

CHAPTER SEVEN

UKRAINIAN QUEER CULTURE: THE DIFFICULT BIRTH

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The road to the development of modern queer culture was not an easy one anywhere on our planet. Historical and anthropological research demonstrates that while there is a rich spectrum of queer cultural practices in traditional societies worldwide, modern queer identities and cultural practices as we know them developed primarily in metropolitan urban environments.¹ This has created a unique set of challenges for nations with a colonized, stateless status in the 19th and 20th centuries. Using Ukraine as a case study, this paper looks at the complexities of the development of a

¹ Historical research specific to Europe indicates that such subcultural communities began forming in larger urban centres as early as the 17th century. See the pioneering anthology *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Lesbian and Gay Past*. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (eds.). New York: Meridian, 1990, and also David Higgs (ed.). *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Some historians, such as Guido Ruggiero writing on Renaissance-era Venice, argue for the existence of visible distinct subcultures several centuries earlier (see Ruggiero, Guido. *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For a panoramic survey of the sociocultural roles of homosexuality, from the ancient world through the Enlightenment era, see Crompton, Louis. *Homosexuality and Civilization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. For a more recent approach seeking to complicate and challenge this narrative, see Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona and Erickson, Bruce (eds.). *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Within the Russian Empire, distinct subcultures associated with male and female homosexuality began to coalesce in larger cities between the 1860s and the 1880s (see Healey, Dan. *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, chaps. 1–2).

queer culture during the shaping of a modern national culture over the past two hundred years, as the quest for queer self-expression intersects with, and often comes into conflict with, the construction of dominant cultural paradigms. What are the roles of creative intellectuals in the development of modern queer cultures in the context of colonized societies? How is this development affected by the situation in which the national language faces obstacles to its public use and is stigmatized as being allegedly backward and second-rate? How does a queer cultural producer face a situation when her or his project is deemed suspect both by the ruling imperial/totalitarian ideologies as well as by the dominant trends of the national resistance movement? What are the specific challenges of the unique overlap of the post-Soviet and post-colonial condition for the development of queer cultures in recent years? How do these challenges affect the ties of a formerly colonized nation with the former colonial power, as well as hopes for European integration? What aspects of the global LGBTQ rights movement, and the role of cultural producers within it, can be strategically appropriated in the post-Soviet post-colonial context? How can imperialist practices be avoided in the interaction between globalized queer culture and the local/national context? What is the role of literary translation in developing a new queer canon in the national language? How does one approach rethinking the relationship between “high” and mass culture specifically in the queer post-Soviet/post-colonial context?

The case of Ukraine provides unique insights into these and related questions. Ukraine recently moved to a place of prominence in global news as a result of mass pro-democracy protests that eventually led to the collapse of the corrupt and repressive Yanukovych government. However, the hope associated with the momentum of the transformation became mixed with the profound trauma of unprecedented suffering and loss of life during the later stage of the Euromaidan when, for the first time in Ukraine’s post-Soviet history, political clashes led to civilian deaths. The trauma intensified shortly thereafter with the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the mixture of civil war and escalating Russian intervention in the Donbas region. What could constructive strategies for queer activism and queer cultural producers within this ongoing crisis be? How do we imagine the future of queer culture in Ukraine? These questions have become especially pertinent now since despite the promise of change articulated by the Euromaidan Revolution, Kyiv Pride was cancelled in 2014, and the equality march portion of Kyiv Pride 2015, which took place on June 6, although successful, faced numerous threats and violence from militant extremists that resulted in injuries, mostly to the police, but also to some of the marchers.

Traditions and Origins

In 1991 Ukraine became the first ex-Soviet country to get rid of sodomy laws, a few weeks before the official dissolution of the USSR. This happened without much discussion and caught the nascent local LGBTQ liberation movement by surprise. Moreover, the decision was not communicated effectively across the country and, especially in locations outside the major metropolitan centres, members of the LGBTQ community continued experiencing intimidation and harassment by the police—a practice long established during the Soviet era.

As in other post-Soviet nations, it would be difficult to speak of the existence of a coherent LGBTQ community in Ukraine at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union. This problematizes the possibility of speaking of a queer culture. During the recovery from a history of stigmatization and institutional discrimination, however, we see several key aspects of a dynamic cultural development.

To begin with, there is the recognition that sexuality and sexual orientation could indeed be grounds for building a community. This is no place to rehearse in detail the arguments Foucault makes in *The History of Sexuality*, or the views of pioneers of the gay rights movement, like Karl Heinrich Ulrichs or Magnus Hirschfeld. What is crucial here, however, is a recognition that sexual orientation is an identity marker that could be seen as linked to cultural practices, shared histories, and community formation. As with other communities, this community is of necessity “imagined,” in the sense that Benedict Anderson meant it. In other words, it is a horizontal community that requires a certain consensus of its members and a shared set of cultural referents, helped in their dissemination by media accessible to the community. It also requires a set of certain borders that help imagine both belonging and non-belonging.

