literal translation of which would be sideways, not facing the proper direction. A word I, a century later, would hear used far too many times to describe anyone remotely queer.



²⁹ Schulman in *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* provides a statistic that 22 percent of Gay Krant readers in the Netherlands supported the Geert Wilders' anti-immigration party.

³⁰ Schulman, "Homonationalism." In *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, 103–132.

- * And in post-socialist times as a pathology and ideology generated by the 'rotten West.' We're back at the starting point of our concern.

There's a similarity here.. blaming a perceived other. The non-Christian other, the Ottoman other, the bourgeoisie other, the Western other. Blaming a perceived or real aggressor, while othering a marginalized group which is your in-group.

You think about how in parallel, you a non-EU citizen have seen a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric in the West. How often, immigrants are presented as anti-LGBTQ, as 'backwards-thinking.' The countries which claim to champion queer rights then try to convince queers that by not taking immigrants in, they are protecting them. They're scape-goating one group under the pretense of protecting the rights of the very people their governments continually marginalize (queer people). It's just that now, they have a reason to use these people as an excuse, as a weapon to show they are battling a just, moral fight. The country you are based in, the Netherlands, has strong ties with homonationalism, an ideology which arises in countries that have won a lot of legal rights for gays, lesbians, and in some cases trans people.²⁹ Through these rights, "they become accepted and realigned with patriotic or nationalist ideologies of their countries" and soon form an image of a perceived other, usually a person from the Global South.³⁰ Someone who could immigrate to

³¹ Todorova pointed out how the Balkans is othered by generalizing that "its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world" in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 1–20.

³² Bakic-Hayden also addressed the perception of the Balkans as perceived as inherently "violent" and Eastern Europe as "backward." in Bakic-Hayden. "Nesting Orientalisms" 917–931.

³³ Modified question taken from: Ulićević and Brković. „Trans otpornost u Crnoj Gori“, 49. Translation by me.

³⁴ Boston University, "European Voices: A Reading and Conversation With Croatian Author Dubravka Ugrešić."

their country. This ideology builds the idea that the West is a haven of queer rights and other places, like the one you come from, is *backward, primitive, barbarian*.^{31 32} These kinds of narratives reaffirm to your region, that queerness *really* is a Western phenomenon.

Who do the narratives of queer people being a product of the West benefit? Politicians looking for an easy vote from people who need a common enemy. Who else? People who truly want queer people dead or out of the country. And? To a degree, it serves a portion of the West too, the anti-queer, anti-immigration far-right. It enables them to further on homonationalist narratives about non-Western countries... and they'll be right.

What can be done to get out of the one-way street in which LGBTQ questions are considered a marker of Europeaness? And therefore, other to a local context?³³ You sit thinking of ways to counter these narratives and prepare for your long travel through history in search of queer encounters and practices: forgotten, hidden in plain sight, or erased. Despite hearing from Ugrešić that Eastern Europeans "don't plant flowers. Gardening is believing in the future," you hold onto the idea of a future.³⁴

A Past has been Denied to Us



³⁵ Opanci (plural) are the national shoe of many Balkan countries.

³⁶ Eye Filmmuseum, "Belgrado (1922)".

This is a film of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes made by Dutch film makers. It's filled with historical inaccuracies and an oriental perception of the Balkan. For example, of the title cards says, "In a few cities around the world one can encounter so many different races as in Belgrade," while only filming white inhabitants.

³⁷ Familiar other is a term coined by my friend Povilas Gegevičius. It refers to his own perspective of national identity as a Lithuanian who grew up in Belgium for a good chunk of his childhood. He uses it to describe the familiarity of an identity one does not actively live in yet remains alienated on the basis of. While I use it to address the political dynamic of perceiving eastern Europe as familiar (still European) but lesser, othered, peripheral.

As you travel back from your trip in the Balkans, you are once again stopped at border control. You find yourself being probed by the questions but ultimately let through, but instead of doing what you intended to—traveling just through space—you end up being transported to a different time.

You move, making way for the ox carts, quickly understanding that the farmers leading them have a whole invisible intersection of traffic lights by which they decide when and where to move. This cobbled stone feels familiar, similar to the one in the Skadarlija street in your hometown, Belgrade. Around you and your strange attire from almost a century later, walk packs of women in national garments, headscarves and **опанци**.³⁵ The city has way more signs in Cyrillic than it does in your era—a time when globalization didn't yet steer which script is more profitable to use for street vendors. You slow down to notice how many people have stopped to see the foreigners holding elaborate machinery and pointing, shooting. A young boy signals he would pick a fight with the cameraman and you giggle knowing that some gestures, such as inflating your chest, have stayed the same.

You observe the cameraman like a hawk, how he tries to portray an image of this city as a familiar other, Eastern-enough to be exotic, yet Western-enough to be a safe tourist destination.^{36 37}

Yet the city is not the only thing observed under a

³⁸ Jojić, "Prvi slučaj pretvaranja žene u muškarca u Beogradu", *Optimist*, 23-25. Reprinted from Politika's article from 13th October 1937.



³⁹ Highly influenced by Ariella Azoulay's *Potential Histories: Unlearning Imperialism*, I noticed a correlation between the imperial 'discovery' of new land and that of 'discovery' of usually gender-nonconforming people. An imperial prescription here is the act of labeling a people as 'new' or 'first' of their kind, the act of giving their identity a new name, instead of tying them to the lineage that was forgotten before them.

lens—you are too. Why *you*? Well, you came here, to the capital, accompanied by your brothers, in search of a new body.

You speak of your predicament to newspaper reporters, of how your family is helping to right the wrong nature has made of you. They've sold what they could in your home village of Gornje Besnice to help you.³⁸ The reporters follow you through all of your journey; finding a surgeon, arranging the visit, all the way to now, when you await for your surgery on the hospital bed. Your eyes meet the camera solemnly for a single shot, and I ask myself why must your life be turned into a sensation. At the same time, if it wasn't, I would not have found you either. Despite this, decades later, each person living outside of the norm of recognized gender and sex, would be treated as 'the first' of *their kind*.

This proclamation of 'the first of our kind' severs our relationship with past ancestors who were gender-nonconforming. 'The pursuit of new defines imperialism' and this action of constantly labeling people as new, is what I would call an imperial prescription.³⁹

These same reporters, later write about how you 'became a man' through surgery and 'cured an undeciphered sex.' They say nature has punished you, and suffering has been caused by your dual nature. I think about the joys of childhood you've been denied because of your family's shame, such

⁴⁰ Kolo is a South Slavic collective folk dance, performed by people linked in a circle, arms intertwined.

⁴¹ Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

⁴² To some degree, our bodies are never our own because we do not have the right to self-identify. Gender and sex markers legislated by our nation states, identify and by extension create our bodies for us. To read about this more, look into *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler or anything Jovan Džoli Uličević has said about self-identification.

⁴³ Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

⁴⁴ Hartman herself deals with the violence embedded in archives of trans-Atlantic slavery and reparative approaches to deal with it. Her method, critical fabulation, combines historical, archival research and fiction to make sense of the gaps and absences in these archives. She's described her work as bridging theory and narrative in "Saidiya Hartman on Working With Archives – the Creative Independent."

⁴⁵ Žegura, "Trans saveznica," 130–131.

as swimming with friends, dancing in *коло*, existing in public space.⁴⁰

Many words used to describe you in Politika's newspaper article, lurk in my memory. I see you accepting them—'strange child', 'permanently incompetent', 'weakly body', 'it'—as fact.

I picture myself sitting with you in unease, asking "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?"⁴¹ I feel guilty for needing you and your life to speak on behalf of me, to say that we are both allowed to exist in any shape or form—*that we've been here*. But the truth is, despite the article they have written about you, probably most of your life is unspeakable (and unwritable).

You might think that your body belongs to just you, but here, your body is an amalgamation of queer history. You're living through all the lives of your supposed ancestors. You are experiencing what I have been raised with, the idea that your life is not just your own.⁴²

Imagining you, I can't help but ask what Saidiya Hartman asked, "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?"^{43 44} I note the many times the newspaper article switched from him to her. Academics and activists in my timeline wondered whether you were trans or intersex.⁴⁵ From where I'm standing, nothing tells me that you weren't both. After all, gender



⁴⁶ Cerović said that those who surgically adjust their sex “cannot be normal”. Cited from Šarčević, “Rodni identitet balkanskih virdžina,” 190.