Here, of course, we come to the challenge of squaring the development of LGBT communities with those of national identities and cultures. This requires thinking of homosexuality and queerness as simultaneously global and local, and seeking to understand the complexity of interacting with developing nation states in the era of globalization, especially in postcolonial societies.

As Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan write in the introduction to their influential volume, *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*:

[the position] occupied by queer sexualities and cultures in our globalized world as a mediating figure between nation and diaspora, home and the

state, the local and the global [...] has not only been a site of dispossession, it has also been a creative site for queer agency and empowerment.²

The challenge is to embrace and creatively utilize this resistant “globalization from below” and in the process re-imagine national cultures. A productive case study to consider in this respect, as recently explored by Kevin Moss, is provided by Croatia. As Moss notes in his article, recent critiques by some Western-based scholars who “argue that claims for tolerance of LGBT identities reproduce Orientalizing discourse that establishes (Western) Europe as the wiser, more progressed culture to be imitated by local, more backward peoples,” result in an even more problematic “refusal to allow local LGBT citizens to identify as they choose.” “In fact,” he continues, “the critics of homonationalism erase local Central and East European queer experience and ignore Central and Eastern Europe in their analysis [...] It is because the LGBT activists ‘challenge the traditionally heteronormative boundaries of national belonging, asserting that they too, although both ‘gay’ and globally connected, are members of the Nation,’ that the right-wing nationalists react with increasing violence.”³

Ukraine, the largest nation in Eastern Europe outside Russia, entered modernity with a complex predicament: while persons who identified as Ukrainians constituted an overwhelming majority on its territory, as they were dominant in rural areas and small towns, they were, however, a minority in all the larger cities, whether in the parts of Ukraine ruled by Russians or by the Habsburg Empire. As elsewhere in stateless nations of the region, there was a steady tendency of migration to urban centres and upward social mobility which was associated with assimilation into the dominant imperial culture in all its aspects, including linguistic. National Ukrainian culture was stereotypically associated with rural and archaic cultural elements.

These stereotypes were resolutely challenged by several writers and artists associated with Modernist movements in Ukraine who sought to discard this simplistic understanding of national culture. Their pioneering

² Cruz-Malavé, Arnaldo and Manalansan, Martin F. Introduction: Dissident Sexualities/Alternative Globalisms, in: Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds.). *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York University Press, 2002, p. 1–2.

³ See Moss, Kevin. Split Europe: Homonationalism and Homophobia in Croatia, in Philip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte (eds.). *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 213–14 [212–32], quoting Dorottya Rédei in the final sentence.

efforts, that took place from the 1890s through the 1920s, were then suppressed for another half century when, in the Stalinist Soviet context, many of them were silenced and even physically eliminated, and the Ukrainian nation-building discourse outside the Soviet Union took a decidedly conservative turn. Only in the early 1990s, and frequently through the efforts of straight allies of the LGBT community, these earlier steps began to receive greater recognition.

It is highly symbolic that these efforts were spearheaded by the founder of contemporary feminist literary scholarship in Ukraine, Salomea (Solomiia) Pavlychko. In 1991, half a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she published her groundbreaking essay, *Chy potribna ukrains'komu literaturoznavstvu feministychna shkola?* (*Does Ukrainian Literary Scholarship Need a Feminist School?*), which launched a powerful school of feminist literary criticism in Ukraine.⁴ In her work Pavlychko, trained as a scholar of Anglo-American literature, can, among other influences, be seen building on a classic essay by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship*,⁵ which outlines the dilemmas of authorship for writing women. Gilbert and Gubar proceed by emphasizing the otherness of the writing woman within the literary tradition through challenging Harold Bloom's theory of literary history that postulates the artist's "anxiety of influence," the "warfare of fathers and sons," as the key to its dynamics.⁶ They argue that in reaction to the hegemonic masculine authority of the tradition, the female poet experiences an "'anxiety of authorship'—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate and destroy her"; the female artist, they continue, "must first struggle against the effects of socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even [...] self-annihilating." She has to react to the tradition with a revision that is far more radical than that performed by her male counterpart—frequently and actively searching for a female tradition which, "far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible."⁷ Hence for women writers and artists, and, I would argue, for artists representing other non-hegemonic identities (in

⁴ *Slovo i chas*, no. 6, 1991, p. 10–15.

⁵ Included in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984 [1979], p. 45–92.

⁶ See Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

⁷ *Infection in the Sentence*, p. 49.

terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.), a crucial step is to seek out allies and precursors that can be seen as hallmarks of an alternative, resistant canon.