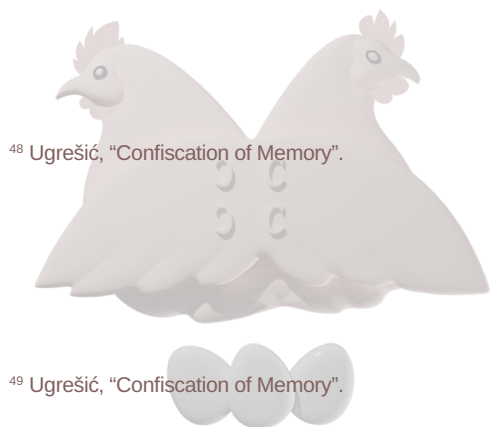
and sex are constructed and patched anew with each era. Yet difference, defiance, anomalies, our stubborn cells, they pop up in each of them.

You weren’t the only one who lived outside of the gendered norm. Virdžine, women who have sworn virginity and socially transitioned to men existed before you, in the south of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. If the patriarch of the family died and there was a lack of brothers, the eldest woman would have to take on the role of man. Along with it she would be able to go outside, down the mountainous hills, to convene and smoke with men, to work in the field, to protect and provide for the rest of the family. A myriad of previously restricted spaces were now available to them, under the pretense of giving up a future of reproduction and staying on the family’s land.

You, now a **вириџина**, have to become a firm pillar of the patriarchy. You grow into old tree bark. When I look at the photos of you, I marvel at how, without hormones, the kind of life you lived has sculpted you into masculinity.

Despite both of us being read in similar light nowadays—as an anomaly, a small, irrelevant, forgettable statistic—you might not sympathize with me. Some **вириџине**, like Stana Cerović, weren’t shy about making sexist and transphobic remarks.⁴⁶ They didn’t see anything queer about themselves. They just *were*. They just *are*. There was *nothing* to

⁴⁷ Doe, *Communing with Queer*, 26.



⁴⁸ Ugrešić, "Confiscation of Memory".

⁴⁹ Ugrešić, "Confiscation of Memory".

⁵⁰ Trans people are so often treated like the first of their kind. To find out more read Limani, "Od borbe za opstanak do aktivizma," 152–189, or Page, *Never be new again*.

discuss.

This is a reminder of how queerness deals with 'the unspeakable, whether that be horrors of violence, loss, unrecognized forms of identity...' ⁴⁷

The past of the Balkans has seen the shift of many countries, all with their own distinct memory politics. You are aware of how reality is built from archival evidence; how grand narratives are constructed to exclude a group of people that does not align with a nation's image and nation-building efforts. As Ugrešić has told you, "[t]he political battle is a battle for the territory of collective memory." ⁴⁸ She warned, not just you, but many, that the past must be articulated to become a memory. Without this articulation, the past and our collective memory become confiscated. Ugrešić highlighted how this denial of a shared past, pushed the sprawling nations of former Yugoslavia into a forced amnesia that allowed for national histories to replace what used to be a shared collective history. "Confiscated memory behaves like an incomplete body which, from time to time, suffers from the syndrome of the 'phantom limb'." ⁴⁹ Ugrešić warned you about the past's insistence, and how people who have latched on to denying it, would often encounter it creeping back in unpredictable ways.

When thinking about you, I understand that a past has been denied to me, and that in the future, people similar to us, for whom a new name might exist, will be buried anew. ⁵⁰ Considering this phantom limb, there's no wonder why so many Balkan queers search and span



⁵¹ Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

⁵² Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

⁵³ Ugrešić, "Confiscation of Memory".

⁵⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, referenced in Milački, "Once Upon a Time in Yugoslavia."

globally to find allegiances and histories to be a part of elsewhere. You've spent so much of your adolescence on Tumblr being queer in secret and making online friends. You say LGBT instead of ЛГБТ. You transliterate terms that don't even exist in your own language. You try to bridge a gap of an unknown past through the glue of a globalized queer culture.

Quite some time ago, I've encountered the question "How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future?"⁵¹ I've sat with Hartman's text, considered the suggestions of 'recruiting the past for the sake of the living' and 'interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past.'⁵² And attempted both through you.

You are wary of (my) nostalgia since its territory is largely absence.⁵³ You were anticipating encountering it on your search for queer traces in Balkan histories. But you know that nostalgia comes in many different forms. Restorative nostalgia aims for absolute truths—it never flinches. While reflective nostalgia—the one that transports you from the airport to different pasts—"operate[s] sideways" allowing for multiple and contradictory narratives to coexist. It also has the capacity to look forward.⁵⁴ Something you know you've been desperately in need of. You cannot stay here, in the past, forever.

What I can say about you through time is that: you are queer, and you are not, you are my ancestor, and you have never been that. We are both contradictions in narrative, we both break the flow of what a nation thinks it



⁵⁵ UB Gender Institute, "New Books, New Feminist Directions: 'I Am Yugoslovenka!' By Jasmina Tumbas," 12-15min.

is. The nation whose national memory *I* am supposedly a part of now rejects the collective past (of the Balkans) to which *you* belong to. The nation here, pushes away your predicament to a different neighboring national history or forgets it altogether. When I write about the Balkans, I write about a collective past, when I write about the nation, I write about a constructed and enforced, strictly narrativized and polished, national history.

Even though you upheld the patriarchy with your existence, that same ideology has abandoned you in my century. Not many in the Balkans nowadays know of virdžine, let alone do they think about them with pride. For a forgetful nation we are continual anomalies that somehow keep popping up. They want to sweep us under the rug, even when we are complicit.

You find yourself, once more transported, in a feminist circle in 1930s Belgrade. You look butch in your suit, content, as if you're getting away with something. The cigarette in your mouth pushing a light smile. By your side is a woman in a dress, your hands intertwined, gentle, a bit awkward. You used to be a graphic worker named Ljuba Petković, and you died young. This is the only information of you that I have, yet the mere photo of you fills me with joy.⁵⁵

By now, I consider myself a scavenger: in light of scarcity of archival resources, or access to them, I've turned towards reading articles of people who have seen these documents. Books and volumes address mostly the violence that people like you have endured. I embrace

⁵⁶ McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, cited in Niang, "notes on scavenging as methodology," 52–66.

⁵⁷ As addressing queer time and Eastern European time is not in the scope of this paper, please refer to "Contemporary Peripheries" by Kulpa and Mizielińska for more information on this.

⁵⁸ Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*.

⁵⁹ Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperialism*, 10–13.

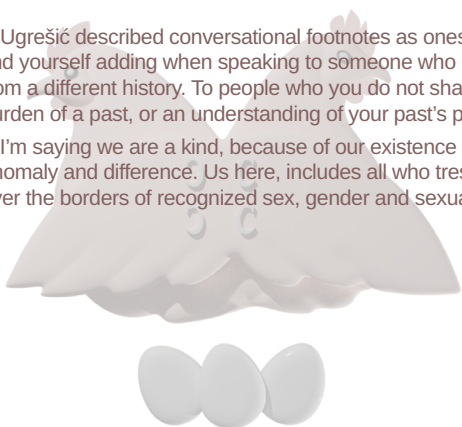
gossip, the tell-tale sign of information about you (from the past) being hidden from me (from the now). I follow the trails to academia, pop culture, and discredited sources of knowledge that are valuable to us. Scavenging as methodology, is a way of finding the elements necessary for making sense of the world. "Everything we need is already here. This encounter, this messy origin story, also captures another central aspect of scavenging: wonder."⁵⁶ You find the method I have chosen challenging, because it transports you from time to time, not allowing you to exist linearly. But histories of this kind don't comply to notion of normative time.⁵⁷

Hartman has warned me that "the loss of stories sharpens a hunger for them", that I might want to 'fill in the gaps' and 'provide closure where there is none.'⁵⁸ I'm learning with you that the past doesn't have to justify and narrativize our existence as queer people. We must allow conflicting narratives to exist in our examination of the past, acknowledging that our existences can be weaponized even when we align with the nation's agenda, ideology or imperial prescriptions of us. These conflicting narratives can give us a possibility for 'unlearning the processes of destruction that became possible: the knowledge, norms, procedures, and routines through which worlds are destroyed' to bring about imperial categories such as citizenships.⁵⁹ Citizenship requires citizens to become complicit agents who reinforce imperial categories through accepting the role of citizen, the grand narratives and the histories the nation remembers, and the laws and regulations which

⁶⁰ Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperialism*, 34–38.