In this respect Pavlychko's arguably boldest and most memorable move was to radically reinterpret the figures of Ukraine's two leading women writers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lesia Ukraïнка (1871–1913) and Ol'ha Kobylians'ka (1863–1942). It was a project of feminist reevaluation and reappropriation of these two authors who have long been part of the national canon but who found their legacy distorted as a result of this process of canonization. Her bold move helped put feminist literary scholarship at the forefront of the national cultural debate in the mid-1990s. The publication of Solomiia Pavlychko's reading of the lives and works of these two remarkable women, later incorporated into her book, *Dyskurs modernizmu v Ukraïns'kii literaturi* (*The Discourse on Modernism in Ukrainian Literature*), produced a commotion in the national media, as Pavlychko emphasized the gynocentric worldview informing the writing of the two authors and their explorations of female bodily experiences, sexuality among them. The more conservative camp of cultural commentators was shocked in particular by her drawing attention to the strongly homoerotic elements in Ukraïнка and Kobylians'ka's intense and passionate friendship. These elements are present in the surviving correspondence between them that began in 1899 and lasted until Ukraïнка's death from tuberculosis fourteen years later, as well as in homoerotic motifs in their published work, most notably in Kobylians'ka's story, *Valse mélancolique* (pub. 1898), which focuses on a passionate friendship between three independent and open-minded young intellectual women.⁸

Pavlychko's "outing" of Ukraine's two greatest women writers, as the publication of her study was interpreted in the Ukrainian media, became one of the biggest cultural news stories in Ukraine in the 1990s. In the

⁸ See Pavlychko, Solomiia. *Dyskurs modernizmu v Ukraïns'kii literaturi*. 2nd ed. Kyiv: Lybid', 1999. Part I (pp. 25–94). The first edition of this book came out in 1997. A version of this reading was published as *Modernism vs. Populism in Fin-de-Siècle Ukrainian Literature: A Case of Gender Conflict*. Trans. Rob de Lossa, in Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester (eds.). *Engendering Slavic Literatures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 83–103. See also my entry on Kobylians'ka in Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon. *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II*. New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 242–44, as well as the post on Kobylians'ka by Olga Kerziouk at the European Studies blog of the British Library: <http://british-library.typepad.co.uk/european/2013/11/valse-m%C3%A9lancolique-with-olha-kobylianska.html>.

course of her discussion of the evolving Ukrainian discourse on modernism, Pavlychko consistently draws attention to the role politics of gender and sexuality played in the work of major Ukrainian authors, both women and men. Her final book was published posthumously, and is a critical biography of Ahatanhel Kryms'kyi (1871–1942) who was an important early modernist writer and Ukraine's leading Orientalist scholar and whose life ended tragically in the Gulag. In it Pavlychko places the construction of gender and sexuality at the centre of her argument by insisting that the impact of Kryms'kyi's psychosexual traumas, stemming to a large extent from his repressed homosexuality, played a key role in determining his literary and scholarly career, as well as his nationalist politics. She finds the keys to understanding Kryms'kyi in the evolving collection of his Orientalist poetry, *Pal'move hillia* (*Palm Leaves*, 1901, 1908, 1922) and his semi-autobiographical novel, *Andrii Lahovs'kyi*, which was published unfinished in 1905, and only published in its entirety in 1972. In her study, she draws a convincing parallel between the thematic and aesthetic concerns of Kryms'kyi's two key works and those of the pioneering Russian gay writer, Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936). Her focus is mostly on Kuzmin's groundbreaking novel, *Wings* (pub. 1906), and his poetry cycle, *Alexandrian Songs* (although Kryms'kyi wrote his novel before Kuzmin, and there is no record of personal acquaintance or contacts between the two authors).⁹

The next major milestone identified by Pavlychko is associated with the 1920s and the so-called “executed renaissance” (“rozstriliane vidrodzhennia”), a flowering of Ukrainian culture in the early days after the Revolution that was brutally cut short by Stalinist terror. In particular, Pavlychko highlights the theme of sexuality in the work of several writers who sought to create new modern urbanist Ukrainian prose; Valerian Pidmohyl'nyi (1901–1937) and V. Domontovych (the pen name of Viktor Petrov, 1894–1969). In the case of the former, it was an interest in 19th-century French literature (especially Balzac and Maupassant), as well as a fascination with Freudianism that brought Pidmohyl'nyi to discuss homosexuality (interestingly, not so much in his own fictional writing, but in critical essays about other authors, especially the 19th-century classic

⁹ See Pavlychko, Solomiia. *Natsionalizm, seksual'nist', oriientalizm: Skladnyi svit Ahatanhela Kryms'koho* [Nationalism, Sexuality, Orientalism: The Complex World of Ahatanhel Kryms'kyi]. Kyiv: Osnovy, 2000, esp. the introduction and Part I, pp. 12–42 and 43–154 respectively. Pavlychko died in a tragic accident on New Year's Eve, 1999. Her untimely death dealt a major blow to Ukrainian intellectual life.

realist author Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi¹⁰). However, an even more radical and fascinating case is presented by V. Domontovych. As Pavlychko notes, in his novel, *Doktor Serafikus* (written 1928–29, published in exile in 1947), we see the first “posing of the question of love between two men in the Ukrainian context” in a work of literature.¹¹ While this is but one of the many plot lines in the novel, its presence in a work that draws a very vivid and memorable portrait of Kyiv intelligentsia in the 1910s–1920s is hugely consequential.