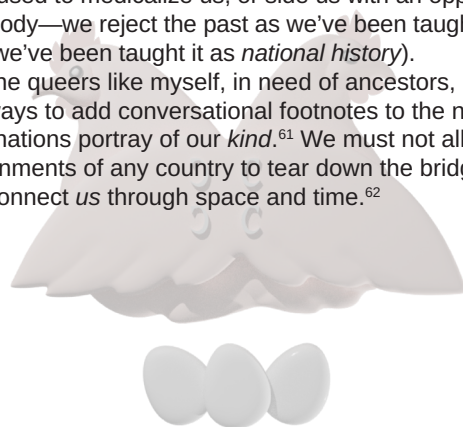
⁶¹ Ugrešić described conversational footnotes as ones you find yourself adding when speaking to someone who comes from a different history. To people who do not share a burden of a past, or an understanding of your past's parallels.

⁶² I'm saying we are a kind, because of our existence in anomaly and difference. Us here, includes all who trespass over the borders of recognized sex, gender and sexuality.

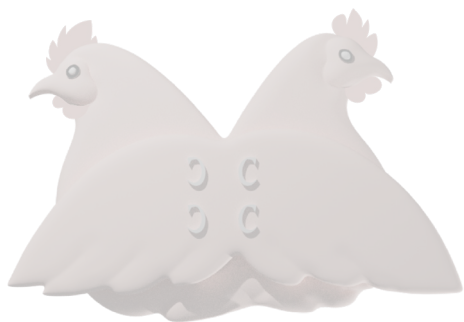


'protect' the citizen and their entitlement to land.⁶⁰ The knowledge, norms and procedures we must unlearn are also the ones that designated that a citizen must exist within a prescribed binary gendered norm. Through this unlearning we reverse the imperialistic prescriptions put upon queer ancestors to separate us, we unlearn every word used to medicalize us, or side us with an oppressive body—we reject the past as we've been taught it (and we've been taught it as *national history*).

And the queers like myself, in need of ancestors, must find ways to add conversational footnotes to the narratives nations portray of our *kind*.⁶¹ We must not allow governments of any country to tear down the bridges that connect *us* through space and time.⁶²



A Political Imaginary: Rendering the Past Back with Us in It



⁶³ This is most true of anti-trans discourse within the Balkan LGBT community which is evidently taken from terfs from the UK. For more info read Bilić, „(Post)socijalističke nevolje s rodom“, 254–259.

⁶⁴ Hadžiristić, “Sevdah na kvir način”, 366–387.

After these travels with you, I am left to answer the question ‘which queer Balkan pasts help us imagine the future differently?’ with you in mind.

I’m inclined to say, the pasts that irk us to think; maybe the church wasn’t that harsh, maybe not only men and women existed, maybe families didn’t give up on their kin, maybe the governing body didn’t banish all of us. We’ve traveled through some of them together here (*you* and *I*).

You might ask me, how are we to relate to these pasts?

We need to continually reclaim the pasts we have been forcefully pushed out of. It is necessary to engage with the baggage of Balkan cultural specificity and use a language more suitable for it (both linguistically and artistically), instead of flattening out queer existence into a globalized Western queer past. Because when Western queer culture is copy-pasted into a region without modification, it also brings about the anti-queer discourse surrounding it.⁶³

The musician Božo Vrećo, who sings traditional Bosnian sevdah, authentically relates to a local history while being visibly queer. He doesn’t use the vocabulary cishet people in the Balkans consider Western. He doesn’t say I am trans, or non-binary or gay, he says “I am both a man and a woman, and I love men.”⁶⁴ In his song *Elma*, he addressed the trauma of the Yugoslav civil war and the friend he lost in it. By using a traditional medium to articulate the hurt of the past he binds the existence of people like himself in it.

⁶⁵ For visual examples, look at the work of Aurora Obscene in relation to Yugoslavia, or traditional values, or Dita von Bill in national attire.



⁶⁶ Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperialism*, 17.

And he's not the only one to do so. Numerous drag queens have worn national Balkan attire and built worlds with them, or addressed the legacy of a decade long war.⁶⁵ This is not to say that reclaiming and appropriating traditional mediums and genres is the only way to make room for ourselves in the pasts of our region, but it is one such way.

There is no queer future in the Balkans without articulating collective memory into a shared past, and unlearning imperial prescriptions by rendering the past back with us in it. We must unlearn "the divisions of time and space, and the differentiations between populations" that were brought about by imperialism and reproduced in nation-states.⁶⁶

Our vehicles of travel to the pasts must allow for the porosity of fiction and doubt. For the possibility of asking: *was the past really like this?* Here, we've traveled using words. In your mind's eye you've conjured up the spaces you've found yourself in. Yet, what you might see if you follow me further, is rendered virtual worlds built from the places we've traveled to.

The unspeakability of queer pasts, or identities that go beyond what we know of now, necessitate immersion in attempting to resurrect the pasts. What I cannot put in words, I invite you to experience by entering the three-dimensional render. Each rendered space only serves as a signifier of a potential past, leaving space for you to imagine the rest.

While reconstructing archival footage through 3D mod-

⁶⁷ Hartman, *Intimate History Radical Narrative*.

⁶⁸ Azoulay goes at far to say that “The thrust-forward rhythm of the click of the cameras shutter acts like a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed, and made appropriable by those who become its rights holders.” and describes the camera-shutter as an imperial technology.

⁶⁹ Duong, “What does queer theory teach us about intersectionality?”, 370–386, cited in Niang, “notes on scavenging as methodology,” 52–66.

eling, it dawns on me that mine is the job of interpreting pixels, of building your world while squinting to see. I allow myself to imagine what happens outside of the frame, something Hartman posed as the ‘concern [of whether] it is possible to annotate and transform the image and to liberate her and us from its frame.’⁶⁷

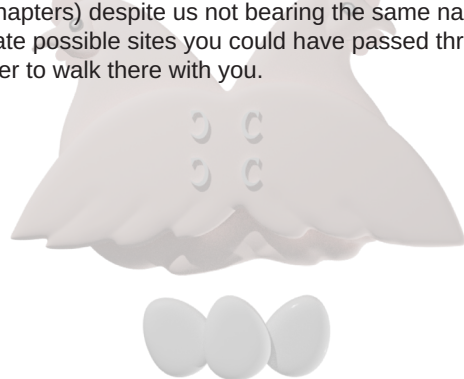
The virtual dimensions of the render allow you to see more than the perspective of a fixed, definitive, and in many ways ‘oppressive lens.’ The narrative the photographer, videographer, director, or any such other person, wanted you to have.⁶⁸ When you walk through the render, fabulation becomes a shared practice, one that is an act of world-making that happens in conversation between you, I and the rendered world (of the past). “Worldmaking conjures up and enacts impossible futures in the present, rendering them possible. It refers to an ‘ongoing collective practice of enacting “the radical aspirations of queer culture building.”’⁶⁹ Each time a computer renders the model into existence, we are bringing the past back to converse with it. With this act, we allow ourselves to imagine different futures that could be conditioned by these pasts.

The renders include the elements from scavenged Balkan pasts, as a way to appropriate, signal, and add conversational footnotes to the globalized view of a shared queer past. To articulate a potential collective Balkan memory we have been denied naming and claiming. They are patchworked from so many different sources, and include conflicts, uncertainty, glitches. The



resolution is purposefully low to reach more people than an archival recording could. As I have done while examining the court documents of Josip Mardešić, you can read into low resolution, and by doing so, open a space for wondering what lays between each pixel and vertice, each signifier of a past.

Through critical fabulation, fictioning in different mediums, I allow myself to imagine *you* (from the previous two chapters) despite us not bearing the same name. I recreate possible sites you could have passed through, in order to walk there with you.



Conclusion

⁷⁰ The White House, "Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government."



⁷¹ Lambda Legal, "Identity Documents for Trans, Nonbinary, Gender-Nonconforming, and Intersex People - Lambda Legal."

At the time of writing this, the failure of homonationalist ideology springs up. Trump, the current president of the USA, issued a sex and gender executive order by which the names and adjusted gender-markers of trans, non-binary, gender-nonconforming and intersex people will not be respected when re-issuing expired passports.⁷⁰ This makes travel for these people more dangerous, by virtue of how the border examines the *truthfulness* of a passport.