As in the case of other East European nations that came under Soviet rule, the diaspora, or émigré, community provided a possibility for continuing free development. It is true, however, that criticism was often advanced of the strictures for models of national culture dominant in the diaspora, most cogently by the great Polish émigré author, Witold Gombrowicz, in his work, *Diary*, and his novel *Trans-Atlantyck*. It was, however, only in the context of the diaspora that his devastating critique and radical openness to the new possibilities of what he called *synczyzna* (“land of the sons,” as opposed to “fatherland”), became fully possible, including the outspoken presence of queer elements within that culture.

Between the core territory, which was under repressive and stigmatizing Soviet rule, and the diaspora, whose aesthetic and political views skewed towards the conservative throughout much of the 20th century, Ukrainian culture created few opportunities for exploring queer themes. Interestingly, when it did happen it often came through translations of major works of world literature into Ukrainian or through projects masquerading as translations. The most important instance of the latter can be found in the work of the leading Ukrainian female poet in the diaspora, Emma Andiiivs'ka (Andiyewska, b. 1931). In two of her collections, *Ryba i rozmir* (*Fish and Dimension*, 1961) and *Khvyli* (*Waves*, 2002), she included beautifully executed and erotically charged cycles of poems presented as translations of two invented gay male poets—a Cavafy-like early Modernist Greek author, Aristodimos Likhnos, in the former, and a classical Persian one, Khalid Khatami, in the latter.

¹⁰ For more on these two authors, see two studies by Maxim Tarnawsky: *Between Reason and Irrationality: The Prose of Valerijan Pidmohyl'nyj*. University of Toronto Press, 1994, and *The All-Encompassing Eye of Ukraine: Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi's Realist Prose*. University of Toronto Press, 2015.

¹¹ *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrains'kii literature*. 2nd ed., p. 227; on Pidmohyl'nyi and Freudianism, see p. 260ff.

Challenges of the Post-Soviet Period

The rebirth of uncensored and innovative cultural practices in the late 1980s created a window of opportunity in Ukraine, as elsewhere in the region, to explore a wide range of themes, including queer ones. Yet for a variety of reasons this path remained rather thorny. For mainstream cultural producers this remained either a taboo topic or a source of cheap titillation. The LGBT community itself remained fragmented and deeply underground, although the first Ukrainian gay periodical, *Odyn z nas (One of Us)*, was launched in 1994 and continued to publish for twenty years. (It is now on a, hopefully temporary, hiatus for financial reasons.) While there was a strong interest in LGBT topics in the nascent field of gender studies and feminist scholarship, here too there were many divisions and fractures. I explored some of these challenges in Chapter 8 of my book, *Mapping Post Communist Cultures*, in particular the problematic argument, advanced by a group of Russophone scholars based in Kharkiv, that Ukrainian culture (understood by many of them in rather reductionist and colonialist terms) was both misogynist and homophobic, while Russophone culture for them represented a path to global engagement. By contrast, a group of feminist and gender-focused scholars embraced the liberationist anti-colonial vision of national culture-construction, and argued for diversity and inclusion (with Pavlychko spearheading this trend). Growing international ties led to increased contact and familiarity with the evolution of LGBT culture and the LGBT rights struggle elsewhere in Eastern Europe and around the world. Here contact with the experience of immediate neighbours within the region became particularly crucial. Thus queer cultural products from countries like Poland or Slovenia, when they appeared in the Ukrainian context, became arguably even more consequential than those from Western Europe or North America.

Queer texts pose a particularly unique set of challenges for translators. In his influential 1998 article, *Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer*, Keith Harvey focuses on a number of challenges posed by literary texts that draw on traditions of self-articulation within the gay community, stemming from:

a cluster of factors that go beyond close attention to the source text and involve cultural and even autobiographical issues for the translator. These issues include: (a) the existence, nature and visibility of *identities* and *communities* predicated upon same-sex object choice in the target culture; (b) the existence or absence of an established *gay literature* in the target culture; (c) the stated *gay objectives* (if retrievable) inherent in the

undertaking of the translation and the publication of the translation (for example, whether the text is to be part of a gay list of novels); (d) the *sexual identity* of the translator and his or her relation to a gay subcultural group, its identities, codes and political project.¹²