Do you look like your passport photo? Do you look like a man or woman? Does your appearance match your government-legislated gender marker?

This order not only threatens to limit the movement of these citizens but is exercising the exact imperial politics of oppression that we started our thorny journey with, those at the intersection of gender and national identity. The very people it claimed to protect by limiting the flows of migration are the ones it is now attacking instead. We are witnessing the generation of a future past, which we will be encouraged to forget, and sever our relationship from later on.

"Remember that you do not need the government's permission to exist."⁷¹ This sentence sticks with you, as you are reminded through our time travel that no queer benefits from aligning their interest with a national ideology. Queers in nations which are at the grips of a homonationalist agenda, are unfortunately witnessing the rights they have fought for—for so long—be stripped away. We must nurture wonder in relation to pasts that help

⁷² Bakic-Huyden, Nesting Orientalisms.

⁷³ This is very anecdotally presented by Slavoj Žižek in the video "Where is Balkan".



us to remember that we must choose unyielding anti-imperialistic solidarity. All Balkan queers who strive for *Europeanness* must ask themselves who do we alienate in our attempt to un-alienate ourselves? Just because we are othered, doesn't mean that we cannot other further. Bakic-Huyden emphasizes this with the concept of nesting-orientalisms, by which a region that is more eastern and southern than its neighbor is perceived as more primitive or conservative.⁷² This internalized reflex to other and Orientalize (for the sake of changing where the border of Europe begins, and Balkans ends) enables the enhanced forgetfulness of queer Balkan pasts. It does so because the demarcation of the Balkans is constantly pushed onto othered neighbors (first the Slavic other, then the Orthodox other, then the Muslim other), no one wanting to claim its messy history.⁷³ And the queers end up looking outwards, eager to belong to a global past.

There is no queer future without solidarity, without realizing the ways in which nations use queer people and with what ease they forget about them once they've gotten what they need. You might recall one of your past lives as a virdžina, of aligning with a national ideology, only to later be almost but erased by a cultural amnesia.

Queer pasts exist everywhere, despite national histories obfuscating, erasing, or forgetting to mention them. Your distrust of your nation should grow, even when you receive the rights you have fought for, you must ask who has been othered in order for you to gain a citizen status.



It is the benefit of Western and Eastern nations to keep us separated, to make us other each other on their behalf. We need transnational solidarity and must resist flattening out our pasts into a singular one. It is necessary to cultivate difference and resist pushing an imperial framework of what is considered a history, a citizen, gender, sex and an anomaly onto others. We must speak to our nations in the language they might understand, to say we have been here, and our stubborn cells will continue to exit, persist and cause trouble along the way (for historians, archivists, passport security personnel and the rest). This language is the conversation we have been sharing. The one we speculated, wondered and made worlds with, rendered the past back with us in it, sown ourselves back into the fabric of a time we were excluded from, and added conversational footnotes to point out where we were taken out, or labeled new.

Now, at a time of rising fascism, we must tend to the past with a critical lens, unlearn the imperial prescriptions of national histories, and rather than despair, cultivate wonder.

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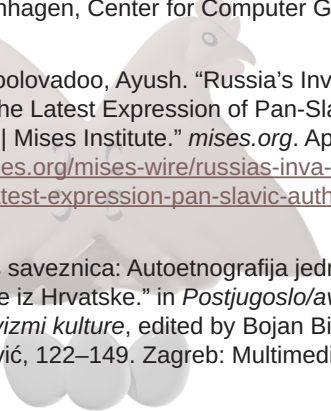
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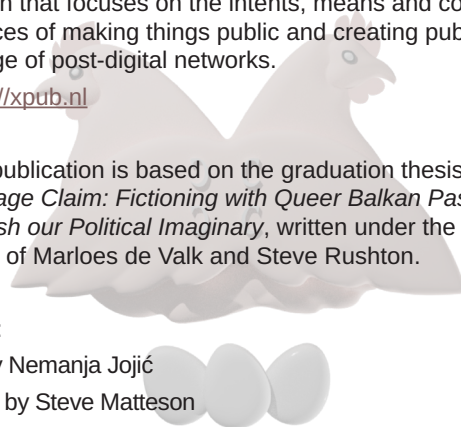
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