In this article, Harvey focuses specifically on the tradition of “camp talk” (verbal performance including parodying and exaggerated reimagining of stereotypical femininity) which is frequently contrasted with normalizing behavioural strategies that are associated with being “in the closet” or with a desire to blend into mainstream society. As Harvey demonstrates, camp talk can be used either as a strategy of othering a character in the text or as a defiant strategy of affirmation and resistance by creating “ironic distance around all semiotic practice, constituting devices of ‘defamiliarization,’” signaling “a suspicion of all encodings of sincerity.” Additionally, they “reinforce gay solidarity between interlocutors” (407). In his research, Harvey focuses on examples of English to French and French to English translations, where complications arise due to the feature of French culture whereby “gayness—construed as a defining property of a distinct group of human beings—conflicts in France with the philosophy of the universal subject inherited from the Enlightenment” (415). As a result, an additional macro-level challenge is created for rendering such polyvalent, code-blending textual elements. These specific challenges, faced by translators, are similar to those of displaced/diaspora gay persons in the process of reconstituting their identities, such as those of Filipino gay men in New York described in the work of the anthropologist Martin Manalansan.¹³ In the Slavic context, arguably the best-known example of the challenge of cultural transfer associated with the traditions of camp talk can be found in the work of the Polish writer, Michał Witkowski (b. 1975), especially in his debut novel, *Lubiewo* (2004), which challenges the normalization and accommodation strategies by the reevaluation of socialist-era camp talk and the behaviour of an older generation of Polish gay men. This book presents formidable challenges to a translator, and we are fortunate to have the Ukrainian translation, *Khtyvnia* (pub. 2006), ambitiously taken on by the Ukrainian writer and translator, Andriy Bondar (b. 1974). Bondar is a straight ally of

¹² Harvey, Keith. *Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer. The Translator*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1998), p. 296.

¹³ See Manalansan, Martin F. IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, and Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan (eds.). *Queer Globalizations*.

the LGBTQ community who in essence had to invent a Ukrainian-language camp gay slang as it might have sounded in the 1970s.

Another important avenue for change came through the world of cinema. Paradoxically, even in the Soviet era some foreign films with decidedly queer sensibilities opened in wide release. Most famously, perhaps, *Some Like It Hot*, whereas others, like *Cabaret*, although released, were “de-gayed” through the dubbing into Russian and the editing out of undesirable scenes. The post-Soviet period brought many more international films that broached queer topics onto Ukrainian screens, and in 2001 the Kyiv-based international film festival, *Molodist*’, introduced an LGBTQ programme, modeled on the Berlin Film Festival’s Teddy, which got the name *Soniachnyi zaichyk* (Sunny Bunny). The rethinking of Ukraine’s own film history helped bring the fate of Ukraine’s greatest film director of the post-World War II era, Serhii Paradzhanov, into public discourse. Paradzhanov was persecuted under Soviet-era sodomy laws after his arrest in 1973.

Finally, it was the rethinking of Ukraine’s modernist legacy, in literature as well as film, associated with the Odessa-based VUFKU film studio in the 1920s, that gave us the most accomplished queer-themed Ukrainian novel so far, Ivan Kozlenko’s *Tanzher* (*Tangiers*, 2007). This ambitious novel, and so far Kozlenko’s only one, overlays two bisexual love triangles, one set in the 1920s, the other today, both taking place in the artistic milieu of Odessa. In this openly and provocatively intertextual work, Kozlenko reaches out to both innovative Ukrainian writers and filmmakers from the 1920s as well as to international classic and contemporary authors, from Gertrude Stein to Michael Cunningham. This text has attracted relatively little international attention so far and in my opinion deserves far greater recognition.

The milestone of Ukrainian queer culture-building that has received the greatest renown so far came in 2009. In September of that year something unprecedented in the history of publishing in independent Ukraine took place. Four events held to commemorate the publication of a literary anthology resulted in violent protests, physical attacks, and vandalism. The first event was a press conference on September 10, in L’viv on the premises of the Zaxid.net information agency in conjunction with the L’viv Book Forum, which for many years has been Ukraine’s most important book fair and literary festival. Several young men in the audience attacked the presenters of the anthology, which included a representative of the publishing house, two of the three coeditors, one of the translators, and one of the authors featured in it. They destroyed books and microphones, broke glasses, and pelted the presenters with tomatoes

and mayonnaise. Police, when called, at first declined to intervene and restrain the vandals, and when they did, acted rather half-heartedly.¹⁴

The next day, the festival programme included readings by authors featured in the anthology. This time several aggressive youths tried to break into the building of the theatre where the reading was taking place. Given the course of the previous day's events, security had been increased. Nevertheless, two of the vandals managed to break into the hall where the reading was taking place and tried attacking one of the poets, who in this case fought back and helped subdue the attacker before the attacker was escorted out. In the building's foyer and by the police cars outside, the protesters fought the theatre's private security guards, while the police again took a "wait and see" approach.

Two weeks later the anthology was also presented in Kyiv. The first event was held on September 24 at Ye Bookstore near the opera house—a location that in recent years has become one of the leading venues for book presentations and readings. The event was billed as a public debate and included Mariia Maierchyk, an anthropologist working in gender studies who wrote the afterword to the anthology, as well as one of Ukraine's most respected senior literary scholars, Tamara Hundorova. Given the history of what had happened in L'viv, police were called, but initially remained outside the building. Once again, a group of young men doused the presenters with water, overturned tables, and destroyed books. It transpired later that the men were activists of the Kyiv branch of the extreme-right *Svoboda* ["Freedom"] party.¹⁵ They were restrained by other guests at the reading and taken away by the police; later another young man tried to spray ground black pepper at the presenters but got most of it on himself. Still later, aggressive youths attacked a group of people leaving the discussion by the subway station.

The next day another event took place during which the anthology and the events surrounding it were discussed at Ya Gallery, run by the rock musician and entrepreneur Pavlo Hudimov. Due to security measures, no disruption took place, but later, in the middle of the night, the gallery's window was smashed with a brick and its wall was defaced with graffiti. Four days later, again in the middle of the night, arsonists set the gallery on fire.

What is this book that generated such persistent violent protests, even if those protests were undertaken by relatively small groups of people?

¹⁴ For details, see <http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1252781733>.

¹⁵ Proudly described in the blog of a *Svoboda* activist: <http://bilozerska.livejournal.com/174838.html>.

How can a book generate such an aggressive, violent desire to destroy it and attack the presenters?

The book is a slim volume of about 150 pages. Its content is comprised of poetry and prose by contemporary authors from Europe and the US (altogether thirty authors from fifteen countries); a prefatory essay and a scholarly afterword accompany the literary selections. The bullying response by groups of thugs was caused by the fact that this is an anthology of lesbian/gay/bisexual and queer writing; indeed, the first such anthology in Ukrainian and the first anthology of international LGBTQ writing published anywhere in the former Soviet Union.

Violent attacks at lesbian- and gay-themed events in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have, sadly, been frequent in recent years, from Moscow to Vilnius to Belgrade. Yet even among the various manifestations of this sad trend, what happened in L'viv and Kyiv in September 2009 was hard to fathom. What additionally made this a unique situation, in the case of Ukraine, was the fact that these were groups allegedly proposing a strong Ukrainian identity attacking a Ukrainian-language publication. In other words, this was a clash not between a faction nostalgic for the "good old days" of Stalinism with a radical group of anti-Soviet roots, as has often been the case, but rather a case of avowedly Ukrainian right-wing extremists attacking a no less avowedly Ukrainian, yet liberal and democratically-oriented, cultural project.

The public events surrounding the anthology were almost completely ignored by the mainstream Ukrainian media. Only the newspaper *Den'* published a brief article by Dmytro Desiateryk, the day before the arson incident, with the telling title, *Mezha tolerantnosti: Natsysty bezuspishno namahalyisia zirvaty prezentatsiiu pershoi v SND antolohii svitovoi gei-literatury* (*Limits to Tolerance: The Neo-Nazis Unsuccessfully Tried to Disrupt the Presentation of the First Anthology of Global Gay Writing Published in the Commonwealth of Independent States*).¹⁶ The burning down of a famous art space received more coverage, albeit of a peculiar kind; the TV channel TSN, for instance, reported on it in the section "Hlamur" (Glamour) in the subsection "Scandals."¹⁷

The events around the anthology received much more energetic coverage in the Ukrainian blogosphere and in online publications, but it was primarily news reporting rather than analysis. Only a few weeks later did the first thoughtful analytical responses begin appearing, such as Marta Varykasha's thoughtful and detailed review published by the site

¹⁶ See <http://www.day.kiev.ua/280700/>.

¹⁷ See <http://tsn.ua/glamur/skandali/art-tsentr-pavla-gudimova-pidpalili-vnochi.html>.

litakcent.com on December 3. Sadly, that publication was followed, on the same site, by a virulently homophobic screed by Petro Ivanyshyn, one of the most notorious figures in contemporary Ukrainian culture. This text did not discuss the anthology but rather mixed personal attacks on prominent literary critics (Tamara Hundorova, and Harvard University's Prof. George Grabowicz) with paranoid ravings about the threat of "homodyktatura" ("homodictatorship"). Fortunately, many prominent figures in the Ukrainian blogosphere called the site's leadership on it, resulting in its editor, and a Kyiv Mohyla Academy professor, Volodymyr Panchenko, printing a statement, several weeks later, where he alleged that Ivanyshyn's text was "an invitation to a discussion," albeit a failed one. As one of the comments on Panchenko's statement rightly noted, true dialogue with a person like Ivanyshyn who denies the other the very right to exist, let alone speak, is impossible.

A surprisingly thoughtful and detailed discussion of the anthology can be found on the pages of a periodical, the Kharkiv-based Russian-language journal, *Gendernye issledovaniia*, that in the past had frequently had a problematic relationship with Ukrainian-language culture. Its issue no. 19, dated 2009 but published in early 2010, carried a portfolio about the book which includes Russian translations of the afterword by Mariia Maiерchyk and of the above-mentioned review by Marta Varykasha. It also included two specially commissioned reviews. One of them, by the Dnipropetrovsk-based poet and translator Viktoriia Narizhna, was particularly instructive.¹⁸

In her essay, Narizhna drew a distinction between this anthology as a text per se and as a conscious act/deed (*vchynok*, *postupok*). She argued that there was a tension between these two aspects of the book since, in her opinion, the book-as-act here is much more daring and provocative, while the book-as-text, with the exception of its title, the preface, and the afterword, is "moderate, indeed cautious." While I beg to differ with her in respect to some of the literary texts included (more on this shortly), I agree with her characterization of the book-as-act. Let us take a closer look at the book and its composition.

The translated texts are framed by a brief introductory statement by the editors, a longer preface by the poet and essayist Andrii Bondar and, as was mentioned earlier, a scholarly afterword by Mariia Maiерchyk. The book also includes statements by translators on their involvement in the project. The book's title is *120 storinok Sodomu* (*120 Pages of Sodom*).

¹⁸ Narizhna, Viktoriia. *Antologiiia kak postupok?* *Gendernye issledovaniia*, no. 19, 2009, p. 340–345; the entire portfolio is available online at <http://www.gender.univer.kharkov.ua/gurnal/19/25.pdf>.

I have not delayed mentioning this title for the sake of suspense. Many among those who have commented on the book and greeted its publication, have stumbled on the title. It is deliberately and uncomfortably radical, and references some of the most transgressive works of world culture (a novel by the Marquis de Sade and a film by Pier Paolo Pasolini). It is an in-your-face statement that echoes the provocations of the leader of Ukrainian Futurists in the 1910s, Mykhail' Semenko, and western counterculture of the 1960s—1970s. Its radical revolutionary spirit is emphasized by the book's coeditors, three young poets, who describe this book's goal as a celebration and expansion of plurality/multiplicity (*mnozhyhnyist'*) and refer frankly to its textual contents as a joyful "explosive mix" (*vybukhova sumish*). These young poets are Oles' Barlih from Zaporizhzhia (b. 1985), Al'bina Pozdniakova from L'viv (b. 1983), and Iryna Shuvalova from Kyiv (b. 1986).

All in all, a key determinant of the anthology is that it was a collaborative effort of a large group of people, many of whom do not self-identify as LGBT or queer. In fact, for the majority of Ukrainian participants the book was a gesture of support for the diversity of voices and subject-positions they hoped to hear loud and clear in Ukrainian. This was what led the publishing house *Krytyka* to support and publish the book and what guided the work on the project.

The anthology's coeditors drew on two main sources. Firstly, they were helped by a well-established LGBT literary presence in Slovenia. Slovenia is the East European country that has been able to demonstrate the most advanced level of openness to ideas and of awareness and acceptance of LGBT voices. Simultaneously to the Ukrainian anthology, a Slovenian anthology of modern European gay poetry was being put together by Brane Mozetič; it was released within weeks of the publication of the Ukrainian one.¹⁹ A result of this cooperation is that men's voices outnumber women's in the book, and modern European poetry overshadows other genres. Secondly, the editors endeavored to bring contemporary Russian-language LGBT writing into Ukrainian discourse where men's and women's voices, as well as poetry and prose, are more balanced. Finally, the US is represented by three authors: one of them, the Russian-language poet, Yaroslav Mogutin, who has been living in exile in the US since 1995, recommended me as a translator of his texts. Therefore I need to disclose that I too was involved in this project as a translator. It is an honour to have my translations of Mogutin appear side-by-side with

¹⁹ *Moral bi spet priti: sodobna evropska gejevska poezija* [You should come back: Contemporary European gay poetry]. Ljubljana: Škuc, 2009.

earlier ones by Serhii Zhadan that the anthology reprinted. The editors also asked me for suggestions on one or two other American poets for inclusion, thus, I also contributed the translations of several texts by the San Francisco-based poet, Aaron Shurin.

In his preface to the book, Andrii Bondar calls it a project that is “selfless, experimental, and rather risky” (“podvyzhnyts’kyi, eksperymental’nyi i dosyt’ ryzykovanyi”), given the strength of homophobia in contemporary Ukrainian society. This book asserts resistance to aggressive phobias through literature; the literary texts emerge as manifestations of hopes, desires, traumas, and identities of resistance (sometimes melancholy, sometimes confrontational). In his own earlier translation projects, notably his work on the Polish Modernist classic, Witold Gombrowicz, and the contemporary radical prose writer, Michał Witkowski, Bondar made it possible for other queer and queer-friendly authors to find an authentic voice in Ukrainian. The anthology helps accomplish the same for thirty new names, among them such outstanding authors as Poland’s Jacek Dehnel and Izabela Filipiak, Germany’s Mario Wirz, Hungary’s Ádám Nádasdy, Russia’s Faina Grimberg and Aleksei Purin, and many, many others.

Mariia Maierchyk’s essay that concludes the book brings the topic of homosexuality—and sexuality more broadly—into the context of everyday cultural practices, past and present, including notably Ukrainian ethnographic traditions. This aspect of the volume puts it in touch with the nascent, but growing, discourse on the intersection between post-colonial studies and queer theory that confronts a double dilemma: many founders of post-colonial thinking, especially Frantz Fanon, were openly hostile to manifestations of homosexuality, while the dominant gay culture in the West has frequently been accused of a troubled relationship with race and geographical origin. The 20th century offers us several examples of a complex identity struggle by major gay writers in the context of the politics of resistance, such as James Baldwin, an African-American from a deeply conservative Pentecostal family, and the Algerian poet Jean Sénac.²⁰ Bearing in mind their struggles, hopes, and dreams, let us hope

²⁰ For a sampling see Muñoz, José. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; Hawley, John C. (ed.). *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. Albany: SUNY P, 2001; idem, *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2001; Cruz-Malavé, Arnaldo and Manalansan, Martin (eds.). *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: New York University Press, 2002; Romanow, Rebecca. *The Postcolonial Body in Queer Space and Time*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars

(against all odds—as the recent cultural and political developments in Ukraine can be very depressing indeed) that their utopian impulse carries forward.

Fast-forwarding six years from the publication of *120 storinok Sodomu*, the situation with regard to LGBTQ rights and queer cultural presence in Ukraine remains precarious. Kyiv Pride has now taken place four times, but only twice, in 2013 and 2015, was it able to include public marches advocating equality and non-discrimination for the LGBTQ community, and both times it required heavy police protection. In 2012, the far-right Svoboda party made it into Parliament for the first time, getting slightly over 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections. While in the post-Euromaidan era its role has dwindled, other far-right groups, including Pravyi Sektor, a loose organization that united many smaller groups, including those that had been active in the 2009 attacks described above, was very vocal in its opposition to the 2015 Kyiv Pride, and appears to be one of the main forces behind the violence perpetrated against the marchers. Yet the marches did take place and the community's rights to freedom of assembly were for the first time publicly affirmed by President Poroshenko, and this year two MPs participated in the march for the first time. As in neighbouring Russia, during the Yanukovych rule (2010–2013) several bills were introduced at both regional and national levels prohibiting “propaganda of homosexuality to children.” Fortunately, growing international protests and opposition from human rights groups, and even branches of the Ukrainian government (most notably from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) prior to the Euromaidan revolution, led to the defeat of those bills.

While these pressures continue, LGBTQ culture in Ukraine is still in a precarious, struggling situation. The country's only gay bookstore, a branch of the Russian *Indigo*, has closed. Ukraine's only gay magazine, *Odyn z nas*, published since 1994 is now on an indefinite hiatus. Still, a number of remarkable examples of queer creative writing have appeared in Ukraine in recent years.

The most active persons in this respect are primarily identified as poets. One of them, Oles' Barlih, the coeditor of *120 storinok Sodomu*, published his first book of poems in 2012. Barlih is also active in other literary genres, and a play he wrote won a major prize at the nationwide

Publishing, 2006. On Sénac, see Louar, Nadia. At the Intersection of Queer and Postcolonial Discourses: Rerouting the Queer with Jean Sénac and Jean Genet, in: Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, Sarah Lawson Welsh (eds.). *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 232–41.

contest Drama.ua in 2012. Vitalii Iukhymenko, based in Kyiv, has been publishing regularly in periodicals. While in the past he wrote mostly in Ukrainian, now he writes more in Russian reflecting the situation that the urban gay subculture in Ukraine is primarily Russophone which has been one of the barriers for developing an original Ukrainian queer discourse. Iukhymenko's Russian-language poetry, while undoubtedly talented, positions him as but another voice among contemporary Russophone gay poets (next to Mogutin, Anashevich, Chepelev, and others); the dilemma is whether to be a lonely pioneer or a follower in a more established community, and Iukhymenko appears to have chosen the latter path. Although post-Euromaidan Ukrainian community-building actively seeks to transcend linguistic divides, the problem of language remains unresolved. In this respect Barlih's recent writing projects display particularly admirable courage and dedication in my opinion. While an active participant in international literary dialogue, who has also translated poetry from several other languages, his insistence on developing a queer Ukrainian-language literary voice, especially given his continued residence in the gloomy post-industrial city of Zaporizhzhia, is striking. *Odyn z nas* definitely deserves recognition in this respect as in contrast with the more commercially-oriented Russian *Kvir* (now also defunct), it has granted a significant amount of space in its pages to the publication of original literary texts, translations, and interviews with writers and literary scholars (in both Ukrainian and Russian). I was particularly heartened to see an impassioned manifesto by Barlih.²¹

Sometimes it is the persistence of just a few, hoping against hope, that eventually creates a true renaissance—in literature as well as in the broader cultural sphere. In the few years since then, we have seen a bold and energetic new generation of LGBT rights activists emerge publicly in Ukraine. The increase in violence accompanying the increase in visibility does not deter them. Moreover, we see the building of an unprecedentedly strong and effective coalition now taking place, bringing together both those working in the field of human rights and NGOs, and a broader strata of society, with an increasingly active role played by cultural producers (writers, visual artists, filmmakers, musicians). Here's to hoping that a queer Ukrainian renaissance is just around the corner, and that we are already witnessing its first vigorous sprouts.

²¹ Barlih, Oles'. *Gei-literatura: Ukraïns'kyi shliakh to legitimizatsiï. Odyn z nas*, 2010, 65, pp. 37–39.

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